

MAGIC HELPERS

ZEEBRAN DENATH

A Novel by Denzil Oakes

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Chapter One

Zeebran Denath

It was a late afternoon early in autumn as a young man barely in his twenties laboured along a dusty highland path. The man was fit and hale but the altitude was high and the air was thin. The youth had been travelling a long time on short provisions, rising early in the morning, sleeping little, walking from dusk to dawn with little rest. He had not money to seek the comfort of an Inn or a hearty meal. Living on what he could catch and a few pieces of dry bread, he was too much in haste to stop and work for food. Weariness had become his constant companion, yet he struggled on in his important mission.

The object of his quest was in sight at last. As he rounded what was until then just another bend in the seemingly endless road. There, nestled at the foot of a jutting boulder, stood a castle. Not a magnificent hall full of light, a small, modest castle dwarfed by an imposing peak.

Our wayfarer however was elated by a glimpse of it brooding there. Being more accustomed to cow-sheds than castles, it seemed to him a fitting abode for a mighty and powerful wizard.

Had he viewed it with a discerning eye, he would have thought it a rather stunted castle. It was one of those enigmatic places, with small clumps of slightly squat trees, or large bushes, if you will.

Portions of the building peeked out from behind these occasionally only to disappear again a little further down the track. This, along with the undulations of the ground, combined to frustrate the voyager. Now the end was in sight and then it disappeared. Atop the next rise it becomes visible again but never in the same direction in which you expect to see it.

This castle defies all operations of logic. On reasoning from which direction it was last seen and taking into account the twists and turns through which we have come, it ought to appear over here. But it is now over there!

After several disappearances, in which it has crossed the road several times, the seeker is totally bewildered, especially as he is now firmly convinced that the edifice is now further away than it was before.

‘Perhaps there are two castles.’ He thinks ‘One on either side of the road.’

But no. There is one and, at length, the path leads him to it and he stands at the very door and wonders if he dares to knock. What if he should disturb The Mighty Wizard and bring his wrath upon him?

As if to prove he was unafraid, he knocks...

‘Rap. Tap. Tap.’

...upon the door of The Wizard’s Castle.

Had he not been so preoccupied with his own fear, and with the urgency of his mission, he might have noticed that the castle was a little the worse for wear. It was showing signs of disrepair. It was chipped and cracked around the edges, as little bits of it began to wear-away.

Bits of debris, deserters from atop the walls, were strewn about the place like molehills and at this altitude, with these poor soils, there were no moles. Indeed, around the castle itself, there was no soil, for it was foundationed on solid rock. It was a cold, hard, dingy place, void of ornament, except for the doors themselves, which were of solid iron and engraved with twin serpents.

The castle stood upon a small mound of rock but this mound was skirted by a well soiled dip, scattered with trees and ribbed by a brook. Behind the castle was the jagged peak of the one and only real mountain amongst these high, rolling hills.

All of this was lost to the visitor as he stood in the doorway, wondering how he would explain himself to The Wizard. If indeed there was a wizard. Imagine asking someone, some ordinary man.. ‘Excuse me. Are you a wizard?’ ...

Wouldn’t you feel silly if he wasn’t?

The long delay left the young man wondering if no-one was at home, and thinking what a waste it would be to have to turn around and go back home. How awful it would be to have failed, and how dire the consequences.

Should he knock again or would this invite the ire of The Mystic Gentleman within?

Then he heard the clicking of a latch, and then another and then another. The small door within the larger began to open.

Our hero was expecting his quarry to be the wizened, old man that his grandfather had described to him. The figure that greeted him was neither young nor old, but ageless. One might say the man was in his middle forties. He had longish hair and a full beard and piercing eyes. His clothes were worn and dishevelled. Naturally this could not be The Great Man Himself. Such a mighty wizard would not have to open the door for himself. This man must be a servant or perhaps The Wizard’s Apprentice.

“I wish to speak to Zeebran Denath.”

The Young Man uttered, nervously, his voice sounding rather presumptuous even to his own ears. He tried to moderate his abruptness by adding ...

“If I may.”

But this sounded no better.

The figure in the doorway stood, gaze firmly affixed upon the young man, who stood before him, as if weighing up the possibilities.

Here was a youth, not old enough for him to have met, for it had been so long since he had ventured forth among men, asking for him by a name which he never used. The querant was dressed as a peasant farmer and yet bore a sword which was strangely familiar. A most unremarkable young man and yet strangely familiar, like a ghost from the past. He looked at the tanned skin, which suggested a southerner, the short, dark hair, something about the shape of the nose and mouth and that sword? The accent too. He had the field narrowed down to a dozen possibilities.

The Young man wondered if The Doorman might be hard of hearing. Impatience and anxiety got the better of him.

“The Wizard! I must see The Wizard!” He shouted.

“You are looking at him.” The Man said, coolly.

“The Old Wizard.” The Young Man replied.

“Zeebran Denath I am and I am the only one. Who are you and what do you want of me?” Zeebran explained and demanded.

“My Grandfather sent me.” Torgud answered.

“Then you had better come in.” Zeebran invited.

The Young Man entered and waited whilst The ‘Wizard’ closed and bolted the door. He still did not believe that this was his grandfather’s companion and saviour. He was wary and rested his right hand upon the butt of his sword.

“You’ll not be needing that.” The Sage laughed, although his back was turned.

“They walked across a courtyard and entered a room which, the visitor noticed, was well kept, not what you would expect from the outside.

“This is The North Wing.” The Wizard answered the unuttered question. “It is the only part of the old place still in use. Now sit down and tell me your story.”

“It is My Grandfather. A witch has stolen his chi.” Torgud explained.

“Hang on a minute.” The Man gestured, picking up a book and reading it briefly. “What a strange concept!” He exclaimed, then added. “By this you mean that he is dying?”

“Wasting away.” Torgud lamented.

“But is he not an old man? Perhaps he wastes because it is in the nature of old men, and what has this to do with witchcraft?”

“He is not so very old. He was hearty before and The Witch left us signs of her sorcery.” Torgud produces, from a small bag, his evidence.

“What do we have here? Firstly, Sorcery is practised by Sorcerers, Witchcraft by Witches. Be precise. Secondly, these things, bits of knotted string, pieces of paper bearing strange symbols, even entrails of chickens, they signify nothing. What you have here is nothing to me. It is, however, something to Your Grandfather and this is where his problem lies.” Zeebran points to his head.

“Then you can help.” Torgud sounds relieved.

“Perhaps I might, if we are not already too late, but there is first something you must know. These trinkets show no great power. Any charlatan can produce these, even get them to work but, if we are dealing with a witch of real power, this is very dangerous indeed. You must be prepared to lose your life, should we fail.”

“I am no coward.” The Young Man pointed out, indignantly.
 “I have not finished yet.” The Sage added, patiently. “I must confess to you that I am not The Great Wizard that I once was. Usually a wizard will defeat a witch, even a mighty one, nine times out of ten, no problem, but that is a proper wizard, possessed of all his powers.

I appear before you a shadow of my former self. I have been thrust out of ‘wizard society’, stripped of my rank. I am Wizard no longer. My powers are strictly limited. I do not know if I can help you or no but all of those powers which I possess are at your disposal.”

“I do not understand. How can A Wizard be ‘thrown out’? How stripped of power? Why? Of what heinous crime were you convicted?” Torgud was amazed.

“I cannot teach you the ways of my people, secrets kept through the long ages. As for my crime... I fell in love with and married a cute, little elf.” The Wizard spoke sportingly and lines of joy furrowed his face into most unwizardlike expressions.

“And this is a crime?” Torgud puzzled.

“It is. A very great one. And for good reason. Wizard and Elf are different kind and may be great friends but let that friendship extend too far and there is grave danger in this. They may influence each other in unpredictable ways. Elves, you see, are frivolous, fun-loving folk, full of jollity and of light heart, always making merry, dancing, singing, playing. Too much sport, you see, may turn a wizard to evil ways and be his undoing.

More than this, the serious, studious, power-seeking, knowledge-seeking nature of a wizard may turn an elf into a fiend. We are, by nature, incompatible.”

“Yet, you married an elf, knowing this.” Torgud demanded.

“Knowing full well that this road may be fraught with danger, that we could corrupt each other. Yes, we married. It is love, you see, and the power of love is more compelling than custom, more compelling than logic, more even than life itself. We had to be together, My Wife and I, simply had to. There was no other answer for it.

It was not easy. We both have given up so much for our love’s sake. I am thrust out of my people. Thrust out, that is, not actually cast down. They didn’t have the heart to. And she is outcast from her kind also. It is so bad for her because elves, you see, have a collective consciousness.” The thought brings a tear to his eye and his face is stricken, for a moment, with grief.

“Still, best not to dwell upon it. We are together, that is all that matters.” He concludes.

“They Your Lady Elf is here with you?” The Young man observes with glee.

“You wish to meet her. That I can see.” Said The Wizard.

He whispers softly, as if to himself.

“You may come in, Love.”

A small, thin figure appears through the doorway and glides across the room with the effortless grace of a hawk. The room is bathed in silence as The Young Man is too much in awe to draw breath.

The Lady is thin and pale as fine porcelain and draped in alabaster white folds of cloth which flow around her like fine clouds as she moves. Her voice sounds as clear as a bell, as soft as the falling leaves, yet as mellow as a reed.

“Welcome to our humble abode.” She greets him with a sweep of a curtsy, as if part of a dance. “You must have some.”

She offers him food and drink from a tray, carried with such ease that he had not noticed it ‘til then.

He is relaxed immediately by her greeting, as if his troubles had disappeared and the miles of weary road seemed to melt from him.

“Thank you.” Was all the speech he could muster as he took a cake and tea.

“This is Torgud, Dear. He is having a little trouble with a witch.”

Zeebran introduces. “This is my wife. She doesn’t have a name. A name, you see, is an important part of being an elf. When they expelled her she lost her name as well.”

Now, looking at her closely, Torgud noticed that she was showing signs of age. Her hair was ashen grey and her face, though untouched by any line or wrinkle, had lost the bloom of youth.

He said nothing but Zeebran, as if responding to his thoughts, answered the unasked question.

“Yes, Torgud, elves are ever young. Thus you see the depth of our calamity. We are tied together and I take on an aspect of her and she of me. Wizards are seldom young, while barely in their twenties they take on that look of gnarled old age. Thus you see in her my age and in me her youth co-mingled with ourselves.”

“Your Lady is an Elf, couldn’t she help to dispel The Witch.”

Torgud asked.

“An Elf alone was never a match for a witch.” Zeebran explained.

“Elves are good for protection. It is said that where there are many elves no evil may prevail. Elves combine their powers. The more elves, the more powerful they become. My Wife is only one, poor elf and has been cut off from her kind.

In addition, an elf cannot act out of malice and remain an elf. To wish to do harm to another would change herself into a creature of mischief. She would become a pixie or even a goblin.”

“How so?” Torgud wondered.

“Some creatures are more spirit than others. A worm is almost all flesh with just a dash of spirit. A mouse has more spirit than a worm but not as much as a fox. So it goes from lower lives to higher.

Lower lives know nothing of good or evil. They are impartial. When a creature develops understanding, then its spirit has a valence. It is either positive, which is good, or negative, which is evil.

A man is much of flesh with some spirit. A dwarf is more spirit again. An elf is half spirit and half flesh, as are other mystic creatures, wizards, witches, genies, dragons, the list goes on. Fairies, Angels and the like are more spirit than flesh, so much of spirit that they lose any aspirations of the flesh and are almost immune to temptation.

Thus we have two things which determine our power. How much spirit we are and of what valence and how this is manifest. In man there is a division of the spirit between good and evil. That is why a normal man has no mystical powers. His spirit is divided, his good and evil wills cancel one another. To develop any real power a man has to choose to strengthen one side above the other. He must be devoted to good or to evil.

This is not so for an elf. An elf is born with a single valence, that of spiritual good. To do evil is not in an elf. In order to do evil an elf must change. A pixie is of elven kind but it has changed to become spiritually neutral. It has forgotten the difference between good and evil. It has lost its true nature. A pixie is never truly evil. It simply no longer understands the harm it does. It has lost its spirit and therefore lost its true-elfly powers.

Goblins, Orcs and Trolls are of elf-kind too, but they have taken a further step. They have changed their valence from good to evil. They have lost some power and their evil spirits have changed their appearance.

Wizards are like men but composed more of spirit and therefore of greater power. The more they stick to the same path the greater is their strength. They can do good or evil and what matters is not the deed itself but the motive for doing it. I can use my powers to kill without diminishing them, so long as I kill in a good cause and for a good motive. An elf, doing the same thing for the same reason may be driven mad by the deed and become a pixie.”

“It is very complicated.” Torgud remarks.

“So it is and we have much to do. First you must sleep and I must prepare for our journey. We will leave at first light in the morning. Show our guest to his room, Dear.” Zeebran requests of his wife. His lady had been sitting on the floor, gently strumming upon a harp and singing an elven song. It’s haunting refrain only becomes apparent to Torgud’s ears as The Wizard stops speaking. The last, lilting note lingers in the air, seeming to circle the room before it fades away.

“What was that, Dear?” She asks, in a voice which echoes the song.

“Could you show our guest to his room, please?” Zeebran repeats, patiently.

“Yes, of course. You must be so tired after walking all that way. Still, you shall sleep well tonight and awake in the morning fully rested.”

Her statement sounded more like a prediction or even a proclamation as she glided across the room and flowed out through the doorway.

Torgud barely had time to realise that he should follow her. She had disappeared by the time he had regained his feet.

Zeebran smiled at him and gave him a knowing wink.

“You have to make allowances for elves.” He proffered, then whispered. “Darling, haven’t you forgotten something?”

The Lady reappears, blushing coyly.

“It’s just this way.” She remarks, with a smile. “If you would like to follow.”

Torgud awoke, as The Elf had said, having had the best night’s rest in his life. It was as if the last three weeks of walking had never happened. The soothing sound that he heard was the lilting voice of The Lady Herself.

“It is time to rise.” She greeted him, setting down a tray of breakfast and, by the time he had looked up from where she had set it, she was gone.

He sat up, blinking, wondering if she had been there at all, or if she had been in his dream. He looked for the tray, half expecting it not to be there. It was. He concluded that he must have seen an elf in his bedroom after all.

He lay back, daydreaming about her, thinking how beautiful she was and trying to remember every detail of her. She was dressed in red this morning, a red, frilly, lace gown. Her hair cascading over her arms merged with the silver of the tray she had carried in one hand, for she had touched him with the other, he now remembered.

He still felt a strange, warm glow in his shoulder and remembered the faintness of her touch. He looked again at the heavy, metal tray and the weighty silver plates and cup and even a silver vase sporting a single, red rose. He wondered how she could carry such a load in one hand without spilling anything.

He arose and tried himself to pick up the tray and set it down again without upsetting anything. It was quite heavy and there was a cup brimming with tea and a bowl of some liquid, like soup, also very full. The weight of the load took hold and dragged the far side down.

He plied the strength of his work hardened, young muscles, for he had worked in the fields since he was ten, to pull the tray back level. He overcompensated and tea and soup became miniature oceans a-dash with waves. The slender vase toppled, spilling water and rose onto the floor. Thus the tray was tipped sideways to boot and only with great effort did the young man manage to stabilise it as waves of piping hot liquid splashed out of their intended containers, first this side and then that.

Torgud, defeated, grasped the tray firmly in both hands and then, with difficulty, set it down again without further accident. The tray and the floor were swamped with liquid. He felt guilty and foolish and thought that he would be in BIG TROUBLE when the mess was discovered.

‘She must be as strong as an ox.’ He thought to himself.

Then he concluded that he must have been mistaken. She could not have carried the tray in one hand. After all, he was still half asleep and only saw her for a second and the memory plays tricks.

This decided, he set about eating what remained of his breakfast and had quite forgotten about it when she reappeared.

“Are you finished your breakfast?” She crooned, as she moved unhurriedly and with an easy grace across the room.

Her crimson gown swirled around her as she moved, obscuring her true shape. The cloth reached so nearly to the ground that she seemed not to have legs at all.

“Had a little accident, did we?” She smiled merrily. “Never mind, you’ll soon get the hang of it.”

She dipped down and wiped up the liquid from the floor with a cloth which Torgud wondered where she had carried and why?

In a trice she had dried the floor and picked up the tray in one hand, for she held the cloth in the other, turned on her heels and swept out again.

Torgud wondered how she could move so quickly without seemingly hurrying and what did she mean by ‘soon get the hang of it’? Had she been spying on him? Or did she just know everything?

While he was still wondering, she returned, carrying what he recognised as his clothes. They were all washed and mended almost like new garments. He could have sworn that he had been wearing them when he retired.

“Zeebran says you must have these.” She said, offering them to him with a curtsy. “They were broken so I have fixed them for you. There is a shower just down the hall if you wish to cleanse yourself. I have three things to tell you.” She stands, pondering.

“Oh dear, I have forgotten something. The clothes, the shower and what? I hope He isn’t going to get mad at me. Edramuth!” She says, biting her thumb and staring at the ceiling.

“Yes, I must remember to get that crack in the ceiling fixed. Do you like the floral design? It reminds me of home. In the forest, that’s where I used to live so long ago. Oh, yes. Be ready in ten minutes.”

With that she turned and left Torgud wondering if she was sane or if he was not.

Torgud emerged onto the main stairway of the castle. He looked down to see the two mystics preparing to leave. Zeebran was donning a black cloak, which made him look every inch The Wizard that he was supposed to be. His wife was fastening about her a red cloak, which matched her dress. Torgud gazed at this strange couple in complete silence. They both looked up at him together, as if they felt his presence.

“You are just in time, Young Man.” Zeebran observed. “Are you walking down or shall I call for a cab?” He quipped.

Torgud dashed down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“We are in a hurry.” Zeebran instructed. “But not in reckless haste.”

“Where is My Grandfather’s Sword?” Torgud asked.

“Do you need a sword?” The Sage enquired, searchingly.

“It is mine. That is, it is my grandfather’s and will be mine.”

Torgud corrected himself.

“Very well, we will carry it with us but not openly. Swords attract attention and, being instruments of violence, invite violence. We can put it in the wagon. Fetch his sword, Love.” He speaks to his wife in a different voice, as though his normal tone would bruise her.

She was, until then, deftly tracing out the steps of some complicated dance. The many folds of her clothing, held in her hands six inches off the ground, revealed her dainty feet, unshod, for elves seldom wear shoes. Even then, elf shoes and elf boots are made remarkably soft and of perfect fit, to allow the feel of the earth to show through. Elves like to feel the earth beneath their feet and the wind and weather through their clothes. Thus the fabrics they use are light. They admit the elements even when thrown into many folds.

She finished her dance, or this phrase of it, and then she looked up with an expression of deep concentration, as if searching the air for something she had lost.

“You said something?” She addressed her husband, as if she had not heard.

“Would you bring Torgud’s sword here, please?” He explained, in his softest voice.

“Does he have a sword?” She asked, as if she had never seen any. Torgud imagined them playing this elaborate trick just to rob him of his grandfather’s sword. He thought how foolish he must be, how naïve, to trust these strange folk. He had gone to sleep under their roof, not knowing whether they would slit his throat and have him for breakfast.

She looked at him with eyes the very epitome of sorrow. Her skin, normally pale, blanched visibly, as if looking straight into his heart. The barbs she saw there cut deeply into her soul.

“I... I don’t remember!” She cried out in a pitiful voice, like a wounded animal.

Her eyes moistened a little. Her cool ease had melted away and she stood trembling like a lost child.

“A sword? A sword! I um.” She paused, deep in thought. “...took it and cleaned it and ...”

She went into a dance, turning around and around until she had described the shape of a clover leaf on the floor of the entrance hall.

Torgud, now drenched in sorrow for her was about to relent, to tell her that it really didn’t matter, to relinquish His Grandfather’s Sword, which had been his grandfathers’ before him and been in the family for a hundred years, just to see her happy once more. He would have given anything not to hurt her, done anything to appease her.

Her sorrow tore at his heart like nothing he had ever known.

“Don’t worry.” Zeebran halted him. “She will find it.”

Suddenly she stopped dancing.

“Ah, there it is!” She exclaimed with glee, as if she was looking at it on the bare, stone floor before her.

Then she scurried off in a zigzag pattern, with a leap in the middle of the floor and a full turn at the doorway.

“Elves remember only dances and songs and all things are described and remembered, understood and communicated by them in this way.” Zeebran told him. “You must never interrupt them or interfere with them in a song or a dance. Don’t worry if she becomes serious or sad. It is me in her. She will soon recover.” She reappeared through the open doorway, her usual self and earnestly enquired.

“What did you want with this, Dear?”

“It is Torgud’s.” He replied, unperturbed. “Shall we go?” And stepped outside.

Stepping out into a grey, wet world, Torgud saw before him a sort of gypsy caravan with cracked and peeling paint-work, rusty, old wheels, hitched to an old, grey mare.

The Elf followed him, carrying the sword as if it were unclean, holding only the belt-buckle between the thumb and forefinger, the scabbard hung down, dragging on the floor behind her.

“You had better take this.” She said to Torgud, holding it out to him. “There is much death in it.”

“Let me put it in the wagon.” The Wizard offered.

“No.” Torgud replied, sharply. “I will wear it.”

“Very well.” Zeebran relinquished, with a shake of his head. “But on your head be it.”

Torgud did not see what the fuss was about. Had he not carried the sword already thousands of miles and it never once had caused him trouble?

Zeebran turned to His Lady with sadness in his eyes.

“It is time to let them go, Dear.” He nodded his head towards the back of the castle.

“I had quite forgotten about them.” She bumbled, taking off across the courtyard at a gallop.

“You will have to bear with us a moment.” The Wizard turned to Torgud. “It is her animals you see. We must turn them loose or they will starve.”

Torgud appreciated the importance of tending to the beasts, having been a farmer all his life. He was interested to see what The Lady kept.

“Can I see them?” He asked, fervently.

“Yes.” Said The Wizard, after some deliberation. “But I warn you she may be sad. I cannot bear to see her sadness. I will wait here.”

Torgud followed where The Elf had disappeared, through an archway and into a smaller courtyard. He heard, not sorrow, but squeals and giggles of glee. His eyes were met with dozens of pens and cages, half of them already open. The Lady was running around merrily lifting latches and opening gates, crying out...

“You’re free.”

Puzzled animals sat bemused all about the courtyard, wondering what had befallen. Some of them were even trying to return to their cages. A white rabbit sat at the back of his cage refusing to budge, as if to say...

‘Not likely. This is my home and it’s warm and safe inside.’

She was gently coaxing him out.

“Come on, Silly, it’s time to go home.”

He could not resist the warmth of her voice and edged himself forwards, sniffing the air nervously. He caught an unfamiliar scent and dashed back home again.

“Just like a rabbit.” She exclaimed, then turned to see Torgud.

“Oh, it’s you.”

She was standing with a dozen doves whirling about her head.

Beside her a little donkey and a half-grown bear, which followed wherever she went. She dashed across the courtyard to where an old owl sat scowling at the world.

“I haven’t forgotten you, Tylluan, my wise, old owl. How are you today?”

The Owl sat dispassionately for a moment and then took flight, climbing up to the height of the nearest wall he sat upon the battlements, glaring down at them.

“He’s a grumpy old thing, just like my husband, but he doesn’t mind me really. He above all will be here when we return.”

“I am sure he will. What male could resist you, Lady?” Torgud uttered and then regretted.

“You like me, do you?” She acknowledged his sideways compliment. “Better watch out for My Husband. He’s awfully jealous.”

“I didn’t mean...” Torgud began to apologise.

She cut him short.

“Don’t worry. I understand. You are only human and I am just being an elf. You will have to forgive me that.”

“So this is what goes on behind my back!” Zeebran’s voice boomed out from behind them.

They are both startled and turn around to see him standing, smiling at them.

Torgud breathes a sigh of relief.

Zeebran chortles.

“Your face.” He says. “I just couldn’t resist it.”

“Now, Dear, stop being silly.” She chided him playfully.

“If all of the cages are open then we must go.” He announces and then leaves.

They follow silently.

The animals followed them into the courtyard. The bear, the donkey, a hedgehog, a badger, two lizards and even the white rabbit deigned to join them. The doves fluttered overhead and the owl sat on his perch above, scowling down at them.

The Wizard and The Lady boarded the cart.

“I will lead the horse.” Torgud offered.

He took the reins and the old wheels began turning, creaking across the yard. The animals followed after, each one at its own pace.

A few yards down the road, Zeebran called a halt.

“Woe, Torgud. We must wait until all the animals are out and then close the gates.”

“Don’t get down, Sir. I can do it.” Torgud offered.

They sat counting to see that all were clear.

“Three dogs, two cats, the mice will find their own way out.

There’s the rabbit and the lizards, now where’s that hedgehog?”

She accounted.

“Don’t worry about the crow.” Zeebran shouted. “He can fly. See that the hedgehog gets out.”

Torgud, watching through the doorway, was overcome with amusement to find himself waiting for a hedgehog.

“He’s coming.” He laughed. “Slowly.”

Then, seconds later, he added with a grin...

“He’s still coming.”

At last the tardy hedgehog waddled through the gateway and Torgud hurriedly swung-to the large, heavy doors, one after the other, bolted them from the inside moved through and closed and locked the smaller door. He ran to the cart and took up his position at the reins.

“No wait!” The Elf shouted, urgently. “Couldn’t I keep just the one. Let me have the rabbit, please, Edramuth.” She called her husband by his elven name, pleadingly. “Just one, little rabbit.”

“Go on.” He surrendered.

She glided down from her seat, and dashed up towards the rabbit, stopping a few steps away she crooned to him.

“Come on, Dear Little One.”

He hopped up to her and she scooped him up gently.

“We are going on a little journey, an adventure.”

She walked back to the caravan and, with a single leap, soared up onto the seat.

“We are ready, Driver.” She said, in mock grandeur. “You may proceed.”

Proceeded they did, for it was a procession. All of the animals followed still. The slower ones fell behind rapidly. The swifter carried on for mile upon mile. The weather turned nasty. The wind gusted and howled, throwing sheets of water against the caravan until it seemed as though it were a boat.

Through the driving rain trudged Torgud, the old, grey mare, three dogs, a donkey and a bear. While on the cart rode The Wizard, His Elf, Her Rabbit, a crow, six doves and a tawny, old owl, the last looking ever-so grim. The rabbit was the only one who had sense enough to stay inside, out of the rain.

Zeebran, in his wizard’s cloak, remained reasonably dry through the foul weather. Torgud found that the rain had soaked through most of his clothes, by degrees, and where it could not soak through it ran down through every available opening. The Lady, in her elven clothes, had been soaked through ever since the rain began. The more it rained and the harder the wind blew the merrier she seemed.

At length Zeebran called to Torgud.

“Come inside and get dry.”

“I’m alright.” Torgud replied, stubbornly.

“It’s time for dinner anyway.” Zeebran countered. “Now don’t be silly.”

“All right.” Torgud relented, halted and clambered aboard.

The Elf took the reins and continued driving.

“Isn’t she coming too?” Torgud demanded.

“She’s in her element.” Zeebran assured him. “I haven’t seen her so happy in ages. She hasn’t been out properly in forty years. An Elf was never meant to be shut away in a dingy, old castle. They love to roam free. They love the wind and weather. It has affected her badly, being shut away like that. I hate to see her wasting away. I have hated myself for being the cause of it.”

Zeebran is cooking up some stew as he talks.

“I don’t know what we are going to do about all of these animals tagging along. Here, dry yourself off.”

He throws Torgud a towel.

“It’s funny. I’ve seen her sit there crying, to see those animals caged. I thought it would torture her to say goodbye to them but she was actually happy to let them go. Maybe she knew that they wouldn’t leave her. She might have planned to bring them along. Between you and me.” He said, with a wink. “She’s pretty clever at getting her own way.”

“Why did you put them in cages anyway?” Torgud asked. “If it upset her so?”

“If you let them roam around they get into strife. They get hunted by men, bother the neighbourhood ... We had some trouble a while back so what could I do? Most of them are strays anyway, wounded or neglected, she takes them in, fixes them up and for the most part lets them go again. There’s never less than a dozen of them about at one time. I can’t stand them myself. Never have anything to do with them. Any animals, if they can’t hold down a decent conversation, I don’t want to know them. Here’s your dinner, Dear.”

He pushes a bowl of piping hot stew out to his wife.

“Enough of this. About this witch. Tell me all you know, everything that has happened. Leave out no detail, no matter how trivial it might seem to you.” The Wizard instructed.

“About three years ago this old crone appeared claiming to be a witch most powerful and says if we don’t pay homage to her and do her bidding that she will curse us and great evil will befall us.”

“That is most strange.” Zeebran comments. “Carry on.”

“Well, we laughed at her, dared her to do her worst. She said she would cause a great drought, turn our fields into a desert. Since then, no rain has fallen for three years. The river dried up, even our wells all dried. There is not a drop of water to be found. Many people gave way and now do the witch’s bidding. Many others moved away, trying to escape her power. Evil has befallen many on the road. My Grandfather, he’s a mercenary soldier still, although over sixty. He came back from a war far away and sees our village in fear of this wench. He said he had some experience with witches and all kinds of strange adventures. He said he knows how to deal with witches. He went away and returned two weeks later with all sorts of weird things. Powders and potions and symbols of great power. You must know the kind of thing I mean.”

“Quite so.” Zeebran affirmed. “It was very foolish of Tomas to try to take-on a witch at her own game.”

“But, I never told you his name.” Torgud utters, falteringly.

“Go on with your story.” Zeebran smiles at him.

“How long have you known?” Torgud queries.

“Why do you suppose I agreed to help you, Young Man? If my debt to your grandfather had not been so great I would not have given you the time of day.

A month before you came I knew that someone was in trouble. We Wizards have our methods you know, even fallen ones. Now let us hear the rest.”

“So Grandfather took it upon himself to go after The Witch. ‘You are old’ I told him and begged him to let me go in his stead, or to let me go with him. No. He would go alone. Just one day he took off whilst I was sleeping. The next day he staggered back to us. He was in a terrible state. ‘She has bested me.’ He said. Said he was lucky to escape with his life and fell into a deep sleep from which he seldom awakens. Every once in a while he breaks free and is able to talk. He sent me to you, instructed me the way to go.” Torgud concluded.

“And what else did he say?” Zeebran demanded, firmly.

“He was not always lucid. He raved a lot and talked in his sleep.” Torgud added, uncertainly.

“Tell me about The Sword.” Zeebran prompted, pointedly.

“Torgud looked uneasy, fidgeted and avoided The Wizard’s gaze.

“He told me not to take the sword.” He blurted, at length, after gathering his courage. “He said it was cursed and all who carry it.”

“He said that, did he? My Wife has carried it.” The Wizard looked deeply into The Young Man’s eyes. “Why did you bring this cursed thing with you into my household!” The Wizard shouted and fairly shook with rage.

Torgud felt the fangs of fear bite down deeper into his heart than he had ever felt before. He thought The Wizard was about to strike him down. His hand instinctively went to his sword and unsheathed its gleaming blade.

Zeebran took no notice, as if the bite of its blade held no terror for him.

“Why don’t you people ever listen!” He continued raving.

Then he looked calmly at Torgud.

“Well, I’d better examine it, I suppose. See what kind of curse it is.”

He stared at the blade concernedly.

“Hold it to the light.” He instructed, irritably.

“See this stain here? The Sword has struck The Witch. If we clean The Sword.” He gave it a rub with some kind of solution. “See, it disappears. Now, what’s the betting that it will reappear. Watch carefully. See, The Sword itself bleeds.”

Sure enough the red stain reappeared and grew darker, as if The Sword itself were indeed bleeding.

“Nothing will remove the stain until The Witch herself is destroyed utterly and all her powers broken. The Curse remains with it. Hand me The Sword, Boy.”

Torgud was unsure, after all Wizards are tricky.

“Come on, come on, we haven’t got all day.” The Wizard grew more cranky.

Torgud handed over The Sword. Zeebran examined it carefully. He smiled knowingly.

“I see. Doubly cursed, ey. You see this stone on the hilt?”

“It has ever been there.” Torgud assured him.

“I know there was a stone but this is not the one. This stone bears the name of ‘Witches Eye’. The original stone has been replaced. With this stone The Witch has watched over your every step. She is spying upon us, maybe even now. Such a clever witch and so resourceful.”

As he speaks Zeebran is prying the stone out of its setting. He places it upon the floor and pounds it with the hilt of The Sword from which it came until nothing but powder remains. He sweeps up the powder and sprinkles it into the flames of his small stove.

“Here I am telling you I am not the mighty wizard I once was and The Witch is watching and listening. She will not be sure. She may think this is just to trick her. I now believe that we have stumbled upon a real witch. A powerful one and perhaps the grandmother of all witches.”

“Can you defeat her?” Torgud demanded, earnestly.

“I’m going to give it my best shot, Young Man, and by the way, the next time you draw your sword upon me I’ll make you eat it! Do you understand me!”

“Yes, Sir.” Torgud tried to appease him. “I am sorry.”

Zeebran interrupted him.

“That is enough, Boy. I am not without resources. Normally all a wizard needs is his staff. Being poor I have had to resort to other methods. Like your grandfather I have to use powders and potions and strange symbols. Look around you. The caravan is full of these things.”

He points to the shelves and opens draws, revealing thousands of strange paraphernalia.

“These are all the things I have accumulated over the years which possess powers of their own. Herbs with the power to heal or the power to kill. Other things the powers of which I do not wish to divulge.

I was a mighty wizard once and when a wizard has more power than he can use on a daily basis, he invests it in things. He stores power for future use. It can be in any convenient object. If you are thoughtful you put it in something nice, something decorative and easy to carry. I used to forge necklaces like this one.”

He holds out a pendant intricately worked in the symbol of the two snakes.

“Just like the designs on your gate.” Torgud remarked.

“Yes. My wife bears one also but in silver, as befits her kind. Your grandfather had one just such as this. That is why The Witch did not kill him. It is protection, you see. She will not break this spell. If she does she is mightier than any witch that I have ever known.”

“Yes. Grandfather wears a chain such as this.” Torgud remembers.

“I would like you to wear one. So that none of us are vulnerable, you understand.” He fastens the chain around the young man’s neck. “Now I must caution you...” Zeebran began.

The Caravan had been stopped for a while but the two men were too busy to notice. Now it lurched forwards, leaning steeply to one side.

“I wish that elf would learn to drive.” Zeebran jested.

Then he repeated, earnestly.

“I must caution you never to lose this or you will suffer great misfortune as will anyone who finds it or steals it from you. It may protect only you unless I take it from you and bestow it upon another. It is best never to remove it. It can offer you no protection if it is not worn just so. Is that perfectly clear?”

“I swear I will never remove it unless you...”

Torgud was interrupted by being thrown upon his head. Not only was he thrust upside down. The whole interior of The Caravan tumbled over. Neither did it stop there. It spun around again and again and again. There was a piercing shriek from without and the sound of a horse in much distress.

The manifold contents of the wagon were thrown out of their respective niches and tumbled around and around, seemingly all aimed at Torgud’s head. It was clear that the wagon was rolling downhill. Its occupants were thrown this way and that and jarred by bump upon bump as each side in turn smashed against the ground. Finally, one bone-jarring crash brought the cabin to its final resting place at the bottom of the hill.

Zeebran scrambled out of the splintered wreckage and Torgud followed him. The Wizard’s first concern was to look to his wife’s safety. He looked uphill to see her bending over the horse, where it had finally been broken loose of the tumbling van.

She was at great pains to save the horse or at least to ease its suffering.

Seeing her well, Zeebran turned his attention to Torgud.

“Are you alright, Boy?” He asked, precipitately.

“Yes, Sir.” Torgud replied, as he was thrown from his feet.

There was an almighty roar and a wall of flame burst from the wreck. The blast knocked both man and wizard breathless to the ground.

Zeebran arose and dragged his companion away from the heat of the flames. He asked again.

“Are you still alright?”

“Yes.” Torgud sat up, shaking his head. “What happened?”

“I don’t rightly know.” The Wizard confessed. “It had no reason to burn like that.”

He looked up the slope and then back down again.

“Come to think of it, it had no reason to roll so violently down such a gentle slope. It must have had a little bit of a push.”

“The Witch.” Torgud concluded.

“I was just about to say, ‘let’s see what we can salvage’, but that will have to wait now.” The Wizard turned towards his wife. “I’m coming, Dear. Hold on.”

Torgud rose to his feet, shakily, as Zeebran dashed up the hill. He followed and watched as the couple bent over the poor, old mare in a grim discussion.

“It’s the only way, Dear.”

Torgud heard Zeebran say as he drew near.

She arose and walked away up the hill, towards the road.

“Do you still have your accursed sword, Boy?” Zeebran asked, but did not wait for an answer. “We have an accursed job for it. You know how to slaughter a beast? Make it swift and painless, this is my wife’s best friend.”

He too set off up the hill, leaving the painful task to Torgud alone. Torgud had seen many beasts slaughtered but he had never had to do the deed himself. He raised his sword and hesitated for a moment.

The Elf was by his side now.

“No, wait.” She pleaded. “I can make it easier for her.”

She bent over the beast and weaved over it a spell of ease to make it sleep, speaking in words of elven beauty, too softly for human ears to hear.

The horse was transported into a peaceful state, devoid of pain. A sounder sleep was never slept by beast. She stood and walked away, saying...

“Now do what you must. She will feel no pain.”

Torgud now lifted his sword and, with one clean blow, severed the horse’s neck.

Where the carriage lay burning it was six inches deep in water. The rain was still pouring and the wind howling, yet it burned still.

The Men buried the horse and then waited for the fire to go out.

They were huddled together, nestled between the bear, the donkey and the three dogs. The birds must have flown off, seeking shelter and the rabbit, well there was no hope for him.

By the time the caravan was burned-out it was too late to bother moving. They searched the wreckage and found that nothing remained.

“Well.” Said The Wizard at last, as the last vestiges of light petered out. “No sense in searching anymore. May as well see if we can sleep in this.”

He gestured towards the heavens. He had hoped they could find some of his symbols of power, at least one necklace or something. Alas, nothing remained.

“There was forty years’ work here.” He mourned.

“And my rabbit.” She reminded him.

“I have nothing left now. Well, My Lady Elf, it looks like just you and I. Do you have the stomach for it?”

“Just you lead the way and I will follow.” She said, resolutely, sounding like a mighty warrior.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you turned back.” Torgud offered. “I can always search for another wizard.”

“What? Give up!” Zeebran exclaimed. “Not likely. There is more a stake here you know. To give in would be a disgrace. My fellow wizards would have no alternative but to cast me down, make a mortal of me. What becomes of My Lady Elf then? Is she to age and die too? And what would you do? No other wizard would help you, because you came to me first. It is our code of ethics, you see. The Good Wizards have to live by The Rules. The bad ones don’t.”

“Then, if I can find a bad wizard...” Torgud speculates.

“Why would he help you? You have no rich prizes to offer. Not even your poor soul would pay his price. No Lad, you’re stuck with me, I’m afraid.”

They walked sullenly and silently, up the hill, to sit in the wet and the cold all night.

The morning looked no better. The prospect of a day’s march with no provender did nothing to cheer our hero.

He was worse off now than when he had started out. His bedroll burned and what little supplies he had carried. The Elf absolutely forbade him to kill any wild animals and he considered that he might die of starvation or of exposure.

Zeebran was resigned. His iron will spurred him on and his resolve to avenge this indignity, added to his desire to help a friend, made him tough as flint.

She was not even sad. She had an aire of nonchalance, even jollity, as if the last night's tragedy had never happened. It was strictly one day at a time with her, as always with elves. Yesterday forgotten and best foot forward. She set out as if on a holiday stroll. The wind and rain did not daunt her at all.

"At least it's nice and wet." She said, splashing through the puddles well ahead of them.

"Trust an elf." Zeebran commented. "It's a lark to her."

"Food." She cried and went racing down a slope at breakneck speed.

Torgud was afraid that she might fall and break her neck.

"Very light on their feet, elves, and very sure footed." Zeebran confided.

"Look. Mushrooms." She shouted up at them. "I will bring you some."

In a trice she had collected a large number of the small, grey unappetising looking objects and, using her skirt as a basket, carried them up the hill.

Torgud noticed her dainty feet, still unshod, and wondered how she could stand the soggy ground squishing through her toes and the piercing edges of the sharp stones which were strewn liberally about the hillsides. He noticed too how she walked, as if dancing, always on her points.

By now she had reached them and placed a mushroom in his hand.

"We must ask it first if it is good to eat." She explained. Squeeze the flesh and if it is discoloured it is a nasty one. These ones are good, look." She said, popping one into her mouth, as if to convince him.

[Caution:- This test for the safety of mushrooms and toadstools to eat is true only of these mushrooms in Torgud's world and should not be used as a general test of the safety of these things to eat on this Earth.]

They were good too, in spite of their appearance.

Not much sustenance in a mushroom but at least it fills. It makes you feel as though you have eaten something.

“After the feast.” She said, enthusiastically. “A little to drink. At least there’s no shortage of water.”

And she was absolutely right.

Torgud felt ashamed, seeing her, so thin and frail, barely four feet tall, making the most of what little there was, unperturbed by the wind and the driving rain and the long march, being cheerful through it all.

Here was he, six foot four inches of strong, young man. He fancied himself weather hardened after years of being out in the fields in all weathers. He was developing a terrible head-cold. He was hungry and his feet ached from the long day’s march. He was deeply troubled and would have been full of complaints if it had not been for her fine example.

“One thing about elves.” Zeebran explained. “They always make the best of things. I was with an elf once, starving to death. You know what he said? ‘At least I won’t get too fat.’ He said, and he really meant it too. We could all learn a lot from the elves.”

“Couldn’t you zap up some food?” Torgud asked.

“Well, I did then. But now is not the time. One thing about magic is you don’t waste it, not when you don’t have much and you have a bit of a job ahead of you. A great wizard may squander all he likes and not even know he’s doing it. A small wizard has to husband it wisely. Do you want me to feed you, or to save your grandfather? It’s your choice.”

The Young Man fell silent and felt even more ashamed.

They walked on through the day, stopping a couple of times for more elf-food as The Lady found it.

Going down from the hill country they came into more wooded areas, where there were nuts and berries to be found. Lady elf took delight in teaching the man which could be eaten and where they could be found. By nightfall they were, surprisingly, quite well fed. They were too close to town to bother about bedding down again, so The Wizard claimed. The nearest town was called Wysgenbad. Torgud looked upon his map, which he had carried in his coat, and the town was not on it. He remembered walking up this very road from Cormandel, the nearest town on his map, and never came upon any place which would pass for a town, or any settlement of any kind other than an occasional farmhouse. He passed the very house the barn of which wherein he was sure he had slept one night.

The Wizard was adamant that Wysgenbad was the nearest town. He showed the man on his own map.

On it there were Cormandel and Wysgenbad not very far apart. Zeebran assured him that he must have travelled by the old road which was not on his map.

“There are two roads, close and parallel. The Old Road is on your map and the new one is on mine. It is very simple.”

Still Torgud was not convinced. Wysgenbad was where Cormandel ought to be, according to his reckoning.

Another thing which had been troubling him was how that caravan came to be rolling down the hill in the first place. He decided he would ask The Lady Elf how it had happened.

It was dark. The rain had stopped. The road wound its way through a wood and was lit by the moon. The world was silent apart from the hooting of an owl in the trees. The Elf was walking behind with her animals about her, drinking in the peaceful atmosphere of the woods and the fragrance of the wood that she had missed for so long.

Torgud dropped back and The Wizard, if he noticed, said nothing. The Young Man was reluctant to break the silence of the still night air. He found it difficult to ask the question, because it might sound as if he blamed The Lady for their trouble. In truth, he could not bring himself to believe that she had been in any way to blame. He was resolved, however, that the question must be asked. He gathered his courage to the task.

“How did we come to lose The Caravan?” He said, rather bluntly. She stopped-dead in her tracks, pondering, as if it was a very difficult question.

“Um...” Was all she uttered as she stood wondering, biting her lip, her eyes darting hither and thither, reflecting the moonlight.

“Come on, Lady, you must know.” Torgud was growing impatient even with her.

Even though she looked so impressive bathed in moonlight as she was. He could not understand that she could not remember. He thought that she was playing some silly game with him or, more seriously, that she was trying to deceive him.

The Wizard was behind him now, glowering at him.

“Don’t torture the poor creature.” He said, stalwartly. “Don’t you see that she can’t remember? Don’t you see that she knows what you are thinking?”

“It’s alright, Dear.” She spoke softly. “I will remember. Could you leave us for a moment?”

Zeebran was reluctant but he knew that it was no use trying to argue with her.

“Very well, dear.” He responded and walked a little distance away. She looked at her five faithful friends and pointed towards The Wizard.

“Canlyn!” She commanded, but her word was just a whisper. The animals followed The Wizard, but sadly, as if they had been scolded or even beaten.

“I can’t let anyone else see me doing this.” She tried to explain. Then she adopted a very serious and businesslike voice, for an elf, that is.

“You make it plain at times that you do not trust us at all. You don’t know how much that hurts me. When you have those suspicions in your heart it is like making a gaping wound in mine. Sit with me a while and I will show you. I will make you understand.”

He complies with her demands automatically, without question. Sitting beside her he feels uneasy, like a hopeful suitor. She takes his hand and presses it to her breast, directly above her heart.

