

Like No Other Beast

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Art by: Samuele Bandini

Acrid vapors curled, intermingling with Muraganda's primal mist. They twisted through the ancient trees, over tangled underbrush. Thickened by primordial gas, these alien fumes became a murky haze. They blanketed the area.

Through that fog strode Khrad.

He lowered himself to a ready crouch, breathing deeply of the fiendish scent. The iron tang of blood, accompanied by blasted stone and a deeper, pungent odor that his people had no name for. Mon'Telu's prince clicked his tongue.

"Smell that, Grazak?" he whispered. The raptor chittered close beside, pupils wide and searching. "Keep your wits about you. Let's show these interlopers why the Telu-Set are feared."

Grazak hissed assent. Khrad crept forth into the jungle brush, loosening the Star-Sword from its woven sheath.

Everywhere in Muraganda, life burst forth unceasing. The jungles near Khrad's home teemed with beasts of fur, of fang, of scale, of wing—yet here, deep in one such grove, silence choked the air. All that could be heard was the crackling of flame and Khrad's skulking footsteps.

Potent foulness had occurred here.

Khrad roared and leapt into the clearing, Star-Sword brandished overhead. The blade gleamed alabaster white within the prince's fist, shining cosmic light across the hellish tableau.

A chasm gouged the verdant earth, belching elemental flame. Cinder cones jutted out at random angles, weeping magma. Molten rivers slashed across the jungle floor, staved off only by the flora's mystic hardness. Muraganda's tectonic wrath had torn the place asunder.

Prince Khrad stood solitary in the clearing, wreckage all around. Heaps of mutilated steel, twisted, blackened, bleeding violent cobalt ichor. Melted ebon rings spun lazily on crooked joints. Khrad lowered his blade, awestruck: there was more metal here than he had seen in his entire life. Grazak sidled up beside, sniffing dubiously.

Suddenly, a gout of flame erupted from the metallic dead. Khrad dove and rolled, fire licking at his back. A mob of bug-eyed figures swarmed from underneath the slag like maggots bursting from a ripened corpse. They snarled and hissed, chattering in an unknown tongue. The raiders wore not furs, but garments of some blackened hide, stitched together raggedly and riddled with metallic spikes. The bug-eyes seemed some sort of masks—ghoulish, leering visages—that only barely echoed human mien. Their war cries crackled, warped and booming.



Art by: Slawomir Maniak

Khrad and Grazak met them. Whatever sorceries these strangers had, Khrad was of the Telu-Set, trained from boyhood in the ways of hunting mages. Let them play their tricks.

A brute that towered over Khrad swung a club of rusted steel, crackling with inner flame. The Star-Sword flashed; Khrad halved the weapon with a mighty blow, showering them both in sparks. Another strike—likewise split—and the giant fell.

Grazak fought in Khrad's periphery, ringed by foes with fire-edged claws and screaming knives. They were cautious. Not afraid, Khrad realized, but experienced. They had seen creatures like Grazak before. Or so they thought. In his usual shape, Grazak barely met Khrad's clavicle, but with the proper victuals ...

"Grazak!" bellowed Khrad. He reached for his belt pouch and produced a pearl of shining jade. "Eat!" Khrad hurled the pearl across the clearing, straight into his raptor's maw.

The raiders pounced, far too late. Grazak's form expanded—doubling, then tripling. Streaks of emerald radiance curled across his hide. The raptor roared, exulting in the sudden rush of strength, and tore into the villains that surrounded him.

Across the battlefield, a marauder ripped their mask away, soot-blackened face beneath similarly grimacing. They snarled a guttural incantation, eyes alight with oily flames, and retched a cloud of cindered smoke. It surged for Khrad, searing his eyes and singeing his flesh. Khrad's heartbeat quickened at the sudden darkness, but he steeled himself. A warrior of the Telu-Set needed not his eyes to see. The knowledge of his foe's location was enough. The Star-Sword found the mage's throat. They would utter no more deviled words.

