

# Ascension

Book 1, Chapter 1

## Dark Communion

BY:

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“I will do your bidding, as you command, my Lord Daalon.” Questa Paar said calmly, his head low. Questa knelt before a vast altar, high atop the tallest peak of Stone Reach, the heart of the dark elves Great Empire and home to the glorious palace of the ruling House. A clear, dark night enveloped the scene, a blanket of stars overhead. The Great Temple where Questa communed with his dark god rose high above all the rest of the Empire. Circular in shape, the large area was enclosed by a waist high, stone wall and, like all dark elf architecture, was carved out of the solid mountain rock. Inside this border was a ring of cylindrical columns, capped by great, carved monoliths with a wide opening at the north end, and a grand entrance to the subterranean palace at the south end.

“I trust you will, my loyal servant. And you shall be greatly rewarded for your service.” Daalon spoke with a deep, thundering voice, though only Questa could hear it. It was between two columns to the north where the smoky visage of the god Daalon appeared to Questa. Clouds of all shades of gray swirled about the edge of a large, misshapen and demonic face, thin with a long cleft chin, hollowed cheek bones and a ridge that ran from the bottom of his brow to the back of his skull. Two immense horns sprouted from the top of his hairless skull on either side of the brow ridge and curved round the back of his long, devilish ears. His eyes were absolutely colorless and his skin was a dark, charcoal gray.

“Take this token to aide you in your task.” Daalons voice again thundered inside Questa’s head. Bright light flashed amidst a small cloud of sulfurous smoke and a beautiful amulet appeared before Questa.

“I understand, my Lord.” Questa said, his head still bowed. Questa took the amulet in his hands. Its center was a perfectly spherical stone of quartz encompassed by an elaborate and seemingly random web of thin strands of silver. The object was round in shape and was small, like a baby’s fist. He gently lowered the amulet into a deep pocket on the right side of his cloak. The strong winds continued to sweep across the large courtyard, grabbing at his long stark white hair. He was a young elf, seventy years. His skin was pale, like all dark elves, and his eyes, like Daalon’s, were devoid of color. His large cloak, tied around the waist with a thick sash, was a dark gray, almost black and covered his large leathery wings. Like all dark elves of noble blood he was born with a full spread of wings, similar to a bat. Noble females, by contrast, were born with a span of tissue that ran up the inside of the arm and down the side of the torso. Questa’s wings were elastic and very flexible, and were worn folded against his body, clasping around the neck.

“Summon me again when your task is complete.” Daalon said, his voice filling Questa’s head. The cloudy visage of Daalon began to dissipate and the smoke drifted away on the wind. Questa was alone; his head now full of

the sound of the wind blowing around him. He rose to his feet and turned toward the palace entrance to the south. He entered the wide descending corridor, and left the star lit court behind him. He was immediately engulfed in darkness. Questa, like all dark elves, was nocturnal and possessed a form of vision that allowed him to see in the blackness of night. Objects, depths, textures, even sources of heat and light, appeared to him in a vast spectrum of shades of red.

The corridor meandered and split off at several junctions. Questa continued without apprehension. This lightless labyrinth was meant to stave off any attacks to the palace, and only an experienced dark elf could successfully navigate the endless tunnels with their dead ends and many intersections.

Questa continued on his path for several moments before he neared the living quarters of the Master Lord of the Great Empire, his father, Tithan Paar. He stealthily approached the chambers high arched doorway with its heavy oaken door ajar. As with the wondrous architecture of the high courtyard, all the corridors and chambers of the palace were carved into the mountain rock itself and polished smooth, like glass. Questa remained outside the door for several moments, listening silently to the conversation inside.

“You must calm yourself, my love.” Tithan said lovingly to his wife. He held her close to his chest and wrapped his arms and large leathery wings around her. She buried her face in the soft black silk of his tunic, her hands pressed to her face on either side. Tithan Paar, the Master Lord and ruler of the Great Empire, was tall for a dark elf, five and a half feet. He had a slender, muscular build. His hair was jet black as were his eyes, which held great youth in their almond shape, though Tithan was almost 187 years old. Tithan was generally a callous, selfish and pretentious man, but he had always had a soft spot for Draveg, his favorite of twelve wives and he had a warm look in his eyes as he gazed down at her.

“But are you sure?” Draveg asked of him, her voice trembling as she looked into the face of her husband with her soft, black eyes. Her face was moist from tears, but she still held that young beauty that Tithan saw in her when he first bought her from her father. Not being of noble birth, only sold into nobility, she did not have the wings of a noble child. Her hair was white, pulled back into a ponytail held by a leather tie anchored to a bright gold headband. The back of the headband cradled the lower half of her skull, an ornament typically worn by women of nobility. Over the porcelain skin of her lovely figure she wore a long draping fabric, white in color and somewhat

sheer. The fabric hung around her neck with a gold collar and had a plunging neckline, barely covering her breasts. The sides were open and the gold embroidered edge of the fabric draped across her buttocks, exposing her back completely. She stood a mere five feet tall with the beautiful round belly of a woman almost eight months pregnant.