“We elves don’t do this with men very often.” She says. “It can be painful and they are likely to misunderstand. This is my heart. This is how it feels to be an elf.”

As she is speaking he begins to feel the way she feels. His heart is filled with the joy that the elves know all of the time.

“To be all elf is to feel no sorrow, no pain. The heart is an empty page, pure white, nothing but inner peace, total calm. Sadly, I am not all elf. Now my heart is part that of a wizard and I feel part of his sorrow. This heart can now feel pain. Elves are often said to be muddleheaded and forgetful. That is because they listen to the music of their hearts and not their brains. They forget in their heads but the heart remembers and is not sad. The Wizard has opened the door to sadness in my heart and sadness rushes in, filling up the happy spaces that were there. This heart was kept intact down through the centuries, now it is tainted.”

The scintillating elf voice reaches Torgud, filtered through the veil of inner calm that he is feeling, then it suddenly changes. He suddenly feels fear and pain and sorrow so great that it almost overwhelms him. The elf voice carries on in its same warm and friendly tone, his only consolation in this moment of torment.

“This is where you thought that I was trying to steal your sword from you. I am sorry that it hurts you. This is how it felt to me. That moment remains in me for as long as I live.”

She releases him from her grip. To continue would be to send him mad with torment or even to kill him.

“Pretty bad, isn’t it.” She laments. “How can I go back to the elves now and share this heart with theirs and torment them with this sadness forever. That is not my worst moment either. When I touched your sword and felt that curse upon it and all of those dead souls that go with it. It was such a jolt. I could hardly bear it. When I lost my poor, old horse and my dear, white rabbit what a blow that was. You see, I bear this heart with me into eternity and it is destined to be filled with moments like these, moments that never should touch an elf.”

“My Dear Lady.” Torgud laments. “How do you bear it? I will try my best never to add to your sorrows. I will try not to wound you again.”

“Don’t promise too much. You will still be human tomorrow. None of this is your fault. I brought it upon myself. You asked about The Caravan. I will tell you using The Wizard’s memory. You were in the van talking, as you know. I was driving and I came to a huge rock in the road. The Wizard has investigated and said that there is no way that such a rock could have appeared there naturally. The Witch must have put it there. Anyway, I couldn’t go through it or over it so, thinking like an elf, I decided to go around it. It should have been safe enough. The slope was not that steep. I didn’t recognise the danger. I didn’t expect The Witch to strike so soon or so hard over such a long distance. What could I do? After all, I am just an elf. I tried to lead the horse and cart below the boulder and that’s when the wagon started to roll. The rest you know.”

Zeebran had planned to enter the town of Wysgenbad in disguise. The people of these parts despised mystics of all kinds. In their ignorance they called them all witches, took them all to be evil and tried to destroy them. Many a poor mortal had fallen under the axe or been burned for merely being accused of witchcraft.

The Wizard could pass for a man quite easily but The Elf posed something of a problem. She was to have kept out of sight in the van and, if need be, disguise herself as a young girl. The colour of her waist-length hair could be disguised but what to do about the shape of her ears? One look at her ears and they were doomed.

“At least we are under cover of night.” The Wizard noted. “You must keep your hood up at all times. As for these animals. The bear is a dead give-away, nobody keeps company with a bear, not at least in these parts.”

“Would it help if he were dead?” Torgud asked. “We often see hunters come down from the mountains carrying carcasses or skins.”

The two mystics stared at him in disbelief. Their wonderment was at his intelligence, not at his callousness, for they discerned his true meaning.

“It would help if you chose your words more carefully.” Zeebran instructed. “It certainly may help if the bear seemed dead.” He turned to his wife. “What do you say, Dear. Can you work your spell upon a bear?”

She wondered if she could.

“Bears can be very difficult, Dear.” She replied.

“I don’t see why.” He Questioned. “They hibernate, don’t they?”

She stopped and turned to The Bear.

It was hours later that that troupe arrived in the town. It was a rough, frontier town, frequented by itinerants who revelled until the early hours.

There were the timber-men, the hunters, the miners from the quarries, the herders of goats and sheep which migrated, following the pastures. There was a lot of bitter rivalry between these groups and frequent brawls. There were The river-men, the mercenaries and the racketeers and in the middle of it all the peacemakers, who were the worst of them all.

In such a town it was dangerous to walk the streets at any time. The travellers walked down the main street, leading a donkey with the sleeping bear slung across its back, as if dead. They kept the dogs about them to ward off other dogs which might otherwise wake the bear.

They attracted the attention of trappers, for they did not look like trappers themselves, and of the fur and meat traders. Bear meat was not eaten in these parts but is often used as a cheap food for dogs.

An old trader approached them.

“How much do you want for The Bear?” He demanded, gruffly.

To give a wrong reply may cause trouble. Zeebran had to weigh his words carefully.

“I wish to discuss it with my partner first.” He replied.

“What, this farm-boy, he wouldn’t know a bear from a rabbit.” The trader laughed.

A surly trapper with a girth greater than his height muscled-in for a piece of the action.

“Never mind that.” He bellowed, halting everyone in the street.

“How did you come by it?”

“It’s none of your damned business.” Torgud shouted back, imprudently.

The sentiment was, of course, perfectly correct but this was no way to avoid attention.

“They ’ll wake The Bear.” The Elf whispered to her husband, as only an elf can whisper.

“Hold there.” Zeebran said, firmly. “The Boy is young and a little light in the head. Why are you asking?”

“Just yesterday I lost such a bear.” The Trapper claimed.

Game stealers were not at all popular and, at this, the onlookers became a mite curious. People began to mill around hoping for a fight to break-out.

“Not this bear.” Zeebran stood his ground, knowing that now he had to prove his case. The audience was already too large and the conflict too developed for any other course.

“You calling me a liar?” The Ruffian screamed.

“Yesterday you lost a bear. This bear is fresh. It is still warm. Feel it for yourself.” Zeebran challenged.

The Trader was already at The Bear’s side.

“He is right.” This expert declared. “This beast has not been dead above an hour.”

Everyone knew The Old Trader well and none doubted his word. There were jeers and shouts from the crowd aimed at The Trapper.

“Bear stealer, yourself.” One very vocal heckler chanted.

The Portly Trapper was forced to withdraw in disgrace. He justified himself.

“I did lose a bear as like to that one as a twin.”

The crowd, disappointed that there was to be no fight, began to withdraw.

The Trader did not.

“I know.” He began. “That it is not possible to catch a bear within one hour of the town. So what is your story, eh?”

“I will pay you well if you will keep it to yourself.” Zeebran offered.

“We are men of the world.” The Trader replied.

“The bear is alive.” Zeebran admitted, thinking that to try out a lie would be folly.

“How so?” The Trader questioned.

“Baited food to make it sleep.” Zeebran suggested.

“But why?” The Old Man pressed.

“You have heard that down south they have carnivals with live bears for entertainment. Performing bears and bear-baiting are popular. A live bear is worth a tidy sum.” Zeebran is baiting him.

“A tidy sum, eh. Would that be worth a hundred Samos for a quiet tongue?” As he spoke the dollar signs lit up in his eyes.

“A very reasonable price.” Zeebran admits. “Now go about your business like a good man. We have attracted enough attention already.”

“If anyone asks you, the beast is sold to Vanim for a customer in the south.” The Trader shouts as he departs. “And I will hear if you don’t deliver.”

So they passed through the town and gave this story to all of the merchants and trappers that enquired.

They passed rows of wooden buildings without a pause but came to rest outside of the only stone dwelling that they encountered. Zeebran rapped upon the door.

It was well after ten o’ clock.

At length a voice cried out from within.

“Who is it that calls at this untimely hour?”

“It is Zeebran. I am in need. Ansel, Dear Friend, excuse me.”

“What’s this.” Says The Old Man, opening The Door. “Zeebran do be plain. Am I to admit you or excuse you?”

The figure in the doorway looks old beyond estimation. Deep furrows line his face and hands and even his wrinkles are wrinkled.

“Ansel, My Brother, my company is many. If we are too much for you just say the word and we will hence.” Zeebran offered.

“Zeebran of The Twin Snakes, don’t be a silly man. What great host do you have? Ah, My Lady, Princess of The Fair People, a farmer, a donkey, three dogs and a bear, asleep. A pygmy expedition and no trouble at all.”

The Ancient led them into a courtyard and called to his servant.

“Mikle. What-ho there! We have visitors.”

“You still have him then?” Zeebran commented.

“Ah, yes, dear, faithful, old Mikle.” The Other replied.

Torgud was expecting Mikle to be really old, for this creature to call him old. Instead a dwarf of no great age, though not in his youth, came bounding out into the courtyard and did three consecutive somersaults.

“Look at him. Just like a young dwarf.” Ansel chortled.

“Visitors! Visitors!” The Dwarf leapt and clapped with glee.

“Who? What visitors?” He stood and squinted at them a moment and then suddenly recognised them.

“Zeebran, Seren-Gwirion. Oh! I shouldn’t have called you that!”

The Dwarf was in the middle of apologising when The Elf fainted dead away.

Zeebran swept her up in his arms as she fell.

The Dwarf was holding his head, jumping up and down and shouting....

“What have I done? Have I killed her or what? Oh, Stupid Dwarf!”

“She’ll be alright. She’s in good hands.” Ansel assured him.

He went to his friend and snuggled The Dwarf’s head under his arm.

“Don’t worry. Just go and look after the animals and then come inside. O.K.”

He turned to Torgud.

“I don’t know you, Young Man, but I am going to presume upon our friendship. Would you be so kind as to help Mikle here with The Bear?”

”Yes, certainly Sir. It is my pleasure.” Torgud replied.

After struggling for some time to unload The Bear from The Mule, Mikle led Torgud inside.

Mikle was even shorter than our elf, being only three and a half feet tall. His proportions were not nearly so elegant however, for while she was in perfect proportion to her height or even more slender, he seemed all torso and very little of the limbs. His body was large enough to be that of a full grown man but his arms and legs were short and stout. He was possessed of a strength which belied his small stature. He was what The Dwarves call a rotund, a part human dwarf, and did not really fit in with dwarf society.

Ansel took him in and Mikle was now his only servant and companion.

Ansel, by the way, was, or had been, a sorcerer. He was caste out of his society long ago for some adventure in which he befriended and aided Zeebran. This, to his fellow sorcerers, was an outrage, for the rivalry between wizards and sorcerers is well known. The rift began millions of years ago, when the two societies sought different means to enlightenment.

The Wizards found the source of their power by looking inside themselves. They found ways to channel the natural energies hidden within things through the power of their own wills.

Sorcerers developed machines to the stage where they no longer looked like machines at all. They imitated nature. They altered themselves by implanting machinery into their bodies. Inside a sorcerer is a sophisticated super-machine which may be only the size of a pinhead but this is the source of all of their powers.

Wizards can’t abide machinery beyond the basic ones of wheels and pulleys. Sorcerers developed a deep distrust of the life of introspection. The argument between them will go on forever.

Man and Dwarf came to The Sorcerer's sitting room.

"Ah, Torgud." Zeebran greeted. "This is Ansel. He is a Sorcerer."

"Was." Ansel corrected.

"Was a Sorcerer." The Wizard conceded. "He is, like me, an outcast."

"I am worse off than you. I am cast down." Ansel again corrected.

"But My Grandfather says that Wizards hate Sorcerers." Torgud declared.

"Not at all." Zeebran argued. "It is Sorcerers that hate Wizards."

"There was a time when I would have hotly debated that point."

Ansel began. "But now I am not so sure. I was cast down for helping him." He pointed to Zeebran. "... and did The Wizards kick him out? No. He even marries an elf and what does he get? Just a polite rap on the knuckles. See what friends in high places can do?"

"What friends? See here, Ansel, you scoundrel." Zeebran began to wind up."

"Excuse me, Lords." The Dwarf put in. "But how is Your Lady?" Zeebran soon forgot the insult as he remembered something much closer to his heart.

"She will be fine." Ansel assured them all. "We have put her to bed and she is resting nicely."

"I was looking forward to her singing and dancing." The Dwarf lamented. "Do you think she will dance for us before you go?"

"I don't think so." Zeebran said, sadly. "Not for a little while yet. We have to leave tomorrow, even if it means going without her."

"But you can't." Ansel warned. "You mustn't."

"You can take care of her." Zeebran suggested.

"Look at me. I have no power. I can barely look after myself."

Ansel pointed out.

"I will carry her, if I must, all the way to Garen and back but she will come with us." Torgud insisted and the matter was closed.

There was an eerie silence for a while. The two strange, mystic gentlemen sat gazing at one another.

Torgud took the opportunity to look around at the equally strange interior of Ansel's room. It was full of apparati and gadgetry that he had never seen before. He wondered about the strange mechanisms. What could they be for?

At length, Ansel spoke. His voice, old and cracked, grated upon the ears.

"You remember, Zeebran, when last you were here, all those years ago, you had to rush away at such a pace. You left your cup of tea. I'll go and get it for you."

The Old Man rose with some difficulty and ambled across to a bench in a dark corner of the room. One of its many dark corners. In Torgud's experience most rooms had only four corners. This one seemed to have any number of them.

Ansel returned carrying a device at the centre of which was a cup. Above the cup was a wisp of steam, as if there was a liquid inside freshly boiled.

This smoke was different, however, for it was not stirred by passing through the air. It sat undisturbed in form whilst it was being carried across the room.

"This cup of tea is over forty years old." Ansel announced with pride. "It has been sitting in here undisturbed by time ever since that day. You know my quest, Zeebran, to rejuvenate myself? Well, this is as far as I ever got. This cup stands on the outside of time itself. The world rushes on and it ages not a jot. While the machine is on, of course." He concluded.

He switched off a switch on the machine and the whirl of smoke came to life. It became caught up in the swirls and eddies of the air that moved around the room, becoming dissipated and then recharging.

Ansel handed the cup to Zeebran.

"Your tea, Sir. I do hope that this time you will have time to savour it."

Zeebran took it and sipped it appreciatively.

"It is still fresh." Zeebran complimented. "And that was a very good year for tea."

"For tea and not much else." Ansel noted.

"And now, My Friend, it is time to pack these two off to bed, for we have much to discuss." Zeebran declared.

"Quite so." The Other Sage agreed. "Mikle, see that our guest gets a good night's rest. Breakfast at seven in the morning." He ordered.

"Yes, Master." Mikle jumped to obey and bustled Torgud out of the room.

This left The Two Ancients talking, apparently all night, for in the morning Torgud rose to find them still sitting as they were the night before, as if they too had been frozen in time, like the tea.

After breakfast Zeebran went up to prepare his wife for the journey.

Not one word had passed between them concerning her. Torgud was reluctant to broach the subject but his curiosity overcame him. He was sitting against a wooden table with Ansel on his right and Mikle on his left, the dwarf with legs dangling, chin nearly scraping his bowl.

Torgud turned to Ansel and asked...

“Is she going to be alright?”

Ansel and Mikle looked across at one another as if seeking one another’s permission to answer him.

Torgud, never patient at the best of times, became angry with their silence and, quite forgetting the eminent company he was in, he burst out.

“Well, answer me, somebody!”

Mikle looked across to Ansel.

“He has a right to know.” He proffered.

“It’s hard to say.” Ansel stated, apologetically. “I have fixed her up so that she will be able to continue her journey but I haven’t tackled her real problem.”

“How do you mean, ‘you’ve fixed her up’?” Torgud demanded.

“I did the best I could do.” The Sorcerer said, uneasily. “I put a sort of limiter on her heart. A sort of block to stop bad things from getting in.”

“I don’t like the sound of that at all.” Torgud railed.

“I know. Neither did her husband but he had to agree it was all we could do. So what do you expect from us, miracles? Neither of us are in top form at the moment. In fact, if I don’t find a way to regenerate myself soon, I don’t think I will last much longer.”

Ansel looked forlorn and Torgud now felt more of pity than anger. It brought to mind his grandfather’s plight but, unlike Tomas, Ansel was not born to die. Tomas stood to lose maybe twenty years of life, Ansel perhaps twenty thousand and Seren stood to lose eternity.

“You will see for yourself.” The Old Man continued. “How well she is, but don’t expect her to be the same as before. She may act a little strange. She will not remember things but, now that evil can no longer touch her, she will be more like an elf than at any time since her marriage. I have done this.” He smiled proudly for a moment and then became serious again.

“Before your partner returns, I have to work a little intrigue with you. Come with me. Mikle, if they surface before we are done, stall them.”

“Yes, Master.” Mikle beamed, always eager to be of use.

Ansel led Torgud into his lounge room, which was also his laboratory.

“Give us your sword, Boy.” He demanded.

Which Torgud did without question.

Ansel took up The Sword and in his hands it glowed white hot.

“It is cursed, is it?” He said, firmly. “If it curses all who bear it then it curses me, right?” He demands of Torgud.

“Come then, Witch, do your worst.” He challenges. “And we will wear this curse so thin between us that it will drain away her power. I wear this curse with pride, for you and My Friend, Zeebran.”

Clouds of black, acrid smoke poured from his hand as he spoke, as if his flesh were burning away.

“Zeebran, being a mere wizard, is afraid to do this. He must save his power for the final confrontation. I am a Sorcerer and I have my own means of regenerating power.”

As he spoke he shook from head to toe. Torgud feared The Old Man would fall to pieces. Then The Sage placed The Sword before him and it cooled instantly.

He plucked a small stone from his pocket and set it in The Sword.

“This.” He told Torgud. “Will make you into a mighty warrior. It will make this sword do your bidding and you don’t even have to touch it.”

“Then The Curse is lifted?” Torgud asked.

“No, Boy, you are not listening. The Curse can only be ended if The Witch is destroyed or her power broken. Either will do but both is better. If The Sword is destroyed it will touch no other but the more who share The Curse, the weaker it becomes. The Sword draws bad luck but now you have the means to deal with it.”

A dwarf’s high pitched voice sings out from the corridor.

“Hello, Master. Hello, Mistress. How are you today, Princess?”

Ansel moves over to the door and opens it. His voice creaks out.

“I trust that you are well, My Lady.”

He steps aside to allow The Elf to pass. As she enters the room it is a different elf which greets Torgud’s eyes.

By Ansel’s treatment she is transformed to her former self. All traces of The Wizard’s influence are removed. Seren now looks every inch an elf. Her hair, no longer grey with age, falls in golden tresses about her childlike face.

She is again a creature as ageless as the sun that shines upon her. The light streaking through the window dances around her, illuminating the aura of peace around her.

Torgud is struck dumb by the sight of her.

“You know.” She says, in a voice like the tinkling of a wind chime.

“I woke up this morning and I could not manage to dress myself. I fell down when I tried to walk. Imagine that, an elf falling down?”

There was no bitterness or strain in her voice, rather there was a peal of laughter, as if her difficulties amused her.

“It was a full half-hour before I could manage to speak. It was like being a new-born babe again. This gentleman had to come and rescue me.”

“Madam, This Gentleman is your husband.” Ansel informed her.

“Is he?” She smiled. “Oh yes, you told me that upstairs, didn’t you?” She turned to Zeebran. “What did you say your name was?” Zeebran was the soul of patience. He seemed not at all perturbed by this.

“I am Zeebran Denath, My Lady.” He replied, as if he were addressing some royal personage totally unknown to him.

“I am sorry but even my own name escapes me at the moment.”

She whispers vaguely, in a voice like the rush of wind through the leaves.

“You see how well she is.” Ansel congratulates himself. “Your name is Seren, My Lady.” He relates. “You are a princess of The High Elves of The Northeast.”

“I’m sorry. Did you speak?” She asks him politely.

“You see, her heart doesn’t heed anything that will do it harm.” He confides.

“Yes, but don’t take any chances.” Zeebran warns. “Who knows what might happen if this infernal gadgetry of yours goes wrong.”

“Infernal gadgetry.” Ansel was snubbed. “Well, I suppose you had better be on your way now.”

“I am sorry, Old Friend.” Zeebran apologises. “I am just concerned for her safety.”

“One thing you must do.” Ansel reminds them. “Is to tell these wretched animals of yours to go away.”

“We will take them with us and release them a safe distance from the town.” Zeebran decides. “We don’t wish to trouble you any more. You have been more than generous. Come, Torgud. We have tarried long enough.”

Torgud’s gaze was transfixed upon Seren. He neither saw nor heard anything else.

“Elfstruck.” Said Ansel.

“I am afraid so.” Zeebran agreed.

“Would you like me to fix him up for you?” Ansel offered.

“Please.” Zeebran nodded. “I can’t travel with him in this condition.”

“Mikle, get those animals ready, will you.” Ansel barked.

“Yes, Master.” Mikle responded automatically and hurried out through the door.

Ansel pulled out a machine from one of his many shelves and dusted it off. He attached it to Torgud and began switching switches and turning dials.

“Trouble with humans, they always fancy themselves in love with elves. It would help if she would stop looking so alluring. Isn’t she supposed to be disguised as a human child or something?” Ansel babbled.

“Oh, sorry, did I do that?” Seren realised. “What did I do to him?”

“Nothing, Dear. If you will just wear your cloak and don’t let anyone see how cute you are.” Zeebran fastens her cloak around her and pulls the hood down.

“Am I cute?” She asks, in tones of disbelief.

“Yes, you are.” Zeebran assures her, as he arranges her hair. “Hold still, you’re getting all tangled. This ought to hide your eyes and those ears. Can you see alright in there?”

“Yes, of course I can. I’m an elf, aren’t I.” She explains.

“Now don’t go saying that to everyone you meet. You are My Daughter and your name is Krystle. Can you remember that?” He lectures.

“I am your daughter and, sorry, what was that name again?”

She can’t bear any name. It just will not register with her.

“Never mind the name. If I’m looking at you, then I’m talking to you. Alright?”

“Yes, Edramuth.” She smiled.

“Why did you call me that?” Zeebran asked, intently.

“I don’t know. It’s just you remind me of someone with that name.” She is totally confused.

“And so I should. Ansel, did you hear?” He asks, ominously.

“I don’t know.” Ansel admits. “It’s always tricky tampering with elves. This one is ready.” He spoke of Torgud.

The Dwarf re-enters.

“Take a look out of the window. There are six white doves and an old owl on our roof. Is it some kind of omen?”

“Yes.” Zeebran quips. “It means the birds have come home to roost. Now, if we are ready, then lets go.”

“Where are you going?” The Elf asks.

“On an adventure.” The Wizard explains.

“How nice. Can I come too?” She asks politely.

“Of course but remember you are in disguise.” Zeebran leads the way out into the courtyard.

“Mikle. See them safely out of town.” Ansel orders.

The Dwarf gives a knowing grin and takes off after them.

Meanwhile outside, Zeebran emerges ahead of Torgud.

“So. In love with my wife, are you.” He sais, pointedly.

Torgud doesn’t know what to say or where to look. He ends up saying nothing and just staring at the floor.

“Well, now you know how I felt when I first saw her. But I had seen many elves before. It was not for her looks that I married her. It was for herself. Why she married me I can’t say. By the way, where is she?”

“She is here.” The Dwarf calls from within.

They appear, Mikle leading Seren by the hand.

“I got lost.” She uttered, coyly.

She was, naturally, forgiven instantly.

Before them were three dogs and a donkey, laden with a dozing bear, and a thousand miles of hard road at the end of which was a witch.

“I’ll close the gate behind you.” Mikle offered. “Have a good journey and a safe return. Dear Lady. I am sorry that you could not dance. I do hope to see you dance when you return.”

“I am sure you shall.” She said, kindly and leaning forwards, kissed The Dwarf on the forehead.

“Oh, thank you Ma’am!” He chirruped with glee and somersaulted backwards. “Goodbye!” He shouted as they departed and slammed the gate shut behind them. “Now.” He said to himself. “It’s ten seconds for a human and twenty seconds for a wizard and thirty seconds for an elf.”

Then he counted up to thirty and peered through the gate. Seeing the party round the corner he crept out after them.

The small band walked along the streets of the town which were already bustling with people, most of them oblivious to them.

They were unaware that there were eyes watching them and more eyes watching out for them. There were even eyes watching over them. One pair of eyes that were looking for them were the eyes of an old warrior.

If The Witch had to choose someone to do her dirty-work, she could not have picked a nastier piece of work than he. His name was Denim and had been a mercenary in The Great War. It was quite by accident that he had found himself upon the right side upon that occasion. He was in it for the money and would have joined the other side if they had offered him more. It was during that campaign that he had lost his left hand. He had since suffered further amputations and an unusual number of other wounds. He figured himself extremely fortunate not to have been killed upon any of those occasions. This luck he attributed to an amulet which he had stolen from a young prince the night before The Great Battle that ended The Great War.

The next day The Prince died but Denim survived. The Old Fool still did not realise that every misfortune that had befallen him since that day was caused by his 'Lucky Piece'. Had he not stolen The Charm, he would not have sustained any of his injuries. He would not have lost his wife and family and scores of other calamities would not have befallen him. He was so stupid he didn't even realise how unlucky he had been since then. Denim had always despised The Wizard. Perhaps just because the latter was good. Perhaps because the former felt guilty about stealing The Amulet. He had been among the crowd the night before and had recognised Zeebran. He knew how much the locals despised 'witches' and all kinds of 'faerie folk' and was determined to see The Wizard burn. He had a dozen fellow warriors with him who were just as malevolent as he, always ready for a little sport.

People who have fought together for a long time develop a subtle language of looks and gestures, so that a look in a certain direction is enough to signal 'this is him' and that this is where the fun begins.

Torgud, they had seen, was quick to rise to any bait. So he became the target. He was ahead of the rest, leading the donkey, when a tall, bull-headed warrior broke off from the rest and snarled at him gruffly.

"Hey, You Boy." He began. "Where'd you get The Sword?"

"It is mine." Torgud answered, forthrightly.

"Come off it. You're not a warrior. You're a farmboy."

With this last remark he gave Torgud a push on the shoulder.

Torgud's hand felt for the hilt of his sword.

“Hold there, Boy!” Zeebran halted him, pushing forward. “Sir, we have no quarrel with you.” He addressed The Man.

“I’m asking this boy where he came by his sword and I’ll have an answer.” The Warrior insisted, lifting Zeebran off his feet.

“And I say it’s none of your damned business!” Torgud assailed him. “Now let My Friend go or I’ll do for you.”

Torgud drew his sword and stood prepared for battle.

The Warrior threw The Wizard aside and drew his blade.

Zeebran looked up at the man perched atop a wagon, lacking an arm, a leg, an eye, an ear and battle scarred from head to toe.

“Make yourself scarce, Love.” The Wizard whispered, so that only an elf could hear. Then he shouted. “Denim! Call your dog off.”

The Warrior and Torgud stood weighing each other up. They had thrown a couple of mild faints at one another in preparation. The older man gestured to his opponent and turned his back upon him as a slight and a jest for his fellows.

“Hang on a minute. Denim, do you know this guy?”

“I do an’ all. This is The Wizard of The Mountain come down to curse us all!” Denim shouted, as loudly as his lungs would carry. Up and down the street the people stopped and stared. Then the cry went out from a dozen voices. The cry of “Witch!”

In a few seconds people came thronging into the streets while others armed themselves. The whole town was in an uproar crying ... “Witch! Witch! We’ve caught a Witch!”

Zeebran, still laying on the ground, was grasped by a dozen angry hands and carried off towards The Town Square. Torgud was grabbed by a dozen more and about to suffer the same fate when a young man with an aristocratic look and a voice like thunder shouted out.

“Whoa there!”

He swept Torgud’s assailants aside.

“Is this man a witch?” He demanded of Denim.

Denim was taken aback by The Young Man’s aire of authority.

He did not know whom he was addressing and, as he had already done for The Wizard, The Boy meant nothing to him. He weighed his words carefully before he spoke.

“Now I can’t rightly say if he is or no. The Other I know well enough.”

“We don’t want any miscarriage of justice here, do we?” The Young Man asserted.

“He was consorting with A Witch.” A voice called from the crowd.

“Aye.” The Youth countered. “And you may be standing next to a murderer but we can’t hang you for that. We judge a man for himself and not the company he keeps.”

This raised laughter from The Crowd.

“What say you, Sir, are you a Wizard or no?” He asked.

“I am a farmer but I hope to become a great warrior, like My Grandfather, Tomas before me.”

“I can vouch for this man.” Mikle shouted from behind The Crowd. “Let me pass.” He pushed through The Crowd. “You know me, Mikle. I speak for this man. His Grandfather and I fought together in The Great War.”

Many of the townspeople knew Mikle and took him as a man of his word.

Meanwhile The Elf was standing secreted in a doorway. She had quietly slipped out of the limelight in the commotion. She had not gone altogether unheeded, however. One zealous warrior, following an old martial tradition, had ‘marked his man’, and done the job well. Now he leapt at the opportunity to show his prowess. “This one was with him!” He shouted, grabbing The Elf by the shoulder.

No sooner had he spoken than the cloak fell empty. Seren had worked an old elf trick upon him. He stood for a second holding the empty cloak as his prize, bursting with pride.

The Crowd looked on and the spectacle evoked roars and howls of laughter.

It was only then that he discovered the cloak was empty and let it fall to the ground.

“See! What witchcraft this is?” He shouted. “We must find this creature.”

By this time The Elf had spirited herself far away. She had slipped through the open doorway behind her. She had crept around the edges of the room, slipping behind curtains and under tables, crawled between people’s feet and found her way out of the back entrance.

She didn’t know who she was or where she was or where she was going. All she had was a feeling that she had escaped. She had no idea from what she had escaped or why. All she had was an elf’s instinct to drive her to safety. Safety to an elf meant ‘take to the woods’. So Seren, alone as she had never been in her life, crept around the back streets of the town and out of town and into the wide world beyond.

Normally an elf would be guided to the nearest gathering of elves. Seren could not feel their presence. She could not hear their voices singing to her from afar. She could not feel their dancing feet upon the earth. She could not follow their paths on scented trails where they had walked. She was alone because the pathway to her own heart had been cut, severed tenderly by a well-meaning friend. In her heart was her memory and her guide and her means of communication with her own kind, but the doorway to her heart was soundly locked.

In The Town there was still much hullabaloo. Zeebran had been dragged to The Town Square and people were busy building a fire upon which to burn him.

He was thinking how ridiculous it was that they could ever believe that they could burn a witch. He was preparing himself to work the age-old burning witch trick upon them. It was, he well knew, the best way out of this situation, to let them believe that they had burned you.

The trick was to wait until the flames lick your feet, until there is as much heat and smoke as you can stand, and then produce masses of smoke and flames, the better to conceal your escape. He regretted having to waste his power in this way but it seemed the best alternative left open to him.

It is not unlikely that the rumour about burning witches was begun by witches themselves, to allow themselves this easy means of escape.

Of all of the party Torgud was in the most imminent danger, at least in the estimation of The Wily Dwarf. That is why The Dwarf had stuck with him. The sudden appearance of The Young Lord upon the scene had surprised even Mikle, who was pleased that all had worked out so well.

The interest in this part of the action had dwindled. Most of the onlookers had rushed off to gawk at 'The Witch' being burned. Torgud was not important or interesting enough to bother with by comparison. His danger was not over, however, as there was still a question of honour to be settled between him and his interrogator. He had threatened The Mercenary Gentleman openly and before witnesses. This was a matter which The Ruffian could not dismiss unanswered. Even Denim, with his interest in The Wizard's fate, would not budge until he had seen his friend's honour satisfied. The Man in question, nicknamed Lawyer by his friends, was a sort of spokesperson for the group.

He was, heaven forbid, the most intelligent of the bunch and was used on these occasions because he could put together words of more than one syllable and make some sort of sense out of them. After the commotion of searching for The Elf had died-down he found his chance.

“We are not finished yet!” He bellowed. “You.”

He pointed violently towards Torgud.

“Have challenged me. This is a challenge that I accept. Choose your weapon, place and time.”

The Challenge was a time-honoured tradition among men of arms in which the authorities never interfered. It was not unknown upon these occasions for friends of the stronger side to join in. Honour was a relative thing to some of these roughnecks.

Torgud never hesitated to consider the danger. That the odds may be a dozen to one against him never occurred to him.

“I choose The Sword.” He replied. “Here and now.”

The two men drew their swords and began the affray. Several of Lawyer’s friends drew closer to the action.

“Hold your ground!” The Young Lord shouted, taking a position between them and the fight, sword at the ready.

Mikle, who carried with him a battle axe, a weapon favoured among dwarves, took his weapon and with it drew a circle around the field, pushing people back where need be. Then he stood alongside The Young Nobleman.

“Any man who cross this line, let it be to his dismay.” The Dwarf proclaimed.

The fight was, by now, well in progress. Swords clashed heavily against one another and the duellers sweated and strained. They were evenly matched. Lawyer was older and shorter than Torgud but was a good deal stronger. Torgud had speed on his side but the older man had years of experience in battle.

Lawyer’s friends began to heckle with shouts of ... ‘Come on, Lawyer.’ And... ‘Finish him Lawyer.’

The stronger man dealt blows so hard that Torgud was jarred by them. Then one hefty whack caught him off-balance and sent him sprawling onto the ground.

Lawyer, thinking that he had his opponent beaten, prepared to deliver the final blow. He stood over Torgud, sword poised to strike, when Torgud’s sword leapt from his hand and thrust-home, right through The Man.

To the onlookers it looked for all the world as though The Boy had thrown The Sword. Torgud knew that he had not. The Sword had taken upon itself the task of his defence.

Denim and the other warriors knew that there was something amiss. They were greatly angered to see their companion robbed of victory. They did not like to see one of their own defeated at all, even in a fair fight. These were not sporting gentlemen, neither were they men of honour, as many good warriors are. They all drew their swords at once and lurched forwards.

The air was filled with the ring of warcries and the voice of Denim shouting.

“Get ‘em, Boys.”

Mikle shouted also and gestured to his young companions.

“Clear off!” He instructed. “Every man for himself.”

Torgud grabbed his sword and took to heel with His Lordship not far behind. Mikle moved swiftly to The Donkey, which had stood there patiently all the while, and released the rope which held The Bear. He pulled the animal, ‘plop!’, to the ground, an action designed to rouse it.

The Warriors found themselves hampered in their chase by three dogs, a donkey and a bear.

The dogs took after the swifter of the men, snapping at their heels, tripping them up and generally getting in their way. The slower men found that they had to get past a donkey and a very angry bear and, seeing no chance of catching their quarry, gave up on the chase. A couple who had been trying to corner The Dwarf found that he was much too slippery a customer. He weaved his way through the crowds, using spaces that no ordinary man would fit into.

Mikle also had lots of friends, who delighted in tripping-up his pursuers or ‘accidentally’ getting in their way.

Mikle was at great pains to see that the animals came to no harm and, as a parting gesture, whistled out and shouted...

“Gadael.”

To which they responded.

He had succeeded in giving The Young Men a head start and drawing-off most of their pursuers. Only five remained hot on the heels of the pair.

The Young Aristocrat was a surprisingly swift runner and soon overtook Torgud.

“Follow me.” He instructed. “I know The Town.”

He led Torgud a merry chase through the back streets, weaving in and out of the small, back alleys, over fences, through gardens and even through buildings.

Five men pursued them still, young, strong, skilful and determined not to be outdone, taking delight in the chase.

The pair rounded a corner of a back alley. The approach was blind and their hunters some distance away.

“Keep going.” The Leader whispered, dropping back.

He stood close to the fence, next to the corner, sword drawn and ready. As the first of the soldiers came rushing around the corner he was struck right through the belly. The Young Adventurer then took off with four hot on his heels.

Mysteriously the man at the rear fell dead with an arrow through his back.

Torgud didn't like what was happening. He didn't like running away and he didn't approve of his partner's tactics. He had no stomach for the hide and seek or for the quick stab in the dark. He was wondering now why he was running away. He wondered why he had run in the first place. He remembered his words to Zeebran. He was no coward. He decided that for honour's sake he must stand and fight.

“Come on!” His Lordship beckoned, as he passed.

“No.” Torgud said, resolutely. “I will not run from three.”

He armed himself and stood ready, blocking the small alleyway completely.

The Three Warriors slowed to a walk, seeing him stand against them. They drew their swords and then the man at the rear fell dead. Felled by a bolt as the man before.

This time the attack did not go unnoticed by the pursuers.

“Ambush!” The new hind-runner shouted and the remaining pair escaped the alleyway.

One went over a fence and the other burst through a gateway.

Torgud and his companion stood gaping at one another for a second. The Lord shrugged his shoulders and then cautioned.

“They might be aimed at us. Let's make ourselves scarce.”

He led Torgud to his hideaway, a squalid, little house of ill-repute hidden in the back-streets of town.

In a town which was not exactly refined this place was the very worst. The door opened into a barroom in which there was no room at all. Apart from the bar there were four tables and these so close together as to allow hardly any room to walk between them. The walls were of wood so thin you would swear that the wind blew through them. The wind, however, didn't have to for this place was badly fitted together and full of knot holes.

A red-faced, portly barman stood at the bar.

“Hello Mot. Two beers here and have one yourself.” The Young Lord threw some money on the bar. “I am Lord O’ Cazian.” He offered Torgud his hand.

“Torgud is my name, Sir.” Torgud replied, formally.

“You don’t have to call me Sir.” O Cazian replied. “We are friends and allies.”

“Why did you help me?” Torgud enquired.

“Because you needed it, My Friend, and just for the heck of it.”

“I thank you anyway.” Torgud responded. “And offer you my sword.”

“Not very busy this morning, Sir. I hear they are out burning a witch. I’ve even given the girls the morning off.” Mot The Barman chats as he serves the drinks.

“Quite so. Now make yourself scarce, Man. We have important business to discuss.” Said O’ Cazian, not at all politely.

They proceeded to discuss all that had happened and many other things. They drank their beer and then another and then some more.

Torgud was not a drinking man, normally. He soon became a little the worse for wear. First happy and then drunken and finally stocious. He had intended to persuade his new friend to make a daring attempt to rescue The Wizard but he became lost in the drink and the conversation.

“My father wanted me to go to be educated in The Southwest, to learn The High Culture. I’ve had enough of books. I want to learn about life. I do anything I can to get my family’s disapproval. Just to anger them, because I know that nothing they can say or do can stop me from becoming Lord in my father’s place.

He hired two bodyguards to watch over me but I gave them the slip a while back. You can bet they were the best fighting men that money can buy, from The Northwest, but I gave them the slip.” O’ Cazian was raving.

“The best fighting men are from The South, everybody knows that. We are famous for it.” Torgud argued.

A voice called from the alcove behind them, where a Young Man had been sitting unnoticed all this time.

“The best fighting men come from wherever they are born.” The Man revealed himself.

“That is nobly put, ‘specially by one from The Northwest.” O’ Cazian congratulated.

“I am Vabian.” The Stranger said, placing a strange looking contraption upon the table.

“What is that?” Torgud asked, with a chortle.

“We call it a crossbow. It’s arrows carry much further than an ordinary bow and with much greater accuracy.” Vabian explained.

“It seems you have many allies, Torgud.” O’ Cazian notes.

“They must be about to burn Your Wizard by now. Do you want to see?” Vabian reminds them.

“We must rescue him!” Torgud exclaims. “I had forgotten.”

“There is nothing we can do.” Vabian tells them. “Besides, if he is A Wizard worth his salt he will know what to do.”

“How do you know?” O Cazian asks, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I was educated by A Wizard.” Vabian claims. “Not as A Wizard, you understand, but some things he told me and other things I worked-out for myself. I feel that I owe a debt to all his kind for the service that he gave me. Anyway, it is time to go before the fireworks begin.”

“You are a mortal magician.” Torgud decides.

“Come, let us see The Wizard burn.” Vabian insists.

The Trio make their way towards The Town Square.

The Square is thronging with people, not only from The Town but people from miles around. It is the largest crowd assembled there in many years. The Square was not made to accommodate so many all at once. There are people hanging out of second story windows and people sitting upon the rooftops.

In the centre of all there was erected a twelve foot post of wood, the lower half of which was stacked with planks and tree branches. Perched on top of this bonfire was our guy, Zeebran Denath, whom The Elves call Edramuth, a contraction of edrych-mwth, once the fourth of The Council of Twelve, about to be burned again. He had been burned about five times in his long history, though not as Zeebran, but that is another story. He was tied to the stout post by the hands and legs and yet through it all kept an aire of dignity. He bore the taunts of the crowd quite easily. The one thing that he regretted was the time it was taking.

He had hung around for long enough already when he heard a familiar voice. The high-pitched voice of a dwarf he knew whispered in his ear from behind.

Yes, it was Mikle, that handy little fellow. Clad in a cloak of invisibility he had clambered up the woodpile and whispered to his friend, a captive audience.

“Master Denath. It is I, Mikle. My Master sends his regards and says not to do anything. He will rescue you in good time. He says you will know what this means.”

“And I do.” Zeebran confirmed. “But you must know what to do. In my pocket you will find a map. Take it and give it to Torgud and tell him to meet me just off The South Road at the place marked. If I am not there by the morning he is on his own.”

“Very well, Master.” Mikle takes the map and clambers away. Thus it was that Mikle approached the three youths as they entered The Market Place, now an execution yard.

“Master Torgud.” The Midget tugged at his sleeve. “Take this map and meet The Wizard at the place marked. Tonight.”

Then he was off again in a great hurry.

“Mikle, what do you mean?” Torgud began and then realised that he was talking to himself.

“They are lighting the fire!” Someone cried from above.

The crowd became excited. The Newcomers had arrived too late to get any kind of view at all. The fire took only a few minutes to grow into roaring flames. The flames crept higher and higher until they were lapping at The Wizard’s toes. The smoke and heat had preceded them and were making it very uncomfortable for Zeebran. Yet he did not flinch or cough.

The Crowd were growing increasingly disgruntled with this lack of activity upon his part. They were waiting for him to show the tell-tale signs of extreme agony.

The heckling and jeers and shouts grew louder as the flames grew higher. Zeebran himself was growing impatient, thinking that his friends had forgotten to rescue him. He was about to give up and, as an act of desperation, liberate himself, when at last relief came. In a flash, tongues of flame leapt from the fire in a dozen different directions. Rivers of fire flowed across The Square, scattering or scorching people before them.

These flaming arms embraced the sides of the surrounding buildings and scaled their walls.

Meanwhile in other parts of The Town buildings burst into flame and fires burst forth for no apparent reason. This is what Ansel would call a diversionary tactic?

In the meantime The Wizard also seemed to burst into flames and gave off a fountain of acrid, black smoke.

People were scattering everywhere out of The Square. People in panic were shouting...

“Fire!”

There were people rushing to The River to get water, people rushing home to see if their houses were alright, and there were those whose only thought was to get away as quickly as possible.

Torgud stood back, pressed against the wall of a building which, luckily, had not been a victim of the inferno. He stood and watched as his wizard went up in smoke. His heart sank. He thought that now he must return to his grandfather's side alone and either destroy The Witch himself or die in the attempt.

"The whole town is burning." O' Cazian warned, shaking Torgud's shoulder. "Come on, we must get away from here."

Torgud's two new friends led him out of town. He was like a zombie. The drink and the shock and the weariness from his long travels piled up within him.

They stopped at a safe distance from The Town and sat and watched it burning. They watched also as lines of people filed past, some carrying all that they could rescue of their belongings.

"That was one real mean Wizard." O' Cazian declared. "What do we do now?"

"Didn't your wizard tell you what to do, Torgud?" Vabian asked.

"He said nothing." Torgud lamented. "Only The Silly Dwarf gave me this."

He took out the map and unfolded it.

"He said to meet The Wizard here. It doesn't make sense. The Wizard is gone. All burned up."

"Wizard, Wizard, burned so bright, in The Town without a fight. Wizard, Wizard, burned away, lives to burn another day." Vabian recites. "We'd better do as The Wizard says. One thing I do know is that you never argue with A Wizard. You always follow their instructions to the letter."

"But it makes no sense." Torgud argues.

"The place is not far from here. It can't hurt to humour him." O' Cazian recommends. "We will wait for one day."

"This map doesn't make sense either. It is completely different to mine." Torgud complains.

He takes out his own map and compares it with The Wizard's as he walks along.

"You see, Wysgenbad isn't on here at all and it is on The Wizard's Map."

He looks on The Wizard's Map to check and to his surprise Wysgenbad has disappeared from it.

"It was there yesterday. He showed me. According to my reckoning The River must be on our left."

"Yes but what river?" Vabian enquired. "When you travel with A Wizard you travel by different paths." He says, as if making a direct quote from somewhere.

“Here is our place.” O’ Cazian announces. “Now where is Your Wizard?”

“I am here, Torgud. Now where have you been?” A voice from behind them startles all three.

Torgud turns sharply to find an old looking man. He looks not unlike Zeebran but of indiscriminate old age.

“Who are you?” Torgud demands.

“Zeebran Denath I am and I am the only one.” He sais, sounding like an echo from the past.

“But you are so old!” Torgud exclaims.

“Well, when we first met you thought I was not old enough. I assure you I did not change just to please you. It is The Elf. Her influence has gone from me. Now that I know you are safe it is time to worry about her. We must find her before we can go on. Who are these two?”

“They are my friends, Lord O’ Cazian and Vabian.” Torgud introduced.

“You have a strange taste in friends.” Zeebran said, disapprovingly.

“Can they come with us?” Torgud begged.

“This is your adventure and the customer is always right. Just don’t trust them too far, that’s all.”

Zeebran led the way off of the road through the woods.

In the distance The Town was still burning and belching a cloud of smoke into the air. One building alone in Wysgenbad was built to stand against fire, flood, hurricane and siege, the old, stone fortress of Ansel.

