

8. Humble Origins and Fractured Histories

The army camped on the fringe of sparse woodlands the first night, still within farming communities, and huddled into small personal tents that amounted to little more than large sleeping sacks. Although all on average stayed dry, a strong cold wind made for an altogether miserable experience. Traveling for as long as daylight allowed the next day, the overall mood remained dreary while hardly any conversation occurred, and the companies all plodded along and slept in their tents cold, uncomfortable and unhappy. Shortly after the following sunrise, the company passed beyond the last remnants of inhabited areas and funneled between two wooded hills into an expanse of grassland sprawling out to the horizon, which appeared on Highland maps as ‘the flat’, and the name served as a literal description. Up to a hundred miles wide, the flat traversed a span of one-hundred and fifty miles from the western to eastern end and within it grew hardly a single tree, nor did river or stream of any substance flow and no contour or shape sculpted the land but variations in the myriad heights and textures of diverse grasses and reeds. The snow cover nestled down deep at the base of the shafts and the vegetation rustled in the wind fully exposed, concealing most of the snow. Even in the dead of winter, the tints and hues of grays and browns exhibited an unimaginable spectrum of color in a dazzling array. The grasses swayed and rocked in the wind, and gusts rolled over the landscape, compressing reed and stalk like waves on a great sea. As his horse shuffled along, Wyl gazed in continuing wonder and it occurred to him, though he traveled barely more than a day from his home still within his native land, he yet wandered in a strange and alien world.

After a campout in the relative warmth of a blanket of thick weedy grasses, the journey continued at sunrise but concluded abruptly at midday as the companies arrived at the only manmade object within the flat. The militia originally constructed the comfort station at the flat in Edyn Year 1 during the appointment of Elgyn 2nd Martial, four-hundred and fifty-six years passed, and it stood at the dead center of the expanse. Otherwise nearly identical to the station at the Elbyrn Bridge, the station at the flat consisted of two roundhouses, each substantially larger than the house at the bridge and an enclosed link connected the two together. At a detached stable house, a watchtower soared over the green conical roofs of the roundhouses, eighty feet above the land surface. Before he pitched his tent while the company made camp in the grasses, Wyl rushed to the tower, climbed up and stared out into the vast expanses along with a crowd of fellow travelers. Even from the top of the tower, the flat spread away in all directions and the faint white snowcaps on distant peaks offered the only visible contour.

Glendwyn and some of his council set roaring blazes in all the fireplaces inside the station and formed a rotation so every individual in every company spent time in the comfortable warm washrooms and cycled through the common rooms with turns in front of the fires. The brief indulgence lifted spirits to some extents but also dampened them later, for having enjoyed the warmth and luxury of the comfort station, returning to the tents and campfires felt almost worse than before by the benefit of comparison. The sun long since set by the time Wyl concluded his turn in the comfort station and he made his way back to his tent where Fae sat alone before a small campfire. Leaning close to the flames, Wyl turned his back to the station, the other campfires and the motion of the companies so the infinite featureless expanses of grass consumed his field of view.

Scattered clouds drifted silver under a pale moon and the snow obscured by dense stalk reflected dull light illuminating the vegetation with an eerie and ghostly fluorescence. Waves of winds rolled over the grasses in random patterns mixed with chaotic swirls.

Wyl inquired, "How can something so close to home be so..." but then fell silent struggling for a word to describe it.

"Alien?" Fae suggested.

"Alien." Wyl repeated, "Yeah, that's a good word... Alien... What is this place?"

"Historians say it is the bed of a great shallow lake, drained dry or maybe evaporated in ancient times." Fae stated as if reciting from a book. With a pause, he advised in a suddenly cautionary tone, "Tradition says even our earliest ancestors to walk on these lands, a thousand years ago or even more, found the place exactly as we see it now."

"Why have we never occupied it?" Wyl asked, "It seems like it would be perfect for—" then straining to identify the perfect use for a flat expanse, he settled on, "something."

"-and what would that be, Wyl? What don't we have enough of?" Fae asked as if to emphasize the inconclusive impulse but then confided sympathetically, "I understand what you mean. It seems like something so unique ought to somehow logically serve some special function, but the fact is... it doesn't... and... the place is considered... sacred... or maybe more accurately... forbidden..."

From some remote distance, a sudden howl screeched in the darkness, escalated in tone to a shrill shrieking crescendo then warbled and tapered off. A bit startled, Wyl demanded, "What was that?" Glancing down, Wyl discovered Fae with eyes rolled up at him in the look Wyl affectionately and privately named the 'predator stare' but he in addition detected a faint smile. Wyl rolled his eyes anticipating Fae judged the conditions favorable for support of a faerie story. Fae preferred dramatic settings for faerie, reasoning that darkness, wilderness or ideally both helped sustain a tension level that might otherwise collapse under the light of day, and Fae evidently finally desired some form of relief from the days of sullen sulking quiet that dominated the journey so far. Wyl tilted his head and responded, "Forbidden, huh?" as he reached for the journal book in his pocket and taunted, "Go ahead. Tell me about hauntings and mortal spells."

Fae smiled slightly amused and countered, "You misunderstand the purpose of faerie and legend, Wyl. You want to be entertained then, is that it? I'll entertain you with faerie but first I will tell you something about the truth... In your scholastic instructions, I presume you studied some geography, and so you would know at the eastern edge of Argael, the base of the Teaerenys Mountains rests upon the common lowlands -- the other world -- and along the eastern base of the range runs the River Rhok. By what name do we refer to that region east of the River Rhok?"

