

The Ivory Wand

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“You know I’ll always fight when the money’s right!” The others around the campfire laughed and nodded in agreement to the big man speaking.

“Tell it like it is, Particus.”

Particus nodded at the man, took another drink from his mug and continued in his deep voice:

“In battle my arm is strong and true;
I’ll take on any foe, old or new.
Take my sword, take my shield;
I’ll fight some more, a stick I’ll wield!
Take my money, take my gold;
I’ll leave you all out in the cold.”

The group of mercenaries grumbled and nodded in agreement at that last verse. Particus sat back down and grabbed some more of the smoking meat from out of the fire. The smell of the cooked pig was refreshing, and he voraciously ate it down. The smaller man at his right interrupted his thoughts: “Hey Particus, how long have we been out here now? Three weeks? Or has it been four now?”

Particus paused in mid-chew and answered, his voice muffled by the mouthful of pig, “Aye, I guess its been four now, Timar.”

Timar nodded, “Four weeks, and hardly a bit of fighting. We just sit around these fires, eating and telling stories. Every few days we move to a new campsite and do it all over again. And just think: we get paid for it!”

Particus swallowed and tossed the bone over his shoulder into the darkness. While wiping the grease from his hands he said, “I come here to fight. I get paid to fight. That’s what I do. I don’t like sitting here, eating and getting lazy. I think the enemy knows that. They’re just sitting out there in the dark, waiting. Waiting to attack us. We should go to them and fight!”

With that, Particus finished off his mug of ale and stood. He adjusted his sword on his belt and looked out into the darkness. He looked up at the two moons, deep in thought for a moment. He turned to face Timar, speaking so that only Timar could hear him:

“In another night, the moons will align. That will be the one night this month we will have complete darkness. I think that’s when they will attack.” Timar nodded and stood, looking into the darkness. Particus continued, “We’ve been at this site a day, and I think they’ll have us stay another day. That means we may be here tomorrow evening. I’m going to check out those ruins over there right now, before someone or something comes out of them to interrupt us.”

Particus looked around the fire at the other mercenaries drinking and enjoying themselves and then headed away from the warmth of the fire into the darkness. Timar followed.

The ruins, as Particus referred to them, were hardly more than a pile of rubble. It looked as if at some time in the distant past that there had been some sort of small square tower or fortress on the site, but now there were just a couple of walls and a

lot of broken rock. Particus and Timar walked towards the ruins, the sounds of their companion's laughter fading in the background.

At the ruins, things were very quiet. The two stopped and listened for a moment, but the only sound was a lonely cricket chirping nearby. Without speaking, the two men stepped into the ruins. Rocks crumbled underfoot as they tried to step through an old doorway. The sounds of rock breaking and tumbling over one another echoed off the few remaining walls. Particus stopped and held up his hand to Timar.

"One moment," he whispered. "Did you hear that?"

Timar turned his head to the side and strained his ear to try and hear anything. He could hear nothing but the slight sound of a few pebbles still bouncing around near their feet. He shook his head to Particus and shrugged his shoulders.

The two men headed towards the one section of the ruins that appeared to be intact. There was an open doorway leading into a room of some sort with no roof. There was a brief sound of well-oiled metal on metal as the men simultaneously drew their swords. They carefully stepped through the rubble towards the open room, swords at the ready.

Particus stepped through the doorway into the room. The moons lit the room enough to see all but the darkest corners. It was a square room, about twenty feet on a side. There was no roof, but all the walls were intact at least to eight feet on a side. Particus looked around the room and saw nothing but rubble.

He stepped to the near wall and pushed hard, still holding his sword. A few pebbles rolled off the top of the wall and scraped on the ground as they fell. Particus sheathed his sword and headed to the left wall. Again he pushed on the wall, and it held sturdy. As he headed towards the third wall, a small white object caught his eye half-buried on the floor in the corner.

Particus pushed the rubble aside while Timar stepped closer to see what Particus had found. He uncovered a small rod about two feet long. It was dusty: it had clearly been buried here for quite some time. Particus picked it up and brushed the dust from the item with a gloved hand. He turned it over in his hands as Timar looked over his shoulder.

It was completely smooth, end to end. It was just about two feet long and completely symmetrical. It looked like a bone, but it was too finely polished and even. The ends were solid, and the weight of the wand made it appear that it was solid. Particus held it by one end and waved it towards Timar. Timar backed up and exclaimed, "No, wait, that could be a..."