Within its walls Ansel and Mikle could remain safe, their work unhindered by the comings and goings of the mortals surrounding them.

Ansel, since his powers had been removed by his own people, had set himself the task of trying to duplicate their achievements. He was trying to build his own ultimate machine to replace the pin that had been unjustly taken from him.

Alas, the task was too much for him. As it was too much for any single being. The technology had taken millions of researchers thousands of years to perfect. He had done some remarkable things, however. His achievements were a tribute to his skill and ingenuity. His body was ageing and he now was certain that he would not be able to sustain it for long enough to complete his task.

“Come Mikle.” He announced. “We are going to help Denath in his quest.”

“But Master, what about your work?” Mikle asked, concerned.

“It is too late for that. I want to have one last fling. I don’t want to sit around here and watch my body rot away. It will be just like before. We will follow along and give whatever help we can.”

“Just as you say, Master.” Mikle agreed, reluctantly.

“Get ready The Wagon with all of the equipment that we can carry. You never know what might come in handy.”

“Yes, Master.” Mikle sprang into action.

“Such a fine dwarf.” Ansel comments to himself, as soon as his companion had disappeared.

Chapter Three Out in The Woods.

In the woods the shadows were beginning to hang long. Seren wandered between the trees smelling the flowers, listening to the birds and drinking in the sights.

She stopped here and there for a little light refreshment. A piece of fruit here, there a tasty leaf, then a wild mushroom or two and a drink from a tiny stream. Nothing could be more at home in such a wood than an elf. She made friends with all the animals and danced around the trees. She was happy as an elf could be. Seren-Gwirion had come home to the trees.

These woods were not her woods. They were not even elven woods. The Elves never set up camp so close to human habitation. Neither were they faerie woods, with their well kept appearance. In a faerie wood everything seems to be in exactly the right spot, through careful tending.

She had wandered into an area of wood which was unkempt.

Everything was all over the place. The undergrowth was all over overgrowth. Plants were scattered around all higgledy-piggledy. All the wrong plants in all the wrong places, completely helter-skelter.

These tell-tale signs would have told any other elf to beware.

If an elf had a memory it would have recognised the signature of pixies. Pixies, by their very nature, are careless creatures. They sport and jest and delight in making fun of visitors. Though there is no real harm in them if you have a strong mind. Show one sign of weakness and they will pick at it until they drive you insane.

They love to frighten visitors to their woods. They love to see bold men run off all in fright.

Pixies will not normally trouble an elf. An elf's will is much too strong for them. Elves generally keep well clear of such places if they can. Our Elf is oblivious to danger. If she were in her former delicate condition pixies might have driven her mad or turned her into one of their own kind.

Ansel's little device was keeping watch over Seren's heart and, before this night was over, might well prove its worth, if it could withstand the test to which it would now be submitted.

Seren wandered on, not minding the brambles which scratched at her legs. Now and then she fancied she heard the tinkle of tiny voices, now in the trees, now from behind them and then from the undergrowth.

That is the way of pixie voices. As soon as they are gone you are not sure if you have heard them or no. You fancy it was something else you heard, the babbling of a brook, the wind rustling through the leaves or some small animal or bird. .

Then you hear them again, dotted about, aimed to confuse you. It is no good looking for them for, by the time you do they are no longer there. The Pixies try this for a while to see who you are and how it affects you. If you become frightened then it becomes worse and worse. If you ignore them they soon tire of the sport and hardly bother you at all.

These pixies felt the spirit of Seren in the wood, what little of it was apparent. They knew that she was no harm to them. She had the goodness of an elf, which annoyed them and made them jealous of her. They did not feel in her the full strength of her elf spirit, which meant that it was safe to sport with her.

"It's an Elf." Said Blackheart, who, of course knew everything.

"No. It's not an elf." Chirped Stinkweed, who naturally knew even more. "It has no spirit."

"A fallen elf." Said Doctor, who actually did know something.

"Good morning, Elf." Cried Lunkwort.

By now Seren knew that she had heard them. They had become bold now and did not try to hide.

"It's not morning, it's afternoon, isn't it?" Her memory really didn't serve her that well.

"It's morning, The Sun's coming up." Sang Nightshade.

The wood tinkled with a thousand pixie voices shouting

"Good morning."

The call travelled around and along and back again and kept on going for ages.

"Very well. If you say so. It is morning." Seren agreed.

“Good evening.” Shouted Lousewort, living up to his name.

The chorus started up again, echoing his pronouncement.

“She doesn’t know.” Whispered Blackheart.

“Are you an elf?” Horehound demanded, jumping down from his hiding place in a tree.

“Yes. I am.” Seren answered, forthrightly.

“I used to be an elf.” Squill piped up.

“No you didn’t.” Blackheart argued and a lengthy altercation ensued.

They argued without imagination full of ‘Was’ and ‘Wasn’t’ and ‘Liar’ and ‘Not’ and, of course, ‘Liar yourself.’ until Blackheart had Squill in an armlock on the floor.

“Say you weren’t.” He demanded.

“You don’t have to fight.” Seren said, tenderly.

“Hey! None of that.” Said Blackheart, running away a little distance. “None of that goody-goody elfishness with me.”

The chorus piped up....

“Goody-goody!” and it turned into a song... “Goody-goody. Hey na goody-goody.”

“That’s better.” Seren cried and joined in. “Goody-goody.”

“Shut up. Shut up.” Shouted Blackheart and his fellows proceeded to mock him. You can’t expect loyalty from a bunch of pixies.

He was taller and more powerful than the others, being fully two foot tall. It is that way with elves and pixies. The High Elves are taller and the lower elves smaller until we get right down to pixie size. It is the opposite with faeries, the smaller they are the more powerful they are.

Blackheart stood holding his breath until his face went green.

“I’ll fix you all later.” He warned.

Pixies are not brave and have a great respect for power. They knew Blackheart meant it and so they piped-down.

“What’s your name?” Doctor, the one with half a brain, asked.

It was a mean question and he knew it. If it had not been for Ansel’s little device, Seren would have been in serious trouble.

“I don’t remember.” Seren said, puzzled.

“You must have lost it then.” Doctor concluded. “Anybody seen a name?”

“Let’s look for it.” Horehound jested.

Pixies appeared from everywhere and started looking under every rock and bush. They filled the air with cries of ...

“Nothing here.” and “It’s not here.” and “No.”

"I've found a frog." Cried Dunce who, you may have guessed, had no brain at all.

This was met with jeers and peels of laughter from all.

"Henceforth." Doctor started-out solemnly. "We name you Frog. Welcome, Frog, to our happy band."

"We don't want her." Blackheart challenged. "An' if we did I should be the one to say."

Doc leaned over to appease him and whispered ...

"It's a joke."

"Well, what's your name now then?" Horehound demanded.

"I don't know." Seren insisted.

"Hey, Dunce. You've met your match here. We just told you. It's Frog. Get it? Frog!" Blackheart lectured.

"Now what's your name then?" Horehound reiterated.

"I don't know." Seren persisted.

"No name." The Pixie chorus began and, sensing that they had found a weak-spot, they kept it up for a long time.

"Don't. Please don't." Seren cried at length.

To which the chorus replied....

"Don't. Please don't." with the occasional "No name." thrown-in. This Seren found not quite so bad.

"That's no use." Blackheart silenced them. "She's enjoying it."

"Let's listen to her heart." Goatsbeard suggested.

"Yuck!" Blackheart exclaimed. "All that goody-goody rot."

But The Chorus was against him this time. The pixies longed for the feelings hidden deep in their past. They all wanted to become elves again. The heart of a High Elf could restore at least ten of them to a low caste of elf before becoming depleted.

"Yes, let's." They cried. "Let's share her heart."

Blackheart sensed that he must either agree or give up his leadership to Horehound, his nearest rival.

"All right, but I go first." He insisted. "Just to see if it's safe." He added a note of feigned altruism.

He approached the elf and touched her as no pixie would dare to touch a healthy elf. Seren felt searing pain, like an electric shock, which sped straight to her heart but it was stopped there at the threshold and could not enter.

Blackheart felt the same and the force of it threw him to the ground. His heart had no protection but the danger was not to him.

"She has no heart." He was astonished.

"Then she must be ill." Goatsbeard announced. "Send for The Doctor."

The Chorus lit up with cries of...

“Doctor. Doctor.”

Doctor, of course, was standing right next to them all of this time.

“Alright, stop shouting. I’m here.” Doctor informed them.

“Doctor’s here.” Everyone shouted.

“Please, it hurts.” Seren pleaded for them not to touch her.

“That’s it. Show Doctor where it hurts.” He replied.

He touched her and the same thing happened again but then he touched her again and there was no pain.

“Contact has been made.” He announced, dramatically. “There is a heart.” He discerns “I am pleased to inform you that you are not dead.” He jests. “But this is serious all the same. The heart is blocked. It is sorcery.”

The cry passed around...

“Sorcery.”,

... and many of the pixies disappeared

There is nothing more disconcerting to pixies than something more powerful than themselves.

“If we all try really hard we can unblock this heart.” Doctor informed them.

This sounded too serious a proposition for most of them.

“No.” Said Blackheart. “I want this heart. I want to dance with The Elves again.”

“It won’t work. The best we can hope to do is make her one of us.”

Doctor observed. “But we can cure her of this curse.”

“No, why should we?” Blackheart demanded, storming off.

As their main leaders dropped out, so staunch followers also turned their backs upon the affair. They withdrew to a safe distance and went into hiding to watch the action unfold.

Those that were left were Doctor fans and free thinkers and those who believed that they were inches away from being elven again and were greedy to be elves. Then there were some who felt the vague stirrings of long forgotten compassion, those who were almost too good to be pixies.

“Come.” Doctor invited. “You must dance with us.”

Normally dancing with the pixies would have made Seren one of them but now, who could tell what might happen.

“I don’t seem to remember any dances.” Seren admitted, poignantly.

“I’m not surprised.” Doctor nodded. “All those silly elf dances, who remembers them? Much too complicated.” He dismissed them.

“Look, do this.” He did a little jig.

Seren tried it but could not manage more than the first two steps before forgetting the rest.

“Who said that elves could dance.” Squill mocked and did an exquisite solo routine. “Now that’s dancing for you.” She boasted.

“That’s not going to work then.” Doctor concluded, deep in thought. “I’ll tell you what. You dance and we will follow you.”

Seren knew some fancy steps but she could not remember what she would call a proper dance. She ad-libbed, putting a number of easy steps in random order.

The pixies were dumbfounded. They could not manage to keep up with her.

“Show-off!” Squill complained, who was rather proud of her dancing. “Well, if you’re going to be like that, I’m leaving.”

She burst into tears.

“Oh, now.” Seren tried to comfort her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. Come on, dry your eyes.” She took out a silken handkerchief.

“Now blow... and again. There, are you better now?”

“I think so.” Squill smiled.

“Let’s try again.” Seren invited.

“But keep it simple.” Squill entreated.

“Let’s just do this three times. Heel, toe. Heel, toe. Heel, toe.” She counted. “Now with the other foot. That’s it.”

Soon there were a hundred pixies dancing with her but it was not a proper dance.

“That’s no good.” Doctor barked. “It doesn’t do anything. It has to be a dance of power.”

He rushed around pushing them, trying to get them all to quit. As soon as one section had stopped another grew impatient and started up again. The calls of... “Heel, toe.”... rang out all over the place.

Even pixies who were not with the group started dancing all over the wood. They forgot that they weren’t joining in.

“Now.” He said, when they were mostly finished. “Form a circle.”

“Form a circle.” Shouted Dunce, intermittently.

“We’ve got to concentrate.” Doctor instructed.

The Pixies looked for all the world as if ‘concentrate’ meant ‘pull funny faces’.

“Now, sit.” Doctor said, firmly, trying to get them in line.

“Lady Elf, you sit here and take my hand. Now, Dunce, stop shouting ‘form a circle’ and sit next to The Elf. Take her hand.”

Doctor waited for the response and when it came he laughed heartily.

“Ouch!” Dunce yelled. “She bit me.”

“Don’t be silly. She can’t bite you with her hand, now can she?”

Doctor pointed out. “Now do it again... Go on.”

Dunce took her hand and this time felt no pain.

“Now we’re going to do this all around the circle, one at a time but, I’m warning you, the first time it hurts, so all of you cry-babies better toddle off.”

Some of The Pixies didn’t like the sound of that, so they did ‘toddle off’.

Those that remained added to the circle one by one. As the circle grew the pain became less and less for each pixie addition. For Seren the pain grew more and more as their minds penetrated into hers and their souls joined to hers, but her heart remained intact, protected by her little, green fuse.

She sat bravely through it all, her body wracked with shock after terrible shock and she gave not one word of complaint.

The Pixies were full of ‘youches’ and ‘ows’ and some of them ran-off screaming and crying and carrying-on.

At last the circle was complete and the wave of psychic energy blasted into Seren until she almost passed-out.

“We are going to push our combined wills through this channel and break our way into this elf’s heart.” Doctor spoke, ominously.

The Pixies were concentrating now in an uncharacteristic manner, because they were joined to the elf’s spirit. It guided them in a course which was of great danger to itself.

The High Elves are important to all elf-kind, for only they have power enough to protect them all. There are times when even elves must protect their own. To do this they have evolved a system. The lower castes of elves cleanse and purify The Higher Elves. If an Elf Lord has to kill in battle the deeds would diminish his power until he finds lower elves who will, in effect, take the blame from him. They share his pain between hundreds of them until his heart is pure as a new-born babe’s.

If one elf were to take all of this evil to itself it may become a pixie or even a goblin, that is, if the shock didn’t kill it first.

It is possible for this to work the other way. A High Elf can take the evil out of a whole lot of pixies and turn them back into ordinary elves but with the same dire consequences.

Here is Seren about to join her heart with the pixies, not realising the danger she faces. That is, if they can defeat The Sorcerer’s tool inside her.

“Concentrate harder.” Doctor spurs them on. “It’s no good. There are not enough of us.”

He thinks for a moment and then comes up with the answer.

“We’re going to play a trick on the others.” He whispers to Squill beside him. “Pretend you’re enjoying it. Pass it on.”

The message is relayed around the circle.

Pixies love to play tricks and they ham it up really well. The Circle becomes alive with laughs and ‘coos’ and ‘oos’ and ‘ahs’ and pixies saying ‘wow’ and ‘oh, that’s good.’ and ‘weeeeeeee’.

Soon hundreds of pixies are becoming curious and creeping out of their hidey-holes and clambering out of their trees to get a closer look at what’s going on.

“What’s this then?” Blackheart steps up, kicking Doctor in the back.

“The best fun I’ve had in years.” Said The Wily Doctor.

“Is this true.” Blackheart said to Squill, twisting her pointed ear.

“It’s marvellous, simply marvellous.” She crooned.

The circle became alive with pixies offering alternative superlatives like ‘wonderful’ and ‘fantastic’ and ‘amazing’ and even Duncie threw in the only word he knew.

“Nice!” He exclaimed.

“Let me try.” Blackheart insisted, breaking into the circle.

This gave Seren the greatest shock of all.

“Steady-on.” Cried Doctor. “You’ll kill The Elf. You’ve ruined it now. We shall have to start all over again.”

Start again they did. This time with a thousand eager pixies, even pixies which were born pixies and had never been elves, who didn’t know what the fuss was about.

After all the problems of getting a thousand pixies to co-operate, things got underway. There were some pixies who were too afraid to join-in and those who did not care to and those who wimped out when they were hit by the initial jolt of touching the circle.

Those within the now huge circle were all concentrating very hard, for pixies.

Ansel’s little, green fuse was being tested to the limit. The force of all those minds pushing at it threatened to burn it out. There were strange noises rising from it, which amplified themselves in the cavities of Seren’s body and she was heard to spit and crackle.

Layer after layer of machinery peeled and melted and cracked away. A thin wisp of smoke began to rise from Seren’s mouth and it had that ozone-electrical smell.

A tiny opening began to appear in the machinery. A crack through which a minuscule amount of Seren's heart leaked out.

This time there was no faking in the howls of delight, as the pixies felt this peace and tranquillity exude. Then a tiny bit of joy seeped forth, like a drip for a leaking tap, sending the pixies into raptures. There was pain in there too and a bad memory floated out, setting the pixies off crying and moaning and weeping and wailing.

It was fortunate for Seren that the breach was not too wide and that it still allowed nothing to pass in. An inrush of the mischief in all those pixies would have turned her instantly into a very mean and powerful troll.

Just as something really terrible was about to happen, Lousewort, who was not in the circle, because he did not want to feel anything that could be described as 'nice', came running up and shouting.

"Wolves!" And then he puffed and panted. "Evil spirits!" And then he huffed and puffed. "Coming this way."

He shook Blackheart, who was trying to draw all of the elf-spirit into himself that he could.

"Not now." Shouted Blackheart. "What is it?"

"Evil spirits, in the shape of wolves, coming to eat us." Lousewort panted.

Not even the lure of elf-hood could keep those pixies sitting there after an announcement like that. They broke the circle en-mass. All at once. No thought for Seren's delicate condition.

There were pixies crying

"Head for the trees."

It always seemed to work out that way that there were precisely as many pixies as there were trees. Today was no exception. No-one knew why and I don't suppose they cared. It had always been that way. I suppose it stopped the wood from becoming too crowded.

The pixies each called out as they climbed their trees.

"This is my tree." And "I've got mine." And there were pixies fighting over trees, trying to stop each other from climbing them, until one won-through or somebody else grabbed it.

The breaking of the circle had been too much for Seren. She had passed-out for a few seconds. Not for very long but for just long enough for every pixie to grab a tree and every tree to be grabbed by a pixie.

Something in Ansel's machine had given way too. When the circle broke something in there went-off with a loud 'Pop!'.

Just before then Seren had begun to look a little less elvish and a little more like a pixie. Her fine, flawless features had become a little more angular and pointed and she had diminished somewhat in stature.

Seren arose, shakily, to her feet. Now strangely restored to her elven form, if not even more elegant than ever.

“What’s going-on?” She asked. “Where did everybody go?”

“You’d better hide.” Blackheart warned. “Wolves are coming.”

“I’m not afraid of wolves.” Seren replied. “All creatures are our friends.”

For no natural animal will attack an elf.

“These are possessed by evil spirits, Madam. Go climb a tree.” He said, scornfully.

“I shall climb this one.” She replied.

“No! This is my tree! One to a tree!” He said, fervently.

“Why?” She asked.

“You don’t ask why. Rules is rules.” He corrected her.

“I’m coming up.” She warned.

“If you do, I’ll climb down.” He countered.

“What will you do when the wolves come?” She asked.

“I shall climb Squill’s tree and throw her out.” He said with a decisive nod.

“Then I will take my chances with the wolves.” She decides. “They are bound to be much nicer than you are.”

“I don’t want to be nice.” He adds, as she walks away.

There is silence in the wood. An empty, expectant silence, as if the earth itself is holding its breath. The sun is on the horizon. It throws an eerie glow through the trees. It’s light barely grazes the ground on its way through. It is that hour when the light seems unnatural. It paints the air with colours not normally seen. The shadows of ordinary things are so much longer than themselves, seeming to take-on a life of their own and out of those shadows grew the wolves.

Vague, grey shapes padded through the shadows, heads down, nosing the ground, following the scent of elf. On lean legs that had carried them over many a mile, driven by a malevolent spirit. They zigzagged between the trees, searching this way and that way and slowly their outlines became larger and clearer. Their presence became stronger too. The Wood, normally abuzz with the activity of small animals and birds each evening at sunset, fell into a deep hush. A dangerous calm, the silence of terror. The power of their hatred turned the hearts of The Pixies into jelly and halted their breathing.

In all The Wood nothing stirred but The Wolves.

The lead wolf, a powerful beast five feet long and one hundred pounds in weight, lifted his head and caught his first sight of The Elf. She stood, a faint outline bathed in the last rays of the fading sunlight. He stared intently and sniffed the air until he was certain of what he saw. Then he came rushing-on.

His followers, which had wandered along behind him, with steady even strides, now sensed his discovery and took-off after him.

The Elf stood and watched them come-on, like a maid admiring her pets. In all The Wood she was the only creature which could not feel their evil intent.

Even The Trees around them seemed to shiver as they passed-by.

The governor on Seren's heart hid the terror from her.

The Top-dog stopped a few feet away from her, perhaps perturbed by her boldness, for she had no fear within her.

He stood, teeth bared, his hair erect above his shoulders, an imposing and terrifying figure, and a deep growl rumbled from him.

"Hello Puppy." She greeted him in a kindly voice.

The voice of an elf is soothing to an animal as to a man. It has the power of spiritual healing and the power to soften hearts. The power of an elf can, by itself, exorcise evil spirits and lay troubled souls to rest.

The warmth of this voice, the fairest of the fair, washed over The Beast. It was a contest of wills to gain control.

In this exchange The Wolf was the instrument and the unwilling victim. The Wolf itself was in a state of extreme vexation and confusion. Within it was a will which drove it to attack The Elf but the power of The Elf fought against this and invited affection.

In a contest for the will of an animal, an elf should always have the upper-hand over a witch. Elves have a natural affinity with animals and The Elf was so close, The Witch so far away.

Alas, our elf was not a perfect elf and The Witch was strong and her control of the animal was so deep.

"Are you troubled, Little One? Come, let me help you?" Seren replied to his angry snarls.

The other wolves looked-on, afraid and bewildered, waiting for their leader to decide what to do.

Seren slowly pushed-out her hand towards him, offering comfort.

"Hush, hush, Little One. Tawel." She crooned.

The Beast snapped at her hand and caught it firmly by the wrist. It now obeyed its instincts, unable to reconcile the two wills which clamoured for possession of its soul.

The Wolf tried to keep its prize to itself.

It pulled Seren off her feet and dragged her away from the other wolves.

The pack took-off after them. Strong as The Leader was and light as The Elf may be, it was not long before the other wolves caught-up.

A second wolf, the leader's nearest rival, caught hold of Seren's leg and began a tug of war over her.

The other wolves, afraid of The Leaders, circled a few paces away and gnarled and snapped.

The Leader, angered, let go of Seren's wrist and flew at his rival.

They began a terrible battle of wolf against wolf.

The other wolves, equally confused and angry, started attacking each other in a snarling, snapping frenzy.

Seren, fortunately, escaped their attention for a moment. She pulled around her a cloak of invisibility and silently crept away into the shelter of some bushes. As softly as an elf, she crept from cover to cover, exploiting all of her elfin prowess, and inched away from her pursuers.

The wolves had become unruly and had, for a moment, forgotten the captor of their wills. That power was not long in reasserting itself. Now it was in control again and the wolves resumed their search for The Elf.

Seren had not escaped very far and the wolves were certain to pick-up her trail in a short time.

She took to heel and the sudden motion caught their canine attention. They bounded after her.

Elves run very swiftly and can keep going for quite a time but they are not inexhaustible.

Wolves follow relentlessly. They can keep on a trail for days until capture is made. At first The Elf pulled further ahead of them, but she was already tired from her many ordeals of the day. The Wolves started to gain ground. They drew nearer and nearer.

Seren ran and ran, not heeding anything about her. She left the confines of The Pixie Wood and carried on into a deepening forest. Tall pines were about her now and she ran on a wide path between them, not wondering where it led or who had made it. A carpet of grass twenty metres wide lay between two walls of mighty trees. A forest so thick that light hardly penetrated to its floor and nothing grew beneath the pines.

You would think an elf would have the sense to climb a tree. Seren just ran and ran. Her breath was laboured but this did not daunt her. Her arm and her leg were a-gash with deep wounds but she did not falter. To an elf a wound in the body is not nearly so bad as a wound ‘of the heart’.

Meanwhile an old owl alighted in a tree in Pixie Wood. There were pixies still quaking in their boots, shivering in their shoes and even trembling in their bare feet. None of them had ventured down from their trees and a pixie in hiding will tolerate no company at all.

The owl had been following the elf and had come to lute recognising the feel of one of that breed nearby.

The tree, however, was populated by none other than Dunce.

Dunce, the pixies, as he was, sat staring at the owl and the owl stared back at him expectantly.

“Shoo!” Dunce shouted at him in a whispering, hidey sort of shout.

“Go away. Silly owl.”

The owl sat unperturbed by this strange behaviour, out on a limb so frail that even a pixie could not reach him.

“Go away, Tylluan.” Dunce insisted, quite forgetting about hiding and keeping quiet.

Dunce, being Dunce, hardly noticed what he had said. The other pixies around him heard it quite plainly and the sound of the elven tongue was like a spear-thrust through the heart to them.

“Elf!” Cried Blackheart, also forgetting to hide.

Now that the pixies’ attentions had been drawn from their fear, they all felt the presence of ‘goodhearts’ amongst them and started looking around suspiciously. This was not as with Seren, whose heart had been muted. This felt like real elves were in the wood, probably several of them.

Pixies, perhaps because they were jealous of them, made their own folk-lore, devoid of truth, about elves. They said, and wanted to believe, that elves were their enemies and would steal into their woods and kill them. The pixies, knowing that they could not hide from elves, went into a frenzy and tumbled out of their trees in panic.

Out of Dunce’s tree dropped an elf. A very fine wood-elf, standing three foot three, but he certainly looked a lot like Dunce.

“Dunce, you’re an elf.” Shouted Doctor, who alone amongst the pixies was unperturbed.

Then he heard himself speak and listened to the music of his heart and felt as he had not done for a long, long time.

“Come to think of it, so am I.” He realised.

In the turmoil of those last moments, as the circle of pixies was broken, so the forces were polarised.

The selfish impulses of the majority of pixies had brought the evil away from the elf and a portion of what little good that remained in the pixies had flown into her and into those who were next to her.

The power had been enough to elevate four pixies into elves and to restore Seren to her former self.

All of the sorrow she had born escaped from her heart and was now shared amongst many pixies.

Doctor looked around. He saw hundreds of fleeing pixies and three elves.

“Goatsbeard! Squill!” He called. “Why are you running?”

They looked at each other and then at themselves and it took a moment for them to realise what had happened to them.

“I don’t rightly know.” Goatsbeard admitted.

“Tylluan, dyfod.” Doctor turned to the owl, which flew down at his command.

Doctor stared into the owl’s eyes and the owl stared back.

“Where?” Doctor demanded. “Then go and get them. Bring them here.” He ordered.

The conversation over, the owl flew off.

“Now, we must follow Our Lady Elf and try to rescue her.” He turned to his three companions.

“We have no weapons.” Said Goatsbeard. “We shall be torn to pieces.”

“No matter.” Said Doctor. “We must still try.”

In a few moments they saw the approach of a band of animals.

There was the owl, three dogs, a bear and a donkey.

The whole party took off at high speed.

Seren was still running but no longer at such a high speed. The wolves were gaining on her more and more rapidly.

Her legs were leaden heavy and she felt her lungs would burst. She could go on no longer. She collapsed to the ground.

“Come on, Silly.” She told herself. “It’s just a little jog.”

She could not raise the strength to stand but her indomitable will drove her on. She crawled along on all fours.

She heard the sound of the wolves not far behind her and thought that the chase would soon be over.

Then she heard a voice in her mind, a smooth, calm, mellow voice.

“Hello, My Lady.”

She looked up and her eyes were greeted by the fairest sight of all.

Towering over her was a white steed, shining in the light of the new risen full moon. A shaft of light caught and glinted from its one great, spiral-twisted horn.

“Ceffyl-a-corn.” She spoke. “Look out for the wolves.”

“Oh, I see them.” He replied.

The wolves were about to overtake their victim when, over the rise he came. A unicorn standing six foot tall at the shoulder. A powerful beast with an armoured spike atop his head.

A unicorn gives out an aura of goodwill which extends for several metres from his body. A powerful force for good, which melts the heart of even the sternest hunter. The wolves had become caught up in this net, projected through his horn, and had once again become bewildered.

They backed away but their hearts were still hard and they growled and snarled and showed their teeth.

The Unicorn shook his head and his silver mane cascaded around his neck and flashed in the moonlight.

“These are nasty beasts.” He told her. “I don’t know if I can hold them off. You’d better come up and I will carry you to safety.” He lowered his head and she, grabbing his mane, pulled herself up. The wolves began edging forwards, some running in a few paces and then backing off again.

“Hurry, Lady. I don’t much like this position.” He instructed.

“I’m hurrying as fast as I can.” She sais politely.

“I’m up.” She announced at last.

He rears up on his hind legs, pivots on the spot and leaps away at a blistering pace.

The wolves take-off after him but are quickly left far behind.

They have travelled for quite some time. Huge, dark clouds had risen before them and now the moon had disappeared behind them. The wind started to howl and drive the snow against them. Now with no light and drifting snow piling higher and higher they could no longer go on.

They found what shelter they could and slept through the howling of the winds and the swirling of the snowflakes and the bitter cold. It was a cold so deep that even an elf felt cold and even a unicorn might freeze.

As cold as it was, they did not freeze. The sheltered spot they had found had stood them in good stead, or perhaps it was the fact that they were almost buried in snow when they awoke.

Unicorns are not built for snow, they generally go south for the winter. Seren had great difficulty in rousing her helper and he found it difficult to move through the drifted snow.

At times he found himself buried belly deep while the elf floated over the top of the drifts, like a boat over water.

Their progress was slow and they knew that the wolves would quickly catch up with them.

“You will have to leave me here and make good your escape.” The Unicorn offered. “I will work my way out in time.”

He was particularly stuck at the time.

“I would not leave you.” She sighed. “Even though I am exhausted.”

She was exhausted from pulling him out of the drifts.

“You think you’re tired? I can hardly lift a hoof.” He complained.

Her keen eyes looked all around.

“Look.” She said, excitedly. “The snow ends just up there.”

Sure enough the snow ended abruptly not very far ahead of them.

The Unicorn pushed himself forward with one mighty leap after another. Each titanic effort yielded an entire foot of progress.

The end of the snow edged closer and closer. The wolves, however, came on in leaps and bounds. It was like a race between a swift and a snail.

“I call it very odd, all this snow so early in the year.” The Unicorn remarked.

Just then Seren saw the wolves not very far behind them.

“Never mind that now, here come our friends.” Seren said, tongue in cheek.

“That cheers me up no end.” The Unicorn remarked, trying to try even harder.

The Unicorn bounded out of the last large snowdrift with the wolves only a few steps behind. Seren jumped onto his back and he took off at a sort of half pace which the wolves very nearly matched.

“That was close.” He commented.

“Nonsense.” She said, irreverently. “I’ve had much closer calls than that.”

“Yes, but you’re an elf.” He excused.

“Well, where are you taking me?” She asked.

“Home, of course.” He asserted.

“How do you know my home?” She demanded.

“Come, Dear Lady, do you not know me? I am your childhood companion. We were born on the same day. Ours is not a passing acquaintance to be so easily forgotten.” He explained.

“You will have to excuse me. I have no memory of my past.” She said, apologetically.

“I am not here by coincidence. I sensed you were in trouble and have travelled from my nice, warm winter home in the south to be told that you don’t remember. Well, no matter. I remember and I will take you to your father.”

This decided they travelled on. The Unicorn, at first, recovered a little from his day’s battle with the snow. The wolves fell further behind again. Then he began to tire again and there was every possibility that they grew closer with every step. At last he spoke as the light was waning.

“It is no use, I shall have to rest soon.”

“Of course you shall.” She agreed.

After a quiet night, in which they both ate a little and slept a little, they were fresher and stronger to renew their journey.

They had travelled for a couple of hours when they saw a small figure clad in green approaching. He was an elf and no ordinary elf. One of The High Elves of Seren’s own tribe, for he stood full four feet tall. He carried a bow and a quiver of arrows, as do many elves, but he also had about him a sword, which showed him to be an Elf-Lord.

He would have seen them coming from afar and, had they been men or any source of danger, they would not have seen him.

He stopped a few paces ahead of them.

“Hello, Cousin. What brings you to this neck of the woods?” He greeted her and then corrected himself. “Sorry, Noble Beast, I should greet you first.”

“No matter, Little One.” The Unicorn excused him. “Family comes first after a long absence. I found her wandering in the forest, chased by wolves and she has no memory.”

“Well, you can’t go that way.” The Elf Lord informed him.

“What do you mean I can’t?” The Unicorn demanded.

“You must not, I mean.” The Elf cautioned.

“I’m taking This Lady home.” The Unicorn stated.

“She can not go home. She is not welcome there. Do you not know her trouble? She is besotted with a wizard.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of a road barred to a unicorn.” The Beast complained.

“You may pass, Noble Beast, but you must leave your burden behind.” The Elf allowed, but he also took out his bow and plucked an arrow from his quiver and began to load it.

“Turn back.” Seren begged her steed.

“I will talk with this elf first.” The Unicorn insisted. “How can I help her?”

Take her back to her Wizard. His name is Edramuth, his wizard name is Denath, his present body is called Zeebran. To us he does not exist, we are not supposed to speak his name or to speak of him or to him.”

“Then why do you so?” The Unicorn enquired.

“This Lady is my cousin and is very dear to me, even though she does not exist.” Said The Lord.

“They may find out and cast you out.” The Unicorn warned.

“Then I shall live with the wood elves who are not so fussy.” The Elf replied.

“We are fortunate indeed that it was you who we met, Calon-Agored. Oh yes, I remember you. Go in peace.”

With that, The Unicorn turned about and began a slow march back towards the wolves.

Calon had a great love for his cousin and had done her a great favour in speaking of The Wizard. He had defied a royal command and risked his own future or, at the very least, severe censure. If she had tried to continue her journey he would have to kill her. His sense of duty to his tribe left him with no choice. To speak to her, even to warn her, was a fault in the eyes of his people. What he was about to do showed more of love than of duty as ‘Open-heart’ lived up to his name.

“Wait. I will escort you to safety.” He said, running after them.

“You must not risk yourself for me.” Seren argued.

“Don’t worry, Cousin who shall know? I was going this way anyway.” Calon scoffed. “Our elders have forgotten what it is to be an elf. They have grown too stuffy with all of their rules. I much prefer the company of wood-elves these days. They are so much more informal.”

“Yours was ever a rebellious spirit.” The Unicorn recalled.

“Exactly. My Uncle and I are always disagreeing. He always said I would overstep the mark one day and we can’t let The King be wrong, can we?”

He searched desperately for an excuse for what he was doing, even though his heart told him that it was the right thing to do.

“I never agreed with what they did to you, Cousin. I couldn’t believe that elves could be so cruel. I nearly left them then. I should have. If we go to The Low Elves, they might adopt you as their queen and give you a name. It won’t be as good as your old name but at least you’ll be a proper elf again. What do you say, Cousin?”

“I don’t want to be a renegade.” Seren replied.

“Forget your high ideals, Cousin. You’ve forgotten everything else. I have found a band who would have you. I have discussed it with them.”

He was resolute and she had no will left to argue with him.

“I will do whatever you think best.” She relented.

“Good, then it is settled.” He acknowledged, and the three continued travelling back towards the angry, snapping jaws of those wolves.

Chapter Four

Ran out of fancy headings.

Walking through the woods were three young men and one old wizard. They followed the trail of a bear. The Wizard paused, leaning against a tree. He did not look at all well. His legs were shaky, his weather-beaten face had turned pale and a cold sweat was pouring from his brow.

“Are you alright?” Torgud asked, concernedly.

“I am fine.” Zeebran reassured. “It is The Elf. She is in some kind of trouble.”

“What can we do?” Torgud demanded.

“Nothing.” Said Zeebran. “Just carry on searching.”

“I don’t like this.” Said Vabian, who was scouting on ahead.

“There are other tracks following the bear.”

“Let me see.” Said Zeebran, putting his suffering aside for a while.

“They joined the trail back there. Half a dozen men.” Vabian pointed out.

“Yes, I see. Hunters, by the look of it.” Zeebran noted.

“If they catch our bear, that will make our task more difficult.” O’Cazian declares. “We’d better hurry.”

“Better hurry.” The Wizard repeated and then collapsed to the floor.

The others rushed towards him and knelt beside him, wondering what to do. The Old Man was not long in coming-to.

“I’m alright. I’m alright. Don’t fuss. I can get up.” He rose to his feet and dusted himself off. “Well, we are still alright at any rate. Come on, let’s get on. The light is beginning to fade.”

A little further on they saw the light of the trappers’ campfire and encircled it to pick up the trail on the other side.

“Well, they haven’t caught The Bear at any rate.” Zeebran noted and, strangely, blood started dripping from his hand.

“Look. You’re bleeding.” Said Vabian.

“Am I.” Said Zeebran, seeming unconcerned. “I must have caught it on something.”

“But there’s no wound.” O’ Cazian noticed.

“Well, never mind, let’s get going.” Zeebran prompted.

“Your leg is bleeding now.” Said Torgud. “The light has gone and we won’t be able to see until the moon rises. Let’s just rest until then.”

“Very well, you rest and catch me up in the morning.” Zeebran said, marching off.

“I will lead you. I can see quite well in the dark.” Said Vabian, dashing after him.

“I must say, I don’t well like your wizard.” Said O’ Cazian. “But we’d better not lose him.”

They trudged on and the moon rose. Now that they could see they noticed that the wood was different.

“Well, Vabian. You say you were educated by a wizard. What do you see?” Zeebran asked.

“Trees mostly and the place is badly overgrown.” Vabian answered.

“Signifying what?” Zeebran pressed.

“I don’t know.” Said Vabian, testily. “Suppose you tell me.”

“Never mind.” Said The Wizard. “We shall see.”

They followed the trail until it was joined by more tracks, those of wolves. Then they came to a place where there were many signs, including the fairy-rings. One of the rings was very, very large.

Zeebran paced around it, tutting and shaking his head. Where each pixie had sat was marked by the growth of a new toadstool.

“Oh, what have you done, Girl?” He sighs to the air.

He follows a trail of blood to where the two wolves had fought.

Vabian is on a different trail.

“There are signs of more than one elf here.” He sais.

“Look over there. A snowstorm.” Zeebran discovers.

“A little early for snow, isn’t it?” O’ Cazian asks.

“There should be no snow tonight.” Zeebran declares.

“Then that is where we will find your elf.” Vabian infers.

‘He is bright enough when he wants to be.’ Zeebran whispers to himself. “Now let’s get on.” He presses.

The path takes them out of the pixie wood and on to the tunnel between the pines. Zeebran waits until they are close to the trees.

“Now, Vabian. You can prove your worth.” He begins. “There are two men following us. I want you to stay here until they pass and capture them. Give us a yell when you have them.”

“Yes, Sir.” Vabian purrs and springs, catlike into the branches of the nearest tree.

Zeebran leads the others on over a rise, so that they can not be seen. The light is fading now as clouds begin to cover the moon and a light snowfall begins. They are right on the edge of the storm. They make camp and wait for Vabian to call.

It is not long before two men on horseback ride up to where Vabian is treed.

“One of the tracks ends suddenly here, Fadik.” The younger man finds.

Fadik draws his sword.

“Then he must be lurking around somewhere.”

“Correct, gentlemen. Nobody move and no-one gets hurt. Drop your swords and dismount on this side, so I can see you. Slowly. Now chase-off your horses. That’s it. Stand still and hands high.” As Vabian barked each instruction the two men complied. Then Vabian gives a yell sounding like a scalded cat.

Zeebran and the others come rushing down the hill.

Before anyone else could say anything Lord O’ Cazian piped up.

“Fadik, Golad, I thought I had lost you ages ago.”

“We have been close to you all the time, Sir.” Said Fadik. “Why do you make it so hard for us? Are we such bad company?”

“You know these men?” Zeebran demands.

“They are my bodyguards and all this time I thought that I was in great danger.”

“And if you’d needed help we were there all the time.” Golad announced.

“Welcome to the crew.” Zeebran invited. “Pick up your swords and your horses and come and have some supper.”

“That’s very kind of you, Sir.” Said Golad.

“That depends what we’re getting into.” Fadik warned.

Over supper they discussed their predicament. A light snow fell while a little further on the world was drenched in white.

“Well, there’s no chance of tracking in that.” Golad added his little bit of wisdom.

“We’re not going to drag the horses through there anyway.” Said Fadik, decisively. “You can walk that way if you please but this little lot is only five miles across and we can ride around it and pick up the trail before you get to the other side.”

“That is if the trail comes out of the other side.” Said Vabian.

“The thing that I don’t get is where she came by that horse?” Said Vabian.

“Horse be damned.” Said Fadik. “In all my days I never saw a horse with hoof marks such as that.”

“What is it then?” Golad asked.

“I’m darned if I know but it’s no ordinary horse.” Fadik asserted.

“It’s strange how the snow just comes to the end of the trees, like someone planned it that way.” Said Golad.

“Yes, She has a nice touch, our witch.” Said Vabian.

They slept that night and took turns at watch. Torgud shared his watch with Vabian that night and, every now and then he fancied he heard a cat about but he saw nothing.

The sun came up and he roused the others. Fadik and Golad went their separate way and our quartet took off into the snow.

Torgud turned to Vabian and enquired.

“Did you hear a cat last night?”

“No, why?” Vabian shrugged his shoulders.

“I kept hearing a noise like a cat and it seemed so close to you, I thought you must have heard it.”

“Well.” Said Vabian. “The wind was blowing the sound towards you and away from me.”

The explanation sounded plausible.

“Must be bobcats around.” Torgud concluded.

“I expect so.” Said Vabian. “I heard an owl.”

It was an innocent remark, just mentioned in passing, but it aroused Torgud’s attention. He grew wide-eyed at the mention of the word ‘owl’.

“Zeebran. Vabian heard an owl last night.” He said, hurrying over to The Wizard’s side.

“Where away?” Zeebran demanded.

Vabian pointed out the direction

“You know, I think those two are mad.” O’ Cazian uttered. “Here we are with an impossible task ahead of us and they go jaunting off looking for owls. What’s the fuss about an owl anyway?”

“They probably want to ask him if he’s seen anything.” Vabian said, half in jest, but only half in jest.

There are some nights when even an owl can’t see. Once under the dense cloud cover Tylluan had to give up following the trail of his mistress. He came to roost in a tree not very far away from our little band of travellers. He was very weary, for he had been travelling a lot by day as well as by night. This was an unnatural existence for an owl. The daylight hurt his eyes and he was not a youngster anymore.

Now he was as fast asleep as any owl could be, as were all of his companions. They were huddled in-between the bear and the donkey, trying to keep warm.

This was the sight that greeted Zeebran when he marched onto the scene.

“Bless my soul, what have we here?” He bellowed.

The dogs jumped up and set to barking. Drowsy elves raised their heads and peered through half-open eyelids. They could hardly hold their heads up over the carcass of a fat, sleeping bear, which never moved a muscle to protect them.

“Torgud, did you ever see such a sight?” Asked Zeebran.

“No, Sir.” Laughed Torgud.

The owl peered down disdainfully with one eye open.

“Tylluan, dyfod.” Zeebran called him to come.

He looked into his eyes and silent messages passed between them. Then The Owl flew off in search of Seren.

The elves were now alert.

“Who are you?” Doctor demanded.

“”You speak first.” The voice of Vabian rang out from behind.

He had an arrow pointing at Doctor’s heart.

“That won’t be necessary.” Said Zeebran. “Put up your weapon, unless you intend to use it on me.”

All of this time Zeebran had his eyes upon the elves and his back to Vabian. He did not turn his head or look behind.

“Yes, Master.” Said Vabian, lowering his bow.

“I am Edramuth, The Wizard of Lonely Mountain. I am looking for my wife. She is a daughter of King Meddwl-Cyflawn. These about you are her friends.”

He gestured to the animals.

“The gracious lady of whom you speak was taken from us by wolves. They chase her still. We found she was spirited away upon a, em...” Doctor could not find the word.

“On a Unicorn.” Zeebran spoke impatiently. “Now are you ready to join our number?”

“Indeed, Lord Dewin, Swynwr, Edramuth Denath of great renown, for we owe this lady our fealty and our elf-hood. We are Doctor, Goatsbeard, Squill and Dunce. Not elven names, you see, for we are but recently risen from pixie-hood and have yet to be renamed.”

“All this you can explain on our road, for it is a long one. For now, may we leave. We are Zeebran, Torgud, Lord O’ Cazian and Vabian.”

“Excuse me, but may I suggest that I take the donkey and catch my bodyguards. The beast will only slow us down otherwise.” O’ Cazian offers.

“That would be very wise, Sir, but mind how you go.” Zeebran allowed.

“I could do that. His Lordship should not be left alone.” Vabian offered.

“No, Sir. I want you with me, where I can keep my eye on you.” Said Zeebran, firmly and rather impolitely.

“I am not a child. I can look after myself.” Said O’ Cazian indignantly, leading the donkey away.

“You see.” Said Zeebran, moving off. “He has been overprotected all his life and his recklessness is an overreaction to this. Given time he will calm down. He will make a great lord one day.”

“Anyway, what do you mean, ‘keep an eye on me.’?” Said Vabian, feeling hurt.

“I mean I don’t want you going off and killing people willy-nilly. You, Sir, need taking in hand. Never trust people who greet you with a weapon in their hands and a smile on their face.”

“What is that great stick that you carry then, if not a weapon?” Vabian turns interrogator.

“This is to lean on when I walk.” Zeebran answers. “And don’t badger me or I shall hit you with it.”

About an hour later The Owl returned and presumably directed The Wizard to where the trail reappeared, for Zeebran headed directly for the spot. The snow was still deep in places and progress was slow so that it was not until noon that the place was reached.

