

Wishsong And The Downfall of the Faerie Realm

I

Gnomes believe themselves to have once ruled a dry, near-barren world. They told their children that they held sway and authority over creatures that were far bigger and more aggressive. Titanic predators with brains the size of peanuts roamed above the red earth in this elaborate mythological construction, and fought over prey and limited sources of water. These prey, armoured creatures, products of fantastic imagination, fed on packets of sparse vegetation and were driven from oasis to oasis during their long, harsh lives. In between cracks and crevices lay hidden organized settlements of Gnomes that oversaw this little, sunburnt world in comfort. A utopia based on survival.

Conflicting stories that lent little credibility to this canon explained how this world transformed into the rainforests of today, and how faerie queen after faerie queen practised their brand of benign condescension, overlords to ground-dwellers in this fantasy world, leaving gnomes bereft of gnome-pride, snubbing their opinions to lead the process of governance. That epic world where they lived on dry grass roots was no longer in evidence. They ate strawberries now, sprawled in abundance amidst the tall grass below shady canopies, and had to avoid being stepped on by elephants. They talked to few but themselves, they explored little beyond the surface of the ground, and they submitted quietly to the undemanding sovereignty of this alien manifestation.

The faeries did not keep themselves away out of desire, they simply preferred to haunt regions of the upper canopy, where it was perpetually windy. Any gnome who took the trouble to climb that high met with the occasional smile of a mysterious, knowing, aloof being, floating about in needless existence. Wishsong, whose business deeply concerned the Queen of the Forest, saw such smiles often. Water flowed from the ground to the canopy, within the trees, whose slender branch-vines could be cut if occasion demanded a gnome to drink while far above their forest pools. Instead of strawberries, on canopies there grew figs that made for heavy meals and long sleep. The air grew thinner and along slopes revealed a visual spectacle that was held among gnomes with as much fear as awe – the grey mountains of the south, beyond which lay hidden the great lake.

From one such branch, Wishsong jumped off the canopy into the distant fields below, equipped with special robes sewn for him by his mother, the witch. He glided on to the back of an elephant as the herd was making its way to the edge of the forest, onto mountain terrain. Today, this edge, a transition from green paradise to bushlands, was much sharper than it had once been. A marking of territory, the wisemen of the gnomes claimed, confining the dominion of the Queen of the Forest. Trees did not grow there, the boundaries were prone to fire – fire that issued from the red orb to defend the forest realm. Fire, which faeries abhorred most.

As he left the herd and proceeded to the snow line there came to view a sentinel faerie who had been standing in a long wait. She wore a pale, translucent blue, and looked on, unconcerned and meditative, at the distant greenery where she was aware of the presence of a hidden sentinel who was staring right back. One of the three ruling powers of this strange world had long been hidden in obscurity, with a powerful stolen artifact in the hands of its leader, the Queen of Night. Many searches were conducted in vain by both her sisters for her, and her stolen possession.

Wishsong, too, had been involved in these affairs for much of his life. He had seen faeries kill each other and dissolve into nothingness, when, somewhere in that world, they would be reborn eventually from one of the three orbs. And the owner queen of the orb that gave birth would foster the little faerie, and the faerie would willingly serve that queen. But for many years now, his hunts within the rainforest had never once led him, despite his eminence in surveillance and espionage, to his target - faeries clad in red, faeries with green eyes. Several years ago, in purges where many faeries paid the price of self-sacrifice, the Queen of the Forest, strong in following, had, to all appearances, eradicated the clan belonging to one of her sisters.

“She cannot see past smoke.”, Wishsong had remembered his mother, the witch, remarking once. The concerns of the canopy were relayed to her in fullest detail, at her demand. Every piece of the Faerie Queens’ mind had to be taken into account if the witch’s plan was to succeed.

Now he, strongman of the gnomes and servant to the Queen of the Forest, was the only one who knew why. When faeries killed each other in embrace, queens at random were gifted with faerie infants. The populations of the three dominions should have remained in balance – or at the very least, the elusive Queen of Night must have been somewhere out there, hidden with many faeries, perhaps in the mountain domain waiting quietly for the uprising she had no doubt planned. This potential danger laid to rest the old tussle for power between mountain and forest.

Yet the forest following had increased, dramatically, to the confusion of all. A flood of infants had entered into the care of the Queen of the Forest. Every evening, she would attend to them personally in her halls, playing with them, talking to them, imparting that strange wisdom no self-respecting gnome should be seduced to believe. And those crimson-eyed angels looked back at her, too young to detect the troubles of thought she was immersed in.

