

4. Kings, Economies and Enterprises

At the conclusion of autumn festival, the Martial called all the captains to an assembly and kept the affair somewhat secretive. The meeting occurred late in the afternoon and the attendees mostly socialized until the last stragglers trickled in then after cycling around the room conducting an informal role call, Glendwyn stood at the center of the room while the captains slowly quieted down and formed a loose semicircle around him, some seated and some standing.

In a calm measured tone, Glendwyn stated, “I’m sure we are all well aware by now of our visitors last month and I know it has been the source of some gossip. I apologize for the delay in addressing you but we actually have been waiting for a second visit and I didn’t want to talk about it until I heard from all sources. That visit occurred a few days ago so I have now heard all I am going to hear.

The parties involved in this, and the circumstances, are unusual. One of our visitors is from the city-state of Algath. For those of you unfamiliar with the name, it is a small kingdom three to four weeks east in the Angoran Plain. To their east are some other kingdoms with which they have historically had contentious relations at best, including some number of wars. These eastern kingdoms formed a sort of alliance and over recent years have staged up an army that is now the source of considerable concern for the people of the Angoran Plain. The report is this army is preparing now to conduct a campaign into the plain this spring as soon as weather conditions permit.

Algath has a standing army of about eight-thousand and this eastern army outnumbers them to such an extent they will hardly offer resistance so their defeat is a foregone conclusion. The occupation of Algath will establish for the eastern army a foothold in the Angoran Plain and from there they will conduct a siege on the central city of Angora, which is actually the ultimate target of the eastern army. The state of Angora has a population of something well over a hundred-thousand and a standing army of a little more than twenty-thousand and even so, can probably hold out in a siege for no more than a couple years, so their defeat is ultimately also a foregone conclusion. What this all adds up to is the consolidation of the Angoran Plain with this eastern alliance in the formation of a regional empire. The reason this is supposed to mean something to us is once this empire forms, we will lie just beyond its western frontiers so I guess we can all draw our own conclusions as to the consequences of those developments.

Our visitors propose a counter alliance for the purpose of simply conducting a plausible defense of Algath. The strategy is to deny the eastern army that foothold then the siege on Angora never occurs, therefore, the formation of an empire never occurs.”

Glendwyn paused evidently intending to solicit question or comment and almost immediately, a captain, sounding more like a conclusion than a question, stated, “We’re talking then about staging up and marching out for war on foreign soil.”

“Yes,” Glendwyn affirmed almost reluctantly, “that is the proposal.”

The proposal constituted something of a violation of fundamental Highland principles. For just barely less than five-hundred years, the Highland militia repelled hostile incursions into their homeland and all Highlanders considered themselves something more decent and honorable than those they regarded as barbarous hordes from the other world below. The militia never fought beyond the borders or for any reason other than defense nor had Highlanders ever engaged in foreign trade, politics or intrigue.

Glendwyn addressed the apparent contradiction contending, “It arguably constitutes an ostensible defense. This empire would eventually presumably move against us and we would fight them here on the borders in conformance with tradition, but by then we will have no chance and they will easily overrun us. The proposal obviously operates on the premise that fighting them now in Algath precludes the eventuality of our utter defeat here later. We’re talking about our survival. We’re talking about the extermination of our tradition in our lifetimes.”

“-if we draw a number of presumptive conclusions.” the captain added.

“Obviously.” Glendwyn conceded.

In something of an open question to the assembly, a scout captain asked, “Once we take an action of that nature, how are we any different from southerners? We can call it defense and even if we’re perfectly right to do so, what’s to stop us from later defining a trade route as a defense interest. We could speculate a particular trade route makes two cities too friendly and constitutes a potentially threatening alliance. We’re one step away from the politics we have always opposed - If we ever take that step, that also qualifies as the extermination of our tradition. It’s the exact same result as defeat.”

