

Travok wanted to use peace as a basis of his ruling when Delg died but had only been trained in the way of war. His training had made him a great fighter but he did not know how to rule by peace. He found that he had the choice of ruling by war, which he could do well, or rule by peace but ultimately fail and shame the name of Loderr forever. His brother knew how to rule by peace but the ancient laws of succession stated that a king was king until the day he died, stepping down was not an option and that his eldest son would become king. Travok knew he would have to leave to allow his brother to take the throne in his absence but Delg grew wise to his plan and ordered the guards of the castle grounds never to let Travok out without the king unless Travok *was* the king.

Spicar was on a major trading route and the castle had accommodation for the many traders who passed through the land with exotic wares and fantastic stories – the truth of a story did not matter if it was told well.

Every week Delg would hold a banquet for all who were staying in the castle and everyone would eat, drink, dance and sing but most importantly listen to a new story and retire when they were too tired to listen to another yarn.

The snows grew heavier as the years progressed and the number of traders who passed through in the winter months grew less and those who did come stayed longer. It was one of these winters that a mysterious man came to stay at the castle. He wore a dark hooded cloak and had a bag, which never left his side, but he was seen taking a book out of it and studying it. This man's book was of interest to everyone in the castle and people speculated and discussed what it was about. Travok once was able to look at it when the man left it open on the table while he was occupied in holding his cup out for a servant to fill up. Travok was surprised to see that all the pages were completely blank.

The man spoke to Delg one night telling him that he had to be on his way the next morning and had far to go and needed to leave several hours before dawn. Delg sent a message to the guards that someone would be leaving the castle early the next morning and that they were to allow him to leave. If someone was leaving that early they were usually questioned but the guards were to let him out.

That night Travok retired early but found he couldn't sleep. It was well past midnight and he decided to go down to the banqueting hall and see if there was any food left. He came down and as usual there were several people slumped over a table sleeping off vast quantities of ale. Travok helped himself to some of the meats, breads and cheeses that hadn't been eaten and a hot drink that was still simmering in a cauldron when he noticed a movement in the shadows behind him. He swung round to see the mysterious man standing there with his bag over his shoulder. He suddenly looked taller than he'd been and seemed to tower over Travok although this wasn't a new feeling since gnomes and halflings were the only people who'd ever visited the castle who were shorter than the dwarves.

"Ready?" the mysterious man asked.

Travok looked round to see who he was talking to but aside from the men slumped over the tables there was no one else around but him.

"Ready for what?" he eventually said.

"You want to leave the castle don't you?" the man responded. He sounded impatient to go.

"I can't" Travok said. "The guards won't let me out." He paused and then added, "How do you know I want to leave? Only my family know that and none of them would have told you."

The man ignored his question and said, "I'm leaving now. The guards are expecting me and if you leave with me they won't question there being two of us. In the dark they won't recognise you. If you ever want to leave before you're king, this is your only chance."

He looked at Travok who looked back at him and knew he was correct. "Get dressed and we'll go" the man said and to Travok's amazement handed him his travelling clothes.

"I need time to pack some possessions" Travok protested.

The man pointed to a backpack and said, "All your possessions are in here. Don't be deceived about the size or the weight. Get going. If you want to get away we need to put as much distance between ourselves and the castle before you are missed."

This was almost too much for Travok and he seriously considered going back to bed but suddenly realised that this really was the only way he could get away and would have been prepared to go naked and with nothing if that's what it took to get away.

He hastily dressed, took the backpack and then followed the man through the gardens towards to nearest gate. Just before they got into sight of the gate the man handed Travok a cloak similar to his one and told him to put it on and pull the hood up. Travok did this and they went to the gate. The guard opened it and told them he'd been expecting them and didn't question them. As soon as they were out sight of the gate again the man took the cloak from Travok and took his own cloak off and threw them into a nearby fast flowing stream where they were washed away in an instant.

"I don't know how late you usually sleep," the man said, "but that will determine how long it will be until you are missed."

He started marching off as fast as he could but Travok's short legs had trouble keeping up. In the end the man matched Travok's pace but instructed him to walk as fast as he could.

"Where are we going?" Travok asked.

"Save your breath." The man snapped back and then added, "we're getting as far away as we can so that you won't be found. I've got business up North and so you're better off sticking with me if you can keep up."

Travok hurried as best as he could but was not used to walking at a fast pace for hours on end and the man insisted that they only rest for five minutes once every five miles.

As it grew light they were nearly at the border of Spicar. The next kingdom was on uneasy terms with Spicar due to what they'd recently heard about Delg, but Travok wondered how their attitude to him would be. Before the Sun was up the man turned round to the way they came and waved his hand as if stroking an imaginary large dog while muttering under his breath. Travok suddenly realised this man was a mage and their footprints disappeared.

"The people in the next kingdom have heard about your different views to your father," the man said. "They think highly of you and I have some friends. When we get to the border we'll ask the guards to tell anyone looking for you that you haven't come this way but have heard reports of two men matching our description heading South. They will be looking for people wearing those cloaks I got rid of. If we can get to the other side of this kingdom you should be safe but I think until your brother becomes king you should continue North with me."

Travok thought about the man having friends, which seemed for some reason strange and then it struck him that this was because he hadn't asked the man his name.

"My name is Visitork" the man said when asked.

"Are you the Visitork I've heard about in legend?" Travok asked.

"It depends which legends you've heard" Visitork said. When Travok opened his mouth to ask another question Visitork added, "If any of the legends suggest that I want to discuss them then I would guess the rest of the legend is just as untrue." After a pause he then said, "Did you have a question?"

"No." Travok said simply.

"Let's get moving then," Visitork said and lengthened his stride so Travok had to run to keep up before Visitork finally reduced his stride to match Travok's again.

Crossing the next kingdom unnoticed proved difficult since Travok was well known and very popular and everyone wanted to greet him and he wondered how they could prevent word of his passage through the kingdom leaking out.

At the gate the guards recognised him but were happy to keep his presence a secret. They even told him that if anyone else tried to cross their border then the stories of Delg, would be an excuse for people to be refused access. The guards even went to the nearest inn and made arrangement for Travok and Visitork to get rooms so they wouldn't have to show themselves.

Visitork assured Travok that they had nothing to worry about his being known everywhere and this had Travok worried. He knew the Visitork was keeping something from him but tried to forget it and told himself that it was just one of those things that a wizard knew but fighters didn't need to think about, but there still was some nagging doubts gnawing at the back of his mind.

The delight of the people to see him and the eagerness of them to feed them well and give them lodgings wherever they went made their passage through the kingdom very fast and in a couple of days they had passed the far border and Visitork was satisfied that now that Travok wouldn't be searched for this far away, they didn't need to travel at quite the pace he'd set before but insisted that they should still keep moving.

Travok thought that now the feeling of being hunted was gone that he'd enjoy the journey much more but found that this land was quite different from what he was used to and it gave him an uneasy feeling. It appeared that Visitork was also on the lookout as if they were being watched. The villages appeared quiet and the fields had animals that looked like they'd seen better days and few people were working in them.

The sky was continually cloud covered and most of each day there was light drizzle which was strange since the temperature was colder than in the previous lands and it should have been snowing. It meant that the roads were muddy and the fields appeared waterlogged and streams had to be crossed by bridges and involved them travelling several miles up or downstream to find one.

At the end of the first day they found a sheltered spot in a thick wood to make a camp. Visitork leaned over to Travok and whispered, "Make as little noise as possible. We'll have to risk a campfire or we'll freeze to death but neither of us should sleep at the same time. Don't wander more than ten strides from the camp for any reason."

"What's up?" Travok asked,

"Something sinister is afoot." Visitork answered. "This land has always had an 'uneasy' reputation". He said this empathizing the work 'uneasy'. "I'll take the first watch and wake you in a few hours. You can take the next watch but make sure that if you feel tired before your watch ends that you wake me. One of us **MUST** be awake at *all* times."

When Visitork woke Travok, it seemed like the wizard was not going to sleep but when it got light he was alert and just as wary. He explained that the mist that was hanging around was not normal and when it got dark it would manifest itself into mist people who would make you one of their own unless you could protect yourself in a building or with a fire. Mist people couldn't cross rivers apart from across bridges anymore than people could and the next time they came to a stream Visitork threw Travok across before jumping across himself.

They spent the rest of the day putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the stream and it was already dark when they came to a deserted town. Visitork went to look for somewhere safe to sleep and while he was searching Travok heard a voice and went to investigate.

The voice was coming from a house where the darkness inside was almost tangible. As Travok went inside he felt a sword standing by the entrance and picked it up as he went in. The darkness was not normal since Travok's infra-vision had no effect but he could just make out the shape of a bed with a figure on it.

Crossing over to the bed he could just make out the features of an old woman.

"It's about time you got here" she said in barely more than a whisper.

"You were expecting someone?" Travok asked.

"Not just anyone" the woman replied. "I've been waiting too long for you Travok Loderr son of Delg, king of Spicar and descendant of Kildrak."

Travok was shocked. "How do you know who I am or that I was coming?" he asked and held the sword pointing down toward her in the darkness above.

"Don't waste my time with questions" the old woman said. "I've got a lot to tell you and little time."

She paused briefly and then went on, "When the Earth is your enemy look for the blue light. Those with no fear, fear the way. That which you know not can use it."

"What kind of meaningless rambling is this?" Travok demanded ever ready to plunge the sword into her.

"No questions." She screeched. "Swap that for the favour..." She appeared to be struggling for breath and she just managed to gasp, "You'll have to work it out for yourself" and died.

Travok was shocked but nothing in comparison to what he felt when he examined her body and found out she'd been dead for several hours.

Visitork had to call him five times before he registered and Visitork told him he'd found a building with a large fireplace and a great store of wood and insisted that Travok help him move enough inside as quickly as possible. Remembering that it was only a matter of time before the mist people arrived Travok forgot about the woman and was thankful when they'd got enough wood inside and had a large fire blazing as it seemed to be getting misty outside.

That night they kept the fire burning and knew that the building was surrounded by mist people. When they were hunting someone they

would not stop and would try to trick them into leaving the warmth of a fire or the safety of a building to get at them. Visitork was concerned about the route they were taking. He'd never heard of mist people in this kingdom before but this kingdom was quite different from how it used to be. Up ahead were marshes to cross but they would be swarming with mist people and there were no buildings to shelter. Marsh sirens and other strange creatures on their own were not problem but would put them at greater risk from the mist people.

When it was fully light Visitork told Travok of his fear and said that going back was not an option now and the only way he could see was to travel a steep trail nearby to a large town at the top of the hill. Not much was known of the town because nobody dared go near it from old tales about it. One tale however said that mist people had never gone near it and Visitork could see this as the only way to escape them. It was believed that the town was home to vampires and that the area round the town was full of werewolves. Visitork just hoped they could shake off the mist people by venturing there, and be out again before Selûne was next full, but that didn't given them more than a few days, although getting through shouldn't take long.

The mist that day was thick, but they found the steeper the trail got, and the higher they went, the mist got thinner until they found they'd left it behind. Visitork wasn't convinced that they would be safe after dark though and it was already getting late. It was virtually dusk when they saw the lights of the town at the top of the hill and just managed to be admitted into its gate as the last rays of light were vanishing.

People in the streets who saw them kept out of their way seeing they had only just arrived before dark. They were all carrying wards to keep away vampires and were making their way to their homes as quickly as they could now that it was dark. Visitork and Travok decided to follow their example and went to get lodgings at the first inn they found.

The inn keeper welcomed them in and assured them that werewolves hadn't been seen for many years and that the walls were impregnable to vampires. He old told them that the hill they were on was like a boundary and mist people had never been heard of any further north.

He promised them a large breakfast and when they bought a meal there, he gave them a bottle of wine on the house.

That night just as Travok was getting into bed he heard a sound outside and looked out the window. In the street below a few men seemed to be having a disagreement involving a girl. As they were fighting one of the men with his back to the inn straightened up and looked the other men in the face. Travok could see the faces of the other two and the look of fear and they turned and fled while the remaining two men carried the screaming girl off.

Travok grabbed his backpack and his great axe and was about to make for the door when Visitork thundered into the room, glanced at Travok and said, "Good. You're ready. We've got to get out of here."

"We've got to help that girl." Travok protested.

"We can't help her. It's too late." Visitork yelled. "We've got to get out of here."

"You go." Travok snarled back. "In my father's kingdom no one would ever leave without trying to help her. I may be a dwarf, I may be far from my father's kingdom but I'm going to try and help her. You can either help me or leave on your own. Those are the only two options."

"You are a fool." Visitork said well aware that he'd lost the argument. "But you are also right. We have to try and you need me to keep you alive."

They hurried out into the street and followed the tracks the two men with the girl had made which led to a large building with large gates tightly closed. On closer inspection the tracks led around the side into an archway into the building. Travok went first insisting that he could use his infra-vision to see what was in the room but needn't have bothered since Visitork had a spell that gave him the same advantage.

They crossed the first room, which apart from a couple of small tables set against a couple of the far walls and a carpeted floor, was completely empty. The only thing Travok really noted was there were no windows and the way the arch was set away from the room meant no light outside would shine into the room, even during the day.

When they reached the door in the corner of the room they could hear the girl screaming from the other side. Visitork suggested throwing the door open as he cast a Superlight spell into the room which would not affect him but dazzle everyone else in the room to give him enough time to let off some damaging spells.

Travok agreed to this but things didn't go to plan as Visitork stepped in and cast the spell the men were strangely unaffected by the light and grabbed hold of him before he could cast any more spells.

Before he knew what was going on, Travok was grabbed and pulled into the room and held by another of the men.

The girl was being held nearby by one of the men. The thick white dress she was wearing in the street was missing and she was wearing a thinner white under dress with a high neck that had been torn.

"What are they?" the man holding the girl asked.

"This one's a dwarf," said the man holding Travok. "I don't know what that one is though," he said gesturing at Visitork.

"It's a human you idiot," the man holding Visitork said. "It has just memorised some simple magic." The man snatched Visitork's satchel off of him and took his book out. "It's powerless without this."

The man with the girl released his grip on her.

"Run!" Travok shouted at her, and used his strength to force the man who was holding him back. The man was unprepared and stumbled back against the wall but didn't release Travok. The girl was startled and didn't move.

"Run for your life," Travok yelled again using all his strength to struggle and Visitork did the same causing enough of a commotion to give the girl the opening she needed to run through the door and escape.

As she ran through the door, Travok shouted "Warn".

The man who'd released the girl was planning for one of the other men to take her. He didn't seem to be bothered that she'd escaped, but the man behind him was furious. Before their eyes he suddenly increased his size by about three feet and large black wings sprouted out of his back. He snarled at them and they could see he had two pointed teeth.

The barman had said vampires couldn't penetrate the walls when the gates were shut but that meant if they were already inside the town then they couldn't get out.

"What the hell are you?" Travok yelled.

“We are vampires,” the beast replied, “but we came to Toril from Abeir during Spellplague so we may not be what you are familiar with. We are a lot stronger than your native pathetic vampires and a lot hungrier.”

As Travok and Visitork looked around, all the beasts were now three feet taller than they remembered, and either had wings or were unfolding them.

The one who'd been holding the girl spoke. “I'm not worried about losing that thing. Dwarf blood is my favourite.” He looked at Travok for a moment but then said, “You'll be the desert” and bit at Visitork's neck, but he took one sip of his blood and spat it out.

“I'll eat that inn keeper one day,” the beast yelled. “They've been drinking his blood wine. It'll be three days before their blood is drinkable. I wish I'd had that female now.”

The vampire holding Travok looked as if it was about to twist his head off but the other one stopped him and said, “throw them in the dungeons with the others. We can enjoy them in three days time.”

The dungeon that Visitork and Travok were locked in occupied the lower floors of the castle and the door was a heavy portcullis controlled by a lever. There were dozens of other men in the dungeon who said they'd been there for what must have been months. In this darkness however it was not easy to measure time. The men all appeared to be thin, weak and pale and it was sometimes a wonder to see some of them being able to stand at all. One thing they all said was if they were let out, they'd be able to handle the vampires.

Visitork insisted that even without his book he was not powerless but found that there must be a power he was unfamiliar with that held the portcullis closed. While he spent his time trying all the spells he knew, Travok searched the other floors of the dungeon for a way out. He had a keen eye for secret doors but after two and a half days of searching he returned to Visitork to report that he'd found no other way out and Visitork reported he'd had no success with the door. It was just at that moment that the food hatch opened and Travok jammed it open with his foot. He thought that he could just about fit down and it had to come out somewhere so while Visitork held it open, Travok crawled in and found it led out to the other side of the portcullis and he was able to open it with the lever

and recover his weapons, backpack and Visitork's satchel with the book back in it.

Visitork along with Travok and the men prepared to leave the castle and found no resistance. The town was deserted. Obviously the girl had warned everyone to get away but as they made to leave they found a section of the wall had been breached, and the vampires could get out, and as they left the town they found they were suddenly surrounded by them. Visitork and Travok found a gap in the line and took it. As they were running they heard a sound behind them and looked around and the vampires chasing them also looked around. The clouds had cleared revealing Selûne and this time she was full. The men were undergoing a transformation and it was clear that no werewolves had been seen recently because the vampires had trapped the men for months which also meant the men did have a chance of dealing with the vampires.

As soon as Visitork saw what was happening he pulled Travok behind a rock with him. He knew the werewolves would be able to smell them but guessed they'd be more interested in going for the vampires.

"I think we've got to get away now," Travok hissed to Visitork.

Visitork was deep in thought so Travok gave him a shove.

"When a man fights with a werewolf, he becomes a werewolf," said Visitork. "When a man fights with a vampire, he becomes a vampire."

Travok had never heard that but guessed that in some cases that was true and this must be one.

"So what happens," Visitork asked rhetorically, "when a vampire fights with a werewolf and a werewolf fights with a vampire?"

They peered out from behind a rock and saw the vampires and werewolves turning into hybrids embodying the worst elements of both.

Before Travok knew what was happening, Visitork was holding him and running away so fast that his feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. He didn't stop until they were at the bottom of a hill and had just crossed a bridge that went over a dry river bed.

"What was that?" asked Travok.

"Swift Wind," Visitork replied. "It's a super speed spell. It only effects me but I can manage to carry you once in a while."

“Why didn’t you use it when we were trying to get away from my father’s kingdom, or to get us away from the mist people?” Travok asked.

“It’s a dangerous spell.” Visitork said. “It doesn’t always work and when it doesn’t what can happen is not ‘good’”. Visitork emphasised the word ‘good’ and then added, “In this case, I didn’t think things could get much worse.”

Travok looked up the river bed at a dam that was diverting the river. He glanced at Visitork who got his idea and after quickly consulting his book muttered a few words and pointed his hand towards the dam. A fire bolt leapt from his hand destroying the dam.

As the water rushed down, Visitork said what they’d both been thinking, “Vampires can’t cross running water.”

“What about the south side of the hill?” asked Travok. “The river doesn’t run there.”

“There’s no problem there.” Visitork assured him. “There’s no shelter at the bottom of the hill and you can’t get all the way down and back in one night. Vampires combust in daylight. I doubt the were-vampires will ever get out of that town now.”