It was a year ago, Wishsong remembered, that she made her decisions clear – she needed to find the green orb, which she believed to be in the confines of the mountain. In order to search there, she needed to first defeat her sister, the Queen of the Mountains, who created that artifact, long ago. And it was this sister who unlawfully took possession the blue orb, once. And so it came to be that once again, after years of truce, the blue orb once more demanded the attention for the Queen of the Forest, who once forsook it. It now lay displayed in an icy chamber near the summit of the grey mountains.

II

In the darkness of the underground settlement of the gnomes, Wishsong waited as the witch’s business with the prisoner came to an end. He was looking into a great cage.

“You gave her back the stone. Why hasn’t she broken out yet?” he asked his mother.

“Why, because she doesn’t know how to use it.” she said, gleefully. “Her sister’s magic is beyond her primitive methods and lack of subtlety. She can burn a forest down, the volatile little thing, but she doesn’t know how to grow one back, does she? She can’t cast spells, she can only spew fire from that monstrosity. But that object is safely tucked away with your mistress, and now she will remain here for the rest of her life...” she paused, as though trying to find the right words. “.. kissing her children goodbye as they arrive.”

“I will be rescued one day.” spoke the Queen of Night, from the darkness of her cell.

“You will be killed one day, my darling.” the witch replied, and left.

Wishsong knew better than to question his mother’s actions, which always had hidden motives, and long-term implications. He merely stood there, surveying as little as he could see of the once proud Faerie Queen, now searched for by both her sisters, for the unforgivable crime of burning Faeries, leaving nothing of them but charred remains that would never be reborn again. Her followers waited above ground, leaderless, to be relieved of their labours by the advancing Faeries of the Queen of the Forest.

“Will you help me?” the voice asked him in desperation.

Wishsong kept silent. There was a long minute’s pause.

“She wants to kill my sisters too.” the Faerie said, with an indifferent resignation. “In the end, perhaps, she thinks gnomes would rule over all, and that we would subject ourselves to such a race.”

“Don’t try to understand my mother. It is well that you have not been thrown back at your sister, who would certainly burn you to death.”

The voice laughed.

“Why don’t you kill me too? Don’t know how to make fire? Do you think the red orb is going to come if you lock me up and wait?”

Wishsong did not respond.

“You think you can defeat your mistress? You will be burnt to death. You think you can conquer the mountains? Even I could not approach it. You think you will *steal*? *An orb*? Ha!” her voice rose in hysteria.

In a moonlit hall amidst the snowy slopes, magically floating on a small altar, the blue orb sparkled. On an ornate chair of ice beside it sat the Queen of the Mountains, looking haggardly at her guest, the gnome thief chained before her. Her hands idly hovered over the her orb, and ice mirrors moved in accordance, keeping chamber in a constant, kaleidoscopic metamorphosis.

“You really are withering away...” said Wishsong to the old woman who had finished stating her demand. “Rumours of this have already reached the plains. I’ve never seen any faerie age before.”

“The green orb is special.” she said, to the air.

“And you think us gnomes are in possession of it? The green orb has not been seen since the Queen of Night last came out into the open; and that was a long time ago.”

She did not speak. He knew that a refusal might send him to a frozen tomb. But that was not his intention.

“You must let me cross the realm and speak with my mother.”

“No.”, she said. “Do as I ask, or die.”

“You cannot penetrate the forest without an army of faerie sorceresses. The red orb will destroy you. There is nothing you can do.”

“Concerned about my safety?”

He measured his words. “Concerned about mine, as well.”

She leaned forward, and gave him a leer. “This orb here, look. It can be manipulated into doing a great many things.”

There had come a point during her incarceration that the Queen of Night’s mental deterioration became difficult to ignore. She howled in solitude, bickered in an alien language with creatures of her imagination, and spent much of her time in desperate attempts to bring the green orb to life. The gnome witch would come and watch once in a while, just for the pleasure of this sight.

“An obstacle has been erased, my son. What remains for us now is to instigate war between the forests and the mountains.”

“Gnomes could be killed again, needlessly.”

“Battles are not won without losses.”

He paused, and then ventured to ask: “And after all this sacrifice, what would you replace the Faerie realm with? What will be left for us to rule?”

“The outside world. The harsh wilderness outside the vine circle where gnomes once lived as masters of their own fate.”

The vine circle, which bounded the massive expanses of forest and slid into the great lake behind the gray mountains on either side, circumferenced the entirety of the known world. Very few of the realm were willing to believe that outside this reassuring protection there existed a place where strawberries did now grow on the ground and where the canopy was replaced by clear sky. To Wishsong, it was only academic. It was a world where he could not belong. His mother’s ideas seemed unreasonable.

