

3. Suspicion and Observation

After a late start and a leisurely breakfast, Wyl searched the militia compounds until finally discovering the door to the quarters Fae occupied then knocked gently several times until a muffled voice shouted, “Come on in.”

Entering the parlor, Wyl observed no immediate sign of Fae and after a moment of hesitation, he sat on a huge soft and comfortable couch. Casually surveying the room, Wyl immediately noticed but for four bulky pieces of furniture, no decoration or personal object adorned the space with the exception of a large glass ashtray on the foot table. Highland legend frequently circulated stories of souvenir collections gathered by scouts in the militia and as Fae alleged, any such collections more likely than not, consisted of items seized from dangerous men at varying stages of their mortality. In truth, some always indulged in the practice and persistent rumors in fact included Fae among them, and even with such specificity that if one should visit his quarters, one would observe innumerable objects of just such origin crowded across the walls of his parlor. Wyl even expectantly anticipated his visit to the quarters with mild excitement over the opportunity to inspect such objects and so it intrigued him to observe exactly the opposite. Upon closer inspection however, Wyl in fact observed upon the walls, vague and shadowy shapes where objects presumably shielded the surfaces from the discoloration of natural aging, and though presently faded, stains of time still held images in evidence and among them swords, daggers, axes, spears, shields, helmets, and other shapes not quite so obvious. Wyl clenched his teeth and shuddered somewhat surprised by his own reaction. Considering it more than merely curious such things might once have occupied the walls yet currently did not, it immediately occurred to Wyl he might never consider any inquiry about it, or at least not for some time, and perhaps even after some time, any explanation might occur as so obvious as to compel no inquiry.

“You want a brew?” Fae called from the kitchen.

Wyl answered, “Yes.”

Fae shouted, “Honey? Cream?”

“Yes and yes.” Wyl replied.

Fae asked in addition, “Syrup?”

Wyl responded with a subsequent question, “What flavor?”

“Cherry.” Fae answered then asked, “What other kind would I have?”

“Mint.” Wyl suggested.

“I don’t like mint.” Fae explained.

“Cherry.” Wyl confirmed.

Fae emerged from the kitchen with two clay mugs, sat on a cushioned footrest, nursed his brew and smoked in silence then commented, “So, it appears you survived.”

“I guess so.” Wyl concurred. Fae nodded as he continued nursing his brew and his smoke. Wyl blew wisps of steam from the mug and gingerly sipped at the edge of the rim then speculated, “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Fae squinted and asked, “-did what on purpose?”

“The thing with that girl in the black dress.” Wyl elaborated, “You guessed exactly how she would react. You knew she would turn me down. You anticipated weaknesses and vulnerabilities -- mine. You gave me all the tools and weapons and then tricked me into using them to cut my own heart out. It was a lesson, wasn’t it?”

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about!” Fae exclaimed triumphantly, “That is an excellent observation, Wyl.”

Wyl leaned his head in contemplation and asked, “How would you guess that?”

Fae responded elusively, “The answer to everything is obvious after we know it, Wyl.”

“What does that mean?” Wyl mimicked with a sneer in an attempt to imitate Fae.

Grinning silently, Fae sat for a moment sipping his brew, puffed on his smoke and exhaled sharply expelling a small cloud toward the fireplace then advised, “I would like to point out that you did not necessarily fail your assignment utterly in talking to the girl. I said when we spy on neighboring cities we talk to strangers. You talked to a stranger - She didn’t shriek, ‘Spy!’ at the top of her lungs, so that counts as a successful conversation with a stranger. The drink was incidental. I just made that up to artificially increase the degree of difficulty. I don’t ever allow a recruit success on a first test. It makes them think they’re competent. They’re not. The lesson is no recruit is competent. You become competent by listening to me. Does that make my point?”

Wyl nodded in response.

“Good.” Fae stated firmly, “Are you ready for your next assignment?”

“Yes.” Wyl stated eagerly.

“Go home.” Fae blurted abruptly, “You’re on break. Report back to me after festival.”

Wyl wobbled his head alternately with an affirmative nod and a negative shake concluding, “Okay.” then soliciting specifics, inquired, “What day-”

“-When festival is over.” Fae repeated before Wyl completed the question then added, “-whatever that means to you. Use your own best judgment... but with two conditions: When I say, go home, I mean go home, to your parents’ home, today. Visit with them for at least a few days... and... you have to come back in here, if for no other reason, for race day. Kel will be in the horse games, and I want you to observe.”

Wyl considered the instruction then asked, “Where will I meet you?”

“You don’t have to meet me.” Fae explained, “Just be here. I’ll take your word for it.”

Wyl nodded, drank his brew and surveyed the room the way people examine unfamiliar places, and the vague suggestive shapes of former souvenirs loomed perhaps just a bit clearer and more pronounced than before. With a glance in his direction, Wyl found himself in immediate and direct eye contact with Fae. Bowing his head slightly to his mug, Fae rolled his eyes up toward his forehead, glaring out over his drink perfectly still, and he drew slowly and silently from the mug.

After his initiation at the Edyn Inn the previous evening, the occasion almost immediately degenerated into a simple drinking party, and Wyl found Fae surprisingly gracious and charitable but occasional moments occurred, similar to the present. Wyl noticed the shapes on the wall, Fae noticed him notice and felt compelled to let Wyl know it. Evidently, nothing, no matter how trivial, escaped his observation and Fae relentlessly exposed it as vulnerability. Wyl sat in the parlor in discomfort while Fae glared relentlessly, afraid to approach the subject of the ghoulish objects no longer displayed on the walls, and they both knew it, and they both knew they both knew it, and Wyl found it all quite distressing. With a flinch, Wyl concealed an apprehensive shiver with immediate and complete knowledge no such vulnerability would by any remote stretch of the imagination go unobserved by Fae, and that caused him even more distress. The flinch he judged a more preferable vulnerability for Fae to observe than a shiver, and it made Wyl feel like an easy breakfast for a predator.

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Small clouds rolled across the sky in scattered patterns under a brilliant sun and a cool crisp breeze rustled through the dry leaves and grass. Riding eastward on the main road toward his home, Wyl maintained a casual pace that would take him a few hours to get there but with no reason to hurry, he took in the sights of the rolling fields and occasional dense pockets of woods. To Wyl, the feeling of going somewhere on horseback and the simple sensation of motion accounted for his principle motivation in joining the militia. The house at the family farm stood some twenty feet off the roadway and throughout his entire childhood, he watched the traffic on the road, and most of all, the militia traffic. The rumble of horse hooves carrying bold and adventurous men to and from far off mysterious places on daring and amazing adventures romanced him throughout his childhood. For as long as he remembered, Wyl always dreamed of the day he would wear the cloak, carry the sword and dagger, and ride atop a horse while the scenery, any scenery other than the scenery that surrounded the farm, rolled past.