Fire-spitting staffs and fists encased in rending claws were little change from magma wyrms and bone-knapped blades. Wherever these strangers came from, it hadn't made them strong enough to conquer Khrad.

Grazak threw his head back and bellowed out his triumph. Khrad crowed and raised his sword in turn; sunlight sparkled off the blade as blood evaporated from it. In their victory's new silence, Khrad surveilled their battlefield.

"No sign of the beast that the oracle foretold," Khrad mused, scratching at his squared jaw. "Think it fell into the magma? I'd hate to go through all this mess and not even take a trophy."

Grazak trilled an answer, shaking off the verdant afterglow of the pearl's blessing as he shrunk to his normal size. He dipped his head low, sniffing 'round the clearing. A beat later, he stiffened, barking out a squawk.

"Found a clue, have you?" asked Khrad, squatting beside his trusty friend. The raptor's nose pointed to a fallen tree near the clearing's edge. Khrad shouldered it aside. Below lay what he sought: two grooves a handsbreadth across and a stride apart, dug into the jungle floor and running off into the wood. Where it led, the trees lay bent, uprooted by the creature's path.

From the distance came its call: a rasping, strangled roar.

It was days before, in Mon'Telu, central stronghold of the Telu-Set, when Khrad had first heard word of it. The root oracle had cried out through their breathing pipe after seven sunsets 'neath the Elder Tree.

"We stand invaded," croaked the oracle, caked in ancient mud. "Monsters beyond understanding have surged into our world, agents of some far-off realm. One draws near to Mon'Telu—and nearer to our doom! It must be found and vanquished, lest it fall to Amarth-Tel. Amarth-Tel! Ley mage of the Tarry Spire, supreme among Mon'Telu's foes! If the beast should fall into his grasp," the oracle proclaimed, "Amarth-Tel would use its soul to amplify his vile craft to heights never seen."

King Khal, ruler of the Telu-Set, listened stony-faced. Townsfolk thronged Mon'Telu's meeting hall, squeezed in side by side and hanging from the rafters, and watched him closer than they watched the stricken seer. When the oracle was finished, Khal bowed his head and stood.

"The doing will be deadly, but something must be done," he said, mighty fist curled tight upon the Antlered Throne. "Amarth-Tel is arrogance incarnate. He seeks to bind what should not be bound and, in so doing, risks us all. His taboo can no longer stand. The sorcerer must die." King Khal's voice, deep and loud enough to shake a man's heart in his chest, softened to a whisper. "Once, I would have gone myself, but a king must stay among his folk. So, who ...?"

"You ask, already knowing!" shouted Khrad. All assembled turned as one. Khrad strode into the meeting hall, muscles glistening from his morning drills. Onlookers parted before him like the sea. "None can match your might but me. I've learned beside you all these years; it's time for me to prove it. Come now, Father King: let me loose on Amarth-Tel."

The assemblage stomped and hooted, cheering for their prince's plea. King Khal hesitated; a warrior himself since he could clutch a blade, he knew what threats his only son would face. He feared the end of his line, to be sure, but more than that he feared the death of his boy. But Khrad was a warrior grown, a paragon of his people, who threw himself at trials with ferocity and mirth. Little doubt existed of his expertise or might, but a quest of this magnificence would enshrine him as a legend.

“Very well,” he said after a time. “But let your father gird you rightly for your journey.” All of Mon’Telu congregated for Khrad’s departure. The city’s priests painted demon-warding glyphs across his skin in azure pigments. The farmers’ coalition gave him a sturdy pack of preserved fruit and dried meat. With each gift, the people cheered. When King Khal approached, however, those assembled hushed.

