

The birth of the Lightners

A short story by
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2000 words

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One bright night when the full moon shone, bathing the mountains in an eerie silver pallor, Fhynaral, Goddess of Darkness, approached Rhotgar's forge uninvited. It was located in the heart of the highest mountains in the world. The God of Metals, busy moulding and shaping a lump of gold under his fiery hammer, did not notice his guest.

Slightly annoyed, the Goddess raised her hand; a strong gust of wind blew into the forge, making the red coals spark all over the place. Rhotgar swore and jumped three feet backwards, patting his beard to extinguish the quickly spreading flames. After ensuring he was no longer on fire, he looked around to find the cause of the wind, and he finally noticed the Goddess. His eyes widened.

Fhynaral stood composed at the entrance to the forge. The moon beams did little to illuminate the dark silk dress she was wearing, but they shone brightly on the numerous beautiful jewels she was wearing. She was tall, slender and pale. Her face was more beautiful than that of an elven princess and her body more enticing than that of any woman on Earth. Her crooked smile alone could make any man tear their heart out and present it to her as a gift.

"My lady!" exclaimed Rhotgar, stuttering. He quickly recomposed himself and frowned: "What brings you here, Fhynaral?"

The Goddess took a few feather-like steps forward and smiled again. "I have come to watch in person the mystical craft that gives birth to such beautiful masterpieces," she pointed at her jewels. Her voice was soft and melodious, like a nightingale's song, but also powerful and stirring.

The God's jaw almost dropped in surprise. He caught himself, cleared his voice and stroked his beard, blushing. "Well, now. That's an exaggeration..."

"All over the world, every creature speaks highly of your art in shaping rocks and metal to create such beautiful things," she interrupted him, drawing closer. "Would you give me the honour of letting me watch you work, brother?"

The dwarf's face turned red. "They say so? Well... I guess, I've been refining my craft over the centuries. Sure, sister," he added, "you can, uhm, watch me work. I can show you how to create jewels."

Phynaral smiled enticingly and drew closer to his workstation. The dwarf reached for his hammer and resumed his work on the piece of gold, now cold. As he felt more confident, he started describing the process of working metals, and he became excited.

The Goddess rarely spoke but watched him the whole time, spellbound. Hours went by, until Rhotgar, realising he had been talking the whole time, put down his hammer, turned to her and asked: "Maybe I can help you create something? Is there a jewel you would like to make, sister?"

"Actually," she said, regarding him with admiration, "there is something I would love you to help me with." She turned and gestured to the entrance of the forge.

Only then did the dwarf notice the seven creatures standing by the entrance, barely lit by the moonlight. Chained to one another by their hands and feet, stood seven goblins, shrinking as far away as possible from the Goddess and shivering in fear. Slightly shorter than the dwarf, the goblins were slim and thin-boned. Their skin was green and grey, and their faces were twisted into a perpetual grin. Their ears were disproportionately big and pointed.

The God looked at them in disgust. "What have..."

"You see, my dear brother," she interrupted him. "My skills in creation are not as advanced as yours. I recall your mastery in creating the dwarven race. I would be most grateful if you could help me shape these... creatures, into beautiful beings. Beings that may worship me and that may show the world your crafting mastery."

The God's eyes darted from his sister to the goblins in the corner, torn. "I don't think, uhm, I don't know how... I mean, I thought you wanted to create jewels."

"Indeed, Rhotgar. Help me turn them into jewels. I want tall, strong and beautiful beings. I want them to harness my magic and be devoted to me. Let the world see once again the skills of the God of Rocks and Metals."

The dwarf fiddled with his sturdy hands, trying to disengage from the awkward situation. "Well, I mean. I guess I could, uhm, show you how to, how to enhance their bodies and..."

"Thank you, brother!" she cheered, drawing closer and hugging him tightly. Her exotic perfumes intoxicated him, and her body emanated a chill that, even in the hot forge, made him shiver.

"Well, alright then. Bring them over. But I cannot make them devoted to you. That is something they need to decide for themselves."

The Goddess' face flashed with anger for a moment, but she immediately smiled again.

The arcane, holy process of life creation, which only belongs in the realm of the Gods, began. For hours, the God of Metals worked on the new creatures, following the ever more demanding requests of the Goddess of Darkness.

When the moon had set and dawn drew close, Rhotgar, sweating in fatigue, had nearly reached the end of the process. He raised the hammer for the last time and was about to strike it down to seal the holy pact, when his sister raised a hand and, without uttering a word, froze the dwarf in that awkward position with her powerful magic.

