

# **How to Steal a Mountain**

**Dan Brockington**



For T, R (with a 'z') and E

## **How to Steal a Mountain: Cover Material**

“They said I’d have to steal the forest ... But I’ve done better than that. I’ve stolen the mountain”

Samti’s life is happy, peaceful and illegal.

She lives next to a mountainous reserve, which she steals from – and she can out run the guards. But then Samti’s world is turned upside down by the arrival of a conservation project devoted to saving a mysterious new animal. Only no one really understands the creature. They don’t know where it has come from, or what revolutions it will bring. Worlds that have been safely separated for centuries are colliding. Lethal criminal networks are growing in influence and power. Treachery abounds. When things begin to go wrong, and go wrong badly, Samti faces a deadly choice that could ruin all she cherishes.

Explore Samti’s forest – on page 12

Meet Ratona – on page 16

Discover Grimcats – on page 26

# Contents

A Confession	iv
<b>PART ONE</b>	<b>1</b>
Toffee	2
The One True Story	4
The Forest	10
A Breach in the Walls	17
Amandla	23
The Guards	29
The Trial	36
Mama Leo's Promise	43
Meera's Proposition	50
Explaining the Foelorn	55
Poaching	61
WACO	67
The Interrupted Home-Coming	74
<b>PART TWO</b>	<b>80</b>
The Big Push	81
Saving the Wilderness	87
Cave Bears	93
The Saboteur	99
Claudi's Decree	106
Imprisonment	113
Traitors	118
The Trap	124
Sacrifice	131
Revelation	136
The Bending-Down Path	142
Mortal Enemies	148
Dawi	154
Sitaki Fujo Tena	160
If We Can't See Her . . .	166
Revenge	174

# A Confession

When I first heard this story, I did not believe it. It was too fantastic, and too dangerous. No one should face the betrayals that threatened Samti and Ratona. In fact, nothing like Ratona could even exist. The whole thing had to be made up.

But when I set out to prove it was false, I failed. The more I probed, the more I investigated, the more truth I found.

There is a feeling you get when you imagine something impossible, but completely wonderful. Like winning the lottery, or being able to fly or turn invisible, or having magical healing powers. You get a tingling in your skin, a glorious wuzziness that fizzles through your fingers and up your arms, and ends in a delicious shiver. You probably know that feeling. Well, that's how I felt when I realised how true this story was.

And I shivered for another reason. This is a perilous tale. I have had to protect the people involved. Samti, Dawi, Molly and Ben have other names in real life. My editors, and their lawyers, insisted that I should disguise them. And no one dared to tell me Ratona's true name. But she is a different being from a different world. She does not fight her battles with legal arguments. She is more of a fire and brimstone type.

I have also kept secret the locations of this story. I can tell you that Samti and Dawi live somewhere in Eastern Africa, and Ben and Molly somewhere in Western Europe. You may think you recognise some places I mention – but that may just be a good disguise working. I can certainly never reveal Ratona's world. It must be hidden forever. Fire and brimstone are deadly.

With my informants' permission, I have not written this record as a set of mere facts and dates. These events are myth come true, legend re-enacted, and I have tried to capture some of the excitement, joy, grief and fear that its characters knew. This means that the different worlds you encounter may seem odd at first. Samti and the others also had to piece together their joins and ruptures. It's part of the mystery that they – and now you – have to unravel.

# Part One

## Chapter 0

# Toffee

It was the end of the dry season. Roasted grasses dissolved into powder. Dust devils danced with dead maize husks. And an alien cluster of clouds boiled over Samti's head.

They had to be alien. No earthly clouds dared defy the sun. So these strangers bulging above her must be invaders.

Samti was resting beneath a forest giant, her ti'ita. Its smooth grey limbs reared skyward, shielding her from the sun. Red maamáy fire lilies erupted from the ground around her, their delicate petals calling the rains. High in the forest reserve, this was her sanctuary, the place her mother had shown her. Hidden by mossy boulders the ti'ita's shade, and the deep pool beside it, made the perfect refuge from the heat. Samti had a supply of guavas by her side and a large mound of toffee candies in a sun-patch before her. The toffees were heaped together. She was melting them into one enormous sweet, the biggest she'd ever eaten. Soon she would be in heaven.

