

# Orc'Takai

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Deep in the heart of the Frostfang Caverns, orcs worked about the main cavern in preparation for a grand feast. The center of the chamber was nearly a half-mile wide, with a ceiling that stretched up hundreds of feet to beautiful glistening icicles. Below, a massive fire was formed in the center of the cavern, with tables arranged about the expansive floor. There was no way to tell which table was the head and which was the foot; it demonstrated equal respect among all members of the great celebration. Some fifty or so orcs were hurrying about the space, placing down tablecloths, arranging chairs, and decorating.

Any day an orc child was born came with celebration. Every newborn was greeted with a feast, song, and dance. All members of the clan were out to celebrate, normal activities put on hold to acknowledge the miracle of life. Such celebration was necessary, so the child knew they were loved. The entire clan was a family; every child, regardless of rank, was a child to them all.

Today was a special birth, however. Today would be the birth of the *khan*, the firstborn child of the chief. This child would be brought up to replace the chief upon their death or retirement. As with all births, the celebrations would include a great feast with all members of

the clan, hours of music from the local musicians, and the finest flasks of Frostwine shared. But one special addition separated this birth from all others.

Before the feast began, a great ceremony would take place: the *Orc'takai*. This was the grand ceremony in which the khan's *malak'kai* would be selected. The *malak'kai* would be taken from the young children born in the past five years. A total of twelve would accept the honor, swearing an oath binding them by blood to the khan, their future chief. It was a great honor to be a *malak'kai*. Many families had submitted their children for potential candidates, but only twelve would be selected by the *khalal*, the spirit mother.

"Hey let's make sure the center of the room is clear tonight alright? We'll be needing it for the swearing in!" Ghar bustled about the massive cavern shouting orders to the orcs. He was a short, plump orc, with massive arms and scars. His skin was a light grey, with hair shaved completely bald.

"Ghar, sir overseer," a meek voice spoke beside Ghar. The orc was average height with pale green skin, uncommon among the Frostfang. "Sir, where do we place the totems?"

"In a star you twat!" Ghar shouted. "You arrange them in the order of the seven below, with Bromthos at the front, right where the orc'takai will take place!"

The young orc nodded, then ran off to arrange the seven totems, one for each of the gods below, about the fire.

Ghar sighed and continued with the preparation, sparing a brief glance back to the high caverns where the khan was being birthed. He prayed things were going well up above. A good birth usually meant a promising future.

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Beildun wiped away the last bit of vile from his mouth and breathed in heavy sighs trying to compose himself. His stomach was still rumbling, but he believed the worst of it had passed.

The Khalal had insisted he wait outside until called in. But Beildun had refused. After all, he was the chief. He stood a head above all other orcs, with arms the size of a dragon's neck. He was fierce, his dark blue skin and piercing red eyes enough to intimidate even the bravest of men. Surely a man of stature and experience would be able to handle the birth of his child.

The Khalal and his wife had laughed, knowing he was wrong in such assumptions. One look at the process, and Beildun had to leave before his second lunch made a surprise appearance.

He stood now in the hall of the high cavern, the air still and cool. Usually the place would be bustling with orcs carrying about their daily activities. But today, the day of the orc'takai, most of the orcs were out preparing the festivities. Those that were not were Khalal, her group of attendants, Beildun, and his wife, Myrata.

Out in the halls the world was silent. Just beyond the doors Beildun had exited, screams and chants were echoing off the walls, everyone working to bring about the successful birth of his child. But he heard no such sounds in the halls, the heavy stone doors blocking out the sounds from within.

Hearing Myrata begin to scream the way she did had been half the reason Beildun had to leave. She was the strongest orc in the tribe, both in strength and mental fortitude. Words bounced off her spirits like snowfall, resulting only in a little laugh from the orc. She wielded her battle axe with unprecedented precision and grace. Add that to her smooth, grey skin, fierce blue eyes, long purple hair, and strong tusks, it was no wonder Beildun had fallen so deeply in love.

But hearing her scream, seeing her vulnerable for the first time, had truly shocked him. He knew if his wife could get through this, there was no question she was the strongest woman alive.

