

Ascension

Book 1, Chapter 2

Hope Lost

BY:

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Broa Paar sat alone at a table in the corner and silently stared into her wooden flagon, engrossed in the frothy head of the thick ale. She was a beautiful, young dark-elf, with long, ashen hair; bright, amethyst-colored, almond-shaped eyes, and pale, porcelain skin. Her hair fell loosely around her long, pointed ears and over her shoulders. Her companion, Kathra, had left her momentarily to relieve the pressure of several ales on his bladder. Her mind was lost to the dark, smoke-filled tavern and its noisy, boisterous patrons. She was remembering the adventure that they had had before returning to the small port-town of Dragon's Dale, the tale of which Kathra would delight in regaling to anyone who would listen.

A sudden commotion on the other side of the tavern brought her from her reverie. She looked up to see Kathra standing before several human males, flapping his arms wildly and squawking like a bird. Shaking her head, she knew Kathra had found an audience. Broa had heard Kathra's telling of the story several times and knew exactly how it would go. He would begin by telling them of the moderately successful hunting trip which the two of them had gone on and he would slowly build up to the exciting part of the tale, the events of their final night. Embarrassing as it was to Broa, Kathra would always include the part about the two making love. This would always bring looks of disdain from his audience, each of whom surely thought, "A dark elf and a human? How repulsive!"

Ignoring their disgust, Kathra would go on, acting out the story as he told it. He would talk about the horrible screeching and the unpalatable stench that interrupted them. The audience would then be guessing to themselves, and each other, as to what awful creature it was. Continuing, Kathra would describe the tent being torn out of the ground by the huge talons of an ugly harpy, the half-woman, half-bird creature that had a jealous hatred for anything good and beautiful. Dancing about the table and waving his arms, he would act out the ensuing battle as he and Broa fought off the creature. He would always end the tale, telling his audience how he had wanted to bring the carcass back as a trophy, but Broa wouldn't let him.

"That was fun," Kathra said as he returned to the table and plunked himself down in the carved, wooden chair across from Broa. He gave her hand a playful squeeze and grinned at her.

"Must you always bring up the part about us making love?" she asked him sternly. "You know how the skjine hate my kind." Without thinking, she spoke the word her race used to describe the 'lesser races', a word that Kathra also disliked. She hadn't noticed her voice rise.

Kathra quickly pulled his hand from hers and looked at her harshly.

“I’m sorry. You know I don’t mean you.”

“I still don’t like you using that word. It’s because of the way ‘your kind’ treats the rest of us that we ‘skjine’ detest them,” Kathra said. “And it’s because of that, that people don’t like you either, and you talking about us the way they do isn’t helping your social status.” He again took her hand in his and gave a gentle squeeze; the look in his eyes was soft and forgiving.

Almost sub-consciously, Broa unclasped the tips of her wings from around her neck and pointed them toward the ceiling, stretching. Broa was a very unique dark elf. Not one person could ever recall seeing a female dark elf with such wings. Wings of that impressive stature were reserved for the noble males of her kind. Drawing her wings back, close to her body, she could hear the barely audible grumblings of the other patrons. Two small boys, the youngest sons of the innkeeper, were playing a light, airy melody on a wooden flute and a small harp, though they could hardly be heard over the din of several raucous conversations. Broa noticed that the innkeeper, as well as several patrons, kept a keen, stern eye on her. “I wish we could go somewhere that people wouldn’t stare and point at me.”

“Come on,” Kathra consoled her, “you know that your kin are no-ones favorite people, and seeing one as unique as you traipsing through their towns and villages upsets them.”

“Still, you would think that in all the places Tala and I have visited with this circus, that we would find at least one place where they wouldn’t gawk at me like I’m some freak.” Again, she hadn’t noticed the volume of her voice.

“This is the world we live in, no one likes dark elves.”

“I know,” she said dejectedly. She took a heavy pull on her ale and set the mug down hard on the table, attracting a stern glare from the innkeeper.

“I’ll get us another couple of ales.” Kathra rose and approached the bar. He returned a moment later with two fresh flagons. “Our gracious host has asked me to tell you to keep your cool or he’ll not-so-gently toss you out of here.”

Leaning to the side slightly, Broa peered over Kathra’s shoulder at the innkeeper, waving casually to him, shrugging her shoulders and mouthing the words ‘I’m sorry’. He off-handedly dismissed her apology and, shaking his head, turned his back to her.

“What a horse’s ass!” she muttered.

“Take it easy, Broa. We’ll be packing up the circus in another week, and on our way to another town.”

“Where it all begins again!!” she said bitterly, her voice rising again. The innkeeper was not pleased, nor was a surly looking human sitting at a table with his three friends at the opposite end of the bar.

The four large men stood and strode over to where Broa and Kathra sat, the big surly man in the lead. They spoke to Kathra but glared at Broa, “You should keep a leash and muzzle on your friend here, sir.”

Broa met their glares with equal intensity. “If you’re going to speak of me, speak to me!” she said sternly, moving to stand. Kathra gently squeezed her hand.

“Let me take care of this,” he whispered to her. “Just let us finish our drinks, and we’ll leave, nice and easy, no trouble,” he said calmly to the big man.

“Our problem’s not with you, sir.” The man’s voice was rough, as was his tanned complexion. His fire-red hair was cut short and he had at least three days growth of beard on his heavy, square jaw. He stood nearly a foot taller than Kathra and was almost three times as wide. His dark-gray shirt was open in the front and was filthy, as were his linen pants.

“How about we buy you gentlemen a drink and forget all about this? What do you say?” Kathra continued as Broa stared into the cold, blue eyes of the stranger. Out of the corner of his eye, Kathra could see that every one in the bar was now focusing their attention on them. He could see the innkeeper quickly usher his two sons into a back room and return to the bar to claim his rifle from beneath it.

