

## Illya Nikovitch Volkov (7722.2 )

Here it is - a little spider - hanging from a thread so fine you can barely see it. It swings gently, rocking from side to side as it speaks in the authoritative tone of an old scholar.

*"The Ushka were the first human inhabitants of this land;" it says. "Their legends claim that they were born, fully formed, from the soil and the shadows beneath the trees. Their villages clustered together in the wilderness, prey for wolves and worse, but they had an understanding of the cruel realities of life in the forest. They made bargains with stronger powers and thus survived, although they often paid a steep price for their survival."*

The spider pauses in its swinging.

*"Bas Celik was born to the Ushka tribes prior to the appearance of the Vard. She was born and lived her early life in what is now Miekarova, in the region of Mieriada. The Forsaken of Ushk describes the young woman as being possessed of rare insight, and a gentle nature that made her much loved in her village. She was said to be able to charm the birds and creatures of the forest, and that her singing could soothe the heart of the angry bear or hungry Wolf."*

The spider stares at you for a moment, then climbs up its thread and disappears beneath a leaf. There is a sudden movement and a squirrel is perched on your shoulder, eyes bright, tail puffed out.

*"Zoria lived long before the Vard came to the forests, when the Ushka were young. Perhaps she walked with them when they first came from far away to be under the trees. She sang to the beasts of the forest and they listened, she gave them their names. She passed a fragment of her wisdom to those who came after, and so we have farmers and herders, and oxen draw the wagons of our merchants. She never walked beneath the same moon as Bas Celik - or if she did It was as a shadow of memory and not as a woman."*

The squirrel pats your ear, leans in close, whispers.

*"But the staff remembers. There is no bitterness, no deep fear, no twisting urge to cling to the thread of life. There is wonder, and sadness, and anger, and magic, and joy, and the grinding of a grave stone. I ask you friend Illya. Could this be the staff of a volodny?"*

And the squirrel pats your ear again, and disappears into the trees.