"Wychia." Wyl replied with very little effort.

With a contrived pause for dramatic effect while gusts rustled and the grasses rattled, another distant howl screeched somewhere in the darkness, and apparently satisfied the natural world accommodated his technique, Fae advised, "All witch legend that offers any explanation at all, always describes witches as arriving from, and departing back into, the east. Wychia is to our east and is dense with ancient deep forests. They always say the witches live in the 'secret forest', a convenient coincidence, don't you think? ...-but an even more convenient coincidence, words sometimes go through natural transformations over the ages, especially names, and probably for no other reasons than simple spelling errors or mispronunciations along the way... and the word 'witch' is one of those.

Ages ago, somewhere around the time we named Wychia, our word for witch was wychen.” Wyl raised his eyebrows and Fae remarked in reaction, “Then you recognize the obvious name derivation? Legend tells some fringe element of wychen, possibly as the result of some ancient internal dispute, split off from the secret forest of Wychia and headed west, eventually settling here in the Highlands for some time. The ancestors named these immigrant witches, ‘Rhokwychen’, and as you might independently conclude, the name originally meant something along the lines of ‘the wychen that came west from over the River Rhok’. The name of the river ‘Rhok’ is also a word that has gone through some transformation and we now recognize it in its contemporary form, red, and so the name River Rhok means River Red, and the name River Red was originally a metaphor for... River of Blood ... but that is another story... a different story... not this story...

Now, over the ages, original names can lose their meaning or transform as well and so the geographical reference in the name Rhokwychen was somehow lost and forgotten, and our ancestors were at some point left with only the root, rhok... or red... and so, Rhokwychen; ‘the wychen that came west from over the River Rhok’ transformed into, the Rhokwychen; ‘the coven of the red witches’... and what was the first symbolic association I mentioned in regards to the color red?”

“River of Blood.” Wyl responded softly.

Fae nodded in approval and asked, “-and what does faerie say about the Red Witch?”

“Savagery.” Wyl answered.

“-and bloodlust.” Fae added, “Do you recognize the lesson yet, Wyl?” Wyl considered the answer obvious enough but convinced any answer from Fae ought easily account as more entertaining, he remained silent until Fae concluded, “Humble origins.” then immediately asked, “What came first, the name... or the truth? Does the name describe the bloodlust? -or does the bloodlust conveniently match the color? Those are some pretty humble origins for such a legendary character and disposition, don’t you think?”

Wyl comprehended the logical foundations but struggling to guess the correct answer, he simply asked, “Then what is the truth? Who is the Red Witch?”

Fae paused and with deliberation as if telling the punch line to a joke, concluded, “Any foreigner cloaked in red... is the Red Witch.”

Wyl looked up from his journal laughing softly as Fae produced a small flask of cherry liqueur and offered some. With a sip from the flask, Wyl demanded, “How do you know all this? If the meaning of the name River Rhok was lost, then how would you know about the River of Blood?”

“Fractured histories.” Fae answered.

“What is that?” Wyl inquired.

Fae shrugged and responded almost as if guessing, “Small hints and clues, residual evidence, maybe even some conjecture? Our perception of reality is a puzzle constructed of composite bits and pieces of fractured histories and humble origins -- No one I have ever met, no text I have ever read, explains the story of the name River of Blood but I know that much... the name... just barely... Something is missing from our history. Something is missing from our reality.” Fae refocused and looking directly at Wyl, he speculated, “You have heard of the age of stone tools, skin and fur clothing and the hunter-gatherer way of life?”

“Of course.” Wyl confirmed with a nod.

“There are nomadic tribes out there that still live that way, and always have.” Fae asserted, “They live in a different world than us, in a different time. Who is the average and who is the anomaly?” Pausing to stare a moment, Fae then added almost as if telling a secret, “I have seen them with my own eyes.” Wyl glanced at Fae in the expectation the declaration accounted as some ingredient of the legend, but the seriousness of his expression immediately convinced Wyl otherwise and Fae explained, “In the northern tundra and out west, I have seen them. They almost always see us first and then vanish but I sneaked up on one of their camps once. They saw me first and ran but from a distance, maybe a hundred feet, one stopped to look back and eye contact occurred between us... and for that brief moment... there was no time... no past... no future... just the two of us... I smiled and held a palm open. He stared for a moment, and then he turned and vanished. I inspected their camp. They had these huts made of huge hides on frames of great giant bones, tusks, horns and antlers.” Reestablishing eye contact, Fae asked, “How do wolves behave, Wyl? -all the same? Do some wolves grow gardens and eat nothing but cabbage? No, they don’t, but how do we know that for sure? Do we know every single wolf? We know that because we know all wolves do what all wolves do, and we know wolves don’t grow gardens and eat cabbage.

Which is the easiest, least complicated, most practical and most obvious... to talk, work and share, or to make sharp pointed instruments and jamb them in each other’s faces?

Why does it not occur to us to do the easiest things, yet it occurs to us to engage in the most complicated, the most difficult and impractical, the most painful alternatives?

We are living in a dream, a fantasy, bits and pieces of fractured histories, and our perception of reality is distorted. Something very important is missing from our lives. Something has been concealed or lost and long forgotten.”