“Do we want a drink from this dark-elven harpy and her man servant, Karn?” the large man asked of the man to his right, needling him with a meaty elbow. Broa glared hatefully at the man.

“No. No, I don’t think we do, Ahman.” The little balding fellow joked. He turned to speak to the man on Ahmans left, “How ‘bout you, Lazar?”

Lazar merely shook his head and pounded the fist of one hand into the palm of his other hand. His hair was black, oily and curled tightly. He was larger than Karn, yet not nearly as big as Ahman. The fourth man standing behind Ahman kept silent, waiting for the excitement to begin.

Broa stood up suddenly, tipping her chair backward. She stepped up to Ahman and looked him coolly in the eyes. She was two feet shorter and possibly a quarter his weight, but showed no fear of that brick-wall-of-a-man. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I quite heard what you called me. Maybe you’d like to repeat yourself.”

“I said, ‘We don’t want anything from this elven harpy and her man servant!’” He said it slowly, as if speaking to someone who hardly knew the language.

“You bastard son of a harpy!” she muttered under her breath in elven.

“What did you say?” Ahman suddenly went flush with anger.

Kathra stepped next to the two and insisted to Broa, “Let’s just leave, before there’s trouble.” He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her away from her foe, guiding her toward the exit.

Ahman laid his meaty, calloused hands on each of the companion’s shoulders, stopping them in their tracks. “But, sir, there already is trouble,” he said sardonically.

Broa and Kathra exchanged glances. “Did this skjine just put his hand on me?” she stated more than asked.

“I believe he did.” Kathra replied and in an instant he and Broa turned on the large man. He was unconscious on the floor before he knew what hit him. Ahmans friends were quick to react, the silent fellow leading the charge. Broa swiftly repelled him, slamming a fist into his throat. The man staggered back clutching his neck, wheezing for breath. Karn attacked suddenly and caught Broa with a glancing blow to the chin, dazing her only slightly. Lazar charged Kathra, planting wide shoulders into his gut, driving him backward into the wall.

Karn tackled Broa to the floor and pinned her shoulders down in a puddle of ale. He joyfully smacked her face lightly from side to side, delighting as she squirmed beneath him.

Momentarily pinned to the wall, Kathra wrapped his arms tightly around Lazars midsection and, lifting him off the ground, tossed him squarely onto the table where he and Broa had been casually drinking only a few minutes earlier. The table buckled under the force of the impact, sending flagons of ale and wood splinters into the air. Kathra turned at the sound of Broa’s struggle and rushed the man perched on top of her and, clothes-lining him, launched him off of her and onto his back, knocking the breath from his lungs. Kathra’s attention was drawn toward the innkeeper and, watching him clumsily load his rifle, grasped Broa tightly by the arm and said to her, “I think now would be a good time to leave.”

Helping Broa to her feet, Kathra hadn’t noticed that Lazar had returned to his feet as well. Lazar grabbed Kathra around the chest in a vise-like grip, squeezing the wind from his lungs. Karn also had stood up, glaring at Broa. “You elven harlot!” he spat. Broa and Karn circled each other cautiously. Karn feigned a jab with his left and again with his right. Broa deftly avoided both, and instantly countered with a strong right hook, connecting squarely with the man’s jaw. He staggered, momentarily shocked by her speed and strength.

The innkeeper finally had his rifle loaded and raised the weapon to his shoulder, aimed squarely at Broa, whose back was to him. Placing his finger on the trigger, he squeezed. The hammer fell sharply, igniting the gunpowder. The single lead shot burst from the barrel at lightening speed. In an instant the lead bullet found and tore through flesh, glanced bone and finally buried itself in the meaty flesh of the heart, bringing its rhythmic thumping to a sudden halt.

Broa hadn't seen the innkeeper fire his rifle, nor felt the impact of its speeding projectile. She watched the lead pellet pass through her as if she weren't even there. She had also seen the magical glow of the pendant that hung heavily on a thick golden chain around her neck, and felt its warmth. She was in utter shock to look up and see the bloody wound in Karns chest over his now lifeless heart. A sudden dizziness passed over her and she fell backward onto the floor, dragging Karn with her.

"Broa!" Kathra shouted. Still held securely by Lazar, Kathra threw his head back, crushing his nose on impact. Lazar stumbled backward with his hands to his face. His eyes filled with tears and blood poured from his nostrils. Kathra left him whimpering against the wall and rushed to Broa's aid.

Rolling the corpse of the thin man, Karn, off of Broa, Kathra pulled the dazed dark elf to her feet. With a quick look over, Kathra decided she was not injured and, looking over his shoulder and seeing the innkeeper once again loading his rifle, he said urgently, "This time I think we really should be leaving." He took her gently by the arm and led her out of the tavern and down the short flight of stairs to the well-groomed lawn outside of the inn. She stared in amazement at the pendant that she gripped in her palm, dull and unremarkable as it was before the gunshot. The sky was slowly darkening, and the town curfew would soon be enforced. The early fall air was crisp, and their breath could be seen in a mist that floated on the air.

A man wearing a dark hooded cloak had sat, unnoticed in the shadows, keenly watching the brawl. As Broa and Kathra fled the tavern, he discreetly slipped out through the rear. No one noticed his exit as the innkeeper was tending to Lazars broken nose; Ahman was just stirring from unconsciousness, and the silent fellow was still wheezing slightly with a partially collapsed airway. All the other patrons had fled when the fighting first broke out. Most ran home or fled to other taverns. The innkeeper's wife, however, had ran to the Marshall's home, where he was relaxing before a warm fire with a steaming cup of tea. Grudgingly he rose, pulled on his leather boots, his sidearm and a thick coat and hustled off to the inn, the innkeeper's wife in tow.

