

Winter: The Vracken's Gate

A Fantasy Novel By

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*for tim and elliot,
sorry i couldn't help. fondest farewell.*

*to the boys (in order):
dave, cory, tom, steve, henry, brothers phi sigma, brendan, pat, donal, robert.*

To be read high and slow, as opposed to low and fast.

Deep

The restless planet thrust the range of jagged mountains skyward as though it were reaching for the moons. Those twisted claws of snow-bound granite stood guard over an old secret.

Beneath the dizzying heights of rock, deep under the ground where even Durin's most durable dwarves dare not delve, sat a small cavity - an interruption in the stone as old as the crust itself. Nothing moved in the chamber, and in an ongoing testimony to the mages who had envisioned it, nothing had for ten thousand cycles of the sun.

An icy parody of a body lay curled up on the hard floor, immured there for an unremitting protraction of time, its thin pale lips peeled back mouthing a soundless scream. A coiled and ferocious singularity of consciousness circled relentlessly in the great head, leaving in its wake a perpetual dream of release. The powerful soul waited with a patience born of necessity for another crack to appear in the thick walls of the earth-magic prison. Waiting for more particles of sweet light to find entry and warm the frozen cells in the once splendid mind.

The toneless inner chant never wavered. Said prisoner would find his way free. Oh yes. And The Imp, as they once knew him, would become a gift from a long forgotten past to a future yet unaware.

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Prologue
Din and Noctodondolus
Sun Cycle 7684 - Deep Winter
The Last dual eclipse

“You surely is the cleverest sorcerer of ‘em all, Bass,” said the large bony troll with a wide grin, teeth like stalactites and stalagmites filled the cavernous space between his bulbous protrusion of a nose and great angular jaw like an assault of bull elephants arriving at the last watering-hole.

“Tonight, we shall see, Din. Mighty preparations make for the sweetest rewards,” said the sleek man-figure beside him. Scattered strands of dark hair danced around the ageless face in the breezes of the cold evening.

Arms crossed, the vracken gazed up at the sky. The two stood on the wall walk of one of his less public keeps, well out of the way of prying eyes. The troll towered over his master but still used the body language of subservience. Around them the youngest and most violent of the planet’s many mountains silhouetted the bloody sky of dusk. The oils of concealment - harvested from a host of wood spiders - covering the castle walls glistened pink in the fading light.

Din looked at the full moon crawling up the night sky towards its much smaller sister. “Not long now, methinks,” he said, holding up a thick knobby-boned hand at arm’s length, a great warty lid closed over one of his large green eyes.

The vracken admired the rough troll-science at work and smiled. “Just over three hours, Din. The first dual eclipse in eighty-one cycles.”

“Eighty-one cycles,” the troll repeated slowly, reflectively scratching his long nose with his free hand. “...Three-hundred and...twenty...four seasons.”

“Correct.”

“Before I was born. Ancient history,” Din observed, looking down into the courtyard.

In the centre sat a crystal pyramid, glowing colourfully. “You make a nice bright light tonight, everyone forget who made it happen last time. Little doubt, Bass.”

Noctodondolus nodded.

For ten cycles the pair had worked on the construction of the magical amplifier. Quite sometime on this planet since it ambled its way around the sun rather slowly. By a coincidence of celestial mechanics each round trip allowed the larger of the two moons to wax and wane exactly sixty times. Some of the inhabitants expressed time in terms of the sun cycles, others of shorter life counted the fifteen-moon seasons for greater precision.

“Little doubt isn’t no doubt, Din. Beware of the boast. We can not count out the competition with confidence.”

“Can we not? Who’s left, Bass? Lexxor, the hexer? You fixed him good. He wont be summonin’ no demons to help ‘im now. Not the way you bad-mouthed ‘im down...down in dat way down place.”

“Mmmm,” the vracken agreed. “The down place.”

“There’s them intramistesseses...imstametras...”

“In-stru-ment-ress-es.”

“Ya, the twins. Won’t even speak to each other now, ‘cause ‘a you. You come right between ‘em.”

“Lovely girls. Much too easily distracted by...affairs of the heart.”

“The heart. Ha! Sure Bass, your heart.” His rumbling trollish laugh whittled away at the peace of the evening. “An dat ‘oly man who worshipped that southern god... Goshta...Gochkta...”

“Gor-cha”

“Ya. He wears the headdress of his god’s most treacherous wife on the high altar of their holiest day! How’d you manage that? You never told me.”

“I converted him.”

“Hah! See, all dead, dyin or wishin’ they were. And a dozen more I could name. You fixed ‘em all. Who’s left?” Din asked with a shrug.

“The ones we didn’t think of.”

Din nodded his large head sagely. “True, true.”

The vracken sighed deeply and said, “Time for final preparations, Din. The moons will align soon. Tonight I will forge an item that this world has never seen. I had better, old friend. For I have woven all my magic into this enterprise...you know though, there is never enough magic to be sure. Its like a law of these things.”

The troll frowned, sensing a strange note in his master’s voice.

“And there is nothing more evil than a law, eh, my substantial friend?”

He slapped the troll’s shoulder with an affection sufficient for the big hard creature to feel.

“I will take my leave of you now, Din. I have to see to a few final details. Keep an eye out from the tower. I will find you tomorrow when I have finished this.”

“Ok, Bass,” Din said simply as Noctodondolus dropped effortlessly the thirty feet to the ground.

If the troll had known how much time would pass before he saw the vracken again, he would have said more.

Three hours later Noctodondolus stood at the apex of his crystal pyramid, watching the shadow close across Kea, as the elves and humans called the planet's largest moon; dwarves had a harder remembered name. They paid little, but not no, attention to the heavens.

Soon it would be the moment of the dual eclipse, that time when the sun, the planet and its two satellites would align. When only a shiny lunar flake remained of Kea, the vracken began his final cant. Swirls of energy gathered around him, tentacles of magic drawn from the pyramid wove into a silent wind. Before long a chromatic hurricane of energy blew in the astral plane. The vracken stood in the eye feeling like its undisputed master as he teetered on the brink of his greatest triumph.

The moon darkened completely and with a word the vortex of enchantment propelled him towards the big orb on the spike of a wave. He could sense other mages on the night side of the planet as their spells gathered force as well; the mind of each struggling to ascend and control the focal point somewhere in the heart of Kea.

There was always competition.

As he neared the moon his concentration peaked, and in the maelstrom of energy Noctodondolus almost missed the small round object sailing towards him through the ether. He noticed it out of the corner of his inner eye, but the spinning ball reached him before he had time to react. The iron pod opened and out poured an insidious black substance that clogged his magical senses.

The vracken struggled fruitlessly for a few moments against the vapour's smothering effects. But finally, and catastrophically, his concentration failed and he slammed back to earth, crashing into the centre of the pyramid. The crystal structure shattered in a vast explosion, levelling the keep, and every corner of Noctodondolus' multifaceted world with it.

The blast flung Din over a mile away. The troll piled into a cliff face and collapsed at its base. Despite the regenerative nature of his cells, it took a full thirty days of a moon for his mangled body to collect itself. Once whole, the massive troll limped back to the remains of the castle. He searched for the thirty days of the next moon after that but found no trace of his master.

Little wonder since, although the troll did not know it then, it would take nine long cycles of the sun for the vracken's scattered soul to gather itself again.

Sun Cycle 7693 – Spring
Nine Cycles and Then Some Later

Din had to duck his head to enter the deepest part of the cave. Even the troll's insensitive wad of a nose did its best to wrinkle at the smell. Carcasses of long-nawed animals lay strewn about the cold damp cavern. Puddles collected the relentless seep of water dripping from the inverted forest of formations hanging from the roof. Noctodondolus had sat there the fifteen moons of the entire summer, ever since he had miraculously reappeared, never once telling Din what had happened to him.

"I don't like this place, Bass. It smell. It ain't nice. No trickery to it. No devices for contemplatin'. No magic or foolery or wizzery a think-pan can latch onto. It drip an' it drop." He wiggled his big hands as he spoke, glancing about at the grey uneven walls of the cavern. "It be slimy...an' dark. No lively contraptions ta fiddle about wit'. It go nowhere and it do nothin'..."

"You've been chewing troll weed again, haven't you Din?" the vracken observed. "It always leads your tongue down...philosophical roads."

"Nothin' else to do," the troll replied, theatrically spitting a spent plug of the potent herb into a cluttered corner.

"You know, Din, this is my home."

"This ain't no home."

Noctodondolus sighed. "I suppose not, but sometimes a man just has to rest and take stock."

"You ain't no man, Bass."

The vracken looked up from his crumbling manuscript, his handsome human face illuminated by the random flickers of a single candle. He pulled back his thick dark hair like a drape revealing his eyes, and said, "Not entirely, anyway. I am glad, however, that you never tire of complaining."

Din sat down heavily on the floor, and pulled a portion of the carcass of a rock cat from his backpack. He tore off a leg, and tossed it on the stone table in front of the vracken without ceremony.

"I am not hungry."

"Eat anyway."

The vracken shrugged, tore off a piece of the uncooked meat and chewed it without enthusiasm.

The troll leaned back against a boulder, eyeing his master while devouring the remainder of his own meat-strangled bone. After a considerable pause he said, “Bass, we need a plan.”

The vracken sat back in his simple wooden chair and stared at his henchtroll for a moment before saying, “I have one, Din. A grand plan.”

The troll stopped eating, strings of raw meat hung from his great jaws. He had waited a long time to hear those words.

“The next dual eclipse is only seven cycles away. We shall try again. But this time we need more magic. Much more. And I know where to get it.”

“Where’s dat, Bass?”

“We shall open a gate.”

“A gate?”

“Yes. A trans-temporal dimension portal.”

The large words inspired the troll. “A trans-da-temple...a dim-damental...a gate to where?”

“A gate to nowhere, Din. A gate from somewhere.”

The troll paused to allow time for the concept to grind in the mills of his mind. “I don’t get yer meanin’.”

The Night Fang grinned deeply and began a patient explanation.

Part I: The Chaos

Seemingly unrelated...

Cet
Sun Cycle 7700 - Late Fall

A large spider of the type Noctodondolus had slaughtered in great numbers years earlier, regarded her most recent work with her huge abdomen raised to the grey sky. The web lay in a strategic location by the side of the road, nestled under the huge buttress root of an odam tree. She had doused the strands well with those same excretions of concealment (but also mixed with a dose of sticky containment), hopeful that the autumn gusts would bring a bounty.

“That will fool no bat, or even a brainless bird!” shrieked the pixie hovering nearby, only inches larger than the spider.

“(Perhaps not, Reet. Then I will be forced to feed me on a pixie child.)”

Reet had to watch the delicate dance of the spider’s mandibles closely to decipher her meaning.

“Take more than these simple magics to catch me!” Reet shouted as he fluttered to a near by branch, there he severed a crucial strand with his tiny sword.

The child danced in victory as two days of Reet’s tireless web-work collapsed. The spider flew across her remaining strands in a blink, and had the youth ensconced before he could draw breath for a second guffaw.

“(Winter comes soon, Reet. I suppose your blood will have to warm me and my young ‘til springtime.)”

Reet struggled, unable to move or make a sound.

“(Stay there a time, while I repair your mischief, child. Forty days until winter. One catch, maybe two. Life and death decided by my quiltings. No time for your pranks. I think Toonak will be displeased...)”

The pixie relaxed some at the possibility the spider would not eat him.

“(...If I tell him.)”

“Tell me what, Larche?”

The spider fixed her eyes on the newcomer without slowing in her repair work.

“(What your little sprat has been up to.)”

“Did you do this, Reet?” asked the larger pixie.

The boy nodded as best he could, his eyes wide.

“Maybe I should let you keep him a while, Larche. You could give him a lesson in the histories of your ancestors, and their ancestors, back to the dawn of relevant time.”

The boy groaned. He knew that spiders remembered and remembered, just never anything interesting.

The rumble of a distant rolling thunder distracted them both. Together they looked up as a horseman galloped by. A small stone flung from an iron-shod hoof poked another hole in Larche's web.

“(Bother!)”

“That was mate to the guardian,” Toonak said. “It is rare to see him ride with such...vigour. Something is amiss.”

“(Roosha's mate, was it? Then he should know to have more care.)”

Two more horsemen charged by, followed by another four, a half minute later. All of them clearly engaged in a mortal pursuit of the Guardian's mate, and all of them flinging stones. One came close to Reet.

“I will free this catch of yours, if you do not mind, Larche. The forest is restless, I wish him back in the hive. We will find a suitable punishment for his insolence.”

“(As you wish, Toonak.)”

With a flurry of furry legs and her best approximation of a sigh, the spider returned in earnest to repairs on the six-foot web.

Trunks of the ancient trees flew by on either side of Cet as he sped down the dusty road. The twisted roots of the massive odam trees politely refrained from the path. Due in part, at least, to countless delicate negotiations made by his wife on behalf of those who wished to pass through the great forest. High above, a dense canopy of thick needles closed over the road completely.

Another hundred pounding strides of his mare would bring him to the next outpost. The whispers racing ahead of him through the trees had alerted the watchers who stood guard there. Cet could feel his horse becoming exhausted. Enthusiastic though she was clambering up mountains for a day's journey, she could not match the speed of the mounts behind them. His wits had given them what little headway they enjoyed; sensing the ambush just moments before its climax. Now, a four minute gallop later, only six of his pursuers remained, half their original dozen. And they neared relentlessly.

Ahead, beyond the (rapidly approaching) abrupt northern edge of the ancient forest, he glimpsed the wide expanse of white marble of his home. It sat at the foot of a cliff like the foam crashing at the bottom of a great waterfall of rock.

A bandit's arrow glanced off Cet's shoulder, his reptilian armour reflexively hardened at the blow, the tough fibres thickening until they formed a slab of resilient lizard-skin.

"Damn," he hissed through clenched teeth. Cet's mare twitched her ears at the sound of his voice, sending a fleck of sweat into his face.

He blinked and a blurry thought interrupted his continual prayers to the goddess beneath the trees. A vision of evil rode the unpredictable waves of the ether into his mind. The telepathic intrusion fractured his concentration.

"Ahhh! Not now, Jorj." he uttered aloud; knowing well that no curse ever deterred the messages.

The mare snorted in frustration, presumably mistaking Cet's cry as an encouragement to greater speed. He knew she had nothing left to give.

"Not much further, girl. We'll finish this soon."

Two of the horsemen, wearing grey robes, rode just a few strides behind him waving their swords menacingly from their black wild-eyed mounts.

Cet could only see the outpost because he knew where to look - high in the odam tree they called Avrist, just above where the eight mighty trunks weaved together as one and reached for the forest roof.

A knee-clench brought his mare skidding to a halt, her back legs tucked to her belly. Advantaged by the sudden change of pace, Cet struck back at a pursuer with the heavy blade in his right hand, severing an arm and knocking the man to the ground.

A white flame flashed out of from the hidden platform and enveloped the other rider as he struggled to pull up his horse. The man howled as the magical bolt penetrated his thin armour and incinerated the underlying flesh. Cet murmured a silent thanks to the *xera* in the flet for his timely contribution.

Eight down, thought Cet, maybe I will see tonight after all. Wheeling his mount, he turned to face his remaining foes. A volley of arrows from the watchers above brought down two more. His horse pranced beneath him. Although near the end of her strength, she still hungered for the kill. As his wide hazel eyes appraised the last of the band, his mind clouded again with untimely psychic images. Cet cleared his head with a roar that shook the trees. He raised his swords, one heavy thick and long, the other a delicate razor with a hilt, and bolted towards his assailants.

The two bandits still charged, seemingly unmindful of the slaughter their band had suffered. With a satisfactory *klang*, Cet met both of their swords. His big blade

shattered the right man's weapon. A sickening crunch followed as the edge cleaved a helmless skull a moment later.

The bandit leader, to the Cet's left, dodged the keener of his blades with ease. The momentary imbalance threw Cet from his horse and he fell hard to the forest floor. By the time the bandit leader had spun around, Cet had risen and stood facing him in the centre of the road.

A second round of arrows materialised from the watcher's post, one penetrated the lung of his opponent, and another the flank of the man's big stallion. Wounded, he charged anyway, leaning off his horse to lend his full weight to the swing of his sword.

Cet wielded only his heavy blade now, having lost the other in the fall. He gripped it with both hands and consciously willed the smooth scaled armour on his forearms to thicken.

A heartbeat later, the rider towered over him. Cet deftly avoided the offered strike, and clipped him hard across the back as he passed. With a simultaneous steel-toed kick to the mount's hind leg he tumbled both horse and rider. When the flesh stopped rolling, the bandit lay pinned under the dying animal with a broken back.

Cet walked over to him, breathless from the exertion. He looked down at the leader of the band that had chased him the six-mile length of the forest, the man who had driven his raiders needlessly to their deaths. As life drained from the face surrounding the black eyes, Cet could see they stayed bright beyond their time - the eyes of a man possessed. Another mind lurked within.

"Kill me," the bandit pleaded, momentarily regaining his voice, and visage.

Cet nodded slowly, but with the first of his blows he killed the horse.

Cet and Thinian

Several hours later, Cet approached the great castle as a gentle rain began to fall. He had spent time rounding up the bandit's horses, their bodies he left to the forest. His mare had recovered some from her ordeal. She snorted as the weather grew heavier and took her head, breaking into an anxious trot keen to return to the warm enclosure of the Citadel stables. Eight of the vanquished bandit's rider-less horses happily kept pace behind him.

Above them rose the ancient architectural atrocity of the Citadel, a two bow-shot spread of white marble stacked arbitrarily like the building blocks of a giant child. The vast pile of rock grew out of the mountain without plan or reason, like weeds of stone.

Clouds of unwanted images still filled his thoughts. The meaning became garbled as the originator struggled to find the right spirit strand to link their minds. However, one theme from the menacing visions came though clearly – beware the vracken.

Reet sat on the mare's head just behind her ears, rubbing them dutifully as instructed, his delicate fingers well able to root out the most sensitive of the horse's pleasure nerves. The pixie boy had said nothing since Toonak had deposited him in Cet's care, staring wide-eyed ahead of him finding himself in another land for the first time, just two miles from the hive of his birth. The pixie king had approached Cet with the boy in tow while he collected the horses after the attack.

He simply instructed Cet, "Please have Roosha find a suitable service for a thoughtless child?"

Ahead, a mélange of workers gathered around the main gates in the front wall. A mule team stood harnessed to a tangle of ropes and pulleys prepared to raise the massive second door of the palace into place. Stonemasons, heavy-wood carpenters, and ironmongers mulled around the fallen portal; hot forges for working the hinges sizzled cheerfully in the rain. Soon the doors would stand for the first time in the seventeen moons of their occupancy; and for some considerable time before that. Only the order to heave remained.

Thinian stood in the centre of the group, shirtless, hands on hips, his knotty muscular body oblivious to the cold drizzle. Even at a distance Cet could imagine the scowl of industrious concentration on his old friend's face.

As he rode through one of the large breaches in the outer wall Cet's horse stopped instinctively when he reached Thinian, as did the animals behind him.

“I take it these once belonged to the raiders the trees whispered of,” Thinian said.

“Yes. Their leader sacrificed his men without cause or care.”

Cet looked down. Such a slaughter held no appeal for him, even when he came out the better of it.

“I can make no sense of it, Thinian. This was no hunt for a winter home. I think I caught a glimpse of possession in the eyes of the last before he died.”

“Where was Finch during all this?”

“I don’t know. He said he had to meet someone, so he didn’t ride out with me today.”

“Ha! Some unsuspecting young girl, no doubt.”

“Mmm,” Cet smiled. “He’d follow me to hell unless he had an itch in his trousers. Just as well he wasn’t with me, though. These long-legged beasts would have made short work of his pony.” He patted his mare, standing stone still in her fatigue. “They nearly caught her.”

Thinian gave the horse a rub on her jaw. He spied the pixie nestled down in the animal’s mane. The thick brown hair did not hide the eight-inch woodling.

“And who might this be?”

“This is...what’s you’re name again?”

“Reet,” the pixie croaked, barely audible.

“This is Reet. Roosha has been tasked with finding him useful work. Penance for some unnamed crime.”

“Is that so? What’d you do, Reet?” Thinian asked, leaning in a little closer.

Reet found his voice. “I’m not afraid of you, human!” He stood up on the top of the mare’s head, and pulled out his tiny sword.

“Good.” Thinian shot back. “Because I’m not afraid of you either.”

The bellow startled the pixie, and he fell backwards off the horse, grasping the mane to break his fall. Then, remembering his wings he fluttered back to his ground atop the mare, waving his sword with menace at Thinian’s hawkish nose.

The two men grinned.

“He’s brave enough among the men. Will his bravado last under Roosha’s gaze, I wonder?” Thinian observed.

Reet sat down into the mane again to ponder the question.

Cet surveyed the work going on around them. “Well, this is an interesting expenditure of energy. Has the spirit of construction that haunts this mountain

finally taken hold of you, or perhaps, Lathalia's still locked away in her dark study?"

Thinian glared at him for a moment. "A little of both I suppose. Any day now she says. At least that owl of hers says. Any damn day. Six moons is too long for a man to go without his wife, even when she's so close by I swear I can smell her."