Glendwyn responded, “That’s an excellent point and I agree with you.” then with contemplative pause, advised, “I suppose it’s probably somewhat apparent I’ve already made up my mind. I’ve had the unfair advantage of more time to think about this than any of you so for whatever that’s worth, I’ll explain my conclusions.

Clearly, I’m talking about an unprecedented action that will fundamentally change our identity forever, so let’s not pretend anyone is trying to suggest otherwise, and let’s all appreciate it for what it is. To further complicate matters, in all of this we are relying exclusively on outside reports from foreigners. If we are going to act, we will march in four to five months depending on weather conditions, which means the time to start preparations is now.

I point to the fact that we are relying exclusively on outside reports from foreigners as evidence of a profound failure to prepare on our part. I’m sure we are all familiar with the name Seilvhan and I would hazard a guess that most of us think of it as nothing more than the legendary forest haven of witches. I have been told in only the last few days that the Seilvhanians consider us common descendents of their own ancestral tribe, we share the same traditions and they also resist trade and intrigue. We have every reason to be suspicious of these reports but more than that, we should be suspicious of ourselves. Almost five-hundred years ago, we escaped politics and economics because someone had the foresight to see the emergence of a new age and prepare for it. Empire represents the emergence of the next new age and we have failed utterly to prepare for it by cloistering ourselves away. I am ashamed of the collective ignorance and superstition we have so stubbornly exercised to lure ourselves into this vulnerable condition. The fact that we don’t know any of this firsthand is all the reason I will ever need to commit to this proposal. I don’t care if it’s all lies - I want to know that, firsthand, right now. Algath this spring or the southern kingdoms later - One way or another the time will come to resist the empire and the time to prepare for it already commenced some time ago. Yes, this will fundamentally change our identity forever, and it should, because the conditions necessitate it. I say let’s go to Seilvhan and meet these people, and then let’s go to this Algath and know for ourselves what this is all about. Let’s fundamentally change our identity forever and understand our place in this world.”

The words Glendwyn spoke easily accounted as bold and challenging statements, and he gave the captains a moment to absorb them. Although he continued with content perhaps even more urgent, Glendwyn did so with an even more calculated reserved tone, asserting, “Edyn suggested a fundamental change in our identity well over four-hundred years ago and that is the cornerstone of our identity today. I think if he were here now, he would suggest a fundamental change in that identity, and I think he would have suggested it long before me. We are the stewards of something extremely rare that has improbably survived into a dark and degenerate age for the rest of humanity. I’m sure I can’t possibly comprehend its value but something intuitively tells me to preserve it and never relinquish it. We have been far more lucky than smart and the time has come to be more smart than lucky. If I believed this would automatically lead to economics and politics, I’d say let’s just surrender now without wasting any effort on a fight. Our rejection of economics and politics is the core of our tradition that counts most and I say let’s make every necessary compromise in communications and in war to preserve that inflexible principle. I say compromises in that principle will always be the easiest compromises to spot and we will one day make those compromises or we won’t, and those things will occur or they won’t occur regardless of any actions we pursue over the next year... so I stress one more time... I say let’s go out into the world and investigate the situation, and from now on, let’s know things firsthand... and oh, by the way, while we’re at it, maybe we’ll even incidentally resist an empire and survive for yet another generation...”

Turning slowly in a full circle, Glendwyn established eye contact individually with everyone present then concluded, “I apologize for any personal offense from my allegations of ignorance and superstition, and I assure you I include myself as no less guilty than any. I have occupied the appointment of Martial for nine years now and I consider my lack of preparedness for these events more than ample proof of sufficient ignorance and superstition on my part.” Almost as if a recommendation, he added, “I would also welcome any consensus for a reaffirmation or consideration of a new appointment if anyone thinks it appropriate.”

After a slight pause, Fae stated, “You won’t get out of Martial that easy, Glen.”

