



THE MINOTAUR WARS
VOLUME II
TIDES OF BLOOD

RICHARD A. KNAAK



THE STORY THUS FAR . . .

As the War of Souls spreads, General Hotak takes command of the minotaur empire in a bloody coup. He slays the corrupt Chot, then orders death to all those tied by blood or oath to him.

Not all suffer the wrath of Hotak. The ghosts and the sorcery of Hotak's wife, Nephera, high priestess of the Forerunner cult, combine to hunt all the usurper's enemies, but some manage to escape. Rahm, a general of the Imperial Guard, swears to avenge Chot. Faros, Chot's nephew, is mistaken for a servant, and arrested and sentenced to the mines of Vyrox, where he will toil under the whip of the cruel overseer, Paug.

As his enemies die and scatter, Hotak plots a grand invasion of Ansalon. He makes a pact with the most unlikely of allies, the ogres—historic enemy of the minotaur race—forging the new alliance with the ambitious ogre leader Grand Lord Golgren.

In Vyrox, the oppressed workers revolt. Trapping Maritia, Hotak's daughter, who is visiting the mining camp, the workers appear on the verge of victory, until legionaries led by her brother, Bastion, arrive. Faros manages to kill Paug, but most of his friends are slain, and he himself is recaptured.

Rahm returns to assassinate Hotak, but Nephera discovers his plot. Ardnor, her eldest and the lord of the black-helmed Protectors, gives chase. Rahm flees. There are tensions and rivalries between the legionaries and the Protectors; and when Rahm attacks Ardnor, Kolot, trying to save his brother, perishes.

Faros is taken aboard Golgren's galley. To seal the pact with the ogres, Hotak has sold his own kind as slaves, to their ancient enemies. And now, as the War of Souls nears its climax, and the invasion of Ansalon grows imminent, Hotak reigns supreme.

But in the ogre land of Kern, an obscure slave makes a desperate escape. . . .

CHAPTER I



BLOOD TRAIL

He had managed to survive a week since his escape, or was it a week? The passage of time had long blurred for him. He did not even know how long he had been enslaved here. Two years? Three? Maybe as many as five?

Only fragmented rumors passed on by those who better understood the guards' brutal tongue had given him or any of the others a sense of the enormous changes sweeping through the world. He knew this much: The continent of Ansalon was at war; an enigmatic and charismatic figure known only as Mina was gathering armies under her banner in the name of some unnamed god. The Knights of Solammnia, respected adversaries of the minotaurs, had been forced to retreat, and retreat. Well-known places, such as Sanction and Solace, were said to either be preparing for war, under attack, or already conquered. Some of the Dragon Overlords were said to be missing. In his own homeland, among the multitudinous islands east of Ansalon, the usurper who had condemned him and so many others to this living hell continued to build up legion after legion in preparation for their planned invasion of the mainland.

Yet these and other tales from the outside had meant little to him in the long run. With the other slaves, he had toiled and dreamed of escape, never thinking the latter truly possible.

Then the guard had turned his back at just the right moment. A sudden primal urge made him swing the shovel with all his power, cracking the huge overseer's skull. In the heat of the moment, he broke his shackles and ran, ran into the parched wilderness surrounding the camp, and continued running for endless miles.

For seven days he had managed to hide from the eager bands of hunters. Three times they nearly caught him, but he learned how to crouch in slime and mud and how to stay clear of them. The search parties grew fewer, turned in different directions. . . .

Now the ogres were on the hunt for him again.

They had been out late last night, their torches fluttering around the harsh, rocky landscape like huge fireflies. They had scoured the barren region in their search for the stubborn escapee, but their torchlight gave them away at a distance. It had taken some risky maneuvering in the dark—the dry hills and ancient ravines treacherous enough in daylight—but he managed to stay ahead of them until they had finally tired of the dark chase.

Now, with first light, they had returned.

He counted more than twenty, each in teams of two or three. The ogres were tall, husky, tusked brutes with dirty mops of black hair and shaggy, flea-infested brown hides. They wore only gray, stained, goatskin kilts like his own and most carried huge, thick clubs, well worn from use. A select few wielded whips with pointed metal tips, which they used to urge along monstrous, savage lizards almost the size of horses. The meredrakes acted as bloodhounds for the ogres, tasting the air with their slaverling tongues and sniffing the trail with their long snouts.