“The Telu-Set do not fight and kill dispassionately. We pour our hearts into our blades so that the sharpness of our faith may cut our foes apart. As you go into the world, I gift you my heart, so my love is with you always.” The king undid his sword belt and offered the hilt. “As our champion, it is your duty to wield the Star-Sword, sharpest of all blades. It is the only pure-steel weapon the Telu-Set possess, whose ore fell to us from the sky, whose blade was forged in Momotaxos’s burning blood and quenched in the Coral Highlands’ purest spring, and whose edge, blessed by our highest priests, cuts all—even souls.”

With reverence, Khrad took the sword, drawing it and holding the blade skyward. Its edge gleamed beneath the morning sun, a pure and jeweled white, shining like its namesakes. Mon’Telu roared in exultation.

Soon after, as revelry engrossed the common folks’ attention, King Khal pulled his son into a shadowed tent. “I have one final gift for you—or rather, your companion.”

He beckoned for a white-draped monk, camouflaged among the bone-shade tarp. He approached, a woven pouch in hand.

“A wanderer scribe?” asked Khrad.

“His name is Harl. He and I have had ... dealings, in the past. He brings us a boon I would not trust to any other. Three pearls of distilled mana, gathered from the emerald leyline, so that Grazak’s claws may rend ever more colossal foes.”

“Father!” Shock tore through Khrad’s whole being. He would have drawn his blade and struck this magic-user down, were his father’s hand not on his arm. “What devilry is this?”

“I know it falls outside our peoples’ teachings,” whispered King Khal quickly. Harl let out a sound that might have been a sigh. “Someday, the leylines will be dammed and the scourge of magic routed from our lands—but that day is not today. Our enemies are numerous and terrible, and you are just one man. Please. For me. Take this edge and use it.”

Faith and loyalty warred in Khrad, locked in vicious struggle. Ultimately, however, son of Telu as he was, Khrad was first the son of Khal. He took the pouch and hung it from his belt.

Then father and son pressed their brows together, whispered words only they could hear, and Khrad turned and left Mon’Telu.

He would not be back for many years.

Khrad stalked through the underbrush, following the creature’s trail. It had no tracks, as such—only the two deep grooves that continued without step or stop, curving when faced with sturdy trees it could not trample. Here and there the prince found bits of viscous tar. An ooze had been through here—but oozes did not leave such rigid trails. *What manner of beast was this?*

The rumble came again. Closer this time. Khrad and Grazak broke into a sprint, mantling over fallen trees. The creature’s roar drew nearer. With it came other sounds. A reedy, snarling voice cried out, “Faster, damn you! Faster!”

“Amarth-Tel!” hissed Khrad. Grazak hissed in turn. *Their enemy was just ahead!* Khrad pulled the second mana pearl from his pouch and fed it to Grazak. The raptor dipped, slipping under Khrad as his frame expanded, so that the prince rode astride with nary a misstep. The duo charged after the ruckus.

Then they were upon it. Amarth-Tel, wrapped in oily vestments, stood atop a beast of steel and fire, dragged forth by a massive tar-black ooze. The creature’s feet were spinning sable rings, carving through the jungle mud. Its shape was nearly crocodilian. Its massive, steel-tusked snout belched intermittent flame. A frill of some transparent crystal framed a hollow in its back, from whence Amarth-Tel lashed his whip of magic tar.

“Release the beast, foul warlock!” bellowed Khrad.

Amarth-Tel twisted on the beast’s back, disdain curled his lips. “Beast? Ha! This relic is no living creature! It is forged from alien steel, imbued with elemental flame! Get thee to your livestock, barbarian!”

The sorcerer flicked his wrist. An ichorous black tendril extruded from his ooze’s back, slicing toward Grazak’s neck. The raptor ducked, bucking up his hindquarters and launching Khrad into the air. The world around Khrad spun. He twisted, drawing his sword. With all the force he could muster, the prince of Mon’Telu heaved himself toward the steel beast’s snout. He landed with a mighty *thud*.