Zeebran took Torgud aside while the others prepared lunch.

“You see what is happening here?” He began. “It is a game of cat and mouse. Question is, are we the cat, or the mouse. I am now prepared to believe that nothing that has happened so far has been coincidence. This witch of yours is using the wolves to get at our weakest point, my wife. The unicorn comes along and out-foxes the wolves. How can she stop a unicorn, or at least slow it down? She uses snow but not quite enough it seems. Perhaps we are finding her limits. She tries to con me into wasting my powers but I am too smart for that. If the need becomes desperate enough I may have to do something but, for the moment, we are O.K. You must trust me. You must trust my judgement and do everything I say, no matter how strange it may sound, even if I am dead. First thing, watch your friend Vabian and mark him well. I have the strangest feeling about him. I had from the start. Second thing, don’t trust your sword too much. It is still cursed and still partly controlled by your enemy. It may not always do your bidding.”

“It is strange you should say that. When I fought with it before, for a while it seemed to go anywhere but where I aimed it. This guy Lawyer, I ought to have beaten him but The Sword would not behave.” Torgud revealed.

“Now tell me more about Your Grandfather and The Witch. Any detail might help.” Zeebran asked.

“Grandfather came back, as I have told you ten times already, and we were very short of water. Everyone had tried digging wells but every well came up dry.”

“But Tomas was able to find water. Describe exactly what he did. This is important because it shows the witch’s weakness. He must have stumbled upon something that she had overlooked.” Said Zeebran.

Zeebran listened intently whilst Torgud described every detail he could recall.

“I think we have the answer.” Said Zeebran, at last. “Now all that we need is for you to believe me. No matter what happens you must believe that we will win. If you can do this then we will win. There must be no doubt at all in here.”

He taps Torgud lightly on the head.

“If you can not believe then we may as well give up right now. I can find my wife in two minutes and get us home yesterday. You must believe that or you will be our weakest link.”

Dinner had been delivered and they had eaten whilst they talked. The dishes were collected and washed and neatly packed away. Vabian approached them.

“Say, You Two, are you ready?” He demanded.

“As ready as you are.” Zeebran replied. “It is time to leave this place.”

It was at this time that Seren spotted the wolves again. There they were, coming up the road towards them as malevolent as ever.

“Blaidd!” She cried, for she and Calon had been speaking in their native tongue for a while and begun to think in it once more.

“Jump up on my back.” Said The Unicorn. “And we shall charge right through them.”

... And that they did.

The Wolves which barred their way were scattered in all directions before the powerful beast.

It was not long before the wolves gathered themselves up and charged off after their prey.

They raced and chased back along the path over which they had come. The Unicorn, on its majestic legs, sped on ahead of them. They tore down the steep, winding track over rocks and stones and soared over the large potholes and small streams and glided over every obstacle with ease and grace.

The Unicorn is a beast whose footfalls never falter, even on the roughest ground, but a very mysterious thing happened.

The Unicorn's foot hit a boulder and The Unicorn went tumbling to the ground.

The two elves were sent sprawling into the dirt and rushed back to find The Unicorn laying there all forlorn.

"I fear my leg is broken." He said, calmly. "This is most strange. Unicorns, as you know, don't just fall down."

"I think you were tripped." Seren said, to comfort him.

Calon stood with his bow bent ready to receive the wolves.

"It won't be long now." He said.

"It's no use." Said The Unicorn, as Seren tried to mend his leg.

"No time for that. You two get away. It will take them a week to eat me."

"You don't understand. It is me they are after." Said Seren.

"Unicorn not good enough for them I suppose." The Unicorn joked.

"Two seconds to make a splint, that's all." Said Seren. "Now, if you can get up on your feet, just try not to use the broken leg for a while."

"That's very difficult when your weight is evenly distributed." Said The Unicorn. "I can get up by myself, thank you."

"Now, Cousin, you take The Unicorn to safety and go on about your business. I shall lead the wolves away." Seren commanded.

"I can't leave you. There are no trees here." Said Calon.

"It is a royal decree. You can not disobey me. Now go, Calon, and take care." Seren insisted.

"Very well." Said Calon, intending to defy her anyway.

Seren took off like a rabbit, headlong down the hill. Calon began to lead The Unicorn, appearing to do as he had been told.

When Seren was far enough away Calon let The Unicorn go.

"You will be alright on your own a while?" He winked.

"Indubitably." Said The Unicorn, hobbling off, not too far.

Calon took position behind a large rock and waited, bow at the ready. The Wolves came tearing around a bend in the road, into sight. The first arrow took the lead wolf straight through the heart. The Wolves came to a halt and sniffed and pawed and whined at their leader.

Calon and The Unicorn both sensed that the evil could be broken. The Witch had concentrated her power upon the lead wolf for greater economy. Now he was gone the other wolves were only half under her control.

“I think I’ll just amble over there.” Thought The Unicorn. “Or perhaps I’ll just limp.” He corrected himself.

Calon stepped forwards, bow at the ready just in case.

“Dyfod blaidd.” Calon invited them. “Come, wolves, come and walk in the light.”

At first they were wild-eyed and snarling but the power of elf and unicorn now combined to tame them. This elf was perfect elf and The Witch’s grip was weaker.

“Come on, My Children.” Said Calon, lowering his bow and his voice. He no longer felt threatened. “All my children, go free.” The Wolves came to him, one by one, and as he touched them the darkness was taken from them and the anger was removed from their souls.

“I shall need a great deal of cleansing after this.” Calon thought.

“But it is well worth it.”

“Myned.” He told them. “Go and sin no more.”

They left him, once again to live as natural wolves following their own desires.

Calon, however, determined to follow his cousin and keep her from further danger.

“Come, Unicorn.” He invited. “And I will lead you to greener pastures.”

“Sounds good to me.” The Unicorn agreed.

Seren was running swiftly, far ahead of them and The Unicorn could move only slowly. She was on her own again, getting further and further from help.

Seren didn’t really know which way she had come. She came to a fork in the road and went dashing straight ahead. After several miles she came to a lake.

‘That is strange.’ She thought. ‘I don’t remember any lake.’

The terrain was such that it was impossible to walk around the lake. It was surrounded by steep sided cliffs. On the road behind her, for all she knew, was a pack of vicious wolves. Before her there was no passage. She had run herself into a dead-end.

She sat upon a rock with her head in her hands and stared at the dark, cool water. The water reminded her that she was thirsty after running so far and looking at it seemed to make her feel thirstier and thirstier.

If she had remembered the stories from her childhood she would not have drunk from that pool. Any other elf would have turned and walked away, even into the jaws of wolves.

Deep within the bottomless lake, thousands of metres down, was the home of a particularly nasty water sprite called Blaga.

Blaga's pool was a place of great renown and not only among the elves. It was also known as Blaga's larder. Blaga had lived in the pool for as long as anyone could remember. The pool was the cone of an extinct volcano and extended right down to the bowels of the earth. Blaga had adopted it and woven a spell over the waters, so that all who drink there fall into a deep sleep. A kind of suspended animation in which the victim can remain for centuries without breathing.

If the victims do not fall into the water, Blaga will emerge and pull them in. Once in the water the body sinks slowly into the waters of the lake, rotting as it falls. Blaga never eats them until they are really rotten, for he detests his meat too fresh. The trouble is that the victim is still not dead all this time and feels their body rotting away.

Blaga will come along and nibble at the parts that are nicely rotted. The sight of the water induces a raging thirst in the weary traveller, to entice them to drink and the longer they look, the thirstier they become.

Seren was feeling ever so thirsty.

Zeebran and his party had been joined by Lord O' Cazian and his bodyguards and were following the trail, on the heels of the dogs. On the next rise there appeared an elf leading a unicorn.

"Fadik. Lend me your horse a while." Zeebran asked.

He took the horse and galloped up to where Calon stood, bow bent, arrow pointed at The Wizard's heart.

"Stop right there." Said Calon. "Is that really you, Edramuth?"

"I should say so." Said Denath.

"Who am I then?" Calon demanded.

"Calon-Agored." The Wizard recognised.

"Only you never know with Wizards, do you?" Calon observed.

"Where is she then? Where is my cousin, your wife?"

"I had hoped that she was with you and. Pardon me, Noble Beast, good day." Said Zeebran.

"That's alright." Said The Unicorn. "I can see that you are busy. Good day to you, Edramuth."

"She left my side in a hurry heading this way and she should have reached you by now." Calon informed The Wizard.

“Then she is between here and The Devil’s Highway.” Zeebran said, looking over his shoulder.

“Blaga!” He shouted, turned Fadik’s horse and galloped off. Seren was ever so thirsty. She sat looking at the water, her mind was on The Wolves.

“I do wish those wolves would hurry up and come if they are coming. I’m so thirsty. No sense in drinking if you’re going to die in a minute anyway. I’m so thirsty, I don’t think water will do me any good anyway.”

She looked around and saw just what she needed growing nearby. Not many people appreciate what all elves know, that there are some fruits which quench a thirst better than just plain water. Luckily there were lots of water-berries growing nearby and Seren picked some and sat eating them, looking at the water and thinking. “It’s so nice and peaceful here. A lovely place to die. If it weren’t for this thirst. It just won’t go away. Well, if the berries won’t cure it, water never will.”

Blaga had his pool set up just so. He picked it because every sound carried all the way around. Any disturbance in the air or on the water he could hear even from the depths of his pool. Blaga also could read minds and the thoughts of visitors were carried around in the same way.

Blaga knew that he had a visitor. On occasion he had been known to grow impatient waiting for visitors to drink. Then he would appear and try to lure his victims to drink. He would tease them or try to trick them. He had never seen an elf before or no for as long as he could remember. Elves either knew the place, or the legend of it, or they sensed something wrong and took-off long before he had a chance to surface.

He took a lot of animals and the occasional human and even a goblin or two.

He was listening to Seren’s thoughts on his way up from the depths. He was getting very annoyed at her refusal to drink.

‘What shall I do now?’ Seren wondered. ‘I can’t sit here forever, that’s for sure.’

She went on thinking and it annoyed Blaga no end. To him it was like someone shouting in his ear. He became so annoyed that when he surfaced he quite forgot to be polite.

“Who’s that thinking?” He shouted as his green head, covered in water weed, suddenly popped out of the water.

“Oh. You scared me. Don’t go around frightening people like that. You have no right.” Seren complained.

“You have no right to come around here thinking at people like that either.” Blaga counter-complained.

“I can think if I want.” Seren said, indignantly.

“Not round my pool you can’t. It disturbs me.” He insisted.

“Well, you have no right to listen-in to my thoughts anyway.” Said Seren.

“I can’t help it.” Said Blaga. “It goes into my head and I can’t turn it off. Why do you think I live here all alone? It’s to get away from people like you and your blasted thinking. That’s why.”

“Oh, you poor creature.” She pitied him. “No wonder you are so miserable.”

“What do you mean, miserable? Don’t be so insulting. I’m not miserable. I am very happy. That is, I was very happy until you came along.” Said Blaga.

“Oh well. I’ll just go away then and leave you alone. I have an appointment with some wolves anyway, any minute now.” Seren declared.

Blaga remembered his larder.

“Er, no. You don’t have to go. If you have to get eaten by wolves they might as well find you here. I quite like wolves, seeing as how they don’t think much.”

“Yes but you don’t like me though and I wouldn’t want to disturb you.” Seren said, backing away.

“It’s not that I don’t like you. In fact you look really tast... er... I mean, nice. Just as long as you don’t think too much.” Said Blaga.

“Well, if you’re sure I won’t disturb you.” Seren conceded.

“Yes. I shouldn’t forget my manners. It’s seldom that I have company, you see. Would you like a drink, er, of water, I have plenty to spare.”

“Well, I am a little thirsty.” Seren considered.

“Of course you are. Come in for a swim if you like. The water’s lovely and cool.” Blaga invited.

“No, I couldn’t really, not when you have to drink it.” Seren was genuinely considerate.

“Maybe not. But have a drink anyway, before you go, just to show there’s no hard feelings.” Blaga cajoled.

“Alright then, but just a sip.” She relented.

She bent down and took a scoop of water in her tiny hand and sipped it gingerly.

“You see, isn’t it nice?” Said Blaga.

“Yes.” She began. “But it makes you even more ...” And she was about to say thirsty but she fell asleep and fell ‘splash’ on the edge of the pool.

‘Yes. Very nice she is too.’ Said Blaga, inspecting his meal for sometime next century. ‘Almost too nice to eat. It’s strange, I was getting to quite like her.’

Blaga had never had a kindly feeling for anything before and he found the feeling quite disturbing.

‘I’m getting soft in my old age.’ He thought. ‘Never mind. It will soon pass.’

He dragged the sleeping elf out into the pool and her body began the long, slow drift into the depths.

‘I think I’ll give this one about ninety and nine to mature, or maybe a hundred and ten. She’s a very special treat.’ He plans.

Then he turns his mind to other items.

‘Speaking of special, I must get that last little bit of dragon before it gets too old altogether. Shame to let a good bit of dragon go to waste. Now let’s see, that must be one thousand and ten years old, or is it one thousand and nine. It’s a pity it wouldn’t wait for this one to ripen, whatever it is. I must remember next time to ask it what it is first.’

And he went on planning his menu for centuries in advance.

Calon turned to The Unicorn.

“You’ll be alright, won’t you?” He asked.

“Yes, yes, I will just limp along.” He replied.

“I’ll tell these people to wait for you.” Calon said, dashing off down the hill.

“People. I don’t trust people much.” Said The Unicorn but by this time he was talking to himself.

Calon tore up to the band ahead.

“Lend us your horse.” He shouted to Golad.

Golad shrugged his shoulders and dismounted.

Calon took off after Zeebran.

In a few moments he had drawn alongside of him.

“You’re going to tackle Blaga?” He shouted.

“If I must.” Said Zeebran.

“Could be tricky.” The Elf considered.

“You think I don’t know that? We may be lucky and get to her in time. If not, I’ll try to bluff him.”

“That’s not much of a plan.” Calon pointed out.

“It’s all I have.” Said Zeebran. “Remember, he can read minds and that is why I would prefer to go in alone.”

“You can trust me.” Said Calon.

“Trust an elf. That’s what I always say.” Zeebran made himself perfectly unclear.

They galloped up to the edge of Blaga’s pool.

“Now you make sure that these horses don’t drink, if you please, Calon.” Zeebran instructed.

“Blaga!” He shouted, in a voice naturally loud.

As it happened, Blaga had returned from the deep carrying his last, precious piece of dragon. It was a little past its prime however, and he was not enjoying it as much as he should.

His head popped out from the centre of the pool.

“Who calls!” He shouted, in a voice which boomed and echoed around the walls of the canyon, as if to say... ‘I can do that too, so there!’

“It is I, Denath.” Said Zeebran.

“Of what species?” Blaga asked.

He always liked to know what was on the menu.

“Nostraddyn.” Said Zeebran, expecting Blaga not to know what he meant.

“Oo, a wizard.” Said Blaga. “Not very tasty but they last a long time. What do you want?”

“I was wondering if my wife had wandered by here. She is a small creature, an elf, much like my companion here.”

“Haven’t seen any.” Blaga lied. ‘An elf, hey.’ He thought.

“Well, if you see her, would you send her to me?” The Wizard asked.

“Sure I will.” Said Blaga, rather condescendingly.

Zeebran turned as if to leave and then turned back again.

“And, by the way, don’t let her in the water. Elves poison water.”

Zeebran asserted.

‘Nonsense.’ Blaga said to himself. ‘Utter nonsense.’

“Mount up and let’s go.” Said Zeebran, which they did.

“Thank you very much, gentleman. Do call again and have a drink of water on me.” Blaga jeered as they left.

Zeebran had planted the seeds of doubt in Blaga’s mind and, in such a small mind, these seeds grow very quickly.

At first Blaga was sure that it was a trick. Then he thought, well, let’s see what he thought...

‘Elves poison water? Ha! Silly Wizard, to think that I, Blaga The Magnificent, would fall for such a trick. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to check. Well now, Blaga, don’t be silly. But it wouldn’t hurt to check. But aren’t I immune to poisons? Well, most of them.

Aren't I Blaga The Despoiler, Blaga The Terrible, Blaga The Poisoner. Poisoning is my business. I know my poisons. Why, poison, to me, is like honey to a bee, is like sweet perfume to a flower. Still, it wouldn't hurt to check.'

At least Zeebran had given Blaga something to think about.

When they were a safe distance away, they stopped.

"Well, that is the worst rescue I have ever witnessed." Said Calon.

"I thought you would not have left without her."

"I should have taken him by the throat and squeezed the life out of him, you mean." Zeebran mocked.

"Something like that." Said Calon.

"If Blaga were that easy to dispose of he would have been gone a long time ago. That one thinks a wizard is a joke, a sparing partner to play around with. There are things mightier than wizards. That is something we have to learn to deal with. Our advantage is to use superior intelligence. Now is the trick, to convince him that what we have said is true."

Zeebran takes out his wizard's book.

"I need a poison that will do even him some harm, if I can find one. We have maybe fifty years before he starts to nibble her toes."

"Why not fill his pool with fresh flowers and live fish." Calon suggested.

"I am sure that he must have ways to control these things. How do you suppose he kept it clear all these years. Don't underestimate your enemy. If he suspects that we don't believe him then no trick is going to work. As for using force, if I had the power I would drain his pool or cause the old volcano to erupt or simply pluck my wife out of the mire but it would come to a conflict of wills. You and I know how weak I am. Blaga must not have the chance to find this out. There was a time when I would have gone fifteen rounds with him and he must believe that I still can."

"He is just a sprite. If we had enough elves we could exorcise him." Calon asserted.

"Yes, and how many would die in the attempt? Blaga is a creature who has the same right to live as any other. There is no sense in inviting conflict." The Wizard considered.

"Offer him a horse in exchange for an elf. He may consider it a bargain." Calon suggested.

"That is a surprising solution, coming from an elf. It is a wizard's solution. He would not go for it. Horses he has plenty of and only one elf, as a gastronomic delicacy. He will treasure it for its novelty alone."

While The Wizard and his friend were debating and The Wizard was studying his book, Blaga was checking-out his catch.

There was something odd about it.

Elves, you see, do have sweat like the perfume of flowers, thus they paint the air around them with a gentle fragrance.

The water in Blaga's pool was not stirred with currents and eddies. It sat stagnant and static and whatever exuded from the corpses and half-dead things floating in it diffused slowly from them unless disturbed by Blaga himself in his wanderings. He did the best he could to disturb them as little as possible, the better to mature them gently.

Seren's body, floating a few feet beneath the surface, was slowly building up a layer of exotic oils around it. The water around it was becoming very lightly perfumed.

Blaga had excellent chemical senses and could detect minute concentrations of things in the water. The fragrances that greeted him were not what he liked. He liked half rotted flesh and foul water weeds, putrefaction and lots of 'good' bacterial and fungal growth. The oils would inhibit the growth of these things that he loved. They would slow down his unique cooking process and preserve his food.

'If the entire body is like this...' He figured. 'Then we have twenty kilograms of oils and ...'

He worked out that this thing could destroy his larder.

'This.' He concluded. 'Is a wizard's trick to make me give it up and I am not going to fall for it. The body is going to require special treatment.'

He set about to prepare a concoction to get rid of the unwanted oils. It was a method he used to get rid of oils from plants which fell into the water.

"We need professional help." Zeebran concluded, closing his book. "We go to the water specialists."

It just so happened that there were several such volcanic funnels in the area and not all of them were inhabited by water sprites. One such pool was the home of a small band of mermaids. It was believed to have once been connected to the sea, or part of a vast inland sea which no longer exists. It was, at any rate, populated by mermaids and not too far away. Moreover The Mermaids were old friends of Denath and they owed each other so many favours on both sides that no-one cared to keep track of them any more.

“We shall go to Mermaid Pool. I am sure The Mermaids can help.” Zeebran proposed.

“I had forgotten about The Mermaids.” Said Calon. “It will be nice to see them again.”

“I will go alone.” Said Zeebran. “You must stay here and look after all of my other friends. They will need a strong leader. Watch that they do not fall under the spell of the water and wander into Blaga’s grip. They are already here.”

Sure enough the whole band of animals, elves and men and even The Unicorn, came sauntering around the corner

“A fine leader we have, not letting us know where you were going.” Vabian complained. “If not for these fine animals we would not have found you at all.”

“Who asked you?” Said Zeebran, abruptly. “I’m borrowing these horses.” He announced and took off again.

Chapter Five Mor-Forwyn

While Zeebran was riding towards Mermaid Pool, Calon led the army of followers further away from Blaga’s pool. There was some discussion of the day’s events and some criticism of Zeebran’s leadership and many queries as to just exactly what was going on.

“This Zeebran doesn’t seem like much of a Wizard to me.” Vabian whispered to O’ Cazian. “His track-record so far hasn’t been too good. All that he has done is to drag us from pillar to post after his wife. It doesn’t help Torgud at all, does it?”

Torgud was walking next to Calon.

“Would you like to tell me what is happening? Where is Seren?” He asked The Elf Lord.

“What? Zeebran’s wife has fallen under the spell of a water sprite. Zeebran has gone for help. As to your other question, I don’t know what you mean. Who did you say?”

“I am sorry, I should not have said.” Torgud apologised.

“Well, Torgud, what do you say?” Vabian shouted, interrupting.

“We are enough to settle The Witch. Leave this wizard of yours to sort out his own mess.”

“I don’t know what your problem is exactly, but I would not advise you to try to tackle a witch alone.” Said Calon.

“Who are you to advise.” Vabian challenged. “Who made you the leader? We don’t know you.”

“He is an Elf Lord.” Said Doctor. “Born to lead.”

“Who should lead us then? You?” Fadik said, directing his remark towards Vabian.

“Torgud. Since it is his affair. Or Lord O’ Cazian, as he is also a lord.” Vabian suggested.

“The fact is that Zeebran is our leader and if he chooses Calon as his second in command, then we should not question his judgement.” Torgud quoted, in soldierly ethics.

“Here, here.” Said Fadik.

“If you don’t like it, you can sling you hook.” Said Golad. “I do wish that fellow would come back with our horses though, my feet are killing me.”

All that day they watched and waited for Zeebran and slept the night at the fork in the road.

Zeebran rode up to Mermaid Pool and dismounted.

Mermaids are shy creatures and hide whenever anyone passes by. Zeebran beat the water at the edge of the pool and called for them.

“Mor-forwyn! Fair maids of The Pool! It is I, Denath!”

“Who is that who knocks at our door so loudly and so long at such an untimely hour.” They call, for Mermaids much prefer to live by night and sleep by day.

“Denath I am, whom The Elves call Edramuth.” He replied.

“Oh, it is you, Denath.” Said a single mermaid, head popping up out of the pool.

“Ah, Laurali. How have you been?” Zeebran greets her.

“Lonely since you have been away so long.” She says. “You have a new body, I see, and what is this one called?”

“This is Zeebran, incarnation number seventeen.” Zeebran said, with some pride.

“We are getting old, you and I.” She says, despondently. “And what brings you here?”

Zeebran began to explain but when he came to the part about his wife Laurali seemed upset.

“Wife!” She said, almost choking on the word. “So you went and married an elf did you? You chose an elf over me? What does an elf have that I...”

She never finished that sentence but plunged deep into the waters of the pool.

Zeebran sat by the pool for quite a while, hoping that she would calm down and return. Eventually impatience overcame him.

“Hello.” He cried. “Is anybody there?”

A very young, fresh-faced mermaid popped up.

“Hello.” She greeted. “Great-great-grandmother says to tell you that she isn’t talking to you. My name is Wendy, but I’m not allowed to talk to you either. Goodbye.”

“But it’s very important.” Zeebran shook his head. ‘Mermaids, there’s just no reasoning with them.’

“Now don’t be insulting or we won’t help you at all.” Came a familiar voice, followed by a head.

It was none other than The Queen of The Mermaids of The Pool. It was Vixen herself.

To look at her you wouldn’t think that she was as old as Zeebran, all of thirty thousand years. She had long, dark tresses and deep, grey eyes, almost the colour of the pool from which they emerged. The freshwater mermaids had huge eyes, because the pool was so dark, but these suited their moonlike faces so well, giving them the appearance of china dolls.

“Don’t mind my great-great granddaughter, Laurali, she has always fancied herself in love with you. I myself am more mature and not a bit jealous of your spindly-legged little elf. By the way, how old is she?” Vixen asked, just out of curiosity, of course.

“About seventeen thousand and something, I think.” Said Zeebran, hopefully.

“Oh, My Dear, she is too young for you.” Said Vixen and she popped down to tell The Girls all about it.

“Is she pretty?” She said, on re-emerging.

Zeebran sensed that this was a time to be more diplomatic than truthful.

“She is pretty in her way but not what you would call beautiful.”

He stated.

“Quite so. I’ve seen elves, with their pointed, little faces and their bodies like skeletons. Not my idea of pretty at all. Is she prettier than I am?” Vixen tested.

“No. You are more than just pretty. You are beautiful.” He flattered.

She was beautiful too but no more so than his elf.

“Now, what’s your problem?” Vixen asked.

She listened intently to what he had to say and threw in the occasional comment, such as ‘How awful’ and ‘That was silly’ and ‘The poor girl.’

“It is so like an elf.” She said. “So why don’t you just rough This Guy up?” She asked, at the end of his tale.

“Well, after all, it is his lake and he has a right to protect it., you know.” Zeebran excused.

“I see your point. If anyone comes messing around here, boy do we give them what for. But we don’t eat them, of course, not unless they are fish, that is.” She rambled.

Early the next morning, Zeebran rode into camp, beside him, sitting side-saddle upon a horse, as she must, was the lady, Vixen. The others were amazed that a mermaid could ride a horse.

“Noble-Beast, Gentlemen and Elves, this is Queen Vixen of The Mermaids.” Zeebran introduced.

“Very nice too.” Said Golad, cheekily.

“Thank you.” Said Vixen. “I like you too.”

Mermaids love to flirt.

‘Remember, Sir, you are addressing A Queen.’ The Unicorn thought, but that is lost upon a human. ‘Good morning, Your Majesty.’ He telepathed The Mermaid Queen.

“Good morning, Noble-Beast, good morning one and all.” Vixen enjoyed the attention.

They rode down to The Pool and placed Vixen in the water.

“Remember, don’t drink the water.” Warned Calon.

“Don’t be a silly-elf, I am a mermaid.” Vixen chided.

Holding the end of a long, elven rope, she swam out of sight in search of Seren.

Bлага surfaced to see what was going on.

The Mermaid, who was much faster than he through the water, literally swam rings around him and tied him in knots.

The Water-Sprite captured, the others pulled him out of the water where he was all but helpless.

Vixen then swam out and found Seren and dragged her back to shore.

“She is sort of pretty, in an elvish sort of way.” Vixen conceded.

“Is this the elf that you have never seen?” Zeebran demanded of Bлага. “Answer quickly or I’ll leave you here to fry.”

“I didn’t put her there. I didn’t know she was there. I have never seen her before. I swear.” Bлага lied.

“No matter.” Said Zeebran. “Remove your spell from her.”

“I can’t do that.” Bлага claimed. “I don’t know how.”

“Shall I kill him?” Said Vabian, aiming at his heart.

“Not yet.” Said Zeebran. “We’ll let him fry first.”

“An arrow’s too good for him. Too quick.” Said Golad.

“Oh, very well.” Blaga groaned. “I’ll release her but I have to get some things to do it with. You’ll have to let me go first.”

“Nice try, Blaga, but we can get you anything you want and mix it for you.” Said Zeebran.

“If you’re not careful we will move in with you.” Vixen threatened.

“No, not that. Fifty females all talking and thinking all day long, and nagging. Have mercy. Kill me now. Kill me quick.” Blaga begged. “See, The Elf is alright.”

Seren awoke as if from sleep.

“Just one more thing.” Said Zeebran.

“Anything just to get this woman out of here.” Blaga replied.

“You must promise to eat only dumb animals in future. No elves.

No people nor any mystics, not even unicorns”

“I promise I will eat only dumb animals and goblins.” Said Blaga.

They let him go and when he was in the middle of his pool and The Mermaid sitting upon a horse he shouted...

”But you can’t make me!”

Zeebran escorted Vixen safely back to Mermaid Pool. He left the others encamped, as before, with Calon in charge.

On the way a fog descended, a fog so thick that it soaked through clothes as if it was a thunderstorm. Zeebran, on looking back, could not even see the horse that he was leading. The fog did not deter him nor even slow him down. He trod the path unerringly, directly to The Pool.

‘Come on then, Witch.’ He challenged, mockingly. ‘Do your worst.’

When he returned to the camp the others had gone. They had not packed up and left, for the camp was still set up as before. There were tents still pegged and dishes unpacked, some yet unwashed. There was no sign of the inhabitants except for tracks leading out from the camp.

Zeebran had his work cut out for him to discern which tracks were the result of normal comings and goings and which were not. He also had to decide which tracks to follow. Naturally he wished to find his wife but she was an elf and, he assumed, would be in far less danger than any of the men in the party.

‘It all depends on what has happened.’ He thought to himself, but he had no idea what could have made them thus dash off in different directions.

He found no evidence of anyone attacking, unless the attack came from the air. There were none of the tell-tale signs of dragon about.

Then his mind turned to Blaga. Could this be Blaga's revenge? 'I should never have left them.' He reproached himself and sped-off towards Blaga's pool to confront the scoundrel.

Blaga, as it happened, was dragging a horse into his pool. The poor beast had wandered there and taken a drink. It used to belong to Golad.

"Blaga!" Zeebran called, as a lasso of elven rope caught Blaga out of the water.

Blaga found himself, once again, hog tied and out of his element, but he was nonetheless defiant.

"You ain't getting this horse back no matter what you say." He sneered.

"I'm not interested in the horse." Said Zeebran, hastily. "Now what have you done with the others?"

"What others? I ain't seen nothing else for days. Not since you were here before. All I want is to be left in peace to stock my larder. You're beginning to annoy me, Mister Denathi. I won't put up with your meddling much longer."

"I think I'll keep you out of the water for a week." Said Zeebran.

"There ain't no Mermaid Spirit here to protect you now, Mister High and Mighty, and as good as this elvish rope is, I don't think it will hold me for long." Said Blaga, and he was absolutely right.

Something of the spirit of an elf must have touched Old Blaga lately, because he was not at his most belligerent.

"Now you and I both know that a contest of wills between us would do neither of us no good. So I'll tell you what I know if you will leave me this horse and leave me alone." He proposed.

"That sounds fair." Said Zeebran.

"There are strange things going on." Blaga related. "And they don't do anybody any good. These strange creatures come around looking for folks like us, anybody with any power, and carts 'em off. They come snooping around here but I'm too much for 'em and drove 'em off. Them what you call elves, they like them. They took them away and left the others wandering around in the fog looking for them."

With that, Blaga spun around and slipped out of the rope and into his beloved pool.

"I don't know what's come over me lately. I must be getting soft in my old age." He added and blasted The Wizard right off his horse as a parting gesture.

Zeebran picked himself up.

“Blaga, you old scoundrel.” He declared.

“Wizards don’t know beans about magic.” Came a voice from the pond.

Zeebran pushed Golad’s horse into the pond and was about to thank Blaga for his help when up from the pool came a-gurgling these words.

“None o’ that. Don’t you dare!”

Zeebran took to Fadik’s steed and set-off at a gallop.

When he reached the camp who should he find there but Vabian.

There he stood, staring intently at The Owl.

“What happened here?” Zeebran demanded, as he dismounted.

Vabian recounted the events of the day before.

First there was the fog and then the camp erupted into turmoil.

They were attacked by an invisible enemy. The men and animals were all knocked out and, when they came to, the elves were gone. The fog lifted for a while and the men discovered that each elf had left the camp a different way.

Each man had taken an animal and followed a different trail. Then the fog returned and Vabian could only assume that the others had become lost in it. He had just recently returned to the camp, having lost the trail of the elf he was following.

“Not even The Owl could find any trace.” Said Vabian, finally.

“Creatures come along which can capture elves and you men decide to go wandering off separately in search of them. Who’s brilliant plan was that?” Zeebran stormed.

“I’m afraid it was mine.” Vabian admitted.

“Well, if you wanted to sabotage us you did a good job of it.” The Wizard said, harshly.

There followed a few moments of uneasy silence as the two looked at one another.

“What became of The Unicorn?” Zeebran asked, at length.

“I don’t know?” Said Vabian. “But I do know that the trails all joined up before they disappeared. The last I saw was five elf tracks. Their captors left no trace.”

“Five elf tracks! Then where is the sixth elf? Perhaps they did not know She was an elf.” Zeebran speculated. “And where is she?” He wondered, making significant assumptions.

In another part of the wilderness Ansel and Mikle were sitting beneath the stars. While Zeebran's world was blanketed in fog they were enjoying a starlit night.

Then the night was lit by more than the customary stars. Suddenly there were flashing lights high up above the atmosphere. A significant fireworks display rarely seen, especially in the skies of such a primitive planet. It was the light of high-tech weapons and the eruptions of dynamic field explosions as space ships disintegrated.

An exploding spacecraft lit the sky for a few seconds with an illumination almost equal to full daylight. In that flash of light Ansel and Mikle could see the outline of the vast coniferous forest which began ahead of them.

"What is it, Master?" Mikle asked.

"Somewhere, way up there, two mighty armies are fighting for possession of the skies, in ships as large as cities. They may be fighting for possession of this planet and soon the victor may come to kill or enslave its simple inhabitants. It is all part of the cycle of life that has persisted for thousands of millions of years and may go on for just as long again." The Sorcerer spewed forth his diatribe.

"Can't The Sorcerers do something to protect us?" Mikle queried.

"Alas, we are few and even in our halcyon days we could not control every act of aggression in the galaxy." The almost Sorcerer declared.

"What are they called, these warriors of the sky?" Mikle questioned.

"To the likes of us they are just Aliens, unless we should get to meet them face to face. Their species doesn't matter. It is their intentions that concern us."

In the morning there was a screaming sound in the air and a tail of fire, as if a comet was falling to earth. Out of the 'comet' came a tiny, black spec. Then the head of the object exploded into a million particles. The spec however, grew and grew gradually until it became apparent as a parachute with a man suspended below it.

Ansel and Mikle jumped onto their horses and galloped off towards the object. The Sky Warrior was coming down over the forest and was trying to steer himself over the open ground. It was apparent from the ground that he was destined to land in the trees. Thus they discovered the extraterrestrial visitor suspended high above the forest floor, his chute strung across the tops of several trees.

“Kali val i dedu eth?” He pleaded with them, which roughly translated means... ‘Can you get me down, please?’

“It’s no good jabbering away in that language.” Said Ansel. “I will have to give you the gift of understanding.”

He produced his little black box, which was the remote control for all of the marvellous machines in his wagon. He pressed a button and waited for The Alien to speak.

“Help me, please.” He asked.

“Are you friendly?” Ansel asked in return.

“Yes.” Came the reply, (as if he would have said no?)

“Then throw down that weapon which you hold in your hand.”

Ansel demanded.

The Astronaut threw down his weapon and Ansel released him from the trees.

“Now, Young Man, would you care to tell me what is happening up there?” Ansel asked.

“The Oscilons are trying to take over the galaxy. They are drawing together all of the dark forces into one great alliance. There is a fellow called Serlgeifein of Spica who is tracking them down for us. We were called-in to fight them off. I am Naven of Cassia. I was shot down and lucky to escape alive. You must have seen my escape-pod self-destruct.”

“Yes. Now, these Oscilons, are they operating from this planet?” Ansel asked.

“Yes, Sir.” Said Naven. “They are here gathering elves to build-up their power supply.”

“How do they get power through elves?” The Sorcerer wondered.

“That’s very complicated, Sir. The Oscilons come from a different universe. They use the elves sort of like fuses to draw power from the other side. The elves protect their machinery. Too great a power flux and the elf is destroyed instead of burning-out the machine.”

“Living fuses. This is very gruesome. Well, My Friend Zeebran, I will have to leave you to your own devices, this is a more pressing matter.” Ansel speaks to the wind as if he was speaking to Zeebran face to face, then turned back to his newest guest.

“We must stop these Oscilons. Tell me all that you know of them, how they work, how are you fighting them, and you couldn’t lead us to them, could you?”

“Well.” Said Naven. “They exist in this universe by a trick called oscillation. They are here and there both at the same time, jumping across The Boundary and back many times each second. They can control how solid they become here by how long they stay each way. They can become invisible and almost weightless and difficult to destroy. Antimatter is the only thing that is certain to destroy them, it being so powerful, you understand.”

“I most certainly do.” Said Ansel. “You are lucky you came to me. There are not many hereabouts who would understand.”

“I don’t understand any of it.” Mikle confessed.

“I am Ansel of The Kalinari. A Sorcerer no more but I dabble. This is my assistant Mikle Delving. He is, as you see, a dwarf. A real dwarf. Not a small man or midget. Now, where are these creatures of which you speak?”

“All I know.” Said Naven, pointing. “Is that direction. If you have instruments you should easily pick up their power-flux from here.”

“Instruments? Oh boy, do we got instruments!” Ansel said, with a grin. “Mikle, take the horses and fetch the wagon.” He ordered.

“Yes, Master.” Shouted The Dwarf and took off.

This accomplished, the trio set off to tackle The Oscilons, a very ambitious quest indeed. Mikle was driving while Ansel showed off his equipment to his alien visitor.

“You are very clever.” Naven congratulated. “To make all of this on such a primitive planet.”

Zeebran and Vabian were following the trail to where Vabian had lost it. They were unaware that they too were being followed. They found the spot where the tracks disappeared.

“Some sort of airborne vessel must have landed here.” Zeebran concluded. “Or perhaps hovered overhead. There can be no following now. There is no trail.”

Saddened, they camped for the night and, in the morning, were woken rudely.

Zeebran felt a shaft of cold steel pressed to his throat and opened his eyes to discover Denim standing over him.

“Got you.” Said Denim, pleased with himself.

“What brings you here?” Zeebran said, coolly.

“This here scoundrel you keep company with.” Said Denim. “He killed two of my men. Two of my friends.”

“You don’t have any friends, Denim.” Zeebran corrected.

“Don’t get funny with me or I’ll get Larth here to slit your throat. This fellow.” Denim paused to kick Vabian. “He shot them in the back with these arrows.

You know our creed, Denath. You know we can't let him get away with that. Since you are with him, that makes you a complice too. Right Lads?"

Half a dozen surly voices grunted approval.

"I can see your point of view." Said Zeebran, reasonably. "This young fellow certainly has a case to answer. As for myself, I hardly know him and barely trust him. I had not even met him when the event in question took place."

"Oh yes, Mighty Wizard. Go on, save yourself and damn me."

Vabian snarled, angrily.

"Shut up, You!" Denim shouted, kicking Vabian again, with his wooden leg. He continued. "Now, Denath, I'll grant you that but your other friend killed Lawyer and very suspicious it looked too. I never saw a sword thrown like that and I guess it must have been powered by magic."

"Hey, I was busy being burned, remember. I wasn't anywhere near the place." Zeebran protested.

"Since when did you have to be?" Denim challenged.

"It wasn't me but it doesn't matter, since you're determined to kill me anyway." Zeebran surrendered.

"I won't kill you." Said Denim. "This is a matter of honour and you both will have to duel to the death with my champions."

"That's very sporting of you." Zeebran complimented.

"That's quite alright, Your Worship, because I choose as my champions these six men here." Denim gloated.

"That's three each." Zeebran, who had a good head for figures, reckoned.

"That's right." Said Denim. "And that gives you just about as much chance as my men had. I haven't forgotten you're a wizard. I brought along my own referee, just to make sure that you don't use any wizards' tricks."

"Denath." Came a voice from behind him. It was a voice which he recognised very well. A voice that he had not heard for a long time.

"Baran!" Zeebran exclaimed.

Baran was a fellow wizard. He had sat with Denath on The Wizard's Council and had once been a great friend. When Zeebran had his trouble over The Elf, Baran had been the one who campaigned most bitterly against him. Zeebran had never understood why. This encounter would do nothing to enlighten him further.

It was ever that way with wizards. Internal politics and the eternal power struggle. Perhaps it was just that with Denath gone, Baran was one step closer to the top.

“Yes, Denath. It is I.” Baran said, stepping up to where Zeebran could see him. “I thought you weren’t supposed to go abroad anymore.”

“Well, you know how it is. Pressing matters.” Zeebran excused. “And what The Council doesn’t know...” Baran showed the level of his understanding.

“Oh yes, The Council. How is The Council these days?” Zeebran stalled.

“You still have to do things your own way, don’t you. Still have to play the rebel, don’t you. I told you long ago you would go too far one day. Now look at you. You are a right mess, aren’t you?”

Baran scolded.

“I was doing pretty well until you showed up.” Said Zeebran.

“You’re not going to let these men murder me, are you?”

“If you gentlemen are quite finished.” Denim interjected.

“Be silent.” Said Baran, very softly. “Or I shall turn you and your whole crew into toads.”

Baran was no fallen wizard to be toyed with. He was one hundred percent the genuine article and when he spoke people obeyed him and when he threatened them people shook with fear because they knew that he meant it.

“I met these vagabonds in the woods. When they told me that you were abroad I just couldn’t believe that you could be so stupid. I have listened to their complaints and, with due regard to your other transgressions, I think that you should meet in a fair contest. If you use one skerrick of magical power I will double it in opposition.”

Baron adjudicated.

“I wasn’t planning to use any magic.” Said Zeebran with an aire of confidence which belied his apparently hopeless position.

There they were, The Wizard and Vabian, face to face with six seasoned warriors in a ‘fair fight’ to the death.

Zeebran used his magic to take his sword and run himself through.

Baran, to be true to his word, had to turn the swords of two of the opposing men to run them through.

Zeebran stabbed himself again and again and Baran, naturally, had to stab another two men and then another pair. All six men lay dead but Zeebran and Vabian were very much alive.

“What kind of treachery is this!” Denim protested.

Baran looked at him and shrugged his shoulders.

“He tricked me.” He explained. “I have been true to my word. I have done what I promised to you and he both.”

“As for you, Denim.” Zeebran stepped forwards.

“Have mercy on me, Noble Wizard.” Denim grovelled.

“I will take back that which is mine. That which you have stolen and may this be the end of bad luck for you. Go and live in peace.” And with these words he took back The Amulet from around the old man’s neck.

“Zeebran, are you alright?” Vabian asked.

“So-so.” The Wizard replied. “I have seen better days. The wounds are not fatal if treated promptly.”

“It’s not very wise to use your own body as a pincushion.” Said Baran. “I will heal it for you.”

Baran seemingly did nothing but Zeebran began to look better at once.

“I should rest it for a week.” Baran counselled.

“You want to know what brought me out? Tomas is being attacked by a witch and now my wife is lost.” Zeebran announced.

“The Scourge of The Elves. I was onto something about that myself. There is a great confluence of dark forces. Something is amplifying their power and the source is close to here. I wish that I could help you but I have pressing matters elsewhere. If I have to tell The Council anything I will tell them your wife is taken. They may excuse your wanderings then. As far as I am concerned you have paid the penalty for your transgressions and are free to go, for now. Live long and prosper, Denath.”

“Live long and prosper, Baran.” Denath replied, bemused.

Baran just quietly faded into thin air. He was in a hurry, trying to make up the time that he had lost by being thus side-tracked.

“Now that is A Wizard.” Said Vabian, haughtily.

“Alright, kick a wizard when he’s down, why don’t you?” Zeebran said, with an aire of mock complaint.

“Kicking. Speaking of kicking.” Said Vabian, looking askance at Denim. “Shall we steal his wooden leg?”

“This poor creature has had a life of misfortune just because he made one mistake. He didn’t realise that he was murdering The Young Prince, the only hope of lasting peace on this planet. He has had enough punishment now. Let him be. Denim, take yourself a horse to ride and a spare horse to sell and go and settle down somewhere. You are getting too old for soldiery. I consider all scores between us settled. What do you say?”

“Oh, I do, Sir and I will, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” Denim said, hobbling away.

“The Old Blackguard has all the sincerity of a sea-snake but we have no need to fear him. Come, let us go.” Said Zeebran.

“Go where?” Vabian asked.

“You heard Baran. The Source is close and we shall find it.”

Zeebran mounted and rode off towards a close encounter of a dangerous kind.

The Oscilons had built a huge power receiving centre upon this remote planet. Here great ships were assembled and launched and powered with cosmic forces. A vast fleet of such ships used this as a base at which to refuel.

Serlgeifein, The Spican, who does not appear in this story, had wandered into their universe in his experiments with boundary energy and was now held captive there. On his own side of the boundary he was an ordinary mortal but on their side he had, unknown to them, become a mighty ‘wizard’ and was using his powers to guide his allies in locating oscilon incursions.

Within the power complex of The Oscilons, elves were being processed. There were many power channels and each one had to be charged by an elf. Some elves had been functioning as power governors within power channels for months, even years, without being harmed. They were lucky enough not to have experienced an overload. If you can consider it lucky to sit and have huge amounts of power forced through your body continuously and very painfully.

An overload was very dramatic. The unfortunate elf, sitting in a transparent tube within a power beam, would burst into flame and be rapidly burned up. All that remained was a lump of charcoal, sometimes vaguely elf-shaped, often distorted into a horrible parody of that once beautiful form.

The beam would cut out and the elf would be unceremoniously replaced with another of its kind. Other creatures were used, occasionally but elves were best suited for the job.

