

Fallen Elders

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Prologue

I often visit my children though they are never able to see me. Sometimes it feels like some of them might sense me, briefly, as I pass among them. Oh, how I long to feel them, to take their hands in mine, to hold them close and make all their troubles go away. That is, unfortunately, a part of the prize I paid to bring them to life. In return for their life and breath I gave up all hope of ever getting to know them. Of them getting to know me.

In a way I am glad that they cannot see me. Two ways, to be honest. First, and perhaps hardest, I have no way of interfering in their actions and decisions. I must simply trust that they will be able to take good care of themselves and each other. Second, they do not blame me for their creation, something I fear they might otherwise do.

It strikes me as odd, now, that I cannot remember the time before their creation. What came before, why I made them, how life was, if I even had a life. All I remember is them, my children, as they first struggled to find themselves and learn what they needed to exist in the world.

The world. Another unknown. I do not remember walking through their world myself, yet I also do not remember creating it for them. Often, when I sit in my chamber late at night I wonder about these things. And always the conclusion is the same: there was nothing before me.

There are seven of them, in total, each as different as fire and water, wind and earth. All of them living their own lives, following their own dreams and goals. I have a feeling that some of them would never be able to live together. Yet they work together not just when needed, but also when it is not. Some of them more often than others, granted, but none of them ever back down when the need is great. That was how I made them, that was my plan: to split myself into seven ideas so that each idea could flourish and become perfect. For what feels like an infinity I worked on creating each of them to fit their idea and in the end, when it was done, I sat back and watched as they awakened.

What was not my plan was that they should follow so closely in my footsteps. How I hope they will not undo what I have done.

A New Life

The first to move was Cat. She stretched her graceful body and purred slightly as she got up and looked around at the sleeping figures of her siblings. She carefully groomed herself, running her slender hands through the crimson fur that covered her entire body and adjusting the flowing tunic she had on. It took her a few moments to get the garment to follow the lines of her body and fight back her urge to crawl on hands and knees. She flexed her fingers as if to try them out and carefully inspected her nails. All in all she looked pleased with her body and continued to adjust the tunic and soft breeches she wore.

When she was satisfied she quietly tip toed over to the largest of the others, the majestic form of Dragon. Cat tenderly ran her fingers along the scaled body until they reached the face where she lovingly scratched Dragon behind the ears. The response was a low rumbling in Dragon's throat that made Cat skip back a few paces, not in fear but in surprise at the force of the sound.

With slow movements Dragon lifted her head and blinked her eyes a few times. Like Cat she had slitted, black pupils set against and almost fiery amber iris. She looked down at Cat and tilted her head slightly, puzzled. Soon, though, a slow smile spread across her jaws and looking around at the others she nodded sagely.

"So," she rumbled, "we awaken."

Cat said nothing to this. She, too, looked around at the other forms around them. Dragon was by far the largest of them with her massive body ending in a long tail. Of the others only one looked significantly larger and Dragon reached out with a clawed hand and lifted it to its feet. This one also had a scaled body, but in contrast to Dragon's golden scales Daemon's more resembled slabs of stone. Harder, heavier, everlasting. Almost as soon as Dragon held it upright it stood steadily on its feet and opened eyes that burned with white-hot strength. It did not say anything but simply walked a few steps to apparently stand watch. The sound of its feet on the granite floor boomed hollowly through the vast chamber they were in.

Dragon motioned for Cat to follow her and said, "the others appear to still be sleeping. Come, sister, and help me prepare for them."

Together they explored the chamber. The seven of them had been asleep in the middle of a circular hall expertly carved from stone. Their sleeping place had been a large septagon, each side of which held a throne suitable for each of them, with the exception of Dragon who's throne was in fact a pile of coins and nuggets of the purest gold. The rest of them had exquisitely carved stone thrones set with pillows and blankets as soft and beautiful as anyone can imagine.

Behind each throne large chairs of the same design, and more piles of gold, spread to the edges of the hall. Cat danced around the room, her eyes gleaming with joy and pleasure.

"Look," she purred, "there are more chairs than we can see! Whenever my eyes follow them some trick makes it seem like they never stop!"

"Indeed, sister," Dragon said. "That is because there will be more of us than there are now. We are merely the embodiment of our own race. Look to our brethren, see how they truly look. In their sleep it becomes ever so clear."

Cat danced back to the septagon and crouched down next to the nearest sleeping form.

"Such beauty!"

The sleeping form was that of a young man. Slender and strong with black hair flowing down over his shoulders. His face was slim yet soft, the tips of his long, pointed canines, only just visible against his lower lip, giving him a predatory beauty that Cat could only envy. She lowered her face over his and gave him the briefest kiss on the forehead.

"Wake, my beautiful brother. Let us begin our work."

Slowly he opened his eyes. The beautiful Vampire who even in his sleep managed to look perfect in every way. When he got to his feet it was with slow, calculated movements that were designed to make his cape continue to flow perfectly around his shoulders. Finally he unfolded completely and let his gaze take in Cat and Dragon before he shifted it to the still unmoving form of Daemon.

"Grace, intelligence, strength," he said nodding at each of them in turn and then indicated himself, "and beauty."

“But who are the others?” Cat asked. She danced around the forms, briefly stopping to look at each, but never keeping her focus on any single one long enough for her to really look at them. Seeing this Dragon let out her low rumbling sound again. To Vampire it sounded eerily like laughter.

“Relax, sister,” Dragon said, “they themselves will know who they are and it is best that they be allowed to tell us in their own way.”

Cat pouted, clearly displeased at hearing this. Her pout, however, only lasted a few moments before it was replaced with a new look of wonder as she looked at the forms again. Gracefully she jumped over a slightly brutish looking, green man with great tusks and playfully gave his big ears a gentle nap. The brute grunted and waved his hand sleepily as if trying to wave off a small insect. He rolled over on his side and curled up, intent on sleeping more. This only spurred Cat on and despite Dragon shaking her head Cat curled her tail around her legs so it tickled the man’s nose. With a violent sneeze Orc sat up. So did the other two, woken by the sound.

Dragon sighed heavily.

“Ah, well,” she said, “perhaps not the best way to wake up, my dear brothers and sisters, but here we are now. All of us together.”

“Huh,” Orc grunted, “where are we?”

Next to him Dwarf and Elf repeated the question. Dwarf was, due to his short stoutness, on his feet before his taller sister. He held out a steady hand which she took gratefully and stood up. When none of the others answered their question they repeated it, standing together with Orc looking warily at the others.

“Where are we?” Dragon said, “Where indeed? We are in the Hall. The place where we shall begin our work together to make the world a beautiful, prosperous place for our selves.”

“How can we do this, o great sister? With just the seven of us?” Elf asked, her voice filled with respect for her sister.

“In time there will be more of us, each one a perfect image of ourselves bringing their energy to bear on the task in front of us.”

“But how do you know this?”

This time it was Dwarf who spoke. His voice was as deep and steady as the very rock upon which they stood. Dragon lowered her head slightly and sighed.

“In truth, I do not know,” she said. “But I do know it to be true. We have a purpose, my mind is filled with the knowledge of everything that we must do, how the world outside this hall works, how we can make it continue to work. For without us, my mind tells me, the world will come apart and be undone.”

“Then I shall do as you command, great one,” Orc said and slapped his right fist to his chest.

Again Dragon shook her gigantic head.

“No,” she said, “while I do know all these things it will take all of us in unison to decide how to transform that knowledge to actions. We must rely on each and every one of us for this. From you, Elf, who must make sure our decisions remain noble and pure to quiet Daemon whose strength, I fear, we must over and over rely on to get much of our work done.”

At these words Daemon’s eyes narrowed slightly and it seemed to stand up a little bit straighter than it had done before. Dwarf nodded at this and went to place a hand solidly on Daemon’s chest.

“You may not speak much. But fear not for while you may bear the burdens we shall forever make sure you have. . .”

His words trailed off as he realised that he did not know what Daemon needed. In his own stomach he could feel a slow hunger growing, but Daemon’s face had no features except those furnace hot eyes.

“Daemon,” Dragon said, “does not require much. But what it requires it will fall upon your shoulders to produce, Dwarf. For the fuel that drives Daemon can be found deep in the ground and requires more than mere muscle to excavate. As does everything else we need for our world to be perfect.”

The seven of them stood quiet for several long minutes. Each of them savoured the moment for they knew that this was the only time they would be together, just them without any concerns or problems. They looked at each other as they stood there until a deep rumbling was once again heard.

With an amused smile Cat looked up at Dragon who shook her head indicating that the rumbling did not come from me.

“Errr,” Dwarf said and shuffled his feet, “that’d be me stomach. Let’s get ter werk, ‘cuz I’m ded ‘ungry!”

Only Vampire and Daemon did not laugh at this. The former because he feared it would ruin his majestic, beautiful features, the latter because he did not have a face to laugh with. They all took their place on the thrones and settled in for a very long discussion of what needed to be done. None of them, of course, had seen the world yet, but Dragon’s knowledge would serve them as a good starting point and give them a sense of direction so not too much time was wasted blindly running around.

A Perfect World

As quickly as they could the seven explored the world and worked hard to make everything they found better and more prosperous than it already was. It had not taken them long to discover that their world was not as big as they had imagined. Even so it still took Dragon more than a week to fly across it, a trip that took her from one great ocean to another. The world was, in fact, a very large island floating alone of an otherwise empty little planet hurling through space. Even several decades after their awakening none of the other six races would have, on their own, travelled the length and breadth of the island themselves. They relied on being carried by Dragon who were more than willing to let them crawl onto her back.

The first year they had decided to spend on exploring the world and meeting regularly to add their discoveries to Dragon’s vast knowledge. This, they hoped, would further make sure that they could swiftly begin their great work. They were right and after the first year they all had a very clear view of how their new found world worked, where they could find lush lands suitable for growing grain and raising cattle, where the world’s animals resided, where they could find massive mountains with the diamonds Daemon needed for its strength and so on.

Precisely one year after their awakening they gathered again for what they knew would be the last time in a very long time. Six of them had so

far entered the Septagonal Hall as they, ignoring that it was really round, called the chamber they woke up in. Only Orc was missing which was unusual given his loyal and courageous nature.

For a while they wondered if they should send Dragon out to scout after him and as first one then another hour passed they grew concerned. What if something had happened to him? An accident?

It was while they were in the middle of these thoughts that Elf saw the flickering in the air around Orc's throne that signalled his arrival. Their sighs of relief never finished as they realised that it was not Orc who materialised. It was two Orcs almost exactly alike as if they were seeing double. As one of the new arrivals stepped forward and raised his hand the others could see that there were subtle differences in the two Orcs. The one who remained behind looked slightly smaller and wore its leather clothes differently.

"Everyone," Orc said, "I bring important news."

The others waited with ill concealed patience, all but Dragon who simply kept smiling her all knowing smile with a glint in her eye.

"My last journey brought me, as you know, up among the mountains away from the sun. It was there that I discovered something amazing. One night, while I was camped in the mouth of a cave, I noticed that despite being high up on the cliff side and away from the warmth of the sun the earth itself seemed to give off an incredible amount of heat. And from deep in the cave a very faint, red light grew as darkness descended around me. What I saw when I went to investigate it nearly made me freeze with fear."

At this last bit the Elf covered her mouth with a hand and Dwarf swore loudly. They had all come to know and respect Orc's courage for on more than one occasion only their fearless brother had made it possible to overcome the dangers of the world.

"Going deeper into the cave I felt the air become warmer until it was nearly unbearable and I had to take off most of my armour lest I be boiled from within. Finally, just as the heat began to make the tufts on my ears curl, I saw it spreading out before my very eyes: an enormous lake of melted rock. At first I did not know it was rocks, I thought it was burning water

or some other unbelievable thing. But looking around at the edges I saw how it had hardened into a porous, yet hard, rock.”

As he spoke he pulled a piece of cooled lava from a purse in his belt and handed it to the others. When it came into Daemon’s hands, the last of them to feel it, the silent Daemon held it before him as if the rock was a treasure of immense value. Then he simply closed his hand around it, crushing it to dust which it threw into the air. Rather than scatter in the air the dust seemed to settle on Daemon and where it did the rocky shape began to shimmer and become more fluid. The others watched in stunned silence as Daemon fell to its knees, its pain somehow visible in its never changing, white burning eyes. Slowly the dust settled on its entire body which seemed to melt before their very eyes. Dwarf took a step forward, unsure what he could do yet determined to do something, but the first Orc put a hand on his shoulder. The second Orc remained still behind them all.

“Wait,” Orc said, “and watch. As much as it pains us all to see our strong Daemon suffer there is nothing we can do.”

A part of Daemon’s body began to float away and hung in the air growing and sucking more of the original body towards it. All in all the process took no more than a minute or two though it seemed like ages had passed when two Daemons finally stood up. Both were the same size as the first Daemon had been and it was only barely possible to see which was which. Neither of them seemed harmed or injured by the process and simply stood there quietly just like the first Daemon had done throughout all their meetings this past year.

The first to speak was Dragon.

“That,” she said, “I did not know about. This explains everything.”

“What do you mean?” Vampire said. “Apart from how we could obviously make the world even more beautiful than we thought possible by duplicating me over and over like this?”

A sharp light shone in Vampires eyes, quite like what was usually there when he looked at reflections of himself only infinitely stronger this time.

Dwarf rolled his eyes, yet said nothing. Being the sturdiest of the seven he was also the one least interested in maintaining a beautiful exterior. Over

the past year he had only travelled short distances and mainly kept near the centre of the world where they exited from the Septagonal Hall. There he had worked almost furiously at planting seeds from the forest, gathering wood and raising goats and pigs. All of which had helped feed them.

“You have no doubt guessed,” Orc said, “the same happened to me deep in the cave. Believe me, the experience is not something I am keen to go through again, but I fear that it is a sacrifice we must all make. Often.”

“Hmm,” Cat purred and traced a nail down the side of her nose, “yes, yes, it does make sense. Not the rock, but that there will be more than just us seven. Just think about it. We know how each of us fit into this world, how we can contribute to make it glorious. But don’t tell me you never wondered how there would ever be time for just us seven to do everything we need to do.”

For a while the chamber rang with their excited voices as they opened themselves to all the possibilities that now stretched before them. It was not until Orc cleared his throat that they grew silent again.

“As you saw I brought some of the hardened lava with me back, but for what you mention we shall need a lot more than what I or even Daemon can carry. For, you see, when I first left the cave I carried a piece of rock so large that it took both of us to carry it. We wanted to bring enough for us all to use, but once we got the rock outside in the clean air it simply grew smaller and smaller. For what reason I do not know, but that is how it is.

“Another important thing, though, is that while me and Orc, for I can think of him by no other name than that, are two separate bodies we seem to share some kind of link between us. It allows us to, how shall I explain it, share our feelings when we are near each other. We cannot as such speak to one another and when we are more than a dozen or two yards apart the link quickly fades. But when close it is as if we simply work together as one being.”

Halfway through his speech the first Orc had simply stopped speaking and the second Orc had taken over, their flowing switch from one to the other adding a power to the statement that their words alone could never have done. It was immediately clear to them all that in the future they would need to multiply themselves. None seemed thrilled about the process that

was apparently so painful that even Daemon had hurt badly. But their resolve was so great that, as they looked at each other, there was no doubt that they would endure.

For years they laboured. The lands and forests proved full of fertile soil and fat animals that easily provided enough food right from the start. As the years wore on and the seven multiplied again and again they slowly expanded and in less than half a century almost all parts of the world was populated by small settlements. At first all of the seven shared the work needed to make the settlements survive, but it soon became clear that they would work both faster and better if each of them began to focus on their speciality.

At the centre of the world Vampire had undertaken the mighty task of building a huge city whose size would only be surpassed by its beauty. For weeks and months the Vampires toiled away long into the night. They would gather either in the Septagonal Hall or in one of the building Daemons had built for them and draw building after building, hall after hall, city after city. Around them Daemons would carry timber and heavy stones while Cats bounced around the growing city directing everything.

Overhead Dragons frequently soared on their way to and from the different enclaves. They carried news across the world and served both as couriers and advisors. Where the others would take joy in settling down and staying in one place the Dragons soon became restless and set off again in pursuit of new knowledge. Often Elves would travel with the Dragons and as time passed a special bond began to grow between those two sisters. They never became as close as two Elves or two Dragons, but eventually they became able to work closely together so an Elf's wisdom and nobility could be combined with a Dragon's intelligence. This was proved important over and over again as the far regions of the world became settled. These parts of the world were difficult to survive in and several settlements had been lost either to rampaging gargantuan animals or succumbed to the freezing cold in the Southern tundra.

Losing their brethren was never pleasant for the seven. They could all feel it when any of their numbers died. But it was always the newer copies of them that died, never the original seven that had awakened together. This they often discussed and they came to the conclusion that while the

copies did resemble them closely they were still just copies and the original seven were somehow more intense in anything that happened. Where the copies could feel a death very painfully up to several hundred yards away the original seven felt it every time no matter how far away they were. On several occasion on of their great meetings would come to a sudden halt as a settlement, or even just a single individual, perished while some topic or other was being discussed. They would all know it, feel it, instantly and they would simply sit back down on their thrones often crying.

It was after one of these interruptions a great change began to show in them. It happened shortly after the great city in the centre of the world was finished and they had allowed themselves some time to sit back and ponder where next to focus their efforts. They were discussing how to balance the sun's power so the tundra to the south and the desert to the north could become habitable. Orc had undertaken a brave quest to walk deep in the dessert towards an oasis Dragon had spotted earlier. Despite several attempts at landing near the oasis Dragon had found that she could not get near it. For some reason it seemed to jump around and whenever she came close it would blink out of existence only to become visible several miles from her. Before the meeting they had sent out a scouting party of Orcs that had travelled quickly through the desert only carrying the barest of necessities, mainly water. Dragons had soared high overhead. The heat given off by the red sand was harmful to their wings and they could not stay low for longer than an hour or two at a time before they had to return to the coolness of the high altitude. The group had been larger than any they had sent out in the hope that the greater numbers would make it possible to find out exactly what was going on with the oasis and if, perhaps, it was the result of some strange phenomenon they needed to understand to make the world fully habitable.

In the middle of Dragon's latest report from the group the seven all suddenly fell quiet as the pain struck them hard. This was not just a settlement that had vanished, but something that struck far deeper inside them. Orc was clearly hit the worst and he slid from his throne to sit sobbing at the ground in front of it. His massive form looked almost broken as he sat there sobbing. None of them spoke a word. They just sat there while trying to compose themselves after realising what had happened: every last one of the Orcs and Dragons sent out had suddenly died. Disappeared

in an agonising instant. And they had all been too deep in the desert for them to be linked back to any survivors.

None of them knew what had happened.

It took them several hours to recover from the shock and even when they did they no longer felt a need to continue the meeting. They sent the newer ones away and gathered alone, just the seven of them. Elf was the first to break the silence.

“Truly horrible,” she said, “I hope I shall never experience anything like it.”

“Yes,” Dwarf agreed, “but I fear we may. Who’s to say what shall happen in the future?”

“The horror!” Vampire gasped, “We cannot send someone else to see what happened. We must not. Lest the same befall them!”

“But then what,” Orc said. “Shall we abandon the desert? Our goal to make the entire world beautiful and fantastic?”

As the pain slowly resided they began to discuss what to do and how they should continue. Elf, Orc and Vampire were directly opposed to sending others to investigate. Apart from Daemon the rest felt that, despite the pain, they must above all find out what had happened. That, they said, was the only way they could prevent it happening again.

A deadlock was reached and for a while they all sat there in silence, thinking hard. In the end it was Daemon who came up with the solution. As always it had remained perfectly still throughout the discussion, but suddenly it walked to the centre of the dais upon which the thrones stood. The others blinked in surprise. This was most unexpected.

“What. . .” Dragon began, her superb mind failing her for once.

Right before their eyes Daemon began to change. Small, subtle things at first: its head got slightly longer, its rocky skin became more flexible, its shape lost its bulkiness. Faster and faster the changes began to happen until Daemon’s shape had changed almost completely. It now resembled something in between Cat and Dragon. No longer bulky, but still massive and strong. When it straightened to face them its movements betrayed a

graceful limberness that made it hard to believe that mere moments before it had been a silent, slow hulk.

All this the others took in in shocked silence. The changes to Daemon's body alone were hard enough for them to fathom, but it was nothing compared to what had happened to its face. Where it had earlier only had a blank, almost featureless head with only its two glowing eyes it now had a grotesque face. Its eyes were still glowing, albeit fiery red rather than white, its nose was twisted and crooked, its mouth half-open unable to close because of the long, jagged teeth that stood out at odd angles.

A slow rasping sound escaped from it and it narrowed its eyes to thin slits as it look around. The sound turned into the grating of granite slabs being dragged across gravel as it began to speak.

"My brothers and sisters," it said, "things have changed. What we thought we were, we are not. What we thought we could do, we cannot."

With a crackling sound it stretched its back and neck, growing slightly in height as it did.

"Ah, much better. Too long have I been hidden in that abominable form. It feels good to be free again."

"But who are you? What are you?"

It was Cat who first regained her tongue.

"Sweet, little sister," Daemon hissed, "I am still Daemon. Or to be precise, I am Daemon in my true form now. That other body was... a cocoon, you might say. I myself did not realise this until I found the lave in the mountains. But as I made my first copy it seemed as if a part of the shell around me vanished and I began to understand that I was more than just a lumbering piece of rock.

"With each copy I came closer and closer to the surface until, finally, I was able to break all the way through. And in doing so I feel somehow... lighter, both of mind and body. It is as if everything seems clear to me now."

"I do not like this," Dwarf said, "we have always been the same. Even as we duplicated we did not change!"

“Oh,” Daemon said, “I think that perhaps you did. But that you have yet to truly be aware of the changes. Forget not that I have, by far, duplicated the most. Almost as much as the rest of you put together.”

“Hmm, yes, that might explain it. But what will happen to us if we continue? If we do not?”

Daemon laughed, a sound that made the others wince. There was something about this form that just seemed plain wrong to them and Cat had withdrawn to behind her throne where she hissed menacingly, the hair on her body standing on end.

“That,” Daemon said, “I know not. What I do know, though, is that we will never be able to live long in this world. Is that not so, my scaled sister?”

Dragon nodded slowly, hesitantly. She closed her eyes and spoke softly.

“I have felt it since Daemon brought the first piece of lava back. At first I brushed it aside, but lately I have felt as if something had gone missing from within me.”

“And you did not tell us?” Elf said. She seemed almost as angry as she was shocked. “You should have warned us that something might happen!”

“Yes,” Dragon sighed. “I know and for that I do apologise.”

“What do you think has happened?”

“We are ideas,” Dragon said. “Each of us a single, perfect idea when we woke up. Cat was Grace. Elf was Nobility. Dragon was Intelligence. Dwarf was Stability. Orc was Courage. Vampire was Beauty. And I was Strength. Alone none of us would have been able to do anything, but put together we were complete.”

“Precisely,” Daemon said. “And once we took that first step away from perfection we destroyed the one thing we had that was not embodied in one of us: Hope! Hope that we might survive forever.”

“Then what can we do?” Cat said. “Surely we should not just lay down and do nothing until we wither away?”

“Don’t know,” Daemon said, “and I have come to realise that I do not care anymore. All this work? Why should I care what happens to the world?”

It was clear to the others that something had changed just as much inside as on its outside. Before now it had seemed content to do as they had asked it to and now, well, it seemed more inclined to simply turn its back on them. None of them could think of anything to say and after Daemon had paced back and forth a couple of times it took a last look at them and scuffed before it departed from the hall.

“Can someone explain to me precisely what just happened?” Vampire asked.

Despite the simpleness of the question they all knew that he had understood perfectly well what had happened and that, just like they were asking themselves, he was more asking why it had happened.

“I do not know precisely what goes on inside Daemon’s head,” Dragon said. “I think that, perhaps, none of us ever did. Did we just take it for granted that Daemon would always supply the strength needed to see our plans through to fruition?”

In silence the others nodded their agreement and after a few minutes they decided to break up the meeting and take some time to think about the ramifications of Daemon’s decision and change. They would return the following day to discuss it further and, hopefully, come up with a new plan for the future.

At first light the next day the six met again. None of them had slept well and even Vampire only managed to look half-way his former self. The first thing that became apparent was that Daemon and all the Daemons had disappeared completely. All the building, farming and other heavy tasks in the city had almost stopped completely. From what they had heard all of the Daemons had also changed both shape and attitude the day before.

“It does look bleak,” Elf said, “but we must keep our dream alive. One way or the other.”

“But how?”

“We cannot, not without Daemon!”

“Daemon does not matter, we can still do this!”

All of them talked at the same time until Dragon shushed them. And even then it took her quite a while to get them all to calm down. It was clear

that they were all nervous about what was to come.

“There is a way,” she said, “in which we might be able to fulfil our destiny. Though I think you will not like it. As things are now we are not complete. We quite simply lack Daemon’s strength to be able to continue. None of the rest of us can match it in that aspect as we are the other ideas given substance.

“But what we can do is to try and melt ourselves, or rather the ideas after which we were formed, into a single unity that may be able to survive and prosper. Not from excellence in any single area, but because the whole is more than the sum of the parts.”

“What do you mean? Should we give up ourselves?”

Vampire looked disgusted.

“Not in the physical sense, no. We would still be here, us seven, no six. It is our duplicates I am thinking about. The research we have done on the duplication process has led me to believe that we may be able to fuse the copies together and form a giant pool of matter which we can then mould into new beings that will share a little bit of all of us. Not unlike differently coloured ice statues melting and mixing.”

“Ah,” Orc said, “yes that does make sense.”

“Pah,” Vampire huffed, “and when was the last time you tried to melt differently coloured ice? I tried it briefly when I tried to create windows for the southern cities. And you know what? When the different colours melt together they just form a murky pool of greyish brown water that is no good for anything.”

