

Prologue

Grollik stalked through the forest underbrush, following the barely marked trail that lead along the cliff face. Stealthily the orc moved forward, doing his best to avoid alerting the bands searching for him. A few more hours of hiking, and he'd be free – out of the human territories, and back to the secret vales and canyons of his own kin and kith. Creeping along, he allowed himself to fall into daydreams about his ancestral home, no longer paying full attention to the dangerous surroundings.

Snap. The sound of a twig breaking underfoot. Realizing his foolish mistake, Grollik suddenly froze in place, breaking into a cold sweat. He hoped that the men hunting for him didn't hear it, or that they would pass it off as some animal among the trees. Either worked. As long as they didn't investigate, the orc might yet survive the misstep. Silently looking about, barely even breathing, Grollik concentrated on the movements of the nearby hunters. Sensing that they weren't approaching, the orc quietly continued on his way. If it continued like this for the entire hike, he was sure he would die of the stress and suspense.

However, only a few of the pursuers were truly interested in recapturing the orc. Many in the search parties were woodsmen who cared not for the nearby villages. Only the rabid, prejudiced villagers sought the orc, hungry to lynch it, thirsty for more blood on their hands.

It was easy to tell the villagers from the hunters.

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For all their desire to capture and torture the orc, they noisily crashed through the forest, making themselves easily detectable and avoided. Only the hunters had the skill to move quietly.

One of them, a dour middle-aged man named Durgan, searched alone in the woods. He hoped to find the orc, and see him safely away from the others. A friend of orcs, the grizzled ranger had participated in a number of their campaigns during the border wars. Durgan wanted to ensure the orc got away. Or better yet, band with the orc and escape from these damned lands altogether.

Durgan moved apart from the other hunters, toward the nearby cliff. He noticed the orc, following the trail, and moved himself to follow.

Grollik sensed the distance between himself and the hunters widen, found it harder to detect where they were. This could be a blessing or a curse, he thought. While some fell back, others might be able to sneak up on him better. Then he would be trapped.

The path was beginning to widen, as it met with a well used game trail. Sunshine lightened the track, breaking through the canopy of trees. Feeling it too unsafe to continue this way, Grollik made his way to the face of the cliff. Looking around, he noticed a boat similar to those his clan used for fishing and travel, floating on the river below. And in the sky, a great burning star, hurtling through the sky.

This is an ill omen, the orc thought.

Staring at the fire in the sky, Grollik allowed himself to be distracted. Suddenly, he heard the snapping of a twig very close by. Too close! The orc realized that he would be caught, now. There was no

way he could stay totally hidden where he was, and any movement would be sure to attract the attention of the hunter or hunters anyway. With a quick jerk of his arm, Grollik brought free his sword and put himself in a defensive stance.

With a look of annoyance on his face, Durgan emerged from the brush, to stand in front of the orc. Eyeing its posture and weapon, the ranger glared but made no offensive mood. Hissing, he said, "bloody orc! Put that blade away. I'd rather avoid a fight and bring all the others here, wouldn't you?"

He noticed the subtle signs of worry in the orc's form, in how it held the sword and stared at him. In the orcish language, he continued. "If you want to get away from here, fighting won't help you. Nor will jumping off the cliff. Come on, I'll show you a better way."

Grollik watched the old man, wavered under his glare, and finally put away the blade. "That's better," the ranger whispered. "Just follow me and keep as quiet as you can. Kazh's star be damned, staring at it won't help you any." The orc tensed, realizing that the ranger had seen his moon-faced lack of attention.

"What is your name, orc?" The ranger, not waiting for an answer, began to stalk away, leading Grollik through lighter bush and grass along the edge of the cliff.

"Grollik, of Athalad, the clan Krazaul." With this, Grollik stopped moving, waiting for the old ranger to answer his unspoken challenge. He stood and waited a moment before receiving his reply.

Durgan turned about to face the orc. "I am Durgan Fruer, ranger of Ushiila. Friend of the clan Sukga

and honourable combatant in their campaigns many years ago." For a moment Durgan felt fear. While the orc clans of Krazaul and Sukga were allied during the border wars, the ranger didn't know if this was still the case. If the clans were at war, then this orc might decide to fight him anyway. But a challenge of names must be honoured. Durgan waited to see the orc's response.

Grollik, for his part, stiffened up for a moment, before making a slight bow. "May the wine of friends be shared as the blood of enemies be spilt," said the orc.

"May the stars shine as brightly as the honour of friends," answered the ranger. The orc slightly relaxed, and Durgan continued leading him toward safety. The challenge of names, and the challenge of allies. Both passed.

Before long, the duo came across a slight path leading back into the woods. Durgan closed his eyes and listened intently for other life. The rustling of the trees, his own breathing and that of Grollik's, was all he heard. It seemed to be safe. They followed an intersecting trail, continuing within sight of the cliff edge at most times. As evening approached, Durgan time and again attempted detecting other life. And each time, there was nothing but the two of them and the nature that surrounded.

