

# Ascension

Book 1, Chapter 4

## True Gods and Keepers

BY:

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“Well, this was a rather fruitless day of hunting, don’t you agree, Sitara?” Shantos asked of his elven companion sarcastically.

“It’s not my fault those deer were scared away. I didn’t ask that wretched snake to slither up my pant leg,” she protested to the man who rode next to her. Sitara sat mounted on her dear companion, Basata, a great silverback bear whose name was the elven word for ‘friend’. She wore her usual outfit; a loose, dark green tunic and molded leather bodice; dark brown, fitted leather pants and knee-high black leather boots. She let her long curly, auburn hair drape down her back and fall over shoulders, her long pointed ears peeking through. Shantos casually watched her sway with Basata’s slow gait. He let his eye’s drift down to her rounded rump.

“We should camp here for the night,” she said turning toward Shantos.

Shantos quickly turned his eyes from her rear end, “Sounds good.” He could feel a slight blush burning in his cheeks. Sitara pretended not to notice as she climbed down from Basata.

“How long do you think it will take to reach Dragon’s Dale?” Shantos asked, pulling in the reins of his beautiful black steed. He dismounted and watched Sitara from the corner of eyes as she withdrew some gear from her neatly packed saddlebags. Again he quickly looked away as she turned in his direction.

“We should arrive by late afternoon tomorrow.” She leaned casually against Basata who lay on the ground with his massive paws stretched out. She found herself looking at Shantos as he often looked at her. Beneath his dark silk tunic and brown leather pants, Sitara knew there was a beautifully sculpted body, hard and lean. He had the typical look of a human from the northern territories; clean-shaven chin and skull, dark skin and his body decorated in gold. Sitara sighed to herself, accepting the fact that they could never be lovers. Society was not tolerant of inter-racial couples and half-elves were often the targets of viscous cruelty.

The summer sun was quickly setting as Shantos began building a fire. Each of the two companions stole a lingering glance at the other before closing their eyes to the starry sky for a peaceful nights sleep.

Sitara slept soundly, covered only by a light woolen blanket pulled up over her shoulder. Her copper colored skin radiated in the light of the fire. Her long hair fell in disarray about the sharp, graceful curve of her chin. Over the cuffs of her long billowing sleeves, she wore thick black leather bracelets, laced up the inside of her wrists

with a matching collar around her neck. Her left leg was bent at the knee, peeking out from beneath the embroidered edge of the vividly colored blanket. She stretched out her right leg, laying it across the other, her foot protruding from the bottom. Next to her feet, lay all her tack: her molded leather bodice with its ornately decorated, oval-shaped face; her twin scimitars in their sheaths attached to a dual shoulder strap; and her black hooded cloak. Also laying near her feet were her large saddle pack and Basata, with whom Sitara shared an empathic bond that could never be broken. They would, and had, trusted the other with their life.

Basata lay on his side, his heavy legs stretched out before him. With paws larger than a human's head, he was a massive creature, standing nearly 6 feet tall at the shoulders, and almost 12 feet on his hind legs. He weighed well over a ton. Basata did not seem so monstrous as he slept though, snoring casually, kicking his legs subtly, and playfully chasing Sitara in a dream, as he often did in waking hours. It was the streak of silver-colored fur that grew over a mature male's back that earned his species their name. His massive head was up-stretched, his tapered muzzle moist at the tip. His big round ears, also decorated with the coarse, silver-colored fur, flicked occasionally as he dreamed.

Shantos lay on his back across the fire from Sitara. He also slept covered by only a thin woolen blanket, though his was a dull brown color and not as vividly decorated. Shantos faced the starry sky, the light from the fire flickering over his dark, chiseled features. His jaw was strong, as if carved in stone. As was the custom of his kingdom, he fastidiously groomed his skull, and the entirety of his body. His head rested on a thick, dull brown blanket, wadded loosely. His eyes were shut to the spectacle of stars overhead. He stirred only slightly as a cool breeze swept over the clearing in which they camped for the night.

