

# Ascension

Book 1, Chapter 3

## Homeward

BY:

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Broa slowly woke that afternoon, nestled against Kathra's chest, having been lulled into a deep sleep by the rhythmic beating of his heart. As she lazily curled her fingers in the soft wisps of hair on his chest, a light knock came from the door across the room. She became still and a chill of fear crept up her spine. She could hear the townspeople bustling about in the street beneath their second-story room at the Serpents Crest Inn. The shades were drawn over the large windows, barring the bright sunlight that Broa found so uncomfortable. The smell of dust and mildew clung to the hot air in the room. Kathra began to stir and was momentarily unsure of where he was, still in that state of confusion between sleep and consciousness. Broa eyed the door handle as it turned slowly, drawing within itself the bolt that held the door shut.

Kathra, snapping wide awake, reached over the edge of the straw-filled bed and, finding the hilt of his heavy broad sword, grasped it and lifted it slightly off the floor. The door slowly crept open, seeming to Broa to take forever. Silently a figure slipped through the crack and closed the door quietly.

"Oh it's just you!" Broa said, exasperated, as Garvane turned to face the room. Lying hard upon her back, she breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

Garvane was clearly startled. "I thought ya' two would still be asleep!" he said holding his hand over his rapidly beating heart.

Kathra, too, sighed heavily, releasing his grip on his sword. Broa threw aside the wool blankets and rose from the bed to stretch, her mighty wings reaching high above her head. Barefoot, she padded across the rough floor to a basin half-filled with cold water sitting on a small table beneath the window. She casually splashed her face to rinse the last of the sleep from her eyes.

Kathra sat up and reached for his light tunic that lay on a bedside table. "Did you find anything, Garvane?" Broa turned and looked at Kathra with a quizzical look in her eyes. "Garvane and I believe Tala was murdered, Broa." he said, understanding her odd look.

"Murdered? But who?" she asked, dumbstruck. A cold shiver went through her body as she recalled the events of the previous night.

Kathra gazed at her sympathetically. "Garvane went out this morning to see if he could find out anything." Turning back to Garvane he asked again, "Did you?"

“Sorry, no,” he lowered his eyes as he spoke those first words. “None of the workers at the circus saw anythin’ strange, and the Marshall looked all through the wagon and foun’ nothin’.” He turned away from Kathra, and gazed at Broa, “One of the workers got worried when Tala din’ show for work this mornin’, and foun’ her body when he wen’ lookin’ for ‘er. The Marshall was called right ‘way.”

Broa cringed and swallowed against a lump that formed in her throat as she recalled the ghastly scene in the wagon. She closed her eyes and shook her head as if to banish the image from her mind.

“Menook,” Garvane continued, “has ordered the Marshall’s men to lock down the town. No one gets in or out ‘til farda’ notice.”

“We can’t stay here!” Kathra was dismayed. “They’ll hang Broa if they find her here!”

“I think I can still get ya’ outta’ town. I know some people in the black market. They oughta’ be able to smuggle ya’ out.” Garvane offered.

“But where do we go?” Broa sat herself on the edge of the bed near Kathra. Sensing her pain, he took her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“You said Tala tole’ ya’ that yer’ father was some noble in the Great Empire, right?” Garvane asked Broa.

“Yeah,” she replied unsure of where Garvane was going with his question.

“But Tala admitted in that letter that she lied to you about all that.” Kathra said to Broa.

“Still, somma’ it might be true.” Garvane thought for a moment, “Ya’ know, I was a slave of the Empire once. I still have some contacts thar’ I can talk to if ya’ wanna go?”

“That may be our only option, Broa.” Broa merely nodded, staring blankly at the blankets on the bed.

“I’ll talk to my contacts ‘ere, an’ we can probly leave tonight.”

Again, Broa merely nodded. Tears began to well up in her eyes and stream down her cheeks. She was mourning Tala, and she wept for herself. She also recalled something Tala had written in her letter:

‘You must never enter the lands of the Great Empire.’

They traveled that night, blindfolded by Garvane's 'friends', for nearly three hours. Broa, at first, tried to keep track of where they were going; one left, then two rights and another left... or was it another right. She gave up quickly. Finally the blindfolds were removed and they were standing in a clearing in the foothills some distance from Dragon's Dale. Broa and Kathra were warned by Garvane not to speak to his cohorts, that he would do all the talking. He gave the men a brief goodbye and a bag of coins that he procured from a pocket hidden deep in the crotch of his pants.

"Now what?" Broa asked Garvane after the other men had disappeared from view.

"Now we go sout'," he said in his rough, northern accent.

"How long will it take to get there?" This time it was Kathra asking.

