

DANGEROUS WORLD



New fiction by Andrew Foley



The goblins' terrified shrieks died on their tongues when they burst into their camp and saw Grathm. Whatever sent them crashing through the forest didn't scare them as much as their hobgoblin pack chief.

Grathm's face was a mask of scars. Part of his upper lip had been torn off long ago, giving him a permanent sneer. His yellow eyes narrowed as he looked at the hunting pack. "I don't see the wormbaby." Grathm's growl was even more menacing than usual.

"We almost had 'er," said Hosstrep. "I heard 'er chanting, clackin' bones."

"She was doing the ghost dance," offered Swart. "Called a panther down on us."

"You more scared of a dead cat or me?" said Grathm.

"Depends who's closest," said Hosstrep, who never did know when to keep his mouth shut.

Grathm's fist caught Hosstrep in the side of the head, sending him flailing to the ground. "She's a little girl!" bellowed Grathm. "A little girl!"

"Panther wasn't little..." muttered Swart.

"Get out of here! Find her! Go!" shouted Grathm.

The goblins reluctantly headed back into the woods.

Grathm sighed. He'd hunted his own kind before. Many times. None had been this much trouble.

M'Khiin Grubdoubler looked down on the forest from her perch in

M'Khiin Grubdoubler looked down on the forest from her perch in the tallest oak she'd been able to find. Her troubles seemed smaller, more manageable from up here...

She shook her head, chiding herself for fuzzy thinking. Trees could be cut down. So could she. Grathm's hunters got close this last time—too close. The panther she danced scared them off, but it'd take more than spirits to turn Grathm back.

A band of black cloud was growing on the horizon. Tendrils of lightning curled inside it. No thunder yet, but M'Khiin would need shelter soon. She spied a line of rocky hills jutting above the treetops to the west. Might be an overhang there that'd keep her dry, or a cavern. Or she might find nothing, but she'd be no worse off there than here. She shimmed down the tree and dropped lightly to the ground, careful not to disturb the brush. Grathm had the tribe's best trackers with him. She was going to make their lives as hard as she could.

M'Khiin moved slowly up the rocky slope, wind and rain lashing her back. Lightning cut the sky, followed instantly by a crack of thunder. She was ready to give up, take what shelter she could among the trees, when she found the cavern. It had a good view of the surrounding forest and looked deep enough to protect her from the rain.

She scurried into the cave's shadows, eager to escape the downpour. The smell hit her only after she was well inside. Fleshrot, and underneath it other scents: flowers, herbs, oils. No natural mixture, those.

Hefting her axe, M'Khiin crept deeper into the murk. Goblin eyes could pierce darkness, but not stone. The cave had countless nooks and crannies to hide in. Her nose told her whoever was in there was hurt, maybe even dead. If they weren't, they'd probably be desperate. Desperate was dangerous.

A trick of the cavern's shape kept the dark-skinned elf's moans from

A trick of the cavern's shape kept the dark-skinned elf's moans from her ears until she was all but standing on it. Its skin was like a starless night. White hair like fine strands of spider web splayed out on the rock under its head. She'd heard of dark elves before—what had old Klemper called them? Droe? Drau? Something like that. This was her first time seeing one.

Blood soaked its shirt, sweat soaked the rest of its clothes. Grey pus oozed from a deep cut in its left shoulder. Rot-stink rolled off its body like fog from a lake.

The elf would surely die of its wounds, which suited M'Khiin well enough. She picked through the many pockets in its clothes, along the way learning his gender. She reached for the ring on his left hand—

His eyes snapped open. M'Khiin jumped back, but his bony fingers grabbed her wrist and held tight.

"What's this?" His words slurred together. Each blood-red eye wanted to wander on its own way. "Trying to kill me? I'll not die so easily."

"Won't be easy," said M'Khiin. "Still gonna happen, though."

"Help me." Though the words nearly drowned in his gurgling throat, it was clearly an order.

"You're used to people doing what you say. Used to having power." M'Khiin paused, then added: "Don't have any power here."