“I don’t care what it is,” spat Khrad, struggling upright. The creature shuddered underfoot, as if it had a limp. Khrad’s grip tightened on the Star-Sword’s hilt. “This blasphemy is done.” The prince wound back, tensing for a neck ward chop—

And then his eyes met hers.

She sat shackled in the creature’s hollow, bound in Amarth-Tel’s tarry cord. Her dark hair was held in seashell-adorned plaits of Telu’Ahn tradition. Eyes of deepest sapphire transfixed Khrad from a sun-kissed, heart-shaped face. All thought vanished from the prince’s mind.

“So small-minded,” snarled Amarth-Tel. “A testament to your ignorant stock.” Gathering his magic reins into one fist, he swung his freed one backwards. The ooze’s surface boiled. Khrad’s wits returned a beat too slow. A lashing oily tendril surged and sent the prince aloft.

The ground was mercifully soft. Khrad bounced as he fell, tumbling crown over heel, the shackled beast’s sputter fading as it fled. He wheezed, rolled onto his back, and gazed up at the endless sky above.

“This azure is no equal to her eyes,” said Khrad. Grazak’s swiftly shrinking head peeked into view. The raptor sniffed him. Khrad scritchd at Grazak’s spine, then sprang upright. “Of all the rotten fates, my friend! Not only does Amarth-Tel work his foul occultisms. He holds caged a beauty like this realm has never seen!”

Grazak cocked his head. Khrad clenched his fist until the raptor mirrored him. Satisfied, the prince retrieved his fallen sword and belted it once more.

“It’s obvious, Grazak. This isn’t just our duty. It’s our destiny as well.”

The tree line rustled. Khrad spun on his heel, hand ready on the Star-Sword’s hilt. An enormous frame came lumbering into view, presaged by its gleaming eyes.

“Not so easily discouraged, eh?” the figure said. Khrad observed lanky primate arms festooned in leafy camouflage, a wizened wrinkled face from which thrust boar-like tusks. A Fang Druid, vaunted recluses and soothsayers. The great ape grinned. “Good. I am called Chatal. Keep that fire in your belly, prince. You will need it if you wish to vanquish Amarth-Tel.”



Art by: Nino Is

Khrad's grip lessened, but did not release. "You speak as if you know my quest, but you folk are isolationists—why reveal yourself to a royal of the Telu-Set?"

"Had things not happened as they had, you would have never known I was here," replied the druid, dipping his colossal head. "But things lie as they fall. Necessity bids interference. Amarth-Tel must not be let to bind the vehicle's spirit."

"*Vehicle*," said Khrad, rolling the word about in his mouth. "Amarth-Tel calls it a relic. The oracle back home named it beast. Now you give it further, foreign titles." The warrior paced, mind clawing at his puzzlement. "You know more than you say."

The druid hummed, rumbling his cavernous chest. His deep eyes twinkled, boring into Khrad. It appeared he measured up.

The great ape nodded. "True, there are secrets I must keep. But know, o prince, that past this vibrant wilderness, beyond the Dawnband's endless morning and our vivid Coral Canyons and Momotaxos's burning veins, outside the Telu-Set's reckoning and that grasping Autarch's schemes, lie realms your wildest dreams could scarce envision. The world is larger than you realize, Prince of Telu. Keep that knowledge in your heart. Alloy it against your pride." Chatal shuffled closer, unfurling a vast palm and offering it out. "Perhaps, then, you might forge yourself anew."

An object glittered in the druid's hand. An oblong metal chit, carved saw-toothed on one end and looped onto a fine steel ring. A thumb-sized token hung beside it, crafted from the forepaw of some tiny, furry beast.

"Some kind of amulet?" asked Khrad.

“Call it what you want,” said Chatal. “Overlooked among the wreckage by both you *and* Amarth-Tel. If used correctly, it will grant mastery over the beast, allowing communion between machine and man.”

