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The One Who Would Be King:

A Book Of The Lands

A Novel

Gareth Blackmore

Author's Publishing, LLC

Book One: Escape!

Chapter I: A Princeling On The Run

For the second time in as many days, Djar tasted blood in his mouth.

“Get up,” snarled the thick green lump of a goblin, with an ugly, twisted grin.

Djar tried once more to make the goblin captain understand: “... as I’ve been trying to tell you, I tried to tell him you ordered it, but he simply wouldn’t listen. He said he wouldn’t ... couldn’t give up any more of his stock. With summer already waning, he has to prepare for winter. With all due respect, Karn, you may be pushing them to the brink.”

The goblin rolled his eyes, which was an eerie sight. They were a shiny yellow, his iris and pupils both very cat-like. He sank back onto what used to be Djar’s father’s throne, the action seemingly adding more girth to his already bulging belly.

“*Princeling*, you are alive for one reason, and one reason only,” he said, pausing to wave Daelwoo, the royal scepter of countless generations, mockingly in front of Djar’s nose. “You are to have your people refrain from all forms of civil disobedience with no exceptions or excuses!”

“I will try again next week, Kar ... uh ... Sire.”

Karn smiled, revealing a menacing number of sharp, yellow-stained teeth. "You will try immediately."

* * *

"Cookie! Get your stuff, we're getting out of here – now!"

"Oh, Djar," cried a lithe and pretty young woman, wildly springing up from her sitting position on the floor. "He hit you *again*?"

"Yes," Djar answered, bringing his hand up to his lip to feel the now hardening blood and test the swelling. "But he won't get another chance. Just get some traveling things packed – and I mean only the bare essentials. I'll tell you what's going on after we get into the Durn."

Cookie was off to her room in a blur, while Djar began stuffing his own essentials into a small red leather bag. Pausing, he ran his fingers over the griffin insignia on the bag's brass buckle – that of the House of Lahroan. So much had happened so quickly that it still made his head swim. It seemed like only a few days ago – though in fact it had been nearly half a year – that Mahhrain had been overrun by Captain Karn and his goblin horde.

He resumed packing, violently thrusting needed things into his bag. He knew he would be glad to be rid of the life that had been thrust upon him – no matter

what the outcome. It was completely draining, always feeling like a gutless little traitor. Of course, the once proud Duke Daeron Lahroan – Djar’s father – would have been proud of him. He would have said that it was better that he served his people in any way possible, as lives would be spared and that was paramount. And that was what mostly kept him going. That, and just a small measure of hope; hope that something would happen to drive the goblins out of the great city.

Thinking of his father brought tears to his eyes, but this time he choked them back. Usually, the tears were followed by sobs, but he simply had no time for that now. He had to resign himself to the fact that his family was gone, murdered by the leathery-green force that now patrolled their castle.

But, now, maybe he could do something about it. The ever-battling goblins had spread their army just a bit too thin. Increasingly, they had trouble keeping the provincial peoples in check. More and more landowners missed their tax deadlines, and Karn’s division found itself busy with the sometimes petty and oftentimes mundane administrative tasks of occupation – nothing the violent goblins relished. They were much better at ransacking than running a city. Also, vandalism, looting of the goblin stores, and acts of ‘treason’ plagued the conquerors. They were finding that it was one matter to overrun a castle, quite another

to run the entire duchy with any semblance of efficiency. And not only was controlling the city and surrounding countryside a problem for the aggressive goblins, they were also expending a lot of bodies in their campaign to overtake Fort Durn. Djar's situation was bleak, but he had reason for his small bit of hope.

Djar's job – in the vast scheme of goblin ideals – was to explain to the landowners that the new administration deserved the tribute, and that he was there to collect it before the *tax department* was forced to pay a visit. Djar usually chose not to explain the *deserved* part, but he never forgot to tell of the risks of non-payment. If he didn't get what the goblins were after, his visit was eventually followed by a visit from the goblin version of an undertaker. So even though Djar felt like a coward and traitor sometimes, deep down he knew his calm reasoning had indeed saved many lives. The majority of his people were farmers, not warriors. Almost all the fighting men and women had been killed in the battle for the city, or had retreated and later headed north to regroup with the army at Fort Durn where they now waged a desperate battle for their own lives.

After retrieving Dybol from its hiding place, underneath a loose floorboard where it had rested since the occupation began, he strapped it to his back under his woolen travel cloak. He ran over to Cookie's room,

pausing just for a second in the dimly-lit hallway to make sure there were no goblin sentries about. Though it wasn't likely that he would be searched, it was important that he be extra careful. If caught in the palace with the magic talisman, it would mean a quick end to his plans, and he would lose the priceless and essential sword that had been in the Lahroan family for countless generations.

For the past month or so, the goblins usually let him go about his daily tasks in peace, only bothering to give him orders each morning. He then had to report his progress to Karn every evening. Though he had begun to exhibit a bit more rebelliousness, it was not anything the goblins considered serious, especially after he quelled several small uprisings. And even though several months before, on his twentieth birthday, he had taken his rites of manhood, he was still seen as a boy — *The Little Prince* — and really nothing to be all that concerned with. Hopefully, this underestimation would soon haunt the conquerors.

“Ready?” whispered the pretty, brown-eyed nymph of a woman. She was suspended between the top of the doorway and the ceiling like some kind of huge, cute spider. Among her many talents, she could climb nearly anything — and she regularly practiced, though it was sometimes disconcerting to Djar. Or maybe he was just a bit jealous.

“Yes, and get down from there. You look like an insect.”

The young woman seemed to simply go limp for a split second, flipped over and sailed to the floor on all fours. She grabbed her hunting pack off the four-poster bed. It was bulging with a variety of little things that would make life on the trails more comfortable: a tinder box, her short hunting bow, her short sword, string, fish hooks, rope, bandages, and she threw in just a bit of dry meat and a few roots to begin the journey. She knew the Durn quite well, and could forage for food on the way – to wherever it was they were going.

Nearly ten years had passed since Djar’s father found her living alone in the wilderness. Though she was now an adult, she still looked very young – and indeed she was – in terms of spritean life expectancy. Most likely, she was probably more than ten years older than Djar – they didn’t know her exact age – but she looked his age or even a bit younger. It was well known that sprites lived about forty to fifty years longer than humans.

Most of the others of her kind, including Cookie’s family, were killed in the early days of the Goblin Wars, before the Power Nations even bothered to take notice. At the time, a unified front may have seen a quick end to the menace, but those days had long slipped by. Inaction, bred by self-centered administrations with

private agendas, assured the goblins one victory after the next. The stark reality proved to be that none of the nations could handle the goblins by themselves, though that was what each seemed to want to do.

After nearly exterminating the sprites, the goblins took several small border areas formerly governed by humans. They took Naru, the one city settled and ruled by nearly all peoples – a city most despised by the goblins! Next, they occupied several cities in the Dwarf Lands. Northville fell easily, though the great dwarven city of Confluence was – and still is – another matter. The city proper was occupied, but the dwarves still waged a valiant underground war in their vast tunnels, making the goblins expend still more of their energies. Of course, how long the noble but rag-tag army could hold out was a matter of debate.

The most brazen of all the heinous goblin attacks, however, was their assault on Mahhrain. The duchy was the largest – and most powerful – of the three major human cities in all The Land, and just a few years ago an attack on any one of the human duchies would have been unthinkable! Many now concur that the greedy monsters will not be happy until they push all the way down into the West Wilderlands, the home of the elves and remaining handful of sprites. And maybe that still wouldn't be enough to satisfy their blood lust.

Walking out to the stables, much as they always

did, they grabbed their ragged mounts and saddled them. The goblins had long since confiscated the prime battle stallions and sent them up to their Northern Stables to be used as common working beasts.

Djar eyed the inattentive guard as they approached the stable gate. He was nervous, but steadied himself as he realized the guard wouldn't suspect anything out of the ordinary. Sure, they carried packs full of traveling items, but they often had to bring things here and there to complete their normal daily routines.

"We're going back down to Josh Bucklyn's place to see if he will give up some of his herd in lieu of this month's payment," said Djar.

The disinterested stable guard just growled and looked away. He was nearly nodding off, lazily slumped against the barn door.

They breathed a collective sigh of relief.

* * *

"What do you mean we're going to Dymorla's?" Cookie yelled. "You can't be serious?"

"What do you mean: 'what do you mean?' I told you. We've talked about this before. The witch is the only one left I can think of to help us. With all the fighting going on in the Durn and Confluence, the

goblins may not be able to properly defend a concentrated attack on Mahhrain. Dymorla may be able to help us regroup ... somehow. In any event, we may as well face facts: we can't simply stroll up to Fort Durn and expect the goblins to let us pass the siege. And getting to Confluence would be difficult at best, and we'd be faced with the same problem even if we did make it. No, we need to think differently. And it will be easier going south ..."

"But ... Dymorla! I still get frightened just thinking about her! And, anyway, isn't it treasonous to attack one's own castle?"

"Don't be funny, Cookie. This is serious," Djar scolded. "Many people will probably end up dying. Of course, we'll be the first, if Dymorla's as bad as you believe, or if any of those bedtime stories about the old witch are anything close to the truth."

Among other things, the old sorceress was said to be an evil recluse. Although no one in Mahhrain had actually seen or heard from her in nearly thirty years, most still believed she existed, wielding ancient magic like it was an everyday household necessity. The trouble was, Djar was unsure if the stories of her vast necromantic powers were just legend — stories made up to scare bad little girls and boys — or were they true? The tales differed from teller to teller. Some said she was an old hermit who ate children, others said she was, in

fact, not evil at all; they said she simply didn't like to be bothered with people. The reason Djar even considered the trip at all was the fact that his grandmother used to tell stories about seeing the witch when she was a little girl. Being the daughter of a Duke gave her certain traveling privileges, and one of her most memorable was a trip nearly to the border of the East Wilders, and to Dymorla's Keep, with her father who was trying to get some kind of information from the witch. Djar's grandmother never relayed what it was that his great grandfather needed – or if he ever received any help from the mage – but she had told him that Dymorla appeared to be both powerful and compassionate, albeit a bit eccentric. She mentioned many strange goings on in the keep; she spoke of things that could only come about from someone with vast powers. Of course, she also said that Dymorla did indeed wish to be free of political squabbling. However, Djar was at his rope's end – he had to try to engage the witch. He'd try just about anything at this point! He was also banking on the gamble that his grandmother's stories were not inflated for entertainment value.

“Halt!”

Djar groaned. It was Demron, the thick-skulled goblin arms master posted at the portcullis that separated the walled city from the grassy rolling hills of the province.

“Show your orders, *Little Princefing*.”

Djar slowly reached into the front pocket of his cloak and produced a piece of parchment covered with the crimson scrawls of Captain Karn’s administrative assistant. Djar had to suppress making a face every time he looked at his orders. The blood-red ink was an effect the goblin miscreants took to all too readily.

Demron slowly studied the writing, clearly having trouble with the content. Cookie finally yelled: “We’re in a hurry. Must you detain us from the Captain’s ordered duties every day?”

The guard menacingly drew his ax, which up until Cookie got rambunctious, was strapped to the back of his leather and chain mail jerkin. “Stop, sprite, or I’ll cut you like a finger through ham.”

The saying was pretty stupid, but the intended threat quite evident.

“Wait, Cookie. Demron is only doing his duty,” Djar shifted uncomfortably in the saddle, realizing that Dybol’s pommel was pushing up his cloak in the back.

Albeit not the brightest creature, even for a goblin, the movement was not wasted on Demron.

“What’s that?” he said, pointing to the protrusion in Djar’s cloak.

“Nothing.”

“That’s not ’nuthin.’”

“Correction. It’s not something.”

“Get down off the horse.”

“Can I get up off the horse?”

