

# THE TROLL KING

*The Jharro Grove Saga: Book Four*



TREVOR H. COOLEY

The Jharro Grove Saga: Part Four

# The Troll King

A Bowl of Souls Novel

By Trevor H. Cooley

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## Dedication

To my son Hazen. Hyper and crazy and awesome, he's like a smarter, but admittedly, less coordinated Cletus.

He is turning eleven at the time I write this and has just begun his Bowl of Souls journey. He has listened to the first three audiobooks and each time he tells me about a part that excited him, my heart leaps.

This is why writing is worth it. Love you, Duderma.

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## Prologue

### **“Awaken.”**

Elise Muldroomon sat up in her bed. Her heart jumped in her chest and she threw open the curtains. Soft morning light flooded in, illuminating the interior of her large canopied bed. A sense of relief came over her. It was all right. She was just in her room.

A smile hit her face as she slipped out of the bed, her feet touching the soft white fur rug at the side of her bed. It was a gift from her brother and made from the skin of an exotic type of bear found only in Khalpany. Andre had given it to her when he became king. She would have to remember to thank him again.

She opened the glass doors to the balcony that opened up off of her room and walked outside. She looked over the city of Dremald that spread out far below her and smiled, breathing in deeply. The smell that wafted up from the congested city below wasn't exactly pleasant, but it was familiar; the smell of home. Contented, she walked back in and sat in front of the mirror to brush her hair.

This was her morning routine, the same one she had followed since she was a little child. Once her hair had reached the desired straightness and luster, she would eat breakfast and call in her maids to dress her. She would need to look her best when she stood with Andre next to her father as he addressed the nobles that afternoon.

### **“Awaken.”**

Something within her mind flashed and Elise froze mid brush-stroke. She looked into the mirror with horror. The face that looked back at her was that of a stranger. Her hair was not full and lustrous, but limp and dull. Her skin was no longer pink with youth, but so pale as to be nearly translucent.

“No-no-no.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. That face was an illusion, an idle dream brought about by still-tired eyes.

When she opened her eyes, her face was familiar again. All was back as it should be. She laughed at herself and continued to brush her hair until she was satisfied. Then she stood and approached the desk by her door where the servants would have left her breakfast. There it was, still steaming. Bacon and buttery strawberry jam pastries. She lifted up one of the pastries and lifted it to her mouth to take a bite.

### **“I said awaken, Queen Elise Muldroomon.”**

Something within her mind flashed again. The luxurious pastry in her hand had been replaced by a hard chunk of bread. The platter before her was no longer polished silver, but plain hammered tin and held just a lump of cheese and two cold sausages.

She dropped the unwanted bread onto the platter with shock and turned to take in the rest of her room. It was still the bedroom of her youth, but so much had changed. Everything was dimmer, like the life had been drained from the room. Her fine tapestries were gone, as were most of her wardrobes.

Elise heard music floating in from outside and stepped back out on the balcony. The familiar smell of Dremald was still there, but her view was partially obscured by thick iron bars that encased the balcony. It was as if she were standing in a bird cage.

She looked down into the square below and saw that a large number of people had gathered for some reason. A band was playing. What was the big event?

Some of the people below saw her and pointed up. Shouts rang out. Angry shouts.

With a cry, she fled from the balcony and ran to her front door. She reached for the handle, but there was no handle. All of the locks that that she had installed were gone. In fact, it wasn't her original door at all. It had been replaced by a thick, ugly door that locked from the outside. There was a barred opening where a guard could peer in and check on her.

Elise swallowed, trembling as her illusions began to fall apart. She was no longer a child princess. Her father and brother were dead. She was queen of Dremaldria now, and her husband . . .

"Ewzad!" she cried. "Ewzad, I need you! Come, please! I'm frightened."

**"Ewzad Vriil is dead,"** said the Dark Voice.

"No!" She ran to the rear of her room, looking for Ewzad's secret entrance. She would go down to his laboratory and visit him there. But the entrance was gone, sealed shut by mortar and heavy metal plates. She pounded on the metal. "Ewzad!"

