

Ascension

Book 1, Chapter 5

Thieves and Betrayers

BY:

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A frigid wind swept across the barren, arctic landscape as the sun slowly fell behind the western mountains, casting its dying light over three lone figures on the frozen dunes of the Icewind Isles. Kathra, a rugged and handsome man with dark, piercing eyes and short, curly raven hair; Sumay, a Thamali warrior with the head, tail and legs of a leopard; and Broa, a dark elf orphan, unlike any of her kind. Broa's hair was as white as the snow beneath her booted feet and her skin was the color of ivory. What made her unique among her kind was not just the large, dark, leathery wings that sprouted from her back, but they were on a female. Naturally being nocturnal, her amethyst eyes were covered by a swath of dark cloth torn from Kathra's long, hooded cloak to protect her from the light of the sun, made worse by the snow and ice surrounding her.

"Can we stop and warm up for a little bit?" Kathra asked of Sumay, who led the way northward. He knew Broa was cold, feeling the shiver of her body through her mittened hand as he held it, guiding her. He also knew she was too stubborn to admit it herself.

"Let's get out of the wind first," Sumay replied, keeping her pace, yet changing her heading toward the east. As they traveled the plateaus, the trio kept close to the low lying cliffs and rocky terrain of the Coramay Hills, which lay at the feet of the Crystal Spires mountain range, home to the Coramay Giants and the Ice Dragons.

Once finding a small crevice and happily being free of the biting wind, Sumay and Kathra each pulled back the hoods of their heavy cloaks and Broa removed her blindfold, blinking her eyes against the reflected light of sun set. Kathra could barely see his hands in front of his face, and Sumay, too, despite having a feline depth of vision, found the degree of darkness awkward. Kathra retrieved a heavy woolen blanket from his shoulder pack, laying it on the crisp snow and he Broa sat down, their bodies enjoying the reprieve. Sumay also took a blanket out and sat down facing the couple as they huddled together.

"Cover your eye's... Broa," Sumay said, hesitating. Although she had grown quite fond of Broa, she found it hard not to use the more colorful, and not so kind, phrases many used when referring to her race. Sumay spoke several words of an ancient and forgotten language, while Broa hid her eyes behind her delicate, porcelain hands. As Sumay finished, a bright, crimson orb appeared between them, its surface swirling and rolling like oil on water. It took only a moment for the trio to feel the globe's warmth fill the air around them and their chilled bodies.

"Thank you, Sumay," Broa said, opening her eyes and quickly adjusting to the mild glow of the orb. Kathra gently squeezed her hand and also thanked Sumay. The dim, vermilion light of the orb was alien to Kathra and Sumay, who, like most, were used to seeing the world in myriad colors. Broa, however, always saw through a sort of thermal vision, a wide array of shades of red, blue and white, depicting depth and heat, among other things. This did unfortunately make her and her race virtually color-blind.

“Feeling better, Kathra?” Sumay asked, knowing full well that he was covering for Broa’s stubborn nature.

“Much better, thanks.” He untied the sash around his waist and unbuttoned his woolen vest, starting to feel too warm. “I hope these breaks aren’t taking too much out of you.”

“No, no. Simple spells like these don’t weaken my *Perl* too much,” she answered referring to that magical essence that exists in all things. “It’s the more powerful spells that exhaust my *Perl*.”

“How powerful are you, anyway?” Kathra asked. Sumay merely fell silent. He always suspected there was incredible power locked away in the lithe, feline body of the beautiful Thamali, but she would never speak of it. Silence enveloped all three of them. Sumay laid down, tucking her cloak under her furry chin and soon fell fast asleep. Broa and Kathra, too, curled up close to each other and closed their eyes. Broa burrowed deep into Kathra’s arms and pressed her face against his chest. She took comfort in the rhythmic beat of his heart and the warmth of his embrace.

Sumay was the first to rise the next morning, the sun already peaking out over the eastern mountaintops. She was already preparing a hearty breakfast when Kathra blinked his eyes and shook his head, shaking away the sleep fairies. Naturally a creature of the night, Broa was the last to stir. She sniffed at the air. “Is this the morning meal or mid-day?” she asked with a pang of hunger in her belly.

“It may surprise you, but you actually rose before the moon this day.” Kathra joked.

Broa made a sour face and began to stretch, her arms and wings wide. She put her hand over her eyes to block out the sun’s bright light, reaching for her cloak and donning it quickly “How much further, Sumay?”

Sumay spoke with a somber tone in her voice as she stirred the thick soup bubbling in the pot over a fire she had magically created. “The stories say that Tridanon had sent three of his closest followers deep into the Icewind Isles with the two cornerstones of the stilla and the hammer he used to destroy it. The three priests wandered for months to throw off anyone who might have tracked them. This is where all the stories begin to differ. The more accepted tale says the trio came across a hidden cave deep in the mountains that had a long meandering tunnel that opened into a vast valley beneath the ice at the top of the Isles. Many have searched for the cave, but no one has ever found it.”

