

BERYLL & OSIRIS  
BRACKHAUS

# ORC HAVEN



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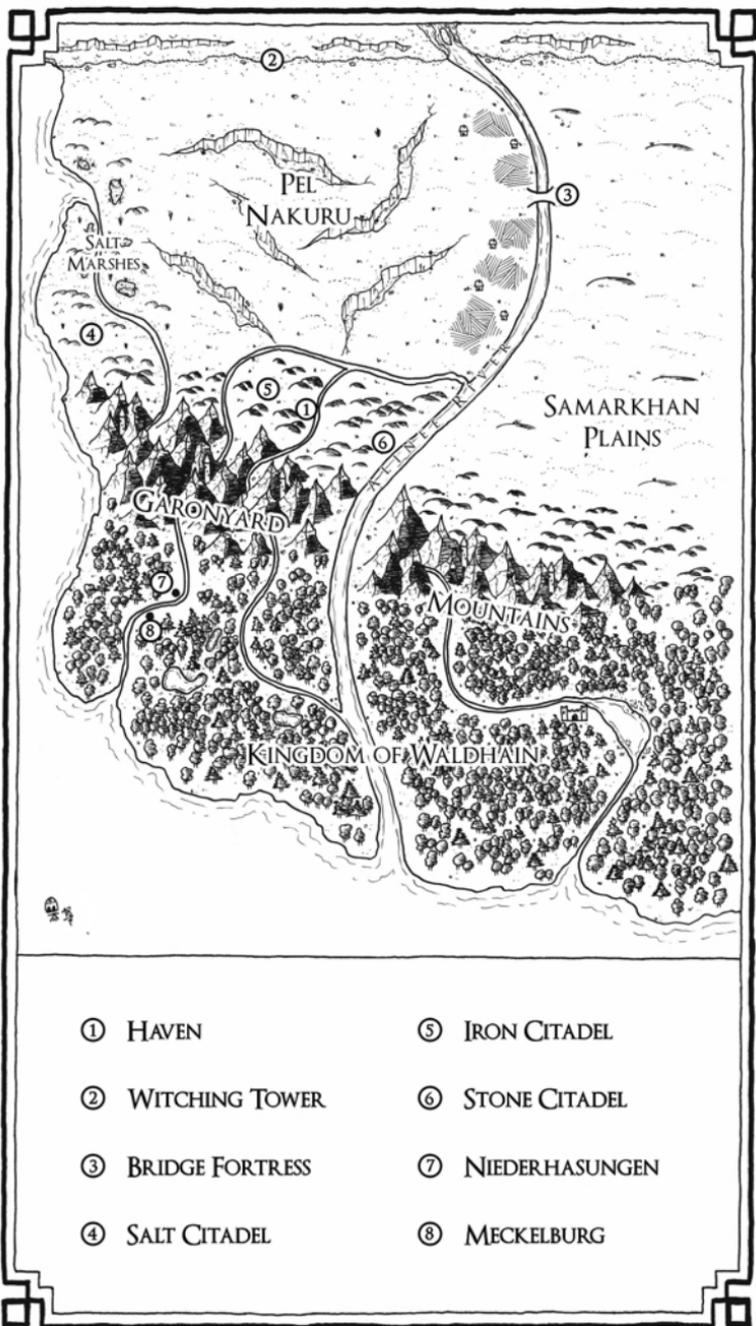
ORC  
HAVEN

## DEDICATION

For mom, who is our Irma and our Vash.

## CREDITS

A big Thank You to our beta readers –  
Alana, Aleks, Eija, Leseratte, Tif and Uhu –  
for keeping both our heads and the story straight.



① HAVEN

⑤ IRON CITADEL

② WITCHING TOWER

⑥ STONE CITADEL

③ BRIDGE FORTRESS

⑦ NIEDERHASUNGEN

④ SALT CITADEL

⑧ MECKELBURG

## CHAPTER 1

Vash sniffed the pale blue berry. It didn't smell of much, but that might have been due to the fact that her fingers smelled so much stronger, sour with sweat. Cautiously, she bit into it and nearly spit it out when its sharp taste exploded on her tongue, tangy enough to prick like needles. She had to force herself to keep her mouth closed and wait. It didn't burn, so that was good. Her only way of telling whether it was poisonous was to trust her instincts, and so far, they had proven surprisingly accurate.

Like those roots she had found her maggots chewing on once. She had told them to keep away, but 'no', they just had to. A few hours later, they had been whimpering about their belly aches. They had been lucky nothing worse had happened. They could have died. Or they could have been back in the pits, where they would have been thrashed – first for disobeying and then for whining.