Of the villagers, of the angry lynch mobs, they were free.

Galai was alone. She rowed her canoe through the swamps, leaving behind the ruins which once were her home. She didn't know what destroyed the

village, or why she survived. But deep within, Galai felt that she was being lead to the answer.

Slip, slip, slip... The paddle smoothly entered the water and pushed it. Although it felt like she was barely moving, Galai rowed speedily through the great swamps of Ipiati.

Without thinking about it, Galai changed her direction slightly, and began working her way along a stagnant, weed-filled river. Despite the marshy detritus, Galai encountered no obstacles in her trip down the river. Expertly she paddled onwards, driven by some gut feeling that her answers laid ahead, waiting for her.

Eventually, night fell. Taking a long rope of woven creeper, Galai found a heavy rock she could use as an anchor. After fixing the rock and rope together, she returned to the middle of the stream and slipped the rock in. After tying the other end of the rope to a secure point on the canoe, she drifted off into a dark sleep.

The next morning, well rested yet feeling oddly disturbed, Galai continued on her course along the river. Around midday, she banked on the edge of the river and scavenged a short while for something edible. After eating, she continued on her way.

In the late afternoon, she reached the end of the river. Leaving behind the murky stream and humid swampland, Galai emerged into a stony lake surrounded by woods. A small isle sat in the middle of the lake. She paddled toward it, and made landfall. After pulling the canoe onto the island, she fashioned a pole and line from supplies brought with her. Setting it to work, she soon caught a supper of fish, and ate it with some small berries growing on

the island.

As she rested that night, Galai dreamt of a forgotten horror. Waking with a start, she saw a great shooting star, brighter than any she had seen before, slowly heading toward the distant eastern mountains. A chill came over her as she stared, but she quickly fell asleep, once again.

In the morning, Galai continued travelling, to a place she didn't know. But now, she was navigating consciously, no longer at the compunction of unknown urges. Still, all she knew was the direction in which her goal lay. And that wherever she ended up, the answers she sought would be there.

Aloz wandered through the marketplace of Halaptis, absolutely carefree. The young man went from booth to booth, sometimes just looking at the goods for sale, occasionally waving about at a merchant when he found some interesting trinket or object. His companion Katys sombrely followed, casting a critical eye on anything that Aloz seemed interested in purchasing, and occasionally haggling with whatever seller ran the stall.

Acting dour and withdrawn, the warrior played the perfect counterpart to Aloz' childish enthusiast. It was a trick they had worked out years before in their adventures – one would convince a merchant of a sale and the other would make him earn it through harsh negotiation. This way, the two of them almost always had quality gear at below average prices.

After leaving the market, Katys restored herself to her normal attitude – still somewhat quiet, but with an air of curiosity and adventure. Likewise, Aloz

calmed himself down, but only slightly. Like his partner, he could not resist feeling excited with the prospect of good adventure and great loot ahead.

Aloz peered through his new goods. The recipes and scrolls he acquired in the market would surely help him increase his skills. He pulled out one of the scrolls, and prepared to study its mysteries.

Suddenly the sky dimmed, and another sun appeared above, cruising eastward to the north. As Aloz and Katys watched its languid flight across the heavens, both forgot their well-laid plans. Without even speaking, they both agreed that wherever the comet crashed, would be the greatest adventure they could ever dream of.

Before they realized what they were doing, the duo had returned to the market, purchased horses – at full price, yet – and had gathered their belongings from the hostel at which they were staying. Already this far gone, Aloz and Katys decided there was little more they could do but strike out and begin their adventure. They made for the city gates, and headed north as quickly as the horses would take them.

A Troublesome Beginning

Durgan and Grollik shared a meal of squirrel stew. It had been three days now since they fled the village and its environs, and still no end to the forest. Grollik was anxious to return to his ancestral lands, but all Durgan cared for was better food. Nothing but damned squirrels in the whole wood, it seemed.

To their right, to the west, lay the great river Tannith, still at the bottom of a short cliff, and now met by another on the opposing bank. At least, they were leaving behind the lowlands. Soon, the forest too would be shuffled off, and they would be able to find better game. Or travel faster. Or both.

Durgan chewed sourly on the stringy, tough gibs of squirrel he fished from the cook pot. Grollik was right, he thought, that the food was overcooked. It had been a long time since Durgan had ate in the orcish fashion, but after a few days in the company of one, his tastes were already adjusting for their style of food. "You're right about it," he grumbled.

Grollik looked up from the pot, almost dropping the chunk of meat he was coaxing out. "The squirrel?"

"Yeah. Bloody overcooked, like you said it would be." Durgan didn't like to admit when he was wrong, but couldn't help the compunction to do so. This just made him all the more bitter.

"Meh. Don't worry about it. It's still edible, at

least,” replied the orc, popping the bit of squirrel into his mouth as he finished speaking. He chewed for a bit, before sticking two fingers in his mouth and pulling out a bone. Grollik tossed the wee bone over his shoulder, and resumed chewing.