A murmur of laughter rumbled through the room and Glendwyn retorted, “Well, it was worth a try.” With the apparent intent of assuring sufficient opportunity for all present to consider motion for reaffirmation or new appointment, Glendwyn then surmised, “All right, now that we’ve established we can’t find anyone better, and I’ve made my speeches, I’m sure you all have questions so let’s discuss the particulars. However, when we’re finished, we’ll schedule another assembly in a couple days, and I don’t want any of you to state any conclusions until the next assembly and we’ll conduct a census then, but until then, talk about it amongst yourselves and anyone else you trust, but don’t talk to me about it and don’t fuel any rumors. At the conclusion of the next assembly, we’ll make our determinations and then issue a public accounting of the whole thing.”

The captains all offered affirmative indications then Fae inquired, “I appreciate your need to address fundamentals first, but the situation is a little vague. Is that all you know or do you have more details about numbers and who’s involved?”

“A little.” Glendwyn responded, “Aelbryct from the Lower escorted the council, not because of any relationship but just because his scouts made first contact with them, two of them Seilvhanians and one from Almath. Like I said, Almath can put eight-thousand bodies on their wall. The Seilvhanians say they can put together seven-thousand-”

“-Seven-thousand?” Fae interrupted, “This is our neighbor to the east? The famous witches of the magic dark forests of Seilvhan have an army of seven-thousand?”

“Yeah.” Glendwyn responded with a nod for emphasis, “I’m glad to see you appreciate my point about our isolation... and they claim they consider us family.” Fae bowed slightly both in acknowledgement and in apology for the disruption as Glendwyn continued, “The Lower Highlanders can put together a thousand, which I’m sure we all appreciate leaves them quite thin for defense, and I recommend we leave ourselves proportionately thin for defense and assemble about four-thousand of our own. That’s twelve-thousand we’ll take to Algath for a total of about twenty-thousand once we get there and join up with them.”

The assembly remained silent for a moment. The Highland militia, Upper and Lower combined, numbered approximately six-thousand fully deployed and talk of an army numbering twelve-thousand stretched the imagination of any Highlander. Fae finally inquired, “What is the number of this eastern army?”

“Uh,” Glendwyn pondered as if laboring to recall it from memory, “the report is something like about... forty to fifty-thousand...”

A deafening silence immediately followed. Fae rubbed his chin and after some deliberation remarked, “That’s a pretty big army, Glen... so... you said Angora’s army numbers over twenty-thousand then between Algath and Angora they can put together just about thirty-thousand. In a defensive situation, I would be confident with those numbers. Add our twelve-thousand to that and it’s a virtual overwhelming advantage.

“Right,” Glendwyn stated, and apparently struggling again with how to present the information, he then advised, “but it won’t happen quite like that...”

“What does that mean, Glen?” Fae asked with growing curiosity.

“The city of Algath is an independent island within the Angoran state.” Glendwyn explained, “For all practical purposes Angorans consider Algath the product of something along the lines of a rebellion and wouldn’t necessarily lose any sleep over its demise-”

“-but a hostile force of fifty-thousand inside its borders would surely constitute a credible threat, right?” Fae insisted.

“Right... You would think so,” Glendwyn concurred then added, “but evidently, the current king of Angora is convinced the eastern army will be satisfied with Algath and trusts some sort of informal neutrality agreement with them I imagine also includes some concessions.”

“... Oh boy.” Fae moaned rubbing his palm against his forehead.

Glendwyn composed himself and forged ahead, advising, “This is how the representatives of Algath explained it to me-”

“-You said one representative from Algath just a moment ago when you described our guests.” Fae asserted, “‘Representatives’ is plural; that means more than one.”

“... Okay... Thanks for pointing that out, Fae.” Glendwyn conceded, “Can I continue with the explanation now and worry about the technicalities later?”

Fae nodded apologetically and Glendwyn delicately continued, “Unfavorable domestic situations are a distraction to the king of Angora and I guess he’s reluctant to commit to all out war if he thinks he can avoid it. That is why he was without representation in the emissary-”

“-What ‘domestic situation’ is more serious than an invasion of a fifty-thousand man army?” Fae inquired somewhat incredulous.