“Then how do you think we’ll find it?” Kathra asked, always the skeptic.

“Because none of those who came here before had Broa,” Sumay said, looking to Broa. Kathra, too, turned his eyes to his friend.

“But how is having her along going to help us find this cave?” Kathra asked

“I don’t know for sure, but she has a very unique Perl, though undisciplined. She’s the key to defeating Daalon. With her along, I’m sure we will find the cave and the last two shards we need.”

“Let me get this straight. The only thing you’re sure of is that Broa here is different. You’re *guessing* the stones are in these forsaken mountains and that *if* we put this stilla back together, we can keep Daalon out of our world.” Kathra was obviously frustrated. He turned to Broa, “How did she convince us to tag along on this insanity?”

“Oh, keep your britches on,” Broa reprimanded her friend. “I’m sure she knows what she’s doing.” Broa gazed into Sumay’s feline eyes, not completely convinced by her own statement.

“I’m more convinced now than ever that Savire had my father killed. Did you see the way he smiled at me when the funerary procession passed his estate?” Valen said, angrily tossing several parchments into the air over the wooden table behind which he stood. He was a handsome, slender yet strong snow elf. Copper skin, raven hair and dark, gentle eyes, he was thrust prematurely into politics after his father’s suspicious death. Over his black, silken tunic and dark leather pant, he wore his family’s resplendent robe, with the family colors, purple and yellow.

“My Lord, you are the Master of the Dragon Perl clan now. I understand your thirst for vengeance, and the time will come,” Kroma said respectfully to the young elf. “But we can’t go charging into the Court with only our suspicions and virtually no evidence and strip him of his family honor and his properties. We must act carefully. Little good will come to us if our case is not solid.” Kroma was the most trusted advisor of Valen’s father, and his is a life-long title. Valen also trusted the wisdom of the 143 year-old elf. Kroma was still considered only middle-aged by elven standards, his long raven hair was salted and the years began to show in his face. He, too, wore the family colors in a light, silk cape that hung down his back over a white linen tunic and dark leather pants.

“I know, Kroma. You are a wise man, and I am young, foolish and frustrated.” Valen stepped around the table and put his hands on Kroma’s shoulders. “As always you have been a dear friend to the Dragon Perl family, and have always had our best interests at heart.”

“You should sleep, my Lord. It’s been a long day and you are surely tired.”

“You’re right.” Valen said, his hands dropping to his side, exhaustion showing in his eyes. “Would you please send one of the servants to my chambers with a flagon of dandelion milk?”

“Of course, my Lord.” Kroma bowed slightly before he turned, exiting into a long marble corridor through a row of towering columns.

Left alone with his thoughts, Valen sat down into a wooden chair next to the table and vowed, “I may sleep tonight, Savire, but I will not rest until the Eagle Talon clan is crushed beneath my boot.” After a brief moment of silence, Valen rose, admitting defeat to the sleep fairies and retired to his bedchamber across the corridor. He threw back the sheets that covered the soft, feather filled bed and sank his tired body into its folds and draped himself in the smooth, silken plies. A moment later there was the sound of slipped feet lightly pattering across the stone floors and a small cough at his doorway. It was a pretty, young elf with a small tray upon which sat a cup of Valen's favorite nighttime drink. He called on her to enter, and she padded over and laid the tray on a table at the side of his bed. He thanked and dismissed the young second-generation servant and took the vessel, swallowing its contents heartily until it was empty. He closed his eyes, burrowed into the sheets and soon fell into a deep sleep.

A short time later, while Valen sleep soundly, two lone figures entered his bed chamber under cover of darkness, and crept up to the side of his bed. Their faces and bodies were covered in a concealing layer of silk fabrics and they quickly removed the sheets that covered Valen's inert body and bound him with thick leather straps. In the silence and peace of night, they hoisted him over the shoulder of one and the other led the way through a secret corridor of the Dragon Perl House and out into the estate yards. Leaving the property via a back way, they wound their way through the city using quiet back alleys and out into the lowlands. Valen still slumbered as the two thieves arrived at the mouth of the tunnel that would take them out of the vast valley, the sub-glacial home of the snow elf race, and into the frigid cold of the northern Icewind Isles. Once reaching the outer mouth of the tunnel and into the cave whose hidden entrance had protected the solitude of the snow elves for centuries, the thieves, with their valuable bounty, went out into that barren landscape that the ancients had escaped many years earlier. They traveled several miles before dumping Valen's body into the snow and turning back toward the cave, confident the driving winds would erase their tracks before Valen woke.

There he lay, the Master of the most powerful family of all the snow elves, his face in the chilling snow, drugged, kidnapped and left for dead. And he didn't even know it yet.

Sumay drove them hard, reminding them many times that Daalon would soon find a way into their realm, and only they could stop him. They had traveled for three days, stopping occasionally to rest and eat. Broa's eyes throbbed from the light and her body was weary. Kathra was built more heartily than she but still felt the ache from the tough pace and biting cold. Because of her

coat of fur, Sumay didn't feel the cold as deeply and she had great endurance, but she was not invincible. "There's a good place to stop for a while." Sumay said, pointing eastward to a small crevice in the mountainside.