With little conversation, and all of it terse, the two quickly finished up the stew. Durgan walked to the soak where he had originally found water with the pot, and gave it a quick clean and rinse. Returning to where they had eat, Durgan glanced over at Grollik, who was shouldering a pack.

The old hunter asked, “you really thinking of striking out further?”

“There's still an hour or two of good light, and even when that's done, the twilight should still be good for a while. I don't see why we should stay put, with all this time unused,” replied the orc. “Besides, the sooner from this forest, the sooner I am home.”

Durgan thought it over for a moment, before putting on his own pack. He gave the orc a short look, and began leading the way. As they hiked, Durgan felt that not every old orcish quality he once gained would return as quickly as the taste for food.

It had taken two more days, but Durgan and Grollik had finally emerged from the woods. The land sloped slightly down and became meadows, but didn't drop enough to pull the Tannith from its baby canyon. In the distance, they saw where the land rose again, and the gentle turn in the river canyon leading to its south-eastern source.

That first night in the open, Durgan had given Grollik one of his spare cloaks. “These meadows are no doubt populated,” explained the old hunter, “and

likely by the same sort who chased you back at the forest village. Keep that hood over your head lest you want that fate to come again.”

Grollik accepted the cloak with grace, but found himself concerned that he had nothing to give in return. Considering the cloak a gift, rather than a necessity, he found it poor that there was nothing he could afford to give in return.

Noticing the orc's difficulty, Durgan spoke again. “Don't bother with returning the favour. While we're through these lands, you need it to keep both of us from trouble. If it pains you so much, just give it back when we reach the highlands.”

“Then that is what I'll do,” said the orc. Still troubled, but accepting the circumstances, Grollik draped the cloak over his pack, and began setting up a campsite. Before long, two low, canvas tents were strung up by a warm fire, and the food caught while hiking was brought out to cook.

Since the incident with the squirrels, Grollik had done all the cooking of meat. He decided that it would be the best way to reacquaint Durgan with the orcish tastes. But tonight, the hunter was adamant about doing the cooking himself.

“I'm sure that this time I won't be overdoing it,” he said. “If you're so concerned, just keep an eye on me and tell me if it's on too long!” Durgan gave a long glare to the orc.

Grollik acquiesced. He could deal with the human tastes once and a while, and if Durgan overcooked it again he would not complain.

In the end, however, the orc had to admit that the old hunter got it right. He said so, which brought a rare grin to Durgan's face – more of a sneer, really,

but that was unimportant. Tonight they would eat well, and tomorrow would bring them yet closer to home.

In the night, Grollik tossed and turned in his sleep. In the dreams under his fitful stirrings, the orc saw again the skyfire from a week before. The dream-orc felt a compunction to follow the shooting star to wherever it would crash. The urge was strong, almost painful, as if he were being dragged in irons to whatever lurked at the end of its path.

When he reached the destination of the fireball in his dream, Grollik saw a desolation, surrounded and pitted by marsh and mire. At the centre lay the ruins of a tower. In his dream, the orc felt an insatiable curiosity, a need to explore the ruins. Grollik shuddered, a powerful fear coursing through his sleeping body.

As he stepped into the tower, the orc awoke with a start. He jerked upwards, pulling out several of the pegs holding his tent, and ending up draped in the canvas. Pulling it off of his face, Grollik looked into the night sky, anxious for any sign of the comet.

Seeing none, he got up, reset the tent pegs, and crawled back under, slowly feeling the feeling of sleep return. He hoped he would have no more dreams that night.

“Are you sure that road leads nowhere?” Katys asked of the people within the small village pub. It had been a week now, and it seemed that she and Aloz were no closer to the mountains where they had seen the shooting star disappear. Each path that appeared at first a shortcut invariably lead to some

farms, or a watering hole, or the occasional rocky hill, they were told in almost every village.

And with each village they passed through, it seemed like the road they were on drifted more and more westwards! Much more like this, Katys thought, and they would be forced to simply ride cross-country without any real idea of where they were going. While that might be more fun, she worried that such a route would lead to delays or other troubles that would add much time to their travels. She would much prefer the roads.

One of the villagers, a strange-looking man in straw sandals, spoke up. "I ken tell ye o' a trail that may head yer way," he rambled, "although ye could have more trouble than ye wish." The odd fellow, his piece said, walked to a dank corner of the pub and sat down, obviously intending for Katys and Aloz to interview him away from all the others.

Thus baited, the duo joined the strange man in the corner. They sat down, and leaned in to join conversation with the villager.

"The path o' which I spoke, it's still a bit north o' the village, but not a long ride fer yer steeds. But I ain't sayin' more unless ye can make me an offer."

Katys expected that. It was very common – a cliché, even – that a villager with information would appear, but would want something in exchange for it. Inwardly sighing, Katys asked what the man wanted.

