

## 14. Secrets and Divine Intervention

“Wyl... get up.” Fae shouted.

Wyl stirred, rolled side to side and finally recognized the voice as Fae then moaned and dragged himself up to the edge of the bed while Fae looked him over.

“Are you sick?” Fae eventually inquired.

“No. Witches held me down and poured liqueur into me through a funnel.” Wyl replied.

“I enjoyed myself too.” Fae casually responded, “These people really know how to entertain. They’re serving a breakfast for us now. If you want some before it gets cold, or if you want to find it at all, I suggest you get ready in a hurry and follow me because I have no confidence at all I can give you any coherent directions to the place.” As Wyl forced himself up, with a hint of irritation, Fae inquired in addition, “-and what did I tell you about ‘witch’? I told you to strike it from your vocabulary. That means you don’t say it to me either, even in private. These people are very sensitive about the word.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Wyl remarked sarcastically.

“What does that mean?” Fae demanded, “Did you say it to-”

“-Don’t worry about it.” Wyl insisted, “She taught me my lesson and everyone is square. You don’t have to intervene.”

“You idiot.” Fae reprimanded with an exasperated sigh, “I told you specifically not to say it anywhere she in particular might hear it-”

“-She said it first!” Wyl protested.

“Oh, that’s real mature.” Fae exclaimed, “Well, if she said it first, how could that possibly not provide you all the justification in the world to bludgeon her over the head with it? In what context did she say it first, Wyl?” Fae glared as if the question consisted of its own obvious answer then scolded, “You tried to interview her and she said it in mockery, right?” Wyl looked down and frowned while Fae sighed and shook his head.

Wyl suddenly looked up with an expression of suspicion and demanded, “How would you know all this about a total stranger?”

“Don’t think you can trap me in some game of wits, boy. I never said I know this about her. I just know this in general about wit-” Fae scowled then barked, “Now look what you made me almost do. Enough of this. Shut up now and get ready if you want breakfast.”

Wyl nodded and shuffled to the bathroom, washed his face and hands and cleaned his teeth then Fae led the way to a comfortable dining hall where the same group assembled as the council the previous day. The Seilvhanians served a feast of eggs, cheese, bacon, sausage, beans, biscuits and gravy, and an exquisitely spiced hot herbal brew. Orna and Antha sat together nearby and Wyl watched them intently from the corner of his eyes. Wyl avoided speaking to the pair sure they did not notice the difference then he replayed the encounter with Orna in her room the night before and he wondered what he might have expected or how dramatically that might have differed from what he observed. The single small modest room did not necessarily prove anything but somehow, Wyl knew it did and he intuitively accepted it as an indisputable truth. Orna lived in no witch mansion and collected neither skull nor slave but merely occupied just one small room with some clothing and personal articles she could scoop up and carry in two arms. Wyl again struggled to determine some vague concept of motive for her but could identify none and he concluded no wonder in faerie, she collected skulls because otherwise no action of hers would ever coincide with any plausible objective.

The cause of action for the Red Witch obviously consisted of something more abstract than mere material evidence would ever reveal. Wyl would have been more comfortable with slaves and skull collections figuring it easier to understand, and a better story as well. For Orna, Wyl identified no gain or loss in the affairs of men and so concluded as of yet, her motive still evaded reasonable explanation.

After breakfast, the Highland council gathered in privacy on an open circular deck surrounded by pine that pressed up against and spilled over most of the perimeter, while three great trunks passed up through circular openings in the surface confined within the railing. Although the trees isolated the deck from all but the gentlest breeze, shafts of sunlight slanted through the branches warming the space to such an extent some of the party removed their outer cloaks and coats then relaxed with hot brew in the sunshine. Wyl sat silently immersed in thought and paid no attention while Glendwyn and the captains spoke quietly. Compelled by an urge to tell Fae about Orna, his sensations and terrors, Wyl felt embarrassment for fear Fae might ultimately conclude he simply amounted to a superstitious rustic rube, and Wyl would rather preserve some skepticism than believe such a thing about himself. With but perfunctory effort, Wyl understood her lesson as he always understood all his lessons - He just never believed them. Expecting some modicum of truth to prove he lived in a world of mortal reality without witches and monsters, Orna indeed showed Wyl a familiar world of mortal reality yet revealed within it a terrible truth he never before appreciated. Orna showed Wyl a world in which inhuman monsters gather the remains of a shattered humanity for earthly reward, and stash golden bands in their gear.