Samti examined the sky. In one small patch above her head, the clouds beat and pummelled each other. Waves of heat rolled from their battling forms. Her sweets would melt even faster now. She rolled over to check the sticky pile and started in shock. Her candy was gone.



Samti looked around in alarm. She jumped to her feet, heart beating, searching through the trees up and down the hill-side. But the forest pretended that nothing had happened. All was silent.

As her heartbeat slowed, Samti's fists clenched. She beat the ground, challenging the stillness. She had stolen those sweets herself. They were hers. How dare anyone take her bounty!

Samti glanced upwards. The clouds had dissolved. In the distance, she heard the clang of beaten metal. Her aunt was beating a saucepan, summoning children for the evening chores. She dare not be late. Reluctantly Samti gathered up her guavas and threaded through trees and over tumbled boulders, kicking the stones in frustration. One day she would find the culprit – and they would be sorry.

When the girl was gone, a slow growl rumbled in the air, followed by a dull, wet splat on the ground. A large mound of dissolving toffee slapped onto dry leaves and lay glistening, coated in dribble and spit. It had fallen out of nothing, from thin air.

A satisfied rustling surrounded the toffee, a whisper on the leaves. The sweet mass began to jerk and dance, pushed one side, then the other. Small chunks of it snapped off and disappeared. Drool pooled around it. There was a smack of sloppy licks – and a deep, contented purr.

## Chapter 1

# The One True Story

A thin rain darkened the coarse asphalt of the school yard. The air tasted of metal and concrete and stank of rubbish overflowing from industrial bins. Steam from the kitchens wafted over, belching fumes of overcooked dinners.

Ben squatted on the ground, back against the wall. Blue veins marked his shivering hands. His trousers were getting damp. But he did not notice. He did not care.

He was glued to his phone. Ben had received a simple message from his aunts: 'WATCH THIS'. And so he was watching it, again, and again, and again. His skin was tingling.

It began ordinarily. Goats wandering along a mountain path, children tagging along behind. That bit was fine.

But Ben was watching what happened next. The animal that appeared in front of them. Out of nothing. Out of thin air. That creature was impossible.

But if this was faked, why did his aunts want him to watch it? That thing could not exist, yet it looked so real. Ben dared to hope.

Benedict Rawlins was twelve years old. His muddy blond hair was permanently messy, his face was earnest and freckled and he knew that he was living in the wrong place, and the wrong time. He couldn't be an

explorer – there were no places left to discover. He was too old to get lost in the rainforest and be adopted by an unknown tribe. He should have lived in the Dark Ages, swirling with rumours of dragons and knights. Or the Ice Age and battled mammoths. But if this video was real, those disappointments did not matter. He could find the adventure he craved.

A pair of trainers appeared before him, interrupting his dreams. Molly, his sister, was steaming after her workout. She was seventeen, a champion kick boxer and oblivious to the cold.

“Are you watching that video?” she asked. Her blue eyes were curious.

Ben pushed himself off the ground, wet grit sticking to his palms. “I can’t stop. It’s just the most amazing thing. Jacki and Meera will be around tonight, I can’t wait for them to explain it.”

“I think we should go looking for that creature.” Molly said.

“We? I could manage by myself, thanks.”

“If you go anywhere, I come with you,” Molly said. “You’re scrawny, you’re annoying and you need protecting.”

“And you slip into extreme violence too easily, even for a big sister,” Ben observed. “I think I’m big enough to look after myself. You need to accept your retirement.”

“Me, retire?”

“Yes, retire. You can stop worrying about me. In fact, I’m going to get everyone worrying about you. I’m going to start a charity for you, because of your spots. No. I’ve got it.” Ben danced around his sister, edging away. “I’ll start a charity for your spots, because they’re on your face.”

And then he was running, with Molly a breath behind him, laughing despite herself.

\* \* \*

"Where is my son?" Jacki demanded, bursting through the front door that evening, her bright clothes glowing, "and where is my amazing daughter? Ewe!" she marvelled at Molly in isiXhosa. "Ukasemhle! Yes. You are flawless."

Behind her, Meera shuffled in. She was short and slight, and wrapped in a thick dressing gown to ward off the cold.