"It's about time, damn it." Kathra exclaimed.

Broa echoed his frustration. "How in the dark realm am I supposed to help find this damned cave? It feels like we're walking in circles." As they neared the crevice, in much need of rest, Broa felt an intense warmth on her breast. Her amulet lit up and that voice began calling to her, incoherently at first, then growing to a very strong and definite statement. 'Go now. You must go now.'

"We have to go. Now." Broa said in earnest.

"What..." Kathra began, then saw Broa gripping the amulet tightly in her petite porcelain hands. "That's really creeping me out. He lives in the dark realm with Cytherea. How can he keep speaking to you like that?"

Sumay, feeling the stress of their hard trek, like both of her companions, she lashed out at him, "That's why you humans are so primitive, unevolved and live such short, unremarkable lives. You never could understand the depth and power of magic. You have no Perl. You are so... small."

"Hey! My people are masters of art and architecture. We've built palaces and cities and roads and have connected every race in the known world. Your people live in waddle and daub huts and tree houses. You chase your food around in the forests and shit in your own backyards," he yelled back.

Sumay stepped up to him, her breast touching his, and stared up at him, "Civilization doesn't equate to evolution, you brute. Your idea of growing is conquering other people and expanding your borders. You should try thinking for once in your limited existence. Why the Kurhidaya would create a weak people like yours is baffling."

"Why you furry little bi..." Broa cut him off.

"I said we have to go. Not later, *now*." She was stern and her voice carried a physical wave that chilled them both to the core.

"Uh...Where do you suggest we go?" Kathra barked, then cowered.

"Let's go... that way!" Broa was angry and pointed randomly, fanning her wings briskly. Sumay and Kathra were not about to argue. They started off and Broa led the way this time, Sumay taking up the rear for the first time on their journey. It wasn't long before Broa spied a dark mass lying in the unending white of the Isles. Nolraa's voice sounded loudly in her head. 'Go. Go now.'

She had no way of understanding his intentions. "Quickly, he's dying," she called out as she sprinted toward the still mass. Kathra and Sumay didn't have time to argue, they could only follow Broa as she dashed across the snow to help someone she had never met. She only knew he was close to death. And she had to help.

Broa could feel his Perl from that short distance and couldn't ignore it as she dropped to the snow and slid to a stop at his side. "He's barely breathing, Sumay. You have to do something," she begged of her friend.

Sumay hesitated at first, then looked into Broa's eyes and felt her sincerity. "Very well, but this will weaken my Perl a great deal." She knelt next to the stranger and rolled him onto his back. His kind was strange to her, but she had heard stories of the long-lost race. They were said to be like a forest elf, though their skin, hair and eyes were darker. "He's a snow elf," she stammered, "They haven't been seen in thousands of years!"

"Are you going to help him?" Broa asked passionately.

"Yes...yes I will," Sumay said, laying her palms on the man's body. She spoke a few words of the ancient language and their Perls embraced, mingled and intertwined. Bright crimson ribbons of magic swirled about their bodies and lifted them off the cold snow and ice. Like a cocoon it enveloped them, making it look to Broa as if their bodies had become one. Kathra watched in awe. The spectacle lasted several minutes before the magic dissipated and returned the pair's bodies into the hard snow. Sumay collapsed from exhaustion and the stranger remained still.

"Did it work," Kathra whispered to Broa.

"I don't know," she replied, her voice wavering. She crawled over to Sumay and gently shook her.

It took Sumay a moment to regain consciousness. She opened her eyes and was filled with confusion, pulling back from Broa. "Who are you? Where am I?" she asked.

"It's me, Broa. You used your magic to help this snow elf," Broa explained, nodding toward the man in the snow.

Sumay shook her head as her memory slowly returned. "He has a strong Perl. It was overwhelming," she paused, "How is he?"

"He hasn't moved, but I think he's breathing better and his heart is beating more normally."

"It will take time for the magic to heal him, but he will recover." Sumay shakily rose, "We should find some shelter if we're to nurse him back to health. Kathra, would you please carry him, I'm too weak right now."

Begrudgingly, Kathra agreed and went to the man and hoisted his smaller body over his shoulder. "Where are we going?" he asked blankly. Broa merely shrugged.

"We might as well keep heading north," Sumay suggested, leaning on Broa lightly in her weakened state.

Valen shivered and moved to pull himself into an upright, sitting position. He opened his eyes and what he saw shocked him more than anything he had ever seen. Amidst the cold, mountain landscape, he saw three creatures, the likes of which were foreign to him. One being, much like him, only larger, and without his pointed ears; another looking much like a leopard though standing on her hind legs. And the last, which seemed the most familiar, a pale version of his own kind, but with large, dark wings sprouting from her back. Fear and apprehension gripped him. “Who are you?” he asked, looking about his surroundings, “Where am I?”