Horsemanship skills that qualified as marginal at best warranted an old and slow horse by militia standards, customarily assigning the best horses to the best riders so as not to squander the abilities of either. When Wyl rode with Fae on a real patrol later, he would no doubt ride a younger horse but until then, old and slow accounted for as young and fast as Wyl might merit. However, he rode a militia horse, he wore the militia cloak and he rode on the road on a perfect day for horse riding and so appreciated the conditions as sufficiently favorable.

Complaining he lost weight, his mother made Wyl eat immediately upon his arrival then Wyl sat with his father on the porch all afternoon and drank beer with their neighbor, Haery. For some time, his sister sat with them and asked Wyl questions about the militia, which he answered with an emphasis on horses and other passive subjects. That night, Wyl slept soundly into the next morning and after breakfast, insisted on helping his father with chores rather than sit idle all day, so the two gathered up and oiled all the tools in preparation for winter storage and occupied themselves to some extent for most of the day. By late afternoon, the call of cold beer on the porch beckoned, and Wyl washed his hands and splashed his face at the hand pump behind the house. Although he might just as easily have used the washroom indoors, Wyl always preferred the icy cold water at the pump. As he rubbed his hands and face, he heard approaching, the unmistakable thunder of a group of horses and stood to watch over the hedge while a small militia company sprinted past. Raising his fist in their direction, those in the company mostly nodded, waved or otherwise acknowledged Wyl as they dashed by. The sudden rumble of the approach and swift passage represented precisely the kind of occurrence that accumulatively seduced him over the years, and his heart raced for a moment at the thought he could finally at last count himself among them.

Arriving at the porch to find his father and Haery already reclined in the shade with cold beers, Wyl clutched a bottle that stood in the narrow shadow of the post at the stair and he sat on the top step then drank slowly while Haery talked about crops, luck and bad omens. Haery originated from a remote corner of the Highlands and never attended formal academic instruction in his youth so as a result some acquainted with him occasionally characterized him as quaint or rustic, as he remained intensely superstitious even in his advancing years. Evidently, Haery believed most legend and faerie in literal terms even despite an otherwise impressive degree of common sense and practicality.

A number of days passed slowly while Wyl adopted a routine of relaxed idleness during the day and at night, he accompanied old friends to the local taverns. At the end of another day helping his father perform some repairs and maintenance on the house and the barn in preparation for winter, again late in the afternoon, Wyl crouched at the hand pump behind the house. Holding his eyes closed as the cold water ran over his hands, he faintly heard the clip-clop sound of a single horse walking at a casual pace and he felt the urge to look, for the allure of the road always compelled him to observe any traffic capable of attracting his attention. Turning to peer over the hedge as he stood, Wyl observed a shiny black horse with a curly mane so long it almost brushed across the ground as it emerged on the road from behind an oak tree, carrying a small girl perhaps within a year of his own age, her raven dark hair fluttering in the breeze. The girl dangled both her legs leisurely over the same side of the saddle and garments almost golden in color stretched tight across her figure under a bold rich red outer cloak with some golden trims. Discreet sleeves flared a bit at the shoulders and perhaps concealed leather or metal armor reinforced portions of the cloak that appeared somewhat rigid while a sword and fighting dagger rested one on each hip. By no means, would Wyl ever mistake the girl for militia or even Highlander at all and in fact easily concluded she accounted as a foreigner. As he stared at the mysterious girl and his heart raced, a gust lifted her hair from her shoulders and swirled it around her head while sunlight washed out behind her. Time froze as Wyl stared into her eyes, sounds faded and brilliant light radiated.

With astonishment, Wyl snapped open his eyes to discover he lied on his back in the grass behind the house and as glaring lights faded, his father and Haery materialized leaning over him. As the two glanced at each other then into his eyes, they urgently inquired simultaneously, “Did she look at you?” “Did you see her eyes?”

“What?” Wyl replied as he pulled himself up to a seated position.

“Did she look at you?” “Did you see her eyes?” the pair repeated.

“What are you talking about?” Wyl demanded as he climbed back to his feet. His father and Haery helped him up and examined him like physicians while Wyl squinted, immediately suspicious one or both of them knocked him down or accidentally struck him in the head with something, or otherwise somehow bore responsibility for his unconsciousness.

In what he judged as but a moment, Wyl sat on the top step of the porch drinking cold beer from a sweaty bottle as his father and Haery studied him intently.

Exhaling with a sharp concise laugh, Wyl asked with increasing irritation, “What is the matter with you two?”

“What happened? ... Do you remember?” Wyl Senior inquired.

“What happened when?” Wyl responded not at all sure to what his father referred.

“Just now, in the backyard.” Wyl Senior elaborated.

“The little girl in red?” Wyl guessed as if it only just occurred to him.

“Did she look at you?” “Did you see her eyes?” the two elders chanted in unison once again as if prompted by the mention of the subject.

Wyl laughed and shook his head remembering the strange little girl in red and bright lights then composing himself, he concluded, “I think I’ve had maybe a bit too much beer with my friends and... the sun made me dizzy.”

“The sun made you dizzy?” Wyl Senior inquired skeptically.

“The witch made you dizzy.” Haery proclaimed.

The introduction of the name actually surprised Wyl and he repeated, "Witch?"

"The Red Witch." Haery said in an ominous tone as if fearful to speak it aloud even glancing nervously over his shoulders as if searching the sky for lightning.

"The girl in red?" Wyl repeated in disbelief such a delicate little waif could possibly inspire fear or even deserve such a disparaging moniker.

"She's the Red Witch." Haery confirmed undiscouraged by any skepticism.

"What red witch?" Wyl demanded innocently even though he could not possibly have grown to his age without any familiarity with the Red Witch. All Highland legend that referred to any witch by any name more often than not named the Red Witch and any that feared witches always feared most the Red Witch. Wyl considered all witch legend entertainment for children and in fact considered the thought of a grown man speaking of witches seriously somewhat embarrassing. Consequently, Wyl foresaw clearly the direction Haery pursued with the subject and he intended no participation in it.

Haery casually dismissed the ploy of ignorance, assertively stating, "You know who the Red Witch is, Junior."