Every few minutes the general hum of the machinery was punctuated by a horrifying scream of pain as an elf was burned in a flash of light. The line of waiting elves wondered which would be taken next, how long before it was their turn and how long they would have to endure the agony before their luck ran out.

To this line were added Doctor, Dunce, Squill and Goatsbeard, who had not been elves again for long enough to be given proper elven names, and Seren-Gwirion, she of no name, officially.

Yes, Zeebran had been mistaken. The Oscilons had taken her as an elf after all. They did not realise that she could not function in their

machine in her present state. It would be like trying to pass an electric current through a perfect insulator.

This, of course, begs the question, what of Calon-Agored and The Unicorn?

Calon was a noble elf of great power and not as easily captured as any ordinary wood-elf or an elf with muted powers. The Unicorn is a beast of mystical powers equal to any, just as Blaga had been, he was too powerful for The Oscilons to capture.

Calon and The Unicorn had both escaped, reunited and followed The Oscilons. Discovering the location of their City, they were even now on their way to Calon's homeland to begin A Great Gathering of The Elves, to attempt to storm The Oscilon City. What was that? The Unicorn's leg? Well, Unicorns are highly magical and the leg was healing up quite well, thank you.

If the Elves attempted such an attack, mighty warriors though they were, they would be nearly all destroyed or captured. The Oscilon City was well defended against both The Elves' primitive weapons and their magical powers. The Elves would be effectively delivering themselves up to be taken prisoner, making the Oscilons' task in finding them much, much easier.

"Good heavens!" Ansel exclaimed, looking at his instruments.

"They have captured Her."

Ansel had a trace upon Seren, a blip which emanated from the device inside her, the only one of its kind in The Multiverse.

Examination of the two sets of data which he was monitoring showed that She now was at the location of Their power flux, which he was also tracing.

"You remember our problem of how to get antimatter into The Oscilon City, My Friend, Naven? The means is there already and they have carried it home themselves."

Ansel explained to his guest about the elf and the device and how it could be made into an antimatter generator, if it were inserted into the power beam.

Torgud had become lost in the fog and fancied he heard a sound up ahead. He drew his sword. To his amazement the sword glowed with an eerie light which penetrated even that fog.

He held The Sword aloft and waived it, hoping that it would serve as a beacon to the others. He waived it for a minute and then rested for a minute and kept this up for a long time.

After a couple of hours Golad appeared, drawn by the light. After some time more Lord O' Cazian arrived and finally Fadik rolled

up. Torgud had tried giving The Sword to Golad to wave but its light was extinguished as soon as it left his own hand.

“I think I have to give up now.” He said. “I can lift this sword no longer.”

“You have done well.” Said Fadik. “I don’t think anyone else will arrive now anyway.”

They rested there for the night and in the morning discussed what to do next.

“In a way I think Vabian was right.” Said Torgud. “Anyway, it is no good counting on The Wizard now. I will have to go back home and face The Witch alone.”

“Not alone.” Said Lord O’ Cazian. “We are with you to the end. Isn’t that right, Lads?”

“Yes, Sir.” Said Fadik.

“Well, I’ll have to think about it.” Said Golad. “I mean, witches are sort of mean.”

So the four men and their animal friends took off southwards, to face The Witch, a dangerous thing to do.

There is a saying that people who embark upon a journey together should complete that journey together. This is doubly true when one of those people is A Wizard. Vabian had said it. When you embark upon a journey with A Wizard you walk along different paths. Torgud had crossed over from the familiar paths of his world to the land of faerie. He had stepped off of his map and onto the map of Denath. He would remain on that faye map until Zeebran restored him to his own world. On his travels he was likely to meet with strange creatures that would not normally cross your path on a pleasant stroll in the country.

Thus it was that the four men walked straight into the path of a wandering ogre. The Ogre was seven feet tall and three feet wide and two feet deep in the chest and built as solidly as a rock. He had thick, tough hide and long, matted hair with legs and arms like tree-trunks. His hands and feet were armed with strong claws and his mouth with three inch fangs and he was very, very hungry. In fact, he was always hungry.

He charged at the men and bowled them all over before they had a chance to draw their swords. He swept aside the dogs and even the bear and the donkey bolted for the hills. He picked up Golad and tore a large bite out of his side.

Now The Ogre might have been tough and strong but he wasn’t very smart. Holding Golad in his powerful claws and biting him

with his sharp teeth meant that these weapons were temporarily tied up. He had practically disarmed himself as far as the others were concerned.

Meanwhile Fadik took the opportunity to thrust his sword right through The Ogre's side.

The Ogre seemed to take no more hurt from this than a man would from a splinter. It twisted its huge bulk around, snapping the sword-blade off and dropped Golad on Fadik's head, knocking him senseless.

O' Cazian thrust at The Beast from the other side. It caught his blade on its arm and this sword too was broken. The Ogre lifted O' Cazian up, tightening its claws around his neck.

Torgud, in the meantime, was wrestling with his sword, trying to unsheathe it. The blade steadfastly refused to come out. It was involved in a powerful struggle between the power of The Witch's Curse and The Sorcerer's Blessing.

It may have been Torgud's own determination that settled the matter. He placed one foot either side of the sheath and gave one mighty heave. The Sword came unstuck in the nick of time, for The Ogre was about to bite off O' Cazian's head.

Torgud swept underneath the monster's arm and thrust his grandfather's sword deep into its belly.

The Ogre fell back as the magical power of The Sword struck at its heart.

Torgud and his friends were a sore and sorry bunch. Everyone had been battered and bruised, except the donkey, which could by no means be induced to approach.

Golad's side was worst. Lord O' Cazian had deep bruises in his neck and throat, so that he could neither move his head nor speak. Fadik had a severe headache. The dogs and the bear, which had persistently worried the beast throughout the encounter, had been kicked aside by its powerful legs. Even Torgud, who had only been knocked over in the initial charge, felt as though his ribs might be broken. No-one was in any condition to travel that day.

"Well. I guess we'll just rest here for a couple of days." Said Torgud.

"Or a couple of weeks." Said Golad, hopefully.

While Torgud and his friends waited for Golad to be well enough to travel, Zeebran and Vabian searched in vain for The Oscilon City. Calon and The Unicorn walked to the north east to gather

The Elves and Ansel sat waiting for his instruments to indicate that Seren had been placed in The Power Beam. Poor old Tomas was still in a deeply comatose state waiting for his rescuers to arrive.

Chapter Six The Sixth Chapter

Mikle Delving, a dwarf of tender heart and delicate sensibilities, sat on the back of Ansel's wagon, his feet dangling in the air, as a dwarf's feet are condemned to dangle. It had been several days now that they had sat within striking distance of The Oscilons' power complex.

Mikle had been much troubled for several reasons.

Firstly, he did not understand what was going on at all. His Master spent a lot of time with The Alien, Naven, working on goodness knows what and staring at his machines and, at times, Mikle felt like a spare thumb. He felt useless and left out.

He did some simple tasks like cooking and cleaning and feeding the horses but he never felt useful. Most of all he was worried about his beloved elf. Of course he had never said, but he had fallen beneath the spell of that wonderful lady forty years ago. His friend Ansel had noticed that The Dwarf was not his usual, cheerful self but The Sorcerer had been very busy. Only now did he find the time for a chat.

"Mikle, Old Friend, what is the matter?" Ansel greeted as he emerged from the wagon.

"Oh, nothing." Mikle sighed.

"There must be something troubling you." Ansel observed.

"Well, I've been thinking. About this thing you're doing. This thing you're going to do to get rid of these Oscilons."

"Yes. What about it?" Ansel asked.

"Well, is it terribly dangerous?" Mikle asked.

"It has its problems. That is why we are working so hard to see that nothing goes wrong." Ansel told him.

"Yes but, as I understand it..." Mikle began. "Seren has to be put in this machine and then you will do something to make the whole thing explode."

"Yes, that is right, only if they put Seren in there can we destroy The Machine." Said Ansel.

"Well, if The Machine is destroyed and she is in there then won't she be destroyed too?"

“It just might come to that, Mikle, My Friend, to get rid of these monsters before they kill all the elves on our planet. War is never simple. Sometimes we must sacrifice a few to save the many.”

“Well, I don’t think it is right at all. Isn’t there some other way?”

“What we are trying to do is to work out how to destroy the heart of the machine and nothing else. I believe it is possible that The Elves may come to no harm.” Said Ansel. “You will just have to trust me.

“Well.” Said Mikle. “You remember Wysgenbad. It wasn’t supposed to burn was it? You told me it would be a cool flame and not hot enough to burn the wooden buildings. You said that no-one would get hurt and look what happened.”

“I know.” Ansel began. “I am not perfect. I still don’t understand what happened there. I think The Witch had something to do with that. However it turns out, Mikle, you know that I have done my best. I can do no better than that.”

“I suppose.” Mikle groaned.

“No matter what happens, promise me one thing, that you won’t hold it against me. You know I wouldn’t hurt her if there was any way to save her.” Ansel assured him.

“If she were here.” Said Mikle. “If she knew that she was our only hope, she would insist that we do it. She would give herself up to save us all. I know she would. She is that noble.” He sniffed.

Naven was sitting inside the wagon and had heard all that had been said.

“She must be quite a lady.” He said, popping his head out.

The next day, Mikle was out exercising the horses when his eyes beheld an incredible sight. There, before him stretched a host of elves, perhaps the greatest assemblage of their kind since The Great War itself. Ten or maybe twenty thousand of them. His heart leapt at the sight and he raced back to tell the others.

Not very far away, Zeebran and Vabian were locked in a heated discussion.

“We’re never going to find this place. Why don’t you admit that it is hopeless.” Vabian challenged.

“I am not giving up. You can do what you like.” Said The Wizard.

“Then at least use a little find-magic and get us there quickly.”

Vabian urged.

“Yes, you would love that, wouldn’t you.” Zeebran accused. “You and that witch of yours.”

“I don’t know what you are raving about, Old Man. I think you have become demented.” Vabian dismissed.

“We shall see.” Said Zeebran and then stopped and pulled up his horse. “Now there’s something that doesn’t take any power to discern.”

“What?” Vabian asked.

“Be still, Young Man. Listen with your heart. Do you not hear?” Zeebran challenged.

“Nothing.” Said Vabian.

“You do not feel the presence of elves. Where would they be going with such a host? Off to war no doubt. If we follow them they will no doubt lead us to where we must be.”

“I don’t feel anything.” Said Vabian. “I think you must be imagining things.”

“Don’t argue, just follow swiftly.” Said Zeebran, galloping off.

Mikle galloped up to the wagon shouting wildly.

“The Elves! The Elves are coming! Thousands of them!”

“Oh, no!” Ansel exclaimed, scrambling out of the wagon. “They mustn’t. Mikle, go quickly. Tell The King of The Elves he must not attack. He must not, you understand.”

“I do not understand at all, Master, but I will do as you say.”

He rides off.

Ansel returns to his machines.

“Any sign yet, Naven?” He asks, hopefully.

“No movement at all.” He informs.

“If it doesn’t happen soon we are going to have thousands of dead elves, unless we can dissuade them from their attack.” Ansel says with a shake of his head.

Mikle rode towards where he had seen The Elves and came within sight of them. Then they disappeared. Every last one of them. He rode up to where he judged they had been and dismounted.

“Hear me, Sylvan Folk.” He called. “I must speak with Your King. It is I, Mikle Delving of Ezed-Rath.”

Not long afterwards Mikle rode up to The Wagon, followed by an elf. It was The King’s Emissary, none other than Calon-Agored, mounted upon a unicorn, The Unicorn in fact.

They stopped a little way from the caravan and The Dwarf dismounted and walked inside to summon Ansel.

“Welcome.” Said Ansel, stepping out of the wagon.

“My Uncle, The King sends his greetings and wishes me to acquaint myself with your point of view. Calon-Agored, Fifth Lord of The House of Gorffwys, at your service.” Said Calon, majestically.

“I am Ansel, a poor outcast from my people. I am honoured to greet Your Lordship.” Said Ansel, with a bow.

“Who is within?” Said Calon, eyeing the wagon suspiciously.

“It is a spaceman who was unfortunate enough to be stranded here, Your Lordship. I beg that you do not disturb him. He is carrying out a very important task, one which is vital to our victory over our enemies.” Said Ansel.

“Let him show himself.” Calon insisted.

Naven appeared holding in his hand a laser pistol.

“There is no need to fear.” Said Calon. “I only wish to be sure that you are an ally.”

“I am Commander Naven, a pilot in the Cassian Star Corps.” He established. “I was shot down whilst attacking an Oscilon supply ship.”

“So you say.” Said Calon, suspiciously. “I know nothing of Star Corps. I am a terrestrial elf. Tell me, Naven, what do Oscilons look like?”

“I have never seen one.” Naven admitted.

“And you, Sorcerer?” The Elf questioned.

“I do not know.” Said Ansel.

“Then you might be harbouring a viper in your bosom for all we know.” Calon observed. “Will you, Naven, agree to any examination?”

“If it means that you will trust me. Yes.” Naven agreed.

“Then do stop pointing that weapon at me.” Calon requested, as he dismounted and approached.

“A laser beam will not harm an elf.” Ansel informed. “It is like shining a light on glass.”

“You won’t mind if I fire on you then.” Naven asked Calon.

“I certainly do.” Said Calon. “I don’t want holes in my best clothes.”

“Then take them off.” Said Naven. “I just want to see that you are not lying to me.”

“Very well.” Calon agreed and bared his chest.

Naven raised his ray gun and fired it directly at The Elf. The beam passed straight through him.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Naven exclaimed.

“Yes.” Calon agreed, readjusting his clothes. “You probably will. Now that foolishness is over let’s get down to business.”

He approached Naven and placed his elven hand over the alien’s heart. After a few moments he was satisfied.

“He speaks the truth.” Calon observed, letting go. “There is a lot of anxiety in him.” He told Ansel, as if Naven could not hear. “It is not my business to comfort him.”

“Thanks a lot.” Said Naven.

“I have a big battle coming up, I am not about to waste my power. By the way, that gun of yours is no use against The Enemy either.”

“I know that.” Said Naven.

“You know it in your head.” Calon told him. “But your heart doesn’t believe it. You are still hoping that it isn’t true. You still put your faith in it.”

“It is hard to change the habit of a lifetime.” Said Naven.

“Master! Master! Something is happening!” Mikle shouted excitedly, appearing out of the wagon and jumping up and down.

“Come, quickly, Master.”

They all rushed towards The Wagon. Once inside they saw the levels on the power meter were going sky high.

“They have installed Seren into their machine. They are trying to force the power through the blockage.” Ansel concluded. “If it doesn’t work they will burn The Elf instantly. They can only be continuing with it just for curiosity.”

As he speaks, Ansel is shifting the controls on a dozen different machines at once. He is desperately racing to complete his task before it is too late.

“Calon, tell The King, if The Dome is rent asunder, then is the time to attack. The base of this building must be protected. There are many elves inside there.” Ansel instructed.

Calon, realising that there is no time to take this message to The King, sits and establishes a telepathic link.

“If he can form a Circle of Power around the building, it will prevent The Enemy from escaping.” Ansel continues, still frantically adjusting his controls.

“The impulse is not being received. We are getting interference from the beam itself.” Said Naven. “We need a booster or some sort of interference moderator.”

“If we boost the signal and then get through, too much antimatter may be produced. We could generate enough power to destroy the whole planet.” Ansel warned.

“Even that is better than no result at all.” Naven argued.

“We can’t be sure of the magnitude of the backwash as it is. I want to save those elves if I can.” Ansel was concerned.

“If they don’t get some power-flow soon, they will give up trying. Then we will have missed our chance.” Naven argued.

“Goodness knows what will happen to her then. Oh, Seren, forgive me. Can we at least wait until the power level drops because this level will burn her out instantly.”

“It is dropping. See, they have given up already.” Naven observes. “I’m going to try a partial release. There, it is done. What are the signs?” Ansel demanded.

“We have a low level of energy flux.” Naven read. “If they don’t force it their end your friend should be alright.”

“It looks like they are assuming that that is all she can give. We are levelling off.” Ansel said, relieved.

“Now, what about the real job? It should be stable enough now for the antimatter release.” Naven prompts.

“I’m not at all sure about that.” Ansel stalls.

The truth is that he is afraid to press the button which might snuff out his favourite elf.

At the same time another discussion was being carried out in the small wagon. Calon, on hearing his cousin’s name mentioned, came out of his trance and asked The Dwarf just exactly what was going on. Mikle explained as well as he understood, to Calon’s utter disbelief.

“They are playing around with my cousin’s spirit. That is absolutely insane.” Calon decided. “They must be stopped.”

He took from around his waist his elven rope and lassoed The Sorcerer with it.

Within the dome of The Oscilon City a sinister experiment was taking place. The Oscilons had discovered that something was blocking Seren’s heart and had decided to test the device to its limits. They realised that the device might make elves obsolete. Ansel’s machinery, however, was impregnable to their probes. They had managed to work out only that, if they tried to remove it from The Elf, it would destroy itself and its secrets would be lost to them forever.

They had decided to force power through the machine, firstly to see if they could control its conductivity and test its limitations and then to see if they could burn-off The Elf, leaving The Device intact. This was logical to them, if you can’t remove The Machine from The Elf then remove The Elf from The Machine.

They had placed Seren inside one of their conduction chambers, knowing that she would not function in the normal way. They tried to force enormous amounts of power through her, to see if The Device would yield. There is no doubt that this caused her a great deal of discomfort.

When Ansel switched his device they assumed that they had succeeded in breaking through it and decided to test it for a while at normal power levels. Now Seren was functioning normally, as were the other elves in the machine and was submitted to the same, ordinary level of torture.

Within the base of The City were a great many power channels. These all fed into a gigantic column which was the main accumulator. This extended upwards for most of the height of the main dome. It was twenty feet in diameter and eighty feet long. This part of the machine was the main target for destruction. Without it no power could be drawn and The City's main defences would be silenced. Without it a fleet of Oscilon warships would be unable to refuel and spread terror across this section of The Galaxy.

The Main Accumulator fed off into ten output channels which powered The City and a further ten which refuelled The Warships. Ten refuelling channels were occupied almost continuously. According to Ansel's best guess the injection of antimatter into the power stream would cause an explosive force which would project upwards with immense power but have very little downwards momentum. It should destroy The Central Column and The Dome and carry along The Beam, completely destroying any ships that were associated with it.

The one burning question was, how large was the residual back-pressure? Different ways of calculating yielded different results from 'not enough to worry about' to 'enough to dig a hole fifty feet deep', depending upon which theory of mechanics was used.

All that Ansel could do was to hope that the former answer was correct. The effect upon The Elves of a sudden interruption in the power flow was a question which he could hardly bear thinking about. The Elves could either be crushed or burned or 'goodness knows what'.

As it happened, Calon had lassoed the wrong one. Ansel himself did not even know if he could bring himself to press the fateful button and, if he did, he would have a better idea of what to do to control the reaction.

Naven was the only one there not in love with Seren and had only passing interest in preserving her life. His mission was to destroy The Oscilons at all costs and so he showed no hesitation in pressing the fateful button.

No sooner had Calon hog-tied Ansel than Naven pushed the button. Mikle bashed him over the head just one fraction of a second too late. For good or ill, the deed was done.

A very small amount of antimatter was formed by Ansel's machine and, carried by the power-beam, which was in effect a power containment field, allowing neither matter nor antimatter to come into contact with the containment walls, up into the accumulator, the walls of which were material, and into the ships, which were also material.

When matter and antimatter meet there is one hell of a bang. And so there was. The directionality was quite good. As predicted the explosion carried upwards very strongly and punctured a hole right through the atmosphere.

At high altitudes the inrush of winds to fill-in the vacuum left caused a monumental hailstorm.

It was the action of The Elves that prevented a disaster within The City. Expecting a strong back-pressure to occur, King Meddwl had formed his army into one large circle around The City. The Elves combined their powers to form a strong, protective barrier around The City's base, a sort of force-field, which saved The City from being flattened.

Inside The Oscilon City, one moment it was business as usual, with hundreds of elves sitting inside their chambers in power channels and dozens of others waiting in line to become part of the machine. The next moment there was an almighty roar as The Central Column evaporated into nothingness. The Dome of The City was blown apart but at ground zero there was not a ripple of energy, nor one whisper of wind. Nothing penetrated the protective power of the host of elves surrounding The City.

The Elves in their chambers were suddenly released from their torment. They were neither crushed nor burned, nor were they sucked back into an alien universe. They sat in their chambers bewildered, for there was no escape. They were locked in from the outside. The walls of the chambers were perfectly frictionless and unscalable.

The Oscilons were not entirely without defences and The Elves faced a gruesome battle against unknown odds. The enemy carried unfamiliar weapons which were effective against elves. Several Oscilon warships, fully fuelled, might unleash sudden death upon the entire elven army.

Luckily, there were no fully armed oscilon ships in good repair and fully fuelled in the vicinity and available to fight.

Naven's people, The Cassiopeians had recently mounted a strong attack which, though unsuccessful, had reduced the fighting strength of The Oscilon fleet in the area. Continual attacks drew the bulk of the operational ships further and further afield. The ultimate objective was to lure them so far away from their fuel source that they would be unable to return and condemned to drift through space, perhaps for eternity.

There were a couple of crippled vessels under repair in dry-dock and these made some attacks upon the elves. The combined power of The Elves withstood the test of these attacks.

To destroy The Oscilons The Elves had to bind them in elven ropes and keep them bound for several minutes. The ropes prevented The Oscilons from oscillating and, denied access to their own environment, they suffocated.

To find their enemies, The Elves had to make themselves invisible, in this state they could see the otherwise invisible enemy.

Many elves were destroyed that day but, in the end, the victory belonged to them. The Oscilons were killed and every trace of their city destroyed. The captive elves were released to return to their families.

That night, by the light of the moon, The Elves held their cleansing ceremony. The Warlords and their fighting elves were restored to their full power and all traces of taint were removed from them.

The next day, The King held his council. There were many matters which required attention after so great a battle, not the least of which was that of what should be done with his miscreant daughter.

The King had long consultations with Ansel, The Sorcerer and Naven of Cassia and even longer ones with his Elf Lords and advisors. He never once spoke to his daughter.

He ordered the removal of Ansel's machine from her and, to this end, gave him the assistance of one hundred elves. It was their task to sustain Seren's spirit during the operation and keep her safe from all of the dangers that it entailed.

After the operation, Ansel was dismissed with a stern warning never again to tamper with an elf's spirit. The fact that he had saved The Elven Army from destruction seemed to have been completely overlooked.

Ansel was led out of The King's Court, which was a convenient clearing in the endless expanse of trees. The Court was populated only by a handful of top officials and the parties concerned.

The next person to be led before The King was Zeebran Denath. On these occasions The King spoke to no-one directly but all who spoke, spoke directly to The King alone. Zeebran strode up to the centre of the circle and faced The King at its head.

“Your Majesty.” The Announcer proclaimed. “This is The Wizard Denath, whose elven name has been struck from the register.”

“Let him speak.” Said The Speaker.

“Your Majesty.” Zeebran began. “I deeply regret the circumstances of this meeting. I am aware of the great sorrow that I have caused yourself and your kind. Whatever sanctions to which I am due I will accept gladly, but I pray Your Majesty to spare My Wife. She was a guileless victim of circumstances in this matter. Whatever punishment she may have earned, let it be meted out on me in her stead. I alone am at fault in this matter.”

“Your pleas will be considered.” The Speaker announced. “Being a citizen of a foreign society, it is not our intention to meter out punishment upon you or to apportion blame. We will set this matter before the authorities of your own society and let them decide your fate. As to other parties implicated in your actions, they will be dealt with, in as far as they fall under the jurisdiction of this court, with due regard to your pleas for clemency and your admission of guilt in all things relating to this matter.”

On hearing that The Council of Wizards was to be involved Zeebran thought... ‘Oh, no, not them.’ but said nothing.

“Do you have any objections to our ruling?” The Speaker demanded.

“No, Your Majesty.” Zeebran said, politely.

“Then you are dismissed.” Said The Speaker and Zeebran was led away.

Ansel, Mikle, Naven and Calon were also discussing their judgements.

“Well.” Ansel summarised. “They let Mikle and Naven of Scot-free and only gave me a mild reprimand. It is The Elves alone who have suffered.

“I don’t understand an elf’s idea of justice.” Naven criticised. “If I had served my people half so well any minor infringement of the rules would have been forgotten.”

“A fault is a fault to an elf. There are no excuses. Good deeds do not cancel bad ones. The King’s judgement is correct. If anything it is mild. What is a hundred years to an elf?” Said Calon.

“Yes, but you received no credit for the good that you did.” Naven pointed out.

“Did I not?” Said Calon. “We shall see.”

“If your elves are ready then I must begin my operation, if I am to finish in time.” Ansel reminded.

“I will summon them.” Said Calon.

“And I must go and prepare.” Said Ansel.

“Can I help, Master?” Mikle offered.

“Yes. You can stay here and keep Naven company.” Ansel replied, hurrying off.

“Oh, is that all?” Mikle sighed, resting his chin on his hands.

“Cheer up.” Said Naven. “Tell me about these elves.”

“What about them?” Mikle enquired.

“They say that there used to be elves on our planet. I would like to know why they left and how.” Naven questioned.

“Ansel told me.” Mikle began. “That there have been elves on every inhabitable planet for thousands of millions of years. The elves are sworn never to interfere with the development of intelligent life on a planet. As soon as a civilisation begins to grow The Elves disappear before it. They colonise a planet as soon as they are able and stay there as long as they can but, in the end, when all the space is taken up by mortals, they always have to leave. How they travel from planet to planet no-one knows. How they disappear without leaving a trace is just as mysterious.”

“The Elves are disappearing from this planet aren’t they?” Naven observed.

“Men are taking over this planet very quickly and all of The Mystics are preparing to leave. Most of them took off a couple of centuries ago. They can’t all just take off at once. There are always some evil beings that decide they don’t want to go. To counteract these, good folk have to leave behind a few of their own. The last of these will not leave until all traces of evil, all the bad witches, sorcerers and wizards, all of the dragons, goblins and trolls and all manner of sprites, demons and worse are all utterly destroyed. Just one powerful, malevolent spirit could ruin the future of the mortals here.” Mikle related.

“What happens to The Dwarves in all this?” Naven asked.

“Dwarves are no problem. They only live a couple of hundred years They either dwindle in numbers or get mixed in with the natives. If you’re lucky you can hitch a ride with a Sorcerer or some other Great One.” Mikle concluded.

The next case was that concerning Calon and Seren and her elves. Seren and the others could not appear before The Court. They were estranged elves. Calon had to bear the responsibility for their defence.

Seren had been restrained from associating with other elves. She had violated a solemn oath by doing so. Calon was at fault because he knew of this and still decided to help his cousin. The other elves were also in a questionable position, as if they were still pixies. Calon had contributed greatly to the defence of The Elves and the defeat of The Oscilons. He had located the enemy and it was he who had discovered how to seek and destroy them. He had fought bravely in the battle, leading an army of one thousand elves into the heart of The Oscilon City.

If it had not been for Seren, the victory would not have been possible at all. None of these things rated a mention in The Elven Court. Only the specifics of the matter in question were considered and judgement was handed down accordingly.

Calon's summing up remarks went something like this...

"Your Highness. The Lady in question was not aware of any breach. She was not in a position to know that she was doing wrong. Her fellow elves accompanied her out of gratitude for the way she had helped them and sought only to save her life. They were newly reborn elves and could not have understood the implications of their actions. As for myself, I wished only to see that no harm came to her. I could not stand by and see a fellow creature suffer. I know that what I did was against a ruling of this court but it was the right thing to do. It was the only thing that any elf could do. Your highness, I rest my case."

The speaker arose and proclaimed The King's Judgement.

"In as much as these elves have acted against the judgement of this court they must be punished. You, Calon and the other elves shall withdraw from this society as from tomorrow and will be banished from all territories governed by His Majesty for one hundred years or until His Majesty sees fit to revoke this judgement. You are dismissed, Lord Calon."

After the pronouncement, Zeebran was returning to Vabian, who had not committed any crime under elven law but was still regarded with suspicion by the elves. He was eager to learn of the judgement.

"Is that so terribly bad?" Vabian asked.

“Terribly.” Zeebran moaned. “The Wizard’s council won’t worry so much about breaching the elven rules. It is the fact that they will know that I have broken theirs. They will have to give me a stiff punishment just to save face. In a way it is also a blessing. It is a punishment deferred until The Council convenes, which may give us just the time we need to save Tomas.”

“Do you think that this is what The Elf King had in mind?” Asked Vabian.

“I don’t know. He is pretty shrewd, Old Righteous-Thinking.” (Which was the literal translation of The King’s elven name into the human tongue.)

That night The Elves had a magnificent feast and there was music and dancing and other entertainments of all kinds. It was not by way of a victory celebration. The idea of celebrating the death of any, even the worst of enemies, is totally incomprehensible to elves. The elves were celebrating, as they always did, life itself. A day, to The Elves, lasts just as long as the celebration continues. This ‘day’ may have gone on for two weeks or three. No-one can keep track of time when among such a host of elves.

Zeebran had been kept in an elven prison. This consisted of a length of rope strung in one strand between four trees. Elves, in their comings and goings walked freely through this cell.

It was a strange prison and not an unpleasant one to be in. There was a constant supply of food and wine and there were dancers dancing and singers singing tripping too and fro and many elves who knew The Wizard would stop and exchange pleasantries. It was, so to speak, a prison party.

It was a prison from which The Wizard might have been able to escape if he cared to defy his father-in-law and cause him further dismay. It was a prison in which he was kept blissfully unaware of what was happening outside. In a way Zeebran was participating in the enormous elven celebration but he was not aware that his wife was also there safe and sound nor did he know of Ansel’s presence or of the deeds that had led to the destruction of The Oscilons. Zeebran’s cell-mate Vabian had no choice in his captivity. He had no power to escape the elven prison. He was untroubled by any worldly considerations as he succumbed to the elven magic around him. It was the best time he had ever had in his life. He quite forgot that he was a prisoner who had been imprisoned unjustly.

Zeebran could not surrender to the elf magic with such gay abandon. He had to struggle to remain aware that he must not dance with The Elves nor could he join in their songs.

He also still believed that his wife was wandering alone and unprotected in the world, in her most delicate state.

The removal of Ansel's device from her could not reunite their spirits whilst he was thus imprisoned. Had he stepped outside his cage he would instantly have felt her presence and known that she was both safe and well.

Ansel and all of the others, except Seren, were engrossed in the celebration. Ansel, no longer a true sorcerer, enjoyed, for the first time, an elven party with no restrictions. He was allowed to sing and dance as he had never been before. There was great jubilation as the party came to its climax with The Royal Proclamation.

"All please be silent for The King." The Speaker announced. Immediately the many thousands of revellers halted whatever they were doing and drew nigh to listen to His Majesty. This would be the end of the official part of the celebrations but bands of elves would go on partying even as they travelled to their separate homes.

When the elves hurried away from his prison cell, Zeebran knew that the party was coming to an end and that soon he would be able to resume his duel quest to recover his wife and to battle The Witch.

The host of elves were all gathered around and all silent in anticipation, something which only a royal proclamation could achieve.

"Elves and honoured guests." The King began. "I am proud to announce that it is time for us to leave this place and to return to our homelands, which we so dearly love."

This remark was greeted with cheers and a toast was proclaimed.

"To home."... from many lips.

One might think that it was a sad occasion to break up such as a swell do, but the elves were as happy to be going home as they were to have stayed.

One might also argue that it was exceedingly bad manners to interrupt The King's speech but this would be a mistaken belief. It was not an interruption because The King paused periodically during his speech and the pauses were at precisely the right moment to allow the people to respond.

“Before we leave, there are several commendations to be made and other important matters to be dealt with.”

The Elves applaud and shouted “Hurray!”

“Most important. It is my pleasure to welcome back among us my daughter who has been so long in exile.”

Through the cheering crowd, clad in elven silver and regally crowned, Seren was led up to the king’s seat by Calon and was followed by her four faithful elves.

“I dub thee Seren-Gwirion.” The King announced.

“Seren-Gwirion.” Seventeen thousand elven voices echoed.

“I am proud to announce the formation of a new tribe. The Tribe of Herio, of which I make thee Queen. I give you, Queen Seren-Gwirion of Herio.” The King Proclaimed.

“Queen Seren-Gwirion of Herio.” The chorus echoed.

“I have made this decision, having observed that your heart has been untainted by your association with your wizard, husband and because of your unique service in ridding us of our enemies. Calon-Agored, formerly fifth Lord of The House of Gorffwys, I promote you to First Lord of The Tribe of Herio and call upon you to serve this lady, to be her Warlord and to protect her and her people from adversity.”

“This I do swear.” Calon acknowledged, joyfully.

“Lady, I do give thee to thy charge these five elves to be thy people and all others who may choose to follow thee. Doest thou swear to rule them wisely, fairly and impartially?”

“My Lord, I do so swear.” She gives her oath.

“Let all who follow this Lady now pledge their allegiance. We will follow you faithfully and fearlessly and always do thy bidding.”

The King entreated.

“We do so swear..” Her five followers declared, along with several others.

“This bond that elf has formed let no power split asunder.” The King sealed, to tumultuous applause.

“Naven of Cassia, for your services we name you Elf-friend and welcome you among us. Ansel and Mikle, Elf-friends of old, all we can do is to renew our blessing and our thanks and to speed you on your way. Whatever boon we can give will be yours.”

“If you will speed us and our companions to our destination, that will be thanks enough.” Ansel requested.

“So be it.” The King proclaimed. “A little elf travel magic if you please.”

The elves began a song and dance of power which, once completed, saw the whole crew off to a tiny village deep in The South Country.

It was some time later when Zeebran and Vabian were released and brought before The King. They had arrived on the scene a little too late to help the elves in their struggle. Zeebran was still in The King's bad books and for some unknown reason Vabian was equally disfavoured, perhaps by association only.

The Elves' celebration had disbanded. Groups of elves had moved off, bound for home, though these were probably celebrating all the way home and beyond.

You may have noticed that when elves have to punish or criticise, they do it discretely but when they reward or commend they do it openly and with great enthusiasm. They are frequently fun-loving and happy-go-lucky en mass but serious very seldom and sadness and anger touch very few very rarely. The King is one of the few. The serious tasks fall upon his shoulders most often. If not for frequent cleansings he would be worn-down within a month.

"Now, Zeebran." The King spoke as if to an old friend in this unusual, personal audience. "I know that you are much troubled. I also know that you have had problems in keeping track of your wife since you ventured forth. I must caution you to take better care in future. I say this not only as a king of elves but also as a father-in-law. I know that you have done a remarkable job of keeping her heart pure. I also know that my revoking her name has put you both through great trials. If you have not enough strength to protect her I will have to take her back. If you doubt your ability to protect her you had best relinquish her now, before you both come to grief. What do you say?"

"Your Majesty. I can not give her up. I wish only to be with her and she with me, for life or death it makes no matter. We share the same pain and still we are both sure we cannot be separated."

Zeebran stated.

"It grieves me to hear you say this yet again. Even I tremble at the thought of what might happen to you. I do not know what can be done with you. I can not bear to look upon you, you and this familiar of yours." The King replied.

"It would serve her better if we were together. You know this."

Zeebran insisted.

"That I know and, though I would not help you to her doom, I will as I must. Go to her and keep her safe." The King charged.

“I will do all that I can, Your Majesty. Just a small favour. There are four humans somewhere, in great distress. I need them also.”
 “So be it.” The King proclaimed and it should have been so.

Chapter Seven

Torgud and company have been having a very bad time since their little squabble with the ogre. They rested for a few days and tried not to move Golad unnecessarily. With the smell of the ogre’s corpse it soon became necessary to move.

They moved a few yards further off and then a few more and yet the stench seemed to grow and follow them. They finally settled on a spot about a mile away from the remains. A place in which a faint whiff reached them only occasionally on the wind.

“There it is again.” O’ Cazian complained, over supper.

“That weren’t no ogre.” Golad joked. “That was Fadik. I’d know that smell anywhere. Beans.”

At this distance from the ogre even the donkey had joined them with its precious load of food and water.

The men were extremely lucky to have these few days of peace and calm. They could have almost forgotten their quest were it not for Torgud’s moroseness. He spent his time brooding over the fate of one old man in the small, almost depopulated village of Dern, far to the south.

“Come on Torgud, lighten up. Worrying never solved any problems.” Fadik counselled.

“Neither does waiting. Perhaps I should go on alone.” Torgud considered.

“Well, if you are killed, how then will your grandfather be freed?” O’ Cazian reasoned.

“I think that I have as much chance alone as with you.” Torgud assessed. “I have a magic sword and the power of love and I believe that my will is strong.”

“He has a point.” Said Golad. “Then we could go home and rest.”

“Your sword serves your enemy as well as you.” Fadik warned.

“And you should not underestimate the power of evil. Right does not make might. I have seen a lot of just men go down. You have already run out upon your wizard and his friends when they may have needed you. If you run out on us too, I may have to kill you myself.”

“You think we should go back, Fadik?” Torgud offered.

Fadik shook his head, sadly.

“It is too late. That mistake has already been made. We can’t take it back now. Nature doesn’t let you go back, not ever.”

“I am sure that none of them will blame you.” Said O’ Cazian, cheerily. “It was a hard decision to make. It was your decision and you made it. You say your will is strong, then stick to your own plan.”

It was a fine idea, perhaps, but what O’ Cazian did not appreciate was that, while The Sword was in his possession, Torgud was the target of every malevolent spirit that existed. Like a magnet it drew them to him. He alone was pitted against them because none of his mortal companions could help him.

Torgud had stayed in the same place for long enough now for evil to seek him out. All manner of demons were waiting in the wings, marching towards him on foot, riding on the winds and drifting on the ethereal plane. Danger was waiting to strike at every turn, at any moment.

In the night, goblins came. They were The Balakri Goblins. They were said to have descended from dwarves and not from elves. They lived in caves and mines and loved to accumulate treasure but they hated work. They captured all kinds of beings to work their mines for them. When their victims became unsuitable to work, they made a meal of them.

The Balakri Goblins had a smattering of magic and hunted in large packs, so that collectively they were quite strong. More importantly, they were smart. They encircled their victims whilst they slept and wove a spell which controlled their minds. The Goblins could sense anything which was invested with power and had learned the trick of removing it from its owner so that he could not be protected by it.

The Goblins encircled Torgud’s camp, so silently that even the dogs could not hear them. They wove their spell over both men and animals but soon discovered that Torgud was protected.

With the others under their control and Torgud sound asleep, they crept up to where he lay.

One of them bashed Torgud on the head, to knock him out. They removed his sword and wrapped it in a magic-proof cloth, took it away and cast it into the river. Then they set to work. With especially designed tools they wrapped The Necklace and Amulet and removed it from Torgud’s neck, casting this into the river also. Now they were free to enslave Torgud’s mind also.

They carried the men off, leaving the animals, which they regarded as useless. Only when the goblins were far away would the animals awaken.

Torgud, Fadik and Lord O' Cazian were taken to the mines and made to work long and hard and fed very little of an unappetising swill. Golad, because he could not work, was taken to the larder and made to eat and eat and eat until he thought that he would burst. When they considered him fat enough, the goblins would kill and eat him, for they loved their meat very fatty.

There they all would have remained until they had died in the mines or been consumed as a goblin feast, had it not been for Torgud's dreams. If they were in fact Torgud's dreams. They may have been Torgud's dreams or perhaps they were Seren's but that is of little consequence.

The days of work were long and terribly hard and the times of sleep were short and restless. Torgud was haunted in his dreams by the image of Seren-Gwirion and sometimes he fancied that he heard her voice, faint and far off. Days and nights were a blur. In its captive state Torgud's mind did not know the orders of his captors from his own thoughts. The days of endless activity and constant torment did not seem real at all, minutes, hours, days all melted into one another and meant nothing.

The only time that Torgud was able to think and understand anything was when Seren's spirit visited him. At first it was far off and seemed to be searching for him. Then it was a little closer until, by degrees, it became more and more real. Now it was more real than anything that he encountered whilst awake.

Seren's appearances were not indeed a sign of her good health. Quite the opposite, they arose from her precarious state of health. They indicated that she too was a spiritual captive. This was still before Ansel removed his machine from her but that is not the captivity in question.

You will remember that Seren had fallen under the spell of Blaga. That Old Scoundrel had never really released his spell at all. He had kept half a grip upon her. He still half controlled her.

While-ever Seren was awake she was herself but in her sleep she became Blaga's prisoner once more. Blaga had done this out of spite. He had outwitted The Wizard to his own satisfaction. That neither The Wizard nor His Elf suspected anything made his revenge even more sweet. The longer he could maintain this trick, the better the victory becomes.

While-ever she slept, Zeebran's wife was condemned to be Blaga's companion. Blaga figured that he had half stolen Denath's wife, making The Wizard and unsuspecting cuckold.

Seren remembered nothing of her somnambulistic haunts, except perhaps a hazy dream.

Blaga himself had become trapped in his own web of deception. What began as a trick against The Wizard ensnared The Water Sprite also. He had grown more and more captivated by The Elf. He found himself longing for the time that he could be with her again, the sight of her, the sound of her voice, the peel of her laughter, were indispensable to him now and his heart ached that she could never be his completely. Well, not while The Wizard was alive. But he could not kill The Wizard without destroying their beloved elf as well. It was a terrible dilemma. Simply terrible. There are those who will say that he deserved it.

Now, if Blaga and Seren happen to be both asleep at the same time, then Seren's spirit is free to roam within the confines of a certain spiritual plane. It is that spiritual plane which belongs to captive spirits of all kinds. It is the same spiritual plane which Torgud's spirit now occupies.

Therefore it is possible for Seren to find Torgud and to communicate with him. Elves can not bear to be alone in spirit. Thus she shares her time between three suitors. While awake she is with her husband in spirit. If she is asleep and Blaga is awake she entertains him perforce. If Blaga is asleep she visits Torgud whenever she is sleeping. All this is taking place while she is waiting to be zapped by The Oscilons.

Seren entertains Blaga with songs and stories and dances but while she is with Torgud she wrestles against his captors and tries to help him to escape.

Torgud's mind is captive awake or asleep and if Seren can establish contact strongly enough she will be able to speak to him even while he is awake. Then he may be able to escape.

"Torgud. Wake up!" She cries. "Awake and think only of me."

At times Seren succeeds in awakening Torgud only to lose contact with him. In his wakeful state reality was a strong distraction.

Seren also had to be careful, while Blaga was asleep, not to let him catch her. She could easily outrun him but, each time she led him closer to her destination. If he knew where she was heading he could lay in wait for her. He might also decide to do harm to Torgud, just out of jealousy.

“Hurry up, he is coming.” She cried. “I can smell him. It is no good, I will have to lead him away.”

Seren disappeared and Torgud awoke from his dream into another oblivion. This time, Blaga’s sleeping spirit had almost caught her. She could not roam too far for fear that she might lose her way and never find her way back. This, of course, is a form of death. Seren fearlessly trod this perilous path again and again until one day she made the strong contact that she needed. It was as if the two were meeting face to face.

“Seren, where are we?” Torgud asked.

“You are captured by goblins. Now listen carefully and do what I say. We must act quickly before Blaga catches us and before we lose contact again. Think of your sword. Think hard. Take my hands I will help you.”

“What will this do?” Torgud asked.

“Don’t talk. Think. Remember what Ansel told you, his exact words.” She instructs.

“How do you know?” He begins but she silences him.

“Enough questions, please.” She begs. “I hear Blaga already.”

Sure enough the slopping of his footsteps can be heard and the gurgling of his breath and even the gallumph of his heartbeat.

Torgud concentrates as hard as he can.

“It will make this sword do your bidding and you don’t even have to touch it.” Torgud spoke.

“Good then.” Said Seren, as a whiff of Blaga’s acrid odour wafted by her. “I can lead him away while I uncover The Sword for you. You must make it invisible and draw it towards you. You understand? Don’t forget.”

Seren felt Blaga’s hot breath upon her.

“Oops! Got to go.” She dashed off. “Remember. Wish it invisible and draw it to you.” She shouted.

Torgud saw her dash off and caught a fleeting glimpse of Blaga trundling after her. Then he felt the sharp sting of one of his goblin guards’ chastisers.

“Work!” It shouted, as Torgud lost contact with Seren and promptly forgot her instructions, his will once again in the hands of the goblins.

“Delashe ni sela sele shemole.”

These words burned their way into Torgud’s mind, the sound seeming to come from nowhere. The words meant nothing to him. He did not understand them and yet, for a brief moment, his will became his own. A strange force impelled him to remember Seren’s words.

All that Seren had to do to release The Sword was to make a tiny hole in the magic-proof cloth or to unfold it so that a gap appeared through which the magic could pass.

In her spirit world she could not touch material objects, neither could she move them. She had to act quickly because the sleeping spirit of Blaga was close behind her.

While he slept he could not control her spirit unless he caught her. She entered the body of a catfish and took possession of it.

In the water she was in great danger, for Blaga could more easily overtake her. He could control her completely again.

Seren took over the will of the fish and used its body to carry out her plan. The fish chewed through the layers of cloth until it had formed a small hole. Small though it was, it allowed the magic to pass and, once the magic flowed, Torgud was released from the goblins' spell.

Seren leapt from the fish in the nick of time as Blaga was about to merge with her. He was left holding the fish, if only for a moment. He was most annoyed and particularly malevolent. He seized upon a chance to spite Torgud.