Just then a white beam tracked from the end of the wand and towards Timar, striking him in the chest. Startled, the two men both fell to the ground, Particus dropping the wand. Timar recovered first. He scrambled to his feet and shook his head. "Wow. I feel better. Refreshed."

Particus, however, was slower getting to his feet. He held his head in his hands while shaking it. "Oh. That really drained me. I feel like I've spent the entire night out drinking."

Particus picked the wand up from the ground and looked at it carefully. Timar looked at it as well, then spoke: "You know what this is. You know what this means! This is some sort of magic. You know what the church would do if they saw this!"

Magic isn't permitted, ever since the Great Breaking. We can't have this. We have to turn it in to the church. They'll kill us if they find us with it!"

Particus nodded thoughtfully and looked around the small room. "But who would know? What if I were to find someone of the underground. I hear they pay good money for black market magic. I think maybe I'll hold on to it and decide what to do later."

Timar was nearly jumping out of his skin. "Nooooo! You can't! I just know they'll find us. This is against all the rules. If we turn it in now, they won't bother us. Better yet, let's just put it back. I don't want to have anything to do with magic. The church. They'll kill us for sure!"

Particus tried to calm Timar: "Look, just you and I know about it. No one else needs to know. There's no way the church will find out if we just keep our mouths shut. I'm not going to use it! Did you see the way it drained me? It appears to be some way of transferring energy from one person to another. If you had actually been hurt, I'm sure I would have taken your injuries. You think I'm going to use this thing? No way. I'm just going to hold it until I can find someone who is willing to pay solid gold. Then we'll be rid of it and be richer at the same time. There's no sense in leaving it here, as someone else will be sure to find it and sell it. If it's going to be sold, I say that I'm the one to sell it."

Timar nodded and calmed down some. Particus continued to reassure him, while all the time thinking of how much gold he might be able to get for the forbidden magic item. After Timar finally quieted down, the two men looked around the room. As they were about to head towards the door, they heard the sound of crunching rubble from outside the room.

Particus put his finger to his lips and gestured for Timar to be quiet. Particus slowly pulled his sword from his scabbard, trying to muffle the sound of sliding steel at the same time he put the wand into a sack at his waist. The footsteps outside the room stopped at the noise. The two men heard the sound of numerous swords being pulled from scabbards. They realized they were quite outnumbered, so Particus sheathed his sword and stepped openly to the doorway, hands above his head.

As he stepped through the door, he saw five or six men, swords drawn, facing the empty room. After a moment, he realized that the men were some of the same men that had been at the campfire. He put his hands down and laughed, "What are you guys doing up here?"

The group of men relaxed and the one that appeared to be the leader said, "We're patrolling. They told us to head up here and check this place out. Guess you beat us to it. Anything here of interest?"

Particus' footsteps crushed more rubble as he stepped past the patrol. "No, nothing up here. We'll just be heading back to get some rest before tomorrow."

Timar moved quickly to follow his friend Particus. The patrol watched the two men walk by and then continued to walk through the crumbling ruins.

The sun rose early the next morning and saw Particus sharpening his sword. He had had the last watch of the night and spent much of the time thinking of who he might know who would be interested in buying the magic from him. Maybe Oron would be interested, but he didn't usually pay much. Yofar would pay more, but it

was always hard to find him. And to get to either, he'd have to get past the church guards at the town gates. It should be worth it, as magic was quite rare, so even Oron should pay enough.

The day was pretty much like each day for the last four weeks. The hired men just wandered about, talking, joking, and looking for an enemy that had not been seen in weeks. After the noon meal, another group of men relieved Particus' group. Particus, Timar, and their group headed a few hundred yards further along the border. They set up camp at the edge of some trees, next to a short stone wall.

As dusk was falling, the dozen men sat down to eat around their fire. Just as they were starting to get comfortable, they heard the sound of steel on steel in the woods. The men jumped to their feet, grabbing swords and shields as a group of orcs came running from the woods, grunting and swinging various spears and swords.

The men looked to be outnumbered about two to one, and the falling darkness clearly favored the orcs. Particus stood and drew his sword, bloodlust in his eyes. He gave a yell and ran into the swarming orcs, swinging his sword from side to side. Particus knew his trade, and he had been waiting for such a chance. Dodging the unskilled attacks of the orcs, Particus sliced his way through the orcs, knocking one after the other to the ground. He was using all his mind and body, oblivious to those around him. Anything with a pig nose was going down.