“More strange words,” spat Khrad. His head spun at Chatal’s words, struggling to reconcile them with his people’s teachings. Shoving down his doubt, he looped the fire amulet upon a hook beside the Star-Sword’s sheath. “Come, Grazak, before the druid relapses into poetry. There is a sorcerer to slay.”

Not meeting Chatal’s eyes, Khrad turned and marched into the trees. He felt the druid’s gaze upon him as he went. Chatal’s last words echoed in his wake:

“Fear not the unknown, Son of Khal. A world outside your ken is not so foul a thing.”

It was two more days of hard marching before Khrad and Grazak reached their prey. Amarth-Tel’s trail led from jungle to wetland, through ancient mammoth graveyards and iridescent tar pits. They approached Kalaka’s Scar, where the craters of fallen moons made bowls of viscid onyx oil. It was a place suffused in eldritch magic.



Art by: Borja Pindado

Upon its edge stood the Tarry Spire, a jagged shadow slashed against the sky. Here, the leylines bunched; the Spire their malignant branch.

Bruised thunderheads roiled above. A prelude to the coming battle. Khrad could just barely spy the creature—relic—*vehicle* atop the spire’s roof. Amarth-Tel flitted around it, faint strains of chanting wafting to Khrad’s ears. The prince was not too late.

“Come, Grazak,” he said, pulling the final mana pearl from his belt pouch. “To work.”

The Tarry Spire's door was bound by bolstered ribcage bars. They splintered under Grazak's talons. Khrad rode in atop his comrade, Star-Sword brandished high.

"Amarth-Tel! Your downfall comes!"

Inside, the spire was hollow, a narrow staircase curling around its inner face, spiraling up to its distant summit. Warped bones and occult talismans dangled from each balustrade, complicated structures echoing Khrad's war cry into strange, unearthly tones. Amarth-Tel peered down through his fossil-lattice rooftop, locking eyes with Khrad. The sorcerer's mouth split into a killer's grin.

"Meddlesome barbarian! My mercy was ill-given. All along you yearned for death! Sadly, I am occupied. Maybe my pet will slake your thirst?"

The hung bones clattered, rocking like a wind-chime in a summer storm. The tar that coated every surface lurched and boiled. Khrad grit his teeth and charged on Grazak up the stairs.

"Quick, Grazak, before the ooze can—"

A tide of oil slammed into Khrad's sternum. His words were stolen from his mouth. The warrior went flying, wheezing. Grazak snarled. Khrad caught the edge of the stairwell, dangling in the open air. Beneath, the spire's flooring seethed, bone and oil roiling in a swiftly growing churn. The mammoth ooze expanded, creeping jelly given form by ancient skeletons. A dozen skulls of sundry shapes swirled within its mass, eye sockets pulsing mystic malice. Their jaws split wide as one. An otherworldly caterwaul screeched out.

Khrad clamped the Star-Sword's blade between his teeth, whipping up his legs before the ooze's jaws could grab them. Another swinging kick, and he flipped onto the railing.

"We'll get nowhere with this monster on our heels," he said. "What say you, Grazak? A warm-up for the proper trial?"

Grazak threw back his head and shrieked. Khrad whooped with mad delight, took a two-hand grip upon his sword, and together man and raptor plummeted into the fray.

Khrad plunged the Star-Sword deep into the behemoth. The ooze's jelly-flesh frothed around the jeweled blade as Grazak's talons scored its side. The tar-ooze quavered out an anguished scream, pitching itself over so its bulk would crush the hanging prince. Khrad braced his feet against its side, sandals sizzling, and dislodged his sword just in time to dive away.

The creature's jelly crackled where the Star-Sword sliced it. The bones within its morass crunched in Grazak's jaws. With each blow, however, it rebounded. Flecks of wayward ichor stung them, a prelude to the slow decay that lay within. Even as the Star-Sword boiled off the ooze's excess, oil flowed like water to replace what had been lost.