All this for one minotaur.

All this for Faros.

Crouched behind the crumbling side of a sandstone rise, his scarred, bovine countenance hunkered low, Faros judged their progress. None of the search parties headed toward the narrow

cave he had discovered in the predawn hours. If he turned and raced back to the cave, the minotaur suspected that the ogres might pass right by him, even with the eager meredrakes seeking his scent. After so much time as a guest in the domain of the sadistic Sahd, Faros had learned more than a few ways to throw the tan-and-green reptiles off their mark. His luck might still hold.

Confident that he could not be observed, Faros wended his way down the unstable slope. The tenacity of the ogre search parties, after a week of intense hunting, surprised him. But with little else to occupy their off hours, the ogres from the mining camp made a sport out of hunting down and killing the occasional escaped slave. Now and then, their cruel taskmaster even turned his back and allowed one or two slaves to sprint for freedom, just so that he and his minions could track them like doomed game.

Sahd must be furious with the time they are taking! Faros thought bitterly. And he hates it when they lose a quarry. How many heads would he crack? How many wretches did he whip to death daily, just to satisfy his sick impulses?

He had no sooner had thought of Sahd, his great enemy, when in the distance, he heard the familiar harsh bark that sent chills down the spine of every slave worker. When Sahd commanded, slaves died, died horribly, even if the reason was sometimes whimsical.

Faros peered warily over the edge. Sure enough, the gargantuan figure of the ogre leader stood below him, fortunately at a safe distance. One of Sahd's meaty hands clutched his long, wicked whip. Sahd turned to berate one of his underlings, and suddenly Faros found himself staring directly into his horrific visage. He ducked down, shivering, but no one had glimpsed him.

The fiendish overlord of the ogre mining camp haunted Faros's nightmares. The minotaur's ragged brown fur failed to hide the long, deep scars that crisscrossed his back, arms, legs, and chest—in fact, nearly every part of his body. Many were the product of Sahd's own nine-tailed whip. Sahd's flat, squashed countenance, reminiscent of a fleshless skull, would twist into an expression of evil pleasure whenever he had an excuse to punish Faros or

another minotaur slave. Sahd loved his foul work. He was worse than the worst guards at Vyrox—a distant memory now.

Vyrox. Faros gazed up. Thick, dark smoke filled the sky; this northern region of the kingdom of Kern was a volcanic area. Sahd's Camp—that was the only name by which it was known—lay nestled between a pair of high, black peaks created by some long ago eruption of titanic proportions. The desolate location had, on his first day there, made Faros almost yearn for Vyrox, the brutal mining camp run by minotaurs, where he had slaved before coming here. In Vyrox, he and thousands of others loyal to the previous emperor—Faros's uncle, Chot—had been condemned to servitude; their backbreaking labor provided the raw materials needed to fulfill the usurper Hotak's grandiose ambitions. Yet, despite the harsh conditions in that place, at least Vyrox was a strategic base of the homeland; at least in Vyrox prisoners could hope and dream, however deluded their dreams might be, of one day regaining their place in minotaur society.

Here . . . across the sea from his beloved, betrayed homeland . . . here in the realm of ogres, there was never the slightest illusion of hope.

He watched as a subordinate nervously knelt before Sahd. The lesser ogre grunted something that made the large ogre leader laugh harshly. Sahd pointed west with his whip then marched out of sight in that direction. The other ogres meekly followed.

Stirring, Faros abandoned his position. The diamond-hard rocks cut even his heavily calloused feet as he descended, but Faros paid them no mind. The sandals he had worn when first arriving in this place had long ago deteriorated, and the ogres felt no need to supply their slaves with footwear. The minotaurs were expected to work until they died, and then they were replaced by newcomers.

The thought of being dragged back to Sahd's hell urged Faros on. No, he wouldn't be dragged back; they would torture and bleed him to death on the spot. Good—he'd rather die than kneel under the ogre's whip again.

He was barely subsisting on what little life existed in this barren area. He caught and ate the tiny, spine-crested cousins of the meredrakes, but they crumbled in one's mouth and tasted like ash. The prickly green plants found near shaded spots were better, but rarer. Had he been in minotaur lands, Faros would have been more resourceful, but he felt lost, a stranger here. The continent of Ansalon did not welcome his kind.