“Nolraa has assured me everything is fine.” Tithan insisted, gently squeezing her closer to him.

Next to Tithan and his wife, stood his great friend and court advisor, Nolraa. The three stood in the cavernous common chamber of the Paar family. The most prominent feature of the chamber was the grand central pool with two massive fountains at either end. The pool was not deep, only four feet, and was bordered by a series of steps that dropped into the pool. Nolraa faced his dear friends, compassion written in his features. His eyes were of a steel-gray color and his hair was black, elaborately wound into the typical headdress of a Wizard of the First Circle, the most powerful wizards in the Great Circle. Nolraa also wore the purple colored robe that only a wizard of the First Circle could wear. He neatly had his wings folded and his hands clasped beneath the robe.

“I’ve foreseen it my Lady. Your child is female.” Nolraa stated respectfully. He well understood Draveg’s fears. He remembered how his mother died giving birth to him. He remembered the bargain made centuries ago. Nolraa replayed the story in his mind. The story of how the noble dark elves were granted their wings by the god Gestad. Nolraa remembered his father telling him how a dark elf is expected and encouraged to take several wives.

“My dear wife,” Tithan began, in a soothing and patient voice, “We all have heard the tale of Gestad who fell in love with a mortal and told the father that if he let the child become his wife, he would grant the noblest of dark elves to be born with wings. A female would be allowed any number of daughters, but only one noble son, and upon his birth, her life and soul would become the property of Gestad.”

Tithan gently put his hands on Draveg’s shoulders and pushed her away from him slightly. He looked into her eyes sincerely, and said, “Nolraa has assured us both that our child is female. You need not fear dying for Gestad.” Tithan’s black silk tunic hung around his neck with a silver chain adorned with a lovely pendant of sparkling alabaster. The tunic was open in the back, allowing for his impressive wingspan, and draped loosely over the top of his tight, black leather pants. Tithan wore soft, molded leather boots beneath the loose cuffs of his pant legs.

Tithan moved to place his arm around his wife, took her right hand into his left, and gently led her toward a large oak chamber door. “Now go back to your chamber and instruct your nurse to put you into bed. You need your

rest.” He gently kissed her on the forehead and held the door open for her until she was half way to the adjoining hallway.

Finally Tithan let the door close silently. “Shall we go to stretch our wings?” he said, turning to face Nolraa.

“As you wish, my Lord”.

Questa, hearing his father and Nolraa approaching, silently fled up the same corridors he had only moments before descended. He reached the archway and exited out onto the grand courtyard where he and Daalon had communed earlier. I’ve got to hide before father and that detestable wizard get here, he thought to himself. He darted behind one of the large, polished stone pillars next to the magnificent entrance to the palace. He wanted to be close enough to hear his father and Nolraa speak.

Tithan and Nolraa casually, and without hesitation, navigated the corridors that led to the courtyard high atop the palace. As they reached the exit to the courtyard, they deposited their cloaks at the base of the archway. They emerged into the moonlit night, the cool, crisp spring air greeting them. The wind blew hard against their backs as they neared the center of the ring of pillars.

“My Lord,” Nolraa began, “May I speak with you candidly about your son, Questa.” Nolraa always treated Tithan, his Master, with great respect. Tithan would not hesitate to punish any lapse in decorum and the strict demands of court conduct. Hearing his name, Questa became intensely interested in his fathers conversation with the wizard that he hated so much. *How dare Nolraa presume to speak of me behind my back, and to my father no less, he thought.*

“Of course.” Tithan replied, looking not at Nolraa, but gazing at the two bright discs that hung in the night sky. Of the three moons that rose and fell over Stone Reach, these were the only two visible. The smallest moon, known as the dark moon, could only be seen when it eclipsed the largest of the moons. The light of the two moons lit the cold, hard lines of Tithan’s face, casting an eerie pall over the porcelain skin. His black hair danced about on the strong wind. He had his wings pressed against his back, the tips folded over his shoulders, clasping each other.

“I fear his ambition, my Lord. His lust for your position and power may drive him to treasonous acts against you.”

From his vantage point, Questa could easily hear the wizard's words of blasphemy. How right you are, wizard.

"I would expect such ambition, but I suspect his loyalty to me is not as strong." Tithan said, stepping toward the stone wall outside the ring of pillars. Nolraa obediently followed. Reaching the wall, Tithan laid his hands upon it and leaned forward slightly, breathing in the crisp night air.