To his left, Shantos had laid his tack. The solid opal hilt of his large, sheathed broad sword glimmered in the firelight, next to his long, black hooded cloak and hard leather boots. A quiver of obsidian tipped arrows, and a long, tightly strung bow lay next to his heavily worn saddle. The bags attached to the saddle were brimming over with supplies. Sitara would constantly accuse him of over-packing, even for the shortest trips. 'You never really know when this stuff could come in handy,' would always be his defense, a dopey, apologetic grin painted across his handsome face.

Not far from where he slept, near the edge of the clearing and bound to a tall oak tree, was Shantos' beautiful steed. She stood casually grazing on the underbrush of the heavily wooded forest that bordered the quiet clearing. Her hard agile body was covered in a sleek black coat that shimmered in the light of the fire. She was tall,

nearly 20 hands, and elegant in stature. She was of the well sought after Sigarnian breed, known for swift feet, lightning agility and radiating beauty. Though she carried no name, she was the envy of many. Shantos always felt that to put a name on such a creature would be to possess it, and you cannot own what is wild.

Suddenly the horse drew her head up, her ears cocked and senses alert, neighing nervously, pulling at the thin leather reins that restrained her. She stepped about the edge of the clearing, her sleek black coat beginning to glisten with fresh sweat, turning herself around then back again, straining to see through the dim light of the clearing. Basata, too, began to stir from his deep slumber. He groggily rolled onto his back, his paws in the air, and casually blinked the sleep from his eyes. Still half asleep, he turned his head toward the sound of the beautiful steed's whinnies that grew increasingly distraught. The sleep cleared from his eyes just in time to see a small glimmer of light that seemed to float in mid-air amidst the pitch-black shadows of the forest. Basata rose onto all four legs cautiously as the source of light, a spectacle of bright colors, continued to grow.

He approached Sitara's sleeping form and gently nudged her lower back with his large muzzle, never taking his eyes off the glimmering light show as it grew in size and brilliance. Sitara stirred, swatting away Basata's insistent prodding. As she slowly woke, she became more empathically aware of Basata's urgency. She sat up; wiping the long curls of hair away from her face, and looked first at Basata then followed his unwavering gaze toward the bright lights, whose center was now black as pitch. She immediately recognized the ever-growing dimensional portal.

Shantos was also beginning to stir as Sitara rushed on hands and knees to his side and shook him none too gently. "What...What is it?" he stuttered, considerably annoyed by the rude awakening at the hands of his beautiful elven friend.

"We have company!"

Shantos quickly, recognized the hard tone in her voice. He found himself staring into her almond eyes, normally soft, beautiful and inviting, now stone cold. Not so much a look of fear, as a look of urgency. He followed her eyes as she turned her gaze toward the portal, now nearly four paces in diameter. The rough, scalloped edge of the portal glimmered in a rainbow of colors that shone outwardly from the black void at its center. Shantos rolled over and in one seamless motion, was upright; his heavy sword in both hands, its brilliant blade reflecting the awesome spectacle of light across Shantos' now very determined features.

In that same split-second, Sitara dove over the fire and picked her twin blades off the ground,

simultaneously unsheathing them and standing at the ready. Her elven heritage allowed her incredible speed and agility compared to her human counterpart. That was something both she and Shantos had often relied upon. She stood with her left foot forward, bright blades before her. She stared into the depths of the portal, whose core was now six steps across, only a hand's width from the hard earth below it. Shantos, too, stood with his left foot forward, and shifted his large blade into his right hand. There they both awaited the arrival of some uninvited guest, whose intentions were as yet unclear.

Shantos' steed now grew panicked, pulling urgently at her bindings, her neighing becoming more agitated. Basata had taken a place between Sitara and Shantos, his head and upper body low to the ground; his tightly strung muscles set to pounce at the slightest command. The rim of the portal now touched the ground, the extreme heat of the tear in dimensional space scorching the earth. An indistinct form began to take shape in the darkness of the void. Two dark, blood red eyes materialized, blinking at the trio standing only paces away. The creature seemed to be trying to decide what to make of what it saw. A rather small, delicate looking forest elf; a large, probably dim-witted bear; and a tall, hulking human. The creature seemed to laugh at the trio from inside the depths of the darkness. Sitara swore she could almost hear it's deep, hissing cackle.