The battle lasted just a few minutes, but it seemed like hours to those in the battle. When the noise had died down and the battlefield cleared, there were only humans left standing. In the middle of the carnage stood Particus. He stood with bodies all around him, his sword and armor covered in foul-smelling blood. His chest rose and fell with his labored breathing. He had a few cuts, but nothing major. Nearly all the blood on him was that of the fallen orcs.

He looked around and smiled. "This is what I live for," he thought to himself. He kicked a couple of the fallen orc bodies away and headed back towards the campfire where food was still cooking. As he walked, he saw many dead orcs on the ground, and a few men. "Those were not as skilled as I," he chuckled lightly to himself.

When he was nearly to the fire, he saw one of the men he recognized: Timar. Timar was badly wounded, and was bleeding from a gaping wound in his side. He reached out towards Particus, trying to speak. Particus bent down to listen to the dying man.

"P...P...Please," Timar gasped as his breath gurgled in his throat, "I...Can you...use the wand? ... Help ... me... the wand..."

Particus thought but a moment and patted his friend gently on the shoulder. "Would but I could, dear friend. If I could be sure the wand wouldn't kill me, I'd use it in a minute, damn the church. But it's too dangerous for me. I cannot do it. I am sorry."

Particus turned and walked back to the campfire thinking to himself, "I guess he was not as strong a warrior as I." When he got to the fire, he picked up a piece of nearly burnt pork. He ignored the stench of the dead orcs and the moaning of the dying as he sank his teeth into the well-cooked meat.

The rest of the night passed rather uneventfully. After finishing their meal, the mercenaries cleaned up the battlefield. A few members of the church arrived to see

to the dying and to perform the last rites for the dead men, including Timar. The mercenaries rejoiced in burning the horrid bodies of the orcs, knowing they would be rewarded in gold for each one they had killed.

The next morning, a messenger arrived at the mercenary campsite. Because of the skirmish last night, it was believed the main enemy army would be trying to break through at this very point. Therefore, one of the most prominent generals of the land, Balfor, and a number of troops were headed this way to help shore up this area.

Most of the mercenaries were indifferent to the news, as they were getting paid no matter who was there with them. Particus, however, knew the name of Balfor. Many years ago, Particus had fought alongside Balfor. Particus had been greatly impressed with Balfor's skill in battle, and indeed learned a great deal from this powerful man. The two had not seen each other in many years, but Particus was sure that Balfor could only be more skilled in battle by this time.

Particus grew more excited as the sun advanced across the sky. He could not wait to meet his old friend and swap tales of war and battle. He knew Balfor would always know more about the art of war, and Particus relished the chance to learn more and to fight once again at the side of such a powerful man. It would not be long before his patience would be rewarded.

Late in the afternoon, the reinforcements started arriving. The advance scouts appeared quickly and disappeared just as fast. Before they arrived, the men could hear the thundering hoofs of the armed cavalry heading down the roads. There were at least 500 men, so they must have really been expecting a large horde of orcs. In the middle of the main body a large white banner whipped in the wind, indicating the arrival of General Balfor.

As soon as the banner had arrived and placed on the ground marking the general's tent, Particus made his way there. He called out to his old friend and was greeted with a solemn nod and a shoulder as Balfor turned and made his way into his tent.

Particus followed Balfor into the command tent and found himself among a number of obviously important people. They all looked at him, and he thought one of them said something under his breath about, "Unreliable hired help," but he wasn't sure. He ignored the stares of the men and walked towards Balfor. As soon as he started, the other men blocked his passage.

"Where are you headed, mercenary?" one of the men asked as he stood in Particus' way, arms crossed in front of his chest. Particus stopped with his face mere inches from the other man's face - close enough they could feel one another's breathing on their faces.

"To see my friend, Balfor."

Balfor looked over and nodded to the other men in the room who quickly stepped aside to allow Particus to pass. Particus walked over to Balfor and clasped a hand to his shoulder. "My friend, what have you been getting yourself into? You must tell me the stories of your recent battles and glorious victories! I long to learn more from you, as I have before."

Balfor shook his head and began speaking in a solemn, low tone. "Ah, my friend Particus. It has been quite a time. Alas I do not have time for the stories of old. Times have changed. I owe my allegiance to the crown now. I have promised my service and my life to defend this magnificent country which I love."