And so, mostly he hid among the rocks, doing nothing and seeing no future beyond sundown. Escape had been his chief goal and now that he had temporarily succeeded, Faros had no plans. All he had was the thirst for vengeance that boiled within him.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, the minotaur skirted its edge toward the west. His long ears remained taut as he listened for any sounds. Narrow, dark eyes watched warily under thick brow ridges. When he felt certain that it was safe, he moved swiftly, darting to the next protective scattering of rocks.

A horn blared from the east. Planted against a twisted outcropping, Faros snorted grim satisfaction. If the horn was any indication, the hunters were heading away from his vicinity. He started to relax; his sanctum was only a short distance farther.

But then movement from atop a jagged rise caught his attention. He threw himself into a shallow indentation and, holding his breath, watched as two ogres appeared from the north.

A pair separated from the main party. One of the ogres strained with the worn leather leash of a hissing meredrake, the huge, toothy maw of the reptile snapping as if seeking fresh meat. The two ogres peered down from their high vantage point. They were not yet looking in his direction, though. Faros followed their gazes, at first seeing nothing but the dry, windswept hills.

Then something came hurtling around a huge rock, something running desperately.

Another minotaur. Loose links of chain still attached to broken fetters dragged behind him, raising a slight cloud. Likewise, broken chains dangled from his manacles, whipping him as he ran. Red welts covered his thick snout.

A moment later, a second, more bedraggled figure followed the first. The second escaped slave stumbled badly every time he put pressure on his left leg. He had also lost part of one horn. Both bore the ugly scars of many beatings and whippings. From this distance, Faros didn't recognize them, nor did he care.

Above, the ogres eagerly shouted something in their coarse tongue. One raised a curled goat horn and blew it hard. The shrill blare echoed throughout the hills.

Faros swore. The renewed zeal of the hunting parties had not been due to him but rather to this sorry pair. He silently cursed the two minotaurs for heading west as he had, instead of the obvious retreat to the east, the direction of the sea and the island empire of their own race. Never mind that, as far as he knew, no slave had ever made it there, never returned home.

Perhaps this pair had intended to elude the first pursuit, circle around from behind the hills, and then make their way to the Blood Sea, but now they were as good as trapped.

And because of them, Faros, too, was facing a dire fate.

Now he could not return to the cave, at least not immediately. He didn't dare move in that direction. Let the pair run; let the ogres follow. All he had to do was let the hunt play out. He would backtrack; he knew where he could be safe for a few hours.

Then, as Faros watched, the first minotaur suddenly stopped in his tracks. He looked back and shouted something to his hobbled companion. That one in turn glanced over his shoulder. After an anxious pause, the limping figure finally returned his gaze to his comrade, shaking his head frantically.

His expression grim, the first one did an astonishing thing; he started back toward the slave camp. With a shrug of his shoulders, his injured companion did his best to follow. They seemed oblivious to the looming threat of the ogre posse.

What had just taken place, Faros did not understand. But if it led the escaped slaves and their ogre pursuers farther away from his secret sanctum, then so much the better.

He looked up and saw that the two ogres had disappeared.

Cautiously continuing along the winding path, Faros finally neared the cave entrance, hidden by brush and shadows, that he had stumbled on by chance. The entrance was curved and narrow, so much so that he scraped his back and chest on the diamond-hard rock when entering. Even if the slit of an entrance were noticed, no ogre would think to search in this tight place.

His muscles taut, a vein in his neck throbbing, Faros laboriously squeezed his way inside. The low ceiling forced him to walk at a crouch. Farther in, there was room enough for him to stretch out a bit. The almost-oval chamber had a dank, musty smell, and old bones indicated that it had once been the lair of some wild creature. Still, the conditions were ideal compared to what he had grown accustomed to as a slave. In the ogre mining facility, most of the slaves simply slept outdoors, huddled up against each other, regardless of their unwashed smell, suffering the night elements as best they could. The only housing structures in the camp were crude, wooden huts for Sahd and his overseers.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, Faros discovered a stranger had violated his hiding place.

