

3rd prize, Prose

Wildcat

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I saw a human today. He must have been at least a deer and a half tall. I don't think he was carrying a Bang, but I couldn't be sure. I don't trust them either way. I remember a story my brother told me, about the time he watched one take down a stag. We were still kittens. His pale eyes widened as his breath warmed my ear against the night chill. He told me not to tell mum, as he'd snuck out further than the fallen tree. It was out of sight of the den, something we weren't to do until we'd grown up enough to hunt for ourselves. He may have made it up completely, but I believed him. I knew he'd be a powerful cat when we were older. I haven't seen him for a while. Watching the human rummage in his pack took me back to the den. Memories of family security crept out of my present anxieties. It ended with us both being washed, forcibly, with mum ignoring my insistence that I prefer my ears dirty.

It makes you think though. Humans fight without a struggle. They just lift up the Bang and with a bone-jolting crack, they win. You never see them hungry, but you never see them eat their catch either. In all the seasons I've pawed this land, I've never seen a human wet his canines with a kill. They must have a cache of uneaten remains to come back to later. They surely wouldn't waste anything. I've seen skinny ones, but never one that is starving or sick. They're always in their prime, even the old ones. It defies all natural logic.

The one I saw this evening wasn't hunting. He was sat on a rock at the forest's edge, doing nothing useful. He wasn't asleep, but almost stationary. In his hand was pre-packaged prey, but it had halted half-way to his mouth. He seemed distracted, his eyes not quite focussed, gazing back towards the mountain. He'd left it behind earlier in the day, like most of them do when they visit these parts. But unlike the others, there was no urgency to leave, despite dusk falling. Most vanish before this hour, I assume heading back to the warmth of their dens. A pang of hunger shot through my belly as the breeze carried teasing particles of the pseudo-hunt's prize, which landed all around me, tickling the inside of my nose. Or it may have been the midges. It's hard to tell some days.

He couldn't see me from where I crouched. Fur on end, rock still, muscles taut. He showed no interest in anything nearby, myself included. But although I sensed the danger was low, I remained ready to dart at the first sign of trouble. The evening was progressing, and although I ached to hunt for myself, I daren't risk being spotted. I had to wait him out. I've never been noticed, and I intend to keep it that way. I had considered patrolling the other side of my range tonight, and I cursed myself for coming this way. There's good rabbiting over to the east, towards the loch. It's never as fruitful here, amongst the trees.

Their trunks stood guard in the summer duskiness. It's unusual to see a human at this hour. You can usually smell them before you see them, particularly after the sun's peak, whilst they're busy descending from that of the mountain. Their scent triggers something different inside me. It's not like picking up a scat, an indicator of a friend or foe that I might know. In their case, the message is

always to be wary. Their scent marking is at its weakest on the way up, and more pungent on the descent. Something must change in them, up there in the sky. Perhaps it's the something that draws them upwards. There must be good hunting up there. But it's not for me, there's far too many open stretches.

The new generation's opinions are split. There are some with their heads screwed on the right way around, who keep their distance from anything that lacks the appropriate number of legs. It's the wisest way to be, if you ask me. Not that anyone often does. You can observe them to your heart's content, but keep out of their way. There are rumours circulating that they are doing their best to bring civilisation to an end. As far as I'm concerned, if it's just *theirs*, then it's no problem. But leave the rest of us out of it. We're doing just fine. I've seen the wreckage they leave behind when they're left to do their own thing. Felled trees, debris that entangles the finest birds, and even intentional traps. Once seen, those images never leave you.

Other young cats can't see the trees for their whiskers. I've lost count of the number of times I've heard the stories. My mother's sister had a litter of eight. There's two we'll never see again, but not from natural causes. It's far worse than that. They've intentionally left us behind. They're not fussy on that side of the family, not with prey or mates or, well, anything. The rumour is they've mixed with *domestics*. It won't stop there though, the next thing you know, we'll all be expected to curl up on rugs and abide by their rules. I don't know why they can't see it. There are fewer of us now. I don't know the numbers, but the old generation still purr of a time when we prowled through these mountain forests, leaving whole vole cities quaking as our paws shuddered the earth. Now they say we face extinction. It's something I can't comprehend. All I know, is that I rarely see anyone new in my territory. There's no need for the legendary battles they used to talk about, whilst we lay curled together in the den. No fighting for the land. It's all mine if I want it now, for what it's worth. Even that won't be much consolation if I don't find a female to mate with soon. There are a few with a decent set of stripes on them, but bumping into them is getting harder and harder. It's too late for me this year anyway. A kitten wouldn't survive the winter. I'll have to look again after the solstice.

Still, it doesn't help to be gloomy. The human didn't hurt me this evening. He didn't even notice my presence, despite his very existence prickling all of my senses. It was all I could manage to stop my strong tail flicking as it wanted to. I fought the urge, so it wouldn't give the game away. He finished staring at the midge-speckled sunset as his shadow grew across the fallen twigs. Hauling his home up onto his back, he left. As he did so, he raised one hand up to his ear. It stood out eerily, illuminated with a soft glow in the darkening wood. He mewed quietly to himself, as if he were talking to one of his kind, but he was alone. It will always baffle me how such strange creatures manage to do so well out here, whilst the most stealthy and intelligent of us dwindle on the foothills. I stretched my legs, and stepped out into the night, which was arriving as quickly as he departed.