Wyl shivered and scanned the vague horizon as a series of shrieking howls echoed from the distance then returned his attention to Fae with a sudden expression of confusion and asked, “-but this thing -- these men in the east -- your whole life. How can you believe-”

“-I never said I believe anything, Wyl.” Fae stated with abrupt finality.

Wyl inhaled and exhaled deeply then closed his journal and motioned to put it away.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Fae inquired. Wyl stared at Fae with no idea to what he referred and Fae exclaimed, “Faerie stories!” as if astonished Wyl might have forgotten such an important subject in so short a time then he added, “Your legend... for your entertainment?”

Shaking his head slowly as he reopened his journal, Wyl remarked, “You are a strange man, Fae.”

Fae passed his liqueur flask again, ignited a smoke then formally commenced, reciting, “In the earliest times the ancestors occupied the Geaelen, only a short while after they migrated to the region, in the infancy or perhaps only crude preliminary versions of crafts and traditions such as domesticated crops and herds, permanent settlements and metals, some number of the clans, perhaps more than half, still observed the hunter-gatherer tradition. To supplement supplies during the transitional period, foraging parties often wandered the territory for perhaps a week or two at a time and hunted occasional wild herd, field butchered their kills, smoke-preserved the meats, harvested wild vegetation and collected valuable materials they might stumble upon in their travels. Surely intimately familiar with all the lands within the three ranges, the tribes nonetheless never dared set foot upon the level plain of the flat.

Even in the earliest ages, the ancestors feared the flat, and to such extents, should they look up and discover they even wandered within distant sight of it, they turned back the way they came for they believed if one approached too near, stood upon the fringe and gazed out, the hypnotic powers of the grasses cast spells. The tribes believed spirits possessed each individual blade of grass, and the rustling of the wind through the blades awoke spirit voices that whispering incantations and enchantments with the lure of seductress sirens. The spell so enamored with desire any near enough to hear it, they stumbled out into the grass in a stupor... and they were never heard from again.

The ancestors stayed clear of the flat as generations passed but on an occasion as a foraging party traversed the area, they passed near the western edges of the boundary and stopped to make camp as dusk approached just beyond sight of the expanse. Setting a fire, the party prepared a meal and barely did they finish when a sudden nearby thrashing occurred in the brush as if perhaps a beast in distress and the party rushed to investigate the cause of the disturbance. Peering out from undergrowth, the foragers observed a lone man running wild as if in a panic and they pursued the man, at the least mildly curious. After chasing him down, the fastest and strongest of the party tackled and restrained the man while he screamed wildly and thrashed against them but they held him still and gave him water then in time, they finally pacified him to some degree. Upon examination, the party noticed garments torn in places and dried blood caked on the face of the stranger then pulling him to his feet, they brought him to their camp, offered him food and some warm malt ale then as night fell, the stranger recovered to some degree and the party finally coaxed from him his story.

The stranger proceeded to explain he originated from the tribes in the valleys by the easternmost spur of the Alaepys mountain range, just south of the River Daruth, and he traveled up into the Teaeren along with a 'hunting party' seeking 'herd game'. Although immediately they saw through his subterfuge, the foraging party nonetheless refrained from any challenge anxious the stranger might react defensive and alter his story or refuse to recount it altogether. The stranger then explained his party ascended the steep wooded slopes up into the Geaelen tracking a 'herd of big game' but upon scrambling up to the crest, they looked west onto the flat and the sight of it mesmerized them. An enchantment lured the stranger and his party down the shallow slope to the edges where the grass hissed and rattled in the wind, and the party heard the whispered voices of sirens singing then fell under a spell. Dropping their weapons where they stood, the party stumbled dumb into the grass and wandered for the duration of the day, heading always west under their enchantment then as darkness fell, they threw themselves down into the grass overtaken by a deep slumber of haunted dreams.

Late in the night just before dawn, one among the hunting party awoke apprehensive and he stirred his companions suddenly alarmed by the situation as if the spell finally subsided then crouching low, they peered east from whence they came into the earliest dim light of dawn. From a distance, the party observed vague shadowy figures drift across the grasses and the figures moved with unnatural swiftness without apparent motion as if borne on the wind, drifting over low grasses before vanishing behind higher concentrations. Suddenly stricken with the terror they ought to have felt all along, with their course to the east obstructed, the men of the hunting party recognized but one direction in which to flee and as quietly as they might but with great urgency, they continued west and only hoped to soon find some form of relief in that direction.

Upon the dawn of a new day, as the party gazed into the glare of the low morning sun, they found to their growing apprehension upon each inspection, the mysterious figures they observed appeared ever nearer on their trail. Driving harder and pressing ever faster as the morning passed, the party encountered an exceedingly high and dense stand of grass, substantially higher than even their own heads. With diminishing alternatives, the men plunged into the high grass wall entertaining no reluctance, and they thrashed at the stalks with their arms as they ran while panic escalated to even greater degrees until they spilled out the other side of the stand into growths the height of knee where they might again adequately survey the conditions. Immediately the men observed there before them, spread each by some short distance, three small girls in both appearance and garment virtual replications one of the next, still as stone with eyes that burned like dark coal and hair dark in color like the blackest night fluttering in the wind. Wrapped on each girl, rippled a garment of a single swath of red fabric wound over and around a shoulder then several times around waist and hips with loose ends that swirled about legs and rustled in the wind. Secured by tasseled strings at the waist, each girl in addition possessed a dreadful instrument of sharp metal and a rough textured cruel and blunt club, and although none spoke the name, every man present knew he faced the Rhokwychen.