"Proibly a week, walking." He said and turned to face south. Far in the distance he eyed the mountain home of the dark elves. Its peaks could barely be seen from where the trio stood, and it looked horribly ominous to Broa. Garvane felt a cold shiver run through him. Broa looked up at the man's face and could swear she saw fear etched in the hard lines. She too felt fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of what had driven her mother and Tala to escape. Fear of what she might find in herself.

Kathra gripped her hand gently, "Well, shall we?"

"Yes," Broa choked on the word.

"Ya', lets get dis over wit'!" Garvane agreed gruffly.

Two days of traveling by foot, and the trio were getting tiresome. They stopped to camp for the night near one of the Common Lands most southern settlements, Kipshire. Broa and Kathra were alone in their tent. Broa had felt Kathra grow silent and apprehensive as they closed in on the town. Sitting on the edge of their bedroll, he recalled the days when he was a slave on a Minotaur warship.

"I had been conscripted to join the captain of an army that was trying to stop a fleet of minotaur ships that were raiding the common lands for slaves," Kathra began. "We were betrayed by the Captains first officer and were captured by the minotaur. We were sold off to some rich dark elf Lord, me and most of the soldiers. The Captain was separated from the rest of us but escaped during a huge storm." He stopped and rested his chin in his hands, with his elbows on his knees. He became very solemn. "The ship began

breaking apart. Flying debris killed many of the others. The rest and myself ended up in the water as the ship sank. I don't know what happened to Captain Shador. He was trying to find his wife who was captured and sold with us."

Kathra stopped to clear his throat, tears beginning to well up in his eyes. "I floated out on the Dark Sea clinging to some of the ships broken timbers, I don't know for how long. I was tired, hungry and thirsty. Finally, when I was too weak to hold on anymore, I reached shore. I had no idea where, or whose shore. For all I knew I could have floated right back to the minotaur's island. I passed out from exhaustion there, half out of the water."

"And when I finally woke up, I was in the bed of some old man and his family. They had found me half dead on the beach. They took me in and nursed me back to health. The old man's name was Corven. I don't remember the rest. I left as soon as I could. I wanted to get as far away from the memories as possible. Corven understood. At least I think he understood." Kathra fell silent. Broa had sat behind him on the bedroll and had her soft arms wrapped around him while he told his story. She took his hands into hers and turned him to face him.

"We could go see him. Thank him. Let him know you're alive and well," she said solemnly.

"He wouldn't be alive now. He was very old and it's been a long time." He wouldn't look at her. His heart felt too heavy. Sensing he wanted to be alone for a while, she stood up and left the tent; left the man alone with his memories.

Stepping out of the tent she saw Garvane on the far side of the clearing. He was kneeling before a circle of light that glimmered and faded as she watched. She immediately recognized it as magic. She slowly approached him. "I've never seen a human with magic before," she said timidly, standing over him.

Startled, Garvane looked up at the dark elf. The glow of the fire silhouetted her beautifully. "It's a spell dat shows me im'ges of people I car' 'bout." He looked down at his hands, clasping and unclasping over the edges of his tunic. "The people I saw jus' now were my family. Mos' of dem died in the las' clan wars." Broa could see him choke back a sob. "Jus' a few of us can use magic. We'r secret and widespread, an' our magic ain't strong. Not like you elves." He wiped a tear from his cheek with the sleeve of his tunic and turned away, becoming silent. Broa left him. She sat on a log next to the fire and wondered to herself

what answers she might find in the Great Empire, the home of her people. The home her mother feared enough to escape from.

“I have good news, my Master.” Questa said to Daalon. He knelt before the altar high atop the Palace at Stone Reach. His patron god appeared to him as he always did, in a clouded visage suspended between two stone pillars at the north end of the vast temple. Questa wore a black tunic parted in the back for his large wings and had his hands clasped in his lap. He squeezed his hands so tightly he almost pierced the skin of his palms with his fingernails. He was overjoyed at the news he could now share with his Master, his creator.

“What is it my servant?” Daalon asked, his voice sounding only inside Questa’s head.

“I have found the child of Draveg, my Master.” Questa could barely contain his excitement.

“Very good, my child.” Daalons voice thundered in Questa’s head, paining him. “Where is he?”

This caught Questa by surprise. Surely he must know the child is female. He was unsure how to react.

“Why do you hesitate?” Daalon boomed.

“The child is female, my Master.” Questa fumbled for words.

“I see your trouble.” Daalon paused. “This is very interesting. Your last report to me was that the body of Draveg appeared as if it had birthed a master elf. Is this not correct?”

Questa was shaken. He searched his memory, and finally recalled their last communion. That was when Questa admitted he had failed his Master, and also when Daalon planted in his sleep the awful day mares that wouldn’t let him rest. “That is correct, Master. That is what I told you. But it appears that assumption on my part was incorrect. My apologies, Master.”

“No apologies necessary, child. Now, you must answer my question. Where is this child?”

