

10. The King of New Plunder

“Where are the girls?” the captain demanded in a harsh bellow.

“I don’t know... There aren’t any girls here.” the farmer stammered.

With a deep breath and a scowl in frustration, the captain pressed the blade of a dagger against the farmer on the side of his neck and asked in a restrained carefully controlled tone, “Then why are girl’s clothes and girl’s things in your house?”

“I, uh... I don’t know.” the farmer declared less than convincingly then added as if he only just recalled, “It’s- They died recently!”

Ripping open the shirt the farmer wore, the captain slid the blade across skin producing a relatively superficial wound that nonetheless bled profusely and ran down his chest as the farmer squirmed. The captain then repeated, shrieking childishly in a near temper tantrum, “Where -- are -- the girls!?” while pressing the tip of the blade to the farmer on the underside of his chin but the subordinates of the captain suddenly released the man then backed away staring behind the captain over his shoulder. Attempting to turn his head, the cumbersome helmet and body armor restrained his motion, and the captain clumsily rotated on his feet to investigate the cause of bewilderment then jolted with surprise to discover a mere two steps distant, a diminutive young girl in a red cloak. With her side turned in his direction and her hand across her midsection resting on the hilt of her sword, the girl glared up at the captain with a curiously detached and impassive expression that appeared substantially inconsistent with the immediate circumstances.

The captain froze for a moment then twitched. A flash of reflected sunlight glinted on polished steel followed by a loud -- clank -- then both the girl and the captain stood motionless although her sword no longer occupied its sheath and glistened extending away from her in her hand. The companions of the captain leaned away slightly, perhaps even wondering why he lowered his head to his shoulder but any curiosity surely faded as his helmet teetered then toppled loose and the metal clad head of the captain struck the ground with a thud as his body collapsed with a clattering racket atop it. Entertained by the abuse of the farmer, the companions of the captain failed to notice the approach of the girl but under the immediate conditions, they fumbled frantically at their hips even as the girl advanced and two fell to the ground howling in plumes of blood before ever drawing their weapons. Those yet on their feet then fled in panic still fumbling at their sides and to their own misfortune, turned directly into a bristling array of sharp instruments.

The pursuit of noteworthy events comprising epic tales of adventure fostered his interest in stowing away with the party, and his observation of the mistreatment of the farmer filled Wyl with rage and lust for punishment. Although he followed his group far enough at the rear that the likelihood of his direct involvement accounted as highly improbable at best, Wyl nonetheless held out his sword and prepared to stab at their faces but as the hapless perpetrators stumbled into the scouts, his rage and lust instantly abandoned him as he observed two occurrences in excruciating detail. A blade slashed halfway through the neck of a subject, and a misty cloud of blood splattered with improbable volume and distance then a raspy gurgling scream issued from the mouth of the subject in question or from the gash in his neck. Some sort of hammer or axe blade struck another subject in the side of his head, blood sprayed out in a plume then things Wyl wished he never saw and furthermore wished never to see again dislodged and expelled from a cavernous gash.

The fight ended abruptly and unexpectedly for Wyl, instantly transforming into a vague memory of the distant past. Although he stopped abruptly and froze in mid step, he sensed the landscape continued to rush past him as blinking lights twinkled all around then without recollection of turning or even deliberately moving his legs, Wyl discovered as if awakening from a dream the landscape flowed effortless past him in the direction opposite the action. Diving into a concentration of bushes pressed against the side of a barn, Wyl pulled his knees up to his chest in near convulsion and as ringing in his ears faded, metallic clatter from a distance accompanied assorted shrieks and howls then clenching his eyes closed, he frantically wished the encounter to a conclusion, believing it already lasted an eternity.

Recovering his awareness, Wyl reached for his sword intent at least should he hold it out in front of him, any potential opponent entering the bushes might perhaps accidentally walk into it but then he reeled in shocked disappointment to discover only an empty sheath on his waist. With no recollection how he lost possession of his sword, Wyl furthermore entertained no confidence he might retrace his steps to it later or even recognize it should he trip over it then producing his dagger, he pointed it away from him as a ruckus of stomping and shuffling footsteps occurred nearby.