"It was a girl with a red riding garment, that's all." Wyl argued.

"I seen her before." Haery admonished, "I know who she is - Ask your dad."

Wyl glanced at his father expecting him to restore some semblance of reason but his father hesitated for a moment then said almost as if in concession, "I can't say she's the same one I saw before, but that's the way I remember her."

Wyl dropped his jaw in shock his father apparently bestowed any degree of credibility upon the notion.

"I can say." Haery insisted, "That was her."

"I'm not arguing." Wyl Senior stated perhaps a bit defensively, "I'm just saying I can't say for sure I recognize that particular girl."

Haery paused, looked Wyl in the eye and informed him, "About fifteen years ago -- you was just a toddler and evidently don't remember -- bandits come up the pass, lots of them and the militia couldn't even stop them. They ran wild, burned stuff and even killed some folk, but right before they got here, the Red Witch showed up with some militia then ambushed and massacred the bandits. The militia come to the neighborhood and chased us all out, behind them come the bandits and behind them, the Red Witch come. The militia was outnumbered but they fought with these folk and for whatever reason, the Red Witch went after the bandits and she killed them, killed them all, she did, right here. Once the bandits was all dead, the militia practically run away from her. We stayed away too until she was gone then we come back and I tell you... it was not a pretty sight to see. I won't even tell you what I saw in any detail, but let's just say there was lots of body parts and heads... and there was lots more body parts than heads if you catch my drift."

Wyl continually glanced between Haery and his father in an attempt to register some modicum of disbelief from his father, but his expression never contradicted Haery.

Haery continued undistracted, "Some say 'Red Witch' is a title or appointment like our Martial and everyone in the witch clan is related, and they practice incest so generation after generation produces these almost identical girls... but I seen her three times in my lifetime -- about fifteen years ago, just now... and the first time was about thirty-five years ago... and I swear them ain't nieces or cousins what I'm seeing... Them are all either identical twins or the same girl, and either way, twin or no twin, I'm saying the same thing, aren't I?"

With a slow draught from his beer, Haery peered with cautious deliberation across the horizon and over each shoulder to alleviate any fears that perhaps the Red Witch lurked nearby prepared to smite down any that dare utter her name then leaning forward for dramatic emphasis, he asserted in a near whisper, "This is spooky timing, Junior. What with those foreigners visiting the Martial last month and you just joining the militia and all? Whenever she shows up something bad always happens and I'm here to tell you I seen as much myself twice a'fore. Some say she brings curses with her but I think it's more like she knows something's going to happen whether she's there or not, and she just wants to be a part of it... And sometimes she travels with the militia and when they go somewhere with her, they never all come back and even then, some of those what do come back are haunted by her mortal spell and they're never the same. And you take that serious. Watch yourself, Junior." Haery hesitated then said with some trepidation, apparently reluctant to disparage militia, "Get away from that captain, Faelryd, if you can." To hear Haery state the name surprised Wyl and Haery nodded his head apologetically for the offense but explained, "Witches... and militia - He's the last man on earth you want to be next to right now. Don't let yourself get stuck in a group with her. Keep your eyes open. If you find yourself in a situation and she's there... don't talk to her... don't look at her... don't let her see your eyes... and Junior... don't **never** let her touch you!" Haery pointed and waved his finger to stress the seriousness with which he considered the advice then admonished, "You seen what she can do. She knocked you out from thirty feet away. She didn't even raise a hand or even blink. You let her touch you... and you'll end up in her witch mansion with the vagrants and the vagabonds, washing her dishes and polishing her skull collections."

Wyl silently laughed at and cursed the conspicuous timing of his dizziness that so conveniently reinforced all the superstitions Haery entertained but his father apparently substantiated at least the basic facts by mere silence and that perplexed Wyl.

"Believe me or don't, Junior," Haery summarized, "just remember my words. There may soon come a time you'll think them more practical and sensible. Don't be afraid to believe. Don't be afraid to be cautious, even if it makes you feel silly."

"I want to eat dinner now, Dad." Wyl stated somewhat impassively.

As he stood up, Haery reached down and pulled Wyl to his feet then clapped a hand on his shoulder and shook it gently. Haery lived next door since before his birth and Wyl understood Haery no doubt sincerely cared about the entire family consequently conceding an appreciative look with a slight nod in acknowledgement.

At the conclusion of dinner, Wyl helped his father clean up and wash dishes while his mother and sister stoked up a blaze in the fireplace then glancing at them over his shoulder, in a near whisper, asked, "Is that story about the bandits and the militia true?"

"Yeah... It's true." Wyl Senior confirmed.

Wyl nodded slowly and inquired, "Why haven't you ever told me about it before?"

With a moment of thought, Wyl Senior then replied, "I don't know. I guess it just never occurred to me to recount it like some kind of story. I guess I just don't see the value in describing all the particulars."

"It's more than just the particulars, Dad." Wyl contended, "Yeah, it's not a pleasant story, but the people involved, the events leading up to it... That's history -- our history. If we don't record and understand it, we'll never know who we are... We'll never know how to determine it as opposed to just remembering it."

Wyl Senior lowered his head and held still for a moment of silent contemplation then asserted, "I don't want to record it and I don't care who we are. I know who I am. I just want to grow beans and wheat, and I want my son to grow beans and wheat, and live in peace and comfort. You keep that journal of yours hidden somewhere I won't find it, Wyllie. If I could have my way, I'd burn all the journals and there'd be no history, and we'd forget all about war. We wouldn't know what it is and we wouldn't know how to conduct one if we had to. If everyone just forgot all history for just one day, I don't believe it would occur to anybody ever again to have another war. Witches, heroes, bandits and war -- your history books are instruction manuals for how to kill and that's all. I already know who we are from what history we've got. We're murderers, that's who we are. That's what our history tells us. I think we'd all be better off if we forgot it."

"Dad, we can't all grow wheat and beans." Wyl countered, "We can either fight them in the mountains with weapons or we can fight them here with hoes and rakes. We're going to fight whether we like it or not. We might as well fight trained and in the place of our choosing, prepared with the proper gear."