"Auntie Meera," Ben said, "I think Jacki's going mad again. Did she just say something nice to Molly?"

Meera ignored him. "To think we've had a hand in raising you two," she murmured, kissing Molly and Ben on the forehead. "Now Ben, tell me how your amazing artwork is getting on, I want another portrait."

Professors Meera Kothari and Jaqueline Ngqola were not Ben's true aunts. They were zoologists and knew his parents because both his Mum and Dad worked for a large conservation organisation. They had been part of the family for years and treated Ben and Molly as their own.

"Never mind the artwork today," Jacki said. "We know he is brilliant. Now we must talk. Yes! Did you both get the video we sent? It is the best."

"I did, and I've not stopped watching it," Ben replied. "What is it?"

"It is proof!" Jacki was triumphant. "We have been trying to find that animal for years. This video is the best evidence we have."

"You mean that thing might really be real?" Ben asked. "Have you shown Dad?"

"We are about to," she said, "where is your tiny father?" She ploughed on to the kitchen. "Richard!" Jacki stooped to embrace him. "How does your family put up with you?"

Ben's father was looking even more dishevelled than normal. His hair was wild, his clothes crumpled and he was noisily enjoying a smoothie. A trail of orange peel and banana skins surrounded the blender.

"Dad, Dad!" Ben was almost jumping up and down, "you've got to see this!"

"If it's from Jacki and Meera," Richard said between slurps, "then I don't want to. They like making me look stupid."

"That's not fair, Richard," Meera protested. "You look stupid without us. And we have an important new species to show you."

"Really? The last new species you showed me was a rock-shaped tortoise. I spent ages staring at it, waiting for it to move, only to discover that it was, in fact, a rock."

"It was quite funny Dad," Ben said. "I mean that rock looked nothing like a tortoise."

"It was hilarious," Richard replied. "And now I don't trust you."

"But you are still going to look at our new animal," Jacki insisted. "Ben, show him."

Ben smiled. Jacki reminded him of a bulldozer. A beautiful bulldozer, with a perfect headdress and large, round earrings – and a bulldozer, nonetheless. He gave his phone to his father.

Richard jumped when the beast appeared. He replayed the crucial moment again, frowning at the screen.

"Is this shot in your Indian field site?" he asked Meera. "How did you do that?"

"We did nothing," said Meera. "That's just what it's like. Look at its fur again."

Ben slowed the clip down, watching it frame by frame. "The colours aren't stable," he said at last. "Its stripes are moving. The reds become orange, the oranges yellow, and back again."

"But how does that explain the way it appears and disappears?" Molly asked.

"It can change its colouring," Meera replied. "That's why the stripes move. But its special secret, and the reason why it's never been discovered until now is that it can mimic its background perfectly, even when it moves. You can only tell where it is from the shadow it casts."

"Yes!" said Ben, "There is a shadow on the path, right where it appears."

“Son, that proves nothing,” Richard insisted. “It’s a small leopard. They’ve doctored the video to give it those weird stripes.”

“But if it is a leopard,” Molly asked, “what’s going on at the end of the clip?”

It was a good question. The children herding the goats dropped something on the path, and whatever that was, it seemed to distract the creature. It stopped and disappeared.

“That is the proof we were looking for,” said Jacki. “Those children dropped sweets to distract it. In some countries honey works as well. That creature has a sweet tooth, it prefers sugar to meat.”

“Right,” Richard said, “so you want me to believe that you have discovered a large cat with iridescent, bright stripes and stealth abilities. And the proof is that it likes sugar. D’you think I’ve got a tiny brain or something?”

Meera crouched down and inspected Richard’s head closely. “Yeees,” she said slowly, “I think it probably is quite tiny, now that you mention it. Because you’re missing the point here. All the stories agree on the sugar bit. That’s too weird to make up, and it is repeated by different sources who could never have met.”

“Oh stop it,” Richard said. “That proves nothing, you’ve fallen for a doctored video and now you’re peddling fables.”

Jacki rounded on him. “Wena kwedini! Une ngqondo yenja!” (This was not entirely fair: Richard was short, but he was not that stupid). “Fable, Richard?” she said. “No! I’ve collected mythical stories for many, many years. And this is the best. Yes. How do you know this is not the one: the true story amongst hundreds of falsehoods? I, too, have heard about these cats, when I was a child growing up near the Drakensberg. My grandmother told me about them. That is an entire continent away!”