**"His death is your fault. You disobeyed me and he grew reckless."**

"No," said Elise, shaking her head. "Get out of my mind!"

She leapt back into her bed and shut the curtains after her, then pulled her blankets up over her head. They were the magic blankets that her father had given her when she was a child. He had promised her that the runes sewn into them could keep out evil. Surely if she stayed under them, this terrible dream would end and she would awaken again.

All would be made right. She would run to her father and hug him and he would tell her that all was okay. She willed that better life to be true and slowly she began to believe it again.

**"There is no hiding anymore."**

The voice shattered her defenses. Elise clenched her eyes closed and prayed. She prayed to every god she could think of. "Please. Please I beg you. Make my blankets work again. Protect me from the voice."

**"All your prayers come to me now, Elise,"** the Dark Voice reminded her. **"Do you so easily forget?"**

"P-please," Elise whimpered. Of course she had forgotten. She had to forget. Reality was misery. Reality was pain.

**"Enough! The time for insanity is over."**

She felt the Dark Voice's power flex in her mind. He tore away the safe world she had created bit by bit. More true memories flooded her mind. She had been queen and married Ewzad. He had gone to conquer the Mage School and, despite the Dark

Prophet's commands, Elise had gone after him. But why had she done that? Why?

The Dark Voice freed another memory in her mind, this one the most terrible of all. She had gone after Ewzad because . . . she had been pregnant. The Dark Prophet had demanded one of her unborn twins and she hadn't wanted to give it away.

Sobbing, she paced her hands on her belly. It was flat. Her babies were gone. Her womb was empty, a shriveled husk.

She screamed in grief. "Why? Why do I have to know this? Why must you cause me this pain?"

**"Get dressed, Elise. I have a task for you,"** said the Dark Voice.

"It was Talon." Her lip quivered. "You sent her. You and the moonrat witch. You had that vile creature steal my babies!"

**"That was the result of your betrayal. They are gone."**

"D-did she . . ." Elise couldn't finish her thought. The idea that Talon had eaten her children was paralyzing.

**"The beast did not harm the infants,"** the Dark Voice said.

"Then give them back!" she growled.

**"You do not make demands of me!"**

A sudden spasm of pain lanced through her. Elise arched her back and would have screamed if her jaw had not been clenched shut. A series of awful cramps contorted her body, twisting her muscles until it felt as though her bones would snap.

**"You are mine, Elise,"** the Dark Voice reminded. **"You bound your soul to me when you sacrificed your brother."**

That was another memory she had suppressed. She had first heard the voice when she had stabbed Ewzad in his throne room. But the process of binding her soul had not been complete until, with Ewzad at her side encouraging her, she had used another of the Dark Prophet's ceremonial daggers to pierce Andre's heart. There was no escape for her now.

*Yes! I'm yours. I know it!* The cramps ceased and Elise gasped as she collapsed, whimpering with exhaustion. "Please, Master. I'll do anything you want. Just let me see my babies again."

**"You are not in a position to negotiate,"** the voice reminded her. **"However, your desires and mine are not out of line with each other. If you are obedient, you may yet have the opportunity to raise your heirs."**

"Yes, Master," she whispered. A small flame of hope lit inside of her. Would he actually let her see her babies again?

**"A visitor comes. Be ready."**

"Yes, Master." With a groan, Elise slid back out of her bed and stood on shaky legs.

Her master's punishment had taken a lot out of her. She felt like she had been running for miles. Her nightgown was drenched with sweat and clung to her body. If only she had time for a bath. Resting her sore muscles in hot water would have been wonderful, but the Dark Prophet's voice had been urgent. She stumbled to her desk

instead.

Elise pulled off her sodden nightgown and reached for a container of perfumed powder. She dusted herself liberally, letting the powder absorb the moisture on her skin, and flung open the door to her wardrobe. It was packed full of frilly dresses and gowns. Despite her imprisonment, the nobles still let her dress like a queen.