The stranger with the wings spoke first, “You’re among friends. I am Broa, a Dark elf. This is the Thamali, Sumay,” she said pointing to the leopard creature, “And this is the human, Kathra.”

“I...I’m Valen.” Suspicious, he withheld his rank and title, the dense fog still fleeing from his mind.

“We’re in the northern parts of the Icewind Isles, on the east side of the Crystal Spires Mountains,” Broa explained. “We found you in the snow, nearly dead. Sumay here healed you.”

The one called Sumay suddenly seemed familiar also. He felt a deep connection to her that he could not understand. He dismissed it for the time being. “How did I get here?”

“We were hoping you could tell us,” the human said, towering over him.

Valen looked down upon himself. He had been covered in heavy, woolen blankets, which fell to the snow at his feet as he rose to stand. “The last I remember, I was sleeping in my bed chamber, then I woke here, with you.” His head pounded mercilessly and his body ached in places he never knew he had.

“You’re a snow elf,” the leopard creature said. It seemed to Valen to be more of a question than a statement. He merely nodded. “Your kind hasn’t been seen in thousands of years.”

“My kind,” Valen began, with resentment in his tone, “has only heard tales of others like you.” He turned toward Kathra, “we’ve heard stories of your people. But you, I’ve never heard anything about your people,” he said to Broa.

“She’s unique.” Kathra looked to Sumay, mockingly.

Broa almost withered under his intense scrutiny before fanning her wings. “I’m a dark elf Queen,” she protested. Kathra and Sumay looked at each other, then her.

Valen nodded his head respectfully, believing her, “I’m Valen, Master of the family, Dragon Perl. And if I am here, I must have been abducted and left for dead out in this terrible place.” The cold, dark mountains to the east and barren ice fields to the west filled him with fear.

“Abducted from where, and by whom?” Sumay asked.

Valen hesitated at first, but somehow felt he could trust the feline creature. “My people live in a deep valley beneath the glacier. I fear my rival’s have subjected me to this punishment.”

“Rival’s? Punishment?” Broa goaded.

“My family has battled another for the head seat on the Council for centuries.” He sat on a nearby rock as he regaled them with his story. “My father had been the Master for forty-five years, before Savire had him killed. As his oldest son, I became the Master of my family.” He was lost in thought before continuing. “The last thing I remember before waking here with you was speaking with my Counsel about our suspicions. Then I went to rest with a glass of dandelion milk.”

“Do you think someone may have put something into your drink?” Broa asked, always the suspicious one.

“I hate to think to that someone in my home could do this, but you might be right.” His shoulders drooped, and his seem more weathered then than a moment earlier.

“I hate to interrupt, but those clouds aren’t bringing good tidings,” Kathra brought their attention to the large mass of dark rumbling clouds moving rapidly over the horizon. The sky quickly darkened and the air about them cooled abruptly.

“Broa, you lead us to shelter.” Sumay said. Broa was, of course, the best choice under the circumstances, being able to ‘see’ in the dark. Valen, still weak, clung to Kathra’s shoulder as he followed Broa across the crisp snow and Sumay took up the rear. The storm caught up to them with incredible speed enveloping them in its intense winds and blinding them with icy snow and the bitter cold crept into their bodies. “Do you see anything yet?” Sumay yelled above the howl of the winds. Kathra, only a few steps ahead, could barely hear her. He was only slightly surprised Broa heard her with her elven ears.

“Nothing. Nothing but endless rock and snow.” She cursed under her breath. Suddenly she spotted something along the rough mountainscape. To her eyes it looked like a deep red emanation of light, signifying to her it was a heat source, probably a deep cave. “I’ve got something over here. Follow me.”

“Follow you? I can hardly see you!” Kathra said with disdain.

“I can see her.” Valen said weakly.

“Great. The maimed leading the blind.”

Once inside the cave and out of the bitter, raging winds, Kathra set Valen down and Broa wrapped him tightly in a warm blanket she produced from her sack. Sumay explored the darkness of the cave to no avail. “Broa, I need your eyes.” She said, her voice resounding off the walls.

“Watch him, Kathra.” She rose and approached Sumay.

Feeling her presence behind her, “How deep does this cave go?” she whispered, “I may have a cats eyes, but the deeper it goes the less I can see.”

Broa peered into the distance and could see the red heat of the bowels of the mountain emanate from a fair distance yet. “The cave goes on quite a distance before ending. But I think there’s a tunnel that starts down at the bottom of the cave.” She paused for a moment, realizing what she said. “Do you think this might be what we’re looking for?”

“Shhh...,” Sumay whispered, “It might be, but we have to be discreet. I’m not sure we can trust Valen with the truth about our mission. At least for the moment.”

“Very well. But we should ask Valen if he knows of this, he might have some information that can be helpful.”

“I agree.” The two turned and strode back to where they left Kathra and the weak snow elf.