The last statement left the obtuse guard in a quandary for just a moment. Fortunately a moment was all Djar needed to realize that it was time to quickly vacate the premises! He put his heels to the horse, working the chestnut mare into a frenzied gallop. Cookie didn't need to be asked to follow – she was quick in pursuing. Djar felt a strange sort of exhilaration – like a warrior on the charge. The feeling didn't last long, however, as he saw Demron's huge spike-armored warhorse tethered to the hitching post, just a few feet away. His heart sank. The charging knight had been revealed as a fleeing *Princeling*.

The chase was on and the two companions' mounts galloped as best they could, but Demron's huge warhorse, Ghaarhart, steadily gained on them. Ghaarhart was heavily armored and carried an immense passenger, but the beast was much younger and of a far different breed than the other horses. Just as they reached the main trail leading into the Durn, the massive bulk of Ghaarhart and Demron caught up to the fleeing companions.

“Stay here, Cookie,” screamed Djar, whipping his horse about.

He clumsily freed Dybol from its leather scabbard, and charged. At first, Demron was taken

aback by the audacity of *The Princeling*, but eventually figured that it was a great excuse to teach the whelp his final lesson. Besides, he never understood why Karn hadn't simply eaten the boy's innards and been done with him.

The two met in a mixing of dust and clash of metal. Djar brought Dybol up to block the powerful first lunge of Demron. The force from the savage blow sent him sprawling from his mount. Demron then dismounted, moving forward to attack.

"Give up now, and I may let you live. At least until Karn hears about this."

"It's you who should give up, Demron, for I wield the mighty Dybol," Djar said, waving his sword menacingly at the goblin.

Demron let out a laugh that could more easily pass as a snarl. He then began a slow advance on the young man. The massive goblin hesitated, however, when Dybol began to faintly take on a greenish glow – even in the bright daylight. And the eerie green color grew brighter as he approached his young prey.

"She anticipates the blood of an enemy, Demron!" cried Djar, hoping the glowing sword would unnerve his gigantic foe.

Apparently, it did. Beads of sweat began rolling down Demron's sloping forehead, splashing like raindrops at his feet. This made Djar feel a little better.

Though he was well trained in the martial arts and swordsmanship, the fact was he didn't have any real combat experience. At least his tutors were among the best fighters and blade masters in Mahhrain. This was somewhat comforting, and helped his resolve.

Of course, the goblin wasn't going to back down. Though a bit shorter than Djar, the creature outweighed him by over eighty pounds, and thought the boy would be an easy match. On he came, bringing his own weapon to bear. Then, suddenly, the mass of green muscle lunged, his speed belying his bulk. The huge battle axe just missed taking off Djar's ear and part of his shoulder as he quickly ducked right.

Then it was Djar's turn: He purposely fell to his side, quickly slashing upwards with Dybol. *The Possum Turns Scorpion* was an effective maneuver that his father's bodyguard Dermatt had taught him long ago. He put a nice scratch in the behemoth's thigh, and then rolled away from Demron's powerful down stroke. It was a masterful move.

Djar stood, then quickly retreated as the angry goblin came at him again. He became increasingly nervous as the behemoth seemed to shrug off the blow. *How could that be? The stories about Dybol ...*

But Demron didn't get too close before he grabbed at the seemingly insignificant flesh wound. "Unnnggh ... what devilry is this, boy?"

“No devilry, just a bit of old-world magic to keep big-bad goblins away!” laughed Djar, leaving Ghaarhart in favor of his own ragged mount. “Let’s get out of here, Cookie!”

Meanwhile, Demron fell to his hands and knees and vomited. Thanks to Dybol, he would feel that way for the next few days. That made Djar feel good.

Chapter II: On To Durbin

They rode on for several hours before stopping for a break. While searching the plentiful and giving surroundings for something to go with their bits of dried meat, Djar wondered if his decision to leave Demron's horse was a good one. The beast was far stronger and much faster than either of their mounts, but Ghaarhart was also far more conspicuous. He ultimately felt they were better off trying to blend in with the general populace than traveling around the countryside on an armored goblin warhorse; not your everyday sight, you know.

Cookie managed to round up a few edible roots. Djar simply couldn't match her seemingly innate survivalist talents, so he left much of the foraging to her. She could always find and identify – the important part! – the best and most nutritional food in the forest. A perfect example was a bunch of sweet tasting bluish-colored berries that she found growing on several long spine-covered vines that snaked their way up a huge oak.

Being a sprite, she did have heightened senses that made it much easier for her to live off the land. Djar could remember dozens of times when Cookie had gotten them out of tough spots on their regularly scheduled camping excursions. Finding food, finding

the right trail, getting their bearings straight during a downpour – these were all hallmarks of the young woman.

Djar leaned lazily against a tree near the small fire that Cookie had started. He closed his eyes, letting his mind slip well into the past, to much happier times. He could vividly remember when Cookie joined the family. After getting over her initial shyness, the little sprite would continuously pester him, chanting, among other things: “I go with jar – like a cookie.” At the time, Djar thought it was pretty stupid. But his mother thought it was cute, so his parents began calling her Cookie from then on. Even then he had to admit that the name fit her well, but he took more than his fair share of ribbing from friends. He took even more abuse from kids whom he’d never consider his friends. Eventually, however, it became no big deal. It didn’t take long for the two to become best friends and nearly inseparable. Djar found Cookie fascinating. Her outdoor skills were honed to perfection and her wisdom was extraordinary, yet she still retained a kind of naïve innocence. His feelings were always very strong for her, but lately, he simply couldn’t deny feeling something ... more. He would have explored those feelings by now, but felt strange. Even though they were not related, they were sort of raised like brother and sister, so it was awkward at best. *And what would she think about ...*

“This Raipar Root’s pretty good,” said Cookie, interrupting his thoughts with her munching on the steaming, yellow root. “And these berries are great!”

“They are,” agreed Djar, walking over to the fire and carefully taking another leaf-wrapped root from just inside the little ring of stones.

Cookie gobbled down a huge mouthful of the baked root, grabbed a fistful of berries and shoved them into her mouth; both of them were quickly dispensing with their courtly manners. Djar’s mother had been no aristocratic prude, but she had taught them the etiquette necessary for state functions. Both of them did maintain a certain dignity too – at least whenever they were in the castle.

“How long do you figure it will take to get to Dymorla’s neck o’ the woods?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. If we don’t run into any goblin patrols, it should still take well over a week to get to Durbin Springs. We can then get some provisions and a small boat to ride the current of Teardrop Lake until we get downriver well into the Astabor. Then we’ll hike southwest through the corner of the South Durn until we reach her keep – or whatever it is she calls home.”

“What are we going to do if and when we find her?”

Djar sighed. “I’m not sure. I’ll worry about that when we get there.”

* * *

The following day dawned bright and blue and flawless: an utterly perfect late summer day with just enough morning heat and breeze to keep away the mosquitoes. The little vampires often plagued them during their forest excursions – but not today! They rode along in the near-perfect day reliving now nostalgic adventures. *Remember when* and *What about the time* began several long stories – some of them a bit embellished, but neither seemed to mind. The stories kept them amused for hours. They only stopped their enjoyable, easy pace to rest the horses or forage. At least for a while, it seemed like the good old days. The weather, the ride, the condition of the trail – everything seemed ... *right*. It was also easy for them to supplement their meager store of dried meat. Several times they were distracted after smelling enticing aromas emanating from the forest's fruit-bearing shrubs and trees. They'd stop just long enough to collect a bunch, and ride on.

This part of the Durn was also well known to them – they had traveled the trail frequently on hunting and camping excursions, so they didn't have to pay too much attention to the intersecting side trails.

Toward the evening of the sixth day of travel, the

forest broke apart to reveal a gently rolling grassy plain.

“The Bedlands! We’re making pretty good time,” Cookie said, wheeling her horse around to face Djar.

“Yeah, we’ll probably get to Durbin Springs in another day-and-a-half ... maybe two days.”

“Do I really have to tell you that I don’t like the idea of going there? I know you haven’t forgotten what happened last time,” Cookie lectured. “What if those thugs give us trouble again?”

“Durbin Springs is a pretty crowded place, Cookie. I highly doubt the idiots will still be waiting for us.” *Then again, with those morons, you never could tell,* he silently added. “Anyway, why don’t we just camp here for the night – it looks pretty comfortable – then we’ll get an early start tomorrow.”

They slept very well through the entire night, waking only once when a howling coyote agitated the horses. Cookie reassured the animals by whispering something to them. Djar couldn’t understand it, but Cookie had a way with animals like most of her kind. And he was glad.

They resumed their enjoyable journey after a cold breakfast of fruits, just before the slowly rising sun obliterated the remaining darkness. They felt good, even though the early-morning dew had dampened some of their provisions, including their cloaks.

The day warmed significantly as they rode on.

The sun shined down through the bunches of broad green leaves in brilliant swords. Chirping birds, rustling squirrels and small chattering insects filled the warm air with the cacophony of nature. To both of them, it was a long-remembered but long-missed animal symphony, and the concert pleased both travelers. Again, since entering the forest, both travelers felt like everything was like it had been before the occupation. Even with the goblins in Mahhrain, the forest was the same inviting place it had been for as long as they could remember.

There was one important difference, however. They met no other people on the great East/West Trail upon which they traveled. At this time of year they should have met up with any number of passing caravans, riders or trappers from the frontier. But these days no one came to Mahhrain. There was no reason to. There was nothing to trade and nothing to gain, except possibly death or imprisonment. In fact, most of the trade throughout all of The Lands was now put on hold, except maybe for the cities far south, such as Port of Navatu on the South Ocean.

The realization of how bad things had become sent Djar's thoughts spiraling down the now familiar road of trying to understand what had happened and what could be done about it. The invasion of Mahhrain was an unprecedented historic event, the likes of which

had not been seen in centuries! The other two duchies in the Human Lands had sent a sizeable but belated force to Mahhrain after hearing of the siege, but, at that point, nothing could be done. By the time the mobilized army reached the city, the goblin occupation was complete. Mahhrain's scattered army came together with the forces of the two duchies and fought a valiant battle. They could not long stand against the larger and more aggressive horde. Before losing too many men fighting in the open, the armies marched to Fort Durn, where they fight on, actually becoming the first serious problem for the goblins to cope with. Durn is a well-stocked, well-protected stronghold for the army. Many deep, secret tunnels dug long ago enable small bands to actually make their way out behind the goblin army and strike small, effective blows before scrambling back to the well-hidden and protected entrances. The goblins simply figured the bands to be rogues hiding out in the forest. Of course, the tunnels also serve as great supply lines.

All of this was told to Djar by some of the provincials he had visited on his collecting errands for Karn. He never got to see, let alone take part in any of the battles. For several months following the occupation of Mahhrain, he was locked up in one of the towers like *The Little Prince*.

But now, if Djar could enlist the help of Dymorla

— and if she really was a powerful sorceress — just maybe he could oust the goblins from Mahhrain. Visions of this conquest played in his mind for a long time as they rode on. The time passed quickly and it was time to camp.

The next day their journey took another direction. The morning was cool and cloudy, and by the afternoon, the distant muffled rumblings were replaced by dark green storm clouds and great blasts of thunder. These savage turns occurred fairly regularly this late in the summer. A vicious electrical storm tore at the now-weary travelers for more than an hour before it settled into an uncomfortable shower.

Still onward they trudged; their horses searched for sure footing on the increasingly flooded trail. Large clumps of mud and clay stuck to the hooves of the poor beasts, causing them discomfort. Their human companions did not fare much better. Even with their hoods drawn tight, the rain kept running into their eyes making it difficult to see. Their cloaks also felt increasingly heavy as they became soaked through.

Not a word was spoken for a long time as both struggled to keep the horses on the trail. The memories of the previous enjoyable days were drowned in the torrential downpour. They finally had to stop. Not because they wanted to, but they were increasingly concerned for the well-being of the horses. They were continuously slipping on the flooded trails, and it

seemed that they could fall down any second. Besides, the poor animals needed rest and food.