"Ye be takin' me with ya, that's what. Ye won't even be findin' the trail t' begin with without me anyhow." The strange man thumped his chest and looked pleased with himself. "An then, once we be partway down it, I'll be makin' me second demand."

Neither Aloz nor Katys could believe it. This weird man, not asking, but demanding that they take him along. It wasn't the first time they ever had a guide, but for such an odd character forcing himself as a guide on them...

Katys looked to Aloz, saw the look on his face. Something didn't seem right about this, Aloz felt, and in a single glance Katys was able to sense that doubt. Still, they had few other options open to them. Cautiously, she replied.

"Fine, we'll take you with us. But you need to supply your own ride. We won't take you on our horses."

"That ain't a problem, miss. I have me own steed anyhow." The strange man grinned, showing off a few yellowed teeth and more than a few gaps between them. "I be Malvik, byways. What ye two known as?"

Katys and Aloz each answered with their own names in turn, wondering all the while how things would turn out with this character.

"Me fellows, for t' path, it's best fer us to begone in the evendark. Rest yerselves now, and I shall meet ye here in the twilight hour." This said, Malvik raised himself from the table and hobbled out of the pub. As he walked by, Aloz for a moment thought he saw some dark mark on the strange man, but the feeling quickly vanished.

"I wonder what you've just got us into," the young mage said to his partner. Katys just stared at the door to the pub, thinking the same thing. This could be trouble anyways.

That evening, the strange man returned. In the

twilight, Malvik had an air about him that made Katys and Aloz even more worried than they were during the day.

Before either of them could say anything, Malvik squeezed in the first words. "It's not too late t' say nay," he spoke, seeing the duo's fear through their masks of bravery. "I ain't the worst ye'll be facin' tonight. But if ye be ready, then let us begone."

Without a word, Katys and Aloz followed the strange man out of the pub. They saw that Malvik had already gone and fetched their horses, and as they readied their mounts, watched Malvik climb aboard his own, a sickly looking mule.

They started along the road, going northward for a mile or two before stopping. Malvik turned his mule around, and faced the duo.

"The path, it lies down here. As I said, there'll be worse than me down it. Soon you'll see why you needed me to come along, and what toll I shall extract from you."

Expecting the style of speech Malvik used at the pub, Katys was taken aback. Aloz, however, had expected this.

But he still needed to know the reason for the change. "What brought on this different mannerism?" he asked of the strange man.

"Little more than a need to keep those fools of the village convinced that I am a greater fool than they," came the reply. "You obviously knew that there was more to me than I let on at the village. But before we get to that, shall we take care of the matter at hand?"

With that, Malvik started down a narrow side path, nearly invisible, that branched to the right,

between a tall rock and a copse of trees. Quickly Aloz followed, with Katys, now truly worried, in the rear.

For the first hour, the trip was uneventful. Aloz and Katys stayed close behind Malvik, without whom they would be lost on the dark path, now surrounded by thick trees. They crossed a few muddy streams, and all the while Aloz concentrated on the man riding ahead of him.

What was this Malvik? Why was he leading them along this path, one that no other from the village knew about? What ends does he have in mind? These and other questions rattled through Aloz' mind, and as they rode on, he became even more concerned.

Suddenly, as the path entered a clearing, Malvik came to a stop. Aloz and Katys quickly followed suit, and brought their horses nearly to flanking positions around him.

In the forest surrounding them, hundreds of small, red eyes stared out.

Up a deep, broad river, Galai navigated her canoe. Even though she was working against the current, it took little effort to guide the craft upstream, working it toward the distant lands where the star crashed down.

Eventually, however, she found that she could only fight the current for so long before needing to rest. On this great river, her effort counted for little more than half of what it would elsewhere. Paddling to near exhaustion, Galai came across a small town built on one of the banks. She decided to rest here, before heading out again in the morning.

After finding a secluded and secure location for her canoe, Galai leisurely walked into the town, taking a few trade goods she had salvaged from her ruined village. After trading the merchandise for coin, she looked for a place to eat and rest, settling on a small inn near the town dock. In the morning, she decided, would be a good time to restock on supplies depleted in the week long travel. But for now, food and rest.

The inn, a two-storey shack of driftwood and poorly cut timber, was nearly empty. In these respects, it matched the ramshackle, depressed town in which it lay. Galai paid for a meal and the use of the common space for rest overnight, the cost as low as the dirt floor of the inn. The meal, bland and overcooked fish, drove home the sorry feeling of the town.

After her meal, Galai realized that there were more people in the inn than she had first thought. Small groups were entering every few minutes, twos and threes, until eventually there were about thirty people, all draped in muddy rags, sitting about, just watching her. Galai didn't sense any danger from them, just a curiosity. They must not get many visitors, she suspected.

One in the crowd, a balding and hunched fellow, eventually approached. "Did you come to chase the day star across the land?" he asked.

