

Chapter One

It all started around dinnertime. I was sitting at the table with my father, Grom. He was a brute of a dwarf. We were the same height, but his shoulders stretched two hands wider than my own. He had a thick mane of black hair that framed his eyes, cheeks, and nose. His thick mustache hid his mouth and blended into a beard that stretched a good hand's length past his belly. It twitched when he talked, but he didn't talk often. Dirt from the mines covered his cheeks so his eyes were really about the only thing that stood out that night, that and the gray strands that age wove into his beard. He smelled of sweat, dust, and leather. I hardly noticed Grom's smell, though. It was one that I had grown up with. One final thing that should be known about my da; he earned the title of Orc Slayer in his youth. It happened in a battle he didn't like to talk about. I never heard the story from him, but many an old soldier would brag about my da's exploits. It seems he lost a lot of friends. Friends he held dearer than any title.

Grom and I sat across the table from one another in my clutch. Technically, the clutch was Grom's, but he turned it over to me when I had my son. The agreement was that he lived there with me, but I raised the family and acted like the head of the household. Mostly, he didn't butt in. Mostly.

Little Gostov was my boy, my pride and my joy. A knee-high version of myself that made funny noises, drooled, and pooped more than any creature ever should. The boy sat at my right elbow in a seat made just for him. It was a tall stone chair that allowed him to sit high enough to reach the table, but small enough so that he didn't slide around in it. The boy was a little fellow, so the chair was pretty small. A leather strap held him in place for added protection. My da made it for him just after Gostov was born. I think Grom was at least as taken with the midget as I was.

A mug of ale sat before me and a matching one sat in front of Grom. In the center of the table, between the mugs, sat a glass lantern full of phosphorescent algae, or maybe lichen. I don't really know. The moss lamps, as we called them, were just something that were always around and we didn't give them much thought. They didn't give off a lot of light, but we dwarves can see in almost total darkness, so the little light they shed was more than enough. They didn't smoke or burn, perfect for our underground environment.

I also need to add, for those who don't know dwarves too well, that we can see in the dark, but it's different. When the light gets dim enough, everything goes sepia, all browns and yellows. To an outsider, a human or an orc, our underground homes would be black as the inside of their eyelids, as dark as any cave. Without a light, they wouldn't be able to appreciate the worked columns, carved walls, or glorious arches. We dwarves can see it all, and we take pride in every cut of the stone. In total darkness, the beauty of our home is painted in shades of brown. With the moss light, there is just enough illumination to allow us to see our dark world in all its glorious, stony color.

Taila, my wife, prepared dinner over the hot rock across the room. She was a real looker; a stout girl, dark-bearded, and buxom as you please. That's the way I like them, but I think I liked Talia more because she kept me in line. My wife was the rooted granite that I clung to in the midst of life's storms. By Donnan, I miss that woman...

Didn't mean to drift off there. I got to thinking about my wife...and well, I just got lost in the moment.

Like I said, Talia was fixing dinner on the hot rock. The geothermal life within the Iron Mountains kept the flat stone hot enough to broil a steak within minutes. Mushrooms and rabbit sizzled on a sheen of butter as she pushed it around. The smell made my stomach roll with anticipation. A good smell, and one I will always remember fondly.

My da and I talked of the day's work in the mine. None of the talking was of anything in particular. A bit of it consisted of how hard a few batches of ore had been to get to, the antics of a few of the more memorable dwarves on the crew, and the progress we made that day, typical end of the day dwarf talk. To be honest, I did most of the talking while Grom sat back and slurped his ale. I'm more like my ma with the conversation, Donnan bless her. I suppose that's good though. If I were like my da, we would just sit and stare at one another. Foam coated his beard and mustache like

snow on the branches of an evergreen. He watched me as I talked, adding a nod or a grunt of agreement on occasion. My da wasn't much of a talker, but he was one of the best listeners a fellow could ever run across.

Talia slid the mushrooms and rabbit across the hot rock and onto a plate, then walked over to the table and set the plate down next to the moss light. Grom's nostrils flared as he inhaled the delicious aroma. He smiled. At least I think he smiled. His mustache arched up a little, and the creases next to his nose became deeper, so I suppose it was a smile. My wife returned seconds later with plates and forks for everyone and we dug in. I even handed Gostov a slice of mushroom. He gripped it in his tiny fist and shoved it into his mouth with a gurgle of happiness. I wasn't sure if the little fellow was eating the mushroom or his fist. Talia laughed and the old man smiled. I rubbed the soft hair on the boy's head then forked a mushroom and a chunk of rabbit and shoved it into my mouth.