A red eyed Faerie sitting atop the last tree of the forest looked on at the mountains. The calm, reassuring gusts of the static terrain of her mistress’s enemy hit endlessly on the forests border, while she sat in alert meditation on a branch.

She knew something was wrong even before the ground began to freeze underneath her tree. She took out her horn and blew it with all her strength, and the cold climbed the tree, like a deadly predator, and silenced her.

III

The snow in the forest lasted for ten minutes before it was forced into a cold, unhealthy rain. It poured and poured, while the Queen of the Forest sat in her chambers as her faeries attended to the orb, fuming in the quietness. A signal had been reported from the boundaries; her border sentinel had been attacked.

“Faeries will soon be on alert, and I fear that your journey into the forest will not last long before it ends with death.” Wishsong said, drenched and looking for cover.

She did not speak, choosing to give her attention to the glowing orb, on which she was working intently, as if against an unseen hostile force. The atmosphere had now become foggy, and it had become steadily more difficult to see where they were going. She relied on his navigational skills to take her to the vine wall as quickly as he could, and thereon to the entrances of the underground chambers of his mother.

It was then that a disturbance led Wishsong to spot pursuers, floating on the canopy, not too far behind them. His mistress the Queen of the Forest had suspected the worst and must have ordered this hunt.

“Flee!” he said. Hiding was of no avail. The orb’s glow had probably given them away.

Soon, the rain stopped. The fog died down slowly, and the unpleasant game of cat and mouse that Wishsong had got himself into with the old faerie progressed in the damp forest paths that led to the vine wall.

“So it was you who caused the snow and fog.” he managed to say, as they hurried along the forest path.

“The Queen of the realm has figured it out by herself. She will attempt to hunt me with the weak creatures in her service, but by now I expect will have encountered my other little surprise.” she said. “And what is this I sense?”

“What?”

She paused, confused.

“My orb.”

The Forest palace of the Queen of the Forest came under siege. The entirety of the mountain realm had come down in a suicidal ditch effort ordained by their queen, who was still at large amongst the thickets of the forest. And so, in the course of a few hours, the realm she had structured over the years seemed to be collapsing in front of her eyes. As she burnt her way through the blue eyed creatures that sought to kill her, the Queen had only one place to go, if she were not to lose her dominion forever. Her sense of the blue orb would guide her there.

The gnome witch was being choked, pressed against the wall by an invisible force. Her assailant stood on the doorway, asking nothing, wanting nothing, malice in her eyes and a floating green orb in front of her that her withered hands manipulated. There was a big crack on it. The witch looked at the orb with an involuntary terror.

The green orb was once a powerful medium of nature magic, used well in the hands of its true mistress. It adamantly silenced itself to any other sorceress, including the Queen of Night, who had stolen it long ago out of envy and lust for power, and who in the process lost her own orb. But during the height of her confinement, when she had begun to think that all was lost, its defences began to break slowly, and a crack grew on one of its sides. As the orb's powers grew adhering to the coercive style of this new user, she planned her escape from imprisonment. Then one day she deemed that the opportunity had come when she sensed the red orb being used again. Her sister was being kept busy.

Upon their approach to the entrance of the underground settlement, Wishsong and the Queen of the Mountains saw the creature that was standing in the shadows, with her clothes torn, crouching in the fashion of a wild animal, basking in the moonlight of her newfound freedom. Behind her, some slain gnome guards. For a few seconds, the two of them stood there, unable to say anything.

“Sister...” called the Queen of the Mountains. The ground under their feet began to shake.

In that perilous situation, when the attention of the two queens were focussed on each other, Wishsong knew that the only thing he could do was to save his own life. He began making his way to the entrance, as inconspicuously as he could.

“You brought me to this.” said the Queen of Night.

“You have no right to complain.” said the Queen of the Mountains. The ground froze under their feet and a strong blizzard began to blow.

“Sisters..” a ghostly voice sounded from far away. Wishsong dashed for the entrance as the Queen of the Mountains was pushed off her feet into the woods behind her while the red orb came into view, with its mistress. He had reached the entrance when he saw the inferno begin.

Postscript:

Unobserved by the gnomes who huddled deep inside their underground lair without daring to emerge, a battle raged for many days in the terrain above. The glow of fire and the howl of wind persisted through day and night, while rocks piled at the entrance while chaos reigned outside. And then, when ashes went to ashes, and smoke went to smoke, the gnomes reemerged to find their forest home charred and lifeless. The Faeries were no longer in evidence. The queens and their orbs had left, or had been destroyed, the gnomes never found out. And with the vine circle burnt away, the once cossetted residents of that world bore witness at last to the desert beyond.