"As I, too, suspect, my Lord."

"We should keep a close eye on Questa, my friend. He may one day have my title and power, but not until I am finished with it."

"Yes, my Lord."

"I should like you to speak with General Coraal." Tithan turned and started toward the center of the grand courtyard, Nolraa following obediently. "Tell him to find two of the best men from amongst the Imperial Guard. They shall be our eyes and ears as it concerns my son."

"Yes, my Lord."

Reaching the center of the court, Tithan turned to his friend, grasping him by the shoulders, a gesture implying that Nolraa had permission to raise his eyes. "I should like another son, an heir, but not at the cost of my favorite wife."

"Indeed not, my Lord."

"I think I would like to spend the evening with one of my other wives. Kastraa, perhaps." A strange, lascivious grin stretched across Tithan's face.

"I shall see to it myself, my Lord."

Questa stood in the shadows listening to his father and Nolraa. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists in rage. How dare that abhorred wizard speak to his father in such a casual manner? He reached into his pocket, his fingers touching the magical amulet given to him earlier by the god Daalon. He grasped it in his palm and pulled it out into the open air. The moonlight shimmered brightly off the flawless sphere at its core.

“I’ve got plans for you, my dear Nolraa. And you, father, I’m afraid I must say goodbye.” he quietly whispered to himself. Holding the amulet with both hands, he quietly muttered a few indistinct phrases in an old dark elf dialect.

A swift gust of wind blew past Nolraa, his senses suddenly becoming alert. “Did you hear something, my Lord?”

Tithan’s senses also became quiet alert.

Suddenly, a vast portal opened over the alter at the north end of the courtyard. Bordered by a spectrum of brilliant light, the core of the dimensional portal was black as pitch. Tithan and Nolraa stopped and stared into the void.

Nolraa was the first to speak, “Stand back, my Lord.” He placed himself between Tithan and the portal, closed his eyes in a quick moment of concentration, and began to recite a spell that would create a magical, invisible shield around himself and Tithan. He was not quick enough.

With incredible speed and agility, leaping out of the portal high and far, the sleek, black creature was suddenly upon Nolraa, tackling him to the cold, hard stone. Nolraa found himself looking into the blood red eyes of an Arenay, a panther avatar. Dwelling in the Dark Realm, the panther avatar served the will of the gods as an assassin. Beautiful, muscular and quite deadly, the Arenay stood four feet at the shoulder. The panther growled Nolraa’s prone body, pinning him to the ground. Tithan stood a mere four feet away, frozen in shock and disbelief.

Nolraa tried to struggle against the weight of the creature, to no avail. The panther swatted Nolraa in the head, easily knocking him unconscious and slashing the left side of his face with razor-sharp claws. The panther raised its eyes to Tithan.

Tithan stepped backward, tripping slightly. He regained his balance as the panther started in his direction. Tithan continued to stumble backward away from the creature; unsure of what action he should take.

Questa poked his head from around the pillar to get a good look at his work, being careful not to be seen by his father. He watched with frightening giddiness as his father backed away from the creature that Questa himself had summoned from the Dark Realm.

Unsure if his dear friend Nolraa were still alive, Tithan turned and bolted toward the entrance to the palace, hoping to lose his deadly predator in the vast labyrinth beneath the high courtyard. He passed into the high arched

passage and weaved expertly around the corners and down the slopes of the tunnels, but the panther continued to follow, swallowing up the distance between them.

Finally, as Tithan neared an intersection deep in the bellows of the mountain, the panther closed in on its prey and lunged at the tiring dark elf, tackling him to the ground. Tithan struggled against the powerful creature, his screams resounding through the polished stone tunnels. The panther clawed at Tithans back, nearly tearing his magnificent wings off. Tithan was bleeding profusely and continued to wail helplessly.

The panther, at last, sank his lethal fangs into Tithans neck, collapsing his throat. The panther, fresh, warm blood dripping from its mouth, stepped off Tithan and turned back toward the way it came. Its work done, the creature left its prey to die in a pool of his own blood. The only sound in the dark corridors was that of Tithan's final breaths bubbling out of his collapsed and blood-filled throat. The panther easily navigated his way back through the labyrinth, entered the grand courtyard and returned to the Dark Realm through the portal that closed behind him.

Questa set himself upon a new task. He had watched as his father fled into the labyrinth with the panther in pursuit before removing himself from hiding. He entered into the ring of pillars and approached the unconscious body of Nolraa, bleeding heavily through wide lacerations. He crouched down next to Nolraa, near his face, pausing to gleefully admire the damage.