Time passed by, and still Beildun waited in the hall. He twiddled his thumbs together as he paced up and down, thoughts of dismay and pleasure blending into one another. Sometimes he thought it was taking too long and some ill had befallen the child. Other times he thought everything was going so perfect because a son, looking just like him, was about to enter the world. But if the child were just like him, he would be brash and difficult to manage. Which of course made Beildun wonder if he was even ready to be a parent in the first place.

All this spiraling continued about his head, driving him insane. He began clenching his fists together, sitting down to clear his thoughts. However, this only added physical pain because of the cuts his nails were now creating on his knuckles. Frustrated he growled and smashed his fists against the wall, cracking the ancient stone.

“Calm down, Beildun,” he whispered to himself. “It’s ok, you’re going to be alright.”

Just as Beildun felt he was losing his last nerve, the door to the chambers swung open. There was no sound of screaming or chanting emanating from the room now. Instead there was a new sound, a high pitch sort of wail that melted the orc chief’s heart.

It was the sound of a little baby orc.

Beildun leapt to his feet, turning to face the Khalal who had opened the chamber doors.

“Is it...?”

“Come in chief,” Khalal spoke sweetly, a gentle smile across her face. She was the eldest orc in the clan and had served as Khalal for many years now. Her white hair was braided in long locks that reached the back of her legs, her entire body covered in the traditional dress of the spirit mother. “Your little khan awaits.”

Beildun rushed into the large chamber of stone. It was the main chamber in which Beildun and Myrata shared their nights. Normally it was simply the bed, their armor, and a dresser arrayed in neat order. But today, all other objects besides the bed had been thrown aside. Covers and blankets were littered around the floor, the smell of sweat and blood thick in the air. It was stuffy, and all the Khalal's assistants were drenched in rigorous sweat, quenching their thirst with large skins of water.

Beildun paid little mind to it all. He had eyes for only his wife, sitting with a single cloth blanket over her lap holding a little bundle: their first child.

"Myrata," Beildun smiled as he sat next to his wife, placing a comforting hand around her shoulder, the other reaching to touch his baby for the first time. The little orc child was round and plump, even for an orc. Already tufts of black hair were growing on its forehead, skin the same dark blue as Beildun. "He's beautiful."

"No, Beildun. She. She is beautiful," Myrata smiled, glowing as she looked at the chief.

"She eh?" Beildun returned the warm smile and kissed Myrata gently on the forehead.

"Then I know the perfect name."

"As do I," Myrata said.

"Talla."

The two orcs spoke in unison and Beildun felt on the verge of tears. Talla was his sister, a brave orc woman who had died years prior when humans from the Storm Plains had raided the Frostfang Forest. Beildun had avenged her death, but no amount of violence ever healed those wounds. For his wife to understand his pain, to allow him to bestow such honor on his firstborn, was enough to bring the great man to tears.

“I love you,” he smiled, kissing her again, then kissing his baby girl on the forehead. “I love you, my little Talla.”

“As I am witness, the name has been bestowed on our Khan,” the Khalal spoke, bowing on her knees, hands up as if in prayer. “As the gods are our witness, I bless this young child, little Talla. May she hold strength in her arms, power in her words, and wisdom in her heart.”

The assistants bowed their heads as well, joining in a synchronized and well-rehearsed ritual. “We swear this day to bestow love and protection for one of our own and follow her as she grows to be chief. May the gods grant life, happiness, and prosperity to the khan and all her people.”

The assistants began to bustle about again, drawing new water and gathering cloths from around the chambers. The Khalal rose and placed a hand on the chief’s shoulder.

“Come,” She said to him. “Your duties for now are ended. We must continue with the mother and child in private. Dress yourself and prepare the grand feast; we shall follow shortly.”

Beildun turned to give one last kiss to his wife, then nodded and left the room. The doors closed behind him, and he stopped in the hall as tears fell from his eyes.

He was now a father, and he had never been happier.

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The main cavern was finished. The entire clan was present, though they had yet to take their seats. The formalities would wait until the chief and his family arrived. For now, the orcs mingled about and shared in drink and food, smiling and laughing with one another. The fire was lit and burned bright, illuminating the space. The band was prepped, the drums and horns prepared for the chief’s entrance.

Ghar overlooked the milling people with pride. He had done his brother well, and everything looked perfect. Even better, he was about to be an uncle. If the rumors that had begun milling about were true, Myrata had given birth to a beautiful little girl. It was an exciting time in the tribe, as it was the first time the Khan would be a female in nearly eighty years. She would not be the first woman to grow to be chief, but it was a rarity all the same.

