

Witch in the Green

It seems to the visitor in the wilderness that the rivers and the mountains are ancient, and the root and branch spread over them is a temporary blanket, rising and falling with the long years - appearing and disappearing at the whim of the seasons or the hands of mortal labor.

Any strong back with an axe can fell a tree. Any ox with sturdy rope can remove root and stump. The earth remains.

This is the failure of observation, of the length of mortal years. The elves passed this wisdom on to the Greenweavers. The only remaining elven kingdom is the Sacred Elvenhome. It is no mountain or sea coast. It is a forest.

When they visited our lands, our legends tell us they were tall and graceful like the alder, their minds as flexible as the willow, and as wide-reaching as the oak's boughs. Their honor was as towering and strong as the redwood.

They reached into our wild spirit with hands of rosemary - slow, pervasive, sweet. They changed us. They taught us to walk upright. They taught us mortal speech. But they did not make us part of the man world. They left us half in the green twilight. They did not or could not pull us all the way out, as they did with the gnomes and the other young peoples.

For us, cities are a prison, and this last Northern Wilderness is a great palace full of endless gifts.

Smell this tea. The black tang of real elven tea. The humus of mushroom, the high arch of the white peaberry. The bitterness of willow bark at the back of the throat.

The green endures. This Talon, spiked into the earth is moored by lichen and the encircling clench of roots.

Like hair covers wolfen, grass covers the earth. Its roots run in a great net. Distant forests learn about fires and floods and oncoming locusts in the air. In the earth.

Leaves lift to the sun. They gather the rain. They shelter all living things in their shadow.

This Talon pierces a shadow. Beech trees and oleander grow here because they consume the toxins of the earth, and turn them into life. The beetles tend their roots. The worms bring food and feed the burrowing animals that nestle deeper against the stone.

No burrowing animals live here. No worms feed the roots.

Slender branches reach to the sky. The air here tastes always of the tang after storms. Pale white roots sniggle into the earth, below the clench of the beech roots, which form a great bowl with their smooth and constant strength. This stone they do not crush.

A CRASH, VAST CYMBALS MADE OF CHINA

The long green thread wrapped around the world carries the sap of Palladium, the life blood of the world itself. The Talon pierces the skein, buries under its vast weight, filled entirely with a heart of iron burning with imperishable fire and unquenchable words of power, something wriggling and writhing and rotten. A Stain inside the earth. Something that would devour the sky.

A vast eye in the center of writhing darkness slits open. It almost sees you, but the shadow in you wraps itself around your heart. It almost sees you, and something else nearby wraps the long fibers of the Lifeskein around you. It almost sees you, but the pulse of the Lifeskein rips you away....

There is a capstone with complex wards and elven power on sacred ground. Its seal was broken before you removed it. The chamber below showed the Stain preparing for battle against the Light, which is now dim and far away. This effigy of the Stain was scratched from the world by a figure pregnant with the Stain's darkness, hair burning like copper on fire, attacking the revelation laid in the Stone. The stone forgets, but the Green remembers.

There is a shop full of pottery and broken hopes where you have stood where a taproot of the lifeskein touches the surface. There is a garden of bones below the earth, an effigy to the Stain. Those taken here ingested the Stain, but were guilty only of foolishness. Two yet remain who have ingested the Stain in their innocence. They are women.

There is a shop that was once full of jewels where a root reaches the surface, still hidden. The root remains closed, but the Stain seeped out of it nonetheless. The Stain has become Gray. It reaches toward the Light, and walks now in the world of shapes.

There is a symbol hidden in the taproots, that can be opened by the Talent or the Gift. The symbol is inside you now, and you see it.... There is a doorway full of power so strong it taps the Lifeskein directly. The doorway is alive. It lies under a pale elven tower that descends like a spike into the Lifeskein.

There are two lesser Threads running under the walls of the Outpost. The Stain has infected the lesser Threads. Two sets of hands lay across these flows. They are beginning to strangle and untangle and corrupt the Lifeskein. One set of hands is of the elfblood. One of them bears the Light, but is Stained.

Your hands are on the Lifeskein now, bearing the Shadow and Fire, but serving, somehow, the dim and fading Light.