With a shudder, Vash forced that thought away. They were all lucky to have gotten out.

She swallowed the bit of berry and waited for that queasy feeling she got whenever she tried something inedible. Surprisingly few things out here were. The orcs' fabled constitution apparently also applied to being able to eat almost anything. Until their escape from the pits, she had never eaten anything but the slop cooked in their huge, grimy kettles. All the food delivered to them from outside went into those pots and was cooked until it didn't taste of much at all. Even when their guardians had been set on slim rations, they had still received plenty. Vash were more important to the war effort than some stupid grunt that could easily be replaced. Vash were who made those replacements. They were the rarest kind of orc – those who could breed.

Her stomach grumbled angrily, but it was a pang of hunger, not nausea. Vash smiled. The berries were good and there were several bushes of them. A single one didn't bear many fruits, but all together, they would feed the maggots tonight. And, if she managed to reign them in, they might even have some for tomorrow. She popped the other half into her mouth, and this time, she welcomed the taste. She started picking the bushes clean, gathering the berries into the makeshift bundle she had made of a tattered cloak.

Her own clothes were a ragged mix, the simple, coarse shift she had been wearing in the pits and whatever she had picked up since – a pair of sturdy leather pants that were a little too short, and a thick, padded tunic which she wore over the shift. Her lower arms and her feet were wrapped in rags both for warmth and protection. She'd even found a pair of fitting boots on a corpse a few days ago.

"Vash?"

The voice calling her was small and pitiful, full of fear, but it made a flash of anger run through Vash. She had told them again and again to stay inside the cave. It wasn't safe out here. Not for her and most certainly not for screaming, little maggots.

Stretching up to her full height made her back complain after having worked bent over for a while. Her bundle was nearly full and not many berries remained on the bushes. It was one of the two biggest maggots, the one with the crooked tusks, that was stumbling through the underbrush like an idiot, attracting pits knew what with its squealing. Its bright green skin didn't provide any camouflage in the mud-brown of the above-ground world.

Her first urge was to grab it and shake sense into it, but she didn't. Usually, that made them howl, and that was

the last thing they needed now.

"I'm here," she called out, trying to keep her voice low enough so it wouldn't attract any hostile attention and yet loud enough so the maggot would hear her.

Luckily, it was paying attention. As soon as it turned in her direction, it caught sight of her and hurried over. Judging by how scared it looked, it knew that it shouldn't have come out here. Vash expected it to cower before her, but instead it ran straight at her and clung to her with its short arms.

"Vash!"

What the pits was wrong with the little shit? The urge to peel it off herself warred with the urge to hug it protectively. They weren't supposed to coddle the maggots. Strong, dumb, merciless orc grunts weren't forged through care and tenderness. The instinct to do it anyway plagued all vash, but only after the fall of Dark Queen Nakuru did those instincts override the iron control she had maintained over her subjects. Vash shook herself. Since the maggot only came up to her waist, she knelt down and wrapped one arm around it. Was it actually sniffing? The Queen's fall sure was doing funny things to all of them.

"I told you to stay in the cave," she admonished gruffly, once it had settled down. "Why did you follow me?"

It muttered a reply she couldn't understand.

"Speak clearly!"

It shrank away, but caught itself. "Vash stop breathing," it repeated, now paying attention to the words.

For a short, blissful moment, Vash had no idea what it was talking about. She was breathing perfectly fine. Then it hit her who it had to be talking about. The old toad.

"No..."

Vash stared down at the little maggot. It had to be mistaken. The old toad wouldn't dare leave her alone with the maggots. She couldn't just up and die. She had made Vash

run away with her and the maggots in the first place. Yes, she was old as pits, ugly and wrinkled and stinking. And their flight had taken its toll on her, the lack of rest and food weakening her. But she had been taking a nap when Vash left to scavenge for food. She had told Vash what to do all her life. When Vash had been a little maggot, when they had found out that she would grow up to be vash, in those short, extra years between being a maggot and vash, when she had been nothing, when she had become vash, during her first breeding and after, when she had raged like every fresh vash trying to keep her first maggot... The old toad had always been there.

"Vash? Am scared."

The maggot was standing a pace away from her, now hugging itself, yellow eyes huge with fear. Orcs weren't afraid of anything. Orcs were proud and strong. Orcs got fear thrashed out of them when they were maggots.

Only there wasn't anyone but her to do the thrashing now and pits take it all.

Vash pulled the maggot back in and hugged it with both arms now. I'm scared too, she thought, but there was no one she could tell, and no one to hug her.