“Fair enough,” Dragon said, “perhaps the ice analogy was not entirely well chosen. Perhaps if you think of it as a meal instead.”

“Now yer talkin’,” Dwarf said, earning a raised eye brow or two from the others.

“A meal,” Dragon continued unabated, “where the pure flavour of the spices combine to make a superb culinary experience.”

Vampire waved his hand in the air.

“Enough with this,” he said. “Ice. Food. Enough. Go ahead and explain what you plan to do. Unless someone else have got any other suggestions? I’m completely blank as to what to do.”

The others shook their heads so Dragon continued.

“As mentioned, we should be able to take our duplicates apart and rework them into new beings. It will, granted, take a lot of our energy and even if Daemon had still been here it would have been a huge undertaking. But I am confident that we can do it.”

“What would the result be?” Elf asked, “Some new brother or sister for us? Or more duplicates of a new being?”

“No,” Orc said, “I think duplicates would be a bad idea. Look where it has got us.”

“True,” Cat said, “plus, as much as I enjoy my duplicates there is something to be said in favour of being unique. It feels, I don’t know, more right.”

“Valid points,” Dragon said, “and I tend to agree. Though I feel that while the ones we create should not be identical to each other they should bear close resemblance. And they should have a way to multiply without duplication or I fear they will be caught in the same problems as us.”

For several days they discussed back and forth about how they could create this new race until, finally, they had a plan. With great confidence they began to gather as many of their duplicates as they possibly could. Sadly, far too many of them were too far away from the central city to be able to return. In the early days the Dragon had carried each of them to the far corners of the world where they had duplicated over and over again. They had decided to spend a year gathering as many of the duplicates as possible and hope that would suffice. Dragon’s theory was that the only real difference between a few duplicates and all of them was how many of the new race they could create. It would not influence the final result.

And so, a year later, they were gathered in the Septagonal Hall, surrounded by duplicates. More than a thousand of each of them had been found. Ideally they should have had precisely the same amount of each of them, but the numbers were close enough that they preferred to use all of them.

“If only we had still had Daemon,” Elf said, “then it would have been perfect.”

“True,” Dragon agreed, “but it made its choice.”

The duplicates stood eerily silent as if they knew they were about to be wiped from existence, but did not resent it. Also present was several large chunks of lava that they had also gathered. One by one they took a piece of it and went to stand before their duplicates. Solemnly they raised the rock over their heads and threw it far among the duplicates.

As the rocks hit the ground they shattered and immediately the nearest duplicates began to turn liquid. The other duplicates slowly turned toward where the rocks had landed and began to crowd nearer, pushing those in front of them closer and closer to the rock. Their liquid forms began to melt together until all of them had disappeared, leaving six large lumps of liquid rock in their place.

Rather than seep away into cracks in the ground the liquid lay like the underground lava had, a thick mass that slowly shifted a little in one direction or another. Dragon stepped forward and used her mighty claws to guide the liquid to the centre of the hall where they would be mixed and the new race would be created.

A single tear ran down Elf’s face and lodged in the corner of her mouth. She, most of all, hurt from the feeling of betrayal that ran through them all. They had created the duplicates, given them life. And now, in just a few moments they had simply unmade them. Deep inside her she hoped that it was all for the better, but right there in that moment she could not help but feel that they had just ensured their own doom firmer than if they had simply sat down and done nothing at all.

For days and days they worked on the liquids, mixing them all together, drawing bits of it out to form it into a new being, pushing it back when they were not satisfied. The more they worked on the liquid, the harder it became to mould it as they wished because the liquid thickened ever so slowly. But with the thickness came a firmness that made the shapes they created seem far more solid and durable.

When the liquid was so thick that Cat and Vampire could no longer form it the two of them stood back and looked at the shape that was standing before it. Orc and Dwarf still strained their muscles to form the last details on the shape, helped by Dragon’s claws.

The shape still looked more like a statue than a real being, but it was something they felt pleased with. It had the best from everyone of them: sturdiness from Dwarf, a graceful bearing from Cat, a noble gaze in the uncoloured eyes, beautiful features from Vampire, a strong body from Orc and last, unseen but still there under the surface, the intelligence from Dragon that they hoped would make this new race one that would endure forever.

Standing back they looked upon the being and they knew they were finished. They sat down, weary to the bone, on their thrones and watched as the liquid began to spread out again and more and more shapes started to grow from it. The shape they had worked on became more detailed. At first its dark blond hair gained volume, then its skin changed colour from the dull grey of the rock to a smooth, light brown tan. It opened its eyes and took an experimental, staggering step away from the liquid from which it had been made.

And thus the first Human was created.

I Promised You A Rose Garden

Hard Work

Fiachra stood leaning on his rake and shovel and watched how the setting sun cast its crimson rays over the small pond and the neatly arranged bushes and flowers. It had taken him several weeks to get it all properly sorted out, but now it was nearing its completion. And it was perfect. Just as perfect as Xanthe, the woman for whom he had made all of this. In his mind he imagined how she would see the scenery and throw her arms around him to show that she did really love him.

A loud boom could be heard from across the palace grounds. This was not unusual as the barracks lay in the direction the

Fiachra sighed in resignation as he left his wonderful daydream and returned to the work in front of him. Not because he disliked his work in the palace gardens. Far from it, he actually loved it. Working with the fertile soil and the many fantastic plants made him feel so alive. And of all the places he could work right there, in the Chancellor's large personal garden. This was his dream. However, dreams sometimes turn into nightmares and from the moment he had first caught a glimpse of Xanthe he knew he was lost. It had been one late afternoon when he was trimming some of the trees along the road leading up to the main entrance of the palace. She had arrived there in an open coach, sitting there looking ever so beautiful and pretty in her white dress with her golden curls flowing behind her in the gentle summer breeze. He had lost his heart instantly. And very nearly had it crushed when he had later learned who she was.

How could a mere gardener ever possibly hope to have a chance with the chancellor's niece?

With a tremendous force of will Fiachra pushed the thoughts of Xanthe away and gave his work his full attention. He was currently working on the bushes surrounding the small pond where the swans lived. The bushes and flower beds were nearly finished and tomorrow the project would be presented to the chancellor. Despite his low position in the hierarchy he had still been allowed to be present because of his hard work and dedication. His boss, Janech, thought Fiachra was a bit slow, dim witted even, and

that the hard work had been because of his excellent leadership. If he had suspected that it was Fiachra's affection for Xanthe that was the driving force things might have looked a lot different. Fortunately for Fiachra he had learned a long time ago not to reveal his feelings lest they drew unnecessary attention to him.

With a small smile of satisfaction he stopped working and stepped back. As the sun's last rays bathed the lush bushes in a crimson light he inspected his work. Everything was perfect. From the stones set around the flower beds to the way they bushes had been trimmed to give the illusion of green clouds surrounding the deep blue water.

He sensed a presence behind him and turned around. He smiled as he recognised Vam's beautiful face. Fiachra did not know exactly who Vam was or where he came from. That was part of their deal: no questions. Vam had simply appeared one evening when Fiachra was cutting the grass near the edge of the palace grounds. He has simply stood there for a while as the gardener worked and not until the grass looked neat and fine did Vam approach him. The proposition has been strange. Vam had not given it at first, instead he had commented on Fiachra's fine work and given him a few suggestions on how to make the garden even more beautiful than it already was. They had talked for a while and Fiachra generally liked this man. He was a little concerned about why he was there but figured that since Vam did nothing to hide, not even as they passed the guards who patrolled the palace grounds, then he either had a reason to be there or it was not Fiachra's problem. Over the next couple of days Vam had shown up from time to time with more of his suggestions and Fiachra had begun to respect his opinions and the way Vam managed to make them sound not like critique but as improvements on an already good design.

Then, late one night, Vam had made his proposition. It was after Fiachra had let slip that he was attracted to Xanthe which Vam had in no way seemed to have a problem with. Quite the opposite, in fact, he had encouraged Fiachra to pursue his dream and, he had said, if only he believed enough in it it could become reality. Vam had promised to help him win the beautiful woman and had only asked for one thing for himself: that Fiachra continued his work and kept on making the gardens beautiful.

At first Fiachra had been suspicious, but over a few weeks he had come to

appreciate Vam's ideas even more and now genuinely believed that Vam simply wanted what he had said: to make things beautiful.

"More of you fine work, my dear Fiachra," Vam said, "it is quite simply flawless."

Fiachra blushed slightly.

"Thank you. Coming from you that means a lot to me."

"As much as if Xanthe had said it?"

Vam winked.

"Oh, now you tease me."

"Yes, I suppose I am. Accept my apologies. I bear good news, though. About Xanthe. I have heard tell that she will indeed be there tomorrow. And more, she has expressed some interest in who has been in charge of the work in the gardens."

A delighted smile spread on Fiachra's face. This was just what he had hoped would happen. Maybe now he would be able to make Xanthe notice him. Oh, the feeling of joy that spread in him that perhaps by this time tomorrow Xanthe would know who he was.

The smile soon disappeared, though, as a horrible thought struck him. He sighed.

"That's all well and fine. But I fear that it will be for nothing. If things go as it usually does Janech will take the credit for everything. He always does and I can say nothing or I risk getting the boot!"

Vam seemed to ponder this for a few moments.

"Yes, that is indeed true. But fear not. Even if it will be Janech who will do the talking tomorrow you will still be there. In fact, him doing the talking might even be of benefit to you."

"How so?"

"Listen, Janech is, well, he is not a bad gardener, but he is quite clearly not good enough to have made something like this."

At this Vam gestured at the arrangement around the pond. He continued.

“Just let him do all the talking. It will show that while, yes, he is in charge, no, it is definitely not him that has actually made the designs or done the hard work. You just stand there and look sharp and it will only emphasise what you have done even more.”

“Well, if you say so.”

“I do say so! But, alas, I have other things to attend to. You will not see me tomorrow, but I will see you. If you begin to feel nervous, just look at the beautiful bushes you have made.”

With those words Vam bid his friend good bye and strolled off down the gravel path leading to the eastern gate. Once outside he checked to see that he was alone before he slipped off the path and in among the trees. There, he was greeted by Cat who had sneaked around among the trees and listened in on the night’s conversation.

“So,” Cat said, “you decided to interfere despite our decision not to?”

“Yes, I cannot help it. It is in my nature. And can you blame me? There is so much potential in them, Fiachra really does possess a talent for creating beautiful things. And I am not interfering. More... giving him ideas.”

“That’s just play on words, my brother, but you are right. You are not really interfering. Yet. But I will be watching. For we cannot risk that the Humans realise who we are and that we created them.”

“That, my sister, is true. And I promise you that I shall not interfere. But what about your project? Are things coming along?”

“Not yet, but I am working on it and I am confident that it will soon bear fruit. Now, shhh, someone’s nearby. I’ll find you later. Good luck!”

“Same to you,” Vampire whispered into the night after Cat had slipped back among the shadows.

Back in the garden Fiachra leaned on his rake and looked at the light fading at the horizon. Tomorrow would be good, he knew it.

“Oh, Fiachra,” a voice said in the darkness.

Fiachra sighed and turned to face Drust who came walking, in his big boots, across the newly raked lawn. That man, Fiachra thought, has absolutely no respect for other people’s work or their time and effort. He also had a

disconcerting tendency to show up just when Fiachra was in the middle of pleasant thoughts, especially when he thought about Xanthe.

“Yes, Master,” Fiachra said, “what can I do for you?”

While Drust was not, technically, Fiachra’s boss he was one of the nobles of the court and as such Fiachra did not have a choice. He would be forced to do whichever silly little task Drust had for him. He just hoped it was not something that involved searching in the lake for his croquet ball or running up and down the stairs to the cellar fetching different bottles of wine until Drust got tired and simply took whichever one Fiachra had in his hand.

“Fiachra, my dear friend,” Drust said, “I seem to have come into a slight bind over at the croquet field.”

Fiachra sighed, a bit too loud, and picked up his rake, resigned to spend hours wading through the muddy waters until he found one of the small wood balls the nobles used to play croquet. Drust, however, held up his hand and stopped him.

“No, no. It’s not the balls this time. It’s just that there is this horribly annoying little hole in the field near the end zone and we keep getting caught in it. Could you be an absolute darling and sort it out for us before the grand finale tomorrow? There’s a good chap.”

As Fiachra headed over to the croquet field he felt that things could be have been worse. After all, how bad could it be to dig out the hole, fill it with fresh soil, move some grass over from the side of the field, the part that was never used, and pad it all down and make sure the new grass was fairly well blended in with the rest.

It was not until he was halfway across the palace grounds that he suddenly remembered the somewhat large, crackling noise he had heard earlier. Given Drust’s fascination with explosives and machinery, Fiachra suddenly felt an icy shiver run down his spine. He hoped the boom had had nothing to do with hole in the croquet field, he really, really hoped it had not. As he came closer his heart began to sink. A couple of the others workmen passed him and from their brisk pace it was obvious that they were trying to be anywhere but here as quickly as they could.

With something close to fear inside him he turned the last corner. What

he saw made him stop completely and just stare for several moments as the sight before him sank in.

A Hole In The Ground

It was... just wrong. Whatever had happened, whoever had done this, it was just wrong. There was no longer any croquet field. It had been completely blown away. In its place there was what could only be called a crater. The word 'hole' just did not encompass the enormity of it. Despite the shock of seeing this Fiachra could not help but wonder, and be amazed by, how they had managed to do this without making more noise. If he had known anything about explosives he would have been able to tell, from the way the dirt had been pushed up and out to the sides that the explosion had happened underground.

He sat down on a nearby bench. He would sit there only a few moments, he told himself, but he needed to sit down. To get a grip on reality and figure out what to do. He knew that if he did not finish the croquet field in time for the finale the next day, at noon no less, Drust would have ample reason to get him kicked out immediately. And if he did work on this he would not get any sleep at all.

No one was around which did not really surprise him. The workers would all have disappeared lest they be tasked with cleaning up the mess, the nobles because, well, the show was over.

Maybe he could get some of the other caretakers to come back and lend him a hand, but given the enormity of job chances were that they would simply refuse. Perhaps that was the price he had to pay for being a bit of a loner. Maybe if he had spent more time buying drinks for the others at a nearby pub he would have some friends who he could call upon for help with this.

He pushed those thoughts aside and faced the facts. The field was in shambles, he had one night to sort it out, there were no one who would help him.

"Oh, Fiachra," he said to himself, "what have you got yourself into this time."

More than a few moments went by as he tried to gather the strength needed for the task in front of him. A part of him considered just giving up and taking whatever punishment he would get. But that was not who he was, someone who quit. He took quite some pride in knowing that despite all of the troubles Janech and Drust and the other people at the palace had caused for him over the years he had never backed down. Instead, he had always looked inside himself and found both the strength and resolve to go on. And the results had spoken for themselves. Never had the palace gardens been so well kept nor the flower beds arranged in so beautiful patterns.

Just as he was getting ready to begin working on the croquet field something at the bottom of the crater caught his eye. Amidst all the dirt and lumps of grass something sparkled, reflecting the light from the palace. Figuring that he would have to go down in the centre of the crater at some point soon anyway he thought he might as well do it now and climbed down. It was slippery and a little tricky to get to the bottom without sliding too much, but since he was well used to walking and climbing in dirt he managed it without too much trouble. When he reached the centre of the crater whatever he had seen was no longer reflecting the light so he had to search around for a little to try and find it. Reversing his hold on the rake he used the handle to poke through the dirt.

After several minutes of careful poking and looking he finally felt the handle hit something solid. Cursing himself for not bringing his shovel with him he began to dig with his hands. He quickly discovered that it was some kind of large box with an intricately carved lid. There were all kinds of patterns from flowers and animals to various shapes that looked a bit like humans, but small details in them made them look different. It took him some time to realise precisely what it was and then, suddenly, it was staring him directly in the face. It was their faces. Small, nearly invisible features like pointed ears, slightly pointed teeth, inhuman beauty.

Quickly he cleared the entire lid of the box and looked at it. Apart from the carvings it looked more like a coffin than, for example, a chest. But it was nothing like the coffins Fiachra had seen before. Commoners like Fiachra would usually either be burned or at most buried in a simple coffin of pine planks. Nobles sometimes had slightly more fancy, and expensive, coffins, but they were never carved or decorated.

As he worked his way down the sides of the coffin he saw more creatures depicted in the carvings. These were definitely not human. A few were still humanoid, but one looked more like one of the wild cats that lived in the forest and yet another was a being he had never heard of before. It looked somewhere between a bird and a lizard, but the way it was carved hinted that it was infinitely larger than the other people in the scene.

That last creature was, in fact, a dragon, but since the elder races had taken steps to hide their existence from the humans there were no tales or myths about the elder races. Unfortunately, there were items here and there that they had missed and this was one of them. Sometimes when these things were found the finders would not realise exactly what they had found, but Fiachra, with his keen mind, knew immediately that this was something special. What none of the elder races, least of all Vampire, had realised was that some of their duplicates had in fact begun to break away from them. Especially the vampires who had quickly realised that their beauty was unsurpassed and that had made them arrogant. When the call had gone out for the duplicates to return for the creation of the human race some of the vampires had decided that they wanted no part of it. They felt they were above such nonsense and had hid beneath the large palace in the centre of the great city. There they had lived in secret, not wanting to be discovered by the humans they slowly began to detest. Everything the vampires had worked on the humans were tearing down and making unbeautiful. As Fiachra would soon find out he was about to stir a hornet's nest that had been best left alone.

Seeing as it was now almost pitch black he decided that he needed to get back for some lamps anyway and he decided to go to the tool shed and pick up some rope, a large shovel and a wheel barrow as well. It did not take him long before he had found everything he needed. On the way he had seen Drust looking down on him from one of the windows and, worse, Xanthe had been with him, her hand resting lightly on Drust's shoulder. That sight alone made Fiachra decide, there and then, that he would find a way to clean up the croquet field and safely store the strange box for later examination.

He quickly returned to the crater and scrambled down towards the centre. Along the way he placed a few oil lamps so he could see his way when he had to go back up. When he was nearly there his right foot disappeared

deep into the ground and he fell flat on his face, nearly twisting his ankle. As he tried to get back on his feet he felt the earth shift underneath him and he froze in panic. If there was some kind of hollow space beneath him he could easily be trapped and either crushed or smothered by the heavy soil. Very slowly and carefully he began to pull his leg out. Inch by inch he pulled it toward him while shifting his hands to get a better grip so he could slide forward on his stomach.

And then the worst thing possible happened. Everything beneath him gave way and he fell down in a shower of dirt and grass. Before his brain had fully registered that he was falling the wind was knocked from him as he landed on something hard and sharp. The dirt kept pouring down over him and he was pushed onto his side and slipped further down into the ground.

He panicked.

All around him there was darkness, he could not move his body, he was afraid to even try to take a breath for fear that his mouth and lungs would be filled with soft dirt.

His lungs burned.

Experimentally he tried to move his fingers, being very careful to feel if the earth started to shift again. Much to his surprise he found that he could not only move his fingers, he could move his entire hand.

He took a deep breath.

And he was surprised that he could. His mouth and lungs did not fill with dirt. The air he breathed was stale, but well enough. Fumbling in his pocket he searched for the small fire device he always kept handy. He pulled it out and struck the flint to get a small flame so he could see his surroundings.

He was in a tiny hollow under some kind of board that lay angled on top of him. Ahead of him he could see soil, but it did not look as if it was pressed together. This gave him hope as it might mean that he was only under a little bit of dirt and not completely buried. He shifted and looked down to where his legs were. His feet were covered in dirt but he soon discovered that he could kick it off and move them freely.

Crawling backwards he slowly made his way out. He turned off the fire device to preserve its oil and avoid the risk of dropping it or inadvertently setting fire to himself. There might also be something flammable nearby. The board that had saved him from being crushed had definitely not been part of the croquet field so there was definitely something strange going on here.

When he got out from under the board he re-lit the fire device and saw that he was now crouched in some kind of hallway. In front of him was a large pile of soil under which another box, very similar to the one in the centre of the crater, was half buried. Within arm's reach on both sides of him were strong looking stone walls and behind him, he saw when he turned around, the hallway continued as long as he could see in the flickering light.

It was not without a certain nervousness that he lifted his head and looked up. To his relief he saw that the walls closed in to form a solid dome above his head. Where it had collapsed, several yards in front of him, the stones were slightly blackened as if from a fire. Perhaps whatever explosion that idiot Drust had set off had broken through the roof of this tunnel. Also sticking out of the soil he could see one of his lamps so he quickly lit it to have some better light than the small fire device could give him.

When he got the light out he saw that the oil canister was still intact and apart from being dirty and a little banged up the lamp was none the worse for wear. It was easy to get it lit and when he did he could see the tunnel a lot clearer. It seemed to bend away to the left not too far away, in the opposite direction of the cave-in. Along the walls more of the beautiful boxes stood, all of them with the same style of carvings as the first one he had seen. There was about a half dozen of them in total.

Fiachra went over to the one that was half buried. It was its lid that had protected him from the cave-in. The adrenaline was beginning to leave his body and that combined with the horrible feeling of being trapped underground made his hands tremble as he peeked into the box.

It was indeed a coffin for inside it lay the form of a man. He was dressed in the best and finest clothes Fiachra had ever seen, right from his suit to his shoes. Though the latter were not exactly well polished right now it was clear that they had not just been made by your average shoe maker. They had been made of some kind of hard, shiny material that looked like

what the nobles used for their ball room shoes, but far more fine and well made. When he saw the man's face he nearly dropped the lamp. It was Vam. Just lying there, immobile with a solemn look on his face.

With stumbling steps Fiachra moved to the next coffin and opened it, afraid of what he might find yet unable to stop himself. The lid came off easily enough and, as he had feared, the man in this coffin was also Vam. The third coffin was the same. He dared not open the last three.

Not knowing what to do he just stood there staring at the lifeless forms of his friend. Or maybe Vam was not his friend after all, maybe Fiachra had been a pawn in some strange game the nobles played. All these thoughts raced through his head and he began to feel truly frightened for the first time in his life. Looking back at the cave-in he saw that it would be impossible for him to get out that way. With an eye on the coffins he made his way down the tunnel hoping to find a way out. He got as far as the corner before he heard the sound. The horrible sound of a coffin lid sliding aside and someone shuffling out of it. The noise came from just around the corner. Fiachra froze. Behind him he, to his horror, heard the same sounds from the coffins he had just passed. His brain raced as he thought about what he should do. What he could do.

In the end his survival instinct kicked in and he ran around the corner dead set on simply getting as far away as he possibly could. As it turned out he got about five yards down the tunnel before he slammed into a door and was knocked unconscious. Just before his entire world went black he saw Vam open the door and step forward to catch him.

Secrets Unveiled

“Cat?”

Vam knew it was a big risk to call out for his sister in the middle of the woods like this. It was in the middle of the night, but there might still be humans nearby. Often foresters, or more sinister types, might be around either hunting night animals or lurking behind the trees as is the time honoured tradition of sinister types everywhere.

“Cat?”

A faint purring sound came from a nearby tree.

“Brother Vampire,” Cat said, “what brings you out here in the middle of the night?”

As always Cat was playful and could not resist a little teasing.

“Something terrible has happened. We need to get the others together, now.”

“Oh? What has happened?”

Cat’s voice became more serious as she saw the worried look in Vampire’s face. It was obvious that this was not just some small matter like the wrong colour of a building’s facade or something similar which Vampire had complained about in the past.

“Some of the nobles at the palace uncovered, through one of those silly games they always play, a secret room under the palace grounds that not even I knew existed. I drew the plans for that palace! How could I not know that there were so many tunnels and underground passages there?”

“Correction, brother, your duplicates drew that palace. But what of it? No one would expect you, not even you, to know every single little detail?”

“No, no. It is not the tunnels themselves that it the problem. It is what was in them.”

“And what is in the tunnels?”

“Something horrible. Something that should not be there.”

Rolling her eyes in mock impatience Cat decided to play along since Vampire did not seem able to get to the point on his own. For a while she kept prodding him with follow up questions until Vampire finally told her about the duplicates that Fiachra had found.

“Duplicates? Here?”

Now there was not even the smallest hint of playfulness or teasing in Cat’s voice. She was dead serious because when they had created the humans they had rounded up every single duplicate in the great city and the surrounding areas. Or, as was becoming evident, they thought they had rounded them all up. That some of them had decided to ignore everything and remain behind was disturbing news. Very disturbing indeed.

“But how?” Cat said. “They are not able to do that. The duplicates has always done what we wanted them to. True, they were not mindless drones or they would not have been of any use. But going against us like this? This is... this is... impossible!”

“Yes,” Vampire agreed, “and yet it has happened. It does not matter that it is only half a dozen. The fact that there is even a single one means that there might be more hidden either in the city or elsewhere.”

“Hmm... yes. That is bad. It is one thing that the humans might eventually find the duplicates that we had to leave behind far from the city. As we know those duplicates have, by now, settled down and simply work as they always have. But having duplicates here, right in the middle of the city. Very bad.”

“But what can we do? We need to get the others together for a meeting immediately.”

“And tell them what? That some of the duplicates are still here? They will want to know more, to find out what the duplicates are doing and what made them stay behind. Can we answer those questions?”

“No,” Vampire said slowly, “maybe it would be better to find out more before we take this to the others. Yes, that is what we should do.”

Cat nodded, a speculative look in her eyes.

“Better yet,” she said. “Since it was, am I correct, only your duplicates why don’t you go back to them and try to find out what goes on and I will begin to gather the others. It may take a while since, last I heard at least, Orc had gone awandering in the mountains to clear his mind or whatever it was he said.”

“Good idea, little sister. I will meet you back here in two days.”

With a playful snarl Cat pounced on her brother and easily pinned him to the ground.