We ate in silence, as dwarves tend to do. Everyone concentrated on his or her digestion. The room was silent other than the clink of forks, Gostov's gurgling, and my da's loud chewing. When Gostov got a mushroom down his gullet, he would stretch his greasy hand to Talia or me and bark, "Mo. Mo." If his hand went to me, I would hand him another mushroom without breaking my digestive stride. His mother did it with a little more finesse and concern, usually adding a smile and maybe even a pat on his puffy, little cheeks.

When the plates were forked clean and all that was left of the mushrooms and rabbit were globs of gravy, Grom and I leaned back in our chairs with satisfied sighs. I wiped the grease from my beard with the back of my hand while my da patted his stomach and belched.

Talia wiped Gostov with a dishtowel. As I reached for my ale mug, I caught a glimpse of my wife out of the corner of my eye. She faced toward me and I had to turn and look at her full on. The frown she gave me let me know that my ale drinking was done until I at least helped her clear the table. She did it with just a glance while wiping the boy's mouth, but that glance was all it took. It conveyed more meaning than she could have ever done with words.

With a sigh, I got up, stacked all the plates, and walked them over to the basin as my da's eyes lit up with humor. The basin was a half bowl of stone against the far wall that had been worked into the rock surrounded by a stone counter. A finger-sized hole created a black mouth in the rock just above the bowl, and water constantly arched into the center of the basin. It sounded like a waterfall, but the arched stream always made me think of peeing. A hole in the bottom of the basin released the same amount of water that flowed into the bowl, so it always stayed at the same level. It always stayed fresh.

As I turned back to the table, I inhaled the sweet smell of pipe tobacco. Grom's eyes met mine, still filled with humor. The long stem of his pipe held tightly clamped within a nest of hair on one side of his face while a ghost of smoke drifted from the other. He held my wife's cup up to me, reminding me that I had forgotten it.

"Thanks," I mumbled as I took the cup from him and brought it to the basin.

With the dishes in the basin and the boy being tended to by his mama, I sat back down in my chair and pulled my pipe from an inner coat pocket. From another pocket, I pulled out my tobacco pouch. The moist pipe leaf smelled sweet. It reminded me of simpler childhood days when I would sit at my da's feet while he loaded his own pipe. I stuffed a generous amount of leaf into the face-carved bowl, then I dug into another pocket for my matches. Soon my da and I were quietly smoking our pipes, drinking our ale, and watching Gostov play with his toys on a rug at the end of the room while Talia rinsed the dishes.

When Talia finished with the dishes, she plopped down next to me. She had no sooner nested her bottom in the chair when a bell tinkled. Someone was at the door. She took a sip of tea and gave me another look, one I easily read. It's funny how familiarity forms silent expressions that communicate more than words ever could. That simple look said, "I'm tired. I just sat down, and I want to drink some tea. The person at the door is probably your drinking buddy. So, you need to be the one to answer the door." My da's crescent eyes betrayed his smile. Their mischievous twinkle said, "Hop to it, boy. Your wife's right. It's probably for you." It was the same every night

inside our home. Not a lot spoken, but a great many words were bantered about.

I pulled the pipe from my mouth, exhaled smoke from my nose, and said, "I'll just see who's at the door."

The bell above the door chimed again, though I wouldn't call it much of a chime. It was only a cheap brass bell tied to a string that hung outside the door.

"Just hold on a second. I'm coming," I hollered.

I swung the door open to three bearded faces. Two black beards and a red one. The red beard belonged to my cousin, Orcam Stonechunker. The other two were a couple of Orcam's friends, Bolvin Deepdigger and Wulgur Kegsplitter. We all worked together from time to time in the mines. Being part of my clan, Orcam lived in the Stonechunker community, just next to the Stoneheart section, two small parts of the Stone Township. The other two lived a mile or so distance in a nearby township within the mountain. I wasn't too keen on Bolvin as he was a braggart. Wulgur I could take or leave, but Orcam was like a brother to me. Growing up together, we spent more time with each other than anyone else, getting into trouble and causing no end of mischief. When I got married to Talia, my days of mischief ended, mostly. Orcam hadn't married yet so he was still up to his armpits in trouble most of the time.