A flailing tendril caught Khrad's temple. He reeled, blinking back the flashing lights behind his eyes, twisting to avoid a cloud of carven bones that rushed to fortify the ooze's frame. Every blow the monster threw was stronger than the last. The ooze was dense and getting denser. Khrad curled his fingers and whistled a sharp blast.

"Grazak! Up!"

The raptor chittered, dipping down to lay his head against the floor. Khrad sprinted, jumped, and landed one foot on his comrade's head. Grazak snapped up, flinging Khrad into the air.

He tumbled. Soaring. Seeking. The ooze turned up to meet him. The panoply of skulls wheeled and orbited within its bulk, a massive imperiosaur's the centerpiece among them. Its jaws stretched,

cavernous, with strands of burning jelly spittle dripping 'tween its fossil fangs. The nucleus of Amarth-Tel's dominion burned behind its eye-sockets.

As Khrad fell toward the open maw, he had no concern of what came next. All that mattered was the *now*: this single, vital blow.

Once, his sword had been a falling star. Now, he was the same.

The Star-Sword pierced the ooze's eye. Light erupted. Sound and fury *roared*.

Slowly, Khrad's vision returned. He blinked away the lingering motes of light and flash-burnt shadows to find himself kneeling on the rough stone floor of the tower. The boiling remains of the ooze cooked away around him. He grinned as he found the central skull impaled upon his sword. He forced himself upright, muscles groaning with the action. Grazak hustled to his side and caught him where he stumbled.

"Good fight, Grazak," said Khrad, brow pressed against the raptor's flank. "One more left." Grazak dipped. Khrad vaulted onto his back. The duo bounded up the stairs.

New sorcery met the pair at every landing. Khrad and Grazak passed an abattoir of dinosaurs, flayed and harvested to sustain the warlock's bone reserves. Past that lay a sacrificial altar, runnels leading to a perfumed bath. Farther still lay instruments of esoteric function, aligned to match the westward sky. Khrad and Grazak passed them all with swiftness and disdain, hurrying to reach the top.

That was when he saw her.

Amarth-Tel kept his gaol near the spire's apex so prisoners would suffer in seeing freedom they could never reach. The only living captive was the girl. She strained against her shackles, appearing wholly focused on the business of escape. Khrad slipped off Grazak's back without a second thought, walking nearly spellbound to her cell.

"I've come to save you," said Khrad.

The girl looked up mid-tug and blew a braided lock out of her eyes. "Perhaps you'd get to saving, then?"

"Right." Khrad drew the Star-Sword, fumbling only briefly in the maiden's azure stare. One strike and the bars were sundered. Another and her hands were free. The blue-eyed woman straightened, rubbing at her wrists.

"Thank you, noble sir," she said. "I am called Nathala, once a pearl diver of Telu'Ahn."

If Khrad had been less taken, he might have wondered what a pearl diver from the isles of the Coral Canyons, leagues into the west, had been up to so deep within the jungle.

Instead, he said: "I am Khrad, son of Khal. Prince of Mon'Telu."

"I recognized the sword. Now come, we've got to hurry."

Khrad held up a stoic hand. "Sorry, but I can't."

"What? But the warlock—"

"Must be dealt with," said Khrad, brandishing the Star-Sword. "I'm the only one who can. Use this opportunity to flee back to your home."

"Flee?" the lady goggled at him. "Never in your life!"

Khrad's heart quickened. Did she feel this connection, too? "Very well. Hide yourself as best you can. I will slay the sorcerer."

Nathala stared, mouth agape. “Warrior, do you not know my station?”

Thunder rumbled overhead. Lightning crashed beside the spire. Khrad whirled, sword at ready. “Please. I would not see a beauty such as you endangered so. This is warrior’s work.”

Grazak chirped. His mana markings faded, evaporating into mist as he shrunk back to his normal size. Khrad cursed. “That ooze fight took more than I expected. Grazak, stay here with Nathala. Keep her safe. It falls to me to ensure our duty’s done.”