Finally out of the town and free of the pursuit of the mist people Visitork imagined their journey north should be fairly easy now and found the lands from the hill were just like he had remembered the lands of the south last time he’d journeyed here. The animals in the fields were well fed. Few people worked the fields but in winter the ground was too hard but the skies were mainly clear and the winter sun was more than welcome.

The next kingdom however did seem to be different. They didn’t see much of the fields since the border was in the middle of a dense forest but what they did see was that nobody seemed to work the fields, the animals seemed to have been left to do their own thing and it looked like everybody had been on a holiday for years.

As the path left the forest there was a large hedge on one side with the forest continuing on the other. Visitork called a halt.

“I’m not sure what is going on here,” he said, “but the people here are friendly and I know they will have a reason for this. I haven’t travelled in this part before but I have seen maps and I know this path leads to a large castle where we may get some answers.”

As he said this Visitork heard a sound behind him, before he was hit over the head and collapsed to the ground muttering something as he

did so. Before Travok could react, he too was hit over the head. Dwarves have hard heads and so Travok came round only minutes later but found everything of value they had, apart from their clothes was gone including his backpack and weapons and Visitork's satchel. What's more Visitork was still unconscious and didn't look too good.

Travok decided that they needed to get to the castle Visitork had mentioned and tried to take him along with him which of course was not easy. He hadn't gone far when a young man and woman saw him and helped him to get Visitork to the castle before continuing on their way.

Travok knocked on the castle door and a tall woman answered it and immediately saw Visitork and invited Travok in while she single handedly took Visitork into a nearby room and laid him on a bed.

"I'm afraid we no longer have a healer in the castle." She told Travok. "I think the best we can offer your friend is rest, but my husband knows a little more than myself in these matters."

"We were attacked and robbed." Travok told her.

"The robber is probably the one who has been robbing this kingdom for some years now. Take a moment if you would like to freshen up and then join me and my husband in the great hall. Just follow this passageway to the end" the woman said and left.

After the woman left, Travok tried to take his coat off and found he couldn't. He heard Visitork mumble something in his sleep and Travok found he was still wearing his backpack and had his weapons still and Visitork satchel was next to him. He realised that Visitork mumbling as he went down was to make invisible anything of value so the robber would have nothing he wanted. Travok breathed a sigh of relief and found some more presentable clothes in his backpack which were right at the top as was whatever he wanted every time and headed for the great hall.

The great hall was sparsely decorated but had a blazing fire. The woman sat at a table with a large bearded man. They were both eating a modest sized meal and had left a place for Travok.

"I am Weld, queen of Gumdrick," the woman said. "This is Rorf, the king." She indicated her husband who nodded to Travok.

Travok knelt down on one knee and bowed his head before them until they permitted him to get up and take a seat.

Travok took a seat.

“My lord,” he said. “My friend is a mage and made our possessions disappear. I think that the robber didn’t find anything to take.”

“You have a good choice, in friends,” Weld said. “The baron has been coming to our kingdom for years.”

“He came here, leading in mist people who took all the adults.” Rorf told him. “Only the children and the old people were left. None of them had knowledge on how to do the jobs of their parents and we have been dependant on buying food from neighbouring kingdoms.”

Weld, continued the story, “The baron seems to know how much gold any house has and with no one to protect us he visits houses demanding they hand over all their gold. Anyone who this happens to comes to us and we provide for them. It has now got to the stage that we are supporting everyone in the kingdom. We have six bags of gold left which is enough for people to just manage for a year. We have heard the baron will be returning tonight with his army and demand our gold. We don’t know what to do.”

“We can offer you lodgings for your friend to recover and maybe a meagre amount of food but I’m afraid that is all we have.” Rorf said.

“Maybe you can use this,” he went on and gave Travok a bottle of a greyish substance. “Rub this on your friend’s head. It should speed up his recovery for a few hours but it will only work once.”

Travok thanked them and went to help Visitork. He was confident he could stand up to this baron but not if he had an army with him.

In a few hours Visitork recovered enough to wake up briefly and began mumbling to himself. Travok sat by his bed and outlined briefly what the king and queen had told him. He asked if Visitork knew anything they could do to help. Visitork made no reply and Travok asked if there was any way he could help him recover.

Visitork didn’t open his eyes but in a quiet and slow voice, told Travok to take six sacks into the garden and fill them with leaves. Travok found six sacks and took them to the garden. He’d been told that the baron would be arriving around midnight and he had to stay hidden. It was just getting dark so he had plenty of time to fill the sacks and when he had he took them to Visitork.

Visitork looked at the sacks and got up using a large cane shaped like a claw to support himself and started to chant. When he’d finished, all six sacks were filled with gold and surrounded by a pile of precious gems. Visitork pointed at the gems which vanished.

Visitork seemed virtually unable to stand but insisted on waiting in the passageway while Travok took the sacks to the king.

The king and queen joined Travok to return to Visitork.

“Your friend has told me of the spell you have cast,” Weld said.

“I’m familiar with this magic. It won’t last long. When the baron finds out what we’ve done, he’ll be back. This time it won’t be gold, it will be blood.”

“The spell will wear off gradually.” Visitork told her. “As they travel away, the bags will get lighter but it will be many days before they decide to stop to count the gold. When they turn round to come back they will find the path has disappeared behind them. I have cursed the sacks so the baron and his men will never find their way back to this kingdom again.”

He paused to let this sink in but before they could answer said, “I’ve cast a healing spell on myself and it will work faster if I’m asleep.” He turned and went back to his room and lay on his bed, where he was asleep within moments.

Travok helped the king and queen hide the real gold and put the new sacks in their place. Travok went to his room and locked the door just before midnight but listened at the keyhole.

When the baron arrived he demanded the gold and the king and queen pleaded with him but in the end gave in and handed over the six bags that had been leaves only hours ago. The baron left telling them he would be back soon and if they didn’t have twice as much he’d start taking people and sell them as slaves to make up the amount.

The next morning Travok joined the king and queen for a small breakfast and they gave him some to take back for Visitork.

“The baron will not be back then?” Weld asked.

“My friend hasn’t let me down, yet.” Travok replied.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do.” Rorf said. “The gold we have will only just support our people for a year and that is only if the two of us go without. The old people are dying but the children who were left are young adults now and want to have children of their own.”

“You say the children,” Travok started then corrected himself, “young adults can’t help your kingdom to support itself since they were not taught how to before their parents died.”

“That is the problem.” Weld said.

“In that case,” Travok said, “I suggest you divide the remaining gold equally among the people and tell them to go to neighbouring kingdoms and be back within a year. They can bring back people who will be willing to teach your people the skills, give you back your own army and rebuild your kingdom. All they will ask in return is citizenship.”

Rorf said, “If you ever need anything, I shall provide it for you, up to half my kingdom.”

Travok decided to come clean. “My name is Travok Loderr, son of Delg king of Spicar and descendent of Kildrak, my lord.”

“We’ve heard of your father.” Weld said. “He is known as the greatest king of Spicar since Kildrak. Recently however, the nearer kingdoms don’t speak so favourably of him. Why is this.”

“Can we just say, my lady,” Travok said, “that he wants to return Spicar to its former glory. He believes the way to do this is by war. He has trained me only in the ways of war so I have left so that my younger brother, who can rule by peace, will be king in my place. Delg has been cursed with rapid ageing and will not live much longer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Rorf said.

“He’s kept me trapped to ensure I would be king.” Travok said.

“I’ve escaped now but if you ever want to give me anything, please help my brother bring peace as best as is possible.”

“You have my word, Travok Loderr.” Rorf said and he and Weld then knelt before him on one knee for a moment.

When Visitork was well enough to continue, the king and queen had arranged to share out the gold the next day and Travok was confident that part of his brother’s plans had already started.

As they passed through the kingdom the people would offer them a bed but couldn’t offer them any food. Visitork had picked up food from various sources along the way and shared this with the people in whose houses they had stayed in. The kingdom was surrounded by forests on all sides and they made for a forest where they hoped they’d cross the border. They camped that night in the forest and decided to get moving at first light. It was after about an hour they found a large set of buildings with a courtyard to one side where they could have stayed inside, and decided to search it for signs of life or anything they could use.

The layout reminded Travok of the place they'd stayed when he'd spoken with the dead woman and he was reminded of her meaningless ramblings.

Just as they thought it was deserted they saw a building with a glow coming from a window suggesting that there was a fire burning in there and they decided that they might kill a day here to sit by the fire before heading further north. When they entered the room they found it was dark and empty and when they looked at the fireplace it was clear it hadn't been used for months. In the next room they could hear sounds of people enjoying a meal so they went there to ask if they could make a fire.

Entering the room they found it was also empty and the roof was half missing so they returned to the previous room to build a fire. As they entered the room they suddenly saw it was dark outside when it was only an hour after dawn and they looked around and saw a small candle burning and a figure sitting in one of the large chairs against the wall. He was dressed in a dark grey cloak with a hood pulled up. His legs were bare and his boots looked like they were made out of metal. On his lap he had a cylindrical object just over half a foot long.

The man didn't say anything but looked at them. His hood didn't obscure his face but in that light, it cast a shadow over his face. When Travok picked up a log to put into the fire place the man lifted up his hand but still said nothing but a breath of air caused the candle to light up his hand and the fingers ended in claws. Visitork backed away reaching for his book before realising he couldn't read it in this light and didn't want to cast a light spell.

"Let's leave," Visitork said but as he reached for the door that led outside the man rose to his feet but as Visitork moved away from the door, the man sat down again. Visitork gestured to Travok to move towards him and then moved past the man to the door where they'd heard the sounds of feasting. Visitork reached for the door, the man made no move when he opened it so Visitork stepped cautiously through but suddenly the door slammed closed and the candle went out. Travok made for the other door that was nearer and narrowly missed having his beard singed by a bolt of energy. In the light that accompanied it he saw the man was on his feet and the object he'd had in his hand had fired the bolt of energy towards him and he

dived through the door as another bolt of energy exploded behind him.

Contrary to what the windows had shown from inside, the second time Travok and Visitork were in the room it was light outside and Travok ran away from the house and found himself in the courtyard. There were two statues, one on either side and a tree was behind the one on the right. The statue on the left was set on a pedestal and was of a naked girl down on one knee while the other one on the right showed a warrior with a large war hammer raised high.

Travok thought he'd escaped when a blast exploded just behind him. He ran for the other side of the courtyard but didn't get half way before he had to throw himself to the ground as another blast flew over his back. He scrambled behind the left statue and used it to help him onto his feet. The statue was taller than he was and provided good cover. Behind him was the skeleton of a figure that had eight arms and most of the hands had a different weapon in them while the last held a large shield. Travok reached for the shield as the statue in front of him exploded and he lifted the shield to protect himself from a second blast. The energy struck the very centre of the shield and was reflected back and hit the cloaked man who appeared to vaporise and all went silent.

Travok looked at the remains of the statue and then looked at the other one that appeared to be crumbling until the statue collapsed revealing that encased inside was a woman wielding a war hammer. She swung it even before the rock that had encased her hit the ground but Travok was not standing in the path of the hammer. "You won't get away with this, you evil warlock!" she yelled and raised her hammer again.

Travok grabbed his axe and prepared to dodge the hammer but before the girl brought the hammer down she stopped and lowered it. "What's going on?" she exclaimed. "Where's everyone gone?" She looked at Travok. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I could ask you the same question." Travok replied.

"I'm Asny Tisserand," the girl started.

"Princess of Re' Clar" Visitork finished for her, entering the courtyard from the opposite entrance.

Asny glared at him. "I've answered your questions. You can at least answer mine."

“I’m Travok Loderr,” Travok said. “My friend here is Visitork.”
“What’s going on? Where’s everyone gone and what are you doing here?” she asked slightly less angrily.

“What’s going on,” replied Visitork, “is that you are queen of Re’ Clar.” He nodded his head which, appeared to be the nearest he’d get to a bow. Travok dropped to one knee and bowed his head. When Asny said nothing he risked looking up and saw surprise of her face. She motioned him to get up.

“What are you talking about?” she asked seeming to get more angry again. “I’m last in line to the throne.”

“85 years ago,” Visitork said, “Seven of the Tisserands were killed. One was unaccounted for. I’m assuming that one was you.” He looked at the rock around her feet and the remains of the other statue. “It seems that you’ve been imprisoned as a statue for the last 85 years by some evil warlock. That statue,” he gestured to the remains of the other one, “was what kept the spell on you.”

This seemed too much for her to take in and she just stared at Visitork and Travok for a long time before she looked around. She finally looked back at the remains of the statue.

“What was that a statue of?” she asked calmly.

Visitork looked at Travok.

Travok looked at the remains of the statue and thought. “I can’t remember,” he finally admitted.

Visitork gave him a strange look but Asny seemed to be expecting that answer.

“You didn’t touch it did you?” she asked Travok.

“I honestly can’t remember.” Travok replied.

“I hope you didn’t.” Asny said. “That statue probably holds a curse. If you touched it then we’ll both share that curse at some point. As long as you didn’t touch it the curse will have been destroyed with the statue.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” asked Visitork.

“I was riding through here with my mother and sisters.” Asny said.

“We were hunting trolls when we came to this courtyard.” She looked at the tree remembering it being a lot smaller last time she saw it. “There was a commotion and an evil warlock was using spells to fight some adventures. I believe there were two clerics and a paladin and they seemed to have a wounded thief and a dead half-orc and a dead ranger nearby.”

She stopped there. Both she and Visitork wondered how she knew what the adventures had been.

“We came to their aid. I remember raising my hammer to the warlock but when I brought it down, this...I’m sorry, Travok was here and everyone else was gone.” Asny finished.

There was a long silence before she asked, “What has become of my kingdom?”

Travok looked at Visitork who was deep in thought.

“Your kingdom is ruled by representatives of each district. Until the last Tisserand is accounted for, they have left the post open for her.”

Asny relaxed. She’d been standing as if she was ready to defend herself.

“I must return.” She said. “Where are you headed?”

“We’re headed North.” Travok said. “You’re welcome to travel with us.”

“We can’t take anyone with us.” Visitork said sharply. “We are headed North but I’m afraid the two of us must go alone.”

Visitork saw the look of confusion on Travok’s face and added, “If you want to travel with us until nightfall then keep up. Tomorrow we must go our separate ways.”

Travok had been trained to talk to people which his family believed was one of the most important qualities of a king. Visitork hadn’t been much of a conversationalist and Travok hoped that having the company of Asny for the day might give him the opportunity to chat to someone. Especially since they were both from royal families and both fighters. Asny however didn’t seem to want to talk and kept very much to herself. Travok wasn’t sure if this was the way she was or if she needed time to adjust to being trapped out of time for 85 years.

That evening however as they made camp she did start to chat with Travok and they hit it off quite well. Visitork sat nearby but didn’t join in. Travok wasn’t sure if he was listening but knew that wizards could not listen to conversations if they chose not to, yet their ears would alert them if there was something being said that they needed to hear. Asny seemed reluctant to talk much about herself though. Visitork retired before Travok and Asny had finished talking and they could have gone on all night except that they both agreed that they needed to get some sleep to get going the next morning.

Visitork seemed to want to get going as dawn was breaking. Asny was still asleep and Travok didn't want to leave without saying good bye but just as they were ready Visitork woke her, handed her a hot drink and then said good bye before starting off leaving Travok little time to say his own farewell without getting left too far behind.

The terrain up ahead became more rugged as they were approaching a large mountain range. They were getting higher although not rapidly. The grass, trees and shrubs seemed to be decreasing leaving only rocks but water was just as common. Travok had heard stories about these mountains telling of monsters that inhabited them and magic being at work but one thing always was consistent, the stories never revealed what lay beyond the mountains. Travok was hoping Visitork knew but had doubts and wished Asny was with them since her kingdom was to the north and although her information may be nearly 100 years out of date, Travok guessed that up here things didn't change too fast.

After three days, Travok was getting tired of the monotony of the scenery which said something for a dwarf to be tired of stones and rocks. They camped in a sheltered spot because there was often a cold wind. Although they heard many animal sounds they didn't see any but as well as animal sounds, they heard sounds that could only belong to monsters and they always seemed closer and it was only a matter of time before they saw the owner of one of these sounds. Visitork had tried to make light of it by suggesting some kind of wager of whether they would see an animal or a monster first but the look that Travok gave him would have made a hungry dragon look for a different restaurant.

That evening they found more trees. There was the edge of a forest at the top of a slope and part of a cliff edge to the right. It wasn't particularly sheltered but was out of the wind and was the most suitable spot they'd passed for several hours to make a camp. As Visitork was about to make a fire they heard the sound of a monster that they hadn't heard before but it seemed a lot further away than any of the other sounds. Travok asked Visitork if he could identify the monster. Visitork said he couldn't. He knew what it sounded like but that particular monster inhabited deserts and there was no reason to be this high in mountains.

He paused making the fire to consult his book but didn't get far before, from around the high cliff, there came two fiends. Huge beasts with leathery red skin, large claws and teeth and with horns on their heads. The moment they saw Visitork and Travok they blew blasts of fire straight at them, which they managed to only just roll out of the way of.

One of the fiends went for Travok while the other headed toward Visitork. Having to dodge their slashing claws and the blasts of flame, Travok couldn't get near enough to attack it with his battle axe. Visitork also having to dodge, wasn't having much of a chance to concentrate on any spells but managed one that sent a fire bolt towards the fiend that was heading towards him, but it had little or no effect and Visitork was not as mobile as Travok and had a hard time keeping out of their way. Travok found if he kept low then he might be able to get off a few blows and found if he timed them between the fire he could get close enough but the blows didn't seem to do a huge amount of damage against the fiends skin and each time he got a scratch or a wound from a claw. He was beginning to feel that he would sustain more damage than he could take before he could inflict more damage than the fiend could take, when a bright light hit his axe. The blade seemed to disappear and be replaced by some enchantment.

"Seize your opportunity," Visitork shouted. "That spell will only give you one strike." As he said this, Visitork suddenly took a serious slash from the fiend and fell to the ground with blood flowing from a wound in his stomach. Travok heard this but knew he could do nothing to help until he'd taken out the fiends and looked for an opportunity to attack.

Travok decided to throw his knife at the fiend's face which distracted the fiend long enough for him to move in and strike. The axe passed deep into the fiend, almost cutting it in two. The blade of the axe rematerialised in the body of the fiend and Travok pulled it out a different way from the direction it had entered. He received a massive swipe that caused a serious wound but ended up cutting the monster in three. It didn't even manage to let out a roar before it combusted in a column of fire for a moment before disappearing. Travok struggled up and the other fiend letting out a roar of rage turned to Travok and let out a blast of flame that Travok only just managed to dodge. It hit his axe and threw it from his hand. Travok prepared to crawl to his axe but the fiend returned its attention to

Visitork who was losing a lot of blood and was holding his right hand in front of his face.

The fiend let off a blast of flame toward Visitork but before it reached Visitork a purple shield of energy formed between them deflecting the flame. The shield increased in brightness and as the fiend stopped breathing the flame, the shield discharged shooting a massive bolt of energy into the fiend and remained pumping in terrawatts of energy. The fiend was dead well before the energy beam disengaged, but the monster didn't combust until the beam stopped. The spell had taken almost everything Visitork had and he collapsed to the ground still bleeding, with a healing spell out of the question.