GUARD AND PROSPECT

It has been a long time since you tapped so much of your inner strength. It felt good, like stretching your hand after holding something too tight for a long time. The dark thrill of that secret under Faran's Outpost was a dark and welcome jolt of excitement. Feeling the power of a True Healer convincing the mind to rearrange the body – exhilarating.

The bodies. The blood. The writing in that chamber under the Potter's. Whatever filth has infested the people of the Outpost, that's something else. It rankles the new foreground of your mind that is a Captain. That Guards.

For the first time in a very long time, you enter into the Recovery. You find the white line of the horizon and the pink hum of thoughts at rest. You invite the Waking to become one with What Never Sleeps within you. At some point, what has never happened before happens: you fall asleep.

High above Faran's Outpost, the unsteady storm winds didn't concern you. The clouds passed beneath you, and you entered the quiet, rarified sky. Somewhere above the great blue, it was said the Powers of Light had retired. You would never reach them, no matter how high you soared. Murder would chain you to the earth.

The storm, from above, was white and clean with a growing funnel in its center. It was almost a complete circle. This storm is not a storm.

You fell. There was lightning in the clouds – the gap between what is, in the Earth, and what is desired, in the Light.

Back below the clouds, Faran's outpost was a maze, filled with insects scuttling to and fro on their meaningless business. The graceful curve of the Outpost walls seems to indicate the great outcropping of rock that does indeed seem like a finger plunged into the earth. Your mind will not go near the Stone, or the Earth. It is repelled, like a lodestone from its like. Somewhere, under the earth, the Witch Hunter is stalking, wrapped in green and shadow.

There is a great motion there, under the earth. Back and forth under Faran's Outpost. Under the streets. Back and forth. Back and forth.

It strikes you. The teardrop shape of Faran's Outpost. The back and forth motion. It is an eye. The eye is sleeping, and moving in its restless dreams. Barely sleeping. Maybe even now, it is opening. It will see you, outlined against the dark sky that Heaven hides herself with.

Your mind pulls itself apart.

"Pardon me, sir? Captain? I wake you only because of how you are sleeping and that you do not smell of liquor. Are you well?" It is Median's small hand, even more gentle than his kind voice that touches your crippled arm. There is something in the race of changelings that is broken – in the body. But all of your gray-skinned, unfixed race possess something else in the mind that is broken in the opposite direction, to make up for it.

You hired Median before you were you, but would hire him again. He is small and scrappy and capable, but when pushed, or in crisis, his first go-to is always kindness, softness, conciliation. His child-like body and sweet face keep men from doing things they might do to you or Wren and would certainly do to Burl, whose first defense is sarcasm and wit.

You were slumped against the wall. Your back ached, but it was nothing compared to your head. You didn't smell of alcohol, but from all that mental exertion of the day before, you had a hangover that was going to hang on your back all day long, pounding on the inside of your skull.

It was late morning. You went out.

The Winter Wolf was quiet. The Witch Hunters' rooms were empty. The empty apron that was the owner – successful because he was the least interesting human being to walk the earth – had no idea where they had gone. He saw the beautiful elven lady leave hours ago. He hasn't seen anyone else. He's happy to help the Captain with any–

Faran's Pride – your hateful, stupid, willful and thoroughly excellent horse – was skittish, but seemed happy to have you on his back this afternoon. That worried you.

Wren looked a little better. The big sack of beef was tough. He would recover from whatever had friend his insides, but left the Hound and the Witch Hunter nearly untouched. Although Illyria had laid hands on Gavin... You would like her hands on you, but would not trust them. They are murderer's hands, which you know something about.

The Prospector's House was the ruin you left it in. No sign of a blue floating lady, although you didn't go upstairs. You looped a length of chain through a hole in the wall and the knob hole in the door. You used a lock much less excellent than the ones Illyria took.

Someone had been inside the lower floor, but you guessed it was a neighbor. They cleaned up a little, laid boards over the hole in the wall. Secured the door with cheap twine. You asked around. The husband across the street – a brutish, simple loader and day laborer – had gone in this morning, made sure no one was hurt. Nailed up a couple boards. Didn't, fortunately, kill himself on any remaining wards.

The bar party you broke up last night seemed to have reformed, smaller, at the White Bull across town. You asked around; no one was Sgt. Miller. You asked around after the old proprietor. No one knew anything new. A couple drunks swore they'd seen him this morning, sweeping up. That bugged you. You asked around. You found out where he lived.