“Okay. I get it Orna. That was real clever, yes?” Wyl muttered inaudibly to himself.

Impulsively Wyl wished someone might concur, judge Orna the monster and judge him innocent, but he knew Fae would never accommodate such an indulgence, not if it involved a lesson and especially not if it involved contradicting her. For the moment, Wyl suspended the subject but determined only to pursue it more vigorously later, until he heard the answers that ought sufficiently satisfy his curiosity -- until he heard the correct answers -- but he felt discomfort with her again and would no doubt encounter another awkward moment with Orna before another opportunity to interview might again occur.

Wyl eventually went for a long walk, found a stairway down to the forest floor on the bank and wandered the pine needle bed under the branches for most of the day then entering the camp, he located Kel, Gaeryn and Aengys. The company drank Seilvhanian spiced ale from red bottles with an assortment of scouts and some of their Seilvhanian hosts, and they entertained themselves around the campfires until after dark. A surprising number of Seilvhanians played musical instruments and at times, it appeared perhaps all of them. Seilvhanian music probably occurred to most Highlanders as more sophisticated or advanced than their own music, in fact most things Seilvhanian probably appeared more sophisticated or advanced to most Highlanders.

Fae and others met for dinner that night then drank liqueurs with Antha and Orna, and to the best of knowledge by Wyl, Fae never asked Orna if she knew him fifteen years prior or asked her to show him her room. Fae evidently never asked anyone a question to which he did not already know the answer, and so no answer ever surprised or terrified him. Fae always determined his own answers and those things he could not determine on his own he disregarded. Fae did not ask questions for the purpose of learning things, he asked questions for the purpose of teaching things. Fae was not a curious man.

The march commenced slowly over the course of the morning after breaking camp and even after the secondary council, it appeared no Highlanders reconsidered and so, the journey continued with full attendance. The Seilvhanian army materialized out of the city in the trees and by noon, the entire force and all their horses and carts assembled on the trails ready to depart. The inhabitants of Seilvhan crowded under the trees on the sides of the trail and the departure only vaguely resembled the departure from Edyn. None present spoke any commemorative words and none cried either while all stood silent and watched as the army slowly moved off on the trail while perhaps some subdued hand gestures accompanied a solemn unspoken support or encouragement.

At the edge of the community, alone at a distance from all others, Antha stood under pine branches swaying in the breeze. Exchanging eye contact and facial expressions with Orna, an obvious discomfort of disagreement unresolved still weighed upon Antha yet also with no apparent effect on her unconditional adoration. Antha stared Wyl in his eyes as he passed and he turned his head to gaze at her then at the last moment just as she broke eye contact and turned away, she offered a very subtle gentle smile that made him feel so consequential it brought a tear to his eye. In a world full of Anthas, Wyl concluded, surely no single act of cruelty could ever possibly occur.

Dorian led at the front of all companies as many trails crisscrossed the one on which the parties rode along the way to the edge of the great Seilvhanian forests and he navigated the twisting maze of lesser trails. After hours of travel, the trail climbed a high ridge and at the crest, Wyl turned and looked down on the army extending back below. Riding at the head of an army twelve-thousand strong, well over twice the number of any army ever assembled by Highlander, Wyl suddenly felt frightened as the reality of the conditions truly occurred to him for what felt like the first time. An expedition to foreign soil of an army twelve-thousand strong occurred to him as no more than an abstract concept up to that point but the actual sight of twelve-thousand with their equipment exceeded his wildest expectations. Of course, all consequences accounted as obvious all along but observing such numbers and weapons, Wyl appreciating the damage of which they were capable as a harsh and convincing reality. The endeavor amounted to no casual stroll through the neighborhood, and at the destination, people would die.