As he stood about watching the festivities, he glanced up towards the high cavern where his brother would enter. He would come down and give a little speech, before the Khalal led out the procession of assistants surrounding Myrata and her child. Ghar's duty was to wait for them to appear and signal for the band to begin.

As he watched, the doors to the high cavern opened, and out stepped his brother, the chief himself. He stood tall and proud; his hair slicked back into a traditional warrior's braid behind his head. He had white paint across his eyes, marking the sign of their god, Bromthos. He was dressed in a thick leather cloak that was cut just above the knees, with a white cloth decorated in ancient runes long forgotten draped over his shoulders. A necklace of baby dragon teeth hung about his neck. He looked imposing in his current fashion, gathering silence from the crowd before Ghar had even signaled the band to start.

The band began their tune, a slow march. Beildun stepped in time as he proudly descended the steps to the cavern floor. As he came towards the main gathering, the orcs made a small circle around him, and the band stopped. All ears now belonged to their chief.

"My fellow Frostfang," he called out, his voice enhanced by the Khalal to fill the massive cavern. "Today, we celebrate the birth of a new child. Today, we welcome a new member to our ever-growing family!"

His words were met with loud cheers from the crowd and the clinking of glasses. He allowed them their fun before raising his hand to silence them.

“Today is no ordinary birth though!” Beildun’s voice was loud and exuberant, his face practically glowing as he spoke, his eyes holding back tears of happiness. “For today, we celebrate the birth of our Khan! Today, is Orc’Takai!”

At this the crowd erupted, louder than before. More drinks were shared, congratulatory words shouted towards their chief. As before, he raised his hands and motioned for the crowd to silence themselves.

“At this point, I ask you all to claim your seats. Now, join me to welcome down Myrata, bearing with her the newest Frostfang: my little girl!”

The crowds cheered and made their way to their seats. As they did, Ghar signaled again to the band. This time, they struck up a boastful tune, with uplifting horn lines and a steady drum pattern. The doors to the high cavern parted, and the procession began their decent towards the bonfire and feast below.

At the front, as expected, walked the Khalal. Her walk was slower than usual these days, but she still radiated in her purple robe. A hood was pooled over her head, a traditional custom for the Khalal when in public. Her assistants were dressed in similar, though more plainly adorned, robes. In their center, still unseen by those below, would be Myrata, holding her baby wrapped in the golden blanket used only for Orc’Takai.

The procession continued their decent, and the crowd continued to cheer. Orcs stood on tables, some even jumping up and down. The sound was a deafening roar, the band’s music nearly drowned out. The roaring lasted all the way to the point the procession broke into a single line in front of the fire. The assistants stepped back, so only the Khalal and Myrata stood at the



front. Myrata was dressed in a simple golden cloth to match that of her child, her hair down long behind her. She stood tall in front of the Khalal as the two prepared for the final part of the formal ceremony. The crowd silenced, all waiting in anticipation to know who the mala'kai would be.

“Brothers and sisters,” The Khalal’s voice boomed across the cavern, echoing about the stone walls. “We are gathered to bare witness to one of the grandest of all miracles: the miracle of life! Today, we bring forth a new Frostfang into the world. This little girl, bestowed with the honor bound name of Talla by her loving parents, is our Khan: the eldest of Beildun and Myrata, and our future chief!

“As with any child, we bring the Khan into our tribe and bless them with protection and love, as befits all who seek refuge among the Frostfang!” The Khalal turned and placed two fingers across the baby’s forehead, forming a semi-circle with a line running vertically in its center. “Let the mark of dragons of ice bring you wisdom and courage, as a rightful member of the Frostfang.

“However, you are more than just Frostfang. You are its head!” This was a unique part of the ceremony, and the baby was covered with golden paint that circled about the previous mark. “You are Khan, and you shall hold this family in your heart and in your arms. You protect; you serve; you love. And as you protect and serve us, so too shall we protect you.”

The Khalal turned from the baby now and faced the crowd. “We gift you our life and blood, our own children, to live and die by your side as your guardians. May the mala'kai show you strength and love as they fight endlessly by your side. Twelve souls have offered their hearts to you, and before Bromosh and the Gods of Seven, swear their blood ties!”