The thought filled Elise with anger. She had been supplanted. She, the rightful queen was imprisoned while the nobles squabbled over succession. How dare they? Now that she had her mind back, she would not stand for it! She would demand her kingdom back.

**“He approaches.”**

She swallowed, realizing that she was still standing there naked. She grabbed one of the dresses, a blue one with silk skirts and began lacing it on. Who would this visitor be? Who normally visited her?

Despite the return of her sanity, Elise’s memories of the recent past were jumbled. So much of that time had been spent in a dream-like trance. Surely the servants came and cleaned. She seemed to remember the odd noble showing up, but one face was most common. Demetrius.

Elise grimaced in embarrassment. Captain Demetrius had visited her often, bringing a tray of tea. He had sat and spoken to her as she had gibbered on about her father and brother and other silly princess nonsense. He had never corrected her, simply smiling politely as if she weren’t crazy. She felt the urge to strangle him just for the indignity of it.

There was a rattling of keys at the door and Elise turned in time to see it crack open. A man wearing a brown traveler’s cloak slid into the room. He winked at her.

“Hello, queen.”

The man’s voice was high and unfamiliarly accented. His hair was a shock of red and his face was splattered with freckles. Under his cloak, his clothes were plain, though he wore a sword in an ornate silver scabbard.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, he dropped a large sack onto the ground and stepped over to the desk where her breakfast platter sat.

“May I?” he asked.

The man lifted a cold sausage from the platter and bit off half of it. Then, while he chewed, he bent and shoved the rest of it down into the doorjamb. He nudged the door closed, but it didn’t latch. He turned to face her.

“Sorry, but once it shuts I got no way to open it from the inside.” He jerked his thumb back towards the door. “You know, dead guard.”

She frowned. “Who are you?”

“Oh! Sorry about that. That was rude, wasn’t it, not introducing myself?” He smiled and held out his hand. “You can call me Nod.”

Elise didn’t take his hand. “And you’re not worried about leaving a dead man outside my door? What if someone comes by?”

“Oh, I covered it up a bit,” he assured her. “Also, no one’s gonna come.”

“And why not?”

“Because of the coronation, of course,” he said. “Everybody’s busy with the preparations.”

Elise blinked back at him. “Coronation? What do you mean?”

He reached up and scratched his head. “Wow, you have been out of it, haven’t you? Can’t you hear them all outside, yammering?”

She glanced back towards the balcony, where the tinny sound of music and the low roar of voices were still flooding into the room. “Yes, but I wasn’t aware . . . So the nobles have decided. Who is replacing me?”

“Well, the great Lord Commander Demetrius is rising to the top of the ranks, milady,” he said.

“What? But how.” Her cheeks reddened with outrage. How dare that man? “He isn’t even of noble blood!”

Nod grinned. “I can see that this will take some explaining. Tell you what. I’ll fill you in while you get dressed.”

“I am dressed,” she said.

“True, but you ain’t wearing that. Here.” He lifted the bag that he had dropped on the floor and tossed it to her. “Put them on.”

Elise caught the bag and wrinkled her nose as she looked inside. “These are servant’s clothes.”

“Yeah, well how else am I gonna get you out of here? What’ll folks think if they see me trying to take the imprisoned bloody ex-queen out of the palace?”

“I’m leaving?” she asked, eyes wide. The idea hadn’t occurred to her.

“We got places to go, don’t we? Lots to do,” he replied. “I’d disguise you better if we had the time. Once we’re far gone, we’ll stop and cut your hair. Probly should dye it too, I wager.”

“Cut my hair?” Elise said in shock. Where exactly was this man planning to take her? “And why should I go anywhere with you?”

“You ain’t burning to leave?” Nod said in disbelief. He shook his head. “Sorry. It’s me and my bad manners again. Of course you’d be wanting to see my credentials.”

The red-haired man lifted his left hand and made a fist. Blackness swirled across the back of his hand, revealing a dark rune. Elise licked her lips. This man had been named at the Dark Bowl.

The man grinned. “I see you recognize who sent me. Now get changed.”