"I sympathise. One moon without Roosha has me anxious."

"Hmm. What else is there to do, but keep busy. And this gate needs fixing. For our protection."

Cet looked around for a moment, and then motioned to a ruined section of wall beside the gates. "What about the gaps? Why not fix those first?"

"No marble. Anyway, I had to start somewhere. Use your imagination, Cet. Try to think of these doors as a symbol."

"Of what? Absent marital relations?"

"Maybe. I suppose Roosha's absence had nothing to do with the deaths of those twelve men," Thinian said.

"Only six to my sword. The rest were the work of the watchers."

Four wagons rumbled through the same breach in the wall that Cet had motioned to earlier to avoid the construction. The gap mocked the gates next to it. "Let's just hope our enemies don't think of hiding in a wheat cart."

"That's the last of the grain. Will it be enough for the fifteen moons of winter?"

"How am I supposed to know?" asked Cet, shrugging his shoulders. "We've never run a city before."

"A city, indeed. Another sixty arrived today. There are near a thousand here now."

"I suppose you gave them refuge."

"What else could I do? They claim trolls drove them from Ratouk."

"Trolls? They rarely come that far west. Couldn't they find rooms in Snowden?"

Thinian shook his head. "I don't know. They probably found a cool welcome there with no gold. The dwarves are tiring of so many humans. The tensions have grown since we last drank in *The Ungrateful Child*."

"Did they bring food?"

"Not much I'm afraid."

"Well, the mushroom farms are thriving. Roosha says she can keep them producing indefinitely. The Dominion hasn't died a winter yet..." Cet rubbed his head as his visions returned. "What's a vracken?"

"A vracken? It's a kind of varog, I think. Why?"

“Jorj has been invading my thoughts with visions of them for the last hour. He could pick his moments better, the distraction nearly cost me the fight.”

“Well, the paladin’s thoughts are always of great importance,” said Thinian.

“Yea, I suppose,” Cet answered. “Space and time appear to be in peril of unravelling again.”

“I hate it when that happens.”

“Yea. Me too. I will leave you to complete your vital work here. Raise these gates, Thinian, as a symbol to the coming snows.”

“That I shall. And mind what the guardian tells you, Reet,” Thinian said with the briefest of smiles.

He turned, set his jaw in a line of command and barked an order to the work gang, bending to grasp a rope. A man clearly ready to do the part of at least one mule lifting the huge door into place.

Cet clipped up the narrow street of the small stone village between the inner and outer walls with the procession of horses in tow, his mind a jumble of thoughts – only some of them his own.

The houses here, like the rest of the great building, stood in various states of disrepair, but all had occupiers - their owners busily preparing the dwellings for the coming winter. Thin wisps of smoke rose from the chimneys of each hutchment. His mouth watered at the smell of heavily spiced meat wafting through the lane.

“What’s this place?” Reet asked.

“We call it *The Village*. Many new people live here.”

“Running from trolls?”

“Some, I guess.”

“Will the trolls come here? I’ve never seen a troll. There are none in my forest.”

“You don’t need to worry about trolls, Reet.”

“Just the guardian?”

“Hah. Don’t worry about Roosha either. She will find you something interesting to do. Think of it as an adventure and it will be.”

“You are the guardian’s male?”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“That must be scary.”

“Sometimes,” Cet smiled.

The steady clang of the farrier’s hammer along with the rich odour of the animals greeted them at the arching marble entrance of the stable.

“And where will I find room for these?” groaned the stable master when he saw the extra horses.

“Somewhere I’m sure. They’re fine animals.”

“Aye.” The man stroked the lead stallion. “From what I hear their riders will no longer be in need of them.”

Cet was not surprised the man knew this, his confidence in the palace’s protection lay in the web of communication between the forest and Citadel. A tangled matrix of plants, animals and subtle magical devices from outposts hidden in the great trees relayed alarms to the castle. This was a rough part of their world, civilisation kept its head down and its ears pricked.

Afterwards, they made their way through the labyrinth of corridors towards Cet’s family rooms, stopping at the kitchen to get bread, mutton and beer, all for Cet.

“What do you want to eat, Reet?”

“I have food with me.”

“Fine. After we supper, I must go see a man who knows...some things about some things. I will leave you with my son Lerick. He will find you a place to sleep. Roosha will be back tomorrow.”

“I know Lerick!” Reet exclaimed.

“Good. He can show you around.”

Vin Chi

The seventh stance of the mongoose, or so the fight masters of his order called it. Admittedly, Vin Chi's adoption of the ludicrous posture opened his energy gates fully and the vortex of power within him raged like a young river. His five earthly senses tingled, and his supernatural muses became alert and receptive. At least that was the theory. The monk had never quite believed in it. Any fool could tell you that a mongoose did not have seven stances, let alone another nine - all of which, of course, he knew perfectly.

Moments earlier he had completed his third hand-walking traversal of this lonely mountain lake, when something had triggered his subliminal training. Apparently, he was in some great danger.

The three small muscles in the back of his throat not playing a part in the concert of his pose groaned in scepticism. He hated having his reflexes managed by a bunch of stuffy old monks. He felt a familiar need for a few bottles of fortified dwarven wine. That usually had his higher-self drooling in the corner pretty quickly, leaving him happily oblivious to the hazards that perpetually surrounded him.

Vin Chi held the stance, nonetheless, and waited until he could determine the source of the threat. Finally, he observed a small group of humanoids standing atop a pass at the southern end of the valley. The two peaks on either side of the saddle rose like fangs over the lake.

At least his hangover had gone away. Once again, his mind, body and spirit were in their proper alignments. Two weeks earlier he had awoken, penniless and bruised, in a particularly disreputable alley in the mining town of Snowden. He had only a blurry memory of the previous night involving the friendly girls at *The Pink Lady*, and the black-fortuned gambling of *The Easy Bones*.

He had taken this trip into the mountains to refresh his spirit, making use of the invaluable techniques acquired from his venerable masters. Those same men who had tried to teach him to stay out of whorehouses, bars, and betting halls in the first place.

A double-dealt curse on those flaccid ninnies, thought Vin Chi as the inner fabric of his soul began to swell. His mind reached out to the valley, and like a river heedless of the pull of the earth, he flowed up the western shoulder of the pass to get a better look.

A large troll commanded a sorry-looking assembly of goblins, humans, and a few ragged looking blue elves. He wore a well-maintained suit of fine chain mail and had a number of tools and weapons strapped to his large muscle-roped body. The monk imagined him a rather handsome creature, as trolls go, and wondered briefly what female trolls looked for in a mate. Figuring it had to be pretty close to this guy.

The big creature repeatedly consulted a large leather-bound book and growled out directions to the detail. In Vin Chi's limited experience trolls had always been stupid and unmotivated. However, not only could this one read, but he shouted precise and explicit orders to the harried workers that bordered on pedantic.

"Maintain a perfect alignment between the southern star, an' the second eye of the lesser snake with them tertiary trenches...to a tolerance of half a thumb" he bellowed, drawing a line in the gravel with a big bony toe to avoid doubt. "Ensure sufficient depth in them pivot holes to allow for the matin' dance of a snarl spider...The black variety, not the brown..."

Tingling charges of familiarity crawled up Vin Chi's spine as he listened. Although the workers had just begun, the monk could already tell that the construction formed part of a defensive perimeter. That meant something worth defending, which meant something worth stealing. Suddenly, he really needed to get a look at what lay over that pass.

A wriggle of excitement tickled his belly at the thought of some great puzzling prize and its attendant dangers, a perfect antidote to the terrible ennui that would grip him from time to time. Since that first sip of ale in the port town of Bronamesk so long ago, the junior monk of the order of the Blue Fly had left his destiny behind, and had embraced, with earthy abandon, the providences of his fate. He felt another surge of gratitude to the then young Cet, and the bright forest girl, Roosha. They had opened his eyes to a better, albeit fuzzier, world.

Only meditation, serene introspection, and contemplation of the lesser, greater and transcendental selves will ease the distractions of the hunger for life, whispered the voices in his head. Dealing with boredom, by becoming boring! Vin Chi would hiss back. Fighting water with water. He could never win these internal arguments, but neither need he surrender.

Vin Chi's eyes fluttered and he searched deep in his astral self for a hold on the old spirit of the Moonreach mountain range. In a timeless, silent, moment within a moment, he came near the top of the westernmost of the two peaks. He planted himself beside a boulder with a view into the next valley.

Below, nestled in the crater of a nearly dormant volcano, sat a huge silver-black metal structure that did not disappoint the monk at all. On the contrary, he had never seen anything so intriguing.

Vin Chi smiled to himself and settled in for a good long look.

Finch and Gouda

The rain had stopped, and a bright low moon peeked out through the clouds. It illuminated a figure, like a five-pointed star, clinging impossibly high up a smooth face of marble. Like a vertical highway, it rose on the eastern side of The Citadel between two outcroppings of harsh mountain rock.

Finch paused for a moment. He had made his last lunge successfully, and his fingers now grasped a thin settlement crack in the considerable breadth of stone. Old stone. Fantastic. So many seasons, sun cycles even, thought Finch, so much history. The hoolean loved this castle, loved that unlike so many dead ruins he had seen, this great palace still lived. Resident's came and went, bickering and squabbling, usually killing for the right to live here.

But the walls remained and grew with an altogether different agenda than the countless transient denizens. Generations of sentient life had worked and reworked the great castle without plan or reason compelled by something to build - to serve the stone. Finch had watched Thinian repairing the gates, and he knew they too would play their part in the Citadel's history.

He edged closer to the tiny ledge. At this rate it would take another twenty minutes to reach. A warm flush of pride filled him as he savoured a moment of self-satisfaction. Of all the Citadel's thieves, Finch felt certain that only he could have made this climb unassisted, and the joy of revealing the mysteries of the hidden ledge belonged to him alone. No doubt a great treasure awaited, he assured himself, although he had an inclination to imaginings of that sort. And its discovery would force Cet to forgive him for not riding the forest perimeter that afternoon.

The hoolean had a passion for the secrets of this ancient place. Like the rings of an old odam tree, the history of Citadel revealed itself to his prying eyes and fingers. How deep it went, how many times some new force had routed the huge building's occupants not even that blowhard, The Sage, would hazard a guess. The mists of time concealed the origins of this haphazard pile of marble.

The Dominion, as Cet and Thinian had called themselves, and their followers lived here like so many had before on the facade of a living labyrinth of stone. Finch vowed again to peer beneath the surface, grasped by an obsession to know its nooks and passageways as strong as Thinian's to make right the ravages of time on the great battlements.

The small ledge he crawled towards sat just eighty feet away, high in the tallest of the Citadel's walls. Finch had noticed it the week before, just after dusk by the

light of a strong moon. He did not know why he had never seen it before, but assumed it had lay concealed by some vaguely defective spell undone by the lunar light. As he traversed towards it he noticed occasional movement.

Another few feet won with care, finding another slab slightly out of line. Finch dislodged a loose piece of stone, and it plummeted to the rocks a hundred yards below without a sound. The hoolean smiled, the wall shed its skin like a snake. It would not have surprised him if new wall grew in from beneath.

A small head appeared at the ledge, seeming to emerge from the wall, it emitted a long “Squaaark!”

Finch had come close enough to make out the head of a young wyvern, a breed of large flying lizards common in these high mountains. The hoolean experienced his first pang of fear. A young wyvern crying for food meant an old wyvern out looking for it somewhere.

He needed to hurry this along, so he pulled two stout daggers from his belt and wedged them in a crack, deftly fixing the end of a climbing rope to the pitons. He lowered himself a distance, and then with two dancing traverses, crossed the face to the ledge, grasping it with one hand.

The wyvern chick pecked without mercy at the fat morsels of hoolean finger, and Finch almost cried out as he scrambled over the lip. The chick backed out of his way, eyed him once then, not being a species renowned for fear, dismissed him and then went back to chattering in earnest at the big moon.

Up close the shimmer of the illusionary wall covering the entrance became evident. Although not expertly done, it had prevented detection of the grotto so far. Behind the false wall he discovered a passage that led back into the Citadel. Finch unsheathed the long daggers he kept in each boot and made his way down the wide sloping corridor in the shadows provided by the obliquely positioned moon. The warmth of a body registered with the wide pupils of his night eyes. Something with hotter blood than a lizard lay hidden around the corner twenty feet ahead.

The skin on his neck tingled, he felt the outline of a danger field here. The hoolean wished he had worn his ‘tilian armour, however it took time to don and to remove. He had not expected an adventure this afternoon, at least not this kind. His original intentions had involved a girl named Selena. Although to all appearances a young human, she revealed a marvellous sparkle in a love embrace. She kept her quarter-elven heritage a well-guarded secret. He suppressed another non-existent pang of guilt at not riding the forest rim with Cet. Choosing between six hours on a pony and the joys of life’s friendliest game was not difficult.

At the alcove's end he found a nest of sticks and old blankets. The chamber opened to the right and the larger room had old pieces of furniture and clothing. A human form lay wrapped in blankets on a small bed in the corner. The body grunted and rolled over.

'Well, well. A lass, and an appealing one at that,' Finch thought to himself. He flicked a small pebble at her head and said aloud, "Hey lizard-maid. Wake and feed that chick."

The girl jumped up in an eye-blink, armed with a small sword, searching the room for the intruder. "Where do thee be?! Show thyself. Out where I can smite thee dead!" She growled, her voice feral and fearless, penetrating Finch's normally resilient confidence surprisingly well.

"Drop your sword, girl, and I will not put out your eye."

"My eye? Oh, how you will die. When plucked from thy belly, my sword will I drop. Come to me as you do, like a shadow rodent."

"Your name, girl."

"Your face, rat! Out where I can see thee, and maybe then will I talk."

The request seemed reasonable, and Finch stood up out of the darkness. The girl laughed, the two had similar heights and builds.

"You be but a child. Oh, so bold. Thou shall have a smack on thy insolent behind."

Finch took a moment to contemplate the thought and then said, "That is not your name."

"No young one, I have the name Gouda."

"And I have the name Finch," he said, mocking her peculiar speech. "I am not a child, but a hoolean. And fully grown."

"Then thou should know better than to creep to a maid's bedroom, Finch," she hissed.

Finch thought to himself, not the first time he had done that. Aloud he said, "Have you hidden here in our Citadel for long?"

"Citadel it you call it now. Not always yours. Drove us out you did...and all my people did you kill. All my family," her voice quiet and low.

"Well it is ours now. And well deserved. Your people were like animals sucking at the foul tit of a demon horde in the cellars. For all the good it did them."

"You know nothing of us!" She shrieked, tensing to strike at Finch, but then thought better of it.

The room darkened, as if someone had covered the moon with a sack. A large shape landed on the ledge and descended silently into the entrance, its wings folding as it advanced. The parent, thought Finch, Gouda must have been waiting for it to return.

Finch cast a stone from his sling, striking the beast in the centre of its head, eliciting a satisfactory howl of pain, but not slowing it any. Gouda rushed him as well. Finch backhanded her sharply as he sidestepped her clumsy strike, sending her crumbling into the corner. Although capable of a savagery belying the gentle disposition of his race, Finch did not relish the thought of killing, and did not wish the girl dead. He just wanted time to concentrate on the big charging lizard.

Finch dove across the room. The wyvern also had keen night sight, and struck as the hoolean passed, taking a piece of his leather jerkin along with a small sample of skin. Recovering from the blow, he rose and rushed the wyvern, dodging its second strike, and burying both his daggers in the creature's chest.

It collapsed with a gurgle.

Gouda recovered to see Finch withdrawing his blades and scrambled across the floor to the dying creature.

"To kill her...no need. Just protecting her chick she was!"

The fire of battle died in the hoolean's chest, and as he watched the distressed wailing of the girl mourning her dead pet, coldness gripped him. He wanted nothing more than to leave here and let this one corner of The Citadel become forgotten.

"I am sorry, Gouda."

"Sorry? No use is that! Murdered his mother you did. The chick needs feeding. Rode her to gather food, I did. Steal enough from your kitchens, I could not."

"You rode an eight-foot lizard into our kitchens to steal food? That seems unlikely, even gnomes would have noticed that."

"No you fool..." her sobbing had subsided.

Finch noticed her glance at a chest of drawers. He crossed to it and found that it pushed easily to one side revealing a small sloping tunnel.

"So you come and go to the Citadel through here. Where does it lead?"

"Uninvited you come, with daggers drawn, to kill things and ask your pointy little questions. Find answers yourself."

He spotted a dot of light at the end of the tunnel, and backed down to it keeping an eye on Gouda. She sat on the floor next to the dead wyvern watching the hoolean with eyes now dry.

Finch peered quickly through the peephole, and then sat on the floor and laughed. The Sage.

Then he groaned. Cet sat with him.

The Sage

When Finch crawled into the room, followed by Gouda and the wyvern chick, he understood why he had not found his way to the ledge earlier. The Sage had lied.

Small lamps burning in every corner cheerfully illuminated the room, wooden shelves full of neatly organized books, scrolls, and maps of every imaginable sort lined the walls. Finch always found it fascinating, beguiled by thoughts of so much secret lore.

The owner-curator of the esoteric clutter perched on the edge of a worn leather chair in the centre of the room. The ancient fellow leaned forward speaking in earnest to Cet, who sat on a low stool listening intently. The older man's jowls, covered with a thin greying beard, wobbled gently to the rhythm of his energetic explanations. His sparkling eyes sat deep in his head under a single black eyebrow. A few wisps of snowy hair, meticulously combed, failed to cover his shiny age-spotted dome.

He claimed to have the name Uianania Sawasterack. However, behind his back the Citadel's denizens simply referred to him as The Sage, mostly because he stood ready to laud forth his vast store of arcane knowledge to anyone ill-advised enough to ask. They used the title as something of a pejorative as the man did not always know all the facts, and everybody knew it. However, some of his information proved useful.

The problem lay in separating the hugla from the bugla.

The Sage had lived in the Citadel for decades, or so he claimed, before Radoun and his demon cult, and even the previous occupants. Cet never got the straight answer he wanted on the subject and had eventually stopped asking. Other tenants must have found The Sage's seemingly inexhaustible well of knowledge a useful resource and allowed him to remain. And in turn he had begged Cet to allow him to continue his tenancy, claiming his enormous library and network of fellow academics, as well as his own substantial intellect, could service them as it had others. Cet had agreed.

"Gouda," exclaimed the Sage, "You know better than to come when I have a visitor." He added with a chuckle, "and Finch. Why do I not find myself unduly surprised?"

"Me either, Finch. I see now you had more important matters on your mind this afternoon than the Citadel's defence," Cet said. "And who might this be?"

The bright light revealed a simple and attractive girl of at least fifteen seasons. Finch felt relieved he had not killed her, and he experienced another pang of guilt at rashly taking the life of her wyvern. But what else could he have done?

“Um. This is –“

“Dead be the chick’s mother! Thanks to the little butcher. Hungry he be,” the girl interrupted.

The young wyvern pecked at the leg of Gouda’s baggy trousers. She walked over to the real door, lizard in tow, and left without another word. The two men watched her go, then looked back at Finch. He also watched, focusing on the rhythm of her slender hips. His elders observed his fascination with amusement.

“- Gouda,” The hoolean said after the door slammed.

“Its all right to tempt the fates, Finch,” laughed Cet, “just don’t do it scornfully.”

The comment irritated Finch. He felt bad enough without their insinuations. As if he would lie with a girl who lived with lizards. Although, having observed her in the light, he felt inclined to forgive the odd personal habit.

Finch explained briefly the events of his afternoon, starting after his tryst with Selena, and ending with his concerns over the lizard bite.

“Don’t worry about your scratch,” said Cet. He felt no need to berate the hoolean for not being with him that afternoon. When Finch learned of the bandit raid, the hoolean’s own guilt would do the work of any number of tirades about discipline. To the Sage he said, “How is it, Uianania, that this girl comes though your bookshelf with such familiarity?”

The beetle-browed academic sighed. “She is the daughter of one of the men in Radoun’s band. A man called Kol. He performed the tasks of the wyvern master. She came to me after you defeated them, begging me to hide her. She did not know the kindly people you would turn out to be.” His face broke into an obsequious, yet sincere, grin.

“Gouda knew the wyvern nest well, and wanted to stay there. Like her father she has a way with them...She seemed harmless. So I kept her secret and let the matter be. I should have guessed that Finch here would find his way to the pretty young thing eventually. I suppose it’s best out in the open. I believe she is a good girl, under the dirt. At least, as good as you’ll find raised by demon worshippers, living with lizards in these unfriendly mountains. Perhaps you can find a place for her here.”

Cet shrugged. “She can stay. Finch, you found her, she’s your problem. See to it she finds a real room if she wants. Other than yours.”

The world stopped revolving about Finch long enough for him to realize that he had interrupted a meeting between Cet and the Sage and started towards the door.

“However, you may stay and hear this, if you wish.”

Finch heard the command and sat down on the floor with a sigh.

The Sage continued where he had left off before the interruption. “There aren’t many vracken. They don’t like one another. They have territories, almost like cats. These can extend for thousands of miles. If one is nearby, then it is most likely that he came from somewhere else.”