“Now times are hard, but I have renewed my vow. Indeed, this may be the time I am asked to give my life in the hopes of keeping the repulsive orcs from our land.” He looked Particus in the eyes, “There are between 800 and 1,000 orcs headed this way. They have poor leadership, but the simple numbers are enough to slaughter us. We have brought 500 troops, but when added to all the mercenaries in the area, we only total 600. We cannot get more troops here before the orcs arrive, so we have to hope there is some way we can destroy the horde.”

At that, a number of the other men in the room spoke up:

“Sir, we shall follow you.”

“Indeed, there is not a man here that would not do all he can for you.”

“We shall follow you even unto death.”

Balfor nodded to the other men, “I thank you. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your loyalty. Do not ally yourself with me without allying yourself with our country. I would not be able to lead if I did not believe in keeping this land whole.”

Particus nodded, a little unsure about the attitude of everyone else in the room. “I see. Perhaps when the battles are done we shall have time to talk. I am confident that with your abilities that you will not perish.”

“You may tell the other mercenaries that there is a substantial bonus for those who are valiant and survive the battle. Those who do not wish the risk are free to depart. The orcs will be here by first light tomorrow morning.”

Particus nodded again and walked out of the tent, back to the campfire with some of the other mercenaries.

The men slept early, and prepared for battle throughout the early morning hours. The sound of steel crashing and being sharpened could be heard, although there were few voices. Most of the men were making peace with themselves and their maker, preparing for the giant battle to come. At dawn, the orcs arrived.

There were hundreds of them. They came in waves, one after another. As soon as one fell, two others ran up to take its place. At first the men were slaughtering the orcs, but soon the tide began to turn as the men tired and fresh orcs rushed in.

Particus was doing well, he had only a few scratches here and there, and he had felled at least a dozen orcs himself. Around him some men were falling, but most were still fighting. A short distance away, he could see Balfor, rallying the troops and cutting a wide swath through the orc swarm. He did not understand the man, but he certainly respected his fighting abilities.

The battle continued for hours, and Particus found himself battling near Balfor. The two men were slashing and destroying orcs like a machine. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Particus noticed an orc with a bow. Before he could react, the arrow had been shot and it sank deep into Balfor’s chest. The general fell immediately, and his troops quickly pulled him back away from the orcs.

Particus cut down a couple more orcs and then ran to see Balfor. When he arrived behind the lines, he could see that Balfor was barely alive. Balfor’s breathing was labored, and the arrow was still stuck deep in his chest. He was trying to whisper to his troops, but was unable to shape the words with his lips.

Particus thought to himself, “How can this be? He is a much greater fighter than I. How could he leave himself exposed to the enemy like that? This man is the most knowledgeable fighter I know, and yet a simple orc can cut him down?”

In a moment, a hundred images flashed before Particus’ eyes. He imagined the huge pile of gold that would await him when the orcs were killed. He imagined all the things he could buy with that gold. He imaged what he could do and where he could go. He imagined how popular he would be among his friends and the glorious tales he could tell. Then he looked again at Balfor lying on the ground, dying.

Particus looked outside and saw the battle was starting to turn against the men. They were trying to rally, but with Balfor down, their biggest leader was missing, and the orcs were starting to push the men back. Particus thought of joining the men at the line, but he knew he didn’t have the skills to renew the men’s vigor.

He reached into his bag and fingered the ivory wand. He thought another moment while he watched the light in Balfor’s eyes fade. Without thinking again, Particus pulled the wand from the bag and lunged towards Balfor. A couple of soldiers tried to stop him, but he got close to Balfor, pointed the wand, and a beam of light flew from the end of the wand and struck Balfor square in the chest.

The land of Gonar stands today, completely devoid of orcs. The king rules the land fairly and evenly. Along the northern border stand a few guards, watching for a renegade orcs, but never finding them. In a clearing in the trees, there on that border stands a small marble monument, marking the final resting place of many a man who fought and died to preserve Gonar. Once a year, every year, before the summer celebration, there you will find a man bent over the monument, giving thanks to those who have died. There, every year, you will find King Balfor.

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About the Author:

Jeffrey Ober has been enjoying his life reading and writing for many years. His favorite genres are fantasy/sci-fi and spy dramas.

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