Elise pulled the clothes from the bag. They were wrinkled and stained. He must have pulled them from a laundry bin. “Turn around then.”

He sneered at her. “Sorry, I’m not the sort of man turns around when a perfectly good-looking woman’s getting naked.”

“I insist,” she said with a glower. “Otherwise you can leave without me.”

“I counter your insistence with insistence of my own,” he replied with a short bow. “You don’t have a choice if you want to see your babies again. Don’t worry. Our mutual master ain’t gonna want me touching you. My eyes however . . .” He snickered

again. “See what they want to see.”

She turned away from him with a scowl and began unlacing her dress as quickly as she could. “So tell me, Nod. Just how did Demetrius talk the nobles into crowning him king?”

“He did that by becoming a noble himself,” the man replied.

She could feel his eyes on her bare back as she lifted the servant’s dress. “Impossible. There hasn’t been a new noble house created in centuries.”

“Yeah, that would be a problem. Guess that explains why he went and got himself adopted.”

“Adopted? By who?” Elise knew the noble houses better than anyone and she couldn’t imagine any of them allowing an uncouth commoner soldier like Demetrius into their ranks, no matter how much his prestige had risen during the war.

“Why the long lost heir of house Vriil,” said Nod.

Elise spun to face him. She wasn’t completely finished putting the new dress on, but that didn’t seem to matter at the moment. “You mean Willum?”

Ewzad had told her about the boy child of his sister that had disappeared during his parents’ execution. Ewzad had looked for him for years before assuming him dead.

“That’s right. Willum Vriil, resurfaced during the war. Evidently he had joined the academy and become quite the hero,” Nod replied. “Once his secret got out, the nobles demanded that he take up his inheritance and become one of them, you know. Instead he sent a letter announcing that he had adopted old Demetrius and appointed him as steward of the Vriil lands.”

“He adopted Demetrius via letter? And the nobles stood for that?” she said in amazement.

“Of course the houses squabbled over it for a few weeks,” he said. “But Demetrius is really popular among the common folk. He did liberate them from you and your dead husband after all.”

Elise quivered with rage as she put on the sturdy boots that were in the bag. It wasn’t anger at Demetrius or even the other nobles. It was anger at herself. If only she hadn’t wasted the months after the war descending into madness.

“Kind of funny when you think about it,” he added. “All that trouble they went through to get rid of one King Vriil, just to crown another.”

“I could have done something about this,” she said. “I know how to pull strings. I could have salvaged the situation. Perhaps even held onto my throne.”

“Yeah? Well you didn’t,” Nod said. He gripped the edges of the door and pried it slowly open. “Now let’s go. The master’s got plans.”

## Chapter One

“Perhaps I do have need of someone like you,” the Troll King said. He stood from his crumbling throne, leaving a thin slimy residue behind.

Mellinda, who had been leaning over him, was forced to take a step back to keep from being knocked over. The king’s muscular seven-foot frame towered over her and as he peered down at her with his mismatched eyes, she felt an electric thrill. To think that her work over a thousand years ago had led to this person.

The Troll King was a living dichotomy. Like all of the trollkin his body was part troll and part something else, but his deformations were quite distinct. The right side of his body was handsome and human, while his left side was frightening and trollish. His left eye glowed a dull red, the left side of his mouth was overly wide and filled with sharp teeth, and the fingers of his left hand were long and tipped with wicked black claws. Somewhere, he had found an ancient garment that hadn’t completely rotted away. It was made out of what had once been rich green silk and was draped over one shoulder and belted at his waist.

His voice was a raspy tenor only partially slurred by the deformation of his mouth. “Come with me, Snake Woman. I would take you to the Mother’s womb.”

Mellinda held back a retort. It was the third time he had referred to her as a snake. If the fool had any idea who she really was, he wouldn’t dare. He and his people should all be bowing and scraping to her.

Nevertheless, she forced a smile and gave him a bow of her own. “Of course, my king.” Mellinda meekly stood aside as the king walked towards the rear of his chamber.

