

PALIMPSEST

1

They raided the palace of earl Magerber at the height of the two hour day: seventeen men of iron chainmail, their crossbows loaded with quarrels of illegally wrought steel. In the searing heat the walls of the stronghold were no more substantial than mist and the raiders smashed through like a man brushes away a spiderweb. It broke with sound of tearing perkament, armlong spindrift drifting away on the afternoon breezes.

Several elves woke from their deep slumber, but they moved in slow motion, their swords and wands of springy willow, their strongest enchantments only mumbled words.

Winslow found the earl in one of the deepest halls, his naked body reclining on a mound of

freshly turned earth. The faintest hint of magic still lingered and the damp walls seemed hung with spectral gobelins, the threads of fairy gold gleaming dully.

Winslow stepped closer to study his enemy. The skin was very pale with the silvery hue soon found on the wings of certain moths. The earl's face seemed a clever mask of ivory, but a more precious ivory than any human would ever handle. Peering closer Winslow noticed that the skin was ivorysmooth too. No pockmarks disfigured the slender body and it was devoid of pores. Clearly the elves were made of finer stuff than their subjects. Still, they could be killed like any other thing.

Winslow touched the pulsing jugular with the tip of his dirk and the elflord opened his eyes. His orbs of twilight blue, blind seeming in the light of their torches. His pupils were pinpricks, tiny in the aquamarine of his eyes. "You come in the rough glare of burning firs. The humblest troll only for trolls or mortals. You carry iron fashioned from the bones of the First Hag. You come to my life." His voice was low and melodious and the words issued from the thin air, the carved stone of the earl never moving once.

"Such is the case," Winslow replied. "I won't bore you with the enumeration of your crimes. If you would even understand why they are crimes. In some ways you're innocent. Like the innocent of any wrongdoing when he savages a little child."

"Yet you kill wolves."

"Certainly. But I don't have to hate him. It is just something that should be done."

"I see."

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Winslow touched the pulsing jugular with the tip of his dirk and the elflord opened his eyes. Cloudy orbs of twilight blue, blind seeming in the light of their torches. His pupils were pinpricks, tiny flaws in the aquamarine of his eyes. "You come in the rough glare of burning firs. The humblest tree, fit only for trolls or mortals. You

carry iron fashioned from the bones of the First Hag. You come to take my life." His voice was low and melodious and the words issued from the thin air, the carved lips of the earl never moving once.

"Such is the case," Winslow replied. "I won't bore you with the enumeration of your crimes. I doubt if you would even understand why they are crimes. In some ways you're innocent. Like the wolf is innocent of any wrongdoing when he savages a little child."

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Winslow didn't have to clean his dagger, the ruby blood evaporating the moment it was touched by the rays of the sun. The raiders opened leather sacks of finely ground iron and seeded the hill. The misty walls crumbled, sinking in the sedge. The central tower turned into an gnarled oak. A cloud of pale bats rose, chittering.

Winslow felt the magic dissipate, the coarser stuff of daytime reality filling the void.

"They'll never rebuild," Manfred, the smith, said. "We poisoned their

damn hill. No more hellmusic to lure our maidens."

Winslow nodded absently, gazing at the sun, which moved perceptibly across the sky. Twenty minutes left. At most.

"We'd better hurry. Twilight is pretty close and we want to be deep in the forest before they discover the Gossammer Palace is gone." He stopped one of the younger boys before he upended their last sack of iron fillings. "We'll need that. Dust our footprints. Cold iron will confuse their wolves."

"The caverns aren't that far," Manfred objected. "We'll be there

before twilight falls. Better use the dust where it will do some good."

"We're not even sure if the dwarfs will give us sanctuary. True, they have no reason to love the elves, but we have swindled them often too. Perhaps too often. We may have to flee a long way."

Twilight found them halfway to the caverns. The sky hung low: a sheet of grainy indigo, shot through with green flickerings. The stars circled like trapped fireflies. The stench of magic gradually filled their nostrils: freshly turned earth, mouldering copper, nightblooming orchids.