The elf licked his coal-colored lips with a dry grey tongue. "You wouldn't have... water, would you...?"

"I could get some, easy," said M'Khiin.

"Not so easy it will come... free, though... I suspect." A ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "Very well. Fetch... Fetch me some water and... all that I possess is yours."

"Already got your stuff." M'Khiin gestured to the pile of coins she'd taken from him.

"You don't have the ring."

taken from him.

"You don't have the... ring."

"I'll take it after you're dead."

"Surely... there is some... some arrangement we can come to... Must be something you... desire..."

"Shouldn't use so many words. You don't have many left."

"Riches. Help me and... you will gain wealth beyond your wildest dreams."

"Life's too wild already. I dream quiet."

"Fame, then. Glory. I've raised the... reputations of rascals... more wretched than you to heroic heights." She shook her head. "Power? I can provide power... beyond parallel."

M'Khiin snorted. "Power? You're dying in a cave."

"Well what do you want? Whatever it is... you have my... word. I can win it."

M'Khiin wanted to survive. Even wounded and weak, the elf might be able to help with that. "Tell me about this place," said M'Khiin.

"The cavern?"

"No, I can see that. Outside. What's it like out there?"

The elf nodded. "I can tell you... Water first."

After the rain filled the copper cup she'd stolen from her brother when they were children, M'Khiin returned to the elf and held it to his lips. He tried to gulp it down and suffered wracking coughs for his trouble. "Slower," said M'Khiin.

The elf did as he was bid. His eyes focused, but his voice still quavered unsteadily. "This region is called... the Sword Coast. A brutal... beastly place. Elves are cruel, dwarves crueller, humans... cruelest and most vicious of all." He paused, then added, "Gnomes can be all right... if you limit your time amongst them."

"That's how things are normally. But these... are not normal times."

"That's how things are normally. But these... are not normal times. The Sword Coast is... is more dangerous than ever. Especially for goblins—and drow."

Drow. That was what Klemper called them.

"A religious zealot has embarked—"

"A what?"

The drow cleared his throat, or tried to. The crackling gurgle under his voice was going nowhere soon. "A madwoman has rallied an army... embarked on a crusade... wrecking the region. Those like us... are rarely welcome in the world above... but the crusade... has deepened the prejudice against outsiders. And so a band... of baseborn brutes beset me." He convulsed as series of wet, barking coughs tore their way from his throat.

When the coughing spell was over, he recovered himself and continued, his voice noticeably weaker now: "It was not... always so. I had a place once... a sanctuary from those who would... do our kind ill. It was glorious. I called it... called it the..."

The drow's head rolled to the side, eyes closing. Dead? No. His chest still rose and fell in time with gurgling, pained breaths.

Letting him die would be easiest, M'Khiin knew. But his clothes had been fine once, not so long ago. Alive, he might be able to help her with Grathm. She didn't trust the drow, of course, but he was still the friendliest person she'd met outside her village—in truth, friendlier than most back in the village. And he knew more of this "Sword Coast" than she did.

If nothing else, M'Khiin could run faster than him. That could be useful if Grathm's pack caught up to her again. After some reflection, she decided to heal him—a bit. Enough that he wouldn't die, not so much that his living would become a problem.

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that his living would become a problem.

She peeled the drow's shirt off and looked closely at the gash in his shoulder. Collecting some water from a puddle near the cavern mouth, she dampened a not entirely blood-soaked piece of the shirt and carefully cleaned the wound.

Straddling his chest, she placed her hands over the cut. The drow moaned, but didn't wake. "A little hurt now and you live to hurt more later," she said.

She closed her eyes and called out, beseeching the spirits for aid. The drow's flesh rippled beneath her hand. She could feel the wound closing as ebon skin knitted itself back together.

The drow cried out. M'Khiin clamped a hand over his mouth, fearful that his voice might carry into the forest. He squirmed under her, but lacked the strength to shake her off.