A rustling in the grass approached near from behind and the men fled in disorganized panic, some even crying out as more Rhokwychen converged in greater numbers perhaps even a dozen as if materialized from vapor, surrounding the men from all sides and moving through the grass with unnatural swiftness as if floating without effort. Several Rhokwychen swarmed over and tackled a man that straggled behind then on each arm and leg one took hold while one pulled by his hair as another swung out an axe and lopped off his head. Like ravenous dogs over meat scraps, the Rhokwychen then wrestled over the body, each in turn clamping mouth over flesh and gulping blood hot as it gushed from headless neck, presumably until running dry but the men only guessed as much for they lingered not long enough to observe such details as they raced desperately for their lives. Throughout the day, the party fled west while the Rhokwychen swarmed upon one straggler then another, held each they overtook by arms and legs, lopped off the head or even worse, lopped off an arm or a leg then drank gushing blood from the stump as the unfortunate weary traveler watched screaming and died slow.

With the approach of sunset, the party staggered near a line of low hills with clustered trees and brush and though they knew not if the terrain might aid them in any way, the men at the least identified some destination somewhere else in the world other than the dreadful grass expanses of the flat. Three men yet survived the merciless pursuit hurdling toward the hills and just as they reached near the edges, Rhokwychen caught two, swarmed them over and beat them senseless with clubs. While the last man on his own feet dashed shrieking, a Rhokwychen clutched at his garment but he charged only harder and dragged her along as she clung firm and beat him with club then his garment tore and he slipped free, splashed through a shallow creek then scrambled up a gentle incline. Expecting a swarm to overtake him, the man glanced over his shoulder from the hillside but to his relief, he stood solitary while at the edge of the creek below as if constrained by boundary, the Rhokwychen that nearly caught him stood still and glared then she smiled a cruel smile with teeth and lips bright red with fresh blood. A short distance away, Rhokwychen lifted then carried into the depths of grass expanses the last two companions of the last man standing, wailing pleas for mercy and thrashing against their captors.

Continuing his flight west, the lone survivor then thrashed through brush and weed until passing near the foraging party and attracting their attention with commotion. Upon conclusion of the account of the tale, the members of the foraging party exchanged glances and then served the man more malt ale...

... Even had the stranger offered no explanation regarding his geographical origin, by the materials and workmanship of his garments alone, the foraging party easily identified him as of no clan of the Teaeren...

... He was a southerner, and his 'hunting party' climbed up and entered the Highlands seeking plunder and slave, and in this, the foraging party entertained no doubt regardless of any explanation...

... And so the foraging party drank with the stranger more ale and made available all he might consume and then some, while congratulating him on his remarkable endurance and daring escape then as they drank late into the night, he fell into slumber, groggy from ale and even in spite of his harrowing experience and near miraculous survival, while he slept, they struck him close to dead with stone blows to his head then lifted him up and carried him dizzy back to the western edges of the flat where they hurled him into the grasses in sacrificial appeasement to the Rhokwychen. This they did in demonstration they would cast back to the flat what rightful prey of Rhokwychen might so undeserving and fortunate stumble west from its extents... and as the party fled the edges of the flat back to the safety of their own territory, they heard from a distance, the bloodcurdling screams of the last to die of the 'hunting party' from the south...

... And so they departed and forever stayed clear of the haunted terrain of the flat, and although on occasion some might wander near drawn by good fortune in their foraging, in the dark gathered around the fire they might hear the tortured cries from a distance of the tormented spirits of those hapless travelers that wandered unwary into the whispering grasses, forever bound to the enchanted domain of the Rhokwychen."

Glancing up from his journal, Wyl rolled his eyes and conducted obligatory motions demonstrating he appreciated the story only as pure faerie. Perhaps the lonely terrain or mournful wails of unidentified melancholy beasts out in the darkness spooked him a bit but mostly Wyl thought it profoundly disturbing that someone -- anyone -- might concoct such a story and wondered what mental deficiency the one responsible might have suffered. "What about the two captives they took alive?" he asked.

Fae appeared pleased Wyl paid close enough attention to recall such a detail and explained. "I imagine the Rhokwychen probably worked them as slaves until close to dead then killed them, drank their blood, ate their flesh and decorated their witch mansion with the skulls and bones... You know... that kind of stuff."

"Why did I bother asking?" Wyl remarked and after a moment of thought, he inquired, "Remember what you said about legends being mostly true?" Fae nodded and Wyl subsequently asked, "What parts of that story do you think are mostly true?"

Fae paused and rolled his eyes as if carefully considering then concluded, "Well, unlike my 'warlord of Enet' story, this time, I wasn't there... but based on familiarity, pattern and anecdotal experience, I would speculate the truth is most likely something approximate to... there was no swarm of Rhokwychen, probably not even four or two. There was one witch... or maybe there was one foreigner cloaked in red, or cloaked in brown, and our ancestors, the 'foraging party'-" Fae glanced to his sides then leaned forward and whispered, "-they probably did most of the killing."

Wyl nodded his head slowly and stared into the fire. Fae leaned a little closer and said softly, "The stories we make up probably tell more about us than the stories that are true." then leaning back into a relaxed slouch, Fae inquired, "You understand what we are doing, Wyl, right? You understand when we get to where we are going, we are going to kill people?"