“She is coming here now, as we speak, Master.”

“Very good, child. I shall enjoy bathing in her blood when I arrive.”

“As you wish, Master.”

“You shall sleep well tonight, my child.” And with that, Daalon was gone, his clouded visage floating away on the breeze.

Questa slumped over as if a heavy weight had been lifted from him and he wept. He had pleased his Master, and he would finally sleep without those wretched day mares.

Not far away, Conius listened to the conversation between Questa and their Master, Daalon; well, half of it anyway. He had magically called upon one of the rat avatars to spy on his half-brother. Through the rat’s eyes and ears, Conius could follow his half-brother anywhere he went, and hear anything he said. Though he only heard one side of their conversation, he understood most of it. The child of Draveg was a female elf with the wings of a male, and she was on her way here.

“So the prodigy child returns,” he thought to himself. “I shall have to be in attendance for this glorious reunion, and prove to our Master that Questa is nothing but a weak and incompetent fool.”

Questa awoke two nights later, having slept the whole time. He felt rejuvenated, felt young again. The dark bags and red rings around his eyes had faded and he felt stronger than he had in years. The miserable day mares were gone. He breathed a deep sigh and began to weep, tears of joy streaming down his face. A light rapping at the door stirred him. Refreshing himself quickly he signaled for the person to enter. It was one of the Master Lord’s personal messengers.

“My, Lord,” he spoke softly, fearfully. He has not been in the Master Lord’s employ for very long, and had only experienced his Master in sour moods, wracked by day mares. He had never known his Master to be in a joyful mood. It took him by surprise when his Master took his chin into his hands and allowed him to look directly at the elf, who had never appeared so youthful to the boy.

“Ahh, my dear, Kaelon. How good to see you this dusk. What news have you for me?” Questa was almost giddy with joy. Kaelon supposed the man must have been going mad. He couldn’t speak. “Come now, my dear boy. Speak up.”

Kaelon paused, then remembered his message, sent urgently from the guard post at the northern entrance to the subterranean Great Empire. “This has been sent from the First Gate, my Lord,” the boy

stammered. He handed his Master a parchment roll, sealed with a dollop of wax with the imprint that denotes that it is for the Master Lord only. Questa broke the seal unrolled it and read it silently.

‘My Lord Paar,

‘We have at our gate two humans and what appears to be a dark elf. One like such as we have never seen, my Lord. Your response is graciously asked in humble expectancy.

Master of the First Gate, Piorean.’

“This is wonderful, Kaelon!” Questa jumped from his bed and pulled hard on the silk cord next to him, ringing the chamber bell and lighting the blue-flame torches. Yonan immediately entered, bowing his head to his Master.

“Yes, my Lord,” the boy said.

“I will dress myself this dusk. You will escort Kaelon here out of the Palace-proper and accompany him to the First Gate. There, you will find two humans and a dark elf female. Both of you will instruct the Master of the first Gate to have an armed escort take you all up to the Great Temple where I shall meet you. Is that clear, my children?” Questa was very excited, and this shocked the young elves.

“Yes... Yes my Lord,” Yonan and Kaelon stammered in unison.

“Very good, now off with you two.” He gestured to the door and both boys were eager to leave.

When they reached the end of the hall and felt they were out of earshot they both looked at each other and Yonan asked, “What was that all about? Has he finally gone mad?”

Kaelon merely shrugged his shoulders, and the two set off for the First Gate, stopping to retrieve clothing for the still-nude Yonan from his chambers.

Half the night had passed before the two young elves reached the First Gate. They gave their Master’s instructions to the Master of the Gate and Piorean grudgingly accepted them. He ordered four of his guards to escort the group back up to the Palace, all four of which were at the moment staring in amazement at Broa. The dark elf mistress with the impressive wings of a master elf also enthralled Questa’s two slaves. They stared at her in wonderment before Piorean barked at them to get moving.

The two slaves took up the lead, followed by two guards, then Broa and her companions, Kathra and Garvane. The final two guards took up the rear. Leaving the First Gate and heading into the base of the huge mountains, they entered the First Labyrinth, built to stave off any attempts to attack the Empire. Garvane whispered to Broa and Kathra that they would travel several Labyrinths before entering the vast city that is the Great Empire. No matter how hard any of them tried to keep track of where they were going, it would fail. The Labyrinth was enchanted by very powerful, very old magic.

Emerging, finally, from the First Labyrinth, Broa found she was in a hidden valley set low in the mountain range. Only the light of the moons lit the valley enough for her human friends to see. With her night vision, she could see it was lush and full of forests, and even had a wide stream meandering through. They walked along a long paved road that ran through the heart of the valley. From the road, Broa could see large battlements hanging from the mountainside, carved out of the stone itself.