Travok looked at his own wound and had no idea how he was going to heal that, let alone Visitork. He looked around for inspiration and saw an enormous nandibear come towards him. Nandibears are huge beasts but this one was large even for a nandibear. They move stealthily to take their prey by surprise and it was only by looking around that Travok had seen this one. The nandibear had been moving stealthily and Travok could see it would get to him, before he could get to his axe.

Just at that moment, there was a flash of movement and the nandibear stopped dead. Completely dead, and Travok saw its skull had been crushed and Asny was standing over it, with her hammer in her hand.

"Can I be of service?" she asked jokingly and then seeing Travok's wound she immediately dropped the jape and came over to have a look. As she came over she looked at Visitork and took another look at Travok.

"Your wound needs binding," she said, "But it can wait, I doubt your friend can."

She examined Visitork and asked, "Have you got a small pan I can put over the fire?"

"In my bag," replied Travok.

"Get it out and half fill it with water." Asny instructed. "There's a stream just around the cliff." Travok did as he was told. When he came back Asny had lit a fire and opened a pouch attached to her belt and took out two green leaves that had been cut into squares. She took the pan from Travok and poured some of the water away saying that the exact amount was important. Asny put the bowl over

the fire after putting the leaves in the water and while the water was boiling, bound Travok's main wound.

While the water was boiling, Asny looked around and went to get some bark from one of the trees and broke it in her hand before adding it to the water.

"Have you got another slightly larger pan?" she asked Travok.

"I've got several." Travok replied.

"Fill one with water," Asny said. "This has to be cold to work."

Travok didn't question her. When he got back, Asny was standing with the pan, by the cliff edge where the wind was probably cooling the water in the same way someone would blow to cool their soup.

She put the pot into the one full of water and within minutes was happy it was cool enough. Travok sat Visitork up and Asny poured the liquid, which was fairly thick due to the bark, into Visitork's mouth until he'd drunk about a third of it.

The result was instant. Visitork opened his eyes and sat up. He'd stopped bleeding and his wound was healing before their eyes. He looked at Asny.

"Who taught you to make a healing potion?" he asked as Travok drunk a share of what was left and found he could remove the bindings.

"When you're the seventh daughter," Asny said, "You're unlikely to become queen. Your best option is to be the healer and a little magic can make a big difference as it just has."

Visitork looked at the nandibear. "Did you do this?" he asked Travok but he then saw the skull was crushed and looked at Asny's hammer.

"I thought I could help out." Asny said simply.

"Have you been following us?" asked Visitork.

"Not at all," replied Asny. "I'm surprised you took the route you did, if you were coming here. I took an easier route, which crosses your path here. I didn't expect to find you here since I thought you had another destination in mind based on the route you took."

"How come it took you as long as it took us to get here?" Travok asked.

"I took it easy." Asny replied. "I've got a hard climb ahead and wanted to conserve my energy."

"A long climb?" asked Visitork. "There are gentle paths that take you to a pass over these mountains."

“Who said anything about going over?” Asny retorted. “These mountains are full of caves and tunnels. It’s much easier to go through. That would explain what a nandibear was doing here. It was probably using one of the caves.”

“Full of tunnels,” Visitork said, “and full of monsters.”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of orcs and hobgoblins?” asked Asny surprised.

“Aren’t you?” Visitork asked.

“No.” Asny answered firmly. When Visitork said nothing she added, “Tisserands used to hunt them for sport. We didn’t do that any longer in my time but we aren’t any less able.”

Visitork was impressed by her courage and fearlessness although he didn’t show it. He didn’t often see it this strongly in a woman, although the truth of the matter was that he didn’t often see it this strongly in anyone. He thought it was due to an over large ego although no one from Re’ Clar would claim to be able to do something they couldn’t.

Travok decided to step in here. “Why don’t we decide which route is safer at another stage. We have camp to make. The fire’s burning low so I’m going to find some fuel before it goes out and fighting two fiends has given me an appetite.”

“Fiends!” Asny exclaimed. “What are fiends doing here? They belong in deserts.” She looked around and saw the scorch marks left by two combusting fiends.

“I was thinking they and the nandibear were related.” Visitork said.

“Now I’m not so sure. A nandibear is usually found in caves and you say these hills are full of caves.” Asny nodded. Visitork went on, “the fighting could have alerted the nandibear and they are hostile and would have come as soon as they heard something. But the fiends don’t belong here. Something doesn’t add up.”

That evening, Visitork searched through his book to try and work out what fiends were doing here. When Visitork took a turn at getting some more firewood, Asny took the opportunity to speak to Travok without Visitork eavesdropping.

“I don’t think your friend likes me,” she told him.

“I don’t know if he likes anyone,” Travok replied, “although I must admit, he does seem to have taken an exception to you.”

“Do you have any idea why?” Asny asked.

“He knows about your family and he’s been up north before. Maybe he has some grudge against your family.”

Travok hoped Asny wouldn’t be offended by him suggesting that. “I don’t think it’s that,” she replied. “It’s something against me personally.” After a pause she said, “That second statue that kept me imprisoned. Do you think he’s worried about a curse?”

“If it was a curse, he’d have exorcised you by now.” Travok told her.

“Does he still not want me to travel with you?” Asny asked.

“I’ve told you before. We go alone.” Visitork said coming into the firelight. It was clear he’d heard the whole conversation using an acute hearing spell.

“If I hadn’t shown up when I did,” Asny said, “your journey would have ended here.”

“Our paths go separate ways.” Visitork said.

“You’re going north. My kingdom is north.” Asny pointed out.

“Whatever we’re doing, we need to get to the other side of the mountains. It makes no difference to me if I go alone or with you, but three is safer than two and I know the way.”

“Three is a crowd.” Visitork said. “Tomorrow morning we’ll go our own way.”

“I agree.” Travok said suddenly. “You can attend to your business up north and Asny and I will go to Re’ Clar.”

Visitork was silenced.

A couple of hours later, as they were about to go to sleep, Visitork said to Travok, “We’ll have to go together. You need me to protect you.” Asny was quite happy to have a wizard join them. Travok did wonder what Visitork had meant. He wasn’t sure he was referring to monsters and wondered if Visitork knew about something else that lay ahead, or if something was following them.

The climb that Asny proposed to take was about a week’s journey ahead but would take a lot out of you. It was just at that point that the path would divert to the path the Visitork preferred and after the ‘discussion’ the previous night, neither wanted to bring the subject up again. The fiends and the nandibear were only a taste of what was to come and over the next few days they had to take on eight Toa-Suo, a Tarator, two Hell Hounds and even a night stalker and they saw signs of Will-o’-the-Wisps. Every one of these monsters had no place here and it was as if something was summoning them for some

reason. Between the three of them, they managed to take on each encounter but as they reached the end of the seventh day, they all had the feeling that something had brought all the creatures from somewhere and had something against them personally.

Travok had heard of these monsters but never expected to see any of them. Visitork was worried that if these monsters were here that they would be in trouble if this was the norm when they were further on and had the native monsters to take on as well. Asny on the other hand seemed to look at it as a challenge and was completely unfazed and took on each fight fearlessly.

As it was getting dark they saw the fork in the path up ahead and just in front of it there was the light of a fire and there appeared to be a woman sitting by it. As they got closer it turned out to be a man who seemed to be talking to himself, and was smoking a pipe and enjoying himself. Each time he puffed out a cloud of smoke from his pipe it came out a different colour and manifested itself into the shape of a recognisable object for a instant. He had five quails cooking over the fire and when he saw them he beckoned them over and invited them to eat with him.

“Greetings travellers,” he said as they approached him. “Why not stay with me tonight. I’ve got some quails, which are almost ready and a large tent you can share with me. If you’re heading north this will be your last chance for a while.”

They greeted him and thanked him for his offer. The man and Visitork swapped tobacco although when Visitork tried out the man’s tobacco his smoke only changed colour and didn’t form the shapes.

“Which way were you planning to cross the mountains?” the man asked them. Visitork and Asny exchanged hard glances and before Asny could answer Visitork said, “We’re going to take the west road from here over the pass.”

“I’m from the north heading south,” the man said, “but I’m not in a hurry. You won’t get over the pass. The paths are treacherous and there’s snow like you’ve never seen before. It get worse every year. You won’t get through that way until the summer and the snow doesn’t clear every summer anymore. If you must take that way, you could be here for a few years.”

“Can you recommend another way?” Asny asked. She still planned to go through the passages but didn’t think he was the type of person to do so and she wondered how he’d got here.

“Take the passages that run under the mountains.” The man said. When he saw a look of surprise on Visitork and Travok’s faces he said, “There haven’t been monsters there for years. They seem to have all gone. The tunnels are as safe as houses.”

“We’ve had a bit of an issue with monsters ourselves.” Visitork said. The man listened with interest as Visitork told him about the encounters they’d had.

“I haven’t seen a monster since I left Re’ Clar.” The man said.

“You’ve come from Re’ Clar?” asked Asny.

“Absolutely,” the man replied. “Most people from the north come through Re’ Clar. It’s been the largest kingdom up there for more than a thousand years.”

“What’s it like at the present?” asked Asny. “I’ve heard old stories about it but they’re a bit out of date I expect.”

“It’s a funny land,” the man said thoughtfully.

“Funny?” asked Asny.

“It was once monster free,” the man said. “The people were always known as being happy but they seemed to have lost something. I think they ascribe it to the loss of their royal family. They were loved by the people.”

This was news to Asny. She knew her family were well liked and respected but didn’t realise how much they were loved and what effect their absence would have on her people.

“Who rules it now?” Visitork asked. Something about how the man had said this had put his defences up.

“They seem to have no one ruler. Each district has a representative and they meet to decide on things.” The man looked at them. “They say that one member of their royal family was never accounted for and they are waiting for her to return.” He said this as if he seriously didn’t believe it.

“You doubt that?” asked Asny.

“This was nearly a hundred years ago,” the man replied. “How long do they expect her to live?”

The man looked at Travok and said, “the girls there are the best looking girls on Toril.”

“Is that so?” Asny said.

“No doubt,” the man said. “You’d look out of place there.”

Travok got up and walked off at that and Asny came with him. She didn't show any sign of being affected by this, but Travok had got used to Asny only showing the emotions she chose to share.

That night Travok and Visitork shared the man's tent, which was immensely comfortable and warm which was welcome due to the cold outside. Asny choose to sleep outside saying she didn't care much for comfort.

In the morning though, the man woke Visitork saying that someone had been in the tent in the night. Nothing of his was taken but suggested the three of them check that they still had all their possessions.

Travok's backpack was still there and since whatever he wanted always seemed to be at the top, he guessed that someone else wouldn't find anything in it. Apart from the clothes and armour she wore, Asny said her only possession was her hammer which she still had. Visitork was happy that his satchel was still there until he picked it up and found it was too light and when he looked inside he found his book had been taken. The thief obviously knew what he was looking for.

"Are you powerless without your book?" Asny asked him.

"Not at all." Visitork said. "I know every spell in the book but I wouldn't want the wrong person to get hold of it."

"Do you know who could have taken it?" Travok asked him.

"There are a lot of people I know who would like to have taken it, but none that I know of anywhere near here."

"Why don't you check her?" the man said, indicating Asny. He'd noticed the tension that existed between them the previous day.

"Nothing would have got past me in the night." Asny said.

"You know what I mean," the man said. "She's concealing it in her cloak or armour." The man looked straight at her. "Make her take her clothes off," he said. "You'll find your book."

Asny looked back at him her face firm set and Visitork and Travok knew when she had that look that to make her do something she didn't want to do, would involve killing her first.

"She hasn't got it." Visitork suddenly said. He seemed very sure of that.

Visitork spent a lot time searching everywhere over and over again for his book and Travok and Asny helped at first before realising it was futile.

When Visitork finally stopped he thought about things for a moment.

“You said nothing would get past you,” he said to Asny. “How did you know someone was here in the night?” he asked the man, only to find he’d gone.

They looked and saw the man in the distance following the river down the path they’d come up the day before. He saw that they’d seen him and waved his hand and a thick green fog surrounded him but Visitork waved his hand in a similar manner while saying an incantation and the mist was quickly dispelled.

The man saw this and pointed his hand at the clouds above them and it suddenly began to rain blobs of lava. Visitork lifted his hand with the palm facing up and a great icy mist flew up dispelling the rain. Seeing this the man suddenly started running at incredible speeds. Visitork sighed and held up his hand and loudly recited an incantation. The man was suddenly pulled back by an unseen force as if he’d been attached to a lasso and was being reeled in.

He came right back into Visitork’s hand and Visitork gave him a hard shake and the book fell out from beneath his coat. As Visitork turned him round to face him, the man freed one hand, saluted and disappeared in the cloud of vapour. As he disappeared his appearance changed to an older evil looking man with long hair which was why when they’d first seen him, they thought they had seen a woman.

“I know that face.” Asny said. “When he disappeared his appearance changed. That was the warlock who imprisoned me.”

“I expect he was responsible for the monsters that don’t belong here.” Visitork said, picking up his book and putting it back in his satchel. “He won’t try that again.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Travok.

“Now we know the monsters have been created by magic, they won’t appear.” Visitork said. “I know that spell now. I should have guessed it, but I had my mind occupied.”

He looked at Asny. “I think he was telling the truth about the pass though. We’ve wasted enough time and we have a long climb ahead.”

The climb was steep and took most of the day, however there were ledges that allowed them to rest at regular intervals and they made

sure everyone had had all the rest they needed before they climbed the next section.

Visitork led the way so that he could cast protection spells from any falling objects and deal with any monsters who were waiting for them on the ledges. In both cases this wasn't necessary. He could also find the hand holds for the others.

Travok followed him but with short arms and legs he found it hard going. Dwarves hadn't been designed for climbing. Asny helped Travok where he needed it but she and Visitork were impressed at what Travok was able to do.

When they finally got to the top they decided to call it a day. There was just enough space to make camp. There was a wide ledge off to the right that wound along the edge of the mountain and straight ahead the path had a wide opening, where they'd sleep, and then continued into a cave in the mountain whose mouth had been reinforced. Any further climbing looked almost impossible but Asny said that from this point on there were plenty of choices of tunnels and the one they were outside was as good as any.

The amount of the truth the warlock had told them the night before was debatable. He'd said there were no monsters in these caves anymore and they'd seen no sign all day, but Visitork and Asny knew these mountains and believed he was lying. Caves had large numbers of monsters from Banshees, Cyclops', Orcs and Ogres to Hobgoblins, Gargoyles, Cave Giants and Nidibears to name just a few.

Visitork spent the evening going through his book while Asny talked to Travok about the weaknesses of some of these monsters and the best ways to deal with them.

After the climb though they were all tired and went to sleep early and slept well.

As they entered the cave Asny asked for a torch but Visitork cast a torch spell that lit the way just as well as a torch without having to carry one and he said it was a really useful spell since it didn't take much energy to cast and saved having to carry dozens of torches. He could also cancel it in an instant if they didn't want to be seen and was much quicker than lighting or extinguishing a torch.

As they ventured into the tunnel it was clear it was well used but when they came to a fork they had differing opinions on which way

to go but decided by tossing a coin. They took the left fork but there were a number of traps along the path. Visitork's sense of traps and Asny's lightning fast reactions with Travok's keen eye for hidden things allowed them to get by. Travok was wondering if the traps were a sign they'd taken the wrong path or a sign they'd taken the right path but guessed that there may be somewhere worth going at the end of it.

Somewhat later he was questioning this after all three of them had sustained quite a bit of damage and he was drinking what had been left over from the healing potion Asny had made after their fight with the fiends. Each of them hadn't had the same kind of skills needed when they started to encounter magical traps and they stopped to consider continuing this way or not.

If they turned back the natural traps had been disarmed but they had to get through the magical ones first. Some may have been set to go off only on the way back, the others might go off again although they'd already been sprung and knowing where they were didn't help.

If they encountered as many traps on the way back, they might not all get through and so they decided to continue. As it happened, they didn't encounter any more traps and emerged into a large cavern. There was a dim light here and although it wasn't as good as Visitork's torch spell, he cancelled the spell since the dim light was enough to see by and the torch spell may attract attention. There was a shelf running along the left side of the cavern with a large pit taking up most of the rest of the space. There was mist rising from the pit and when they were all silent they could hear what sounded like faint ancient voices murmuring fragments of long forgotten incantations. There was no one around for these voices to be coming from and they made their way around the pit in silence listening to the murmurings. On the far side of the pit was a man made archway that led into a small room. Inside was a withered looking human with a vulture like head. It looked like it was centuries old and was dressed in fine robes. They all recognised it as a Hamakei. Although these were usually found in deserts or ruins, the cavern they'd just come from could have kept it here while it was travelling as Hamakei are sages and warlocks, although they see themselves as scholars and observers. They were always on the look out for more information on magic and this one could have been trying to expand its knowledge by listening to the voices.

It was startled to see them but didn't seem troubled although it was concerned that they'd made their way through its traps. They didn't appear to be a threat so it welcomed them and took them through to a larger room to sit down. It gave them drinks but one look from Visitork told them not to drink them but when the Hamakei wasn't looking they passed the drinks to Visitork to dispel so they could drink them. Hamakei weren't aggressive unless provoked but this one could probably detect an aura of magic from Visitork and would want to learn anything it could from him.

"What brings you to my library?" the Hamakei asked them.

"We are travelling through these mountains," Asny said. "We came to a fork in the passage and choose the one that led us here."

"If you will disarm your magical traps, we'll leave at once." Travok said.

"No, you must stay here a while," the Hamakei replied. "I don't often have guests. We could learn from each other." The Hamakei seemed ill at ease and it was a bit concerned that the magical drinks hadn't taken effect yet.

"What brings you here?" Visitork asked.

"I came travelling to find human sorcerers," the Hamakei started. "I wanted to find out how much of the lost arts they had rediscovered. I came across this cavern and realised there was much to learn if I could make sense of the murmurings. I believe there is great power and knowledge that exists no longer anywhere else but here. I returned to my home and brought everything here with me. I may take a long time to learn all I can from here but time is not a problem for my people."

"Where did you come from?" Asny asked. "I've heard of your kind but never seen one, nor met anyone who has."

"We are the last remnants of a past more sorcerous age," was the only answer it would give. The Hamakei paused in thought observing them and then said, "I'll heal your wounds if you will teach me some spells or give me a scroll each in exchange." It had thought that they were all magic users and was now convinced since its drinks hadn't affected any of them.

"I'll teach you three spells if you'll heal us." Visitork agreed. "He had three in mind that weren't very powerful but which the Hamakei probably wouldn't know."

As the Hamakei cast a healing spell it noticed that Visitork was being very protective over his satchel and used a simple spell to find out what was inside. When it knew about Visitork's book it decided to change its tactics and gave Asny a hard look directly in the eyes. In a fit of rage, Asny jumped up and swung her hammer at the Hamakei which dodged it and it dodged the second blow when she swung again. Visitork and Travok jumped to their feet to hold her back but she was too strong for them.

"What are you thinking of?" yelled Visitork. "These creatures are sometimes more powerful than me."

