

Dognar Freemul & Thothnok Freegolth
A Shared History
By David Keffer
November 29, 2013

The ruined lands of Athas serve as the final resting place for many broken dreams. Some in Athas, born to slavery, die without ever conceiving of dreams in which they escape their misery. In Draj, the most brutal of Athas' cities, the nobles, merchants and Templars all maintain stockades in which their respective slaves are kept. Although many races have mixed in Athas, lowest among the peoples are the Mul, descended from the inauspicious intermingling of dwarves and humans. Mul, renowned for their incredible toughness, represent the vast majority of the population of the slave yards.

There are no paths to freedom in Draj. Born a slave, die a slave, although the particular means of death may vary: toiling until exhaustion in the barren fields, mining until the very bowels of the desert collapse, or simply meeting one's end at the hand of a capricious master. For those slaves possessing an unenviable combination of physical strength, mental resilience and emotional vacuity, there is another path, though it too leads to death. The audiences that gather in the public arenas of Draj seek the champions of the sport of blood, gladiators. Nobles settle grudges by matching their champions. Success in the arena brings notoriety within the city, though scant other rewards.

Dognar, just Dognar, for slaves are not allowed family names, experienced the same hardship that all Mul slaves know in Draj. The only time Dognar left the slave pens or the mines was the morning before dawn when he was escorted to the Arena Precinct, to live or die, with a bag over his head. He lived; others died. He laid claim to a great two-handed axe and let his instincts take over. As his number of victories (so they were called) grew, so did his reputation. Dognar understood he was the pride of the clan patriarch, though he had never met the man, never so much as stepped into his lavish compound. Nevertheless, Dognar was a champion, greatest of the Mul of Draj, simultaneously a symbol of their innate, enduring will and the cruelty of their lot.

The praetor of Draj occasionally orders the Templars to assemble a force and raid the Giant's Ribs Mountains that lie to the west, for the quarry there is valuable, Goliath, a race whose distant origins lie in the magical breeding of giants and humans, whose progeny are destined now to hide in the wilds or to suffer the fate of the enslaved. While still a child, Thothnok witnessed the brutal slaying of his parents at the hands of the soldiers of Draj. Shackled and marched to Draj, where he was sold to the foreman of an unseen noble, the orphan knew no mercy in the stockades. It was clear to the lackeys who lorded their petty authority over the slaves that Thothnok stood too straight, walked too proudly, held his head too high, glared too fiercely, in short was altogether too dangerous to remain with the other slaves. Thothnok too marched to the Arena Precinct, a hooded mystery, with the promise of blood in his stride to the onlookers who gaped at his immensity.

Thothnok, mightiest of a people both reviled and admired for their unparalleled strength, was, like the rest of us, but a flimsy marionette in the eyes of the Uncaring who reign above the stars. It seems written in those stars that hung and burned above Athas that Thothnok's destiny was nothing short of an arena champion. Thothnok never made any attempt to keep track of the number of his victims and, had he tried, he would have lost count for the matches never ceased. When one opponent proved too little challenge, two, then three, then four, were provided. With a great sword over six feet long, none stood a chance against him.

In Draj, champions are not intended to live very long. Theirs is a self-extinguishing profession. No one in the city knew what else to do with the cresting reputations of Dognar and Thothnok. There seemed only one obvious solution—so obvious that both combatants understood the inevitability of their meeting many months before it actually came to pass. The two clan patriarchs manufactured a squabble so petty that no one remembers it now, and arranged to have the dispute resolved in the arena.

At three o'clock in the afternoon on the summer solstice, after the arena crowd had had its blood lust whetted with the public execution of common criminals, Dognar and Thothnok were ushered onto the blood-stained gravel of the arena. The two gladiators stopped at a distance of ten paces and faced each

other—the scarred, stocky half-dwarf with the great axe and the tattooed half-giant, wielding the great sword as if it were a bodkin. No words were exchanged on that field of battle. The crowd quieted until they lost their patience and began hurling insults at the immobile foes. The Praetor himself had descended into the precinct to observe this much touted spectacle. His high, squealing voice carried above the din, demanding bloodshed. His martial call was answered, though not in any form he found acceptable.

Side by side Thothnok and Dognar leapt the walls of the arena and, in the crowded stands, wrought such a slaughter as Draj had never known. On that day, Thothnok and Dognar slew hundreds—commoner, noble, and Templar alike, a proud sacrifice to the Summer Gods smiling above and looking down at the carnage offered them on their holiest of days. Those that survived the massacre described only a fountain of blood that swept through the crowd like the dirt-devils that arose in the wastelands around the city. Curiously there could be found no consensus from the survivors as to whether the killers were driven by a cold, methodical hatred or an unbridled berserker rage; perhaps there was no difference in these two.

There is no path to freedom in Draj, thus Thothnok and Dognar did not know what next to do when the slaughter ended and they found themselves alone among the corpses in the arena. Side by side, they walked silently from the arena, down empty streets, to the city wall, where the soldiers at the gate hid themselves in the pantry and latrine of the gatehouse as the champions passed.

It took two days for the city to rally a posse and give chase. Perhaps the delay was due to the lackluster appetite for what seemed an unpleasant confrontation with the duo. However, the Sorcerer-King of Draj would not let such a slight to his honor, as the murder of his favored Praetor, go unpunished. A force of thirty tracked the pair of fugitives along the hundred-mile length of the Trade Road, past the city of Altaruk, through the Great Alluvial Sand Wastes. Clearly, the pair was headed for Tyr, the Free City, bane of the kings of the other city-states.

But Tyr, child of Athas, is less free than its name implies. There could be no mistaking the two travelers as they arrived at the city gates. A Mul with a great axe, a Goliath with a great sword, both ragged with hurried travel, the weight of a life of slavery on their shoulders, the glint of death in their eyes, they were denied entry. Tyr would not offer them sanctuary for the leaders of Tyr knew such prizes would be pursued and did not want to invite a political imbroglio over so trivial a matter as two runaway slaves.

Past Tyr then over the Ringing Mountains, where the markings on Thothnok's body identified him as a foreigner to the Goliaths that dwelt in those heights and prevented any succor that might have otherwise been forthcoming. Besides, there was the awkward matter of his unusual choice in traveling companion. Even in Athas, the hereditary hatred between dwarves and giants is well known, and has been stoked in the fiery hearts of their half-blood descendants. Across the Ringing Mountains then, through the Forest Ridge, they traveled, skirting the villages of the cannibalistic Halfling tribes that dwelt therein. By the time the pair reached the Empty Plains, a bare scrubland beyond the Forest Ridge, they had evaded all pursuit.

But at what cost? They stood at the edge of the Western Hinterlands, the domain of the insect-men, the Thri-Kreen, nomads who roamed the desolate lands following herds seeking water and, when stumbling upon the rare caravan, knew no mercy. And yet, the nomads of the Empty Plains possessed something that Dognar Freemul and Thothnok Freegolth has yearned for all their lives—freedom.