In the distance elfhorns sounded.

"We'll give them a hard time," Manfred said, his voice gone flat with despair. "Nothing magic can penetrate iron." He threw a handful of filings in the air. They ignited, each mote burning with a yellow flame that feebly mimicked sunlight.

Once again the haunting tones drifted through the forest. They didn't sound distant at all.

"I think we'd better halt," Winslow said. "Make our stand here. Before we're totally winded."

They spread their last iron dust in a circle and cocked their crossbows. I wonder how many we killed, Winslow mused. Perhaps all twelve times

twelve of them. We had a lot of dust.

He sneezed and blinked his eyes. Iron dust covered the raiders and made their eyes burn. A haze of drifting motes surrounded the humans, negating the omnipresent enchantments for a moment. He glimpsed the sky and the twilight stars were frozen in fixed patterns, no longer circling. They seemed impossible remote, farther even than dragon infested Cathay, and somehow huge. Yet he once had seen elves gathering those same stars, dislodging them with long wands of carved bone.

The dark boles of beechs surrounded them like the pillars of a

pagan temple, their tops lost in the gloom. Most of clearing was lit by the ghostly glow of reacting iron, so they clearly saw their doom.

They came in a dark tide, streaming across the fallen leaves. They were quite small individually, but there were millions of them.

Ants have no reason to fear iron.

2

The sound of hoofs, converging on the hidden village. The neighing of fairy steeds. Followed by a sudden, horrible silence, more oppressive than any sound.

Strangely enough her first panicked

thought was: I hope they don't wake the baby! But Thomas slept on, his head cradled on the red rag doll. Joseline Winslowswife opened the door on a crack, peering in the trouble twilight. The elves had halted at the improvised hedge of barbed wire, steering their horses away from the poisonous metal. She opened the door completely and stepped outside. Joseline heard the hiss of indrawn breath, but the other doors remained closed. Indistinct forms moved behind the windows of pigs' bladder, but the villagers seemed quite content to let her act as spokeswoman.

She recognized one of the elves:

Gespalidor of the Bottomless Well. Reputedly the sire of earl Magember, though elves seldom acknowledged the bands of blood. Still, in this case...

She clutched the jade amulet between her breasts, finding a measure of the comfort in the smiling face of Jezus of Nazareth, the Gentle Sage Who Loves All Men. She could hope for little gentleness from these stern lords, who had nothing to learn from the Saviour, being born soulless. For a moment she yearned for a more savage guide for there was no strong magic in dying at three score and ten, surrounded by disciples and wellwishers.

She lifted her head and looked Gespalidor right into his unhuman eyes. It disturbed her to find no hate there, only sadness. "I suppose they're dead," she said quitly.

It wasn't even a question.

The elflord nodded. He gestured with a pale hand. "See."

A stir at the edge of the wood: seventeen skeletons, their bones glittering in the cold moonlight, stepped into the clearing. Some still carried their crossbows.

"They murdered earl Magerber and all of his followers. The elfhill is blighted for a thousand years. I suppose they had some justification

for their crimes. The reign of my son seems to have been needlessly harsh. The Unnamed gave us dominion over the Gardens of Eden, over the mute animals and the animals that speak and feel. We're meant to be the gardeners of men, and according to the testimony of those dead, earl Magember was more like a wolf."

One of the skeletons stepped closer. With a pang of horror she recognized the copper ring on his fleshless finger. The dead man raised his hand. "All my passions are spent. I have killed and I have been killed. This is my counsel: let these awful deeds fade in the past. Hate breeds

hate and a drop of blood spilt in anger can drown the world in a crimson flood." Manfred pointed his finger at the elflord: "You, lord Gespalidor will foster my son Thomas, forging a bridge between man and elf. The village will renounce all use of iron and show the elves the hidden veins of ore so suitable wardingspells can be set."