“*He’s right, you know. You are a snake,*” said another, unwelcome voice from within her mind. “*At least he knows it before letting you in. I wish I would have known.*”

Her reply to this second voice was mental, *You should know by now that your insults mean nothing to me, Arcon.*

“*I bet it’s the rings that help him see it,*” Arcon observed. “*You give away your true nature with every movement.*”

The comment stung but Mellinda did not let her irritation show. It had been weeks since she had turned the power of the rings inward and she still didn’t quite have full control over her new body’s eccentricities. The rings had turned her limbs snakelike. Keeping them under control required a constant amount of concentration and Arcon did his best to undermine her efforts whenever possible.

*You seek to distract me, but your voice is as a mere buzzing of a fly. Easily ignored,* she replied.

“*In that case you won’t mind if I rattle off a list of other animals I could compare you to,*” Arcon said with amusement. “*Let’s see. Vulture, slug, muskrat, moonrat, mole, salamander, dog, wolf, goat . . .*”

Mellinda gritted her teeth. This was another of Arcon's techniques to annoy her. When regular insults didn't work, he fell back on chanting inane lists of words. Ridiculous. He should have learned by now that his prattle had no effect.

"You c-coming?" asked Murtha, the king's part dwarf assistant. Her greenish lips were pulled back in a distrustful grimace, revealing a mouth filled with rows of sharp teeth.

Mellinda realized that she was still standing by the throne while the others were waiting at a doorway on the rear of the throne room. "Of course," Mellinda said, her cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

"This way," said the Troll King. "The Mother awaits."

The king exited the throne room and Murtha gave Mellinda an assessing glare before following at his heels. Murtha wore a ragged dress made of animal skins. She was the only trollkin Mellinda had seen wearing a dress. Perhaps she saw herself as the king's consort? Whatever she was, the half-dwarf held some importance to the king. Mellinda knew that if she couldn't win the creature over sooner or later she would have to kill her.

Mellinda stepped out of the throne room and onto a crumbling stone balcony. She moved to the balcony's edge, pausing for a moment to take in the view. The Troll King's throne room was at the top of the Axis Palace, the tallest building in Malaroo. It was a pyramidal structure made of enormous rock slabs carved by Roo artisans and the home of generations of Roo High Priestesses. From this vantage point she could see the whole of KhanzaRoo as well as most of the swamps surrounding it.

KhanzaRoo had once been one of the greatest cities in the known lands. A marvel of engineering, it was built on top of unstable shifting swampland. Yet it had thrived. This was because Roo people had made a city that breathed with the swamp. The permanent structures had been made with foundations sunk deep into the earth below, while the smaller homes and businesses had been made out of wood and anchored to the grassy islands that shifted with the waters. It had all been linked together by rope bridges and rafts that floated on top of the water and could be moved and re-anchored when needed.

But those glory days were a thousand years gone. The wooden structures and rafts had long rotted away and been reclaimed by the swamp. Now only the crumbling remains of the most well-built stone buildings marked the location of the once prosperous city. The current state of KhanzaRoo would have left her with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction, had she not been filled with irritation at Arcon's incessant droning.

*"Pig, tortoise, horse, cow, frog, rabbit, mountain cat, mist bronto . . ."*

"Is something troubling you, Mellinda?" asked the Troll King. The tall leader of the trollkin was waiting for her next to a staircase that descended from the far end of the balcony. His human eye was fixed on her with curiosity.

"I am well, my king," Mellinda assured him. This king was perceptive. She was confident that she had let no hint of her frustration touch her face. "I simply feel a bit of sadness at KhanzaRoo's current state."

Her words were partially true. When Mellinda was a child, KhanzaRoo had been her favorite place to visit. Then again, when Mellinda had been a goddess, she had choked and overwhelmed the city with her armies of trolls.

“*Snake*,” Arcon added, an accusatory note in his voice.

The king, unable to hear the snide comment of the human mage trapped inside of Mellinda’s mind, simply nodded in understanding. “Yes, my city is a shambles. But that will soon change. My people work hard to bring KhanzaRoo back to its glory. Already they have cleared most of the buildings of trees and vines. It will go faster as our numbers grow.”