Eventually, the drow went still, falling into a deep slumber. M'Khiin moved off him and crawled to the far side of the cave. She lay on the cold rocks, listened to the rain shushing outside, and let sleep take her.

A curtain of grey cloud hung across the morning sky.

The drow still clung to life—had even regained some strength. He waved for M'Khiin to join him, though doing so clearly pained him.

His voice remained weak, but the gurgling was gone. "I'd say good morning, but it really isn't." M'Khiin waited for him to say something useful. "I'm still weak. Thirsty. Hungry."

She collected some water in her cup and helped him drink.

"Need more healing," the drow rasped. "Get strength back." His eyes closed.

When they didn't open after a few seconds, M'Khiin carefully poked him with a toe, then did it again, less carefully. The drow didn't respond.

Her satchel was all but empty after Grathm's pursuit. Keeping the drow alive would require venturing from the cavern to find something to

drow alive would require venturing from the cavern to find something to eat. She'd have to be careful to leave no trace of a path. Grathm was still out there. He wouldn't give up the chase any time soon.

The rain started again soon after M'Khiin left the drow, but after a night in the rot-stink she didn't mind. She found some mushrooms less than an hour after departing the cavern, and on the way back stumbled upon what appeared to be an abandoned druid's grove, rife with untended vegetation. She started cutting and digging, letting her hands work as her mind ranged free in a way her body had rarely been allowed.

After a good day's scrounging, M'Khiin left the grove in high spirits. Her upbeat mood wouldn't last long.

As she neared the cavern hill, she heard voices over the crackle and pop of a fire pit. She gripped her axe, ready for an attack.

The voices continued talking, their owners seemingly unaware of their goblin eavesdropper.

"I say we go get the bleeder now." The speaker sounded angry. M'Khiin thought he probably always did, no matter his mood.

A woman's voice replied. "We don't have the djinn—"

"Don't need it! I near as damn hacked the drow's arm off meself. Any spells he slings'll be nowhere near the target. We can take him!"

"Feel free to try. Akissa and I will be by to scrape up whatever's left of you come morning."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," said another woman's voice. This one was musical, almost soothing.

M'Khiin crept through the branches, trying not to make a sound. The first woman said, "You may be right," though her tone made it clear she didn't believe it. "It's your choice, Blarn. If you want our captor so badly you'll not give us sufficient time to prepare, go forth and fetch the drow."

Blarn grunted in disgust. "Well, get on wi' yer meditations or whatever ve gotta be doin' then. I want that mold-licker's head on a

whatever ye gotta be doin', then. I want that mold-licker's head on a pike!"

"We all do. But I'd rather we survive getting it there. All of us," said the first woman. "Life wouldn't be the same without your endless misery to keep me entertained."

"Don't say that word!" Blarn snarled. "I heard it more'n enough dancin' fer the bloody drow."

M'Khiin peered through a tangle of brush. A small camp had been set up less than a hundred feet from the cavern mouth. In it were three people: a scruffy dwarf with a face like a brick, an elven woman in flowing robes of gold and black, and a grey-robed human woman. A long dagger hung from the elf's belt, and a warhammer stood on the ground near the dwarf's hand. Judging by Blarn's armor and the human's boiled leather vest, they were used to fighting.

The human—Akissa, the elf had called her—said, "Our former captor has a price to pay and he will pay it... but only when we are fully ready to collect."

"Let him suffer a little longer," said the elf. "He's not going anywhere, not while we're here."

"At first light, we move," said Blarn. "Awright?"

"Agreed," said the elf. The human smiled beatifically and nodded.

As the trio busied themselves preparing for the night, M'Khiin drew back into the trees.

The drow was being hunted, too, and by seasoned adventurers. M'Khiin had seen only a sliver of the world beyond her village. She wasn't going to get killed before she saw more, not on the drow's account.

But...

The drow was in her debt. There weren't many she could say that of.

But...

But...

It had been a good day. Her satchel was full of mushrooms, leaves, roots, and berries. She could walk away now, having lost nothing but a little time.

But...