“So, how does it look?” Kathra asked as they returned. Broa stood next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“There’s a tunnel at the end of the cave.” Sumay started. Kathra was about to speak, but Broa harshly squeezed his shoulder. He winced, but held his tongue, not sure of what was happening.

“That must be how they took me out into that frozen world.”

“What do you mean?” Sumay asked, innocently.

“Few of my people know of this anymore. Our ancestors once lived in the snow, nomadic clans that hunted and foraged. The different clans fought often. Then the weather turned on them and many found this cave and hid. They found that tunnel and the great valley that it leads to. After much debate it was decided that the other clans should be found and lead here. It took many centuries, but we managed to create a vital and flourishing civilization.”

“But if you’re out here with us, it obviously can’t be that great.” Kathra said, quickly receiving a slap on the back by Broa.

“At least the stories of your kind’s rude and ill-mannered nature seem to be true.” Valen lashed back.

“You’ll have to forgive our friend. Old habits are hard to break.” Broa said, again squeezing his shoulder hard. Kathra winced, this time understanding the silent reprimand.

The group fell silent for a moment before Sumay finally spoke, “So this tunnel will lead you back to your people?” she paused, “We can help you back, if you like?” she offered, looking down at his sickly state.

“That would be appreciated under any other circumstance. But now I’m afraid that Savire will have had my families honor stripped. All of our possessions and persons would become his. It’s our way.” His voice cracked and his face became sullen, “I’m not sure if I can do anything about it. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Broa looked down on him, then at Sumay and they silently agreed. Kathra simply rubbed his tender shoulder. "I'm sure there's some way we can help." Sumay offered.

"But how?" Valen asked.

"I don't know, but the four of us should be able to come up with something."

"The four of us?" Kathra repeated.

"Yes, the *four* of us." Broa looked at him sternly.

Dejected, Kathra merely shook his head and shrugged.

The going was slow, many sections of the tunnel were steep and the floors were covered in loose stone. Other times they would come to a dead-end or a rock-fall and have to double back. Though the tunnels were naturally carved, they resembled the labyrinths of the Great Empire. Then, after what seemed to them to be near forever, they reached the mouth of the tunnel, opening into the vast valley home of the snow elves. Above, the dying sunlight filtered through a great frozen glacier, hundreds of meters thick, yet crystal clear. Below, the rolling hills were covered in lush forests and dense mists. Stone spires rose from the ground towering above the landscape, and ice tendrils hung from the glacial ceiling amongst thick, moist clouds. The myriad creatures they could see and hear were strange to Broa, Kathra and Sumay. They saw what looked like miniature dragons floating on the warm updrafts and heard the calls of birds and terrestrial creatures that had not been heard by any ears but those of the snow elves for countless centuries. In a distant field, they could see some reptilian creatures grazing. They stood much taller than Kathra and their necks were crowned with a wide shield and their heads adorned with horns, two on the brow and one on the snout.

"This place is amazing!" Broa said in awe.

"What do you call that thing?" Kathra asked pointing to the grazing beast.

"Those are balconies on the stone towers aren't they?" Sumay asked, "Do your people live there?"

"Are those baby dragons or a different breed all together?" Kathra asked.

"Do you have Mastodons here? And what's that bird call I hear?" Broa asked excitedly.

Valen was feeling overwhelmed and weak. They all seemed to ask their questions at the same time. "Please, friends, can I answer your questions later? I'm tired and I need to see my Counsel, find out what's going on."

"Of course, I apologize." Sumay said.

“Yes, me too.”

“Right, sorry.” Kathra finished.

It took sometime for the strange group to arrive at Valen’s palace, moving stealthily along side streets and dark alleys. The valley had grown dark and silent. Valen led the others to a hidden entrance and they proceeded up a narrow, winding staircase and exited many stories up the towering rock formation from which the palace was carved, into a vast chamber that Broa guessed was intended for entertaining. Many long tables were organized neatly about the room and another sat on a dais, overlooking the chamber. The walls were decorated with beautiful paintings and tapestries and had niches that held marvelous sculptures.

“Your people are quite the artisans,” Sumay commented in a low voice.

“Yes, they study for many years just to become apprentices. It takes decades before one is considered a Master.” Valen said proudly.

“I could barely scribble anything with a piece of charcoal and I’m nearly forty.” Kathra said in amazement.

“I’m not surprised,” Valen scoffed. Kathra was about to comment, but Valen continued, “We need to see my Counsel. *I must* know what has happened since my ‘departure’.”

Passing through the long colonnade that separated his sleeping apartment from the common room, they found Valen’s Council, Kroma sitting at the large wooden table; his head bent low, his body still.

Fearing the worst, Valen ran to his trusted friend’s side and shook him. Kroma woke with a start and looked up at who had so rudely stirred him from his slumber. He was thrilled to see his Lord standing over him, “My Lord, how wonderful you have returned,” his elation quickly disappeared, “Though I have sad tidings to bear. Since you left us, Savire has invoked his right to take ownership of the Dragon Perl clan and all of its possessions.”