The creature burst through the portal, landing amidst a small, rising cloud of dust, between Shantos and his frightened steed. Shantos could hear her panicked screams, as she rose on her hind legs thrashing her fore legs in defense.

In an instant both Sitara and Shantos knew they were dealing with a night dragon, one of the most feared of the dragon-kind, a nearly indomitable nocturnal predator. The night dragons had the natural ability to teleport themselves from one place to another through dimensional portals, opening and closing them with the power of mere thought. From his head to the tip of his tail, the dragon measured twenty-seven steps long. His agile serpentine body was studded with twelve-inch long razor-sharp spikes and his tail split into a dozen thin, whip-like appendages. His hide was made up of fist-sized scales, colored a dark brown with black stripes running from side to side. The head of the magnificent beast was crested in the rear, shielding its neck, and was adorned with a trio of horns. One horn, half the length of a human arm, was mounted atop its muzzle, like a rhino, and two were mounted on its skull, behind its wide-set eyes. An intelligent species, the night dragon was capable of speech, reason, and treachery.

"Leave here now, and I will spare your lives. All I want is the mare." The dragon turned and hissed toward Sitara and Shantos, the intensity of his eyes driving into the companions. The dragon turned his fearsome, gaping

maw in the direction of the helpless horse; each mandible lined with a row of dagger-like teeth. His breath was vile and his mouth was filled with rotting flesh from previous dinner appointments, which allowed toxic bacteria to thrive. If the beast's devastating bite did not kill, the infection that followed certainly would. Shantos stepped suddenly in the creature's direction. The dragon turned its head sharply; rage beginning to boil in his eyes. Night dragons were not well known for their patience. "I said leave now. Or do you want to become an appetizer?" he hissed, a strange grin spreading across his hideous visage. As if to punctuate his sincerity, he whipped his tail over the heads of the companions, each of the twelve splinters cracking loudly in the air. Merely a threat, each of the three companions easily ducked under the loud cracks, yet feeling the ferocity of each splinter in the sharp movement of the air above them.

"I hope you're feeling energetic this morning." Sitara whispered to her friend, looking him coolly in the eyes.

"Well, I haven't had breakfast yet." he replied, also in a whisper. The dragon moved again toward the frightened horse. The beautiful animal neighed wildly and frantically pulled at her restraints, her nervous sweat boiling into a lather. "Leave my horse alone, you son of a harpy!!" Shantos shouted with rage.

The dragon turned his head once again toward Shantos, the hatred in his eyes boiling over. He hissed violently, pawing at the earth with claws as long as an assassin's blade, curved and deadly sharp. "You are trying my patience, human." Again he hissed, this time releasing a stream of corrosive and very toxic venom.

'I forgot about that,' Shantos thought to himself as he deftly sidestepped the putrid stream. He watched as the corrosive acids pooled and dissolved the short grass and a portion of the woolen blanket he had earlier slept so soundly beneath. Foul, acid-filled smoke rose in plumes, and Shantos could not help inhaling some of the fumes. "Well, you're beginning to piss me off!" he retorted, stepping over the puddle of venom toward the large, angry reptile. Sitara shook her head at Shantos' brazen foolishness. The Dragon, however, ignored the human nuisance and returned his attention to the delicious looking horse, so readily available, strung to the heavy oaken branch like a curing ham in a butcher shop. Sitara and Shantos simultaneously, though briefly, looked at one another and stepped toward the dragon, feigning stealth. Basata, for the moment, remained still.

The dragon sensed the approach of the two companions, and in an instant, his tail was in the air, each splinter snapping violently and lashed out at the frenzied horse with his right paw, smashing her across the neck. The momentum of the violent impact sent her body soaring into a tree and slumping into the dirt at its base. She was not

dead, but her neck was broken and she suffered several deep lacerations that had already begun to bleed profusely.