Finch frowned, “What’s a vracken?”

“They are a kind of varog, rooted in the same...darkness. But they are more intelligent, and dangerous creatures.”

“Jorj claims to feel the presence of one near here. He is hunting it, alone, as we speak,” Cet said.

Finch’s eyes settled for comfort on his daggers, and he fingered a hilt with as much bravado as the gesture allowed.

The sage went on, “Now, there are only a handful of vracken on the continent, and I can only find one who is unaccounted for. The why-of-that is an interesting story in itself.”

“What happened to him?”

“All traces vanished after the last dual eclipse.”

“That time of alignment of the moons? The last was well before I was born.”

“Yes. Sun cycle 7684. There is another this winter, as you know. It is a very special time for the most powerful of mages.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think any of our xeras are making preparations.”

“Not just xeras, any of the magical disciplines could make use of the magic, instrumentors, hexers, vivectors, even druids like your good wife. Anyway, it is rumoured that this missing vracken attempted the great magic on that night, but was outwitted by none other than the Baron of Gauree. They say it was he who finally ascended to the centre of Kea and completed his spell, forging an item of great power. The vracken was never heard from again.”

“What did the Baron make?” asked Finch.

“He never told me. But I suspect it has something to do with the absence of magic in his city.”

“Sixteen cycles ago, that’s a long time,” Cet pondered.

“Yes. So perhaps he is not the vracken Jorj is tracking. Although he did hunt in these parts. He may be dead, if that’s the right word for it. Of course, Jorj’s vracken

could have come from another continent, another planet, or another dimension. They usually do their best to blend in to the surroundings, certainly when they first arrive. They are dangerous, but as a rule prefer an orderly life, one that does not involve being in continual contention with the local population. They usually stay away from...or kill, those that can detect their presence.”

“I believe Jorj is in more danger than he realises,” said Cet.

“Isn't he always?” Finch sighed quietly.

“They are curious beings...the vracken. Partly human, and partly like their lesser kin, the varog. Not altogether evil in the traditional sense of the word. It's as if their human side needs to balance the darkness within.

“The older they get - and they can live indefinitely if they are not destroyed - the greater the tendency to keep to themselves. That's quite common among lesser immortal beings. Building elaborately defended lairs, and such. They usually, but not always, keep out of the affairs of men. You see, seclusion is the key to their survival. But one cannot always predict what they will do. They are possessed of truly unfathomable spirits.”

As always, the Sage was peppering his dissemination with qualifications. The old man's in true form, thought Finch. All they seemed to have learned so far was that this thing could be anybody, who could do anything, and might not be called evil in any traditional sense of the word. He hoped the Sage would come to a point soon so he could leave. He had better things to be doing. Gouda's curves, under that loose clothing, occupied his mind.

Cet had grown accustomed to the droning flood of vague facts that accompanied any request for information from the Sage.

“If it is our missing friend, you might be interested to know that he lived here in this palace once, long ago.”

“And who is this vracken?”

“He has gone by many monikers in his nine hundred seasons, but his real name is Noctodondolus. But he's no daemon, so knowing that won't help.”

Roosha and her Daughters

Finch awoke right before dawn and jumped to his feet, pulling on his leather trousers. He gave the young kitchen maid who lay on the bed covered with a blanket a pat on her ample rump. Her huge feet hung off the end of the bed.

“How are you this fine morning...sorry, I’ve forgotten your name. Margtada wasn’t it?” The gnome girl grumped and rolled to her back, nowhere near consciousness. Her long black hair wrapped around her huge nose. A prodigious snore choked to life deep in her throat.

“Is that so! Well, My Lady, I too, feel tremendous!”

Again, the ginoma did not respond.

This did not surprised Finch. He had made love to her, or perhaps at her, continuously for three hours the night before, revealing to her pleasures well outside her normal experience, spending her thoroughly.

As he pounded out of her room and down the hall, Finch pulled a small worn pocket book from his trousers, etched on the cover he read again the words *Erotic Greatness*. He liked the sound of that even more now than he had when he first discovered the book lying in one of the forgotten corners of the Sage’s library. He turned to a page marked with a small piece of red silk. The chapter title, *Lesson 12 Willing Slaves – the Art of Congregation*, leapt off the delicate vellum.

Finch took a deep breath as his fingers traced the elegant words and his heart beat double when he found he could now turn the page. The words raced to his eyes from the tome. He read as he walked.

You have mastered the deepest roots of your sexual control, and a woman is now yours for as long as she pleases you. You have seen that withholding your seed focuses and strengthens your energy. An array of potent herbs for enhancing pleasure are now yours to dispense. You have examined the variety of erogenous mechanisms available to women of different races. Did you find the ginoma surprising? Little wonder the males are so willing to do the cooking and cleaning. And if you are reading these words, you have mastered many of the talents required to become a great lover.

Great lovers, however, do not rest until they are legendary lovers. Stay vigilant young stallion, as you now enter the most critical part of your training. You must learn to wield your newfound strength and energy as you would a sword. You must take two partners this time, and fuse them into one ball of lightning. Using the techniques from Lesson 3 ‘The Aromas of Ripeness’, you must find two females

whose cycles are aligned. This is more challenging than finding one, of course. Fortunately they often hunt in pairs...

The hoolean grinned, closing the book, saving the rest for later. He still could not believe the rivers of pleasure the tome had opened for him. Thanks to its teachings, he felt as though an extra team of horses pulled the chariot of his libido. Meet them, entice them, consume them, and forget them, had become his new rather long-winded motto.

But wind he had to spare. Each new day yawned before him full of the promise of new triumphs, and he left no passageway in the huge castle un-prowled in their pursuit. He had even managed to bed Gouda. She had chosen to remain in the wyvern nest, so he had scaled the great wall a second time to avoid The Sage and his gossiping tongue. The reticent girl had finally succumbed to his charms. Waking the appetites of the cloistered virgin remained his greatest triumph so far, but the climb of the wall and her possessive ranting grew tiresome so he had moved on.

Finch felt like a glowing iron bar spewing sparks of enchantment, leaving a swath of forlorn females and bitter cuckolds in his path. The former devastated, and the latter held at bay by the well-founded rumours of his skill with a blade. He took a moment of comfort from the subtle weight of the pair of long daggers. One in each boot.

On this particular day, Finch's nose led him to the small town in between the walls where several new families had taken up residence. There, he hoped to find some lovely young thing in need of his special attentions. Perhaps seeking comfort after a frightening ordeal at the hands of a rogue band of trolls.

He rounded through the great gates on a full head of steam, and stopped suddenly. He had come face to face with Roosha and her three daughters as they returned from a moon in the great forest. A small army of rodents, lizards and birds followed in their wake.

Lea led the procession, a squirrel squatting on her shoulder. The oldest of the girls, she had the same dark complexion and efficient build of her mother. Only her large hazel eyes belonged to her father, Cet. Her face floated in front of the hoolean, glowing from the exertion of the hike, haloed by the cowl of her robe.

Their eyes met, and a jolt erupted in his groin, sailed up through his heart, and continued to his brain. It wiped any objections he may have had to a congress with the girl based on fealty to her father. She had crossed the verge from girl to woman, and in his energized state of mind, that was that.

Roosha had to bite her lip to keep from laughing as she gazed upon the stupefied hoolean. To her heedful eye, Finch had shouted, “Off with your smock young Lea! Down on the ground. I am ravenous. And you shall be my next meal.”

Lea glanced at her mother, who conveyed her approval with a look. She could have signalled with fireworks and trumpets for all the difference it would have made to Finch, who stood there as oblivious as a horny little fence post.

“You should go slower, Finch. You will get where you wish to be in better time,” said Roosha, delivering the words in a measured way, ensuring that each syllable would linger in his mind.

Upon hearing his name, Finch popped out of his reverie and responded inventively, “Um, huh?”

He turned his head to look at Roosha, his eyes reluctantly breaking their engagement with Lea’s. The girl had borne the ram of Finch’s regard with outward ease. Lea’s composure pleased Roosha, but she could feel the storm raging inside her daughter.

Finch’s gaze returned to the girl, and Roosha allowed the moment to continue. Lea widened her eyes, and Finch’s mind opened to the wonder of the possibilities. The dew on the early morning grass focused the sun’s rays about the girl’s head, and the menagerie of small animals gathered around them began to chatter and chirp helpfully. Finch drank in her face, his mind dazzling at the pleasures that awaited him - them.

The younger two girls watched on, quietly recording every detail.

“Were you not on your way to somewhere, Finch?” asked Roosha, as she glided past him, her daughters falling in line behind.

Finch radiated an unnatural heat indicative of his recent antics. Any such abuse of the chemistries of life angered Roosha a little. It could disrupt the balance of the whole community. So you’ve been withholding, the druid thought to herself. Dare to my daughter, then we will see.

The earthy little ship headed off around the corner dragging nature in its wake, leaving Finch standing outside the Citadel in a daze. It started to rain rather heavily. The big wet drops, and the spiteful peck of a small bird, brought him fully to his senses. He turned and headed back inside, thinking, hadn’t the sun been shining a moment ago?

Lathalia

“I’m tired of this spell, Old Feathers,” said the gaunt woman sitting at the small desk scribbling in two journals at the same time. A small green stone spun silently around her head, the soft glow reflecting off the oily matting of her hair. A layer of grime concealed any attractive qualities she might have possessed. “And I miss Thinian.”

“I see, I see, whoo...I see.”

“I, I, I see, see, see, ahhh! How long have I been down in this wretched hole?”

“Too long,” the owl said, preening himself on the shoulder of the mage.

Long ago Lathalia had stopped noticing the smell from the swamp in the next room. She used it to raise electric eels for her research. With the exception of the small glow lamp on her table, all remaining illumination came from the eclectic gathering of magical devices flickering and bubbling around the room, and the shimmering blue energy creature quivered silently over in a corner.

“A bath. I say, a bath would be lovely. No. Better yet, two bathes, or is it bathi. Ha, ha, ha, hee! I think I need a drink, Ouanoow?”

“All goone.”

“No more? Damn. Or is it nooo moore? Do I talk like you, or you like me, bird?”

The xera jumped up suddenly, disturbing the owl, which flapped to its perch. She raised her hands in the air and began a staccato incantation. A crackle of white flame erupted from her fingertips and snaked slowly across the room. It curled and twisted in response to her gesticulations, then slammed into the energy creature with a final surge of enthusiasm.

“Zzzt. Ssssseven, mmm’lady,” The blue cloud hummed appreciatively. “Best evvver. Zzzt.”

“Best ever. Yes. And the control,” she exclaimed. “Did you see my control, Ouanoow? Did you? I have become a goddess.”

“Whooo. Always have yoouu been my gooddess, sweet xera,” Ouanoow hooted quietly.

“You mock me owl. Is that wise? Have you not witnessed the power in my fingertips?”

“Every - whoo - day four six moons.”

Lathalia sat down at her desk. Her quill tapped nervously for a moment, and then she jumped up again and began to pace the central chamber. Only this room of the ancient dwarven complex allowed her freedom to stretch her long legs.

“I miss sex. You know what I mean? Huh, owl, hmmm?”

“An oold ooowl am I, mistress. Tooo many children –“

“Children? I never mentioned children; I’m talking about sex. The lusty hot tangling of limbs, a good grind. Children. Ha. You sound like Thinian, you old bird.” Adding in the deep voice of a man “Come on, Lay. Cet has six. I just want a son...Arrg. Does he think of anything else? Six! And all ordered like a little army. Girl, boy, girl, boy, girl, boy. She’s a brood dragon that Roosha. She lives only to make children.”

“Whooo. And tooo be guardian of the foorest. Oooh.”

“Yea, the guardian, whatever that means. I think she just gave herself that title to feel important. The time of the druids has come and gone, long gone. I mean, can she do this?”

Another searing flame shot from her fingers across the room reaching the energy creature in a fraction of a second.

“Zzzt. Eight!” it said.

“Nooo. But she can doo oother things. It is mooore than a title as yoouu well know.”

“Yea, I well knooooow.”

Lathalia collapsed on her bed with a sigh, staring up at the ghostly bas-reliefs on the ceiling. She lay there awhile recklessly spinning a fine necklace, mesmerised by the flashing red reflections off the large ruby in its gold setting.

The stone was a gift from Hogan Ironshield.

“Dwarves made these carvings, Ouanoow. Did you know that? The engineers that helped me with this place made me promise to let their lore-masters have a look when I’ve finished. By the gods, this Citadel is old.”

Ouanoow had decided long ago, that once he had heard a story more than twelve times, he would say nothing.

“Ohhh. But I do miss Thinian. His strong body. His sweat. His great stiff thing. And his energy, like a hammer,” Lathalia said stroking her naked leg, “But he was nothing like the dark man, Ouanoow. Oh that he would come back. It seemed so real, but it was all just too much magic. Can fantasies lovers ever return? A black and sparkling mist he was, and the heat, oh the heat. Oh. Ohh...oohhhh...”

The owl fluttered uncomfortably for a moment as his mistress writhed on the bed, then went to sleep.

Roosha and Cet

Cet sat in the bedchamber he shared with his wife. An energetic fire burning in the hearth warmed the evening air. Three big dogs lay spread before it soaking up the heat with placid relish. Situated in the morning wing of the Citadel, the spacious chamber belonged to a suite of rooms used by his family. Thick brown matting covered the walls. The weave came from a vine found climbing the huge odam trees. It gave off a mild scent filling the room with a dozy pleasance; one of the hundred little ways Roosha shaped even her inside her world.

The druid came into the room with her four most ardent followers in tow. The little forest creatures eyed the dogs warily and scurried to favoured places around the room. Cet read by the soft light of a glowing sphere suspended from the ceiling and he looked up from his book when she arrived. He smiled, but said nothing - content just to watch her for a while.

In preparation for bed, Roosha removed her smock, but donned no sleeping attire. She moved to the fire and stood warming herself, inviting his eye. The moon of absence made her nakedness arousing and Cet wondered if he read an invitation in the slight tilt of her hips. Probably, she was reliable in that arena. Her strong compact body had well-formed thighs and calves, and the small firm breasts showed little signs of the suckling of six children. The sun had freckled her skin brown and her thick chestnut hair tumbled off her head into a single poorly-managed plait that ran down to her rounded buttocks.

The flame flickered on Roosha's square face. Her mahogany eyes, heavy of lash and rarely blinking, ruled her visage from beneath untended brows. The dark orbs seldom relinquished one's gaze to her full lips. Her tranquil expression revealed little of her thoughts, evoking the impression that she preferred to observe rather than participate in the events that surrounded her. It must be said that this reaction did not serve the truth well.

As Cet watched, a small fearless ferret crept across her feet and curled up under the neck of the largest canine. Roosha looked content, and nicely settled in herself. She stood quietly allowing the inspection. As he eyed her familiar contours the reason for the display came to him.

"You're with child again, aren't you?" Cet asked, leaning forward in his chair.

His wife continued to look into the fire for a few moments. Then she smiled, went and kissed him affectionately. Pushing his feet off the footstool, she sat down

and began undoing her hair. Her sleeping gown hung on a wall within reach. Cet took it and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“A boy or a girl?”

Roosha shrugged, “I do not know, husband. Maybe in seven moons it will come. A child of winter. Born here in warm den. Nice, no?” She looked up at him out of one eye.

“Our warm den,” Cet corrected her reflexively.

“Our warm den.” The heavy accent of the ancient language of her coven touched even those few words.

“Maybe in seven moons?”

“Yes. I do not know this time. Not yet. Maybe I do not care. I will not look this time. It will come as it comes.”

“I thought you were finished with making children.”

“I was. But I thought again. One more before grandchildren appear.”

“Grandchildren? Don’t be absurd, Lea is just in her sixteenth season. Much too young for children.”

“She is able. She is same age as I when we began.”

“That was different.”

“Different. Yes, maybe...”

“This child breaks your pattern.”

“Hmm. Yes, all harmony lost,” she laughed quietly.

Cet pondered this puzzling development as he admired her face in the firelight. A small black bird flapped from the bedpost to the top of her head and carefully pecked at a bug that had surfaced out of Roosha’s thick hair.

“It is good to have an unplanned child, Cet. Do you not think? You do not mind, do you?”

“Ha. You are asking me? I thought druids did not consult men in these matters.”

“We do not.”

He thought about it for a moment and said, “No, I don’t mind at all...quite the opposite.”

Roosha beamed.

Cet stared back in astonishment, and asked, “Is this how normal women go about making families?”

She nestled into his lap wrapping her arms around his neck. “I do not know these normal women of which you speak, fine strong husband.”

“In seven moons. That means three moons past.”

Cet thought for a moment. Their marriage had reached a stage where they could remember individual lovemaking encounters.

“That time by the waterfall?”

“Could be,” she said, “or in glade...down in valley.”

“Hmm. Maybe it was here, in the bath, when I twisted my ankle, and you...” He looked down past the bush of her eyebrows. “...saw to my injury.”

“Mmm. Perhaps,” she giggled, and then kissed him again, this time with passion.

Cet returned the kiss certain now of the offer in her manner. It dawned on him that she would have this child to please herself and him. He appreciated the importance of the gesture and found the thought deeply arousing. Roosha got up and pulled him to the bed.

“Come. Be with me,” she said in a voice she saved for love play. She had not bathed since returning, and the dense mixture of odours from the forest, and from her own body, stoked the fire already burning.

“Ummm, I will, indeed. That would be most sweet.” He frowned. “It’s like there is something in the air around the Citadel lately.”

Roosha laughed, “Don’t worry, I am having something done about that.”

Her comment confused him momentarily until she brought his attention back to the subject at hand with a gentle whinny, like his mare gave around the stallions. Exactly like his mare, in fact. He laughed aloud then eagerly followed her under the covers.

Cet came upon Finch the next day in a courtyard at the back of the Citadel. A small but vigorous waterfall plunged out of the rock into a shallow pond in its centre. The hoolean sat under the cascade, letting the cold water pummel his head.

A huge frog had occupied the pond since before their time here. It always gave visitors to the glade a judgmental stare.

Both Cet, and the frog, found the hoolean’s behaviour odd.

“Hmmm. What would this be in aid of?”

“Nothing,” Finch snapped. “Just sitting here minding my own affairs.”

“Well if you’re not busy, maybe you could help me collect some axes from Hogan later.” Cognisant of Finch’s apparent ill temper, he kept the edge of command out of his voice.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t busy. Besides I’m not in the mood for that little hairball.” Many of the clean-faced hoolean race had a healthy pognophobia.

“Suit yourself,” Cet sighed, leaving Finch in the desire-quelling rush of water. He would not waste his time disciplining the hoolean for his insolence. He had determined that nothing would spoil his radiant good humour.

Vin Chi Interferes

The gang of fire giants attending to the obsidian-black framework below wielded their titanic hammers with an enthusiasm that should have deafened the moons. That they did not was perhaps due to the delicate magical shimmer that blanketed the rock-strewn crater floor.

Now there is something you don't see every day, thought Vin Chi. It almost made him forget about the troll who could read, or the ghostly sense of familiarity in his directions to the work crew still toiling in the pass to his right. The structure had more iron and silver in it than Vin Chi would have thought possible. A million cycles of turbulent civilisation on the planet had made both resources scarce.

A small keep with a single tower perched halfway up the western wall of the crater. It quietly commanded a view of the construction effort and Vin Chi knew he would find answers to his thousand questions within its walls. So he watched the industry buzzing silently below and waited patiently for nightfall.

As dusk came and the daylight failed, large floating light-orbs appeared. Their radiance allowed work to continue uninterrupted. Vin Chi stirred to life and traversed under the pass where the troll-led party still worked, heading directly for the castle. As the monk approached, his eyes fixed on the building. The deep calm of his training settled on him and guided him through a twisted path up and down the sharp rise of the crater wall.

He came out of the trance suddenly and cursed. Then he looked back to see what invisible dangers he had avoided subconsciously with every step. Around him an ingenious variety of deadly devices of every sort latticed the landscape. He spotted pits, spikes, poison darts, alarm wires, and other esoteric machineries of death; many so cleverly concealed, he should never have noticed them at all.

He had only come this far because even in the vanishing daylight his neural pathways had known exactly where find each trap and where to find passage between. Then he had stopped. His training had expected something different. His foot should have been one inch from a fang of coiled snake. Instead he stared at a two-foot gap.

You could walk a drunken dragon through this, thought the monk.

The niggling sense of familiarity that had plagued him since his arrival finally clicked. He recognised the path of sanctuary he had followed. Someone from his

old order of monks had designed these defences. Someone trained in their most secret arts.

The ancient and studious order of the Blue Fly, thought Vin Chi, like the kind you found buzzing contemptuously around your head on a hot day ignoring the wave of your hand. How strange he should have happened upon this place so far from any civilised public house. His careful training had taught him to expect this kind of coincidence, the product of the holistic nature of the multiverse, so he had long ago decided to detest these freak occurrences whenever he encountered them.