"Of course." Wyl acknowledged.

"You realize some of us will die as well?" Fae inquired.

"I know." Wyl stated somewhat hesitantly.

While his tone indicated Wyl would clearly prefer a change of subject, Fae nodded but nonetheless advised, "If you have to fight, Wyl -- I know I told you, you wouldn't -- but just in case, if you think you might have to fight, always run away first, but if you can't get out of it and you really have to fight, use your dagger and get up close. The larger your opponent's weapon, the closer you need to get. Stab directly forward. Don't swing or slash. Stab directly forward... and always stab directly at the face."

Wyl cringed slightly and attempted to reply, "-but-"

"-I know what you've been told." Fae immediately stressed, "Forget everything else. Always stab at the face. I want you to visualize it. I want you to think about it. If you find yourself in a fighting situation, I want you prepared to do this without hesitation, like an instinct. I want you to chant silently to yourself, every day... Always stab at the face... Always stab at the face... Always stab-"

"-Okay. I get it. I'll remember it." Wyl insisted.

Fae stared then nodded apparently satisfied Wyl considered the advice seriously.

After retiring, Wyl lay in his tent mesmerized by the soft rustling of the grasses and the occasional distant howls, and in the last moments before slipping into sleep, he thought he surely heard the soft whispering and gentle singing of sirens.

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For a full day, the companies rode from the station then camped again in the grass and upon breaking camp the next morning, the light of sunrise revealed tall massive clouds on the western horizon rising in great plumes, the cloud ceiling hovering so low, it almost blended into the horizon barely distinguishable from the gray terrain. Accumulating billows appeared to glide atop the grasses, closing in and towering ever higher as a savage wind whipped up with gusts that thrashed as harsh as to rock riders in their saddles while clothing sailed and snapped loudly. Horses bolted about restless and jumpy and for the first time since the departure from Edyn, the pace accelerated from a walk to a gallop but even so, the storm steadily loomed closer as hours elapsed until a line of low rolling hills rose from the grass plain to the east. On the other side of the crest, the Emerald Ridge tumbled down in great ravines and valleys to the Lower Highlands, some two-thousand feet below and as sunset approached, the companies charged up the brush tundra of the rolling hills then crossed over the top of the rocky ridge. Below, the land fell away steeply and the trail wound between two ridges as it descended while some miles further below, the tops of a lush thick pine forest peeked up out of the ravines.

Churning cloud plumes illuminated in yellow and orange flashes from within as lightning bolts blasted against the grasses and flashed back into the billowing maelstrom in great veined sprawls. Over the crest, the trail plummeted toward the pine forest below and the ridge shielded the descent from the wind to some degree but the thunder continued to rumble louder and nearer.

A monstrous wall of clouds spilled over the top of the ridge and rolled down the slopes as the companies reached the pine forests then leaving the road, riders ducked into the woods and under the canopy just as a barrage of freakishly large snowflakes swirled down through the boughs and clung in clusters to the needles. Instructions circulated throughout the companies to hold positions in saddle until daylight and as darkness descended, a thick blanket of snow accumulated at the treetops until at some critical threshold, thick clumps tumbled from above and occasionally landed upon the head of a rider, stuffing snow down inside clothing.

Fae somehow managed to smoke in the mess and Wyl actually slept to some extent but he woke late in the night as the snow transformed into something more similar to a slushy rain that splattered against surfaces with quite a racket. The wind that howled all day long diminished to a weak breeze then torrents of slushy snow washed around the tree trunks and the feet of the horses. Wyl gazed at the swirling deluge for some time then forced himself into a state vaguely resembling sleep but there, a shadowy figure stalked him through swirling wisps of misty fog and emerged in the form of the cute little foreign girl in red with a smile that suddenly transformed into a gaping mouthful of blood stained jagged teeth -- As his horse stomped and sloshed in the torrents, Wyl awakened abruptly to tug desperately at his saddle and reins only narrowly avoiding a spill. After righting himself and reassuring the horse, Wyl then squinted to observe in the darkness a slushy surge tumbling down the slopes perhaps as deep as a foot, and he shuddered at the thought of how perilous a situation a tumble might have produced. With a sigh of relief, Wyl then grunted angrily that he should suffer such hazard and discomfort over faerie stories best suited for children then he closed his eyes in a last vain attempt at sleep.

At the first hint of sunrise, the companies stumbled out onto the trail, moaning and grumbling in protest of weather conditions but the sun rose into a crystal blue sky while streams and shafts of golden light burned through the trees offering finally some small relief from the misery. Fae lit a smoked and appeared suddenly a bit annoyingly cheerful as he advised, "Tonight we will sleep in the city of Argael... maybe even indoors."

'Indoors' appealed to him without qualification and Wyl felt perhaps a bit annoyingly cheerful as well and although his ears irritated with muffled sound as if underwater, he judged conditions overall favorable and turned his face to absorb sunlight while passing through warm golden bands filtered through the deep blue shadows of the pines. As the first party rounded a bend onto a straight stretch, Wyl jolted in his saddle with surprise to notice a horse with rider on the trail ahead and with some distress, he immediately recognized the shiny black horse with the curly long mane and the small raven-haired girl... the alleged 'Red Witch'. Loose baggy white clothing rippled on her in the breeze and cute little fuzzy white boots covered her cute little feet but if Wyl entertained any lingering doubts about her, he surely recognized the red outer riding garment.