“I did not ‘leave’, my friend. I was abducted in the night and left out in the Wastelands to die.” Valen saw that Kroma began to stare at the three strangers standing in the distance. He put his hands on Kroma’s shoulders, easing his suddenly tense posture. “These three friends aided me in my time of need and nursed me to health. They deserve our thanks, don’t you think, Kroma?”

“Yes indeed, my Lord.” He turned to the trio and stepped toward them and, holding his hands out before him, he bowed his head. “Please tell me your names friends so I may honor you before the gods.”

“My name is Sumay of the Thamali.” She mimicked Kroma’s posture as did Broa and Kathra.

“I am Broa Paar of the elves.”

“And I am Kathra De Moerdarain of the human clans.”

“We would like to help in any way we can.” Sumay offered.

Kroma nodded in her direction then turned to Valen, “I’m not sure how these strangers to our ways can help, my Lord.”

“First we must know exactly what has happened in my absence.” Valen said, leading his advisor back to the table and sitting him down. “Tell me everything.”

“Well, the morning you ‘disappeared’, Savire called for an emergency session of the Great Council. He suggested to the Council that your abrupt departure was an admission of guilt in the death of your father, considering your vocal suspicions of Savire. After deliberation, the Council agreed and granted Savire the House Power. I don’t know how he knew so readily that you were missing.”

“We, as in Valen and the three of us, suspect there was an ally of Savire’s here in the Dragon Perl House that was involved in the abduction and reported to him directly.” Broa suggested.

“It’s hard to believe that someone in our own House could do such a thing.” Kroma was beside himself.

“Savire is a powerful and wealthy elf.” Valen stated. “Not everyone is incorruptible.”

“We must find this rat and punish him.” Kroma pounded his fist on the table.

“Indeed, but we must also find some evidence linking Savire to my fathers murder.” Valen sat in his chair, deep in thought.

The room was silent for a moment, when Kathra spoke, “Do you think Savire would keep records of what money he spent and where?”

“He was in fact the records keeper for the Eagle Talon House when his father was alive. He is stickler for accurate and in depth records.” Kroma said excitedly.

“But how do we get in without being seen?” Valen asked.

“Sumay knows some pretty powerful magic, I’m sure she could help.” Kathra said, to which Broa responded with a sharp elbow in the ribs. He looked at her with a deep hurt in his eyes and rubbed his side.

“Can she walk through walls?” Valen asked sarcastically.

Sumay looked scornfully at Kathra and he withered under the intensity. “Maybe not walk through walls, but I’m sure I can pull a trick or two out of my fur.”

“Very well, Sumay and I will go to the House of the Eagle Talon clan and search for evidence. Kroma, you and the others search out our rat.”

Kroma nodded and he and Broa and Kathra watched as Sumay and Valen left the room and entered the secret corridor that would lead them out into the hills outside of the House. Broa and Kathra looked at Kroma and spoke first, “What do we do now?”

The sub-glacial valley was dark and still as Valen led Sumay through the city towards the stone spire that was home to the Eagle Talon clan. Like his own home, the spire that reached high into the clouds, was surrounded by lush gardens and numerous small buildings that housed the servants and many service buildings. A tall stone wall circled the entire estate with one grand arch and gate at the front. Valen assumed that there were small, secret entrances in the great wall, as there were in the wall around the Dragon Perl estate. It took the pair some time to find one, hidden high on a hill and covered by an iron gate and camouflaged by thick, thorn covered bushes. Sumay wore thick leather gloves that covered arms past her elbows and was able to squeeze past the bushes without harming herself. Valen however wore a thin silk blouse and tore the fabric and his skin several times. Upon examining the iron gate, Sumay found it locked. “Can you use your magic to pick the lock?” Valen asked in a hushed voice.

“Who needs magic?” Sumay whispered simply, reaching into a small sack that hung from a leather shoulder strap and pulled out a tool roll. She unrolled it and extracted two small tools, long and thin, and inserted them into the lock. She fumbled with them for a brief moment and an audible click told her she had succeeded. “Magic isn’t always necessary.” Valen merely shrugged his shoulders and followed her as she pushed the iron gate open. It squeaked lightly in protest and they passed into the sheer darkness of the tunnel that would lead into the estate grounds. The walls of the corridor were damp and covered by pungent moss and mossy tendrils hung from the ceiling. Dripping water echoed throughout the passageway as did the splashing of their footsteps in the pools of water on the floor. Valen was blind and Sumay could only see a few paces ahead of her. The tunnel meandered until Sumay could finally see some light at the end. The mouth of the passage was partially covered by more of the thorny bushes and Valen again injured himself pushing through the thick brush, and his silk blouse was virtually ruined.