The Blue Fly passed their ancient and collective wisdom down through the millennia essentially unchanged. Every now and again a truly remarkable monk would accidentally do some creative thinking and devise a new way to do an old thing. Then, after a generation of debate, modifications would be made to their tomes of expertise. Vin Chi shuddered as he recalled the countless hours spent absorbing their erudite passages.

The old pattern of traps around him brought to mind an era in the order referred to by his masters as the Rising Star. Considered now as a time of great imbalance and skewed alignments in their teachings. Vin Chi had stopped at a spot with an almost laughable deficiency in the layout. He stood for a moment and pondered the implications.

An old monk had designed this - a very old monk.

Fear is an emotion strange to a monk of the Blue Fly. But this nest of subtle defences made recently by a monk of some great age chilled him. The huge structure, which had so intrigued him earlier, began in the fading daylight to take on a sinister quality. He looked at the remaining distance to the castle feeling he did not want to learn its secrets after all. However, it stuck a chord with his normally well-suppressed social conscience, and he suspected this unfortunate discovery would lead to some great sacrifice on his part.

Vin Chi took a pause from the passage of time and aligned the wild rhythms of his imagination to the mountain beneath him seeking guidance from the wisdom in the stone. Unleashing the energy of his kidneys and spleen, he focused his formidable powers of concentration. The monk determined he would find and exploit a crack in the defences of this strange edifice, arising with apparent spontaneity from the ashes of flaming rock, in this forgotten corner of the MoonReach Mountains.

The monk glided in a velvet peace towards a shadowy point at the base of the northern wall of the keep. The lights from the work below cast an image of the

building on the side of the crater, the shadow providing excellent cover. As he drifted down, he noticed movement from a cave above the castle. Something had ambled out of the opening, and bounded down the slope on two long bandy legs. The distance and the shadows defeated further investigation. A shudder passed through him as he observed the creature descend easily over the rocks. The powerful loping motion revealed something dangerous, even by Vin Chi's standards.

The monk crept along until he reached the northern end of the building. Peering around the corner, he spotted the beast from the cave, apparently standing guard. It leaned against the wall near the front gate picking its teeth with a dagger long enough to serve as a hoolean's sword. To Vin Chi's fearful eye the sentinel's four long muscular arms, eight-inch tusk-like canine teeth, glowing red eyes, shining black pate, and enormous pointed elven ears, both long-lobed from the weight of skull earrings, competed equally for the prize of most distinctive feature.

Monsters of this sort this could only have arisen on this magically dense planet, created by powerful vivectors or vivectresses, wizards who had turned their minds to the manipulation of life itself. They created animals to be friends, guards, assassins and assistants. Hundreds of species owed their existence entirely to the artistic impulse, and hundreds more to sport. Many of these had magical enhancements. They had hardened bones, sharper senses, or the ability to fly, swim, or dig exceptionally well. Some could reproduce, and over time became integral parts of the environment.

No one had ever told Vin Chi that you called one of these creatures a gryox, pronounced with a growl. Or that vivectors had created them specifically as guardians. He lived in ignorance of the fact that it could emit a piercing scream audible for miles on this plane and thousands of miles astrally. He did not know that iron reinforced the creature's claws and teeth, but guessed as much from the soft screeching and occasional sparks as it scratched at the remains of its last meal.

The monk did not know any of this, but as he crouched looking at the beast, he would have believed anything you told him. His mind quickly cluttered with ways to avoid an encounter and still get into the castle. Over the wall seemed the most obvious route. Someone had constructed the castle recently and had rushed the job. He found the climb trivial. So he went up in the shadowed corner made by the courtyard and the protruding pavilion. Once on the wall walk, he looked across the courtyard towards the tower. A curled form slept on the parapet to his left. It looked

like a huge snake but with two sets of wings. It lay coiled carefully around an iron brazier glowing with the heat, keeping itself warm in the brisk cold.

Creeping his way around to the right, Vin Chi passed over the gate and its fearsome guard, and around to the end of the walk at the base of the tower. He had expected to find an entrance from there, but he did not. How odd, he thought, but the monk had seen stranger buildings.

He once visited the ruins of a castle built for the king of a mighty country, but one that had come under the influence of the court philosophers. They argued that to be king was to be perfect. The ruler nodding sagely in agreement. As well, they pointed out, that to be king was to descend from kings. Again an obvious point. Hence to be king was to be descended from perfection. Too true, poppa was great, thought the monarch. And indeed, it is clear that the perfection of rule was to establish a government that required no ruling. Uh, Ok. So since his ancestors were perfect, he was not needed, and they built him a castle with no way out.

Justice eventually prevailed however, since in arguing later about the nature of law and order, one had pointed out that most, if not all, crimes were committed by living creatures. Nods all around. Therefore life itself was guilty. Good point. So, they all promptly took their own.

Another good example of the dangers of letting logic guide you, thought Vin Chi, as he unwound the length of cord he kept around his waist. He made a lasso and after two tries, looped one of the crenels at the top of the tower. He silently made his way up. The winged serpent, a scilion, in the corner remained unaware of his presence. On the top he found a hatch. The monk spent a full hour examining the door for some traps, but could find nothing.

Good fortune remained Vin Chi's constant companion. Din had devised an ingenious exploding fire needle trap for this very door. It required extracts from an, understandably rare, sea-dwelling fire anemone and those took some time to come by. With so much to do he had moved on to other things.

Satisfied he could do so safely, Vin Chi picked the lock, and carefully lifted the door an inch. After a moment's inspection he could see that the round room below had no occupants and he lowered himself inside. The monk eased the heavy trapdoor closed, and slid noiselessly down the ladder.

He would come to think of this remarkable place as 'the room with three books'. Colourful lights from the structure below played through the single large window.

A small glowlamp sitting on a table in the centre revealed a busy room lined with iron plating. Padding around to the front, Vin Chi examined the collection of items on a curved table against the wall under the window.

On a pedestal in the middle of the wide sill sat a spherical silver cage a yard in diameter. Like a huge eyeball, it looked out through the window at the black structure below. Inside the sphere an orderly tangle of thin curved bars held a collection of variously shaped and coloured gems. Each of the mountings held a precious stone except for the one in the centre. That sat empty, awaiting a gem the size of a baby's fist.

Curious, thought the monk.

To the right on its own little stand there lay the first book, closed and locked with a thick silver clasp. Vin Chi would have bet his next three nights at *The Pink Lady* that the indecipherable curved writing on the front indicated that the book contained magic.

On a round table in the centre of the room he found the second book, a journal with the last entry dated two days ago. This one lay open amidst an intriguing collection of magical curios and devices of strange technology, evidence to the monk of exotic other-worldly experiments. At this point, it came as no surprise to him that he recognised the writing as the short pragmatic script he had learned as an acolyte in the Blue Fly.

The language contained mostly nouns and verbs, with only the simplest comparative adjectives, designed for the efficient recording of factual information. So, of course, Vin Chi had tried to write poetry with it. He got as far as:

The air disturbance of strength 3.6 - 4.3 causes second person female (possessive) epidermal body hair coloured (red: 30 brown: 70) located at cranium, fluctuations which allow the author to model with 70 of 100 accuracy (subjective): dead leaves found during seasonal cycle 8.4-9.2 inclusive...

And gave up.

However, he could take advantage of the fact that he could read it fast. He glanced at the latest entry first. It told how the author would go away to collect a wazua liver. The meticulous old monk gave an expected return date as several days hence. So Vin Chi steeled himself like he used to do as an acolyte, turned to the front of the journal and began to read.

A true adept had penned the ancient writing and the journal wove a spellbinding tale describing the events surrounding the construction below. The terse words came alive as Vin Chi read, impressing him to the point of envy.

The journal told a moving tale of loss describing a void left by a terrible misfortune, a courageous gamble gone wrong, revealing each detail with a poignant self-pity. It described the blackness of oblivion during which the author lost nine cycles of unlife. Then it sang joyfully of rejuvenation and finally of a newfound purpose: the building of a glorious gate, a portal to a distant plane that would bring an endless horde of demons from which he would harvest a bounty of magic, more magic than anyone ever had before. And with this power he would succeed.

This time the old monk would own the dual eclipse.

An irritating noise down the stairs interrupted Vin Chi's reading. He turned the journal to the last entry, he had a mind for such details, and hid in the only corner he could find in this round room: behind the trap door at the stairwell.

Din, the troll, tread lightly upon the stair, only the tuneless whistle announced his coming. It was a sound so irksome that a fire giant blacksmith hammering at his meteoric iron forge had once yelled at him to stop. He carried the leather-bound volume Vin Chi had seen him with earlier. Din stood for a few minutes hitting notes left out of even the worst musical scores. The noise reverberated around the iron walls of the room in a way that seemed to please the troll. After reading one more passage he placed the book on the windowsill, turned and went down the stairs. Even the thick leaded glass of the great window seemed grateful for the silence.

Vin Chi waited a few minutes and went back to the journal, turning to where he had left off. The fascinating tale continued describing dangerous quests for special items, cunning negotiations with powerful demigods, and brutal tortures in search of information. It mentioned rumours of powerful magic that might prove useful, and gave great detail of problems encountered, speaking with pride of solutions achieved. Sidebars had notes of consultations with wizards and intricate calculations of magical frequencies. Much of this went over Vin Chi's head. He had not studied much magic.

One entry troubled him especially. It concerned the collection of a soul from an ideal candidate located quite by accident. The soul would be used to bait the demons, the theory being that they would find its vulnerable purity irresistible.

As he finished reading hours later, the dawn broke, and the monk glanced at the third book, the one left by the troll. Written in plane language across the front he read the words: *The Book of Trans-temporal Dimension Portal Design*. Much of the content described the magical spells required to build and arm the gate below.

The author had scribed some parts in the script of the Blue Fly, and some in a common tongue, presumably for the benefit of the troll. It said that another volume recorded the final spell for opening the gate, clearly the book with the please-keep-out clasp under the window.

The troll would probably return soon to start a new day's work, so he thumbed through the rest quickly. Towards the end he found the description of the silver cage. It contained the precious stones that would help focus the magical field which would in turn open the gate and give the demons passage to this world. The sphere required a number of different types and sizes of gem, although unusual and valuable, none one might class as exceptional. Except for one. A large ruby would sit in the centre of the cage, a gem of incomparable quality and value. So far the author had only heard rumours of three that might suit his purposes.

Vin Chi read with great personal interest about the candidate rubies, performed some intricate mischief, and then left without a trace. Heading towards a place where he knew the folks would find all his little discoveries of great concern indeed.

Jorj

Twirls of dust performed a listless dance in the fading light of day, disturbing the patch of gravel at the intersection of the ancient roads. Jorj sat on his horse in the centre sniffing at the autumn air. The vracken left no trail of smell, but the activity helped to focus his senses. The slightest feeling of nausea passed through him. The creature had moved somewhere west, but he could not tell how far.

“I am a mouse to this cat, Gallia,” the paladin said as he stretched in his saddle.

He sat again and encouraged the big mare to a trot.

“We’re just a ten minutes ride to the Eagle’s Rest, girl. Tonight, a proper bed for me, and for you a rubdown and a nice bit of oats,” he said with a pat. “Three weeks sleeping hard, and gnawing bits of grass have earned you a break.”

She whinnied, seeming to approve.

The Eagle’s Rest lay in a valley with high walls like a gorge. But no river ran down the centre, only a single perfectly-cobbled road. The buildings nestled up against the rock on either side. A quality of the mason’s craft gave the finished stones of the village a character sturdier than the surrounding rock.

“I swear there’s dwarven blood in these folk, Gallia. The buildings will outlast the mountains.”

Jorj dismounted in front of the only pub, it sat along the northern wall in the centre of town. The expertly worked granite blocks had meticulously raked joints and subtly bevelled corners. Bright glowing globes bracketing the front door kept the dusk cheerful. He welcomed the promise of simple comforts offered within the warm house.

He left Gallia with the stable boy.

“Feed and water her well, lad. Rub her down, and give her a nice bed. She’ll be no trouble.”

He handed the boy a coin twice the size custom called for.

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir. I’ll see to her proper.” The young fellow’s eyes widened at the height and demeanour of the horse. “You don’t see an animal like this often.”

Jorj patted her dapple flank once more, “No...No you don’t.”

The hinges of the inn’s front door worked noiselessly. The joinery would armour the pub well against the guileful swordsman of the winter winds. Jorj drew few looks from the thin crowd as he entered. When deep in himself, the paladin was

nearly invisible. The citizen nearest the door glanced up at the cool air and noticed in passing the slight man with his furrowed brow and downcast eyes, maybe wondering what mild internal conflict troubled the stranger.

The innkeeper would probably have greeted even an invisible Jorj, and he led him to a quiet table in the corner. The great-great-grandfather of the current innkeeper had brought the heavy wood of the table and bench from the south at great expense, or so the tale went. The inn took great pride in the dark furniture and each piece bore the rings, carvings and burns of countless sessions of drink.

The curved stone of a bar embraced one corner of the room. Behind it, a warm light shone out through the open doorway of the kitchen burrowed into the mountain. Jorj had not eaten since morning, and his mouth watered at the happy clanks and knocks of pots and pans.

“I shall have my wife make up a room, sir. And dinner will be out shortly.”

“Thank you, Jensik. And an ale, while I wait, if you don’t mind.”

The innkeeper did not mind, and he made good the beer and promises of a meal. Jorj attacked the wooden bowl of thick heavy stew with enthusiasm, scraping up every morsel with such deliberateness that Jensik brought him a second helping without being asked.

With a full belly, and a second tankard in front of him, the paladin sat back and stared at the cracking fire burning in the great hearth set in the natural rock of the back wall. His thoughts turned quietly to Kartha, the Citadel’s instrumentress. Her sweet face and ardent stares tugged at his heart, making him gulp at his beer.

Jorj foreswore women out of courtesy to them. The peculiar nature of his sensitivities doomed him to a life of the sword and its accompanying hardships. He felt certain destiny had a short life planned for him. But even the shield of his lonely purpose could not keep out the devoted stare of Kartha’s pale eyes, and for a moment he indulged himself in a gentle fantasy about a different life.

One of the thick wooden shutters over a front window blew open with a bang, startling him out of his reverie. Jorj frowned as the innkeeper closed and secured the window. He watched Jensik as he returned to his duties behind the bar. The what-might-have-been spell had vanished, replaced by an uneasy feeling at the way he had let his thoughts wander.

The paladin became alert a heartbeat before six black forms glided through the windows, disintegrating the shutters. Jorj cursed and jumped to his feet.

Varogs. How could he have let them get so close? His inner eye saw a half dozen bolts of the blackest hearts sail into the room, their fangs and claws just adornments on evil.

The swordsman ignited in a symphony of motion. Moving many times faster than the activities of the pub, he leapt to the tabletop with his sword drawn and set the rich fluid of his spirit ablaze, a bright beacon of purity and life in the astral plane. The creatures shrieked, assaulted by the gale of white wind. Two dispersed in a cloud of dust, a third turned and fled, but the other three pressed their attacks.

Jorj frowned, that should have sent them all to oblivion. Something stronger commanded them. If the vracken had gotten this close he should have felt the creature's presence like a sucking wound of darkness. He knew then he had walked into an ambush, lured to this place by a foe far cleverer than he had guessed.

The paladin wore a death mask as he projected a trajectory for his sword that would carry it through the lower and upper torsos of the first two varogs, and impale the third on its tip. He began his swing with a deliberate slowness. By the time it penetrated the skin of the first, its blade made an audible hum, propelled by the fury of his resolve. Two of the creatures dissolved on the sharp edge. His blade stopped, point forward, and waited on the momentum of the third.

The vracken came close enough to the tip of the sword to allow it to pierce his clothing, but not his skin. Then he dropped the cloak of magic and revealed his true nature to the paladin with a smile.

No simple varog was he.

Jorj observed the transformation with grim comprehension, like a scratching kitten on your lap suddenly becoming a tiger, its maw alive with teeth as it leapt for your throat. He lunged forward, but he met no resistance. His opponent retreated out of reach.

Noctodondolus opened his hands as though making an offering, divulging his great secret.

As Jorj's eyes gazed on the small black stone in the vracken's palms, his world dissolved. In an instant, he knew only the boundless pain of exposure to a timeless and formless void. The stone ripped his soul from his body. The paladin's consciousness morphed into an ever-lingering moment of vulnerability and defeat, lost on an endless featureless plane.

The magical forces unleashed by the device consumed the bulk of Jorj's physical self. The rest, a dust comprised mostly of metal, skin and bone, settled unnoticed to the floor of the warm public house.

One of the patrons shouted to the innkeeper, “Shut that window you old fool. We’ll catch a winter’s death.”

The innkeeper went to the casement to do as instructed. He frowned to himself, one of his guests had left without settling his bill. He experienced confusion closing the now fractured shutters and gave up after a time, throwing another great log onto the fire instead. It would take hours for Noctodondolus’ magics to wear off.

Out in the stable, Gallia sensed her master’s departure. With one well-placed kick she broke out of her stall, and then another freed her from the stable, startling the stable boy from his sleep. The horse had known only two allegiances in her young life, and began a mad unfettered gallop back to the familiarity of the Citadel and the comfort of Roosha. Covering the return distance that had taken two weeks here, in less than a day.

Hogan Ironshield

Cet stepped through the shimmer of the transgate just moments before the magical tunnel consumed the last of its gems and vanished. He had arrived in the portal chamber of a thriving dwarven country, a thousand miles north of his home. The transgate anchors sat deep in the barrow, mounted in the wall of a hemispherical room fifty feet across. The lighting complemented the artistry of the stonework and not an inch of wild rock remained.

Cet released the nine men that accompanied him to the wiles of the local dwarven gamblers for the evening and wandered off through the elegant complexity of tunnels.

Clang-Clang! Clang-Clang!

He could hear the hammers ten minutes before he reached his destination.

Hogan Ironshield stood at his forge pounding out the edge of a battle-axe. A blistering stream of curses escaped from his lips encouraging every blow of his hammer. Each impact sent off a spectacular shower of sparks. The dwarf-king looked like a hairy cherub standing in the middle of a fiery fountain. Although he stood just a knife-edge over three feet tall, short even for a dwarf, people usually made the mistake of equating small with harmless only once.

“You swore on your beard I’d have these axes by the last moon,” Cet shouted over the din, sure this comment would rile the dwarf.

He had no fear that he would break the weapon-smith’s concentration. The spells cast in this great forge involved magic stoked slowly to a white-hot fury and did not contain any delicate girlie rhythms. Hogan did not reply, but the hammer’s tempo, the profanities mixed with demands to his bellows-man and the sparks, increased a frenzied notch. Cet smiled. There existed some peculiar law of nature that the more bad-tempered a dwarf, the greater his sensitivity about his beard.

Cet had little doubt about receiving his axes. The two had a long and chequered history of alternating mistrust and mutual need, but he could always count on Hogan to provide him with axes. The dwarf made the finest weapons in the world if you asked him. Something Cet avoided doing just as he tried to avoid going there at all. The transgate had a potent appetite for gems, and despite his talents with a hammer, Hogan could be thoroughly unpleasant.

The round torch-lined smithery, an axe-throw across, had a high conic ceiling that vented the smoke. The smooth block-brick walls had none of the traditional dwarven adornments. Hogan’s forge sat in the centre on a raised twelve-sided dais,

the only piece of ornate stone in the room. Intricate faintly glowing lines gave the subtle impression of age, and contrasted with the bluntness of its purpose, a velveteen motif veiling the power harnessed in its fires. Heat emanated from it, and from the dwarf who stood upon it.

Apprentices manned twelve forges surrounding the central platform, a smith and a bellows-man at each. Hogan led with his hammer and the others followed in perfect counter step. A blow to the central anvil always followed half a heartbeat later by twelve simultaneous blows. In the midst of his cursing, Hogan cast spells of forging that gave the axe-blades an unyielding edge. The secondary hammers would capture the wave of magical energy radiating out from the centre forge. Cet could feel the forces crashing against him as he watched, an impressive sight matched by a tremendous noise.

Why don't I just take the few you have done with me now," offered Cet amicably.

Hogan took deep pride in his work and in the presentation of the weapons in a special ceremony. This, of course, required an obligatory session of drink. Cet knew that the master smith would have no truck with the suggestion.

The racket from the central forge stopped abruptly, and with it the twelve subordinate hammers. Hogan turned towards Cet, his leathery face burning, and his chest puffed like the bellows that enraged the fires of his furnace. Thick sinewy arms exposed to the shoulders, covered with dirt and sweat, glistened in the flames. His savage glare, and the lens of magical forces, made him appear many times his own size.

"Look!" the dwarf roared. "An access tunnel collapsed last week. Thirty good beards lost. Done deliberately." He emphasised each syllable with a jab of his hammer. "Done by Glonards! Damn the pale greasy bastards to the rotting hells of the rockless swamp!"

Hogan spat on the ground, and his twelve apprentices dutifully spat a moment later. "I got behind. You'll get *yer* damn axes."

The dwarf turned back to his forge, and the cacophony of poundings, curses and sparks began again. This time, although Cet would not have thought it possible, with a dramatic increase in vigour. The human sighed, the explanation sounded more than adequate, and he would trouble Hogan no further.