“I didn’t say more serious - I said he’s distracted.” Glendwyn equivocated, “The representatives... the council offers assurances they have some close personal relationships with some number of the Angoran generals who have indicated they are prepared to act independently if they have to, and those generals that might not act directly with them will at least not oppose them. They humor their king to satisfy protocol but won’t stand by idle if he insists on these ill-advised strategies... The Angoran generals indicate they can respond with at least half their army, but they need the king to expose his intentions first in order to rally their companies to the cause and that’s why they can’t offer any assurances up front.”

Fae speculated, “-so... we’re depending on a mutiny to account for about a third of our strength... but we have to fully commit first on faith, in order to draw them in?”

“... Yes... I guess that about sums it up, Fae.” Glendwyn admitted.

“Could you go over the real numbers again then?” Fae requested.

Glendwyn recounted the numbers in summary, “Eight-thousand in Almath; seven-thousand Seilvhanians, five-thousand between us and the Lower, and about ten-thousand from Angora.”

Fae paused and tilted his head then speculated, “That’s thirty-thousand. That’s the number I started out with when I counted Almath and Angora together. That means we, along with the Seilvhanians, are going to make up the difference for an army we expect won’t fully commit to its own defense.”

Glendwyn inhaled and defensively inquired, “What am I going to do, Fae? Travel to Angora and straighten this king out? These are the conditions. I can’t change them by lying to you and we can’t change them by pointing out other people’s faults.”

“I know.” Fae consoled, “I’m not ridiculing you, Glen - I just want the facts... That’s the point of this assembly, right?”

“Of course.” Glendwyn acknowledged apologetically, “I’m sorry I’m defensive... I’m not trying to conceal anything; I just simply recognize, like you, these are some convoluted conditions involved here and I’m anxious all of this might make it difficult for some of us to take it seriously.” Glancing from side to side to demonstrate he intended to address everyone equally, Glendwyn counseled, “I want everybody to understand this. Like I said before, the most alarming thing about all this is what we don’t really know, and the most important thing about it is that we find out. If at any point, we think we’re getting ourselves into a pointless suicide mission, there is absolutely no reason at all we can’t just run away and work up a new strategy, and at the very least, we will know what we need to know.”

The captains all offered affirmative indications and Glendwyn appeared relieved by it then another captain commented, “I understand the premise of defense, so don’t consider this an argument, but this Almath and Angora are both kingdoms, and this eastern army is an alliance of kingdoms, so despite our own unrelated motives, we’re talking about involvement in the economic and political power struggles of kingdoms. Why would we favor any one over the other and how do we know the defeat of one doesn’t encourage another to simply take up the vacuum and try to become the same empire?”

Glendwyn even laughed in a short burst in reaction to the question then answered, “We don’t know. None of us has any way of knowing the answers to those questions and I’ll plead my same defense again: We need to know the answers to those questions right away, and we need to go there to find out.”

Glendwyn held up his hands to restrain question or comment while he collected his thoughts then suggested, “We could just as easily send a company of one-hundred to gather information and establish communications but the report is an initial army of fifty-thousand that will ultimately end up on our doorstep in some number greater than that. Yes, it’s a calculated risk to take most of our militia that far away, but to send a company of one-hundred would ruin our credibility. It would be too obvious we never took the report seriously and even worse are the consequences if we don’t prepare and all these reports turn out true. I think the calculated risks are higher if we don’t go. Fae says he has confidence in a defensive situation with thirty-thousand against fifty-thousand. If the reports are true, these odds are as good as they are ever going to get. If this army consolidates this empire, they can put together a conscript army of another fifty-thousand overnight and by the time they get here and gobble up a couple of the southern kingdoms along the way, they could march up a pass with over a hundred-thousand bodies. Fifteen years ago, the army of Enet came up the pass with an alliance of about nine-thousand bodies and we couldn’t repel them. It took us half a year and a miracle to clear them out. One-hundred-thousand would roll over us in a week and we would never clear them out. We are going to have to face armies of hundreds of thousands some day. We’re going to need allies and we’re going to need foresight and advance intelligence.