The army camped in the forests still well within the home territory of Seilvhan but even so, scout parties established a two-day advance watch, for the exit from Seilvhan accounted as a sensitive maneuver. Word of so large an army moving east reaching the wrong ears could easily provoke an attack on either or both Seilvhan and the Highlands. The lead party arranged an exceptionally large fire and all gathered around it for a meal followed by drinks and smokes. While the beginnings of friendships between former strangers already developed over the two days in Seilvhan, the intimacy of the campfire stimulated even closer bonds.

Light rains fell in the morning then in torrents most of the day while cold winds whipped the trees and most concentrations of snow that remained washed away. The trail followed the bank of the River Iris and the water ran swift over a rocky bed. Alternating between walk and gallop, the companies crossed a stone bridge in the late afternoon then set up camp under the trees and made fires that mostly smoldered. The majority of the travelers gave up and retreated to their tents early while rain continued throughout the night accompanied by occasional heavy storms but mercifully, the weather broke just before sunrise and most travelers commenced the day less than completely drenched.

As the companies traveled, the forests thinned progressively throughout the day until great open prairies spotted with woodland glens on long rolling hills with gentle slopes spread across the horizon. The sun shined bright through scattered clouds but a cold wind still blew strong and the company formations staggered out into informal groups as paces varied. Wyl fell some distance behind the lead group slowing down regularly to carefully observe the scenery until he noticed Arieth nearby and seized the opportunity to speak with her. Although all in his party knew his name after days of exposure, Wyl hardly spoke a word to any of them as of yet. Wyl said a number of complimentary things to Arieth about the country, the forests, the villages and architecture, the music, food and culture, even her wardrobe and hair, and Arieth expressed appreciation. With a conscious act of reminding himself to strike the word ‘witch’ from his vocabulary, Wyl asked, “What is the story behind this talk that our countries are related?”

Arieth appeared slightly surprised and asked, “What story do you know of it?”

“I know of no story of it,” Wyl replied, “which is to say, there might be one, but I have never heard of it. That’s why I ask.”

Considering for a moment, Arieth remarked, “That sounds a bit odd, although I suppose it is not all that dissimilar to our account. We conclude you are kin more by assumption than anything else and our mythology is the only source for the conclusion. Our oldest tradition describes the origin of our community as occurring in a time gods walked the earth and our matron protector god and namesake, Vhana assembled and settled the first tribe of the Seilvhan. An age of a sort of paradise elapsed but ended with an age of war involving neighboring tribes. The presence of a god among the Seilvhan angered other tribes and consequently, the gods concealed themselves for the protection of the tribe or until such time the age of war comes to an end, or something of that nature. We count our years by that date, the first year of the age without gods. That was twelve-hundred and seventy-three years ago. Sometime shortly before or shortly after that, the original tribe split and I would imagine the reasons for something like that are probably a bit complicated but the only explanation of record we know is a dispute over eating meat.”

“Eating meat?” Wyl repeated with some surprise.

“Yes.” Arieth confirmed with a smile, “It sounds like not much of an explanation, I know. I noticed some of you eat meat. I do not, but some Seilvhan do, so I don’t know which of us in this story might be the ones that ate meat and which did not, and we don’t know if the portion of the tribe that split off is in fact you, the Geaelen and Teaeren. We simply guess that only because the similarities between our cultures make you the most likely candidates, and that is our only story behind this talk of kinship.”

Wyl asked, “Did you say twelve-hundred and something years?”

“Twelve-hundred and seventy-three.” Arieth equivocated.

The number astonished Wyl and he informed her, “We only count four-hundred and fifty-seven years.”

“I am aware of that.” Arieth responded, “I am no expert but I have some familiarity with your accounts. Our formal histories go no further back than those twelve-hundred and seventy-three years and all our earlier traditions, as I said, describe an age of gods on earth. We don’t necessarily consider it literally true but literal or otherwise, we mark that as the division between two ages, distinguished at least by formal recorded history versus mythological tradition. Your own count of years marks the same kind of division, isn’t that correct?”