Galai sized up the old man. She glanced around at the crowd again, trying to determine if they may be a threat yet. "Yes, I'm following it," she cautiously volunteered.

A few members of the crowd took a step or two forward, but many shuffled back, muttering amongst

themselves. The old man stood where he was, thinking of his reply. Eventually, he spoke again.

“That star is a harbinger of death,” he said. “It brings nothing good to our world. Turn back, now; go back to where you came. Save yourself.”

“Why?” she charged. “What does it judge? Why are you so concerned for the actions of a stranger?” Realizing the angry tone that had entered her voice, Galai tried to calm herself and asked again. “How do you know what it brings?”

The old man, taken aback by her outburst, regained his ground. “That star leads people to their death. The last time it passed these lands, it brought war and chaos in its wake.” He drooped his head for a moment, then straightened his neck again and continued. “This time, a good number of our people have ventured out to chase it as well. And I fear that they shall never return. We have seen it.”

Galai, still not understanding the compulsions which had originally lead her on this course, was captured by the old man's statement. “You have seen it?” she asked. “Who saw it? There is a diviner amongst you?”

“There is, but he did not see the vision. But he can still explain it.” The old man started to turn around, facing the exit. The townsfolk who had gathered in the inn were already starting to depart, although a small number of them settled in and got for themselves food and drink.

The old man waited. “If you want an explanation for this. And I think that you do.” He began to walk out of the inn, with Galai right behind.

The tense situation pained Katys. She preferred

the quick, furious attack; just sitting here, on a mount, and staring back at the glowing eyes in the surrounding woods was getting to her. But so far, neither she, Aloz, nor the strange Malvik had made any overt, offensive move.

It was driving her mad.

“The guardians of these dark woods,” Malvik had said when they had first entered the clearing. “We will wait here, until they come for us. To continue further in the woods would be suicide.”

Katys, adventurous and brave, would rather that.

But here they waited, staring back at the glowing eyes. She began to concentrate on a particular pair of eyes, a bit ahead and to her right. Watching them, she started feeling the night hours weighing upon her.

Abruptly, the glowing eyes burst from the surrounding forest. A myriad of dark creatures, black as the night, ran from the woods toward the mounted trio.

Finally, Katys, thought, the battle would commence. She readied her weapon, a strong yet flimsy-looking sword, and turned her horse to face the grim creature into whose eyes she had stared.

As the creatures approached, they merged together, the myriad combining into no more than a dozen of the dark beings. But with each combination, the creatures became slightly larger, and the number of eyes – those blood-red, glowing eyes – remained ever the same. As she watched their approach, Katys felt a deep fear swell up within her.

Aloz wasn't doing much better. During the wait, he ran across in his mind the many possibilities waiting ahead. Concentrating on the vagaries of fate,

he had barely noticed when the horde had burst out from the forest, and it took a yell of alarm from Malvik to wake him from his daydreams.

He muttered an incantation, and gestured toward a group of creatures that were blending together while hurtling toward him. A dull light left his fingers, and dove straight into the midst of the fusing beings, but with little effect. Aloz cursed out loud and prepared his own sword.

It didn't take long for the creatures to clear the distance between the woods and the adventurers. Shortly, both Aloz and Katys were battling them. In the midst of combat they had forgotten about Malvik, which suited the strange man just fine.

He flitted about the clearing under a dark grey cloak, silently dispatching the attacking creatures that had been greatly wounded by the adventurers but not yet dispatched. Every so often, he plucked out some of the many eyes on them, occasionally eating one, but usually putting them in a small sack at his side.

Before long, however, Aloz noted the disappearance of their guide. The first dozen of the beings were almost all slain, and as he helped Katys fight off the last two, the mage yelled to his companion. "Malvik is gone!"

The two dispatched the final creatures, and despite noticing a second wave waiting in the boughs of the surrounding trees, dismounted and began to search for the strange man who had lead them here.

Their quick search of the clearing proved fruitless, but as they returned to their horses Malvik suddenly appeared again, already upon his mule. "Looking for

someone?" the odd character questioned, his yellow teeth visible in a twisted smile. "Come, we must leave this clearing before those creatures return to life. Indeed, we would be best to get from the forest entire."

"What?" exclaimed both adventurers.

"Is it safe?" asked Aloz, noting the eyes that still watched them. "We are still being watched."

"Those that lurk, and those that fight, are in concert, indeed, but they will offer us no trouble while the creatures you fought rest on the ground here."

Malvik pursed his mouth and continued, "As soon as they rise again, things will be different, however. And then, even the daylight won't be safe in this forest. We must ride now, and not stop until we are clear of these woods."

Grollik and Durgan entered the village before them. They had spent the past couple of hours walking past a number of orchards, the hanging fruit on the trees tempting their appetites. If the community were humans, a plate of the fruit would discourage the them from realizing Grollik was an orc; most thought that orcs ate only meat, never realized that even orcs needed their greens. Besides, after a week and a half of trapping and hunting their own food, the two were anxious to have another person prepare a meal for them, rather than do it themselves.