Sitara leapt into the air and somersaulted over the whipping splinters of the dragons' tail. She could hear the sharp cracks, and feel the air move about her as the whips snapped past. She landed in a crouch several steps back, just in time to watch Shantos' steed fall to the ground. Sitara felt the horse's incredible pain as it thrashed its legs frantically. She closed her eyes, trying to tune it out. 'I'll mourn you later.' she thought to herself.

Shantos, too, reacted quickly to the onslaught of the dragons whipping tail, jumping to his left and rolling into a low crouch, his large sword still in hand. He was not as quick as his elven friend, however. Two of the slivers of the creature's tail caught him as he tried to jump out of their path, one directly across the lateral face of his right shoulder, the other across his upper back. He reached up with his left hand and cringed as he touched the open lacerations. Dirt mixed with the blood and created a chalk-like feel to the wound. He could not take his eyes off of his fallen horse, lying on the ground, kicking out in pain. For what felt to him like forever, he watched as the dragon scooped up the body of his prized steed, her head hanging limp, her thrashing become less feverish.

"You put her down, you bastard!" Shantos hissed, rage dripping from every syllable and hatred boiling in the silver-blue eyes that glared at the hideous dragon. All the color had drained from his face. Sitara stole a quick glance at Shantos, shocked at the hatred that twisted the face of the man she knew so well. Never had she seen that much rage in him, and never did she want to see it again. In an instant, Shantos launched himself at the dragon, gripping his sword with both hands.

The dragon whirled and retreated toward the still open portal behind him, hoping to go elsewhere to enjoy his meal. As he spun, his tail exploded into the air, directed solely toward the annoying human. Shantos adeptly ducked and rolled under the attack, anticipating it, and remained crouched low to the ground, momentarily pausing to consider his next movement, something he rarely did.

Sitara, also anticipating the dragons move toward the portal, reached into her saddle pack beneath her and quickly found what she was looking for. Pulling her hand from the opening of the bag, she grasped in her palm a small, teardrop-shaped blue spinel stone. She thrust her hand out before her towards the portal, concentration etched on her face. She muttered a few indistinct words from a long forgotten tongue, and in an instant, a bright, almost blinding, beam of light shot out from the stone and entered into the heart of the black void.

Both the dragon and Shantos, at the dragons left rear flank, stopped and watched as the integrity of the portal began to fail. In a rainbow of color, light flooded the small clearing, in unison with the emanation from

Sitara's magical stone. An orchestra of hues danced across the faces of those who filled the clearing. The dragon rose on hind legs, still gripping Shantos' now dead horse in his powerful talons, and screamed at Sitara, "You interfering, elven bitch!" He whipped his tail at Shantos one more time and stepped toward Sitara who stood at the ready, a single blade in hand, cautiously stepping back from the dragon.

Shantos leapt into a roll over the dragon's left rear leg and slashed viscously at it, opening a wide, bleeding wound. The dragon screamed out in pain and dropped the limp body of Shantos' steed from his right hand. The dragon spun his head toward Shantos and spat, "You contemptible human!" The dragon was consumed with hatred. He struck out with his wounded arm, serving Shantos a crushing blow to the chest, sending him stumbling over the dragon's hind leg. Shantos lost his wind and heard several ribs break as the huge scaled limb of the dragon struck him. He dropped his sword and hit the ground hard, clutching his chest with both hands, wheezing desperately.

Sitara watched her dear friend, scrambling to avoid the dragons swinging tail that threatened to crash down on him. With the portal now closed and the clearing lit only by the dying campfire, Sitara dropped her magical stone back into her bag and quickly reclaimed the scimitar she had laid down only a moment earlier. It was not long before the dragon was nearly upon her, his attention solely on her now. He was set to wreak his vengeance.