Blaga's spirit was strong enough to manipulate objects. He tried to prevent The Sword from escaping its prison. Failing this he tried to return it to the cloth.

As he took the sword in his hand he felt its terrible two-fold sting. Both the curse of The Witch and the magic of The Sorcerer were pitted against him. The Sword glowed white hot and the hand which sought to hold The Sword was completely melted away. Blaga let out a scream of pain and immediately awoke from his dream. He awoke to discover what was left of his right hand burned and horribly disfigured, as if it had not been hideous enough to begin with. Blaga had helped our hero. He had weakened The Witch's hold upon The Sword even further by taking the curse upon himself.

Ansel's machine-based power was not similarly diminished. Its 'batteries' were rechargeable, figuratively speaking.

Blaga, at this moment, had no thought for controlling Seren. He was too wrapped up in his own suffering for that.

Torgud, meanwhile, was momentarily free of the goblins' control. He bent his will towards The Sword.

"Be invisible. Come to me." He uttered.

A zealous goblin prodded him with its sharp chastiser.

"Shut up!" It instructed. "Keep working."

'I'll deal with you in a minute.' Torgud thought to himself, while hacking away at the hard rock wall.

Torgud slipped back under the control of the goblins for a little while but, as The Sword grew closer and its influence grew stronger, he became more and more lucid.

He felt the approach of The Sword and held it far enough away so that the guards would not feel it. He waited until he was locked away in his cell for the brief rest period and then he summoned it to appear.

"Cut these chains." He ordered and it obeyed.

Lord O' Cazian and Fadik were fast asleep with exhaustion as he cut their bonds. Then he instructed The Sword, invisibly, to find Golad, free him and lead him to them. The Sword even hid itself from the goblins and released his friends from their grip.

The smoothness of this operation was partly due to Seren's assistance. She was able to guide Torgud's actions while Blaga was preoccupied. It was not long before the four companions were all gathered in the same cell and free of the goblins' spell.

"Why don't we free the other prisoners?" Golad suggested.

Torgud would have agreed but for the intervention of Seren. She spoke to his mind and told him to beware.

"The thing about magic is that you don't waste it." Torgud quoted.

It was just as well because the freeing of all of the prisoners would have been a massive drain upon the power of The Sword. It might have 'run out of gas' and left them helpless once more.

"We can free a few of them." Torgud decided. "To free too many would alert the goblins and bring them down on us in force."

They freed the section of the prisoners with which they had been working. There were eleven of them. The Sword had killed about a dozen guards in its wandering about the caverns, leading Golad to his friends. It had struck them down and completely destroyed their remains so that there was nothing left to alert others. It had destroyed the guards for this section, so that our friends were able to move freely within its confines.

They made their way cautiously to the tool store and picked themselves out picks, shovels or hammers as weapons. They began the difficult and dangerous journey to find their way out of the goblins' city.

Seren's influence was fading. She was trying to tell Torgud to recover The Amulet. The Sword itself would draw the goblins to him. Blaga had begun to take control of The Elf and even Torgud seemed not to hear her.

“No, not down that way.” She pleaded, as Blaga tore her will away from her.

Blaga, in his torment, had finally realised that The Elf could heal his wound and had struggled against his pain to regain control of her. Now she was his elf again, until she awoke or he slept. He forced her to tend to his wound and to entertain him.

Torgud was, at this time, heading down the rocky road to ruin, going deeper and deeper into the maze of goblin tunnels.

“Find us a safe path to escape.” He ordered The Sword but it was an impossible task for it and you can’t ask a machine to do the impossible, not ever. The Sorcerer’s magic in The Sword was machine based and asking its machine intelligence to do the impossible caused a systems overload. It crashed the program and the magic stone ceased to function. The Sword carried on, driven by the malevolent force of The Witch’s Curse. It was leading Torgud to certain death, deep in the bowels of the earth. How terrible must be the demon which drew it on, leading Torgud away from the goblins to an even blacker peril.

Onwards they journeyed getting deeper and deeper. They were entering workings which had been long in disrepair.

“This doesn’t seem like a way out to me.” Grumbled Fadik. “Are you sure that sword knows what it’s doing?”

“I am not at all sure of anything.” Torgud confessed.

“I think it is leading us astray.” Fadik suggested. “It all seems to be downhill. I’m sure that can’t be right.”

“What can we do but follow?” Torgud reasoned.

“Can’t we put The Sword to some test?” O’ Cazian suggested.

“Ask it to do something else and see if it does your bidding.”

“Very well.” Torgud agreed. “Sword, become invisible.”

This it did.

“Now light the way.”

And The Sword gave off a dull glow.

“Satisfied.” Torgud demanded.

“No.” Said Fadik. “But lead on.”

They travelled down and down until they came to a wide cavern.

“This has not been dug.” A dwarf among them told, for he was an expert miner. “From here it will all be natural, subterranean caverns. There is danger in such places. We should turn back before it is too late.”

They had the same debate over again and decided to venture forth just a little way, as long as the path was straight and it would be easy to find the way back.

“If it shows no sign of climbing soon, we will not go much further.” Torgud promised.

They continued for an hour or so and then came to a halt again. They had travelled down a single path and had seen no branching tunnels. They had torches but, as the road had become so long, they decided to keep only one lit at a time. A couple of torches had given out and Torgud foresaw a time when he would have to rely upon his sword alone to light their way. He did not know how long its light would last and had long since extinguished it, to preserve its power.

“I think we had better turn back.” He said, regretfully.

“Just as well.” Said The Dwarf. “More and more I don’t like this place.”

Dark caverns and diggings are a dwarf’s natural habitat and if a dwarf has a bad feeling about a place then it were wise to listen to him.

They started on their way back. The Dwarf was just saying that, if their journey was to be a long one, they must return to the goblin city to steal some food.

“Even that goblin muck. We don’t want to starve to death down here.” He completed.

Then the torch went out.

“Another one gone.” Torgud exclaimed. “Everybody stay where you are. Sword, give us some light.”

He held aloft his sword but it gave no light. Others were frantically trying to light one of the other torches.

“It needs a dwarf’s touch.” Said The Dwarf and quickly the flame was struck while at the same time Torgud’s sword began to glow. The light revealed that one of their number was missing. There should have been fifteen people, our four and three dwarves and eight other men.

“We’ll count up again.” Said The Dwarf. “Line up against the wall. One, two, three, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. We’re definitely one short.” He confirmed.

“Well, let’s go and look for him.” Golad suggested.

“Don’t be silly.” Said Torgud. “If we do that we shall all disappear one by one. The sooner we get out of here the better.”

“There is nowhere anyone could have gone in this darkness except into the belly of some foul fiend.” The Dwarf pointed out. “I’m not going to be the next on the menu.”

They hurried on back to the large chamber and directly across it to the tunnels leading towards The Goblin City. The path carried them up and up but the dwarves were not contented.

“This is not the way we came.” Their spokesperson barked.

“It cannot be anything else. We went straight down and returned straight back up.. How could we go wrong?” Torgud reasoned.

“We dwarves know tunnels. We live by them and these are not the ones that led us down to the cavern. Something has switched tunnels on us, blocked one and opened another. It is possible.”

The Dwarf asserted.

“It is possible?” Torgud repeated, halting. “Fadik. Do you trust these dwarves, trust their feelings?”

“This is their world. I trust them as much as I trust your sword.”

Fadik answered.

“Then we must return to the cavern and find the right way back.”

Torgud decided. “Before our enemy returns for another snack.”

They returned to the cavern. By careful inspection the dwarves were able to discern the fine lines in the rock walls. The joints of doorways which could be moved around. Their owner was able to open and close passageways at will. The solid rock doors were most likely several feet thick and it would require colossal strength to move them.

They found not one of these mobile blocks but a large number. A very large number, not only in the chamber but all along the passageways as well. The dwarves were really worried.

“It is worse than I thought.” Paddy moaned, for that was the name of the talkative one. “This might not even be the same chamber. We could be anywhere.”

The Dwarves went off into a corner by themselves and tried to work out exactly the paths along which they had travelled. They talked in terms of a tunnel leading south-west at two hundred and twenty seven degrees, with a slope of twelve degrees for three hundred feet which curved about fifteen degrees to the left and levelled for sixty feet, etceteras. This figuring went on and on. Any tiny oversight could make a difference to which tunnel to open.

Torgud wondered how, if any particular door was chosen, they were going to open it. There was no possibility of any one, or even all of them, being strong enough to push them open.

They had picks and sledge-hammers and shovels and the dwarves assured them that they could smash through in a couple of hours.

Their unseen captor could, no doubt, close up another door ahead of them and then another.

They could not dig forever without food and water.

“You look troubled.” The Voice of Lord O’ Cazian greeted him.

“I just don’t know what to do next.” Torgud confessed.

“Why not order your sword to open up the right door?” O’ Cazian suggested, assuming that it could do so.

“I have lost all confidence in The Sword. It seems to have given up. I don’t believe that it is helping at all, quite the opposite.”

“It’s worth a try. It will be a real test for it.” The Lord supposed.

“Sword. Open up the door.” Said Torgud and then waited a moment. There was no response. “See, nothing.”

The light went out in the cavern.

“Sword.” Torgud ordered. “Kill The Beast.”

In such darkness it was impossible to tell if there was any response from the blade.

A few moments later a torch was rekindled and, once again, one of the party was missing.

“You see. The Damned Sword is useless.” Torgud raved.

“Wait.” Said O’ Cazian. “Don’t throw it away. Perhaps it is this monster which affects its power. If we get out of here it may yet be useful.”

The dwarves went back to figuring. They argued back and forth whether the section with the wet walls came before or after the convex roof and if this or that section was really fifty feet or sixty. For the first time in quite a while Torgud fell to sleep. He saw Seren standing before him.

“There you are. I thought you would never get here. I tried to warn you. Tell your sword to stop what it is doing.” She instructed.

This done The Sword stopped trying to find a safe way out of the mine and was restored to normal.

“You must be careful what you ask of it. It is not all-powerful you know.” Seren counsels. “Tell it to find the safest possible way out of here.”

This it soon achieves.

“Well, open the door and lead the way.” Torgud demands.

“Do speak to it nicely.” Seren advised. “I must dash. Good luck.”

Torgud is awoken by the sound of huge rock doors opening and closing. He finds his sword in his hand ablaze with light. It is a warning that their formless, nameless enemy, The Stalker of The Deep is hurrying towards them.

“Everybody come this way.” He shouted. “Hurry.”

They all clambered through the opening. Torgud stood until they were all safely through and would have challenged the onrushing monster at the doorway.

Seren's voice spoke inside his mind.

"Oh, no. Don't do that. Close the door. Run away."

Torgud took a step-back through the doorway.

"Hold the door closed." He ordered The Sword.

The door swung closed and Torgud took to heel just in the nick of time. Another second and The Monster would have been on him and all of the magic swords in Christendom would not have saved him.

Of course, The Stalker in The Dark would have opened the door, but it would take it some time. It could have chased them up towards The City but it hated to leave its domain. Deep within the bowels of the earth it was safe from all enemies.

Torgud and his crew continued upwards through the tunnels until they came within earshot of the diggings. There was the ever increasing danger now of being spotted and recaptured.

"We must have food and water." Said Paddy. "I vote that we bed-down here until the place quietens down. Then my fellow dwarves and I will creep about and steal what we can. Then we can make good our escape."

"Very well." Said Torgud, whose last sleep had lasted only a few minutes.

No sooner had he nodded off than She was there again.

"What do you want now? Let me sleep." He grumbled.

"Here I am trying to help you... You must tell your sword to go and fetch you The Necklace." She whispered, for Blaga was not far behind.

"Very well. Go and fetch The Necklace." Torgud mumbled in his sleep.

"Good man. I will come and see you when I can." She said, fading from view.

Torgud managed a couple of hours sleep and awoke to find his necklace attached to The Sword. He carefully unwrapped it from its magic-proof cloth and replaced it around his neck.

"We are off now." Said Paddy. "If we are not back in two hours then we won't be coming back. O.K."

"How am I to know two hours?" Torgud asked.

The dwarf took a container and placed it under a drip from the walls.

“When the water reaches this mark, that is two hours.” He said with a grin and a wink.

The Dwarves came back with sacks full of provisions. Torgud wondered how they had managed it.

“We had to kill a few goblins on the way.” Paddy confided.

“There’s nothing good to eat. It’s all the same junk that the goblins feed their prisoners and lots of water.”

“Thank you, Dwarves.” Torgud commended. “You have done very well.”

“It’s nothing.” Said Paddy. “All in a day’s work for a dwarf.”

“It is nothing.” Said Golad. “Do we have to eat this?”

“Not at all.” Paddy replied. “You can starve if you prefer.”

They began the next stage of their climb to the surface, sneaking down corridors and peeking gingerly around every corner. The dwarves did much of the spying out for them. They were extremely good at it.

“I’m getting the hang of this magic stuff.” Torgud congratulated himself. “Now Sword, I want you to warn me when a goblin approaches.”

Sure enough a little voice kept on popping into his head, saying things like...

“There is one on the right behind the pillar.”

This sped up their progress and made their journey a lot safer.

Most of the goblins were asleep, or drunk or both. They became so numerous that Torgud could not handle all of the information The Sword was sending him.

‘Only the ones that are alert.’ He thought and The Sword responded.

“Wow.” Torgud realised. “I don’t even have to speak the instructions.”

The Sword led them to a ventilation shaft which was equipped with a series of narrow ladders leading up through the centre of the mountain. It extended upwards for hundreds of feet.

“Are you sure this is the safest way out?” Golad asks.

“That’s what The Sword says.” Torgud insists.

“That sword needs a good talking to.” Golad complains.

“This is a strange person.” Said Paddy. “Doesn’t want to eat, doesn’t want to climb.”

As a matter of fact Golad’s side was not completely healed and climbing would afford him much pain.

“How is your wound?” Torgud wondered.

“Take a look.” Said Golad. “It ain’t a pretty sight.”

His time in the filthy conditions of the goblin larder had not helped. Golad was extremely lucky not to be dying of fever. The wound was septic all over.

“I wonder?” Torgud wondered.

“What?” Golad asked, suspiciously.

“Sword. Heal this wound.” Torgud commanded.

Nothing happened.

“Perhaps if you applied The Sword to the wound.” Paddy suggested.

“Oh no you don’t.” Golad complained.

They had to hold him down to get the job done.

“Don’t make a noise, you’ll get us caught.” Torgud warned. “And hold still if you don’t want to get cut in half.”

Torgud rubbed the wound with the flat of the blade and then Golad was released. (Incidentally this transferred a portion of The Sword’s curse energy onto Golad too.)

“Is that any better?” Torgud asked.

Golad thought about it and stretched his arm in the air. Then he smiled.

“Yes. No pain at all.” He reported.

“Torgud, The Mighty Sorcerer.” He boasted.

“Don’t get swell-headed.” Lord O’ Cazian cautioned.

‘Goblins are coming. Many of them.’ The Sword signalled.

“Come on, let’s go up.” Said Torgud.

“Men first.” Paddy, The Dwarf insisted, as the sounds of goblins could be heard. “We dwarves stand a better chance of holding them off in these confined spaces.” He reasoned.

The sounds of Goblin feet tramped closer. The sound of goblin armour clanked along with it and the sounds of goblin voices grew louder.

“Sneaking up on us, are they?” Said Paddy, facetiously.

Then he had an idea.

“Close the fire-doors on them.” He suggested.

“Fire doors?” Torgud questioned.

“There are always fire doors somewhere about.” The Dwarf divulged.

“Well, Sword, do as he says.” Torgud ordered but nothing happened. “Close the fire-doors.” He thought and the fire-doors swung shut. “Now bring the roof down upon them.” He added, for good measure.

There was a crashing sound and a crushing sound from the other side of the doors and the sound of goblins' howls.

"That was easy. Who needs wizards." Power was going to Torgud's head.

"Amazing what a little power can do." Paddy offered, sarcastically. "Come on, let's escape."

All but Torgud and the three dwarves had begun the long climb to the top of the shaft. The dwarves were used to the narrow step ladders and caught up rapidly, leaving Torgud lagging behind a little.

It was not long before goblins were at the base of the ladder. They had come there by a different way which Torgud had not known about to seal. Before he knew what was happening he was pierced by a goblin arrow fired up the shaft and lost his grip. He found himself falling down a drop of one hundred feet.

"Stop!" He cried in panic and somehow he became caught upon the ladder again. He was still the target of a barrage of arrows.

"I thought you were supposed to protect me. Stop the arrows, please. Now break down all the ladders below this one. Now take me up to the top of The Shaft."

He held The Sword aloft and it rocketed him quickly up to the surface.

"Collapse the other side of the tunnel." He instructed The Sword.

"Now all we have to do is wait for the others to climb up. I have an arrow in my back. Remove it please and heal the wound."

Torgud was becoming infatuated with his new-found power.

"I just can't believe how good this feels. I can do just about anything. This is wonderful." He expulsed.

After a time Golad emerged from the shaft.

"Isn't it marvellous? Climb up here, he says and then goes flashing past you and doesn't even offer to help." He complained.

The others clambered out one by one with Paddy bringing up the rear. The Dwarf quickly looked around and then added his own complaint.

"That's alright, Torgud. You can just sit there daydreaming while The Goblins prepare to recapture us."

"What?" Torgud exclaimed.

"They are forming a circle around us, so that they can subdue us again." Paddy explains.

Sure enough that was what was happening. On the slopes of the mountain a ring of goblins was forming and closing around them as an army of Balakri swarmed towards them.

“What do we do?” Torgud wondered.

“You’re the one with the power.” Said Paddy, cheekily.

“I could always save myself, I suppose.” Torgud countered.

“As I see it we have two choices. We can try to break out before the circle is complete or we can form a circle of our own and see if your power is strong enough to resist them.” Paddy tutored.

“But there must be a thousand of them.” Torgud judged.

“Then the choice is plain.” Said The Dwarf.

“Stay as close together as you can and if need be we will form a circle. Sword, warn us when The Goblins circle is almost complete. We charge down the hill, southwards.” Torgud decided. Torgud led the way at a reasonable pace and the others followed, staying as close together as they could.

“If they fire arrows at us you will have to turn them away from us.”

He told his sword. ‘I feel so stupid talking to a sword.’ He thought.

The goblins were marching up the hill as the escapees were running down and so they came closer and closer together.

The goblins did shoot arrows at them and The Sword did deflect them away from our group. The enemy was dangerously close to completing their circle before Torgud reached them.

‘The circle is forming.’ The Sword warned, as The Goblins began to join hands.

“Circle now!” Torgud shouted, coming to a halt.

The allies formed their circle and then Torgud had a brainstorm.

“Sword. Transport us down the hill.” He ordered.

The circle of friends started to whirl around at great speed, floated up into the air and drifted, like a feather on the wind, down to the base of the mountain, right over the heads of the goblin army. They escaped just as the last pair of goblins joined hands. The Goblin circle was complete but the quarry had already flown.

“What a coup.” Torgud declared as they landed.

It was a bumpy landing. The circle broke up and everyone went sprawling on the ground. Their heads were whirling from all of that spinning around and poor Golad landed in a thorny bush, but they were all safe and far below the goblins.

The escape was not yet complete however. As they went whirling overhead the goblins broke their circle and took off after them at great speed. They were even now speeding closer.

“Run!” Shouted Paddy. “The goblins are coming!”

The escapees shook their heads and rose shakily to their feet. By the time they had recovered it was really time to run.

“Westwards.” Shouted Torgud.

“That’s this way.” Said Paddy, taking off as fast as his little legs could carry him.

They ran and then they ran some more. Some goblins pursued them, about a hundred or so.

They ran and then they cantered and then trotted and finally walked. Golad had passed out and had to be dragged along.

Still The Goblins followed.

Chapter Eight.

Torgud ran from the peak of Mount Balakri, across the flood-plain of the meandering River Sena, towards the Plateau of Darkness.

The river used to flow south even before the plateau was formed.

As The Plateau lifted the river cut down through it, forming a deep gorge which cut the plateau in half.

Changes in the rainfall and the rate of uplift had caused the plateau to rise more quickly than the water could cut into it and the river had changed its course, swinging to the east around the skirts of the plateau before turning south again.

The dry gorge remained, lifted a couple of feet above the level of the river. In times of flood the river still rose and poured its excess water down through the gorge. This happened just often enough to clear away any boulders which tumbled down the slopes so that the gorge remained mostly passable, like a highway leading south. Of course, you had to be wary of falling rocks.

To get to Deepening Gorge, it was necessary to cross the flood-plain and the river, a flat valley scattered with marshes which were hard to negotiate. Many an unwary traveller had disappeared into the bogs never to return.

An unwary traveller was an apt description of Torgud at this moment. He was unfamiliar with this country and simply lit out in the direction that led directly home. He was in territory which was well off of his map.

The voyagers started out across the flood-plain, suspecting nothing, but they were soon knee deep in mud. The Balakri were hot on their heels, whooping and hollering but their pursuit ended where the marsh began. They were too familiar with the marshes to venture forth. They stood at the edge and watched their quarry sloshing away from them, throwing a few spears as a parting gesture of ill-will.

Torgud was delighted that the chase was over. Yet he was suspicious as to why the goblins would not follow, their broad feet would make it easy for them to catch the humans in such a swamp. None of the travellers knew how to negotiate a marsh, how to tell the solid ground by the plants which grew there. So there was little chance of them finding an easy way across. They certainly were doing it the hard way. Every few feet another member of the group would get stuck and they would have to be hauled out.

After a couple of hours of this they found a dry spot in which to rest. It was not exactly dry but drier than the rest, a sort of dampish piece of high ground. It was not exactly high but higher than the rest, by about an inch.

They made up a batch of the goblin, so called, food by adding some of this green powdered rubbish to water. It came out even worse than when the goblins made it, all slimy and full of dry, green lumps.

“This is powdered horse manure, I’m sue of it.” Golad complained.

“It’s green. Horses’ isn’t green.” Said O’ Cazian.

“I don’t care what it is. I am hungry and it fills.” Said Paddy.

“Yes, so does cement.” Said Golad. “But I don’t eat it.”

“Hey, Sword, how about making this meal a little more palatable.” Torgud suggested.

“Hm.” Said Paddy. “Cream of chicken soup, my favourite.”

“Hey, this tastes like strawberries and cream.” Said Golad.

Each person had his favourite flavour.

“You couldn’t do something about the texture, could you?” Golad pleaded.

“Now let’s not stretch a good thing too far.” Torgud warned.

Suddenly, a little way off, a ghostly, white figure rose out of the marsh and stood looking towards the diners.

“What the hell is that?” Said Fadik, pointing.

The figure seemed to float across the surface of the marsh.

“It’s a ghost.” Said Golad, timorously.

“So it is.” Torgud agreed. “Don’t panic. Just stay where you are.

There is nothing to fear from a ghost. The only thing about a ghost that will harm you is your own fear.”

“So what can we do?” Asked O’ Cazian.

“All we can do is to not be afraid.” Said Torgud, hopefully.

“It’s a bit hard not to be afraid.” Said Golad, shakily.

“Ghosts don’t necessarily mean any harm. It might be here to warn us not to go any further.” Torgud speculated.

“Well it’s a bit late, isn’t it. Where were you a couple of hours ago?” Golad taunted.

The figure seemed to move a little closer, or at least Golad imagined so.

“No. I didn’t mean it. We’re very grateful, really.” He apologised. “Supposing it isn’t warning us to go back.” Said O’ Cazian. “What if it wants to lead us through the swamp?”

“To have something to guide us can’t be much worse than wandering around on our own.” Torgud thinks. “Pack up, quickly, we are going to follow the ghost to see what it wants of us.”

Some of the others were reluctant but, in the end, they preferred to follow rather than to be left alone.

They followed the spirit and found the going surprisingly easy.

Their path wound around so that they were travelling several times as far as if they had headed straight but they were travelling over ground that was fairly dry most of the way. There were still places in which they had to wade but these were not as frequent.

The spirit came to a place where it seemed to be pointing to the ground and then it raised its right hand and sank down into the swamp.

“The rest of you stay here.” Said Torgud, intending to visit the spot alone.

“And suppose you get stuck. You could sink down before we could get to you.” O’ Cazian warned.

“We will go with you.” Fadik stated, insistently.

“Very well.” Torgud allowed. “But it is your choice.”

“Are you coming, Golad?” Fadik invited, half in jest.

“Not bloody likely.” Came the expected response.

The three walked to where the apparition had disappeared.

To their surprise it was dry land but the mat of grasses was like a sponge which squished underfoot. They searched for the exact spot indicated by the spectre.

After a while, in which they poked around aimlessly, in the grass a small, rounded window was seen just barely poking out of the surface. It looked like the top of a glass marble.

Torgud uncovered the top of it, digging away at the sods around it. As he probed and the hole became larger so the object revealed itself to be larger than they had at first thought. They dug and dug until they revealed a complete glass ball six inches across. What is more the ball was still held aloft by a perfectly preserved hand.

“It’s a crystal ball.” Said Torgud with glee.

“No it’s not.” Said O’ Cazian. “It’s a dead body.”

“Shall we dig it up?” Torgud asked.

“I think not.” Said Fadik. “Shouldn’t go disturbing the dead.”

“You’re not going to keep that thing, are you Torgud?” O’ Cazian demanded.

“Why not. The creature led us to it. See how it strained to hold it aloft. It must have some very great significance.” Torgud told.

“Suppose it doesn’t want us to take it?” O’ Cazian warned.

“What can it do?” Torgud challenged. “This is no use to him, he’s dead already.”

They rejoined the others and Torgud showed them his prize.

They had another meal and then the ghostly figure appeared to them again and continued to lead them across the fen.

That night they rested and the following day they continued on their trek to the river.

The morning passed as uneventfully as any morning in which you are following a spook across a mire.

In the afternoon they were nearing the river. There was a screeching sound in the air and a beating as the flapping of huge wings. High overhead swept a huge dragon. The beast was fully forty feet long. It was toothed and clawed and scaly and snorted a flame. It swooped from the sky, diving at the weary travellers who scattered to either side and sprawled face down in the mud. As the leviathan passed overhead.

“Run to the river.” Paddy shouted. “A dragon can’t catch you in the water.”

Most of the companions had lost the dry path and ended up swimming through the mud.

The dragon swooped again. This time it picked out a victim and swooped upon him. It grabbed one of the men in its powerful claws and stretching its mighty wings beat and beat the air.

For a moment it looked as if its wingbeats were ineffective and that the monster would be trapped in the mire. The mud was not deep enough to hold it and it swept into the air carrying its victim high up to the peak of Mount Balakri for an afternoon snack.

After the dragon had left the travellers spent an hour dragging stranded people out of the mud. Their efforts left them exhausted, sitting beside the river.

“Where too now?” Golad gasped.

“That’s the gorge leading south.” Torgud pointed out, across the river. “It’s treacherous but it is the quickest way. It is hundreds of miles around the plateau either way and its walls are impossible to scale.

The quickest way to the gorge is to swim across the river, or at least to tread water and to float. It's about a mile downstream from here I guess."

"Hands up who can't swim?" Said Golad, putting up his hand.

One of the dwarves and two other men did likewise.

"Trust you." Said Torgud. "The others will have to help you. It's easy really. All you have to do is float and, whatever you do, don't panic."

"That's easy for you to say. 'Don't panic'." Golad scoffed.

They spent a little while teaching those four to swim, or at least to tread water and to float. Then they set off and made steady progress downstream.

It was a difficult task. Those who were the better swimmers were hampered by the none swimmers, especially when the dwarf panicked in mid-stream.

Still, evening found them camped at the head of Deepening Gorge.

They were waiting for morning before attempting to cross. The

gorge went on for many miles, none of them knew how many.

They were hoping to rise early and complete the crossing in a

single day. No-one relished the idea of spending the night under

those cavernous walls. The river had cut through the plateau

through a natural fault and the gorge was little wider at the top

than at its base. The walls rose sheer for hundreds of feet and

boulders hung precariously over the edge, threatening to fall at any time.

Torgud unwrapped The Crystal Ball that he had found and sat staring into it in the firelight. Visions began to take shape within.

He was looking into a cave. Strewn around upon its floor were

numerous treasures. Coins, arms, goblets, jewels and other strange

objects. Among these were human bones and, at the end of the

cave, slept a massive, green dragon. There, snuggled up against it,

were its most prized possessions. One of these, in a position of

pride, pressed up against the green dragon's heart, was a glass ball

It was the very crystal that Torgud was holding.

Torgud watched as a sinister figure, clothed all in white, crept up

even beneath the dragons' very nose and plucked the stone away.

A white cloud formed and swirled around the glass and, as it

cleared, there was a scene of the plain that our travellers had just

crossed. Torgud recognised the view looking back across the river

and the swamp to Mount Balakri.

Through the air the dragon, peering at the ground, searching for a small figure that crept along the ground.

There, in the swamp, he was. The stealer of the treasure. He was finding the safe tracks across the swamp. The dragon swept down at him and he took off in panic, blundering into a deep mire. He sank without a trace, holding aloft the precious stone.

Torgud watched as the ghostly figure sank. Time and time again the dragon swooped down, trying to pluck the orb from the hand, until only the hand remained, holding the bead inches above the surface of the mire.

Then even these disappeared. The dragon let out a blood curdling scream of anguish and wheeled away back to its cave.

Torgud thought for a moment and then spoke, as if to the orb itself. "So you belong to yon dragon, do you? Then I shall return you to your master in peace. Grandfather sais that dragons truly know the hearts of men. I hope that he is right."

"Talking to yourself." O' Cazian said, approaching.

"Talking to the bauble." Torgud replied, naïvely.

"This is very dangerous. All those can see who have eyes for these things." The Lord told him.

"I didn't know that you were schooled in wizardry." Torgud commented.

"It is an old proverb." His Lordship explained. "That has just now taken on new meaning."

"Fear not this crystal. For I have just now devised me a method by which I can make it disappear." Torgud hinted.

"How is that?" O' Cazian asked.

"Come morning." Said Torgud mysteriously. "All will be revealed."

Rest assured that Torgud's dabbling with divination did not go unnoticed in certain quarters. Those who have eyes for such things were busy making plans of their own.

Torgud had resolved to use the ball no more, lest it should alert his enemies to his situation. Yet in the middle of the night he was awoken by a strange buzzing sound and a light which glowed from the orb, even wrapped within his cloak.

Foolishly he failed to ignore it. Stupidly he took it up and looked deeply into it. In the orb he saw strange events unfold. He saw with crystal clarity a bitter conflict between his friend, The Wizard, Zeebran Denath and a mighty witch. There he saw, after stroke and counterstroke of magic devices, The Wizard torn apart by a fearful bolt of lightning. The little that was left of him was reduced to smouldering, charred remains.

Torgud sat and pondered. Has this come to pass? Or is it yet to be? Could it be prevented? Torgud resolved that, either way, he must face The Witch alone.

Morning came and The Company was in great fear. They saw quite clearly the dragon's fire far off across the valley. They could hear the thrashing of its tail, like thunder in the distance. The dragon was stirring but Torgud was not.

They roused him with great difficulty, when it was clear that the dragon had taken to the air. Torgud seemed pallid and frail and drained of his strength. A great weariness had overtaken him.

"The Dragon comes!" Cried The Dwarf, Paddy, in terror.

The Dragon soared, from the lofty peaks, on outstretched wings which scarcely felt the need to beat. It drifted rather, in one long glide, to the rocky platform upon which our travellers were encamped. So precisely had The Windlord calculated its last night's roost, as if for just this purpose. And it was.

While the others cowered in trepidation, Torgud stood in admiration of The Beast. He wondered at how masterfully it rode the wind with a sensitive tilting of its wings. He marked how it cut through the gusting wind on the knife-edge of its wings. When the wind dropped wings bellowed out like twin sails and still the dragon slid through the air, hardly wavering from its course.

"Find yourself some crevice in the rocks in which to hide." Torgud instructed. "Do not show yourselves, no matter what happens.

There's no sense in all of us getting killed."

"I'm convinced." Golad heartily agreed.

"I will face this danger with you." Fadik offered.

"It serves me better to meet it alone. Go, quickly, or you will spoil my plan." Torgud urged.

"Do not you forget who hires you, Fadik." O' Cazian reminds.

"Come and protect me."

He takes Torgud by the hand.

"I don't know what your plan might be but I will trust your judgement and be a true follower. If you choose to die alone to save the rest of us it is a poor trade in lives. You do not know your own worth."

"Death plays no part in my plans. Now go while there is still a chance." Torgud told him.

A lone figure stood and watched as the dragon came on. It did not swoop down upon him and squash him with its mighty bulk. It alighted with surprising gentility some fifty feet away and stood towering over him with wings unfurled.

To his surprise Torgud was treated to the sight, not of a dragon drab and green, but of brilliant iridescent hues, as each scale, greeting the sun, split its light into many colours. Each colour scattered this way and that and then that way and this with every move the dragon made. This was a wonder to behold, a painted dragon, a multicoloured dragon, a veritable tapestry, ever changing as each scale moved independently, making the light shimmer and quake, so brilliant that eyes could hardly bear to gaze upon it. The Dragon revelled in its own splendour and delighted in flaunting itself before its victims. It paraded its body around, splashing light in all directions, scattering colours into splinters, like some demonic artist, its canvas at once itself and the world it illuminated.

Our hero greeted the scene before him with all due ceremony. He lifted up in his left hand a ball of clearest crystal and in his right his sword. Both of these, catching the dragon's glare, glistened out shards of light. It seemed as though the pair were locked in picturesque battle to outshine one another. The Dragon, of course, was winning.

"O mighty and mysterious lord of the air." Torgud began, momentarily. "I have stumbled upon this orb for which I have no use. I wish to return it to your safekeeping. I lay down my sword as a sign of my peaceful intent."

With that Torgud ceremoniously lay down his sword. He walked forwards, holding out The Orb in both hands.

Sir Dragon strutted around, bristling his scales with pride, revelling in this attention. Torgud sank to his knees and, kow-towing on the ground, placed the ball reverently before him.

He stood and walked slowly backwards towards his sword, The Dragon eyeing him all the way. Torgud picked up his sword and, after a sweeping gesture of salute, sheathed it, retreating from the dragon with his head bowed.

The awesome beast, enormously pleased, did a graceful courtesy and then strutted forwards, ever watchful, to where the crystal lay. It plucked the tiny marble up, with amazing dexterity, in one of its massive claws. Then, beating its powerful wings, it propelled itself into the air, at once rising and backing away from the sheer cliff face before it.

The force of its wingbeats threw Torgud to the ground and he lay there laughing hysterically until the beast was high in the air. His companions came rushing up to see how he was.

“Let me warn you, My Friends.” He said, as soon as he could.
 “Never stand too close to a departing dragon, however friendly.”
 They all laughed at this but had they understood what had just been done they very well might have cried.

They prepared to continue their journey and began their march south through Deepening Gorge beneath a blazing sun. For some distance the way south was like a stone highway twenty metres across. Then they encountered places where fresh rock falls narrowed the gorge to a winding track. Then they reached a place where it was completely closed by a fall of rocks several metres high. They persuaded Paddy to climb up and survey the conditions ahead. Meanwhile they prepared what was left of the food.

“We shall find nothing more to eat whilst we are in this gorge.”
 Said Torgud. “So let us gorge ourselves on this while we may.”
 His pun was not appreciated.

“It’s straight and clear further on for a good, long way.” Paddy shouted down to them. “You be sure to leave me some food now.”
 And with that he descended.

After dinning they all climbed over the obstacle and walked a long way with only minor encumbrances. In the distance they could see another place where the gorge was closed.

“Looks like another bit of a climb.” O’ Cazian remarked just as a huge boulder narrowly missed his head.

The projectile, fully two foot across, hit the ground and shattered into a dozen pieces. . Stones of various sizes spat out in all directions. By some miracle no-one was hit by them. The Entire company, after jumping this way and that to avoid these fragments, stood frozen to the spot, gazing up at the towering canyon walls, which now seemed to overhang them threateningly.

They each expected an avalanche to ensue as the sound of the impact boomed and echoed around the walls. Every breath was stilled, every eye straining upwards, everything fell silent once more.

“Not my favourite position to be in.” Whispered Golad, as everyone drew breath again.

Things were silent for some time before they resumed their journey. No sooner had they started than another rock was hurtling down on them. This time, watchful, they saw it coming. It was clear that it had not rolled from the cliff, it had been thrown. Another lucky escape as the rock struck the ground some distance ahead of them.

“There is no cover here.” Fadik warned. “We are trapped.” Everyone took to heel and, as they did so, rocks began to rain down upon them from both sides of the canyon. A couple were struck down. Others were injured before the blockage of the canyon was reached. Those who made it that far sought what shelter they could among the rocks there.

Torgud stood and watched as the last three followers arrived. A couple were carrying their friend.

“My leg is broken.” The Man moaned.

“Get behind me.” Torgud instructed.

Now backed up against the wall of stones there were not so many directions from which they could be hit.

“Now, Sword, protect us.” Torgud ordered.

He stood between his friends and the stony deluge. His sword thrashed out at each rock which fell towards them. As he hit them mighty boulders were shattered by a strength not his own, or deflected to fall harmlessly elsewhere.

Still the band were struck by fragments that slipped past and each one was cut and bruised several times. Rocks piled up in front of them higher and higher and still the barrage kept on coming.

“I can’t keep this up much longer.” Torgud complained, his body cut and bruised, his lungs bursting for air.

High above them came a scream, louder than thunder. There, high in the air, there was the crashing of a giant wingbeat. Briefly they spied the outline of a painted dragon. Also to be heard were the startled cries of the rock giants as they ceased their sport and ran off in panic. The grim barrage had ended. The commotion however was too much for the rocky gorge and a real avalanche began.

Rocks that might have been loosened by time and weather stood impatient for a mighty storm to release them from their constraints.

Now they seized upon this opportunity and cascaded downhill in a wild stampede. Rocks can run fast downhill you know but it takes them a little while to get going, say a thousand years or so.

Pity our friends. The Dragon which had come to aid them very nearly crushed them to death. Guess what saved them?

It was nothing more than the pile of rubble thrown down at them by the rock giants, their enemies. The avalanche came to a halt right there, inches away from them.

The group could hardly believe what had happened. After a few moments of stunned silence they whooped and hollered and hopped for joy. Hopping, mostly because of what might have happened to their other leg.

Lord O' Cazian waved his other arm in the air, waving around his cap with the feather still intact. It was amazing what that feather had gone through. In fact, the feather was the soundest of all the crew. Each one had such a list of complaints as would fill a book. Sore and sorry as they were, they now had to climb and scramble over the piles of rock to escape The Gorge.

At the village of Dern, some way south, a strange thing happened. Suddenly a host appeared. There were The Wizard and His Wife and Vabian and seventeen thousand elves, give or take a couple, including The Elf Lord, Calon-Agored and the four newly reinstated elves who once were Doc, Dunce, Squill and Goatsbeard. Then there were four strangers, all battered and bruised, one with a broken leg.

Zeebran looked around at the empty streets of the almost deserted village, at the surrounding land, parched and yellow from the long drought. Then his attention turned to the four men who were looking bewildered.

"Do not be alarmed at our sudden appearance." He said, soothingly. "We mean you no harm."

"This poor man is hurt." Whispered Seren and gestured to one of the elves to help him.

"You keep back!" Shouted Jon Ton, a burly fellow, stalwartly, raising the pick, that he had used in the mines for seventeen years, threateningly. "Who are you and why have you brought us here and what have you done with the others?"

"There seems to be some mistake." Zeebran apologised. "We did not mean to bring you here. Your blessed elves have delivered us the wrong people."

"The elves are not to blame. Some other force is behind this."

Seren defended. "From whence did you come, Sir?"

She spoke in a voice that soothed away all trace of anger from him. "I was just now in Deepening Gorge being pelted with boulders by The Rock Giants. But The Crystal Dragon came and frightened them away. Then The Dragon caused an avalanche that stopped just this far from my toes."

He held his thumb and his index finger an inch and a half apart.

"I know this sounds strange but it is as true as I am standing here, wherever that may be." He completed.

"Why then we have rescued you from great peril." Zeebran asserted. "Now put up your weapon and allow us to dress your wounds before they become infected."

By now the few who remained in the village had assembled agog at the scene before them. There were not many villagers, only a dozen or so families had been stubborn enough to stay.

Zeebran now turned to them.

“Could one of you good people lead me to the home of one they call Tom-a-Dern?”

“You are the one called Denath. The one that Tom has sent for, to help us in our time of need?” One of them greeted. “I am Ana, his brother. These are my sons, Arad and Belon and their children.” The introductions went on and Zeebran took little notice so that by the end of it all he knew none of their names.

“Is this the whole village?” He asked.

“Yes it is, Sir.” Ana replied with pride. “And every one of them is related to me. All the others have given up and left or, even worse, sold themselves into slavery to That Hag. Your warriors are small but they are many. You will need them all for I have heard that this witch is building an army of the most horrible creatures. That is why she wants the land. She wants us to farm it for her to feed her brood.”

“If she has an army why does she not take the land?” Zeebran asked.

“I don’t know. You are the wizard.” Said Ana, pointedly.

Zeebran found himself led to a house by Tomas’ son, Torgud’s father, whose name was Arne. The house was of dried mud and had an earthen floor. Inside Tomas lay motionless, seemingly lifeless.

“Thus he has lain for months now.” Said Arne, sorrowfully. “He used to have moments of wakefulness but now, nothing.”

Zeebran examined his old friend for some time.

“It is exactly as I expected.” He confirmed, without trying to explain the problem. “There is but one cure. To remove the curse we must remove The Witch.”

It was not until some time later that Zeebran found the opportunity to talk to Jon Ton and his three friends. After hearing their story of The Ghost and The Dragon he grew pale. At the mention of The Crystal he almost froze.

When they told him of Torgud giving the sphere back to the dragon he flew into a rage.

“He did what? The fool! Complete and utter idiot!” Zeebran raved.

“He had it and he let it slip through his hands.”

Then Zeebran remembered his wife and his present quest.

“No. I must not grow angry or ambitious. Avarice at this time could be fatal to me. To all of us. First this quest then... Oh, I’m forgetting. I’m supposed to be grounded.”

Seren entered hurriedly.

“My Lord, you are troubled?” She asked, concernedly.

“No, My Love, all is well now.” He said, wishing not to contaminate her any more.

She smiled, knowing more of what was in his heart than he did himself.

“Very well. I shall be close at hand, My Husband, should you need comforting.” She said, departing.

“She is very nice, your wife.” Said Jon Ton. “What is she?”

“Do you know of elves?” Zeebran replied.

“Of Fair-Folk. I have seen some slaving in the mines but she is different. Special. Even more special, I mean.”

“She is a princess.” Said Zeebran, beaming with pride. “But no.”

He corrected himself. “She has been recently created a queen.”

Jon Ton nods understanding.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying.... you know.”

“When you live with an elf you have to get used to it. Every mortal loves her, so long as his heart is not totally black. Now, back to business. You left Torgud in Deepening Gorge. Whatever possessed you to go that way? Eldoramus is there.”

“Who is Eldoramus?” Jon Ton could not help asking.

“Eldoramus is trouble.” Denath replied, from the far recesses of his memory. “Calon, My Friend.” Zeebran whispered. “I have a job for you.”

A few moments latter Calon sauntered in, in his steady, even gait, reflecting his heart’s ease.

“O Great Denath, Mighty Edramuth, you have summoned me.”

He spoke with an aire of mock grandeur. The Elf Lord was at once teasing his friend and diplomatically reminding him that an elf-lord is not one to be summoned, even by a wizard.

“Most revered Calon-Agored. My apologies for disturbing you.”

Zeebran began respectfully.

So it was that Zeebran persuaded Calon to take a party of elves with all haste to Deepening Gorge to search for Torgud and see him safely home.

Out in the desert where the air is clear a small caravan rolled along.

“This’ll do!”

An alien voice pierces the silence. The caravan drew to a halt and Ansel and Mikle disappeared inside.

Inside was where Naven sat watching a number of dials.

“What do you make of that?” He challenged.

“Massive power flux.” Ansel observed. “Upper atmosphere disturbance too. That’s your power-beam alright.”

“You couldn’t explain to a dwarf what you two are up to, could you? It seems crazy trudging around in all this heat.” Mikle complained.

“Explain to The Dwarf, would you, Naven.” Ansel invited.

“Triangulation.” Said Naven, not very enlighteningly.

“All right then. I don’t care.” Said Mikle. “If you don’t want to tell me, I don’t want to know.”

“Somewhere up there is an alien power source. We are trying to find out where it’s coming from and where it’s going to.” The Sorcerer explained.

Mikle stood with his fingers stuck stubbornly in his ears.

“Hopeless.” Said Ansel, playfully, raising his eyes.

“Well, don’t tease me.” Mikle lay down the law. “If I ask a question I want a proper answer, not an invasion.”

“That’s exactly what we are trying to avoid, an invasion.” Naven averred.

“So what are we doing here?” Mikle asked once more.

“If we get directional information from places far enough apart we can locate the source.” Naven explained.

“Locate the source.” Mikle parroted. “And suppose we do locate the source, what then? What can we do?”

Ansel and Naven stood looking at one another, each expecting an answer from the other.

Nothing was forthcoming.

Then the two were silent for a while.

They both stood thoughtfully.

“Well.” Said Ansel, at last. “We haven’t found the answer yet but we will. We’re working on it.”

“I see.” Said Mikle, finally. “And you call me hopeless.”