"I've heard this speech before, Wylmaer, and I don't believe it. You know that. If you have to serve, serve. I respect that but you don't have to go out of your way to look for people to fight." Wyl Senior countered then leaning on his hands for a moment, he looked Wyl in the eye and with thoughtful deliberation, stated, "I'm not just afraid you might get hurt. I don't want you to hurt anyone. I don't want you turning into one of those- ... I appreciate the intentions of the militia are honorable, but there is something fundamentally wrong with anyone who would hack up a fellow human being with a sharp tool without first making every possible attempt to run away or somehow avoid it. I suppose if I were cornered and had no other way out, I would fight with a hoe or a rake, but making and carrying around a sharp object for the specific purpose of hacking up fellow human beings -- it's a plan for violence. It says something about basic intent and character. When those men came here burning and killing, I ran. I would have run over the mountains and into the other world. I would run for the rest of my life before I would willingly participate in those things. The militia killed those men for me and I didn't have to run but I thought long and hard about packing up, taking you and your mother and leaving this place forever. I don't want anything in this world somebody killed somebody else for. 'Expect no benefit from the suffering of others.' - We've all heard that before, right? You know who said that, right?"

"I know who said it, Dad-" Wyl conceded.

Despite the affirmation, Wyl Senior stated, "Edyn said that. The one with the fabled two blades, and he hacked thousands of fellow human beings to pieces out where next to no one ever noticed it... then told us we should never expect to benefit from the suffering of others. Now, doesn't that strike you as something of a contradiction?"

Wyl shook his head and countered apprehensively "Dad, you're talking about Edyn-"

"-I know who I'm talking about." Wyl Senior insisted raising his voice slightly and as both he and Wyl turned to glance at the girls by the fireplace he then lowered his voice and counseled, "You don't have to be a scout, Wyl. You can do good things and make a meaningful contribution... Shit, growing wheat and beans is a meaningful contribution, a lot more meaningful than hacking up your fellow human being. Choosing the scouts is choosing violence. That's not you. I know you'll never be that kind."

Wyl sighed and attempted to pacify his father, "Dad... I-"

Wyl Senior raised his hand to interrupt, stared for a moment then as if to share a secret, he said softly, "I know I'm not going to talk you out of it. If I was going to talk you out of it, I would have talked you out of it with one of the other five-hundred arguments we've had over the last dozen years. It's real now, Wylmaer. You're a scout now. One way or another, one day soon, you'll be there for a fight. I know they'll keep you in as safe a position they can at first but when that first fight finally happens, gods willing no harm will come to you, but I want you to take a good close look at what happens. I know you think you're following your heart. Follow your heart with the scouts if you must, and when you see a fight and your heart tells you run... run. Run away and hide... and know that I'll be proud of your actions. When that moment comes, that is your chance to find yourself, if that is what it takes. If you're going to follow your heart into the scouts, be willing to follow your heart out of the scouts without argument or resistance. Promise me you will at least give that fair consideration and I won't argue with you anymore about it. That's all I'm asking - Just remember it and give it fair consideration."

Wyl thought about it then nodded and stated, "Okay. I promise." Wyl Senior looked closely until Wyl finally reaffirmed, "I promise, Dad. It's reasonable and it sounds like something that should come naturally enough."

Returning his attention to the dishes, Wyl Senior asserted, "The better man is always the one who avoids the fight. It takes more courage not to fight."

"... Okay." Wyl acknowledged and after a pause, he said, "I love you, Dad."

Wyl Senior smiled and nodded. Wyl turned to face the fireplace and stated, "I love you, Mom. I love you, Myr."

Beaming the bright smile of a child, Myraen squealed, "I love you, Wyllie." then immediately conducted an enumeration of all those upon the earth she loved.

Wyl dried a few dishes then tilted his head slightly and asked, "What was all that about looking into the witch's eyes? I've never heard you say anything superstitious before."

With a restrained smile in apparent embarrassment, Wyl Senior conceded, "I guess I've been living next door to Haery too long... and maybe I'm a little more superstitious than you think. We believe in the gods, right?"

"... I guess." Wyl concurred for the sake of conversation.

Wyl Senior sighed and insisted, "Don't make me have this argument too. I believe in the gods, all right? If I believe in the gods, how much more farfetched is a witch?"

Contemplating the explanation, Wyl then inquired, "Do you mean you think she's a witch for real, or are you just saying witch because Haery said witch?"

"I'm just saying witch because that's what we call foreign girls." Wyl Senior explained, "It doesn't mean I think she's going to cast spells and set us on fire with her eyes. You heard me tell Haery I don't know if I recognize her, right? I saw a foreign girl in red on a horse today. Fifteen years ago, I saw a foreign girl in red on a horse. I can't possibly be positive it's the same girl and neither can Haery."

"Yeah... but it is weird." Wyl admitted, "The foreigners visiting the Martial, the witch showing up before the bandits back then. It is the kind of stuff that happens before war."

"It's also the kind of stuff that happens before there isn't a war." Wyl Senior countered, "Folk like Haery like to call it some kind of causal relationship but he never remembers the time the witch showed up and no war happened later."

Wyl nodded in appreciation of the point then stated as if a conclusive judgment, "I don't think that foreign girl is any witch."

Wyl Senior raised his eyebrows as if in mock skepticism and asked, “Why not? ... -and what about your dizzy spell?”

“I don’t know.” Wyl pondered, “I just don’t think she was scary enough to be a witch... Shouldn’t a witch be scary?”

“Scary how?” Wyl Senior inquired with an expression of amusement.

“I don’t know... like, big long claws for fingernails or sharp teeth and pointy ears or something-” Wyl speculated, “That girl... that girl was... really cute!”

With a laugh, Wyl Senior countered, “Well, she scared Haery pretty good, didn’t she?”

Wyl sighed in exasperation and argued, “Dad... mouse droppings in a pattern on the barn floor scare Haery. Thunder scares Haery.”

With a hearty laugh at the expense of Haery, Wyl and his father concluded the kitchen chores then Wyl Senior collected three bottles of beer from the icebox and announced as Wyl followed him, “We’re going to go have a beer with Haery and watch the sunset.”

Haery already occupied a chair on the porch, puffing on his pipe and suspiciously scanning the horizon, presumably for indications of the presence of witches. A stiff autumn wind blew, vegetation rocked and swayed across the whole of the landscape and clouds gathered as a brilliant orange and red sunset sent scattered golden rays of light across the darkening sky. Wyl and his father exchanged a discreet smile as they sat down and Wyl Senior handed Haery a bottle then with a grateful nod, Haery sipped slowly from it never peeling his eyes from the horizon. Wyl reluctantly acknowledged to himself the weather conditions and obvious apprehension Haery exhibited in fact spooked him a bit as well then drinking from his bottle, he glanced at his father engrossed in preparing his own pipe and asked nonchalantly, “You see anything out there, Haery?”