“They have done admirably,” she said, bowing her head slightly. “And just how quickly are the trollkin growing?”

The right side of his face gave her a slight smile. “The Mother births more of us every day, but . . . you will see.”

Mellinda smiled and inclined her head again. From her short time among the trollkin, she estimated that they numbered no more than three hundred. For her army to be effective she would need more. A lot more.

The Troll King turned and descended the stairway that snaked down the palace’s terraced outer wall. As she followed the king and his assistant, Mellinda could see the result of the trollkin’s hard work. Though sections of the palace were still blanketed by vines, all of the sections in use had been completely scraped clean. The stairway, though cracked and weathered, was clear save for one place half way down where a tenacious swamp tree had grown out of the side of the palace. The trollkin had cut the offending tree down, leaving a flat stump. Its roots bored into the rock of the palace like spider legs.

They passed the stump and rounded the corner of the pyramid and Mellinda saw that the staircase continued all the way down to the base of the pyramid where a small courtyard butted up to the edge of a small lake. A distant memory entered Mellinda’s mind and she knew where they were headed.

“We are going to the High Priestess’ gardens?” she surmised pointing at the shoreline below. To call the shoreline of that lake within the swamp a garden now was a bit ridiculous. It was an overgrown tangle of vines. But once it had been full of exotic flowers and fruit trees.

The Troll King slowed his descent and looked back at her. “I do not know what this location was once called but that is where the Mother’s womb will greet us, yes.”

“Her womb is here?” Mellinda asked. She had expected it to be some distance away, further into the swamp.

“The Mother is everywhere. Her womb is wherever she wants it to be,” said Murtha, narrowing her eyes.

“*Chipmunk, ox, bear*,” added Arcon.

“Murtha is correct,” the Troll King said. “Her womb was not always here, but she moved it once she had chosen this city for our people.”

“I see.” So she could move parts of her body great distances now? This was more evidence that the Troll Mother had changed greatly since Mellinda had last been

here.

The Troll King continued walking down the stairs and Murtha let out a short hiss, before turning around and trailing after him. Mellinda caught herself chewing her lower lip. It was an old habit from her childhood that she had picked back up recently. It mainly happened when she was deep in thought and Arcon was droning on.

*“Pigeon, donkey, sparrow . . . uh, sock-.”*

*Sock isn’t an animal, you idiot!* Mellinda snapped and her knees buckled, causing her legs to bow out bonelessly. She nearly fell.

Arcon laughed. *“It threw off your concentration though, didn’t it?”*

*Silence!* she barked back at him mentally as she forced her legs back into proper form. *You gain nothing with your annoyances!*

*“Ah, but annoying you is the only true pleasure I have left,”* Arcon replied. *“Deer, pheasant, boar, snail, worm, mouse . . .”*

Mellinda growled under her breath and pushed his voice as far to the back of her mind as she could. Unfortunately, the body was his and her grasp on his mind was slippery. The mage had learned much in his time under her control and no matter how far away she shoved him, he always found a way to come back. Oh how she wished she could tear him from her thoughts and extinguish him altogether.

As she neared the base of the stairs, the air grew thicker with humidity and her nostrils were filled with the slightly chemical scent that was unique to the Troll Swamps. She breathed it in with satisfaction, reminding herself that this was all her doing. Whatever her current petty setbacks, she was still Mellinda, the Dark Goddess; the Troll Queen. The world had once trembled at her name and it was only a matter of time before her full glory was reattained.

Two trollkin waited for them at the bottom of the stairs. One had a mangled nose, protruding fangs and cat-like ears, while the other was incredibly thin and exuded a yellowish slime. They grinned at the Troll King’s arrival and called out to him. He smiled back at them and called them out by name, patting them on the shoulders as he strode by.