The minotaur lying on the ground moaned and tried to slide back away from him, but his right arm and both of his legs did not seem to move as they should. He had been brutally injured, no doubt beaten by heavy, wooden clubs. Sahd's overseers knew how to punish a slave and yet leave just enough life in him for a day's work. It looked as though someone, however, had gone too far with this pathetic soul, perhaps the extreme taskmaster himself.

Even his face had not escaped punishment. His snout had been crushed in, and though it had healed, it would forever boast a severe twisted look. Many of his teeth had been broken or were missing; one eye was shut from heavy bruising. Burned into his left shoulder was the humiliating brand the ogres used for all their minotaur slaves—including Faros—a pair of broken horns within a triangle.

"Kos-Kos-Kos. . . ." the stranger repeated over and over to some invisible figure, looking beyond Faros.

Faros had no idea whether Kos was the injured slave's name, that of one of his friends, or some other incomplete word. Faros did not care what the fool slave was saying. All he knew was that by finding the cave, and babbling so loudly, the newcomer was putting him in jeopardy.

It would be too much trouble to drag the minotaur out—and some distance away. That meant that Faros himself had to leave, as soon as possible. He knew of another cave up a hill some minutes away. It was a less-protected refuge, but better to go there than to wait here until the meredrakes tracked down this one's obvious blood trail.

As Faros started to edge away, the injured minotaur gasped, "P-please . . . S-Sahd . . . no . . ."

At mention of the dread taskmaster's name, a chill ran up Faros's spine. He glanced indifferently at the broken form of the slave.

"No . . ." murmured the stricken figure, drifting off. His body twitched from obvious pain even as he became unconscious.

Faros snorted, then continued outside. The slave was obviously delirious and already as good as dead. Faros was only concerned for himself. The failed revolt in Vyrox had taught him the folly of worrying about anything but his own hide.

A dry, oppressive wind arose. Grating dust filled Faros's nostrils as he headed away. There was no sign of the other escapees or their pursuers. But he had to hurry.

As he stumbled toward the next rocky hillside, he heard movement from the north. Faros ducked behind an outcropping. Off to his right, an ogre was creeping warily toward him—no, past him and toward the cave. But the dull creature was sniffing the air, like one of the meredrakes, and was obviously unsure.

Faros held his breath as the ogre, club ready, looked around. The broad, flat nostrils flared. Tusked mouth opening in anticipation, the dust-covered figure moved closer to the cave.

As Faros watched from nearby, the ogre passed the entrance at first without noticing it. Then the ogre suddenly whirled, club raised, with its bestial gaze fixed on the narrow passage.



Faros could only guess that the injured minotaur had spoken or moaned. Either way, his movement had signed his death warrant.

The huge ogre now peered inside the slit mouth of the cave then entered cautiously. A sudden indecision overwhelmed Faros, and despite his earlier determination to stay hidden, he reached down and took hold of a jagged rock the size of his fist.

As he neared the mouth, however, he heard the brutal grunt of the ogre, then a slight sound that might have been the stricken minotaur. A heavy, final thud followed.

Rock held tight, Faros quickly slipped away behind some rocks. He had barely found his position when the ogre, the head of his club dripping red, squeezed through to the outside.

Faros eagerly swung his makeshift weapon, failing to effect a killing strike, but managing to hit his foe hard on the temple. With a savage grunt, the ogre flattened against the hillside. The rock itself cracked in two, tumbling from Faros's grip. Blood stained one side of the ogre's piggy face, but other than slowing him for the moment, the strike appeared to have no great effect.

Before the huge warrior could bring up his club, however, Faros crashed into him. Despite the force of the collision, the larger, better-fed ogre controlled the advantage. He kept Faros from goring him then struck the escaped slave hard in the muzzle.

They twisted around and around. The ogre pushed Faros back and managed to raise his weapon. The minotaur ducked back as the heavy club came within inches of his snout.

"F'han . . . Uruv Suurt!" growled the ogre, yellowed teeth bared. "D'kai f'han!"

Despite his long captivity, Faros understood little of the ancient language spoken by his savage overseers. But he knew "Uruv Suurt" was the Old Ogre term for *minotaur*; as for the rest, he only had to look at the ogre's furious red orbs to get the meaning. The ogre had no intention of bringing back a live prisoner.

The beastman raised his club again. Faros surprised him by stepping forward, a maneuver that brought an expression of pleasure and anticipation to the ogre's grotesque countenance.

