

## CHAPTER ONE: THE SWIRLING MISTS

Deep in the caverns of Ord, Sindor was disturbed. He decided to call for Soag. Silently, the black mist seeped out from under Sindor's chamber door, pausing only slightly before crawling in all directions at once—hundreds of hands attached to the blackness of a single arm.

Sindor searched the underground castle for his Chief Advisor, spreading his long tentacles of darkness until one of them slithered into the stately chamber and around the tall bedpost where Soag slept. Moving stealthily along the satin sheets, the icy black fingers found their mark and wrapped themselves tightly around Soag's throat. He awoke, gasping for air and grimly aware of the sulphur smell that filled his nostrils. "Coming," he choked, and his neck was released. Following the receding vapors, he quickly made his way to Sindor's chamber. The darkness waited.

As Soag moved into the deepening mists, he closed his ears to the mournful wails that swirled around him, the howling wraiths of Sindor's conquests crying out in madness and terror. Soag walked on, finally reaching the very heart of Sindor—the core where the howling was so loud and fierce, the darkness so black, and the cold so penetrating that only those protected by Sindor himself could survive. Soag stood unflinching. At last, out of the screaming vapors, Sindor spoke.

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"Hurry up, Mushbrains!" said Grilla. "Soag has been with Sindor and needs to see us at once."

"I'll take my time, Snake face," said Grat. "I want to catch a rabbit." Grat looked hopefully at a small patch of grass. It was brown at the ends, but it held more promise of rabbits than the mud bogs and rotted tree stumps that surrounded it. Grat licked his lips in anticipation.

"You're the dumbest lump that's ever lived," said Grilla. "There hasn't been a rabbit in Calt in a hundred years."

"There might be today," said Grat with a huff, rubbing the patch of grass with an oversized and grossly bent toe.

"Look, Stickhead," continued Grilla, "a rabbit couldn't live in this foul place if it wanted to—today, yesterday, or any day—and if you don't get moving, you won't live here either. Remember when Soag wanted to see old Morp, and he didn't show?"

Grat shuddered. "I'm coming, I'm coming," said Grat as he sank to his scarred knees in mud and scrambled out again. "But what can Soag want this time? I hope we don't have to kill any more Kings and Queens. I seem to have trouble with that."

Grilla moaned. "Motark and Kogh did the hard part—THEY did the killing. All you had to do was hold on to a lousy stick—and YOU dropped it at the first sign of trouble."

"I did hold on to it," said Grat, scooping up a handful of cold slime. "Nobody told me a second stick was going to come jumping out of the first one." He threw his handful at Grilla, and it hit the mark with a disgusting "splat." Grilla scowled. "Besides," continued Grat, keeping his distance, "you could have picked it up instead of kicking it into the river." He stopped long enough to heave another mudball at Grilla.

"Hey, Slime Nose," said Grilla, quickly closing the gap between them, "what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm covering you with mud," said Grat. "I'm not going to be the only one to appear before Soag looking like a pig in swine heaven."

"In a minute you'll BE a pig in swine heaven," said Grilla, pushing Grat into a sizeable bog with a look that said he meant it. "Sometimes I'm tempted to tell Soag just what else you lost that night."

Grat wrinkled up his nose, trying to keep the nasty smell of dead things in the bog where it

belonged. “If you do,” said Grat as he pulled himself out of the mud once again, “I might have to tell that you were the one to let that old woman escape. Thanks to you, there’s an eyewitness roaming about, just waiting to let the cat out of the bag.”

“And who’s she going to tell?” asked Grilla, scraping mud off his arms and legs. “The Council was dissolved with the deaths of the King and Queen.”

“Well, someday...” muttered Grat.

“Someday nothing. Sindor’s power is growing fast. Soon we won’t have to answer to anyone but him.”

“That’s not very comforting,” said Grat, not quite out loud, and the two continued on to Soag’s Council Chamber.

The Council Chamber was large, although many claimed that no chamber could be large enough for the presence of Soag. The chamber was also ornate, but only seemed so when Soag was in it. Not that Soag was such a large man or such a handsome one, but strangers meeting him went away knowing they had met a man of great power.

It was no secret that Soag’s magical powers were well developed—he had completed most of the wizard’s lore when Sindor found him—but it was not traditional magic that separated Soag from other men. It was a personal power, an iron will and enormous self-confidence, that made Soag shine in a land where the people shook and groveled before the blackness of Sindor.

Soag looked grave as Grilla and Grat finally entered the chamber. Motark and Kogh were already present, each robed and seated in the special places their high offices required. “You’re a bit late, aren’t you?” Soag asked.

“We were looking for rabbits,” said Grat. Grilla pinched him hard.

“What he means to say, your Nobleness,” began Grilla in a sweat, “is that we were looking for a gift suitable for your glorious person, but could find nothing worthy and were thus delayed.” Grilla grinned foolishly, revealing a lifetime of dental neglect.

“Sit down, both of you,” said Soag. “There are weighty matters to discuss.” All eyes turned on Soag, and none were disappointed. His golden robe sparkled under the candles which lit the windowless hall, a single spot of brightness in a darkened land. “Sindor sent for me last night.” Soag paused to let the gravity of the announcement take effect. His voice was deep and would have been resonant in any other land. But in Calut, Sindor’s presence absorbed sound as well as souls. There were no echoes, no reverberations, no music of any kind. What was spoken barely had time to reach the ears for which it was intended before disappearing like a buzzing fly suddenly snatched into oblivion by a frog’s tongue. The only enduring sounds in Calut were to be found in the presence of Sindor himself; and those were sounds so chilling that it was said to drive even the bravest warriors to madness.