Orcam's braided beard formed an arch that dangled from his chin to just under his chest. It tinkled with brass bands as he grinned and said, "Me and some of my boys are going to The Rusty Axe for a pint or three. I figured you might like to join us."

Orcam smelled as though he'd already gotten started on those pints.

He looked around my shoulder and waved to my da and Talia. "Hey, Uncle Grom. Talia."

Grom nodded. Talia forced an awkward smile and an equally unenthusiastic wave. Neither cared much for my cousin. Da was familiar with his mischief and didn't like it at all. Talia knew my cousin's effect on me and feared I might have a relapse to my wilder side one day because of him. Before I could answer, my da spoke up. "Don't forget. Tomorrow's the tenth of Bokken's Black. We got our prayers in the morning at Temple. Gotta be there before work so you're gonna need to be getting up early."

I nodded and turned to face Orcam. He gave me a lopsided grin and rolled his eyes. He made sure I stood between him and Grom so my da couldn't see him do it. He wasn't too old yet to have his hide tanned by my da and he knew it. "You'd better go on without me this evening. Maybe we can get together tomorrow after work and have a pint or two."

His grin showed few teeth as he leaned forward and whispered, "You sure the chain round your ankle's long enough to reach The Rusty Axe?"

"Ain't no chain around my ankle. I do what I please and what needs to be done," I whispered back. "Whatever. Come on, boys. We got us some drinking to do." He waved them on as he marched away.

I watched them walk down the corridor for a moment before closing the door and turning back to my family.

Grom pulled the pipe from his mouth and gave me a nod, his way of letting me know he approved of my decision. His way of saying he was proud of me. Talia patted my chair and nodded for me to have a seat, which I did.

My da, Talia, and I sat until our pipes had smoked their last, and her teacup drained of tea.

Dwarves aren't much into clever conversation or making idle talk, so there wasn't a lot of talking going on that evening. I think it's got something to do with, "If you don't have anything nice to say then don't say anything at all." Dwarves tend to focus on the negative side of things. We're pessimists. We'd rather assume the worst and be happily wrong than assume the best and be sadly wrong. It's just our nature. We simply sat and enjoyed each other's company while Talia drank her tea and Grom and I smoked our pipes. Finally, Talia said that she needed to get Gostov to bed.

Grom emptied the ashes from his pipe into a bowl in the center of the table. It was his prayer time before bed, and he never missed prayer.

I watched as he got up and went to the prayer room. He looked tired, worn down. I guess even the mighty Grom was destined to get old one day. I waited, knowing that he wouldn't be in the room

for very long. We could have squeezed in together, but the room wasn't very large and somehow prayer seems like it needs to be a private thing, words between the pray-sayer and his god. Several minutes later, Grom walked out of the room, gave me a nod, and went to his bedroom. I pushed myself up and followed his path into the prayer room.

There really wasn't much to it. The room was six arms long by four arms wide with a marble prayer bench in the center. Engraved along the stone were runes of protection, wisdom, and strength. The ceiling arched into the rock overhead and formed a dome. Our axes hung on the other side of the prayer bench, seated into custom-made marble frames also etched in runes. Each frame fit our axes perfectly. The "Chortax" rune was engraved into the stone below Grom's axe. It meant "Orc Slayer," sometimes "Enemy Slayer" in high dwarven. It all depended on how the rune was interpreted. No name was etched into the stone below my axe. I hadn't earned a battle title yet. It wasn't my fault. Grom's generation had gone and made things peaceable, so there was little opportunity to prove myself in battle. Things had been so peaceable for so long the elders were even considering a new way to get weapons titled, because without war there just wasn't an opportunity for a fellow to make a name for himself.

That ain't to say there hadn't been a skirmish or two each year. I'd seen a few battles and lost a few friends, but all out war seemed to be a thing of the past.

I placed my palm on my unnamed axe and bowed my head. I hate to say this, but prayer just isn't natural to me. I mean, I say the words in my head, but that's all they seem to be, words. I ain't ever gotten a feeling from them, never been comforted, uplifted, consoled, nothing. I don't know what prayer did for Grom, but he stuck with it day after day and year after year. By Oblivion, I usually just came into the prayer room and sat for a few minutes to give Da the appearance that I said my prayers. It's something I had done since I was knee-high to the old man. I just didn't want to disappoint my da. His opinion meant a lot to me.