The Hamakei held up its hand and the three of them were thrown back against the wall and the Hamakei chanted and a black fog blew over them knocking each of them out. Visitork just managed in time to use the same spell that he'd used when they were attacked by the robber. When they woke up, they were locked in separate cells, two adjacent and one opposite and the healing had been reversed.

Visitork lost no time in trying to break his door open with a barrage of spells only to find that the doors were protected with an even more powerful magic and he couldn't cast any effective spells outside his cell either. His cell was opposite Asny's and on Asny's right was Travok.

Asny was unfamiliar with the invisibility spell and was angered that her hammer had been taken. When she came to the window just seeing her sent Visitork into a rage.

"What on Toril did you think you were doing?" he yelled at her.

"That Hamakei was more powerful than me. You should have seen the power it had. Now we're stuck here to rot. Why did I ever let you come with us? The last Tisserand disgraces the name of her family."

"Shut up Visitork!" Travok yelled back. "Let Asny answer your original question before you hurl any more abuse on her. I'm sure she had a reason."

Asny had been ready to yell herself but Travok's outburst made her feel prepared to answer the question without raising her voice.

"I'm afraid I can't give you a reason," she said quietly. "It didn't feel like I was doing it. It was like watching from the outside."

"Is that the best you can come up with?" Visitork scoffed. "I've heard that a thousand times before."

“You’re calling me a liar.” Asny said with a voice that made Visitork briefly glad there were two enchanted doors between them.

“That is an insult on my entire family.”

“Your family is without honour now.” Visitork said. “You’ve just forfeited it. Your ancestors are probably lucky not to be alive to see this. Ironic that the one who manages to become queen of Re’ Clar is the only member of the family unsuited to the role.”

As Asny thundered against the door it moved slightly and the magical field round it flicked for a second. Visitork took a step back in shock. As he did so, they all noticed a red glow shining from the back of his cell. Visitork ripped a piece of his cloak off and covered the glow.

“I thought as much,” he said. “That Hamakei is trying to turn us against each other so we betray one another for our freedom.”

Asny was familiar with the enchantment and decided to forgive Visitork for what he’d just said. Travok did notice that although the spell had been driving Visitork’s tongue, that Visitork didn’t apologise.”

After what seemed like hours the Hamakei came outside the cells.

“I will not forgive that unprovoked attack against me,” it said. “If you want to buy your freedom, you’ll have to give me your book.”

Visitork looked across at Asny and realised she’d been telling the truth and the Hamakei had made her attack it to give it an excuse to lock them up and demand his book in exchange for their freedom.

“Is that what this is about?” Asny asked.

“If you don’t give it to me, you’ll die here.”

“If you kill us, you’ll never find the book.” Visitork said.

“I never said I’d kill you,” the Hamakei countered. “Time will do that eventually. Even if you escaped from here, you’ll never get past my traps.”

The Hamakei left to give them time to think about this and the three of them wondered how long it would be before they died of thirst, before a Calacorm came round the corner. In one hand it had a set of keys and in the other it had a tray with three plates of food and water. There was plenty of water but not much food.

The Calacorm had opened the cells, put the food in and locked them again before they could take advantage of the situation since they had barely noticed it opening the cells because they were too busy staring at its two heads.

Before the Calacorm left Travok had asked it what it was doing here but with both heads talking at once, none of them could make out a word of it. It might have been okay if they had said the same things but they told them the same thing but in their own words.

“What was that?” Travok asked when it had gone.

“The was a Calacorm.” Visitork told them. “They are possibly related to Lizard Men but aren’t as hostile.”

“What are they like as fighters?” Asny asked thoughtfully.

“They are very skilled and strong.” Visitork said. “Their two heads give them co-ordination that make them redoubtable fighters.”

It was clear that Asny would have had no fear of taking one on, even without her hammer.

“Do you think it’s happy here?” Travok suddenly asked.

“They probably have a comfortable room and plenty of dead snakes,” Visitork said, “but I doubt they get many prisoners to torture for entertainment.”

Travok had thought of gaining its trust and offering it the chance to escape with them but this didn’t seem likely now. The only thing it could want that it didn’t have was not something they would provide even if they could.

The Calacorm came and fed them each day for the next five days but after the first time, it came armed with a spear and made sure they were at the far end of the cell before it opened it. Asny had tried to rush it but had underestimated its reactions. The first time it sent them to the end of the cell they had trouble working out what it was telling them with both heads trying to telling them at the same time. Whenever it left, the two heads were talking to each other but each time it came, they tried to engage it in conversation. It seemed willing to talk to them and they managed to get used to two heads talking and were able to make out some of what it said. The Hamakei hadn’t returned but was probably going to wait quite a while to see if they’d agree to its demand.

As the Calacorm came to feed them at the end of the fifth day Visitork decided to ask the Calacorm some direct questions, which might help them escape. Although they had average intelligence, Visitork believed that it might answer the questions without thinking about why they were being asked.

When the Calacorm had opened his cell, before it left, he asked it if the magical traps of the Hamakei could be disabled. One head started telling him they could while the other one told him they couldn't. After the heads had a discussion and with a bit more questioning from Visitork he was able to gather that the traps could be disabled but only by the Hamakei, which didn't help.

Visitork asked if there was any protection from the traps or a way to avoid them. The two heads of the Calacorm eventually told him that there was no way to get past the traps and Visitork was not sure where to go from here. He wasn't going to give his book to the Hamakei and didn't believe it would let them go anyway since it could learn a lot from Visitork and was convinced Travok and Asny were magic users too.

The Calacorm made to leave and then causally mentioned there was another passage leading out and at the end of the passage where the cells were, was a secret door that lead to the safe route out.

Wanting to prevent the Calacorm from closing his cell Visitork tried casting a spell. He had given up days before but cast a spell which meant that when the Calacorm closed the door a yellowish light flashed across the door instead of the green light that indicated the enchantment was in action.

When the Calacorm had gone, Visitork sat down to eat his food and waited half an hour. He then got up and touched the edge of his door. The yellow light appeared and dissolved. Then Visitork used some simple spells to destroy the door to his cell and since the enchantment on the doors only prevented magic from inside the cells he was able to use the same method to destroy Travok and Asny's doors and free them. He then reversed the invisibility spell which helped rearm Travok and Asny and they went to find the door the Calacorm had told them about. The dungeon seemed to be empty and Travok was able to find the door and work out how to open it and they came into a narrow tunnel and followed that. Eventually they saw a pale light and headed towards it but before they got there, they found a closed door on the right but it wasn't locked and they decided to have a look inside.

The room was a treasure room but instead of gold and gems it had hundreds of very, very ancient books, scrolls and papers with a few strange artefacts. To Asny and Travok they all seemed unintelligible and worthless but the way Visitork's eyes lit up, his eyes would have

been much more effective than a torch spell. He only looked at a couple before leaving the room. As they headed towards the light again, Travok asked Visitork why.

“I could spend forever in there,” Visitork said, “but we’ve got to be away before the Calacorm finds we’re gone and either comes after us or alerts its master. Also I expect that the Hamakei comes there regularly. Even if we are gone before it comes, if we spend any amount of time there, it’ll notice someone had been there and put two and two together.”

The light was caused by a large crack in the side of the mountain but it was where two passages met and as they joined the main passage, the opening to the one they’d just come from disappeared. They were now confident they were on the passage that had forked to the right before and hurried along.

As they moved along the passage they found a blockage that could have been caused by a rock fall but it looked more like a huge boulder had been dumped in the passage. There was enough space for them to climb around. Travok decided to go first with Asny following him so that Visitork could remain at the back with his torch spell lighting Asny’s way and if she moved into a shadow from the light, Travok could help her through the dark bit.

Just as Travok got up to the boulder he heard a noise and felt what appeared to be an earthquake. It turned out the only earth that was moving was the boulder and it hadn’t been a boulder at all but a cave giant which were known to blend in with their surroundings to take their targets by surprise and it tried to strike a blow at Travok, and if he’d been any taller it would have hit him.

The cave giant wasn’t much more than ten feet tall, being the smallest of all types of giants, but appeared shorter since its back was hunched in the low ceilinged passage. Its hairless skin was light grey and it had dim silvery eyes. Although they were usually blinded by light, magic light didn’t have the same effect and Visitork’s torch spell didn’t give them any advantage apart from allowing Asny to see. The giant was wearing a loin cloth and had a stone club and as it swung that at Travok, he ducked and rolled forward using his axe to cut into the giant’s foot.

The giant didn’t seem to notice and swung its club at Asny and Visitork. Visitork jumped backwards and Asny ducked and swung

her hammer at the giant's hand but having to duck at the same time gave her little chance to aim and she missed.

The giant used its other hand to try and grab Travok but over estimated his height again and missed but in the same movement managed to grab Asny and lifted her up with its grip pinning her arms by her side preventing her from being able to use her hammer and it was all she could do to keep hold of it.

Travok swiped his axe at the giant's leg cutting a slice out of it. The giant did feel that and let out a roar of pain lifting its hand above its head almost smashing Asny into the roof and swung its club at Travok catching him on his arm and sending him flying down the passage.

While the giant had its arm up Asny decided to risk letting go of her hammer which fell down and hit the giant on the head. It groaned and dropped Asny, and she was able to land on her feet and grab her hammer in the same movement, so she was able to use the reaction of landing on the ground to leap up and hit the giant on the head with her hammer in the same place causing it to fall backwards towards Travok. Travok wasn't in any danger of the giant landing on him but didn't have time to move and the giant fell with its neck landing on the blade of his axe, getting severed in two.

Asny went to help Travok up noticing that his left arm was broken. She looked behind her as Visitork.

"Alright?" she asked in a sarcastic tone since Visitork seemed to have been keeping out of the fight.

"I don't think so," Visitork replied ignoring Asny's tone. "I was keeping watch and there are two more coming from behind us and I don't think they'll be very happy with us when they see their friend."

Asny was reaching for a torch but Visitork stopped her.

"There isn't time to light a torch. I think in this case, we should avoid danger and not take any more unnecessary risks."

It was a long winded way of saying 'run' but Asny and Travok didn't need telling twice and the three on them ran. Travok found the need to run allowed him to ignore any pain running did to his arm. Being in the passage they had no idea of the time of day and hoped it wouldn't be dark outside. The giants wouldn't follow them into daylight. They just kept going as long as they could before emerging

into daylight just as the sun was rising. They hoped that they wouldn't be followed this far by the Hamakei either.

"I think after what we did to the first giant," Visitork said as he was healing Travok's arm, "the other two giants will think twice before attacking anyone again."

"Cave giants are extremely dim." Asny replied. "They rarely think once."

Although it was already light they decided to get a few hours sleep before they carried on for as long as they could towards the next passage, connected to where they were by a narrow but sheltered ledge.

After a few hours they started to make their way to the tunnel opening which they could see in the distance.

"Keep your eyes open." Asny said. "This gap is often quite popular when it comes to monsters. They are easy enough to fight but you don't want to lose your footing on this ledge."

Travok kept a look out and they all listened out for tell tale sounds. They had got to a slightly wider part of the ledge and were just making their way back onto the narrow ledge when they heard a screeching and cawing as three harpies swept towards them. They looked a bit like large bats with their wings and tried to torment them keeping out of reach of their weapons and expertly dodging any of Visitork's spells.

In the end the harpies were taken by surprise when Asny propelled Travok into the air by his foot and he swung his axe and caught one of the harpies by its wing. The others shirked in rage and swooped down at them but made the mistake of getting into range. Travok sliced at one with his axe slicing it in two and Asny knocked one out of control with her hammer sending it flying into the mountainside. The third harpy moved out of range. Visitork pulled out a metal bottle of alcohol that he used to have sip from at night. He handed it to Asny. She took a mouthful and spat it at the harpy as Visitork ignited it, setting the harpy on fire. They didn't see what happened to it but were confident, it wouldn't bother them again.

"Let's move on." Asny said tossing the bottle back to Visitork. She made a mental note to see if now they knew about it, if he would offer to share it at night. "There's rock demons and giant eagles here too."

She didn't seem bothered but knew that Visitork and Travok would prefer not to see them so they made their way towards the cave and found a secluded spot to camp. They thought a fire would alert monsters but found a place that could conceal the glow and which had a gap in the rock above it, that would work like a chimney. "The tunnel ahead does have a passage leading to a fairly large underground city." Asny told them that evening. "I don't know what lives there. From what I've heard, various monsters have used it but none that are any problem to us. I know of a route that bypasses the city. I've been here before and I know that the route around the city isn't uninhabited but I've never seen any creatures there."

"Can you tell what there may be?" asked Travok.

"The tunnels do look dwarfish." Asny replied. She looked at Travok and went on, "They are not dwarves but they may have had dealings with them. The tunnels may once have been N'yadach but there are clearly none of them there any more."

"I suggest caution." Visitork said. "Are you sure the city is not a better way to go?"

"I don't know what reception we'd get at the city," Asny said "but I don't think it's a very direct route. If we take the bypass route, we might get a good reception from whatever's there with Travok with us."

"As long as they don't take exception to humans." Travok suggested. "How many times have you come through these tunnels?" he added.

"A few." Asny answered. "Not too many. We didn't often have dealings south of the mountains."

"If you've been here a few times and not encountered anything, we should be okay." Visitork said, although they all knew things could change in 85 years.

The next day they ventured into the tunnels. Visitork cast a torch spell for Asny and Asny assured them that this tunnel would be the last they needed to go through. After this one they could stick to the mountain trails. The passage did seem to be well made as if leading to the city but a passage led off to one side part way along. It was accessed by a narrow crack and ran parallel to the original passage before sloping steeply downward and then twisted quite a bit. Visitork lost his sense of which way they were travelling but being a dwarf Travok had no problems. Asny didn't seem to have any

problems but that was most likely due to having used these passages before.

As they ventured down they could see signs of the tunnels having dwarf and N'yadach traits. Just as they were beginning to think that they might be through without being found, they heard a sound behind them. Visitork immediately cancelled the torch spell plunging the passage into darkness and they could see a dim light far behind them but coming in their direction.

They pressed themselves against the wall of the passage in a recess and hoped the light would pass them by. Visitork silently cast a spell to allow him to see in the darkness but couldn't do anything about Asny being completely blind. He noticed she had her hammer raised and suggested that she lower it so they didn't appear offensive. Asny lowered her hammer but kept it in a position where she could swing it up rather than down and seeing this Travok adopted a similar position with his axe.

As the light approached they guessed that there may be more than one creature approaching. As the light reached them the creature carrying the lantern along with another one turned to look directly at them seeming to know they were there.

The creatures were just over a meter high and were hunched and stooped with bald heads and high ridged foreheads. Their eyes were deep set and their faces looked a bit like those of Hobgoblins and Orcs with upturned fangs poking from the sides of their mouths. Their bodies were muscular and completely hairless and they were dressed in short loincloths and leather sandals. They also appeared to be covered in sweat and dust. They had annoyed expressions on their faces, but not malevolent, however they suddenly looked more friendly when they saw Travok.

Travok immediately recognised them as Skorn, which had joined forces with dwarves long ago in fights against the N'yadach that had enslaved the Skorn. The two races had remained on friendly terms but the Skorn still didn't like intruders. The Skorn greeted them especially Travok, but made a point of escorting them to the nearest exit to their section of the tunnels.

When the Skorn had left Asny whispered, "I know where we are. These tunnels will lead only to the city or outside the mountain on the same side we entered, but much higher up."

“Are there any passages from there?” asked Visitork.

“Only one I know of,” said Asny “but if we went in there it would take a couple of weeks before we came out.”

“Is that a problem?” asked Travok.

Visitork looked at him. Travok might not mind being underground but Visitork didn't like it and didn't think Asny would want to be stuck underground for weeks, especially since she was totally reliant on a light source.

“The tunnels come out way over to the East.” Asny said. “I've never been there so I won't know the way. Have you been there?” she asked Visitork.

“No.” Visitork replied. “I'm sure we can find our way from there but we will be a long way out.”

“I'm not sure where Visitork is heading.” Asny said, “but from there it could take up to a couple of years to get to Re' Clar. I don't know how the druids in the neighbouring kingdoms would view us but they would probably recognise me as a Tisserand which could cause complications.”

“I think we should risk the city.” Visitork said. “You said yesterday that whatever was there wasn't anything we couldn't handle.” He didn't share Asny's fearless views but saw this as the only option.

After Visitork had cast a torch spell they headed down the corridor and saw a figure in the darkness. He seemed to be beckoning them closer and in a hoarse voice said “Put out your torch.”

Visitork immediately cancelled the spell and he and Travok approached while Asny followed the wall of the passage with her hand.

“They're here!” the figure shouted as they grew level and six trolls appeared out of the darkness and grabbed them. Asny had no chance at taking them on in the dark but as she struggled to get free a third one had to come over to hold her. The man then cast his own torch spell and gave them an evil grin.

“Sord!” exclaimed Visitork. “What are you doing here.”

“Now, now.” Sord said. “That's not the way to speak to an old friend.” As he said this the trolls were leading them down a passage to the left until they came into a large lit chamber.

In the middle of the chamber was a large throne and seated in it was an enormous bulky creature, human in shape with its skin hanging down in thick folds and it was clearly tougher than leather armour.

What was noticeable was it had a large horn of matted hair projecting from its forehead making it look like a cross between a rhinoceros and a human. All three of them had heard of Rhino-men but had never seen them before this far south.

The man snatched Visitork's satchel off him and held up his book for the Rhino-man to see.

The Rhino-man seemed to be the king of the city and it was easy to see how it had managed to move in and force the trolls to be its subjects. What the man was doing here, none of them knew but it was clear to Travok and Asny that he and Visitork knew each other and it was also clear that if Visitork had never seen him again, it would have been too soon.

"We are not friends." Visitork yelled back at Sord. "We never have been and never will be. I haven't forgotten about you and would be a fool to while you are still alive. I hope one day I will have the luxury to be able to forget about you."

"Silence him!" the Rhino-man shouted at one of his trolls, which held a large knife to Visitork's throat making it clear what it would do if Visitork said anything.

"Don't worry about him." Sord said. "He's all talk without this," and he gestured the book.

"You've done well," the Rhino-man said. "The gems are yours unless you'd like to become my wizard."

The Rhino-man took the book from Sord and looked in it.

"You will die!" it bellowed at Sord. "All the pages are blank."

"Wait." Sord yelled as two trolls moved towards him. "It's a simple trick he's used to make the writing appear invisible. I can read it, I'm surprised he used such an easy spell."

The troll that had been holding a knife to Visitork's throat was one of the ones that moved over to Sord.

"Don't trust a word he says," he said to the Rhino-man. "He's trying to double-cross you. He would sell out his own family and friends if he could benefit from it."

"I've seen no signs of that," the Rhino-man said. "Release him, but take his staff," he said to the two guards holding Visitork. The Rhino-man handed the book back to Sord and said to Visitork, "Let's see how good you are against your own magic. Don't try anything on any of us, or your friends and your book will be destroyed."

Sord riffled through the pages of the book looking at some of the spells and stopped at one.

He pointed his hand at Visitork and recited an incantation. Visitork just stood there looking as relaxed as he would have looked in an armchair.

A dozen lights looking like dandelion seeds but much less harmful appeared around Visitork's head and disappeared in the same way bubbles pop.