They stole their way across the lush grounds, past the service buildings and servant’s quarters and at last reached the perimeter of the stone spire. Valen again assumed that there would a secret entrance into the spire similar to his own. They clung to cold stone walls until they found the opening hidden behind several more of the ‘infernal bushes,’ as Valen called them. Sumay used her tools on the locked gate and they proceeded up the ramped passageway that felt to Valen to be very similar to the passage beneath the outer wall; damp, dark and uncomfortable. “I’m glad I don’t have to do this too often,” he whispered. His voice echoed more loudly than he anticipated.

“Shhh,” Sumay scolded him harshly, yet quietly. “Take my tail and follow me. But be quiet.” Valen obeyed and blindly took the end of her tail in his hand and she led the way up the meandering tunnel and eventually found the end which opened into what she surmised was a large galley. The walls were lined with shelves brimming over with various spices, oils and other culinary supplies. Several tables were placed about the room with all sorts of cooking utensils scattered about the clean surfaces.

“I can’t see a thing. Where are we?” Sumay spoke a few words of that magical, forgotten language and conjured up the crimson orb that filled the room with a subtle glow, allowing Valen a better view of his surroundings. He recognized the space, having spent a good deal of time in a similar room at his own estate. On one of the tables he spied the large carcass of a bird marinating in a mixture of oils, spices and vegetables. The bird looked to Sumay as a very large turkey, but with much larger wings. Valen very much enjoyed this meal at his own home and often served it for feasts and celebrations.

With both of their appetites now whetted, Sumay urged them on, “Where would Savire keep his records?”

“Either in the library or in his private chambers, I would guess.”

“Let’s try the library first. Which way?”

“If I remember correctly, it is several floors up on the east side of the spire. My father and I were here several times for various formal events, but it’s been a long time.”

“I suppose we will have to trust your memory.” She strode out of the galley and into the hall where Valen assumed the point position, leading her to the end of the hall where there was a great staircase that spiraled upwards.

They reached the fourth floor and Valen said, “I think it’s this way.” He stole down the hall stopping at each doorway, trying hard to remember which opened into the library. He stopped at a door that was ajar and heard a muffled voice. He signaled for Sumay to stop and bent low next to door. They both listened intently. Valen recognized the voice as that of his rival, Savire.

“My Lord, Daalon. Every thing has gone perfectly according to your wishes. I have killed my rival and the blame had been laid on his ‘absent’ son. What would you have me do next my Lord?” Savire knelt before a large cauldron that boiled and steamed without flame. His raven hair was long and fell perfectly straight down to the middle of his back, his pointed ears poking through the thick wisps. His skin was a deep copper and his eyes were dark, as with most snow elves. The long heavy robe which he wore was dyed in the traditional Eagle Talon clan colors of red and blue. His chest was bare, as were his feet, and he wore tight, black leather pants.

The scalding water in the cauldron rippled outwardly as Daalon spoke to his servant, though only Savire could here the booming voice, “You have done well, child. Now that you have power over your people, you must prepare your armies. The rest of the mortal world awaits you. But I must caution you. There is one who may interfere with our plans, a female of elf-kind, with white skin and the wings of a bat.

“My Lord, why should this winged elf want to interfere?”

“Yours is not to question, but to obey.” The voice was loud, angry and impatient. Savire grimaced at the pain as it resounded in his head and a trickle of blood crept from his nose. “Have your armies ready by the next moon.”

“But that is barely a fortnight, my Lord. I am merely a figurehead; the Council still retains control of the nobles and the armies. It will take much time to convince the Council of the necessity of preparing the armies before the next moon.”

“Then you must challenge the Council and take their power. It is your destiny to rule the mortal realm. Have you the fortitude to be a mortal god?” Daalon baited the snow elf.

“No one has ever challenged the Council before. Not since we first settled this valley.”

“You are weak, Savire. Shall I find some other to rule the universe at my side?” Savire’s head ached from the reverberations of his Lord’s voice, and his nose bleed profusely.

“No, my Lord, it shall be done. The council is in session on the morrow. I will challenge their leadership as you have commanded. And what of this white skinned, winged elf?”

“Seek her out and destroy her.”

Valen and Sumay quickly and quietly left Savire’s estate and returned to Valens home under the cover of night. After hearing the one sided conversation, they felt they had enough with which to confront Savire in front of the Council, opting not to search for the records that may or may not exist. Upon arriving in Valens private chambers, they found that Kroma, Kathra and Broa had been able to track down Savire’s agent.

“I didn’t even have to touch the boy, just threaten him and he spilled every thing.” Kathra said as Sumay and Valen entered the common room. The young elf was bound to a chair before the great wooden table. His head hung low, his face wet with tears and he sobbed quietly.

“Is he familiar to you, my Lord?” Kroma asked.

“Yes,” Valen replied, shaking his head with disappointment. “His name is Kaeton. He was one of my dressing boys before I had him moved to the stables. He always enjoyed horses. I thought he would feel more comfortable tending to horses rather than an old man.”

“He told us he and his older brother were paid by Savire to put a potion into your night drink and take you out into the Wastelands.” Kroma told his dear friend. “He has promised to testify to that effect before the Council on the morrow, but would like to ask for the ‘continued protection of the revered House of the Dragon Perl for him and his kin’ as he put it.”