Time crept miserably by as they waited for the downpour to ease. After searching out food for themselves and their mounts, they tried to nap, huddled close together under a makeshift lean-to they fashioned with sticks, leaves and grasses. They were already soaked, so the only relief the shelter permitted was to shield them from the large falling drops.

The wet afternoon finally gave way to a misty, iron-grey evening. Although both were glad that the downpour had subsided, the drizzle still clung to their bones and afforded no great comfort.

Cookie smiled reassuringly, but said nothing as they began to pack their things to resume their journey. They traveled slowly on into the night, not wanting to stop since they lost so much time during the storm. Cookie was an invaluable asset, as the sprite seemed to have a built-in compass, and always seemed to know the correct paths to follow to maintain their westerly direction. Djar most certainly would have gotten lost if he was in the lead, for the clouds obscured the moon and stars, so visual directions were impossible. But even Cookie had difficulty seeing in the pitch black forest, and, eventually, she called a halt to the march.

They slept until the black night gave way to a grey dawn. The drizzle then gave way to a fine mist. It was

nearly noon when the forest broke into a meadow of long green and yellow grasses.

“We’re close to the Astabor,” said Cookie.

“I think I see it up ahead.”

“Yep, that’s it. And I think we came out of the Durn just a bit north of Durbin Springs, so head south along the river bank.”

“Okay. How long do you think it will be before we reach town?” asked Djar. “I want to get to a tavern, dry off, and get a good hot meal.”

Cookie turned in her saddle to face him.

“We probably won’t get there until the evening, what with the time we’re making. And what’s the rush, anyway? Don’t you like being chilled to the bone, eating soggy fruit and not-so-dry-meat *Princeling*?”

Djar just smiled.

* * *

Durbin Springs was a place of cutthroats and thieves. Dirty money changed dirty hands in dirty alleyways. Fighting dogs, creaking signposts and singing drunks were about the only things that broke the gloomy silence. And these unsettling noises were quite contrary to the soothing sounds of the forest that they had grown used to for more than a week straight. In retrospect, the rain didn’t seem nearly as bad anymore.

“What kind of people would live here?” Cookie whispered, pulling her cloak tightly about her.

“Some don’t have a choice – others like it,” breathed Djar.

“I told you I didn’t want to come here. It’s only gotten much worse.”

She was right. The last time the travelers found themselves in the city it was quite by accident. They were on a camping trip when a huge bear attacked one of Duke Taelbor de Kellwood’s hunter-guards, Drew de Lago. They had no choice but to seek medical help in Durbin Springs.

While waiting for the doctor to do his business, Djar and Cookie walked into a seedy tavern to get something to eat. A barrel-chested trapper dressed in animal furs started taunting the young lord, who did look pretty hokey in his Imperial Hunting Garment. He also started to make passes at Cookie – who to this day maintains she could have “taken care of the thug.” Push came to shove, and soon shove broke out into a dangerous sword fight. Djar didn’t have Dybol then (his father still carried the sword), and he was fighting for his life, so he searched for an open killing strike. The trouble was, he had yet to become the blade master he now was, and he was no more than a boy going up against a man nearly twice his weight. Things didn’t go according to plan.

He never even came close to a killing strike, as his sword was knocked out of his hand, and the burly trapper backed him up against a wall. Cookie was kept busy with five of the trapper's friends.

If not for Dermatt, and a few of the Home Guard making a timely entrance, Djar would have been cut to ribbons. Thankfully, however, the trapper's sense of manhood was supplanted by his instinct for survival, so he let his young prey go without a fight. This was wise as Dermatt had quickly drawn his huge sword and was more than ready and willing to run him through without the slightest hesitation. Thinking of the encounter, Djar once again wondered what became of his father's most trusted bodyguard; Dermatt was probably killed in the battle of Mahhrain's occupation, but he didn't know for sure ...

"Okay," Djar said, bending close to face Cookie. "We'll just get one quick meal, then dry off and get some sleep. If we get up early enough, we can get out of town before anyone even wakes up – most of them will probably be sleeping off hangovers, anyway."

They walked the fetid streets, searching for an inn that looked somewhat respectable. They passed clusters of ramshackle huts and garishly painted storefronts. The town's larger two- and three-story buildings were in disrepair as well; some of the structures visibly leaned to one side or the other.

Finally, they came to a place called The Broken Keg. It was a sorry looking two-story structure in bad need of repair. Most of the paint had long since chipped and peeled off, and some of the planks even had rotted-out holes in them. A misspelled sign told of “bargan priced luxery rooms.”

“Should we try this one?” asked Djar.

“I don’t like the looks of this place, but then again we haven’t passed anything better.”

Before entering, they hitched up the horses. They stopped at the door, peering into its dirty little pane of yellow glass. Several men and two women sat at four different tables. Smoke filled the room. At the table nearest the back, four rough-looking characters played cards. One smoked a huge pipe that belched a gigantic cloud with every exhale.

There was a rough plank bar set atop several barrels alongside one of the walls.

“That’s probably who we talk to about getting the room,” whispered Cookie, pointing to an old, disheveled man behind the makeshift bar.

“That’s fine because I need something to eat before I go to bed.”

She gave him a dirty look.

“Come on, Cookie – I’m starving.”

“Okay, let’s do it,” she said, grabbing the rusty door handle and pushing the creaking door. Upon

entering, a wicked odor assailed their nostrils. It was different from the odor in the streets – but equally bad. The mix of smoke, sweat, perfume, and food smelled so strongly that it was a wonder that you couldn't *see* the odor. At any other time Djar's stomach would have been unsettled, but presently he only had one thing on his mind.

Walking up to the crooked old man behind the bar, he called: "Two ales and two big bowls of hot soup, please!"

The old man turned, pointing to a large steaming pot in the kitchen area.

"No soup. Stew."

Djar smiled. "That sounds fine. I guess we'll eat at the bar here."

"Suit yourself," was all he said before shambling over to get two bowls from a shelf over the old wood stove.

Djar looked at Cookie who was glancing about nervously.

"Take it easy," he whispered. "Don't worry. These people have no interest in us. Remember, we're just poor travelers on the way to Elfin."

"Elfin?"

"Yes. You pretty much look like an elf, albeit a runt."

"Very funny."

Djar smiled. Though Cookie was an expert outdoorswoman, he had the edge when it came to handling people – and getting out of people trouble. He was well versed in diplomacy – practically since the first day he could speak! Actually, he used to call it hustling, though never in his father’s presence. Yes, Elfin was a good story. It was a newer border town actually set near the troll lands of the East Wilderlands. Many elves were taking up residence there since the signing of the Pact Of Peace by Aara, queen of the elves; Aeironic, prince of the woodland elves; and Thag Olrood, the great troll Chieftain and Master of the Seven Tribes of the Dark Peoples as they were known.

“Here’s your stew, and I’ll get the ales right now,” said the barkeep, a little more pleasantly. “Four Coppers, for-the-goods.”

“Great.” Djar carefully felt in his tunic pocket for a large Silver. He didn’t want to be flashing Golds around in a place like this. “You can keep the change, my good man.”

The barkeep quickly took the coin – at first looking suspiciously at it – then quickly stuffed it deep into his apron pouch. Apparently even he didn’t like flashing his money around in his own establishment.

“Care for anythin’ else?” he asked, the big tip making him a bit over-friendly.

“Now that you mention it, yes. We need a room

for the night, but we'll probably be leaving early, so we want to pay for it now. Can you help us?"

"Uh, hum, uh ... sir," he said. The innkeeper was definitely beginning to smell a profitable evening. He looked at Djar, then looked Cookie up and down, pausing at length in certain places. He raised an eyebrow and smirked. "All we have left is the honeymoon suite, and that is ten Silvers a night."

Cookie gave the innkeeper a disgusted look. "Ten Silvers? Are you kidding? We—"

"We'll take it - for seven." interrupted Djar.

The innkeeper happily scurried into the kitchen area with his newfound riches - presumably to hide the coin.

Djar leaned close to Cookie. "What was that? You talk about me, then you almost cause a scene over a few Silvers?"

"That's way too much money to spend on a dumpy room for a night."

"You know, you take after my father," he scolded. A few of the patrons glanced curiously at them. He then lowered his voice to an almost imperceptible whisper. "Don't worry about the money. I have a lot."

One of the card players then began to whoop it up about winning "the mother of all pots." Djar was glad, because it took the attention away from them. The drunken winner then stood up and did a comical little

jig, slapping the palms of his hands on his heels. He called out to the innkeeper “to get his big behind in here” and give everyone a round on him, then flung a Silver at the smiling old man.

It was definitely a good night for the innkeeper.

* * *

The “honeymoon suite” was nothing more than a dirty little room with a large, musty bed. The straw mattress reeked of mildew, and felt almost wet in the humid room. At least the sheets had been washed – if not, they probably would have slept on the floor.

“I’d hate to see the regular rooms,” said Cookie, as she slumped down on the mattress. “Sharg! There’s a stick in the mattress – and you can guess where!”

Djar rolled his eyes. “Let’s just make the best of it and get some sleep.”

Sleep was what they wanted. Sleep was what they needed. But sleep is not what they got. Apparently, the tavern was a popular place, as more and more sounds emanated from the downstairs escapades. It seemed that some crashing sound – usually accompanied by screaming or laughing – startled them nearly every time they fell asleep.

This went on long into the night before Djar finally sprang from the bed.

“I can’t take this! Look, Cookie ... it’s getting light outside! The sharg-encrusted idiots partied the entire night!”

“Let’s just get our things together ...” she began, getting up from the bed, “and get out of here.”

They packed their goods and left the room, stopping to peer over the aged banister before descending the stairs.

Djar’s heart sank.

“Cookie. It’s one of the guys from last time,” he breathed.

“Get out.”

“I’m not kidding,” he said, pointing to his former adversary. “We’ll have to try and sneak past them. Pull your cloak tight and try to avoid his face.”

Djar felt like he was in a dream, but he knew it wasn’t so. It was much too real to be a dream.

He waited until the innkeeper went back into the kitchen before beginning a descent that seemed to take an eternity – they didn’t want their newfound friend to make any commotion upon their departure – they had, after all, probably made him more money than he usually brought in during the course of a full week.

They made their way past the remaining patrons – who were mostly coming down from a full night of being drunk – carefully trying to avoid the face of the bearded giant who almost succeeded in snuffing

out Djar's life once. Djar certainly didn't want to give him a second chance.

They made it all the way to the door before Djar felt the overpowering urge to glance at the giant.

He did.

The giant glared directly into Djar's face and scowled. Then he looked away.

The trapper was so obviously drunk that he probably was only seeing two small blurs walking in front of his red, squinting eyes.

"Wow, are we ever lucky," said, Djar, after they walked out into the early morning grey.

"Yeah, real lucky! Someone's stolen our horses!"

Chapter III: Of Long Walks And Demons

They searched around the inn, and much of the surrounding streets, before finally admitting to themselves that they would have to resume their journey on foot. Their earlier plans of renting or buying a small boat would have to wait – they just wanted to get out of the wretched city. Besides, there were several small trading outposts along the lower Astabor, and they could re-supply and get transport at any one of them.

They walked long into the afternoon. It was still mostly cloudy, but it had warmed back up, and most of the puddles were disappearing.

Djar sighted a high spot laden with a large, soft looking patch of high grass. “Why don’t we stop and get some sleep. I’m dead on my feet.”

“I was wondering when you were going to suggest that,” she said, following Djar up the rise.

Djar slumped down in the grass, looking to be sure that they couldn’t be seen from the trail.

“You know, I don’t even care about the horses. I’m just glad to be out of Durbin.”

“I told you: It’s bad news.”