Finally turning his eyes slowly away, Haery smiled at Wyl and said, “Don’t think you can get away with ridiculing me, Junior. I may be ignorant but I ain’t stupid.” Wyl laughed and nodded then Haery raised his eyebrows possibly satisfied to have found something else on which to focus his attention and suggested as if in challenge, “Let’s see who’s ignorant and who’s superstitious... You saw a little midget foreigner girl in red riding a big shiny black horse out there on the road today, huh?”

Wyl confirmed in the form of an inquiry, “Yeah?”

Haery leaned over and winked then contended, “Yeah? ... Well, so did I... and when I tell my story ten years from now -- presuming I’m still breathing -- about the day the Red Witch rode into town and knocked out the neighbor kid from thirty feet away with a glance of her eye, you going to tell them folk the superstitious old rube is lying?”

Wyl almost angrily conceded, “No.”

Tilting his head in a sharp nod, Haery concluded, “That’s right, Junior. That shit really happened, didn’t it? A little midget foreigner girl rode into town on a big shiny black horse. She looked at you and you fell down... and when the kids don’t believe me, you’ll tell them I ain’t lying. You’ll tell them you was there and saw it too... just like your dad was there and saw militia hopelessly outnumbered do in a bunch of nasty bandits with a little midget foreigner girl in red, and later... heads was missing-”

“I don’t know about any missing heads.” Wyl Senior objected, “I didn’t count heads.”

“Yeah.” Wyl expanded the argument speculating, “See? That’s the thing. You said she looked at me and I fell down, and that’s true enough, but when you tell it in a story, you’ll say she knocked me down like it was some active thing she did, and my dad doesn’t remember missing heads, so he can’t tell me you’re not lying-”

“-That’s all good and fine, Junior,” Haery immediately countered, “but the foreigner girl rode a black horse and you fell down, and the Red Witch killed bandits. They’re true stories. I say you fell down ‘cause the Red Witch looked at you - You say it’s coincidence, but did you fall down yesterday? Did you fall down a half a hour before she showed up, or a half a hour after she left? She looked at you - You fell down. That’s the truth. When was the last time you fell down when someone looked at you? Has it ever happened even once before? How many times before you seen a witch? What were the odds the first time you ever seen a witch would coincide with the first time you ever fell down when someone looked at you? Why... to believe odds like that are nothing but coincidence... you’d have to be... superstitious or something.”

“All right.” Wyl conceded, “That’s real cute but I say those little details make all the difference in the world. I drank a lot of beer last night, I did stuff out in the sun all day and I was hot and tired, I closed my eyes and splashed cold water on my face, I heard a horse and I stood up fast. That’s all reasonable enough stuff to make someone dizzy once in a while. She could have been anybody. It didn’t happen because she looked at me - It happened because I looked at her -- because I stood up fast after drinking too much beer. If that had been your cousin, would you be calling her a witch right now? Some foreign girl rides by on a horse, an unusual coincidence occurs and ten years later, she’s the Red Witch come to collect heads. Those little details turn an innocent passerby into some monster responsible for all the troubles of the world. It’s not proper history - That’s the way all those warlords and their war parties down south think. That’s why no one includes all the oral tradition stuff in the history books.”

With a begrudging nod, Haery scanned his eyes out across the horizon and drank from his beer then countered, “Just don’t be so sure you can trust something just ‘cause somebody writes it down. When you write it down or read it, you don’t have to remember it ‘cause you think you can always read it again if you have to but written or spoken, either way it commences with someone describing something and that ain’t any more or less credible either way. Tradition is memorized word-for-word. When you memorize, you don’t get to change it. My daddy told stories around the campfire an hour or two long, and he knew a couple dozen of them. He told every one of them the same way every time, word-for-word. He learnt them when he learnt to talk and he died telling them the way he learnt them, just like his daddy. They told stories far older than any history printed from militia, and nobody ever changed them, not a word. What year we call this? Edyn 456? That’s what your written history tells you - Four-hundred and fifty-six years, and before that, nothing ever happened? Well, something happened down south what brought them first men with weapons up the pass in Edyn’s day. You suppose folk down south tell stories about that shit? You may consider written history something better but it’s only something different.

I never learnt tradition ‘cause my daddy died when I was young before he could teach me. My momma brought me back here where she was born after he died and I don’t know if anybody remembers tradition anymore, but I heard stories at the campfire growing up. I heard of a time when witches was witches right out in the open and everybody knew it, and there was hundreds of them all the time, not ones and twos every twenty years like we see now. They ruled over folk like lords but they taught folk secrets about metallurgy, agriculture and medicine, and the whole thing was some kind of paradise thing, but the witches had some falling out and had a witch war.”

With a pause to sip his beer and repack his pipe, Haery leaned forward a bit as if to focus attention on something very complicated then he explained, “You see, only witches can kill witches and they got to drink each other dry of all their blood and then burn the body to do it ‘cause even for witches, witches is hard to kill. These witches, they killed each other off until only some few survived and in all this, they dragged people folk into their wars and some kind of exterminations took place. The stories tell we’re the survivors of those wars and exterminations, and some kind of reckoning has to come of it one day. What few witches is left are waiting maybe for some sign or something, and when that time comes, the witches are going to come back out in the open and divide all folk up into two camps for one last war, then they’re going to leave this earth, and whatever folk are left standing get the earth with no more war in some kind of everlasting paradise, or damnation, or something, and I guess that’ll all depend on who wins.”

Although Wyl and his father both smiled, they also attempted to conceal it to some extent that Haery might interpret as something less than outright ridicule and like most of his stories, they considered it audacious but nonetheless somewhat entertaining. As if anticipating their thoughts, Haery nodded slightly in acknowledgement and focusing primarily on Wyl, asserted, “Now, I know you think if nobody wrote it down when it happened, it don’t count, but a midget foreigner girl looked at the neighbor kid next door and he fell down, and a midget foreigner girl killed off bandits right here. We might squabble over why you fell down or if heads was missing, but those are some pretty trivial details. I don’t believe folk make stories up, and even when they do, they’re retelling some story they already heard even if they don’t even know it. Something about them stories is true. Nobody’s lying or making stuff up - There’s just more than but one way to tell a story is all. I could say witch or I could say foreigner. I could call her the Red Witch or I could call her Jyl the farmer’s daughter, but one way or another, we saw who we saw and if I’m wrong and tradition is all nothing but bullshit, then you tell me who that little midget foreigner girl in red is, Junior.”