"I'm willing," the elflord said almost instantly. He looked very noble and wise and Joseline hated him with a raging yellow repugnance.

She scowled. "I don't think we have much choice, n+? Of course we agree."

3

She waited for three months until she was quite certain that the fickle elves had lost all interest in the rebel village.

The graveyard lay in a hollow, the thick boughs of oaks sheltering the dead from the alien sky. Winslow's marker was still bare of moss, a rough slab of granite, his name deeply etched and filled with yellow clay. The small mimosa she had planted in front had died, the flowers turned to brittle brown husks.

She laid her amulet in the damp moss, the smiling face downward. The

Gentle Sage frowned on the dark arts and would no doubt have urged her to forgive, to turn her other cheek. But there were other more forceful gods left from the ages that the sun still shone for half of each day and twilight was but a fleeting moment.

She placed three stalks of ripe corn on the cold stone, crushed a handful of berries. She next took a iron pin from her tresses and jabbed her wrist. Blood dripped on the ears of corns, mingled with the purple berries.

She had but scant knowledge of magic, but her hate was strong and hate had always been the most vital ingredient of the dark enchantments.

"I call you from the sunny lands, the far lands. I call you from the elfless lands, promised by the Martyred Friar. Anubis, unlock for him your toothed gates, for he was a virtuous man. HeliosRa, light his long way. Winslow, by your seed that made my womb blossom, by the kisses we shared, come to me. My love will be your bridge, my hate will be your mantel. Rise, like Lazarus rose." Her voice lowered to a whisper: "Or take the darker road, the earthen tunnel that nosferatu travel."

The moonlight yellowed, the stars froze in their course and a dark form stood at the edge of the wood, his face

a lump of clay, his hair a shock of brittle grass.

"Joseline." His voice was a low rumble, joyless, tired. "Blood calls to blood," he said. "I came for the love we once shared. But be warned. Though the dead are wise, their wisdom is a heavy and useless burden and seldom profits the living."

She hissed in anger. "The first time you counseled us we lost all ablebodied men. The second time you stole my son! Tell me, did your fleshless skeleton speak the truth or were you but a puppet of the elves? Your bones manipulated by elvish enchantment?"

"You want to destroy our overlords. I tell you, it is an easy thing to do. But it would avail you nothing and take away what little humans still have left. Know that the world, all of reality is a palimpsest. A lie written over older, awfull words that are horrible true. You live a dream, you are a dream. Don't force the world to wake for you will stand with empty hands and even those hands will fade."

"So you wanted me to lose my only child. How you must have hated me! Go! Go! My love is ashes."

"Children are not meant to be swords, Joseline."

She made the gesture of dismissal

and the moonlight coloured silver.

4

Thomas was twelve years old when he awoke in the middle of the day. His sleeping pattern imitated that of the elves and he had learned to dislike the short intervals of searing light punctuating the long twilight of the Elfish realm.

A soundless voice had spoken his name. It wasn't the first time. Nor, he feared, the last.

He kept his eyes closed for almost twenty minutes, fighting the compulsion, and listened to the dry

scrambling of bats, the slow drip of a hidden well. Rest eluded him and the earth felt unbearable lumpy and damp. He finally opened his eyes and scratched his belly. A longlegged spider walked across his left arm and he flicked it away with a sweep of his hand.

The Hall of Peaceful Dreams became suddenly an oppressive and cramped place with the rows of elves lying like bloodless corpses in the dim glow of mushrooms.

*

She waited just outside the gate. His mother seemed older than the last time, her face a furrowed field, grey

invading her black tresses. Or it might be just the merciless glare of the sun, which hid nothing and always seemed intent on highlighting the worlds imperfections.

She eyed his pale body with some distaste, noticing that the white of his eyes had acquired the slightest tinge of elfish blue. "I see you have learned to fear the sun."

He shook his head, but not in negation. "Why do you keep troubling me, mother? I'm happy here. Almost. At least happier than I would have been grubbing the earth in your village. I'm learning important things."