It was the evening hours, and few people were out of doors. Those that were payed no attention to the duo, instead going about their way with barely even a glance. The hunter and orc both noticed the shorter

stature and greater girth of the residents. They realized that they must have come upon a dwarven commune.

The buildings of the commune were unadorned and largely similar, but by dint of guesswork, the two determined which one was the public house. The pair entered, but rather than sit down with the dwarves immediately, they headed toward a door they assumed led to the office of the community's leader.

Before they could knock, however, the door opened, a hunched dwarven crone standing across the doorway from them. Her face told the many long years of her life. Without a sound, she beckoned them to enter. Behind her was no office but rather a hallway, with a number of rooms branching from it.

With a little unease, Grollik and Durgan followed the crone as she led them along the hall toward one of the rooms. She brought them, still silent, to a door at the end of the hall. She opened it, and waved for the adventurers to enter the room.

As they entered, they noticed at the opposite end of the room, a particularly turgid dwarf seated behind a large but plain desk. The desk itself was covered with various knick-knacks, and in one corner, two thick books were stacked upon each other. As the fat dwarf beckoned them to sit in the seats facing his desk, the duo were startled by the door slamming shut behind them.

Durgan and Grollik sat across the desk from the dwarf, who waited for the dwarven crone to glide across to a seat at the side of the desk. They noted that the silent one's chair was angled to face them, and that it lay closer to the overweight dwarf, and

not themselves.

“Cherkas Ginnot, overseer of Cherkas commune,” the dwarf said in way of introduction. “And you are?”

Durgan replied for the both of them. “I am Durgan Fruer, and my companion is Grollik of Athalad Travellers.”

“A man and an orc,” surmised the plump overseer, recognizing the origin of Grollik's name. “A very interesting pair.” He gestured to the mute crone, who peered at the duo, a harsh look in her eyes. “This is Aelos. She has told me that you were coming here.”

His nervousness of the crone got the better of Grollik. “She did?” he stammered. “I mean, how did she know we were arriving?” Durgan gave a light groan, feeling the orc's embarrassment and sensing some of his own.

Grollik felt the old dwarvess' stare grow harder, but the fat overseer payed no notice. He laughed, and continued. “Aelos is a seer, and can communicate quite well when she wishes to. Can't you, Aelos?”

“I can, overseer.” Grollik and Durgan heard the voice in their heads, but saw that the crone didn't actually say a word. That was it, then. She was a seer and psion. Involuntarily, Grollik shuddered. It was rare for such a talent to emerge amongst orcs, and any who had the ability of mental communication were shunned.

“What is wrong, orc?” probed the voice. “You couldn't be afraid of a little old woman, could you?” Her physical body remained silent, but Grollik could hear her cackling in his head.

Obviously fat Ginnot did too, for he waved his hand at the crone, and the mean laughter stopped torturing the orc. He continued the conversation. "It's not often that such parties as yours pass through our commune. Aelos has said nothing, but I can only assume that the two of you are following the path of the comet that appeared many days ago."

At the mention of the comet, Grollik gave another shudder. He had never told Durgan about the dream he had, of the broken tower and its haunted environs. Still, he was certain that the wicked old seer would pull it from him now.

Durgan was about to speak, but Grollik interrupted before the old hunter had a chance. "And if we are?" he challenged. The crone silently cackled again, transmitting the screechy sound into everyone's heads. The old man glanced at the orc, surprise clearly visible in his eyes.

Admitting to himself something he kept buried in his psyche, Grollik continued. "Since I first saw it, I have felt the need to find the end of that fire that grazed the sky." There, he thought victoriously, she can't take from me what I give away.

"Well then," replied Ginnot, obviously pleased. "If that is your goal, then I give you leave to rest here and resupply yourselves if necessary. In return, all I ask is that you take Aelos with you on your journey." That said, the fat dwarf leaned back in his seat, looking content.

The crone, too, looked happy with this turn of events. Both Durgan and Grollik, however, were anything but pleased. The old man surprised that Grollik would only announce this now when his stated intention throughout the journey thus far was

to return home; the orc shocked that he might have to have that wicked dwarven fossil as a travelling companion!

“Could we have an opportunity to discuss this in private first?” Durgan politely asked. He glared at the orc, bewildered and annoyed.

“By all means, by all means!” The dwarf overseer, without concern, gave them directions to another room where they could deliberate. The entire time, Grollik could hear again the cackling of the crone.

In a small room, just the two of them, Durgan and Grollik stared at each other. Several times, the old hunter was about to say, or yell something at the orc, but each time he stopped himself and returned to simply staring.

Eventually, he spoke. “Is this what you really want to do?” he asked. “Were you really feeling this urge the whole time or was it some trick of the crone?”

Grollik stirred. “I felt it the whole time, but it was only when we were talking in that office that I recognized the urge for what it is.” He let out a very un-orc-like sigh. “Still, I don't want that witch to come with us.”

