Wimsel and Quid, Outside of an Inn’s Outbuilding

Quidbury and Thor arrived at the inn just before dawn, peddler’s cart in tow.

The cart was folded up like a ramshackle, mobile puppet theater, covered high in bags, poles, blankets, pots, and other instruments of travel and commerce, strapped haphazardly together by lengths of mismatched rope. Quid had left behind all the meagre trappings of his former life only two weeks ago, for this assemblage of different things that were now the tools of his new profession.

Thor was a burrow, given to Quid by his aunt Elynore and Uncle Bertrand, when the young man left his home village of Grumpledon to travel the kingdom and make his fortune. Thor, as a rule, did not generally form opinions about things that happened around him, so he had been mostly content to pull the cart about while Quid tried to figure out what they were both doing there, and where their ultimate destination might turn out to be.

Quidbury had just turned twenty-one last week. Something about entering his third decade (although that had technically happened the year before, when he turned 20, as his uncle liked to point out) made him take stock of what he had been doing with his life up to that point. Mostly he had helped on his aunt and uncle’s turnip farm. They grew excellent turnips there – prize-winning turnips in fact – but Quidbury was a dreamer, and spent more time out in the patch imagining ways to improve the lives of his fellow peasants than he did actually tilling, and digging, and planting, and… whatever else real turnip farmers spent their time doing. He did not exactly absorb all the minute details of the business, that much he would admit.

So, when he got it into his head that he needed to explore the world, and bring his own brand of genius to the good people of the kingdom, his aunt and uncle did not hesitate much to round up all of their spare bits of wood, leather, burlap, rope, and tin, and send him off into the world to make his fortunes selling… whatever it was that he could make, which others might pay silver for. They loved him dearly, it was true. They just never really understood what made him tick, despite all those years of effort. What they did come to know of their nephew was that he needed to go and follow his heart, wherever it might lead him, because the boy had always been mostly heart.

Quid and Thor stood side-by-side now, in the first rays of early morning light, taking in the details of the small roadside inn. Its outside lantern had caught their attention as they had emerged from Mosswood Forest about a quarter-of-a-mile back, in the predawn gloom. They had just crossed a small, sturdy wooden bridge spanning a nameless, bubbling brook that separated the patrolled lands of the Duchy of Addlebright (where they were now) from the wilder lands through which the two had just journeyed.

They had seen an elf two days ago, in the forest. An *elf*! At least, Quidbury had been fairly certain the fellow was an elf. It was a bit hard to tell for sure. Thor had thought it was a bush, but what did he know. The Mosswood Forest had certainly been a very different place than the farmlands he had grown accustomed to. Perhaps elves looked like bushes, to burrows.

The inn did not appear to be open at the moment. There was a small stable nearby, with two horses tied up in it, absently munching on carrots and ignoring the newcomers completely. The inn itself was a squat, two-story stone structure, with a thick, steep straw roof, and many tiny, shuttered windows peeping out in just about every direction, except perhaps straight upward. There was a fat, crooked chimney attached to the building’s side, and black smoke curled lazily from it, unhurriedly fading into the crisp morning air.

“Smell that air, Thor! It’s so… *exciting*! I can practically smell adventure!” Quid drew a big, giant gulp of air through his nostrils, to confirm this.

“Or maybe what I’m smelling is… adventurers!” His eyes got wide.

Thor could smell horse, pig, smoke, and stale beer. He wasn’t sure what an adventurer smelled like. Maybe just those things?

A wooden sign hung over the inn’s front door. It read, *The Roosting Rogue*. There appeared to be a hunter’s arrow stuck jauntily into it. It was not immediately apparent to either traveler whether this was an intentional design choice, or if somebody had recently decided to use the sign for target practice.

To Quidbury, this was all quite beyond perfect. This was the sort of place where legends began. Everybody knew that heroes of great renown – swashbuckling swordsmen, noble knights, mysterious sorcerers – congregated at roadside watering holes just like this one, seeking fame, fortune, and perilous quests to save the kingdom from disaster. Or at least a princess from a curse. People like these would certainly value his services highly. He was about to make a colossal name for himself, of that he was certain.

For his part, Thor did not especially like that they appeared to be considering staying at an inn called “The Roosting Rogue”. He also did not like that he had unexpectedly began forming opinions ever since they had left the farm.

“The inn will be open in about an hour” said a voice from the general direction of the stables. “That is, it opens whenever Henry wakes up and starts looking for his breakfast. There’s really no sleeping, once Henry gets hungry for breakfast”.

Quid had turned toward the stables to see who had spoken, but all he could see were the two horses, whose heads were still busily munching carrots.