Adjusting to peer through the bushes, Wyl observed a man in a yellow uniform stumble around the corner and flop face first into the dirt barely ten steps away as the Red Witch leapt over him then turned and swung her sword at five other men that converged. To the surprise of her adversaries, Orna drove directly into the man nearest her, slamming up against him and piling him back into two others then she twirled away as all three men shrieked, staggered and crumpled over, perhaps one or two even slashing and stabbing at each other in the confusion. Two men remaining on their feet maneuvered to approach her from opposite sides but Orna thwarted their strategy by charging one and as he jabbed at her defensively, she deflected his blade though it yet punctured her thigh. Even as her adversary attempted to withdraw, she swiped her blade upwards and he dropped his weapon, clasped both hands over his face then stumbled away while the last man standing to oppose Orna conducted a desperate lunge, stabbing her low in the back and propelling her forward. Stumbling as she swung her sword backward, it slipped from her hand as her opponent crashed into her with a thrust that ran Orna through and his blade emerged from her front side dribbling red. Suddenly euphoric over his apparent victory, the combatant swung his foot up against her back to withdraw his weapon as Orna teetered but to his surprise, she slashed with a dagger and he immediately released his sword then pushed at her with both hands as he doubled over and fell to his knees gasping. The Red Witch staggered near then swung her arm from overhead to underhand, plunging her dagger into his chest with a clang as it punctured his breastplate and blood ran out from under it at the waist as the man reached at her then crumbled onto his face. Turning away, Orna stepped, fell to her knees then doubled over onto her hands and rolled to her side then scratching at the ground with her feet like a wounded animal, she reached behind her, pulled at the sword with several short thrusts, wincing and moaning until finally dropping it loose. An eerie silence suddenly dominated as Orna lay motionless for a moment then struggled back up to her hands and knees. Returning his dagger to his waist, Wyl crept from the bushes, approached timidly and with a dry croak said, "Orna?" then as he stepped closer, she suddenly spun at him brandishing her dagger and growling as he frantically held open his hands and plead, "Orna, it's me, Wyl."

Flexing her eyebrows to inspect Wyl for a moment, Orna then wiped her dagger clean with the clothing of the dead man nearest her, sheathed it, crawled to her sword and repeated the procedure. As she struggled to her feet, Wyl resisted an impulse to help her up again recalling the warning from Haery, ‘never let her touch you’, and he in fact shuffled half a step further away while Orna wobbled over her feet, swayed and squinted to examine him then inquired, “Who are you?”

“I- I’m F- Wyl... Fae’s assistant?” Wyl stammered.

“Oh,” Orna replied with a nod then recounted, “the one that did not want to touch my hand, yes?” Wyl pressed his lips tightly together with a degree of embarrassment but as if she hardly noticed, Orna casually instructed, “Follow me, Wylmaer. Stay close.” then she limped along an old worn dirt street, lined with broken down old buildings in various stages of collapse with vegetation protruding from cracks and hollows.

At the edge of the tilled fields, the scouts assembled, dozens of bodies lay scattered about amid pools of blood and among them, a couple bodies of locals presumably murdered by the bandits before the arrival of the scouts. Upon approach, Orna pointed at a group of scouts as she passed near them and Wyl stopped, concealing himself at the edge of the group while Orna continued slowly ahead surveying the scene. Some forty bandits successfully surrendered to Fae and his company, and they sat in soft damp grasses in between slushy patches of snow, clustered into small circles while scouts watched over them with brandished weapons. Clearly disappointed by the developments, the prisoners hunched over staring down at the earth trying to avoid eye contact and attention. Ornamental clothing and decorative accessories including metal armor, helmets and bright feathers distinguished three or four captives from the rest and Fae looked them over then approached one of the more decorative among them, reached down, pulled the man up to his feet and inspected him carefully even pulling at some of his decorations to examine them closely.

“Who is in charge of this nonsense?” Fae inquired in a calm but quite threatening tone.

“You killed him.” the man replied, obviously intending the statement as mere factual information while straining to avoid an accusative tone.