The club came down hard.

But Faros stepped aside so fast that his adversary was thrown off balance. Momentum sent the club and its wielder flying. The club struck the earth, raising a small cloud of dust.

Faros threw himself at his off-balance foe. He hit the ogre hard then slammed his foot down on the handle of the club. The force of his kick tore the weapon from the ogre's grip.

Before the brutish figure could recover, Faros kned him in the stomach. Doubled over, the ogre reached for his weapon.

The minotaur seized it first. He brought it up quickly, catching his opponent under the chin. Bone cracked, and with a harsh cry, the bleeding ogre fell backward with a heavy thud.

Eyes crimson, nostrils flaring, Faros stepped over his fallen foe. The ogre struggled to rise but was too stunned. Faros brought the club down with all his strength. He did it again and again, long after it was clear that the ogre was dead.

At last sated, Faros dropped the splintered club. He had not stalked the ogre because of any foolish thought of either saving or avenging the wounded minotaur slave. Only an overwhelming desire to kill one of his tormentors had driven him to this act.

His wits returning, he dragged the body away to conceal it. Faros dumped it in a shallow, winding ravine beyond the hill. The other ogres would have to search long and hard to find the corpse.

Faros returned to the scene and did his best to remove any signs of the struggle, including the blood shed by the ogre. Soon, all that remained was the beastman's club. Faros almost discarded it, then decided better. He glanced at the cave then eyed the direction in which he had last seen the other escaping minotaurs. The blood-lust rose in his throat.

Faros started off in the direction of the pair of escaped slaves. Their trail was easy to find and the second trail—left by the ogres pursuing them—was clear, following closely behind. The two ogres alone might not have bothered Faros so much, but along with their prints were those of an impressively huge meredrake.

The vengeance-seeking minotaur pushed on. Faros ranged to the side of the tracks, climbing up the nearest hill. He realized where the path would lead the hunters and prey, and knew a swifter route.

It did not take him long to catch up. As he might have expected, the two minotaurs had gotten lost in the maze of hills while searching for the third member of their party. They had entered a cul-de-sac, a narrow passage halting at the edge of one of the highest, most foreboding black hills. To ascend the sheer cliff face, the pair would have needed to sprout wings.

The ogres and their massive, scaly hound had them backed into a corner there.

The minotaur with the troubled leg was down on one knee. Even with the aid of his companion, he could not seem to rise and aid the fight. The two escaped slaves were breathing rapidly, not only exhausted but also aware that they were facing the final defeat.

In mangled Common, Sahd had more than once told the minotaurs that death was the only sure thing awaiting those who attempted to flee. To illustrate that harsh code, he often had the guards bring back only the heads of the fugitives, which he then displayed on pikes as a lesson to the rest. That did not deter others from trying to escape, though, for in truth, the slaves had very little to lose.

Faros almost left the foolish pair to their dismal fate. They deserved to end their lives in the belly of the meredrake for such feeble failure. Others had lasted far longer, even made their way to freedom—or so he'd like to imagine. Yet these two had only managed to get this far.

But then the smell of the blood on his club reminded him of more urgent desires. It compelled him to think of something that made him bare his teeth in a mockery of a rare smile.

He shifted, edging around and closer, eyeing the meredrake's handler, a broad-shouldered beast tugging hard to keep the lizard under control.

One of the slaves noticed Faros, and looked his way in astonishment.

The ogres followed the slave's gaze.

Gritting his teeth, Faros clutched the club tightly and acted.

The lizard's tongue lashed out, tasting the air and the scent of trapped, fearful meat. The handler, warned by his comrade, looked toward Faros—just as the angry minotaur landed atop the straining meredrake.

The thick, roughly scaled body softened his fall, but not enough to keep him from losing his grip on the club. The weapon spiraled down, nearly striking one of the escapees. That one bent and grabbed it with a flicker of hope in his eyes.

The lumbering meredrake roared in surprise. It writhed, ripping free from its handler as it tried to bite the thing on its back.

One reckless swipe of the long, powerful tail bowled over the ogre who had been holding the leash. The other ogre, with a heavy, well-worn human sword in one hand, tried to get near enough to thrust at Faros, but the meredrake's flailing kept him at bay.