“I’m not your ‘little’ sister,” she said teasingly before letting him up.

“Ouch,” Vampire said, “I wish you would not do that. Look, my suit is all dirty now.”

“Oh, you big cry baby,” Cat laughed and brushed him off, “there. See? Good as new. Now go! I will meet you here at midnight in two days.”

Without further delay she ran off into the night deftly avoiding the dark shapes of the trees. Alone in the woods Vampire shivered slightly, not from cold but with unease. He did not look forward to meeting the others. If only there had been duplicates of some of the others it might not have been as bad. As it was now it was him, he felt, that must have made some mistake somewhere.

Leaving such speculations for the future he turned around and went back to the palace in search of the truth about what had really happened. He hoped the duplicates had heeded his warning and stayed behind in the tunnels.

It did not take him long to get back. The croquet field was still a mess, but fortunately no one else had come to investigate it and Fiachra's lamps had burned out so the hole was once again covered in darkness. He made his way down the stairs to the wine cellar where the hidden door to the tunnels was. It was built into one of the wine racks and despite it all he could not help but feel a certain of pride at how beautifully it had been done. It was utterly invisible to the eye, even when you knew it was there. And the combination of wine bottles you had to push and move around was amazing. It had even been designed so the mechanism behind it was independent of the bottles actually being in the right place to begin with. The humans would never be able to stumble upon the door, and what was hidden behind it, by mere chance.

This made him stop and wonder again. A thought had suddenly struck him as hard as if it had been lightning. If the duplicates had gone to this much trouble to conceal the tunnels they would not have been able to do it after Daemon's change and the decision to create the humans had been made. Some of the duplicates had to have been planning this for a very long time before that.

He once more felt icy dread running down his spine as more questions entered his mind. What if all of the duplicates had been like this? That perhaps the duplicates had not simply been copies of the original seven but had their own independent thoughts and ideas. Maybe even feelings?

With quick movements he shuffled the bottles around and opened the secret door. He was relieved to see that the duplicates were still all there. Fiachra was still unconscious on the floor, but at least the duplicates had been kind

enough to put a rolled up jacket under his head and covered him in what appeared to be a cape.

Something deep inside Vampire balked at this. Capes were not beautiful, quite the opposite really. Why would the duplicates even need a cape when they were beautiful in and of themselves? There was absolutely no reason to try and hide who and what they were. Apart, of course, from the fact that they should simply not be there in the first place and so should be kept entirely out of sight of the humans.

Closing the door behind him he looked at each of their faces in turn. Now that he had better time to look at them it struck him that he could actually see quite a lot of differences between them. When he had first gone down there, after hearing the boom and seeing Fiachra be swallowed by the earth, he had not had time to take in all the details. But now he saw that some of them even had different hair colours. Where his hair was so black that it had a slightly blue shine to it two of the duplicates had blond hair. And a third, much to Vampire's horror, had red hair. That was just wrong. Hair should, in Vampire's opinion, be pure black. That was the only thing that was really beautiful and nothing apart from perfection was good enough for him.

He narrowed his eyes and was just about to demand an explanation for why they were here when one of them, the red haired one, began to speak.

"Master," he said, "you have returned to lead us to glory."

Vampire stopped, completely taken by surprise. While it had always been taken for granted that the seven originals were in control and took charge of things they had never seen the duplicates as their slaves and had never imposed submissive behaviour on them. And here were six of his duplicates, all of them bending their heads and acknowledging his supremacy. Yes, he thought, this does actually make sense. He cleared his throat and spoke to them.

"So," he said, "I see you have risen from your sleep. Let me know what has transpired."

There was not a lot for them to report. At the height of the elder races' glory a group of them had begun to think that all this beauty and splendour was wasted on the less beautiful races. It had begun slowly and many of

the vampires had been against it out of a sense of duty to the other races. While the group had never grown large the ones that had decided to break away from the rest were devout in their beliefs that they were the chosen ones who must endure. Secretly they had commandeered a small group of daemons to help them make certain expansions to the palace and soon they had an entire underground complex complete with halls and rooms where they could hide away and revel in their own beauty.

When the other duplicates had left for the Septagonal Hall the group had slipped away underground taking their daemons with them. And when they had found out how the rest of the duplicates had been destroyed they had withdrawn completely, choosing to hibernate for a very long time in the hope that when they woke up the danger of destruction had passed. And now, here they were, awakened to follow their leader in the quest to rid the world of everything that was not beautiful.

Vampire stood there in the tunnel, his mind reeling with the enormity of what he had heard. He knew that he should destroy these duplicates or, at the very least, bring them back to the Septagonal Hall in two days' time. And yet there was something in their words that he could not disagree with. The humans had made the world uglier. Their tinkering and destructive nature had turned a lot of his hard work into abominations. Just look at the crater the explosion had left behind.

Slowly a plan began to form in his head. Images of himself leading a race of perfect beings spring up in his mind. Yes, he thought, this could work. But he needed to adjust a few things. In turn he went to each of the imperfect vampires in front of him and summoned a power he did not know he possessed. It nearly drained him, but when he had finished they were now all completely perfect, their hair jet black, their suits impeccable and their faces lean and sharp.

"Now, my children," he said, "let us be about our task. Remain close and be quiet as I make sure the gardener here cannot reveal our existence. It is not yet the right time for us to assume our rightful place as rulers of all this. You two, go dig out the daemons you told me were still here and clean up the mess with the croquet field. The humans cannot know that we are here. Go!"

After they had left he instructed the others to simply stay there and look

as peaceful as they could. He had, he told them, plans for the gardener and it was important that he did not go missing. It would draw too much attention to them and might cause the humans to become curious enough that they would uncover their secret lair.

If Cat could have seen him her hair would have stood on end and she would have hissed at the savage ferocity that lay in his eyes. Despite his words there was nothing beautiful about his face. His lean features had turned too thin and his eyes were deeper set and looked hollow. Worst of all were his teeth which seemed to grow even as he spoke causing his voice to become a slithering lisp.

As Vampire turned to kneel beside Fiachra he willed his features to return to their former shape. It would not do for the gardener to be even more suspicious than he was already bound to be.

Oh, Vampire had plans for this one. Great plans.

Of Ponds And Roses

Fiachra blinked his eyes a few times. The light was far too bright and he had a splitting headache from the bump on the head he had received when he hit the door face first. It took him a short while to remember what had happened and when he did he sat up with a start. The coffins, Vam, the strange people. What had that all been about.

“Ah,” a voice Fiachra recognised as Vam’s said, “welcome back.”

On hands and heels Fiachra scrambled backwards and pushed himself against the wall that was there. He looked around and saw that he was still in the tunnel and apart from Vam there were several of the creatures that looked just like him. Vam did not look happy, in fact, he looked very worried.

Fiachra tried to speak but all that came out was a slurred noise. He was still groggy from being unconscious and squeezed his eyes shut against the headache. When he opened them again the others were still there, Vam crouched in front of him occasionally glancing back at the others.

“Fiachra?” Vam said, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Fiachra managed to get out.

Painfully he got to his feet and backed a few steps away from the others. It pushed him all the way into the corner near the door he had run into, but he did not care. He just had to get away from those creatures. With slow steps Vam followed him until Fiachra held up his hand.

“No, stay away from me!”

“Fiachra, listen. Let me explain.”

“No! I don’t know what those. . . those things are. And I don’t want to know! I’ve got to get away. Get back. There’s work to do. The croquet field.”

Dizziness made him sit back down, sliding against the wall.

“Do not worry about that. It has been taken care of. Let us get you back to your room. You should rest.”

“No. No rest. I can’t. Not with. . .”

Fiachra’s eyes opened wide in panic and he scrambled over to the door and began to claw at it in an attempt at getting it open.

With a sigh Vam stepped forward and put one hand under Fiachra’s arm pulling him to his feet while the other hand opened the door.

“Look,” Vam said, “I will take you back to your room. Get some sleep and we shall talk again tomorrow. Trust me. As much of a shock this has been to both you and me there is nothing you need to be worried about. Okay?”

Feeling Vam’s strong grip helped steady Fiachra’s nerves a little and he nodded his acceptance and let himself be led through the palace ground to the little cottage he had to himself. Vam helped him to his bed and then left. The second Fiachra heard the door close he relaxed a little. He was now in familiar surroundings, those strange creatures were no longer there, Vam had left. It began to feel more and more like some strange dream he had had. His head was still spinning a little as he lay back in his bed and pulled the blanket over his legs. It did not take him long to fall asleep again and he slept soundly throughout the rest of the night.

The warm rays of the sun caressed his face and gently woke him up. For a few moments he enjoyed the feeling until he stretched and sat up, ready for the presentation of the pond. Something nagged at him, his mind telling him that there was something very important that he should remember.

He pushed it aside. If it was that important he would either remember it soon enough or be in too much trouble about it to be unable to do anything about it.

There were still a couple of hours before the presentation so he allowed himself a little time to enjoy an extra cup of tea after his breakfast. He felt he had earned that after having to work late last night to cover up that mess Drust had made of the croquet field.

Fiachra shook his head as he thought about the nobles and their silly games. From what he could tell they must have tried to play croquet with halberds instead of the normal clubs.

“Gits,” he murmured to himself, “whatever will they do next?”

He put on some clean clothes before heading out. They were still work clothes, but he felt that it would not do to wear the dirty clothes he had had on last night. The hole Drust had asked him to fix was not as large as he had feared, but working by lamplight in the darkness had left his clothes all muddy and torn. He could not bear the thought of Xanthe seeing him in such rags.

Xanthe.

Thinking of her raised his spirits even further and with a happy smile he went outside. His mind was once again filled with pleasant day dreams of their future together. Not a single trace of what had really happened the night before was left.

The sky was blue and from the way the sun rose over the tree line Fiachra could tell that it would be a wonderful day. Humming to himself he made his way to the tool shed and picked up a few essentials: a rake, a hedge cutter, a shovel and similar things. On his way to the pond he came across Janech whom he greeted warmly. Janech, in return, just gave him an odd stare and hurried away. This struck Fiachra as strange, but over the years he had grown used to such behaviour from the old man so he thought nothing of it.

The scenery at the pond was as he had left it the night before, but as always he could find a few things that needed to be corrected. One of the roses hanging over the pond was sagging a little under the weight of the flower so he tied it up with a piece of string so fine that it was all but

invisible. He also adjusted some of the stones around the flower beds and raked the gravel path before setting the tools off to one side behind a tree. That way they would not get in the way of the presentation but would still be at hand in case some last minute change needed to be done.

Taking a last look at his work he decided that he had best make himself scarce. He knew that it was a very bad idea for the craftsman or artist to be the first on the scene for a presentation such as this. It was not unheard of for the chancellor to have a statue torn apart simply because he felt the artist had been too confident that their work would fall in the chancellor's taste. Upon reflection Fiachra could see the sense in that. The chancellor's power came from his being able to subdue anyone who was against him. He usually did this quite swiftly and efficiently, often with the aid of the palace guards or the armies at his disposal. Sometimes it even seemed as if this was the main purpose of the armies. It was not as if there were any problems with the outlying duchies. They had all sworn loyalty to the chancellor and while they sometimes complained a little they were all too small to be able to actually do anything.

Smiling to himself Fiachra decided that, on the whole, life as a gardener was actually quite good. He got to do what he loved to do and apart from some fairly harmless, though annoying, nobles like Drust he was mainly left to himself. If only Xanthe would return his love his life would be perfect and beautiful.

His mind lost in daydreams again he roamed the palace park waiting for the right moment to return to the pond. Ahead of him on the path he saw Vam come toward him and he lifted his hand in greeting. In return Vam swiftly raised a finger to his lip and gestured frantically to the side. For a split second Fiachra did not understand his meaning, but when Vam also pointed behind him to a bend in the path Fiachra understood. He dodged in among the trees just before Drust, Xanthe and a few other courtiers came around the bend.

To Fiachra's horror he saw that Drust had his arm around Xanthe's waist. Given the state of things at court Fiachra knew that such a display of possession would not be allowed unless Drust had made some special arrangement with Xanthe's father, or perhaps even with the chancellor. An arrangement that would have to involve Xanthe at the very least being

betrothed to Drust. Fury burned deep in him as he wanted to jump from his hiding place behind a tree and rip Drust's head from his body. Just as he was about to leap forward he saw Vam cast a quick glance in his direction and shake his head ever so slightly. It was as if Vam had read his mind for he fell back a step so he was behind the rest of the group. When he was out of their field of vision he motioned for Fiachra to wait a few minutes before going down to the pond and then winked. This made Fiachra relax a little. He reminded himself of all the good ideas Vam had had in the past and forced himself to believe that his friend would once again have a good solution to the problem at hand. Vam had definitely seemed as if the thing with Drust and Xanthe had not been serious.

Waiting patiently he heard another group approach on the path and stiffened as he recognised the chancellor's firm voice. He was walking along the path with his secretary. They were clearly in the middle of some deep discussion and Fiachra managed to catch a little of it.

"And after the reports from last month," the chancellor said, "we need to send someone to investigate further in the eastern regions."

"Yes," the secretary said, "I will make the arrangements as soon as I know who you wish to send."

"There is only choice in the matter. We shall send Drust. Not just because he would actually be a very good choice, but also to sort out the slight mess with Xanthe's father."

"You mean the betrothal?"

"Indeed. As you know I was against it, but Lord Venari made it public before I gave him permission to. Perhaps because he felt I would..."

That was all Fiachra heard and his heart skipped a beat or two as the chancellor's word sank in. Maybe things were not as bleak as they seemed to be. When he was certain there were no more people coming down the path he went out from his hiding place, brushed himself off and once more headed toward the pond.

Even before he got there he could hear that a lot of people had showed up and when he came out from the trees in the park he saw that there were several dozen. Many of them he recognised as being important among the courtiers and there was, of course, the chancellor and Xanthe in the middle

of everything. Fiachra had to force a grin from his face when he saw that the chancellor had separated Xanthe from Drust who was now sulking on the other side of the pond. Surprisingly enough Xanthe did not seem as bothered about it but was instead giggling with her ladies and looking at all the flowers and bushes. Fiachra felt almost dizzy when he noticed that Xanthe seemed to really like what she saw.

Over to one side Fiachra saw Vam who seemed to be deeply caught up in a heated discussion with a beautiful, young woman who Fiachra had never seen before. He figured she was probably someone who was visiting from one of the other estates, or perhaps she was simply the daughter of one of the richer merchants in the city. While not strictly speaking nobles the rich merchants had enough influence that they were tolerated at court by the real nobles. Something about her caught Fiachra's eye. Not in the sense that Xanthe left his mind, but this strange lady had something over her that just seemed far more noble than all the other nobles put together. Whoever she was it was obvious that she and Vam did not see eye to eye on something.

He took another look at what he was more and more beginning to think of as his master piece. The pond was bent in a bean-like shape but more narrow in the middle. On the small peninsula between the two ends he had cleaned out the old pavilion and given it a fresh layer of white paint. To hide it a little from the lawn leading down to the pond he had arranged several rhododendron bushes in a semicircle that was only open in the two ends toward the water. The bushes were still young and would need a few years to grow tall enough to completely shelter the pavilion and he had placed them far enough from the pavilion that they could also grow naturally to give a round shape rather than being cut into a more wall-like shape. Up along the columns of the pavilion he had placed climbing roses that had just yesterday begun to bloom with wide pink flowers. He knew how much Xanthe loved that colour and had not been able to resist it.

On the far side of the pond was what he considered the crown of the piece. It had taken him several weeks to finish the base of it, but it had been worth it. From the pond and up to the tree line of the park he had built a gentle slope that rose several yards from the water and spanned the entire width of the pond. The slope was almost fifty yards long and twenty yards deep and was filled with rose bushes neatly arranged in colours so the red

roses formed a large heart in the middle around white roses while out to the sides the colours gradually went from red over orange to yellow.

Fiachra had had to employ all his guile and ingenuity to be able to get enough earth moved here from other parts of the garden without anyone complaining. He knew that Janech had thought he was crazy, but Janech had at least had the good sense to let Fiachra be about his business without too much interference. And so Fiachra had simply, painstakingly and wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow, gathered earth from the other places. Janech had not been too pleased with the new whole in the middle of the park, but after a while he had simply accepted that none of the nobles ever strayed so far from the path that they would stumble upon in. Besides, Fiachra had convinced him, the hole might serve as a good place to build another pavilion or small cottage sometime in the future.

“Ah, Fiachra,” Janech said behind him.

Fiachra had been so absorbed in his thoughts that, for a brief moment, he had completely forgotten everything around him. The old gardener looked very pleased. Hardly surprising, thought Fiachra, considering that Janech would get most of the credit while doing practically none of the work.

“Janech,” Fiachra said, “is his lordship the chancellor pleased with our work?”

He deliberately put a slight emphasis on ‘our’. Janech either did not notice or ignored it. His eyes were literally gleaming with joy.

“Pleased? Oh, he is so much more than pleased! This is good. Great even. Come, come.”

Janech motioned for them to withdraw a little so they would be out of ear shot from the nobles. He seemed very excited to Fiachra who said as much.

“Excited? Of course I am excited. Listen, I overheard some of the nobles talk about how this pond set entirely new standards for how gardens can be arranged. In the past it has either been about individual flower beds or about parks which are, well, they are basically just trees, as you well know.”

“Hrmph,” Fiachra said letting his general dislike for the nobles show.

“Ah, ah. Don’t go harrumphing the nobles, Fiachra. Some of them seemed very keen on getting similar work done at their own mansions. Not similar enough that the chancellor might take offence, of course, but still some very large and very interesting projects. Which would, of course, need to be overseen by someone who had been deeply involved in this project. Catch my meaning?”

Fiachra nodded. He caught Janech’s meaning all too well. So this was why he had let Fiachra work almost exclusively on this project for the past four months. So Janech could move another couple of steps up the ladder and place himself as advisor for the nobles and no doubt find a way to do even less than he already did.

“Well,” Fiachra said, not without some resignation in his voice, “you have mentioned that you have dreamed of doing some travelling before you got too old.”

“Yes, yes” Janech said enthusiastically, “and if I play my cards just right this will all go really well. For both of us.”

“What? You want me to come with you?”

“Well, I must admit that the thought had crossed my mind. But I also know how attached you are to the gardens here and how many projects you have put a lot of effort into.”

Here it comes, Fiachra thought, this is where he is going to tell me that I am to stay here and work my arse off while he and some other lazy bum is off to get money for doing nothing. Janech made no inclination that he even noticed Fiachra’s grim look.

“And,” Janech continued, “combined with a certain rumour I heard about a certain someone who managed to restore a certain destroyed croquet field in no time at all, well. Who would be best suited to become the Master Gardener of the palace once Erich and I move on? Who other than you?”

It took several seconds before Janech’s words registered in Fiachra’s mind. And even after they did he still stood there gaping like a dim witted moron. Could it really be true? A large part of him wanted so desperately to believe it. Him, the orphan who had been taken in and put to hard work throughout his entire life, Master Gardener?

Deep down Fiachra still suspected that this was some malicious joke on Janech's part. He gathered himself and tried to look thoughtful. He did not know what to say, but fortunately he did not have to say anything for at that moment the chancellor called out for silence.

"Quiet!" the chancellor said loudly, "Quiet! I have an announcement to make."

All around them the nobles quieted down and servants sped through the crowd with more wine to make sure everyone had something in their glass. The chancellor was known to end his announcements with a toast and it was considered ill manners not to drink with him. So ill, in fact, that some had even lost their head with the sheer embarrassment of it.

"When I look upon this newly created part of the garden," the chancellor said, "I am filled with longing thoughts of my youth when my wife and I would take long walks here."

Even the servants stopped moving at hearing this. The chancellor was usually very closed when it came to his personal life and, especially, when it came to his late wife. Many had speculated as to why he had not remarried and over the years the general theory had evolved that, maybe, the ruthless chancellor had quite simply truly loved his wife and could not bear it in his heart to marry someone else. Not even for show. No one, of course, ever dared mention this too loudly lest they, too, should find their heads come loose with embarrassment.

"As I know you all speculate about," the chancellor continued, "my wife meant a great deal to me and, sadly, we never did have children before she passed away. Fortunately I have had the good fortune to be blessed with many nieces and nephews instead, not least of whom is my beautiful, fair haired Xanthe here."

Xanthe giggled and blushed and covered her face with her fan. Fiachra thought she looked even more beautiful like that than she had ever looked before.

"Xanthe tells me that this is the most beautiful garden in the entire realm and since she has seen more of them than anyone else I am inclined to believe her judgement. Also, she tells me what a pity it is that people far from here will not be able to see such splendour. Oh, how it breaks an old

man's heart to see such caring for others. Yes, you are allowed to laugh."

The chancellor's stern gaze combined with his obvious sarcasm provoked a few nervous laughs from a few of the nobles. Most of them remained silent, though, unsure what to make of the speech. One or two did, undoubtedly, speculate about whether the chancellor had finally lost it and whether they could use this as an opening to gain more power for themselves. The chancellor waved his hand in sudden irritation.

"Never mind that," he said, "we must get to the point. For while I am sure there are those who could not care less about a few bushes and a bucket of water are placed it is a matter of some importance to me that we make sure to spread knowledge of the glory and splendour of the palace and our court to every corner of the realm.

"Therefore I have consulted with my advisors and have decided to begin a project that will, I am sure, make our wonderful realm rise to even greater heights. From what I have heard of the outlying regions they are sorely lacking in both the architectural and horticultural departments while having an overabundance of, say, agricultural or other, more unmentionable, resources."

This last remark drew direct laughter from most of the crowd since recent events had uncovered some rather interesting activities among some of the noble families to the north. Activities of a most depraved, and sexual, manner. The affair had ended with some hasty reorganisation of both the aristocracy's general structure, and of the specific height of certain members of those aforementioned families.

The chancellor raised his hands and the nobles grew quiet once more.

"We have decided that the outlying regions need to undergo a change in this aspect and so we have chosen to create a council that will be responsible for just that. To try and prevent the usual bickering and squabble that comes with a council we have taken a somewhat novel approach to this. Instead of drawing upon the ranks of the realm's finest we will draw upon the ranks of the realm's bestest: the people who actually put in the hard work needed to finish something like this."

The chancellor gestured at the rose bushes across the pond and narrowed his eyes as he looked at the gathered nobles. It was clear in their faces

that they were not pleased with him singling out craftsmen as being better than them, even if he had called the nobles the realm's finest.

Fiachra saw Janech's back straighten. There, Fiachra thought, this is where Janech will be appointed whatever fancy title he will get and I get to go back to shovelling dirt. He was just about to quietly slip away from there when the chancellor spoke and surprised everyone, most of all Fiachra.

"We would therefore like to see our very own Fiachra up here immediately as Xanthe has informed me that it is this young man who is solely responsible for creating this beautiful piece of art."

All of a sudden Fiachra really did wish he had slipped away. Now everyone's eyes turned to him as people began to point at him and murmur among themselves about who he was. He felt his cheeks begin to burn. Not just from the attention he got, but also very much from the fact that Xanthe had mentioned him to the chancellor. That she had even known he existed. And now she was looking straight at him with a smile he could not make any sense of.

The rest of the morning was a blur to him. When he tried to recall it later in life he could only remember a few things. Xanthe had, by means of her ladies, learned of the project and been so pleased with the project that she had investigated it further and, eventually, spied upon Fiachra while he worked. What she had seen had completely overwhelmed her and made her fall head over heels in love with the man she saw patiently, and with great love, care for the flowers in the garden. Somehow she had then managed to convince the chancellor to make Fiachra a free man so he could travel freely throughout the realm and, in addition, be given a yearly allowance. It was virtually the same as a title of nobility, but without owning land he was not put under the same constraints and taxes as the nobles. At some point Vam had also been by to congratulate him and ensure him that he fully trusted Fiachra to create even more beautiful things than he had done here.

Two things that did stand out clearly, however. One was that Vam had smirked and looked far more pleased than Fiachra felt completely happy about. The other was that, as the nobles began to drift away, Xanthe had finally got rid of her ladies so they could have a few moments to themselves.

"Fiachra," Xanthe had said, "do you remember some weeks ago when you

were painting the pavilion?”

“Erm, yes. Yes, I think I do.”

“Well, I must admit that while you did one of my ladies were hiding nearby and, you know, you have this adorable habit of talking to yourself when you work.”

Fiachra had gone crimson at hearing this and silently cursed himself. He hoped Xanthe’s lady had not heard anything too stupid.

“You apparently spoke with yourself,” Xanthe said, “about me and you. You made me a promise and while I was not there, no because I was not there, I find it truly humbling that you kept that promise. Do you remember it?”

“Yes,” Fiachra said, “I promised you a rose garden.”

One By One They Fall

A sad silence hung in the Septagonal Hall. Since the creation of the humans almost a century ago the elder races had become more and more withdrawn and for the last several meetings not all of them had shown up.

Dwarf and Orc sat quietly on their thrones, lost in their own thoughts while Dragon paced back and forth. It was quite an impressive feat, actually, Dragon being able to pace despite her body having grown so much that she took up more than half the space originally made for her and her duplicates. A low rumbling started in her throat and grew louder and louder until it brought Orc and Dwarf back to the present day.

“What?” Orc grumbled. “Stop that noise.”

Dragon huffed a small cloud of smoke and sat down with a sullen look on her face. She missed Cat. Ever since they had made the humans Dragon and Cat had grown quite close. For her part Dragon had enjoyed Cat’s seemingly carefree outlook on life and the way she would always seem comfortable was something Dragon actually looked up to. Being somewhat bulky and heavy had always made it uncomfortable her as she could never really find a relaxing position but was continually reminded of her weight. Not that she was fat. No one would dare call her that. No one in their right mind, that is.