“-then who is in charge now?” Fae inquired and as the prisoner looked down and offered no comment, Fae placed a palm on the side of his face and pushed the man away like bad food then slowly proceeded looking the prisoners over. Discovering a man in particularly fine clothing including some silks with an ornate jeweled band of gold wrapped around his head even though only barely visible under his hair so messed from all the activity, Fae pulled him up to his feet and inquired, “Who are you?”

“... I’m... just...” the man stammered hesitantly.

“Just?” Fae mocked, “Just what? ... Are you nobility? ... Are you a king?”

Clasping the golden band with two fingers and a thumb, Fae attempted to lift it from the head of the subject but it snagged hopelessly tangled in his hair then casually producing a dagger, Fae arbitrarily cut away clumps of hair in a sawing motion, some obviously unnecessarily, until freeing the band. Methodically and meticulously picking the band clean of stray hair, Fae continued his interrogation, inquiring, “Where are you from?”

“... From... far away... in the east.” the man declared.

“Really?” Fae inquired as if intrigued by the presence of exotic distant travelers, “You’re not from Enet?”

“... Where?” the man asked innocently.

Leaning close as if to accommodate the hearing impaired, Fae bellowed almost directly into the ear of the subject, “EN -- ET,” then paused and continued with calm deliberation even more distressing than the shouting, advising, “You wear the yellow and gold. You wear the red sash. You’re from Enet. You’re some kind of general, prince or king, or something like that. They don’t let anybody in Enet but nobility wear this kind of shit.”

“... No-” the subject insisted, vigorously shaking his head.

Fae raised his eyebrows and defensively inquired, “Are you suggesting it’s just coincidence you wear the same stuff... even from so far away out east and all?”

Shuffling nervously, the subject only stared at his feet in response and Fae huffed impatiently then asked, “What are you here for?” Leaning closer with a tilt of his head, Fae speculated, “I though I might have heard inquiries as to the whereabouts of girls? Aren’t there any girls in Enet? I’m pretty sure I’ve seen girls there.” With an exaggerated demonstration of vanity, Fae straightened and fashioned his hair then placed the golden band upon his head, adjusted it until evidently judging it ‘just right’ then announced, “I guess I’m the king now.” The deposed former king offered no objections then Fae said, “I’m sorry, but we’re going to keep the girls for ourselves, if you don’t mind. Maybe we’ll go to Enet next. I remember some pretty girls there.” Orna slowly inched near Fae throughout the inquisition and he glanced at her as if surprised to see her. “Oh, look!” he exclaimed with apparent delight, “Here’s a girl now! Is this what you’re looking for?”

The former king froze still and continued staring down, which evidently only agitated Fae even more and he scowled, leaned close then demanded, “How come you’re not laughing now? How come everything that was so funny half an hour ago isn’t funny now? What did I miss? Maybe I got here too late and missed the first part of the joke... so the conclusion is out of context for me. Why don’t you tell it again? ... so we can all enjoy it?” Leaning particularly close to the former king, Fae insisted, “Explain it to me.”

The king bowed his head then froze still. Fae glared down as if perhaps the king discovered something of great importance near his feet but then jolted back up as if suddenly disappointed with the results of the inspection. Suddenly recoiling, Fae struck the king high on his chest, almost in the throat, twisted the top of the silk garment into his fist, pulled him up close and repeated, “I said... explain it to me... Explain to me how funny it is to kill unarmed bystanders who are trying to cooperate.”

The king forced his head even lower and remained resolutely silent. Fae angrily swiped his hand loose from the clothing, cocked back his arm and swung wildly, striking the king near the top of his head with an open palm. The king cringed and cowered as Fae swung his foot, also wildly, apparently intending to kick the king in his backside but connected somewhere closer to the hip and the king stumbled then Fae swung and struck his head again with an open palm. Grappling furiously at the hilt of his dagger, Fae shrieked, “How many times do I have to kill you?”

“Faelryd!” Orna barked sharply.

Spinning around, Fae stared at Orna for a moment then stepped away from the king as Gaeryn approached and the three engaged in a whispered discussion, possibly including even some degree of argument. Eventually, Fae just barely nodded his head as the council concluded then returned to the king, pulled him up straight and barked, “Take off your clothes.” The king reacted with a squint and Fae reacted to the reaction with a rabbit punch to the side of his head that toppled the king over then Fae clutched at his hair and yanked him back to his feet shouting, “Stand up!”