But, but, but. M'Khiin scolded herself for even considering helping the drow. She couldn't even reach the cavern, not without one of the adventurers spotting her. And she recognized the human's robes—a holy woman's. Any ghosts M'Khiin danced wouldn't last long around her. Best to leave the drow to his fate. There was nothing she could do for him.

Nothing on her own.

Grathm's hunters had waited out the storm under leaking hides that offered little protection from the elements. Soon after the lightning and thunder passed, Kolth the Foxkiller slipped in the mud, breaking his ankle. He'd lose the foot if a healer didn't get to him, and soon. The closest healer Grathm knew of was Klemper back in the village, a tenday or more away.

M'Khiin Grubdoubler had much to answer for—

A movement in the corner of Grathm's eye turned his head. He stared in shock. Standing dead still among the trees little more than a stone's throw away was M'Khiin. The stupid witch had almost wandered into their camp by accident!

"She's here!" Grathm shouted. "The Grubdoubler's here!"

Grathm grabbed his bow as M'Khiin ran, disappearing into the brush. "Get yer spears!" shouted Grathm, racing after his quarry.

The hunters were close, dangerously so, when M'Khiin dove off the trail she'd made earlier. She scuttled under the covering she'd woven from grass and dead branches and waited, not even daring to breathe.

Seconds later, the pack crashed through the brush just a few feet

Seconds later, the pack crashed through the brush just a few feet away. Their hollers and howls filled the air as they passed, then receded into the distance.

By M'Khiin's reckoning, she had less than five minutes before the doughheads realized they were following a false trail. She breathed deeply, preparing mind and body for the dance.

"Where is she?" Grathm wheeled to face Kullor Clawmark, roaring, "You're a tracker! Track her!"

Kullor did as he was told, examining the area for traces of the Grubdoubler girl. After several seconds, he rose and announced, "I don't think she's ahead of us."

"Then where is she?" shouted Grathm.

Kullor shrugged. "Behind us, probably."

An enraged Grathm grabbed Kullor and threw him into the air. Landing in a stinkweed brier, Kullor shrieked as the nettles dug into his flesh. Then he shrieked again, louder and longer.

It wasn't stinkweed that made Kullor cry out this time. It was the faintly glowing giant boar less than an arm's length from him. And the ghostly leopard, wolf, and bears behind it.

The leopard's ghastly roar echoed through the forest, shaking leaves from the trees. As one, the goblins turned and fled, with Grathm leading the way.

The bones strung around M'Khiin's neck rattled as she twitched and writhed, guiding the spirit beasts she'd danced. They in turn guided the hunters where M'Khiin wanted them to go...

Akissa was the first to hear the clamor in the woods. She scrambled out of her bedroll, grabbing her staff. Outside the tent, Blarn snored beside the fire. Their elven companion sat across from him, legs crossed, eyes closed in meditation, an open spell book floating in front of her.

Deeper than deep in the wood, the cleric saw branches bend and trees

eyes closed in meditation, an open spell book floating in front of her. Beyond them, deep in the wood, the cleric saw branches bend and trees sway. Clawed feet scrabbled along the forest floor. Something was approaching. Several somethings.

"Silver Hawks!" cried Akissa, rousing her fellows. "Prepare yourselves!"

The goblin band burst into the clearing and were halfway into the adventurers' camp before they realized what they'd stumbled into.

M'Khiin sensed her ghosts' turning at the camp's edge. She stopped dancing and scurried through the forest, fast and quiet as she could.

Surprise and panic gave the goblins an edge. Hosstrep jammed his spear into Blarn's side before the dwarf could rise to his feet. Akissa's warning let the elf fare better. She hadn't finished preparing her full complement of spells, but she had a few useful ones ready for emergencies. She gestured at Swart and uttered a few syllables; three projectiles of mystical energy burst from her fingers. The spell's impact ripped the goblin apart.