"Awww, did the big kitty hurt you?" Questa sadistically mocked the oblivious wizard. He reached down to Nolraa's face and caressed the gaping wounds, ignoring the blood as it ran between his fingers. His eyes became very cold as he placed the tips of his fingers around the bloodied eye of the wizard and pressed them into the flesh. With his bare hand, he viscosly wrenched Nolraa's eye from its socket, blood filling the now empty orifice

"This, my friend, will be very useful. To me anyway." As Questa stood holding Nolraa's eyeball in his fist, he laughed maliciously, throwing his head back. He suddenly felt very good about himself.

By the time a group of Imperial Guards found Nolraa, bloody and unconscious, Questa was back in his private chambers communing with Daalon.

"My task is complete, Lord Daalon, as you have commanded." Questa said over a cauldron filled with the same cloudy visage of his god.

"Very good, my child." Daalons voice filled Questa's head as he spoke. "I trust you understand your next task?"

"I do, my Lord."

“Ah, Lady Draveg. How good of you to see me.”

Draveg merely bowed her head in acknowledgment, as she was required by court protocol. Questa sat comfortably in the Master Lord’s receiving chamber holding a nearly emptied flagon of ale. It was a large, carved wooden throne with a padded seat and back. He sat lazily across the arms, his strong, sculpted body draped in a lavender silk robe open in the back. The tips of his wings, as always were clasped around his neck.

“It has been nearly three weeks since the unfortunate death of your husband, my father, and you have rarely left your room. Why is that?”

“I have been ill, my Lord.” she lied. She had always hated Questa, the only son of her departed husband.

“As you know, this is the night of the Festival of Loraal. With the arrival of summer, we must celebrate the goddess who gave it to us.” Questa was in a cheerful mood.

“Yes, my Lord,”

“You also know that this is the night that the court will officially recognize me with the title of Master Lord. The night when everything that was my father’s becomes mine. His power, his wealth, and all of his possessions.” Questa was becoming quite giddy. “And that would include you, would it not, my dear?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Draveg instinctively cringed at the notion of becoming his property. He would be able to do what he pleased with her. She also feared for her unborn child.

“Tonight,” he began with great exuberance, rising from his chair with his hands in the air, “I become Master Lord of the Great Empire. I will take our friend Nolraa as my trusted Wizard Lord, and I shall take you as my first wife.” He looked directly into Draveg’s upturned eyes.

“You will look away from me when I speak to you!” he snapped at her, tossing his empty flagon at her and trembling with rage. As if a switch had been flipped, he casually turned his back to her and sat upon the throne, folding his wings against himself and clasping the tips around his neck.

“I should like you to be there, Lady Draveg, when the ceremonies begin.” he stated calmly.

“Of course, my Lord.”

Questa watched her bow her head to him, appraising her figure. She wore the usual costume of a noble lady of the court. The same sheer draping white fabric hung around the neck with a gold collar. He admired her stunning

beauty for a moment before dismissing her, and as she walked out and toward the common chamber, Questa ogled the round fullness of her bottom, its cheeky cleavage exposed.

The heavy oak door between the chambers closed behind Draveg, and Questa was left to himself to daydream of the coming celebration late that night. He soon fell fast asleep, drunk and slumped over in his throne.

When Questa woke two hours later, only a short time before the start of the festival, his head pounded and his mouth was dry. He gently shook his head, trying to clear the sleepy cobwebs from his mind. He was only momentarily unaware that he was not alone in the great chamber.

Three small hunch-backed creatures scrambled about the lower risers of the dais where Questa was perched. The small claws on their hands and feet clicked and scraped across the stone, echoing throughout the chamber. They chattered at one another with small raspy voices. Questa rubbed the sleep from his eyes and was briefly shocked at the sight of the three figures before him. Nekantes, the children of the god Daalon. All three were covered in a coarse, oily fur and had a thick, long mane that ran from the front of the brow to base of their spines.

The first one, on Questa's right, sat perched on the steps of the dais, leaning on the knuckles of his hands. He had a small round head with beady, silver eyes, a protruding snout like a fruit bat and large, elongated ears. He also had small wings that spanned between his arms and torso; a long, whipping tail; triple jointed hind legs, like a lamb's, and small, curved spikes on his arms, legs and head. It appeared to Questa that the creature was nervous and easily distracted, as it looked about the room curiously.

The creature on Questa's left had small furry breasts and appeared to be almost a duplicate of the first, but had steel-blue eyes and far fewer spikes adorning her body. She didn't seem as distracted as the first, as she was studying Questa just as intently as he studied her. Questa now turned to the little creature in the center, which began to speak in his small voice as their eyes met.

"My name Daanoth. This Rostaat," he pointed to the male on his left, "and this Rotraal."