This eastern army is operating under a presumption of neutrality from Angora. They expect to find eight-thousand defenders in Almath and probably even expect to take it without a fight. If they show up and find three or four times that number... who knows... maybe they’ll just give up and walk away, but even if they fight, even if they win, we’ll retreat and their plans will be ruined if they take any kind of significant losses seizing the city. We can let them have the city then siege them and starve them out. This we can do now - A hundred-thousand a few years from now? That, we can’t do. I say we take this seriously and consider it the truth and along the way we can hope it’s all lies.”

With a pause for a moment, Glendwyn again scanned the room measuring reactions. His arguments and speeches definitely made an impact and most of the captains nodded and pursed their lips in obvious acceptance of his logic.

A captain remarked somewhat cautiously, “I’ve heard some gossip around town about witches lurking after dark. What do you make of that?”

Rolling his eyes slightly, Glendwyn remarked, “I’ve heard it too. Two of our visitors last month are from Seilvhan and they wore some pretty colorful and ornamental clothing. I’m sure for some folks that’s plenty enough on it’s own to qualify them as witches, especially out in the countryside. Another visitor just a few days ago came alone and she wore the same kind of clothing. She both arrived and later departed after dark... so... obviously, I’m talking about a foreign girl in colorful clothing traveling alone after dark... so... yeah, she conforms to all the classic characteristics of a witch... and I would imagine that’s a huge contributing factor to some of the gossip... I don’t know what else to say about that. I can only tell you what I’ve observed and I won’t draw any conclusions. I personally don’t consider it of any substance.” Glendwyn clearly exhibited some displeasure addressing the subject of witches at all. Members of the militia on average entertained that kind of superstition with far less frequency than did more rustic traditionalists but nonetheless, some predictable percentage always automatically exercised some suspicion with the mere mention of the name and Glendwyn clearly disliked the idea of superstition playing any role in militia affairs.

In the case of the foreign visitors, the apparent association between the witch clan and the unfamiliar and remote city of Almath represented a puzzling contradiction, and ample fodder for fanciful speculation. Highland legend always portrayed the witch clan as a hermetic and secretive group isolated in their deep dark forests only occasionally emerging to perpetrate some localized act of mischief, and the idea of their involvement in a distant clash of kingdoms challenged traditional characterizations. Some among the assembly even exhibited some subtle reactions but evidently, the size and scope of the situation sufficiently inhibited all present from any compulsion to indulge in any immediate public witch denunciations, at least for the moment.

Glendwyn concluded the formal portion of the assembly and scheduled the next assembly for the same time forty-eight hours later, at which time he would conduct his census of their determinations. The assembly helped themselves to beer, wine and snacks and broke up into smaller groups while Glendwyn cycled around from one group to the next fielding lingering questions that might have occurred in conversation.

Fae wandered about for a little while mostly listening in on other conversations and just before he left, he cornered Glendwyn, pulled him aside then quietly stated, "I know I'm breaking the rules but you can have my determination now, Glen."

Glendwyn insisted, "I don't want your determination now-"

Fae smiled sympathetically but nonetheless insisted, "I don't ever need to hear anything more than kings, economies and enterprises to know when it's time to fight. Even if it's just you and me, and no one else, we'll go to Almath and if we find this army, we'll whip their asses, and if eight-thousand bodies in Almath plus you and me isn't enough, we'll get this army out of Angora. We got witches on our side, Glen."

Gritting his teeth, Glendwyn suppressed a laugh then punched Fae lightly on his shoulder and with that, Fae departed and his consideration period officially commenced.