“Wait!” said Nathala. She wrapped a hand around Khrad’s mighty arm and drew him close. The embrace lasted but a moment, but Khrad’s heart nearly burst with joy.

“For luck,” she said, stepping back. Khrad nodded, turned, and left.

Star-Sword raised, the prince of Mon’Telu summited the Tarry Spire to face his foe alone.

Nathala held her smile only as long as Khrad was visible. Then, her face dropped to a scowl. She turned to Grazak.

“You are a beast of endless patience to put up with that buffoon,” she said.

Grazak squawked. *He understood her words!* With Khrad, there was a deeper bond, but what the warrior actually said oft eluded Grazak. This woman, though, was crystal clear.

“Of course,” said Nathala. “I’m druid-trained, if your Khrad had thought to ask. I had been tailing these racers—these invaders—for some time before that tectonic shift maligned them. My mentor Chatal tasked me with their surveillance to better understand the forces we’ve parleyed with.”

She began rummaging about the gaol. Grazak didn’t recognize her gear—bits and bobs of this and that—but he sniffed each one in turn. *Chatal, she said? He and Khrad had met Chatal!*

“I imagine that’s where you got this?” Nathala held up the fire amulet, twirling it upon her finger. Grazak croaked surprise. She smirked. “Not that hard, lifting trinkets from one so dense as Khrad. The racers—Endriders, they call themselves—called it an ignition key. It activates the vehicle’s engine. Amarth-Tel, pompous as he is, did not realize its use.”

Grazak grumbled. *Khrad may not be the sharpest fang in Grazak’s clutch, but he was kin, and mighty besides!* The raptor would not have his noble brother so impugned.

Nathala rolled her eyes. “I’ll refrain from further insults. In any case, it matters not. The vehicle is mine to take. If these outsiders intend to bring their artifacts to Muraganda, to *us*, ‘tis only fair we benefit. I shall take it, learn its secrets, and share them with my people. Let Khrad pursue his glory.”

So saying, Nathala grabbed a spur of jagged bone and stole up to the tower’s roof. Grazak chittered after her. *All these humans, all these schemes! Why couldn’t they just get along?*

The druid didn’t answer. Grazak huffed and followed after.

Black rain fell atop the Tarry Spire. Khrad’s corded muscles bulged with each swing, hacking viciously through Amarth-Tel’s viscid conjured constructs. The sorcerer dashed backward, ever out of Khrad’s sword-reach.

“You come too late, barbarian!” Amarth-Tel cackled. “My preparations are complete, my apotheosis nigh; soon all of Muraganda will tremble when they hear my name!”

Amarth-Tel raised both hands high, fingers curled in occult claws. A massive rib hurled itself at Khrad. The warrior split it lengthwise with the Star-Sword's white blade.

"Tremble with disdain, I think!" he roared. "A cautionary tale to the people of this realm: tread not the path of evil! Hinder not the path of Khrad!"

He sprang as he spoke, Star-Sword streaking through the air. Amarth-Tel dove, buoyed by a burst of tar, barely dodging the warrior's flashing blade.

So it went between the two. Trading volleys, follies, barbs. Both divested of their animal companions, both equally absorbed in lambasting their enemy as winning their encounter. As bolts of lightning split the air and every blow splashed arcing sprays of rainwater, it was to both combatants as if nothing else existed. They were each other's worlds entire.

Neither noticed Nathala creep onto the roof. Neither saw her climb into the driver seat, ignition key in hand. With Grazak sat beside, she plunged the key into its port and twisted.

The engine roared to life.

Khrad froze in place mid-chop. *Was this the beast's true call?* It bellowed like no creature Khrad had heard in his entire life. It shook its way into his chest and made kindling of his heart. A fire hotter than had ever burned was lit within his belly. A realization gripped him:

He wanted more than anything to ride it.