Turned out, he'd had a bad flu, taken to his bed for a week or so. After that, when he realized that nobody knew he was still alive, it turns out he just enjoyed himself. He snuck in at night and took his money from his till. His long-time manager didn't seem to care he no longer came in, and ran the place like he had for 20 years. Bored, the old man had taken to sweeping up the place in the early morning, and polishing the brass bull horns adorning the bar. Honestly, the old place had never looked better.

One less victim. That was something. Your head ached abominably. The thought of using your Talent made you want to stick a dagger through your hand to feel a little better.

None of your boys had seen the Prospectors – the dead one or the living ones. The Undertaker had cleaned her body, put silver pieces (Old Kingdom, must be from the Witch Hunter) over her eyes, which he had packed with something. She was in a simple box, waiting in his cold basement. How did anyone in the town have basements, with the endless pale hallways, with their cypher stones running underneath, still running inside your head.

Maybe you should ride out the gate, keep going. Maybe you should go to the Great City of Mairne, with its vast Cathedral of Light, tell them about the Evil in Faran's Outpost. They would be too late, but you would be alive. Of course, the sky – or your conscience, or Alain Varcrest in the back of your head – would glower over you all your long doppelganger days, no matter what form you took.

You interfaced with Lieutenant Arissa at the Army Camp. You enjoyed the endless tête-à-tête. She seemed especially vibrant today. The aftermath of battle wore well on her.

The female prospector had returned just after the change of the guard at mid-day yesterday. She seemed harried, in a hurry. She'd been in the woods by the look of her. She looked "up to something".

The Lieutenant took you aside. Professional courtesy. The elven prospector was seen leaving in the early afternoon yesterday. He may have been wounded. His coat may have been stained with blood. All 3 of them had gone out 2 days before and no one had seen him coming back into the city before he left again.

Evening was on you.

The Winter Wolf was full of wary patrons. Burl caught up to you. "Mayor needs to see you. Something's up, boss."

Yes, something's up. Maybe we should burn the outpost to the ground.

Frustration is the velvet glove not strangling

It was time to wrap things up at the Prospector's house. Enough nonsense.

You pocketed the elemental's blue gem, and later fished out a similar gem from the Prospector's stash to keep on your person. You shushed the Captain, loading Jack and yourself with the important goods things found in the Prospectors' personal quarters. You recognized that the footlocker at the foot of the military-style cot belonged to a woman, not to a man. A small woman. She was dead now, and at the Undertaker, assuming Gavin had done what he set out to do.

After all that ... dissatisfaction, there was discharge needed. Distraction. Appetite fulfillment. The Hound was creative, and eager and slobbery. But not so creative as you.

In the morning, Gavin had not returned. The Hound confirmed that he yet lived, though you knew that in your bones.

You waited a small while, but that grew boring. You tormented a few men in the bar. Tormenting yokel simpletons was hardly a pastime.

You worked on your mental list of who in town you would kill first. You picked at the hogswill that passed for food. The Hound was listless without Gavin's blood. You left him satisfied and languid in the room and went out.

You walked the streets. Seemed like people were staying in. The rain had stopped, but the storm pushed down overhead, an unfulfilled threat. It didn't seem to be going anywhere. Good. Neither were you.

No new bodies in the herbalist's glass house. Her plants were dying. You broke into her home. It was tasteful, small. She had many small curios and gifts. She had a book that you found interesting, **Ye Spirites and Sprites of Ye Wilderness**. She also had a book of sappy poems signed, **Thank you for the only good conversation in town... Alain**. Well, well, well. That must be why he hadn't searched her house. Or he knew it was there because he'd killed her. Probably not, but a fun idea.

The nosy widow neighbor Whitecoffee was tedious as a used-up teabag. When going to call on her, you weighed -rationally- whether knife, strangulation or politeness were the best way to wring her for information. You chose politeness because people were noticing people gone missing now. You regretted that before too long. Then you regretted it more. But in the tide of her prattle, you slowly figured out there there was a group of Elaine's friends that used to meet in her greenhouse, but then stopped a few months ago. They included the mayor's wife, the gnome potter, some "small, greasy foreign fellow" - but not the smith - , and perhaps another woman. ***Interesting*** You left her alive as a gift for that information. You put her toward the top of the poisoning-on-the-way-out-of-town list.