Of course, that more or less meant that any of the others were prone to call her that without any hesitation. Both Orc and Dwarf had grown grumpier as the years had passed without them having anything to do and Dragon herself sorely lacked intellectual stimulation. That was one of the reasons she had taken such a liking to Cat and her casual way of life. It took Dragon’s mind off the thoughts she should be thinking, even if it was only for a few hours once in a while.

Lately, though, Cat had not been herself. She had begun to look shabby and dishevelled. It was very unlike her and Dragon often worried about what was going on, what was happening to them. But then, just as she was about to reach some kind of insight or conclusion, she would get distracted again.

She sighed heavily and curled up on her tarnished mound of gold. To be able to rest her entire body on gold she had scraped all the smaller piles

together into one large heap. And there she lay, thinking back on the glorious past when she soared the sky. More majestically than the eagles, faster than the sparrows, more swooping than the hawks.

A slight pop announced the arrival of someone. Dragon lifted her head, hoping it would be Cat, but somehow knowing that it would not be her.

“Oh,” she said, “hello Elf.”

Elf staggered toward her throne. Something had clearly shaken her badly, but none of the others took any notice. Dragon put her head down on her front claws again and simply gazed at nothing through half-closed eye lids.

“Something,” Elf panted, “is wrong. Very wrong.”

“Hrmpf,” Dwarf and Orc said in unison.

They clearly did not seem to care that their sister was in such a state. Her otherwise finely set hair hung in clumps to one side, her dress was torn in places and she had even lost one of her shoes. Normally she would simply had found replacement clothes somewhere, all seven of them had had a knack for simply always having what they needed of those things, but this time she was too distressed.

“No, seriously,” she said, “I went to see Cat and Vampire. Cat had gone and Vampire has, well, he has also gone. Mad. Gone mad. He and his duplicates nearly tore me to pieces.”

This caught their attention, if only in the form of their scorn.

“From the looks of it,” Orc said, “they succeeded.”

Dwarf let out a brief, cackling laugh. His clothes were dirty and cakes of mud lay on the floor where they had dripped from his heavy work boots. Of the seven he was the only one who actually worked on the things they had begun all those many years ago. And with Daemon having disappeared he was now forced to wade through mud and rain and snow to get anything properly done. This had made him weary and bitter. The bitterness saturated his voice as he spoke.

“And what have they been up to this time?”

“No, don’t you understand,” Elf said, “some of his duplicates are still in the great city. And have been since the time of creation when they should have been destroyed!”

This caught their full attention. And there was no longer any scorn in their voices as they sat up, alert and worried.

“How could that be?” Dragon said, “Did he hide them away? Forget to tell us about them?”

“No, that is the part that really worries me. They did it of their own account. It is as if they simply decided that they could strike out on their own and not follow the decision we had all agreed on.”

“Oh, dear,” Dragon said, “that is indeed bad. The duplicates should not have been able to go against us. Did you find Vampire? Had he anything to say?”

“Oh, yes,” Elf said, “he had a lot of things to say, none of them good. Apparently he has decided that they were right, that we were wrong and that the only thing that truly matters is beauty so he...”

Elf’s voice trailed off as she broke down in tears. Orc looked away. Such displays of affection had begun to get on his nerves. There was no need for it, no point in it. What a waste of energy, he thought.

“Steady now, sister,” Dwarf said, “surely there must have been some misunderstanding. As foppish as he can be Vampire would not have completely lost his senses, would he?”

Unable to speak Elf only nodded a few times. Dwarf climbed down from his throne and walked across the floor to her. With a sudden burst of self awareness he brushed his hands off on his trousers to make them a little less dirty before he placed one hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Elf’s fingers found his and squeezed back. She sobbed a few times before drawing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly, calming herself and forcing the words out of her mouth.

“It was on his orders that his duplicates tried to...”

Here her voice broke again and it was a few seconds before she could continue.

“Tried to kill me.”

The words hung heavily in the air for a while. She continued, her voice more steady now the difficult words had been spoken yet also far softer as she felt utterly drained of energy.

“Two days ago I went back to the great city. As you know the last we knew Vampire was headed in that direction, presumably with plans of checking up on the humans and making sure they did not destroy all his pretty buildings.”

A quiet bitterness could also be heard in Elf’s voice at this. It was a response to Vampire’s increased obsession with how the humans were too destructive and did not cherish the wonderful things the elder races had left behind to them.

“Well, I made it into the city undetected and spent some time searching for him. At least he has done a good job of remaining hidden for it took me most of a day to track him down. And as you know we can sense each other so him hiding from even me should mean that the humans, though they can see him clearly enough, have no idea what he really is.

“When I finally tracked him down it was at one of the humans’ silly presentations of some mundane thing. A new garden, I believe it was. They are always so hung up on the small details that I fear they will never move on to the greatness that is their legacy.

“Anyway, when I confronted Vam and asked him about the duplicates he actually got angry with me. Right there in front of all those humans. He began shouting at me, telling me that I had lost sight of our destiny and that he, and he alone, would make sure that our dream came through.”

She could no longer contain herself and got out of her throne and began to walk around the central floor with swift steps. Orc and Dwarf looked at each other with firmness in their eyes as Elf continued to relate all the events that had transpired. Vampire had, once he had settled down a little and stopped shouting, almost bragged about the cleverness of his duplicates and about how it should not have been a surprise that it was his duplicates that had shown their true worth.

For almost a quarter of an hour Elf walked back and forth gradually working herself up to a nearly steaming fury. A few times Dragon seemed about to interrupt, but both Dwarf and Orc gestured for her to keep quiet. In some strange way this actually made them feel a little better. Not that they liked what they heard, but because it stirred something in them and gave them a sense of purpose, something to put their minds and bodies to. A challenge that needed to be overcome.

When Elf had worn herself out she stopped in the middle of the hall and stood there panting for a while as she registered the others looking at her.

“What?” she said. “Am I not allowed to let off some steam?”

“Aye,” Dwarf said, “of course you are. And good steam too, me thinks. But how about putting that steam to good use instead of simply letting it go to waste?”

Orc nodded and rose to his full height. Once more his eyes lit up with a passion that had been long gone from them.

“Yes,” he said, “and I think I know of a good way to do something about this. It seems Vampire and his cohorts will be hiding out in the city for some time, but that they are dead intent on staying in the human realm. Perhaps it is time to set some boundaries and return to our original tasks rather than hiding away here in the darkness.”

“You must be joking,” Dwarf said, “or are you seriously suggesting that we openly return to the world?”

“Not as openly as I, perhaps, would prefer. It will not do to simply walk up to the city gates and ask to borrow a cup of flour. No, I simply propose that we return to the settlements that are still outside the human realm.”

His words made the others protest loudly. While they knew that the humans would, eventually, come across these settlements they had always hoped that there was some small chance that the settlements would remain undetected. If they themselves went there they all knew the settlements would grow in size thus ensuring that the humans would notice them sooner rather than later.

On the other hand, Orc argued, what good was it doing anyone that they stayed in the hall, lost in thoughts of the past. For hours on end they discussed this matter intensely and it once more felt like how it had been in the beginning.

Despite the fact that Daemon had turned its back on them.

Despite the fact that Vampire had betrayed them.

Despite the fact that Cat had simply vanished.

Curiosity Killed The Cat

Hunter in the Dark

In the darkness of night Cat slipped silently from tree to tree. With her inhuman grace she seemed to flow from one branch to another in a way that defied not only gravity, but almost all the laws of physics. Below her on the ground were several smaller creatures who were never even aware that the deadliest predator to walk this earth had just passed right over their heads. Cat ignored them, for now. She had larger prey to hunt this night. Larger and far harder to both track and take down.

For a few weeks now there had been humans in the woods where her and her few remaining duplicates lived hidden, far from the humans' great city. Vampire's great city. Even a magnificent hunter like Cat could not help but snarl at the thought of that pompous arse. The forest floor became alive with the scurrying of several small rodents who suddenly realised just how close they were to danger.

Vampire. The mere thought of him made Cat see red and in a single fluid motion she reached out a claw and left four long stripes in the bark on a pine tree. She had waited for him that night, just outside the city. And he had sent one of his duplicates to kill her. At first the duplicate had looked exactly like Vampire and almost made her believe it was him. But when she had smelled how it was not she had pounced on the duplicate and pinned it to the ground. She was glad she had for the abomination had immediately gone into a frenzy and tried to bite her with its long fangs.

What on earth had it thought, Cat wondered. Had it really thought it could overcome her? Once it had been clear that it was there to kill her she had simply closed her jaws around its throat and held tight until there was no life left in it. Afterward she had dragged the body deeper into the woods and hid it before departing. She did not think of it as fleeing, seeing as how she had taken down her attacker. There was just nothing left for her there anymore.

She had briefly thought about returning to the Septagonal Hall, but that was not a good place for her to be. She needed space to unleash herself. She needed prey before her that she could stalk, hunt, kill. So she had turned

to the east and the coming sun. She had run until her lungs burned and then kept on going. Finally, completely worn out, she climbed a dense beech and curled up on a branch to groom herself before taking a long nap.

When she woke it was still dark. Everything seemed so much clearer to her than it had ever been. She had torn her clothes off. She did not need them where she was going. Besides, there was no point in covering her shining, crimson fur. The clothes only hampered her movements and she would need every bit of flexibility where she was going.

The cool night air felt wonderfully liberating as she ran through the forest. She knew that she would soon be back among her feline sisters. They had originally been a part of one of the hunter settlements to the east, but as the dwarves there got more sullen and stuck to farming the land and cutting down the forests the cats had left and headed deeper into the woods.

By now they had formed their own kind of community where the strongest hunters would lead the tribe and decide where they should hunt. It was magnificent and Cat felt pride burn in her chest. As often as possible she had visited them, discreetly and without the other elders knowing it, but from now on she would live with them permanently. As powerful as her sisters were they were still no match for Cat when it came to speed and strength. She knew it would be fantastic.

Through the trees she began to see the first rays of the morning light. She deftly climbed a tree and looked out over the forest. It stretched before her for miles in every direction, nothing but lush and green treetops. With one exception. Directly to the east, a few miles off, a thick column of black smoke rose. Cat tensed. It was near the last place her sisters had camped. They would never create such a big fire. A smaller fire, yes, or even several smaller ones. But nothing as big as this.

She quickly climbed down and ran as quickly as her two legs could carry her, often using her hands to help speed her along by grabbing and pulling on branches.

Some time before she got to where the smoke rose she could smell it. A thick, nauseating smell that burned her nostrils. She slowed down and began to sneak forward. She could soon hear voices, deep and human

sounding, talk and shout orders. They were still too far away for her to make out what they said, but it definitely did not sound as if things were going the way they should.

Her feet touched something soft on the ground and it did not feel like either dirt or leaves. She looked down and nearly let a gasp escape from her lips. It was one of her sisters, lying dead on the ground.

Cat crouched down, a mask of horror on her face, and quickly examined the body of her sister. There was no doubt the young cat was dead. The large hole straight through her chest quenched all hope that she might still be clinging on to life.

“Oi” a rough voice shouted, “there’s something over here!”

The voice had come from further up. Cat sneered as she tried to see its source. From nearby she could hear more voices and the sound of heavy boots walking toward her. She quickly crouched down in a bush a little behind her where she could see the body and would be hidden from whoever was out there.

A heavy set man pushed his way through the bushes and nearly stumbled over the body on the ground.

“Hey!” he called out, “looks like we got another one. Come give me a hand.”

A call from someone else confirmed that more humans were on their way. Cat smelled the air. There were at least two more males coming and one female. The other voices were further off and seemed to be drawing away so the choice was simple. She would simply kill these humans who had obviously killed her sister.

The other humans quickly found their comrade and the woman lowered herself to one knee and ran her hand over the feline’s body. The woman was dressed in green and brown leather clothing and despite her being human Cat could feel a certain sense of sisterhood with her as she was clearly also a hunter. Over one shoulder she carried one of the long guns the humans had begun to favour for hunting. That was where the feeling of kinship ended. As far as Cat was concerned there was only one way to hunt: with your own body.

The woman ran her hands through the dead feline’s fur in a way that suggested that she respected and admired the creature.

“Yes,” she said, “she is a beauty. A shame about the chest wound, but the embalmer can easily hide that. This one will look beautiful either as a stuffed trophy or as a bed cover.”

One of the men, a truly ugly human not just by Cat’s standards but by everyone’s, laughed at this and mumbled something Cat could not hear. The woman punched him in the face. There was a sickening crunch that made Cat’s lips curl up at the edges.

“Like that’s ever going to happen,” the woman said to the man whose nose she had broken.

The others laughed, but soon fell quiet as the woman glared angrily at them. She barked a few orders and the men quickly cut down a small tree and cleaned off the branches so they could use it to carry the body between them.

Cat sniffed the air again to make sure there were no other humans around. When she was certain there was not she tightened her leg muscles and prepared to leap forward.

The last thing the men heard was the sound of rustling leaves and a low hiss. It took Cat less than five seconds to tear their throats out and the last of them was dead before the first had hit the ground.

The woman only managed to half turn toward the noise before Cat had leaped on her back and pinned her to the ground, twisting the woman’s arm up on her back. Cat leaned down close and let out a slow, menacing hiss.

“You,” Cat hissed. “Did you kill my sister?”

Shock was as clear as the daylight on a summer day when the woman answered.

“What?” she said. “Who are you? Let me go or I’ll have you whipped!”

Cat repeated her question.

“Your sister?” the woman said, “I haven’t killed your sister. Who the fuck are you?”

With a quick and strong pull Cat flipped the woman over on her back. The woman let out a small cry of terror before Cat clasped a hand over her mouth.

“That,” Cat said, twisting the woman’s head so she could see the dead feline, “was my sister. And you will pay for her death with you own.”

Some kind of protest began to erupt from the woman’s mouth and her eyes widened. But Cat paid it no notice. She extended her claws from their sheaths in her fingers and sliced open the woman’s throat.

Blood spattered Cat’s face but she did not care. Though her sister’s killer was dead there was still more to be done. Vengeance would not truly be hers before all these human hunters had been killed.

She stalked quietly through the forest, hunting the other humans who were still unaware of what had happened to these four. This was what she had been made for, this was what she was meant to do.

The other humans led her, unknowingly, to their campsite a couple of miles away. Cat had decided on waiting to learn more about who they were and how many there were before she killed them. While she was spying on them she learned that they had come from the great city in search of trophies for their homes. Most of the humans were ugly, rough henchmen, but some were clearly nobles or hunters like the woman Cat had just killed.

From their talks Cat could gather that there must be several dozen of them in total, all living in a small tent village they had erected at the banks of a nearby river. While she was fairly certain she knew where it was she still followed the humans to try and learn as much about them as she could. Despite being one of the elder races Cat had never paid close attention to the details about other things. Like Vampire she had been more absorbed in her own self and therefore did not know too much about how the human society worked. But she was a fast learner and by the time she lay hidden on the far side of the river she had found out that there were half a dozen nobles each with another half dozen helpers. Additionally she had heard them talk about some kind of Master Hunter who was due to arrive soon.

The humans, stupid and arrogant as they were, still had not realised that four of their kind were missing. Cat smiled wickedly to herself. It was still some time to nightfall so the humans might just presume that the ones she had killed were simply still out hunting. Oh, how little these people knew of the real world, she thought.

When she had first seen the clearing near the river she had found out

what had caused the large plume of smoke. Moored at the riverbank was a large metal beast that floated on the water in a way that should simply not be possible. It was bulky and looked incredibly massive. At both its sides large wheels rose from the water, only the top half of them visible. On the ship a couple of humans climbed around and adjusted ropes and hatches while others carried small pieces of dark rock from a huge pile on the deck to a central building. Despite not caring too much about the humans Cat had seen some of the things they had built for themselves so she knew that somewhere inside this beast there was a red hot furnace that the humans somehow used to make things move. But she had never paid enough attention to really see how they worked and this was the first time she saw the black rock.

And it was the black rock was what had caused Cat to withdraw to the far side of the river. It had taken all her strength of will to force herself to cross the water given that she had never felt comfortable around any body of water larger than a small puddle. She remembered all too clearly the feeling of being ripped apart that came when they had first duplicated and the black rocks the humans carried looked almost exactly like the ones Daemon had first brought back from the mountains.

Cat was deeply worried. If they humans had begun to duplicate there was no way of knowing how far they would take it. The seven elder races had, at least, only duplicated from themselves and not very often due to the pain and mental strain it caused. But these humans. Everywhere Cat had been she had seen signs that the humans cared more for themselves than for anything else. Even other humans. All too often she had seen how one human would simply kill another human. She had no doubt that if the humans found a way to duplicate themselves they would not stop themselves. They would simply duplicate and duplicate forever until the entire world was covered in a writhing mass of ugly, degenerate human bodies.

She curled up and let a low rumbling escape from her throat. Very soon she would deal with these humans once and for all.

Time passed as Cat lay watching the human camp. The nobles and hunters, minus the dead woman, walked leisurely along the river seemingly enjoying themselves while their helpers worked hard to prepare cooking fires, skin

dead animals and wash clothes in the river.

Suddenly there was a commotion near the tree line and Cat lifted her head and leaned a little forward. Yes, some new noble had just arrived. This one with only two helpers in tow. He strode majestically into the camp in his blue jacket and flamboyant hat while the two helpers struggled under the weight of a heavy crate. When the trio had reached the middle of the camp and were sure that everyone were watching the noble began gesturing wildly with his arms. He was, apparently, retelling some wild tale. Cat yawned and ran the side of a paw over her face to clean away some imagined fleck of dust.

The new noble soon settled down a little and with calm steps walked over to the crate and yanked at a band that ran around it. The sides of the crate fell away to reveal the metal bars of a cage. This definitely caught the humans' attention for they clapped their hands and cheered and shouted and laughed loudly. One of the hunters went over to stand next to the cage and spoke quietly with the new noble who nodded sharply. The hunter poked inside the cage with a stick and something in it moved.

At first Cat could not see what it was. The hunter poked it some more until he finally got the reaction he had been waiting for. A jet black form threw itself at the bars in mad rage which provoked even more cheering from the humans. Cat's eyes widened as she recognised the form of one of her younger sisters. She immediately got to her feet and swung down to the ground and raced to the edge of the river, all thoughts of water and detection forgotten. Her feet splashed several steps into the river before she realised what she was doing. She let out a long, deep howl before leaping back on to dry land.

Across the river the nobles and their helpers pointed at her and shouted incomprehensibly. By now Cat was almost as mad with anger as her sister was mad with desperation. If she could have she would have leaped across the river and torn the humans to pieces. To her dismay she could only watch as the hunter laughingly poked the trapped cat again provoking more howling from both her and Cat.

A few of the nobles had come to their senses and were shouting at their helpers to bring forth their rifles. When the bullets began to zoom past her head and send up small sprays of crushed rock at her feet Cat's survival

instinct kicked in and she fled into the forest. Behind her some of the nobles began to launch a small boat to cross the river, but the blue clad noble held them back. While Cat raced up along the river to where she had crossed it earlier, he simply stood on the riverbank with a calculating smile on his face and an eager look in his eyes.

He shouted a few orders and the nobles and helpers settled back to their previous routines. As darkness fell their dinner was prepared and sentries were placed around the camp, all of them with lamps to help them see in the dark. Around the largest fire the nobles sat, talking with their mouths full while drinking wine and laughing at each other's stories and jokes.

Further up the river Cat crossed the river as quickly as she could. She knew her splashes carried far in the night, but she also knew that the humans laughed even more so she felt safe. And with one of her kind trapped in that evil cage there was nothing she could do but get down to the camp as quickly as possible.

Back in the forest she circled around the camp so she could come at it from the forest. The humans had placed the cage near the water, but the open ground along the river would make Cat far too visible. She felt certain she would fare better if she slipped in through the tents where the shadows could hide her.

To avoid being detected she had to stay far from the edge of the forest and walk slowly and silently. It nearly killed her, having to take such a long time to get in position. But she knew that if the humans heard her they would make it impossible for her to get to the cage. Finally she could creep forward to hide under a fallen tree where she had a clear view of the camp.

The sentries were still sitting up and did not look like they were about to fall asleep. Cat silently cursed them. Why did they not do what humans normally did, she thought. It would have been so much easier if they had been their usual arrogant selves and crawled off to sleep, dead certain that nothing could harm them.

Dead.

Certain.

Certain death.

That was what Cat had in mind for them.

Between them the guards covered the entire perimeter so there was no way for her to sneak in unseen. She stayed still for a few more moments making sure that the rest of the camp was quiet. Then she slipped slowly forward until she reached the last of the trees. There she broke into a run and headed straight for the nearest guard.

They spotted her immediately and cried out in alarm and began fumbling with their long rifles. The only thing that saved Cat from being shot on the spot was that the rifles were usually only handled by the nobles, but on this particular night they had felt more comfortable knowing that the guards had a better chance of protecting them against a night time attack.

The guard was still trying to get his rifle to bear on her as she closed the distance and ripped his face to pieces. She was alive with the rush of blood and adrenaline coursing through her veins and she only dimly registered that the other guards started firing at her. As quickly as she could she got to the cage and began to pull at the bars as hard as she could.

The sudden noise made the cat in the cage jump up and hiss angrily, but she soon stopped when she recognised Cat.

“No”, the cat said, “the bars are too strong. Open the door. Over there!”

Cat leapt to the side the cat pointed to and began to claw at the pad lock on the cage’s door. With a snarl she hooked the fingers of both her hands around the lock, placed her feet against the cage and pulled. Her entire body strained against the metal but finally, after several excruciating seconds, the lock gave in and Cat tumbled backwards with a most ungraceful crash as she hit the side of one of the tents. The captured cat leapt from the cage and over to Cat.

Around them more and more voices could be heard shouting and screaming. More bullets began to hiss through the air, tearing into the sides of tents and causing splinters of wood to fly in every direction. Cat and the cat got to their feet.

“Cat,” the cat said, “you are bleeding!”

During her mad dash for the cage one of the guard’s had been lucky and managed to hit Cat in the shoulder. She was now bleeding heavily, but ignored it.

“Can you run?” Cat asked.

The cat nodded quickly.

“Good. Then follow me.”

Cat led her little sister through the tents toward end of the camp away from where the ship was moored. She hoped there would be fewer humans in this direction and she was right. The whole thing had still taken less than two minutes and only the guards had any chance of seeing them in the dim light cast by the fires and lamps. The nobles and hunters, who had just woken up, were either too drunk or too sleepy to be able to make sense of the situation.

Soon the two feline figures slipped away into the trees and the forest closed around them as if it was helping them cover their escape. A couple of the helpers started to run after them and one of the hunters had found even found a few drops of Cat’s blood. But it was very soon clear that it would be impossible to keep up with them.

Prey or Predator

Drust stood in the cool night air and looked at the mayhem the two cats had left in their wake. He cursed loudly as he took in the scene. It had clearly not been a good idea to give the guards guns. While they had managed to wound one of the Ferals, probably the red he had seen across the river earlier, they had caused far more harm to themselves. Two of the helpers were heavily wounded and a third would not live through the night.

It had been two weeks since that horrible day when the chancellor had sent him off to this uncivilised part of the realm to “clean up the mess” as the chancellor had said. The mess had been a number of attacks on the explorers Lord Venari had sent into the great forest. The few survivors had not been able to given any clear account of what had happened. The only commonality were tales of strange creatures that looked like large hunting cats but walked on two feet.

When Drust had first got there everything had been in a sorry state. Lord Venari himself had seemed to have lost his interest in the forest. Instead he

was content to simply sit in his mansion and grow fat from the rich foods his cooks prepared. Even Drust, by now one of the most cynical nobles in the realm, could ignore the richness of Lord Venari's duchy. All around it was fertile land suited for farming or grazing cattle and the forests were filled with deer, rabbits, pheasants and other easy prey. Even the fairly small population living there did not have difficulties putting food on the table. At least not until they had all grown too scared to venture more than a mile or two into the woods for fear of being killed.

Ferals.

Drust had often laughed when he heard that name. It was almost as if the locals credited these animals with intelligence and in all the years he had hunted and travelled the realm he had never come across anything that he could either capture, kill or scare off. That was why, he reasoned, the chancellor had chosen him for this task. That and, of course, that that pompous arse Lord Venari had been so stupid that he had announced Drust and Xanthe's betrothal publicly before getting the chancellor's approval. It did not matter if the chancellor was in favour or against now. The chancellor had not managed to hold his position as ruler for nearly half a decade by being soft on people who even hinted at rebelling against him and he kept a firm control of all the pacts and marriages arranged within the noble families.

On the trip up the river Drust had often leaned on the steam boat's railing and sent silent curses into the murky water of the Creamy River. He had cursed his bad luck that had put him in the middle of a hidden fight between the chancellor and Lord Venari, a position that had not only spelled an end to his relationship with Xanthe but had also resulted in his public humiliation. As if breaking up the betrothal had not been enough the chancellor had promoted that no-good lazy bum of a gardener to Master Gardener and practically handed Xanthe to him on a silver platter.

The name Fiachra was etched into every single cell in Drust's brain and tattooed on the inside of his eyelids. If he ever got a chance to get rid of the gardener Drust would do so without blinking. Not that it would give him any chance of winning Xanthe back, but simply because it would make him feel good.

Once he had arrived at Lord Venari's estate he had been given a cold

welcome. It was clear that Lord Venari blamed him for the problems and, worse, also suspected that he was the chancellor's spy sent to keep an eye on things. Drust felt utterly trapped, he could neither return to the great city nor hide out at Lord Venari's estate. Instead he had decided to simply do what he was best at: hunting and killing.

Being sent on the chancellor's errand did have the advantage that he could commandeer almost anything he wanted. Sure, at some point some of it would catch up with him and he might be held responsible for his choices. But it would take at least a few weeks before that happened and in the mean time he had claimed the Lord's new steam boat, helpers and provisions and equipment for a great hunt. Some of the local nobles and hunters had joined in which was fine by him. It meant he had more resources at his disposal and none of the nobles were important enough that they would be missed too much if they ran into unfortunate hunting accidents.

