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Description:

About the Author *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author **Christie Golden** has written more than forty novels and several short stories in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Among her many projects are over a dozen *Star Trek* novels and several original fantasy novels. An avid player of *World of Warcraft*, she has written two manga short stories and several novels in that world (*Lord of the Clans*, *Rise of the Horde*, *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King*, and *The Shattering: Prelude to Cataclysm*, *Thrall: Twilight of the Aspects*, and *Jaina Proudmoore: Tides of War*). She has also written the *StarCraft Dark Templar Saga: Firstborn*, *Shadow Hunters*, and *Twilight*, as well as the most recent hardcover, *Devils' Due*. Golden is also the writer of three books in the major nine-book *Star Wars* series *Fate of the Jedi* (in collaboration with Aaron Allston and

Troy Denning). Golden lives in Tennessee. She welcomes visitors to her website: ChristieGolden.com.

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One

My name is Thrall. The word means "slave" in the human tongue, and the story behind the naming is a long one, best left for another time. By the grace of the spirits and the blood of heroes before me that runs in my veins, I have become Warchief of my people, the orcs, and the leader of a group of races known as the Horde. How this came to be, too, is another tale. The one I wish to set to parchment now, before those who lived it pass to dwell with the honorable ancestors, is the story of my father and those who believed in him; and of those who betrayed him and indeed, all our people.

What might have become of us had these events not unfolded, not even the wise shaman Drek'Thar can say. The paths of Fate are many and varied, and no sane being should ever venture down the deceptively pleasant one of "if only." What happened, happened; my people must shoulder both the shame and the glories of our choices.

This is the tale not of the Horde as it exists today, a loose organization of orc, tauren, forsaken, troll, and blood elf, but of the rise of the very first Horde. Its birth, like that of any infant, was marked by blood and pain, and its harsh cries for life meant death to its enemies.

For such a grim and violent tale, it begins peacefully enough, amid the rolling hills and valleys of a verdant land called Draenor. . . .

The heart-beat rhythm of the drums lulled the younger orcs to sleep, but Durotan of the Frostwolf clan was wide awake. He lay with the others on the hard-packed dirt floor of the sleeping tent. A generous padding of straw and a thick clefthoof pelt protected him from the chill of the bone-cold earth. Even so, he felt the vibrations of the drumming travel up through the earth and into his body, as his ears were caressed by the ancient sound. How he longed to go out and join them!

Durotan would have another summer before he would be able to participate in the *Om'rigger*, the rite of adulthood. Until that much-anticipated event, he would have to accept being shunted off with the children into this large group tent, while the adults sat around the fire and talked of things that were doubtless mysterious and significant.

He sighed and shifted on the pelt. It was not fair.

The orcs did not fight among themselves, but neither were they particularly sociable. Each clan kept to itself, with its own traditions, styles and manner of dress, stories, and shaman. There were even variations of dialect that differed so much that some orcs could not understand one another unless they spoke the common tongue. They almost seemed as different to one another as the other sentient race who shared the bounty of the field, forest, and streams, the blue-skinned, mysterious draenei. Only twice a year, spring and autumn, did all the orc clans come together as they were doing now, to honor that time when day and night were the same length.

The festival had officially started last night at moonrise, though orcs had been gathering at this spot for several days now. The Kosh'harg celebration had been held on this sacred spot in the land the orcs called Nagrand, "Land of Winds," which lay in the benevolent shadow of the "Mountain of

Spirits," Oshu'gun, for as long as anyone could remember. While ritual challenges and combat were not unusual during the festival, true anger or violence had never erupted here. When tempers flared, as they sometimes did when so many were gathered together, the shaman encouraged the parties involved to work it out peaceably, or else they were to leave the holy area.

The land in this place was lush and fertile and calming. Durotan sometimes wondered if the land was tranquil because of the willingness of the orcs to bring peace to it, or if the orcs were peaceful because the land was so serene. He often wondered such things, and kept them to himself, for he heard no one else voicing such odd ideas.

Durotan sighed quietly, his thoughts racing, his heart thumping in answering rhythm to the voice of the drums outside. Last night had been wonderful, stirring Durotan's soul. When the Pale Lady cleared the dark line of trees, in Her waning phase but still bright enough to cast a powerful light that was reflected on the blankets of white snow, a cheer had gone up from the throat of every one of the thousands of orcs assembled -- wise elders, warriors in their prime, even children held in their mother's strong arms. The wolves, both companions and mounts to the orcs, had joined in with exultant howls. The sound shivered along Durotan's veins as the drumming did now, a deep, primal cry of salutation to the white orb who commanded the night skies. Durotan had glanced around to behold a sea of powerful beings raising their brown hands, silvered in the light, to the Pale Lady, all with one focus. If any ogre had been foolish enough to attack, it would have fallen in a matter of heartbeats beneath the weapons of this vast sea of single-minded warriors.