“From dos battlements,” Garvane whispered to Broa and Kathra, “archers an’ soldiers on top Pegasus can watch any body dat mighta’ got tru da’ Lab’rinth. Ya’ coon’t e’n hide in da’ forest wid out der’ eyes on ya’. Anyone would be a easy target out ‘ere. Anywhere out ‘ere.” He paused for a moment, thinking one of the guards may have heard him. Seeing that this was not the case, he continued, “Dey e’n watching us now. One wrong move, an we’re ded.”

Broa instinctively grimaced at the thought and sidled closer to Kathra.

After quite some time traveling through this wonderful, and lethal, valley, with dusk approaching, the group entered the ‘Second Labyrinth’, as Garvane called it. It did not seem to Broa to take as long to traverse this Labyrinth as it had in the first one. Leaving the utter darkness, they found themselves bathed in the fiery glow of swollen lava rivers wandering aimlessly through a vast city carved into the mountain rock. Broa and Kathra were amazed at the wonderful architecture. They had been in many naturally formed caverns throughout their travels, and this city must have taken just as long, if not longer, to carve. There were no stalagmites or stalactites protruding from the floor or ceiling like great teeth. But immensely tall towers were carved from the mountain and were home to the many denizens of the city. Vast plazas and roadways spanned the city, row upon row of homes and businesses sat next to each other, and calm, clear rivers of water flowed next to the violent, bubbling rivers of lava. Broa was astounded by the beauty and sheer immensity of the project that must have taken thousand of years. Kathra, too, was amazed. Garvane

did not seem impressed at all. Then Broa remembered he had been here before, as the slave of a cruel Master. He rightfully feared this place.

It was then that she first noticed the population of dark elves stop and stare at the parade as they passed. Two humans itself was not that odd to see escorted through their streets. What piqued their interest was what looked like a dark elf, but one like they had never seen before. They stared in awe at her marvelous wings, their dark color contrasting the porcelain color of her skin. Those brave ones that came close enough, without being sent away by the guards, saw the elven beauty of her face, her amethyst eyes, and her flaxen hair. They nudged each other saying, “It is a dark elf” or “That’s amazing!” or “I don’t believe my eyes.” Others in the distance pointed at her, gawked at her, or hurried their overly curious children away.

“Even my own people treat me like a freak.” Broa said to Kathra with disdain. She caught a glimpse of one youngster who had escaped his irate mother and came for a closer look. Broa flapped her wings at him angrily and barked some elven curse that Kathra could not understand. He grabbed her arm and drew her back as one of the guards glared at her. Broa watched as the child ran screaming back to his mother.

“I hope you’re happy with yourself. You nearly scared that kid half out of his wits.” Kathra chided her, gently pressing his fingers into the flesh of her arm.

“The brat deserved it.” She coldly crossed her arms over her chest and separated herself slightly from Kathra, but not too far. She only wanted him to know she was upset. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and nestle herself into him. He knew it, too, but let her carry on the pretense. Arguing with her was always a waste of time. She was very stubborn, as he had learned long ago, the hard way.

As the group proceeded to cross the city through its vast central corridor, Broa glanced at the different faces in the crowds that gathered around after hearing the news of her arrival. She quickly noted that few elves in the crowds had any wings at all, and those that did, seemed to be merchants, and very rich ones at that. Their clothing was more decorative, obviously well made, and very expensive. Those without wings, though their clothes were decorated, were not as ornate and not made of the same quality textiles. Also the winged elves lived higher in the dwellings and much closer to the central spire that, according to Garvane, led up to the Palace. They stood on high balconies overlooking the streets and had servants, other,

wingless elves, catering to them even as the entourage paraded past their elegant homes. Broa could see inside some of the homes at street level. They were drab, dusty and had few furnishings.

“Ev’n dose fat cats up on da’ balconies are considered lower class to ‘dose in or near da’ Palace.” Garvane said with a sideward glance at one portly fellow, as portly as an elf can get, that is. He sported gaudy jewelry and fanciful coats and trousers. An elven girl stood next to him, dressed plainly and peering over the top of the stone railing. Broa watched the gaudy elf swat at the girl with the back of his hand and chide her away. “The rich stand on da’ backs of da’ poor, and da’ fartha’ from da’ Palace yur born, da’ poorer your family is. Der’s no way out,” Garvane said coldly.

The trio fell silent and watched as the homes changed slowly from the dank hovels, to modest homes; from poor estates and large manors to the seven rich estates that surround the Spire. Their journey was nearly at an end. Approaching the Spire, the trio again entered a maze, the Final Labyrinth. It wound upwards to the Palace. Its lower levels overlooked the cavernous city that was the Great Empire. They climbed steadily for what seemed like forever to the trio.

“How close are we?” Kathra nudged Garvane.

“Dun know, never bin ‘ere befor.” He replied with a cold shiver that ran up his spine.