Leaving the cavern, he decided he would go and show his respect to the families of the dead.

Cet wandered around the barrow looking for a familiar face. It did not take long, he knew many of the dwarves here.

“Garand!” he called to a figure he spotted in the main cavern.

“Cet! Well met,” answered Garand Heavyvein, recognising the swordsman at once.

The dwarf trotted up and shook both of Cet’s hands vigorously in the crossed fashion for greeting, then unclasped his right hand and continued at a more solemn pace. His face became grave.

“Hogan tells me you had a cave-in.”

“Yes. Yes. Very sad. Very bad. Glonards swarmed the cave. Thirty were not saved.” Garand shook his head slowly. “I can take you there. I know you care.”

“The mourning den first, I think.”

Garand nodded, and led him across Honwee, the oldest of the main *carddons*, and the heart of the barrow. The cubical cave, three hundred yards on a side, bustled with dwarves. Despite its age, work continued on the ceiling, walls and floor. Large and small walkways crisscrossed the space above connecting the numerous tunnels that entered the vast room at different levels. Glow-spheres gave the underground expanse a bodacious illumination.

They had burrowed the mourning den out from the first floor of Honwee. A series of sound baffling walls isolated it from the hullabaloo of the centre of the barrow. They interned the bodies of the slain here. The dead came from every part of the city. Family members would keep a vigil until the time came to seal the door, and turn the chamber into a tomb.

Cet had to bow his head to enter. The muted lighting came from covered lamps on the floor in the corners. In accordance with ancient dwarven ritual a sweet smelling smoke snaked up from incense cylinders filling the hazy chamber. Originally, the scent masked the smell of the rotting bodies during the mourning period, which would last for moons. Eventually they developed methods for preventing decay, but the custom of the smoke remained.

The mourners sat back-to-back on both sides of a wide bench in the centre. The bodies lay on marble slabs along the walls. Cet walked around the room meeting with representatives of each of the gathered camps, greeting each dwarf. He shook only one hand this time; one for sorrow, two for joy. Dwarves lived long and developed deep affections for one another. When even one died, they said a piece of history passed with them. They had suffered a massacre here and it filled the

room with a fundamental sadness. Cet had red tear-filled eyes long before he finished the circuit.

Afterwards, Garand took him to the site of the collapse, a tunnel deep in the mountain near the front lines of the continual dwarven assault on the rock. Here they slowly tamed the tangle of torturous natural caves that bordered on the forward carddons of the barrow.

A column of dwarves marched by, double-time. All the engineers carried arms and wore armour. Many had suits of the same living lizard skin Cet wore. They produced it at the Citadel and traded it to Hogan for gems and axes.

“We’re sending them into the caverns to place observation stones,” Garand explained.

The Citadel’s instrumentresses also produced these small devices. They could detect intruders and pulse signals back through the rock to raise an alarm.

Garand led Cet to other sites where tunnels had been rigged for collapse, but discovered in time. One of the engineers now working to reinforce the passage had seen the Glonards struck.

“We followed them into the caverns. Killed some, but most got away,” the dwarf said, shaking his head. “Captured one, though. We ain’t killed him yet. Wanna see?”

“I do,” answered Cet.

The glonard they held captive in the Dento carddon looked like a dwarf, but with pale and oily skin, and hair much finer than that of the beards of Hogan’s clan covered his face.

“It won’t stop talking. Keeps going on about the hordes of his barrow, and his fearless king, Glok. He says we’re all gonna to die.”

The dwarf clearly did not believe the distasteful little monsters could be any sort of threat, even in huge numbers. “They tricked us once. They won’t do it again.”

Cet looked into the eyes of the captive, who grinned back wildly and shrieked, “Tens of thousands!” Then the glonard laughed long and hard, until Garand removed his head with a swipe of his Hogan-forged axe.

Thinian and Lathalia

“Hello, Thinian.”

The dark eyes looked up from their scrutiny of the smooth floor. The tall swordsman stopped in the doorway of the bedroom. It took a moment for him to take in the sight.

“Do you have a name, or do you just go by that distinctive odour?”

“Oh, yes, the swamp.”

“And what looks like owl poop. Oh my, Lay.”

Lathalia glanced at her shoulder and made two precursory swipes at the build up before surrendering to a cause long lost.

“I have a new spell, Thinian. It’s wonderful. It’s powerful and elegant even. And it cannot be reflected. You will be proud of me.” She smiled weakly, and her stone spun faster about her head. “Do you want to see...?”

“No. Not now. Later. When was the last time you ate...or bathed...or changed your clothing?” He took two steps forward and looked her in the eye.

“I...I...”

“Ouanoow, when did she last eat?”

The bird, on its perch near the window, stepped back and forth but said nothing. Thinian shook his head and snatched the green stone orbiting her head and placed it in a box on the dresser.

Lathalia slumped as a lump of her personality melted away.

“Uuuuhhh. I...I...” She stuttered before starting to cry.

Thinian rang for gnomes. Two arrived a minute later. Servants on lend from the Goddess.

“Bring hot water for a bath.”

They all looked at Lathalia covered in soot from head to toe, her hair a random tangle of knots.

“We will keep bringing it, my Lord,” said the older one, and they trotted off, the other adding, “And soap, many bars of rough soap. And towels, and brushes...and incense...and scissors for that hair...and some tongs for her robes, I’m not touching those...”

Lathalia continued to blubber in huge gasps. “So tired...”

Thinian held her until the arrival of first shipment of water and sanitising paraphernalia. He led his wife to the bathing chamber and removed her scant and

rank clothing, finding her just as filthy underneath. The once dazzling woman had become a sunken shell of her former self.

“Were you naked the whole time as well?”

“I don’t know. It...was...warm down there,” she said through the tears.

He helped her into the bath and began a meticulous and torturous scrubbing of every inch of her body.

“I really missed you, Thinian.”

“And I you.”

Scrub. Scrub. Scrub.

“Owww. Careful, I’m in...a delicate place.”

“Yes, but the grime is not. I will have to cut off most of your hair.”

“No, you will not.”

“Its not really hair anymore, Lay.”

“Ohhh. If you must.” After a pause.

He sliced it off carefully with scissors provided by the gnomes. More water came. They had to empty and clean the bath before putting it in. Thinian alternated the cleaning with small healing spells. She had no grievous wounds, just many small burns and cuts.

“Some of these injuries have already healed badly, there will be some scars. It’s like you did battle with pixies?”

“Not battle exactly. Well...some I suppose. You see the eels didn’t like me much.”

“Didn’t like you? Why?”

“Well, it’s complicated. You – oww – see – oww, there are sixteen different frequencies in the spell – owwee – and each required an extract from a different gland on the – ouch –“

“Please, please, explain later.”

“Well you did ask...” Lathalia looked up at her husband, shirtless and wet. “You look wonderful, Thinian.” A wave of shyness brought her eyes back to the black tips of her toes protruding from the water.

“There was little to do during your absence except scramble up mountains, humiliate my captains in sword practice, fix the Citadel walls...and sleep alone.”

“Can we fight tomorrow, Thin? I had to do this. But I’m back now - and glad. Ahh, hot, hot.”

Thinian had added more water from a small copper tub above the bath.

“We have to get you clean. By the gods, look at your hands. They’re the hands of a dwarf.”

Lathalia examined the coarse black powder ground into her palms, seeing their state for the first time, her eyes wide in disbelief. “How did I let myself get like this? I’m a beautiful woman, aren’t I?”

“You were once if memory serves. Let’s clean you up. Then I will make you fit. And then you will be beautiful again.”

She slid under the water and let her breath out slowly with a stream of bubbles. When she surfaced Thinian wiped her face, now bright pink from the scrubbing.

“Your eyes are still the finest I have ever known,” he said quietly.

Lathalia smiled and kissed him slowly. “I am burning for you, love.”

Thinian’s breath caught in his throat from the rush of desire, but (as always) he mastered himself. “After we are done here, and you have eaten a proper meal, then we will see.”

She rolled to her hands and knees, lifting her filthy arse out of the water. “Don’t forget my back side.”

Thinian smiled. “Never have, never will.”

Cet Goes Home

A telepathic impression travels quickly through the ether of the astral plane. The wave from the absorption of Jorj's soul hit Cet at roughly the same time as Gallia's hind hooves hit the stable door.

A vision of Noctodondolus holding the soul stone impressed itself on his mind. The sensation made Cet ill. He supported himself with one hand on the wall as he retched, momentarily overcome by the shadow of soul pain experienced by the paladin. As suddenly as it had come, the wave of emotion passed and he went directly back to the smithery.

"Hogan! Something has happened. Please summon me your magicians. I need to open the transgate. And I will take the axes you have ready now," his tone quelling the dwarf's inevitable objections.

"Suit yourself," Hogan frowned.

Cet turned and went back to his quarters to collect his few things, and to inform his men that the time had come to go.

"Sorry, Cet. We opened the gate this morning," Sweeny, Hogan's chief magician, said indicating the fifty suits of 'tilian armour collected as a result. "I'm afraid we can't to do it again 'til midday tomorrow. Kartha says the rift needs time to heal."

Cet sighed, suddenly overcome by exhaustion. The idea of sleep suddenly appealed. He wanted to hide from the mental assault and the bliss of unconsciousness beckoned. With little else to do he returned to his room and passed out.

The next morning he met the dwarven mages and his nine men at the transgate, two twelve-foot iron pillars set into a grey wall. Sweeny and his partner Hawist stood in front. Cet deposited four diamonds, each the size of a small raisin, in a small depression in the centre of the square formed by the two xeras and the pillars. It was enough to keep the gate open for about forty-five seconds.

Around the perimeter stood ten boxes. Each contained ten of Hogan's axes, one hundred in total, as promised. They all picked up a box and stood flanking the pillars.

"Where's Hogan?" Cet asked Sweeny.

The xera shrugged. "Don't know."

Once satisfied that they had made all the necessary preparations, Cet nodded to the senior sorcerer. The xeras began intoning the appropriate chants, and waving

their hands, slowly shaping the magic. The four diamonds glowed with a swelling radiance, and they seemed to suck all the light from the chamber. With a loud pop and a *vwoosh* the diamonds transformed into a glowing white ball, and the magicians willed the quivering blob of energy to a point between the pillars. It spread on the wall like flaming oil, enveloping the iron frame. The granite wall became a gaping hole, revealing through a diaphanous shimmer the gate's goal: the cellars beneath the Citadel.

Each man would require two full seconds to pass through. Move too quickly and risk disturbing the concentration of the magicians. Although it appeared as a simple incandescent hole in an otherwise unremarkable wall, in fact, the magic opened a thousand-mile long tunnel with fantastic dynamics of movement. Break the spell and the two ends of space would snap back to their rightful places, leaving anyone travelling through it at the time spread across the intervening distance.

With two seconds per man, and half a second in between, they would have only ten seconds to spare. Cet barked a command to each in turn. After the ninth man had passed through, Cet entered and experienced the now familiar unnerving feeling of magical transit, his soul's way of saying the journey should have taken longer.

When he emerged in the chamber at the other end, he heard a muffled shout of his name. He turned to see Hogan heaving two more axes at him. They sailed through the gate making a weird hum but hardly disturbing its surface. Passing on either side of Cet's head they buried themselves in the wall with a clank.

Hogan left his arms out-stretched for a moment then flicked his wrists. The axes wrenched themselves out of the wall with a screech and spun back through into Hogan's gloves with a snap loud enough to hear over the buzz of the portal. The dwarf grinned madly and threw them again. This time he whipped two heavy iron bracers off his wrists and tossing them through afterwards, leaving the axes deep in the stone.

"Bonus for a good customer!" Hogan shouted as the passage winked out of existence.

The Forest Edge

“Are we riding too fast?”

“No! That’s the third time you’ve asked. I told you I was fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Lathalia sighed, wondering if she looked as bad as she felt.

“I need this,” she said spurring her horse into a gallop and passing him.

The xera turned off into the forest along a narrow path. The trees hung low, but she dodged the assault of branches almost as easily as her husband.

“You still ride well,” Thinian said as he watched her, trying to work out how to undo their third fight of the day. He followed her in silence for a while.

Lathalia stopped suddenly, lulling her horse.

“What is it, Lay?”

Lathalia shushed him with a nervous shake of her hand, revealing and relieving a tension she had felt since leaving the seclusion of her lab. “Something’s wrong here.”

Thinian looked at her hard, then scanned the forest for anything alarming. Another hundred yards would bring them to main western gap into the mountains, the road led eventually to the port of Bronamesk. The late afternoon sun sprinkled through the needles of the tall trees bathing the path in a soft green light, more evocative of romance than danger.

“Is there still an outpost in the trees up there?” Lathalia whispered.

“Yes. I’ve looked in on them every day for the last week. Since Cet was ambushed.”

Lathalia nudged her horse forward. “I smell magic.”

Fifty yards further, Thinian dismounted and examined a knothole in a tree.

“This senk has been damaged.”

“Senk?” Lathalia hopped to the ground to get a better look.

“Something concocted from the fertile minds of Roosha and Kartha while you were away. It passes voices through the trees, or as Roosha puts it, encourages the trees to speak. The forest whisper they call it,” Thinian said.

He drew a sword and padded up the path. One word from him to the horses sent them trotting quietly back to the road. Lathalia tucked in behind him, one hand on his back. The cords of muscle moving beneath the skin of his armour soothed her. She had always loved the rough masculinity of his body, always the man in charge, save maybe for Cet. Her other hand rested in her pouch of spell components.

“These trees are dry, Lathalia. Be careful what magic you use.”

“Do you think my mind has shrivelled in my absence? I wish you’d let me wear my stone. I can’t use my new spell without it.”

“When you’re fit, you can wear your stone. If memory serves, you have other tricks.” Thinian became still. “Look up there.”

“The outpost. I don’t remember them being that easy to spot.”

“They’re not supposed to be.”

Lathalia looked around. “I don’t hear any *meesas*.”

“Me either. I don’t know why. They will be wintering soon, but they should still be about. They’re a constant torment to the outposts - they love to play. But, Roosha won’t hear of us moving them on.”

“Familiar noises from the forest freak.”

Thinian stroked the bark of the central trunk of the odam tree - king of the local glade – murmuring its name. A small passage opened in its side, and the two stepped in. The tree grew around behind them. They climbed a convenient set of handholds in the hollow of the trunk until the passage narrowed. Another stroke of wood let them out on to a thick branch fifty feet above the forest floor.

The outpost lay in disarray and abandoned, no sign of the five lookouts Thinian had met the day before. A great struggle had jumbled and broken the once carefully groomed branches of the hideout.

“Look here, Thiny. Scorch marks. Wand magic, I think,” Lathalia pointed out.

Thinian examined the burns and returned his eyes to the forest ceiling. “What does that look like to you?” He pointed to a nearby tree.

“A body without a head.”

Thinian nodded.

A screech shattered the moment as a meesa fell from the tree like a big brown drop of muscle and fir onto Lathalia’s back. Before the creature could sink its fangs into the xera, Thinian wrenched it off, shouting “Orsce! No!”

The meesa responded to his voice and crawled to the corner, cowering in fear and guilt. Lathalia pulled her long dagger, but Thinian restrained her.

“No. I know her, she’s one of the younger ones. She’s just had her first pup.”

“You know her?”

“I know the tribe. They’re observant. And they like me.”

“Like you? Ha. As do most of the furry creatures of the forest. You say she’s a mother? Then what’s she doing here attacking me?”

“No idea. Let’s get that body down.”

“Shouldn’t we get some help?”

“Yes. But I want to know what happened here before we bring more sarns.”

Lathalia rubbed his hard arm. “You don’t have to watch this place all by yourself, Thinian.”

“I don’t. I have a signal stone, I’ll use it when I feel the need.”

“What about her?”

“Orsce! Go! Cave home. Go!”

The meesa scampered away dutifully at the command.

Another pair of eyes watched the pair from the trees. The frightening voice in the meesa’s head gave another order. ‘Move. There!’ The terrified creature did not want to obey, he wanted to go back to his cave, and leave these people from the great white rocks alone.

Herske did as instructed all the same, moving carefully so he did not to damage the strange piece of wood he had taken from the human with the sky-fire – just after he had snapped his neck. The device felt unfamiliar in his hands as he pointed it at Thinian.

Back in the meesa’s cave the remainder of his tribe shivered in fear. Huddling together as the varogs took turns hissing and tormenting them. The beasts contented themselves with these little horrors, impatiently awaiting permission from their master to feast.

Herske had seen the black ones come, but they had no mouth-sound for varog. He watched them take Orsce’s child with relish. And he feared for the rest of his tribe, somehow he knew the black ones would hurt them if he failed to listen to the voice in his head. The meesa peered down at the two people in the tree home. He knew Tin Tin and wanted to go to the man. To get help. What the tribe had done was bad, bad. And Herske made them do it. The meesa ached to make it good again with the white rock people.

The voice in his head allowed Herske a bellow of rage. Then his mouth made the strange talk noises and the stick spit more sky-fire. The blue ball rumbled down towards the platform and his friend, Tin Tin.

Thinian saw the lightning and pushed Lathalia out of the way. The ball smashed into the floor and left a smouldering hole. Lathalia responded with a wider fan

charge into the forest canopy near the meesa, wounding the creature in the tree and sending him fleeing into the nearby rocks.

“That was Herske, their leader. I think he’s going back to their caves. He has one of Jarek’s wands.”

“I’m surprised he could use it. Not just anyone can fire them off,” Lathalia said, adding, “I’d be surprised if you could.”

“Come on!” Thinian veritably flowed down the centre of the tree to the forest floor and to its edge. This time he drew both swords, like Cet he preferred a second weapon to a shield.

“Whom will you use those on?” Lathalia asked, winded from the effort of keeping up.

“No one, I hope. I’ve signalled the Citadel, they will send riders. I’m going to the meesa’s cave, you wait here...tell them what happened.”

He dashed up the rock, and Lathalia followed disobediently. Thinian looked back at her in irritation.

“Thinian, the meesa is using magic, even if he doesn’t know how. You may need my help. I remember when you didn’t go anywhere without me.”

The two perched on a lip of rock, looking across a small ravine at the mouth of the cave. A big meesa sat motionless outside the entrance.

“There’s Herske. It looks like you hurt him. Pity.”

“I had no choice, Thinian.”

“This isn’t like them. They adore us. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t want to hurt them. I’m going down there to try to talk to him. You stay here. Kill only if there is no other way.”

He leapt over the top of the rock and danced down the gravel to the bottom of the ravine. Lathalia followed more slowly, muttering, “I also remember when you were easier to follow.”

As Thinian climbed up towards the mouth of the cave, another ball of lightning sailed down towards him. He jumped easily out of the way. Behind him Lathalia resisted the urge to turn the creature to dust.

“Herske! It’s me Thinian. Tin Tin!”

The meesa was beside himself. Too many thoughts. No joy. Tin Tin not bad.

‘Again! Or I’ll shall have them feed on another child!’ the no-place voice commanded. Herske pointed the stick and heard the noises come from his mouth, blazing another angry ball of fire down at Tin Tin. Closer this time.

Then suddenly the voice fled the meesa's mind. Herske dropped the stick and rushed into the cave. Free to act again. The black ones had descended on his children. He hurled himself onto the back of the nearest but the creature cast him effortlessly against the cave wall, landing at Thinian's feet as he entered.

"Tin Tin! Chibbins!" Herske cried grabbing Thinian's arm. Then the fearless creature rushed the closest varog again.

The four varogs stopped their feeding when they saw Thinian. Huge grins broke from their malignant heads, a disarray of fangs dripping with the blood of Herske's tribe. They had dull black skin, not the chestnut of flesh, but the dried soot of an old coal fire. As one they howled in joy and rushed the swordsman.

It took three strikes for Thinian to kill the first, their thick hides resisting his blades almost as well as his own 'tilian armour. The others piled into him, knocking him back towards the entrance. Around the cave the meesa tribe hooted in fear. Herske threw himself at the varog closest to Thinian with such force he knocked the monster away. Thinian turned and took the creature's head with a scissor blow. The two remaining tackled him, sinking fangs into each shoulder.

Lathalia entered the cave with arms glowing red to the elbows as though dipped into a barrel of iridescent oil. She grabbed the heads of the varogs, and the magma flowed from her hands. They shrieked and released Thinian as the magical liquid dissolved their skulls.

The battle died with them.

In a dark corner the Night Fang watched through the eyes of a lonely rodent. He observed calmly as the swordsman and his wife efficiently destroyed his servants – much as he had watched Cet a week before from the eyes of a doomed raider. The vracken left the mind of the rat and returned to his own body many miles away.

"The lady Lathalia is even more magnificent. I will have to keep a careful eye on the swords of that husband of hers," he said aloud to no one in particular.

Kartha

Kartha sat in her small room in the centre of the Citadel. She could have done with bigger chambers, or even a lovely huge laboratory like Lathalia. The instrumentress did work just as important as the xera's. More so, she thought. But it was such a bother to ask, and she did have all the space she needed, she supposed.

A senk sat on the table in front of her next to her journal. The instrumentress fiddled with the dysfunctional device examining the tangle of delicate spider webs and strands of gold in its centre. Finally she set it down and sat back in her chair.