Mellinda raised one eyebrow at the familiarity in which the king addressed his subjects. *This may be easier than I thought. They do not fear him.*

Arcon paused in his litany long enough to respond, *“Look at their eyes. They adore him. You put too much stock in fear.”*

She let out a soft chuckle. *You will see how easily their adoration for him fades when someone with true power comes along.*

The Troll King noted her amusement. “Do you have something to say, Snake Woman?”

Her smile slid. “No, my king. I was just admiring the rapport you have with your subjects.”

His human eye twitched and he gestured at the two trollkin. “This is Omar and Trelsk. I pulled them from the Mother’s womb two days ago.”

“Two days?” she said. “Yet they speak and move like fully formed adults.”

The two new trollkin looked at each other and the one called Trelsk said, “Why

would we not speak?”

Murtha frowned. “We are all born that way, snake-k. Not like-k you weak-k humans.”

“It is a gift from the Mother,” explained the Troll King. “She teaches us in the womb so that we awaken strong and aware.”

“*They are born as adults.*” Arcon said in surprise.

*Fantastic, isn't it? They emerge able to communicate and understand orders.* Her army would be so much greater than the regular troll army she had intended to build. She just needed to make sure that they would follow her.

“Omar?” she said and the trollkin with the cat-like ears looked down at her in curiosity. She pointed at his twisted lump of a nose. “You poor thing. Can you breathe?”

He blinked at her and she could tell that he was sensitive about his disfigurement. “I breathe.”

“Oh, but you will breathe so much better,” she purred and reached into him with her power, her fingers writhing bonelessly with the energy of the rings.

She had been using the rings for over a month now and she was still impressed by the complexity of Stardeon's creation. The rings established a link between her mind and the body of the creature before her. This link was much like a bonding wizard had with his bonded, but it was linked with its physiology only. She couldn't hear the creature's thoughts or emotions, but she could feel and see within its body.

This trollkin didn't just have a facial deformity. The very bone structure of his skull was twisted. This was why his fangs protruded from his mouth so strangely. This most likely also gave him chronic headaches; something else that he would be grateful to have relieved. Fixing these defects would be a delicate procedure, requiring her to move large blood vessels out of the way while she reconfigured the bone. Carefully, she poured her magic into the trollkin's flesh-

“*Fish, chicken, duck, goose!*”

Arcon's voice was as loud in her ears as if he were shouting right into them. Mellinda jerked in surprise and the trollkin screeched in pain. Blood erupted from one of Omar's nostrils in several long spurts.

“Omar!” shouted the king.

Hurriedly, Mellinda shoved Arcon's voice away and repaired the ruptured artery. She then moved on to his bone structure. Omar continued to screech as she worked and just as Mellinda put the finishing touches on the flesh of his face, she was tackled by the king's assistant.

“What did you do to him?” Murtha demanded. Her weight pinned Mellinda to the ground and the long talons on her fingertips pierced deeply into the flesh of Mellinda's arms.

Mellinda's first instinct was to destroy her. It would have been so easy to use the rings' power to explode the trollkin from within as Ewzad Vriil had done so many times in the past. If it weren't for Arcon cheerfully egging her on, she might have done so. Instead, Mellinda ignored the pain of Murtha's attack. Her voice was calm as she

said, "I fixed him. Look for yourself."

"My face!" Omar exclaimed. Touching his new features with trembling fingers. All traces of his former disfigurement were gone. He now had a proud human nose and his fangs no longer protruded oddly, but had been shortened and fit snugly in the proper place in his mouth. "It's different."

"Murtha, let her go!" the king commanded.

"How many more of us will she change?" the half-dwarf replied, her grip tightening. Mellinda gasped with the pain.

"It is okay. It hurt but I-I am better," said Omar, a smile touching his mouth. "Look at my face, Trelsk!"

"Let her up, Murtha," the king said, placing a hand on his assistant's shoulder.

Murtha glared at Mellinda but reluctantly released her and stood. She stomped several paces away and grumbled.

Mellinda groaned as the pressure was relieved. She climbed shakily to her feet, unused to being attacked in such a physical manner.

"How badly are you hurt, Snake Woman?" the king asked. "The wounds on your arms-."