Kathra, too, felt a shiver up his spine, but blamed it on the change in temperature, not wanting to admit to himself he was growing fearful. *Maybe we made a mistake in coming here.*

Broa took his hand in hers partly because the Labyrinth was not lit well enough for the human to see, but also for the comfort of his touch. Garvane groped forward and clutched the shirttail of the guard ahead of him. In the First Labyrinth, the elf was insulted that the skjine would think to touch him, but acquiesced at the cajoling of his superior. He still told himself he would burn the tunic when he got home.

Eventually, they all exited the Final Labyrinth, and to their dismay soon entered another. “They muss be takin’ us to da’ altar way up top of da’ mounn’,” Garvane whispered, following after the disgruntled guard whose shirttail had become wrinkled and damp with human sweat. The guard muttered something at the man in elven and turned back to the corridor that reached out before him. Garvane grimaced at the comment and Broa giggled, stifling herself too late. “Wut, wut’d he say?” the confused and angry man asked her.

“Something about your father and a goat,” she said grinning, thankful the darkness hid her face from him. Kathra seemed about to laugh but Broa squeezed his hand harshly and he caught himself.

Questa stood in the center of the Great Temple that was perched at the very top of the Palace that reached through the heart of Stone Reach. The night sky was clear and star-filled, and the three moons, the daughters of Paarel, were nearly aligned. Standing around Questa in a semicircle were the Wizard Lords of the seven Noble Estates, those circling the base of the Spire. Eyes closed, heads raised to the heavens, and arms outstretched, the Wizard’s were concentrating all their energies on expanding the magical portal at the north end of the Temple above the stone altar. The Nobles of the Council stood outside the semi-circle of magic, standing anxiously, watching with fear and sharing with each other their apprehension. Questa casually and briefly wondered to himself about the odd absence of his half-brother, Conius.

The attention of the Nobles was suddenly drawn from what they were doing when a group of armed guards and a strange looking trio emerged from the Holy Labyrinth. One of the Nobles was about to go into a long-winded reprimand on the lead guard when Questa turned to see the group. He spoke just as the Noble, Lord Kavish was about to open his mouth.

“What wonderful timing,” he said leaving the circle of magic. “I shall deal with this, Lord Kavish.” Questa dismissed the irate Noble with a wave of his hand.

“But, my Lord...” Questa glared at the impudent noble, causing Kavish to digress. He joined the other nobles who stared at the skjine in disgust. Broa, they gazed at in awe.

Questa, too, studied the strange group that had accompanied the guards to the sacred Temple. The guards, with their hooded cloaks, all bowed their heads to their Master, as did Garvane. Broa and Kathra looked him directly in the eyes. This angered him slightly but he excused their behavior as ignorance of dark elf ways.

He continued his visual inspection of the trio. The two humans were of little interest, and he merely gave them a mild glance up and down. Broa, however, grabbed his attention. He circled her slowly, admiring her. He was not gawking, as others had, but appreciating her unique beauty as one might a work of art.

“Quite a lovely specimen,” he said, touching her wings lightly. She pulled back from his touch and glared at him. “I mean you no harm, my Lady.” Broa glared at him even more hatefully.

“What do you mean, ‘Lady,’” Kathra asked coldly. The insinuation was apparently lost on the skjine.

“Why,” Questa explained, “you have nobility in your presence. The Lady, Broa Paar.” He spied the glances of suspicion cast between Broa and Kathra. “The Lady is the long lost daughter of the late Tithan Paar, formerly the Master Lord of this powerful Empire. I have been searching the known world for her you know.” He spoke to Kathra, but continued to gaze into Broa’s eyes. She felt him boring deep, as if he were exploring the depths of her soul. She locked eyes with him.

Glancing at Garvane, Questa said, “It was our friend Vissel here who found you and brought you to me. Oh, that’s right, you know him as Garvane. I’m afraid that was just an alias. Well done, Vissel.”

Vissel bowed slightly at the waist. “Thank you, my Lord.” The heavy accent was gone, and it seemed to Broa that the man carried himself differently too. She glanced up at Kathra, rightly confused.

Kathra was about to speak, when Questa cut him off. “I’m sorry to hear about Tala’s unfortunate death, but, as Vissel explained to me, it was required.”

Broa shot Vissel a glance that could almost kill a man. Vissel hardly blanched under the hard, cold and hateful glare. “So you murdered Tala,” she spat. She was about to lunge at the man when Questa grabbed her roughly by the wrist.

“His time will come,” Questa said to her in a low tone that Vissel did not seem to hear. He led her toward the circle of magic and two of the guards followed, escorting the humans. Broa turned her head and glared at Vissel again, tears in her eyes.