With that he walked out into the desert.

“Two possibilities.” Ansel counted. “Intercept the beam or knock-out the source.”

“If you happen to have a spaceship in your pocket, no problem.”

Naven declared.

“Alas.” Ansel lamented, stretching his arms in a gesture of despair.

“No pockets.”

“No use then.” Naven reaffirmed.

“But I do have a dish.” Ansel pondered.

“Yes but we would have to put the dish between the source and the receiver.” Naven warned.

“There is the mountaintop.” Said Ansel.

“But it is awfully close to The Enemy. We wouldn’t get within a mile of the place.” The Alien winced.

“It is all we can do, so we must try.” Ansel decided.

All day long Torgud and his five companions had alternately marched, scrambled and climbed, surrounded by the grim walls of the canyon. They were sore, weary, hungry but, worst of all was the overwhelming thirst. The sky was grey but the unforgiving clouds would drop no rain.

“Now you’d think in a place like this there’d be water, wouldn’t you.” Golad complained. for the hundredth time.

“Will you quit complaining? Things are bad enough.” O’ Cazian chided.

Torgud stood and stared in disbelief. On a rock a little way ahead sat an old man clasping a crooked stick.

“Who do you suppose could that be?” He asked the others.

“Who cares. Let’s ask him if he has some water.” Golad suggested.

“I don’t like the look of him.” Said Fadik.

We must not forget that two of their friends, both dwarves, had recently been squashed by boulders and four had mysteriously disappeared right before their eyes.

“It’s just a harmless, little, old man.” Said O’ Cazian. “I’ll go and talk to him.”

As he approached, The Man eyed him suspiciously. Before he had time to speak, the sage piped up in a shrill tone.

“I don’t wish to speak to You.” He said, spitting on the ground.

“Send me another.”

“What other?” O’ Cazian said, more curious than angry.

“Yon Young Buck.” The Man squeaked, pointing to Torgud. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Very well.” Said O’ Cazian, feeling slighted.

He ran across to the others.

“He sais he wants to talk to you.” He told Torgud. “He is an irascible old man.”

“So now tell us the good news. Has he got any water?” Golad demanded.

“He wouldn’t say.” O’ Cazian replied.

“You want me to squeeze some out of him?” Golad offered.

Torgud approached the stranger.

“Hello.” He greeted.

“Speak when you are spoken to.” Came the brusque reply. “You are Torgud-a-Dern, are you not?”

“I am of that name and from that place.” Torgud replied.

“Then listen carefully. I have a message for you. All you have seen is correct. Your friend, The Wizard is dead. Your quest is doomed. To go on alone would be folly. Turn back now while you still have your life.”

Torgud pondered a moment, wondering whether to believe.

“You doubt my word, you insolent young pup!” The Old Man squealed, jumping up and attacking him with his cane.

“I’ll mottle you!” He shouted. “I’ll whip the tar out on ya.”

All this time beating Torgud about the arms and legs.

At last Torgud caught the offending object and held on to it.

Thereupon The Old Man started kicking at him.

The entire company of his comrades were falling about with laughter at the scene.

“Now look, Old Man. I don’t want to have to hurt you.” Torgud spoke between dodges.

“Hurt me!” Said The Old Man. “Have no fear of hurting me. Better men than you have tried.”

At least now the kicking had stopped.

“Are you going to start attacking me again?” Torgud demanded, his hand resting upon the hilt of his sword.

“Whatever it takes to get you to listen to me, that I will do.” The Old Man asserted. “If I have to I’ll kick you all the way back up north. Now, are you going to listen to me?”

“Say your piece, Old Man.” Torgud allowed.

“Now.” The Sage begins, pointing south. “This way lays only death and destruction. Walk this way and you are walking to an early grave. This way.” He points north. “Lays a life of distinction. Fame, fortune, power, love, happiness. All that can be yours. You must choose.”

“What of my grandfather?” Torgud asked.

“Forget him. He is as good as dead. Nothing you can do will help him.” The Old Man proclaimed.

“If I choose to go north, what then must I do?” Torgud demanded.

“Remember The Dragon? Remember The Crystal. You gave The Crystal back to The Dragon. For centuries mighty warriors have tried to wrest The Crystal from The Dragon.” The Old one paused.

“He who has The Crystal has The Kingdom. You had it in your grasp and you gave it back. Do you understand? You can have it all. You can get it back.” He went on, momentarily.

“Then I will go south. If I am to have a kingdom, I will win it for myself. I will not steal it, even from a dragon. If I shall help my grandfather or no, I have to try or die trying. Do you understand, Old Man. I have to.” Torgud decided.

“Alas, there is no reasoning with him.” The Old Man sighed as he turned to walk away.

He turned back for a second.

“If you go that way, do not go back to the village. Your best chance is to go straight to The Witch. She is even now gathering forces that you cannot conquer. Heed my council, please, it is the best I can give.”

“Who is it that so councils me?” Torgud asked.

“My name is Eldoramus.” The Sage stated and with that he disappeared.

Torgud returned to the others.

“Did he have any water?” Golad pestered.

“Only words, Golad. Empty words at that. No comfort.” Torgud declared.

“Who was he?” Asked O’ Cazian.

“Some Elder or other.” Said Torgud, vaguely. “Listen. You can all go back now if you wish. I would not hold you to stay with me. I can face this thing alone. Perhaps I must.” Torgud offered.

“This is a different man from the boy who went whimpering to The Wizard for help.” Said Fadik. “I will stay with you. I begin to see greatness in you.”

“I, who am a whipping post for old men.” Torgud jested.

“Fear not.” Said O’ Cazian. “I will stay with you. You make life interesting. Things happen around you.”

“You rescued me from a life of slavery in the mines.” Paddy spoke.

“How could I leave you now?”

Which left Golad only to speak and the mysterious, silent man with them to remain silent.

“What are you all looking at me for? You think I’m walking back through those rock giants, ghosts, dragons, swamps and goblins alone. I am no fool. I’m sticking with you. You’re so damned lucky. By the way, did he happen to say what happened to those other four people?”

All day they had debated whether the rock slide took them. The disappearance too strange to be admitted. Perhaps the strange old man had something to do with it. He apparently could disappear.

Chapter Nine

It was around noon and the sun was beating down upon the village of Dern. The Villagers were growing impatient. Their saviours had been there for several days and nothing had been done. At least nothing that they could see.

The Wizard was, as usual, busying himself doing goodness knows what. Through the door came a young elf, pretty as a picture, her name was Gwynfyd, meaning beatitude. She was some sort of niece to Seren and the only other of The High Elves in the tribe and also one of the youngest of their number.

“Uncle Zeebran. Can I speak to you?” She whispered, softly.

“Of course you can, My Dear.” He replied.

“Only, if you are busy, I can wait.” She offered.

“Not at all. What is it, Dear?” Zeebran queried.

“Aunty Seren, I mean The Queen, Her Majesty is dancing.” Said The Young One.

“That’s nice.” Said Zeebran.

“No. I mean, really dancing. It doesn’t feel right at all. Some of the other elves are joining in but I just got scared and couldn’t bear to dance with her any more.” Gwynfyd tried to explain.

“Very good.” Said Zeebran, trying to conceal his anguish. “You did right. Go and find all the elves that are not dancing and bring them here. O.K.?”

Gwynfyd may have been very young for such a responsibility but, as A High Elf, she was already more powerful of will than the lower elves around her and the only one there with the presence of mind to, perhaps, resist the growing mass hysteria.

“Yes, Uncle. I shall do that.” She replied, dutifully.

One elf in a dancing frenzy is bad enough but a whole tribe of them hardly bears thinking about.

Zeebran was worried mostly because his wife should have been alright now. After all, her name had been restored and the machine had been dislocated from her heart.

‘I wonder where Calon has gone.’ He thought. ‘Now I wish that I hadn’t sent him away. He would be able to keep the other elves from joining in. He would know just what to do.’

A few minutes passed. Agonising minutes for Zeebran because he knew that there was nothing that he could do. Suppose the young Gwynfyd succumbed to the dance too? Then it would easily capture the whole tribe. He wondered if this were not some artful attack directed by The Witch.

Then, at last, The Young Elf returned.

“There aren’t any more elves.” She cried. “There isn’t anybody else not dancing. I am all alone.” She sobbed.

For an elf, this is a terrible thing.

Such an elf-dance can last for hours, days or even years, sometimes nothing can stop it. Everything that comes into contact with them may go mad. With seventeen thousand elves dancing, even The Wizard himself was in danger. That would lead them all into evil. “Poor young flower.” He comforted her. “You are the only elf here strong enough to resist it. I cannot even leave this room for fear that I too shall be taken up in this thing. But I have one good elf, don’t I and that’s a lot to have. You are going to have to be brave. Very brave and very strong.”

“Yes, Sir.” She said, dutifully, wiping the moisture from her eyes. “Now give me your rope. I’m going to tie this around you. I want you to go out there and grab hold of the nearest dancing elf and draw them in here. Don’t you dance now.” He instructed and cautioned.

“I’ll try not to.” She said, bravely. “But it is going to be difficult.” One by one she dragged elves into the room and brought them out of the dance, until they had a couple of dozen of them calmed down. Then the real difficulty began.

“I have a blip here.” Shouted Naven. “A for real, honest to goodness blip.”

“Let me see.” Cried Ansel, excitedly.

“See, I knew they had ships in this region. They must be mining this place. Why else would they bother with it?” Naven stated.

“Then the ships must actually land somewhere.” Ansel concluded.

“We will track this one as far as we can. We may have a spaceship in our pockets yet.”

They kept on tracking ships until they were able to plot the exact position of the landing field. Then they trekked across the desert to The Solemn Mountains. Soon they were overlooking a vast alien mining complex and spaceport.

“It looks like they can only handle one large ship at a time. Several smaller ones though. I need to get into one of those one man ships.” Said Naven.

“I have just the way.” Said Ansel.

They returned to their wagon.

“Please step inside this box.” Ansel instructed.

Naven went in and waited until he was told to come out.

“So what does that do?” He asked, feeling no different.

Ansel offered him a mirror.

“Take a look.” He said with a wry smile.

Naven was so taken aback that he dropped the mirror.

“What the... What have you done to me?” He shouted.

“Only given you the perfect disguise, that’s all.” Ansel replied.

Naven had taken on the exact appearance of the aliens that they had seen at the spaceport and they were not a pretty sight.

“Am I going to look like this forever?” He had to know.

“The effect will wear off in a day or so.” Ansel assured him.

Naven snuck into the launch site and took off in one of the alien ships. He radioed back to the caravan.

“Commander Naven reporting. I’m on my way. I took the fastest ship I could find. They’re chasing me but they’ll never come close, not in those rust buckets they have down there. You can carry on with your part of the plan. Good luck.” He signed off.

“What is our part of the plan, Master?” Mikle enquired.

“We take this dish up to the mountain above The Cavern of Doom and place it to intercept the power beam..” Ansel described.

“Why, Master?” Mikle queried.

“Just in case Naven doesn’t manage to knock out their transmitter.” Ansel explained.

“We have to fight our way through goblins and climb the lofty peaks. Just one more question, Master. Who gets to carry this thing up the incredibly steeply sloping mountainside?”

“Well, it looks like that formidable task must fall on you, my faithful friend.” Ansel declared.

“Good.” Mikle chuckled. “I was hoping it might. I’m good at carrying things, aren’t I, Master?”

“Yes, Mikle, you are very good at carrying things.” Ansel conceded.

The next day Eldoramus returned to visit Torgud and his companions. They were walking along and his voice appeared. There he was, sitting on a rock as before but this time no-one noticed him. Had he not spoken they might have walked straight by him, which might not have been a bad idea at all.

“Good day to ye.” He said, simply.

“You startled the life out of me!” Golad complained.

“Hello, Old Man. What can I do for you?” Torgud spake, politely.

“It looks more like what I can do for you.” The Old Man asserted.

“How so?” Torgud questioned.

“A mite thirsty, are you?”

“Just a little. Why?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking that I might show you a little hospitality. I guess that you could say that I was a wee bit short with you yesterday.”

“I could say that.” Torgud admitted.

“You have to excuse me. You see, I’m not used to socialising and I sometimes gets a mite testy.”

“You don’t say.” Golad scoffed.

“My cave is not far from here, just on the left. If you care to, just drop in, I may offer you a drink, perhaps.”

With that he faded away again.

“Did he say a drink?” Golad gleaned. “Let’s go.”

“Not so fast.” Fadik cautioned. “I don’t like this fellow and I don’t trust him at all. I think we should give his cave a miss.”

“But if we don’t find something to drink soon we’ll die.” Golad insisted.

“It’s up to you.” O’ Cazian looked to Torgud.

“I don’t see any harm in visiting his cave.” Said Torgud. “So long as we don’t go inside. Let’s say we go there, ask for a drink and stay outside?”

“That sounds fair enough.” Fadik conceded.

They arrived at the cave and called several times but received no reply.

“Come on, let’s go.” Said Fadik.

“Perhaps if one of us went inside.” Torgud considered.

“Let me.” Golad offered.

“Not you.” Said Torgud. “Paddy, you are good in caves. Go and ask The Old Skinflint if we could please have some water.”

“O.K.” Said Paddy, entering the cave.

He emerged a minute later followed by a scantily clad young maiden carrying a pitcher of water and six cups on a wooden tray. As she placed the tray upon a rock she leant towards O’ Cazian and whispered in his ear.

“Help me. He’s keeping me prisoner.” Then she spoke loudly.

“Shall I pour, Sir?”

“Demilsa. Leave it!” Eldoramus called from within.

“But I was only...” She cried, as she turned on her heels and ran back into the cave.

“What did she say?” Torgud asked O’ Cazian.

“Nothing.” His Lordship evaded.

“Come on. She spoke to you. We saw her.” Said Fadik.

“Just that I have a nice face.” O’ Cazian said, feigning embarrassment.

“You have a nice face!” Golad exclaimed. “What’s wrong with my face?”

“Do us a favour, Golad. Don’t ask.” Fadik pleaded.

“There’s the water you wanted, Golad. Have a drink.” Torgud invited.

Golad poured himself a drink.

“Why insist on water. We could have asked for wine or beer.” He said, looking around at the others. “Isn’t anybody else going to have a drink?” He asked.

“If you’re still alright in the morning we will.” Said Torgud.

“Well that’s nice. You’re all sitting around waiting for me to keel over. I don’t care. You might all die of thirst anyway.” He took a large gulp. “This is nice. I might even drink the lot.”

“You’ve had enough.” Torgud told him.

“Just testing it for you.”

Golad went to pour another cup.

Fadik restrained him.

“You heard the man, leave it alone.”

All that day they waited outside Eldoramus’s cave. Occasionally they were greeted by cooking smells or a glimpse of a woman flitting across the entryway.

“How many women are there in there anyway?” Golad asked.

“It’s the same one.” Said O’ Cazian.

“No it isn’t. It can’t be. That’s three times she’s crossed in the same direction.” Golad pointed out.

“It’s like a maze in there. It’s perfectly possible.” Said Paddy.

“Smell that. That’s tobacco. It’s a long time since I had a smoke.”

“It would help us all if you didn’t keep watching the entrance all the time. I think we should move away to a safe distance.” Fadik suggested.

“How are you feeling, Golad?” Torgud asked.

“Hot, hungry and bored.” He replied.

“It’s a pity you don’t trust me.” The Old Man emerged from his cave. “There is food inside. I have some nice servant girls too and it is cool inside with soft beds to lay in but I can see that you are not interested. Don’t you like your water either? I can take it away if you don’t need it.”

Eldoramus turned around and hobbled back towards his lair.

“Well, that just about covers everything, doesn’t it.” Said Golad.
“Does he have any books to read?” Mumbled the very quiet man whom none of them knew at all.

“Yes.” Called a voice from inside the cave.

“I didn’t know he could speak.” Golad observed, of the sixth member of their party.

“We all know you can.” Paddy declared.

“Oh yes, well you’re not exactly entertaining are you? What are you going to get up and give us a dance or something?” Golad snided.

“My girls can dance for you, if you wish, or sing you a song. One of them plays harp.” Eldoramus stood at the cave’s entrance.

“I quite like dancing.” Said The Dwarf.

“And I like singing.” Added the formerly quiet man.

“Then come inside, Gentlemen. Anything I have is yours.” Eldoramus offered.

“Send them out here.” Torgud insisted.

“No!” Eldoramus roared. “Trust me or I will give you nothing.” That night they posted a couple of sentries, taking turns on watch. A faint glow of light emanated from the cave and an occasional fragment of song drifted by on the breeze.

In the morning they awoke to find themselves imprisoned in the cave.

“So you thought you would outwit me, did you?” Eldoramus greeted. “There’s no escaping old Eldoramus.”

“What do you intend to do with us?” Torgud demanded.

“For you I have a special purpose. You are going to get The Orb for me. The rest of them are no use at all. I shall take their souls of course, as I always do.” Eldoramus disclosed.

“You were right, Fadik. We should have passed right by here.” Torgud commended.

“It would have made no difference. You had to sleep sooner or later. You have saved my servants the trouble of carrying you, that is all.” Eldoramus chuckled.

“How did you do it, Eldoramus?” Torgud asked.

“Don’t be an ass. I am not going to tell you that. Now You, out!” He opened Torgud’s cell.

Torgud prepared to spring at him but he found no power in his limbs and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“Don’t be a fool. I can snuff out your life like that.” Eldoramus clicked his fingers.

When Torgud could move The Old man led him to a large, well lit, sumptuously decorated cave. Everything was draped with silk, including the concubines. There was food and wine, everything of which Eldoramus had boasted earlier.

“Sit!” He ordered. “Now eat, drink, enjoy.”

“If this is your idea of torture, I warn you, I can take a lot of punishment.” Torgud declared.

“Dance, music, singing.” Eldoramus ordered his slaves. “Torture. He answered. “What torture? You and I are going to be great friends. I want you to be happy, as I will make all of your friends happy before they die. A dying man deserves these things, don’t you think?”

Thus Torgud was entertained, indulged and pampered for a long time.

Outside, in the Deepening Gorge, a certain elf was having a different kind of problem. It was The Elf Lord, Calon-Agored and his problem was that his ‘find-magic’ was not working. Try as he might he could not get it to work and he knew that this could only mean one thing, that some other magic was working against him.

“Eldoramus.” He concluded.

“What is that?” Asked one of the others.

“There is a legend of an old, evil conjurer who waylays wayfarers and steals their souls. He delights in misleading them and resorts to all kinds of trickery. It is said that a tribe of sirens work for him and cater to his every whim. The voice of the siren can lure mortals or lull them to sleep or even drive them mad.”

“My Lord. An army of goblins are coming this way.” An elven sentry signals from afar.

The elves secreted themselves among the rocks as only elves can and watched and waited as the goblins passed. They followed them up the canyon.

“Stop!” Bellowed the leader of the goblins, who was not himself a goblin.

He was in fact an alien, of the same kind that inhabited the mine and spaceport. Naven was even now flying high above them in one of their own spaceships.

The goblins were carrying a few odd articles that the terrestrial elves were unfamiliar with. There was a ten foot long laser cannon, which six of them bore with difficulty and some power source tracer the technology for which was only possessed by The Oscilons.

The goblins marched like a troupe of clowns, all this way and that. They came to an untidy halt.

“You unholy rabble. What are you, stupid?” The Commander shouted. “Get that lot over there. Gently. Gently, I said!”

He was used to more ordered troops than these and was getting quite frustrated.

After a load of mucking about, in which they dropped the laser cannon, picked it up, pointed it the wrong way, and so on. There was a lot of palaver involved in getting it up and aiming it precisely. The finer adjustments, of course, had to be done by the commander himself, which he obviously found irksome and this put him in a really bad mood.

“Right.” He shouted, at last. “Fire!”

Nothing happened.

“When I say ‘fire’.” He instructed, for the umpteenth time. “Press the fire button. That one there!”

He waited a respectable time for everyone to prepare.

“Fire!” He shouted. “Oh, get out of the way, I’ll do it my bleedin’ self.”

The laser cannon went off with an almighty crash. The side wall of the canyon was blasted away. They were now looking at the inside of a cave. Eldoramus was caught right in his living room. There was he, disgruntled. There were his dancing girls, formerly entertaining Torgud, now swept onto the floor like fallen leaves. There was Torgud, couched on a bed of silk, now covered in debris.

“Do you mind, I’m being tortured here!” He complained. “Can’t a man even be tortured in peace?”

“What is this outrage!” Eldoramus stormed.

“Mister Eldoramus?” Enquired The Captain brusquely.

“Yes.” The Old Man replied.

“You are ordered to surrender up the prisoner, Torgud, to us immediately.” The Alien stated.

“Ordered, you green, slimy jackanapes. Who has the utter impertinence to order me!” Eldoramus challenged.

“My Mistress says, if you do not surrender the prisoner to me, that I am to destroy everything that you possess, and that includes you.”

“How can you destroy me, you worm?” Eldoramus scoffed.

“With this.” The Captain holds some sort of device unknown to everyone including me.

“What is that?” Eldoramus laughs.

“A life-force disperser, Sir, and I am empowered to use it.”

“Tell me, Sir. With which finger do you plan to press the trigger?”

Eldoramus queried, bemused.

“Stand aside, Sir, or I shall shoot.”

The Captain tries to pull the trigger but his finger is frozen in place.

“A stand-off, I think.” Eldoramus gloats.

A blast from the gun knocks Eldoramus off his feet.

“That was a warning shot of low intensity. I do urge you to give up the prisoner.” The Captain inveigled.

“Very well.” Eldoramus conceded. “Take him.”

‘Had the damned thing wired up to his brain.’ Eldoramus shook his head. ‘I’m getting too old for this sort of thing. Technology is catching up with The Old Ways.’ He lamented.

The goblin army marched off with the prisoner in custody.

Eldoramus watched as they marched off, with a pained expression on his face.

‘I’ll have to move to a planet with no technology at all. All of these space travellers are ruining the game.’ He considered.

“Excuse me, Eldoramus.” Came a polite, soft voice.

“What is it now?” The Sage said, disgruntled.

“It is Calon-Agored, a lord of The Northern Elves.” Calon introduced himself.

“What do you want, Elf?” Eldoramus demanded, turning to face his newest guest.

“I would very much like to take the rest of your guests.” Calon told him.

“And if I don’t care to give them up? What then?”

“Then I will be forced to take them.”

“What you? Just one elf?”

“No, Sir. A whole host of elves. If these are not enough we can be many more by tomorrow morning.” Calon told, signalling his troupe of elves to reveal their presence.

“So, it’s elves now, is it? What next, a dragon!” Eldoramus exclaimed.

“Very likely.” Calon allowed.

“Why wait ‘till tomorrow morning? Let’s save any trouble. Take them now. Take them all. Have a drink while you’re here. Take everything. Girls, bring those pests up here. Let’s be rid of them quickly while we still have our lives. Oh, and if you are following those fellows, your friend will need these. They are of no use to me. Potentially harmful in fact.

An accursed sword and a damned amulet. Handle them very carefully. Don't remove the wrapping." He detailed.

"That is very gracious of you, Sir, but I will decline the drink just the same." Said Calon, prudently. "I bid you farewell, Sir, and a good day to you, Sir."

"Good day? This is the worst day of my entire existence."

Eldoramus stormed.

They left Eldoramus complaining and licking his wounds.

On the trail of an army of goblins. Goblins are very easy to follow.

They are heavy footed, loud mouthed, messy creatures.

The Elves followed until nightfall and waited until the goblins had bedded down for the night. It was the alien Captain enforcing his own peculiar schedule upon them, irrespective of the goblins preferences. He was in command and they just had to wear it.

Then the elves sang an elf sleep song and put them all, even those on guard, to sleep.

A few elves crept into camp and freed Torgud. Then they crept away, leaving the goblins to sleep 'til dawn. Elves never do damage if their ends can be achieved peacefully.

When they had covered some distance, they too bedded down.

In the morning they awoke to find to find themselves immobilised and the camp surrounded by goblin guards.

As you know, The Oscilons can become invisible and move their power by using elves. Oscilons had supervised the whole operation and used their elf trapping system on them.

For several days the captives were marched towards The Witch's stronghold in The Caverns of Doom.

Then, one morning, the captives awoke to find that their captors were in captivity.

Somehow Eldoramus had managed to destroy The Oscilons and capture the goblins.

Eldoramus walked over to Torgud and kicked him.

"You are an infernal nuisance." He barked.

He held a large knife in his hand and pointed it menacingly at Torgud's throat.

"I'm going to cut you loose." He said. "Not for love of you but to get even with That Bitch!" He shook his fist in the direction of The Caverns of Doom.

Eldoramus continued.

"Here is your sword and your amulet and don't lose them again.

The stupid dragon can keep his silly crystal. I'm not interested in ruling on this planet any more. It is doomed to fall to the likes of them." He gestured to the bodies of The Oscilons.

"I'm going to steal a ship and get away from here while I still can. If you had any sense you would come too."

"No thanks." Said Torgud. "I have a job to do here."

"I will go with you." Said The Quiet Man.

"Cut him loose." Eldoramus ordered. "I need an apprentice."

He turned to walk away, followed by his sirens. Except that one did not move.

"Come on, Demilsa!" Eldoramus ordered.

"But Master, I want to stay with The Pretty One." She pointed to O' Cazian.

Eldoramus knew better than to argue with such things. He knew to pick his battles wisely.

"Very well." He said, magnanimously, as if the choice was his.

"Take her. A gift from Eldoramus. May she bring you much displeasure. Come, my fine, young apprentice. You read books, do you not?" He spoke to The Quiet Man as they departed

When he was gone and the men and dwarf were free, they realised that the elves were still immobilised, as The Oscilons always immobilised them for the night.

"A right mess." Golad enumerated. "Forty goblins in chains. One hundred elves, they're lame. One alien thing and there are only four men, one dwarf and a dame able to move. How long before they are able to catch us again? Eldoramus did us no favour. He left us stranded. Would have been kinder to kill us."

It was difficult for the few of them to control so many goblins, even chained as the enemy were. At first almost impossible. Then the elves began to influence them. Although unable to move, the elves soon recovered their ability to influence minds and to sing soothing songs. In a couple of hours the goblins became quite manageable.

So they journeyed through the day with the goblins carrying the elves, up to three elves per goblin. It was a strange sight to behold, each laden goblin jogging along with an elf on its back and one under each arm. It was uncomfortable for the elves too, not that they would complain.

It took several days for them to reach the village. During this time the elves began to recover. On the last day many of them were walking on their own.

One of the first back on his feet was Calon, a full day before the rest he awoke and discovered that he could hobble around. Since that time he had refused to be carried and pretty soon was walking apace with the others. Now he walked with a spring in his step, like a true elf.

It was the last night camp before the village. They were discussing what to do with the goblins.

“Half of the elves can walk now.” Calon reported. “We can carry our own. We don’t need the goblins now.”

“What are we going to do with them?” Torgud wondered.

“Kill them, of course. They are the enemy.” Golad proffered.

“It is out of the question.” Said The Elf. “We must let them go.”

“They will go straight back to their own kind and next time you meet they won’t show any compassion. They will kill you if they can.” Golad insisted.

“He is right.” Fadik agreed. “We can not trust them.”

“Then trust me.” Said The Alien Commander. “I will lead them to some place where they will not trouble you.”

So they let them go in his keeping.

One by one Gwynfyd had led a group of several elves away from the dance, away from its insidious influence, and into the house.

Zeebran had managed to bring them out of their reverie and disconnect them from the hysteria of the general populace.

“Now, My Faithful Friends, I want you all to tie yourselves together with your elven ropes. Make yourselves into a long, living chain.” Zeebran asked.

This done he asked them to sing a song.

“Whatever happens you must keep singing.” He counselled. “This way you will keep in contact with one another. With this song you will lead your people home. Listen to the song, concentrate only upon the song and, whatever you do, don’t dance. Guide them back to me and I will calm them and instruct them and, when they are ready, I will send them out to help you. Gwynfyd, you must be the leader, because your will is strongest. I know you are young. I know you are tired. Do you think you can do it?”

“I will try as hard as I can.” She said, dutifully.

“Good Girl. You are a good, brave, little elf. Now go on your way before too many elves are lost.”

They went out and, hour after hour, sang the song and searched for their friends. It was The Calling-Home Song that they chose because it was simple and beautiful and yet powerful and to the point and not as likely to leave them susceptible to join in with the dance.

Its clear, sharp notes rang out over the land.

‘Come home wanderer, your heart is needed here.

Too long you have strayed from we who hold you dear.

Listen wayfarer, wherever you may roam.

We, the ones who love you, call your heart to home.’

It is a poor translation, of course, from elvish to the common tongue, and it loses most of its meaning and all of its power. But if you could have heard it as the elfin voices sang it on that balmy afternoon. Then it would have stirred your heart.

It was a contest then. The peace and loveliness of the song on fifty tongues against the powerful frenzy of the dance on almost seventeen thousand pairs of feet.

The dancers were not unified in spirit and purpose. They were simply lost in the dance. Each dancer danced alone to the music of their own heart. The singers sang together in harmony and they had a single purpose. They were unified in spirit and each dancer met was turned into a singer.

The remaining dancers now were drawing further afield and becoming harder and harder to find. The line of singers grew longer and longer and the song more and more powerful.

All this day and all this night the contest continued. Then on into the next day and the next. Now few elves were dancing but these had travelled so far away that they might never be found again. Some may be doomed to be lost in the dance for eternity or until they danced themselves into oblivion, becoming one with The Nothingness.

It was the greatest good fortune that The Queen herself was not lost. They formed a ring around her of elves singing a song of protection. Many elves combined could not restrain her from dancing. It was safer, for her, not to even try. They held her powerful spirit captive inside the ring, so that she could not dance too far away from them and be lost. They had to sit and sing and wait and wait until she either stopped dancing or faded away to nothing. Many were the tales of elves who had danced themselves into oblivion.

Torgud and his party entered the village. Everything was strangely quiet. There was no outpouring of elves to greet them. The villagers were all asleep. The humans had become caught up in the dance and had exhausted themselves. They had had to be rounded up from the fields and put to bed. They would probably sleep for another week yet.

The elves were all sitting in a circle around Seren, singing. Zeebran sat outside the circle, eagerly watching for any sign of his wife slowing down.

There, on the steps of The Village Hall, his chin resting upon his hands, a solitary messenger. It was Vabian.

“What’s going on? Where is everybody?” Torgud demanded.

Vabian pointed south.

“About ten miles.” He said and then went back to his own thoughts.

“I have been hearing the song for days now.” Said Calon, the first any of his companions had heard of it from him. “What does it mean?”

“It is something to do with The Queen dancing. That is all I know. I am not privy to Denath’s secrets.”

Even Torgud could sense the tension there.

“You are not getting on well together?” He asked.

“He doesn’t like me, Never has. He kept me around so that he could keep an eye on me.” Vabian admitted.

“I have more pressing matters to attend to. If you will excuse me.” Said Calon, courteously.

“You going to ignore me as well, are you? Go on then, your cousin needs you more than I do.” Said Vabian, bitterly.

“We must talk, later, but I must see my grandfather first.” Said Torgud.

“What’s the point? He is still the same!” Vabian called after him.

“So, how long have you been here?” Asked Golad.

“Weeks? Months! Who can tell? Does it matter anyway?” Said Vabian, despondently.

“No. I guess you’re right.” Said Golad, sitting next to him.

“If you two are going to sit around and be depressing...” Said O’ Cazian. “I’ll have to organise things around here. Paddy, find some water. Fadik and the others, search for some food. I’m going to have a descent meal tonight if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Probably will be.” Said Golad.

“You look sad.” Said Demilsa, sympathetically, strutting off.

“Who is she?” Asked Vabian.

“It’s O’ Cazian’s girlfriend. She was given to him as a joke, I think. You want to watch her. She’ll eat you for breakfast. She plays up to every man around as soon as ‘his’ back is turned but ‘he’ just won’t see it.” Golad described.

“She just likes to tease men. It is the way of her kind.” Vabian noted.

“You seem to know a lot about it. As a matter of fact, you seem to know an awful lot about a lot of things you shouldn’t. Perhaps Zeebran is right not to trust you.” Golad accused.

“Perhaps I should keep my mouth shut a little more and my eyes and ears open. If I had more to hide perhaps I would be a little more discrete.” Vabian argued.

“Far too clever for your own good, you are.” Golad observed.

Vabian looked at him with wild eyes that spoke of hatred.

“I’m only trying to keep you company.” Said Golad.

“I enjoy my own company.” Said Vabian, pointedly.

“Well, have it then. Keep it.” Golad said, rising and walking away.

After a few minutes Demilsa returned, stood in front of Vabian and softly crooned.

“Why are you so sad?”

“So you did come back. I thought you might.” Said Vabian, matter of factly.

“Would you like to play a game?” She asked, invitingly.

“I don’t care much for games. But it depends what game you would like to play.” He conceded.

“How about the truth game?” She asked.

“Interesting game but a dangerous one to play with a treacherous lady such as you.” Vabian considered.

“Just who are you working for?” She asked.

“I’m not working for anybody.” He replied, automatically.

“Come now, we working girls must stick together.” She declared.

“Do I look like a woman?” He challenged.

“Not in your present form but who knows what you might really be?” She wondered.

“I grow weary of this game. Shall we try another?” He suggested.

“Now what could this game be?” She enquired.

“The ‘Let’s Cheat on Your Lover Game’. You know, I could take you away from all this.” Vabian offered.

“But I only just got here and I’m having so much fun.” She replied.

“Very well but, if you get bored, I can show you a world that you have never seen before.” He claimed.

“Ah, there you are!” Shouted O’ Cazian. “No luck then?”

“Not yet.” Said Demilsa, equivocally.

That evening The Elves returned. Seren was carried into a house that was Zeebran’s headquarters. Only Zeebran and Calon remained in the room where she lay.

“You will have to link your mind to hers.” Said Zeebran.

“It will be dangerous for both of us.” Calon noted.

There came a knock on the door.

Zeebran popped his head out to find Torgud.

“Not now, My Friend, I am busy.” He said, straining to be polite.

“But I must speak to you about your lady. She came to me between waking and dreaming.” Torgud divulged.

He told of Seren’s help and of her constant flight from Blaga.

“Come inside, Dear Friend. Now tell your tale to this elf.”

Zeebran instructed.

After it was told and retold again and details clarified and everything probed and investigated, they sat silent for a while.

“Of course, this is only a vision from a mortal in a state of great confusion.” Said Zeebran.

“It would explain many things but so much remains unclear. To take a leap at such dark fantasies is hopeless.” Said Calon.

“Not hopeless.” Said Zeebran. “It is our only hope.”

“If He is in there, how do we get him out?” Asked Calon.

“Give me your rope.” Zeebran requested.

This he tied around Seren’s head and wound it around three times.

“It is said that an elven rope will not harm an elf. I hope that this is true.” Zeebran prays.

He pulled the rope tight and then tighter and tighter. He pulled it with a strength that could not be matched by ten men and then pulled it tighter still. He pulled until it cut deeply into Seren’s skin and through her skull.

“For goodness’ sake, you’ll kill her!” Torgud screamed.

“Either be quiet or get out.” Said Zeebran, firmly.

“I would kill him first.” Calon assured Torgud, moving between them. “It is not as bad as it seems. I think it will work, Zeebran.”

He said, encouragingly.

“No more interruptions please. The next part is critical.” Zeebran requested, sweat pouring from his brow and an anguished look upon his face.

Seren lay seemingly oblivious to everything. She looked pale and weak but had done since she stopped dancing.

“You are losing her.” Said Calon.

“Give her some help then.” Zeebran suggested.

“Calon sat and lay his hand upon her heart and at once a host of elves gathered outside began a slow chant and dance. No instructions had seemed to pass between them.

“Seren, this way, Love. This way.” Calon called, but he was speaking, of course, in elvish.

To Zeebran he nodded and called...

“Now!”

The Wizard gave one almighty heave, which seemed to Torgud to send the rope cutting right through Seren's brain. He drew a deep breath, gritted his teeth and shut his eyes against the gory sight.

When he reopened them the sight that greeted him was even more bizarre than he had expected. Out of her head poked a great, black foot with an elven rope knotted around it.

Slowly Zeebran pulled and, inch by inch, Seren's head gave birth to the bulbous body of Blaga.

"I'm coming." His voice emanated from deep inside her skull. "No need to push."

The terrible farce continued until Blaga was completely out.

"You sussed me out." Said Blaga, magnanimously. "It's a fair cop."

"Spare me the clichés." Said Zeebran, angrily. "What were you doing in my wife?"

"That was a neat trick with the lasso and all. Is she going to be alright?" Blaga asked, fervently.

"I think she'll be fine." Said Calon, also answering the question in Zeebran's heart.

Indeed now there were no apparent marks upon Seren's unbreached head at all.

"Stop evading the subject." Zeebran spoke angrily to Blaga.

"Well, you weren't exactly nice to me, you know." Blaga counter accused.

"I'll deal with you later." Said Zeebran.

Blaga, of course, was very powerful in his own pool or in any kind of water but here, in the southern desert regions, he was so far from his element that he was feeling particularly under the weather. Not at all up to wrestling with a wizard.

"Deal with him now, before you regain your temper." Torgud counselled. "I will stab his vile heart for you." He offered.

"Now, now." Said Blaga. "You can't keep me here. You know there's no water. No-one could sanction such vile torture. I'll bet you can't kill me either, because of your wizards' code. I am an endangered species, you know. And getting more and more endangered every minute."

"Don't hurt him." Said Seren, her voice frail. "He is a poor, misguided, vengeful creature."

"Anything you wish, My Love. Whatever you wish." Zeebran said, in relief at hearing her speak. "Just so long as you are alright."

“Get a bath full of water for this creature, if you have to squeeze it out of the dusty ground.” Zeebran instructed.

“I’m saved. I’m going to have a bath.” Blaga chortled.

“Don’t push your luck!” Torgud warned. “Some of us are not so forgiving.”

“Now we must look to The Witch.” Said Zeebran.

“Yes indeed. It is time.” Torgud agreed.

The next day they held a council of war. A certain old elf, who was something of an historian, told them the history of the old goblin wars and The Caverns of Doom.

It seemed that, some time ago, the goblins had become very numerous and troublesome and threatened to kill off all others. The only way to defeat them was for all the men and dwarves and elves to join against them. They had succeeded in driving the goblins south to The Caverns of Doom. As always in these affairs there were wizards and warlocks and sorcerers meddling on behalf of both sides, each trying to gain whatever advantage they could out of it.

The whole affair at the chasms was a clever scheme to trap the mortals and the elves. The chasms were heavily fortified and an ideal place to spring a trap. In that place the armies met and death was on all sides. The losses were so appalling that it was difficult to call anyone a winner. The battle was a disaster on both sides. The important thing was that the elves, dwarves and men had left families at home to carry on. The goblins, almost every one, were there at the caverns and had not enough force to rally to invade anything. The goblins that were left were driven deep into the caverns. Now goblins were growing in numbers again and had other, more wily creatures with them.

“I have had a small band of elves working in this area for several weeks and can definitely state that there are many thousands of goblins gathered there and some other ferocious beings of unknown origin. The Witch, it seems, has quite an army and is being helped from outside of this planet.” He concluded his hour long dissertation, from which the details have been removed to protect the reader.

“In your estimation, do we have enough elves here to mount a full scale, frontal attack?” Calon asked.

“Quite frankly, and to be precise, I don’t think so.” Came the expected reply.

“Didn’t my grandfather walk in there and out again?” Torgud asked.

“Your geography is in error, Young Man.” Said The Old Elf. “Had he walked all day there and all night too he would not have reached there. It is several days march from here. Obviously your grandfather was intercepted along the way somewhere.”

“If we only want to kill The Witch?” Asked Torgud.

“Then you would have to fight your way in there.” The Old Elf told him.

“A few might sneak-in some way.” Said Calon.

“Or one.” Said Zeebran.

“Which one?” Said Fadik. “If it’s an assassin you want, I’m your man.”

“He is the best mercenary alive.” Lord O’ Cazian commended.

“I will go.” Torgud offered.

“It is no longer a matter of just getting rid of The Witch. The Goblins and The Aliens have to be controlled. We will need an army. Perhaps many more than we have. There is no time to gather more, so we will have to make do.” Zeebran expounded. “If a few of us can infiltrate and eliminate their leadership then our small band of elves might, just might mind you, prevail over the goblins. There are no guarantees.”

Meanwhile, Ansel and Mikle were trundling along past a line of low hills when suddenly Mikle jumped with glee.

“There are dwarves here!” He shouted.

There was a track leading up to a mine entrance which looked like a tiny spec in the distance.

“This might not have been worked for years.” Said Ansel.

“I tell you they are fresh diggings. Let’s go and see.” Mikle invited.

“I don’t see how you can tell from here.” Ansel doubted.

“Let’s go see, please.” The Dwarf pleaded.

“Oh, alright but we must not stay too long.” Ansel gave in.

They made their way up the track. Before they came very close they heard the dwarf look out give his alarm call.

“Hulla Bulloo!” He shouted and the cry was echoed by a line of lookout posts between the travellers and the mine entrance.

After a short while a strong body of dwarves, heavily armed, emerged from the mine and made their way towards the caravan.

They met them on the road and bared the way.

“This is a private road. Turn back.” The Leader ordered.

“What about a little hospitality then?” Mikle asked.

“Are you a dwarf or a small man.” The Dwarf asked.

“A dwarf of course. Don’t you have eyes in your head?” Said Mikle, insulted.

“Midget.” The Miner accused.

“Well, I intend to pass anyway.” Mikle insisted.

“You will have to prove your right.” His inquisitor stated.

“Very well, I’ll bump you for it.” Mikle challenged.

Bumping was an accepted form of combat among dwarves. A strange contest it was indeed. A line was drawn on the ground and the contestants stood at either side. Neither of them was allowed to step back more than three steps from the line at the risk of being disqualified. Sometimes the back lines were drawn as well. The opponents squared up and ran forwards into one another. The idea was to knock your opponent off his feet without losing your own footing. Each time your body touched the ground you lost a point. Matches of various lengths were played but usually the first to lose three points lost the contest. Naturally there were lots of local variations to the rules. Most insisted that the use of hands was illegal. Some ruled that the hands be held or even tied behind the back, to preclude any nasty habits such as pushing or pulling or the use of the hands to hold the body off the ground. I cannot go into the subtleties of the game here but will try to describe the contest accurately.

“I am Mikle Delving and I challenge for the right to pass into the mines.”

“I am Baric. I deny you the right to pass and I accept your challenge.”

“I am second for Baric.” Another dwarf piped up.

“I choose my companion, Ansel as my second.” Mikle announced.

“Not possible.” Said Baric. “The challenger’s second has to be a dwarf.”

“Since when?” Said Mikle, outraged. “I can choose anyone as my second. The only one who has to be a dwarf is the referee and the contestants. Who is the referee?”

“I am the oldest dwarf here and therefore it is my right to act as referee.” An elderly dwarf spoke up.

“I question your competence.” Said Mikle.

“Naturally you do. You also question my impartiality.” Said The Judge. “As Judge I must appoint four groundsmen. You, you, you and you. I must select a piece of ground which favour neither side. I will put the line this way and caution both contestants that the ground is sloping slightly to the south. The usual rules apply. No head butting, no shoulder barging, no kicking or tripping, no pushing or pulling or grabbing with the hands.

In deference to the slope I think we must have hands free. I will allow forward or backward rolls or flips without loss of points. I will allow the use of hands to arrest your fall or to bridge, also elbows and knees. For a fall the contestant must land body flat to the floor, front or back, even momentarily. I want you groundsmen to keep a careful lookout for that. No magic is allowed at all, should either of you possess any. A contestant may choose not to move and steps to the side are allowed. If one should choose not to charge on three consecutive passes he must charge on the fourth pass or else forfeit the match. The Judge can stop the match if either party is knocked out or injured and may give the contest to the injured party if any breach has been committed against him. Points can be lost for damaging play or if a player is unable to ready himself for the next pass in thirty seconds. Is this contest acceptable to both sides?"

Both contestants nod their approval.

"From henceforth neither contestant is to communicate with anyone other than their own second. All protests to be lodged with the referee through the seconds only, at the penalty of one point. I rule that the challenger may appoint his own second of whatever species. Groundsmen in position. Contestants in line. Three steps back. First pass.... Go!"

Word had gone back to the mine by now that a bump was on and a large crowd was gathering as the contestants made the first pass. Mikle sprang forwards but Baric fell to his knees and thrust his head forwards, butting Mikle in the stomach. Mikle was winded and doubled up in pain but did not fall to the ground. Ansel rushed to attend to him.

"Call a fall on him." Mikle hissed through his pain.

"My client claims a fall." Said Ansel.

"Hands and knees don't count." Ruled The Judge.

"Head butting." Said Mikle, still bent in pain.

"My Client complains of head butting." Ansel repeated.

"Head butting refers to the hitting of one contestant's head against that of another. Stomachs are not included under that category."

Ruled The Judge.

"Call damaging play." Said Mikle.

"My Client cites his opponent for damaging play."

"Are there any ribs broken or any signs of bleeding?" The Judge asked.

"No." Ansel admitted.

"Then the play was not damaging in our definition of that term." The Judge finds.

“I must caution your client to be ready for the next pass within ten seconds or forfeit a point.” He adds.

Ansel rubs a soothing balm upon Mikle’s stomach and he is ready in the nick of time.