A gray cloud cover rolled low overhead and a chilly wind whistled in the bare branches as Fae made his way along the fence on the edge of the horse yard to the stable. The poor horsemanship Wyl demonstrated surprised Fae and immediate improvement quickly became his first order of business in preparing Wyl to serve as an apprentice. Leaning onto the fence surrounding the yard, Fae stared at the scenery until Kel and Wyl returned, and as they rode near enough to notice him, Fae displayed a signal to Kel to stable the horses then wandered through the stable to meet up with the two, stopping to visit his own horse along the way.

Approaching his companions as they finished packing away their gear, Fae inquired, "How is it going?"

"Fine." Wyl replied.

"We're making progress." Kel stated with a nod.

"Good." Fae concluded, "Let's go eat."

The party commenced in the direction of the Edyn Inn but Fae changed course at the last moment heading instead to the 'Horseshoe', a location considerably closer to the stables. Constructed of sturdy stone and slate, the Edyn offered comfort and cleanliness unequalled by the rustic, dilapidated and slightly dank ancient wood frame of the Horseshoe but Fae insisted the Horseshoe had 'character'. The threesome drank beer and ate meat sandwiches with battered and fried vegetables while Fae made casual conversation, and in the process, inquired, "Wyl... I'm curious... How can someone who grew up on a farm be so unfamiliar and uncomfortable with animals?"

“Well,” Wyl explained, “my mom and dad don’t believe in forcing beasts into burden.”
 “-so... your mom and dad are traditionalists?” Fae concluded.

“Yeah... sort of.” Wyl replied while shifting his eyes nervously.

“You seem... embarrassed?” Fae speculated.

“I guess... maybe a little. I know some people consider traditionalists a bit... odd.” Wyl remarked then added as a defensive afterthought, “Almost the whole neighborhood is-”

“-I’m familiar with the neighborhood, Wyl.” Fae assured as if to indicate of course his familiarity with all the Highlands qualified as intimate. Wyl nodded, slightly embarrassed by his underestimation then looking down at his boots for a moment then back up at Wyl, Fae asked, “What about you? You eat meat and your clothes are not very traditional.”

“Well, actually my mom and dad are pretty relaxed about the clothing and ornamentation thing.” Wyl explained, “My dad says too much concentration on the avoidance of flamboyance is a form of flamboyance.”

“Your dad sounds like a pretty intelligent fellow.” Fae remarked.

Wyl nodded appreciatively and commented, “Yeah... He’s not one of those-”

“-Wyl,” Fae interrupted and admonished with a patient and tolerant tone, “I don’t mean to imply I think traditionalists are otherwise unintelligent. I am militia. I respect and support tradition. That’s why I’m militia... Do you remember our conversation about knowing why we are militia?”

“Yeah.” Wyl replied with a nod then chewed his food while looking out the window.

Upon conclusion of the meal, Fae addressed Wyl concerning the developing situation, advising, “Listen, Wyl... Things are developing that may cause a reassignment for both me and, or my company. We’ll know more in a couple days. The reason I’m telling you this is because it’s possible you might get reassigned as a result.”

“Why?” Wyl demanded with obvious surprise, “If you get reassigned why wouldn’t I just go wherever you go?”

“That’s possible, too.” Fae reassured, “I just want you to be advised you might get reassigned. It won’t happen for days or maybe even longer than that. If it does happen, you will have a chance to say something about it, if you want. I just want you to be advised it might come up later.”

“... Okay.” Wyl responded rather unenthusiastically.

Changing the subject, Fae informed him, “Tomorrow, Kel is going to take the day off, but I want you to go to the stable and ride. Don’t worry about what you do, just get out on the trails... walk... run... get comfortable with your horse, okay?”

Wyl nodded in response as he finished his beer.

“All right listen,” Fae stated immediately before Wyl exercised any chance to consider another drink, “I need to talk to Kel about something... so... I’m asking you to leave now because I’m not supposed to talk to anybody else about it. Take the rest of the day off. Do whatever you want. Check my door tomorrow evening; I’ll leave a message with instructions for the next day.” Wyl nodded and Fae stated with a polite smile, “Thanks, Wyl. Have a good day then.”