Though surprised, Grathm was quick to see an opportunity. The pinkskins were well-equipped. One of them was bundled in flimsy clothing trimmed with gold. To the hobgoblin, that meant wealth. His hunters outnumbered the adventurers four to one, and the dwarf already had a spear stuck in him. "Get them!" he shouted, swinging his axe at the elven magician. She ducked to the side, narrowly avoiding having an arm cleaved from her body.

Creeping up the hillside to the cavern, M'Khiin listened carefully to the battle below. She ignored the sounds of stone clashing with steel. Screams and yells mattered most. If she and the drow weren't away when those stopped, things would get ugly.

Inside the cavern, M'Khiin found the drow awake and on his feet. His left arm still hung limp at his side, but the clouds had left his eyes and his skin looked more like skin than wax.

his skin looked more like skin than wax.

"What word?" he asked.

"The people hunting you ran into the ones hunting me."

"Pitting your pursuers against another party. Clever."

"Don't want to be clever. Just not dead. We've got to go."

He slung his good arm over her shoulder, letting her take the weight. "Lead on, little one," he said. M'Khiin didn't like his tone, but there were other things to worry about now.

Outside, she nodded to the trees at the base of the rocky incline. "Need to reach the woods before they know you're gone."

"Yes," the drow replied absently. The skirmish below had caught his eye. A third of Grathm's followers had fallen. The human lay face down in the dirt, a goblin's hatchet beside her. The elf still lived, but a curtain of blood flowed down her face, drenching her robes. There was a spear in the dwarf's gut, but he swung his hammer like there wasn't.

"Slow down, little sister," said the drow. "Take a second to savor the spectacle."

"Leave it, or I'll leave you," growled M'Khiin.

When he didn't start walking, she yanked his arm, hard. He hissed in pain. "That hurt, you heartless—"

"You'll hurt worse if they catch us."

"The skirmish stirs nothing in your soul?" The drow's voice carried with it a note of accusation.

"That dwarf'll stir your guts with his hammer if you don't move." M'Khiin glanced down at the camp. Despite the goblins' numbers, the tide of battle was turning against them. Blarn was a blur of motion, his hammer shattering bones with every swing. The elf flung liquid arrows from her fingers. Wherever they hit, a scream of agony followed.

Grathm still stood, but swayed unsteadily. He wouldn't stand much longer. When he fell, the other hunters would run. With luck, the drow's

Grathm still stood, but swayed unsteadily. He wouldn't stand much longer. When he fell, the other hunters would run. With luck, the drow's pursuers would chase after the goblins. But counting on luck never got M'Khiin anything but trouble.

Hosstrep fell to the ground beside Grathm, screaming as he tried to claw bubbling green acid off his skin. Desperate, Grathm flung his axe across the fire pit. It buried itself in the mage's skull. She stumbled forward—Kullor's spear caught her in the throat, sending her sprawling into the flames. Sparks and embers leapt into the air.

The drow gestured to the battle. "You see the struggle for survival, unfurled before us in all its sublime splendor?"

M'Khiin was preoccupied with her own survival. They were more than halfway to the trees, now, but the drow was hardly moving at all. Safety seemed further away than ever.

With a thundering warcry, Blarn charged at Grathm through the fire pit, kicking up a cloud of embers and ash. Grathm dove to the side, narrowly avoiding the dwarf's hammer. The spear in Blarn's side caught in the dirt, driving deeper into his body. He roared in pain, dropping his weapon.

The drow pumped a fist in the air, then gasped in pain. Noting M'Khiin's disapproving sneer, he smiled sheepishly. "Surely even you can respect so remarkable a recovery."

The surviving goblins circled Blarn as he struggled to pull the spear from his body. Swart snatched the dwarf's hammer and threw it out of reach. Grathm pried his axe out of the elf's skull.

"Now!" the hobgoblin shouted, lunging forward.

Blood spurted from Blarn's mouth as he snapped the spear piercing his guts in two. He rammed the loose piece up under the hobgoblin's chin. The end burst out the top of Grathm's head, whose body dropped like a sack of very dead potatoes.

like a sack of very dead potatoes.

"Goblins gonna run," hissed M'Khiin. "So should we."