The rumours about the attacks had made him head upriver, away from the estate and deep into the forest. For several days they had launched small hunting parties, but had not had any luck. Most likely because the nobles put more emphasis on the partying aspect of it all and not so much on the hunting part.

Then, earlier today, he had finally had a break through. While out hunting they had been attacked by something that could very well be the strange creatures people had talked about. The first attack had cost them two helpers, but they could easily be replaced. When the second attack struck they had been better prepared and had managed to kill at least one of the creatures and would another.

While the others dragged the kill, or kills, back to the camp he had set off in pursuit of a third of the creatures. Along with his two personal helpers from his father's estate he had managed to set a successful trap. At first he had not believed his own eyes. The stories had been accurate. This really did look like a blend between a large hunting cat and a human. Despite being completely covered in black fur, Drust could see that it was obviously female. Its grace and deadliness was unparalleled by anything Drust had seen. There was something in its eyes that even made him begin to believe that it just might possess some kind of intelligence.

And then he had seen the red Feral across the river. Compared to that

the black one had looked like a mule compared to a horse. He had quite simply known that the red Feral had not run away as the other nobles had thought. Oh no. It would come back. That was why he had let the guards have the guns. He should have known they would spoil it.

He pulled his attention back to the scene around him. Apart from both Ferals having escaped things were under control so he decided to go back to his tent to contemplate matters and make plans for how to catch the Ferals. Since they had been able to kill several of them and wound others, including the red, they could not be the supernatural horrors the local legends made them out to be. They were flesh and blood and he vowed to catch one alive to bring back to the chancellor.

Long into the night he pondered matters until he finally went to bed with thoughts of his glorious return to the great city with cages filled with these strange creatures. The chancellor would have no choice but to give him back Xanthe. And if Drust played his cards right he might even make it appear as Lord Venari was the root of all these problems. Yes, he thought, taking over both Lord Venari's estate and his daughter was definitely something he would greatly enjoy.

Far too few hours had passed when one of his helpers woke him up. It seemed like the other nobles had got nervous after the last night's attack and wanted to return to the safety of their mothers' skirts. Or at least of Lord Venari's walls. He quickly put on his clothes and walked out into the morning air prepared to let them know a few harsh truths about why they had been chosen for this mission.

"Gentlemen," he said once they were all gathered, "I have been told that the small disturbance last night has disheartened some of you."

He looked questioningly at them, daring any of them to speak.

"Let me assure you that there is absolutely no reason for us to break and run. Quite the contrary, in fact. You have now all seen proof of what is out here. It is our duty, to the realm, to the chancellor, to ourselves, to rid this forest of those vicious devils."

The nobles shuffled their feet. Drust took some comfort in seeing that the two hunters who had joined them were not nervous. It was only the nobles. Good, he thought, that was something he could play upon. He continued.

“The truth of the matter is, gentlemen, that there are those at court who actually expect us to perish out here. They are wrong! Standing before me I see some of the very best hunters in this region. And they are not afraid!”

At this he nodded at the hunters. This made the nobles even more nervous.

“But,” one of them said, “those things killed Liaf and Mareem.”

Drust hated it when nobles learned the names of their servants. In his mind there was no point. They were servants. Slaves. Things he could do with as he pleased. He rolled his eyes.

“Unless,” he continued, “these Ferals carry rifles as well as their claws I dare venture to say that what killed them was their own stupidity. They started shooting wildly around them rather than remain calm. Not, I might add, entirely unlike what you are doing now that you talk about running away like scared chicken.”

One of the hunters turned his head away, suppressing a smile. That was good. Hopefully some of the nobles would notice and either be insulted or ashamed enough to do things better in the future. Personally Drust did not care too much about being noble or not. In his experience it was more about skills and talent than blood lines. That, however, did not mean that he did not take full advantage of the fact that he had been born to a high place in the chancellor’s court.

He had been silent for a few moments but none of the nobles had the courage to say anything. He waved the hunters and some of the helpers over and instructed them to pack up gear for a week’s hike into the forest. They set about the task swiftly and with obvious determination. He did not expect to be gone for a full week but he needed them away from the nobles so he could stiffen them up a little. When he was sure they were out of earshot he continued in a lower, slightly hissing voice.

“Seriously, guys. Think about how it will look if you run back to the court. None of you have the slightest scratch and I dare say that none of you have been more than a few hundred meters into the forest. If word of that got out you would be the laughing stock of the court the entire winter. And trust me, with peasants like these ones around people would find out. That pack of lazy bums don’t know their place and would talk their mouths off

the first chance they get.

“No, it’s far better if we head into the forest to try and catch them. It doesn’t matter if we succeed or not. We can always blame the peasants if things go wrong. But if you don’t try it’s laughter, dishonour and no pretty maids for you. So what do you say, eh?”

Especially the last bit got the nobles’ attention and all three of them looked more resolved and ready to continue. This was good, he thought, the more they were the less likely those creatures were to ambush them. And, if they did get attacked, there would be more bodies between him and the sharp claws. That was, after all, one of the main reasons his last hunts had been as successful as they had.

Even though Drust wanted as many people with him as possible he still chose to leave two of the helpers behind, in addition to the boat’s crew. The latter were under strict orders to not leave the boat and Drust had to, grudgingly, agree with Lord Venari on that. Training a boat crew was a far too expensive and lengthy process for them to risk their lives unnecessarily.

Well before noon everything was ready for their departure and they headed off into the forest. Drust had ordered the helpers who stayed behind to begin packing up the tents. He knew that when they returned they would either be in a hurry to get their catch back to the great city or so tired that they simply wanted to get away from this place as quickly as possible. Either way, he saw no reason for keeping the tents and the heavy equipment around. The boat’s captain, Bedwyr, agreed to wait a full week, but told Drust that he would head back down river on the eighth morning no matter what. This was fine with Drust.

When things were settled with the helpers and Bedwyr Drust went over to the hunters. They were an odd couple, he thought. Good hunters both, no doubt about that, and he had worked with Alboin before and had grown to appreciate the man’s quiet nature. From time to time Alboin would open just a little and tell stories from his past hunts, all impressive if even half of them were true, but other than that he would simply pull his weight and track whatever prey Drust needed to find.

The other hunter, a woman named Varinia, he did not know much about and he felt no reason to change that. She seemed to be at least as good as Alboin, but she was so plain looking that Drust was downright revolted

when he looked at her. If she had been ugly he would not have had a problem with her, even ugly women could provide some entertainment. But Varinia just looked, well, boring. In some way it felt more like she was neither man nor woman. Drust found that thought unsettling and forced it from his mind. Maybe he should just will himself to see her as he saw the helpers. As a tool. Equipment. Yes, that would work.

“Sir,” Alboin said, “the blood trail goes north, almost in a straight line for a few hundred meters.”

“You tracked it last night?”

“No, this morning. Was already packed last night.”

“Good man. Now, you two will take point. Alboin, I want you to follow the trail while Varinia scouts to both sides ahead of us.”

The hunters nodded. One of the nobles, young Lord Foosum, came over to Drust.

“Erm, m’lord,” he said, “there’s still no sign of Lady Bazly. No one has seen her or her helpers since we ran into the creatures yesterday morning.”

“Oh? Right,” Drust said.

Sometime during the night he had heard some mention of Lady Bazly, but he had not given her much thought. She had probably wandered off to look at some pretty flowers or something, he thought, or found some other excuse to keep to herself and do nothing. Still, with these creatures around something might have happened and while Drust was certain none of the nobles on this trip were too important there might still be some slightly nasty questions to answer if he simply left one of them out here. Better to find her body and then at least be able to write it off as a result of her own stupidity. Or better yet, find her alive and send her home in disgrace.

“Foosum,” Drust said and smiled at the way the young man jumped when he said his name, “take two of the helpers and search the nearby area for two hours before picking up our trail. Since we are tracking the beast you should have no trouble catching up to us. I’ll see you at the campfire tonight.”

With this he strode off leaving Foosum standing with a frightened look on his face. He was obviously not used to be put in charge, but it was clear

that he had no choice in the matter. He sighed and shook his head and gestured for his two personal servants to join him.

Meanwhile the main hunting party set off into the forest, guided by Alboin who set off at a brisk pace.

The blood trail was clearly visible as the red beast had been heavily wounded. Drust smiled to himself. A wounded, cornered beast might be deadly dangerous, yes, but it would also be very close so they did not have to track it for several days. With any luck they would find it hidden in a hollow tree less than a mile from here.

As they walked among the trees he tried to remember its exact size and estimate its body weight and from there calculate how far it could have run based on the blood he had seen so far. Not knowing more about this race he could only base his estimate on past experiences with hunting cats and that told him that they should find it within an hour, two at the most.

Once the first of those hours had passed he began to be slightly annoyed. He had ordered the last two nobles and the helpers to rest for five minutes while he hurried up to Alboin. When he got there he wrinkled his nose as he saw that Varinia was also there. The two hunters were quietly discussing something and it was clear that they did not agree.

“What’s up?” Drust asked.

“It’s the trail,” Varinia said in her bland voice, “it grows more and more difficult to follow. Almost as if the beast’s wounds were closing even as she ran. It doesn’t make much sense.”

“True,” Alboin agreed, “but this is not uncommon. Many animals are quick to heal and we are past where we turned back last night. She could have stopped and bandaged herself.”

“She?” Drust said. “Bandaged?”

“Yes, there were some leaves that had been torn off a bush. Large leaves and some had been removed. She could have taken them.”

“Or,” Varinia said, “the leaves could simply have fallen off or been eaten by some other animal. Or it could just have been the wind. It’s an animal. They don’t bandage themselves.”

Drust and Alboin gave each other a meaningful look. The hunter kept quiet, but Drust could not help but give an irritated reply. Varinia really was getting on his nerves.

“Animals also don’t free each other from metal cages, girl. Get back out to the side and make sure there is nothing dangerous out there.”

Varinia clearly did not like being called a girl and sulked off. Good ride, Drust thought.

“So,” he said, “what do you think is really going on here Alboin?”

“Hard to say, sir. But I don’t like it one bit. This is not natural.”

Alboin did not know just how correct that statement was. Cat and her Ferals was unlike anything they had ever hunted before. Not least because, while Cat had been wounded, it was still her that was the hunter and the humans that were the prey.

Drust and Alboin rose to their feet as they heard the rest of the party come closer. Alboin tilted his head questioningly and Drust nodded his permission for the hunter to continue ahead of the others. If either of them had known that Varinia lay dead not ten meters from them they would probably have waited for the party to catch up with them. Of course, once it had they would have found out that it was quite another party from what they expected. But as it was they kept creeping through the forest. Alboin in front followed closely by Drust and all around them the silent, graceful shapes of Ferals who followed them from a distance making sure the humans had no route of escape.

Rural Ferals

Cat watched the humans from a branch high up in a tree. She looked forward to this kill. Quite a lot. In the past she had only hunted to gather food for herself and her Ferals. It was odd, she thought, she was already thinking of her duplicates by the name the humans had given them. And it felt as if that was how she had always thought of them. Despite the initial dislike for the name, mainly there because the humans had thought of it, she had come to like it. It did, after all, very correctly sum up what they were, she and her Ferals.

She looked at the Ferals around her. Every single one of them was ready to pounce on the humans the second she gave the signal. They all worked together in unison as they had always been meant to do.

The humans had split up when they entered the woods. Two of them, the only ones she had the least bit respect for, were sneaking through the forest ahead of the main group. And the man in blue. Cat had forgotten her name, could not even remember if she had ever known it. He was also a little separated from the main group. This suited Cat just fine.

For quite some time they followed the humans. They took great care not to be seen. There were still more humans back near the river and Cat wanted to make sure that none of the humans had the slightest chance of getting away. The Ferals knew these woods better than she did herself, yet, and they had told her that there was a curved ridge not too far away. It would suit her purpose nicely. The natural curvature would encompass more than half the circle around the humans so she and the Ferals would only have to watch the last third or so. They could easily cover that much and it would be quick and violent.

She stopped thinking of the humans in terms of names and professions and merely had them tagged as normal or leaders. As such she did not see any particular reason to kill off the normal humans. But those three in the front were dangerous. They had already managed to kill two of the Ferals and capture a third. And it had been just as much luck as skills that had seen Cat through her haphazard rescue operation. Oh, how she longed to sink her teeth into the man in blue's throat and squeeze and feel his pulse against her teeth and lips as it gradually slowed until his life had drained completely from his body.

Cat tensed.

The three humans in front had gathered and were discussing something. It looked like they disagreed. Cat was not surprised. Humans never worked well together and should never have been given this wonderful world. But still. Something nagged at the back of her mind.

She motioned for two of the Ferals to come with her. Neither of them was the black that had been captured yesterday. For the task she had in mind she did not need someone who was as blood thirsty as herself.

With low snarls and hisses she told them that she wanted them and a pawful of other Ferals to surround the normal humans and capture them. They were to not attack the group, but instead try to contain them and keep them where they were until she returned. It took a lot of effort for her to relay this message to them and even though the pair had finally understood what she wanted she was uncertain as to whether or not they could convince the other Ferals to be calm. Oh, well, it did not matter if they killed some of the normal humans. Or even all of them. It would be best if they did not, but predators were predators and she had no intentions of changing the Ferals' nature.

Together with the black Feral and two more Cat followed the three leaders while the rest fell back to stop the group of normal humans. All four of them exchanged vicious smiles as they saw the female leader slip off to the side. She would be their first kill. No doubt the humans thought they were being clever, keeping their flanks guarded. But it would not matter. The human would never know what hit her.

Cat crept over to the black Feral and hissed in her ear.

“Kill her. Make it swift and silent. No sound. The others must not hear.”

The black Feral did not stop to answer her but simply ran off. Less than a minute later Cat heard a faint rustle of leaves. Soon after that the black returned a single drop of blood lodged in one side of her mouth. She looked pleased but eager for more killing so Cat decided to speed up the hunt.

Together with the black she went left while the other two went right. The humans were almost at the ridge anyway and since there was now only two of them they could easily keep them from getting away.

The first of the humans to notice the Ferals were the man who was not in blue. He spotted the black as she finally lost her calm and raced forward with a deep snarl. The human took one look at her and simply turned and fled, leaving the man in blue behind. That suited Cat just fine. She wanted the man in blue. And she knew the black wanted him as well. She decided to let the black have him. It was enough for Cat to watch him die. To know that the last thing he saw before he died was her and the Ferals. The true hunters.

As the black Feral crashed into the man in blue Cat saw the last pair head

off after the fleeing human. They would soon have him. A cry of pain from the black Feral caused Cat to focus on her own prey again.

The man in blue had somehow managed to dodge away at the very last moment and had drawn a broad knife. He had scored a hit on the black and while it was not a deep cut it had still hurt and was bleeding freely. The man grinned and his eyes shone with a mad glee. Cat paid no notice to the stream of words that flowed from his mouth. She could probably have understood them if she wanted to, but she did not care.

When the man noticed her he stopped talking and for a second his eyes went wide. So, Cat thought, you recognise me. Then you should know that you will be dead in a minute.

Without regard for herself she dodged behind him and feinted a leap for his throat. At the last second she let herself fall flat to the ground. It did earn her a slashing cut from the knife, but it also drew the man off balance. That was all the black Feral needed. While the man was pulling his arm back for a stab at Cat's throat the black jumped up on his back and caught his neck in her throat.

The man crashed to the ground, a gurgling sound erupting from his mouth. Blood splattered the leaves, the black Feral, Cat and the man himself. He writhed and twisted, but the black held on. Cat lay still on the ground simply taking in the moment and savouring the human's pain and struggles. She saw how he tried to stab at his attacker, but he could not. The Feral had sunk her claws deep into his upper arm and used her weight to pin it to the ground.

His movements became weaker and more twitchy.

Cat rose to her feet, something that seemed more and more alien to her. She walked over to look down on the human and placed a gentle hand on the black Feral's shoulders. The Feral responded by loosening her grip slightly. The man took a gasping breath and the near purple colour of his face faded slightly.

"You," he managed to rasp, "who are you?"

Cat spoke the last words she would ever speak in her life.

"I am your death."

And then the black Feral bit down hard. The human's neck finally gave in and his body gave one last twitch before it went completely still.

Cat stood a few seconds looking down on the body. Before her face she held her hands. She had not before now noticed how her fingers had grown shorter and wider. They looked more like paws than hands now. She looked down at the Feral and saw that its hands had completely gone.

When did this happen, she thought, or was it always like this. She slid down on all four. It felt better that way and she nudged the black Feral with her nose. The kill was over, they should join their sisters who had run after the last human.

Cat and the black Feral raced through the woods. The kill had set something free inside Cat and she leaped from branch to branch, jumped over fallen trees, ran faster than she had ever done before.

Up ahead they suddenly heard a deep growling followed by a scream that quickly became fainter and fainter. Not caring about who heard her Cat broke from the trees and into a clearing in a showed of leaves and broken branches. The clearing was not large. It it ended abruptly a few meters from the trees where the ridge was.

The two Ferals looked back at her, surprisingly calm and free of blood. They were standing at the edge of the ridge and in the soft earth leading to the edge Cat could see footprints from a human. She understood what the scream had been and went to join the Ferals. Looking down she could see the twisted form of the human far below. It still moved a little, but one leg was sticking out from the body at a nasty angle and a pool of blood was already spreading around it.

The black came to join them as well and seemed about to jump down after the human. Cat stopped her. There was no point. Even if the human survived for more than a few minutes he would not be able to go anywhere. He would die here, slowly.

The two other Ferals took a last look at the human before they turned from the edge and walked back to the trees. Their calm, casual walk made it clear that they simply did not care. They were hunters. Their prey was down. That was all that mattered to them.

Cat felt pride well up in her and she knew that she had finally found the place where she belonged.

There was still the matter of the other group of humans. On the way back to them and the rest of her Ferals she thought a little about it. Seeing the man in blue dying had satisfied her blood lust for now. And while it had felt good to rid the forest, her forest, of these foul beings it was also true that the purpose of the hunt was to survive. Unless these humans posed a direct threat to her and hers she would let them go. Perhaps with a Feral or two chasing them to make sure they got the point. Yes, the black looked eager to hunt some more and the exercise would be good. It would work the memories of being captured out of her body. That would be so much more fitting than simply slaughtering the humans.

So what if they told the other humans about the Ferals?

Cat knew that they could easily keep the forest free from the humans. And if they insisted on coming back again and again, well, Cat and her Ferals would never grow tired of the hunt.

Retirement

Elf and Orc sat staring at each other. The hall seemed even more empty than it had ever done before. Not even when one of them had been their alone had it felt like this. In the past they had known that the others were simply away doing something else. Now the others really were gone.

Daemon, Vampire and Cat. All of them had succumbed to whatever strange urges drove them toward their new lives.

The two of them were not alone in the hall, but they might as well have been. Dragon was also there, resting her huge form on the pile of gold. Her face were turned away from them and her eyes were closed. She rarely spoke anymore and when she did it was either incoherent babbling or just reminiscences from when it had only been the seven of them.

“What about Dwarf?” Elf said.

They knew Cat had gone feral and would not return. She fervently hoped Dwarf’s absence did not mean he had gone away as well.

“I saw him not long ago,” Orc said. “He was actually not too far from where Cat went. Apparently there are still some areas in the east where the humans have not ventured yet. It sounded like he wanted to settle there with whichever of his duplicates he can find.”

Elf nodded. A tear ran down her cheek and lingered for a second on her chin before dropping to the floor. It was not the first to do so.

“Well, I suppose it could be far worse. Whether he comes back here or not does not seem to matter much.”

“Aye, I fear that may be true. At least it sounds like he might find a quiet place to, I don’t know, retire? Would that be the right term?”

A small, sad smile spread on Elf’s lips.

“Yes. Retirement. That sounds good. But not for us, I fear. Only for Dwarf. How are things going for your duplicates?”

Orc sighed. Things had been hard for him and his duplicates. They seemed to attract trouble no matter where they went. It would follow the same pattern every time. They would migrate to a new, deserted spot but after a short while the humans would manage to find a way to get there and

then it would all go bad. It did not matter what started it all, it always ended the same way: fights and battles. Almost all of his duplicates had been killed by the humans and every single death tore deep into him, the strain of it threatening to tear him apart.

He shook his head.

“It does not go well, my sister. It is as if the humans are somehow always faster than us. Though sometimes it is the other way around. How long ago did Vampire break away?”

Silence grew between them as they both thought about this.

“Several years at least. If not decades,” Elf finally said.

“That is what it feels like to me, too,” Orc said, “but if that is so then how can it be that one of the people who was there when his duplicates were found, the human named Drust, were also around when Cat went wild?”

“He was? I did not know that.”

“He was. I went to take a look, maybe Cat would still be there and would come back. Too optimistic, perhaps, but I had to try. Anyway, I found the human dead in the forest. Killed by Cat or one of hers. He could not have been more than a few weeks older than when I saw him back in the great city.”

It was not the first time they had felt like Time itself was playing tricks with them. Sometimes what felt like years to them would only be days to the humans and at other times one of their meetings would see a decade pass in the human realms.

“What is happening to us?” Elf whispered, “What is happening to our world?”

“I do not know. All I know is that I feel weariness deep in my body, in the core of my bones.”

Behind them Dragon let out a very long, very deep sigh. There was a slight rasp to her breathing and both Elf and Orc worried about her. It had been long since she was out of the hall and she looked as worn out as they both felt.

“I should go visit Dwarf,” Orc said. “Maybe bring the last of my duplicates. There are no more than a handful left and they are already in that part of the world.”

“Were they not on the other side of the desert?” Elf asked. “That was the last I heard of it.”

“Yes. Most of them were. Now most of them are dead. I know you must have felt it. It was almost like when the desert ate so many. . .”

His voice trailed off at the memories of that agonising experience. Whenever he thought about it the old wound was torn open again and the pain came back.

Elf, too, remembered the pain. She grimaced and winced.

“We never did return there,” she said, “perhaps whatever happened there is related to what is happening?”

“Who knows? Nothing more seems to make a lot of sense.”

Orc stood up and put his hands behind the small of his back and stretched a little. His back ached again and he found it difficult to stand up straight. Too much running and fighting, he thought. It had taken its toll on him, but he could not turn back on his duplicates. He would bring them out to Dwarf. Hopefully they would all manage to hide from the humans and live forever in peace, working steadily in the grain fields and pastures. The simplicity of it all called to him. He took one last look around the hall before he smiled a sad smile at Elf and then he left.

Elf sat alone on her throne, fearing that she had now also lost both Orc and Dwarf. And yet, she could not truly bring herself to believe that Orc had gone. It would be too much against his loyal nature.

Like Dragon she had also not been out of the Septagonal Hall for a very long time. She had lost almost all interest in what went on among the humans. They did, from time to time, show some measurement of honour and nobility but the more she learned about them the more horrified she became.

How could they have created this race of indifferent, if not downright evil, beings?

She stood up and looked around the hall. What had once seemed splendid and filled with hope for the future was now as hollow as the dying echo of her footsteps. Passing by Dragon's head Elf stopped to run a hand over the crimson scales. They were cold, almost icy.

"Rest well, my dear sister," Elf said, "and know that I will always keep watch over you."

Come Fly With Me

Little People

Dwarf waited in the small cave until Cat had left the ridge. It pained him to see her reduced to such a state. She was still graceful, perhaps even more now than before. In Dwarf's eyes it just did not matter when her mind had apparently gone.

The shape out on the rocks moved a little. This surprised Dwarf because he was sure the fall must have killed the human. There had been no trees to break the fall and the ground did not level out until almost at the bottom of the cliff. So, he thought, these humans are sturdier than they seem.

Cat and her creatures had now gone and Dwarf ventured out in the open. The sun was still out and it hurt his eyes. As quickly as possible he went over to the human and knelt down next to it. Dwarf could see that it was one of the males. The concept of genders had been more or less wasted on Dwarf. He knew he had both brothers and sisters, but the specifics of what that meant had always seemed abstract to him, unimportant. To these humans, however, it seemed to matter a great deal.

The male moved a little again. No, Dwarf thought, the man moved. That was what the humans used. Man and woman. Hesitantly Dwarf reached out and poked the man with a stubby finger. The man groaned. At least he was alive enough to complain about a poke. That was good.

"Oi, lad," Dwarf said, "le's ge' yer on yer fee' an' to a sa'er place than 'ere."

If the man heard or not was hard to tell. He just lay there. As gently as he could Dwarf grabbed the man under the arms and began to drag him back to the cave. While doing so he considered if he should rather leave the man and go down below and fetch some of his duplicates. In the end he decided against it. He had been curious about these humans ever since they created them. Or rather, he had been curious since they realised that the humans were nothing like what they had thought they would be. However, Dwarf's steady nature and dislike for changes, especially swift ones, meant that he had never done much but observe from a distance. And this he had only done once in a while when no one was around.

Finally he got the man back to the cave. It was not a minute too soon for the sun was now seriously hurting his eyes. He had to sit down with his hands covering his face for several minutes before the red marks faded from his vision. To think that he had once spent every second of the day, and often a large part of the night, outside working in the fields or forests planting crops, chopping down trees, herding livestock. That was all in the past. These last many years he and his duplicates had withdrawn further and further into the ground where they mainly dug deeper and deeper in search of who knew what. Dwarf, sadly, had at some point simply realised that he no longer knew what they were doing. They were just doing it. Digging. Hacking. Mining.

Since they went outside less frequently they had also had to find other kinds of food than grain and meat. They still got meat, but this was the sinewy meat of pigs that had been kept inside the caves. It was nothing like the juicy, sweet, rich meat of a well fed, fat pig. The grain they had replaced with various sorts of mushroom. They had the advantage of being easy to grow underground and contained a lot of energy. Their main form of nutrition was now dried mushrooms. They had found that once dried they could last for several weeks, sometimes even a few months, without going bad. The taste was bland and it felt more like dry, crushed bread than vegetables. But they were edible and could sustain them so they stuck to it.