“I don’t think I have to explain who she is.” Wyl responded, “I think if you’re going to tell stories about her then it’s up to you to explain who she is. If I see a little girl in red, riding a horse and I don’t call her anything more than that, I haven’t told any story and I don’t owe any explanation.”

Haery nodded his head in concession but then challenged, “Okay, but just for fun, try explaining it anyway. Who is she? Where’s she from? What’s she doing here?”

With a deep breath and a pause to consider, Wyl immediately recognized the exercise of explaining the foreign girl constituted a perplexing challenge and all present easily knew it. Riding out in the open on the road, the militia surely observed the girl and reports of her presence preceded her movement by at least a day. Wyl recalled the militia company that rode by fast in the direction of Edyn only the day prior to her passage and realized they may well account as that one-day advance report.

Haery pointed his finger as if he caught Wyl in a lie and nearly taunting, asserted, “Any other foreigner, Junior. She’s headed into the city. Who’s she looking for there? Any other foreigner the militia would of stopped on the border. They would of told her state her business and go away, and if she didn’t go away they would of killed her. That group of foreigners what saw the Martial, come up with someone from the Lower, but that witch come alone. What foreigner under any other circumstances would cross past the border and the militia alive, and stroll free into the city without so much as escort?”

In his vernacular, Haery referred to Teaeren, the Lower Highlands to the east as ‘the Lower’, a part of the homeland territory proper, but somewhat geographically separated. Regular communications occurred between the militias, and Haery himself represented the product of those rare instances in which the Geaelen or ‘upper’ tribes and ‘lower’ tribes of Teaeren wed and produced family. The accompaniment of Lower Highlander merited safe passage into the city of a foreign contingent, but the answer to the question about an unescorted foreigner passing the border alive did not occur so easily. Haery gathered his arguments into a conclusion and asserted, “There’s much more coincidence at work than just the neighbor kid falling down. She ain’t just any foreigner. Either she killed what militia she saw so far or they let her pass, and in either case, she ain’t just any foreigner. She’s here to see Martial Glen and no foreigner ever just walks past militia, sees the Martial then walks away alive. You got no explanation for her, Junior, ‘cause there ain’t no explanation for her. It’s a secret. Next time you go back into the city, you see what folk there say. They’ll talk about the Red Witch come to see the Martial but no militia nor the Martial will ever say so. You don’t get to hide from that just ‘cause you call her a little girl in red, riding on the road. She’s a foreigner what walked past all militia, seen the Martial and come and go as she pleases, and won’t no one say so. That defies all usual explanation, and that warrants explanation, and you don’t got one.”

Both Wyl and his father chuckled softly and nodded, conceding Haery trapped them in a web of circular logic. Wyl Senior collected the beer bottles heading inside for another three fresh bottles while Wyl and Haery sat in silence for a moment and stared out into the west as the sun faded over the horizon and the red glow transitioned into a darker purple. Wyl Senior emerged and handed out beer bottles then lit a small lamp hanging from the canopy above. Wyl presented Haery with his next obvious challenge, asking, “What’s your explanation then? What foreigner merits such special treatment?”

Haery again scanned the horizon suspiciously. As darkness descended and shadows deepened, the Red Witch might easily hide nearby close enough to overhear and Haery leaned a bit then stated softly, “When witches come to talk, you listen... or you die. No man can kill no witch and militia know that better than any. My daddy told stories hundreds of years old about witches known out in the open. My daddy’s dead now and don’t no one tell stories about witches out the open no more neither. You can call that coincidence too but the Red Witch come to talk to the Martial and the Red Witch got a reason. Witch history is somehow intertwined with man history and that weren’t never supposed to be. My daddy knew what that was but I don’t ‘cause witches don’t want us to know that no more. Maybe it’s something too terrible to know or maybe they got something up their sleeves, but in any event, witches is been determining our history forever and not no history books nor journals. Tradition used to tell us that; now history books don’t. It’s not that nothing ever happened before four-hundred and fifty-six years ago - It’s that something changed four-hundred and fifty-six years ago, and that history’s been erased. The Red Witch done that and the proof is in the history books, not ‘cause of what they say about the Red Witch, but ‘cause of what they don’t say about nothing. My daddy told stories hundreds, maybe thousands of years older than four-hundred and fifty-six years. He learnt those stories word-for-word and told them all his life but don’t no one remember them stories no more far as I can tell. Them all adds up to some improbable coincidence, Junior. You can call it superstition all you like but it’s a damn sight stranger and harder to explain than some midget foreigner girl in red, riding a horse.”

A gust of wind dimmed the lantern slightly and from the farm to the north, a dog howled. Wyl stirred slightly and scanned the horizon. Haery smiled with apparent satisfaction and inquired, "What's that, Junior? You suddenly superstitious?"

Wyl tapped his foot and scowled in stubborn refusal of any such admission, but the more they talked, the more the little foreign girl in red intrigued him and the greater his curiosity. "What do you remember about this Red Witch? Who is she to us and why would she erase our history?" he inquired.

Haery raised his eyebrows and gloated, "Oh, now suddenly my stories is credible?"

"He didn't say credible." Wyl Senior noted, "We all know you're a good storyteller."

"Okay," Haery responded, "I'll call that something less than a insult." Adjusting slightly, Haery drank from his bottle and smoked on his pipe as if attempting to build suspense then explained, "Witches don't come from the same origins as men except for the Red Witch. When witches numbered in the hundreds and ruled over men, some of them disapproved of the whole arrangement, and those what ruled men did something to them so there was two kinds of men, and that's why witches went to war and carried out exterminations. They was each trying to advance their own versions of men. The Red Witch was a man once, just like you and me, and she lived in those days of witch wars. Her clan lived the old nomad way just like I did when I was a kid in the Lower. Some army of witches and men come through killing off all those they could find and they slaughtered off her clan, and entertained themselves doing it with clever and imaginative killings. They cut her arms and legs, severing muscles so she couldn't use them then they threw her in a river and watched her drift away to drown. She was just a little girl when they done this to her and she drowned swearing a curse of revenge. She washed up dead on a shoreline where witches found her later and they thought her such a pitiful sight, they resurrected her with witch magic, and she woke back to life still swearing her curse of revenge. These witches what raised her from the dead was those what objected to the whole practice of witch lordship and they took her around with them, and wherever they found those witches they opposed and their armies of men, they set her after them, and being a witch, she tore apart both witch and man alike. In the early ages of her witch life, the Red Witch had no memory of her man life and only knew hatred of all men that nothing ever satisfied, and she ran crazy killing and eating all men she found, even the ones the witches didn't want her to kill so the witches had to catch her and hold her captive. It took years to pacify her but they finally got her under some kind of control so she went on killing only those witches and men what they wanted killed until the exterminations finally come to an end and some kind of balance or truce was struck.