Raising his voice to address all the prisoners, Fae shouted, "I'm going to say this one time. If I have to say it twice, I won't say it twice! I am your king now. I will tell you what to do and you will do it immediately or you will face the girl... and then... you will know where the girls are." Orna showed no reaction while presented a menacing stare, fingering the handle of her sword as Fae continued, instructing, "Remove your clothing... your boots... everything... Throw it all right here."

The prisoners followed the instructions immediately although most tentatively stalled in the removal of their underwear, glancing apprehensively in his direction and evidently, less than eagerly anticipating the sight of such a spectacle, Fae tolerated the modesty.

Returning to the former king, Fae faced him from the side almost pressed up against his shoulder then glared at the side of his head with nose nearly pressed to cheek. The king stared down nervously then with his left hand, Fae drew his dagger in a swift and continuous single motion concluding as the edge swung up to the king against his neck just under his jaw then Fae said softly and deliberately, "I am the king of New Plunder now... This is my town... You run..." Stepping back and extending his arm straight out so the tip of the dagger pressed against the king on his cheek, Fae froze still for a moment then with a flick of his wrist, opened a serious cut on the king from his ear to his mouth. The king gasped and nearly double over but Fae clamped a hand on the his jaw, stood him back upright, moved close again leaning up against his side and then kissed the king on his cheek, directly over the cut. The king cringed while Fae stepped back and stared with traces of blood smeared on his lips and when the king evidently failed to satisfy expectations in a timely fashion, Fae ripped his sword out and swung it overhead. Without further procrastination, the general, prince, king or otherwise indeterminable noble of Enet bolted in his underpants into a field, heading south with the surviving members of his group close behind.

Fae stood in place for a long while and smoked with indulgent deliberation while he watched with an obvious degree of amusement some forty men in their underwear run away across an open field, their feet thudding softly from a distance accompanied by a gentle wind whistling in the bare branches and brush. Never turning his attention from the spectacle, Fae waved a hand overhead and shouted, "Wyl!"

With flushed face, Wyl ran to Fae halting abruptly at his side with exaggerated stomping and in submissive acknowledgement, snapped, "Yes, Captain."

Fae never so much as glanced in his direction during the entire encounter while addressing Wyl with eyes still intently focused on the men in their underwear, initially inquiring, "Why are you here?"

"Uh..." Wyl mumbled, "You told me to stay right next to you, all the way to Seilvhan."

"Yes... That's right, I did say that, didn't I?" Fae exclaimed as if the information surely resolved everything but then he asked, "-and... where have you been since I said that?"

Wyl reinforced his position, replying, "Uh... I've been right here."

"What does that mean, Wyl?" Fae demanded, "Have you been... **right next to me?**"

Wyl inhaled deeply and almost moaned then simply stated clearly and efficiently, "I assumed you would make me stay with Glen so I hid to avoid a direct instruction then I blended in with the group some distance away from you so it would be too late to send me back by the time you discovered me."

"Good enough. Thank you, Wyl." Fae responded with a surprising tone of apparent satisfaction then he shouted, "Aengys!"

“Yeah?” Aengys replied as he casually sauntered near.

Still intently observing the distant men in their underwear and never peeling his eyes away, Fae instructed, “Accompany our young adventurer here and assist him in the completion of his epic quest for the enchanted lost sword.” then readdressing Wyl, he added, “After you’ve found your sword, Wyl... I’ll want you **right next to me**, okay?”

“Yes, Captain.” Wyl dutifully acknowledged in near tears from humiliation.

Wyl and Aengys found his sword rather easily after all, mostly because Aengys had a good idea of where Wyl had been. Wyl in fact did not immediately recognize his sword even after almost literally tripping over it, but Aengys was quick to point out it was obviously of Highland make and only one sword of Highland make was missing.