Then had come feasting. Dozens of beasts had been slain earlier in the season, before the winter had set in, and dried and smoked in preparation for the event. Bonfires had been kindled, their warm light merging with the fey, white glow of the Lady, and the drumming had begun and had not stopped since.

He, like all the other children -- lying on his clefthoof pelt, Durotan sniffed dismissively at the term -- had been permitted to stay up until he had eaten his fill and the shaman had departed. The shaman of every clan left, once the opening feast had been consumed, to climb Oshu'gun, which stood careful watch over their festivities, enter its caverns, and be advised by the spirits and their ancestors.

Oshu'gun was impressive even from a distance. Unlike other mountains, which were irregular and rough in their shape, Oshu'gun erupted from the ground with the precision and sharp point of a spearhead. It looked like a giant crystal set into the earth, so clean were its lines and so brightly did it glisten in the sun- and moonlight. Some legends told that it had fallen from the sky hundreds of years ago, and it was so unusual that Durotan thought those tales might be right.

Interesting though Oshu'gun might be, Durotan always thought it a bit unfair that the shaman had to stay there for the entire Kosh'harg festival. The poor shaman, he thought, missed all the fun. But then again, he suspected, so did the children.

During the day, there were hunts and game playing and retelling of the heroics of the ancestors. Each clan had its own stories, and so in addition to the familiar tales Durotan had heard as a youngling, there were new and exciting adventures to listen to.

Entertaining as these were, and as much as Durotan enjoyed them, he burned to know what the adults discussed after the children were drowsing in the sleeping tent, after their bellies were stretched full of good food and pipes had been smoked and various brews had been shared.

He could stand it no longer. Quietly, Durotan sat up, his ears straining for any sounds to indicate

that anyone else was awake. He heard nothing, and after a long minute, he got to his feet and began to move slowly toward the entrance.

It was a long, slow progression in the darkened tent. Sleeping children of all ages and sizes were sprawled everywhere in the tent, and one wrong move could awaken them. His heart racing with excitement at his daring, Durotan stepped carefully between the only faintly glimpsed shapes, placing each large foot with the delicacy of the long-legged marsh birds.

It seemed to take an eternity before Durotan finally reached the flap. He stood, trying to calm his breathing, reached out --

And touched a large, smooth-skinned body standing right beside him. He jerked his hand back with a surprised hiss.

"What are you doing?" Durotan whispered.

"What are *you* doing?" the other orc shot back. Abruptly Durotan grinned at how foolish they sounded.

"Same thing you are," Durotan replied, his voice still soft. All about them, the others slept on. "We can either keep talking about it or do it."

Durotan could tell by the size of the faint shape in front of him that the orc was a large male, probably close to his own age. He couldn't place the scent or the voice, so it wasn't one of the Frostwolf clan. It was a daring thought -- not only to do something so forbidden as to leave the sleeping tent without permission, but to do so in the company of an orc not of his own clan.

The other orc hesitated, the same thoughts no doubt running through his head. "Very well," he said at last. "Let's do it."

Durotan reached out again in the darkness, his fingers brushing the hide of the flap and curling around its edge. The two orc youths pulled back the flap and stepped out into the frosty night.

Durotan turned to look at his companion. The other orc was brawnier than he, and stood a bit taller. Durotan was the largest of his age in his clan, and unused to others being taller than he. It was a bit disquieting. His ally in mischief turned to look at him, and Durotan felt himself being assessed. The other nodded, apparently satisfied with what he saw.

They did not risk words. Durotan pointed to a large tree close to the tent, and silently the two headed for it. For a moment that was probably not as long as it felt, they were in the open, exposed to any adult who chose that instant to turn his head and see them, but they were not spotted. Durotan felt as exposed as if he were in bright sunlight, so powerful was the moon's glow reflected off the crystalline snow. And surely the sound of the snow squeaking beneath their feet was as loud as the bellow of an enraged ogre. At last they reached the tree and sank down behind it. Durotan's breath misted as he finally exhaled. The other orc turned to him and grinned.

"I am Orgrim, line of Telkar Doomhammer, of the Blackrock clan," the youth said in a proud whisper.

Durotan was impressed. While the Doomhammer line was not the line of a chieftain, it was well known and honored.

"I am Durotan, line of Gar..."

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