Durgan sat silent for a few moments, looking pensive. He didn't want to investigate the comet, but at the same time his arrival in orc lands would be safer with Grollik accompanying him. It wasn't that Durgan wasn't interested, oh no, but something seemed wrong about it, something evil.

Eventually, however, the old hunter acquiesced to Grollik's desire. “Fine,” he muttered, “we can go

after the comet.”

A look of relief came over Grollik's face, until Durgan continued. “But,” he said, “we're taking the dwarven crone with us.”

Durgan didn't share the orcish fear of psions, although he still felt uncomfortable being around one. Still, he thought, having one with them might be more of an advantage than a liability. And the orc's superstitions be damned.

The duo returned to the overseer's office, where both Ginnot and Aelos still waited. After letting themselves in and closing the door behind them, the two settled into the same chairs in which they had sat several minutes before.

“It's decided,” said Durgan. “We will accept your offer and take the seer with us.” Grollik made a disgusted face, but the other three occupants of the room ignored it.

“Excellent!” stated Ginnot, his broad face expressing a chubby grin. “Most pleased, most pleased. Since it's agreed, I'll inform the others to extend to you the courtesy of the commune.”

The fat dwarf slowly raised himself from his chair and waddled out of the room, leaving the adventurers behind with the crone. She peered again at Grollik.

“Now,” she transmitted, “tell me, orc, of your dream.”

The orc muttered a low curse to himself. How had the witch even known of his dream? This disturbing old creature was dangerous, he thought. But now she would be a companion, and he would be unable to do anything to it.

And so he began, against his better sense, to tell

the crone of what he dreamt.

“It wasn't much of a dream,” he stated, “but it felt quite real. The skyfire led me through the night to a desolate and barren land, I know not where. All around, foul marshes and reeking bogs pitted the ground, and in the centre of this waste lay the ruins of a great tower.”

“Tell me of the tower,” demanded the old dwarvess.

“It looked as if it were a thousand years old. The entire thing was crumbling apart, even as I walked toward it. There was a great arch leading into the tower, but as soon as I crossed the threshold, the dream ended and I awoke.” Remembering this, the orc trembled, recalling the horrible feeling he felt when he originally had the dream.

The crone looked thoughtful, but had no reply. She simply nodded her head and pondered the meaning of the dream. Was it a sign of his compunction, she thought, or a premonition of where the comet headed?

Shortly afterwards, the overweight overseer of the commune returned. “This would be a good place for you two to stay before continuing your journey. We will supply you with what you need for it, and in two days time you should be ready to carry on.”

“And,” finished the dwarf, “I wonder what you will find at the end of your journey.”

Maiden of Skyfire

Galai sat on a reed mat, staring at the young man who sat across from her. Between them, a low fire burned in a shallow pit dug in the dirt floor. Since she had arrived, the man had said nothing to her, although he spoke with the elder who had brought Galai to this shack.

The almost-boy paid no attention to Galai, instead watching the dancing flames as if hypnotized by them. He chanted silently as he observed the fire, slowly swaying back and forth in his trance. Eventually Galai grew bored of simply looking at the man, and started peering about the shack, instead.

“The star of Kazh is an ill omen, and its appearance twice in not a hundred years is a sign of doom for the world.”

Galai spun back around, surprised to hear the young man finally speak. She looked at him inquisitively, waiting to hear more.

“Twenty years ago,” he continued, “Kazh's star brought death through all the known lands. Plague and pestilence slew many, and many of those who survived lost their lives in horrible battles without purpose.”

“Now Kazh returns to us, not only to rain down more destruction, but to turn our world into his ruined palace.” Only now did the diviner look at Galai. To her surprise and shock, she noticed that

the young man was blind, his eyes a uniform milky-white.

“Yes, I am blind,” he said. “But that doesn't mean that I cannot see. I can trace all the contours of your face, the look of worry upon it, as if I had better sight than any.” He grinned at this, not an evil smirk but rather a genuine and delighted smile.

“What are you called?” asked Galai.

“Rulf. My name is Rulf.” The young man relaxed, and leaned slightly back on his mat, continuing to face Galai as if he really could see.

“Do you know the story of Kazh?” he asked.

Galai had heard the name before. Muttered curses, worried appeasements by her former village's shamans. But never did she know why Kazh was such a reviled and feared name. “No,” she earnestly replied.

“Kazh,” started the diviner, “is the malevolent of fire. From him comes all destruction. In this he is reviled, and it is because of Kazh that we must always be careful with flame.”

“Long ago, before the world came into existence, the primal beings fought each other. When their blood was shed, the beings we know as the manifests and malevolents were born. The primal beings brutalized each other so terribly that both were slain, and their successors decided to combine them into one entity, what we know as the world.

“But not all of the manifests and malevolents had the same goals for what they had created. Some elected to remain apart from the world, and so created the heavens, where they stay. But others, such as Kazh, decided to take a much more active approach to the world instead.