"What do you want?" Questa was unsure why these three would have left the Dark Realm. Nekantes most often left their home on instruction from Daalon, but sometimes visited the Mortal Realm purely to cause mischief.

Daanoth was distracted briefly as Rostaat scurried off to study the many large statues of dark elves that were carved into niches along the vast walls of the chamber. “These mortals ugly!” he exclaimed pointing up with his crooked little fingers at a nude of a noble female dark elf.

“This one pretty.” Rotraal said, approaching Questa. She reached up to touch him, but Questa easily swatted her away impatiently.

“Answer me!!” Questa demanded of Daanoth.

“Father Daalon send us.” Daanoth said, startled for a moment by Questa’s anger.

“For what purpose?” Questa remained suspicious of the three creatures and kept a close eye on Rotraal, who was quite taken with him, and Rostaat, who continued to scurry about curiously.

“He fears the Draveg child.”

“It’s time to rise, my Lady.” Tala spoke softly in Draveg’s ear, bending over her Mistress’ body. “We must get you dressed for the festival.”

“Leave me be!” Draveg said in a voice muffled by her pillow, swatting away her chamber nurse and rolling over. She rested beneath a thin, white cotton sheet and lay half on her swollen belly and half on her side. Her bed was covered by a large canopy and semi-sheer veil, and was set upon a dais next to the vast wall opposite the oak doors that barred entrance into her private chamber. Her large bedchamber was located in a secluded wing of the Great Palace, along with the chambers of the Master Lord’s other wives. The room was decorated with the same sculptures that adorned the Master Lord’s receiving chamber, and was furnished with various tables, bureaus and plush sofas. Across the tops of the carved wooden dressing tables were spread trinkets, jewelry and perfumes.

“Don’t make me have to dump a pot of cold water over you, my Lady.” Tala joked. Draveg herself trained Tala. Draveg and her then new husband, Tithan, on one of their frequent camping trips alone into the forests north of the Great Palace, found her as a child. Tala was a forest elf that had been orphaned when a rampaging Filitan, a mutant giant, attacked her family’s village. Tithan cared little for the tiny forest elf or her plight, but could not resist Draveg when she pleaded with him to let her take her in. After 35 years of loyal service Tala remained with her mistress, her surrogate mother.

“You probably would, too.” Draveg laughed as she rolled onto her back, her swollen breasts and belly barely hidden beneath the bed sheet. She looked up at her faithful servant. She saw in her bright green eyes the compassion and love of her ‘daughter’. Tala’s hair was a dark auburn color and was cut shoulder length to beautifully frame the elegant lines of her face. She wore her hair loose and occasionally pulled the locks at the side behind her pointed ears. Her soft, radiant skin was a copper color and she wore a draped fabric similar to Draveg’s costume, not as deeply cut in the rear or front, and a dull gray color.

“Let’s get you out of bed and dressed, my Lady.” Tala said, pulling back the thin sheet and helping Draveg into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Even after 35 years of service to Draveg, she addressed her in the proper manner.

“I can dress myself, Tala.” Draveg said, swatting away the helping hands of the forest elf. “I would like you to go to Lord Questa and inform him that I will be ready to present myself to him shortly.”

“Right away, my Lady.”

“Ahh, my good friend Nolraa.” Questa said with blatant sarcasm in his voice. He sat on his lovely wooden chair upon its dais in the Master Lord’s receiving chamber. As usual, he reclined across the arms of the chair with his wings folded neatly against his body and a half emptied flagon of ale in his hand. Like his father before him, he wore a loose black silk tunic over tight leather pants. His pendant, however, was much different than the one his father wore.

Nolraa silently entered the room, closing the heavy doors behind him. He respectfully kept his head low and the train of his elegant purple robe followed behind him as if it floated on air.

“You are awfully somber this evening. Remove your hood and let look on you.” Questa instructed malevolently, absolutely thrilled with his power over Nolraa.

“As you wish, my Lord.” Nolraa painfully obeyed. As he pulled the hood back over his now stark white hair, no longer thick and robust, Questa could see the long wide marks across the left side of his face. Still healing, the wounds were a bright red, tender and sore. Nolraa instinctively cringed, knowing that Questa was smiling triumphantly at his now disfigured face. He knew that Questa hated him and with Tithan dead, he would rule over

the Empire, himself and the beautiful Lady Draveg. Nolraa was filled with rage and great hatred for Questa. He was suspicious of him, convinced he was behind the murder of Tithan. He had no evidence. He was helpless.

“Do you like my pendant?” Questa asked, smiling perversely.

“My Lord?” Nolraa was trying to understand what Questa was leading up to.

“My pendant. Do you like it?” Questa took it into his fingers and dangled it in the air. “I made it myself. It has taken me nearly three weeks to fashion it. Come, take a closer look.”