I actually did it, though. I don't know why. Maybe I sensed the crap was about to come down the pipe. Maybe it was all just coincidence. I thanked Donnan for my axe, my family, and my clan then I asked him to give me the strength I needed to protect all the above. It was a memorized prayer, one of dozens, but one of the few that I could actually recall. I just wished it would have helped, but as I've learned, there's little good that wishing or prayers can do, at least for me. I don't know, maybe I just ain't doing it right.

With my prayers said, I got myself ready for bed, tousled Gostov's hair, and stroked the down on his cheeks, then gave Talia a goodnight kiss. I was asleep the moment my head touched the pillow.

I don't much remember what I dreamed about, but I awoke thinking a dire bear was mauling me. The last thing I recall is the beast roaring, and for some odd reason, I remember his teeth, gold and tipped in diamonds. I don't remember the why or where of it, but I remember those golden teeth. When I dream, I dream big.

I cracked open my eyes and there wasn't any bear, dire or otherwise, but the blaring roar continued. My heart leapt and my eyes flew open. The sound wasn't a roar. It was the Dragon's Horn, an enormous air horn at the peak of the mountain. Legend says it's a real dragon's horn. If it is then I got all sorts of respect for dragons because that horn's at least ten dwarves wide. I heard the durned thing's so big a dwarf can't blow it. Instead, there's a bellows contraption the size of a wagon. I don't know exactly how it works, but I understand it's about the only thing that can make that horn sing.

It sang its tune at that moment. Knick-knacks vibrated on the shelves with each rumble, and the moss lamps swayed, though there was no wind. A long, low blast followed by three shorter ones and two more long, skull-splitting notes. It was a code, one that had been taught to us since we were big enough to stand. The long blast warned us of an invasion. The other notes told us that the enemy was at the main gate and the message finished by bellowing that they also stormed the lesser-known upper gates at the top of the mountain. The blasts didn't tell us who the enemy was, or how many of them needed killing. It just told us enough so that we could grab our axes and defend our homes.

I hopped out of bed. Talia's nightgown fluttered behind her as she ran to get my armor. My da appeared in the doorway, Chortax in hand, as Talia returned with my breastplate. Gostov wailed in the corner and I understood why. The durned horn made me want to join him.

Gorm nodded to the hallway and said, "Come on, boy. Grab your axe. We got work to do."

I gave Talia a quick peck on the forehead as she finished strapping my armor into place, then turned and ran for my axe, hoping that today would be the day that it got a title. I thought "Destroyer" or "Blood Quencher" would make fine names as I joined my da in the hallway outside our home.

Dwarves ran back and forth along the corridors, two lines of dwarves frantically trying to get to their posts. The halls made me think of what the anthill must have looked like the time I stuck my finger in the middle of their mound. I was a boy. It happens.

Dwarves stormed past us. Armor clanked to the rhythm of their steps, but other than that, it was a silent procession. My da waved his hand in the direction everyone was headed and we joined the march. I know this dwarven silence thing sounds crazy to most other races, but that's the way we were about everything. We are creatures of habit if nothing else, and that being the case, we rarely have anything new to talk about. We really struggle with the small talk, but a person should listen when we do say something because it's probably important.

Grom's clutch, my clutch, rested in the stone near the top of the mountain. By Donnan, the whole Stone clan hall rested in the peak of the mountain. It made for a long walk to work for all of us Stonehearts, Stonechunkers, Stonecarvers, Stonefists...well, all the other Stone clan folk, since the mines were at the bottom of the mountain. It's one of the drawbacks of belonging to a clan who doesn't have a whole lot of prestige in the dwarven ranks, but we were working on that. It wouldn't happen over night because every clan put a lot of effort to climbing the ladders of success. I think the Stone clan's rickety ladder fell apart a time or two in generations past. Since we lived near the top of the mountain, guarding the upper gates fell to us. We were close enough to the surface that we only had a half-mile or so of tunnels and stairs to run before we reached the upper gates. The halls at the top of the mountain were cold and drafty, but like I said, the Stone clan didn't have a lot of clout.

Orcam ran up behind me before I had traveled halfway to the gate, his two friends Bolvin and Wulgur in tow. They were armored from head to toe, but two huge ram horns adorned Bolvin's helmet. I'm sure he thought it looked great, but to me he just looked like a durned idiot. Just one more shining example of why I thought the dwarf was a braggart.

Orcam socked me on the shoulder and smiled. "Looks like you might get to name your axe today, cousin."