"Fae." Wyl whispered loudly, leaning close, "That's her... the one I saw on the road... the Rhok-... the Red--"

"-Don't call her witch." Fae admonished urgently and as they approached, he then added in a low discreet voice, "Don't say witch anywhere she might overhear it." Fae straightened up then leaned close again and added, "Strike the word witch from your vocabulary until further notice."

Wyl acknowledged with a single discreet nod then whispered, "Why is she--"

"-Not now." Fae instructed under his breath.

Glendwyn approached the girl first, halted alongside then shook her hand and exchanged some apparent pleasantries then motioning with his hand, he introduced Wyndael, Haemyhl and Fae, introducing her by the name, Orna. As the captains approached and shook her hand in succession, Wyl remembered the warning from Haery, 'never let her touch you', and to his shame and embarrassment, he fumbled with his gear intent to fill his hands as an excuse to avoid contact with the girl. Fae held her hand longer than customary and gazed at her intently, stating, "We've met." and in response, Orna smiled pleasantly but bent her eyebrows as if to contest the assertion.

"This is my assistant, Wyl." Fae stated with a gesture in his direction.

Wyl successfully filled his hands then he nodded, smiled and said, "Hi."

With a smile, Orna nodded then exhaled in a short burst, as if in exasperation and Wyl knew instantly she easily perceived his subterfuge and he felt ashamed, rustic and stupid.

As the party continued ahead, Wyl pressed palms on his ears in attempts to relieve the muffling sensation, and adding to his inconvenience, a ringing commenced in his head. Glancing at the girl as sunlight glittered through the trees and sparkled in her hair, Wyl suddenly in addition to his other discomforts, felt dizzy as well. Conversations occurred between the girl, Glendwyn and the captains but Wyl paid no attention submersed deep in thought. Wyl eliminated as a possible source of his sensations, any amorous sentiment for the little foreign girl in red as the single word, 'strange' might well summarize his initial reaction to her physically, and a cursory examination from the corners of his eyes confirmed his preliminary assessment with appreciation for an overall quality of disproportion. With eyes that alternately protruded as if too large for her head or peeked from narrow slits under eyelids too large for her eyes, no moderation between the two extremes appeared to occur. In spite of so diminutive a physique, the mass and girth of her hips and thighs in all likelihood exceeded that of any man within a thousand feet of her, and in equal disproportion, the protrusion of the chest of any man within a thousand feet of her may well have exceeded the proportionate characteristics of her chest as well. In addition, pale skin under certain conditions occasionally exhibited an eerie similarity to the grim pall of death while hair dark as pitch nearly vanished into the background when shadow engulfed her or radiated with blinding reflective flashes in direct sunlight. By no means did Wyl consider her outright unattractive, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he eliminated as a possible source of his sensations, any amorous sentiment for the little foreign girl in red ultimately judging her simply too strange, too disproportionate, too foreign, too... alien. Under any other circumstances, failure to accommodate a courtesy such as a handshake may well constitute a potential offense but surely, anyone with such keen perception as to identify his reluctance to touch her would also recognize a childhood full of faerie stories accusing her of blood drinking, flesh eating and skull collecting as the obvious source of blame. Her exasperation over his indelicacy easily amounted to a judgmental impulse and that probably qualified as every bit as rude as any reluctance to touch her hand. Fae suggested prior acquaintanceship and even said 'we've met' to her face but evidently, her reaction contradicted that, and that probably counted as every bit as rude as her reaction to reluctance to touch her. Wyl wondered how such an adorable girl with such a charming smile could demonstrate such insensitivity, for he intended no offense, smiled politely in greeting, and that greeting minimally conformed to reasonable customs and qualified as at least adequate by any standards... and she was after all a witch.

Turning slightly in her saddle, Orna cast a suspicious glance in his direction for a brief instant that coincided with his mental use of the word ‘witch’ and Wyl immediately shifted his eyes away intent he should not appear to focus inordinate attention on her but as she turned back around, he just as immediately focused inordinate attention on her. Consequently, it occurred to Wyl perhaps Fae might have advised he ought strike the word from his thoughts as well. As the horses sauntered along, Wyl stared at Orna atop her saddle as her hips swayed with a hypnotic grace while silver rays like twinkling starlight cascaded from her hair as it rolled across her shoulders and fluttered in the breeze like black butterflies. Despite his obvious fascination, Wyl nevertheless stubbornly and conclusively reaffirmed he eliminated as a possible source of his sensations, any amorous sentiment for the little foreign girl in red as the-

“-Wyl.” Fae barked, with a slap across his shoulder that jolted Wyl as if from slumber then sarcastically Fae inquired, “Are you sleeping?”

“...No.” Wyl stated groggily after a moment of hesitation.

Motioning forward with his head, Fae remarked, “Argael. That’s some view, isn’t it?”