"That's one of my own spells." Visitork said. "You can't use them against me."

Sord selected another spell and recited the incantation. Wisps of mist emanated from his hands and dissipated.

"That's another of my own spells." Visitork said as Sord riffled through pages as if he was looking for something specific. Finally he stopped and it was clear he liked the look of the spell he'd found.

"I should warn you," Visitork said. "More than half the spells in that book are deigned to work against the caster as a protection from it falling into the wrong hands like yours. That includes that haze spell you're looking at now."

"If that is the case," Sord said, "then why did you make the writing invisible?"

"Anyone with little knowledge of magic won't be able to read it and can't do themselves any harm. Anyone who knows enough magic to see through that spell is probably dangerous enough that they shouldn't be safe guarded."

The Rhino-man was eyeing Sord. He was also wondering how Visitork had known which spell he was looking at. Visitork had noticed this but Sord was too busy looking through the book to notice. He finally found another spell.

"If you're going to cast that one," Visitork said, "you should step away from your master. He won't be happy if he gets caught in the effects of that spell."

Sord opened his mouth to tell Visitork that the Rhino-man was not his master but after a glance at the Rhino-man he thought better of it. Sord had a distressed look on his face but managed to hide it after a second. He found another spell but Visitork stopped him again.

"Look at the effects of that spell." Visitork said. "Before you cast it, you better make sure you can protect yourself. I doubt you can."

At this the Rhino-man snatched the book off Sord.

“You are pathetic!” he yelled. “This wizard isn’t powerless if it know what spells you are looking at.” He nodded at two trolls who took hold of Visitork again. “You don’t dare cast a spell in that book,” he yelled at Sord. “Throw him to the dogs,” he shouted at the trolls. “They don’t often get human flesh and magic flesh will taste even better.” He paused and then added, “although in him I doubt if they’ll even notice it.”

The Rhino-man turned to Visitork.

“You’ve had dealings with this wizard then?”

“Talōs’ greatest regret is training that wizard.” Visitork said. “He was also my mentor and the same goes for any other major wizard you’ve heard of.”

“For uncovering Sord, I could offer you his gems,” the Rhino-man said.

“You can keep the gems if I could have my book back sir.” Visitork said.

“You can call me Barsk,” the Rhino-man said. “Your book is not an option. The gems were on offer to Sord the book was not.”

“Sord probably knew about the invisibility spell on the book,” Visitork said. “He knows that the spell can’t be reversed and that you’d need him to use it and he would effectively have the book.” Barsk looked at Visitork impressed. “You make a good point. This chamber is magically sealed using magic from deep within these mountains themselves. I doubt even you could break it. I will release you and your friends to try some contests against my trolls. If you win you can leave and you’ll get your book back.”

“If we lose?” Visitork asked.

“I can be very persuasive in forcing you to show me every safe spell in your book and proving their safety by demonstrating them.”

Visitork knew that some Rhino-men knew the arts of torture almost too well and would often torture a victim’s friends to get the victim to talk.

The troll released Asny and Travok.

“We accept.” Asny said. “Let’s try your first contest.”

Barsk seemed to be looking forward to this. He summoned forward a small troll and nodded at another one. The other troll left the room and a few moments later returned with twelve others to bring in the longest table Travok had ever seen. Even longer than the tables in

his father's halls, which were sometimes very long. The troll assembled four chairs around the table. One at the top, two half way down on one side and another opposite those two. The small troll sat at the top of the table and Visitork and Travok sat in the chairs down one side while Asny sat in the one opposite.

"What is the nature of this contest?" asked Visitork.

"Wait for it." Barsk said.

A great line of trolls filed through the door until the table was filled with the finest foods imaginable. Neither Travok or Asny or Visitork had seen foods as fine as these and Visitork had travelled far while Travok and Asny being royals and having not only eaten at banquets in their own kingdoms, had been invited to banquets in neighbouring kingdoms.

"The nature of this contest," Barsk said, "is to eat more than him." He gestured at the small troll who was eyeing up the food with his mouth drooling and had two other trolls holding his hands to stop him tucking in right away.

"Hold on a moment." Visitork said. He leaned forward and whispered, "This room is surrounded my magic. I don't think all of us should eat the food. There may be some curse on it. The curse may be on those who eat it but it may be on those who do not. I think one of us should sit this one out."

"I don't want to eat food that may be not what it seems," Asny said. "I'll sit this one out."

Visitork told Barsk that Asny had opted to sit this one out.

"Very wise." Barsk said. "It is after all enchanted food. I don't keep this kind of food ready on the off chance of holding a contest. I'll think of a separate one for you." He paused then said, "Start."

Travok had no problems when it came to eating and when he saw the way Visitork was eating he was sure they'd beat the troll. He was so small there couldn't be much room for him to eat much. He and Visitork set to work and the more they tasted the food, the more they wanted to taste more with each mouthful being exquisite and full of amazing flavours.

Eventually, inevitably, they slowed down and as Travok felt he could not eat much more he glanced at the troll horrified to see it had eaten more than twice what he and Visitork had eaten combined and was still going like there was no tomorrow. It was eating the bones

of the meats and the wooden platters the food was on and had even eaten a large portion of the table.

When Travok and Visitork were finally stuffed it was clear that they couldn't compete with this troll and they sat back while Barsk had the table cleared and removed while their competitor was carried away still chewing at the table. Barsk told them to wait for a while for the food to go down before the next contest. Asny wanted to get on but Travok and Visitork were glad of the rest.

When they had fully recovered, Barsk called Travok up and told him he was to take part in a wrestling match. Barsk told them that if Travok won this contest it would count as winning the previous one too. Travok took off his backpack and gave that along with his weapons and his outer clothes to Visitork and Asny to look after while he waited for his opponent.

The troll that was brought in looked ancient and could barely stand unaided. Against the build of a dwarf it didn't stand a chance but as the fight began, the troll defeated Travok in less than a minute.

"I think you've lost that one." Barsk said and Travok got up bewildered.

"He may have won," Asny said gesturing towards the troll, "but he couldn't manage a rematch."

Travok looked at the troll who seemed twice as bad as he had been before that match.

"I've done my back in. Maybe in three to four hundred years but not now," the troll said and had to be helped out.

"We'll call it a draw then," Barsk suggested and they knew that was the best they'd get from him.

As Travok got dressed again Barsk told Asny it was her turn. He pointed to the fire burning at the side of the room. Snoozing in front of it was a black feline that they had not seen before. It looked just like a panther but was smaller than Travok's backpack.

"Pick that up." Barsk said.

The cat looked very light and Asny guessed someone as weak as she was strong could pick it up. She strode confidently over, knelt down, put her arms round it and tried to stand up but using all her strength and even channelling all her reserves she could not budge the cat one inch. It looked so light but must have weighed as much as a

mountain. Asny eventually had to admit defeat, which she was sure she'd never done before but guessed that all was not as it seemed.

Barsk handed a drinking horn to Visitork.

"Last contest," he said. "Succeed in this and you can go free but I will keep the book. Lose and my original terms will stand."

He had one of the trolls fill the horn with wine and let Visitork taste it.

"Drink that all down in two breaths to win." Barsk said.

Visitork looked at the size of the horn. "Just to make it fair," he said.

"I'll drink it down in one."

He put the horn to his lips and drank as much as he could until he was purple in the face but found the horn was still just as full as it was when he started.

"You've lost." Barsk said. "Let's make a start on the book now.

Unless you want to see if your dwarf friend or your human friend screams the loudest. Or maybe you do."

"Hold on!" said Asny. "You said you had a contest for me. We haven't lost yet."

"You're quite right," Barsk said. "He led Asny and the others into a straight fairly wide passage. Standing at one end was a old looking fat troll with wrinkles so deep in it's skin you could grow shallow root vegetables in them.

"If you can beat him in a foot race to the end of this tunnel, I'll let you and your friends go as long as you leave all your equipment behind."

Asny took off her armour and her thick cloak. She had been the fastest runner in her family and knew that no troll, especially not this one stood a chance against her.

They stood next to each other but when they were given the signal to start the troll's slow reactions put Asny a couple of steps ahead but the troll sped past her finishing the race before she's covered a quarter of the distance."

"You've had your chance," Barsk said. "You've lost. Are you going to fulfil our agreement Visitork because otherwise I'm going enjoy torturing you and your friends?"

Asny was thinking hard about the contests and then realised that it was 'thought' that had beaten her.

“You’re using magic against us. This is mountain magic and I recognise it.” Asny said.

“What are you talking about?” Barsk said

“The competitor in the eating contest was fire which consumes everything. Travok’s opponent in the wrestling was old age, which always wins in the end. That horn you asked Visitork to drink from held the sea which he could never drink and that small puma was the snake that we in Re’ Clar believe surrounds Toril. There’s no way I could lift that. The race was against thought which moves faster than any man,” Asny said loudly and paused before adding “or woman. Now tell me you weren’t using magic.”

Barsk looked at her. “You’re a Tisserand!” he exclaimed. “Only they know about mountain magic.” After a pause he asked. “Why not? You’re magic users so I’m playing on equal terms.”

“I’m a magic user.” Visitork said. “My friends are not. Your contests are void since you were using magic against them.”

“Don’t give me that.” Barsk scoffed at him. “Even I can detect their magical aura. You can’t hide that from me.”

Visitork, Asny and Travok stared at each other.

“It must be the curse.” Visitork said. “You must have touched that statue Travok.”

“What curse is this?” Barsk asked, suddenly very interested.

“If you try and take on that warlock, then the curse will have unpleasant consequences.”

“In that case,” said Barsk, summoning the power that will still in his horn, “let them suffer their curse now.”

He waved his hand at Travok and Asny who vanished along with Visitork’s book leaving only their clothes behind.

Visitork was shocked. “Why’s my book gone?” he asked. “That had nothing to do with the curse.”

Barsk just looked at him and said simply, “What was the last thing the warlock said to you?”

When Travok and Asny woke up they found themselves in a mysterious place. There seemed to be no walls or ceiling just a white void. Most of the floor was gone too. It extended only a few feet beyond each of them although Travok found out later that if you moved towards the edge the floor extended further as if there was a light source above you that penetrated the dark by only a few feet, although in this case, the dark was this white void.

The first thing they noticed was the unnatural cold. It wasn't excessive but didn't feel like the normal feeling of cold, more like the kind of chill some people say they get from standing near a ghost. It didn't help the fact that they were both naked. Just beyond what they could see of the floor was a massive pile of blank scrolls and they noticed Visitork's book was with them in this mysterious place.

The greatest issue was the cold though.

"You dwarves are masters of fire," Asny said. "Can't you make a fire?"

"I haven't got the means to make a fire." Travok said. "Besides, the only thing that we have to burn is those scrolls and you just have to look at them to see they have some kind of fire protection."

"Then how do we stay warm?" Asny asked him.

"Normally I'd suggest we stuff the scrolls into our clothes." Travok said thinking.

"I can't believe you haven't noticed that that is impossible." Asny said.

"I can only think of one option." Travok said. "You're not going to like it."

Asny had an idea of what he was suggesting but waited for him to tell her.

"We need to cuddle up close together conserving and sharing each other's warmth."

Asny thought about how this would look to someone from the outside and half hoped they wouldn't be rescued if that was possible. She nodded at Travok and knelt down on one knee so she was down to his height and they wrapped their arms around each other keeping close.

Although this worked to begin with, it wouldn't last and after forty minutes they realised that they needed another option. Asny was shivering uncontrollably and Travok although slightly more resilient to cold was sure he wasn't far off himself.

He looked at Asny still down on one knee and suddenly the image of the statue he'd hidden behind flashed into his mind. The girl the statue had depicted was Asny and she'd said that it showed a curse they'd share.

"I've just remembered the statue." Travok said. "It showed you in exactly that position."

“Can you remember what happened before it was destroyed?” Asny managed to ask through her shivering. It seemed very important. Travok thought, the incident was coming to mind clearly now when he couldn’t remember just after the incident.

“I ducked to avoid an energy bolt from whatever it was that was attacking me. I used the pedestal the statue was on to pivot myself behind it and then I jumped to my feet.”

“You must have touched the stature at some point.” Asny managed to say.

“Yes.” Travok said suddenly. “I was about to lose balance and used the statue’s shoulders to steady myself.”

Asny was having trouble talking but was employing all her strength now.

“Was the statue facing towards or away from you?”

“It had its back to me.” Travok said.

“Stand behind me the way you were standing then and put your hands on my shoulders.” Asny said. “It may be a long shot but it could be our only chance.”

As Travok moved behind her he heard her say, “we’ve got nothing to lose.”

The moment he put his hands on her shoulders, the mysterious place vanished and they found themselves in a green field. The mountains were behind them and although it wasn’t overly warm, the sun felt like a furnace in comparison to where they’d been. Looking around they were standing below an obelisk with six standing stones surrounding them.

When they had both warmed up a bit, they were able to think straight. There were some trees nearby and Travok thought he might be able to make a fire. As he went towards the trees he felt an invisible barrier holding him back. He felt it and from its position and angle it appeared to be between two of the standing stones. Asny got to her feet and tried a different direction. It appeared that the standing stones were producing a field holding them in. They weren’t out of the curse yet.

Asny went over to examine one of the stones and then looked at the obelisk.

“To break the curse,” she said, “we need to destroy each of these standing stones and then give the obelisk a hard thump. It will sink

into the ground breaking the curse. If we do that, we could take on the warlock without fear of unpleasant side effects.”

“How are we supposed to break the stones?” asked Travok. “I doubt even you could do that, even with your hammer.”

“Don’t underestimate me.” Asny said. “These stones are not what they seem. I think between the two of us we should be able to push them hard enough to break them. Once we break the last one, we’ll have ninety seconds to sink the obelisk.”

The standing stones were just as Asny had suggested, not difficult to break and between the two of them they managed to partially crumble each one. As each stone was destroyed they had a momentary feeling of power. Although none of the stones were far from the obelisk, they left the nearest one until last. As they crumbled it, they both had a feeling as if time was against them. Travok raced to the obelisk and was about to hit it before Asny yelled at him to wait.

She went over and signalled him to continue when she’d picked up Visitork’s book. Travok hit the obelisk and watched as it sunk into the ground. If it hadn’t carried a curse with it, it could have been described as graceful.

The moment the tip disappeared under the ground, Travok and Asny found themselves back where they’d started in the underground city. The chamber was dark now apart from a faint glow to the right and Barsk and the trolls were gone.

Going over to the glow they found set into the wall about a foot off the ground was a hole about seven feet high with bars across it. In the cage was Visitork looking a bit worse for wear and not at all happy.

“It’s about time you showed up,” he said. “Any chance you could get me out of here?”

There were two large levers. One on either side. Asny went over to the right lever to pull it down before Visitork stopped her.

“Are you sure that’s the correct lever?” he asked.

“One of them has to be.” Asny said.

“Make sure you get the right one,” said Visitork with quite a noticeable tone of concern in his voice. “One of those will open the cage, the other will fill it with superheated tongues of fire. I’d be

burnt to a cinder before I had time to feel the pain.” After a pause he added, “I probably would feel the pain and wish I was dead.”

“How do we find out the correct lever?” asked Travok.

“Did your curse give you any clues?” asked Visitork.

“It didn’t involve you.” Asny said. She looked at Travok and they both thought of the pile of scrolls. Maybe they hadn’t all been blank.

“Look around for a clue?” Visitork told them.

Travok and Asny looked around but didn’t find anything useful. Just below the cage though, Travok noticed two gems in the wall, each one glowing very faintly and he asked Visitork what they were.

Visitork leaned forward to have a look but couldn’t see them but when Travok described them he knew what they were.

“They are Wise Stones,” he told them. “Barsk probably uses them for information.”

“Can we ask the stone then?” Asny asked.

“You can,” said Visitork “but you can only ask one question a day. One of those stones will lie, the other will tell the truth. I expect Barsk knows which one tells the truth. We don’t, so even if we could ask them both, they’d both give opposite answers.”

Visitork and Asny thought the stones were just as much a lost cause as the levers were.

Travok knelt down. He felt ridiculous talking to a stone and it was a few moments before he could bring himself to do it. He addressed the right stone.

“If I asked the other stone, which lever opens the cage, which one would it tell me?”

“That one,” was a voice that came from the stone and a light from no discernable source shone on the left lever.

“If you tell the truth, that would be the wrong lever because the other stone would be lying.” Travok said. “If the other stone tells the truth that still would be the wrong lever because you would be trying to deceive me.”

At that Asny pulled the right lever. There was a short pause, although to the three of them it felt like hours and the cage swung silently open.

“Let’s get out of here.” Visitork said as soon as he’d stepped out of the cage and pointed to the table nearby where their equipment was. Asny handed Visitork his book.

“You had it?” Visitork exclaimed, astonished.

“It appeared with us.” Asny explained.

Visitork thought about what Barsk had said about what the last thing the warlock had said to them. ‘Make her take her clothes off, You’ll find your book.’ Now here was Asny handing Visitork his book without her clothes on.

Travok looked at the table but found their clothes weren’t on it.

“You didn’t see what happened to our clothes?” he asked Visitork.

Visitork pointed at two piles of ashes on the ground.

“When they found your clothes were not part of the curse they wanted to destroy them, so I incinerated them to rob them of the pleasure.”

Asny and Travok stared at him but Visitork picked up his cane and tapped the side of it twice and the two piles of ashes turned into their clothes.

“I guessed that not having your clothes might be part of the curse and therefore destroying them might prevent the curse from being broken. I’m surprised they fell for such a simple illusion.”

Travok and Asny grabbed their clothes and hastily dressed.

“Let’s get out of here,” Visitork said when they’d finished and they grabbed their equipment. “When we’re out of here, you can explain what happened and if we still need to worry about the curse if the warlock appears again.”

They were about to make to the main door opposite the one they’d originally entered by, but Visitork pointed to a small door next to the one their competitors had come by.

“I heard them talking,” he said. “That door will go to their dungeons but there is a turn off, one level above. If we follow that it comes out further down the tunnel where we were found by the Skorn. That point will be out of the Skorn’s territory since it is the only exit on that side of the mountain. They expected to find some trolls on the way but managed to leave the mountain without any resistance.

As they moved off, Visitork said, “I think working out how those contests worked will cause the mountain magic to work against the Rhino-man. We won’t have to worry about him or the trolls again but if we come back this way, there will have been a change of leadership.”

The air around them was cold since they were quite a bit higher than they’d been before, but the main mountains were behind them although Asny said there were still mountains to skirt around before

they could find a suitable route down. The ground was stony here and the plateau was vast but in the distance they could see a lower plain and to the right was the mountain they had to skirt around.

As they camped that night, Visitork took a thick gold wand out and examined it. It had some decoration at one end and two white wings folded down but when he held it up, the wings would open.

“What’s that?” asked Asny.

“It’s what Barsk used to control the mountain magic.” Visitork said.

“It appeared when we worked out how the contests worked and is why the mountain magic will work against him. He’ll be sorry to lose it.”

“What are you going to use it for?” Travok said.

“I won’t be controlling mountain magic with it.” Visitork said. “This wand shouldn’t exist when it can do that.”

“Are you going to destroy it?” Asny asked.