“I’ve got an idea,” Ben suggested innocently. “We can let Mum decide if it’s real. She’s important.”

“You’re brilliant,” Meera exclaimed, “Mary always believes us.”

Ben’s father grinned at him, blue eyes twinkling. “Your mother may be my boss’s boss,” he said, “but really she’s only my mad wife.”

Meera spluttered her protest and Molly cracked her knuckles ominously. Jacki wagged her finger at Richard, hand on hip. "Ewe! You be careful, you messy man. Mary will fire you. You – you are under-performing."

"Well, I think that Meera and Jacki should discover these cats officially," Ben said. "And when you announce it, you'll need to name it. I shall let you call it the 'Bencat'."

"It already has a name, you young coloniser," Jacki warned. "These are 'grimcats'. That translates from isiXhosa, Sesotho, Nepali *and* Lepcha. Which, by the way, is another sign that it exists."

"Could you find it?" Molly asked "Unfortunately, Dad's right. You'll need more than this video."

Meera smiled at her. "On our next field visit we might. Maybe we'll have some good news when we return."

"Please find it," Ben said. "My life needs change so badly."

He looked outside to the flat suburban landscape that slept around his home. It was raining, and the view dimmed into a fug of thick, low clouds. Nothing ever happened here. And every day more of the world turned into this grey tedium. But now he could ignore it. He was filling the land with imaginary grimcats.

## Chapter 2

# The Forest

A faint cry of ancient trouble seeped out of the night. Samti's thumbs paused over her phone. She pushed open the small wooden shutter that covered her window. Cold air and thin moonlight streamed in. Outside, the forest pressed against weeded fields. She looked to the ranks of trees looming above her in the mountains. What had she heard?

Samti quietened her breath. Around her, the night murmured. Crickets busied themselves, bats chipped hard echoes into the shadows, an owl called. Far in the distance, hyenas were yowling. Through earthen walls she could hear the usual farmstead sounds: hens stirring, cattle breathing, the night wind rustling banana fronds behind her home.

And then the cry sounded again. HAYYYOOOORDAT! HAYYYOOOORDAT! The call rolled, yodelling over the land, binding all hearers to come to its aid.

Samti sighed. For the ghosts of this land, that warning had sounded despair. But they were long dead. Now it was rarely anything serious. Most likely some lost drunk frightened of his shadow. But she heard her aunt, Mama Leo, beat on the wall of cousin Dawi's room. He had to go. Samti, only thirteen years old, was excused. In nearby houses neighbours alerted each other, summoning their youth to answer the call.



Samti heard Dawi bumping in the darkness, searching for his clothes and stick. Likely Ambrosi, his youngest brother, had hidden his torch, and his shoes. Finally she heard him stumbling from the house to join his fellows.

She leant back onto her hard mattress and curled up against the night air. Her sleeping blankets were coarse and stiff, they wanted replacing. But she was cosier than her cousin. Dawi was pushing up steep mountain slopes, walking into nettles or else treading on trails of siafu. These were the worst. The big warriors had vicious jaws, but even the smaller worker ants left painful bites.

Samti listened to the scratching of insects in the thatch. Something hungry scuttled after something edible. She could hear Mama Leo asleep again, cuddling her children. Snuffling and deep breathing came from her bedroom.

She wondered when Dawi would return. Phone reception was poor in the forest. They would get no messages.

Haayyyooooordat! Haayyyooooordat!

The call came again, quieter, filtered through moon-silvered clouds. Samti's skin still prickled for what it used to mean. Her mother had recounted the stories of the old times over and again as she braided Samti's hair. Head nestled against thigh. The safest place, for the worst of tales.

Once, Mama would say, the forest had been dangerous. Journeys into the higher reaches had required escorts of heavily armed men, guarded by charms and prayer. People missing late in the evening were abandoned. Cattle enclosures were built of tall timbers and ringed with layers of thorns to keep out the hungry threats that prowled in the darkness.

She would push Samti's hair to one side to scratch her own itching nose before continuing. Nimble fingers tugging, weaving, scalp-tingling.