You went to check on the men in the Army hospital. Alain was there, having an animated discussion under the gate with the sassy little Lieutenant Arissa. You avoided them. The men were doing much better, thanks to you. The dwarven buffoon of a Medicker was there. He told you someone had broken into his office last night and stolen a soporific potion and some silver nitrate solution he used for treating infections. A thick silver solution. Nothing else.

You went to check on the woman who'd told Gavin that Widow Whitecoffee was a suspect. She was an old army wife. She had about as much potential to be a secret cult conspirator as you did to be Exchequer of the Old Kingdom. She told you about some **terrible** thing that had happened at the Prospector's shop yesternight. Demons and spirits, oh my! *Idiot* She told you how one of their neighbor's friends' wives' cousins had told her at the market that the Prospectors had come back just an hour or two ago.

Shit.

The Prospector's dwelling had been chained shut with a cheap lock. Inside things were cleaned up a bit. The hole in the middle wall patched over, but the work desk inside and the chest not cleaned up. That didn't seem right. Didn't seem like the Prospectors.

The day was yawning on. Dark gods those old women could talk. That last one, the old war widow, she should fall down a set of stairs somewhere. You kept an eye out for a really good set as you made your way across town.

You found the Smith, Durn, who had the same Western Wolfen Rebellion tattoos and the same accent as the idiot new tavern owner at the Slaughtered Wolfen. His wife was very pregnant, he said, and out doing the shopping. He fondled his iron obscenely as he talked to her about how social his wife was, and what good friends she was with Aphorisia, the Mayor's wife.

You realized just then that an Aphorisis is when two things come together, and one of them is silent or left out, as in the word Knight that makes it sound like Night. That was interesting, and you weren't sure what it meant, if anything. Other than that posturing bitch was eventually going to be the thing silenced and left out.

Darkness was coming. You headed for the Winter Wolf. Alain was outside, getting on his horse.

Hound and Light

After the dickering over the Elemental at the home of the Prospectors, and the tension of almost-battle - which was frustrating and hackle-raising - it was a relief to wrap things up. To leave in the rain. To get away from wards and Guard Captains.

You and Illyria worked out your mutual tensions. In several creative ways.

Morning came. The master had not returned. He wasn't dead. You knew that, or you would be in a much darker place.

The mistress kissed you on the nose. That led to other things.

She was dressed. Without the master's blood, you were feeling lethargic.

"It's okay, Hound. I know how you get. Sniff around. Keep an ear out," she shrugged into her gloves that became knives when she wished it. Such remarkable hands. "Mistress has some lady business to attend to."

She wouldn't go out and kill without you, would she? You thought she loved you....

It was noon and the disgusting swill that passed for cooked food in the Winter Wolf roused you from chambers. You were the Hound again, because Jack was too difficult at the moment.

The Guard Captain came sniffing after the group of you. You hid. He hadn't seen the master either. He didn't look all that well. Maybe he'd been more hurt than he had let on. His horse looked a little delicious. That houndish thought worried you. You had another sundown before the lack of blood became a problem.

There was fear in Faran's Outpost. And something else. A strange scent, like rabbits sometimes get when they've been stuck too long in the warren. When anything might happen. When cotton tails might bite or offer their necks ... unpredictable.

The storm brooded like thunder and disapprobation.

There was no new body in the herbalist's glass house. There were a few more broken panes. The ones that had had **Akba** written on them. There were a few more smells you hadn't gotten there as Jack. Nothing familiar.

The mistress was nearby, working. She had wanted her space.

At Cern's elven tower, there was a heady tang of powerful magic. The door of the place was black oak bound in iron. Old elven power was in the door. It would not open for you or any other shadow.

At the Chapel of Light, there was a scent of blood and the Power of Light. Also, the sick smell of the Grey Walker.

At the capstone that led you down into the dark there was a powerful smell of Flame - the kind of Flame of those of Flame and Shadow. Whatever was down in the dark yesterday used its power to seal the capstone with demon fire. There will be no more getting down there this way.

On a whim, you investigated the buildings. Someone had been here. They slept in the attic of the dormitory, on the bed used by the old Matron. It was not she or Claret the Monk.

Someone washed off blood in the sink of Claret's little priest house. Someone went into the Chapel of the Light, but you don't go in to find out why.

Afternoon is upon you. You return to the Winter Wolf. You sleep a dark sleep full of running.