

7. Gray Dawn

The day dawned overcast and gray. Fae stood in the parlor drinking herbal brew and Helaena leaned back on the couch as Ethaeldra entered still in her thick soft robe and slippers. The day finally arrived and the three all pretended the presence of Helaena amounted to a routine visit in spite of the obvious. Helaena stood and approached Fae, wrapped her arms around him and kissed the corner of his mouth then he kissed her cheek and held her close and they brushed their arms together as she departed leaving him to privacy. In an extended embrace, Fae and Ethaeldra held each other tightly in silence for some time then kissed as he stroked her hair then brushed her face with his fingertips. For a long moment, the two lingered at the doorway then Fae touched her cheek with a last caress as he slipped away. Closing the door gently, Ethaeldra descended onto her couch, crossed her arms and stared at the floor. Not one of the three ever spoke so much as a word throughout the entire morning of the departure.

The assembly organized slowly and next to no conversation occurred at all other than two or three word instructions and only where necessary. Each captain took a count and presented recorded lists in duplicate, one copy for the Martial and one for storage in his office. Upon their return, the Martial would use the lists for the grim task of determining and reporting casualties. By late morning, the militia assembled into rows and columns ready to commence then shuffled slowly out of the militia compound toward the park where crowds gathered lining the streets to see them off. The companies came to a halt along the main side of the park and a long moment of silence followed while gusty winds whistled through the trees and around the buildings of the city. Glendwyn stood in his stirrups to offer an address and a secretary recorded his words for the benefit of those unable to hear him directly.

“Let those of us that depart and those that remain, honor each other and our memories by the pursuit of a modest and charitable life. And let us all find comfort and strength in the knowledge that what things we choose in thought and deed, and in all things we may suffer and celebrate, we choose these things not for pride or ambition, but for our love of each other and all things we cherish. We carry your blessings with us, and leave our blessings with you. Good luck to all.”

With a signal from the captains, the Martial and his company commenced along the main avenue toward the gate at a slow deliberate pace, exchanging some subtle nods and reserved smiles with folk on the sidewalks along the way. Just a couple blocks from the gate, Wyl observed Ethaeldra on a corner as Fae turned his attention toward her. Pursing his lips hard perhaps even with eyes moistened, Fae held a long mutual gaze with Ethaeldra. Forcing a smile, her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears then Fae turned his head forward as he passed while from the corner of his eye, Wyl observed Ethaeldra turn away crying. Fae consequently hung his head slightly and held his eyes closed while Wyl felt immediate shame for indulging in such a deliberate observation of such a personal moment of sentiment then stared straight ahead intent on conducting no further observations. Conscious visual focus however only served to emphasize audible sensations, and Wyl immediately developed an acute awareness of heavy sighs, sniffles and even restrained cries. With thoughts inevitably turned to his family, Wyl cringed in dread over the impending excruciating moment he would no doubt experience in only a matter of hours as he passed his home.

Glendwyn quite unexpectedly raised his head and broke into a song with a steady unwavering voice, a traditional standard with a gentle melody and pastoral lyric praising the natural beauty of the homeland. Most others in his proximity quickly joined Glendwyn and almost immediately, the city echoed in song mercifully drowning out the sounds of sadness even if the sentiment of song only increased the flow of tears.

Passing through the gate, Glendwyn and his company entered open fields beyond the obstruction of defensive walls where wind and gusts instantly snapped harshly at clothing. Temperatures during Highland winters regularly dropped well below freezing and stayed there for weeks at a time, but to the good fortune of the companies, they departed on an unusually mild day. Snowdrifts during Highland winters regularly accumulated deeper than the height of a horse, but also to the good fortune of the companies, they departed during a trend of unusually light snowfall. A dark and overcast sky loomed overhead but produced no precipitation, and even for all the good fortune of favorable weather conditions on the day of departure, the conditions nonetheless might not have been more miserable.

Fae pulled a smoke from a pocket and buried his face in his cloak to ignite it as the singing ceased, at least in his company, almost as soon as they passed out the gate. Scanning the horizon, Fae relaxed in his saddle as if basking in the glory of a warm summer day while Wyl hunched over, shivered and stared until Fae eventually leaned close and inquired under his breath, “What do you want from me, Wyl, tragic romance? You want something juicy for your journal?” The tone of the comment contained an obvious hint of sarcasm but a moment later, Fae confessed, “I have ridden out of Edyn for the purpose and pursuit of duty at least some fifty or sixty times in my twenty-seven years in the militia and I have never once felt any sense of loss or regret about it. This time is different. This time is the first. I see her face in the candlelight at the inn. I smell her fragrance... but these things will not endure...”

“Fae, please shut up... I haven’t left home yet.” Wyl mumbled under his breath.

“Oh yeah... Sorry about that, Wyl.” Fae replied then remained silent.

The company plodded along the road through the farmlands, fields and scattered woods in a somber perhaps even grim mood. As hours passed, Wyl finally recognized the familiar fields and fences of his neighborhood and even thought about hiding among the horses and riders on the far side of the road but dismissed it as unrealistic fantasy then worked his way to the left edge. A respectable cluster gathered at the roadside and as he approached, Wyl spotted his parents then steered in their direction. With brave smiles, his mother and father both clutched at Wyl affectionately as he passed while his little sister waved with little wiggling fingers. Haery then advised, “Be cautious, Junior.” and Wyl nodded in acknowledgement. Wyl expected his parents to cry and he expected that to make him cry but they demonstrated bravery and strength that both surprised and impressed him. Turning back, Wyl held up his arm in a lingering wave until his home faded from his sight, grateful that his departure concluded with considerably less trauma than anticipated thanks to the strength and support of his family.

Wyl marched in the lead group with the Martial and a long line trailing behind would still filter past his house but for him, the adventure commenced, he left his home behind and considered himself gone. With a sensation of sudden thrill, his heart raced and although he experienced a keen sense of thrill for adventure, Wyl admitted to himself he also felt quite frightened, in fact far more frightened than thrilled.