Faros struggled to hold on, managing to wrap his arms around the ridged throat of the huge lizard. The meredrake tried to shake him off, whirling and lunging, but to no avail.

Now the minotaur slave who had retrieved the club pushed into view, brandishing the weapon. The fresh distraction kept the beast from fully concentrating on the rider clutching his back.

Imagining his arms wrapped around Sahd's throat, Faros squeezed his arms together, applying all his strength to the constricting pressure. Its breath coming out in harsh rasps, the slavering meredrake turned, stumbled, and shuffled away laboriously.

A lash struck Faros on the shoulder. The handler had gotten to his feet and now joined with his comrade to try to deal with the unwanted intruder. He whipped savagely at the minotaur repeatedly, the hooked metal tips biting into Faros's flesh. The pain coursed deep, but a part of Faros knew this pain and found it almost welcome and familiar. He had long experience with the incessant torture meted out by Sahd and his cruel minions.

The meredrake continued to spin and turn, seeking desperate escape from the choking grip. Faros increased the pressure, forcing the giant lizard around until it faced its masters.

In a quick series of twisted moves, the minotaur switched his grip to one arm and pushed himself up slightly. Making a fist, he struck one of the creature's eyes with all his might.

The blow crushed in the monstrous reptile's fiery orb. A gush of blood and other sticky fluids drenched Faros's hand and a noxious stench assailed his nostrils before he reached back down and renewed his embrace of the monster. The meredrake shrieked, leaping about and snapping wildly in agony.

Growling some fathomless command, the ogre handler repeatedly whipped the stricken creature. He gestured toward the minotaurs, indicating that the beast should turn around and face the slave with the club who was advancing, waving the club menacingly.

Driven mad by its wound, and Faros's choke hold, the enraged lizard lunged at the ogre and bit down hard on his head. Arcing claws opened the beastman's chest, spilling fluids and organs.

At that same moment, Faros jumped off, rolled away, and narrowly missed being slapped against the rocks by the huge tail.

The other ogre stubbornly thrust at the beast, trying to help his fallen comrade. Tearing free the mangled head, the meredrake tossed it aside. The creature then turned toward the second ogre and hissed, its good eye fixed venomously on the beastman.

The minotaur with the club was ready to attack, but Faros waved him away.

The surviving ogre now realized that he was in a bad situation, and he made a fatal mistake, turning and trying to run away. That was the signal the huge predator needed. Having torn apart its handler, it was eager to dispose of the second ogre.

The meredrake looked around at the minotaurs with what might have passed for a sneer, and then, with incredible swiftness, it chased after the fleeing ogre, leaping and bounding away.

Dropping Faros's club, the minotaur who had tried to come to his aid turned to help his fallen comrade. Without hesitation, Faros

grabbed his weapon back, and without so much as a glance over his shoulder started off at a jog.

“Who—?” began the uninjured one.

Faros turned to glare at him, cutting off any questions, any further sounds at all.

Leaping atop a rock, he observed the meredrake bounding after the ogre, up a nearby steep incline.

Faros tucked the club under his arm and started after.

“Valun can’t climb that!” insisted the less injured minotaur.

“Then you two stay here.”

An argument almost ensued, but then the one called Valun grunted, “I’ll make it, Grom.”

Faros had already begun his ascent. He made it halfway up the slope then paused at a ledge.

Grom was following, virtually dragging his companion along behind him. The expression on Grom’s blunt features was half exertion, half fury.

“At least . . . at least give him a hand up!” he gasped.

Putting aside the weapon, Faros pulled Valun up onto the ledge. Grom joined them then asked, “What do you think you are doing? It would be better to flee in another direction—”

At that moment, a scream echoed through the hills. The short-lived cry was punctuated by a bestial hiss.

A hint of immense satisfaction tinged Faros’s reply. “I wanted to be sure that ogre wouldn’t be rescued. Now, when the others come back and find what’s left of the bodies, they’ll just think it was a typical incident. The meredrakes, they sometimes do turn on their masters without warning.”

“What about the meredrake?” asked Grom. “Won’t he come after us?”

“That one’ll be busy for a while,” Faros said with grim humor.

Faros gripped his club and, ignoring the two scrambling to keep up with him, turned east and renewed his climbing.