

Monday, December 19, 2016

An Uninvited Guest

The high peaks of the Blue Mountains form the border between the icy lands of the Normen and the more temperate lands of their brothers, the Harlon. Once, the two lands were one, but the difficult passes, the differences in climate, and more than one succession crisis had separated them. Now they fought as only brothers can, speaking the same language, worshiping the same gods, but hating and killing each other at any opportunity.

Somewhere along that rugged border, a broad circular platform of rough hewn black basalt squatted in the silver moonlight. Animals avoided the place, and the few humans that knew about it did, too; something felt off about that place. No one could say precisely what the problem was, but every one of them felt it, a nagging whisper of wrongness at the back of their mind.

On that night, however, someone was approaching. He was the kind of man that is easy to forget: average height, average build, nondescript features. He walked up the steep trail pushing his way through the undergrowth with a stout staff. He wore a small knapsack and carried an empty bottle on his belt.

When he reached the circle, he sank down onto one of the huge stones with a grateful sigh and lowered his bag onto the stone beside him. For a moment, he just sat there, breathing deeply and staring at the stars. He fumbled with the buckles, raised the flap of the knapsack, and lifted out an intricate marble carving of a strange looking building. It looked a bit like a turtle, circular, with squat pillars around the base, and a domed roof. Seven doors were evenly spaced among the pillars, but each door differed from the others. Grunting, the man stood. He carried the model of the building in front of himself not letting it touch his body. He balanced the building on his finger tips, as if to avoid touching it as much as possible.

At the center of the circle, a cross had been etched into the stone. He carefully positioned the building to cover the cross, then backed away quickly, stumbling over the edge of the circle in his haste. The carving began to glow slightly, then with a grinding, scraping noise, it began to grow. Within moments it had covered the stone circle, and towered over the head of the man who had carried it.

The white marble melted away more slowly, gradually revealing pinkish blocks and pillars of granite, and heavy doors of polished cherry wood. Though the doors were all the same size, each door was different. The man walked around the building once, as if to reassure himself that he had done everything right, then sat down to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. Two men, alike enough to be brothers stepped out of the forest. They were both small and thin and both wore a scheming look on their face. The older of the two was dressed in lightweight cotton; the younger wore heavy wool.

They nodded to the waiting man. "Traer, good to see you."

The man nodded back. "Nero, Ola, it's been a long time."

Nero, the elder, asked "Are we the first to arrive?"

Before Traer could respond, Ola spoke up. "Of course we're the first. All of the others have to show their importance by making others wait."

Two women emerged from the forest moments later. They were identical, from their broad smiling faces to their wooden shod feet. One of them clucked at Ola, then spoke in a cheerful, chiding tone. "Oh come, dear, you have to forgive them their little tricks. They'll be along shortly."

Each of the women took one of the men by the arm, then dragged him over to where Traer was sitting.

Even sitting, Traer was taller than the two little round women. He grinned down at them as they approached, and turned his cheek as they stood on tiptoe to greet him with a motherly kiss. "Oga, Asa, I've missed you."

Nero responded before either of the women could, "He missed them, brother, but not us. Why do you think that is?"

Oga elbowed Nero. "It's because you're always such an ass. If you weren't always looking for slights, people would like to be around you more." Nero grumbled, but gave no audible reply. Traer grinned in spite of himself.

A tearing sound split the air; a lightning bolt smacked the ground. In spite of himself, Traer jumped. Nero grimaced.

"Here comes drama, and it looks like she's in one of those moods."

A second lightning bolt crashed down. Two women emerged from the binding flash. Their faces were identical, one's clothing a mirror image of the other's. In strange unison, the women stepped forward and looked around before settling an icy stare on two large men who were stepping out of the woods.

"Secha, you left your cups long enough to join us tonight? How wonderful." The two women spoke with the same strange unity that they moved with, their indistinguishable voices dripping with icy sarcasm.

One of the big men raised a wooden cup high, grinning broadly and winking at the others. The other spoke, his voice a deep rumble. "Come off it, Lima. Nobody needs to hear your sermon tonight."

Without a word in return, Lima and her twin walked to the heavy door carved into billowing clouds and lightning bolts, wrenched it open, and disappeared into the building.

Ola spoke trying to hide the quiver in his voice. "Should we go in, too?"

"Give her a moment to cool off," said a deep feminine voice behind them. Everyone turned to see four figures emerging from a black shadow in three forest. "She'll be herself in a minute."

Those who had arrived earlier regarded the new arrivals with caution bordering on fear. The new arrivals, two men and two women, seemed to be trying to defuse the tension when when one of the men spoke. "So now we're just waiting on their majesties, the Queens of the Night?"

Asa replied, the scorn evident in her tone, "They're probably out dallying with some mortals." She snuggled closer to Ola, who put his arm around her protectively.

The Queens of the Night arrived from opposite direction, gliding smoothly along silver streams of glittering stars. They stepped to the earth face to face, greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek and a warm embrace, then turned toward the building. "Well then," said the taller of the two, her voice breathy and musical, "shall we begin?"

The couples separated then, each person selecting their own door, and entered the strange building. Traer was left outside. When the last door closed, he heaved a deep sigh, shouldered his now-empty knapsack, and disappeared into the forest, leaving the gods to their own business.

If he had stayed a moment longer, he would have seen a rat run out of the forest and wriggle its way under the nearest door.

Posted by Johnny Elbows in The House of the Rat at 09:50

I love it - the rat is most ominous! Is there more coming?Comment (1)
Anonymous on Dec 19 2016, 22:50

I'm planning to post once a week. The best laid plans of rats and men, though. :)Comment (1)
Anonymous on Dec 20 2016, 10:52