Dwarf blinked his eyes a few times to clear his vision. What should he do with the human, he wondered. When he had dragged him back to the cave he had been too blinded from the sun to get a good look at him. But here in the dim light that filtered in through the trees that covered the cave mouth he got a better look.

The man was tall for his race and slim built. This made him look more fragile than Dwarf suspected he was. All over his body there were small bruises and cuts, but nothing that looked serious. Dwarf felt around for broken bones and found a few. Mostly ribs, about half a dozen of those, but also one of the man's lower legs was broken. Not knowing much about how humans should be treated he nevertheless figured that the bone should be set. The sooner the better, and definitely best if it could be done before the man regained his consciousness completely.

At the back of the cave Dwarf had some supplies that he thought might be useful. He dug around in them for a while and found some cloth, a small barrel and his old walking stick. The planks in the barrel could be used to brace the leg and though the stick was far too short to be used for a proper crutch it was better than nothing. Dwarf quickly pulled the leg back in place and tied the planks around the man's calves with strips of cloth.

All that remained now was to wait for the man to come around. From the sound of his breathing, slow and steady, that might take some time.

While he waited Dwarf went back to the opening and squinted out in the sun light. Still no sign of Cat or the creatures with her. That was good. It meant that they were not out searching for the fallen prey so Dwarf and the human would be left alone in the cave for some time yet.

As for his own duplicates, or dwarves as they had taken to call themselves, they were still deep down. He was virtually the only one who ever came up in the sunlight anymore. And that he did not even do that often. It was simply a coincidence that he had been here when he saw the man fall.

He had been out in the forest last night because he had heard some commotion and loud, booming noises. Dawn had surprised him and when he got back to his cave he needed to rest a little before going down the narrow path deep in the bottom of the cave.

It was while he was curled up behind a large rock, and with his head covered by an old grain sack, that he had heard the snarls from outside. He had forced himself out to the mouth of the cave and from there had watched as the man fell down the cliff.

When he recognised Cat he had instantly known that there must be something special about this human and, he thought, perhaps it might somehow be connected to why Cat had gone mad.

Outside the sun was setting and Dwarf felt himself relax a little as dusk began to fall. This was much better, easier on the eyes. The coming of the night always helped wake him up and he checked on the human again. He was still unconscious and now no longer responded to Dwarf's prods and pokes. A small line of blood had flowed down the man's chin from his mouth so perhaps there had been some internal bleedings. Dwarf shrugged

to himself. The man would make it or he would not.

As the cave grew darker Dwarf began to gather his things. His reason for still venturing out in the forest from time to time was his new found addiction to smoking various leaves and herbs he could find there. He dug out his pipe from his bag and stuffed some leaves into it. They were not some he had found on this trip. He had to dry them first and that took quite some time. Especially because he had to do it secretly lest the dwarves might find out about it and want some for themselves.

The blue grey smoke rose calmly from the pipe as Dwarf settled back against the hard rock. It felt good to have something solid behind him. It always made him feel like things would be well again. Maybe not soon, but one day. The earth was solid. It would last. He took another puff on his pipe and blew a small smoke ring. It took a lot of concentration for him to do so and a part of him said that it was a silly thing to do. He did it anyway. Somehow it seemed like something you should be able to do.

Next to him the man moved a little and mumbled something unintelligently. Dwarf poked him and got another mumble in reply.

“‘Ere,” Dwarf said, “time ter ge’ up. ‘S near midnight’.”

More mumbling.

“Ah, sui’ yersel’.”

The smoke in his lungs felt good. It helped him relax even more. He pulled a couple of mushrooms from a small sack and slowly chewed on them. In an attempt to wake the man he held one of them before the man’s nose. There was no response which was hardly surprising since they lost most of their odour when they dried up.

When the man finally woke up Dwarf had lost track of how late it had become. It was still several hours to dawn, but Dwarf had nodded off at some point so he did not now if midnight had passed or not.

He looked at the man who was squinting, apparently not able to see very well in the dark.

“We’come back ter life,” Dwarf said.

“What?” the man replied, “Who’s there? Where am I?”

“Oh, I see. All the ‘ard ques’ions, eh? Well, i’s not wha’ but who. An’ who’s’m. An’ yer righ’ ‘ere. Simple as tha’.”

It was clear that the man could make absolutely no sense of what Dwarf said. Not even when Dwarf slowed down and spoke really slowly and as clearly as he could.

Contemplating this for a while Dwarf realised that the way he and the human spoke were quite different. Some of the sounds were the same, but where the man’s voice was more flowing and his tone varied Dwarf’s was more guttural and harsh with almost no rhythm or change of tone.

The man was obviously distressed and it seemed like he was practically blind. If this was a result of the fall, of his being human or simply because this man was not blessed with good sight Dwarf did not know.

Suddenly it dawned on Dwarf. He had fallen back on the language that had evolved among the dwarves. It was related to what the humans spoke, but being underground it had proved better to speak in low tones without too much variation as the twists and turns in the tunnels ate most of the higher tones.

He tried again in the original language. The man understood this and calmed down a bit. He seemed to believe that he was no longer in any immediate risk of being eaten. Cat and her Ferals had spooked him quite a lot and he was still in great pain. Dwarf let him sleep a little more while he thought about what he should do with the human.

The obvious thing to do would, of course, have been to never even have done anything for the human. That option was gone now, but he might still just leave him in the cave. The man was in no serious risk. His injuries were no worse than he would be able to find his way back. Assuming that the feline hunters had gone.

While Dwarf pondered this the man woke up again. Outside the first light was beginning to creep through the forest. Dwarf had been so caught up in his thoughts that he had once again lost track of time. He did that a lot these days.

“Who are you?” the man asked.

“There’s noo shor’ answer ter tha’, lad,” Dwarf said.

And he was right. How could he possibly begin to tell the story about how they had created the humans? And what right did he have to do so?

He gave a mental shrug. He had, he thought, just as much right to do so as Vampire and Cat had the right to interfere, indirectly or as violently as Cat did, with the humans.

Still, he did not feel comfortable about telling some random human everything about the original seven races. Just enough to let him know that Dwarf was from a different time and age. That he was not of this world. Or, perhaps more correctly, that he was this world.

“‘S a long story, lad,” he began, “bu’ judgin’ from ter sta’e of yer leg ye go’ mor’ ‘an enuff time ter ‘ear it. Firs’ thing, tho. Wha’s yer name?”

“My name? It’s Alboin.”

“Well, Alboin o’ ter humans. ‘T all began long ago. . .”

Crabs in a cage

“Granddad! Granddad! We caught them!”

Cardea’s excited voice rang out over the beach. She and her twin brother Caelum had gone with Alboin, their grandfather, down to the river to catch crabs. The twins could hardly be considered children anymore, but Alboin could not help but at the sheer joy in their voices as they told him how they had created a small cage trap and lowered into the water and spooked the crabs so they could herd them toward the cage.

The children had turned twelve a few weeks earlier and would soon be put to real work in the small port town founded by their real grandfather Bedwyr. What they would do was still undecided, but Alboin had done his best to convince their parents that they should not be given normal apprentice places. And though Alboin was not their true grandfather most people took his words and advice to heart and did their best to follow them.

Ever since he and Bedwyr had been on that gruesome hunt half a century ago they had grown close. Bedwyr and his crew had waited around as planned and was getting ready to leave when Alboin came stumbling out of the woods, injured and mumbling some strange story about small people and inhuman creatures. The crew had done their best to take care of him

as they left immediately. On his way back Alboin had come across the remains of the hunting party. The Ferals had not spared a single one of them, but instead torn them to pieces.

Ever since then Alboin had changed. He had been almost terrified of the forest so he had had to find something other to do than being a hunter. For some years he worked on Bedwyr's boat and between them they came up with some good ideas and designs for business. By the time the two men were old they practically ran a small port town they had helped found, and fund, near one of the larger coal mines north of the great city. In the beginning everyone had simply referred to it as "the town" but as it grew more renowned throughout the realm it had been named Sophropolis after the way Bedwyr and his council ran it.

Bedwyr had started a family that grew larger and larger almost every year. But since Alboin's brush with death had left him with some deep scars inside he had never been able to settle down for long. Instead he had travelled on Bedwyr's boats in search of new opportunities. It had, he thought, been a good life. And while he did not have a family of his own Bedwyr's children and grand children had seen him as one of their own.

On his travels he had occasionally come across things and sights that made him think of the small man's story. Though he never saw any of the creatures Dwarf had mentioned he often enough saw signs that they had been there and the story that had at first seemed unbelievable began to be true to him. No one else believed him, though, and he had soon stopped trying to convince others that they had all, in fact, been created by these elder races.

Now that he was in the early evening of his life he felt too old and tired to travel. There was still a spryness in his steps and he was in no way weak and could easily keep up with the children's games. He just no longer had the stamina to sleep on hard boat decks for weeks at a time and live off dry biscuits and bitter fruits.

The children's excited laughter brought him back to the present time.

They had indeed had an impressive catch. The cage they had constructed was almost full and they had to half drag half carry it across the sand. There was at least a dozen of the large crabs that lived in the river. They

would fetch a good price on the market or become quite a feast for the family.

Alboin considered that the children might become crabbers, but was against it. The big catch today was not the result of their interest in catching crabs. He suspected it had more to do with their ingenuity and cleverness. She had always had an affinity for getting good ideas for overcoming practical problems. Caelum had also been good at solving problems, albeit his talent was more on the theoretical side of things. Between them that combination worked out very well as could be seen on the cage.

When the children had first asked him if he would come down to the beach to hunt crabs with them he had been a little worried. He knew they could take care of themselves so he was not worried the crabs would harm them. All the children in the town had learned to respect the ten pound, heavily armed and armoured beasts that scuttled along the river's bottom. Their pincers were incredibly strong and lost fingers or even hands were common injuries among the crabbers.

No, he thought, he had not been worried that the crabs would hurt the children. It was more the other way around. The children had not mentioned anything about the cage, but Alboin had suspected they had some clever idea for catching them. Fortunately it had not been as creative as when they had tried to smoke out foxes from their nests with some fireworks they had somehow got their hands on. It had worked quite well. So well, in fact, that several of the nearby farmers had been furious because the two children had caused more than twenty foxes to be chased from their underground homes and had hid on the nearby farms. It had taken quite a lot of talking to calm the farmers down after the foxes had, between them, eaten more than two dozen chicken.

But what a sight it had been to see plumes of white smoke rise from more and more hidden holes in the ground and, suddenly, more than a dozen foxes had jumped from their lairs in a mad rush of red fur.

"So," he said to the children, "what shall we do with this fine catch, eh?"

The children looked at each other.

"Oh, we thought we would just let them go. You know, open the cage and run away really fast so they don't bite us."

Alboin smiled. This was so typical of the children. They had probably spent all their free time the entire week, if not more, constructing the cage so the crabs could enter it but not leave. And now that they knew it worked they would gladly let the crabs go. Neither of them seemed to care that the catch was about as much as the average crabber could catch in a couple of days.

Despite his desire to humour them he was also keenly aware of the fact that while the town did prosper it only did so because people worked hard to catch crabs and fish, load the coal ships and did all the other things that simply needed to be done. He felt that it was his duty to help teach the children that it would be a waste to set the crabs free.

Besides, he still felt a chill run down his spine whenever he thought about hunting or killing for the joy of the hunt rather than necessity.

Just as soon as he began explaining about the needs of the town and how they all had to do their part he knew that his words fell on deaf ears. The children were paying attention, they always were. But he could see in their eyes that their thoughts were elsewhere.

“Ah, never mind,” he said, “it can wait to another day. But! Let’s get these crabs back to the house. I’m sure your parents will be more than pleased to see you feed them for once.”

Together they began to drag the heavy cage back to the town. Even with Alboin’s help it was still too heavy and cumbersome to carry.

Along the way Alboin got a good look on the design the children had come up with. When he saw it it seemed so simple that, well, even a child could think of it. But life had long ago taught him that the simplest ideas were often the hardest to get. The cage consisted of nothing more than a small tipping door that only opened into the cage, not out. The crabs, simple beasts that they were, would throw themselves at the door, but none of them would ever try and pull it open. As simple as that.

Of course, coming up with a way of making sure that the crabs did not just pile up right inside the door so no more could come in had probably taken a lot of the time for the children to figure out. But they must have done it or it would not have worked so well. Unfortunately there were too many crabs in the cage for him to see it and when he asked the children

about it they just giggled and said that it was their secret.

He smiled to himself. At least they had learned that much about the world. What had made their grand father Bedwyr so rich and successful was precisely that: keeping secrets. In his case about trade routes and the availability of different merchandise.

Perhaps the children could join the engineer's guild. Cardea definitely could. Alboin was more worried that the engineers would not take Caelum's theoretical approach serious.

Oh well, he thought, that would have to wait for another day as well. Today they would go make the children's parents happy.

Lighter than Air

The large sign above the door showed two beautifully crafted Cs entwined in each other. Below it more hand crafted letters told the onlooker that the shop was 'Cardea and Caelum, Engineering Designs' and through the large windows it could be seen that this was precisely what it was.

All along the walls were work benches and drawing boards and in the middle of the room stood all manner of strange machinery. At the back a couple of open doors allowed a peek into more rooms of the same kind. Clerks and workers were busy working in all the rooms and the shop had a feel of productivity about it. The employees all look happy and when the owners, Cardea and Caelum, could be seen it was clear that they were given as much respect as they gave the people in their employ. Which was to say a great deal of respect.

The twins were now in their thirties and had become very successful engineers. So successful, in fact, that the current chancellor had not only invited them to come work in the great city, she had also had to accept their refusal. Traditionally, when the chancellor invited you to something you immediately did two things. One, you sent a polite letters apologising for not already being there and, two, you packed all your belongings and rushed to the great city.

But Cardea and Caelum were still, in some respects, the children who had played on the beach with old Alboin. As clever as they were they did not

always understand the nature of politics, especially when it came to the games being played at court.

They had chosen to stay in Sophropolis because the mere idea of leaving their family did not exist in their minds. From time to time one of them, but never both, would be away on business trips to inspect building sites or ship yards. One of them would go and the other would remain and the trips were always as short as possible. They felt it was best if one of them was always around to keep track of things. Not that their clerks and secretaries could not be trusted. In fact, almost all the daily business in the shop was run by everyone but the twins, but simply because the place did not feel the same without them around. And it did not. Unlike many of the shops, of any variety, in Sophropolis C&C was well known for having employees who actually preferred to have their bosses around. Most workers would be glad to get rid of their masters for even a few hours so they would not be berated and yelled at.

Another reason for them staying near the shop was that they never stopped thinking about their projects and new designs. If they did not have their notebooks and tools they both felt naked, broken.

These days they both spent far more time in the shop than elsewhere and the only reason they got a good night's sleep was that they had set up two of the rooms on the first floor of the house as bedrooms for them. There they would crawl off to when they had worked so long into the night that they literally was on the verge of falling asleep on their feet.

Occasionally their manager, Pertonia, would force them outside and stuff some good food down their throats. Usually this happened when they began to talk complete nonsense rather than just their normal nonsense.

Pertonia felt it would soon be time for another visit to the nearby restaurant.

The twins had taken on a huge project this time. And to make matters worse it was a personal project. Despite their grandfather, and Alboin, having departed many years before the family still controlled most of Sophropolis and owned not only the largest shipping company but also had its own shipyard a bit down the river.

The project they were working on was nothing less than a complete over-

haul of the ship design used for the large river steam boats.

Both the family business and the twin's shop were going so well that they had managed to find the resources to put aside all the other projects the twins had and work exclusively on the new ship. The cousins who ran the family business had quite simply decided that it would be worth a full year of C&C's time so they had cornered the twins one day and simply asked them how that could be arranged. As it turned out all they had had to do was ask. The twins jumped at the chance like cats pouncing on a mouse.

The goal of the family business had been quite simple. Make something that is faster than the existing steam boats and can carry more cargo. If possible it would also be beneficial if they would be more efficient so the fuel requirements would be less than they were now.

Yes, very simple goal. Over time, though, the twins realised that it would not be easy to fulfil them all. It had not taken them long to come up with hull designs and engine specs that took care of a single goal, some even managed to fix two of them. They would both have loved to see the gargantuan carrier they had designed in the early stages. It was, essentially, just several ships built together around a large barge in the middle, but they had designed everything so the whole construction could be expanded as necessary. The problem with that design was that almost all the cargo capacity would be taken up by the coal needed by the engines to steer the massive form.

Halfway through they had realised that it would never work out and yet it was in their nature to finish the design and polish the drawings to see the final result. It had looked magnificent, at least on paper. If only they had the chance to build it. Never mind the fact that it would probably never find use on the rivers or even the large lakes that existed. It would have been a sight to remember.

Among their next designs had been a few good ideas but nothing of practical use. Their experiments with scaled down models using lighter material had come to nothing. The light pine wood they had tried to use would not be able to carry the heavy iron engines.

When several months had passed they decided to split their efforts. Cardea would work on the hull design and organisation of the ship for a smaller and lighter engine that Caelum would design. The thought was that by

the time Cardea had found a way to make a wide barge-like ship go as fast as needed Caelum had found a way to make the steam engines work without having to resort to the heavy cast iron currently in use.

For several more weeks Cardea toiled over the drawings. She relied heavily on the many engineers they had in C&C to finish the drawings of individual parts while she began work on other parts of the hull.

Meanwhile Caelum made slower progress. The best he had come up with was to use bronze, but its rarity meant it was far more expensive than iron and the engines would not be as durable as the old ones. He had also briefly experimented with using a combination of sails and engines. His hunch had been that adding a sail and mast would make the low keeled ships too unstable and he had been right and the idea had been abandoned. At least he had tried it so he now knew it was a dead end.

One afternoon he quite simply ground to a halt. He still had ideas, they were all just very far fetched, too far out even by C&C's standards. On the large paper in front of him was only a few haphazardly drawn lines and doodles he had made while thinking. Nothing useful.

He walked over to Cardea's work room hoping to catch some kind of inspiration from her latest designs. They did not share their thoughts on a daily basis, not even weekly. Usually they would hole up and work furiously forgetting everything about them until they were completely finished and only then would they show the result to the other.

"Hey sis," Caelum said, "how are things?"

Cardea sat alone on a bench in the middle of the room. On the desk in front of her was several carved hulls and a wide, low pan of water.

"Not good. I just cannot get the ship stable."

Picking up one of the hulls Caelum sat down on the bench. He held it up in front of him in a way that made Cardea giggle.

"No, silly," she said, "you're holding it upside down! Besides, that hull is no good. Much too deep for the rivers. It's nearly impossible to steer and always hits the ground."

Caelum waved off her hands as an idea struck in his mind.

"Here, hand me that other one. And some string."

Recognising the expression her brother always got when he got a good idea Cardea quickly did as he asked. She was curious to see where this was headed.

With swift movements Caelum tied the two hulls together and held them up in front of him. Just as swiftly he cut the string and looked around for something heavy to place inside. Cardea pointed at some piles of rocks she used for just that purpose. Some of the rocks had been cut into round or cubic shapes, others were still in their natural form. Putting some of the rocks between the two hulls he retied them and carefully put them on the surface of the water.

Cardea shook her head.

“It’ll sink. You know that.”

“Yes, but look. There’s enough air between the hulls that it only sinks just below the surface. If we put a tug in front of it the tug could drag the shell, the egg, along. That would lower the surface resistance which is usually the hardest thing.”

“Yeah, it could. Assuming you don’t mind the shell hitting the rocks in the river or your cargo being rolled over and over. Already did something like this a while back. To keep it stable we had to make the lower half heavier than the upper half and the cargo. In the end it was not worth it.”

“Oh. Bugger,” Caelum said but held on to the two hulls.

“How about the engines?” Cardea asked.

Caelum just shook his head while rotating the hulls in his hands. He sighed and threw it to Cardea. As it hung in the air the two hulls came a little apart and one end of one of the strings trailed behind the entire construction.

The hulls sailed through the air and right past Cardea who just stared at it.

“Sailing through the air,” she said. “That’s it!”

“What? Come on, that’s not possible.”

Cardea took two steps forward and gave her brother’s shoulder a hard knock right on top of the head.

“Nothing is impossible. You know that!”

“Touché. But then, how will you do it?” he asked.

“Come.”

Picking up a few things she raced from the room and into the main shop which she found to be completely deserted. Looking outside she grudgingly admitted that it was hardly surprising since it was pitch dark and, given that it was in the middle of summer, it must be well after midnight, yet far from dawn.

“Oh, crap,” she said. “Well, we’ll just carry it ourselves. Quick. Get some of the explosives, some sacks with rocks and a funnel. The largest we have. Oh, and find a very long stick and put a small vice at the end. Not a large one, just enough to hold a match”

She ran outside in the night with a trailing “meet me at the meadow” hanging behind her. Caelum chuckled to himself and began to gather the things she had asked for. He had no idea what she was planning, but he too had learned to simply go along with whatever harebrained idea she got in her head. Nine times out of ten they did not work out, but that one time when it did it was worth it. And, of course, the nine times where things failed were usually fun as well, if for no other reason than because her experiments had a tendency to fail quite spectacularly. Her mention of matches and explosives suddenly made his night look far more interesting than it had an hour ago.

When he had finished finding everything and putting a vice on a stick he went down to the meadow she was nowhere to be seen. A large pile of various tools and materials indicated that she had been there so he put down his things and sat around to wait.

It was well after dawn before she finally returned, dragging some very tired looking porters behind her. No, Caelum thought, they were not porters but tailors. And they were carrying some strange thing between them.

Cardea’s face was lit with an excited smile as she came over to him.

“Did you bring everything?” she asked.

“Yes, I left it by the pile over there.”

“Good! You guys, spread out the bag in that direction. Caelum, help me set things up.”

They set to work and soon Cardea had a very large, bulky looking sack spread out on the meadow. Next to it she had a similar looking, but smaller, sack with the large bronze funnel attached to one end. She had put the funnel upside down over some of the explosives. Under the side of a funnel she had stuck a fuse that could set off the explosives.

The tailors stood back, obviously afraid of the explosives yet curious about what the twins were now working on.

Without much ceremony Cardea struck a match, placed it in the vice on the stick and lit the fuse. About three seconds later a hollow woof sounded and the funnel lifted slightly from the ground.

Cardea raced over to the bag and examined it.

“Hmm,” she said with a disappointed frown, “nothing. Oh, of course!”

She rummaged around in the pile until she found some nails and string which she used to tie the funnel down to the ground.

“I hope this holds. Here we go again,” she said.

Another woof sounded and this time the funnel stayed on the ground. To Caelum’s surprise the sack moved and if his eyes did not deceive him it looked as if there was something in it.

She skipped over to the sack and squeezed it gently.

“Yes!” Cardea whooped. “It works. More explosives!”

At this the tailors withdrew even further. Down from the town a few people had begun to walk toward them. Sophropolis was slowly waking up and the sounds had drawn the attention of some of the early risers.

They repeated the experiment a few times until the sack had grown so large it looked almost like it was bursting. As it had inflated Caelum could see that a thin net of string was covering it and that Cardea had tied it to the ground. At first he could not understand why, but now it was no longer just laying on the ground. Instead its sides lifted off the ground and from the way the net was stretching it looked like it was about to rise toward the sky. The sack was almost completely round with the part where the

funnel was attached pulled out into a tip. It almost like like a drop of water that lay on its side, about an arm's length on each side.

"What..." he began.

"Shush," Cardea said. "One more time."

Again they filled the funnel with explosives and set it off. When it was done Cardea removed the funnel from the end of the sack earning a burnt finger as she did so. The repeated explosions had heated the bronze, but not so much that it set the sack on fire.

With a hard yank she pulled the net free of the ground and the sack rose up, visibly pulling on the hand she used to hold it down. She laughed with delight and everyone there, especially Caelum, simply stood there staring in silence.

Cardea snapped her fingers at Caelum.

"Hey," she said, "get me some of the rocks. And some more string. I want to see how much this can lift."

Despite him not wanting to take his eyes off the sight before him he did as she said and soon they had tied a sack under the larger sack. Or the floatbag, as Cardea called it. The floatbagfloatbag was able to carry several rocks, perhaps a pound or two. It bore no resemblance to any ship Caelum had ever seen, but for now he chose to simply go along with what Cardea was saying.

"That," Caelum said, "is fantastic. How did you do it?"

Cardea laughed.

"Remember that time when we, ahem, had the small accident in the old shop?"

"How can I forget? The whole house blew up!"

"Yes, well, remember how the papers seemed to be lifted up when they passed over the fire? I mean, even after the explosion itself."

"Yes."

"Well, I figured that the fire must set off something that is lighter than air. Just like air is lighter than water and we use that to make ships float."

“Oh . . . you mean . . . erm, what do you mean? Something that is to air as air is to water?”

“Yes!”

“But wasn’t it just the heat that made the paper fly up? It was still just normal air, right?”

“Both yes and no, I think. Heat does make the air flow up. But a while ago I also noticed that something else happens when the explosives go off. I’m not sure I understand it completely yet. But it sometimes feel as if the air takes up more space after an explosion in a small area than after. So I have been playing around with them a little . . .”

Caelum gave her a stern look that should have reminded her of the house she had blown up a decade ago while “playing” with explosives. The look was lost on Cardea who was utterly absorbed in her explanation.

“. . . and so I figured that if we could move the, erm, light air created by the explosion into some suitable container, which must also be very light, perhaps we could make something that sails on air just like a ship sails on water!”

“Incredible!”

Caelum took the floatbag and felt the surprisingly large pull it had.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he said.