The goblins looked at Grathm's motionless body just long enough to make sure it'd stay motionless. Then they ran, scrambling over one another as they raced for cover.

A wide grin crept over the drow's face. His teeth practically glowed in Selûne's light. M'Khiin pulled his arm. "Gonna leave you behind if you don't move," she said.

"Oh, you don't want to do that."

"Don't want to die, either," she snapped.

"Hey!" Blarn shouted. The dwarf had spotted them.

"You're on your own, ebonskin."

M'Khiin tried to slip away, but the drow held her tight. He was stronger than she'd thought. "Bide a moment," he said.

Blarn winced as he bent to pick up Grathm's axe. Blood poured from his wounds. Rage kept him standing. He limped toward M'Khiin and the drow, shouting, "Ye thought ye'd sneak away while the gobbies kept us busy, did ye? Good idea, that. Too bad it didn't work!"

He charged. M'Khiin tore free of the drow's grasp—he stumbled, but didn't fall. The dwarf was almost upon him when the drow raised his right hand.

A bolt of crimson energy blasted Blarn off the ground. His body spun through the air, landing face down at the drow's feet with a sickening crack.

M'Khiin breathed easier for a moment, but only a moment. In the chaos, she'd not seen the human recover. "Blarn!" Akissa screamed. Gripping her staff, she clambered up the slope.

"Oh dear," said the drow. He kneeled next to Blarn's body, and cried out. His shoulder was far from healed.

Ignoring the pain, he rifled through the dwarf's pouches. More gold

Ignoring the pain, he rifled through the dwarf's pouches. More gold than M'Khiin had seen in her life tumbled down the stony incline as the drow frantically rummaged through the dwarf's possessions.

Akissa's voice was loud and firm, calling out to her god for assistance. A green, glowing mace appeared in her hand.

She was a few arms lengths away, no more, when the drow pulled a glass bottle from the dwarf's belt. Without hesitation, he flung its contents down his throat.

The result was subtle. He seemed to grow, in strength if not in size. He stood, no longer wincing in discomfort. As the holy woman swung her divine weapon down, the drow gestured dramatically. An arrow of fire slammed into the human's shoulder. She fell back, feet sliding across loose rocks. She lost her grip on the mace, which vanished, but didn't lose her balance. In an instant she rushed forward again.

The drow waved his arm expansively. Spears of violet energy snaked through the night, converging on the human. Energy ripped through her body. She fell back, her body sliding several feet down the hillside before coming to rest.

The drow turned to M'Khiin. "You see? Nothing to worry about." He waved for her to follow him.

"Should've told me you could do that," said M'Khiin. She wasn't happy. The night had been more exciting than it needed to be.

"Permit a performer some showmanship. It's been too long since I had an audience." He hobbled down the slope, no longer needing assistance. To M'Khiin, the drow's recovery verged on the miraculous. Klemper had spoken of healing potions but she'd never seen one used before.

The drow sat down at the fire and breathed deep, savoring the smell of charred elf flesh. To M'Khiin, he said, "Check the bodies and tents for

of charred elf flesh. To M'Khiin, he said, "Check the bodies and tents for booty. And keep an eye out for a staff with a skull on the end of it. I want that back..."

M'Khiin pulled the elf-corpse from the pit, patted out a few burning patches, and began searching pockets. The drow kept talking. "This was a superior sample of the suffering we must sometimes endure to stay standing. You played a great game, goblin."

"It wasn't a game. Just trying to stay alive."

"Accomplishment achieved, I'd say. Normally these three would cut through goblins like an otyugh through a fishpond, but you evened the odds. Superlative strategy, especially for someone of your sort." Before M'Khiin could ask what he meant by that, he said, "You're a sharp little shaver, goblin. I like you. What's your name?"

"M'Khiin."

"M'Khiin. I am Baeloth, of House Barrityl. We are going to be great friends, you and I."

M'Khiin had never had a great friend before. She still didn't. She'd realize that soon, but not soon enough.

THE END

