

PALIMPSEST

1

They raided the palace of earl Magember at the height of the two hour day: seventeen men clad in 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 the spiderweb like a man brushes away a spiderweb. It broke with sound of tearing perkament, arms long splintered drifting away on the afternoon breezes.

Several elves woke from their deep slumber, but they moved in slow motion, their swords tucked under their arms, 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 sometimes 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 mask 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 would only for trolls or mortals. You carry iron fashioned from the bones of the First Hag. You come to end my life." His voice was low and melodious and the words issued from the thin air, the carved stone the earl never moving once.

"Such is the case," Winslow replied. "I won't bore you with the enumeration of your crimes. I won't if you would even understand why they are crimes. In some ways you're innocent. Like the victim 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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