The Red Witch is loyal to one small clan of witches and no one else. She might work on their behalf favoring one band of men over another for whatever motives witches have, but she'd always just as soon kill you and eat you, and take your head home as souvenir, as save you from bandits. The Red Witch is abomination, once man, raised from the dead and turned into witch. She may barely understand she was once a man but she has the mind of the child she once was, consumed by bitter hatred and lust for revenge and punishment, tormented by her tortured past and terrible mortal death. The Red Witch only wanders the earth now, always in search of some human conflict or dispute in need of resolution. She's just as likely to fault innocent victims as any others, and once she makes up her mind about something, she always resolves everything permanently with a whole lot of killing."

Leaning back in his chair, Haery sipped from his beer then concluded his narrative with a traditional dramatic flourish, "... And to this very day, the Red Witch never lost her taste for meddling in the affairs of men or her taste for blood. When the Red Witch comes to talk, you listen, and hope she keeps talking and don't start killing, 'cause once the Red Witch starts killing, there's no defense for her... and that's why the special treatment for the Red Witch."

Wyl and his father sat quietly for a moment absorbing and pondering the story then Wyl finally asserted in conclusion, "That's an entertaining story, but kind of ghoulish and maybe even a bit stupid."

"Stupid how?" Haery inquired with a bent eye.

Wyl immediately regretted his use of the word 'stupid' and attempted to choose his next words more delicately, explaining, "Well, these witches raise her from the dead and turn her into a witch but the story doesn't even explain how. I mean, what is a witch anyway? That seems like a pretty important detail and it just happens like magic--"

"-Junior." Haery interrupted with some surprise, "That's my whole point. That's all I remember now of a story that was probably hours long once upon a time, but consider these lessons - You're complaining the story don't explain the girl rising from the dead... Are you suggesting there are good and bad explanations for a girl rising from the dead? Is there an explanation you'd believe... as opposed to that one? And think about this too... that little midget foreigner girl strolled right on past us on the road today. By the time she got here, militia surly seen her. What other foreigner does militia ever let stroll at will across the country? That don't happen never. There ain't no believable story that explains that, just like there ain't no believable story that explains her rising from the dead... but there it is nonetheless. You may doubt her rising from the dead but that girl rode past you and you seen her, and that ain't no less mystery than rising from the dead.

There are things in this world our history books don't explain and at a time we boast of our journalistic factuality, that strikes me as a glaring omission."

Wyl appreciated the point and in fact, he indeed found the unrestricted travel at will of the enigmatic girl through the countryside every bit as mysterious as any contention she might have risen from the dead, and he entertained not one reasonable explanation for it.

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Wyl visited the taverns with his old friends again the next couple evenings and he drank and laughed, and the memory of the girl in red and his coincidental dizziness lingered but he told himself, 'too much beer - the sun made me dizzy', and he thought as little as possible about the stories Haery told or his questions. Walking home after beers and games of darts late one evening under clouds that drifted across the moon while a stiff cold breeze blew loose leaves across the road, Wyl found the walk particularly pleasurable due to his special fondness for the autumn season, and the conditions represented just the kind of elements he favored most about autumn. At a leisurely pace, approaching his house no more than a few hundred feet away, Wyl suddenly noticed a shape on the road too substantial to consist of leaves blowing in the wind and halting abruptly, he squinted while all at once he detected the clip clop of hooves and the shape emerged recognizable as a horse and rider. Immediately, Wyl felt a great and irrational fear then he rushed to the side of the road, fell onto his hip and hid behind a thicket of brush while just as immediately, fearing the embarrassment he would feel if someone familiar should discover him cowering from a horse behind the weeds.

Stomping near, the horse plodded along at a brisk walking pace but as it stepped by his location in the weeds, it possibly sensed Wyl and it spooked with a snort then spun in a circle as the rider tugged on the reins. Calming the horse, the rider pulled it to an abrupt halt facing the way it had come and peering through the weeds, Wyl swore the small figure atop the horse stared directly at him. Spinning the horse around, the girl swiveled her head to face his direction all the while then for a moment that felt to Wyl like an eternity, the tiny girl rider froze still, her hair fluttering in the wind with moonlight glittered on it, and her pose sufficiently convinced him she observed him there in the weeds. Whipping the reins, the girl prodded the horse to jolt toward the east then slowed back to a brisk walking pace. Wyl lay motionless as his heart raced and his hands shuddered until the sound of horse hooves faded then he bolted up and ran to his house. After locking the door and checking all the windows, shaking with fear all the while, Wyl crept into his room, closed and bolted his window, which he commonly left open for autumn weather, and inspected the room twice over for indications of intrusion before finally wrapping himself into the covers on the bed. He slept fitfully that night.

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Another glorious and sunny autumn day dawned as Wyl followed the long shadow in front of him back toward the city of Edyn. Race day arrived and with it, the time for fulfillment of his assignment. Sprawling around the edges of the city of Edyn, Wyl wandered the campgrounds, inspecting the wagons, tents and canopies of the annual pilgrims. The grass fields outside the city walls accommodated thousands of tents and the variety of shapes, colors and sizes supported a fascinating tour as Wyl drank hot brew, ate pastries and wasted at least two hours inspecting the campgrounds.

With a small collection of other enthusiasts, Wyl sauntered about watching over two racecourses. A sprint course consisted of a sprawling simple oval confined on the inside by a short wall constructed of baled hay while nearby, an obstacle course laid out in an elaborate meandering design marked by tall white posts with small red banners atop them among numerous hay bale obstructions of various shapes and sizes. Finishing a cup of hot brew, Wyl visited a beer kiosk and by the time he returned, some horses and riders trotted about while others trickled into assembly as a crowd of spectators gathered and spread around the outside of the oval. A militiaman with a red banner wrapped tightly around a staff shuffled among the horses motioning and directing until he separated the contestants into four groups of about twenty each, and Wyl anxiously scanned the riders for Kel even as the first group assembled to a line painted on the grass. Intent on observing Kel as Fae instructed even if it meant missing all other races, Wyl cringed at the thought of admitting to Fae, he failed such a remedial assignment but to his relief, he at last spotted Kel in the third group and watched him so closely, he hardly paid attention as the first two groups conducted their races.