“I can use it.” Visitork said. “It will destroy itself after I have used it once. Usually when I cast a spell I can only cast it on one person or monster or on myself. This wand will allow me to cast it on multiple subjects and in a fraction of the time. Since I can only use it once, I need to choose the time to use it carefully.”

As they went round the mountain they saw a large gem on the ground. It was a brownie, gold colour shaped like a flattened egg and about twice the size of a goose egg. It didn’t have any glow to it.

Asny bent down to have a look at it.

“Don’t touch it!” Visitork yelled at her but it was too late. Asny had already picked it up. She was so shocked she dropped it before Visitork could yell at her not to.

It hit the ground and crunched like a box of glass might. As they looked across the plateau, six earth elementals rose from the ground and started to move towards them!

The Earth elements had appeared as great rocky human shaped creatures. They were the strongest and most evil of all the elementals and were entirely hostile. They were so strong, one blow could kill all but the largest of giants and only enchanted weapons could have any effect on them and then only cause a fraction of the usual damage. Even then, an enchanted weapon would be broken after just two strikes.

“If there was ever a time to use your wand, that would be now.”

Travok said to Visitork.

“No it isn’t.” Visitork said. “My magic wouldn’t have any effect on Earth elementals. I don’t think running would do much good but I can’t suggest anything better.”

They put their heads down and ran with Visitork and Asny taking turns to carry Travok. When they had got behind a large cliff temporality out of sight, they stopped briefly.

“Is your hammer enchanted?” Visitork asked Asny.

“It can wield and hold magic but it doesn’t actually have any.” Asny said. “Anyway, one hammer against six elementals of any type is a bit optimistic to say the least.”

“We’ve got to get some distance between us and them.” Travok said. “Could you use your wand to cast a Swift Wind spell on the three of us?”

“Now is not the time to use the wand.” Visitork said. “We can’t out run them. Earth elementals don’t need to rest. They can move through solid rock if the need to and, while we are standing on ground, they know exactly where we are.”

“Let’s at least get some distance between us and them.” Asny said. She reached in her cloak and took out a small bottle. “It’s a potion of speed,” she told them. “I don’t know if it is the speed or duration or both that would be affected if it is shared but if we all drink a third of it we could at least get some distance and therefore time to think.” She didn’t wait for them to answer and took off her boots. When they looked confused she explained, “This potion will cause wings to grow on your ankles. If you’re wearing boots they won’t be able to help you.”

Travok and Visitork also removed their boots and they shared out the potion.

Each of them felt a blissful sensation in their feet and wings grew out of their ankles feeling as natural as if they’d always been there. Their feet just wanted to go and they took off just as an earth elemental came round the cliff and swiped at them.

The potion carried them for twenty minutes at amazing speed. Asny guessed it would carry one person for an hour and hadn’t realised the power. They were beside a large rock face where a narrow ledge wound around it when they stopped, to follow it, trying to think of

what they were going to do. They had put some distance between themselves and the earth elementals but it was only a matter of time before they were found. As they came round they saw a large cave entrance with a faint blue light inside. Normally a cave wouldn't be a good place to hide from earth elementals but the blue light drew them in.

Travok suddenly remembered what the dead woman had been saying to him. 'When the earth is your enemy, look for the blue light'. He told Asny and Visitork this and they ventured further into the cave and came to a fork.

"Did that woman say anything else?" asked Visitork.

"I've only made sense of the first thing." Travok said. "The rest was rubbish."

"Well earth is our enemy and we've found a blue light." Visitork said. "But we need to know which way to go."

There was what appeared to be a natural cave off to the left and behind them a bit that was pitch black, or an arched passage ahead of them. It was lit by eerie looking torches and had a strange echoing sound of footsteps. Travok looked at the dark passage but found his infra-vision had no effect and it was like a plug in the tunnel.

Visitork noticed him looking at it.

"That looks like deadly darkness," he said.

"What's that?" asked Asny.

"Just as the name suggests," answered Visitork. "If we went down there and lost our light then the darkness would drain our energy. We'd be dead within about twenty seconds. I've even heard that things that cause you to lose your light don't obey the law of averages and are more likely to happen."

Travok had heard of deadly darkness. Dwarves had encountered it before. Not much was known about it though, since unless you could relight a torch or candle of some such thing in time, you wouldn't be able to talk about it.

"I think we should chance it." Asny suddenly said.

"What's wrong with the passage?" Visitork asked. If it hadn't been for a eerie torches they wouldn't have stopped.

Asny's eyes widened in fear. Travok had never seen such a look of terror in her face before. Up until now she'd been completely fearless.

“I recognise that. It is not a passage,” she said. “That is The Cave of Time. If we travel along there we will grow swiftly older. I doubt even the longest living of races could get to the end.”

Travok and Visitork looked at the dark cave but had a deep sense of foreboding about it.

Travok suddenly thought about what the dead woman had said again and remembered the second thing she’d told him, ‘Those with no fear, fear the way’. If Asny feared the passage, it must be the way. When he said this Visitork had a look about him that Travok had never seen before. Asny had a look of sheer terror and Travok was sorry he said it.

“We have to take The Cave of Time.” Visitork said eventually.

“We can’t.” Asny cried out in fear.

Visitork took out the wand. “If anytime was time to use this, it’s now,” he said. “I knew I wouldn’t get to keep it for long. I can cast a fleetfoot spell on us. It works like the Swift Wind spell but takes much longer to cast. We should be able to move fast enough to avoid the effects of the cave.”

He didn’t sound sure but he and Travok were convinced this was the way to go but they weren’t sure how they could convince Asny.

“We’ve got to go this way.” Travok said.

To their surprise Asny said. “I’m going to put my trust in you Visitork. There must be something at the end of that cave worth finding. You said we can’t escape the elementals so the dark cave won’t help. I may fear the Cave of Time, but it is the lesser of two evils, even if you only *may* be able to get us through.”

“I thought it was a popular saying in Re’ Clar,” said Visitork ““If you choose the lesser of two evils, you still choose evil’?”

“I’d rather die of old age than be killed by the ground.” Asny said.

“Cast the spell, the elementals are coming, we may not have much time.”

Visitork took out the wand and held it up. The wings opened and started to glow a silvery colour as he cast the spell. When he’d finished the wings separated from the wand and flew off before disappearing and the wand dissolved in his hand but the three of them found they were running at superhuman speeds down the Cave of Time.

Visitork’s predication about moving fast enough for the time not to affect them seemed to be correct. They expected to pass others

who'd tried to use the cave and died of old age but the time in the cave would have caused the bodies to turn to dust in years rather than hundreds of years.

Eventually they saw that the cave had an end and was a sight that nobody had ever seen before, at least not since the cave was built, although who built it was beyond anyone's guess and the cave was supposed to predate almost anything else of Toril.

They stopped in the wide bright lit and well decorated chamber. In the centre of the chamber was a metal stand with a blue glow emitting from it and casting a huge halo of light around it and in the stand was a sword. The blade was the finest blade any of them had ever seen and the hilt was carved in such a way that it was both beautiful but easy to hold.

"Is this the blue light the dead woman was talking about?" Visitork said. He didn't expect either Travok or Asny to know.

Travok stood looking at the sword.

"Go on," said Asny and nudged him forward slightly.

Travok looked at her and she said, "the woman said she'd been waiting for you. The sword must be for you."

Travok looked at the sword again and picked it up. Immediately the light the sword was casting went out although the chamber was still lit by torches. The blue glow also went out and the sword felt just like any other sword Travok had held.

None of them had expected that to happen. As Travok put it back on the stand, the sword resumed its appearance from when they'd first found it. Travok picked it up again and handed it to Visitork.

Visitork took the sword but it still appeared to be just an ordinary sword.

"What do we do now?" Visitork asked Travok.

"The woman didn't mention a sword." Travok said but did remember that she didn't get to finish what she'd been trying to tell him.

"I was hoping they'd be something to allow us to deal with the earth elementals." Asny said.

Visitork swung the sword. "This sword won't help. It won't even make a dent. Maybe it's the stand that's causing the light."

"You've heard of The Cave of Time," Travok said to Asny. "Is there any mention of a sword at the end of it?"

"No." Asny said simply. "No one knew until now what was at the other end or even if there was an end."

“When we leave here it will be our end,” said Visitork. “Have a look at the sword. See if you notice anything.”

Asny handed her hammer to Travok and took the sword. The moment she touched the sword the blue light lit up much brighter than before. The sword could be seen to be full of power and Asny could feel the power of the sword pulsing through her body. She swung it and felt how light and easy it was to use. She’d never thought of using a sword before but this one felt as if *it* would do the fighting and only required her to hold it. Travok now remembered the last thing the woman had said to him, ‘That which you know not can use it’. At that time Travok didn’t know of Asny. He told them this.

“I don’t want a sword.” Asny said. “I prefer to fight with a hammer. Besides no matter how powerful this sword is, it won’t help us against six earth elementals.”

She reached out to take her hammer back, but as Travok lifted it up to give it to her, the head glowed red.

Asny stopped. “How did you do that?” she asked.

“I just lifted it up.” Travok said.

“Think,” said Visitork very forcefully. “Did that woman say anything else? This is really important.”

“She last thing she didn’t finish.” Travok said. “Something about favour.”

He looked at Asny’s hammer and then at Asny. He handed the hammer to Visitork. Visitork took it and raised it but it seemed as normal as it was when Asny used it. Travok took it and raised it and it glowed red again.

Travok twigged. “I’ve got it,” he said. “She was talking about favourite. You can hold the sword, Asny and while you do so, your favourite weapon is channelling power for me. We have two magic weapons.”

“That’s still not enough.” Asny said. “Did this woman realise how many elementals we’d be up against.”

“We’ve got a chance.” Visitork suddenly said. “Lift the hammer up high Travok.”

Travok lifted the hammer high and the red glow went out.

“I’ve heard about this.” Visitork said. “I don’t think I was supposed to but it was a conversation I overheard long ago. If we leave the cave, we should be okay walking out of it. If you hold the sword Asny, and point it at an elemental, Travok can point your hammer at

the same one and it will emit a beam of energy that should be strong enough to destroy it. The hammer is only responding to you Travok because you were the first to touch the sword.”

As they prepared to return the way they’d come, three times Visitork made them be sure they had everything saying that coming back for anything would not be possible.

Asny was a bit apprehensive about returning through the cave. She seemed to remember it taking them quite a while to get through when coming from the other direction and at that time they were travelling at super speeds.

By the time they did reach the entrance to The Cave of Time and the cave of Deadly Darkness, they were all relieved to be out of there and now had to be ready for what awaited them outside.

Knowing that the sooner they got outside the better, they couldn’t wait around and went to the entrance and looked out.

They had spent more time in the cave than they’d wanted and one of the earth elementals was closer than they’d have liked but as Asny pointed the sword at it and Travok lifted her hammer, a red bolt of energy like a lightning bolt leapt from the hammer and struck the elemental causing it to explode. They had to duck to avoid being hit by lumps of rock.

“Earth elementals when killed return to the elemental plane of earth and can never be summoned again.” Visitork said and was impressed as together Asny and Travok took out the other five in rapid succession but he was surprised when they collapsed in exhaustion.

“Did you know this would happen?” Travok asked Visitork a few hours later when he’d recovered.

“I knew that it would take energy but most of the power comes from the sword. I didn’t expect it to take so much energy from you two. I haven’t seen it done through two weapons, or on more than one monster before.”

“You didn’t think to mention that before?” Asny asked crossly.

“I didn’t think it was important.” Visitork simply said.

They headed off again. By the time it got dark they found Asny’s potion of speed had given them such a boost that they’d be out of the mountains in a couple of days. Their route from there should be easy and Asny said she knew of a narrow section of land that lead into Re’ Clar between the other lands that surrounded it that were

inhabited by druids. Asny said that Re' Clar had no problems with the druids but knew that their beliefs were very different from her peoples and if they recognised her as a Tisserand they might want to take an unpleasant advantage of the situation.

After four days they'd left the mountains behind. The grass was a lush green and the temperature was quite warm for this time of year but Asny said that it was this temperature most of the year round with each month having about the same amount of rainfall. It was one of the most fertile lands this side of the continent and was incredibly rich from the trade it made as a result of this.

There was no marked boundary to the mountains but as they passed a point that could have been the mountains limit Asny felt a jolt that went through her body. She couldn't explain it but Visitork suggested that maybe it was a feeling of being within striking distance of her home now. There was a tower they could see in the distance and Asny said from the top you could see into Re' Clar and just at the very limit of their vision was a barely discernable object sticking up, that Asny said was on top of a large mountain in Re' Clar.

As they made their way onwards Travok was surprised that Visitork was still with them. He kept it to himself but remembered before they'd gone into the mountains that Visitork said his business prevented them from travelling together and that he was going to go his own way when they'd crossed the mountains, but he seemed to be sticking with them.

He'd been mulling these thoughts over in his mind for quite a while before he noticed that Asny was having trouble keeping up. Her pace had slowed considerably and she seemed to be on the point of fatigue even though they'd only been travelling for an hour and a half. He'd thought being this close to home, if anything she'd be striding ahead.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked her.

Asny murmured something about being alright but didn't seem to be in the mood for talking.

Visitork had noticed this and was thinking Asny was being difficult but Travok thought she knew that something was up ahead that worried her and this worried him. He mentioned this to Visitork.

“If there is something up ahead, she’s got the sense to tell us,” Visitork said. “If she can’t keep up then she’ll have to go at her own speed. I told her the day we freed her that she’d have to keep up.” As Visitork said this they heard a gasp and looked back to see that Asny had collapsed. They went to her to find she was unconscious and they couldn’t wake her.

“The curse.” Visitork said.

“I thought we’d broken that.” Travok replied.

“Not that one. It was the food.” Visitork told him. “The curse was on the one who didn’t eat it. She must have been protected from the curse by the mountains but now we’re out of them, the curse had taken effect.”

“What can we do?” asked Travok.

“Some curses can be removed by pricking the victim’s finger with a magical object.” Visitork said. “I doubt that will have any affect against this magic but we can try.”

He handed Travok the sword and Travok used the point to prick Asny’s finger.

“When will we know if it’s worked?” asked Travok.

“We should know fairly soon.” Visitork said, clearly impatient that they’d have to sit and wait.

When they’d waited for half an hour, Visitork told Travok they’d waited long enough and if it had worked, they’d have known by now.

“What do we do now?” asked Travok.

“I’m powerless against mountain magic. That magic comes from deep within Toril and predates anything else, even the Cave of Time. That was why that wand was so dangerous. I can’t remove this curse, I doubt even having some of the food now would work.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Travok snapped.

“There’s nothing we can do.” Visitork said. “We travel in dangerous lands and encounter powerful magic. From time to time there are casualties. There’s nothing we can do. We may as well leave her here.”

Travok stared at Visitork but said nothing as he picked up Asny and slung her over his shoulder. She wasn’t too tall and he was able to just manage. As he resumed the track he noticed Visitork had slowed his pace to match Travok even though he was moving slower than Asny had been and Visitork had refused to slow his pace for her.

It wasn't far to the next town and Travok was determined to find someone who would help Asny despite Visitork's continued protests that it was useless and they should keep moving.

"Will you shut up!" Travok finally yelled. "If you want to get moving, then go. I can find my way to Re' Clar from here. I'm going to find someone here who can help her. If you want to stick along, then stop repeating your mantra. I'm surprised Asny hasn't woken up and done a runner to get away from it."

"Alright," said Visitork, "but you're heading for the market square. If you carry her in there, you're going to attract unwanted attention." Travok turned into one of the streets leading through the merchant's quarter of the town hoping he could find a mage's guild. As he was inspecting a street he heard footsteps and decided to duck into a nearby shop.

Inside the shop there were a lot of weird looking objects that looked like charms or magical apparatus. From the way Visitork was looking around Travok guessed that the proprietor was the person he wanted to find in this town.

The proprietor had been behind the counter when they'd entered but was moving over to them by this time. Travok had a bit of shock when he looked at him.

He looked a little like a dragon but with human proportions rather than a lizards'. He had longer arms, straighter legs and no wings and was covered in a scaly deep red skin. He also seemed to be dressed like a human. Visitork recognised him as a Lizardine.

"Come through to the back," he said in a friendly voice, "and I will help your sister."

The Lizardine led the way to the back of the shop, carrying Asny. As he passed the counter he pointed a rod that was lying on it, at the door, locking it.

"She's not my sister." Travok said.

"We're all brothers and sisters," the Lizardine said lying Asny down and examining her.

"Can you help her?" asked Travok.

"Yes. I think I can," replied the Lizardine. "She has a curse but it is within my power to lift it." He looked at Visitork. "Why hasn't your brother lifted it?"

Visitork was about to answer but before he could Travok said, "He told me nothing could be done about mountain magic."

“This is not mountain magic,” the Lizardine said. “Who ever cast it didn’t possess the magic themselves and must have stolen it from somewhere. They may have used mountain magic to make it work, although very few can control it without a special wand or amulet.”

“You said it was mountain magic,” Travok said glaring at Visitork.

“Obviously it’s not.” Visitork said simply.

“Are you a wizard?” asked the Lizardine.

“I’m one of the most powerful wizards you’ll ever meet.” Visitork said.

“I’ve met Talōs,” said the Lizardine, “but you said this is obviously not mountain magic but it’s so obvious, that any qualified wizard would have noticed it just by looking.”

Travok gave a suspicious look at Visitork and was about to say something before the Lizardine stopped him.

“I’ve got to help her now,” he said. “I need concentration and silence. Could you two wait outside?”

Visitork and Travok got up and went into the main part of the shop leaving the Lizardine with Asny.

When they were alone Travok looked at Visitork.

“How come you couldn’t tell that wasn’t mountain magic?” Travok asked Visitork in a voice that could cut through stone.

“The curse was done in the mountain. Barsk said he was using mountain magic.” Visitork said.

“The creature...” Travok started.

“Lizardine.” Visitork corrected him.

“The Lizardine,” Travok started again, “said anyone should have noticed it just by looking. Were you paying attention?”

“I was watching you.” Visitork said.

Travok thought back at what had happened. Asny had collapsed and Visitork had suggested that Travok prick her finger. When that had failed, he hadn’t looked at her.

“You weren’t even looking!” Travok yelled at him. “We’ve got something to sort out. How were you sure that I would be okay going through the neighbouring kingdoms of Spicar where everyone knew me?”

“I can alter their perception and memories so they see you but forget about it afterwards as if it was a normal event which you don’t usually remember. They might remember seeing you but they’d have to put their minds to it.”

“Altering their memories?” Travok all but yelled appalled. “The only reason wizards are taught to do that, is so that they won’t do it.”
“I learnt to do it.” Visitork said calmly. “If the magic is there then it’s to be used.”

“Like the spells Sord used?” asked Travok.

“Sord was a special case.” Visitork said.

“What are you on about?” Travok said. “The magic he used was there so he used it. Simply because you’re not directly damaging people you think it’s alright? Messing with people’s minds is the worst thing you can do.”

“I don’t operate under anyone’s approval.” Visitork said. “I don’t have to explain myself to you or anyone. If you have a problem with what I do, then deal with it.”

“In that case,” Travok said, “What else have you done that you decided to keep secret from me?”