Kathra whispered to Vissel, “If we ever get out of this place, I’ll be sure you don’t.” Vissel ignored him, keeping his eyes on Questa and the wizards standing around the altar.

Reaching the center of the Temple, Questa stopped, Broa next to him. With a guard flanking them, the two humans stopped a pace behind the Master Lord and the lovely dark elf. Broa was wide eyed in amazement at the magical display in front of her. The air was as if it was electrified, crisp and hot. Bolts of lightning crackled from the fingers of the wizards’ outstretched hands, running through them like a swift conduit. The lightning seemed to flow from one wizard to the next and then cascade across the stone floor

of the temple and shoot up over a stone box on the altar, resembling a sarcophagus and into the portal. The portal itself was a magnificent display, a spectrum of colored light banded and rippled around the edge of the tear in space. In the center, the gateway between the realms, Broa could see the vague shadows of figures moving on the other side.

“You know, Broa. It was from a portal similar to this that I called the panther avatar that killed our father,” he confessed to her in a hushed, almost reverent tone. Broa gasped and was about to speak when Questa continued. “I also ordered the death of your mother, though it seems that you would ultimately cause her death.” He glanced up at her wings. The soft, dark skin reflected the bolts of energy that surrounded them. He gripped her roughly around the wrist. “And you, too, must die, my Lady. Our Master, Daalon, has demanded it. You are about to meet him, my dear.”

Broa followed Questa’s gaze toward the portal. Her eyes widened in terror. Beyond the portal, approaching the gateway, were two huge, winged creatures. The Chrimada. Ethereal servants of the gods. They had the head, arms and torso of a human, the legs of a reptile, and large, black wings, similar to her own. Their skin was a charcoal-gray and they were completely hairless. With a crackle and an odd shriek from somewhere inside the bowels of the earth, they passed through the portal. The electrified energy around the temple hissed and cracked. They were the tallest creatures Broa had ever laid her eyes on, fifteen feet if they were an inch, and she had seen some big creatures in the world.

Once through, the two Chrimada, with their colorless eyes, turned back to face the portal. Broa watched as another figure approached from the ethereal realm; Daalon she could only assume. She knew from Tala’s teachings that most dark elves worship this evil god as their Master and Creator. He was the god of wrath, death and darkness. *Fitting*, she said to herself.

Daalon sucked in a deep breath and thrust his hands through the portal, writhing in agony. Deep below the mountain Palace, the earth shuddered and gave a cry. The wizards, too intent on their task, did not notice the movement of the mountain or its screams. The Nobles however, were filled with fear by the reaction. The Chrimada took hold of Daalons hands and began to draw their Master through. Broa just then noticed a difference in Daalons hands. In the ethereal realm, his hands were large and lithe, able to crush a mortal’s skull with ease. But now, on the mortal side of the gateway, he had the small, chubby and weak

hands of a newborn infant. Upon closer inspection, she could see what looked like blood and mucus. *He is actually being reborn into our world!*

Outside the circle of magic, the Nobles were huddled together cowering near the entrance to the Holy Labyrinth, ready to flee at the first sign of trouble. Kathra and Vissel, holding their ground, were enraptured at the sight, just as Broa was. Broa looked up to see a hideous grin on the face of the one whom she had just discovered was her murderous half-brother. “You’re just as evil as Daalon is,” she shouted at Questa, but he could not hear her over the noise of the electrically charged air or the angry mountain beneath them.

Suddenly, Broa heard a strange voice saying to her, “Use the amulet.” She looked around her, confused, to see who had spoken to her. No one was near, nor could anyone take their eyes off the spectacle on the altar before them. She then noticed a strange warmth emanating from the amulet around her neck. She looked down to see it glowing faintly against her porcelain skin. She quickly covered it with her free hand and glanced around to see if anyone noticed, but, again, everyone was too enthralled. She had only seen and felt the amulet’s power once before, in the tavern of the Crossing Swords, and it saved her life then, or so she thought. Daalon was almost through the portal, when Broa heard the strange voice again. “Use the amulet,” it said, more urgently.

“It is time,” Questa said, drawing Broa closer to the sarcophagus. Broa assumed, correctly, that it was to be Daalons ‘cradle’ and basin. The Chrimada lifted Daalons infant form over the lip of the sarcophagus and placed him gently inside. To Broa, he looked just like any other child who had just been born. Blood and mucus covered his tiny, fragile body; afterbirth clung to him in pieces and a severed umbilical cord dangled from his belly. “Once our Master tastes your blood, it won’t take long for him to grow to his natural form,” Questa hissed, drawing a dagger from its sheath beneath his tunic. He raised her arm over the screaming infant. Broa fought to pull away. The more she fought, the tighter Questa gripped her. He raised the dagger over her wrist.