When he arrived, the tale he heard from all in the bar held Broa to blame for the incident. The men told the Marshall how Broa had instigated the fight, stole the innkeeper's rifle and shot Karn dead in cold blood. The men all knew that they would be believed at face value. After all, she was just a dark elf.

Kathra and Broa sat crouched in the bushes a few yards away from hers and Tala's wagon. There was among the many tents and wagons of the employee's of the large traveling circus, though it was more secluded, away from the others in the back of the clearing. The two had only just arrived after fleeing the bloody scene at the inn. They had watched men on horseback arrive to see the Marshall, and then leave again, just as quickly. Broa and Kathra could only assume that they were being sent to hunt them down. Darting up and down dusty lanes and creeping in shadows, they stole their way back to the fairgrounds where the circus was camped. Broa and Tala had been employees of the circus for as long as she could remember. She had grown up with the circus, traveling all over the Common Lands, maturing quickly because of the constant ridicule due to her uniqueness. But as Broa grew older and more independent, she couldn't be penned in any longer and wanted to see and do more, despite Tala's constant refusals.

Thus she met Kathra, a fellow employee of the circus whom she was keen on. They spent much of their spare time together, and had developed a very strong friendship. On more than one occasion, they had discussed becoming more, but always decided against it. For one, he was human; she was dark elf. Society would never tolerate that. Second was age. Elves age three times slower than humans. Kathra was already thirty-four while Broa was only twenty-seven. He would surely die of old age before she was even seventy, still very young for a dark elf. They did however decide to share the same bed occasionally.

Sitting in the bushes behind the wagon, Broa and Kathra waited for a moment when no one would notice them enter the wagon. Inside, the dim light of several candles told them Tala was home, probably indulging in her favorite pastime, which was reading. Reading and writing were skills that most people did not possess. Tala claimed Broa's departed mother had taught her and it was Tala who taught the skill to Broa.

Finally, after several minutes in the shadows, the two companions crept around to the back of the wagon and climbed the short staircase. Reaching over Broa's head, Kathra gathered the canvas flap over the doorway into his hand and pulled it aside to let himself and Broa in. This wagon was obviously built for elves, Kathra would

always say to himself upon entering. The ceiling of this wagon was built much lower than that of his, and he was forced to duck his head uncomfortably as he stood comically on the threshold behind Broa.

Tala looked up at them from the aged pages of a thick book open on the table before her. She could see the taut faces and the sweat on their brows. ‘What’s happened to the two of you? Some of the Marshall’s men have come looking for you.’ Tala said, rising and taking hold of Broa’s hands, gripping them tightly.

Tala took Broa into her arms as Kathra spoke, ‘‘Some distasteful men at the Crossing Swords decided to stir up some trouble. Broa tried her best,’’ he lied, ‘‘but they wouldn’t let her alone.’’

Tala released Broa from her tight embrace and gazed into the deep, amethyst eyes of the dark elf, caressing her face lightly. Tala’s bright green eyes were always soft and full of love and compassion. Tala, a forest elf, was the closest friend Broa ever knew. Tala had raised the girl from birth and had always tried to teach her tolerance and patience. She seemed to know that Kathra lied to her. ‘‘They said you shot some man in cold-blood!’’

Broa choked back on a sudden flush of rage, her cheeks, turning crimson. ‘‘I didn’t,’’ she said simply, matter-of-factly.

Again, Tala embraced Broa, whom she had always loved as her own child. ‘‘They’ll likely be back to see if you came by. They’ve put a bounty out for you.’’ She paused to reach beneath the blanket she had had laying in her lap. Pulling out a satchel, she handed it to Broa. ‘‘I’ve packed a few things for you, nothing that will be missed when the soldiers return. There’s a letter inside that I wrote a long time ago. I guess I had hoped I would never have to give it to you, but I suppose now I must. You must go!’’ Several tears welled up in Tala’s eyes as the gravity of the situation hit her. She kissed Broa lightly on the cheek and gave her hands a gentle but firm squeeze. She suddenly realized she might never see Broa again.

‘‘But I can’t leave you, Tala. Beside Kathra, you’re the only family I have. I need you. You need me.’’ She became suddenly stern. ‘‘I won’t leave,’’ she said choking back on her tears.

Kathra gently grasped her shoulders, pulling her toward the exit of the wagon, ‘‘She’s right, Broa. We have to go. They’ll be coming back soon.’’ Kathra turned his gaze to Tala, and told her softly, ‘‘I’ll take care of her, Tala. I promise.’’ Tala simply nodded, her eyes wet and red-rimmed. Broa started to argue but stopped looking into her friends eyes.

Then they were outside, into the crisp night air, the coolness of it chilling the tears that fell down Broa’s cheeks. As they left, Broa could faintly hear Tala weep. Slinking back to the shadows, leaving to claim their horses

from the stables, they did not notice another figure in the shadows, the man in the hooded cloak. He stood silently watching as the two companions fled. He then turned his eyes toward Tala's wagon. He watched her figure silhouetted on the canvas of the walls. He listened as she wept. He watched as she regained her composure, dressed for bed and bent over the candles. One at a time, she blew them out, and the wagon grew dark.

Even with Kathra's arms around her, Broa slept restlessly. They had easily claimed their horses after saying a tearful goodbye to Tala and rode northwest out of Dragon's Dale for several hours under the cover of darkness. They had kept to less traveled paths through the thick forests and found a small clearing in which to camp for the night. After pitching their tents, Broa read the letter Tala had given her. Kathra could read and write the human language, but could not make sense of the elven, so Broa read it aloud to him. It was the contents of this letter that caused her restless sleep. She could see in her mind's eye the characters of the elven language on the aged parchment and she could almost hear Tala speaking their meaning:

'My dearest Broa. You know that I am not your mother, but have cared for you and loved you as a mother would. I vowed to your mother that I would care for you and raise you. I have always told you that your mother died birthing you. That part is true. But, my child, I have lied.'