Nolraa hesitantly stepped forward as he was commanded. He looked deeply into the heart of the object with his remaining eye.

“Do you see anything familiar?” Questa asked with great excitement growing in his voice.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean, my Lord.”

“Look closely. Do you see anything?”

Nolraa began to make out a form inside the object, something round and white. As the pendant turned slightly in the air, Nolraa caught a glimpse of some a circle of steel-gray color with a black dot in the center. He recognized it now, and his heart fell.

“Yes, Nolraa. It’s your eye. I wish I could say I found it rolling about when I happened upon your unconscious body in the grand courtyard.” he paused for a moment. Nolraa looked at him dumbfounded. “I have a confession to make, my dear, disfigured friend.”

Questa rose to his feet and returned to his chair. He reached into a pocket in his tunic and pulled out the amulet that was given to him by Daalon. He tossed the amulet to Nolraa, “Do you recognize this?”

“No, my Lord.”

“It’s the little trinket I used to summon that nasty tempered beast that gave you those rather ugly marks on your face, and played a brutal game of cat-and-mouse with my departed father.”

“I knew it was you!” Nolraa hissed, his words dripping with rage. He stepped toward Questa.

“I wouldn’t do anything foolish if I were you.”

“I’m not afraid of you or your guards. I would gladly die if it meant taking you with me.” Nolraa again moved toward Questa, rage etched across his mangled features.

“Oh, I wouldn’t need those pitiful little minions. I have this lovely trinket.” Questa dangled his pendant before him.

“You would kill your father and disfigure me, to sit on the throne and make a necklace out of my eye?”

“You silly, silly man.” Questa rose, suddenly very angry. “I was perfectly satisfied to wait for my father to give me the throne, but you had to poison his thoughts. Filling his head with lies and suspicions about me, turning him against me! None of this would have happened if it weren’t for your meddling. My Lord Daalon saw what was happening and chose to help me punish you, and all my enemies.”

Nolraa looked at Questa, shocked at hearing the name of the dark god. “You evil little...”

“Choose your words carefully, Nolraa!!” Questa spat angrily, again dangling the pendant in front of Nolraa.

“I collected this piece of you as a precaution. I knew you would try to kill me if you ever found out about my plans. So I fashioned this magical pendant to protect me.” He sat back down in his chair, his wings folded beneath him. “I can choose to inflict any sort of torture I wish upon you, with only a thought.”

Nolraa suddenly bent forward, a wrenching pain burning in his abdomen. He fell to one knee as the pain continued to tear into him.

“You can feel my power over you.” Questa smiled triumphantly at the kneeling form of Nolraa, writhing in agony on the floor. “This pendant will also protect me from any harm you may wish to inflict on me. Any attacks on me will only harm you twofold.”

Instantly the pain in Nolraa’s belly eased, and he rose slowly to his feet. “What do you want of me?” he asked, breathing heavily.

“I have a task for you to perform. I would suggest you don’t refuse me.”

“What is it?”

“Kill lady Draveg and her child.” Questa stated coldly.

Outside the doors to Questa’s receiving chamber, Tala crouched with her ear to the doors, listening intently to the conversation inside. She had arrived only moments after Nolraa, and was about to turn away and return to Draveg when she heard Questa begin his tale of conspiracy and murder. She became frightened and physically ill as she heard Questa order the death of her Mistress and the child. I must warn my Lady, she thought as she rose and silently fled down the dark corridor toward her Lady’s chamber.

“Why must you ask me to do this?” Nolraa was pained by this command to murder the wife and unborn child of his dearest friend.

“It is not your place to ask, but to obey.” Again Nolraa fell to his knees, gripping his belly.

“I...I will obey, my Lord.” Nolraa forced the words out between painful gasps for air. His heart sank and tears began to well up in his eyes. “I must return to my chamber to prepare, my Lord.”

“Very good. You will leave now and return when your task is complete.” Questa commanded calmly and coldly.

Nolraa rose, a dull ache remaining in his belly. He turned away from Questa and replaced the hood over his disfigured face. He left the room quietly, humiliated, angry, and beaten.

As Nolraa closed the door behind him, the three Nekantes came out from their hiding places. “We go watch?” Daanoth asked enthusiastically. The other two were equally excited at the idea of watching Nolraa perform his duty.

“You may. Just be sure you are not seen.” Questa said, dismissing the three companions. Their claws clicked across the floor as they scurried to the door.

When Tala arrived at Draveg’s chambers, she found her casually brushing her hair. Tala was flushed and breathing heavily and sweat dampened her soft skin. She rushed to Draveg’s side and took her gently by the shoulders. “We must leave now, my Lady. We have to get away!!”

“Why? What’s...?”

“No time. We have to leave!!” Tala said cutting her Mistress off.