The dwarf couldn't hit much harder than most girls. I'm awfully glad of that because shoulder punches were how he mostly greeted me. "Yeah, maybe. Any idea who's attacking us?"

Bolvin marched up on my other side and said, "Nope, but I don't think it's those stinking orcs. They ain't smart enough to attack our upper gates. I'm guessing humans or maybe those uppity elves." He gave me a wicked grin. With his big-horned helmet, it made him look like a mentally challenged, bearded goat. "Don't you girls worry, though, I'm here to protect you."

I didn't like Bolvin, but he had a point. The orcs always attacked the main gates at ground level. I don't know if they were too stupid to scout for other entrances, too lazy to climb the mountain, or too bloodthirsty to have the patience to make the climb. Whatever the reason, they never attacked our upper gates. By Oblivion, their attacks on the ground level gates were always crazy tribal antics, unorganized and doomed to failure.

We kept marching and within moments, a cold draft blew through the corridor. Screams, cries of war, and the clangs of battle reached our ears. The enemy had breached the gates and, believe it or not, they were orcs.

I take back what I said about the dwarves in the hallway reminding me of ants. Ants are numerous, but our numbers were few compared to the orcs that swarmed through the gate in a dark gray tide of flesh, teeth, and rage.

They had stormed the gates, but luckily, more dwarven reinforcements like myself showed up

every second. The orcs' numbers were great, but they lacked training and didn't fight like a group. Dwarves, on the other hand, are battle trained from birth. It's joked that our first toy is an axe, and we cut our teeth on orc ears. We're trained to work together and we're trained to fight together. We also fight amongst ourselves, but that's training too, I suppose.

Grom grabbed my shoulder and forearm and Orcam out of the way. "You gonna stand there gawking or you gonna earn a name for that axe?"

Before I could reply, he rushed forward, plowing through orcs and dwarves alike, axe cutting a bloody trail of orc flesh until he became lost among the combatants.

My da's words spurred me to battle. I don't know if he took any pride in me or not, but I planned to take this opportunity to earn some boasting rights. By the Void, I'd do it or die trying.

I forgot about Orcam and his two friends as I raised my axe and followed Grom's lead. My heart pounded beneath my armor. I filled my lungs with cold mountain air tainted with the stench of orcs and blood.

The pig fornicators were pushed outside the gates even as I got there. It's a good thing. I hate trying to swing my axe in the close quarters of the tunnels. Outside, I would have the freedom to really cut loose.

The snow fell in gusting flurries, blizzard-like in its intensity. I looked for Grom, but couldn't find him. By Oblivion, everything further than twenty arm lengths became a white wall shadowed with a blur of dwarf and orc shapes. I picked the orc shape closest to me and charged, axe held high. The creature met my charge with a battle roar. Sprinkles of spit flew from its mouth. Its breath reeked of dead vulture.

My axe sliced faster than his long blade. I buried it in his rib cage, then yanked the weapon out. The blow flung him to the ground, and he lay in snow on his side. The white powder turned red as he bled out. I charged on to the next one.

The second orc I met was wilier than the first. He had a shield and knew how to use it. He blocked my axe, and I dodged the swing of his scimitar. If speed was all that mattered then we were an even match, but I knew his shield arm couldn't last long under the pounding of my axe. He cringed each time my axe slammed into his shield. His teeth grew more prominent with each blow, and his shield arm fell closer to his body with every swing of my axe. As we battled, the orc backed away from the gate, toward the nearby cliff.

I feared he would run so I doubled my axe work to keep him busy. It took all his skill to keep my blade from getting past his defenses. I could see the panic in his eyes, but I made sure he stayed too busy to turn and rabbit.

Finally, my axe blasted into his shield. It sank a half-inch into the poorly worked metal. I jerked the weapon back and blood filled the metal gap. The orc let out a roar of pain and flung his shield to the side. As his arm extended, I planted my foot into his stomach and pushed. A second later, his hind end hit the snow and my axe connected with his groin, sending his butt another six inches into the white powder.

I left him to wail and roll through the snow in agony. I looked for my next target as the orc bled into the powder.

An arctic wind gusted snow up from the cliff. It buffeted my armor and blew my beard back over my shoulder. The brass rings braided into my mustache clanged together like wind chimes in a hurricane. Snow speckled the air and swirled like a swarm of glacier bugs around me. I had to squint as the durned flakes obscured my vision and turned the world into shades of dark against the white foreground.