"It is broken," she said to Sera, overlooking the table from her web in the corner.

The spider's smaller mate wandered around on the desk, amusing himself with a thorough investigation of everything he found in front of him.

("You told me that an hour ago.")

"It is still true."

("Well, you have not moved since you last spoke. Do these whispering devices come back to life if left unattended?")

"No. But it's a nice idea. That is more Roosha's art than mine. I will suggest it. She has returned from the forest and sent word she will come to see me today."

Kartha reached a hand to the furry male on the table. He scrambled up her arm gratefully, and looked in her ear.

"I wonder where he is."

("Who is he? This mate of yours?")

"He is not my mate, Sera. We are just...friends. I think," Kartha said quickly.

("I am your friend, Kartha. Do you wonder where I am, when I am not here in my web?")

"No, but it's different."

("Different. Yes. Because you wish him to be your mate.")

"Yes. I do."

("But you can not find him for mating?")

"Well, no...but there is more to it than that." Kartha let her unhappiness rule her expression for a moment.

("Why wish a mate you can not find? Or eat, if he displeases?")

"It is easier for you...at least I think it is. Humans have different rules for mating."

("Will you make young with him?")

“Young? Hah!” Kartha exclaimed. Her mouse brown hair fell over her face as she leaned forward to rub her eyes. “He does not even know I exist.”

(“But if he did know, you would then mate?”)

“Then, maybe,” she said with a short laugh.

(“Then it seems to me that you live by the same rules as we do, mage. Just take this male and make him yours.”)

“Love must be given, not taken,” Kartha said slowly, repeating a litany.

(“Maybe you do live by different rules.”)

“Discussing this with a spider is too hard.”

The male climbed from Kartha’s shoulder to the top of her head, and then jumped to the table and mandibled the senk with enthusiasm.

(“Perhaps you should feed him. Then he will settle.”)

“He does not bother me, Sera.”

(“I think I tire of him.”)

“Do not over-tire, he is the cleverest spinner you have brought me.”

(“Do not fear, weaver of devices. He does please me. He is quick, and alert. And he hunts as well as he spins, if you do not feed him.”)

“How do you know?”

(“She...rat counts...some bringing do...I to her.”) The male’s signs were less clear than Sera’s.

“Oh! You’ve taught him to speak...sort of,” Kartha exclaimed.

(“It was not easy. We prefer our males small, quick, and... unsophisticated.”)

“As do I.” Kartha’s smile did not reach her eyes.

(“I do not think so. Does this mate of yours have a slow wit?”)

“Oh my, no. He is well studied, and he writes. And I told you he is not my mate.”

The spider did not respond, and Kartha went back to work on the senk, remaining hunched over it until there until disturbed by a knock on the door an hour later.

“Roosha. Hello. Come in.”

The druid glided into the room, Reet was on her shoulder. “Good morning Kartha. This is Reet.”

“Hello, Reet.” Kartha smiled a little.

“Hello.”

Roosha instinctively went directly to the table, and began examining the items upon it. “You are tired looking, Kartha.”

“Yes, the senk. I have been fixing it. Thinian brought it to me. It was damaged by the meesas.”

“I heard,” Roosha said, playing with the spider on the table while she covertly eyed the visible entry in Kartha’s journal.

She read:

..tried to talk to Jorj. He was open at first, he even smiled at me. I almost worked up the courage to touch his arm, but then he stopped. I don’t know why. He just looked up in the corner, and his smile was gone. And his words and charm. He was polite, but I was no longer there. Why can I not reach that man? Why does he keep me out?...

Kartha closed the journal, and put it away to make room for work on the communication device.

“Have you been up all night?” Roosha asked.

“What? I was.”

(“She just turned the device over and over. And put it down. And picked it up. She wrote in her journal, and stared at the wall.”)

“Sera,” cried Kartha. “It is my business what I do.”

“I heard Jorj visited Citadel while I was gone. I wish I could have seen him,” Roosha said.

“My business, Roosha.” Fatigue gave her voice an uncharacteristic edge.

“Yes, your business.” The druid touched her arm in reassurance. “Cet believes he may be in some danger.”

“Please do not goad me, Roosha,” Kartha said, wiping away the tear that had formed in a tired eye. “If you wish to work, then I am willing. Otherwise, I beg of you to leave me be.”

“He always be in danger, Kartha. That is why he not let you in.”

Kartha bit her knuckle, listening to Roosha, but saying nothing.

“Who is Jorj?” Reet asked in the silence.

“A very courageous man. A hunter.” Roosha answered. “I wish to leave Reet here with you, Kartha. Toonak feels he needs to spend time in service. I thought he might aid you in your work. He is said to have clever hands.”

“I...I suppose. I don’t know, Roosha. I -”

“You need more company than pair of spiders.”

Reet just then noticed Sera in the corner. “Who’s she?” he asked in trepidation.

“This is Sera,” Kartha said. “She and her mate help me build things.”

(“Hello, pixie child. I have a sister in the forest. Larche. Do you know her?”)

“What? Do I know...Don't let her eat me.”

The two women looked at the pixie in some confusion.

“Don't be silly, Reet,” said Kartha. “Why would you think that?”

“I...never mind.”

“Are we going to work today, Roosha?” Kartha asked.

“You are not fit to work, Kartha. We will come back tomorrow.” The druid reached out and rubbed her thumb across the instrumentress' forehead. “Sleep.”

Roosha caught Kartha as she collapsed and laid her in the bed and covered her with a quilt.

Leaving, she said to the spider, “Sera. When she wakes, tell her to find me.”

(“Yes, guardian. I will see you tomorrow, Reet.”)

The pixie clung to Roosha's hair, and said nothing.

Gallia's Return

Kartha stood alone in a corridor high in the Citadel staring out a window, her large eyes observed the world with a degree of disinterest. Her grey mood inconsistent with the sunny fall sky. As she waited for Jorj to return she occupied her time tormenting herself with another analysis about the state of their relationship. The central issue of the contemplation revolved around the fact that the relationship only existed in her mind.

It did not matter she told herself, when he returned he would remain oblivious to her. He never seemed to notice. She was stupid, she would just forget him. She always had her work, she thought, there she could find noble release. Or not. Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, Kartha continued the vigil she had kept since early that morning.

Blame life's dramatic license for requiring that the instrumentress notice the return of the paladin's horse first. Kartha stifled an irrational pang of jealousy at the thought of Jorj's devotion to Gallia. The horse would never leave the man for no reason and she instantly concluded that something terrible had happened. She stood looking at the large gates Gallia had come through, making small sobbing noises, her face drained of its colour, her hands on the stone sill, watching the stable hands trying to soothe the animal. The mare's mad return to the Citadel left it exhausted, and covered in lather.

Lathalia found Kartha standing there. She looked out the window and after a puzzled moment grasped gravity of the situation. Kartha's preoccupation with Jorj did not rank as one of the Citadels' best-kept secrets, and she rested a hand on Kartha's shoulder in an attempt to calm her. All the while failing to devise an explanation that avoided the obvious conclusion.

A quiet but insistent chirping sound, like the peep of a small bird, interrupted the moment. Kartha reached beneath the folds of her smock and withdrew a glowing signal stone, rhythmically pulsing bright and dim red.

Someone had opened the transgate.

"That must be Cet coming back from Hogan's," said Kartha. "He will know what's wrong."

Kartha broke free from Lathalia's grasp and headed off down the corridor to one of the many dimly lit basements, her bare feet slapping frantically on the stone floor. Lathalia, whose long legs allowed fewer strides, followed closely behind.

The two women met Cet coming up a narrow stairway.

“What has happened to Jorj?” demanded Kartha.

“Jorj?” Cet asked carefully, hearing the desperation in her voice. “Why do you ask about him?”

“Gallia came back without him,” Lathalia said.

“When?”

“Just a few minutes ago.”

“Cet! What has happened to Jorj? Is he all right?” begged Kartha.

“I don’t know exactly,” Cet said slow.

“What do you mean exactly? Is he dead?” The last word stuck in her throat.

“Kartha! How could Cet know anything? He’s been at Hogan’s.”

“He knows! He always knows about Jorj,” Kartha exclaimed, shaking her head at the floor in her frustration with the stupid question.

Lathalia bowed to Kartha’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the preoccupied paladin with some confusion. Cet did not seem surprised at the questions. He obviously had some information. The two women looked at him with differing degrees of expectancy.

“I don’t think he is dead. But it’s not good.”

The images of desperation and terror that had enveloped him the evening before had not diminished. He did not yet grasp their significance, and he certainly did not want to describe these feelings to the frenzied Kartha, but he had to say something.

“I think...that...he found whatever it is he went looking for. I’m sorry Kartha, I don’t know more.”

“Where is he?” Kartha asked.

“I don’t know,” said Cet.

He had tried earlier to establish mental contact with the paladin, without success. They lived in a world where death had different levels of finality. He had a fear for Jorj beyond the mortality of the flesh, but he did not understand the feeling. He pushed past the two women, leaving them no wiser.

“Lathalia! Go find Thinian,” he shouted, as he pounded up the stairs. “Tell him to gather the group leaders, and meet me in the large dining hall.”

Lathalia watched him go and then turned to Kartha, who stood looking at some non-specific point down the stairs, her face dull orange in the scant illumination of the torches.

“Don’t worry. Jorj will be fine. Cet will find him,” Lathalia said. But the tone of her voice convinced neither woman.

The Dominion Sarns

Most of the Citadel's notable personalities had gathered in the great hall. Cet stood at the head of the table; his arms folded, his countenance grim, waiting for the group commanders to arrive. Thinian sat expressionless in the great chair by his side. In the inglenook Roosha took in the heat from the blaze in the fireplace with Kartha.

Lathalia leaned against the mantle next to them.

Six of the seven unit commanders sat or stood around the table. These men and women of different races commanded the Citadel *sarns*. A sarn did not imply soldier, at least in the sense of a pawn. The commanders never forgot that members of the community made up their units, and would never squander them in a military ploy.

"Where is Finch?" Cet asked the room.

"He has...a task. Soon he will be home," Roosha said from the corner.

"I won't wait. As many of you probably already know, Gallia returned without Jorj."

"She would never have left him, unless something awful had happened," spouted the quivery voice of Iawat Snowcaster, the leader of the Citadel's gnomes, and the smallest by half of the gathering.

"Yes, Iawat. I believe you are correct," Cet said carefully.

"When?" asked Machauly, commander of Red Star.

"About three hours ago. But she has come a long distance, we do not know how far. Maybe a hundred miles."

"You must know more, you always do!"

"I may, Iawat. He was out searching for a vracken. That's a kind of varog. Jorj considered it much more dangerous. But..."

"But, what?" The gnome insisted.

"Something happened to him. I sensed it yesterday, when I was at Hogan's." Confirming what was long suspected that he and Jorj had the rare capacity to communicate by telepathy, he continued. "The new axes are here, by the way. I do not understand what I felt. But I am going to look for him. I know many of you here would like to help."

The gathered commanders all volunteered in chorus. Jorj meant a lot to the people in the Citadel.

“I don’t need to tell you that you can’t all go. And I don’t expect to find this vracken, this Noctodondolus.”

“Ssssss. The Night Fang.” The gnome’s voice had become hollow, lost in the long memories of his tribe.

“Yes. I’ve heard he is called that. I expect no combat. I pray we do not find him...yet. He is a dangerous thing. This will be a hard ride. No fight...no vengeance. Suna, Cesan and Iawat at least will stay here.”

The two dwarven women, and the gnome looked disappointed, but voiced no objections.

“We’ll leave the Hornets here as well. Finch won’t like it. But, well, hooleans on horses. Thinian will remain here as well.”

“We will go,” said Lendrax. “The full compliment of Moondance.”

“Good, that’s what, about sixty?” asked Cet, knowing the answer.

Lendrax nodded his wide dark head and leaned back in his chair.

Bunchy Rockface stood and spoke. “Not a lot of point in sending the dwarves from Green Sun, although I’d say most would willingly suffer the hardship. But we’ve got twenty-five men who ride well.”

Cet pondered for a moment. “No. You’ve trained as a unit. I want you here complete. Remember, we have a Citadel to protect.”

“Aye, Cet. ‘Tis up to you and Thinian,” the big dwarf said as he sat.

“You couldn’t stop Red Star if you tried,” said Machauly without a trace of humour, chief of the fifty strong light-horse daredevils.

“I doubt that, somehow,” Lathalia said under her breath to Roosha.

Cet nodded. “With Moondance, that’s a hundred and ten. We have a lot of ground to cover. You two meet me down in the stables in an hour, with your squad leaders and we’ll plan the search. Thinian will stay here with the rest of you and discuss the changes to our defences. That’s all. Any questions?”

“Is he dead?” asked Iawat, his eyes wet.

“The poor dear is desperate he won’t have chance to repay debt to Jorj,” Roosha whispered to the other two women.

Cet glanced in their direction, thinking of Kartha. But he needed to be honest with his commanders. “Something worse, I fear.”

Lea and Finch

At that moment, Finch was behaving in a way that would have shocked him if he had viewed the scene as a disinterested observer. As he crouched peering through the bushes near the edge of a clearing about a mile from the Citadel, the word *disinterested* did not suggest itself.

A clear mountain stream ran into the glade and spilled into a deep pond at the centre. Lea was bathing in it, pretending complete ignorance of the onlooker. Moved by a rare day of unseasonable warmth, she had come down to the clearing with Finch in ill-concealed pursuit and now took great pleasure in tormenting him. After removing her robe, and swimming for a bit, she came back to the edge of the pond and leaned against a rock near the shore, bringing handfuls of spring water up over her body.

The hoolean gaped at her perfection glistening in the autumn sun. To that same disinterested observer it would have seemed only a ludicrous parody of bathing. Not to Finch, though, who despite his recently developed skills at self-control had begun to breathe in a most unbecoming manner, his heart pounding twice its normal time, entirely unaware that she toyed with him.

Lea pondered for a moment what action might wind up her poorly concealed admirer one more notch. Then inspiration struck. She rose up on the rock, and after a long moment soaking up the sun, she began to fiddle absently with one of her nipples, kneading it and tugging at it playfully.

The sight put Finch neatly over the top and an unintended groan escaped his throat, one too loud for Lea to pretend she did not hear. She looked up feigning surprise, and reflexively slipped under the water, thinking to herself, here we have the Citadel's greatest thief.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

Finch closed his eyes and slapped himself on the forehead, further announcing his presence. Lea had him completely off guard. If he ran she would see him, and then never again could he look her in the eye. Out of viable options, the hoolean slowly stood up and sighed.

"Finch! You scared me. Did you just get here?"

He seized upon the generously offered opportunity to lie his way out. "Um. Yes. I was looking for you and someone said you might be out here," the young hoolean said clearing his throat, hoping that between the bushes, and the complicated angle of his hips, he would adequately conceal the bulge of his erection.

Lea glided forward towards him with a single stroke, keeping her head up but collecting a mouthful of water. When she got close enough, she spit a stream towards him. It hit the hoolean squarely, reminding Finch of another time they had swam in this pool, when they had first come to the Citadel, the two of them and a whole gang of children.

The moment felt awkward for Finch, and tasted delicious to Lea. She felt a little sorry for him, considering his incompetence. The thief would steal nothing on this day, she would have to give it all to him unambiguously.

“Why don’t you come in swimming? It will be fun. Like last summer,” the girl offered.

Unlikely, hoped Finch.

Unlikely, predicted Lea.

“Umm, OK.”

He tried to work out how to get his clothes off without exposing the extent of his excitement. Again, Lea came to the rescue. She laughed, stroked once onto her back, then rolled, and swam to the other side of the pond. Finch slipped out of his trousers and into the water in seconds, then he removed his jerkin and threw it ashore. The cold water did little to douse his ardour.

Lea turned again, still in the deep part of the pond, and Finch stroked nearer, playfully splashing her. The two stopped a few feet apart, both treading water. Their eyes met, this time far from Roosha’s watchful gaze. Another jolt passed between them and they came together. Lea wrapped her arms around his neck, and her legs around his hips; mashing her face against his in an unsophisticated tongue-swapping kiss of consummation. She left the mechanics of staying afloat to Finch, the first of his responsibilities in the relationship, which he neglected completely, so they sank beneath the surface.

Whatever coy manipulations Lea had employed earlier fell away. She had wanted him for some time and as they submerged she grasped his haunches and pulled him in. The fit was tighter than she had known, but only for a moment, and she pumped against him. He made two strong kicks and brought them to the soft mud near the shore.

Finch had never felt anything as satisfying as the sensation of the length of his penis taking refuge from the frigid waters of the pond in the soft heat of her vagina. Then out into the cold. Then deep into the heat. Then out. The Cold. In. The Heat. Their bodies rising and sinking in the silt. And out. And in. Cold. Heat. Repeating

for a while, though not a long while, until he could take it no longer. Then release. And release. And Release.

Lea felt him going and moaned in encouragement. His seed finally freed from their long harbour in his testes streamed into her, helped along the first step to conception by the contractions of her own pleasure. Finch jammed into her until he had emptied.

They lay there a tangle of flesh panting in the silt, Finch still erect and inside. He wanted to apologise for being so quick but the words would not form. Happily, his erection did not subside and after a few minutes when their breathing had slowed, Lea encouraged him to roll over. With her on top, they did it again. This time slowly, and with a more pleasing thoroughness. Her amateur gyrations and sincere moans brought him to a second climax, thoughts of expert sexual prowess never crossing his mind.

Lea never wanted to climb off him, but the cold of the water eventually penetrated their young pelts. They swam about for a minute to wash off, then climbed out onto the shore and lay naked in the soft grass, remaining there until they had dried.

As they dressed again, the pocket book on erotica fell from Finch's trousers, apparently unaffected by the soaking it had received. With her father's speed Lea snatched it up before the hoolean could rescue it.

"What's this? Erotic Greatness? Hah. So this is your secret," she exclaimed as she thumbed through it quickly.

Finch watched on with jaw unhinged. "You can read it." It should have been a question.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be able to?"

"Its magic. I found it in the Sage's library. It only lets me read a chapter after I have mastered..." The potential side affects of the revelations he would have to make stopped his tongue.

Lea opened to the page Finch had bookmarked. "Chapter 14 – Harem Management." She looked up at him. "You must be joking."

She skimmed down the page as Finch watched on horrified.

"Clearly, despite your power, engaging and entertaining six women at a time will involve teaching them to pleasure each other – " Lea burst out a laugh so sudden, she had to wipe her nose. "I wonder what my mother would think of this."

"Please don't tell her."

"Tell her? I'm your new lover, Finch. Be afraid of me, not her."

“How about I just be afraid of both.”

“That’ll do.” She grew a wicked grin. “Erotic Greatness. Hmm. It was lovely Finch really. Special. Perfect. Your beautiful, and sweet.” She touched his arm. “And I’m already hungering for you again...but greatness. I don’t know. I think you should probably go back and reread some of this.”

She handed him back the book.

“No fair, Lea. I was overcome. There’s nothing in this thing about mud and cold water,” he exclaimed. “I can be much better. I really can.”

“I’m sure you think so. We will work on it.”

The whole episode had really pleased Lea. She had from time to time heard her parents refer to that ‘first time in the forest,’ forgetting as parents do that sometimes children listened. She had sensed the importance of the memory to them. This would become that ‘first time in the pond’.

Finch and Lea walked slowly back to the Citadel, talking the talk of newly discovered passion.

“You should know, Finch, I could come to be with your child. I am receptive, and I did nothing to prevent it.”

The hoolean stopped in his tracks, and he looked at her as she continued to walk a few steps further. Because of the availability of methods for controlling conception, especially to a daughter of Roosha’s, Finch had never made a connection between intercourse and reproduction.

“But this was only the first time!” he blurted.

Lea just looked at him.

His mouth hung open, and his eyes played between Lea, the looming Citadel, the cold mountains, the darkening sky, and his fat hairy toes.

“And we only did it once! Well, twice. But right in a row. It was just like doing once really,” he said after some more eye darting and head shaking.

Lea waited to see if he could think of anything stupider to say, and the flustered hoolean did not disappoint.

“You can’t be with child. You’re Cet’s daughter!” He threw his arms up in frustration.

Lea continued to look at him with a gentle smile.

“He’ll kill me,” Finch whined, as he sat down heavily on the ground under a tree.

Lea nodded, thinking he had just made his first intelligent comment. Her father might kill him; he would certainly consider it. She left that problem to her mother.

Finch stared up at the Citadel, wondering what reception awaited. He assumed Roosha would figure it out quickly and tell Cet. He had not yet guessed that she already knew, and approved, but the dawn was reluctantly breaking.

“You planned this. Didn’t you? You and that mother of yours,” he said without anger.

Oh, bright boy, thought Lea, but she answered the challenge with a look towards the mountains.

“You might have asked,” Finch said quietly.

“You might have said no.”

He might have at that. He looked at her for a while, examining his feelings. Strangely, he could not find the slightest trace of real irritation. Instead, the idea pleased him, and perhaps even delighted him. He wanted this, he just had not noticed before. What a clever girl.