Those words echoed in her mind harshly. She swallowed a lump in her throat. She could not believe that Tala, her most beloved companion, the only mother she had ever known, would lie to her:

'If you are reading this, then we have parted and I shall probably never see you again. Know that I have always loved you and that I am truly sorry to have lied to you for all of your life. But also know that it was for your sake that I have done so.'

Tears escaped from Broa's closed eyes as she tossed and turned in her makeshift bed lying next to Kathra's warm, slumbering body. She silently sat up, careful not to wake Kathra, and took Tala's letter in her hand. Although the early morning light was too dark to read the characters, she did not have to see them to recall their meaning:

‘You must travel to Claw Valley. There, on the north wall, high on the rock face, you will find a deep cavern. This is where your mother and I hid while she gave birth to you. It is there that you will find all the answers I cannot tell you in this letter.

‘I can only pray that you will not bear me ill will for this. I do now and always will love you, my dearest child. Farewell.’

Reading the final word, Broa could not help but to bury her face in her hands and weep. She felt lost in a universe spinning around her. Darkness surrounded her and she could not tell up from down. Everything she had known and trusted to be true of herself were now suddenly in question. She detested the feeling of not being in control: not having some sort of direction: not knowing. She wept even harder. Kathra woke and took her into his strong arms and consoled her. She pressed her moist cheek against his warm flesh and continued to weep while he stroked her hair gently and held her tightly.

“Be with me.” She said finally, looking into his warm green eyes speckled with brown. Kathra placed a hand on her face and wiped a tear with his thumb. He pressed his lips to hers passionately. The two started to slowly undress each other, keeping their lips together, their tongues entwining, their bare skin touching. She caressed his hard, sculpted chest, curling the thin wisps of hair around her fingertips while he gently took one of her breasts in his strong hand, its dark skin a sharp contrast to the white porcelain of her breast. Her pink nipple became erect under his gentle but firm touch. He rolled her onto her back and began to suckle lovingly at the hard nibs. She laid her hands on his raven hair and gasped at the pleasure he gave her.

They both lay exhausted some time later, in each others arms, half covered by their woolen blankets feeling each others racing heart beats and heavy breaths. The sweat and the passionate juices of their encounter dampened their hair, skin and blankets. Each lay awake for some time, purely enjoying the quiet company of the other.

“Will you come with me to Claw Valley, Kathra?” Broa asked softly.

“Not only because of my vow to Tala, but because I would follow you to the end of this world and the next.” Kathra drew her close and gently kissed each of the lids closed over her eyes. “I love you, Broa.”

“And I you.”

Broa and Kathra rode for three days using the Common Lands less traveled trails and paths. Heading northwest, they rode mostly at night for Broa's comfort, as the dark elves are a nocturnal race for whom the light of the sun is painfully blinding, and as a precaution against encountering any lawmen that would surely be searching for them. They finally arrived at Carache, a town near the northwest border of the Common Lands and Sigarnia, a vast human civilization of warring clans. Carache sat nestled in the shadow of the Lu-Finit Mountains, a natural barrier between the two civilizations. This was where Tala had sent the two companions to search for the answers that Broa desperately needed.

After finding temporary shelter for their horses for the several days travel still ahead, Broa and Kathra rested for the night at an inn on the outskirts of town. They rose early in the morning, collected their gear and set out for supplies, including a map of Claw Valley that was set deep in the vast mountain range to the north. Leaving the town behind them, they did not have to travel far before reaching the foothills that would take them into the mountains.

Trudging a steep, rocky slope, the unseasonably hot midday sun glared down on them. Kathra wore a thin, light-colored linen shirt that was damp with sweat and clung to the bare skin of his back and arms. Over his left shoulder he carried a heavy pack filled with their supplies. He had removed his tight leather pants in favor of cooler, tan-colored cotton ones. His hard leather boots stirred up dust and crunched on the loose stones of the rugged path as it meandered up the side of the mountains.

Broa, keeping pace behind Kathra, was also sweating under the oppressive heat of the sun. She wore a hooded cape of light cotton that draped down the porcelain skin of her back between her large, dark-colored wings. She had the cowl of the cape pulled low over her face, shielding her eyes from the sun's bright rays. Broa, unlike the others of her race, having lived a primarily diurnal life, could withstand it for some length of time, but not without discomfort, and her vision was greatly impaired.

As she followed her companion, Broa could only see a blur of shadows and indistinct forms around her. She drew her wings up and over her head, hoping to further shield her eyes from the sun. *And some people worship that damned thing?* She felt a sudden loathing for the fiery orb in the cloudless sky. She too wore light cotton pants, replacing the leather ones she usually wore. She wore a sleeveless and backless cotton tunic fastened around her neck and waist with thin leather laces.

“How are you doing back there?” Kathra asked over his shoulder.

“Just great,” she answered sardonically, immediately slipping on some loose stones. “Just great!” she muttered under her breath in elven. Regaining her balance and stopping to catch a cool breeze that swept in, she turned to squint at the shadow before her that she knew to be Kathra, “Did you see what happened at the Inn that night?”

“Of course I did, I was there wasn’t I?” He quite frankly had no idea what she was going on about.

“That’s not what I mean!” she wasn’t sure herself what she saw. “I mean when I was shot by the innkeeper.”

“You weren’t shot, that idiot Karn was.” He suddenly turned around on her, stopping in his tracks. “What are you talking about?”

“This,” she held up the amulet to him, “This somehow saved me. It got warm and glowed. I saw the bullet fly right through me. It was like I was a ghost. It went through me and killed Karn!”

“I think you had too many steins that night, dear,” he said and turned back to the path and continued on his way.