“No kidding. I never would have believed that a

town just downriver from Fort Durn could be so decayed – even these days,” said Djar, as he reached into his pack for a bit of dried meat.

Cookie shrugged. “The soldiers don’t really patrolled this far south too often – even before the goblins. And now, no one’s going to clean up that mess.”

“I don’t know if it *could* be cleaned up – it’d probably be better to knock everything down and rebuild!”

* * *

At the conclusion of the Great War – some two hundred years past – the Darian council split the entire known world into five distinct Lands, four of which were governed by the Power Nations: humans withdrew from the periphery, settling in the east-central area, elves – later with a small remnant population of sprites and a few scatterings of humans and even a few dwarfs – ruled the West Wilderlands in the southwestern section of the continent, dwarves mainly stayed in rocky northwest, and the goblins retreated to the northeast. The fifth land, located in the southeast, was named the East Wilderlands. It was made up of a variety of the less-populous peoples – minors, as they were ignorantly referred to. Trolls, ogres, fairies, swamp

elves and centaurs made up the majority of the beings inhabiting the East Wilders.

Things progressed well for quite some time. Rich cultures spawned throughout The Lands. They created their own laws and customs, but also shared in the other's resources and skills. Intertwined economies developed, which meant what was good for one was usually good for all.

That is, until the goblins began their Great Expansion. The goblins were never satisfied with the Great War's outcome, and would have surely fought on, had not the elves behaved in such a cowardly fashion by backing down to the dwarves and humans, just as the battling grew intense – at least that was the goblin estimation of history.

Cookie must have been thinking similar thoughts – which occurred often between the two. “Do you think we could get the elves to help now?” she asked.

“It depends on what you mean by help. They sent a small division up to Fletcher's Canyon to reinforce the Dwarves, but that's about all they'll commit to right now. You know how cautious everyone is. My father tried to warn the Dwarves long before this all started – and look at the help it got him. And I think even he underestimated what was about to transpire.”

They talked on, for a bit, then both fell into a deep,

needed sleep.

The morning brought a flood of sunshine, bright colors, warmth, and a slight breeze – the weather was back to perfect.

They walked on into the afternoon, pausing here and there to pick fruit from the wild forest banquet. The trail was still a bit moist, but it was easy to travel upon. They laughed, told jokes, and had a pretty good time – at least until late afternoon.

Not all scary things live in bone chilling, mist shrouded swamps. And not all bad things happen on dark, cold and rainy nights.

Such was the case on the tenth day of their journey.

The two companions crested a steep, grassy hill, which was at the end of a rather large clearing of the old forest. They were just about to make their way down the hill and disappear back into the forest when they were frozen in their tracks.

“What is it?” whispered Djar.

“I don’t know ... it looks like some sort of demon.”

The Durn forest – and much of the sparsely populated areas of the Lands – contained strange creatures of all kinds. This monster, however, was not just another animal – it was definitely a Majical.

Majicals were creatures that were spawned of magic – usually from experiments gone awry, or beasts

purposely conjured from different dimensions to do a particular sorcerer's bidding. Several of the Majicals, for instance the Trolls and Centaurs, reproduced and developed thriving cultures like the other nations. But most led very secretive lives, or even hunted the other peoples.

Demons were one such group. Several were conjured during the Great War by the strange human wizard, Bellwood. The Council approved his plan because they thought they needed some mystical weapon to fight the physically superior goblins from the north, and the magically-enhanced elves out of the south. But they proved to be unmanageable, and after wreaking havoc on divisions of human soldiers, they went south to continue their clandestine society away from the mass of humans. There they stayed for generations. At first, people thought that they would slowly die out – they didn't seem to breed. However, the trouble was that they seemed to have very long life spans. One, who was caught by a company of Imperial Guard after devastating an entire village, was kept in a subterranean dungeon for over 180 years before finally escaping. He outlived eight Imperial Guard captains, and the last survivor of the company that captured him had been dead for over 120 years.

“What should we do?” breathed Djar.

It was obvious that the creature knew they were

there, and it began to slowly make its way toward them.

“I don’t know, and I’m scared, Djar. That thing is enormous,” said Cookie, unsheathing her short sword.

“Me too. I don’t even know if Dybol can handle this.”

The creature advanced until it stood at the base of the hill. There it stopped, snarling viciously. It looked kind of like a cross between a man, a snake and a lizard – only men, snakes or any lizards Djar knew of didn’t have four inch claws at the end of their nine inch fingers. It had another menacing weapon in the form of a huge tail which ferociously swished back and forth like an angry cat. The tail was smooth except for two rows of hard looking knob-like growths that ran up the center. As if its physical attributes weren’t enough, it wore a wicked array of spiked leather armor.

But what was most frightening was its mouth. Its elongated, green snout displayed what seemed like hundreds of finger-sized daggers. They were straight and bright white – and could even be seen when its mouth was closed. It let out a bone-chilling roar; its jaws splitting so wide that it looked like they completely distended from one another.

And that was enough a cue as he needed: Djar quickly yanked Dybol from the old leather scabbard.

The sword surprised him.

It usually started glowing faintly, and

progressively brightened as an enemy approached. But this time Dybol flared at once, casting off a bright emerald sunshine. It seemed as if the sword knew the kind of danger the demon presented. He knew, and accepted, the fact that Dybol was a magical blade, but until this time he never really gave much credence to the stuff he had been told about it being sentient.

“I hope you can understand this, er ... sir. We mean you no harm and wish to only be left alone,” said Djar, glancing then squinting at the bright green light.

The demon curled its lips and hissed. It slowly advanced.

“You are over confident, demon. Look! This is no ordinary sword. I wield a weapon of ancient magic,” said Djar, adding for good measure, “The same sort of magic that brought you to our realm. Leave us alone, or I’ll be forced to slay you.”

He was trying to sound confident, but his voice shook. His diplomatic training hardly covered subjects like this.

Cookie slipped off to the side, not too far, just enough so they would have two points of engagement.

The demon then began to speak to them in what must have been its native tongue. It was a string of guttural grunts, growls, and hisses. Then, even more surprisingly, the beast began speaking the Common Tongue: “Do not try to scare me, little one. I have been

in your realm far longer than you have, and it will take more than a boy and a little elfling to scare me off. Hunting is about the only sport worth anything in this miserable realm. And your blade ... I must have it ... I like the color."

Djar tried to act as if he wasn't surprised that the beast was actually eloquent.

"Ah, you do speak the Common – and pretty good I might add – but you might want to ease up on the curling lip routine."

"I always like gutting the smart ones best," it countered.

So much for playing it cool!

The demon got near the top of the hill when Cookie yelled, "Djar, let's just run!"

"No – we'll stay our ground."

It wasn't bravery that held him steadfast. It was the vision of that gaping maw reaching for the back of his neck. Maybe Cookie could get away, but Djar instinctively knew that the demon could outrun him. Besides, at least now the much larger beast was at the disadvantage of fighting them uphill.

The demon again surprised both of them. From halfway down the hill it crouched slightly, then with an enormous leap met them face to face at the top of the hill. It wasted no time and lashed out; wicked claws just barely missing Djar's exposed throat.

Djar threw himself back to elude the other arm before it tore him wide open.

Then Cookie sprang into action. Djar could barely follow her as she quickly went around the beast's backside and leapt up toward its throat. The demon either had spectacular peripheral vision, or it sensed her coming, for it turned just enough to prevent the razor sharp blade from being plunged into its neck. Instead, the blade lodged itself into the beast's thickly corded shoulder musculature. Though her sword was as sharp as a razor, the blade could not cut into the demon's tough flesh — it stopped before it blade was a third of the way in. That same stroke would have buried itself to the hilt in just about any other creature alive — but this was no ordinary beast.

The demon snarled and brought his tail sweeping around, but Cookie was able to not-so-gracefully thrust herself away from the beast's natural weapon before it could do any damage.

“Ah, little one. You possess the skills and speed, but have not the strength or weapons for the likes of me.”

They both stood as if in a trance while the demon reached up, curled just two of its long fingers around the hilt of the insignificant short sword, and casually pulled it out.

It looked at the little weapon appraisingly, then

with a snarl, bent the blade in half with its long, clawed thumb.

“Time to end this little game, right now!” it screamed, this time attacking Cookie.

Djar sped into action just in time to save his best friend. He lunged at the beast, but slipped just before he engaged the monster. His forward momentum brought him skidding head first under the demon’s powerful legs. In one fluid motion he brought Dybol up, slashing the back of the demon’s upper thigh, then slid past belly down on the slick mud and grass.

Though this recovery and attack was a superb feat, Djar was only able to get in a minor flesh wound. He also had no time to find out if Dybol's enchantment would incapacitate the beast because he had been unable to completely elude the demon's counter attack. As he slid under and past the beast, it whipped its thick tail and caught him in the back. It was only the very end of the appendage, but the monster's strength was not to be believed. The blow sent him sprawling. Dybol was knocked from his hand and well off to the side; he was completely defenseless. That didn't really matter in any event, because an explosion of pain racked his body while hundreds of tiny lights danced about his eyes as his vision began to tunnel closed.

The demon turned and snarled. “You’ll pay dearly for that, whelp!” He slowly walked toward the

now unconscious Djar, clawing at the seemingly minor wound.

Again Cookie sprang into action.

Before the monster knew what hit him, Cookie retrieved Dybol and plunged it into its huge, muscle-corded back – the preoccupied beast had completely disregarded the lithe young woman. She felt the resistance first from the monster’s tough hide, then from the muscle and tendons beneath.

Every detail of what occurred next was etched in her memory for the rest of her life. The sword flared – she could see the green light even though the blade was almost completely embedded into the demon’s flesh. The monster fell to its knees and let out a scream the likes of which she had never heard. She watched in shock and horror as the demon desperately groped behind its back for the protruding end of the sword. Just as it grabbed the pommel with one of its clawed hands, there was an eerie screeching sound, which she thought came from Dybol, then the demon exploded into thousands of pieces of flesh and droplets of blood.

She was covered in a viscous ooze, and nearly knocked unconscious when a large piece – she thought maybe one of its forearms – hit her in the side of the head. She fell to the ground where she lay horrified. Finally, she mustered enough courage to look up again. All that was left of the monster was more of the

glistening, sticky green and red paste that covered her from head to toe. The once peaceful little knoll was a sickly mess and the sight of it all nearly caused her to vomit. After staring for a few more moments, the shock of the whole situation subsided – a little. But she knew she had to wash off the sickly death paste soon or she would, indeed, throw up.

* * *

After using up most of the contents in their water skins to wash herself, Cookie retrieved Dybol. The sword was stuck in the ground right where she had plunged it into the demon's back. She then gathered the rest of their belongings, and dragged Djar far enough away from the battle scene (actually she felt it wasn't far enough, but she just didn't have the strength to drag Djar any further). He was okay, and had come around, but he was in an awful amount of pain.

"Oww ... what was that tail made of anyway?" Djar whispered.

"You don't want to know," said Cookie, once again thinking about the disgusting mess.

At Djar's request, Cookie relayed all that happened after he was knocked unconscious by the swing of the demon's tail.

"Wow, you bailed me out again, Cookie. Thanks.

I wish I could learn to stand on my own two feet.”

“Come on, Djar. You’ve saved me a coupla’ dozen times, so why shouldn’t I get to return the favor once in awhile? Besides, if that creature hadn’t had its mind on you, I really doubt that I could have gotten Dybol into its hide so easily.”

“Yeah, I guess we can really count ourselves lucky.”

Again, bits of the battle flashed in Cookie’s mind.

“Lucky? There you go again with the ‘lucky’ thing! We have no horses, barely any food or water, your back has a huge bruise on it, and I feel like I’m going to pass out at any second.”

“At least we’re alive,” he said, smiling.