Refocusing on the world around him, Wyl concurred that Argael from above on the Emerald Ridge surely accounted as ‘some view’. The city lay some few miles off perhaps no more than five-hundred feet below, and the trail snaked down to the city through the lush emerald green pine forest. The base of the slopes plunged into the western shoreline of a huge lake so long the northern end of it simply faded into the horizon and a random pattern of brilliant snowdrifts interrupted by sparkling crystal ice spattered across the surface. From the eastern shoreline, a great rolling plain sprawled out into the horizon speckled with farmlands and a patchwork of forest and prairie, a near replication of the Upper Highlands region to the east of Edyn. Around a cozy bay on the shoreline, the city nestled in a dense cluster of low buildings punctuated by a few towers and lighthouses protruding from the edges. Blue and white shadowy shapes of mountain ranges floated on all horizons over misty extents as if suspended like clouds and in addition, Wyl suddenly concluded that perhaps the most appealing aspect of all accounted as the likelihood of dry warmth and comfort.

Resisting the urge to run the balance of the distance to the city evidently occurred to none other than Wyl and he struggled to restrain himself from suggesting it aloud as the company plodded lazily down the slopes. However, before too long, Orna escorted the companies into the edge of town where hundreds of large tents crowded into a grassy cove surrounded by towering pine. Smoke puffed from narrow stacks that poked through protected openings at the tops of the tents as the companies dismounted and unpacked then virtually evaporated into the fabric interiors. A number of temporary kiosks huddled together under the edge of the forest canopy, staged and prepared for service of hot food and cold beverage. Fae instructed Wyl to find Kel and stay with him until further notice then continued into town with Glendwyn, the other captains and Orna. Consequently, Wyl lugged his gear in search of Kel, disappointed by his exclusion, grumpy and perhaps a bit jealous as well.

At the conclusion of a hot meal, Kel, Gaeryn and Wyl reclined on gear and blankets in a warm cozy tent, and just as Wyl opened his mouth intending to comment he never imagined he might consider a drafty canvas tent so luxurious, Kel motioned extending an empty bottle in his direction, instructing, “Go get us more beer, Wyl.”

“But I just took my boots off.” Wyl protested.

“Then you won’t make the same mistake next time.” Kel countered then added sympathetically, “We’ve all fetched beer, Wyl... It’s your turn.”

“Come on, valet, move it.” Gaeryn added with an intimidating smile.

Upon completion of his assigned task, Wyl reclined again as the three occupants of the tent drank their beer but he did not remove his boots. Kel commenced rolling a smoke and exchanged an awkward glance with Wyl, obviously considering instructing Wyl to perform the task for him but perhaps hesitated knowing the recent trip for fresh beers did not account as the last. Dutifully, Wyl reached over and seized the leaf mix and paper then rolled several smokes, and Kel proudly proclaimed as he ignited the first, “Now that’s a true militiaman!”

“What exactly is a ‘valet’ anyway?” Wyl asked directing his question toward Gaeryn.

“Some folks in the southern kingdoms that consider themselves nobility or some kind of privileged dignitary have these personal servants that practically spoon feed them, pick their teeth clean and wipe their asses for them, or whatever else nobility and dignitary are too lazy to do for themselves.” Gaeryn explained, “They call them ‘valets’.”

Wyl flexed his brow and winced in reaction then concluded, “That sounds like something of an insult then.”

“It is.” Gaeryn confirmed then equivocated, “We mean it sarcastically. It’s part of your initiation. Come your first anniversary, we’ll stop saying it.”

Without specifically directing the question at either Kel or Gaeryn, Wyl inquired, “Who is this Orna? Why do we call her type witch?”

“Don’t say witch, Wyl.” Kel cautioned then stated in addition, “-and I don’t remember hearing anybody call her a witch anyway.”

“Well, I did hear at least one other person call her a witch.” Wyl stated perhaps a bit defensively, “-and I’m not calling her a witch. I’m just saying it here in private. Who’s going to hear it anyway?”

“Just get into the habit of not saying it.” Kel advised, “If you feel comfortable saying it in private, you’re more likely to say it again later in public.” then with a sip of his beer, Kel smiled, shook his head and conceded, “All right, yes, some people like to call her type witches. I admit it. I don’t know who she is. She’s a foreigner in bright flamboyant clothing for whatever that’s worth. I guess that’s what makes her a witch.”

Wyl squinted skeptically and argued, “But lots of soldiers and their captains from the south wear bright flamboyant clothing -- and they’re foreigners too... but we don’t call them witches.”

Kel nodded in apparent approval of a reasonable argument then countered, “Those people don’t sneak it one-at-a-time and hold council with the Martial. Those are obvious men with obvious motives. Witches get away with things men from the south don’t get away with. Their motives aren’t so obvious. That makes them mysterious... and I guess that’s probably a part of what makes them ‘witches’ as well.”

“Don’t say witch.” Gaeryn admonished.

Kel glared at Wyl with mock anger and scolded, “Now see what you made me do?”

After a momentary silence, Wyl inquired, “Why is she with us?”

“She is our guide,” Kel responded matter-of-factly, “and an ambassador of sorts.”

“-so... she’s going to be with us-” Wyl speculated but before he completed the question, Kel stated, “-for... ever...” with exaggerated conclusive emphasis.

With a scowl Wyl asked, “How come you know this... and I don’t know this?”

“Fae said Glen doesn’t want to make a big deal of it.” Kel explained, “You know... some people... harbor less than positive sentiment... Glen doesn’t like the idea of militia reluctant to deal with her because of superstition, so he sprang her on us in the form of a friendly foreigner in the hopes we can all just leave it at that.” Wyl remained silent in contemplation and Kel examined him for a moment then inquired, “-so... you can leave it at that then?”