And then, Mama said, it had tamed a little. People crept in, marvelling at the dappled shade, at the rough lowing and red flashes of the lourie birds. But it was not safe. Young ones, tempted by sweet berries, could venture too far. They only realised when it was too late, with the dusk rushing in, the sky darkening with storm clouds, and shadows deepening, brooding and growing. Then the creatures that the night hid grew bold and came scenting,

hunting, relentlessly coursing the thrashing undergrowth as panicked youngsters ran for their lives.

But that, Mama assured her, pulling and tightening, was long ago. Now there were no deadly predators left. The leopards were cautious, keeping to the highlands, preferring goats to people. Hyenas were only dangerous if you slept in the open. And the real problems, the elephants and the buffalo, were gone. It was many years since Bibi Anna had nearly been trodden on by a charging rhino when she was collecting firewood.

You see, my sweetness? Deftly Mama had squeezed her braids into bright bands. There is nothing dangerous. Not anymore.

Samti lay still in the peace of the night, trying again to feel her mother's touch in her hair. Her braids were loose. Despite all Mama Leo's enfolding protection, her aunt still did not have the patience to get Samti's hair right. She turned to the wall, trying to blot out the memories. Would that all the wild dangers returned, baying outside the compound, if that could bring her mother back.

\* \* \*

It was too quiet when Samti woke. She lay puzzled by the stillness. Then she realised: no Ambrosi. Normally he would be jumping and shrieking in Dawi's room, goading the brother he adored to chase him. The noise of his squeals woke her each day.

So, no Dawi yet either. Still, this happened. Sometimes the alarm meant a real problem. People could still get lost in the forest ravines.

Her aunt roused her, calling from the cooking hut. "Samti, my sweetness, I need water."

Samti groaned. Now she had to do Dawi's chores. "But ..."

Mama Leo ignored her protest. "And firewood. My parents will arrive soon. It's sinful not to welcome them."

Then Samti remembered. Babu was taking the youngest grandchildren to his hives in the forest, and she would help. She could eat honeycomb today.

Babu was soon holding court over his morning tea, his hat on his knee, perched on a low stool in the kitchen hut. A graceful halo of white hair rimmed his bald head.

“They’re probably going to die in there, I shouldn’t take them,” he said, trying to frown at his younger grandchildren. “They’re too young, they’ll get left behind. What if the beast eating the search party right now wants some pudding?”

Pretending it was dangerous was part of the ritual of the trip. But it was all pretence. The forest now was protected from people. Squat concrete blocks guarded the corners of a reserve that kept the valuable trees, the duku and mininga, from the timber barons. An imaginary line, unfenced, ran between the blocks marking the forest’s territory on one side, and the village lands on the other.

There was even a peaceful dependency between forest and people. Monkeys stole melons. Pigs, deer and porcupines slipped across the fenceless boundaries to eat maize. Birds gorged themselves in the wheat fields, despite the rocks that the child guards threw. And people needed the forest. They were allowed to gather firewood, and forage for the herds. Children made swings from forest vines.

But Ambrosi and his cousins were still scared and excited. They crowded on a short bench near the cooking fire, rustling uncertainly. Samti saw them timidly desperate to go, and half-hoping not to. She could remember that feeling herself.

Mama Leo sighed at Babu. Her squat form leant over the fire as she fried mandazi for their trip, her hands and kanga were dusted with flour, her forehead beading sweat. She looked up and rolled her eyes behind her father’s back, making the children giggle.

“I know that Babu of yours,” she said. “He just wants that delicious honey for himself. But I, my beautifuls, I want you to eat more honey than him. You run along now. And look out for Dawi. He’s probably waiting for you by the honey tree. But don’t let him have any.”

When they set off, Babu started quickly, his patch-worked trousers and worn jacket flitting through the shade of the trees. The children jostled behind their grandfather, fearful of being left behind. Samti smiled at the tumble of bodies bumping in front of her. They would exhaust themselves. She would have to carry the smallest.

Babu stopped abruptly. "What was that? Did you hear it?"

Ambrosi crowded close to his grandfather, staring around with fright at the quiet trees basking in morning sunshine. But Babu was not trying to scare his grandchildren. He was teaching them the forest lore he knew.