The group including Kel finally marshaled to the painted line and the militiaman with the red banner went to a raised platform at the inside of the track directly over it, rested the banner on his shoulder and stood motionless as the contestants and their horses stirred in a commotion of rude jockeying and jostling. After maneuvering for favorable positioning on the line, the riders instantly froze in position when the militiaman snapped the red banner up over his head and the crowd hushed, while the horses bristled and jolted as if in anticipation. Kel found a favorable position near the inside of the track and he pulled his reins hard as his horse thrashed from side to side and stomped its feet.

The militiaman swung the banner hard to the ground and the crowd cheered as the horses exploded over the painted line, thundering along the straight section in a haphazard and dense cluster that stretched into an approximate column upon approach of the far end. A group of five or six packed tightly together emerged as frontrunners and Kel held a position among them as they rumbled into the first turn in close formation then rounding the bend, they charged down the next straight section. As they progressed, Kel and another contestant established a slight lead over a group hot on their heels, and the two entered into the final turn side by side. At the apex, Kel drifted from the outside position toward the inside and even as he brushed up against the other contestant, continued leaning toward the inside until it appeared he might drive the other contestant into the hay bales. At the last possible instant, his rival slid his hand up high on his reins and with the slack, thrashed at Kel and his horse, even striking the horse in its face and causing it to flinch. As Kel regained control, his horse drifted just enough for the rival to squeeze from the slimmest margin even as he brushed up against the edges of the hay bales and as the two burst from the end of the turn, the rival held a slim lead.

The time for strategy and positioning concluded as only a last straight stretch remained. An unobstructed all out sprint for the painted line developed as the two contestants leaned low and forward until they almost laid out horizontally and the final hurdle occurred with a furious recklessness perhaps even a bit frightening. The rival contestant held no more than a two-foot lead over Kel as they dove over the line, and the crowd cheered and applauded as the other horses straggled in. While his horse snorted and thrashed wildly, Kel applied considerable effort to bring it back under control and finally calm it. As all the horses settled, the riders dismounted and moved among each other smiling and laughing. Even Kel and his rival whose opposition had been so contentious appeared to recount the events with some degree of amusement. In spite of such apparently relaxed even generous ethical standards, the race amounted after all to more entertainment than serious competition.

Upon conclusion of the last sprint, the four winners assembled in order to determine a champion, and the rider that defeated Kel thrashed his opponents by a wide margin. Wyl mentally awarded Kel second place honors overall out of a field of some eighty and that impressed him with the conclusion that Kel came within one haphazard crash of an opponent away from winning it all.

A lengthy break ensued between the oval and the obstacle events so those participating in both might have opportunity to rest up and prepare in the intermission. In the meanwhile, Wyl visited kiosks and made lunch of a variety of breads, vegetables and beer then as the riders gathered at the obstacle course, Wyl located Kel in the last group and again paid little attention to the other races. The event began with the same kind of tension and excitement as the oval race but where the ethical standards of the oval easily accounted as relaxed, the standards in the obstacle event descended to outright dirty. As the contestants struggled through the challenges of the course, they in addition pushed and punched at each other as they came into close proximity in obvious attempts to dismount opponents. It appeared Kel successfully dismounted at least one and perhaps as many as three opponents, several spectacular crashes and spills occurred and in the end, Kel emerged victorious. When the four winners raced for the championship however, Kel finished a disappointing third after taking a spill, and though he mounted a valiant rally to regain the position, that accounted as his final standing.

The races concluded perhaps still a couple hours prior to sunset and as a cold wind whipped up, Wyl set out to find a nice leaf bonfire to mill about for a while after fetching more beer. As he shuffled his way through the crowd, Wyl considered his instructions and wondered what exactly Fae expected him to observe. Perhaps Fae intended it a lesson in horsemanship skills, a lesson in the ruthlessness of contest or even militia etiquette but at the very least, Wyl felt satisfaction for exercising what he considered reasonably respectable ‘anticipation’ of the intentions. Ironically, at that moment, Wyl recognized none other than Fae directly in front of him and in fact, the two nearly collided.

“My captain.” Wyl exclaimed.

“My valet.” Fae sarcastically responded then with a hand gesture to direct attention, Fae stated, “Wyl, this is my closest and dearest friend-” turning slightly to reveal at his side, a somewhat chunky girl with gray streaks in her hair, her hand clasped in his as he concluded, “-Ethaldra.”

“Oh, yes, we’ve met.” Ethaldra remarked quite pleasantly, extending her hand as if recollecting some formal introduction at a dinner party some time previous. Wyl held her hand and smiled then stared at Fae for a moment, and suddenly imagined he felt a burning imprint on his forehead in bright bold letters forming the single word:

fatoldladyicecoldheartlessbitch

Fae evidently also vaguely perceived the imaginary text and a self-celebratory smile indicated as much.

“Yeah. Okay. That’s cute.” Wyl finally conceded then bitterly complained, “You know, I’m actually disappointed. I was so impressed with all your ‘observation’, ‘awareness’ and ‘anticipation’. I thought it was like genius... but it was all just a trick.”

“Wyl,” Fae stated in a tone as if completely unaffected by the revelation, “that’s precisely what genius is... It’s never truly inspired anticipation. It’s just accumulative experience and the clever concealment of obvious facts.”

“-and the answers are always obvious after we know them.” Wyl recited.

“Very good, Wyl.” Fae stated apparently genuinely pleased, “I’m glad to see you’re taking your training seriously. You should write about it in your journal.” he then suggested, “It’s an amusing anecdote, right? Huh? See? Your master scheme to become a rich and famous journalist is paying off already. I’m a wealth of material!” he concluded holding his arms out as if in presentation.

Wyl bent his eyebrows then clawed at his cloak and produced a pocket-sized booklet, which he folded open and in one smooth continuous motion, withdrew a writing instrument from a cavity in the binding and began scribbling furiously on an empty page.

“Wyl,” Fae advised with a cautionary tone, “I hope you’ll also take into account that none of this proves anything about any premeditation or conspiracy in the assignment to buy her a drink.” Wyl tilted his head with a skeptical expression, puzzled by the suggestion and Fae explained, “Just because I’m standing here with her right now doesn’t necessarily mean I’ve known her any longer than half an hour. We might have just met.”

Wyl nearly shouted in protest, “You’re holding hands!”

“Okay,” Fae conceded but then countered, “so maybe I’m a fast worker.” and when Wyl sneered contemptuously, Fae added, “-or maybe I met her the same night you met her after you left, but I just have better communications skills with strangers.”

With a scowl at Fae, Wyl continued scribbling in his journal as he walked away.