Scouts gathered up all the loose weapons and gear scattered about the area in which the fight occurred, and they dug a hole in which to bury all the weapons, gear and clothing of the men of Enet along with the bodies of those killed in the fray. Wyl stood on the lip of the hole, took a long look at the things in it and appreciated an ironic and bitter lesson he composed in a mental note for his journal... *The company from Enet entered the small community, heartless, brutal and dangerous men, mercilessly victimized unarmed defenseless farmers then departed in their underwear, shamed, disgraced and lucky to be alive. They never had a chance, not today, not yesterday, not three years ago. They are the walking dead, playing dice with fate and today, they rolled snake eyes...*

As the scouts organized to leave town and collect their horses, Fae issued instructions for a one-day watch with the usual trail of intermediates, and as they exited the edge of town, they crossed paths with the abused farmer leaning on a fence apparently unsure what next to expect. Fae approached the man and advised, “We are in a hurry and can offer no further assistance.” then surveying the scene and acknowledging the couple of bodies of other farmers nearby, he added, “I’m sorry we didn’t get here in time. I’m sorry for your losses.” The farmer bowed his head slightly in apparent appreciation then Fae leaned close and stated with a hint of a threatening tone, “If anybody asks... we took stuff from you and we killed some of yours as well... and the company from Enet attacked us because we violated their territory... understood?”

The farmer nodded and stated, “Thank you.”

Fae slapped the farmer reassuringly on his arm then the scouts departed into the woods and after regrouping at the horses, Fae conducted a rotation then Kel, Gaeryn and the others joined his party while a fresh group went to advance and rearward positions. Under instruction, Wyl rode with Kel the rest of the day and he interpreted it an obvious punishment or perhaps it even embarrassed Fae that Wyl successfully violated protocol but in any event, Wyl rode with Kel and Gaeryn while Fae rode point with Orna.

From a distance behind her, Wyl studied Orna as the party traveled north through wood and over field. Although she exhibited signs of obvious discomfort, Wyl believed a sword ran her through and even if less than fatal, so serious an injury ought at least to have rendered Orna immobile, yet he observed mere obvious discomfort. Speculating perhaps the encounter traumatized him so with rush of terror and numbing of sensation, Wyl did not fully trust his observations. Perhaps the sword only penetrated the edge of her garment and he misinterpreted in a state of confusion but Wyl saw the occurrence from every possible angle and his eyes nonetheless convinced him the sword clearly ran Orna through her midsection. She reacted and suffered just as Wyl might expect any other but unlike expectations of any other, Orna felt better then returned to her feet.

In spite of his training, mental preparation and even bloodlust for anger over injustice and abuse, the carnage overwhelmed Wyl and he ran rather than even observe. He might have expected combat to resemble representations drawn on paper and observe two parties in different colors conduct maneuvers and counter-maneuvers but the event Wyl witnessed amounted to nothing more in his estimation than chaos, mindless disorganized random mayhem without motive unless, ‘where are the girls?’ constitutes some form of motive. Most of all, Fae surprised him as in all the time he knew Fae, Wyl never observed so much as an indication of emotion and even believed if he broke a bottle on his face and set fire to his hair, Fae would remain dispassionate and detached. When he addressed the ‘king’ however, Fae clearly abandoned composure even if only for a moment and of all the people in the world, Orna the Red Witch intervened to restrain him. The act of apparent mercy surprised Wyl especially considering the unfavorable reputation of the subject in question even if undeserved or outright imaginary and he furthermore entertained no doubt if not for the intervention of Orna, Fae surely would have killed them all. The image of forty men in their underwear running south lingered and Wyl steered close to Gaeryn then asked softly, “What will happen to them?”

“Who?” Gaeryn asked.

“The ones who lived.” Wyl specified, “The ones in their underwear.”

Gaeryn nodded as if he otherwise never would have guessed to whom Wyl referred then concluded, “They control their own fate now.”

Wyl frowned with dissatisfaction and remarked, “You’ve been around Fae too long.” then sarcastically inquired, “What does that mean?”