“Ya’, I suppose,” but she did not really believe it. She fumbled with the amulet as she walked behind Kathra, barely seeing it as it lay in her palm. She put it out of her mind for the time being and asked him, “How much farther?”

Kathra pulled out the map that he had tucked into his belt and unrolled it.

Peering up from the parchment at the path ahead and doing some quick calculations, he lied, “Not much farther!!”

Several hours later, as Broa was welcoming the cooler temperatures of dusk, the two were continuing their trek into the heart of the Lu-Finit Mountains. As the sun slowly fell, the intense ache that had burrowed behind Broa’s eyes began to subside and her vision was gradually returning. She watched the shadowy image of Kathra turn a corner ahead of her and followed, abruptly running into him.

“What are you stopping for?”

“I think we’re here,” he said plainly.

“What’s wrong, Kathra?” She could sense his apprehension.

Kathra slowly stepped through the mouth of the cavern. Broa followed, placing a hand in the small of his back for guidance. In the dying light of day, Kathra could see that the walls of the cavern and the rock formations outside were scorched. He felt the chalky soot and ash fall between his fingers as he stroked the surface.

“What is it?” she asked impatiently.

Kathra turned and looked past Broa. Over her shoulder he gazed into the deep valley below. “Forest fire. A big one,” he said at last, staring at the remains of what was a thick, majestic forest. He passed Broa and looked up at the mountains above the cavern and witnessed the same devastation, blackened stumps and ash abound, stirred only by the gentle breeze. “The fire has burnt everything to the ground,” he said returning to Broa’s side.

“My mother...”

“Maybe the fire didn’t make it into the cavern.” Kathra fumbled through his pack, pulled out a treated torch, and lit it with a flint and steel, its bright flame casting eerie shadows on the blackened stone. He looked around them, carefully scrutinizing the scene. The caverns ceiling was high, twice his height, and it extended deeper into the mountain than the light of the torch could reach. He saw nothing but irregular rocks, stones and boulders, all covered by a thick layer of soot and ash. He took Broa by the hand and suggested coolly, “Let’s go deeper.”

Broa’s vision was finally returning and she could make out the layer of soot and ash, the only remnants of the devastating fire that would have incinerated anything in its path. She felt a cold lump form in her throat and she suddenly found it hard to breath.

They searched the depths of the cavern in silence for nearly an hour. Broa was the first to break the eerie silence, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“Not a trace of your mother. Nothing to tell us she and Tala were even here. And how could the fire have reached this deeply into the cavern. It should have died from lack of air before coming this far. I’m baffled,” he finally admitted. “Now what do we do?”

“I don’t know.” Broa began to weep. “I don’t know what to do! I don’t know what to feel! I don’t even know who I am anymore!” She became bitter and angry, speaking through tears and clenched teeth, “If everything Tala has told me is a lie, who am I? What am I? What am I supposed to be, some freak of nature?” At last, losing all of her well-practiced self-control, she buried her face into Kathra’s chest and wept unabashedly.

It was some time before Kathra could pull her face from his chest and look into her blood-shot and red-rimmed eyes. He wiped a tear from her cheek and said softly, "Let's go back to Dragon's Dale before the circus leaves and talk to Tala."

"But what if they catch us coming back?" she asked, her cold, saddened voice echoing off the charred cavern walls.

"She's got all the answers you're looking for."

Questa Paar, the Master of the great Empire, slept restlessly, tossing and turning as he had for the last twenty-seven years. He dreamed the same haunting day mare every day. That was Daalons punishment for failure. Questa had failed his patron god, the god of death and, above all else, the god of wrath. Questa was given the task of murdering his father, in which he had succeeded, placing himself on the throne and in power over the Empire. He had also been given the task of bringing the Empire's powerful Wizard Lord under his control. In that, too, he had succeeded. His failure of Daalon was twofold. First was the all too simple task, as he thought at the time, of murdering his stepmother and her unborn child. He also failed his Master by killing the Wizard Lord, Nolraa, in a blinding rage, which seemed to hamper Daalons plans, the details of which Questa was not privy to.

The day mares planted in Questa's sleep were a constant reminder of his failure. Though he was a young dark elf, only sixty-seven, the day mares had aged him. His face was always drawn and tired. Black rings circled his blood-shot eyes and his skin began to sag and wrinkle, unheard of even for the most aged of the long-lived dark elves. His jet-black hair had turned to the color and texture of starch. He hardly had the strength to wield the magic that he had trained all of his life to master. The day mares had left him a hollow shell of an elf. 'No better than a wretched, useless human,' he would say, cursing himself and his failure.

Finally, Questa rose, sitting up in his large covered bed. Like all works of architecture in the Empire, the bed and its four posters were carved of the mountain stone itself. He angrily threw off his linen bed sheets, dampened by the sweat of his restless sleep, and muttered under his breath, "Damned dreams." Again he cursed himself as he drew his weary body to the edge of the soft, hair-filled bed cushion. He knew that the dreams would not leave him until he died, or found Lady Draveg and her child.

“In twenty-seven years, not a trace of my dear stepmother, the child or that harpy of a forest elf that helped her escape me!” His brow furrowed and he squinted his eyes until they were mere slits. He had always found it hard to control his volatile temper. “Calm yourself, Questa,” he said, “You have many scouts out searching the known world for them. You will have your revenge.” It was the same promise he spoke every night when he rose from his sweat-dampened bed.

Drawing back the black, silk curtains that hung around his berth, Questa grasped a thick cord that hung idly next to him and gave it a hard pull. Suddenly, the room was alit with a soft glow from blue-flamed torches on the sheer, stone walls of his bedchamber. The sound of a magical, non-existent bell rang in the corridor outside the large, sparsely decorated room. Instantly, a young male dark elf entered the room, his head bent low in respect to his Master.