“Are you from here?” the voice continued. “I don’t think I’ve seen you here before”. The voice was female, but with an odd lilt to it, which Quidbury could not place.

“Hello there. I can’t see you”, he responded, and took a step toward the stables. Thor wished they had brought some carrots.

“I’m having an invisible day”, responded the voice. “I’m here”, and with that, Quidbury all at once saw that a bucket had been hanging in mid air in front of the horses. From it, a carrot suddenly leapt, and carefully inserted itself into the appreciative mouth of the horse on the right.

Quid was not precisely prepared for this specific scenario, and so just stood on the spot, trying to contain the waves of enthusiasm now building in his stomach, the place from which his zest for life sprung unbound, several times a week, ever since he was first able to grasp that he lived in a world of mystery and magic – a world of possibilities. An involuntary squeak escaped his throat. He was talking to an *invisible person*.

The bucket floated to the ground, and came to rest between the horses, who quickly got on with the business of nose-wrestling for the remaining carrots inside. Thor watched them morosely.

The soft sound of padded sandals could be heard, and soon Quidbury noticed a slight impression of smallish shoes had appeared in the ground in front of them.

“My name is Wimsel. I work here. I pay for my food and lodging by helping with the animals. The owner is not that fond of animals, I’m afraid”.

“Where are your eyes?” asked Quid. He could guess within an arm’s span or so, based on the sound of the woman’s voice. He did not want to inadvertently speak to her shoulder, or the top of her head. Or really, anywhere that wasn’t her face.

There was a small pause, and then the sandal prints stepped closer. He felt the presence of a person now, and looked down, to the spot he felt her face might be. A soft hand tentatively touched his chin, and made a careful correction to where he had pointed his head. She must have been only five feet tall, putting her head just level with his heart. The hand withdrew quickly.

“Hello, Wimsel”, Quidbury said politely, at the space where her eyes probably were. “My name is Quidbury Fallweather Cotterpin, of the village of Grumpledon”. Would she know where that was? “That’s to the South, through the Mosswood Forest”, he added, with a short bow as an afterthought.

“Hello, Quidbury Fallweather Cotterpin, of Grumpledon”, the voice responded, “My name is… just Wimsel”. The voice sounded slightly apologetic.

“Hello Wimsel”, Quid said again. Another pause. Thor made a snorting sound. “This is Thor, he’s my travelling burrow, and business partner”.

The warm presence moved past him, and Thor bowed his head slightly, quite aware of when a good head scratch was about to happen. He was not disappointed. “Hello, Thor. You are an excellent burrow”.

It occurred suddenly to Quidbury that he had never fallen in love before.

=== Begin Intermission ===

Hello. Please enter your user id.

**> user017**

Please enter your password.

**> \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

Welcome, user017.

**> load world 1201**

Please wait . . . done.

**> show flags on wmsl**

asleep, happy, healthy, invisible.

**> set flag on wmsl, visible**

Done.

**> set flag on wmsl, silent**

Done.

**> spawn Hunter, type 2**

Type 2 Hunter spawned, id brgn.

**> Set target on brgn : wmsl**

Done.

**> exit**

Goodbye.

=== End Intermission ===

Brom Roghan had been searching for as long as he could remember.

He did not grow tired, because he chose not to. There was no time for growing tired. He had a bounty to collect, and his quarry was close at hand – he could feel it. Resting happened after bounty collection. That was the order of operations.

He was alone in the woods, leaning against the trunk of a large oak tree, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood, and scrutinizing the map he had been given by an old witch who had had no patience for questions. Addle bright was a small duchy, but the soldiers that patrolled her borders were alert enough to warrant caution. Brom did not want to have to escape from another tower or dungeon, or dispatch any guards who didn’t need dispatching. That would be a waste of his time and talents.

The map was weathered, as though it has been through many calamities, but the lines were legible, and Brom could tell he was near the alchemist town known as Glassworks. He had come from the North, where the places had names like Gutforge Pass, Hill of Seventeen Claws, and Ogrewatch Firekeep, and found the place names here … delicate. He imagined breaking a lot of things while chasing bounties through towns with names like “Glassworks”.

A flock of something whipped itself into a flurry through the trees ahead. Brom looked up and scanned the area quickly, looked back along the path from which he had come, and then ahead again, where it continued to wind its way through the forest. He flicked the wood splinter into the nearby brush.

His quarry would not likely be wandering the wilderness, but rather taking sanctuary in one of the villages or inns scattered around the large, farm-speckled valley that made up the bulk of the duchy.

*Wimsel*, he repeated in his head, carefully drawing his thick finger across the witch’s map. Who – or what – was Wimsel? What defenses did they possess?