“I suppose it was best you didn’t,” he sighed.

Lea slid closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder, and they watched the sun disappear behind the range.

Some movement across the large field in front of the Citadel caught their attention. It looked like a round up of the horses into the front gates.

“Is there something planned?” Lea asked him.

“Nothing I know of. We better get back,” said Finch.

Gouda’s cunning ensured that the pair of young lovers never noticed her. The quality of the moment might have suffered if they had. It surely would have fractured at least Finch’s pleasant frame of mind.

She had noticed him leaving the Citadel to follow Lea. He walked right by her without even saying hello, like she was invisible. How could he do that? After what she had let him do? He had come back to her home. He had begged. She had forgiven him for his killing of the wyvern cow. He had made promises and talked his pretty talk. She had let him inside her. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped coming, and right when it began to feel good.

Gouda’s pride kept her from calling out, but she followed him, and witnessed the entire scene in the pond. She watched in disbelief as Lea seduced her Finch. The heart knows nothing more abhorrent than betrayal and her lonely mind toppled over the edge.

As Lea sat close to Finch in the shadows of an odam tree wondering if her new love would produce a child, through no fault of her own, she made her first mortal enemy.

And a formidable one, at that.

Gouda

Gouda had spent all of her life in the Citadel, and understanding something of that life will give some clarity to the journey of desperation on which she embarked. In her earliest memories she sat in her mother's lap watching while her father, a lieutenant of Radoun, and some of his men had tortured several young women captured from a passing caravan.

They carried out these atrocities in a large cavern deep in the mountain for the benefit of a congregation comprised of the men, women, and children of the band. As well, Radoun had summoned several large demons and they hovered over the crowd hissing and snarling. Everyone cackled with delight at the shrieks of the victims, and she could remember her mother laughing along with the crowd.

The men performed the mutilations with detached and meticulous precision, despite the vibrations of chaos in the room. Radoun burned the body parts removed from the victims in braziers of iron. The smoke from the sizzling flesh filled the cavern, and the hexer used it to weave spells that kept the demons placated, but enthusiastic.

In the sweltering heat of the chamber, accompanied by the mesmerising chants of the hexer, the demons took on a radiance that impressed itself on Gouda's young mind and became her most vivid childhood recollection. After appeasing the demons, an orgy of drinking and carnal excess took place that often lasting for days.

The men of power had their pick of the wives and daughters of the band. Weaker men had to sit and watch. The humiliation and anger of these husbands and fathers as their women eagerly participate in every imaginable form of debasement contributed a key emotional element to the debauchery of the event.

The younger children attended the proceedings, but never took part. They would sit close to the walls and watch the adults perform every extreme of lewd behaviour with eyes wide in wonder. Every so often a teenager whose glandular development had reached a threshold would stand and enter the seething mass at its circumference, working themselves into active participation as their appetites demanded.

Once they had exhausted their warped spasms of lust, the group would return to normality. Without explanation, the women never conceived during these convulsions, and no one ever discussed the events afterwards. Despite the depravity, the community maintained an otherwise normal social structure

complete with strong family units and filial love, behaving as morally as any clan of thieves might. Seemingly the satisfaction brought by the nights of amoral abandon was intensified by the juxtaposition.

The ceremonies continued throughout Gouda's youth, becoming less frequent as she grew older, due mostly to the cost of casting the spells required to keep the demons at bay. Without their grotesque forms and bestial energy, the revelry was hollow and distasteful, even unattainable. The supply of gems required for the magic dwindled, and Radoun's men lacked the industry to dig new stones on their own.

In the last season of Radoun's time as the Citadel's master, the gem supply became exhausted. As a result Gouda never took active part in her community's dark observances.

When the mines in Snowden seventy miles away began producing, the band started raiding the town in hopes of finding a sufficient quantity of the stones to make their ghastly rituals possible once again. Before this could happen, Cet and Thinian attacked the Citadel, killing every man in the band, and any woman who resisted. The rest fled with their children into the mountains unwilling to attempt life with the new occupants.

Gouda alone remained behind. The battle had claimed both her parents. Before her mother died, she gave Gouda a ring that had once belonged to her father, saying it would allow her to speak with the wyverns. If she went to the perch she might find one, and she could escape. The girl went to the hidden alcove as instructed, but found no lizards there; the raiders had killed them all.

She cowered in her hideout for days living on what small provisions she brought for her flight. When the food ran out, she would sneak into the castle and steal from its new owners. Quickly the Sage discovered her creeping through his rooms. She pleaded with him to let her pass, and the soft old man had agreed.

One night as she peered up at Kea, she noticed the familiar shape of a winged lizard pass before it, and she remembered the ring her mother had given her. When Gouda put it on, the distant cries of the wyvern became instantly nearer and clearer, and took on meaning in the girl's mind.

Gouda called to them as best she could and one night a young female adult with a chick on her back, answered the summons. Gouda learned to communicate with the lizard and found her new friend a warm and caring companion, happy to do her bidding.

The girl learned to ride the beast and travelled into the mountains for days at a time. However, she felt safe in her little room in the eastern wall of the Citadel and did not want to leave the only home she had ever known. The comings and goings about the palace offered sufficient anonymity to allow her to wander among the new tenants from time to time. Her natural cunning made it easy enough to remain undetected. The new community gave her some comfort, and although her animosity for them had not completely faded, she could put it out of her mind for a time.

Although the ring made her feel special it also accentuated her isolation. The wyverns in the mountains bent to her will, but she did not always relish their company. They treated her like subjects might treat a queen apparent before her coming of age. Her need for human companionship began to grow and Finch's arrival in her life had given her a brief hope that she might enter the world again.

The way he used and then disposed of her had closed that door. After witnessing the touching moment between Finch and Lea, she could only see that she had to leave this place. As is so often the case with items of power, the ring became a thing of hope and purpose. The company of an adoring rook of wyverns appealed more than the ashes of the hoolean's treachery.

She returned to the Citadel as darkness fell and stopped in the kitchens to collect enough food for the adjustment period. Then she went to the perch, ignoring the white-haired old man as she glowered past him. Other than food, her only thievery had been one of the small axes Hogan had made for Finch's troop of hooleans. They left them unguarded in some boxes in the hall, waiting to be distributed. The weapon fit neatly in her hand; it felt wonderful as she practiced swiping it through the air. Her thoughts alternated between the weak humiliation of Finch's rejection and the glorious details of her revenge on the human girl she knew to be responsible.

She stood in the gaping hole in the wall and called to her winged subjects. It took some time before a wyvern heard her. It glided in silently. With her few belongings packed in a small bag, she placed the chick on back of the large male that had answered her summons. She mounted the lizard and with an almost inaudible click of her tongue commanded the creature into the dark, bracing herself for the brief exhilarating fall as they built up airspeed.

Finch and Lea Return

Roosha noticed Finch and Lea returning to the Citadel after dark, seeking the activity near the large stables. The druid gave a reassuring pat to a lazy mare and went to Lea. She passed Cet on the way and heard him discussing the likely provisioning requirements for the mounted expedition with the stable master. The fact that they did not know how long the search would take made the reckoning difficult, that they would probably split the company in the field complicated things further.

“Finch is back, Cet. I think he’s finished...for now,” Roosha said. Despite the disquiet brought on by the occasion of Jorj’s disappearance, her voice had a trace of mirth.

Cet gave her a puzzled look.

The hoolean’s normally spry manner had lost its edge. He avoided Roosha’s eye, and when he saw Lea’s father he turned in a vain attempt to sneak out. Before he could get two steps Cet called to him. Finch sighed and steeled to face his doom, convinced his face revealed the guilt he felt.

Cet strode over to the little clutch. Roosha stood face to face with her daughter, talking inaudibly, mother fussing at daughter’s hair, touching her flush face, and generally clucking over her chick. She even sniffed her breath and tasted her saliva. A corner of Cet’s mind found that a little strange. More superficially, he observed Lea had so much of her mother in her. Roosha had her radiant pregnant look. She always found it a time of great well-being and power for her. His mind came back to the issues at hand.

“Finch, where have you been?” Cet demanded. “Something has happened to Jorj. Gallia returned without him. We’re going to look for him.”

Finch tried to pay attention, but his mind kept flashing on images of the man’s daughter spread eagle in the pond sludge. He could not look him in the eye.

Snippets of the mother-daughter head-to-head found their way to Cet’s ears through the hubbub of the stable, “... matter if some mud got in?” Lea asked in a serious tone.

“Mud?” puzzled Roosha. She noticed a residue of silt in Lea’s ear and rubbed it clean.

How like her mother, Cet thought again.

“The Hornets will stay here, but with extended patrol duties. I suggest you split them into two groups,” Cet explained, observing some red mud caked in the hoolean’s hair.

“... boy or a girl?” Lea’s eager voice.

The anvil of realisation dropped and Cet’s face with it. A storm gathered across his brow and his eyes snapped back to Finch. “Boy or girl?” he growled so loud the nearest three horses whinnied in fright.

Finch broke and ran out the stable door his instincts plotting a course the entire seventy miles to Snowden.

Cet dashed after him shouting, “In the MUD?! You little pup!”

“Mama! Do something,” Lea begged.

Roosha shrugged and rubbed her belly, unwilling to give chase. “Surely Finch should be able to outrun him. He’s younger. Mind you, your father does look angry.”

For some reason she found whole scene riotously funny and her humour quickly infected Lea, maybe as an emotional antidote to the concern she felt for Jorj. The pair began to laugh hard.

Cet gave up the chase as Finch rounded out of the gate. Cet’s longer legs and better purpose had him closing the gap, but his judgment got the better of him.

“I’m too busy to kill you now!” he shouted after the retreating shadow, hearing the anger bleed out of his voice. Cet stood for a moment gazing into the darkness, then sighed and walked back to the stable.

Roosha and Lea stopped laughing and watched him approach. Both had that look of expectation, one novice, one practiced; life testing him yet again.

He had already seen that look two weeks earlier. Only this time an extra pair of eyes gazed at him as well, eyes wide and hazel like his own. He knew nothing more dear than his oldest child. Do not make a mistake now, he thought. He stopped and looked down at his daughter, pausing for a long moment.

“In the mud?” he asked gently.

The words meant nothing, the tone everything. Lea lunged to him and clasped him tightly, burrowing her face in his chest, a little girl clinging to her father. His feelings on the matter would not resolve quickly, but he knew what his daughter required of him at this moment.

Roosha gave him an approving pat - much like the one she had just given the reticent mare.

Good husband. Gooood husband.

Lerick

“What have *you* been doing?” Lerick chided, swinging down from a hidden alcove in the corridor.

He dangled from a rope in front of his sister, scratching himself in an admirable parody of a meesa. Lea successfully concealed the fright he had given her. He did things like this regularly.

“Nothing,” she snapped.

“Nothing...with Finch,” Lerick said in accusation.

Lea blushed noticeably; she could never maintain her composure around her younger brother. When Lerick wanted to he could get under her skin like a splinter. The youth dropped silently to the floor, and walked beside her for a while. Their ages differed by only a season and they shared their feelings and fears with each other openly.

“I saw you come back with him. You were holding hands.” No mocking in his voice this time. Then I saw papa chasing him out of the stables. Ha! I would love to see that again,” he laughed, and slapped his leg. “And I wondered to myself, what did that randy hoolean do to make Cet so angry?”

Lea laughed, “Ohhh...He did, alright. Or we did. I suppose”

“You and Finch? Amazing.” Lerick shook his head grandly from side to side in disbelief.

The boy stood a full head taller than his sister. He had his father’s broad face, and his mother’s dark eyes and full mouth. Ambling along the hall beside her, he leapt and swung at imaginary foes in an animated dance of youthful enthusiasm.

“And with his reputation,” he added with a snicker. Finch’s exploits with women had earned him a legendary status among Lerick’s peers.

“His reputation for childish rutting games, you mean? He was clumsy, brother, undeserving of the accolade,” Lea said.

“Really? Huh. Well you can tame him if anyone can. Still, I wouldn’t mind his reputation.”

“Little fear of that at the rate you’re going with Gorshka.”

“But I’ve tried everything.”

Gorshka’s full figure had a firm grip on Lerick’s hormonal eye at the moment. Lea wondered if the girl could hold Lerick’s attention beyond his obsession with her prominent breasts.

“If you’d tried everything, you’d have everything. She likes you a lot, I think.”

“You do?” He grinned, “And why wouldn’t she? ...I suppose mother knows about you and Finch.”

“What doesn’t mother know?”

“She doesn’t know about Gorshka.”

“Ha! What is there to know? Lerick hankers for a girl with a big bosom. Girl acts as though Lerick doesn’t exist.”

“She doesn’t know about Arlow, and Ella,” he added more slyly. Lea had become involved with the couple in a mild fever of sexual experimentation several moons earlier. Lerick did not know the extent or course of the relationship. It was one of the few things his sister would not speak of.

“No she doesn’t.” Lea said quietly, “And she won’t.”

“But she knows about Finch.”

“Oh yes, and what’s more she wants me to have his child.”

Lerick paused, the conversation had taken a life changing turn. “Does Cet want you to? Do you?”

“...I am ready for a child...His blood is good. He seems good. Father may take some convincing, but that’s mother’s problem.”

“Are you actually thinking of keeping him, as well?” Lerick asked.

“Yes. I am.”

“And that’s another thing mother doesn’t know, I suppose.”

“Well you can’t tell her everything,” Lea smiled.

They walked for a moment in silence through a torch lit hall. The peculiar passage near the centre of the Citadel had small rectangular white stones of various sizes protruded from the walls on both sides; the smallest by several inches, the largest by several feet. Each had a different carved face on its end.

Lerick climbed up and made his way along the wall near the top keeping pace with his sister on the floor below.

“Papa thinks those are tombs, you know.”

“I’ll come down the moment one of their occupants complains.”

The pair kept parallel in silence for a time, then Lea asked. “Will you be riding out to look for Jorj?”

“I want to. But Cet says he would prefer me to stay here. He says we are poorly defended with so many sarns gone. But he says the choice is mine.”

“He’s right. Stay here...it would be better,” she said. “I would prefer it if you were here.”

They eventually reached their rooms in the morning wing of the Citadel, so called because the sun's rays reached it first.

"I'm not tired, and I have plans," Lerick announced and wandered off down the hall.

He had arranged to meet two of his friends. While exploring one of the seemingly endless basements of the building in an old corner of the Citadel they had discovered a door behind a pile of rubble; not so much hidden, as forgotten. They found to their delight that it concealed an old wine cellar with many of the bottles still intact. The treasure had inestimable value, and they agreed to meet that night for a session.

He found Geoff and Mariana there when he arrived. Mariana owed her squat and plain looks to a dwarven great grandfather. She enjoyed the rough company of the boys, and accepted her dull appearance, making no efforts at self-improvement. Despite this, Geoff had taken notice of her, and they had begun a covert and passionate romp.

They stood for a moment before the door in mock solemnity. Lerick turned and saluted Geoff, the first to notice the door. He lit his torch from Mariana's and pushed open the portal to paradise.

A half an hour later, they sat around a low wooden table in the centre of the room, surrounded by short chairs with splayed legs. They suited Mariana best, but the suppleness of youth made the arrangement tolerable for the two boys as well. A large thick-wicked candle on the table gave an appropriate illumination for their purposes. It cast large steady shadows on the rows of wine racks.

The east wall had a stack of barrels in three rows, seven-six-seven, mounted in a solid wooden trestle. The face of each cask bore an intricate mosaic depicting scenes of joyous imbibery.

"This is dwarven furniture, I think," said Geoff.

"This whole basement section is dwarven," Mariana observed. "At least the walls have that finish they like so much."

"Yea, but this isn't dwarven wine," Lerick said. "It's too good."

"So you keep saying. What do you know about it?"

"I know it isn't vinegar anyway, and I know I feel good."

Suddenly Mariana jumped up and announced, "Oh! I almost forgot. I have a surprise."

She produced a small orange sack and poured the contents on the table: two fistfuls of irregular-shaped marble-sized pellets covered with a colourful mould.

“Oooo...I’m glad I skipped dinner,” said Lerick as he examined the heap.

“They’re truffles, you moron. They make you see things, and make you feel good,” she explained. “I found them today in the woods.”

The two boys eyed the fungal growths with suspicion. Geoff picked one up and sniffed it, finding only the mildest odour; he shrugged his shoulders and popped it in his mouth, washing it down with a swig of the wine.

“I told you, I already feel good,” Lerick said, but after a moment added, “Ahh, why not?”

They divided the pile and ate them. Then went on to drink more wine, and smoke pipes of nicotine bearing leaves that Mariana had liberated from a dwarf she found passed out drunk in the hall. They laughed more, and took turns singing. Geoff had brought along a small lute, and played any tune requested. Mariana had a sweet voice that captivated the other two as much for the contrast with her character as for its melodic qualities.

A decidedly indeterminate amount of time later Lerick asked, “Why is that wine cask grinning at me?”

The other two dutifully looked over and stared intently for a whole silent minute.

Then Mariana asked, “And so hugely?”

As one they fell apart into a giggling mass of jiggling bones in lizard skin armour. Rolling around on the floor they clutched their bellies as they roared. Their peals of laughter reverberated off the walls and stoked the furnaces of mirth ever higher.

The fungal trance lasted for hours, and they each took turns introducing concepts so humorous and insightful that they laughed like gods. The buzz finally subsided into a mellower state. They all felt sharp and full of energy. Lerick investigated the room. Geoff and Mariana held hands, the hallucinogenic episode had easily pierced their veil of secrecy.

I feel very fine, Lerick thought to himself as he nosed around the back of the room. He began methodically thumping each of the large wine casks with the hilt of his dagger, starting with the top left. When he encountered a full barrel he would sample the wine and offer a considered critique of the vintage to the gallery of two.

“Fruity, with a well rounded after taste, reminiscent of dubbleberries in late autumn. Mmmm... Rancid, like the armpit of a gnome...with a hint, just a hint – Nay! – a faintest breeze of adelbeast pee.”

“You would know,” said the girl.

The final keg in the bottom right corner of the wall resounded empty when tapped.

“Thump that one again,” demanded Mariana, who had scrutinised the only activity in the room with interest.

Lerick did as instructed, and noticed then as she had, that it sounded different than the other empties. So he knelt and examined it more closely. Marianna joined him.

Geoff stared into one of the many candles that had appeared around the room. The air remained fresh and cool despite the flames, witness to the craftiness of the ventilation system engineers. The boy sat contemplating the demeanour of the voices in his head. He had heard them all his life, but these sounded different somehow, closer and more vivid. At first he attributed it to the truffles, but as the evening wore on the explanation seemed insufficient. Geoff came out of his trance and looked over at Lerick and Mariana. He pondered how to explain his concerns to his friends.

As they stared at the cask it became clear that it differed from its neighbours; remarkably so, in fact. It seemed as though their scrutiny caused some subtle magic of concealment to fade away before their eyes. A subtler, more skilled hand had made the carvings on the darker face of the barrel. Instead of depicting a celebration of the grape and its heroic contribution to the twin causes of revelry and drunkenness, the carvings showed a vengeful god staring at a tiny cringing figure clasped in his omni-powerful palm.

Using one of his daggers Lerick prodded at the scowling face. The half inch thick wood veneer, treated with heavy oil that prevented the surface from drying and splitting, concealed an iron container. His discovery intrigued Geoff enough to get him out of his chair.

“I think it’s a door,” said Lerick.

“It is. To a crypt,” Geoff said, his voice sounded flat and certain.

Mariana looked at her lover. “The voices?”

Geoff nodded absently.

“What voices?” Lerick asked.

“He hears them in his head sometimes,” Mariana answered for him. “Apparently one of them told him where to find this wine.”

“And they told you this is a crypt?... And your telling us this now?”

Geoff shook his head “They don’t tell me much specifically. But they’re close. And they are the voices of the dead.”

“The dead have different voices than the living?”

Geoff nodded. “Yea, they drone on, and repeat themselves. And they’re always complaining. Its like this world is haunted by spirits that are too irritating to be let into the next.”

The three giggled at the disrespectful comment.

“I don’t see a keyhole,” observed Mariana.

“No. Me either. There’s some trick to opening it.”

Geoff stared at the carving on the cask. The scornful eyes of the god stared intensely into the tiny cringing figure held in the deity’s mighty hand. Then he smiled and leaned forward, pressing the eyes of the god and the face of the unfortunate sinner. With a quiet click the door opened inward on noiseless hinges. The circular tunnel extended into the darkness beyond the reach of the feeble light of the candle.

“Oh, Yes. Well done, Geoff.”

At that moment, before exploration, such a tunnel might lead to any sort of treasure – or danger. They savoured the feeling.

“Should we tell someone?” Mariana suggested.

“No!” Lerick said decisively. “First, it may be nothing. Second, what’s down there is ours.”

Their greed convinced them more than Lerick’s fledgling capacities for leadership.

“Give me the glowstone lamp.”

Geoff handed him a small bronze box. The old stone in the lamp did not have a lot of light left in it. Lerick took it and crawled into the tunnel on his hands and knees. The other two followed close behind. His free hand felt the cold metal of the floor.