"It's all good," she lied, "I've got you." And that wasn't a lie.

Concentrating on the things she could control, that was the way forward. One step at a time. Just like the old toad had always said.

"Look, I've found berries for us to eat. They are very nice."

That got the maggot's interest and it struggled free of her embrace to hungrily stare at the berry-filled bundle, though it didn't dare reach for it.

Vash picked one out and held it out to the little shit. "Here, you may have one."

Of course it didn't take the time to savour it. Just snatched it out of her hand, stuffed it into its mouth and

swallowed greedily. It did look mighty pleased with itself.

Vash picked up the bundle and made sure it was tucked in tightly so no berries would fall out. Only then, did she start walking back towards the rocky hillside where they had found the narrow cave that had served as their shelter for the last two nights.

The maggot followed close behind, not straying from her side. Before they ran, it had never seen the outside of the pits. Maggots remained at the pits for the first four to five years of their lives. Then they were taken away to be trained into proper orc grunts. Only those discovered to be vash were allowed to remain. It took another three to four years for them to mature enough for their first breeding. Vash never left the pits at all.

The wide open world under the even wider sky was too big to comprehend. It was hard to judge the size of things or how far away they actually were. What looked like a nearby rock might turn out to be a distant hill.

It was as scary to Vash as it was to the maggots, but she didn't show it. If she appeared weak, the maggots wouldn't respect her, if they didn't respect her, they wouldn't obey her, if they didn't obey her, they would get themselves killed. She wasn't going to let that happen.

It was a long way to walk. It was a small miracle that the maggot hadn't gotten lost while looking for her. It was keeping up well despite the fact that its legs were much shorter than hers and it practically had to run. It would have made a good grunt, hardy and strong. Another month or two, and they would have come to take it.

In the last year, they had come to take them younger and younger. The great armies of the Queen needed bodies. They were told that her plans to conquer all were progressing as intended. Vash had never doubted it. She should have. If everything was going according to plan, why were things changing? But doubting, or even just

thinking, weren't things a vash did. A vash bred and nurtured and obeyed.

The first rumours that something extraordinary was happening had come only days before the Queen's fall. Rumours that they were not conquering, but in fact being attacked. That the other races had built an army of their own, that they were trying to overthrow the Queen. They had all scoffed at the notion. Nakuru was all-powerful. She was undying. Even without a single orc grunt to do her bidding, she could smite all of them. How dare they raise a hand against her?

And then she was gone. Her eternal presence snuffed out like a candle's flame. Her eternal grasp on all her creatures evaporated like sweat dripping on a burning ember.

Vash had no idea what had happened and not much interest in the details either. The sudden chaos engulfing her well-ordered existence had kept her plenty busy. No more food being brought was just the first minor sign. Some of their guardians had turned on them and the maggots, while others, who had never seemed different from the attackers, had defended them more fiercely than Vash had ever thought she'd see an orc fight. Not with mad rage and bloodlust, but with honest conviction and care for their charges. Huddling with the other vash and the maggots, she hadn't known what to do.

Until the old toad barged in and grabbed her, shouted in her face to take the maggots she was pointing at, load them up with anything useful she could find, and to come along. The maggots chosen made no sense to Vash, some of them were almost old enough to be taken away for training, but two were still tiny things, barely able to walk on their own, though back then the thought hadn't even crossed her mind.

Old Toad knew all the tunnels of the pits, knew how to avoid the fighting, knew how to get out.

Vash hadn't asked any questions. She had been too numb. She had obeyed, like she was used to.

Later, she had asked why old toad had picked her. Why not a more experienced vash? Why not all of them? Old Toad had scoffed at her. Because she was the only one who didn't have a maggot brewing in her belly, she had said. Her next breeding had been only days away. Because she was young and strong and reliable. Vash had preened at the praise. How stupid she had been.

It seemed like years had passed, but it was only a few days.

Now Old Toad was dead and the only thing that stood between the maggots and a world that wanted them dead was Vash.

But maybe she wasn't dead. Maybe the maggots hadn't checked properly. Maybe she was still just taking a nap. Vash tried not to cling to that hope.

The hill loomed above her, a dark shadow in the dusk sky. The setting sun looked like a bruise to Vash. The vast sky over their heads had scared Old Toad, but Vash had stretched up to it, feeling like for the first time in her life she was able to breathe freely, like there was enough air. And how different the air tasted out here. The pits had been filled with the sour stench of sweat, mixed with the cloying sweetness of rot and the air had always been thick with smoke. Breathing in out here felt like she was cleaning her insides. Old Toad had coughed and cursed at it.