Finding Wimsel would be the easy part, he knew. The trick to having a long career in this business was not finding your quarry, but observing it carefully once found, to mitigate risk during the grab. One never knew how many allies a target might have, that might need to be dealt with in the process of collecting a bounty. Most bounty hunters did not practice caution at all, which is why most did not last as long in the business as Brom had.

A group of travelers appeared around the bend in the path up ahead, but Brom had already stepped behind the Oak tree, large hand wrapped calmly around the hilt of his sword. He stood motionless, observing as three men leading a pack-laden horse passed slowly by, not twenty paces away. Two merchants, one armed mercenary bodyguard. The horse was about to swing its head in his direction, but the bounty hunter put a finger to his lips, and it got the message. The group continued along the path from the direction he had just come.

Brom dressed in greens and grey, which he found effective for blending into the terrain in this part of the kingdom. Despite his powerful build (and impressively chiseled, if not slightly aged, countenance) he did not go in for flashy shows of excessive weaponry or armor. His sword, hunting knife, and short length of sturdy rope were functional enough, and were all he usually needed to get the job done.

He folded the map and carefully put it in a small pouch hanging at his belt, where he also kept the entirety of his wealth, which at the moment wasn’t very much.

He took the silver coins out (all seven) and arranged them in his palm. Each bore the stamped face of either a queen or king, alive, dead, or perhaps trapped somewhere in between. He let out a slow, contained sigh. Everywhere his journeys had taken him, he had carried around tiny metal portraits like these, depicting people he had neither met, nor would likely ever meet, and he was reminded with great clarity in that moment – as he had been several times during several other moments in the last couple of weeks – that he too had been sought and found, a long time ago.

Three hours later, a family of deer from the area had gathered nearby, to watch with mild curiosity, and more than a little concern, the large, armed man who was now sitting cross-legged under the Oak tree, lost in thought, staring at a handful of silver.

The deer wanted the tasty Sagegreen that grew at the tree’s trunk, but weren’t about to risk finding out if the man had anger or hunger issues. So they just hung back and waited for the situation to change. Men never sat still for long, after all.

Brom had admittedly been having some problems lately, staying motivated to hunt people for money. It was solid work – there were no shortage of bounties to be found in any given town of decent size – and he was really and truly good at it. He had achieved a level of skill at blending into his surroundings that many hunters would kill for (if they could figure out how to kill you and take your skills, that is), and animals tended to show him a degree of grudging respect when he was out and about in the wilderness. He felt pretty good about that. But having to deal with dark witches, embarrassingly wealthy barons, irate tax collectors, and other disreputable clients day in and day out was starting to bring him down, in spite of the daily affirmations he’d been practicing religiously since his last big job had ended.

Sometimes he wished he could just turn himself into a rock, and let the sun go by a few hundred times without him. Maybe the world would have righted itself by the time he awoke.

One of the younger deer, called *Leaps-from-danger-reluctantly*, had finally had enough of the waiting, and tentatively broke off from the group to approach the man, who she was beginning to suspect was sick and dying anyway. She kept her head low to the ground as she circled nonchalantly toward him. She wanted that Sagegreen, and was also perhaps slightly concerned for the hunter, though she could not explain why.

The other deer were beside themselves with worry now, bobbing their heads and stamping about nervously. It seemed certain they were all finally about to witness Leap’s premature end, which they knew for a long time had to be coming. The young doe was an arm’s length from Brom before he even noticed she was there. She paused, took a step backward, swung her head low and cautiously. For a moment, the two simply considered the moment, together.

Brom slowly pulled a fistful of Sagegreen from the ground next to him, held it out. The deer stepped forward, and took it gingerly.

The others could not believe what they were seeing. They always knew Leaps-from-danger-reluctantly was, more or less, insane (by deer standards) but this… this did not happen between deer and hunters. Yet there was the young doe, eating Sagegreen from the man’s hand, while the rest of them could only stand back and watch, in fear.

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The following morning, Brom arrived at the Roosting Rogue. An enormous hog was making an impressive racket at the front door of the inn, as though trying to batter the whole place down. There were two horses and a burrow in the open stables, and a pile of junk strapped to a pair of wooden wheels parked next to it.

The front door of the inn had started to open just as Brom reached the other side of the small wooden bridge, and before it had finished opening, he was crouched motionless behind some rose bushes nearby. The man was like a ghost when he wanted to be.

He had resolved the previous night to make this his last bounty. He wasn’t sure what he would do for silver after it was over, but that wasn’t a concern now; he still had his professional pride, and a job to do.

He would find this Wimsel, and bring her back to the witch, by the book.