"Listen again," he commanded. "It's friendly." A rough cough sounded, the bark of a buck. "That ba/asa has spotted us, and it's warning its friends. That means there's nothing more dangerous than us around."

Samti joined Babu, showing the children the tasty fruits of the gwaa'ami tree, the mooyaangw that she used as perfume. Babu pointed out the distant high ridges, where the duku groves grew with their precious timber.

The explanations, questions and detours for berry-picking, made arriving at the hives a surprise. These were lodged high in the branches of a vast tumat'mo tree, thick with pink flowers and buzzing insects. This was the biggest treat.

Samti guarded their charges while Babu scaled his ancient ladders to smoke out the bees. The children's necks craned, their mouths watering. When he brought the honey down, Justini ate so much that he was sick. Babu made him stick his head in the cold mountain stream until he was clean.

Afterwards they rested in the shade. Far above them, vultures circled on peaceful thermals. Samti watched over the children, cuddling a sleepy Justini. When she was an mkubwa, she resolved, when she had completed school as she had promised her mother, when she had a proper job and a big brick house in town, then her children would make this trip. And she would show them her sanctuary, the ti'ita tree. They would eat toffee and honey and nothing would steal it.

The lazy afternoon slumbered on. Just as she decided to rouse the children, Ambrosi sat up and spotted his dozing grandfather. He crept up to the sleeping elder and growled in his ear.

Babu's reaction saved Samti the trouble of waking the other children. She assembled their belongings as Babu chased a squealing Ambrosi over the rocks.

"Come on," he instructed the youngsters, "we must get back. You've just eaten honey and made yourselves tastier. And even Ambrosi shouldn't be eaten by a monster. It would be unhealthy for the poor creature."

The return journey was downhill. But they went at a gentle pace, easing tired young legs home. Samti, as usual, picked up the rear of the party. So she heard it first. A murmur she had not known before. She called ahead to her grandfather.

"Babu, what's that noise?"

They both paused, heads cocked at the sound chasing down from slopes above them. A running. A panting. Something was coming. Something was out of place.

Babu dropped his precious honey buckets and looked at his grandchildren clustered around him, his smile erased. Then he swept up Justini, and with a horrible whisper commanded: "RUN!"

And suddenly the noise surrounded them. Dawi's search party was back, silent, crouching, scratched, sweating, exhausted and afraid. They had dropped their weapons. Some had lost their shoes. But they ran headlong down the hill. The foremost picked up any child they overtook, hoisting them squirming to their shoulders.

Down they fled. Bushes clung at them; rocks barked their shins. Vines and brambles snapped at their ankles. The path invented new turns and detours. The forest clung to them.

They fought on, ripping themselves from the forest's entanglement, pushing for the safety of the invisible boundary. Samti half-dragged, half-carried Ambrosi as she ran, but always looked to the shadows growing behind her. Dawi was missing.

And then he was there, surging after his companions, calling for them to run faster, hurdling the bushes, throwing himself down the mountain. But

when he caught up, Samti smelt the smoke and soot on him. His face was burnt. Blood and ash mingled with the sweat and dust on his skin.

Even as he reached them, he lifted Ambrosi scrabbling from the ground. Together he and Samti pulled each other to the forest edge. Only when they were near, did Babu sound the alarm, breathless, desperate. “HAYYOOORDAT! HAAAYYOOOOORDAT! Ni’ii i hi’iitiya.” The Children Are Coming! Their friends and neighbours ran towards them, pulling them into their houses, dragging thorn branches to compound gates and barricading doors. Locking themselves away from the coming night.

## Chapter 3

# A Breach in the Walls

The fire-blast was Ratona's worst ever mistake. She had trained for the elite Guard squadron of the pyre-angels for seven centuries. She had served in it for fourteen more. Her time was full of accidents. But nothing, in over two thousand years, came close to that fire-blast.

She could not take all the blame. The alarm had sounded. That alarm changed the rules.

Usually, alarms were part of the rhythm of a Guard's service, measuring out the days. Ratona was used to alerts for flood, calls to attention for visiting elders, or cave-bear incursions. There were alarms to watch over the lava pools beneath the Guard towers where the fledglings hatched. Sirens summoned them to keep the peace at food refineries, breaking up fights around the petrol taps and acid distilleries. Time bells rang as they moulded new nests on lonely, rocky outcrops. Alarms signalled normality.