“While some of these great beings have wrought changes in constructive and good ways, the methods used by Kazh have always been those of death and destruction. Nobody has ever truly determined what the malevolent sees as his goal for the world, but with all his terrible power, it is feared that he wishes to rip it apart, and bring death to all mortal life.”

As he finished telling the tale, Rulf took a handful of sand and sprinkled it into the fire. Galai had noticed, when she was a child, that the shamans had done a similar thing when they had invoked Kazh's name. She watched him, now more worried than before, about the strange feeling drawing her toward the lands where the star had fallen.

Rulf sat silently for a while, allowing Galai to mentally digest what he had told her. He figured that when she was ready to continue, she would say so.

“What would Kazh want with me?” she finally asked. “Since the star passed through the sky I have felt the need to follow it.”

“That is a good question,” Rulf countered. “As I said, nobody knows what ideas really lurk in his mind. And it might be best not to know, either.”

“Tell me, then, about the vision, and who saw it.”

Exhausted and sore, but they were free. Katys, Aloz, and their guide Malvik finally burst from the woods, and the creatures didn't bother to pursue them further. It was nearly midday now, but despite the bright sun shining down on them, the three decided that they would have to rest. After so many hours of riding like fiends to escape the dangerous guardians, none of them felt that they could go any further that day.

Aloz took care of the steeds, using his talents to stave off the ill effects of such long and hard riding on them. Meanwhile, Katys began setting up a camp, and Malvik went in search of potable water. Before long, the three of them had eaten, and as Malvik and Aloz went off to sleep in their respective tents, Katys took the first watch.

Before crawling off, Malvik had told the other two that while they were safe from the beings that dwelt in the forest, there were still beasts and other dangerous things they would have to defend against. As long as they stayed here, however, they would be safe.

Katys kept guard for several hours, into the middle of the afternoon. Eventually, however, she grew too tired to keep watch, and crawled off to sleep herself, after waking Aloz and asking him to take over the duty.

Not long after, Malvik awoke and joined the mage on his watch. "We would be best to remain here for the night, and continue our journey tomorrow," he said.

Aloz nodded. While he was still uncomfortable about the strange man, the mage had to admit that Malvik had not yet done anything evil to him or Katys. In fact, Malvik had even proved himself useful, guiding the party through danger and keeping them all safe.

Still, there was something still not right about him, something that Aloz could sense but not figure out.

When Malvik announced that he would go out a while and hunt for something that could be made for supper, Aloz agreed, and remained at the camp. At

first, he felt a bit of relief, that the strange man was gone. But when Malvik hadn't returned after an hour, he started to worry. After all, Malvik was the one who guided them here, and was apparently the only one who would be able to guide them back out, safely.

After the second hour without the strange man around, Aloz went and woke up Katys. "He's gone," he bluntly stated.

Still groggy for need of rest, Katys responded with a quiet groan. "Are you sure?" she muttered.

"Yes. He went to find food, two hours ago."

"Well," replied the warrior girl, "what do you think happened? I doubt he just up and ran away."

"I'm not entirely sure of that," admitted Aloz.

"For now, let's just wait and see," Katys yawned. "We're still safe for the meanwhile, aren't we?"

With that, Katys closed her eyes and began to sleep again. Realizing that there was little he could do, Aloz simply returned to keeping watch over the camp.

It wasn't until after twilight that Malvik returned. By this point, Katys had finally woken from her slumber, and she sat by Aloz, facing a small fire that the mage had created by his spells.

With him, Malvik carried no flesh, but a sack of collected fruits, berries, and herbs he had found in the surrounding area. He explained that the hunting here was poor, but that the vegetable bounty was great enough to sustain them anyway.

After eating, Katys returned to her tent to rest, while Malvik and Aloz remained by the fire, discussing herb lore and other topics alchemical. Eventually Aloz too felt the need for sleep, and

Malvik encouraged him thus, volunteering to take the first watch.

Aloz stumbled off to his tent, hoping that he could trust the strange man to not bring any further danger on the group during the night.

Grollik felt tortured by the mere presence of the dwarf crone. Since telling her the dream he had of the tower, she had done nothing to him. But the sheer fact of what she was, was more than the orc could handle. He wanted rid of her, that crone and her witching ways.

For her part, Aelos didn't care much for the company of the orc, either. But she was still intrigued by him. He had been touched by comet, she was sure. And through observing him, the seer believed that she might eventually make sense of it, and better her own skills.

It was a unique opportunity, one she didn't get twenty years ago.

It had been several days now, since they had left Cherkas. No longer following the great river, they proceeded on a more southerly course after finding a safe point to cross its deepening canyon. Their travel was faster too, thanks to the mounts that the commune had supplied for the three of them.

Still, it wasn't fast enough for either the orc nor the dwarf. Each wanted to find the resting place of the comet as soon as they could.