His sincere look melted the scowl from her face. “You know, you’re right. Now let’s get some sleep so we can get an early go at it tomorrow.”

The next day was as beautiful as the previous one; however, there were no demons to contend with so it was that much better. They didn’t get too far that day; they didn’t wake early like they planned, and they walked at a very leisurely pace. They needed the respite following their series of misadventures. And the worst of it was that Djar hadn’t had any reservations about the journey itself; he thought that any trouble would come once they arrived at Dymorla’s Keep, if at all.

They camped near the banks of the Astabor River, up on a small, grassy hillock. Cookie went out to

retrieve some food while Djar collected some dry wood and started a small fire. She came back with a variety of roots, fruit, and a nice surprise – a rather large brown trout.

“Wellallright! How did you get that?”

“Easy enough. There must be a thousand of ’em just past those rocks, at the edge of the river bank – the proverbial shooting fish in a barrel with my bow!”

Djar was elated. He always thought the tiny bow was nothing more than a toy – it was not powerful enough for almost any fairly sized game – but now he was utterly thankful that Cookie had the foresight to bring it.

“I caught it so you cook it,” she said, handing him the fish and the fruits and vegetables.

It was the best meal they had eaten in a couple weeks, and both of them felt really good afterwards. They stayed close to the fire, wrapped in their cloaks. The day’s bright heat had transformed into a cool, clear, starlit sky that was breathtaking.

Two uneventful days later, the two were once again ready to hit the trail. “How long do you think it will be before we get to a trading post?” asked Cookie.

“If I remember correctly, there’s one about three days by horse, so figure five days’ journey south from Durbin. At the pace we’ve been making since leaving there, I’d say that we have to be pretty close to it by now.”

“Good. Maybe we can get a boat and stay off our feet for a few days – I know it’ll cut our travel time down considerably.”

“Yeah. When I used to go boating on the river with my father, the current always moved pretty quickly – all the way down to the lake. There aren’t many snags either – at least there weren’t many back then.”

Cookie gave him that motherly look that she used so often when she worried about something.

“You still have the money, don’t you?” she asked.

Djar gave her an admonishing glance.

“Of course! Do you think I’m that careless?”

His tone worked on Cookie, but he slowly, almost imperceptibly, pushed his stomach against the lumpy pouch attached to his waist – just to make sure.

The next day was a good one for travel – just a bit cooler, and still clear and bright. About mid-day they reached Trever’s Trail, a frontier trading post. Much of the periphery of the Human Lands was sparsely dotted with these posts, which offered a variety of goods and services to keep hunters, trappers, and travelers well provided. The outposts had been sanctioned and supported by the three Human duchies: Kellwood, Heatherwood, and Mahhrain. Unfortunately, ducal support dried up – thanks again to the advent of the Great Expansion. With Mahhrain being overrun, and

the bulk of the armies holed up at Fort Durn, the two remaining duchies were busy with the nasty act of self preservation. The goblin threat was real, and any day could bring a horde of the vicious plunderers assaulting their gates just as they had done in Mahhrain. But Djar thought that the goblins would not try to overrun another of the protected cities until they got the specter of the Fort Durn army off their collective backs. Even the great goblin army had limitations.

“Hello! Is anyone in there?” cried Djar, ascending the roughly hewn planks to the covered porch.

There was a small peephole door attached to the thickly planked front door. With a sharp screech, rusty hinges on the small lookout parted slightly.

“Who are you, and what’s your business?”

It was a relief that it was not a big, leathery goblin that stared out at them; it was, indeed, an older man – or at least the wrinkled cheek and eye that peeped out at them looked to be those of an old man.

“We’re traveling down the Astabor, and we need a small boat and some other provisions. I can pay.”

The man looked long and hard at Cookie. “You takin’ this sprite down to the West Wilders’?”

Djar hadn’t really thought much about the story he was to give the proprietor – which really reflected upon the events of the past few days. He normally would never have approached any sort of diplomatic

affair without a semi-prepared oration. And this old man surprised him. He actually knew Cookie was a sprite. Most people never even laid eyes on a sprite, and assumed she was an elf.

“Uh ... she was one of a small group of resistance fighters in the Goblin Lands, and when her people were caught during a supply raid, she fled south into Kellwood. I am on the ducal business of Lord Taelbor de Kellwood, and if you are still loyal to The Way, then you should aid us.”

The old man closed the small lookout, then opened the front door.

“Come in, but you are going to have to be truthful with me, Your Lordship.”

The old man smiled at their facial responses.

“It is you, Lord Djar Lahroan, correct?”

* * *

They went inside and got some fresh clothes and some food. Trever, as he called himself, insisted. He said they couldn't get any business accomplished without a good meal first. But Djar and Cookie had a million questions – and they tried to sneak in a few while gobbling down large, wooden spoonfuls of the hot stew.

Trever would have none of that. Eating seemed a

priority to the cranky old man – or at least seeing that Cookie and Djar were taken care of was. But finally, after supervising them through their second bowls of steaming stew, Trever was ready for the “business.”

“So, what brings the son of the murdered Duke of Mahhrain way down the Astabor?” he asked.

His question was asked matter-of-factly; he meant no disrespect to Djar’s father. In fact, beneath the rough drawl, Djar could sense sympathy in the old man’s voice.

Cookie may not have seen it that way. “Why should we tell you what’s going on? I mean – how do we know we can trust you?”

“Okay, little one. I see your point,” he sighed. “So what do we do? Well ... I guess I can tell you a bit about myself, then you can decide what you will tell me. That sound fair?”

“Fair enough,” said Djar.

The old man cleared his throat and sat up in his chair – as if he were about to address a large congregation.

“My name is Trever de Kellwood, second cousin to the Duke.” He paused as the two companions first looked closely at him, then at each other. “Do you see the resemblance, young ones?”

Cookie nodded her head – she had felt ... something when she looked at his eyes.

“Yes, you do look like Duke Woody,” she said (she always had silly names for anyone she knew fairly well). “You have the same beautiful, hazel eyes.”

Slightly blushing, Trever continued his tale.

“Um, yes. Anyway, I’m not one for politics and the ways of the court bore the demon out of me, so I decided to spread The Way by opening one of these.” He gestured to his modest storeroom, which was chock-filled with coffee, dried meats, bags of grain, tack, tools, wagon wheels, wooden planks, cloth and a variety of other items needed to traverse the forest trails. “It’s not much, but it keeps me busy, and I love the frontier. Well, at least I used to before the gobbies came lumberin’ down. And I used to actually be a help to my cousin. I could always collect and pass on a lot of useful information from well-traveled and well-eared passersby.”

Djar was pretty fascinated with Trever’s tale, but he just had to interrupt.

“Have you heard anything from Duke Kellwood lately?”

Trever shook his head. “No. And I guess you haven’t heard. Kellwood and Heatherwood are occupied. I think my cousin is under siege with the rest of the army at Durn – at least I hope he is ... otherwise ...”

“No!” cried Cookie. She couldn’t fight the tears welling up in her eyes.

“I’m afraid so,” Trever continued. “After the

failed attempt at taking back Mahhrain, the bulk of the remaining armies retreated to Fort Durn.”

“Yes, but I heard they are posing a huge problem for the goblins.”

Again, Trever shook his head.

“At first it seemed to be the best possible scenario – considering the circumstances. But what was really happening was a different matter entirely. The goblins split their army at Durn, sending one detachment to Heatherwood and one to Kellwood. With the bulk of the troops already holed up in the fort, both cities’ Home Guards fell easily enough, and that’s all she wrote! The goblins are now administering – if that’s what it can be called – all three of the major human cities. What I don’t get is how the goblins have suddenly become such master tacticians.”

Cookie gave him a strange look.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I know they’re savage fighters, but I’ve studied the histories. This time – at least their battles – seem so much more organized and they’re so ... patient ...”

Djar’s heart was already in his stomach, but he felt he had to ask: “What about Confluence?”

“The resistance is still alive, but slowing a little. They appear to be nothing more than a thorn in the thick goblin skin. It seems the goblins just want to keep the dwarves holed-up in their rock city, so they can’t do

much. They'll probably just plan to wait them out then concentrate a force and BAM! That's been working for them. They separate the forces, keeping them at bay, then send sizeable divisions elsewhere for more concentrated attacks against inferior forces. It keeps their casualties to a minimum. Yes, it certainly has worked for the treacherous beasts! Thankfully, it's just too much for them to try all-out assaults against the elves right now."

"What's going on with them?" asked Cookie.

"They're far better off than the rest of us. With so much of the goblin army taken up fighting the large human armies, the Elven Imperial has only had to act as a buffer, keeping small goblin raiding parties relatively far up north — at least that's what we think is going on in the west. Also, the goblins won't even think of moving on the cave dwarves at Chapel Rock until some of the other northern objectives are met." Seeing their sorrow, he added, "Hey, all hope's not lost. Durn is a long way from goin' down and the elves have a sizable army. The dwarves have a decent-sized force too. And think about this: the goblin army may be huge, but it's spread thin. One or two well-planned attacks could have them right back in a defensive posture. The key is to unite all the other forces. And what about Illum?"

Djar's eyes widened. He hadn't even considered the massive fortress of the Waypriests — probably

because they were considered zealots at best and a completely dangerous sect at worst. “Yes, Djar, they have a massive force of missionary warriors who could help fight the goblins. That is, if it coincided with their endless prophecies. And it appears as if you also have some kind of plan going – unless you’re just running away.” He paused, and added, “Now, what say you tell me what you’re up to?”

By now, they both felt implicit trust for Trever and it was their turn to talk. They relayed many of the events just prior to and after the goblin takeover, sometimes overlapping and interrupting each other in their excitement. Cookie told of their roles as arbiters, and, later, “tax” collectors.

It was a long tale, but, eventually, they came to the time just after Karn used Djar as a punching bag; the time they decided to set out on their seemingly desperate mission; the time that now seemed so long ago. Sensing their discomfort, Trever told both of them he was proud of them for their work. He apparently understood the difficulty of their situation and how they felt somewhat traitorous. He said saving lives should always be the priority of any Lord, Duke or King.

Djar was the one to tell Trever of their plan and mission; how they were really in search of the sorceress Dymorla. Cookie then told of the incident with Demron, and their epic battle with the demon. Of

course, she was best able to tell of that encounter, being that Djar was unconscious for a good part of the battle!

Finally, after telling of their near miss in Durbin Springs, Trever slowly shook his head back and forth. Then, possibly feeling a bit paternal he said, "I'm surprised at the both'a ya'. You shouldn'ta went to Durbin. You're high profile – 'specially you, Djar – and those cutthroats would have no guilt pangs selling you out to a goblin – or even a goblin Tormentor. Then where would you be?"

Djar smiled. It was funny how Trever seemed to vacillate between his more formal speech – most likely learned at court – and his frontier-style speech.

"I'm serious!" cried Trever. "There are Tormentors about these days, you can bet on that, young man!"

His smile faded. Djar hadn't even considered the Tormentors. In all his days under goblin scrutiny and rule, he had yet to see one. They were said to be an evil lot; brazen and full of cunning. They got their name from the plain and simple fact that they enjoyed nothing more than tormenting – race, politics, religion and creeds made no difference – the Tormentors were said to be equal opportunity offenders! The only thing was, Djar had begun to believe that they were only fairy tales to keep the humans in check.

"You mean, there really are Tormentors?" he asked.

“Most assuredly! I even ran into one once. I was out with a hunting party with some of my cousin’s Home Guard, huntin’ a huge, killer bear. The beast had moved on a tiny settlement in the upper Durn, and killed a whole family as they slept. Well, we hunted the sharg-infested thing, but you know what? What those sleepy-eyed witnesses thought was a huge bear was a Tormentor.”

“So what happened?” interrupted a wide-eyed Cookie.