Recalling the advice from Haery to get away from Fae, it occurred to Wyl reassignment accounted as a splendid opportunity to get away from Fae but he also remembered Fae proclaim, ‘I’m a wealth of material’, and as an aspiring journalist, he considered a ‘wealth of material’ extremely desirable. Fae mentioned a ‘chance to say something about it’ and without doubt, Wyl knew exactly what he wanted say about it.

Fae pinned a note on his door the following morning instructing Wyl to repeat the instructions from the previous day then found Ethaedra, spent the day with her and said nothing to her about the assembly while Wyl took his horse ride and Kel took his day off. On the day that followed, the assembly of the captains reconvened and Glendwyn heard their determinations. Some few in fact objected to the proposal on principle, stating they simply could not accept the idea of seeking war beyond the border for any reason and some others contended they simply could not identify value in choosing favorable and unfavorable kingdoms. The majority however, expressed at least reluctant approval of the proposal even with substantially varying degrees of reluctance.

Glendwyn advised those that abstained to devise a provisional defensive plan for the following warm seasons and to review it with his military advisors of whom one in fact counted among those that abstained then Glendwyn concluded the assembly with an admonishment to keep quiet about the plans until after his formal accounting circulated in print the following day. Later Glendwyn would compose his accounting and dispatch messengers to notify all militia to report for assemblies.

Glendwyn named Aeldryd his closest advisor, interim Martial in his absence to become permanent if for any reason he should fail to return. The order of command for the expedition for the most part, followed simple seniority with Glendwyn first, followed by Haemyhl, Wyndael and Faelryd, respectively. Those three captains along with Aelbryct of Argael, a captain of the Lower Highland militia, would constitute the advisory council, meaning those four for all practical purposes would conduct the military campaign while Glendwyn more or less served as their ambassador.

Fae accounted as the single exception in the order of seniority, which would otherwise have established him as second after only Glendwyn. For anyone familiar with the group, the order established by Glendwyn surely represented some shrewd and ominous calculations. The order of Glendwyn, Haemyhl and Wyndael established the best possible diplomacy but in probabilities for military success and survival, if conditions should erode to an extent of succession to Fae, ruthless tactical brutality and not diplomacy would surely constitute the most appropriate protocol.

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Proceeding directly to the quarters occupied by Fae after stabling his horse, stiff legged and sore from his ride, Wyl found a note on the door instructing him to continue to the Edyn, and the desirable objectives of cold beer, hot food and warmth indoors accelerated his pace. Blazes burned in all the fireplaces of the Edyn Inn and even so, some number of window sashes dangled open by a crack, straining against tie strings in gusts of cool winds that squeezed between the margins then mixed with the warmth of the hearths in swirling currents that rustled tablecloths and curtains. Fae and Kel occupied a table in front of a window dimly illuminated on one side by the setting sun and by flickering fire and candlelight on the other while darker shadows enveloped the rest of the room. With a sigh of approval, Wyl climbed into a chair while Fae arranged hot dishes and another round of drinks then Wyl recounted his riding exercises for Kel and they spoke casually for a bit while they ate and drank. Evidently waiting until Wyl finished his food and drank a couple more beers, Fae then addressed him with the purpose of their meeting, informing him, “Wyl, as it turns out we all have some dramatic changes in duties coming up and so as I told you, it looks like you will be reassigned. I don’t know who you will be assigned to yet, but I’ll do whatever I can to make sure you’re satisfied with it.”

“Why?” Wyl asked with an excruciatingly plaintiff tone.

“-because we are going to war.” Fae stated so matter-of-factly, Wyl wondered for a moment if he intended it as humor but understood otherwise as Fae explained, “We are leaving the Highlands to fight in the east. You’re an apprentice and not prepared for something like this. You’re not ready for a fight so you can’t go.”