But there was one exception to this rule. The Guards' greatest task was to patrol the Walls: the massive stone barrier that hid them from their most terrible danger. And as the centuries had ticked by, no alarm for a Wall-breach had ever rung.

Until it had sounded that evening.

Ratona flinched. The memory was too painful, but her trial was tomorrow. She had to recall it. She had to find that inner space of recollection. She calmed her breathing, blotted out the harsh surroundings of her prison cell and retreated into her memories. Her mind's eye transported her back to that fateful evening, to relive the past as if it were real ...

Once again she was resting in the barracks, the massive towers of basalt that twisted high over the lava pools. Her whole squadron was with her, resting on the sleeping perches that spiralled up the central column of the towers, snacking on lumps of tasty tar. And it was just as she began to doze, wings sagging, fires smouldering, that it all begun.

The alarm, that alarm, thundered through the Guard tower. A huge bass drum sent tremors through the building. Every curve was lit by arc-lights. Brightness and noise filled the air. Ratona erupted into fires of alarm, all about her the sleeping perches were aflame with angry comrades.

There was a moment of black silence. The drum struck again. Flares exploded, fierce electric currents shivered into Ratona's sleeping platform. In flashes of light she saw the other ledges running up and down the tower. On each a Guard lay tensed as she, crouched for flight, wings half unfurled; every one a dark menace of power and spite. Horror filled their eyes, fire smoked from their nostrils.

The drum quickened, beating like a pulse. Then, in the distance, horns sounded from the watchers on the Walls. Deep, terrible, blaring – a collective cry of grief. This alarm was never meant to sound.

Faster still went the deep bass rhythm. Arcs of lightning crackled through the tower and off her skin, an eerie blue light snapped to the beat of the drums. The electric shocks sharpened, sending sparks skittering along the perches, adorning the gobbets of fire and smoke that dripped from the jaws of Ratona's comrades.

Ratona fixed her eyes on Raoul, her flight commander. He ignored the sparks and fire flying around him. In the maelstrom he was still. Even his tail was motionless. His hide mottled in the black-grey of combat. His eyes fed on the launch pad lights while his mind pulsated commands to his squadron.



Large circular doors rotated in front of each perch, their gears grinding. Misty grey holes opened before the Guards, revealing dark views of the landscape beyond, hazy in the half-light.

Ratona strained her eyes to the horizon. Far in the gloaming, warning beacons twinkled with red flame. There was a breach in the Walls, an abomination unfolding on their borders.

Ratona's training took control of her body. Her breath slowed, back legs braced, tail coiled to spring. Her wings tensed and arched. The central column and sleeping perches shook with the final countdown. And then the launch lights blazed around the evacuation doors. Instantly the air filled with glistening black scales and thrusting wings. Tongues of fire slathered from gritted jaws.

Leaping forward, Ratona pressed her legs to her body, flattened her wings along her back and arched into a dive. Her sleek form streaked through the air, trailing sparks. She plummeted downwards. The ground reared to embrace her. This was against all flight protocols.

But Ratona plunged onwards. A Wall-breach required sacrifice. It demanded skill only she possessed. With inches to spare, she flattened out of the dive, an arrow of fire, scorching the earth with the violence of her passing.

Already her bulkier comrades were falling back. They could not slip through the air like she. Ratona knew Raoul and the heaviest Guards were spiralling upwards, beating at the sky, gaining height for one continuous dive to the Walls. She sensed them willing her onwards.

Beneath the Guard towers a fissured land belched flames. Cracked trenches boiled with lava. Ratona flashed through the scorched air. This was their most precious place. In the streams of molten rock their youngsters grew wings. Nothing must reach this spot.

She sped on through the mists, angling her wing tips to follow the terrain. Currents of cool air pushed behind her as she twisted down valleys. Then she gained altitude behind mountains, where back-winds drove her upwards. She burst over cols so close to the ground that her heat melted their frost.

The hostile land fought against her. Gusts of wind tried to smash her into cliffs. The taller trees reared to snag her hide. And cave-bear packs hurled boulders at her as she sped below them down narrow gorges. But Ratona never thought of slowing down or flying higher.