Gaeryn smiled, glanced about then with obvious intent of discretion, he answered, “I presume you’re asking for my best calculation... Well, it’s still not quite spring yet and it will get cold tonight, freezing cold. They will need to make fires, right away, and I would guess they don’t know how without oils and flints or matches but first they’ll have to work their hands free of their bonds and with nothing but rocks at their disposal, they might not even accomplish that much by sundown. They’ll make back for their campsite in a hurry and will probably get there right about sunset. It’s the most predictable mistake they’ll make in a long line of mistakes they made today, and they’re not going to be happy at all when they get there. We visited their campsite this morning right after they made for New Plunder - All their tents and gear are in a creek now some few hundred feet away from their campsite. I doubt they’ll figure that out and just assume they’re in the wrong place then compound their situation by frantically searching for the campsite even after dark. They’re at least three days from assistance. They’ll become hypothermic pretty fast then they’ll become immobile. I don’t believe any one of them will see the sunrise tomorrow.” Gaeryn turned, smiled at Wyl and asked cheerfully, “Are you glad to know all the sordid details?”

“No, not really.” Wyl responded with some surprise then he recalled the instruction Glendwyn issued to Fae that no report of an armed force traveling east should ever circulate back to Enet. It never occurred to him even as Fae sent the men off in their underwear and Wyl in fact interpreted it at the time as an act of mercy but considering the dire forecast from Gaeryn, Wyl clearly understood no such intent ever applied. With a sigh, Wyl shook his head and pondered, “I know I’m not supposed to ask questions or talk about stuff like this, but why... Wh... I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?” Gaeryn patiently inquired.

“Why bother with such a gesture if you know either way, you’re killing them?” Wyl elaborated, “Why not just kill them all right there and bury them in the pit?”

Gaeryn laughed quietly and said sympathetically, “It’s okay to ask me... Just be careful what you ask others. If you’re not sure about something, ask me. I won’t say anything judgmental about anybody else but I otherwise don’t care about talking about things that happen.” With a pause for a moment, Gaeryn scanned the scenery then explained, “Did you get a good look at them? They were a bunch of dumb young miscreants under the influence of older craftier vermin, like that captain and their ‘prince’ or whatever that guy is. If it makes so much sense to kill them all directly and bury them in the pit, maybe you’d like to be first to volunteer for the assignment?” Wyl cringed at the thought and Gaeryn continued, “To do them in like that was just a bit too heinous for us so we let them determine their own fate. Furthermore, as a matter of technicality, we don’t know for absolute fact that ‘either way, we’re killing them’ and we don’t know for a fact they are going to die. In my estimation, they will all die within a day but I have no part in determining that and neither does anybody else that was there. That’s the whole point. We didn’t kill them. We haven’t killed them. Whatever happens to them now is not our responsibility. It’s up to them and it’s in their control.” Gaeryn then stared at Wyl until Wyl looked him in the eye and paid close attention then he continued very deliberately, asserting, “If you all did the same thing to me right now... I guarantee you I would survive... I would walk back into Edyn a couple weeks from now, fat from too much meat and clothed in fine furs and skins, so... if they all die because of this... whose fault is that really?” Watching Wyl carefully until apparently satisfied he understood the principles, Gaeryn subsequently added, “This is how we live with ourselves, Wyl... These are the realities and compromises of the life we have chosen.”

Wyl nodded then whipped his reins as the company accelerated the pace to a gallop and after some contemplation, he glanced at Gaeryn and inquired, “How come Fae had to make special arrangements to transfer you into his company?”

“I started out in Fae’s company.” Gaeryn stated and in response, Wyl flexed his brow in mutual surprise and confusion then Gaeryn laughed and after glancing suspiciously over his shoulders, he leaned closer and said under his breath, “Glen moved me into another company after my first season in the field because a couple other scouts complained to him about something me and Fae did. Glen says we have an undesirable influence over each other and it’s better for overall morale to keep us separated.”

“What influence is that?” Wyl impulsively asked, “What did you do?”

“It was something pretty similar to what we just did a little while ago.” Gaeryn replied.

Opening his mouth intent on a subsequent question, Wyl squinted then clamped his lips shut deciding that with the harrowing experiences of the day still vivid in his memory, the subject matter accounted as one of those rare occasions upon which he would prefer no additional explanations or details and ‘pretty similar’ sufficiently satisfied his otherwise relentless journalistic curiosity.