“Second pass.” Said The Judge. “Go!”

This time neither contestant moved.

“No pass.” Said The Judge. “Second pass again. Go!”

Again no-one moved. The contest was becoming a battle of nerves.

“This time the defender must charge.” The Judge cautioned.

“Second pass. Go!”

Baric charged at Mikle. Mikle held firm. Baric was knocked flat on his back. Mikle held firm.

“One point to The Challenger.” Said The Judge. “Challenger, this time you must charge.” He warned. “Ready? Third Pass. Go!”

Baric repeated his earlier trick, dropping to his knees. This time Mikle was ready for him. He did a forward flip over his opponent’s head and landed solidly on both feet.

“The challenger has crossed his opponent’s back line and therefore forfeits one point.” The Judge announced.

“This is not right, Ansel. There is no back line. There was no mention of that in the rules.” Mikle complained.

“My Client did not agree to play back-line rules.” Ansel put forward.

“Does he wish to forfeit the contest?” The Judge asked.

“No. He wishes to know if there are any more rules to be added at the referee’s discretion?” Ansel demanded.

“Excuse me.” Rose a voice from the crowd. “But may I interject?”

A sturdy, aristocratic dwarf stepped through the crowd. He was the leader of the dwarven community. “Would The Challenger agree to submit to my adjudication?”

“He can’t be any worse.” Mikle whispered to Ansel.

“No objection.” Ansel conveyed.

“Then I will tell you my rules. No none charges will be permitted.

The count starts again at no points each. We don’t want to be here all day, do we?”

From that point on it went all Mikle’s way, three passes for three straight points.

“Well done.” The Head dwarf congratulated. “And welcome to our humble settlement.”

They were escorted into the city and treated to a hearty meal. Over dinner there was much talk of troubles with goblins and Ansel spoke of the coming dangers. He told of their quest to rob The Witch of that outside help so that Denath could defeat her.

“A noble and worthy endeavour.” The Head dwarf spoke. “To get rid of this menace we will assemble an army to help you in your quest. Also we can guide you through the caverns, if you wish.”
 “Your help will be most appreciated.” Ansel assured him. “I propose a toast to the nobility of dwarves.”

Elsewhere, in a private conference, Zeebran and Calon discussed how to reach The Witch and deal with her, unawares that in the next room Blaga is listening. Water amplifies his hearing and, as he lays in his bath, he can hear a whisper anywhere in the house.

“I think we should risk leaving her here. If we take her, The Witch will use her to get at you.” Calon spoke of his cousin.

“She will do that no matter where she is. If we leave her here, even under guard, as soon as we are gone the enemy will come for her. We don’t want to bring them into the village. I need my wife where I can see her. Then I know if she is alright or not and I can look after her.” Zeebran stated.

“None of these mortals are necessary. You and I can go. Between us we can find a way, even without an army.” Calon believed.

“We might kill The Witch but then who would take over in her place. The Oscilons may be infinitely more dangerous. We need all of the forces we can muster. We do not know what the enemy may be capable of.” Zeebran cautioned.

“This fellow Vabian. We must leave him, surely.” Calon advised.

“There again I disagree. I want him where I can see him at all times.” Zeebran countered.

“There is no counselling you, Cousin.” Calon admits defeat.

“There is no swaying me from my best judgement.” Zeebran corrects him. “The Witch’s plan is to lure us into these Caverns of Doom where many dark things have come to pass. She calculates that the powers of darkness are strong there and she intends to use them all in her favour. I can by no means lure her away from there, so I must meet her on her own terms.”

“You make it sound like suicide.” Said Calon.

“Perhaps it is.” Zeebran considered. “But a little good goes a long way. Torgud is of the purest heart and mind a mortal could have. One such as he could tip the scales in our favour.”

In the other room Blaga scoffs at the wizard’s folly.

‘What fools Wizards are. He would take that lovely wife of his and feed her to The Witch to torture and abuse. He won’t win by walking into a trap. You have to be clever to win. Clever and crafty, like old Blaga. I won’t let no witch torture her. No I won’t.’ He decided.

“All that really matters.” Said Zeebran. “Is that I am sure of myself. If I am well enough prepared she cannot harm me. All the rest is a fail-safe. If I should fail there is at least something to fall back on.”

“I hope you are right.” Said Calon.

“Allow me to know my own business.” Zeebran insisted. “Now I need to speak to Our Young Man.”

“I will send him to you.” Calon offered, and left the room.

After a few moments Torgud entered

“You have little reason to have faith in me, I know.” Zeebran began. “You expected to meet one who could do countless miracles at the drop of a hat. I know I must have bitterly disappointed you. Do not perjure yourself to spare my feelings. I tell you now that The Wizard you seek is still within me. I need your faith to revive him. I can do what you want me to do so long as you do not doubt me. No matter what you may see, or think you see, never believe I have failed. Have faith.”

By the next morning several strange things had happened. The Unicorn had arrived leading a group of animals, to wit a bear, a donkey, three dogs, an owl, a raven and several doves. They were waiting outside as were an alien accompanied by forty goblins, an army of mercenary soldiers, a second army of villagers from all over the surrounding territories and a third army of regular soldiers amassed by The Lords of The South. Finally, Blaga had disappeared.

Zeebran seemed little surprised at any of this. All he said was...

“Now we are assembled. Let’s review the troops, shall we?”

“Me and The Lads got to talking and we decided that we liked being with you much better than with them. If, if you don’t mind, we will join you.” Said The Alien Captain.

“Very good.” Zeebran allowed.

“We The Farmers of The South have come to help you rid the land of this menace.” Their spokesman announced.

“Not a moment too soon.” Zeebran declared.

“The Earls, Barons and Dukes of The South have sent you this tithe of their men at arms to support you against The Goblin Menace. I am General Carthai. I salute you.”

“I salute you, General. A tithe is not overmuch but it will have to do.” Said Zeebran. “There are no dwarves. Where are the dwarves? Late as usual, I expect. Well, we can’t wait for them, can we?”

“We mercenaries, having heard that Old Tomas was in need of our help, have travelled far to be here. We pledge our services free of charge until this battle is over.” The Spokesman from The Mercenaries decreed.

“Well, we can’t argue with that, can we? Welcome aboard, Captain.” Zeebran greeted.

“Blaga is gone.” Said Vabian, emerging from the house.

“How strange. Well, he couldn’t live in a bathtub forever, now could he? We can’t worry about him now.” Zeebran decided.

A solitary dwarf strode up to the front of the massed armies.

“The King of The Grey Forest Dwarves pledges two thousand warriors to the coming battle and announces that they will meet you on the road.” He spake solemnly.

“Just so, My Good Dwarf. You come with the lead party. I shall need a dwarf for the caverns.” Zeebran instructed.

At the head of the troops were Zeebran and Torgud and his fellow travellers, including Paddy, and the newly arrived dwarven messenger. Then came The Alien and his goblins, then the mercenaries and the other sections of men with the most numerous elves taking up the rear.

“How many are we now, Torgud?” Zeebran asked.

“About twenty six thousand, assuming that The Grey Forest Dwarves actually arrive.” Torgud counted.

“A goodly number of elves though. That counts for much.” Said Zeebran. “How did you like my little surprise?”

“I am very impressed.” Said Torgud, gratefully.

“I needed a token gesture to build your confidence.” Zeebran stated.

During the long march to The Caverns, The Grey Forest Dwarves arrived with King Arnhus himself at their head. A good dwarf never could resist a battle.

“Good to see Your Majesty. You could have sent me some General though. Kings take too much looking after.” Zeebran greeted.

“I crave some action.” Said The King, dismissive of his own safety.

“Only two thousand though. If you knew how important this was you would be twenty thousand.” Zeebran declared.

“I know you, Denath and if you need help it must be important, but every dwarven life is dear to me. These are my best and will serve you well.” The King replied.

“Join then, between these mercenaries and the other men.” Zeebran requested.

“So far back.” The King commented.

“We have elves at the rear.” Said Denath.

“I will ride with you.” Said The King. “You, Messenger, can go with the others.” He told his man.

After a few days they were close to The Caverns. They sent the goblins on ahead to secure the gate. They had Torgud with them masquerading as their prisoner.

“Open up!” Shouted The Alien. “I have the prize that Her Majesty has long awaited.”

The huge gates swung open. The party walked through. Then they set-upon the gate guards, all on a sudden. Torgud led a party up the left tower and The Alien took the right. When the gate was secured they ran-up a flag to signal the armies to advance. (Detailed later.)

Only the men and dwarves appeared, so that the army looked pretty small. The advanced party and the mercenaries rushed through the gate to secure the large courtyard within.

The dwarves followed to engage arriving goblins in combat within the confines of the dark and cramped spaces of the caverns themselves.

The rest of the men stayed on the plains in front of the gateway. Zeebran well knew of the many cave openings through which the goblins would now pour out over the plains. Thinking that these men were the only enemy, they surrounded them as planned.

The elves remained hidden and waited until the goblins had sent out most of their forces. They could only hope that the small band of men at the centre would be able to hold out for long enough. Then the elves would spring their trap, surrounding the goblins in turn.

Once inside, a small party including Zeebran, Fadik, Seren, Vabian, O’ Cazian, Golad, Demilsa and a party of dwarves including King Arnhus and Paddy, were to infiltrate the inner reaches of the natural stronghold, locate The Witch and defeat her. This was the plan at any rate.

Bлага, on the other hand, had already infiltrated the inner sanctum and, before the gates were opened, had ingratiated himself to The Witch.

He had wandered out into the desert alone, making progress swiftly at first, although the dryness tormented him. He had crawled and clawed his way on his hands and knees with the hot sun beating down, drying and scorching his skin. He had lain depleted, almost dead in the heat until a party of goblins spotted him.

“What is it?” Asked one goblin.

“Some dried up thing.” Said Another.

“If its going to die anyway, let’s eat it.” Said a third.

It went over to Blaga and laid hands on his prone form. A great mistake, for a water sprite has a powerful affinity for water and Blaga began sucking the water out of him at the merest touch.

The goblin’s hand stuck fast.

“ ‘Ere, I’m stuck. Help me!” He shouted.

A couple of others grabbed him and tried to pull him away. They also stuck fast as The Water Sprite took what moisture it could.

“Kill it!” They shouted.

Blaga recovered quickly from his former state of dehydration and looked around, his sunken eyes burning red. Most of the other goblins became too afraid to draw near him. One was brave enough to attempt to stab him with its sword. He bent his will against it and knocked it to the floor with a glance.

“Let us go, O Mighty One.” The first goblin pleaded.

“We really meant you no harm.” Said the second.

“If we’d only known who you were.” Said the third.

“You must do my bidding.” Said Blaga.

“Of course.” Said The Goblins.

“What does Your Lordship require?” Asked the first.

“Take me to The Caverns of Doom.” Blaga instructed.

“Oh, that is too easy a task, Master. We were going there anyway. I expect you shall want to see Her Majesty.” One spake.

“No doubt I shall.” Said Blaga, nonchalantly.

“Good.” One of the others whispered. “She’ll deal with him. We can probably claim a reward on him.”

“Now I must have water.” Said Blaga, enjoying his new found status. “And I want you to carry me.” He added, as an afterthought.

“Very well, Lord. Can I have my hand back now?” The first goblin was particularly dehydrated by this time. Many another kind of creature would have been sucked completely dry and shrivelled beyond recognition but goblins are particularly hardy.

He released them, expecting them to run off, but they did not. They did not want to lose this prize.

He drank all of their water supplies and put them at great pains to find him some more. When they could find none he drained a little water from each of them. Eventually they became too weak to carry him. He captured them, taking over their bodies and minds. He made them walk all day and night and when he became thirsty, or if one became too weak to walk, he drained the water out of it completely and left it a dried out husk.

He mummified them one by one and when they reached the caverns there were only a couple left.

“We have brought a prisoner to present to The Queen.” A weakened goblin announced to the gatekeeper before collapsing. “Take me to Her Majesty.” Blaga ordered. “And get these fellows some water.”

Of course, Blaga was taken and unceremoniously dumped in a cell. He waited until the guard was alone, called him over and drained all the water out of him. Then he took the keys, released himself and padded off in search of The Witch.

“Hello, Your Majesty.” He crooned when he found her.

“What is the meaning of this?” She shouted.

“Your stupid guards wouldn’t bring me to you, so I took the liberty of seeking you out myself.” Blaga replied.

“And just who and what are you?” She demanded.

“I am a water sprite and a great admirer of yours.” He told her. “I have heard of your greatness and have travelled from far in the north to be your servant. I, a water spirit, have braved the dusty desert to meet you, O great and mighty Queen. You are the one who shall rule All The World.”

“You really think so? You really think so?” She was pleased.

“I have no doubt of it. We water sprites are great seers of the truth, great diviners of the future. Why else would I have sought you out but to be on the winning side? I have my own best interests at heart, really.”

“Wait a minute. You’re the pest that’s been killing off my guards!” She assailed him.

“But they are only goblins and of no worth. I offer you myself in their stead. I have many powers. I can be of much use to you. I only wish to serve you, O Mighty One.” He proclaimed.

“You are an ugly brute but I guess you could be useful. No other witch has a water spirit as a servant.”

“Let me show you what I can do, Your Majesty.” He went on, fawning over her and cajoling her until she adopted him as her new pet.

On the eastern side of The Mountain was a climb so steep that no one thought to guard that side of the complex. This side too was festooned with caverns. Most of them had been sealed off so that there was no easy access to the west. It was possible, however, to use the caverns like a step ladder, to climb up inside The Mountain almost to its lofty peak, if one was careful not to get lost, that is.

It was also possible to find a few small, forgotten passages that made their way to the west side by running deep underneath the more accessible and widely used parts of the complex.

No-one ventured into the deeper caverns for fear of meeting rock demons and other ancient denizens of the deep.

Ansel and The Dwarves at this time were making their way, through the upper eastern tunnels, towards the peak. They sought to emerge at the ideal spot to position the dish so that it would cut off The Witch's power supply. The Dish itself had to be disassembled for the difficult climb through narrow passages and reassembled on site.

Deep in space somewhere, high above them, Naven of Cassia was winging his way towards The Oscilon relay station in the hope that he might be able to destroy it.

On the gate towers of the stronghold it was goblin against goblin. At first the gates swung shut, as the ever vigilant gatekeepers realised that they were being attacked.

The attackers fought their way up the stairs only to find that the top doors had been locked and bolted against them.

Torgud unleashed his sword and, with a mighty crash, severed both lock and bolt and the door burst inwards, scattering its defenders aside. The gate guards within were already knocked senseless and were easily overcome. The opposite tower was still locked. Both of the cranking wheels had to be turned to open the huge doors. It was impossible now to cross the courtyard. A huge gong was sounding in alarm and that way was swarming with goblin guards. The lower doorways to the towers were bolted shut to prevent pursuit but a group of aliens were moving a laser cannon into position to burst them. Soon the small groups of allies would be trapped within the towers and still no hope of opening the gates.

Torgud's goblins tried moving the wheel on their side but it would not move. Torgud tore up the steps to the very top of the Northern Gate-tower. He fought his way through the guards atop the tower. He sprang onto the parapets and jumped down onto the top of the gate itself. He ran across the gate tops, harassed by a barrage of arrows.

Torgud scrambled to the top of the parapet of the south tower just as the laser cannon blasted through its lower door.

There were four guards there waiting for him and others shooting arrows at him from the walls and from the courtyard far below.

He dived down and did a forward roll across the tower's roof, ending upright with his back to the south wall.

He faced the four guards alone. He could hear the crashing below as The Alien Commander tried to break down the internal door to the tower room.

One by one he despatched his goblin foes. They fell before him with blood curdling screams, the death knell of the goblin kind. The cry was not without purpose, for on hearing the last goblin fall above, The Chief Gatekeeper despatched others to take their place. Our Young Warrior knew that the longer he took the more of his allies in the tower would be struck down. He redoubled his efforts against the new contingent of guards before him.

This time he was atop the stairwell and they could only approach him one at a time. The first guard slain fell back onto the one behind him making it impossible for the goblin to ward off any attack. The next guard tarried to get a clear field in which to fight but he was pushed forwards by the fools behind him in their eagerness for the affray. He lurched straight onto Torgud's sword. "Thank you." Said Torgud, as he lopped off the next one's head. He fought his way down the stairwell and into the control room. There he had to face the last few guards before he could either open the door or open the gates.

The laser cannon had fired again before he defeated the remaining guards, signifying that the north tower was also under siege. He secured the control room and rushed to open the door. He found that the last allied goblins had been cut down and The Alien fell through followed by his attackers. After the door had been slammed and bolted again, Torgud turned to his ally's aid. Together they finished off the last of the enemy goblins and then strained against the crankshaft but to no avail. The crank-wheels required two operators on each side of the gates. Torgud stopped to see to it that the goblins on the other tower were turning their wheel also. They tried again and the huge gates inched open. Once the gates were fully open Torgud chopped through the gearing wheel and severed the chain and crank handles. The enemy were about to burst through the door into the control room.

"It's time to get out." Said Torgud and made for the top of the tower.

The alien followed to the top of the tower but when Torgud walked across the top of the gate his companion took one look down and refused to follow.

"I'd rather die in battle." He shouted. "I will cover you."

He turned back to face the guards that were emerging from the stairwell.

Torgud continued across the gate and down into the north tower. He destroyed the gate mechanism there. His goblins had not closed the upper door and were still fighting on the stairs.

“Come up!” He shouted.

He swung the door too after them.

“Hold the door.” He told them and he wedged it closed with the gates’ crank handles.

“Now follow me.” He said, leading them to the top of the tower.

There he ran up the flag, signalling the attack.

The attacking army had been advancing ever since the small band entered the gates and were now in position for their attack. At the signal the first wave charged forwards. They were met by a hail of arrows from the fortress walls. As they drew near, the gates slammed shut. This left the advancing army at the mercy of the enemy bowmen and in position to have boiling oil poured on them. Zeebran looked to the elves for help.

‘Seren. The gate has been closed and sealed by witchcraft. Inform your cousin. Ask him to get his elves to open it.’

At that moment a large spaceship appeared as if from nowhere. It had been hovering above the elves’ position and now dropped its cloaking device. It was an Oscilon ship equipped to detect and immobilise elves. Its probing fingers of energy began darting out, paralysing whole sections of the elven force at a time.

Torgud had just lowered his four remaining goblins onto the parapet of the walls below the gate tower. The wall guards were so busy shooting down upon Zeebran’s men and dwarves that they seemed not to notice.

Our Hero heard the gates slam shut with a heavy clang.

“Wait here.” He told The Goblins. “If all does not go well return to your old mistress.”

He went back across the tower and to the middle of the gate.

“Open the gate.” He ordered his sword and thrust the blade into the joint between the two gates.

The sword cut deeply between the plates of solid metal and glowed white hot. Even the handle became hot, so hot that it burned Torgud’s hands to hold it. The Gate did not open, There are some things that even a magic sword cannot do.

Torgud waited a few moments, until The Sword ceased to glow.

“Well, if you won’t open the gates then at least come out.” He ordered, pulling The Sword with all his might. After a struggle which seemed an age The Sword dislodged with a jerk, by which Torgud almost fell backwards outside the fortress.

'That's just where I don't need to be.' He thought, as he scurried back along the door-top to rejoin his four goblins.

As Torgud struck at the gate Ansel was working quickly to reassemble his dish. He fell into a dead faint.

"Master! Master!" Cried Mikle, trying to revive him.

He came round.

"That rash, young man again, asking the impossible of The Sword. He is draining away all my energy. I do wish he wouldn't do that. He thinks that magic grows on trees." Ansel complained. "One more like that could very well finish me off."

It was as if Torgud was stabbing at The Old Sorcerer Himself instead of at the gate.

"Well, I hope it helped him, Mikle and I hope I can finish my work here before my time comes to an end." Ansel declared.

"Don't say that, Master. We will heal you yet." The Dwarf dreamed.

Over the skies of the battlefield a second spaceship comes screaming across the sky, at twenty two thousand miles per second, barely fifty feet above ground level. It fires an antimatter torpedo at The Oscilon ship. The enemy vessel is splintered into a million fragments which are blown away on the breeze, like a cloud of confetti.

The Elves bend their collective will against the magic sealing The Gates. Nothing happens for quite some time. Then the doors begin to glow. They become hotter and hotter until they start to warp and then to melt away. Eventually there is nothing left of them but the hole that they once occupied.

The delay in opening the doors had taken its toll in the lives of men and dwarves of the lead party. They are now surrounded by goblins and aliens on all sides as well as facing fire from the walls above. Now the elves move in to crush the goblins between them and the city.

"Mikle and I will finish up here." Ansel told Baric. "Battle is met in the caverns. I want you to take your army and break through to attack the enemy from behind."

"Have no fear." Said Baric. "It shall be done."

Torgud and his goblin quartet had climbed onto the fortress walls. Once again his goblins treated him as a prisoner.

"We caught this one scaling the walls." The Goblin told one of their commanders.

"Well, get him out of here." Said The Commander. "I'm too busy to hold his hand."

The advanced troops were now fighting their way through the gateway. Zeebran was looking for a way to break away from the fighting to speed his way to The Witch. Up from behind him strode The Unicorn, as if nothing was happening around him.

“Hop up on my back.” He offered. “I’ll get you through.”

Zeebran mounted reverently and pulled his wife up after him.

“You too.” He shouted to Vabian.

The Unicorn took off with the three aboard, over the heads of the wall of goblins. He dashed across the courtyard, dodging where he could and riding goblins down where he couldn’t. In no time at all they were entering a cavern on the eastern side of the compound. The guards were few so far away from the main battle and most of these shied away from The Unicorn. Zeebran dismounted..

“Thank you, Noble Steed.” He said. “You are free to go now.”

“No.” The Beast replied. “It is my lot to be there at the end.”

“As you wish.” Zeebran allowed.

Their progress went unhindered, as if the guards had been instructed to let them pass, and they beat a path to the witch’s door. Not straight there, of course, for nothing was straight in the caverns. The way was complex, tortuous and convoluted. Zeebran chose the paths as if he had walked them many times before.

Not so with Torgud, who was at a loss which way to go.

“We must take this prisoner to Her Majesty.” One of his guards had to ask several times before they could find one who knew the way there. They found a guide to lead them yet Torgud still felt as though he was travelling in circles.

“Are you sure this is the way?” Asked Torgud.

“Shut up, Scum.” Said a guard, hitting him on the back of the head.

“Yes.” Said The Lead Guard. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

“Of course.” The Escort assured them. “But why has your prisoner got his sword on him?”

“You just take us to The Witch.” Said Torgud, drawing his sword.

“Or I’ll slit your throat.”

“All right. Don’t get narky. I’ll take you to her with pleasure.

She’ll deal with you anyway.” The Guide gloated.

Outside The Witch’s inner sanctum, Zeebran paused.

“Now where is The Boy? He should be here by now.”

“What are you waiting for? The Enemy is in there.” Said Vabian.

“For Torgud, what else?” Zeebran answered, impatiently.

“Looking for someone to fight her for you? I will.” Vabian offered, making a move towards the door.

“You stay put. You will meet your doom soon enough.” Zeebran restrained him. “We are walking into a trap but we are not going in until we are fully prepared.”

“I don’t see what Torgud can do. What difference can one man make?” Vabian challenged.

“Watch and take note and you will see.” Zeebran answered.

Just then Torgud appeared at the end of the tunnel.

“Here you are and not a moment too soon.” Said Zeebran. “It is not too late to turn back. Search your heart. If there is any weakness there, any doubt, do not venture forth.”

“I am not turning back.” Said Torgud.

“It will be rough in there for all of us. Vabian, are you willing to change your mind?” Zeebran demanded.

“Not at all.” Said Vabian.

“Come then, let us make an end of it.” Zeebran entered.

Chapter Eleven

Through the door was a large cavern with several tunnels leading off of it. The main chamber was high domed, the floor bare, as if cleared for some reason. There were many smaller compartments, cosy little nooks and crannies, each one set up differently with cupboards and benches and bookshelves and bottles and equipment. Each little, low roofed room had its own purpose.

“Very neat.” Said Zeebran. “I am impressed. The Lady has all this and she wants more. Can you imagine such gross impertinence as to want more than this?”

Zeebran’s eyes strayed to an alcove behind them in which a small black creature was sitting in a bathtub.

“Blaga, what are you doing here?” Zeebran asked.

“I’m taking a bath. What does it look like?” Blaga blurted out, impertinently.

“So where is The Witch?” Said Vabian, impatiently.

“She wants to make a grand entrance I should imagine.” Zeebran speculated.

“You’re too late. She’s gone.” Said Blaga, with a gurgle of laughter. “She wasn’t going to let a pack of houns like you destroy her so she took off. She’s flown the coup. She’s absconded. You went through all this for nothing. Ain’t she marvellous?” Blaga was in hysterics.

The roof came down. In one huge block, covering the centre of the cave. The five figures standing in the middle of the cave must have been squashed flat. It all happened so quickly and without warning. There was certainly no time for anyone to do anything about it. Out from beneath the massive slab of rock came a tiny trickle of liquid. This was followed by another and, on the other side of the block, another. In all five pools of water formed. Each pool took on a different shape. One looked like a horse, the others took humanoid forms. Then each pool came to life. There, standing around the block of stone, were our companions, The Unicorn, The Elf, The Two Men and a wizard all unharmed.

“We don’t need this.” Said Zeebran, at which the slab of rock shrunk until it was as tiny as a sugar cube. He picked it up and placed it in his pocket.

“Look. We don’t have to play this game do we?” Zeebran questioned. “If you want to fight, let’s fight. I don’t want to put on a show. You’re not going to be difficult, are you?” He turns to his companions. “She is going to be difficult. She wants to be dramatic.” He shrugged.

She unleashes a mighty bolt of lightning. Zeebran’s staff acts like a lightning rod and the charge flows harmlessly to earth.

“Come now. You can do better than that. Show yourself. We don’t mind how hideously ugly you are.” He calls.

She floats assorted heavy objects in the air and hurls them at him. At first he wards them off with his staff but then they come so thick and fast that he changes into a statue of pure diamond to escape injury.

She forms a column of fire around him. He is reduced to a wisp of smoke which circles the chamber. Yet when it comes to lite it solidifies into The Wizard again.

Zeebran was in the middle of the chamber. His friends were standing near the walls, where it was safer, or was it?

The rocks themselves spouted arms which seized hold of them, threatening to crush the lives out of them.

Denath sat in the middle of the chamber.

“Here I am, Witch. Leave them alone.” He challenged.

“Make me.” She cackled, appearing before him in the guise of Demilsa.

Then she changed her voice to a lilting tone.

“Don’t you find me terribly attractive. You wouldn’t hurt a beautiful creature like me, would you?”

The Wizard was calm and introspective. He wasn't going to be distracted. He was working out a counterspell to release his friends from their rocky prisons. They were being sealed up in the walls. Only their faces peered out now. Soon they would be fully covered and suffocate.

"Let's forget these fools. Why don't you join forces with me. Together we could be master and mistress of this little planet." She offered. "I could appear to you like this." She said, becoming the image of Laurali, The Mermaid. "You would like that, wouldn't you?" She taunted.

Zeebran pointed his staff at the wall where his wife was imprisoned and let go a bolt that shattered the rocks enfolding her. Then he turned around without moving a muscle, doing the same again and again, crumbling the walls around the others.

"I'm going to have to get serious with you." Said She.

The Witch drew a circle on the floor, around The Wizard

"If you leave this circle you will die." She pronounced.

"That's easy." Said Denath, levitating himself.

He floated across the room, arms and legs crossed and the circle followed wherever he went.

"Come up." He called.

The Circle now floated with him and did loops around him and formed a sphere. He was floating in a little, pink bubble.

"This is fun." He said, but the bubble turned back into a circle and he reached out and plucked more rings from it.

"Now, if you stand within a circle, you will die." He told his opponent and proceeded to toss hoops at her.

She was forced to run this way and that to dodge them.

"Nearly had you that time." He declared.

She grew and grew so large that the rings could not cover her. She was a giant witch. She caught him in her giant hand.

He was in his sphere again and the sphere became so hard that she could not crush him. He was encased in a glass marble. He blew the side of his marble fortress and a bubble pushed its way between her fingers, floated to her nose and burst open, shedding a cloud of pepper up her nose.

She sneezed a giant sneeze, took the marble and threw it hard against the wall. It smashed into tiny pieces.

"You silly girl." He chided. "You broke the circle."

The Witch turned into a dragon, breathing fire at The Wizard.

He sat fanning himself.

"Chilly in here, don't you think." He quipped.

She stepped forward to snap him up in her gigantic jaws. He turned into a tiny mouse and scurried across the floor. He was too small and too fast for her to catch and there was not enough room for the dragon to move. He turned into a flea, hiding between the scales on her belly, bit her and jumped away.

She regained her normal shape and he did his.

“Let’s dispense with this foolishness, shall we?” He said.

He assumed his former position, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Her eyes glowed red and streams of light shot out at him.

It looked as if she would fry his brains but he sat calmly, showing no signs of harm. As long as his mind was calm she could not prevail. She had to anger him somehow. She turned her attention to his wife. A cage formed around Seren and was drawn up on a rope until it dangled high above them. The rope disappeared suddenly and the cage should have plummeted down but it merely sat there, defying gravity.

The cage filled with crabs with snapping claws. Seren turned into a white dove and flew out of the cage, which now fell towards the witch’s head. She changed into an eagle and took off after the dove.

The air became filled with doves, so that the eagle could not tell which one to chase. Seren alighted on the ground and became a beautiful elf again. Zeebran shot a bolt from his staff and the eagle screamed and tumbled to the ground with a thump.

It was The Witch again, flat on her back. She shook her head, clutched her arm and plucked out the bolt.

“So you want to play rough.” She cackled.

She looked at The Elf and invaded her mind.

She began projecting into it evil thoughts, vivid images of cruelty to animals and torturing babies, the horrors of war and all kinds of atrocities.

“No!” Shouted The Wizard.

She had found his Achilles Heel.

He had lost concentration and now she knew that he was no longer invulnerable. With a glance she swept him off the floor and dashed him against the wall of the cave. With a bolt of energy from her fingertips she meant to deal the fatal blow.

It was at this precise moment that Ansel completed the placement of his dish. He interrupted her power supply and she no longer had unlimited power.

The bolt sort of spluttered and faded away and Zeebran took little hurt from it.

She stood staring at her fingers, leaving Zeebran suspended on the wall, stretched out like a bearskin rug.

Again she tried to ignite her spark but the spell would not spark. She made an angry sound and contented herself in releasing her opponent from the wall. He fell with a heavy crash.

Now, while Zeebran lay stunned, was her chance to summon the evil spirits that inhabited that place, the reason why she had chosen it for this encounter.

“Now the ground take him.” She commanded.

The earth opened up beneath The Wizard and he fell into a bottomless chasm. The earth closed over him and it seemed that he surely must be crushed to death.

Zeebran had also had a few moments grace and he had used it to calm himself again. He brought himself back to the ideal state. He was again master of his own soul. There was no anger, no fear nor any torment in him. He was at peace.

Plunged into the bowels of the earth he found unexpected allies. For in that place not only evil ones had lived and died. A host of good men and dwarves and even elves had come there for noble reasons, to protect their loved ones. Out of honour and faith and loyalty they had given up their most precious gift of life unselfishly.

The Witch had miscalculated. She had looked at the place with her evil eyes and seen only the evil in it. She had overlooked the good that was there.

As Zeebran plummeted, so the lost souls called out to him in eerie voices.

‘Let me help you.’ and ‘Take me with you.’

The same souls that battled evil there before were ready to do so again. It was the same battle rejoined.

“Come with me then, Lost Souls. Help me, Noble Ones.” He called upon them, more to please them than out of any need he felt himself. He took pity upon them because they needed to be needed again.

‘Long have we waited for you to lead us home.’

This was their song as they joined him on the journey.

Thus when the earth closed over him he took no harm. He became as a thing all spirit and no flesh to be crushed.

“Now for my next victim.” The Witch looked around and her gaze came to rest upon Seren once more. “O so innocent one. O so beautiful Madam.” She scorned. “What shall I do with you?”

“Leave her alone, Madam!” Yelled Torgud, stepping between them.

He tried to draw his sword but it would not budge.

“You fool. My power is greater here. None shall stop me here.”

She boasted and swept him aside.

“I beg to differ, Madam.” Said Blaga.

“You?” She looked at him and a fire rose in her eyes.

“Even The Unicorn dare not defy me. Look at him cowering in his corner.”

As she spoke to distract him she bent her will against Blaga and clenched her bony fingers around Seren’s throat.

“I can defeat you all at once if I wish, but I will savour torturing you.” She boasted.

Blaga’s eyes burned with a pale blue light as he pitted his will against hers.

“What can a water spirit do?” She scorned.

Blaga thrust his hands forwards and passed one in front of the other over and over, as if drawing in a rope. He pulled and pulled and, as he pulled, the water began to leave The Witch’s body. It floated out of her and hung in the air as he drew it towards him.

“I thought you liked me.” She said, sounding hurt. “I thought we were friends.”

“You can do what you like with the others. I don’t give a fig about them but leave The Elf alone.” He insisted.

“So, you like her! Is that it? You came here to protect Her, not to serve Me. You disappoint me. You really do. How could you like a thing like her? She is an undersized, chisel faced, scrawny little, sanctimonious bitch. What makes you think that she could love a brutish, ugly, toad-faced, slimy little idiot like you? You find him repulsive, don’t you? You think he’s disgusting, don’t you? Go on, tell him what you think of him.”

She squeezes her talon-like fingernails deep into Seren’s throat and shakes her as she speaks. She is looking to distract Blaga and to confuse him.

“I can be like her you know. Which do you prefer, her or me?”

She says, changing herself into a mirror image of The Elf.

“Stone be you!” She throws at him while he is off-guard.

He stands and blinks and smiles at her.

“I’m a water spirit, not a bloomin’ goblin. Don’t take me for a fool.” He draws a little more water from her, just for spite.

“You and I are alike. We like the same things. She’s not good for you. She doesn’t think like us. She wants to live with flowers and butterflies. Well look, I’ll leave her alone, O.K. Just let me get on with killing these things. You can watch me torture them. You would like that, wouldn’t you?” She offered.

“Bargain.” He said, letting the water drain back into her.

“No. This is all wrong.” Said The Elf. “If you let her do that I shall, I shall... Well, I shall not like you very much.”

“But you never did like me very much, did you dear? So you have nothing to bargain with, do you?” He showed his independence.

“Well what must I do to convince you?” She asked, naïvely.

“Say you will love me.” He proposed.

“I can’t.” She said, mournfully.

“Say you will obey me.” He put forward.

“Well. I guess.” She began to consider it.

“Don’t you dare badger my wife.” Spoke The Wizard, emerging from the ground.

“I get to kill you again, do I. Then perhaps you should know me. I am Maduras. Remember my sister, Madurid? You murdered her. That is why I went to all this trouble.” The Witch continued. “I did all of this just to bring you here, to be avenged.”

A crowd of people entered the chamber. Fadik was the first through the door.

“You have no armies left, Madam Witch. All are either dead or fled. I’ll give you one chance to surrender or I will slit your throat.” He offered, generously.

“I wouldn’t...” Zeebran began but the warning came too late.

“You worm.” Said The Witch, pinching off The Warrior’s windpipe with a tweak of her fingers. “Grovel before me!”

Fadik fell, choking, to the floor.

“Don’t forget that it’s me you want.” Zeebran reminded. “Shall we do it properly this time. No more histrionics. I know how you witches love to be dramatic.”

They stood and stared at each other, as if to look one another to death. There was no visible sign of a struggle but they were locked in mortal combat just the same. It was mind against mind, power against power, will against will.

They bent their wills against one another and for a long time there was no sign that either would prevail.

Then Zeebran began to look a little pale and to grow older and shorter and a little more wizened and bent. Then he began to lean heavily upon his staff and his eyes grew dim.

His face showed lines of pain and he seemed to be starting to fade, as if less than solid. Now his pained expression deepened. The lines in his face gave way to cracks. These widened and deepened and spread all over his body, even extending through the thickness of his clothes. The Wizard became a jigsaw puzzle of pieces with nothing to hold them together.

Then, all at once, the puzzle fell apart. The Wizard's body exploded. Bits were scattered everywhere.

Torgud remembered what his friend had told him. These words echoed through his mind as if spoken anew.

'No matter what you may see or think you see, never believe I have failed. Have faith.'

Torgud thought, remembering what he had seen and that all is not always as it seems.

'Perhaps this vision is a trick made by The Witch to deceive us.'

He told himself. 'Zeebran is alive.'

He looked at Seren.

She was wandering around, picking up the shattered pieces, as if intending to put them back together. He took hold of her hands and looked her in the eyes.

"Don't." He told her. "Don't be sad. Your husband lives."

"But there are so many." She moaned. "And I shall never put them right. I was never any good at puzzles."

The Witch thought to make short work of the rest of her foes. She aimed a lightning bolt at Torgud. The bolt was deflected. She looked at Blaga.

"You again!" She accused.

"I should say not." He protested.

The pieces of The Wizard flew back together. In one second they reassembled. Not one piece out of place.

"Me again." Said Denath, defiantly.

They set about to out-stare one another again.

This time the effort began to show on both of their faces and she looked less contented. Torgud felt that she was weakening and tried to unsheathe his sword. It came this time. He felt this an encouraging sign.

Torgud reflected that, with the witch's attention so firmly fixed upon The Wizard, it would be an ideal time to creep over and lop off her head. It somehow did not seem like a proper thing to do.

His thoughts were interrupted by a blood-curdling scream.

A witch, as much like Maduras as could be, sprang from one of the dark recesses of the room and plunged a long bladed knife right through the wizard's heart.

Zeebran fell to the floor. Seren sprang to catch him. The Witch turned to her and The Elf burst into flame. Within seconds she had burned away to nothing. It all happened so quickly no-one, not even Blaga, had a chance to intervene.

“Madurid.” The Wizard wheezed. “I killed you.”

“And I resurrected her, You Fool.” Her sister laughed.

The Unicorn sprang at her and ran his horn through her. She shrieked out in pain. The Unicorn faded away, leaving nothing behind except its horn.

Torgud tried to slash her with his sword but The Sword would not strike. It burned white hot as the sorcerer’s magic was pitted against the witch’s.

The evil Madurid immobilised every mortal there.

Calon-Agored, The Elf Lord, had his bow raised and arrowed ready to pierce her loathsome heart. From out of the shadows stepped Vabian and grabbed him from behind.

“I have him, My Lady.” He said, dutifully.

“Good. Good, My Pet.” She crooned. “Now I shall deal with them all.”

At that moment, deep in space, Naven succeeded in destroying the oscilon relay station. It was a most unfortunate moment.

Until then Torgud’s sword was drawing power from The Oscilon beam through Ansel’s dish. Now The Sword drew its power from Ansel’s own source and when that came to an end it would drain the life’s blood from Ansel himself.

Zeebran was still struggling for life. With his last effort he held out his precious book.

“This belongs to you now.” He told Torgud and then died.

High atop the mountain Ansel also lay struggling for life.

“Master, I have failed you.” Mikle cried.

“Nonsense.” Ansel told him. “You were the best friend any ever had. Do not mourn, for my death will do much good. All I have is yours, Old Friend.”

Below them The Witch moved to Calon and grabbed him by the throat.

“You first, My Little Friend.” She cackled.

She had forgotten Blaga. He was now intent upon revenge. He was creeping up on her.

“Watch this one.” Said Vabian, stabbing him.

“Good, My Pet.” Madurid rewarded him.

Water spirits do not die so easily. Not being able to move, he summoned his will to free Torgud from his paralysis.

Torgud discovered that he could move. With an almighty effort he fought against the resistance in his sword. It was burning hot and felt as heavy as lead. He flung it forwards with a stroke high in the air. It severed the witch's throat and her head rolled onto the floor. The Sword fell, a twisted piece of half molten metal, its blade snapped in two.

Vabian went to strike but, before he could, Fadik thrust his sword deep into his side. Vabian was no more. On the sword was the body of a black cat, The Witch's Familiar.

Quickly, Calon took a cloth and scrapped up the ashes that were the remains of his cousin. Then he took the unicorn's horn from out of Maduras's side and washed off the vile witch's blood.

"Here, Torgud. Take these and guard them well. One day you may know what to do with them. I pray it will be soon."

Torgud secured them in his belt and also took up the wizard's book.

"He said it was mine." Said Torgud, a little uncertainly.

On the cover, in relief, 'Swynwr Denath' and the design of the two snakes. On the first page it read... 'This is the book of the wizard Denath. If you are not his chosen one read no further.'

Torgud closed The Book.

In an instant an old, grey man appeared, dressed in a cloak of grey. "Congratulations Denath." He said, without looking around. "You have done it. You have redeemed yourself."

Then he looked around.

"Where is Denath?" He asked.

"Here is his corpse." Said Torgud.

"Zeebran is dead then. Who is Denath?" The Strange Man asked.

"Is this your book?"

"Yes. Yes, it is now." Torgud admitted, almost guiltily.

"Then I suggest you read it, Young Man. The sooner the better. Never learn anything just standing idle, you know. I'll come and talk with you when you know yourself a little better. Good luck and pleasant reading."

And, with that, he was gone.

Everyone still stood around as if stunned. Calon seemed the only one capable of carrying on.

"All of this wants to be burned." He pointed to the witches' remains.

Then he knelt down to attend to Blaga's wound.

"About time too." Blaga complained. "Leave a poor creature bleed to death, they would."

"Still the same old Blaga, aren't you." Said Calon.

“You’ve a nasty tongue on you for an elf.” Said Blaga.
 Torgud was drawn inexorably to read The Book.
 ‘How to dispose of a wizard’s body.’ Headed the second page.
 ‘How to resurrect an elf.’ Was the third page.
 He looked down at The Pouch containing Seren’s ashes and at The Horn of The Unicorn.
 ‘Is it true?’ He wondered. ‘Can she be alive again?’
 “You are supposed to burn the wizard’s body first.” Said Calon.
 “Before you read The Book. Even an elf knows that.”
 “Why is that?” Torgud asked.
 “Nothing in The Book works unless this is done just right. You must do what is on the first page first and only then can you do what is on the next. It is like a schedule of things to do, a diary written in advance.” Calon described.
 “Then a wizard has no choices.” Torgud speculates.
 “I don’t know. Who understands wizards?” Calon wonders.
 “Come on, let’s get out of here. This place gives me the creeps.” Said Golad, snapping out of his trance.
 “Carry Zeebran’s body for me. You and Fadik, and somebody help Blaga. You dwarves, burn these witches.” Said Torgud, waking the others from their confusion.
 Eldoramus entered the cavern yelling...
 “Demilsa! Did you like the way I handled that spaceship? We can go home now. Everything is back to normal. Aren’t you glad? Never mind, you’ll soon forget about him. You get bored so easily.”
 The Siren allowed herself to be led away by ‘Her Master’.
 Paddy caught hold of Lord O’ Cazian’s wrist and stayed him from objecting.
 “You’re better off without her.” He advised.
 When all were gathered, they burned the body of Zeebran.
 As they did so it was as if a veil had been lifted in Torgud’s mind. Suddenly he began to remember things which could not possibly have happened to him. Yet he had the strangest feeling that they had happened to him. They were every bit as real as any memories that he called his own.
 He remembered Seren Gwirion as if she had been his wife and he grieved for her the same way. He thought he remembered her bringing him breakfast every morning on a silver tray and how she would smile and glide across the floor. He saw her when she insisted on sleeping on the bedroom floor with no blankets, even in the dead of winter, and how she was always wanting to fling open the windows and curtains to let the wind play with her hair.

He thought fondly of all the times that she would run out, barefoot, to dance in the rain and how she would never let an animal go by unaided.

On a whim he opened The Book at the very last page and there he found a list, as if of a family tree. Eighteen names all ending Denath. Beginning with Edramuth Denath and moving through Adrostene Denath to the last but one, Zeebran Denath and below, just appearing, very faintly, he fancied it was written Torgud Denath.

After the funeral he went to Mikle to try to offer him some words of comfort. The Dwarf had turned up during the last stages of the preparations, lamenting the passing on of his own master. The Little Man was baring up quite well.

Torgud then saw to it that The Elves would take care of Blaga and watched as they sent him home. He talked with Calon about taking care of Seren's animals and the elves had a wonderful surprise for him. They had transported his grandfather, Tomas, to see him. Tomas was well again. Awake, alive and as well as he had ever been.

He knew nothing of what had happened. He didn't even remember coming home from his last battle but he listened intently to the strange tale, just as Torgud used to listen to his tales years before. "My fighting days are over." Tomas admitted. "Now that, at last, there is another warrior in the family to take my place."

That evening Tomas enjoyed a reunion with his mercenary friends. It was also his farewell dinner, as he announced his retirement from the mercenary life.

The next day The Elves brought rain to the entire area and the day after everyone packed up to go home.

O' Cazian decided to go home to face his father and to start to face up to his responsibilities. He was going to be a just and kindly landlord and treat the peasants well. He took with him his bodyguards, Fadik and Golad.

Mikle decided to stay with Torgud and be his faithful servant.

Torgud would rather call him his friend but Mikle insisted upon calling him 'Master' or, at times, 'Young Master'.

They spoke with Calon and together decided to meet at the beginning of the next month to go on a quest to resurrect Seren Gwirion. They agreed that none of them would quit, no matter how long it took or what dangers they had to face, while ever they lived.

The End.