She tried to smile. "Elfish magic. I suppose that's quite fascinating. Still, they wouldn't show a mere human the truly important things."

"They hide nothing! I'm one of them!"

"Ah. Even so, there are secrets they wouldn't care to show a human changeling."

"Such as?"

"Their mining spell. The words they use to refine the rocks in aluminium, copper. The words that call the gold from the hidden veins."

He snorted. "That was one of the first things they taught me. It's easy." He tore a lumpy rock from the grass,

spoke three words in the liquid syllables of the elves. The stone flowed like wet mud, separated in tiny nuggets that gleamed in the sun. "Copper," he said. "I could as easily call forth silver or black carbon."

"A multipurpose spell? How ingenious. Must be hard to do. For a mere human."

"Not at all!" He face shone with enthusiasm. "Look." He repeated the first part of the spell. "Now the last word, it says how heavy the stuff is you want to have. If you say seventynine, you get gold. Eightytwo gives you lead."

He smiled and his smile was almost

elfish. "I know what you're thinking. But the moment a human uses the spell to refine iron the elves will know." He had no illusions about his mother, but he saw no reason to dislike her on that account. Crafty treachery had always been admired by the elves and he liked her unbroken spirit. Also, she was his mother.

They strolled for some time along the White Way, a road of stone slabs that showed many cracks and sagged in several places, the slagged stone overlaid with a dark glaze. He once again marvelled at the differences between the sunlit world and the elvish realm. In the starlight no trace

remained of the White Way. Nor of the crumbling ruins that lined the road.

They parted at the edge of the forest, while the sun sank like a ruby moon behind the treetops. A single kiss, almost a token, and he saw her walk away in the gathering shadows.

If only she could forget, he thought. Or forgive.

*

The starlight turned turned the book she had found in the ruined daytime library to a slab of moldy wood, the title becoming no more than an unreadable tracery of wormholes. It didn't matter, she knew it by heart.

THE WONDERFULL WORLD OF CHEMISTRY, AN INTRODUCTION.

Page 23, describing Magnesium, especially fascinated her: "An extremely light and common metal, Magnesium combines with oxygen in an actinic flare. Its ultraviolet radiation has been used in the early photographic processes, because it so clearly resembled sunlight."

A common metal, found everywhere. Captive sunlight. And unshielded sunlight would gravely harm and finally kill an elf.

Thomas read the passage again, frowning. The Latin seemed ancient and strangely matter of fact. Not at all like the ornate language of the later
**LIVES OF THE SAINTS or
DEVOTIONS OF A
GRASSHOPPER.**

"Returning with an additional three legions Julius Ceasar crossed the borders of Faery. He was victorious in the first engagement, the battle taking place in the afternoon. But the moment twilight fell the elves returned, armed with fearful sorceries and not a single soldier was left alive.

Now the Empire of Faery had grown somnolent and weary, the elves

caring little for the affairs of mortals. Ceasar's invasion woke them from their long slumber and they left their hills, swarming over the forest of Gaul. Vanishing in the light of day, ever victorious in the twilight, it took them a scant three years to conquer the Roman Empire and make the lands of Man a part of their twilit realm.

Let the name of Julius Ceasar be reviled, for his greed has brought us calamities untold and a bondage sore!".

Looking up from the brittle perkament Thomas found the librarian studying him. He liked the ancient elf, who tended the catacombs, feeding

the sluggish spiders juicy ants and ladybirds. "This here, it's true?"

The elf smiled. "To some degree. It describes what happened, but not all things that happened were true."

Thomas shrugged. "And I suppose it'll take me another thousand years to understand what you mean with that riddle?"

"Hardly. Perhaps you noticed that I filed the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire in the section with tall tales, fancies and songs? While it clearly should be placed on the shelves for Genealogy and Natural Philosophy?"

"So? You never let me read those."