“What?” Wyl responded then as if recovering from disorientation, he asserted, “Oh, yeah, right... I can leave it at that.”

“That wasn’t real convincing.” Gaeryn remarked then inquired with a hint of sarcasm, “Please don’t tell me you expect she’s planning to drink our blood and steal our heads?”

“No. Of course not.” Wyl insisted, “It’s just-”

“-Ooh!” Gaeryn taunted then shifting his eyes toward Kel, he declared, “He’s sweet on her. That’s why all the attention and inquisition.”

“No I’m not!” Wyl protested.

“Here’s what I want you to do, Wyl,” Gaeryn stated mimicking the initiation assignment Fae conducted at their first meeting in the Edyn Inn, “go get us some more beers... then strike up a conversation and buy a drink for the wicked Red Witch.”

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At the conclusion of a long leisurely commencement in the morning, the companies of Edyn led out first and the companies of Argael followed behind, conducting their departure from home in relative privacy. Kel, Gaeryn and Wyl rode together and after a few hours, approached Fae lounging on his horse at the side of the road evidently waiting for them. Taking up pace with the threesome, Fae maneuvered near Kel to review the scouting situation and informed him he expected the companies should make the great falls of the River Alaepys at the edge of the Lower Highlands on the third night out. Everything east of the falls qualified as hostile territory even if predictably uninhabited for the duration of the current season. However, in the interest of precaution, Fae determined a scouting routine no different from that which he might conduct in a war ought to commence at the crest of the falls with a preliminary full day advance minimum, subject to adjustment as developing conditions might necessitate.

The foursome rode out the day together then camped with the scout company assigned to Fae that night and for the next three days, while the farms and settlements of the Lower Highlands slowly diminished in frequency and number until giving way to wild prairie. On the second day out, Orna instantly transformed into an apparently permanent fixture within the company and kept close counsel with Fae and Kel. At night the party gathered around the campfire and engaged in long discussions about the soon to commence scouting activities, and spoke of ‘two and twos’, and ‘four wides’, and ‘three deeps’, and ‘point flares’, and ‘swing backs’, and ‘double overs’, and ‘one unders’, and so on. To his own surprise, Wyl understood most of that he heard even if he considered it less than fascinating and actually concentrated more on the mysterious and exotic Red Witch, the enigmatic soft spoken, demur and charming little miniature foreign girl with the raven hair. With growing fascination, Wyl discreetly watched her nibble on little bites of dried fruit, drain flasks of strong liqueurs and smoke like a bonfire to his near disbelief so delicate a little flower might soon hunt the wilderness with the hardest of scouts. Never facing her directly, Wyl strained his eyes from corners, tops and bottoms in an attempt to conceal his curiosity as he examined her, and hoped no one noticed.

At the head of the great falls of the River Alaepys, the companies made their last camp on homeland soil atop a last long steep descent that tumbled down to the other world below. Ice still covered the lakes and most rivers but the current of the Alaepys precluded the formation of ice at the falls and although substantially diminished while winter held most fluid locked in a frozen state, a constant thunderous roar occurred nonetheless at the falls accompanied by occasional thick swirling clouds of mist.

A delay occurred in the morning after Fae dispatched his advance scout party, Kel, Gaeryn and Orna among them, and the balance of the companies stalled to allow time for the scouts to establish a significant lead. Traveling light and fast, the advance would easily double the sluggish pace of the cumbersome numbers and materials of the main companies. When midday approached and most present shuffled restlessly in boredom, captains at last issued signals then all companies gathered and crossed over the edge of the Highlands onto the steep rugged slopes down to the lands below. With the departure of Orna, Wyl lost his primary subject of interest but he felt like a peripheral observer during the march to the falls and finally with Fae all to himself, he anticipated plentiful opportunities for private interviews lay immediately ahead. However, reluctant to appear too nose-y or too eager to rush into an inquisition, Wyl maintained silence and went about the business of the descent.

The degree of decline and roughness of the surface made for virtually impossible riding conditions and all companies led their horses by foot. With laborious effort, the descent progressed over a barren landscape of rock and rubble, and continued through the entirety of available daylight. Approximately half the distance to the base, the companies made camp at sunset on terrain that sloped at a shallower degree than the majority of the descent, where trees and other growth sprouted from the rock. The falls rumbled in a constant din while clouds of mist drifted in particularly thick concentrations that dampened every surface in sight and caused some level of discomfort.

Fae and Wyl rejoined the lead company with Glendwyn, and the group hunched close to a small fire in the rocks for a light meal. Aelbryct of Argael accompanied the group since shortly after the departure from his city, and he along with Glendwyn, Wyndael, Haemyhl and Fae all smoked, but half of them with pipes. Before Fae encountered a reason to suggest it, Wyl rolled a fistful of smokes and Fae appeared pleased by the attentive anticipation.

Traveling conditions dramatically improved with continuation of the descent at sunrise as the terrain sloped at progressively shallower degrees, soft clusters of vegetation and a blanket of snow cushioned wider spaces between rocks, and thin stands of pine absorbed some of the chilling mists from the falls. At the base of the descent, a sharp definitive transition occurred where the slope met level ground then Wyl stood atop a large rock straddling the division and called Fae.

As Fae turned with raised eyebrows in acknowledgement, Wyl stepped off the rock onto level ground and declared, "I have left the Highlands."

Fae nodded and stated ominously, "You're in the other world now..."