My battle against the half-skilled orc had taken me to the edge of the cliff and away from the battle. I didn't see anyone, but I could hear the bellowing cries of pain and the roars of triumph from both combatants as they echoed off the mountain walls. My brothers held their own against overwhelming odds, but the fight remained far from decided.

I had to protect the gate. I wouldn't let a single orc mire the Stone clan's halls. I couldn't allow the filth of orc flesh to taint and dishonor the name of my home or my clan.

A roar pierced the wind. I lifted my axe and turned to meet it. Two orcs plowed toward me

through the snow. Rotting fur hides covered their filthy gray bodies as they lifted their legs high to advance through the powder. Crudely tanned boar hide armor covered their heads, complete with dangling tusks that bounced and jiggled with each step. They pushed forward with scimitars held high.

I screamed a dwarfish war cry to Donnan and leapt forward through the waist deep snow to meet my enemies. They met my cry by shaking their heads and snarling into the sky; slobber flew from their thick lips and froze in the cold air.

I pulled my axe back to strike, but slowed my pace as a robed figure caught my attention. It stood several feet behind the orcs with its back against the precipice. Its arms rose to the heavens. A guttural chant carried on the wind.

A shaman.

I'd heard a lot of nasty rumors about them. I hoped that's all they were.

The priests of Okoom were supposed to be a nasty bit of work. I would have happily battled a dozen raging orcs before butting heads with an orc shaman. They could call upon their god and do the damndest things to their enemies. Not only did the pagan bastards do odd things to their foes, but they also did a might of unnaturalness to themselves. They filed their teeth to sharp points and tattooed their bodies from head to toe with the vile signs of Okoom. And if that weren't bad enough, they often amputated fingers or arms as sacrifices to their bloody god. I didn't want anything to do with magic. I'd heard about a dwarf being turned into a pile of quivering flesh as a shaman dissolved the warrior's bones within his body. I swore such a fate wouldn't fall upon me. I gritted my teeth and lowered my head as I charged through the snow with all my considerable might. I pushed the powder with the head of my axe and plowed forward with a speed that surprised me. I had to. If the gray shaman finished his prayer to Okoom, I would be finished and probably not in a dignified fighting fashion. Nope, I wouldn't stand for that.

Thigh deep in the snow, the orcs blocked my path, scimitars held high.

I turned sideways and pushed through the snow with my shoulder. My weapon trailed in the path behind me, ready to swing. Both orcs slashed down with their blades as my axe arced toward an orc's belly. The twin ring of scimitars striking armor clanged through the air as my axe met the orc's stomach. The heavy blade sliced completely through the orc and continued toward the second beast, but he jumped back before I could land the blow.

Entrails from the wounded orc erupted onto the snow and steamed in the cold air. The creature grabbed his innards and dropped to his knees, eyes wide and mouth open in shock. The snow turned red. I ignored it and turned to deal with the other orc.

The beast snarled and pulled his blade back.

Before the pig fornicator could complete his swing, I slammed the head of my axe into the orc's chest and sent him flying into the snow. The creature disappeared in a puff of white. I didn't look to see if he still had any fight in him. I had to reach the shaman if I ever wanted to battle again. I charged forward. Snow exploded around my legs as I pumped them with all my might. The shaman's chant reached a crescendo, spurring me on. The creature's tattooed claws balled into fists and shook at the heavens.

I roared my battle cry as I pulled my axe back for the killing blow.

The shaman's hands glowed with a sickening green energy as they dropped.

I screamed in pain as a searing cold washed over my body. My veins filled with ice, and frost coated my heart. My muscles became frozen blocks of flesh; tendons became icicles.

The orc roared in surprise as my frozen form slammed into his chest. The force knocked him backward. My momentum tipped the shaman over the edge of the cliff that had protected his back from a sneak attack by the dwarven army.

My frozen stomach quivered as the ground disappeared below me.

The shaman tumbled past with his mouth open in horror. The priest of Okoom fell toward the snow that hid the icy rapids half a mile below us. The shaman's terror made me want to smile, but I couldn't.

I fell through a world of frozen white. The air whistled around me. The rapids grew closer by the

second. It would be a good death, a warrior's death. I hoped one of my clan witnessed my bravery so that the bards could write an appropriate ballad. Unfortunately, my axe would have to be named posthumously.
That's how my luck rolls.