"I think the time has come to

enlighten you. You know the word 'palimpsest'? If you reuse an old piece of vellum you scrape off the words that are already written there and inkt you own words. But it's hard to clean the vellum completely. Most of the time you can still read the old words. Thus it is with our own world. We're but a thin film over words already written there. Words that are more true."

"The sun? The short day? That's part of the first script?"

"It's the shadow of the true words, distorted by our sorceries." He took a black mantle from a peg and a silver mask, the eyeholes covered with thin

lenses of black obsidian. "I'll show you the truth. The sun rises soon and in her light it's often terrible easy to see the lineaments of the true world."

6

They crossed the dry meadow, walked half a mile along the White Way. The ruins were almost hidden by the trees.

The librarian gestured. "Even the endless forest where the mortals hide, even her green leagues are part of our dream." He stamped on the crumbly grey stone. "Less real than this. Though the Way vanishes in twilight and the ruins are seen no more."

They climbed a cobweb guirlanded stairs and the librarian halted in front of a tiny round window. The purplish glass had miraculously been left intact. He scratched the cacked dust away. "Part of the first world it annuls our enchantments. See the true world, my child."

He stepped aside and Thomas gazed outside. The forest was gone, the sky altered to a brooding purple dome with scudding stormtorn clouds the color of gal. Ruins dotted the ashen plain. Nothing grew.

Thomas searched the indistinct horizon: the mountains seemed too low and had a molten, scorched look.

Ice rose beyond them in dirty grey turrets, circling the plain.

"You fought a war, unleashing the powers of the sun herself. You killed the world. Not a single animal was left alive, no seed survived.

A horrible void was left, the mighty stream of Time itself halted. We filled the void. We are dreams, history that should have never happened. A second choice reality that is quite improbable and very, very fragile." He nodded. "If any mortal had been left alive, he would have called it World War Three."

"Dreams," Thomas mused. "You're all figments."

"Just like you."

7

Joseline intoned the words, the nine village leaders standing in front of her. A tiny movement, the earth stirring. Five lumps coalesced from the loam. Lumps of a dull silvery grey metal.

"Magnesium," she said. "Hand me a torch."

The lumps ignited with a dazzling flame, a glare so fierce it left pulsating afterimages.

One of the leaders started to laugh, his eyes streaming. "Iron? Who needs iron when we have this!

They'll burn like moths in a

candleflame!"

8

Thomas woke to impossible sunlight. Tall shadows danced through the sleeping hall, brandishing copper swords.

Trolls! was his first thought and he grabbed his sword. A ray of horrible bright light swept the hall, touched his weapon. His magic sword shuddered and reverted to a stalk of dry weed. For three heartbeats he stood frozen, stupidly staring at his useless weapon.

A spear nicked his left arm and he jumped back. The glare wavered and died and his elflearned nightvision

returned. He stepped back in a niche, searching the hall from the shelter.

All the elves had died. Their naked bodies were covered with deep, smoking burns, their skin blackening and peeling. Human warriors swarmed through the hall, an old woman exhorting them from the gate with shrill cries.

Two warriors squatted in front of several metal poles, striking sparks from a disc of flint. A spark arced into the dry moss and rose in a wavering flame..

They shoved their poles in the flame and the metal ignited promptly. The sun returned.

He draped his shuddering body with the bloodsoaked mantle of one of the dead invaders and stumbled to entrance of the hall. Nobody tried to stop him: he was clearly too short to be an elf.

Thomas took the steps three at a time. He felt strangely light. As if gravity was relinquishing her hold on his body, rejecting his reality.

He turned the last corner and glimpsed a segment of blue sky. For an impossible short moment the window framed the silhouet of a swallow. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

The sky turned a dull red and the

temperature dropped sharply. He halted. He knew too well what he would find outside. Only the nuclear Fimbul winter, the empty ruins.

Raising his hands he noticed that they had already grown quite transparant. If only she could have forgiven, he thought. And then, with melancholy curiosity, for he had become more than half elf, I wonder what the Hand will write next...