Soag continued. “In his presence, I was informed that the lost staff,” Soag glared at Grat, “has been found. Indeed, I have felt it myself.” Eyes in the chamber grew wide.

“How would he know?” whispered Grat.

“He’s a staff-holder, Idiot. As long as a staff has contact with a living creature, all the other staff-holders are aware of it. It’s a carry over from when all five staffs were part of one great staff.”

Soag cleared his throat, and the hall was silent. “The staff is in East Kenting. It is not in our possession, but it is under the surveillance of one of our agents in the area. I am sending the four of you to reclaim that which you lost—on peril of your lives.

“You already know the powers of the staff I wield,” said Soag, beginning to raise the staff from its place at his side. Motark and Kogh looked nervously at each other as Grilla and Grat hid their faces. Nothing happened. Soag smiled and then laughed, knowing that for these small minds his own power was enough. He lowered the staff once again. “The lost staff is its mate.”

Without another word Soag stepped to the center of the room and tapped a flagstone with his staff. A bluish mist soon filled the air above it, taking the shape of a dark-skinned boy of about 15 years lying in a simple but comfortable bed. Beside the bed was a long, gnarled piece of wood.

“That’s it!” cried Grat, trying to whisper and shout at the same time.

“Quiet, Wartnose,” said Grilla, “he’s getting up.”

The boy did get up, and, looking at the stick in horror, he took it and broke it over his knee.

“Now what did he have to go and do that for,” said Grat.

Motark gasped. “He has destroyed it.”

Soag scowled. “Fool. Can something of such power be destroyed so easily? It will mend, but our time is short. Normal sticks do not mend themselves. The boy does not know what he has, but he will know shortly that he has found something powerful.” Soag tapped the floor again and the vision faded. “You must leave at once.”

“But, Sir,” said Motark, “could not Kogh and I go alone? We are only hindered by the presence of these two.” He looked at the mud-spattered pair in disgust.

Grilla began to object, but Soag silenced him. “Sindor has said that the four of you will go. Therefore, the four of you will go. Do you wish to bring your grievance before him yourself?”

There was silence in the hall. “Then go,” said Soag, and the council broke.

As the others went off to make preparations, Motark and Kogh slipped quietly into a small, side chamber. Motark pulled the heavy curtains closed around them.

“You know my mind?”

“Very well, my friend,” Kogh answered. “We must not be burdened with those two another time. We lost our positions once on their account, and now that we have gained them back, we can take no risks.”

Motark looked uneasy. “But what of Sindor’s premonition?” he asked. “He has seen Grilla and Grat in possession of the Orgilstone. Sindor may need the other staff to rule the Inner Dominions, but the joining of the staffs cannot take place without that stone.”

Kogh sighed. “Sindor’s powers do not distinguish between past, present or future. The night of the assassination we left those two to get the staff.”

“You believe the stone was on the staff?” Motark asked.

“It must have been,” said Kogh. “Sindor’s vision was of the past—the night of the assassination, when Grilla and Grat held the stone.”

“But the stone would have joined the staffs, making only one. They said there were two staffs—that’s how one got lost.”

“They also said they killed the woman. We have already learned the error of that claim,” said Kogh. “Losing the staff cost them all they owned; admitting to losing the stone would have cost their lives. They held it that night, and Sindor’s premonition is meaningless.”

Motark was not convinced. “But suppose it WAS the future that he saw? Grilla and Grat may be our only hope.”

“If they are,” said Kogh, sinking into a chair, “then the battle has been lost already.” Suddenly he sat up. “But If THEY could manage to find the Orgilstone, then surely WE could do so easily—and in less time.” He stood up slowly. “And if WE found it...”

Motark smiled. “The glory would be ours.” He leaned closer to Kogh. “Perhaps they should not be given the opportunity to try.”

Kogh leaned forward. “No,” he said. “They should not.”

“But we cannot be rid of them inside Calt,” Motark said, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Sindor must not know.”

“There will be plenty of time outside,” Kogh assured him. “Erdgarth is big, and accidents plentiful. We won’t be hindered this time.”

They fell to silence, and a wisp of darkness retreated from the room.

When they had finished their preparations, Motark and Kogh set out to find Grilla and Grat.

“It’s chilly today,” said Motark as they stepped out of their room.

“Looks like a storm is brewing,” said Kogh, “if I didn’t know better I would say the wind is wailing.” He pulled his cloak tight to shut out the black clouds that had begun to swirl around them. Suddenly, each felt an icy hand around his throat.

“Coming!” gasped Motark, his eyes wide with terror.

Kogh could hardly breathe. “Yes, Sir,” he whispered at last. With a mounting horror, the two followed the darkness to Sindor’s chamber.

The message came quickly to Soag, who lost no time in its transmission.

“Grilla! Grat!” Soag called them to attention. “There has been a change of plans.” The two looked at each other. “Motark and Kogh will not be going with you to recapture the staff. They are with Sindor.”

“That’s OK,” said Grat, “we’ll wait for them.”

Soag paled slightly. “That won’t be necessary,” he said calmly. “They won’t be returning.”

Grilla’s face fell.

Soag continued. “You two will go alone.” He paused. “And you will not fail.” Soag left the room, leaving the gold-trimmed doorway looking like brass.

“Do they have rabbits in East Kenting?” asked Grat.

“Shut up,” said Grilla.