At that point the Lizardine came back in. “Your sister is asleep. She’ll wake up in a few minutes. I’ve given her one of my scorpion brooches to help her recover properly.”

“How much do I owe you?” Travok asked.

“I don’t charge for helping people who need it and the brooch is complimentary,” the Lizardine said.

“Thank you mister...” Travok said,

“You wouldn’t be able to pronounce my name,” the Lizardine said.

“I like to keep a low profile as it is. Come and be with your sister when she wakes and then I expect you will want to get on your way.”

“You go.” Visitork said to Travok. “I’ll wait outside.”

When Visitork had gone the Lizardine said, “You watch that wizard. I wouldn’t trust him.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Travok. “We’re parting company here.”

“I’d wait until you pass the tower,” the Lizardine suggested. “He is known there. You’ll get a warm welcome if you turn up with him.”

When Asny had woken up the Lizardine gave her a drink, explained the brooch and wished them well on their way.

As they stepped outside, Visitork was waiting for them. Travok didn’t tell Asny of their exchange but did explain what had happened to her.

“I was wondering when the curse would happen.” Asny said. “After a while I forgot about it. For a time we had more important things on

our minds, including another curse. I should have realised that the mountain magic would protect us. I know what that feeling I had as we passed the boundary was now.”

Asny guessed something had happened between Visitork and Travok. Their silence was noticeable and there seemed to be a tension in the air greater than any tension she’d ever felt between herself and Visitork.

“I think we should head for the tower,” she said when they’d left the village and pointed to the tower sticking up ahead. “From there we can look down onto Re’ Clar. I’d like to look down on my kingdom before I return into it.”

“Does the tower have a name?” asked Travok.

“It possibly does,” said Asny, “but we just all call it the tower. If you are talking about a tower but don’t name it, or make it clear you are talking about a tower in a castle you’re in, then that is the one we’re referring to.”

Visitork wondered if he should tell them that he was known there but wasn’t in the mood for talking to either of them now. There was a bond that had existed between them as they’d travelled together but that was now irreparably broken. Even if they had twice the journey ahead and could form a new bond, it would never be the same.”

It was getting dark when they arrived at the doors of the tower and Visitork stepped forward and knocked on the door. After a moment the door opened and a large guard stood there.

“Visitork, you old devil!” he exclaimed in a friendly voice. “It’s about time you showed up. It’s been too long.”

Visitork held his left shoulder with his right hand in a greeting.

“Come in and bring in your friends. We’ll be celebrating tonight.”

“Choose a pseudonym.” Visitork hissed to Asny as they went in.

“Who are your friends?” the guard asked once they were inside.

Visitork shot a look at Travok telling Travok that they should introduce themselves.

“I’m Travok Loderr.” Travok said inclining his head to the guard.

“You have a strange accent,” the guard said.

“I’m from far away to the south.” Travok said. “My home is the small kingdom of Spicar.”

“Never heard of it,” the guard said, “but we love to have travellers from afar.”

“I’m Alin,” said Asny. “I lived in these parts when I was very young but have been gone a long time. I expect much has changed.”

“Some things change,” the guard said. “Other’s stay the same. Our strip of land here is much the same but things have been getting worse in Re’ Clar as I’m sure you’re aware for the last 85 years.”

The feeling of horror at hearing this Asny did very well to hide.

“I was young when I left here. What’s been happening in the last 85 years. I read some old books about it and they had nothing but good things to say.”

“Let’s just say,” the guard said, “that a formally monster free country now has more monsters than all the neighbouring lands put together.”

Travok looked at Asny but she was hiding her feelings but knew that it would be something to put right when she returned.

“I expect you are weary,” the guard said. “Let me find you some rooms. You can have your usual room Visitork. Wait until the people hear that you’re here. They’ll be feasts for a week.”

“Before you show us our rooms,” Asny said. “We have heard much about the views from your tower. Do you think we could go up and look at the night lights around before we get too comfortable.”

“Yes or course,” said the guard. “Wait here and I’ll get Mintik to show you himself. When he hears you’re here Visitork, he’ll let no one else take you.”

Mintik was a middle aged man, although his hair was going grey. He was quite thin and weak looking but he seemed to have keen eyes and after a major greeting of Visitork he welcomed Travok and Asny but they could feel his eyes had taken in every detail.

“Come and see the night lights,” he finally said. “You can see most of Re’ Clar from here. All the way to the mountain of Orsk, the dwarven city.”

He led them up the stairs eyeing up the sword the Visitork was taking care of. He was also eyeing Asny although she didn’t notice it. It was true that the best looking girls in Osse came from Re’ Clar and Asny’s eldest sister had outshone all the other’s by far but the charisma of the others was still top of the scale. The man had noticed Asny and wanted he ensure she was sitting next to him at the banquet tonight.

When they reached the top of the tower the views would have been spread out before them if it hadn't been dark. Looking south they could see the lights of the town where they'd met the Lizardine and the lights of various villages and towns in the surrounding area. Beyond that was a large black mass that was the mountains. To the east and west they overlooked the druid kingdoms, which were lit mainly by campfires. To the north were the lights of Re' Clar with a large mountain also lit up by pin pricks of light from the dwarf kingdom inside.

Travok looked over Re' Clar with interest. Asny gazed over it but felt like it was only a few months that she'd been away and at night it looked quite similar although she noticed some changes that could only have been brought about by an infestation of monsters.

Asny finally pulled herself from the view.

"Let's get some rest." Asny said. "If we leave early tomorrow, we could be at the borders before night."

As they made their way down the steps Mintik and Visitork talked about the banquet that was being prepared.

When they reached the base of the tower Mintik showed them to their rooms and suggested they get some rest and he'd be back in an hour. He said he'd arrange for the hot spring baths to be made ready so they could use them before the banquet and he'd organise some fine clothes for them to wear.

Despite being unconscious for a good part of the day, Asny went to sleep immediately and it seemed like only seconds had passed when she heard the knocking on her door an hour later.

Travok and Visitork didn't sleep. Their minds were occupied by the same thing although they were both seeing a different side of the issue and Travok was glad when the knock came on his door so he could take his mind off the issue. Tomorrow it wouldn't bother him any longer.

After they'd been given time to use the hot spring baths Mintik ordered a servant to have their fine clothes placed in their rooms for them to change into. Travok and Visitork went into their rooms but Asny was uneasy not caring for fine clothes and would have preferred to wear her armour but the issue was suddenly taken to a different level when Mintik turned to the servant.

“Put her in my room. I’ve got something better planned for her,” he said and then added, “Don’t bother with the fine clothes, she won’t have any need of them with what I’ve got planned.”

When Mintik emerged from his room just before the banquet he was dressed in a peculiar fashion which was to hide the damage that had been done to his face and hoped the rest of the clothes would hide the damage done to his body. His plans had not taken into account the possibility of someone who could knock him into next week if she’d wanted. If he’d known Asny’s true identity he’d never have dared try anything.

He sent several men into his room and they returned a few minutes later with Asny.

As Travok and Visitork made their way to the banquet Travok was wondering where Asny had got to and then noticed her walking with Mintik to the head table. She looked amazing in the fine dress she was wearing. She had a veil across her face leaving her eyes free but partly concealing the rest of her face. Travok could read only too well the look in her eyes and knew that the veil was there solely to cover up the fact that she was gagged and Travok could see that what appeared to be bracelets on the wrists and ankles actually had chains attached to them which went up the long sleeves of her dress. She kept her hands together but that was due to the bracelets on her wrists being locked together.

When she didn’t eat anything all evening it was only due to the fact that she already had her mouth full.

When Travok tried to move towards her, he saw several guards that he’d have to go past had brought their weapons with them.

At the end of the evening Travok found that Mintik was taking great care to keep Asny with him and a lot of armed guards between him and Travok or Visitork. Before Travok went to his room he saw Mintik lock Asny in her room still chained up and when Travok tried the door to his room in the night with the idea of rescuing her, he found his door was locked from the outside.

He guessed they would be given some kind of ultimatum in the morning.

When he heard his door being unlocked Mintik greeted him and invited him to join him for breakfast. Travok kept a knife concealed

in his clothes but found Asny was not there. On the way, however Mintik had told him that he was welcome to stay for as long as he wanted and they'd be having banquets for a week.

"I have a journey to complete." Travok said. "I need to leave as soon as I can."

"That is regrettable." Mintik said.

Travok was waiting for Mintik to say where Asny was but when he didn't Travok decided he would ask him directly.

"Where is Alin? She is journeying with me."

"Not any more." Mintik said. "She is remaining here. She has some lessons to learn. You will have to leave without her."

"That is not an option." Visitork said. "She is part of our party."

Travok made a note to tell Visitork that he wouldn't be journeying with them any further.

Mintik thought about this. He didn't want to damage his friendship with Visitork and then thought he might be able to let Asny go after all.

"I'll let her go in exchange for your sword." Mintik said. Visitork pretended to think about it. The sword seemed that it could only be wielded by Asny but Visitork expected that she was not the only person who could use its powers, rather, the only person they'd found so far. He didn't want Mintik to find he had someone who also could reveal its powers.

"I'm afraid I cannot part with the sword." Visitork said. In a way to disguise why he added, "It has been in my family for as far back as it can be traced."

"It is the only thing I am willing to trade." Mintik said getting up.

"Then we'll have to go as two." Visitork said to Travok.

Mintik left the room seeing that Travok wanted to talk to Visitork alone.

"What the hell do you think your doing?" Travok snarled. "You don't make decisions for me. The sword isn't yours to decide by. It chose Asny and me. You just happened to be with us."

"Asny may not be the only one who can draw power from the sword." Visitork said. "I don't want to run the risk that Mintik has anyone else who can use it."

"I thought he was your friend." Travok said.

"Don't trust anyone. Least of all your friends." Visitork said.

“So you’re happy to go and leave Asny here to probably be tortured until she’s not strong enough to prevent him from raping her?” asked Travok in an acid voice. “It’s clear he tried and failed to do that last night before the banquet.”

“He can’t have the sword.” Visitork said firmly.

“If he’s willing to let Asny go for the sword, we give him the sword.” Travok said.

Visitork got up. “I’m going now and I’m taking the sword with me. You can come with me or you can stay here but if you stay here you won’t get to see Asny again so you may as well leave with me. It’s going to look strange if we don’t leave together.”

Visitork walked out before Travok could saying anything more.

Travok went after Visitork only to find Visitork disappeared into his room leaving Travok outside.

Travok waited. He knew Visitork couldn’t stay there forever and it was only a few minutes before Visitork emerged with his belongings packed, and the sword in his hand. He looked at Travok surprised to see him there.

“You got ready quickly,” he said. “Hang on, where’s your belongings?”

“I’ll get my belongings together while Asny gets ready to go. Give me the sword. I better be the one who gives it to Mintik since the sword chose me.”

“He’s not getting the sword.” Visitork said. “We’ve had that discussion and decided.”

“The hell we’ve decided!” Travok yelled at him.

“Well I have,” said Visitork and walked down the corridor in the direction of the doors at the base of the tower.

Travok was about to chase after him when Visitork was thrown back having encountered what felt like a barrier. He looked at Travok and Travok saw the blade of the sword had a very faint white glow about it, which disappeared within a second. Visitork had noticed it too.

“The sword doesn’t want to be separated from its owner.” Travok said. “I never allowed you to take the sword and it won’t allow itself to be stolen.”

“Give me the sword then.” Visitork said.

“The only person I’m giving the sword to is Mintik.” Travok said.

Visitork held up his hand and muttered a spell that immediately froze Travok on the spot.

“Rather fitting this,” Visitork said and swung the sword at Travok. The sword should have cut him in two but it missed.

Visitork stared at it. Travok was also able to move again since an offensive action broke the spell.

“The sword can’t be used against its owner either.” Travok said.

“You used a spell to paralyse me. You know that I can’t use magic so you use an unfair advantage. That sounds like a coward to me.”

Visitork swung his staff at Travok and Travok dodged it and grabbed a sword from the wall. In a thought he grabbed a second one and tossed it Visitork.

Visitork had had some minimal training in using a sword but as he gripped the sword it was clear he couldn’t even remember how to hold a sword properly. He pointed the sword at Travok and quickly recited a simple incantation.

Travok barely had time to duck as the sword directed a jet of superheated flame towards him.

“You can’t even fight me like a man?” Travok yelled at him.

“Okay.” Visitork said and stepped forward but muttered another incantation as he did so.

Travok saw the blade of Visitork’s sword disappear to be replaced by a brilliant white blade of magic. He knew he couldn’t parry a blade like that but didn’t believe Visitork would be able to deliver a blow that he couldn’t dodge.

Travok let Visitork strike a few pathetic blows which he easily avoided and then in one swift movement sliced a blow at Visitork and Visitork noticed it too late and felt the sword cutting into the skin of his neck.

One second later Visitork was surprised to still have his head. He felt a small dribble to blood come from his neck but nothing he need worry about. Travok had knocked Visitork’s sword from his hand by hitting his hand with the hilt of his own sword and now stood with his sword at his throat. He nodded at Visitork and Visitork reluctantly handed Travok the magic sword.

“Get out of my sight.” Travok said. “If you ever turn up in Spicar or any kingdom aligned with it you will never leave it alive. I expect the same will apply to Re’ Clar but that is for Asny to decide. I owe you my freedom and I’m repaying you with your life. Go!”

Visitork didn’t move for a moment but when Travok jiggled the sword in his hand he turned and left. At the base of the steps he stopped and turned back to Travok.

“I never wanted Asny to travel with us right from the moment you freed her,” he said. “I knew your attraction to her would distract you and impair your judgement. You’ve proved me right.”

At that he walked up the steps and was gone.

Travok took the sword and went to Asny’s room only to find it was empty. He went to his room and picked up his belongings and went to find Mintik.

When he found him he held the sword out to him. As Mintik made to take the sword Travok moved it out of his reach.

“Where’s Asny?” he said,

“Asny!” said Mintik. He thought for a moment. “She’s Asny Tisserand. She’s looking good for her age.”

At that moment a man behind Travok took the sword from him.

“We have an agreement.” Travok said.

“Not any more.” Mintik said. “You deceived me. The sword was for a girl called Alin not a princess called Asny. I’m sorry but there’s nothing you can give me for her.”

Travok didn’t bother asking for the sword back knowing that Mintik would not give it back to him.

Travok decided to try and pretend he’d given up.

“At least let me say good bye to her,” he said.

Mintik took him to a room where Asny was sitting. She was still wearing the veil from the previous evening and had the gag in her mouth and her hands were chained together with chains connected to her ankles that were not long enough to allow her to stand up without being bent right over.

“Your dwarf friend has come to say good bye.” Mintik said. “You have one minute,” he said to Travok and left them.

Travok quickly removed Asny’s gag.

“You’re not leaving?” Asny asked as soon as she could talk.

“Of course not.” Travok said and looked at the locks on her chains.

“You won’t be able to open them in a minute.” Asny said.

“Watch me,” said Travok. He’d always been an expert with locks and had them open so fast he couldn’t have done it any quicker with the key.

Asny jumped up. Her possessions were on the other side of the room and she grabbed her hammer.

“They’ll be five hundred guards between us and the way out.”

Travok said.

“Then we’ll have to persuade them to let you out.” Asny said. At that moment Mintik came in with six guards. He was shocked that Asny was out of her chains. Asny swung her hammer up at him but he stepped out of the way. Not prepared for that Asny lost her grip on the hammer as it swung into the air and she cried out as it hit her head, killing her in an instant.

At that moment the sword suddenly enveloped itself in an electric field that electrocuted the man who was holding it. The sword dropped to the ground blanketed by terawatts of energy. Travok, on his knees next to Asny, hardly noticed. He took one look at her and spared a glance to his battle-axe, which was on the other side of the room. Asny’s hammer was lying in reach, writhing in pain, so Travok grabbed it and swung it at Mintik. The hammer was only too willing to smash Mintik’s bones and skull to pieces but Travok was not prepared for that and was also used to using a slashing weapon, twice the weight, rather than a bludgeoning one, and missed. In a psychopathic fury he jumped to his feet and had taken out all the other guards before any of them knew what was happening. He looked at Mintik but another legion of guards came in blocking his attack and so defeated, he dropped to his knees by Asny and closed her hands round the handle of the hammer that was still howling in anguish. Travok put his ear to Asny’s heart and looked at her head. The hammer in true loyalty to its owner hadn’t left a mark.

Mintik didn’t seem at all bothered about the guards Travok had taken out and was looking on completely unaffected. Travok looked at him, knowing if he’d had his axe that Mintik would be in several pieces now.

“Do you still want her?” he asked in a voice that made some of the guards shudder.

“Not any more.” Mintik said in a voice he’d have also used when refusing cream in his coffee.

“What about the sword?” Travok asked. It was still enveloped in energy but Travok guessed it would let him touch it.

“Do you want to touch it?” Mintik asked. It was supposed to be a rhetorical question.

“It will answer to me.” Travok said.

Mintik thought about this. Suddenly half the guards stood between Travok and the sword.

“You’re getting Asny, I get the sword.” Mintik said. “Don’t forget that I said there was nothing I wanted in exchange for her. You can keep the rest of your and her belongings. You should appreciate my generosity.”

Travok felt like grabbing Asny’s hammer again but knew he’d had the element of surprise before. He looked at Asny, she looked so peaceful and was sorry she’d not had the chance to reach Re’ Clar.

Two hours later, Travok left the tower with Asny’s body and her possessions but without the sword and vowed to return her body to Re’ Clar. He knew he wouldn’t get there by night now and made slow progress carrying Asny’s body.

That night he made camp and forced himself to go to sleep to hide the horrors of the day.

Three times that night he woke. Each time it seemed unnaturally quiet and Travok had the unsettling feeling of a presence watching over him. Each time though the horror of the previous day came flooding back, too real to have been a bad dream and he forced himself to sleep again.

The next morning however Asny handed him a cup of mint tea.

“Wake up,” she said.

Travok looked up and jumped back in fear. He felt his hand reaching for his battle axe and used his other hand to stop it. He’d never raise his battle axe to Asny and knew it would have no affect against a ghost.

As Asny moved silently towards him, Travok scrambled backwards.

Asny saw the fear in his eyes. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What do you want?” Travok asked, the terror in his voice clearly evident.

Asny reached out to touch him and Travok moved back again but could only move an inch before he found he was up against a rock. He couldn’t move any further back without looking at the rock but had been told on many occasions not to turn his back on a ghost.

“I want nothing but to return with you to Re’ Clar,” Asny said. She had thought about his question though and realised what he was afraid of.

“Touch me,” she said and held out her hands for him.

Travok held back but thought about it. A ghost would usually try to touch you. He'd heard no stories of a ghost inviting to be touched – although that didn't mean it had never happened.

He tentatively reached out and took one of Asny's hands. It felt solid and warm so he took her other hand. It felt the same. He pressed against it and it still felt solid so he tightened his grip slightly and felt Asny respond likewise.

"What's going on?" asked Travok.

Asny handed him a gold scorpion brooch like the orange one the Lizardine had given her.