“Use the amulet,” the voice called out to her again. Looking down, the amulet, hanging in the center of her chest, was glowing fiercely, drawing Questa’s attention as well. He reached out to grasp it and recoiled sharply, staring at the burnt flesh of his palm. Looking again at the amulet, he noticed that it had changed form, looking suddenly like the amulet he had used to kill Nolraa in a blinding rage. It was then

that he noticed the eye in the center, Nolraa's eye, the one he had plucked himself before allowing the pregnant Lady Draveg and her handmaid, Tala, escape twenty seven years earlier.

Kathra was about to come to Broa's aide, when one of the guards that had kept vigil over him doffed his hood and crept up behind Questa. Suddenly, to Broa's shock, two blades gleamed in the light of the magic that still held open the portal. The guard's blade split the skin over Questa's jugular from ear to ear. Questa's grip on her wrist went slack and he groped at his neck, as if to stop the flow of blood. He turned around to see his attacker and his eyes flew open in shock. Conius, his own half-brother, stood before him, bloodied dagger in hand.

"I am sorry, brother, but you are not worthy of our Lord's trust," he said as Questa sagged weakly to his knees. The Nobles were in utter shock, but could do nothing with the wizard's magic barring the way, not that there was much they would have done. They were all too frightened of their Master who lay screaming in the stone cradle. The wizards saw nothing, blinded by their own focus. Kathra and Vissel glanced at each other, unsure of what to do.

Conius took his fallen brother's place next to Broa and grasped her arm. He slashed the soft, white flesh of her wrist and thrust it over the infant, letting Daalon drink of it and bathe in it. Broa soon felt too weak from loss of blood to struggle very much, and she was feeling faint. Conius cradled her against his body and continued to let her blood flow onto the infant.

Kathra had had enough. He turned viciously on the last guard within the circle and in a split second the lithe, elegant elf lay motionless on the cold stone floor. Having disposed of one threat, he turned toward Conius. Vissel abruptly laid a hand on Kathra's shoulder and shaking his head, drew the man's attention toward the Nobles. They had summoned several more guards who were massing outside the circle of magic, waiting for their chance to enter. Kathra stopped for a moment, for a second, split between self-preservation and his love for Broa.

In that same second, Broa, half unconscious, heard the voice again. "Use the amulet. Kill the child!" The voice was sharp, very clear and stern. She grasped the amulet in her hand, and with her last bit of strength, she wrenched it from its leather thong around her neck and thrust it savagely onto the infant Daalon's chest. The child shrieked in pain as the magic of the amulet burned into flesh. Broa collapsed to the ground.

Conius stood staring in disbelief as the amulet worked its magic. The infant's face and body contorted wickedly, painfully. The Chrimada, who had been standing near the altar, came quickly, snatched up the infant, dropping the amulet into the cradle, and hastened back through the portal. Kathra ran past Conius who was in a daze, leapt over Questa's inert body with a strange smile forever etched on his face, and gathered Broa into his arms. Vissel sidled past Conius cautiously and neared Kathra.

"Is she dead?" he asked.

"What do you care, you son of a harpy!" Kathra snapped at him.

"I might be able to help," he said pleadingly.

"I think you've helped enough."

"I know magic, I can heal her wound, give her some strength." He seemed to truly want to help.

"You want to bring her back, just so those fool bastards can try all this again?" Kathra said sardonically, gesturing with a tilt of the head toward the Nobles standing outside of the circle, whose magic was coming to an end. He looked into Vissel's eyes and saw the sincerity of his words. "All right, but be quick about it. The magic is almost gone and those guards don't look happy."

Vissel began his work, chanting in a language unknown to Kathra, unknown to a great many people, Kathra assumed. Vissel stopped suddenly, "I have to warn you Kathra, I will be weakened after this too."

Kathra knew his meaning, and snatched the dagger out the hand of the confused and bewildered Conius. Kathra returned to Vissel and Broa and stood defiantly over them just as the magic of the wizards fell apart. The Nobles and a handful of guards dashed past the very confused wizards, who awoke to see their Master Lord dead on the floor, a closed portal and no Daalon. The five guards half circled the trio at the top of the altar and a tall dark elf Noble broke rank and approached Kathra.

"Is she well enough to speak." Kavish said to Kathra in very good human, regarding Broa. He was awed by the unique elf. Broa began to stir and opened her eyes. Seeing Vissel so close she cringed and scrambled away from him, bumping into the legs of the guard Kathra had immobilized. Again a look of shock crept over her face.

“What do you want of her?” Kathra took her by the shoulders and helped her stand, weakly, afraid that in her confusion, she might toss herself off the mountain. He held her close. He regarded the Noble with suspicion.

The man bowed low to Broa and said reverently, “My Mistress, I am Kavish, Lord of the Council of Nobles. It is good to have you home, my Lady.”