Cardea nodded. What they had in mind was almost the same design as their gargantuan river barge. Only this time they would not make a barge surrounded by ships but would let the cargo be carried by this large floatbag.

Around them more and more people had gathered as rumour spread about what was going on. The tailors had overcome their grumpiness at being woken up in the middle of the night and were now explaining to people how they had used their lightest cloth and thread to sew the floatbags. They clearly took a not insignificant amount of pride in having helped the twins.

Cardea and Caelum were lost in a discussion about how to go about measuring how much cargo they would be able to lift or whether it would be

better to make a light barge and simply rest the cargo on it using the floatbags to take off the load.

Both of them suddenly looked at the large sack that was also on the ground. It was four times as big as the one that was already inflated and it had taken half a dozen tailors several hours to prepare during the night.

“We’ll need more explosives,” they said in unison.

When the cousins at the family business heard about it they were sceptical at first. But after a few demonstrations they were soon convinced that the project was sound and might work. Provided that refilling stations could be created at the larger port towns along the rivers. The twins promised to also make plans for this and with that out of the way they went back to work.

Over the next couple of months they reworked the designs until they had made a more stable way of filling the floatbags and tie them to a barge. All in all it took them not much more than half a year to finish everything and once the plans were delivered to the shipyard things were more or less out of their hands.

Back in the shop they had chosen to give their staff some time off. It only seemed fitting since they had all done a wonderful job and all bills and salaries had been paid for the next year and with no other projects in the works there seemed little point in keeping the two dozen people sitting around doing nothing.

Everyone knew, of course, that the twins would soon call them back when they got another new idea, but until then only the manager remained at the shop. She still had some loose ends to tie up and used the quiet period to sort through the accounts and make sure everything was in order.

A few nights later they were sitting at the nearby restaurant, Pertonia having finally convinced them that even though they were well-rested they should still get outside a little. After the main course they sat in the comfortable chairs, silently enjoying the evening.

“It’s a shame,” Pertonia said, “that the floatbags still need ships to move them around. If only they could have flown on their own.”

“Yeah,” Cardea said, “but that’s even more difficult than with boats. We would need even lighter steam engines.”

Caelum looked thoughtful.

“Steam engines,” he said.

“Yes,” Cardea said, “that’s what I said.”

“Steam. Engines.”

“Yes, yes.”

Cardea looked at her brother with annoyance in her eyes.

“Why not use the pressure from the explosives instead of steam?”

Just as she was about to say something Cardea stopped with her mouth open and her hand slightly raised. She closed her mouth and looked at her brother.

Pertonia groaned as their eyes widened and as they ran out of the restaurant she called over the waiter. She needed to pay the bill before she too ran off to gather up the staff. The twins had got another idea and there was nothing she could do but tag along for the ride.

One Down

Using the explosives to power a simple engine had proved to be very simple. With inspiration from leaves, the kind that spun around their own axis when they fell to the earth, they had constructed a small turbine engine that worked quite nicely. Sadly, it only worked a few seconds after each explosion and it took too long to recharge it to get any proper use out of it.

Their first attempt at recharging it quickly had nearly cost them another shop as the explosive caught fire from the residual heat left behind in the engine. Fortunately the engineer holding the explosive powder had quickly pulled it away from the flames that rose from the engine so the damage had been limited to the destruction of the engine and one of the desks.

In addition to this there were also problems with the bronze of the engine melting or at least getting bent out of shape from the intense bursts of heat. Caelum had talked to a blacksmith that had helped them out in the past and he had promised to try to create a steel version of the engine.

It was expensive and difficult to do and the new prototype was still quite some time out in the future.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Caelum asked not waiting for an answer. “It reminds me of one of the stories Alboin used to tell us when we were really small.”

“Oh? Which one?” Cardea said.

“The one with all the strange creatures. Not really beasts but also not humans. It was a good story. This flying ship we are trying to build. It reminds me of the dragons he talked about.”

“Oh, that one.”

Cardea had never been as impressed by Alboin’s stories as Caelum had been. She had always had a preference for things she could hold in her hand.

“Yeah, that one. If only we had some of the black rock that he mentioned. Apparently it was fire from deep under the mountains that had cooled off. It could do all manner of wonderful things.”

A dreamy look had crept onto his face.

“Well, if you’re so keen on getting some why don’t you go up into the mountains to that place some explorers found last month?”

“Huh? What place?”

With a sigh Cardea reminded him of what Pertonia has spoken of the night they got the idea to use explosives to power an engine. She had told them that some explorers had gone into a deep cave up in the mountains. There they had found a river of molten rock. It was so hot that flames rose up here and there and the heat had been so intense that they had to go back or they themselves would have caught fire.

This immediately caught Caelum’s imagination and it did not take him long to decide to travel north into the mountains. He knew he could easily get a lift up river, but would have to walk a large part of the way. Not wanting to spoil her brother’s good spirits Cardea chose not to mention that he would have to sleep outside on the ground in whatever weather it was. Fortunately Caelum was not so ignorant of the real world that

he did not arrange for a guide and a helper who would carry most of the equipment needed for the hike into the mountains.

Before he left Caelum found the explorers and tried to persuade them to come with him. Despite his lucrative offer none of them wanted to go back. While they did not mind talking about their trip they fell silent when he asked them to go back. They claimed that they could not. No further explanation, no hint at why. But also nothing that suggested that he would be unable to go. In fact they did their best to draw him a map showing, roughly, how to get from the river to the cave. Judging by their description the hike would be hard and long, but would not involve any actual mountain climbing.

Caelum spent a few more days arranging the practical things and waiting for one of the family ships to head upriver. The more time that passed the more impatient he became and when he finally stood on the ship's deck the captain nearly threw him off again because Caelum kept telling him to just cast off and not worry about the cargo.

Back on the pier Cardea waved good bye with an uneasy feeling in her stomach. The only times they had been apart one of them had been on business trips to the other towns along the river. This was the first time any of them would actually venture far from the known roads. And he even had to go through the forest which Alboin had warned them so hard against. She had never believed the stories he had told of gruesome beasts that could tear you apart in the blink of an eye. But right there, as she saw her brother sail away, those stories came back to haunt her and they stayed with her all through Caelum's travels and even lingered on long after his safe return.

As for Caelum he set out in a good mood that lasted right until his first night in the forest when he realised just how many roots, bumps and small rocks there is on the ground. The captain had dropped them off two and a half week's north of the town where they had dropped off the cargo. The price for the extra trip had been high though it seemed to Caelum that the captain did not think it was high enough. The crew kept looking fearfully at the trees that came closer and closer to the ship's sides as the river grew narrower.

Finally they reached a good place for them to disembark. A small natural

beach made it possible to get a rowing boat all the way to shore and unload the three men and their bags. Meanwhile the captain turned the ship around and the crew manning the oars on the small boat pulled as hard as they could when they returned to the ship. They were desperate to not be left behind.

Rather than lose a single minute on the beach Caelum headed straight into the woods with Phaedrus, the guide, next to him and Ælred brought up the rear carrying the bags. Phaedrus insisted on carrying his own things, but Caelum would have a hard enough time walking an entire day without also being burdened with a heavy bag. After all, he reasoned, that was why he had paid Ælred to come along.

There were still a few hours left of the day and the forest was sparse enough that even with Caelum in tow they made good way and when the hilly ground took them up above the main body of the forest they could see the mountains. They did not look to be far away to Caelum, but Phaedrus told him that it would still take several days to even get to the foothills.

The first morning on their hike Caelum woke up feeling sore all over his body. He had hardly slept at all and the prospect of not just a half day of walking but a full day did nothing to lighten his mood. And to make matters worse they had woken up to a slight drizzle. As the day wore on the rain became heavier and they wrapped themselves in thick wool cloaks to keep warm if not dry.

During this first day Caelum experienced first hand how slowly a person walks compared to the long distances in forests and mountains. When they made camp that night the mountains seemed to be just as far away as they had in the morning. The day had been completely uneventful with the most excitement being them having to navigate a fallen tree. The tree had been large, at least fifty meters long and too thick for them to easily climb over, but it could hardly be called an actual adventure.

“What had you thought?” Phaedrus asked.

They were huddled around a small, smoking fire made from wet branches they had gathered during the afternoon.

“I don’t know,” Caelum answered. “Something else than this. Definitely not all this rain.”

Ælred kept to himself as he had done the entire trip so far. He seemed to simply be interested in getting this over with so he could get the second half of his payment.

“Ah,” Phaedrussaid, “you’re thinking of the tales that explorers tell all the time?”

“Yes. They never mentioned being soaking wet and having to eat this horrible food.”

Phaedrus grinned. The food really was horrible.

“It’s the way it is. When the explorers come home they don’t particularly feel like reliving this part of the trip. I’ll bet you a nice, large silver coin that you’ll feel the same.”

“No bet!” Caelum said quickly. “When, if, we ever get dry again I’ll be happy if I never see a single drop of rain.”

Phaedrus laughed.

“Better stay away from the farmland, then. Shh! Quiet!”

A rustling in the undergrowth nearby made them all sit completely still. With Caelum’s limited knowledge of animals he had no idea what it could be, but it did not sound that large to him.

For several moments they sat there until a sharp crack was heard followed by some squealing. With a broad grin Phaedrussgot up and headed off away from the fire.

“Excellent. I thought I had seen tracks earlier today.”

“What was it?” Caelum asked.

“Let me go check. If we’re lucky it’s something that’ll make the food a lot less horrible.”

Less than two minutes later Phaedrussreturned with a dead piglet.

“Usually it’s not a good idea to kill them while they’re young, but we’re hungry for real food, it’s raining and, besides, who really cares?”

He quickly butchered the piglet while the others went to find some more wood for the fire. It was still all wet, but they managed to get enough flames that they could roast small pieces of juicy meat.

That night Caelum slept a little better. He was still cold and wet when he woke up, but the extra meat had been good. Mostly for his morale, but that was also not so bad since it made him feel a bit more cheerful and it made the mountains look a little closer than they had the night before.

For three more days they travelled through the forest. Occasionally Phaedrus managed to catch more small animals so they had other things than dried rations to eat. On what looked to be their last evening in the forest they camped in a clearing with a small hill. They had decided to put out their bedrolls on the hill because it seemed drier than the surrounding ground and there were some low bushes that sheltered them from the wind.

The rain had stopped but all their things were still wet and since the next day looked to be harder on their legs they decided to go to sleep early. All three of them soon fell asleep and not long after a gentle snoring could be heard from the hill.

If they had known what was waiting in the forest none of them would have got any sleep at all.

Just at the edge of the clearing a slender shape slipped silently through the night. Not a sound could be heard when she put her paws down and she even suppressed her urge to let out a low growl.

Suddenly she stopped as she smelled a faint trace of something she had not come across for many years. She turned her head and saw another shape waiting in the darkness near the humans she was stalking. She crept around it and settled down to wait for it to move. It was a good thing she did. Before long she saw another shape, smaller than the first, come through the forest.

Where the first shape had been silently waiting this newcomer was anything but. Everything from his breathing to the way his heavy boots broke twigs and branches rang out clearly through the forest. With much huffing and puffing the small shape moved back and forth, apparently looking for something.

Finally the first shape seemed to shrug and stood up. It was tall and broad and its profile stirred long forgotten memories in the silent hunter that was lurking in the forest.

“Dwarf,” Orc called out in a low voice, “over here. And keep quiet or you will wake them up.”

The hunter tilted her head. She had heard both that name and that voice before. Somewhere far from here. Almost, it seemed to her, in a different life. It was as if the memories that woke in her belonged to someone else. Slowly she crept closer.

“Hrmp,” Dwarf huffed as he joined Orc. “Can’t be more quiet with all this rabble around. Forests, pah!”

“Living under ground has changed you, brother,” Orc said, “just as the others have changed. Take Cat for instance. She seems to have lost her old self entirely.”

“Yeah,” Dwarf said, “so I noticed. Strange, that. It’s almost like she’s also changed physically. She walks on all fours now.”

“I know.”

“Oh? How do you know that? I thought you hadn’t seen her since her last visit to the hall?”

“I hadn’t. At least not until a few moments ago when I spotted her just over there.”

The silent hunter sneered as the larger of the two shapes pointed in her direction. They could not have heard her. Or seen her. And yet it would seem they had. Both shapes turned toward her and beckoned for her to join them.

Carefully she moved forward. Neither of them seemed posed to attack, but that could easily be a ruse. She sniffed the air and looked carefully where she placed her paws. No traps, no other smells than the forest and those two. She needed to find out more about them.

“Hello Cat,” Dwarf said.

Cat? She thought. Another name that seemed familiar. She just could not place it.

“It’s been too long,” Orc said. “What brings you to these parts?”

The hunter was taken aback by this. She just realised that she should not have been able to understand what they said. They were different from

her. So why could she understand their tongue? Why were they even talking to her?

Some old remnants of her former self took over, deep down in her subconsciousness and with stumbling words she spoke.

“Yes,” she said, “it has been long.”

She could hear her own voice. It sounded rasping and hoarse, almost like dry leaves rustling in autumn.

“Who are you?” she continued. “Who am I?”

She sat down on her haunches with a puzzled look on her face.

“You’re Cat,” Orc said, “or at least you used to be. Back in the very old days when there were still seven of us. Do you remember?”

“No. . . and yes. There is something. I remember the humans. How they turned on us.”

At her last words she let out a deep growl and turned her head to look straight at the hill again. She longed to bound up there and tear the humans apart. Before the others could react she had taken several steps out in the clearing.

“Stop!” Orc cried, his voice booming through the night.

Up on the hill one of the humans stirred and sat up. Cat snarled and raced off into the forest again. Direct attack was not her style. She needed to lay low again and wait for another chance to ambush them.

“Who’s there?” the human on the hill shouted.

Orc and Dwarf looked at each other and shrugged. Neither of them wanted to interfere with the humans, not yet at least. They spoke quickly in quiet voices before heading off in opposite directions.

“I will take care of Cat,” Orc said, “back then I always had a good way of handling her and keeping her in check.”

“Very well, I shall follow the humans. If they really are headed for the cave I shall do my best to divert them or, if that fails, I will do what is necessary.”

“Don’t kill them,” Orc said, “not even if they find the rocks. We do not have the right.”

“Do we have the right not to?”

Orc gave a sad shake of his head before he got up and slipped quietly after Cat.

Caelum quickly woke the others and put some more branches on the fire to get some more light. He was sure he had heard someone shout in the night.

The others were quick to rise and spread out so they could see the entire clearing around the hill. There was nothing to be seen, the stars gave enough light that they could see that the clearing was empty. They heard a faint rustling somewhere off in the distance, but that could have been anything and it was too far away from them to be of any concern.

Judging by the sky there was just over an hour to sunrise so they decided to begin packing up the camp and prepare breakfast. That would give them an early start on the day and neither of felt like going back to sleep.

Slowly the light turned first grey and then crimson as the sun rose over the treetops. When it was light enough for them to see they went down to the tree line to see if they could find any tracks or other hints of what had been there during the night. Silently Caelum hoped that they would find absolutely nothing. He knew it would mean that he had simply been imagining things, but rather than that the alternative: that there had been someone down there, watching them.

It was Ælred who first found the tracks on the ground. Large paws from that were wider than a hand's breadth. In a few of the tracks they could clearly see how long claws had dug deep into the earth.

The tracks went from the trees and halfway across the clearing where they suddenly turned right and became further apart as if their owner had gone from walking to running.

Ælred cursed hard. His eyes shone with fear.

“Over here!” Phaedrus called. “There are boot prints!”

He had gone over to where the tracks came out of the trees. There were indeed two sets of boot prints, clearly distinguishable as one was longer and wider than a grown man's and the other almost as small as a child's.

The prints went off to either side of the clearing before they became lost on the ground.

“If only we had had a real tracker,” Phaedrussaid. “He would have been able to tell us more about what this was.”

“I thought you were a good hunter,” Caelum said.

“Yeah, I can hunt, sure. But there’s far from being able to hunt and being a good tracker. Those prints out in the clearing, for example. I can easily tell you that they belong to a large predator, most likely a hunting cat. But a tracker would be able to tell us far more about it’s exact size just like these boot prints could also tell us more about who were here. My best guess is a very large man and a child. Which doesn’t make a lot of sense, really. Who would bring a child out here in the middle of the night?”

“Good point. What do you suggest?”

“That we press on and trust our luck. You said you heard someone shout when you woke up. Let’s assume that the owner of the boots were out hunting the cat and scared it away from its attack on us by calling out.”

It was clear to Caelum that Phaedrussaid did not really believe his own words, but in lack of other explanations it was a far better image to cling on to than the others that battled for attention in his mind’s eye.

He nodded and looked around.

“Where did Ælred go? Ælred!”

They looked back toward the hill and could see Ælred hastily repacking some of the bags. He seemed very disturbed and mumbled frantically to himself while pulling things out of one bag and into another. They hurried up to him.

“Ælred,” Caelum said, “are you okay?”

There was no reply. Phaedrussaid took hold of Ælred’s shoulders and shook him. This got his attention for a few seconds. Enough for him to mumble something about beasts in the night out to kill him. He threw one of the bags onto his back and rose, obviously intent on heading back down toward the river. Phaedrussaid held on to him.

“Ælred! Listen!” Phaedrus said, “Whatever that was it did not come after us. And now that we know it is here we will keep watch through the night. Stay with us.”

“No, we can’t. It will kill us. We have to run. Run!”

Phaedrus let the man go. There was nothing short of physically tying Ælred down that would prevent his leaving. Both he and Caelum watched as Ælred fled back into the forest.

“Now what?” Caelum asked. “Should we go with him? To keep both him and us safe?”

“I’d say we press on. I’ve seen men snap before and once they’re this far out it doesn’t matter. Even if we followed him there’s no guarantee that he would stay with us. He might as well run off again in the middle of the night.”

Caelum sighed. This was also something that you never heard of in the stories told by explorers.

“Very well, then. Let us hope that he makes it safely back to the river and finds his way home.”

(The author suddenly blushed as he realised he had sent one of his main characters out in the wilderness, more than three weeks from the nearest town without any plans for his return. And it’s neigh on impossible to get a taxi to drive all the way to Mount Doom in the middle of the night without prior reservations... sorry guys! I’ll make it up to you somehow. Erm, maybe I could send some eagles in your direction? Oh, yeah, great idea!)

They quickly went through the things Ælred had left behind and found that it had actually been most of it. He had taken a fair share of rations, but not much else. Despite that this would make their own trip more difficult they agreed that in a way it was better that Ælred had the food. Hopefully it would give him a better chance to find his way back to safety and they themselves were sure they would find something else to eat.

“How far up in the mountains did the explorers say that cave was?” Phaedrus asked.

“Not more than a day and a half. There should apparently be a mountain with a very flat top and the entrance is hidden on the far side of that.”

“Okay. We better be on our way, then.”

With that they set off and before lunch found themselves at the foot of the mountains. The first part nearly made Caelum turn back. They had to walk up a cliff that seemed nearly vertical and there was not even the slightest hint at a path or animal trail so they were forced to scramble over the large rocks. Caelum had to agree with the explorers that it was not actual mountain climbing, but it was very close to it. From time to time they had to help each other, whoever was last supporting the one in front and pushing him up or the one in front pulling the other up.

After several hours of hard climbing the ground levelled off and the going became easier. There was still some time to sunset so they decided to push ahead into the mountains themselves.

“Wait,” Caelum said. “Look!”

Phaedrus turned around and looked over the forest that spread out below them. It was a magnificent sight. In the distance they could see the river where it cut through the trees almost looking like a scar in the green skin of the forest. And even further away they could see several black columns of smoke rise where they guessed there must be towns.

“It’s amazing,” Caelum said as he momentarily forgot everything about Ælred and the beast that might still be out there.

“Yes,” Phaedrus said, “no matter how many times I see sights like this I never tire of them.”

Caelum nodded.

“That something as splendid as this exists,” he said, “makes me wonder how it all came to be. I mean, did some long forgotten people plant this forest? It boggles my mind.”

“Hmm,” Phaedrus said, “never thought much about that. I guess it’s always just been here, right? You know, since before time.”

With a last look over his shoulder Caelum turned around and they headed further into the mountains.

Black Rocks

It surprised Caelum quite a bit that it was actually far easier to walk through the mountains than it had been to walk through the forest. The terrain was rougher up here, but they did not have to weave through the trees but could instead walk in a fairly straight line. And being able to always see where you were headed was also a great plus. It made it easier for them to see where they were headed.

At the end of the first day they camped in a small hollow in the ground, firmly sheltered from the strong winds by heavy the rocks around them. There were no trees or bushes up here so they had to make do without a fire. Phaedrus has advised against trying to burn the green lichen that grew on the rocks. According to him it would never really catch fire properly and even if you added it to a real fire all you would get was a lot of foul smoke that would make you dizzy.

Fortunately they still had enough dry rations to last them a few more days. That should see them all the way to the cave and back, probably even with a little to spare.

“Hey,” Caelum said when they settled down to sleep, “feel the ground. It’s warm! Or at least less cold than it should be!”

“Yeah, but it might just be from the sun. This part is hit by the evening sun and the wind can’t cool it off. You’re right, though. It should not be this warm.”

“Interesting. I wonder why this is.”

“I don’t,” Phaedrus said with a relaxed sigh, “I just look forward to not freezing tonight.”

He was right. The ground did keep them warmer than they had been in several days and they were actually well rested when they woke up the following morning.

Their breakfast was a quick meal of dried rations. Some stale bread and dried food and some water to wash it all down.

“We do not have much water left,” Caelum noticed.

“No, but there are several springs and streams up here that we can drink from. We’ll find more soon so just drink as much as you need.”

Caelum took an extra swig of the water skin and grimaced. It was the last of the water they had brought from the ship and five days in a water skin had left its mark. He hoped Phaedrus was right. A drink of fresh, cold water would feel really good by now.

As it turned out he did not have long to wait. They found the first spring less than an hour later and quickly filled their water skins. The air was still a little cold, but they never the less removed most of their clothes and quickly scrubbed themselves clean. It felt good and feeling rejuvenated they pushed on.

“I was wondering,” Phaedrus said, “do you know why the explorers you talked to were up here?”

“Now that you mention it, no I do not. I figured they were just, you know, out exploring. Isn’t that what they do?”

“Well, yes. But they usually have some kind of idea about where they are going or sometimes they are looking for things that might be valuable. I wonder what got them all the way up here.”

“Perhaps they were here for the same reason as us? They could have heard rumours about the river of fire?”

“Nah, then they would not have turned back so soon after finding it.”

“Good point.”

They walked on in silence for some time. As the sun rose in the sky the beauty of the mountains became even clearer. It was a sunny day with a deep blue sky and only a few wisps of cloud could be seen overhead. All around them the sun cast its light down on the barren rocks and somehow brought them to life. Reflections sparkled off flat rocks and made it seem like there were gems set into the very side of the mountains.

Caelum felt, more than once, that it would not be bad to live up here. Provided there was some kind of food to be found. So far all he had seen were lichen and small, white flowers neither of which were edible.

Shortly after lunch they climbed a ridge and when they reached the top they both suddenly stopped. There, straight ahead and not too far away, was the flat topped mountain. In addition to having a completely different

shape than the mountains surrounding it they also saw that it was made from nearly pitch black rock.

“Now that is an impressive sight,” Phaedrus said. “Look at it. Completely black!”

“Yes. There is no doubt that this is what we were looking for. If all of the mountain is made from the rock we seek then there will be more than enough. We just need to find a safe way to transport it down to the river.”

“What? Now?”

“No, no,” Caelum said, “not right now. But in the future. If we need this as a replacement for coal we need to set up a steady and reliable means of transporting it down to the river. So it can be loaded onto boats.”

“Ah, but. Do you really think those rocks can burn? If it’s anything like coal it would not have survived out here in the rain.”

“Oh.”

Caelum had not thought of that. Of course the rain would have washed everything away if the mountain had been made of coal or some similar substance.

“Do you think we can reach it before night fall?” he asked.

“Not sure. The way down there looks tricky. Look over there. See that break in the rocks? I think we’ll need to climb a little again. And we should not attempt that in the dark.”

“Okay, let us find a good place to rest, then, and we will climb down tomorrow.”

They found another small hollow to camp in and noticed that the ground was even warmer here than it had been the day before. Unable to figure out precisely why they guessed it might somehow be related to the black mountain in front of them.

“If there really is a river of fire underneath that mountain,” Caelum said, “it would make sense for the surrounding area to be heated by it. It is just like when you put a kettle on a stove. The fire in the stove heats the kettle which in turn heats the water.”

“A kettle on a stove?” Phaedrus said. “I’m not sure I like that comparison. . .”

He looked around at the rocks with a worried look in his eyes. Caelum had to agree. It also made him feel slightly uneasy that there might be something underground that was hot enough to make the rocks warm up here. And yet he was also fascinated by it. As he lay down to sleep he thought about a city built up here. A city that would never need fireplaces or stoves but where you could simply harness the heat from the ground and use it to warm your living room or cook your food.

Late at night Phaedrus woke up. Something had disturbed him and brought him out of his sleep. He swiftly moved to where Caelum slept and gently put a hand over his mouth to wake him quietly.

“Shh,” Phaedrus said. “Wake up. There’s something you need to see!”

At first Caelum was startled. He was not yet used to being woken in the middle of the night, much less while being far away from civilisation. The calm touch of Phaedrus hand made him relax and he looked saw what Phaedrus had seen.

Over the top of the black mountain a crimson glow rose. After they had fallen asleep a mist must have formed around them. Just like Caelum had seen light spread through the morning mist in a town so did the red light from the black mountain light up everything around them. It was nowhere as bright as daylight, but more than enough that he could make out their belongings and Phaedrus.

“What is it?” he whispered.”

“The mountain. It must be on fire!” Phaedrus said.

A note of fear had crept into Phaedrus’ voice and it trembled slightly.