“Very well, let him loose.”

Sumay, Broa and Kathra looked confused. Kroma led the by into the hall between the two rows of columns where a guard waited to take him into custody. After the boy had left, Sumay was the first to speak, “But that boy and his brother left you to die! You’re just going to let him go?”

“Of course not. But he must feel at ease and safe if we are to be sure of his co-operation. The first chance I get, I’ll slit his throat and that of every other member of his family.” Valen seethed, tumultuous rage boiling within him.

“What of your endeavor, my Lord?” Kroma steered from the topic of the boy. “Were you and our friend Sumay successful?”

“Of sorts.” Sumay replied feeling Valen was still too enraged to speak. “We didn’t find any records, but overheard Savire communing with Daalon.”

Kroma was visibly stunned. “But the gods abandoned us mortals countless millennia ago. When did they return? Why don’t they speak to the rest of us as they once did?”

“The tale of the gods as Sumay explained I to me on way back here, is much different than that of our teachings and those of the other mortal races, but after what I overheard this night, I can’t so easily believe those old stories.” Valen paused to assemble his thoughts, trying to tell it to Kroma in a way that he might understand. “We, my friend, have been taught that the gods, led by Daalon, were benevolent but the wickedness of the mortals forced them to leave. But the commands to Savire tonight were not those of a benevolent god, but one bent on power and control.”

“All things were created by the Kurhidaya. Daalon and his followers chased them away and destroyed them because they would not share their power.” Sumay added.

“I... I can’t believe these things you’re saying. It’s... blasphemy.” Kroma threw his hands in the air and sat down on the chair next to the table.

“It is true,” Broa said. “Daalon had my step-brother, Questa, murder our father; attempt to kill my mother with me in her womb and kill my surrogate mother just a few weeks ago. He also had Questa try to sacrifice me to allow Daalon to enter our realm.” She held her wrist up so Kroma could see the scar, still healing.

“If this was all true, what does Daalon want with Savire?” Kroma asked, still disbelieving their story.

“He has ordered Savire to challenge the power of the Council, take control of the nobles and ready the armies of the snow elves. He means to wage war upon the mortal realm.” Sumay said. The group fell deathly silent.

None of the five that were in that room slept well that night. Each had their own horrific dreams of war and death. Before retiring, they had decided that Kroma would rise early in the morning and warn The Council that Savire would challenge them in that day’s session. He was instructed to tell the members of the Council that when Savire challenges them, they must allow him to challenge Savire. He was also instructed not to mention the details about Daalon. They all agreed that that would be more prudent than the five of them bursting in and trying to expose Savire before he had done anything. Besides, Valen carried no more weight on the Council.

Kroma had already left on his crucial task, when the rest of the group woke. Broa and Kathra had been put up in a guest room next to Sumay down the hall from Valens private chambers. Kroma had a light prepared and set out for them all in the common room. Extra chairs had been brought in, enough so they all might sit at the large table. They ate their meal in silence, none knowing what could be said the next.

Valen at long last, was the first to speak. “Council will be convening in about two hours. The nobles will begin to gather shortly before that. If we are to sneak in, we must leave right away. We’ll use the hidden passage in my private chambers to leave. Dress quickly and meet me there when you are all ready. One of my guards will be delivering Kaeton presently.” With that Valen rose and excused himself from the table. Broa, Kathra and Sumay silently went to their rooms, donned their clothes and proceeded to Valens bed chamber where he and Kaeton were waiting.

They went into the dark passage and came out into a crisp, cool dawn in the valley. Under any other circumstances each of those gathered their might think of it as a most lovely morning, except Broa, who squinted against the sun as it shone through the clear ice of the glacier high above. They all pulled over their heads the hood of the cloaks that Valen had provided. They were average in appearance, no family colors or markings. They were much like those that a commoner would wear. They soon fell in line with the

throng of farmers and trades people that milled about on the streets, selling their wares and tending to everyday tasks. Valen and his entourage were not the only ones heading toward the Great Hall where the Council session would be held. It was customary for the commoners to watch and indeed participate in the session. Reaching the Great Hall, Valen led them to an antechamber not far from the floor of the Councilary. “This room is almost never used. We’ll wait here until Kroma sends for us.” They waited silently, each immersed in their own thoughts.

Valen practiced in his head what he would say to the Council and the other nobles in the Councilary. He contemplated various ways of convincing them of his innocence and of Savire’s treachery.

Broa’s thoughts were of her family and the destruction that Daalon had already wreaked. She tried to avoid thoughts of the horror to come if Daalon were successful.

Kathra, as always, thought of Broa and how pained she must be feeling. He wanted to pull her close and never let her go.

Sumay reflected on the importance of their mission, and thought of ways to relieve the snow elves of the Hammer of Tridanon and the cornerstones of his tablet.

TO BE CONTINUED