The iron of the initial section of the passage became smooth stone at the back wall, and they found a circular slab at the end twenty-five feet further. On the front some ancient craftsman had carved four distinct faces, each bore an expression of the deepest spiritual pain.

“They look sort of like the faces on those wall tombs. But they don’t look as happy. And there’s room for more.”

“Charming,” said Mariana. “I am now afraid.”

The others felt it, too. The faces had a souring affect on their moods. A round hole large enough for a sparrow sat in the centre of the stone. Lerick probed the recess carefully with his dagger. A sharp blade severed the tip with a snap that startled them all. He withdrew the remaining length of his once favourite blade and frowned.

“That was a bit harsh,” he quipped. “At least in my opinion.”

The three laughed again this time more to ease the growing tension than for the comment’s comedic value.

After an hour of poking around they gave up.

“Mariana! Fetch Finch!” Lerick said with mock authority.

“Geoff! Fetch Finch!”

Geoff sighed, groaned loudly in objection but crawled back down the tunnel anyway. He took off at a quick trot in search of the hoolean renowned for his skill with locks.

Lerick rolled over onto his back to stare at the ceiling, Mariana did as well, and they lay there shoulder to shoulder, letting the tensions flow out of them; a pair of distant observers waiting patiently for the next moment to begin.

Lerick finally asked, “Doing Geoff long?”

“Two moons.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t want you to know.”

“Why?”

“You’d make a fuss.”

“I know now, and I make no fuss.”

“Not yet. But you’re out of your skull at the moment,” Mariana said after a pause.

“Not so much now. Really,” Lerick stifled a giggle. He added in a low and conspiratorial tone, “Is he good?”

Mariana slapped him on the shoulder and said, “Well he knows more about it than you do.”

Lerick winced at the jibe and scanned his mind desperately for a different subject, finding none he chose to express his feelings honestly with a loud sigh. He looked over at Mariana with painful eyes. She looked back at him for a time.

“You set your standards too high, Lerick. And those girls won’t be what you think. Take Gorshka for example. With her ‘My grandfather was a vice-count-roy something or other’ regal nose. She wants you because you’re Cet’s son. You’re the closest thing we’ve got to royalty around here.” She looked at him, shook her head and laugh. “Mind you, you’re not that close. And she’s gonna make you dance on a string before she lets you under that frock of hers. Girls don’t have to be perfect.”

The moment lingered and Lerick became aroused. The airless tunnel filled with their young heat, and they looked each other in the eye; Lerick noticing Mariana for the first time.

‘Finally,’ she thought to herself.

“Geoff will be gone for a half an hour,” said Lerick.

“I suppose he will. Do you have some sort of plan?” she asked.

“No. But I sense inspiration is about to strike,” he answered, pouncing on her in a blur of hands and lips.

It didn’t take anywhere near a half an hour (either time), and when Geoff returned with Finch, they had moved back to the wine cellar; the fresh air there helped to put some distance between themselves and the scene of the crime.

“Good evening Lerick, Mariana,” said Finch amicably.

The hoolean took a drink from the open bottle on the table. “Hmm, not bad.”

“We would appreciate it if you kept this to yourself,” said Mariana.

Finch laughed and said, “My lips are sealed...except while I’m tasting my fee.”

It took the Citadel’s greatest thief a while to figure out how to open the door. The three youngsters watched in fascination as the hoolean hunted for traps and manipulated the lock with his amazing assortment of tools, taking mental notes. With all the wards removed, and the lock defeated, the circular door opened with a quiet hiss of escaping air; the portal fit back neatly into an alcove in the tunnel.

They found a second circular door similar to the first twenty feet further down.

After a moment’s observation Finch said, “This door is simpler, all we have to do is close the first one. You can’t have both open at the same time.”

“So we have to lock ourselves in?” Mariana asked.

“Along with what ever is on the other side,” Geoff added.

“Seems so. Prudence would have it that someone stay behind,” Finch said.

“Well I wanna see what’s in there,” said Marianna.

“So do I,” chorused the two boys.

“You all want to go in there without me then?”

“No,” they mumbled.

They squabbled for a few minutes, and finally resolved to draw lots to decide. Mariana lost, but accepted her fate graciously and climbed back down the tunnel.

“Light this candle, and wait ‘til it burns to here,” Finch said, scratching a line in the wax. “If we don’t come out. Go get help. Beld would be best, or Lathalia.”

“The voices are much louder here,” said Geoff.

“What’s he talking about?” Finch asked.

Geoff explained about the voices in his head. The new information made the hoolean cautious and he examined everything a second time. He pointed out that the surface of the wall between the doors differed from the entry section of the tunnel. They covered their glowstones and as soon as their eyes adjusted to the dark they could make out the faint glow of magic.

When Finch felt they had nothing left to learn, he uncovered his lamp. The hoolean had access to the best equipment and his fresh glowstone shown far more brightly than Geoff’s. He slowly closed the outer door. It slid back into place with a confident click. The tunnel became quiet. At least for Finch and Lerick, Geoff frowned in displeasure at the noisy inner world of his mind. Finch grasped the handle on the second door and turned it slowly. The moment the portal opened Geoff let out a loud gasp.

“What?” Lerick hissed.

“They...are so angry,” Geoff said with difficulty.

“At us? For being here?”

Geoff listened for a while and then said, “No. I don’t think so.”

Finch swung the door open, like its sister door, the hinges worked perfectly and it fit back into a nook in the wall as well. The room beyond startled the two boys. Everything about it spoke to them of death.

The large chamber had a high vaulted ceiling. In the centre of the thirty-foot expanse of floor sat a stone platform the right size for a body. A chequer board of marble slabs, undeniably crypts, six across by three high, covered the far wall. A bookshelf to the right held two rows of neatly arranged leather-bound tomes. However, the left wall disturbed them most. Finch’s lamp illuminated a series of carvings, reminiscent of human faces, glaring down at the three intruders. Finch frowned and extinguished his light.

“What’d you do that for?” Lerick whispered. Something sinister, or sad, in the room kept him from speaking aloud.

“Just wait,” Finch said calmly.

They remained at the entrance staring into the chamber. Slowly their eyes again adapted to the dark, and the room revealed itself. Strange characters and symbols, etched in lines of colour covered the left wall, images of flowers and happy faces woven together in a mosaic of joyful dread. Some skilled artisan had engineered the conflicting imagery in a subtle manner that captivated the eye.

One particular image held Lerick's attention. A three-petal flower morphed into a three-eyed face, and back again to a flower depending on how he held his head. It touched his soul and he could not take his eyes off of it. Lerick had yet to develop an interest in religion. He accepted willingly that he had a soul, not for the spiritual ramifications, but because it sounded like a strong thing to have to complete himself as a man. However, he spent little time considering its dimensions, and even less nourishing it. For the first time in his life, he wished he had, because the face on the wall immobilised his spirit. He felt that while in its gaze he would remain there forever.

The boy had known death his whole life in one form or another, and had his own peace with it. But he knew he did not want to die here, with that face mocking the very centre of his being. To end life in this crypt, meant to really end. The face-flower with its over-abundance of joy would never let him go.

"I don't like the way the walls are looking at me," Geoff said in his friend's ear.

The words so perfectly matched Lerick's thoughts that the spell was broken and they both laughed.

"Shhhh!!" Finch exclaimed under his breath. "Do not laugh here."

§§§

The dark shrouds worn by the priests masked their expressions; deep cowls kept out the flickering light from the flames of the funeral pyre. The *right maid*, the daughter of the *Sasha*, did not move as the logs crackled around her in the heat.

Pheis'wurs watched on from under his hood, recalling his single secret afternoon of passion with the girl; a simple act of mating that resulted in her death by the purging flames. He knew the laws had no sense or morality to them, but the priest also knew that the right or wrong of the act did not matter. Someone had defiled the right maid and she could no longer lay claim to the place of ascendance. So said the law. For her sins she had to die, and less than one hour after the birth of the boy child conceived during the illicit encounter. The act could be hidden, but

not its fruits. The child would live and, by a quirk of their system of ethics, might even go on to become Sasha; assuming he survived the rite of purification.

The god Anakat demanded adherence to an orderly, but sadistic, dogma. The laws, and their countless derivative and ancillary bylaws, gave the priests, and the followers living beyond the walls in the approaching valley, hours of passionate debate, political manoeuvring, moral direction and (after a fashion) justice.

Pheis'wurs cared little for the sense of the law, only that the other followers obey it to the letter. He had committed a grievous crime, the girl would lose only her life; he dared not even think about the proscribed punishment for his transgression.

The cheerful flames consumed the small corpse with no ceremony Pheis'wurs could discern. The spiritual essence of the ritual meant nothing to him, his mind sought only solutions to the problems of this life. He did not know if Anakat existed or if the god cared at all about the behaviour of his followers. The Sasha, on the other hand, truly believed and had just proved it once again by condemning his favourite daughter to death in the service of his deity.

Pheis'wurs did not need his god to be real, but Anakat's tangled web of laws satisfied the priest deeply. In the chaos that existed outside the walls of the great fortress he felt weak and ineffective. Pheis'wurs needed the order of the priesthood, as desperately as he needed to avoid becoming the focus of its vengeance. He found the conflict an intellectual challenge, not a moral one.

Suson stood by his side, close enough for Pheis'wurs to notice a tear of grief running down his face, despite his hood. Both Suson and Pheis'wurs enjoyed membership in the inner circle of eleven that answered directly to the Sasha. Poor Suson and his genuine love for the right maid, Pheis'wurs had discovered the relationship between them and used the knowledge to bed the girl.

As he watched her burn, he occupied his mind with calculations about his vulnerability. The hunt for the defiler of the Sasha's daughter had begun, but so far no one suspected him. Perhaps Suson knew the truth, but then Pheis'wurs had the other priest's letters, desperate pages of painful devotion spilled out in a readily identifiable hand. How could Suson have been so stupid? To put the love of a girl above the privileges of station seemed to Pheis'wurs an act of folly or weakness.

Pheis'wurs weighed the advantages of Suson as his puppet for years to come versus the danger of discovery. The matter would not pass until they sealed someone into the Karac, and if Pheis'wurs did not take care, he might become one of the nineteen. The preordained number of sinners, with crimes so heinous that

they lost even their entitlement to Anakat's judgment; condemned to spend eternity trapped with only the books of law (and the other eighteen transgressors) for company.

Directly behind Pheis'wurs, aware of every machination in the priest's mind, stood Tan, the newest member of the inner circle of the Ardent Followers of Anakat. Not through the use of any special telepathic powers, he just knew how the man thought. In fact, Tan had first intercepted the letters, and then allowed them to fall into Pheis'wurs' hands. He knew the man's lust would get the better of him.

The vracken had assumed the name Tan when he had joined the order, just another of many names assumed for a purpose. He had done this for one reason, to witness the ritual of condemnation. He wanted to see this Karac, this prison of souls. He had a great interest in the magic it employed, but it also frightened him. The prison's architects had accomplished something amazing: to catch a soul and keep it.

He had not foreseen the pregnancy; he had assumed the girl would take precautions. Had her union with Pheis'wurs not produced a child, the law would only have demanded banishment. In that case, the vracken felt he would have done the girl a favour, instead she had to die. Tan attended the birth, and poisoned the girl so she would not suffer. A small comfort, perhaps, but he had not made their foolish rules.

He took a great risk aiding the girl in even that small way. Danger lurked in some of these priests, and with his own powers still fledgling, he needed to take care. It took most of his concentration just to keep them from discovering his true nature. But, he would not remain with these madmen much longer. He would reveal Pheis'wurs' crime against the maid to the Sasha this very night, and the Ardent Followers of Anakat believed in swift justice.

Later that night Pheis'wurs found himself strapped to the stone table in the Karac, whimpering a sincere prayer to the god he had long served, and long doubted, mortal fear completing his conversion. His eyes darted between the three-eyed face, and the silver three-tipped dagger in the left hand of the Sasha. Tan watched on, standing at the entrance looking at the Sasha's back, along with the other ten priests, all chanting prayers of protection.

The shield on the Sasha's right arm held the vracken's attention. Even standing behind it, he felt weak and he hoped the ceremony would conclude soon. He really wanted to leave.

Three angry souls already haunted the room. The shield held them at bay, and allowed the priests to enter and conduct the ritual. The Sasha said the final prayer of condemnation and slipped the dagger into the side of doomed priest. Pheis'wurs wailed as his carefully ordered life dissolved around the blade. The poison worked in two stages, first paralysis, and then a slow agonizing death.

When Pheis'wurs stopped struggling, the Sasha cut his bonds, and the two most senior priests quickly deposited the still-breathing body in an empty crypt. After sliding the stone front piece into place, the twelve men backed out of the room. Leaving the shield there in a mounting just above the entrance.

The vracken's own soul, now haunting his body, had taken the first of the many steps to death long ago. As a result he feared the power the shield would have over him, and one day he would have to destroy it.

§§§

For seven hundred seasons Pheis'wurs existed in the Karac, the last of the Ardent Followers to be condemned. With little else to do he learned the rules of the shield, and the faces on the walls. Then he waited, and waited, and waited.

§§§

The boys became silent at Finch's command, and the three looked around the room. It took a moment for the four imprisoned souls to react, but when they did the mind of Geoff lay open before them, and Pheis'wurs, the strongest of them, entered it with little effort. The boy clawed at his head and groaned.

"Sorry," Geoff (Pheis'wurs) said a moment later. Imprisonment had made the soul quite mad, but it still knew what had to happen. Someone had to take the shield down and turn it away from him.

"Ah...Lerack...Lerick...look at that shield," said Pheis'wurs, struggling to find the boy's name in Geoff's mind.

Finch and Lerick both turned to look. It had taken all of Pheis'wurs' will to cross the room to Geoff, and he now retreated from the buffeting waves of energy from the shield. As Finch and Lerick examined the elegant piece of armour over the

door, the possessed boy moved back across the room. They slowly took it down, and Pheis'wurs watched on as they held the wretched device.

Lerick turned the shield so he could put it on. In that moment Pheis'wurs bolted past them into the tunnel, and closed the inner door. He startled Mariana when he emerged from the fake wine cask. Pheis'wurs, free at last, stood surveying the room.

“What’s wrong?” Marianna asked.

Pheis'wurs plotted an ingenious lie, but he could not make words form in the boy’s mouth.

“Geoff?”

Pheis'wurs became afraid. A whole world he did not understand lay out here. No shield, no faces, no souls to do his bidding.

“Geoff!”

Pheis'wurs felt himself weakening. Geoff’s soul reasserted itself.

“Get out of my head!” Geoff shouted, as Pheis'wurs’ will crumbled and left the boy to finally face his god.

“What?”

“Nothing, Marianna, just an unwanted guest. Where are Finch and Lerick?” Geoff could not recall anything of the last few minutes.

“You left them inside.”

Marianna crawled back into the tunnel and opened the doors one at a time, freeing the others. They brought the shield with them.

The remaining souls slipped quietly away in the fuss.

Dwarf War

“Over the roasted cinders of my blessed red beard!” spat Hogan as he charged, helm first, into his war room. His five war chiefs struggled to alertness, shaking off the countless days without sleep.

His xeras, Sweeny and Hawist, woke from their catnaps, both exhausted from another day of hard magic. The confined spaces of the dwarven tunnels prohibited the use of simpler fire spells. They had to snake their columns of fire through passageways, avoiding friends and incinerating foes, leaving the structural integrity of the shafts intact. The strain of the difficult magic took its toll.

“Dento carddon leads to the heart of the whole vein, and I won’t give it up. I want Rockred and Ironmelt, out of Greco and sent there. I want you to hold, hold, *hold!* Never forget that every boulder is a precious bone in the body of yer barrow!” He thrust a grimy finger first at the respective commanders, and then at a marvellously detailed three-dimensional granite miniaturization of the entire barrow that occupied the room.

Hogan’s three thousand dwarves lay under a brutal siege by a horde of Glonards, a degenerate - rotten in the local vernacular - form of the dwarf direction. They swarmed out of the countless natural caves and tunnels that honeycombed the mountains. Hogan’s tacticians found it impossible to mount any effective offence against them in the maze of passages, and they consequently adopted an entirely defensive posture.

Right before Cet’s visit to collect his axes a few days before, they had defeated or otherwise chased off the first wave. The situation seemed under control. Instead, the encounter had only proven a portent of the engagement to come. The Glonards returned with a much larger force, supported by several xeras that did not have the same compunction about the use of explosive force or friendly kills as his own sorcerers.

The uncharted underground caverns made it difficult to judge the enemy’s real number, and the horde had Hogan’s troops at their limits. Although, Hogan’s dwarves killed Glonards three or four to one, there seemed no end to the creatures.

For the first time in the stormy history of his little dwarven country, Hogan felt a real fear for their survival.

The barrow consisted of eight caverns or carddons, which the dwarves shaped into living spaces, workshops, and foundries. Honwee sat in the centre like the hub of a wheel; four carddons, above, below, east and west, surrounded it. The other

three, the earthmost, ran in a line level with the lowest of the central caverns. A wide underground avenue connected each to its nearest neighbour. Hundreds of exploratory and mining tunnels spawned out from these main passageways, penetrating like roots into the various veins of ores, either precious or useful.

The dwarves maintained a thirty-foot high model of the entire barrow in the war room. An excellent piece of dwarven stone craft powered by a large red ruby in its centre, it faithfully recorded the position of the carddons, tunnels and natural caverns. They constantly enlarged and embellished the miniature as the barrow grew. The sturdy construction allowed Hogan and his war masters to scurry around on it like monkeys on mad juice. This they did - beards trailing as they swung from shaft to shaft - swearing, cursing, and shouting orders at underlings.

Attendants communicated with forward observers using Kartha's signal stones. They gestured at, and continually rearranged, the various small glowing figurines that represented their own and enemy troops. Occasionally they adjusted the model itself when they received reports of new tunnels dug by one or the other sides in the conflict.

In the war room Hogan felt like the fiery mind of a mighty dwarven body. During the battle, the king spent the majority of his time here. His troops had fought other battles, but never before had so much blood, their own and the enemy's stained the floors of the barrow. Hogan would only join the battle firsthand if Honwee itself came under attack and he found the itch in his axe arm disturbing.

Hogan's tactical mind grasped the complexities of the three-dimensional world below the surface. To fight effectively underground you had to know the lay of the labyrinth, and remain mobile enough to out manoeuvre your opponent in the tunnels; and he commanded his squads through the mines like blood through arteries carrying the cure for the disease of Glonard infestation.

The centre of Hogan's current concerns lay in Dento, the earthmost of the carddons in the barrow; a large rectangular space, hundreds of yards long, bifurcated vertically by a ten-foot wide mantle that ran around the perimeter.

The dwarves had recently (just under four hundred moons) fashioned the ceilings, walls, and floors of a natural cavern into the Dento carddon. They did not yet use it as living space so the walls had few embellishments. The intricate stonework associated with dwarven architecture would come later.

The bridge that once crossed at the centre had collapsed into a pile of rubble on the vast floor.

The rock heartward of Dento contained the richest veins so far discovered, and they had latticed the space with the five-by-five foot mining tunnels favoured by Hogan's engineers. Two natural passages from the carddon led to the caverns deeper in the mountains, and the Glonards now controlled these wild caves completely.

"...but that will leave our east flanks without guard! They'll take the entrance hall!" protested Paranda, commander of the Rockred brigade.

"The entrance hall leads to nothing but daylight. Glonards can't abide it. By the hell of the swamps, they're terrified of it," Hogan snorted. "By my beard, if they get a nose full of the veins near Dento, they will not be stopped. Once they're in the main mine works we'll never get 'em out!" After a quiet pause he added, "Besides, I don't intend to let them get as far as the entrance."

The commanders of the GraniteFace and BadBeard brigades currently defending the beleaguered Dento, nodded their agreement with Hogan's assessment. Garand Heavyvein, commander of Cinder melt, who would sound the retreat and give up the Greco cavern his troops had held for days at great cost, had less enthusiasm.

Each of the five brigades consisted at full strength of about five hundred dwarves. Cinder melt had lost more than half their number, and their position had become untenable.

Garand acquiesced, his pain shared.

Hogan knew what was what.

"Sweeny! Hawist! Cover the retreat...Then prepare to collapse Greco."

This last order shocked the battle-hardened hearts in the room. The entire concept of the collapse of a carddon offended a proper dwarf - akin to a captain scuttling a ship. Worse even, because to a dwarf the carddons and tunnels of his barrow felt like living things, lovingly carved and decorated, built to last and last. Dwarves preferred to keep their options open, even sacrificing a tunnel for the best of tactical reasons had no appeal. To order the destruction of an entire carddon indicated to the commanders Hogan's desperate view of the situation. The xeras groaned in unison, loathing the stress the magic would require. It would also require a significant amount of their gem reserves.

Hogan considered calling on Cet for assistance. But, the Citadel's human troops would have little value down in the tunnels - maybe for open combat in the carddons. The real battle flowed through the tiny passages, and that required a diminutive stature. Maybe they would lend him Finch's Hornets, and he could always find use for another xera, regardless of size.