“No, wait a minute.”

Caelum stood up and began to think hard about the mountain. He tried to remember how the rock had looked in the daylight, what patterns he had seen running down its sides. Yes, he thought, that must be it!

“I know what it is,” he said. “The entire mountain is indeed on fire. Or rather, just like the explorers saw a river of fire there must be a lake of fire inside the very mountain. The top is not flat. It is a crater!”

“No!” Phaedrus exclaimed.

“Yes, yes!”

Caelum jumped to his feet and would have continued straight down the side if Phaedrus had not caught him.

“Steady! The drop will kill you just as surely now as it would have yesterday.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

Together they sat in the red haze for a while just taking in the impressive sight.

“Now,” Phaedrus said, “I’m beginning to see what you meant when you asked who had made all this. This is just too strange. How can there be so much fire, so much heat, in one place? No, someone must have done this on purpose.”

“Yes,” Caelum said. “I don’t know precisely who did, but let me tell you a story that my grandfather told me. Okay, he was not really my grandfather but Cardea and I always thought of him like one.

“It all began a very long time ago...”

Throughout the night Caelum retold Alboin’s story about the Dwarf and how the humans were created. There were a lot of things he could not remember and other things that he could not tell as vividly as Alboin had been able to, but for the most part he got the story right. Once he was finished they sat in silence for a very long time before Phaedrus spoke.

“If you had told me this back in Sophropolis I would have thought you were either joking or mad. But here? In front of this? I don’t know. Who am I to say that your grandfather Alboin did not meet this dwarf creature?”

“Alboin told many stories that were just that, stories. He would be the first to admit that. But he would always make sure you knew if a particular story was true or not. He would never say it outright. It would be in how he chose to tell it. When I think of his face when he told me this...”

Caelum shuddered.

“So,” Phaedrus said. “Those tracks we found back there. And the boot prints. Are they related to this?”

“They might very well be.”

“If that is so, then I am not sure I want to climb down to that mountain.”

“Yes,” Caelum said, “I know what you mean. I just have to, you know? I cannot not go.”

“Oh, I know that feeling all too well. Let us rest a little. I fear we may be in for something far harder than the climb down tomorrow.”

“So you’ll come?” Caelum asked.

“Of course. How can I not?”

Phaedrus winked and they settled in to wait for morning to come.

The climb down turned out to be far easier than they had first feared. There was indeed a steep cliff where Phaedrus had predicted. It was just not very tall and after that it was an easy climb. The last part down to the black mountain was more of a slope than a cliff.

Soon they found themselves at the foot of the black mountain.

“Ouch,” Phaedrus said. “Feel the ground! It’s almost burning!”

“Yes, and it is not exactly cold in the air either. The explorers said the entrance was on the other side. Come, this way.”

They hastily made their way around the mountain. Along the way they got a close look on the cold lava that made up the sides of the mountain. The way it had flowed down and then cooled off made it very easy for them to walk at a fast pace so it did not take them long to get to the other side.

“So,” Phaedrus said, “where is the cave?”

“According to the explorers it was hidden behind an outcrop of rocks. Perhaps something like that one over there?”

For more than an hour they searched for the entrance but without any luck. The more time passed the more frustrated they became. Particularly Caelum who was now almost frantically scrambling up and down the side of the mountain. On his hands and knees blisters had formed from when he crawled around or slipped on the sometimes slippery rocks.

The heat from the rocks made it very hard for them to run around searching the mountain side and they often had to take breaks. They withdrew a

bit up onto the normal mountain and sat or lay against the rocks to cool off. Fortunately there were a spring not long from where they searched for they had to drink a lot of water to sustain them and their water skins were soon empty.

While Caelum searched some more Phaedrus went back up to the spring. When he returned he was nearly dragging the water skins so tired was he. “Blast!” Caelum shouted at the world in general. “Where is that bloody cave?”

Phaedrus was too tired to reply and just sat there breathing heavily.

From sheer frustration Caelum kicked hard at a loose piece of lava and sent it scattering over the ground. A part of him could not help but hope that it would mysteriously disappear into the ground. He was not that lucky. It was not the rock that disappeared, it was Caelum. And it was in no way mysterious.

Unknown to the two rock scramblers the entrance had been covered by a thin sheet of lava. Caelum’s furious stomping around had finally loosened it enough that he fell through the next time he stepped on it.

A nasty crunch was the last Phaedrus heard before he saw Caelum drop down under the surface, a look on his face that was either surprise or terror. It was hard to tell.

Despite his weariness Phaedrus managed to jump to his feet and run over to the hole in the ground. It was not a very deep hole, fortunately, and Caelum seemed to suffer more from shock than physical injuries.

A sweltering hot gust of air blew out of the hole, high pressure from below that had finally found an outlet. They both coughed and gasped for air.

“How far does it go?” Phaedrus called down.

“I can’t see that much,” Caelum said, “it goes on for a few meters but it’s very dark down here. The light is just absorbed by the black rock and doesn’t get into the cave.”

“Hang on, I’ll get a rope and come down.”

Phaedrus ran back to their bags and got out a rope and some spikes. With practised ease he quickly secured the rope and climbed down.

Meanwhile, down below, Caelum had begun to walk crawl into the cave. It started out small but soon widened enough for him to almost stand up. The heat was nearly unbearable and came from all around him, the rocks, the ground, the air, the walls.

As Phaedrus joined him Caelum's eyes had started to adjust to the darkness. The first thing he noticed was that it actually was not dark after all. From somewhere in the distance came the red glow the explorers had talked about.

"Do you really think we've found it?" Phaedrus asked.

"Yes," Caelum said in a confident voice. "Come, let us go further in. If the heat gets too much we'll go back for the blankets and water to douse them."

"Will that really work?"

"I don't know. Guess we'll find out."

Together they crept forward, afraid of moving too fast in case their movements caused a cave-in or they slipped and burned themselves on the ground.

Even through their thick soled boots they could feel the heat. They knew it would not be possible for them to remain there for more than a few minutes before they had to return to the fresh, cool air outside.

Up ahead the tunnel turned. Carefully they looked around the corner and nearly had their faces burned off. At least, that was how it felt to Caelum.

The tunnel opened into a wide, low-ceilinged cavern through which a river of molten rock slowly floated. The sight was as magnificent as it was hot, which is to say quite a lot.

Their eyes began to water from the heat and they drew back to the tunnel. It suddenly felt a great deal cooler than before, almost comfortable.

"So it is true," Caelum said.

There was a strange new look in his eyes. It was somewhere between utter exhaustion and sheer joy. He had found what he set out to find. Or, he corrected himself, he had found the first part of it. This was the river the explorers had mentioned. He still needed to find the volatile rocks they had also told him about.

He found it hard to believe that it should be the lava that was all around them. Partly because it should have burned already because of the heat, but mainly because he had, secretly, tried it the night before after Phaedruss had gone to sleep. The lava could not burn. At least not in a small campfire. He had felt a bit stupid after he had tried it. Not an unusual feeling for him, given his profession. But still. It had been so obvious that he did not even know why he had tried it.

“Come,” Phaedruss said, “we should get back out.”

“Okay. I just want one last look. Go ahead, I’ll join you.”

They split up. Phaedruss headed back to the fresh air where he was soon taking several deep breaths to clear his lungs.

Caelum took three deep breaths before stepping all the way around the corner and a few paces into the cavern.

The heat now burned so hard that he had to squint for fear of his eyes drying out altogether. With a hand held up before his face he began to take in as many details as possible.

There were more lava everywhere. The ground in here was very smooth and seemed to hang out over the river. And yes, over there, right at the edge were some lumps that looked different. They were not as smooth and porous looking as the lava. They seemed far firmer and had that dense quality about them that things like steel and diamonds also have.

And what was that, on the other side of the river? No, surely it could not be. Caelum’s eyes watered so much that he could not see clearly. His hand was beginning to sprout new blisters and with stumbling steps he began to go back to the tunnel.

The walk back to the cave’s entrance should not have taken longer than a minute or two. But in his current state it took far longer. Or maybe it only seemed longer to him. He was not sure how long it had taken him. Nor was he aware of how he had managed to climb up the rope with hands that could not hold on to anything.

And yet somehow he had managed, quite possibly with Phaedruss’ help.

“Here,” Phaedruss said, “drink this. It’s water. You need it. And just lay still. I’ll put some bandages on your hands and face. Don’t touch them

while I go get more water.”

That’s strange, though Caelum, I can’t see anything. Perhaps my eyes did burn out. Oh, but what a sight it was.

Suddenly he remembered what he thought he had seen and he tried to sit up. That is to say, he put his hands on the ground to push himself up and then let out a cry of pain as the rocks bit into the open burn wounds on his hands.

“No,” Phaedruss shouted some distance away, “don’t move. I’ll be right there.”

He hurried over to Caelum and gently eased him back down on his back.

“Rest. You passed out when you came back from the cave and have been unconscious for several hours.”

“I can’t see,” Caelum said, “did the heat burn my eyes as well?”

There was a hint of sadness in his voice.

“No, no. Don’t worry. I’ve just had to bandage them. And it’s the middle of the night so there’s not much light to see by anyway.”

“Oh,” Caelum said, “good. What happened?”

“You collapsed before you got out. Fortunately I managed to hack some of the rock away so the entrance is not as steep anymore. Then I dragged you up and bandaged you. You’ve got some nasty burns on your hands and face.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Sorry for not returning sooner. But I had to look!”

“No worries,” Phaedruss said, “I’ve kind of been in similar situations. So what did you see?”

“It was. . . I don’t know,” Caelum began.

He tried to remember what it was he had seen in the cavern. There had been the river, the lava. The hard rocks and. . . he took a sharp breath.

“There was someone in the cavern. A short person, on the far side of the river!”

“NO!” Phaedruss said. “How can that be?”

“Don’t know. Now I’m not even sure I actually saw anyone.”

“We can go back tomorrow. We’ll bring the blankets and water. And I have some ointment that might make your hands and face slightly better. It will probably still hurt but with wet bandages covering them you should be able to go back, at least for a while.”

“Yes. Yes, I would very much like that.”

The next morning Caelum felt worse despite Phaedruss’ assurances that the ointment had actually worked better than expected.

They prepared for another trip into the cave by wrapping Caelum’s face and hands in new bandages and soaking them with water. They agreed that it was probably a really bad thing to do to his wounds, but he could not make himself stay behind.

Above them the skies were no longer blue and clouds were beginning to cover the sun.

“Good,” Phaedruss said, “at least we won’t be burned by the sun as well. With any luck we’ll get a little rain as well.”

Caelum did not comment. Now that they were ready to go back down into the cave he found that he could think of nothing else.

When they reached the slope Phaedruss took Caelum’s arm and helped him down. The second Caelum was in the tunnel he began to walk forward. He was still weak from the day before, but he did not want to lose a single second. Already the heat was taking its toll on him and he knew that it would take even less time before he collapsed than it had taken the day before.

Soon they stood at the corner and prepared themselves. They held up a soaking wet blanket in front of them and moved into the cavern, Phaedruss making sure to keep the blanket between them and the river.

Their tactic worked and though it was still very hot it was not burning their skin.

“Where were the rocks?” Phaedruss asked.

“Over there, near the river. Can you see them?”

Caelum’s eyes hurt too much for him to see so he had to rely on Phaedruss’ description of the cavern.

“There’s nothing there. Just the river. But wait. There’s something a little left of us. It looks like what you described. And it’s away from the river, though a bit farther from the tunnel.”

Relief was clearly audible in his voice. The prospect of crawling around near the flowing river of lava had obviously not appealed to him.

“Wait here,” he said, “and hold the blanket like this. I’ll take the other and go take a look.”

“If it’s the hard rock bring some back!” Caelum said and huddled down, covering himself as best he could with the blanket.

He peeked around the side of it and followed Phaedrus as he made his way over to a pile of rocks. Yes, Caelum thought, those are the ones we seek.

Suddenly there was a sickening sucking sound. A part of the floor where Phaedrus was walking gave in and before any of them realised what was happening a hole had opened up underneath them and he simply vanished. There was no better word for it. He was just gone.

“Phae...” Caelum began.

Halfway through the name he stopped, his brain finally catching up with what was happening.

The entire bottom of the cavern was a living sea of molten rock. The floor they had been walking on had merely been a hardened rust hanging over the lava, seemingly only held up by an impressive ignorance of the laws of physics.

Caelum sat for a few moments, his mind racing. Phaedrus was gone, he himself was badly burnt and getting worse every second he remained in the cave.

With great difficulty he began to slowly inch back toward the tunnel. Having realised that he, too, could be swallowed by the lava without the least bit of warning he was terrified. And he was torn. On the one hand he wanted to get out alive. On the other he desperately wanted just a single, small piece of those rocks he had seen. If he did not get any everything would be for nothing.

He realised that he had said the last words out loud when someone answered him. A strong hand took his arm and helped guide him.

“Come,” a deep, rumbling voice said, “let us get you out of here, Grandson of Alboin.”

Too weak to protest or even question who was helping him Caelum let himself be led back, first to the tunnel and then outside. It was hard for him to move, his entire body hurt and at some point the bandages had dried out and now did more harm than good. He was certain that however scary his rescuer was he would not have made it back alive without him.

While Caelum slowly recovered the stranger helped change his bandages. It hurt and in several places the skin came off along with the bandages. Several minutes passed in complete silence apart from Caelum’s frequent moans and winces.

Finally it was over and Caelum felt himself relax a little now that he no longer had to withstand the pain. This, of course, meant that his mind was also free to think about what had transpired in the cave below.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Due to the clouds there was not a lot of light and he experimented with opening his eyes just a fraction. Next to him stood a small, round fellow with a huge beard, the largest Caelum had ever seen.

“I no longer know exactly who I am,” the stranger said, “but there are those who have called me Dwarf in the past. Your almost grandfather, among others.”

Somewhere in the back of his head Caelum felt he ought to be scared, disbelieving, curious and awestruck. Bleeding wounds and a throbbing pain in his entire body put a bit of a dampener on all of those feelings and he settled for an appropriately solemn face and a slight nod of the head.

“Time is lost to me,” Dwarf continued, “so though I do know that Alboin was your grandfather I do not know how long ago it was that I found him in the forest.”

“He told me it happened in his youth, perhaps half a century ago. Maybe more,” Caelum said.

The old stories began to resurface in Caelum’s mind. What had Alboin told him about this creature known as Dwarf? He could not remember.

He had always just assumed that it was a story told by an old man to delight his grand children.

“Half a century.”

Dwarf looked as if he was lost in a thought. After a while he shook himself and mumbled something under his breath.

“Harrumph, hrm, yes, half a century. How is he these days?”

“Dead. Long time ago,” Caelum said.

“Ah dear,” Dwarf said, “that’s sad news. I had hoped that he would be the one to find me. Well, his grandson will be a suitable substitute.”

Overhead the clouds gathered even more and it looked like a storm was in the making. Dwarf slapped his thighs and got up.

“Come along, little human,” he said, “we’d best get started. Or at least get out of the rain that’ll soon be here.”

“Get started?”

“Yes, I suppose you’ve come for the secret I told Alboin about, no?”

“What secret?”

Dwarf shook his head.

“You humans,” he said, “here you sit, right next to one of the best kept secrets and all you can come up with are one syllable words that hardly even make up a sentence.”

A look of puzzlement spread on his face and he started counting on his fingers.

“Right. Never mind. So there were several syllables. Doesn’t mean you’re a genius. Now come along. Oh, and put this necklace on, will you, it won’t do to have you burned completely to a crisp.”

From a pocket Dwarf pulled out a strange looking leather necklace with an uncut, red stone hanging in a pendant made of copper. He swung it around Caelum’s neck and started to walk back to the cave.

As the first raindrops began to fall Caelum cautiously joined him. After he had got the necklace his body did indeed feel less battered and burnt.

The heat, he noticed when he entered the cave, was also more bearable now.

He followed Dwarf all the way into the cavern while wondering what this strange stone could be. For fear that it might stop working he dared not take it off or even look too closely at it. Instead he focused on his surrounding.

They were fairly quickly taken in. The river of lava, the floor, the walls. Everything was made from the same black rock, some of it just melted and gently flowing through the mountain. Now that he had time to look at everything properly it really seemed very peaceful.

“So,” Dwarf said, “here we are.”

Before their feet lay a small pile of the hard, black rocks that had cost Phaedrus his life.

“What are these rocks?” Caelum asked. “Something about them draws in my eyes, makes it seem like they are not really here but are more a sort of hole in the existence.”

“You’re not far from the mark, lad. They exist and yet they don’t. I must admit that I’ve never been able to fully understand it myself.”

Dwarf pointed to the river. Following where his finger pointed Caelum for the first time noticed that it was not a river after all. The lava flowed in all directions away from the centre of the cavern.

“Is it coming up from below?” Caelum asked.

“Indeed. And these rocks you see here, they float up from time to time. It has fallen to me and mine to live here, below the ground, to gather them up. For a long time we did not know what to use them for, but after talking to your grandfather and, later, hearing rumours of your work I finally know what my purpose is.”

Again the little creature seemed to drift off. Caelum was slowly overcoming his incomprehension of all of this and his curiosity was now woken. He still felt a little uncomfortable and managed to keep himself from asking Dwarf to get on with his story. Instead he settled for a not-so-discreet cough. Not too subtle, but it got Dwarf started again.

“The rocks can be used much like the coal you know. They just contain an incredible amount of energy, compared to coal. From a single one of these you could get as much heat as you could from a ship load coal.”

Caelum’s eyes widened.

“And,” Dwarf continued, “though others may not like it I have decided that humankind will only be certain of a glorious future if you have the means to build everything you can think of without having to quarrel about mining rights, wear yourself down with hauling everything around and so on.”

From the pile on the ground he took the largest of the rocks. When he lifted it it was clear to Caelum that it was quite heavy. Feeling a special moment coming up Caelum lowered himself to one knee so as not to tower over Dwarf.

For a few seconds Dwarf closed his eyes while he summoned up every last bit of strength. When he opened them again he looked straight into Caelum’s eyes with a steady gaze.

“Caelum of the human race. On behalf of the elders I hereby grant you the knowledge and secret of, erm, these black rocks.”

Dwarf gave an apologetic shrug as to say that it was not entirely the speech he had prepared.

For his part, Caelum felt somewhat awkward. He would have felt better if there had been some trumpets glaring or perhaps a choir solemnly singing in low tones. As it was he simply accepted the rock in his hands and managed to mumble “so. . . I just stick this in the oven instead of coal?”

Last Stand

“Sir!”

The orc soldier looked tired and battle weary as he snapped to attention before Orc. Shifting his cigar stub from one side of the mouth to the other Orc turned away from the table filled with battle plans.

“Speak,” he said.

“The enemy is approaching from the South and. . .”

His voice was abruptly cut off by a hollow boom that echoed through the room they were in. Something had exploded, most likely right outside, directly against the wall. A few pieces of dust fell from the roof and smoke could be seen through the narrow slits.

Orc looked back at the map of the area around the black mountain. It did not surprise him that the attack came from the south. There were no other directions the enemy could send their army from. At least not in sufficiently large numbers to pose any significant threat. Throughout the mountain passes several thick walls and fortresses, combined with the naturally rough terrain, helped protect their flanks.

Another boom shook the room.

“Trooper!” Orc boomed, “What is that?”

“Sir! Sorry, sir. The enemy have brought some of their flying. . . things!”

“What?! The last report said they could hardly lift off from the ground!”

“Yessir!”

The orc soldier who had been interrupted before finished his report somewhat quicker than he had planned. The enemy had moved far quicker than any of them could have anticipated and they had brought some of the strange, little flying machines that the orcs had only thought were still in an experimental stage.

“Get the troops in position. I want every orc who can still breath out there throwing everything we’ve got at them!”

Waving his hand Orc dismissed the soldier and went to take a quick look out the slits. Bloody humans, he thought, who did they think they were?

They were supposed to be the ultimate race, peaceful and able to carry on the elders' work.

Out the slits he could see the small flying machines hovering in the air. They looked so flimsy and vulnerable with their light wooden structure and the single rotor on top. Right up until you saw the sparks where a rocket ignited under the main body of the thing. Like it did right now.

As quickly as he could Orc flung himself to the ground. The rocket exploded right outside the slit. He stayed down a few moments more waiting for another couple of booms. Just before he moved out of the way he had seen several more streaks of smoke from other rockets and he did not feel like taking any unnecessary risks now that he already was down.

"Blast!" he shouted at no one in particular.

His cigar had been knocked out of his mouth which did not make his day any better. The humans had been on the way. Yes, okay, he knew that. They would probably bring bigger weapons than what he had. Yes, okay, he could live with that. Literally, as it were, since their defences were strong and deep. But now those buggers were simply flying over the walls, hammering at them from up in the air.

"You! Get some long rifles up on top. Get those things down on the ground!"

One of the orcs in the group he had vaguely waved at ran out in search of one of the orcish sharp shooter regiments.

Within seconds Orc smiled wickedly as he recognised the sharp crack of the finely crafted rifles that were given only to the best marksorcs. Apparently some of his orcs had had the good sense to show a little initiative. He risked another quick glance out the window and smiled wickedly as he saw two of the flying things going down. One pilot was dead in his seat, the other was desperately trying to regain control over her machine as it spun around and bounced all over the place.

"Ha!" he cheered.

There were still a few flying machines outside, but the presence of the sharp shooters had made them withdraw back to the main human force. From his vantage point high in one of the towers he could see that they were indeed in for quite a scrum this time.

Where there used to be miles of forests there were now almost nothing except a wide road the humans had used to transport the black rock that had fuelled their industry for more than a decade.

Orc spat on the ground. Things had gone bad long before Dwarf decided to let the humans have the rocks, but after that day it had gone irrevocably wrong. And here was the result.

Behind him a low, rumbling voice called to him. It had been too long since he had last heard Dwarf's voice. He and the dwarves usually remained underground, mining or gathering the rocks. Even after they had decided to cut off the humans a few months ago.

"So," Orc said, "come to see the final show?"

"Yes," Dwarf said. "Though I think it will be a somewhat different show from what the humans are expecting. Or you for that matter, my brother."

Orc huffed as Dwarf joined him at the slit.

"How so?" he said.

"Look, there are thousands of them. Tens of thousands. And the flying machines are just the beginning of their array of gruesome inventions. Those long tubes you see? Once they are in place there will not be any walls left at all. Or those vehicles lumbering along on the road? Not even your finest shooters can do anything about them."

"You brought this upon us!"

"That I cannot deny. But I don't regret what I did. Even without the rocks it would probably have ended like this. There was just that one, small chance that the rocks could have altered the way they do things. If only it had made them productive."

With a heavy sigh Orc slumped back against the wall. He took out another cigar and offered it to Dwarf who took it. Orc found another one. Off in the distance the rumbling noise of the humans' war machines could now be heard.

"I don't know what went wrong," Orc said, "and, you know, I don't care that much anymore. It's good that it's finally over."

"Yes. There's only one thing left for us to do."

“Huh? What’s that?”

Dwarf winked and took up two small pieces of the much coveted rocks. With a flick of the wrist he sent first one sailing through the air and then, with great precision, threw the other so they collided on the floor. There was a loud bang and a small mushroom cloud grew from the explosion causing several orcs to scamper back, crying out in alarm.

“What are you saying?” Orc said. “Blow the place up?”

“Why not? There’s more than enough of the stuff to do so.”

“Won’t the humans just come back later? Start it all up again?”

“They might,” Dwarf said, “but we’ll be long gone by then. Besides, before I called you here when we threw out the humans I did some studies of the rocks. I don’t think they are actually of this world. It really does look like they in some way don’t exist here at all.”

Talk like this went, as always, straight over Orc’s head. Dwarf went on.

“Small lumps will just cause an explosion. Setting everything we have off will, well, actually I don’t know. It’ll either be the biggest bang in history or maybe the world will just collapse.”

To Orc the prospect of, at the very least, an explosion of epic proportions was a welcome thought. If for no other reason than to show those bloody humans that they had no business coming here like that when it was him and the other elders who had made them. Bloody ingrates.

“Yeah,” he said and once more shifted his cigar around, “let’s go.”

All around the fortresses humans and orcs were shooting at each other. A few places the two sides had even got so close that small groups of orcs had left the safety of the walls and run straight into the midst of the humans. Ancient swords and axes chopped through human flesh and bone while rifles and pistols made short work of the frenzied orcs.

To everyone’s surprise, in particular their own, some dwarves had ventured out into the open as well, following some long lost instinct to work together with the orcs they otherwise stayed well clear of.

And below it all Dwarf and Orc went side by side down to the underground stores where the rocks were kept. They looked at each other and each of

them grinned silently and took a long drag at their cigars. Then, as one, they each lifted a large rock and smashed them down on the others.

Epilogue

I often visit my children though there is now only one child left.

Elf sits on her throne. All alone in the Septagonal Hall where she and the others used to gather and plan for their fantastic future. Daemon, Vampire, Cat, Dwarf, Orc. They are all gone. Not just from this hall and from the world I made for them. They are also slowly fading from Elf's memories.

She has not moved from her place in a very long time. When last she did it was to go sit by Dragon only to find that she, too, is now gone. All that is left of her is her skeleton. White bones, most of them in a huge, unrecognisable pile on the floor. Only Dragon's skull and neck still stands as testimony of what a magnificent being she once was.

Nothing else is left of her brothers and sisters. Of the world where they worked, planned, lived. Everything is gone and all Elf can do is sit there, her head held high despite her sadness.

No one will ever know she is still here, no one will care. Sometimes I wonder why I can still see her. Sometimes I even have trouble remember who she is as if she, too, is fading from existence as well.

All I know is that whether I shall remember her or not she will always be there, a quiet tear making its way down her chin as she sits there. Doomed forever to cry alone in the Hall of the Fallen Elders.