Soon, night would fall. A night much too bright, Old Toad had muttered. The sky was changing, she had told Vash. Eternal gloom and smoke had blanketed the Queen's realm, but now that she was gone, it was clearing away. At night, tiny lights dotted the sky, and, during the day, it was a kind of colour that 'blue' was too small a word for, a beautiful colour.

Daylight was too bright for her eyes, like staring into

the fire for too long, but she was sure she would get used to it. Orcs were hardy creatures, they could thrive even in the most horrid places. And despite Old Toad's muttered complaints, despite the hunger and the fear and the danger, Vash didn't think the outside such a horrid place at all.

If she could only find a place away from the orcs gone mad and the other races hunting them down and from predators, a place where she could raise the maggots in peace.

The word should have sounded strange to her ears. Orcs were creatures of war. Vash shook her head. Had been. Everything was changed now. A new and terrible world, Old Toad had muttered. A new world, full of impossible things suddenly becoming possible, Vash thought. Old Toad was wrong. Maybe she wasn't so good at obeying after all, when it took only a few days for her to think all these forbidden thoughts, just because there was no one to thrash her for it anymore. Because Old Toad was dead and Vash would make the decisions now.

And she had no idea what to do.

They reached the entrance to the small cave and the maggot dashed ahead, eager to get back into its meagre protection. Vash had to duck to get in. She was tall for a vash and she had always moved hunched over in the pits. Not just so she wouldn't constantly scrape her head, but also so as not to attract attention. A vash wasn't supposed to be unique or special. They were supposed to blend together into a group, all working obediently towards the same goal. Standing up straight, making herself big, like the pit guardians did... it felt strange and wonderful at the same time.

Inside, the small fire had filled the cave with stifling heat and smoke, mixing with the stink of maggots. Making it cosy like the pits, Old Toad had muttered. Vash sniffed. She hadn't told Old Toad that she preferred the

clean air outside and a fresh breeze touching her skin, scared of being scolded.

The other big maggot was crouched next to the fire, opposite the unmoving bundle that was Old Toad. Tending the fire like she had ordered it to while trying to stay as far away from the dead vash as possible. The other maggots were huddled together at the back of the cave, pressed together into a pile of limbs and big yellow eyes blinking at her fearfully. She quickly counted those eyes to make sure none were missing. All were there.

Eight maggots. So many mouths to feed and still so few, compared to the horde back at the pits.

The maggot who had come to fetch her stood near the fire, unsure of what to do. Vash stepped past it and carefully set down the bundle of berries before she moved to the other bundle. Old Toad didn't move. Vash didn't have to touch her to know that she really wasn't breathing. She could hear it – or rather, couldn't. Her breath had rattled like a half-empty box of flint stones for years. Now, she was silent. Old Toad was well and truly dead.

She sat down next to her with a grunt.

None of the maggots dared to speak. It should have been a welcome respite from their usual babbling and whining, but instead Vash found the silence oppressive.

She reached out and poked at the bundle. It didn't move. Old Toad had pulled the tattered cloak she had always wrapped herself in tightly around herself and over her head. Vash felt no urge to look into her face so she left it as it was. She took a few more breaths to steel herself. She couldn't leave the corpse where it was. The maggots wouldn't go near it and she needed to feed them.

With another grunt, she heaved herself up again and picked up the bundle. So thin and light. How could a vash she had been scared of all her life have so quickly become this tiny thing she could discard as easily as a bucket of

shit? Better not to think about it too much. More important was where to put her. Not outside. A corpse might attract predators or carrion crows which in turn might attract even more dangerous attention. Near the cave entrance seemed sensible. Might even do some good that way in keeping the maggots from wandering out.

She set the body down against the uneven wall and used a few larger stones to weigh it down and hide it at least a little bit.

When she turned back to the fire, the smaller maggots were already starting to disentangle. Vash would have expected their interest to be solely on the berries she had brought, but their eyes were on her. Still scared. They needed her. The moment she stepped close to the fire they swarmed her, all seeking some sort of contact, skin on skin. There were too many to hug all of them, but she tried, allowed them to bury her under a heap of small, sniffing, whining bodies.

Only when they started settling down did she notice that the one with the crooked tusk had remained by the bundle of berries, guarding it with an earnest expression on its little face. The other bigger maggot sat next to the fire, tending it like it had been told, watching her with big, sad eyes full of yearning.

Seeing them like that made her heart contract painfully. They were being so good, so brave. How could she be any less?

"Come here now," she told both of them gruffly and they hurried over to her, each receiving a hug of their own.

Then she unpacked the berries and started feeding her little horde.

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