Basata now found his window of opportunity. He had been left to watch, as the dragon's movements had not allowed an opening, his hide covered with long spikes that could easily pierce the bear's soft skin. But now, the dragon's tail was within Basata's reach. He easily launched himself into the air, landing along the length of the enraged creature. Basata buried his teeth and claws into the tough hide of the beast, digging beneath the hard scales. The dragon reared upon its hind legs, screeching so loud, Sitara wondered if the long-forgotten Khuradiya might have heard. She quickly took advantage of the opportunity and, like a conductor leading an orchestra, her blades flashing brilliantly in the light of the fire as she quickly slashed at the dragon's soft and exposed underbelly. A cloud of confusion momentarily swept over the beast as the most severe pain emanated from both his tail and delicate belly. He shrieked wildly and dropped onto all fours, nearly crushing the delicate, but very quick elf. The dragon lashed its tail about wildly, trying to loosen the grip of the large bear. Basata dragged his hind feet across the ground in an attempt to anchor himself. He was thrown in seconds, tearing at the scaly hide before being tossed into the air like a child's toy.

Sitara, now alone, found herself fending off lightning quick strikes by the dragons' front claws and menacing bite as he once again rose to his hind legs and turned his attention solely on her. She fended off strike after

strike. She could smell the dragon's terrible breath as he snapped at her, slowly driving her back toward the edge of the clearing. She once, then twice was caught on the business end of the dragon's talons. The first caught her across the left shoulder, tearing her tunic and the bronze, silken skin beneath. The second blow glanced her upper right thigh, causing her to stumble momentarily. Blood began to moisten and stain her leather pants. In her momentary lapse of balance and concentration, the dragon slammed his open hand into the left side of Sitara's head, knocking her to the ground, unconscious. A small triumphant smile began to grow across the dragons face. Sheer elation and perverse excitement burned in his blood-red eyes.

Shantos stumbled to his feet, finally catching his breath. His lungs burned and he continued to clutch his chest with his left hand, as he frantically reached for his sword. He approached the dragon, whose attention was still centered on Sitara, her inert form lying near the edge of the woods.

Basata, too, regained his footing, lifting himself off the ground, dust clinging to his sweat dampened fur. Seeing Sitara's body lying motionless in the dirt, he launched himself into a full run across the small clearing and again threw his bulk onto the dragon's tail, burying his claws and teeth as deep into the dragons flesh as he could. The dragon shrieked and rose high on his hind legs, his head filled with a cacophony of pain, as Basata drove into him with unbridled passion. Shantos approached the shrieking dragon, half running, and half stumbling. The dragon suddenly whirled around and Shantos thrust his sword into the air as it came down to plant all four claws on the ground. Shantos rolled out from under the immense bulk, narrowly avoiding a crushing death.

The clearing went silent, and the dragon became still. Basata felt its body go limp beneath him. With great caution, he released his grip and lowered himself from atop the beast's tail. He slowly sidestepped around the creature and toward Sitara, who stirred slightly. Basata never took his eyes off the dragon's inert form until he reached Sitara, who rose to her elbows. Using Basata for balance, she rose unsteadily to her feet.

Shantos also rose slowly to his feet, half bent, still clutching his chest. He cautiously shuffled over to the dragon's body, giving it a swift kick. Seeing no reaction, he relaxed slightly.

"Is it...?" Sitara tried to speak, but the thunder in her head stopped her. She swore to herself then and there that she would never again complain about a hangover.

"Yeah, I think its dead." Shantos said, cringing at the pain in his chest, keeping his breath shallow.

"What...What happened?" Sitara stammered. With Basata's assistance, she stepped closer to Shantos.

"He fell on my sword." he said hoarsely, pausing for a moment, "I think." He gave the dragon another kick,

The two looked at each other, appraising the damage the other had suffered. Sitara saw the dirt clinging to Shantos' clothes and his sweated skin and fat lip. His left arm clung to his chest and she saw the still damp blood and dust caked to his shoulder and back. She still saw the rugged beauty in his eyes, and his strong chin.

Her beautiful form was still unbalanced by the terrible blow to the head. Shantos only now noticed the lump forming on the left side of her face, choosing not to point it out to her. He also noticed her torn and bloodied left shoulder and right thigh. The blood around both wounds mixed freely with the dust and dirt of the clearing.

In unison the two companions turned their attention to the broken body of Shantos' prized horse. Its sleek black coat, doused in its own blood, shimmered in the breaking light of day.