Flame belched from the vehicle's exhaust pipes as Nathala shifted into gear. The beast's tires blurred, sending up a sable wake. Khrad, whose reflexes were honed by years of tailing dangerous game, dove to safety.

Amarth-Tel was not so swift.

The sorcerer's body vanished beneath the vehicle's tread, ground into the Tarry Spire's muck. Nathala yanked the steering wheel and drew the vehicle in a crescent-moon slide around the transfixed Khrad. The spire shifted under them.

"You should hurry, prince," said Nathala, eyes alight with vindication. "Without Amarth-Tel to hold it up, this spire's soon to fall."

Grazak scrambled in his seat, chittering sharply at Nathala. The blue-eyed woman huffed. "Very well. But only the backseat." She twisted, detaching a panel from the vehicle's side, some kind of door. "Thank your raptor, prince. He speaks of you most highly."

Khrad gawped at this development. The spire swayed more violently. Wrestling his bewilderment, Khrad climbed into the vehicle. The door swung shut beside him.

"Find something to cling to," said Nathala. She grabbed a lever by the floor and yanked.

The vehicle roared as it hurtled down the falling spire. The tower lurched, barely at an angle adequate for the wheels to catch its surface instead of falling into open air. Howling winds buffeted Khrad's hair, clawing at his face, drawing from his soul a yet unknown exhilaration. Of all the beasts and fish and flying beings Khrad had ridden, naught approached the speed with which their party flew.

The moments stretched eternal, but Khrad reckoned the entire descent occurred in half a dozen heartbeats. The vehicle shuddered as it landed, sinking and bouncing with a springy branch's recoil. Nathala heaved upon the steering wheel, feet working the pedals, until the vehicle's careening slid into a steaming stop. The engine rumbled softly. A predator at rest.

Khrad stumbled from the vehicle and onto solid ground. His legs wobbled underneath him. The world around him swayed.

“Steady yourself, prince,” said Nathala. She betrayed only a minute tremor as she stepped out from her seat. “I didn’t save you for you to drop dead now.”

“Of course,” said Khrad. He clenched his fist, turning to regard the steel behemoth. “What a spectacle this ... vehicle, is! I must learn more about it!”

Nathala laughed, hands on hips. “Not so fast. Your duty is complete. The vehicle is my concern. Use this opportunity to flee back to your home.”

“Flee?” Khrad’s stomach lurched. “Never!”

“Oh, *no*,” said Nathala, voice alight with scorn. “I would not see a beauty such as yours so misemployed. This is scholar’s work.”

Khrad sputtered, staring at the druid. Disdain was incandescent in her gaze, a mirror to that he’d felt for Amarth-Tel. His own words, echoed, filled his throat with bile. The great ape Chatal’s grin floated spectral in his mind.

“Forge yourself anew,” Khrad mumbled.

Nathala recoiled, lip curled. “I beg your pardon?” Khrad knelt and bowed his head.

“I have been a fool. The world is larger than I know, and yet I act as if it’s small. I treat an equal as a damsel. Disregard her skill. Forgive me for my hubris. This vehicle—this *knowledge*—could help protect the Telu-Set. Please, allow my further learning.”

Grazak shuffled to Khrad’s side, staring up at Nathala with widened, pleading eyes. The druid scowled, letting her displeasure suffuse the air between them.

After several lingering, portentous moments, Nathala’s scowl softened.

“Hard to stay upset when faced with such contrition. I suppose, despite it all, you made a handy smokescreen.” Nathala’s head tilted, appraising both prince and raptor. “All right. You can tag along, on one condition.”

“Name it,” said Khrad.

She turned, swinging open the vehicle’s door. “I drive.”

Nathala settled into her seat and fired up the engine. Khrad grinned and leapt into the back. Grazak curled up on the passenger seat.

Together, paragons of Muraganda, they drove into the infinite horizon.