Trever closed his eyes, and slipped back into his trail tongue. “Well, we had some’a the best trackers in the land – you know my cousin; he had the best hunter-trackers east’a Chapel Rock. So we finally catch up to him and track him down a forest trail – a main trail at that. Now, there’s nothing unusual about a bear walking the trails; they are easier after all. But we get to see something just a bit extraordinary – the thing was wearin’ size extra-large boots! Now I don’t know of many’a bear that wears boots, so we get really into this thing. We finally catch up with it – and it seems to me that he – or she! – let us. Anyway, we get to encirclin’ the thing and come to find out that it was a Tormentor. At first we thought it was a demon – and in a way I guess it was! But anyway, he went and told us what he was. Then he proceeded to wipe out the party, but I won’t disgust you with the details. Seven good, strong men died, and two of us were left for dead. If not for a

passing caravan coming up the trail the next day – and investigatin’ all the blood and mess, the two of us would have died as well.”

Trever paused; his mind was clearly going back in time to those long ago days.

“Do you know anything else about them?” asked Djar.

Trever scratched at his nose. The dark-skinned, dark-haired man had a way about him. He was handsome, yet wizened; a weatherbeaten yet solid rock of a man.

“Well, after that, I did have what you might call a vested interest in the Tormentors. I tried my sharg-infested best to get more information, but it was all of the legendary variety. It seemed as if I was one of the only ones – besides the High Goblin Warriors – who lived to tell of an encounter. ’Course I was lucky to be one of the few.

“But the legendary stuff I found was pretty interestin’ in itself – and a bit chilling. Supposedly, there were an unlucky thirteen of the vile beasts. They were said to have been created by an ex-pupil of the wizard Bellwood, named Fralgarzener, who just happened to supposedly be sympathetic with the human cause during the first Great Goblin War, as I call it. Well, you know of the stories of Bellwood; he was a great sorcerer, but made some pretty awful decisions. How a man can be so smart and such an ass at the same time is

beyond me! Anyway, Fralgarzener talked Bellwood into having his blasted Majicals mate with some other gobbies that were also supposed to be human sympathizers. The old fool resisted at first, but as the war got desperate, and the old dukes pressed Bellwood for help, he decided to give it the old sorcerer's try. He tried again and again to cross the beasts with the goblins. Sometimes they mated and nothing happened. Sometimes the demons — or whatever else they were — ate the would-be goblin mothers before the job was done. Kind'a like a reverse praying mantis, you understand. Well, finally they came up with a few of what they called viable crosses. The fools made the whole thing sound like a farmin' experiment — their version of goblin cross pollination."

"What happened?"

Trever smiled. He clearly liked their rapt attention. Life on the trail could always get quite lonely, but these days it was unbearably lonely.

"Well, little one, the Tormentors were born. They say thirteen of 'em, but I don't know if that number is just used for effect. As soon as they were old enough to be of any service, the goblin cause was beginning to fade. They lost the strength of the Elven Imperials, who signed the peace accord — I'm sure you're aware of your great, great grandsire's Darian council — with the dwarves and humans, so they really couldn't get too far

on their own. A couple concerted advances from the humans northward and the dwarves coming at them from the east, and the goblins were forced into retreat. After everything was sorted out, the gobbies were forced to sign full peace accords – but they really never wanted to sign – they knew they would lose even more land if they did. And, of course, that explains their modern animosity with the elves, as well as that of the other peoples.”

* * *

The stories continued back and forth long into the night. Djar and Cookie really needed sleep, but they wanted to gather as much information from Trever while they could. Who knew when they would get an opportunity to leisurely speak with such a well-traveled person again?

Trever really turned out to be a stand-up guy after all, Djar thought. At first glance, the frontier outpostman seemed a bit ragged around the edges: he dressed shabbily, had a thick head of unkempt black hair (streaked with a lot of grey, these days), he had a ruddy complexion, and his speech was – sometimes – lazily drawled. Meeting him on a forest trail would probably find your hand slowly moving to your sword’s pommel. But on closer inspection, there was a kind

intellect in his dark hazel eyes, and he had a handsome face. He also appeared to be as sharp as the finest elven arrow, and probably just as dangerous. Djar knew well that you could not judge a book by its cover – he had been involved in too many disputes during his short but well-learned years to make an error such as that.

Sleep finally overtook the two well into the wee hours of the morning. When they awoke late in the afternoon of the next day, they found themselves unbooted and laying side-by-side in comfortable straw beds – probably where many weary travelers had come in out of the weather for a good many years. Trever must have gently carried them to the beds, because neither could remember getting up from the table. In fact, the last thing Djar remembered was setting his head down on the table as Cookie was telling Trever about one of their hunting expeditions with his cousin.

* * *

They stayed at Trever's three more days; the rest, good food and company were so inviting that they could not pull away any sooner. But Djar knew he had to seek out Dymorla. The fact that other attempts to seek help from great sorcerers in the past often ended in disaster was of no consequence to him. Dymorla was his

only foreseeable hope.

“Well, let me get our stuff,” said Trever.

Our stuff, thought Djar. “Trever, you’re not thinking of coming along?”

“Well, by gosh, what else do I have to do?”

Cookie’s motherly instinct clicked on.

“It’s going to be very dangerous, Trever. I don’t think you should come.”

“What, you think an old man like me can’t keep up with you whippersnappers?” he laughed, but there was an irritated edge in it. “I’ll guarantee that I could teach you two at least a few good lessons.”

Djar believed him. He also thought Trever could at least keep up with him. In fact, Djar felt he might even be able to keep pace with Cookie – which was no mean feat!

“I think you should come,” Djar said flatly. “But I didn’t want to ask you. Cookie is right. We may not return from this venture.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve lived enough for three men,” Trever smiled and winked, then a dark expression overtook his face like a quickly coming thunderstorm – it was a look that the both of them instinctively knew lay dormant behind the kind, hazel eyes, but now it had awakened. “Besides, my cousin and our people need help too. That is, if they haven’t already been killed. Either way, it’s long overdue that I get

directly involved.”

Cookie liked the kinder, gentler Trever much better.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure Duke Woody’s fine,” she said, flashing her most winning smile.

Djar just looked at her a moment – and that strange feeling that had been popping up again and again for the past few months managed to surface. He quickly shook the feeling into some back alley of his brain, and turned to help Trever with the supplies.

Chapter IV: A Late Summer Storm

They left around mid-day, walking because Trever had long since sold or given up the last of his stable of horses. They did, however, have a good pack mule — whom Trever affectionately called Snork — to stow a lot of the provisions Trever had packed. Their former idea of taking a boat down was vetoed by Trever. He said he knew of some trails that would make it fairly easy to get to the sorceress' keep, and they wouldn't run as big a risk since he was aware of goblins patrolling the upper two thirds of the Astabor.

While Cookie and Djar were used to traveling ultra-light, Trever was the type who spent a good, long time on the trails, and wanted (and, at this stage in his life, probably needed) some of the comforts of home. He packed grains, salt, sugar, coffee, rope, canvas tarps, wool blankets and a variety of other goodies Cookie and Djar would have died for just scant days before.

The first day of travel turned out to be quite hot — the late-summer's still air felt heavy and wet, not unlike soaked rags draped all over their bodies. The fetid air also invited a lot of mosquitoes, gnats and a variety of other little nasties, though Trever had the good sense to pack a small brown bottle of some plant-extract that at least kept the things from alighting onto the exposed skin for a quick bite. They were now reduced to buzzing

nuisances. There were no storm clouds in sight, however the skies were a uniform fish-belly white. The thick cloud cover and hazy air did quite well to hide the fiery orb that fed that strange luminescence.

Their luck – if that is what it could have been called – ran out three days later. At first it looked pretty good as the morning’s fog was completely burned off by the hot sun, but soon the first of the thunderclouds could be heard rumbling in the distance. By late afternoon, fueled with the sun’s hot energy, the giant, green-black monsters were upon them. This was one of those epic storms which tore into The Land on occasion during the late summer months, when it was still summer, but change was in the air making the weather uncertain at best. Both Cookie and Djar savored these storms in their youth because they usually brought out all sorts of excitement from the mundane, day-to-day courtly activities.

Trees began swaying, gently at first, then really bending under the ferocious onslaught. Huge, old limbs cracked loudly, adding to the already frighteningly resonant thunderclaps. Sand, twigs, and bits of other forest debris whipped about, and the company of travelers all squinted tightly and brought their hoods close about their faces to protect them from the assault.

It soon became apparent that the storm was not going to let up any too soon, so Trever called a halt.

“We gotta’ take cover; this storm is going to murder us!”

Cookie agreed, and Djar suspected that she, like him, had wanted to stop earlier, but didn’t want to appear weak in front of Trever.

Trever looked around briefly, then pointed toward a steep little rise.

“Over there!” he screamed, but was barely audible over the furious winds. “That hill faces into the wind, so we can get some protection from it – and anything else.”

The ending was lost in a thunderous boom, but both Cookie and Djar got the general idea – it was time to hunker down. This was no ordinary storm, by any means.

Trever immediately set to work setting up a small shelter. Djar and Cookie tried to help, but the old man just waved them off. After a moment he sent them in search of several large rocks, then he turned to his work once more. It was as if he were possessed.

Putting up canvas tarps in a storm like this was pretty stupid under most circumstances, but Trever ingeniously staked the tarps with long, metal poles very low into the side of the hill, then he reinforced the edges with rocks Djar and Cookie had gathered. It took about twenty minutes in all, but it was a long twenty minutes.

Trever then grabbed Snork, whom he had tied to

a tree near the hill, and re-tied him to another tree, trying to keep the animal out of harm's way.

"Poor, lad. You'll be all right. This is no big deal. You'll just get a good bath – that's all!" he soothed, though he wondered if he was saying these things to convince himself.

Finally, they were safe – perhaps a bit of an overstatement – inside the shelter. The thing was so low that they all had to lie down on their stomachs. Rain and run-off streamed over the canvas and the ground was soaked, but the protection the shelter afforded was still invaluable. It really was an engineering feat considering the circumstances. Several times in the first few minutes alone, large twigs and branches crashed near the shelter and a couple actually hit the canvas with some force. They had to re-set the rocks a few times, as the ferocious winds broke the captive tarp free of the ground.

"What is this?" cried Djar.

"Oh, just one of our Mid-Land storms, you know!" laughed Trever, but both Djar and Cookie could see that he was still worriedly peeking out the flap nearly continuously.

"Don't tell me this is common?" asked Cookie, whose smallish voice had the most difficult time of all contesting the noisy storm.

"No, little one, it ain't. But don't you get to

worrying either. It's not as if I haven't seen worse."

She asked a question, but her voice couldn't break the encompassing noise, so she screamed out: "How long do you think it will last?"

"Anywhere from a half hour to all day and night." Trever said with a short smile.

"Great."

The storm — at least the first part of it — lasted for about an hour. Then, everything became deathly still. There was no sound except for the faint drip of water, falling like drizzle from the treetops. The wind had completely died. All the forest's inhabitants had long since buried themselves into their dens and nests, and they wouldn't come out for quite some time, so the silence was further reinforced.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't last.

A high-pitched shriek, a sound like none that any of the three companions had ever heard could be discerned in the distance. It then began to grow.

Djar stuck his head fully out of the tent, but Trever then yanked on his leg, startling him.

"I think it's a tornado! I've seen 'em from afar, but this one sounds like it's going to run over the top of us! Keep your head in — don't worry — it's no big deal! As long as we stay put, we'll be fine."

A tornado! A strange feeling suddenly gripped him — even though he was deathly frightened, he just

had to get a look at it.

At the persistent tugging of Trever on his pant-leg, he did tuck more of his head into the shelter. He quickly peered inside, and took Cookie's hand – comforting both himself and her.

Djar then screamed: “Lay on your bellies with your hands up around your faces!”