Steep valleys fell beneath her, cascading down in cliffs and crags. The Walls were close now, beacons blazing on their rim. What could have breached them? She closed on the nearest beacon, a ring of red flame, and scanned the paths for movement. Nothing. Ratona flew closer, losing speed and turning her senses to infra-red, looking for heat signals in the frosty landscape beneath her. All was still.

Twisting downwards, Ratona braked hard and landed on the rim of the Walls, looking back into her lands for the intruder. She held her breath again and listened. In the distance she could hear the other Guards streaming towards her. She focussed on their shared thought-waves, adding her own to the stream. But she heard nothing amiss.

She paced along the highest tier of the Walls. Close up she could see the beacon ring awash with flame, summoning help. But there was nothing to fight. Nothing had invaded their lands.

Except – Ratona turned her head. Except for the soft, padding footfall in the distance. But that noise came from behind her, beyond and outside the Walls. That was ridiculous. The Walls kept intruders out. The alarm meant a breach, that something was invading their lands, coming in from the outside. Nothing would cross the Walls to go the other way, leaving their secure embrace. It was forbidden. Beyond the Walls there was nothing except the Shifting Zones.

But the quickening patter of feet certainly came from the outside. The noise was running from her. Something had crossed the Walls, but had crossed to leave, not invade. Something was going towards the Shifting Zones.

Ratona did not hesitate. Her orders were to find what had breached the Walls. Eliminate any threat. The threat was beyond the Walls, in the forbidden lands. She must go there. Ratona launched herself after the retreating sound. And as she crossed she triggered the unmentionable alarm for only the second time in her land's history.

Ratona dived again, heading to the small circle of light where the curtain of the Shifting Zones danced and played. She scanned the paths, but the craggy land, blasted by continuous target practice from the Wall gunners, hid the fugitive well. She closed her eyes, homing in on the pattering feet by sound alone. The fugitive was small and limping. But it was also a steady footfall. There was no panic.

She scouted the paths that lead to the platform of rock on which the Zones perched. She circled them, hovering over their peaceful pool of light. Still nothing.

What could make noise, but be invisible? A shiver of suspicion trembled through her wings. Ratona switched to infra-red and yes – there was a blur of movement in front of the Shifting Zones. But that was impossible! Ratona threw out her wings to brake and tumbled out of the sky, landing on the forecourt of the Zones. Before her, their sheen rippled like moonlight on oily water. They quivered, shaken by her landing. The fugitive posed before Ratona and turned its head. It seemed to smile at her.

The sight set Ratona's scales prickling in disbelief. The terrible fugitive which had triggered the alarm was a small, drab foelorn. Only these quiet cats could blend so invisibly into the landscape. But they should be no threat to the nesting grounds, any more than the rodents and deer they hunted, or the honey they stole from wild bees.

But a foelorn now approached the Shifting Zones. It was harmless no longer. Entering the Zones risked opening them. And that risked an encounter with the terrible foe their Walls guarded against. That was too horrible to imagine.

And yet the foelorn's intentions were horribly clear. With practised ease it turned its back on Ratona and limped forward to the Shifting Zones' forbidden boundary. It twisted on its feet and, somehow, the Zones parted. Ratona froze, horrified. The bright wall of slippery light dropped aside, welcoming its diminutive new arrival.

With sick dread, Ratona looked through the gap the Zones left in the air. All her fears erupted. She could feel the tug of minds, the minds of her mortal enemies. They were present on the other side. And, worse still, she caught

the briefest glimpse of them. A small hunting party on a high mountain, and one of them, one Human, turning towards her.

The disaster seemed to happen slowly. The opened Zones pulled at the cat, dragging it to them, beyond catching, beyond redemption. Ratona leapt in one last attempt to stop it, and –

She snapped out of her memory archive and lay panting on the floor of her prison cell. That was when she made the mistake. She had roared fire in her anguish. But as she aimed, the foelorn had shimmered before her. It had shone for a moment in bright, iridescent colours before blinking out of sight.

Ratona's blast, that she now regretted so bitterly, had missed the beast. And it had smashed on towards her defenceless enemy.