Seeing the fear and the urgency in Tala’s face, Draveg surrendered. Tala led her to a bureau next to Draveg’s bed, pulled out a few pieces of clothing, and dressed her quickly.

“Please tell me what’s going on!” Draveg managed to blurt out between shoves and twists as Tala dressed her. Tala claimed a few items of clothing for herself and threw them on roughly.

“Questa has sent Nolraa to kill you and the child, my Lady. I don’t know why. I overheard them talking. Now hush, we must go quickly, Nolraa is on his way.”

“Are you sure?” Draveg asked in disbelief. “Maybe you heard them wrong?”

“No, my Lady. I know what I heard. Now go. Go!” she said pushing her toward the door and into the corridor.

They ran squarely into Nolraa. The hood of his cloak was lowered and the women could not see his face.

Tala grabbed Draveg and forced her back into the chamber, trying to close the heavy door behind her.

With a mere wave of his hand, a magical wind blew the doors off their iron hinges, throwing Tala’s small body aside. She hit the stone floor hard, cutting her left temple. Bleeding profusely she tried to fight the darkness enveloping her. “Run, Mistress, run.”

Nolraa stepped a few paces into the room. Tala struggled to throw herself at him. He waved his hand, and again a magical wind surged into the room. It lifted Tala off the floor and tossed her cruelly against the wall. Draveg was frozen in fear. A sudden softness swept over Nolraa’s face as he looked at Draveg, who quivered in fear, and began to cry. “You need not fear me, Lady Draveg.”

“Don’t listen to him, Mistress.” Tala yelled, fighting off unconsciousness.

“Be quiet, you interfering forest slug.” Nolraa waved his hand at her and instantly Tala’s mouth was magically sealed, as if she had never had one. She groped at her face, trying to find her mouth, her muffled screams barely audible.

“I assume she has told you why I was commanded to see you tonight. I won’t ask what that dark skinned, elven harpy was doing snooping around the Master’s chambers.” Nolraa made no attempt to hide his contempt for the forest elf. He stepped closer to Draveg and took her face in his hands. Draveg couldn’t move. All she could do was stare into the face of the disfigured man she believed was only there to kill her. “I won’t harm you, Lady Draveg.”

The tears streamed from Draveg’s eyes. Could she trust him? He was a friend of her husband, but was now a servant of the detestable Questa. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Tala squirmed, still groping at her mouth, trying to scream for Draveg to flee.

“I have and always will be loyal to Tithan. I promised him that I would protect you from harm.” Nolraa looked deeply into Draveg’s. He drew back the hood of his cloak. Draveg cringed in terror. She scanned over his scarred eye, then looked into the vacant hole where his one good eye had been just that dusk. The rim of the socket was bloodied, and ravaged. She couldn’t turn away and yet she not could draw her eyes from the black void. He

shook her gently to bring her around and said to her, “I, like Tithan, have loved you since the first day I saw you. I could never harm you. I will always love you, Lady Draveg.”

He released the spell on Tala. “I only let you live so you may care for Draveg and her child. Be sure not to anger me again, forest slug.” She too was horrified at the sight of his ghastly visage. As she neared Draveg, Nolraa withdrew an object wrapped in silk from the folds of his cloak. “Be sure her child gets this. It is important. Promise me.” He said sternly to the forest elf.

Nodding, she took Draveg’s hand, leading her toward the door, and turned to see if Nolraa followed. He did not. He stood with his back to them, looking out into the vast room, not seeing anything.

“Take her out of the palace by way of the south corridors and take her to your people. They will help you care for her. I must stay and be sure that Questa believes I have obeyed his command.” He stepped toward the two women, again took Draveg’s face in his hands, and gently kissed her on her delicate lips. “Know that I will always love you.” With that he turned and allowed the women to leave. He waited several minutes, then bowed his head and cried silently, tearlessly.

After several moments, he gathered himself and began to concentrate deeply. He called upon all the power he had within him and unleashed it. From his outstretched hands, great veins of sulfurous flame shot out in all directions, engulfing the room, and incinerating everything within it. The flames swirled about everywhere, even around Nolraa himself, though he would not burn, nor would his beautiful robe. The flames slowly ceased their terrible work and Nolraa found himself standing amidst nothing but hot, black ash, and smoldering plumes of smoke. He felt a weight lifting from his heart, knowing that Draveg would be safe outside of the Great Empire and the walls of the Palace. “Now, I must convince Questa that my task is complete.”

“We lost, Daanoth?” Rotraal asked of her companion. The three had been scurrying about corridors for nearly a half hour, and still had not found Draveg’s private chambers.

“Yes,” Daanoth admitted, “we lost.”