"I'm so sorry," was all Sitara could say.

He stepped to the edge of the clearing and, finding a good strong branch, returned to his horse and knelt next to her. With that heavy branch, he began to dig. Within moments, Sitara knelt beside him, clawing at the dry earth with her small dagger. Basata too joined in, his empathic bond with Sitara allowing him an understanding of death and grief.

"It took us most of the afternoon, but we did put her to rest." Shantos said to his very obedient audience. The room fell silent. Tobacco smoke and stale mead filled the air and the many patrons of the tavern looked upon each other with a mixture of expressions: some with disbelief, others with shock and horror and a few with looks of disdain for a show-boat character taking attention away from them.

One man finally broke the stagnancy of the room, "How did you get your sword back?" It was a tall human, with dark eyes and disheveled hair, and a five-o'clock shadow that had shown up two hours late. He was a robust and handsome man, wearing a light linen shirt and dark leather pants. The stranger sat with an even stranger companion, a dark elf. Not just any dark elf, by Shantos' recollection, but one with an impressive wingspan, for a female of her kind.

"May I have your name, 'Friend'?" Shantos asked with a noticeable inflection.

"I mean no disrespect, friend. I am Kathra of the clan Moer' De Raine." Kathra rose and politely bowed at the waist. "This is my companion, Broa Paar, Empress of the Great Empire, and..." His 'companion' quickly

quieted him with an elbow in the thigh.

“Shut up, you blow-hard!” She bent her head low and grimaced as the company of the room grumbled. She had spent her entire existence living and working with those who hated her kind. Left up to her she would crawl under a large rock before admitting what had been bestowed her upon only two weeks earlier. “Not every one wants to hear your story this time, you filthy ogre.”

“At least you’re giving me more credit; you’re not calling me skjine! Besides, *I* think he wants to here the story.” Kathra motioned toward the previous orator as he approached. “Sit, have a drink with us!”

“I would enjoy that,” he paused for a moment, “Would you mind if my companion joined us?”

“Not at all. The more the merrier, they say,” Kathra said, echoing Broa’s previous elbow motion. Broa rolled her eyes and slumped back deeply into her chair, arms crossed over her breasts. She wore a molded leather bodice dyed vibrant lavender, matching her sharp, almond shaped eyes and starkly contrasting her ashen hair. Her brown leather pants were tight in the bottom and flared out slightly at the hem and fell over the tops of her soft suede boots. Broa did not like crowds, not even small ones, and she flexed her wings nervously as Sitara and Shantos pulled up two chairs from a neighboring table and sat across from her and Kathra.

“Let me introduce Sitara Que Lon Fora.” Sitara was a petite creature, barely fifteen hands tall, copper skin and auburn, nearly fire red hair and piercing green eyes, the eyes of polished emerald stones. She too, wore a leather bodice, though much more decorated than Broa’s. In the center was the image of her family crest, a large bear and a wild cat facing each other with a tall and wide tree in between. Several markings, unknown to either Kathra or Broa, were etched into the surface to each side of the crest. Beneath the bodice, she wore a thin green silk tunic, woven with gold threads, its short sleeves barely covering her shoulders and the hem falling just below her firm, rounded buttocks, much like a short skirt. A young waitress, barely fourteen summers, the innkeeper’s daughter, came over and took their order, and quickly blushed at Kathra.

“Four ales please, dear.” Kathra playfully winked at her and she bustled off to fill their order.

“So,” Shantos began, “the Empress, you say. “I suspect there is an exciting story behind that title.” Broa could sense disbelief in him. The tall man wore the traditional attire of the men of the Northern Territories; dark leather slippers; long, tan petticoat tied with a broad crimson sash whose tail fell to the front and a large, heavy robe. “The last I heard, it was a fellow called Questa who ruled the Great Empire.”

“Apparently, he was her half-brother.” As always, Kathra told the story, embellishing it in his usual

manner. Broa was never comfortable talking to strangers. Kathra told them the entire tale, from Tala's unfortunate death to Garvane and, finally, to Questa's attempt on Broa's life. He left nothing out. It took a few moments for Sitara and Shantos to soak it all in.