"What the..." cried the God, trying to break free. She ignored him and focused on the new creatures. She drew on her powers and began chanting in a language never before heard in the world, transferring her magic into them.

"Wait! Fhynaral, you can't force them to worship you!" cried Rhotgar, still unable to move, with his hands glued to the powerful hammer. "Damn you, stop it! Release me!"

He had barely finished his sentence when the Goddess finished chanting and released him. Losing his balance, the big dwarf tripped forward, and his hammer hit the creatures, casting the last, powerful blow that would seal them forever.

The Goddess, watching excitedly, was forced to close her eyes as a powerful white light illuminated the forge and struck the rock walls like a lightning bolt.

Swearing and cursing, the dwarf righted himself, putting the forge back into focus. He sighed in relief when he found out that the cave wasn't crashing on top of him, then looked down at the new creatures and frowned.

There was no sign of the majestic and huge beings he had been shaping all throughout the night. In their place stood seven curious looking, small creatures. They were as big as the goblins, but their skin was soft and white. Instead of small, dark eyes, theirs were big and colourful, each

eye of a different colour. The goblins' wide grin was replaced by a curious, childlike smile. Instead of a bulky bald head, they had long, soft dark hair that reached their knees.

Thynaral looked at them, aghast. "What happened?!" she cried. "What happened to my beautiful, strong beings?!"

The dwarf snorted. "I told you. You cannot force them to worship you. You ungrateful, selfish, ..."

The Goddess cast him a look that would make any mortal flee for their life. She looked at the creatures again.

They were inspecting the forge, a curious smile on their faces. They seemed completely indifferent to the Gods' presence, regarding them with as much as interest as any of the smith's tools. One of them reached for Rhotgar's hammer and lifted it to examine it.

Rhotgar leapt forward, astonished. "What're you doing!"

Startled, the white creature dropped the hammer, which fell heavily onto the God's foot. Rhotgar bent in two, letting out a very unmanly shriek.

The Goddess looked at the beings with contempt. "You are not worthy of my legions," she spat. She raised a hand towards one of them and pronounced a word. Black flames erupted from her palm and raced towards the creature.

The newborn stared at the flames with keen interest until, when they were about to hit her, she blinked. A small, white electric lightning bolt took her place, and she found herself between the Goddess' legs. The flames struck the floor, blackening and cracking the solid stone.

The Goddess, taken by surprise, backed away from the creature and, in doing so, tripped on her long black dress and fell backwards.

All the fire in the forge extinguished as the Goddess of Darkness stood up, her anger freezing the cave in a magical chill.

Rhotgar once again felt his legs unable to answer him. The creatures, however, looked at the Goddess with interest, then, with another blink, turned themselves into lightning bolts and raced out of the forge, disappearing into the dawning sky.

This is, as far as the legend goes, the story of the birth of the Lightners, who are more commonly known in Lothinias as White Magpies. The appellation is due to the inexplicable bad luck that is said to befall anyone who crosses paths with these creatures. To the skeptical youngsters, the elders would tell of that time a White Magpie was seen walking down market street when, as a result, the fruit stand collapsed, causing an army of watermelons to roll down the steep road wreaking havoc with the passing parade of lords of the city. The tale would often be followed by the story of the siege of Enoras, when, as the storytellers say, a Lightner who was staring at the catapults, fired an unlucky shot that threw a boulder against the walls of the city, creating an opening that ultimately led to the city's fall.

Clearly, many of the stories are fictitious. Once the legends of the Lightners spread across Lothinias, people started using them as a scapegoat whenever something bad happened.

It should come as no surprise that many people tried to banish the Lightners, or even kill them, but most of their effort went to no avail, if not against them. Enhanced by the Goddess of Darkness' magic, as the legend goes, the Lightners are strong magic-users, and have the uncanny ability to escape from dire situations. Unable to get rid of them, the

other races came up with more exotic ways of counteracting their bad luck. In Farahil, for example, people got into the habit of carrying a pouch of flour wherever they went, following a rumour that claimed if you pour flour on a White Magpie, their bad luck turns into good fortune. Whether true or not, the gossip started when a Lightner was caught in a spice shop and the owner, in the frantic attempt to kick him out, dropped a container of flour, which spread all over the place. After the white creature left the shop, the owner ran back in expecting all his shelves to have fallen down, or all his money to have disappeared, but instead he found a small collection of diamonds hidden in the flour jar.

What's more solidly proven is that the Lightners are a peaceful people, if a people at all. Attracted by insatiable curiosity, they spend their lives roaming the world and seem to appear whenever something interesting is about to happen. They fly around using their magic powers that allow them to turn into lightning bolts.