Suddenly, from several yards ahead, came a bright yellow light that flooded the corridor. The brightness of the light blinded the three momentarily.

“What that?” Rostaat asked.

“Maybe not lost!!” Daanoth stated. As the great blast of light finally faded, the three companions waited in the darkness of the hall, stealing themselves away as best they could. They waited for Nolraa to leave. They did not have to wait long. Nolraa strode out of the room, and turned immediately away from the trio and left in the direction of Questa’s receiving chamber.

“Let’s go see.” Rostaat said excitedly.

“Yes, let’s.” chimed both Rotraal and Daanoth.

Nolraa took his time returning to see Questa. He needed time to build up enough energy within his mind to prevent Questa from reading it and discovering the truth. Nolraa tried not to imagine the things Questa would do if he found that Nolraa was deceiving him. After several long minutes, he arrived at the receiving chamber. Entering, he found Questa again sipping from a flagon of ale, reclining in his chair with a sadistic and perverse grin painted on his face.

Nolraa lowered his head and pronounced, “It is done, my Lord.”

“Wonderful!!” Questa exclaimed standing and tossing his flagon into the air behind him. He skipped down the steps of the dais and strode up to Nolraa, placing his hands firmly on the wizard’s shoulders. “Describe the look on her face as you told her of her death. Did you have to kill that nasty forest elf also? Did they scream much?” He was giddy and full of questions. “I’ll tell you what, open your mind to me and I will take a look for myself!”

“I really must rest. Can this wait, my Lord?”

“I don’t see why not. Very well.” Questa turned and began to walk up the stairs to his chair. He paused part way. “Wait.” he commanded.

Nolraa had already started for the door. He turned to face Questa, “Yes, my Lord?”

“You wouldn’t be hiding anything from me would you?” He began to probe Nolraa’s mind, searching for anything that might be out of place. “Why are you fighting me, Nolraa?”

Nolraa tried his best to keep Questa out of his mind, tried to hide the whereabouts of Draveg and the forest elf, tried to hide his own deception.

Questa took his pendant in his hand. Nolraa weakened despite himself, and fell to the floor writhing in terrible pain. It felt like his insides were burning up, just as everything in Draveg's chambers burned. He could not keep Questa out of his mind any longer. All he could think of was the agony that grew inside of him.

"How dare you presume to deceive me?" Questa said, rage boiling within him. He spat as he spoke and lather started to form at the corners of his mouth. His face flushed and contorted. "Did you really think you'd get away with that? You didn't think I'd find out? How dare you!!" he screamed.

Questa bent over Nolraa's body writhing on the floor, and took his head in his hands and spat in his face, shocked to see the gaping hole where his good eye had been. Questa was enraged, "What have you done wizard?" Nolraa was too weak to respond, and Questa saw nothing in his mind that made sense. The intense agony the man continued to experience made his mind a jumble.

"First I will deal with you, then I will find Draveg and that wretched forest elf." He roughly dropped Nolraa's head on the floor. He glared down at him perversely and loosened the pendant form around his neck. He bent down and placed it over Nolraa's heart. He stared into Nolraa's eyes, "Goodbye, Nolraa!! Say hello to Tithan when you reach the Dark Realm!!"

Suddenly, the two burst into flames, sulfurous flames like those that Nolraa used to destroy Draveg's chambers. They were instantly engulfed, though only Nolraa burned. His belly was consumed from the inside as his flesh slowly peeled away from his bones. All the while he faced Questa's distorted, rage-filled face, the empty eye sockets laughing at him. "Forgive me, Lady Draveg." he spoke before succumbing.

Questa continued to stand over Nolraa's corpse, flames swirling about him, until only ash remained. Finally, he stepped away and returned to his throne, and summoned several guards.

"Search for Lady Draveg and her servant. Do not return until you have found them. Bring them to me alive, or I'll have your heads hung from the Great Temple and your bodies sent to your families." Questa demanded angrily.

Shortly after the guards left, the Nekantes returned to Questa's receiving chamber. They scurried into Questa's chamber and stopped abruptly. They looked curiously at the ash that blanketed the floor and sniffed at the foul, sulfurous air.

"What we miss?" Rostaat asked Daanoth.

"I not know. We miss 'cause you get us lost!"

“I get us lost? She get us lost!” Rostaat said excitedly, pointing a crooked little finger at Rotraal.

“I not! That you!” she retorted.

“That’s enough, you bothersome dolts!” Questa shouted, startling the three little creatures. Rostaat scampered behind Daanoth.

“Go tell our Master, Lord Daalon, that his bidding will be done.” Questa said with a very somber tone. His gaze drifted off, “I will see to it, no matter how long it takes. I will follow her to the ends of the world and I will see her and that child destroyed!”

TO BE CONTINUED