“My Lord?” was all the slave boy said. His raven hair was cut short and the lines of his face were long and elegant, as were his pointed ears. Deep emerald eyes held within them countless shames and his lips, whose smile could light a room, were drawn tight, their color paled. His bowed head allowed him to hide from his Master a swollen and blackened eye, punishment for drawing the laces of his Master’s slippers too tightly the previous night. Like all slaves of the Nobility of the Empire, the young elf was nude; his lithe, graceful body glistened under the torches with the cold sweat of fear.

“My pretty young Yonan.” Questa spoke lovingly. Like other Lords in the Empire, Questa could easily master a male or female slave, both in and out of bed, but preferred his male slaves. “You will dress me, and mind you don’t lace my slippers too tightly tonight, my child.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the boy said, rushing to claim his Master’s fine silk robes from a large armoire near the far wall. Questa watched with a happy grin, as the boy’s erect penis bounced as he padded silently with bare feet across the cold, stone floor.

“After I have had my first meal, I will want you to return to me so we might play before I must meet with the Nobles,” he said to the young elf.

“Yes, my Lord,” was all Yonan said. It was all he could say, trying to hold back his tears.

Seven winged and dark-robed elves stood before Questa, their heads lowered in respect to their Master Lord. Questa sat upon his carved wooden throne in his receiving chamber, his aged, wrinkled and spotted hand curled around the silver handle of a glass flagon filled with his favorite drink, dark and frothy ale. A soft glow of blue-flame torches, set high on the black, cold stone walls, cast an eerie pall over the audience of Nobles who convened at Questa's beaoning. The Nobles were silent, waiting for Questa to speak. It was common knowledge among the populace of the Empire that not all of the seven Nobles approved of Questa's rule over them, but none would ever speak of their opinions openly. Several of the nobles disapproved of his close relationship with the dark god Daalon, and were also displeased at the circumstances that led to Questa's succession to the Throne. The Nobles suspected that Questa himself had, twenty-seven years prior, called the panther avatar that killed Questa's father, Tithan, though they had no evidence of this betrayal.

Questa, of course could not tell the council that he had indeed called upon the avatar, nor could he confess that it was he who murdered Nolraa, the Empire's great Wizard Lord. Questa had merely pointed an accusing finger at the Nobles that he suspected of disapproving of his succession. And then there was the odd disappearance of Tithan's dearest wife, Draveg, and her unborn child. Questa had claimed, with a shrug of the shoulders, that Draveg was, perhaps, so distraught over the death of her husband that she flung herself off of the highest peak in the Empire. His explanations and excuses could only pacify the weakest of Nobles, and the others continued, privately, disapproving of Questa and his ways.

Questa freed himself from his reverie and glanced about the group of Nobles massed before him, eyeing each one suspiciously. He was pleased to note that not one looked directly at him, which would have been a sure indication of their rebellion. Each Noble had his head lowered, the cowl of their cloaks shadowing their faces. He also looked up to see his young half-brother, Conius, standing behind him to his right.

"Thank you all for coming to see me," he gestured with his flagon, encompassing all seven. "Our Master, Daalon, has deemed it necessary for me to inform you of his plans for us." He paused for a moment before continuing, "Our Master wishes to enter our realm, the realm of the mortals."

The Nobles silently exchanged questioning glances with each other, but none looked up towards their Master Lord, still sitting in his throne up on the stone dais.

"Our Lord has offered, that in exchange for our assistance in overthrowing his Father, the god Paarel, he will aide us in conquering this world and ridding ourselves of the bothersome skjine."

The Nobles were utterly shocked. They could not fathom what Questa and his dark god were proposing. Overthrowing the gods? Entering our world to battle the skjine? Has he gone mad? Two of the Nobles suddenly felt faint and appeared to Questa as if they might fall to the floor in a huddled mass. Questa looked up toward Conius, who was snarling at the weakness of the Nobles.

“Daalon has explained to me that the barrier between our two realms, that which was raised by the Immortal Lords at the time of their banishment, shall weaken in one week’s time when the three moons are in alignment,” he paused to be sure all the nobles understood. “It is at this time that Daalon proposes we amass the magical powers of our Wizard Lords in order to expand the portal in the Great Temple to allow him passage into our realm.”

After a moment of contemplation, one of the Nobles stepped forward, “What, what will happen when he comes into our world...” he forgot himself, blushing “That is, when our Master Daalon comes to us, my Lord?”

“Lord Shira, my son, it is only for us to obey our Master Daalon, not question his actions.” Questa was angered but showed the Noble much patience, one thing the endless day mares had taught him. The Noble acquiesced, and stepped back to join the ranks of the other Nobles. Questa was about to speak when another Noble stepped forward, much more sure of himself than the previous.

“My Lord,” he said, “I don’t believe Lord Shira meant any disrespect to yourself or our Master Daalon. It’s just that the patrons of our estates will question us greatly on this turn of events, and if we returned with as much information as possible, it would ease their minds and spirits on the matter.” The noble peered up under his lowered eyelids to see Questa looking thoughtful. The Noble quickly lowered his impetuous gaze as Questa turned his eyes back on him.

“I understand your need, Lord Kavish, but our Master will only share with us that which he feels is required in order for us to serve him the best we can.” Questa was satisfied with his answer. And it seemed that Kavish was also satisfied, as he returned to stand among the silent Nobles. “If there is nothing further, my Lords...”

As the last of the Nobles left through the heavy oak door and it had securely been closed behind them, Questa turned to his half-brother Conius. “Weak. They are all weak.”

“Yes they are, my Lord,” Conius agreed. “But they will still serve our Master’s purpose, yes?”

“I believe they will, my Brother.” Questa would not admit, even to his dear half-brother, that Daalon had not deemed it necessary to share the details of his plans with him.