The fires grew and changed from their natural color to a dark red, the color of blood. From the crowd, twelve orc children, four girls and eight boys, stepped forward. They were all without shirts, dressed only in black trousers. They arranged themselves between the Khalal and the fire and reached out their right arms.

“These twelve souls are here to gift their life and devotion to serve our Khan, fulfilling the greatest of all honors among the Frostfang,” As she spoke, she turned and began to bestow paint across each child’s body. Red paint was used, lines being drawn that spiraled from their hearts out over their chest, back, and arms. Each child’s right hand was then cut with a razor-sharp knife. Tears appeared, which was only natural, as each closed their fist, holding in the blood. “May your heart guide you, your arms serve you, your thoughts defend you. Let the blood spilled now forever bind you with that of our young Khan, Talla!”

In unison, or close to it, the twelve children turned and threw their hands out, attempting to toss their blood into the fires. A few droplets entered the blaze, and the fire’s color suddenly changed from the roaring red to a subtle white light. The cavern was illuminated, and wonder befell the eyes of all who witnessed such a grand spectacle.

“The pact is drawn; the gods accept this offer!” The khalal spoke with excitement. “Now, it is finished! Rise now, mala’kai! Rise so the Frostfang may invite you and your duties with open arms. And may we all celebrate the miracle of our khan! For Talla!”

“For Talla!” the cavern erupted, echoing in unison. Then all was briefly silent as all drank from their glasses to the toast. Even the children participated, enjoying a sweet cider saved for such an occasion.

The toast ended and the ceremony participants dissipated, dispersing among their various friends and family. The Khalal thanked the young children and sent them back to their parents, as

they would not be needed again until Talla could walk about the cavern on her own. Once such an accomplishment occurred, the mala'kai would be called together again, never to leave Talla's side until death do them part.

Myrata held her baby tightly, rocking her back and forth as she took her place next to Beildun. The festivities and dazzling colors had been a sensory overload, distracting the child. But with the formalities ended, the feasting and conversations sent her into a fit of uncontrollable crying.

"Good luck with that one," Beildun laughed as his wife sat beside him. "If she's anything like me, she'll keep this up the entire night!"

"Yes, I think you're right," Myrata sighed. "Of course, it won't be my problem much longer."

Myrata shifted and slipped the baby over to Beildun, who was too stunned and nervous to do anything other than hold the baby tightly. His body felt frozen, thoughts and words fleeing his mind. All about him the feast continued, but he noticed none of it. All he was thinking in the moment: don't drop the baby.

"After months of no cider, I'd like a chance at some frost brew," Myrata smiled rising from her seat. "I'm sure you'll be ok with the child for a while?"

Myrata did not wait for an answer, turning to leave her stunned husband alone at the table with the child. Beildun sat there and slowly relaxed his arms. He stared at little Talla's face and felt his heartbeat louder in his chest, a smile crossing his tusked lips. HE began to rock the baby gently and whispered her name softly, like he remembered his mother once did. The little baby stopped her crying and reached a hand up towards her father. Beildun raised one arm and gingerly placed a finger in the upheld hand. The little child barely managed to grasp her father's

hand, but she held his finger all the same. Staring at her, Beildun felt warm inside, his heart melting with love.

“She’s a beautiful little one,” Ghar whispered as he peered over his brother’s shoulder.

“Who would’ve thought an idiot like you would ever welcome in something so beautiful.”

“It’s all Myrata’s doing,” Beildun laughed.

“Aye, that it is,” Ghar laughed squeezing Beildun’s shoulder.

“Look at her, Ghar,” Beildun whispered. “She’s beautiful, she really is.”

“She’s got your little smile, but her mother’s eyes,” Ghar noted. “I can see it already.

There will be songs about all she will do. I truly wish our sister had lived to see this. She would have been proud. They all would.”

“She’s here; I can feel her presence,” Beildun lifted the blanket tightly around his daughter. “They’re all here, watching over my little Talla. I know it. She will be better than us all, Ghar. There will never be anyone greater than my little Talla.”

Talla giggled, a smile crossing her face as she looked at the two orc men. She closed her eyes, nuzzling into her father’s arms and passing into sleep.

“Sleep tight,” Beildun whispered. “Welcome to the family.”