"I heal swiftly, my king. In that way I am not so different from your people," she assured him. Fast healing was one of the benefits that had come from turning the power of the rings inward. She could feel the magic working. The wounds had already stopped bleeding and, though they were tender, they itched more than hurt.

"Good." The king's human arm shot out and his powerful fingers wrapped around Mellinda's slender neck. "Then hear me, snake. You will not use your magic on any of my people without permission. Do you understand?"

His grip was firm, but not so tight that she couldn't reply. "Of course, my king. I apologize. I meant no harm."

The king glanced at Omar, who was still feeling his face in shocked amazement, and nodded. He released her from his grasp. "Come. Let us put this magic of yours to good use."

He headed down a trail that curved along the outer edge of the swamp lake. Murtha hurried after him. Mellinda cleared her throat and followed, ignoring the lumbering forms of Omar and Trelsk that shadowed her.

*What were you thinking, you fool?* she demanded. *That was very nearly a disaster!*

"*Did I disrupt you?*" Arcon replied, joyfully feigning surprise. "*I thought that my voice was as a mere 'buzzing of a fly'.*"

The trail led them to the north side of the lake. There they came upon the ruins of several small stone buildings that had become completely overgrown. Standing between the ruins was a single stone chair that faced the water. It was eroded and covered with moss, but there were just enough carvings on the chair's surface that Mellinda's memories were awakened.

They were standing in Solitude, the center of the gardens. It was a holy place, the one location in all of KhanzaRoo where the High Priestess had been able to find

complete respite from the rigors of her position. When the High Priestess sat in the Lone Chair, no one was allowed to approach. None dared even speak until she stood to leave.

The last time Mellinda had been in Solitude, KhanzaRoo had been abandoned by its people. She, the Troll Queen; sole ruler of the swamplands of Malaroo, had sat in the Lone Chair herself. But unlike the Roo High Priestesses of old, she had found no peace there. The gardens had been dead, poisoned by the thick layer of troll slime that covered the surface of the water. The air had reeked from the stench of the bloated corpses of the ornamental fish that had once populated the lake and her magical control over her vast troll army had been the only thing keeping the place quiet.

Now, a thousand years later, life had found a way to re-enter the lake. Though a thin layer of slime still coated the waters and the flowers that bloomed were foreign and strange, it was lush and green. Solitude felt like a holy place once more.

The Troll King approached the Lone Chair and Mellinda began chewing her bottom lip again. As he sat in the chair there was a certain regal rightness about him that set her on edge. Despite the ragged condition of his raiment and the deformities that marked him, he belonged in this place.

*“It bothers you, doesn’t it?”* Arcon observed, his voice smug. *“You hate the thought of someone else ruling your old homeland.”*

Mellinda smoothed her expression. *It will be mine again soon enough.*

There was a splash at the lake’s edge. A thin, lanky form climbed out of the water and rose to its feet. It was naked and sexless and at first glance Mellinda thought it a common troll. Then she noticed its very human mouth and eyes. It approached the king with easy strides, its clawed hands clasped together, and gave the king a reverent bow.

“The Mother’s womb stirs.” Its voice was raspy, with a distinctly aristocratic accent.

“Where are my cullers?” the king asked.

“They are at work in the city. It is an odd time of day for her to birth, is it not?” it asked.

The Troll King looked to Murtha. “Go and fetch them for me.”

The half dwarf glanced nervously in Mellinda’s direction, not wanting to leave him with her. “I c-can do it, k-king. I was your c-culler once.”

“Alone?” he asked.

“Omar and Trelsk-k c-can help me,” she suggested and the two bulky trollkin nodded happily at being offered such an honorable task.

“If I might ask, oh king,” said the troll with the human mouth. “Why does the Mother stir at this hour?”

“I have brought her a visitor,” the Troll King replied, gesturing towards Mellinda.

It looked at her and cocked its head, noticing her for the first time. “Ah! You have found the snake, I see.”

Mellinda ignored Arcon’s laughter and forced a sultry smile. “My name is