Conius, being a very restless young man, and feeling himself ‘cooped up’ in the private chambers of the Great Palace, wandered the polished stone halls aimlessly, as he often did. He walked leisurely, not really knowing where he was going, or caring. His white hair fell loosely over his shoulders and his thin face had on it a look of utter boredom. His pale emerald eyes stared at nothing and he hung his hands from a silken sash around his waist. The tips of his great wings were clasped around his neck and he wore light silk tunic that draped down his back over his light porcelain-colored skin, between the dark-colored wings. He was twenty-seven years old, more than forty years younger than Questa, and was also the son of Tithan Paar. Conius and Questa did not share the same mother, though their mothers did share the same fate; they died while giving birth to Tithan’s two noble sons.

Conius and his older brother were never close, until their father died. Conius had never met his father, being born shortly after his death, and was raised by his late-mother’s handmaid. After many years Questa appeared to get lonely for some family, and thus ordered the handmaid to relinquish Conius to his care. Conius never believed that Questa was responsible, but after getting to know his half-brother better in the last few years, he was beginning to change that opinion. He had, in fact, grown to dislike his brother, but learned many useful skills from the elf.

Conius suddenly found himself wandering near Questa’s private chambers. No one was around. He silently approached his half-brother’s chamber door. Putting his ear to the door, he listened intently. Questa was talking to someone. Someone that Conius was anxious to learn about.

After meeting with the Nobles, Questa grew weary, and ordered his half-brother, Conius, to leave him. Questa shuffled tiredly back to his private chambers. He had just closed the heavy door when he felt the beaconing warmth of an amulet that hung loosely from his neck. He grasped the lovely object in his thin, wrinkled hand and peered into the clear stone at its heart. He laid his eyes on the image of a cloaked and heavily shadowed figure that spoke to him in choppy elven.

“My Lord, I have news,” he said.

“Let us speak in your language, my child.” Questa hated to speak the human language, but the horrible sound of the man attempting elven was unbearable.

“As you wish, my Lord.” Even with the cowl of his cloak hiding his face, Questa was pleased to see he bowed his head in respect.

“What news have you brought to me, Vissel?” Questa asked, excitedly. He had been let down by many of his messengers and agents, but was still excited each time they appeared to have news for him.

“I have found Tala, my Lord.”

“Did she tell you the location of the child?” Questa was overjoyed.

“Sadly, my Lord, she would not.”

“Where is she now?”

“Resting with the ancestors, my Lord.”

“I understand.” Questa was slightly troubled, “Will you still be able to track down the child?”

“I believe so, my Lord.”

“Very well. Report back to me within the week.” With that, Questa lowered the amulet from his sweaty hand and its glow faded. “I must tell my Master the news,” he said with great happiness.

Outside the Master Lord’s private chamber, Conius listened carefully to his half-brother’s conversation. He heard his brother rise and exit through the room’s rear door. He sat silently, contemplating.

“You, my Brother, are not worthy of the trust Master Daalon has bestowed upon you,” he whispered to himself, “but I am.”

The town of Dragon’s Dale was deathly quiet at that hour somewhere between dusk and dawn. None of the windows were lit in the quaint one and two story houses and shops along the narrow streets and alleys. Only the light of two moons guided a pair of figures atop majestic horses whose hooves crunched along rhythmically over the gravel road. The only other sound was that of crickets serenading their mates.

Dragon’s Dale was quite unlike most port-towns and villages of the Common Lands; music would pour into the streets from busy taverns; couples would be strolling under the moonlight, and there would most certainly be drunken sailors yelling and singing or bargaining with one of the working ladies for some companionship. But in Dragon’s Dale, there was a strict curfew that was enforced by the town’s lawmen. These lawmen and the town

Marshall reported directly to the town's ancient founder, Menook Darven. Menook, a greater dragon, had a brainstorm many centuries ago as the skjine began to develop sea-faring technologies. The port-town that he built soon began to earn him a healthy income through taxes, tariffs and generous 'gifts' from the townspeople. Like all greater dragons, Menook coveted wealth and power.

It was Menook who had put a bounty on Broa's head after the incident at the Crossing Swords only a week earlier. That is why she and Kathra, atop their mighty Sigarnian steeds, traveled the alleys of Dragon's Dale in stealth. There would surely be a hanging in the morning if Broa were caught returning. The whole town would joyously come out and celebrate the execution of the young dark elf.

But for the moment, she put all that out of her mind. Broa found herself back in Dragon's Dale, despite the risk of hanging, seeking Tala and the answers only she could offer. Riding their horse through the dark and silent town, Broa and Kathra made their way to the far outskirts where the circus was camped. Tala, just as Broa and Kathra were until recently, was employed by the large traveling circus. When Broa and Kathra left the scorched remains of the valley, intent on visiting Tala, they knew the circus would soon be packing up and on their way to their next port-of-call. They rested little and pushed their steeds hard, and in a trip that would normally take four days, the two companions cut their time to two and a half days.

Broa and Kathra neared the fairground and could hear the hushed voices of their former co-workers as they toiled, pulling down tents, packing immense wagons and prepping the various species of animal for the four day journey ahead of them. Though Kathra had many friends among the circus employees, (Broa was not very well liked, of course, and stayed to herself a lot when not with Kathra), they chose to avoid the bustling workers and head straight for Tala's wagon.

There were no candles lit, and it appeared Tala may still be off helping the others. Approaching the rear of the wagon, Broa suggested they wait inside, should any of the town's lawmen happen to wander past on their rounds. The two dismounted and lashed their horses to a nearby tree and crept around to the short staircase leading up to the wagon's threshold. The amber glow of several dozen torches scattered about the fairgrounds washed over the face of the wagon. Seeing no traffic around, Kathra, with Broa behind him, climbed the stairs to the tied flaps that hung from the iron skeleton that supported the canvas roof and walls. He untied the leather thong and, holding one flap aside, motioned for Broa to enter.