When he saw that they had listened to him – which made him feel much better – he again poked his head fully out of the violently swinging flap of canvas, taking a ferocious face smacking akin to the ones dished out by Captain Karn.

The grey-black monstrosity could soon be seen rising above the trees. Debris was scattered all about it, front and back and side-to-side. Large trees, which had stood for upwards of three hundred years, were knocked down like so many matchsticks. The wind carried so much sand and bits of debris that Djar could barely see through the watering of his irritated eyes, but he kept right on looking.

The violent, unyielding monster was already fleeing past them almost as soon as it was upon them, and Djar got his first – and hopefully his last – glimpse at a most violent natural phenomenon. Luckily for the companions, the storm was nearly a half-mile away, yet it seemed to Djar that it was right on top of them. It loomed huge in his vision and he had trouble believing

the amount of branches, leaves, dirt, water and other debris that the force effortlessly carried along on its wild, cycling rampage.

Just after the massive cone spun out of sight, continuing its ruinous winding course toward who knew what unfortunate souls, Djar breathed a great sigh of relief. The shelter held – though about half the rocks had been displaced. And all of them were okay – just a bit unnerved. The storm seemed to be finished for them.

But there were a couple real problems with the whole thing.

* * *

Before resuming their journey, they took down the shelter, hanging it on some low branches to let it drip dry for a time. They then checked on Snork, who was very wet and scared, but little worse for wear. They then changed into clothes that were only damp – as opposed to completely soaked – and ate a good lunch.

About mid-way through the meal, Cookie pointed upwards at the sky.

“Look, the sun’s coming out. Great!”

Trever laughed. Though he had been out in the elements far more often than his companions, the storm had unnerved him the most. It wasn’t as if he had lost his composure, or anything – he was just plain scared.

“Now that was really something. I gotta’ admit, that was about the worst storm I’ve ever seen in my sixty-some odd years.”

Cookie glanced at him disapprovingly.

“I thought the storm was ‘no big deal’?”

“I lied.”

They finished the meal, and soon were packing their things. Glancing at Djar a couple times, Trever began to wonder if perhaps the storm had indeed upset the boy more than he had originally thought. The young man seemed to be acting ... *strange*. Trever simply couldn’t put his finger on it. Maybe Djar had simply been foolishly sticking his head out of the tent and had actually been scared and acting irrationally because he was in shock, but he just didn’t seem like he was all that frightened at the time (which was oftentimes the case with younger men – their foolish curiosity got the better of their common sense). And Djar didn’t exactly look scared or in shock right now either – distant was a better way of putting it.

“You okay, Djar? You’re bein’ kind of quiet.”

“Oh, yes. I’m fine. Just thinking how ... close that was.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me. For a minute, I was really worried. Another thousand feet and we wouldn’t a had to worry about the gobbies anymore.”

Djar smiled, still looking lost in his own little world. The old man resumed packing the last of the drying goods, and started the march again. He decided to let the boy be – he'd be all right.

And, indeed Djar *was* caught up in his own thoughts – which came rolling over and over again in his racing mind: It had been windy, loud, and visibility was poor at best, but he had seen that the tornado had a face! And he *knew* that he had seen bodies – weird, rotten looking humanoid bodies caught up in the debris like that many more branches!

But he couldn't very well tell his companions that, could he?

* * *

A couple uneventful days passed before they were in the vicinity of Dymorla's keep, far south towards the border to the East Wilders. Djar was amazed at how far they had come. It was, in fact, the furthest Djar had ever been from Mahhrain.

As the time swept away, Djar convinced himself more and more that it was just his mind that had played a dirty little trick on his eyes during the storm – and sometimes he even tricked himself into being satisfied with that newfound revelation.

"As far as I know, the keep is said to be right

around here, but since we don't have any localized maps, we'll just have to search around for a trail, or other tell-tale sign." said Trever.

"The only trail I've seen is where that tornado ripped through," said Cookie, pointing to another spot where the north-south trail met up with the tornado's path. "Only, that seems to be the storm's origin," she pointed past the line of destruction. "Look, there's no wreckage past that spot over there. That clearing must have been its touchdown spot. We should go check it out!"

At least four times during the past two days, they had come to spots where the tornado's winding, destructive path intersected their trail, and every time it wreaked havoc with Djar's thoughts. This time, however, he was not to be discomfited. His excitement at being near Dymorla's Keep was beginning to eclipse everything else.

"Forget about that now, Cookie," he said excitedly. "I want to find Dymorla as soon as possible."

Cookie then pointed to the northwest, up a gradual rise that began at the end of the little clearing.

"Hey! I think that may be a side trail over there," she said. "It looks pretty well concealed – or at least not very well trodden, but I do believe it's something."

Trever squinted, clearly not seeing what the young woods woman could, and sighed.

“Well, let’s check it out; anything’s better than just walking around blind all day – my only other suggestion.”

They walked about thirty yards before Djar was able to discern the trail. It was another twenty before Trever sighted it.

“Oh, yes, that’s definitely a trail,” the old man said excitedly. “And I’m ignorant of any side trails in this general vicinity, so it very well could be the one. But do you young’ins think we should set up a camp out here – just in case?”

“I don’t see how it will help,” said Cookie. “If the witch does give us aid, she will surely shelter us. And if she turns out to be some ornery old monster, well ...”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. If things go haywire, we wouldn’t want to be packing up a camp before making a quick escape.”

Djar thought a moment then said: “That’s true, but I do like your idea. It’s prudent. Why don’t we put most of the provisions on Snork, and if this is the right trail and we get close to the keep, we’ll hide him and give him plenty of food and water for a day – then go see what her intentions on helping us may be. We could always come back for the mule.”

“Sounds good,” said Trever, making his way up the little rise toward the trail.

They skirted the clearing, taking the most direct

way towards the barely discernable trail. If they had happened to follow Cookie's curiosity and check out the little clearing, they would have seen the mass of twisted, semi-decayed bodies, and the magic symbols burnt deeply into the ground.

* * *

The trail was old, and seldom used, though both Trever and Cookie found enough sign to be certain that there had recently been travelers upon it. Their consensus was the following: At least three humanoid creatures (they figured they walked upright but didn't seem to be human — they were much smaller) had passed within a day. They seemed to be hurrying along, in the direction that the three companions were following. Under this sign were additional tracks — which were much harder to read, but easier to extrapolate from. These were made by the little humanoids maybe two days earlier than the first — going in the direction the little company had just come from.

"Did you see any sign on the main trail, Trever?" asked Cookie, clearly perplexed why she hadn't noticed any of the tracks earlier.

Trever's brow was deeply furrowed.

"No. I didn't see anything either. Strange ..."

Djar felt awkward with all this expert tracker stuff going on. Though he was no slouch on the trails, he had never really grasped all the nuances of trail and sign reading. He was looking at the same sign, and all he could tell was that there was some disturbance. In a couple of spots, however, he did think he could make out strange little footprints – only they didn't look ... natural. The funny thing was, he shared just about the exact outdoor experiences as Cookie, but she just took to it so much easier.

“Oh, well, let's get going. Hopefully, we can get to the keep by nightfall. I don't relish the idea of another night under the stars – especially with only the bare provisions we're bringing along,” Trever added, quickening his pace.

Nothing happened until about ten minutes after dark.

A humanoid creature, ugly, semi-decayed, and bluish-grey colored under the bright moon and stars, was shuffle-walking towards them. Its face was nearly perfectly preserved on one side (though still looking like a fresh corpse), but the other was a mess. The skin curled off the left cheek like a peel rotting off a long-spoiled orange. Both hands were gnarled, and one even had bright white spots gleaming where bone had erupted through its thin skin around the knuckles. The thing wore a fine burial suit – or at least one day it had

been fine before it became mildew-encrusted and began rotting off its decaying owner. It walked on spindly legs, which buckled from time to time, probably from lack of any substantive flesh holding the joints firm. All in all it was a putrid, smelly mess.

It didn't seem too menacing — nowhere near as frightening as the demon, but it didn't look like it would yield the trail, either. Djar unsheathed Dybol. This might set the creature off, he knew, but it was better safe than sorry.

"Are these what were on the trail?" he whispered to Cookie, who had pulled her dagger. After their fight with the demon, she no longer had a sword, so it would have to do.

"No, definitely not." she whispered back.

Trever slowly pulled three throwing knives from beneath his cloak. They gleamed menacingly in the bright moonlight. He then glanced, surprised, in Djar's direction, as Dybol began to glow its signature green.

Djar also glanced at his enchanted blade, then back at the creature. It must certainly be a threat — the sentient blade would not glow if there was no threat at all.

"It's a zombie," breathed Trever, easing off to the side of the trail. "You walk head on toward it, and I'll engage it on its side. Hopefully it will just let us past."

Djar rolled his eyes. With their luck, he knew the

creature wouldn't just say: *good evening*, and stroll by.

"I'll take the other side," Cookie whispered slipping silently off the trail. In a second, she had so completely blended into the forest shadows that she was invisible to both of the men.

Djar was correct in his assumption of the creature – it was not going to yield the trail. In fact, it intended something quite the contrary, as it raised its arms and stagger-ran towards Djar. There was now no mistaking what was about to happen.

Just before the creature engaged Djar, who was solidly standing his ground, Trever quickly appeared to Djar's left and let fly with the three knives. One after the other they landed true, and buried deep within the creature's neck. Viscous, greenish-blue stuff slowly oozed from the wounds, but that was about it.

Djar, still being quite tentative on killing and warfare in general, just brought Dybol forward in a weak arc, just enough to nick the creature. He expected the zombie to go down on its knees – much as Demron had during their battle with the oversized goblin guard – but the creature brushed off the sword like it was nothing.

The zombie swiped at Djar, but the creature was pitifully slow. He blocked the creature's grasping arms with Dybol, then quickly backed off a few steps. Cookie silently appeared on Djar's right, swinging her dagger

in a masterful stroke that relieved the putrid monster of its soft left arm at the elbow. The left hand still opened and closed, clutching at the dirt spasmodically, while the rest of the creature continued on.

Djar was beginning to understand what needed to be done here, so he charged the foul-smelling zombie and swung Dybol viciously. The blow was perfect; *The Charging Lion* was a move Dermatt had made Djar perfect early in his training. The zombie's head was completely severed from its body which continued forward until it tripped over a boulder.

All three stared in horror as the body continued again and again to stand, but with no visual cues even on its most successful attempt it barely made it three feet before flopping over on its side again. The head, which was laying about ten feet from the body on one side, bared its rotting teeth, just hoping someone would be stupid enough to put a finger in its mouth.

* * *

They quickly moved up the trail, now much more unsure of themselves. Was that one of Dymorla's guards? Would there be others? How many might there be? How many could they possibly cope with? Were they making a mistake? These questions and many others flooded their minds as they hurried toward ... what?

Finally, Trever called a halt.

“Guys, I need a rest. That was just too weird for me.”

“I agree,” Cookie said, looking over her shoulder.

“It’s a consensus,” said Djar, also peering into the shadows whence they came.

They found a nice, large boulder and all three slumped heavily down.

“We can rest just a moment, then I’ll be fine.”

Cookie looked a little worried.

“Just tell us when you’re ready, Trever. I know my heart could use a rest about now, anyway. It’ll probably take me a good five minutes just to swallow it.”

Trever pointed at Dybol, which Djar was still clutching tightly.

“I didn’t know you had an enchanted blade, Djar.”

“It’s not something I announce – kind of takes the surprise out of it, you know?”

“May I?” he asked, reaching out for the sword, which Djar gave to him unhesitatingly. “This is an ancient blade ... fine. It says Arctuaas ... Jharweenan ... Magbeth – it means enchanted by ... someone of great stature and power. There are other ancient Elfitch runes, I believe, some of which I can’t decipher.”