"Why didn't you stay and take your rightful place, your birthright?" Sitara asked. Her voice was soft and kind. Broa at once felt eased and more comfortable. She immediately sensed that this forest elf could be a dear friend one day.

"Well, let's put it this way, I can see why everyone hates my kind so much. I saw things there that I want no part of." Broa replied. Kathra was surprised. Broa rarely spoke a word to anyone. It was nice to see her open up, even if just a little. Suddenly Broa felt a strange presence and the amulet that hung from her neck warmed her porcelain skin.

"So, you haven't answered my question yet. How *did* you get your sword back?" Kathra asked of Shantos but turned toward Broa sharply, noticing the tight grip she had on her brilliant piece of jewelry. "What is it, Broa? Is that damned Nolraa speaking to you from the grave again?" Sitara and Shantos looked at each other quizzically, then at Broa who searched the room nervously.

She caught the intent gaze of a tall, lithe Thamali standing amongst a group of men at the far end of the bar. The woman held two full mugs in her petite hands and the two locked stares for a moment, each studying the other keenly. The Thamali, a race of creature with a human torso and the legs, tail and head of a cat, wore a brown leather vest loosely tied in front by thin cords and a long loincloth. Her auburn hair was tied in a thick braid that fell far down the back of her long feline legs and her tail flipped nervously behind her. The fur that covered her body was marked as a leopard and Broa could not help but admit this stranger was a very striking woman. The woman turned back to her companions and joined in the merry conversation while Broa's gaze lingered a moment longer.

"Do you know that Thamali, Broa? Broa?" Kathra asked, placing a hand on her shoulder, stirring her and reminding her of where she was.

"What? Oh, sorry. No I don't know her. At least I don't think I do." Broa's voice wavered slightly, confused by the event. Why would Nolraa want her to see that Thamali and why did she stare at her with such intensity. Why would the Thamali return her stare? 'Always questions, but never any easy answers,' Broa thought to herself.

"Are you okay?" Sitara asked with genuine concern in her voice.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Broa assured her, not very confident herself. The four continued to drink and talk into the wee hours of the night. It was very late and the innkeeper’s daughter had already left for bed when her father finally asked the four to leave. On the way out, Sitara and Shantos said they were going on a three-week hunting trip and would like to catch up when they returned. They all agreed to meet at the same tavern in three weeks time and parted ways, Sitara and Shantos heading off for their campsite just outside of town. Broa and Kathra had rented a room at a neighboring rooming house and went down the lane that led them to the back of the wooden structure and the staircase up to their second storey quarters.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, Broa and Kathra talked of their newfound friends and they agreed that it was a wonderful evening, forgetting for the moment the strange encounter with the Thamali. Broa started up the stairs, remarking how tired she was beginning to feel when a figure appeared out of the shadows and looked up at Broa through bright yellow eyes that seemed to glow in the darkness of the alley. The stranger grasped Broa’s hand as she gripped the railing tightly in a start. The stranger spoke softly, yet with confidence and urgency, “You’ve been touched by Daalon.” She turned Broa’s wrist and the dim light of the alley caught the rough edges of the healing wound on her wrist where her half-brother, Questa, had cut her. Broa felt a mysterious sensation surround the tissue and the scar began to burn and tingle. She looked at Kathra and, in unison; they turned to the stranger awed by her knowledge and ability.

The stranger was the first to speak in the deathly silence that surrounded the trio, “I am Sumay, of the Keepers.” Again, Broa and Kathra looked at each in shock and confusion. The Keepers, as far as they knew, were a secret group of religious fanatics shunned by virtually all the churches of the known world. They were anti-Daalons, opposing the accepted doctrine that Daalon was the god of gods and ruler of the creatures of the mortal realm. Rumor had it, and rumor was all there was as they were a ‘secret’ cult, that they believed Daalon came to power at the sake of some other force. Members of the Keepers were sought after diligently by the powers that be and prosecuted harshly. This stranger openly admitting membership surprised the pair and they exchanged quizzical glances.