Broa passed Kathra and stepped over the threshold, peering into the interior, dimly lit by the fairgrounds behind her. Her bright amethyst eyes opened wide and her mouth fell agape. Had her skin any color, it would have fled from the horror she witnessed. Her knees suddenly buckled beneath her. Her head would have surely gleaned the edge of a side table to her left had Kathra not reacted so quickly and swept her into his strong arms.

Looking up into the wagon, Kathra quickly found the cause of her spell. Tala's unmoving body lay sprawled across the oak floor, her limbs spread in all directions. A glass of tea sat upon its side, its contents spilled across the table and the floor next to and beneath Tala's inert form. Looking closer, Kathra could just make out the blood that stained the front of her dyed tunic and pooled under her head and shoulders. He could see that her head was twisted unnaturally to the right and that her throat had been torn out viciously. Broa stirred in his arms and he looked down at her with a soft, sorrowful compassion. Broa's eyes fluttered open, a dazed and confused look to them.

It only took a brief moment for the fog to clear from her mind before the image of Tala's dead and bloodied body flooded in. The impact swept over her like a tidal wave. It struck her like a blacksmith's hammer. She broke into tears and buried her face in Kathra's chest, clutching the soft cotton of his shirt in her fingers. Kathra gently stroked her hair, sweeping his gaze over the interior of the wagon. Seeing nothing out of place, and Broa still in his arms, he spoke to her softly, "Lets get you out of..." He abruptly fell silent as he felt something suddenly pressed against his back, above his kidney.

"Whatever ya' got in yer' hands, ya' betta' let it down, and turn 'round slowly." It was a rough voice with a distinct northern accent.

Kathra slowly and gently laid Broa down, still whimpering but vaguely aware of the stranger outside. Her mind was still trying to grasp the horror that lay only a few feet from her. Kathra slowly turned around to find he was staring down the barrel of the stranger's rifle. The man looked past Kathra for a moment as Broa climbed to her feet with the aid of the side table near the entry. She stepped unsteadily up to Kathra, still standing a foot shorter than him, though he stood on the first step below the threshold.

"Watcha two doin' in Tala's wagon? Wherz Tala?" the man asked gruffly. His dark hair, curled tightly, framed his square jaw and hid heavily cauliflowered ears. His chin was home to a four-day-old beard and thick curls peeked out the top of his dusty shirt. His large hands, still holding the rifle aimed squarely at Kathra's chest, were calloused and the fingernails were dirty and cracked. He wore simple cotton pants over heavily worn leather boots.

The man was very large, six and a half feet tall and over three hundred pounds, Kathra guessed. Though he felt no fear, Kathra still hoped he would not have to trade blows with the man.

“Who are you?” Broa asked still shaken. She stepped further onto the stoop of the wagon.

The man looked at Broa, the light of the fairgrounds falling on her magnificent wings. The sight visibly surprised the man. He shot a stained and gap-filled grin at Broa. “You muss be Broa!” he said joyfully. “Tala tole’ me ‘bout ya’!”

Hearing Tala’s name shook Broa, though she successfully struggled to keep a rein on her emotions. Sensing Broa’s strain, Kathra spoke. “How do you know Tala,” he paused, “mister...?”

“Oh, Garvane. Call me Garvane.” He said lowering the rifle and offering his hand in the customary human greeting.

Kathra accepted his hand and shook it firmly. “My name is Kathra of the clan Moarderain. And, of course, this is Broa.” he said. “How do you know Tala?”

“She an’ I met at the Crossin’ Swords tavern a few days back.” Broa and Kathra exchanged puzzled glances at hearing the name of the inn where the incident had occurred a week prior. “She was askin’ the wrong people some questions about that scuffle ya’ had ther’ lass’ week. So I wen up an’ saved her. Bought ‘er a drink, an’ we started talkin’ fer a while.”

Garvane stepped closer to the wagon and tried to peer around Broa’s shoulders. “We was suppos’ to have supper tonight, but she never showed. So I thought I’d come check on ‘er. Where is she?”

“She’s dead.” Kathra said somberly, taking Broa by the hand and leading her down the stairs to the grass at the bottom.

“What?” Garvane struggled for words. Passing Kathra, he climbed the stairs and peered into the dimly lit wagon. There on the floor just as Kathra and Broa had found her, was Tala. His face went white and instantly he gagged. Hurrying down the stairs, he barely made it around the corner before vomiting.

Kathra sat Broa down next to the forward wheel of the wagon. She was still horrified, in shock. After assuring that she was comfortable and wrapping her gently in a blanket he retrieved from his saddlebag, he returned to the rear of the wagon. Pausing at the first step, he asked Garvane, “You okay?”

Garvane merely raised his hand as if to say, ‘I just need a minute.’

After searching the wagon carefully, Kathra decided it was no animal that killed Tala, as he had first suspected. That was information he knew Broa would not accept easily. “Garvane,” he said in a hushed voice as he came down from the wagon.

“I’m ‘ere,” he said standing upright, wiping some vomit from his chin with the sleeve of his shirt.

“I think Tala was murdered.” He said coolly, looking Garvane in the eyes. Again, the color fled from the man’s face and a look of shock came over his green eyes. “If she had been mauled by some animal, there would have been bloody footprints leading out of the wagon.” Garvane nodded. “Also there would be some sign of a struggle. Tala’s wounds are too clean and so is the rest of the wagon.” Kathra still spoke so Broa could not hear him.

“Who... who would want to kill Tala?” Garvane stammered.

“I don’t know, but I’d definitely like to find out.”

TO BE CONTINUED