“If you say so,” said Djar, clearly puzzled by words Trever used so knowingly and he had never heard of. “I’m only puzzled by the fact that Dybol –

that's its name —“

“I know, it says so right here,” Trever interrupted, running his fingers over the mysterious runes on the sword's intricate blade.

Apparently talents other than magic swords were being revealed tonight. Trever had knowledge of the Old Ways.

Djar shook his head. “But the blade usually incapacitates without killing anyone it cuts into — no matter how insignificant the wound.”

“Well, the zombie is a non-living being, undead, actually, so that may have something to do with it,” countered Trever.

“I hope so. I don't know where we'd be with Dybol on the blink.”

Trever carefully, almost lovingly passed his hands slowly up the long, slender blade. He had a strange look in his eye and said: “Oh, I don't think I'd worry about that if I were you, Djar.”

Cookie also caught a hint of this odd look. Djar quickly glanced up and down the enchanted blade; he was glad it was not glowing its signature green.

Chapter V: All Gobbed Up

Djar decided not to say anything about the tornado or what he now thought must have been the zombie body parts for at least the present. They had gone through some pretty harrowing events in the past several days, so he figured he might as well not add to Cookie or Trever's stress. There would be plenty of time for that later.

The last leg of their journey was uneventful. They merely walked upon the little-used side trail until its forested sides thinned then broke into an expansive, grassy clearing.

"Look," cried Cookie. "There it is!"

Djar stopped in his tracks.

"Finally. Okay, what now?"

Trever walked back into the forest, pulling Snork by the lead and tied the mule to a small tree.

"Let's get my little buddy all set, then just go knock on the door. What else is there?"

"I suppose you're right." Cookie agreed. "We really have no idea as to what to expect, so we might as well not even try to second-guess her, and, besides, she may not even exist anymore."

"Oh, she's there," said Djar, thinking back to the faced tornado and the zombie. Those were things of magic, and only a powerful sorcerer could summon

energies of that magnitude.

Trever scanned the trees before finding a thick gray-bark. He ripped a nice, curved piece and fashioned the waterproof, semi-pliable wood into a little trough for Snork. He took out two water skins and emptied their full contents into the trough, then took his pack off and laid it next to the mule.

“May as well take yours. Splitting it up seems to be the safest bet for now — just in case,” he said, opening a bag of grain and spilling its contents on the ground in front of Snork. “This should keep you a while, you old goat.”

He gave Snork a final affectionate pat on the neck, then turned and proceeded toward the keep with Cookie and Djar following closely.

The keep was basically of conventional dwarven architectural design — probably built by artisans of the Chapel region — but it was decorated with a bizarre facade, the likes of which none of the three had ever seen. The first floor was built of solid rock blocks with no break — at least in the two sides the three companions could see — except for a huge, ironbound Steelwood door that looked as if five strong men would be needed to open it. Starting at about fifteen feet up, the keep was banded with a series of gargoyles. A second, larger band started up above the second story’s thick, leaded windows, and a third, even larger band

wound around the top of the keep's third level. The final band of monstrosities was up near the roof, directly under the battlements, looking ever larger and more menacing. The closer the little company walked toward the keep, the more eerie looking the myriad of grotesqueries became.

A large raven then settled on one of the gargoyles directly in front of them. It looked uncomfortable sitting on the stone, as it kept shifting its feet and bobbing its head, like it was sitting on a hot frying pan. Trever scratched at his nose and thought: *I swear that that huge thing has been trailing us for a while now. There's something str ...well, no time for that now!*

They walked right up to the keep without incident.

"Apparently they aren't too worried about a goblin attack – or even petty thief –" started Trever, but he was rudely interrupted.

One of the lower band's gargoyles – one with a face that was a cross between a big-eared monkey and a lizard, spit a gooey, white substance at the old trail master.

"Hey! Quit it," he yelled at the now unmoving rock-monster.

Another, larger white blob hit him from above. Djar let out a chuckle. It was kind of like being insulted from a rather large seagull. But the novelty soon wore off. A large blob hit Djar in the arm with such force that

it felt like it snapped. Another, still larger hit Cookie, and soon it was raining white, sticky globs of goop.

After about five unrelenting minutes of the sticky barrage – which they were unable to elude because they were covered so quickly they couldn't move – it suddenly stopped.

“What do we do now?” shrieked Djar, struggling uselessly against the viscous adhesive.

“I have no idea, but I gotta' get this goop out of my eyes – I can hardly see!” cried Trever.

Djar was able to turn his head to see Cookie, who was really encrusted with the goop. She was struggling to get a breath as a large gob of the white stuff slowly ran down the front of her face and onto her chest.

Suddenly, a furry little creature seemed to just appear from nowhere.

“Captured you, we did! Got you! Intruder-warn-gargoyle-swarm!” chanted the little beast.

“Why have you captured us? We mean you no harm,” said Djar, who was really getting worried. “Cookie! Can you hear me?”

She made a weak gesture, and once again started to struggle a bit.

“Cookie, stop. You're only making it worse. Conserve your breath.” Djar pointed to the furball. “You! Go tell Dymorla that the son of Duke Daeron Lahroan and Sir Trever de Kellwood are here asking for

an audience with the great sorceress. She is said to be loyal to The Way, so we are wondering what is the reason for this unprovoked attack.”

The little creature cocked his head from side to side like a dog hearing an unusual noise.

“Captured you,” it whispered.

Djar glanced at Cookie and saw she was now slumping over. She would have fallen completely over, but the pile of ooze, which hid her legs up to her mid thighs, kept her partially erect.

She had passed out.

Djar went berserk.

“Help her, you idiot, or so help me when I get free of this gunk I’ll rip your heart out and shove it down your throat!”

“Eeeep!” cried the little fur ball. “You are a bad man, and we did capture you!”

Djar regained some of his composure.

“Look, I’m sorry. Please, I’m worried about the lady. Please help her; she can’t breathe.”

“Lady,” whispered the now curious creature. “I’ll help the lady.”

It walked over to Cookie – who was now only suspended a foot off the ground in the pile of white muck which she lay in – and grabbed the slowly running goop that covered her face and lifted it gingerly.

“Pretty,” it cried, seeing Cookie’s face. “I like

ladies. Captured one, I did.”

Trever was finally able to free a hand to get the goop out of his eyes.

“What’s your name, little man?”

“Willy-nilly-wing-woo-the-furry-trawingoo,” it sang.

“I’ll call you Willy. Do you like that?”

“Yes. Me like Willy! M’Lady calls me that.”

“Okay, Willy. Would you please see if the lady is okay? She is very sick and we were coming here for help.”

Again the beast cocked its head from side to side in a dog-like manner.

“Sick ...” it whispered, as it ran off.

Chapter VI: Dymorla

Dymorla was irritated, and her head was swimming. Things were going awry far too often. After nearly a hundred years of spell casting, one would think that she would have it down pat! After all, how difficult was it to conjure a few thousand zombies? Generally, her patience was nearly infinite, but she realized that she was running out of both time and options.

Of course, she should have expected these types of setbacks. It really wasn't too long ago that she embarked upon this new path. Her self-appointed mission necessitated new plans and spells – not the type of magic she was used to.

All this meddling was also very unlike her. However, she knew full well that the world was changing far too rapidly – and not for the better. Next time, she would make sure that the zombies ...

Suddenly, the furry little creature she affectionately called Willy burst into the laboratory, "M'Lady! Come quick! Girl is sick! We captured them. Sick, she is! Come!"

He ran out, not waiting to see if Dymorla would follow.

"Dear me," she said wearily. "What have those fur balls done this time?"

* * *

Cookie woke with Djar leaning over her bed. “Djar ... wha ...?”

“Rest up, Cookie. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“But, where’s Trever, and where am I?” she asked weakly, struggling to turn her head and check her surroundings.

“You’re in Dymorla’s keep. We’re all safe. Trever’s talking to her right now. We’ll fill you in later, so rest up for a while, okay? That was a close call – even if it was only a misunderstanding!”

He bent forward and kissed her. She smiled and closed her eyes.

After he was sure she was back to sleep, he hurried out of the small room, down the long hall and into the vast great room. There, Dymorla and Trever were sitting close, speaking nearly in whispers. Fire leapt from the well-fed braziers, casting orange lights on the two, making them look all the more mysterious.

She looked up at the approaching young man. She scrunched her eyebrows and wagged her finger at him. “I knew you looked familiar the moment I laid eyes on you, Lord Djar. I knew your grandparents fairly well, though your father didn’t have much to do with me.”

“I know. My grandma told me some stories about you and the keep,” he said, then added a bit testily, “but

she left out the part about the spitting gargoyles.”

“Djar, she already apologized.”

“No, Trever, he has every right to be angry. It’s one thing to mind one’s own business, it’s quite another to jeopardize the life of an innocent. Djar, things have gotten ... ah ... a bit out of control lately. There have been a few goblin raids on the keep. Just small bands, mind you, but that’s enough for me to step up security. Plus, as I’ve been explaining to Trever, there’s quite a bit more to this entire situation.”

“What?” asked Djar, suddenly even more interested.

“Have you ever heard of Fralgarzener?”

“Yes, Trever told us a little,” said Djar.

“Well, I’m going to tell you a lot more,” she said.

“He is the most vile of beasts.”

“Is?” Djar interrupted, wide eyed.

“Yes, he is still alive. I found this out not long ago. I was wondering – as, apparently Trever was too – why the goblins seemed so organized in this campaign. I decided to look into the matter – especially after learning about, er, your situation, Djar. I’m sorry I didn’t do anything to help, but I had made it my policy – for over 100 years – to avoid involvement in *any* politics.” She looked downward, clearly vexed by her former decisions. “I had no idea the balance of power had shifted so heavily and into such vile hands. As I said, I’m truly sorry and I want to help. Let’s talk about it now.”

Book Two: Regroup!

Chapter VII: Fralgarzener

The large, black raven flew quickly along the rugged coastline of the peninsula known as Kaleb's Claw. The tips of its wings beat only inches from the blackened ramparts of Gol-Morda, the stronghold of the wicked sorcerer Fralgarzener. The multi-towered keep was perched on a rocky outcrop on the very tip of the claw-like peninsula, looking down on the crashing waves of the East Ocean. The bird wasn't at all herself; the creature was being controlled. It was a feeling that couldn't be ignored, though it wasn't at all understood. She flew up and up and finally into a large window at the top of the tallest of the pitch-black towers.

A grotesque figure turned toward the bird as it made its way into the dimly-lit room. "Ahhh, ye've arrived. Come, my friend!"

He held out his bony arm and though the bird instinctively wanted to turn and fly whence she came, she simply couldn't resist. He cupped his claw-like hand over the bird's huge head. She quivered almost imperceptibly, then lost herself as he began feeding on her thoughts. In only a matter of minutes, he saw through her mind's eye the journey that she had been compelled to make; a journey that had lasted weeks.

He conversed with himself, as he often did, being locked up in his towers for months at a time. Of course, there were times when he hadn't left the keep for years and sometimes decades. "Finally," he hissed. "One of you brings back the smallest scrap of useful information. I'm not too concerned about the whelps and the noble. Ah, but, much more importantly, what is Dymorla doing? The wench has something in mind, but what? It is not like her to be involved, yet I can see this massive increase in activity. I can even sense it from here! Unheard of! Yes, it will be prudent to keep a much more close eye on all of them. But what to do? These messengers are taking too much time to get me anything of pertinent value. Perhaps a bit more direct approach, no? And I can complete all of my work as well."

He grabbed the bird's head and began an incantation. It was really quite surprising how quick and effortless it was to transfer just a small amount of his life essence into the bird. A greenish pulsing light enveloped the raven; the bird grew larger. It grew so large, in fact, that the force inhabiting it thought: I can't hold me, and stepped off its own bony arm and onto the broad stone windowsill from whence it came.

It only perched for a moment or two, before it said in an eerily human voice, "Now we'll see ..."

Then it flew off.