Wyl stared dumbfounded as Fae explained the conditions, and when he concluded, Wyl looked directly in his eyes and impulsively blurted out, “No.” almost angrily, “I have my assignment. You are my captain and I will have no other. That is where my loyalty lies. I don’t care if I can’t fight. I will do whatever I can to assist you. I go where you go.”

Fae appeared surprised then drawing from his smoke, he slowly inhaled then exhaled as he carefully examined Wyl. After a long deliberation, Fae concluded, “That was really good, Wyl... You’ve learned something already, and you’ve got good instincts. I’m half tempted to let you go just because that was so well played... In fact... if that was half the bullshit I think it was I am even more inclined to let you go.”

Wyl kept his mouth shut and stared, concentrating only on his desired placement.

“What do you think, Kel?” Fae asked without breaking his stare from Wyl.

Kel pondered for a moment then concluded, “It was a lucky guess... He’s bluffing.”

Fae concurred, “Yeah... Sorry, Wyl... It can’t be as easy as getting lucky once.”

Wyl struggled to conceal his exasperation. Stripped of his lucky instinct, his options limited him to strategy and he recognized it as a serious disadvantage. With a long deep breath, he then shaped his lips to speak but hesitated...

“Would you like advice, Wyl?” Fae graciously inquired.

“... Yes.” Wyl reluctantly confessed.

“Don’t strategize.” Fae stated firmly, “I’ll know... Skip all the steps and go straight to your last ditch act of desperation... the truth.”

Tightening all the muscles in his face, Wyl finally concluded the exercise amounted to a simple act of contrition. Fae merely wanted him to present a coherent argument for his inclusion that supported some plausibly noble intention and probably did not care if it accounted as the product of concoction. Speaking quickly without thinking too much, Wyl then asserted, “This is a critical event not just in our history but in the history of men. If we don’t record our struggle, we won’t remember why we struggled. We’re probably going to lose one day. If we keep our story alive, for as long as any single copy survives, the tradition survives. I want to be a journalist. Let me record this... Somebody has to do it... I want to contribute and I don’t care how stupid or pointless my presence is in this thing. Don’t make me stay here and contribute nothing while history passes me by. I don’t care if I’m not prepared. Everybody else will get to choose where they go and what they do. Even if I contribute nothing, I want to at least try, even if I fail, even if it’s a mistake and I end up regretting it for years to come-”

“-Don’t be so pessimistic.” Fae advised and then dismissively remarked, “I’m sure you’ll never live that long.” Reestablishing eye contact with Wyl, Fae inquired of Kel without breaking his stare from Wyl, “Kel, how about that?”

Kel then stared also and Wyl looked them both in their eyes without flinching until Kel finally stated, “It’s a good reason. I don’t know if it’s a good idea but it’s a good reason.”

Almost imperceptibly, Fae nodded slowly and said, “Okay... Fine.” then leaned back and smoked in silence.

“Thanks, Kel.” Wyl said softly, “Thanks, Fae.”

Wyl in fact told Fae the truth but possibly by no more than a slim margin of technicality. At seventeen years old, some remnants of his childhood dreams still occupied his thoughts and as a child, Wyl dreamed of adventure, celebration and reward as children often will, and when he told Fae he wished only to record a critical event and contribute to history, he told the truth but omitted the less than essential peripheral and incidental truth. Although no words Wyl spoke qualified as outright deceptive, the words he deliberately did not speak concealed substantive information and maybe he never necessarily even thought the words at that moment but at a point in his lifetime he later could not precisely chronologically recall, he wrote on a scrap in his journal,

As an apprentice I will surely participate in no direct confrontation and this has to establish my probabilities for survival as no more or less favorable than staying home with diminished defenses and at least my probabilities for survival will be dramatically more favorable than those who will actually fight and so this presents a perfect opportunity for a firsthand eyewitness account of an historically monumental event and a journal of that caliber ought to account as of incalculable value and with the involvement of kingdoms perhaps even treasure or bounty may play some role so one way or another this has to be about the best thing that could ever happen to me.