“What do you want of us?” Kathra asked sharply, pulling Broa’s hand from the light grip of the stranger. Sumay stepped back, bowing to his dominance.

“It’s not what *I* want of you, but what the known world needs.” Sumay said solemnly, answering Kathra, though she spoke to Broa. “What I am to tell you will go against everything you’ve ever been taught about the order

of things. It will be hard for you to believe, but you must. I feel that you are so very important and must play a pivotal role in events to come.” Broa was about to speak but Sumay stopped her, “I don’t know why or what, but I know it. You have a great power within you that you may have only just begun to realize.” Broa looked at Kathra and back at Sumay, shocked that this stranger could anything about her, let alone so much. “Is there somewhere we can go to speak in private?”

Broa was hesitant while Kathra was very leery. They looked at each other searching the others face for a sign of what they thought of the stranger. Kathra knew immediately that Broa was going to trust Sumay. “Something tells me we should trust her.”

“As long as it’s not Nolraa speaking to you from the dark realm again.” He shrugged his shoulders and waited at the bottom of the stairs as Broa led Sumay up to their rented apartment, following after them and keeping a close eye on Sumay. Deep in his heart, he was not sure of this Thamali’s intentions. He loved Broa dearly and would give his own life for hers, but something about Sumay told him that if she wanted to harm Broa, there was not much he could do. As Sumay felt a great power in Broa, he sensed something hidden in the woman’s lithe body, some force that, if she decided to unleash it, he would need the gods help to stop her.

Reaching the door to their apartment, Broa opened it and allowed Sumay to enter first. Broa followed then Kathra who closed the door behind him, quickly scanning the alley to see if anyone was watching. The room was small and sparsely decorated, a pair of curtains hanging over the two windows and a tall sickly plant stood in one corner next to the simply styled bed with a thin straw filled mattress and airy linen sheets. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a short chest of drawers with a wash basin and two small towels placed on top. Sumay put her hand on Kathra’s shoulder and gently pushed him aside. He was about to argue when she said, “What I have tell you is not for anyone else’s ears.” She began to speak words that were foreign to both Broa and Kathra, and passed her hands over the doorway then moved about the room, stilling chanting those strange words. The door and the two windows of the room started to glow a soft blue and soon all the seams in the dry lumber that formed the frame, walls, floor and ceiling emanated the same hue. Sumay turned to Broa and Kathra who looked at her with confusion. Sensing correctly, they had little exposure to true magic. “It is a simple spell that will give us the privacy that we seek.”

“We?” Kathra blurted.

“Hush,” Broa scolded.

“No. He has every right to be skeptical, as do you. But, please hear me out. It is vital that you understand the entire history of the events that have led us here.” Kathra was about to remark but Broa stopped him with a stern glare. “Is the name Tirdanon familiar to you?” They both shook their heads. “Well, many eons ago, when the true gods were chased away by Daalon and his followers, they cast a powerful spell over our world that barred them from meddling in mortal affairs, and had written the essence of their magic onto two stone stilla. One of those stones was given to the Dragon’s for safe keeping and the other was entrusted to a Thamali named Tirdanon. He was fearful of Daalon’s return and so he forged a great hammer and destroyed the stilla that was given to him. It was this act that threw this realm into chaos. It caused the Cold Age and pulled the many races of this world into war. Tirdanon and his followers cast the shards of the stone across the face of the known world, hoping they would never be found. Unknown to Tirdanon, his destruction of the stilla caused the true gods’ spell over the world to weaken.

“When Daalon returned, he was enraged that he could no longer enter our world, but found he could still communicate with the mortals. He soon learned of the stilla and has been attempting to track them down for centuries. It has been the tasks of The Keepers to protect the secret of the stilla’s and find the shards of the Tirdanon stone. It is our belief that when put back together, the spell that the true gods cast will return to its original strength, as they intended.”

“So what does all of this have to do with us?” Kathra asked.

“I don’t know exactly. But I feel deeply that Daalon fears Broa and that she is somehow vital to The Keepers mandate and I can only beg of you to trust me. The future of our realm is at stake.”

TO BE CONTINUED