

TWO EXCERPTS FROM 'THE WITCH'S BOY'

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Tancred - the villain - returns to the family home:

Force, impersonal and violent as a siege catapult, picked him up and hurled him into the wall. Timbers splintered and burst. The upper story of the mill swayed under the impact. Oswy's shoulder ground out of its socket, and the collarbone cracked. Sulien walked into the room.

A pause which seemed like forever as Sulien looked down at the knight's body, his angel-of-death face utterly still.

Tancred shrugged the pain of injury off onto Oswy, and with it a deluge of emotions and half-recalled images of the past - Pain and the ache to cause pain, nostalgia, hatred and love. His wish for revenge had begun to fade under the desire that everything return to how it once had been.

"Oswy?" Sulien asked, his tone as gentle as the brush of a cat's paw. The very stillness of him seemed a threat, like the set jaws of a man-trap waiting to snap.

"I didn't do it!" Oswy whispered hopelessly. The sound went no further than his own mind.

Oswy's power was torn out of him and as Tancred shaped it into a spell of ravening fire their minds came close in a strange intimacy. Oswy could feel, with astonishment, the depths of Tancred's doubt; his unaccustomed pain of actually caring; the agony of faint hope; Perhaps the boy would come back on his own, if he was only asked.

Strong with a lifetime's habit voices were wheedling at Tancred, insisting that to ask was to be weak, that asking meant certain rejection. Better to take and be sure. He did not fight them, he had learned very early he hadn't the strength.

'But,' he said to them, cunningly, 'Persuasion is less risky than force. Twelve years must count for something, and the boy has always been sentimental.'

He levered Oswy's body to its feet, passing the pain of movement over casually, not even pausing to enjoy its affect on Oswy's mind.

'And,' he finished, with satisfaction, 'Even if he comes back willingly, he will still need to be punished.'

"You have three seconds," said Sulien, intently, "Before I kill you. Now talk."

Oswy's body took a step forward, smiling. It held out both hands. "Sulien, my love," it said, "I've come home."

The rage died to ashes in Sulien's brown eyes. He recoiled. A parade of emotions passed across his suddenly open face; dread and weakness and something very like relief.

Time stopped again. Beneath the stridor of turning wood a silence gathered in which, very faintly, Leofwine's gasping breath could be heard, growing shallower. Oswy felt his own screaming should be audible in that terrible hush - 'Don't listen to him! You hate him, remember?' - but it was not.

Sulien looked up, oddly vulnerable, a child confronting an abusive parent, hoping that, against all the odds, this time it will be different. Tentatively, while Oswy screamed at him to do something, to take control, he said

"Master?"

And Oswy despaired.

Gennan, King of the Elves, plays a joke on Adela:

Though the high hills where they stood were bathed in the hoar light of moon and stars the valley lay in utter darkness. The sinuous line of owls and bats swept down into it silently and disappeared. A smell came up from it - the dank, moist smell of passages under the ground.

"You mean to have the funeral now? In the middle of the night?" Adela asked, nervously. The cold smell of damp earth caught at her throat. A little-girl terror of churchyards rose up in her; the sense of all those dead things lying close by underfoot.

"Why not?" said Gennan. His words were careless, but he, even he, lowered his voice, unconsciously she thought, in reaction to the shadows. "If you can ease your heart before the morning, why spend the night sad?"

Adela picked her way carefully down into the valley's dimness, the elf-lord silent as a ghost beside her. Lights had begun to show now - seeds of cold blue light, drifting aimlessly on the air, sheets of dimly glowing vapor which twisted into strange shapes as she passed.

Gauzy, dreamlike, the veils of pale light floated about Adela as she walked. The cold from them spilled over her like a breath from a tomb. She shivered.

As though her thought had shaped them, mounds began to show, silhouetted by the gray light: A fleet of them like ships capsized, drowning endlessly beneath the faded grass.

Doorways gaped - the dank earth smell flowed out of them like another darkness. The stone lintels were all written over with deep runes, moss-grown but potent, an ancient magic guarding graves.

Some mounds had fallen in, still water lay polished like steel on their bowl-like surfaces. Some had been pillaged, leaving stained yellow bones lying scattered over the valley floor. Some were complete, doors shut tightly against prying eyes. Whatever lay in them still slept untouched. Adela hardly breathed, frightened they might wake.

They came out from among the mounds, but the dark brows brooded behind them, a silent presence at their backs. Rings and trenches of stone lay exposed under the scarves of pallid light. Scattered stones and black empty graves stretched out of sight - an unquiet necropolis silvered by the glow.

"I am quite safe," Adela told herself nervously, "I am quite safe. Gennan is here," but when she looked at him, his skin whey-colored, the tips of his wolf teeth gleaming against his lips, she felt suddenly as though one of the dead was walking beside her, and she wanted to scream.

"I will not be put to shame again," she hissed fiercely at herself, "God will make sure I come to no harm. I am quite safe." But she could not make herself believe it.

"This is where the Fell Dwellers, humans, buried their corpses," said Gennan quietly. His breath brushed her cheek - cold as the night air. "Many hundreds of summers ago. I hope Needle will rest quietly among them."

"If there's some doubt of it," Adela whispered back, knotting her free hand in the folds

of her hood to keep it from trembling, "Then for Heaven's sake don't bury her here."

"If she walks," Gennan said, shrugging, "She will have company."

Adela had to stop herself from pulling free of him and bolting.

By the side of one open grave a shallow mound of earth had been piled. Needle lay beside it on a pallet made of spears. A mantle of ermine had been draped over her, argent and sable like snow in shade, but her white face was uncovered to the night. Under the translucent skin the skull was already beginning to show.

Mourners stood silently about the bier and the yawning pit, their faces, icy and wan in the blue glow, twisted into masks of grief. Torch, his woodfire hair dimmed to bone-yellow, stood at the head of the grave and sang. It seemed to Adela, painfully aware of the twisting shadows, that if he fell silent all the lights would go out.

She looked for her lord. He had stepped up to the lip of the grave and was looking down as they lined the grave with the fur mantle and then lowered the elfen into the darkness. The haunted night pressed at her back. A twinge of panic stabbed her. Hurriedly she scrambled up to his side.

In the pit, the girl's body glimmered. There was the grating sound of wood being driven through dry earth - and then someone brought a shield heaped high with dust and gravel and emptied it over her face. An elfen in the crowd tossed back her head and began to keen - a horrible wailing which seemed to coil into Adela's lungs and make her choke with panic. She could not take her eyes off the body. She was sure it was going to move.

A second shield-full of earth cascaded down. A thin layer now covered the corpse, outlining the curves of its shoulders and small breasts like a sheet of silk. It was going to move. Adela knew it.

The rest of the soil went in - making a shallow swelling of dry earth not thick enough to keep scavenging beasts away from the dead flesh. They didn't know how to do this properly. Of course the corpse would walk. It was going to move now! She held her breath.

There was a whisper of sound; coarse soil shifting. A piece of gray flint on top of the heap shuddered and went tumbling. The mound itself bulged from within. A scream began in Adela's chest, pushed itself into her throat like bile. Torch faltered in his song. The ghastly lights dimmed and fluttered.

Hands pushed out of the earth like strange growths, scabbled at the edges of the grave. The head came up, dust scattering. It opened its mouth - soil dribbled out - and groaned in gibberish. The closed eyes scanned the crowd and found Adela. It snuffed at the air, as if it could smell her blood. Then it began to climb out of the grave.

Adela screamed, a high-pitched, hysterical shouting which she hated but could not stop.

One by one, around her, the elves doubled up howling with laughter.