"Did you see the hammer actually hit my head?" she asked but didn't wait for an answer. "The Lizardine gave me this saying that I would need to fake my death the next day, just before we left. This brooch can make your body appear dead for a few hours. The effect wore off just after you had gone to sleep. I guessed it was the easiest way to escape. I'm very accurate with my hammer. It missed me by a fraction but I knew that if I took Mintik by surprise and activated the broche at the right time, he'd fall for it."

Things began to fall into place. The unnatural silence was that, when Travok had gone to sleep, Asny's hammer was still howling in pain but when he woke it had gone silent and Asny's presence was what he'd felt watching over him.

Travok jumped up and without warning put his arms around her and hugged her close before kissing her.

Asny was taken by surprise but didn't resist.

"Why kiss a princess when you can kiss a queen?" she said. "The border of Re' Clar will be behind us by the time we go to bed."

The journey ahead was covered in less time per league than any other section of the journey. Asny, eager to finish the journey was walking fairly quickly but Travok was managing to keep up and would have overtaken Asny if she'd walked any slower wanting to get there as much as she did.

It had however got dark when they reached the border. Since the kingdom they'd been in was very narrow at this point with the druidic kingdoms on either side, the border was not very large and had a guard post on it. One of the guards came down to meet them.

"Who are you? State your business in Re' Clar," the guard said.

Travok looked at Asny but she gave him a subtle gesture to speak.

“We are travellers from the south.” Travok said. “We come as representatives of Delg, king of Spicar and seek your leader.”

“We have no one leader,” the guard said, “but we can arrange you an audience with our council. I must ask you to tie down your weapons before I can let you through.”

Travok and Asny did as they were told and the guard opened the gate letting them into the guard house.

“Have you anywhere to stay?” he asked as they came in.

“Not yet.” Travok replied.

“We have a camp near here where you will be welcome to stay,” the guard said. “Please stop here though and join us for a meal.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Asny said, speaking for the first time. “I have heard stories of the hospitality of Re’ Clar from a source nearly one hundred years old. I see that has not changed.”

As they moved into the light the guard looked at Asny and gave her a curious look. Asny noticed it but guessed the guard hadn’t wanted her to and so she pretended she hadn’t seen it. To the right there was a table and a pot simmering over a fire next to it. Seated round the table were three more guards playing cards along with a wizened old man who must have been more than a hundred years old.

The guards turned to look at them and as the old man turned his head, he almost fell off his chair in shock. He immediately left his chair and knelt on his knee at Asny’s feet.

“My lady,” he cried. “I never doubted you would return.”

The other guards looked at her. They weren’t old enough to remember her but they had seen pictures and the first guard had given her a funny look because she seemed familiar and he now knew why. They all dropped to their knees in a similar fashion saying “Princess Asny.” Even Travok joined them.

“She is the last of the Tisserands,” the old man said. “She’s our queen,” and he tried to bow even lower.

“Please,” said Asny. “Get up. I’m not queen yet.”

Travok and the guards got up but the old man found he couldn’t get up. Asny crouched down and helped him to his feet. She looked into his face.

“Nim?” she asked.

“My lady.” Nim said bowing his head.

“You do not need to kneel in my presence again.” Asny said.

When they gathered at the table to eat, the guards offered Asny a place at the top of the table but she declined and she didn't allow them to give her any preferential treatment. Travok had guessed this would be the case. The guards also offered them a room in the guard house but before they knew who Asny was they had offered them a place at a nearby camp and Asny insisted they sleep there.

As they were sitting round the fire Travok and Asny found some of the people didn't seem to be the type to use a camp and asked them why they weren't in the city. They were told that the nearby city had been overrun by ogres and although there were fog demons in the forest, they thought they'd be safe enough there until the winter really started to set in.

"Why haven't you taken back the city?" Asny asked. "The royal army used to help keep out monsters. What's happened to them?"

"Since we have a representative from each district co-ordinating things," one of the men said, "the members of the army have had look after their home district. Without a single ruling body the royal army fell apart."

"What about the dwarves?" Asny asked. "They were fearsome fighters, I'm surprised this could have come about unless something has happened to them."

"The dwarves found that when each district was sent a representative to the council meetings, they decided that since non-dwarves were not allowed in the Orsk that they would stay in there and run things for themselves based on dwarf laws."

"Travok," Asny said. "Perhaps you could talk to the dwarves. Tell them that we need their help. They held great respect for my mother. The dwarves, I remember, would make friends with families rather than individuals and I expect a lot of them will remember me."

"I'll go there tomorrow if you want." Travok said.

"Not tomorrow," Asny said. "Tomorrow we're going to rally all the people from the nearby camps and the day after we will take back the city. We shall sleep in the camp for two more nights and the following night we'll take the city. After that we'll ask the help of the dwarves and then talk to the council. The monsters of this land are in for a shock."

"Orsk is not a dwarf name." Travok said. "How did the city get that name?"

"Orsk is the mountain it was built in. They named the city after the mountain." Asny told him.

That night Travok said to Asny, “You told me I was better off kissing a queen than a princess. What should I do when there isn’t a queen available?”

“Let me show you,” said Asny.

Three nights later the people of the camp slept in the city just as Asny had promised they would. Asny’s return had boosted their moral in a way that Travok could never have imagined before. With Asny back the people felt they really had something more than just their land to fight for and believed they were now invincible. The ogres hadn’t stood a chance and although some people had been seriously wounded, no one had been killed and Asny had shown people how to make healing potions and Travok discovered that the leaves Asny had kept in her pouch were as common as daisies in Re’ Clar.

After a couple of days rest Asny accompanied Travok to the huge stone doors of Orsk and hit a massive metal gong with her hammer to summon someone to open the door.

After a long wait the doors opened and a dwarf with a tall helmet stood in the doorway. Even with his helmet he was a fraction shorter than Asny. Asny was wearing a hood to conceal her face and the dwarf gave her a good hard look.

“Only dwarves are allowed in Orsk,” he said. He then saw Travok and said, “your friend can come in.”

Travok walked in and Asny followed him only to be stopped by the dwarf.

“What business do you have here?” he demanded.

“We wish to talk with your leader.” Asny said.

“Your friend will have to do it for you. Does he know all the details?”

Travok nodded and the dwarf led him in. Travok assured Asny he wouldn’t be long. He was led through the garrison level and residential level where they climbed through two trading levels and another residential level before they came to the high class residential levels. Travok had never seen a city like it. He wondered if Kildrak had ever worked in somewhere like this. There was another high class residential level before they came to the leaders palace. Although since Orsk was part of Re’ Clar the leader, Orsik, thought of himself as a king.

The dwarf who met him told him to wait outside the palace while he went in and came out a few minutes later and told Travok the king would see him.

Travok went in and knelt down on one knee. Orsik told him to rise. “What brings you to Orsk?” the king asked. “Where do you come from, I don’t know of any other dwarf kingdoms nearby.”

“I come from Spicar.” Travok told him.

“Spicar!” Orsik exclaimed. “Are you a descendant of Kildrak?”

“I am,” Travok replied. “My father is Delg.”

“Tell me,” Orsik asked, “What is it the Kildrak did for Rilspor that made him king?”

“That was never recorded,” replied Travok.

“I should be bowing to you.” Orsik said and stood up from his throne and knelt down to Travok and gestured to anyone else in the room to do the same but Travok stopped them before anyone else could.

“I have come to you to ask you if you would consider coming out of what seems like a confinement in Orsk to help rid Re’ Clar of monsters.”

“We pride our dwarf ways.” Orsik said. “We have no desire to help if we are told by representatives of districts what we can do. In Orsk we can live by our own laws and values rather than those decided by a council.”

“What if I told you the last unaccounted member of the Tisserand family has returned and is the one requesting your help?”

“I don’t believe you.” Orsik said. “That was 85 years ago. Humans don’t live as long as dwarves.”

“He had a girl with him, my lord,” the dwarf who’d escorted Travok said.

“Is that her?” asked Orsik.

“I couldn’t see her face,” the dwarf said but I knew her voice sounded familiar.

“Bring her to me.” Orsik said. “The Tisserands never believed anyone was above the rules so you know the rules for the few non dwarves we have here.”

The dwarf led Travok back to the doors where Asny was waiting. In truth there had never been someone who wasn’t a dwarf in Orsk before but there were rules in place in the event that it may happen.

“Orsik would like to see you,” the dwarf said to Asny. “I’m afraid the rules are that anyone who is not a dwarf in Orsk must be blindfolded. Will you agree to that?”

“I will agree.” Asny replied. She’d expected that.

“You will have to blindfold me too then.” Travok said.

“No,” said Asny. “I want you there to hold my hand and guide me. You can’t do that if you too are blindfolded.”

Travok agreed and as he helped Asny back the way he’d just come, between him and their escort they helped Asny find her footing and get all the way to the palace without tripping or stumbling.

Travok and Asny waited outside and were then called in.

Travok led Asny in and stood by her in front of Orsik. Asny knelt down and Travok gave her a tap on the shoulder when Orsik had motioned her to stand. He was giving her a good hard look but wasn’t prepared to remove the blindfold.

“You are Asny Tisserand,” he said at last. “Do you remember me?”

“I remember your voice, King Orsik.” Asny said. “My mother thought more highly of you than many she knew.”

“I have the utmost respect for her.” Orsik said. “I extend that respect to you.”

“Thank you.” Asny said.

Travok whispered in her ear that the entire assembly had knelt before her and he joined them.

“Please get up.” Asny told them. “I am in your city and you are the king here.”

“We will come to your aid.” Orsik said. “There are at least five thousand warriors here. We’ll help you with your monster problem. Has anything already been done?”

“We cleared a city of ogres a couple of days ago.” Asny told him.

“Steady on.” Orsik said. “Leave some for us. Please join us for a meal and we will discuss what we can do.”

“May I humbly request that I remove the blindfold to eat?” Asny asked.

“Since you are our queen, I will allow that.” Orsik said. “I will have to insist that you continue to wear it until just before you eat. We will find you somewhere to sit. The meal is being prepared and will be ready presently.”

Five thousand dwarf warriors followed Asny and Travok from the gates of Orsk. There were as many magic users and clerics with

them and they had all been trained as thieves too. Every dwarf warrior over the age of 50 and under the age of 350 had volunteered. As soon as they crossed the threshold, Asny removed her blindfold and led the army to a camp in a nearby forest where people were gathering.

The plan was to alert the council that Asny had returned. The council usually met in Jarsk, which was a large city. It wasn't as big as the capital, Rivisk, but Rivisk had been overrun by Hobgoblins. The plan was to liberate every town between Orsk and Jarsk on their way and then the council could rally the rest of the people together.

It would take some time but Asny was confident that Re' Clar could once again enjoy its monster free status with their queen co-ordinating the plan, helped by her aide from the south...



Seventy-five years later Travok was on his way to Rivisk. He'd been at the border where he'd been sent a message that Spicar and Gumdrick had merged along with the kingdoms between them and Travok's brother had been given overall rule. It was said it had something to do with a debt that was owed to his family. Spicar and Re' Clar were in the process of forming a strong alliance which was being handled by the dwarves.

As Travok was crossing a high point of land an old man with a beard almost touching the ground approached him. Although he looked about a thousand years old, he was as fit as a man in his thirties.

When he reached Travok he greeted him.

“Hello there, Travok or Re’ Clar,” he said. “My name is Talōs. I’m sure you have heard of me. I’d like to have a talk with you.”

As he said this his face changed so that he looked like a man of about 40 with his beard disappearing altogether.

“I have heard of you.” Travok said. “Is it true that you were the mentor to both Visitork and Sord?”

“And many, many more.” Talōs said. “I have trained so many wizards of this world and I will continue to do so for many more years.”

Talōs appeared to be human but he must have been thousands of years old. Travok didn’t want to ask him how old he was.

“Just how old is Visitork?” he asked instead.

“We are from an ancient order of wizards.” Talōs said. “There is an island that we called ‘the land of the neverdead’. There grows a flower there that blooms only once every five hundred years. A sacrifice of pure blood must be made for it to produce orange flowers instead of yellow. These orange flowers can be used to make an elixir of eternal life. The flower blooms for only a few minutes before it withers and the petals are useless, however if you can get the yellow petals, they can give you a drink that will give you five hundred years of life. Most people who do this will try again.”

“Have you drunk this elixir?” asked Travok.

“No one has ever succeeded in making it. Those who try again usually fail. For those five hundred years they had the sole ambition of returning to ‘the land of the neverdead’. It is only after they fail that they realise that they could have achieved much in those five hundred years if they hadn’t been obsessed with returning to the flower. The flower once produced a leaf that didn’t wither and was pulled off by someone trying to get at the petals. The leaf was caught in the wind and blown into a river. A few thousand years later a wizard sought the flower and failed, but he dropped his supplies in the river and accidentally picked up the leaf. When he returned home the leaf got mixed up in his tea and this tea was sent to the wizards guild.

It was a special drink for newly qualified wizards. It wasn’t until the tea that had the leaf in it ran out, that we realised what had happened. The leaf doesn’t provide eternal life but it has provided us with thousands of years of agelessness. We can be killed or die by accident but we will not age for a long time.”

“Do you know how long you have left?” Travok asked. “Until we start aging again no one knows.” Talōs said. “I have no doubt we still have a few thousands years to go.”

Travok wanted to ask another question but Talōs seemed to know the question and answered it before Travok could ask it.

“I am the Talōs that the Lizardine said he’d met.”

“How do you know about that?” asked Travok.

“I have you at a disadvantage.” Talōs said. “I know all the details of your journey, as if I was with you. It is just something I happen to know. I was the one who asked Visitork to stop by Spicar and escort you north. I insisted he accompany you all the way.”

“He didn’t finish the journey.” Travok said.

“I know.” Talōs replied. “It was the disagreement about the sword. He thought that since the sword was from the centre of the Cave of Time that it had to be guarded from anyone else getting it. Only Asny could wield it but he didn’t know that.”

“Mintik has it now.” Travok said. “Is there a problem with that?”

“I don’t think so.” Talōs said. “This world is never short of heroes. I’m sure if he becomes a problem a hero will be at hand.”

“Should I not have given him the sword?” Travok asked.

“Whether you should or not, doesn’t matter,” Talōs told him. “You did the right thing since you thought he’d release Asny in exchange for it. I know of the deep love you share. Some people in Re’ Clar believe you to be her husband.”

“That’s not true.” Travok said.

“It may not be, but your love is.” Talōs told him.

“Asny is ninety-five,” Travok said, “although she can still fight the same as when I first met her.”

“When she used the gold dragon brooch,” Talōs told him, “the hidden powers of time reset her clock. It means the expiration of her allotted time on this world has been delayed.” Talōs said. “I know more than most people should about destiny. That’s why I asked Visitork to bring you here, because of what you were to do. Your destiny is not yet over. I know that Asny will be able to fight like she still does right up until her last few days.”

They passed the top of the hill and looked at Rivisk in the distance with the northern coast of Osse behind it.

“I’ve been asking you questions.” Travok said. “You said you wanted to talk to me about something.”

“Yes,” replied Talōs. “I have a request for you.”

“I cannot agree to a request until I hear it.” Travok said. “I have heard many stories of someone promising to grant a request which they would never have promised if they’d known what they were promising to.”

“I admire that you like to get to know someone before you judge them.” Talōs said. “I also think you’re wise of being wary of any wizard who has mentored both Visitork and Sord.”

Travok wasn’t sure how he should take that, so he waited for Talōs to go on.

“There is a young man in Re’ Clar called Arslam.” Talōs said. “I’d like you to keep an eye on him. Teach him what you have learnt from living here. Teach him how Asny rules. He has a great destiny ahead. I will return to advise him but he must be on course to begin with. I was hoping you might be able to set him on that course.”

Travok was about to tell Talōs that he’d do that, but found he was alone.

Five years later Travok was summoned to Asny’s chamber. She was lying in her bed. Her appearance had changed. She now looked 100 years old. Travok remembered what Talōs had said that Asny would only show the signs of her age just before time caught up with her.

“I want you to be king of Re’ Clar,” she said. “I’ve summoned my aides so they can be a witness to me giving you the kingdom. I know the people will accept you as king. Even if I hadn’t named a successor they would probably want you to be king.”

Travok leaned over, “Dearest Asny,” he said. “I can’t be king. I left my home to avoid becoming king. I know that was because I could not be the king I wanted to be, then. I have learnt a lot now, and know I could be the king I wanted to be, but I have also come to realise, that I was never supposed to be a king.”

“There is no one I can give my kingdom to apart from you.” Asny said.

Travok knew that she meant that her kingdom was the most valuable thing she had. She wanted to leave it to the person she loved the most and felt that she would be betraying him if she gave it to anyone else.

“Your kingdom is not your most valuable asset.” Travok said. “That is your heart. I gave you mine long ago and I know you’ve given me

yours. There is nothing I would rather have. Your kingdom is great but against your heart there is no comparison.”

Asny’s eyes filled with tears. “Who shall I leave my kingdom to then? I think you should name the successor.”

Travok thought. “Arslam,” he said. He remembered Talōs telling him to teach Arslam how Asny ruled and realised that the destiny he had, probably involved him being a king.

When Asny’s aides arrived they were there to witness her giving her kingdom to Arslam, much to their surprise since they had believed like everyone else in Re’ Clar that she would give it Travok. Before she died she warned him that the warlock who’d imprisoned her 165 years ago, and who’d cursed them 80 years ago was still at large.

After Asny’s funeral that involved a floating funeral pyre Travok decided to spend some time alone but Arslam came to find him and asked Travok what he planned to do now.

“I’m not sure,” Travok said. “I know that I belong to Re’ Clar but without Asny, I’m not sure I want to remain.”

“I was hoping you’d be my advisor.” Arslam said. “You have taught me so much, but there must be much more you could teach me.”

“I have taught you what it means to be king and what I have learnt from Asny, but the next lesson is one you have to teach yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Arslam asked,

“The decisions that you have to make now are not ones that I can make for you. If you can be half as good a king as Asny was queen you’ll be a hero.” Travok told him.

“She’s set a high standard to follow.” Arslam said.

“I believe you will excel.” Travok said. “You will do great things.”

Arslam looked pleased. He’d not been sure if he could be seen as a good king after Asny, but he relaxed now that he knew they wouldn’t compare him.

“I’ve decided.” Travok said suddenly. “I’m going to leave.”

“Leave Re’ Clar?” asked Arslam.

“Leave Osse.” Travok said. “There must be other opportunities elsewhere on Toril.”

“Are you going to take a ship?” asked Arslam.

“Since Osse is an island continent, there’s little option.” Travok said.

“I thought dwarves didn’t like travelling over water.” Arslam said.

“I can’t stay here.” Travok told him.

“Will you stay for my crowning?” Arslam asked him,
“I need to leave right away.” Travok said. “I’ll be gone before dawn.
Everything here reminds me of Asny. If I’m going to be able to
manage without her I need to go.”

“I didn’t think dwarves made the kind of connection during a
humans lifetime that you must have
made.”

“Asny was unique.” Travok said. “I
wouldn’t make the same bond with
any other human. There must have
been something that said we were
right for each other.”

After a long pause Travok excused
himself and went to pack his things
and made his way to the harbour
making sure no one saw him go. He
was on a ship for Waterdeep in
Faerûn, that had crossed the horizon
before anyone but Arslam noticed he
was gone.