Kathra and Broa exchanged quizzical glances then looked back at Vissel, who looked just as confused as they. Suddenly there came an angry shriek from Conius, and he launched himself at Broa, ripping a sword free from one of the guards. Kathra instinctively turned Broa away, placing his body between her and her assailant. Vissel, too, acted quickly, thrusting himself onto the deranged elf’s blade. This gave the guards the time to react, with Kavish’s blessing. Just as Conius was freeing his blade from Vissel’s belly, one of the guards stepped up and calmly slit the elf’s throat just as Conius had so calmly done to his half-brother. Like Questa, Conius slumped to his knees and fell to the ground whimpering through the blood that flowed from his open throat. His eyes rolled back into his head and he died lying next to the brother who had raised him in from his youth.

Kathra went over to assist Vissel, leaving Broa with Kavish, whom he reluctantly trusted. Vissel was bleeding profusely, kneeling on the altar, staring down, his hands over the gaping wound in his abdomen. Kathra placed a hand behind his head and gently laid him down on his back, his treachery momentarily forgotten. Kathra placed a hand over the wound and looked at it carefully. A grim look came over his face, and Vissel knew then that he was going to die.

“Can’t you use your magic, Garv...Vissel,” he corrected himself.

“I’m...I’m too weak,” he stuttered between painful coughs.

Broa weakly shuffled over to the two humans, her face drawn and pale. The wound on her wrist was still red and swollen, but was no longer bleeding. She looked down at her wrist and realized that Vissel had healed it, remembering that he had exposed his use magic to her accidentally. “You healed me?” she said more than asked. “You said your magic wasn’t strong, that none of your people’s magic was strong.”

“I’m sor...” he stopped to cough up a mouthful of blood. It dribbled down his chin. “I’m sorry, Broa. When you caught me that night using my magic, I was looking at my dead family. But before you

saw me, I was talking to Questa. I knew he would kill you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I killed Tala." He coughed and spit up more blood.

"Vissel, lay still. Calm down," Broa instructed him.

"No, don't call me that. I hated that man," he grew angry, as angry as a man so close to death can get. "I liked it better when I was the bumbling oaf. I felt like I could have had friends, real friends for the first time in my life. I liked Garvane. I'm...I'm sorry..." He coughed and fell limp in Kathra's arms. The last thing the man heard was Broa's voice saying that she, too, liked Garvane.

Kavish stepped up to Broa and Kathra. Laying Vissel gently on the ground, the two rose to meet the Noble. "I'm afraid I must interrupt, my Lady. I thought you and your companion might wish to rest after your ordeal."

Feeling faint, she stumbled slightly and fell into Kathra's waiting arms. He always seemed to be there to catch her.

The next night, after sleeping restlessly throughout the day, Broa stood alone in the Great Temple. Kathra still slept. Most of the Empire, it seemed, was still asleep in the early dusk. She looked up into the sky. The sun was setting. It was dusk. The moons, barely visible above her, were falling out of alignment, and they would not come together for another two thousand years. She unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief. She looked around her. The altar had been cleared of the all the bodies and the blood and it appeared as if nothing had happened at all. Kavish had told her that the last of her bloodline had died there on the altar. Her father had been murdered. Her mother was dead. Tala, the closest thing she ever knew to family, was murdered at the hands of an assassin hired by her half-brother. Both of her half-brothers were now dead. She was the last. She was alone. Except for Kathra. Her dearest friend and lover. He would always be there.

Kavish woke with a start. It was late dusk, and he had apparently overslept. He assumed the knock at his door was a messenger informing him of his tardiness. He was partly right. It was a messenger, but

this young dark elf, the one called Yonan, carried with him a parchment, rolled and tied with a purple ribbon. He unrolled the sheet and read the contents of the letter, written in fine elven script.

‘My Lord Kavish,

‘I regret I cannot take you up on your offer for me to live in the Palace. Kathra would not be permitted to remain with me, and my home is elsewhere. I do not know where, but it is not in the Palace. What I saw of life in the Great Empire did not appeal to me, nor did the Palace life that I witnessed. Please take no offence, my Lord.

‘I feel I must find my own place in this world. I am not alone anymore. I know that now. I must thank you for the gift of the Guiding Ring. It has helped greatly in navigating the amazing Labyrinths. I will send the ring back with young Yonan.

‘I have only one request of you, my Lord. I humbly ask that now that his Master is dead, you give back to Yonan the freedom he deserves. Send him home, I beg you. A home filled with love is all any of us really needs. I will find mine, or make mine.

‘Humbly, Lady Paar.’

Taking Yonan’s hand in his, Kavish looked softly at the young man, aged beyond his years in the service of others. “It would seem our Lady Paar has taken a liking to you, my boy.” With a tear in his eye, he pulled the boy into his arms and said to him, “Welcome home, son.”

TO BE CONTINUED