“Yes, exactly,” Wyl confirmed, “but we don’t even consider traditional stories worth saving. Only a few old timers remember those stories now and most of us, as far as I can tell, don’t even like the idea of preserving tradition. Our recorded history pretty much describes everything that ever happened before the count as a paradise age, like in your story, and it lasted forever and nothing ever happened.” Arieth laughed subtly in appreciation of his description then rubbing his chin, Wyl inquired, “Why would we tell the same stories and mark the same divisions in ages but count by a difference of some eight-hundred years? Is it just because it took us that much longer to learn how to write?”

Arieth may have speculated to some degree but even so, she obviously considered the question before, at least to some extent and she speculated, “Our stories of war date back to the first year counted, as do yours. I imagine you simply avoided war for eight-hundred years longer than us for maybe no other reason than geographical isolation.”

Wyl stared ahead for a moment then stated, “Fae told me a story from before the count, a tradition story. It’s not a war story but it describes a band of foreigners coming up to hunt for slaves, and tribal Highlanders slaughtered them. How come that doesn’t count as enough of a war story to start counting years? Our history claims nothing happened before the count, but slaughtering slave hunters sounds like something happening to me, and if you’ve been telling war stories for twelve-hundred years...-”

Arieth nodded slightly in response. After a pause, Wyl initially thought she simply shifted to an altogether different subject as she explained, “The darker skin colors among Seilvhanians, such as mine, comes mostly from the Dimir clans. The Dimir migrated here some five-hundred years or so ago and merged with the native clans of Seilvhan. A wide margin of difference in skin tone might occur between Dorian for instance, and myself but after five-hundred years, neither one of us consider ourselves any more or less Seilvhanian or Dimir than the other, both representing some indeterminable combination of the two groups. The tradition we consider Dimir mythology concludes at the time of the migration and the merging of the clans, so that point in time that divides formal history from Dimir mythology coincides roughly with the same point in time as that established by Highland accounts.

Like your people, Seilvhanians tend to neglect tradition to an extent, regarding all things that occurred before history as some vague constant when nothing of historical consequence occurred, but I am something of an historian and preservationist, and I entertain a nostalgic sentiment for tradition. Curiously, Dimir tradition like yours, survives in this cloud of mystery, lacking both detail and credibility, yet still preserving hints of colorful epic tales.

A Dimir tradition describes a distant ancient time when the Dimir lived on the other side of the salt sea, on the edges of a great desert. Even while the rest of humanity still wandered in nomadic tribes hunting game with stone instruments, the Dimir, out of necessity for the great expanses of desert waste, cultivated the first crops and constructed a great settlement on the edge of the sands. Over ages, the Dimir constructed a more advanced habitation until immense spires and towers loomed over the landscape, visible from great distances. The Dimir then grew arrogant and contemptuous, enslaved all other tribes they encountered and intended to build such grand objects as to penetrate the clouds and rival the gods. For this offense, the gods struck down the towers of the Dimir with quake and flame then the great settlement crumbled to rubble, and the drifting sands of the desert swallowed it up and erased it forever.

The gods drove the Dimir away from all tribes of men, banished them to a desolate coastal plain and one god among the gods held watch over the Dimir from within the desert under damnation that no Dimir should ever pass beyond the vast sands until one among them should find the desert sentinel and speak words of sufficient redemption.

Almost immediately, the proudest and boldest among the Dimir that named themselves descendents of kings, set out one after another to find the desert sentinel and negotiate passage back to the world of men or to vanquish the god of desert sands in contest, but once setting off into the desert, not one ever returned. For ages, the Dimir toiled in that place only to barely survive until none left among them called themselves descended of the ancient kings nor remembered the grand towering settlement on the edge of the sands. Finally, no more even set off into the desert and they almost abandoned altogether any thought of ever leaving that place.

The humble but adventurous fisherman Nan-Jahir wandered by foot or paddled his boat to all the extents of the coastal plain and at times, disappeared for as long as multiple weeks so with his experience, he roughly calculated a course he expected might deliver him beyond the desert into green gardens. Perhaps no longer even believing in the damnation and the god of desert sands, Nan-Jahir at last set out into the expanses in search of deliverance and traveled first along the shoreline but in time came to a great wide river where he constructed a small boat to cross the water. Great monstrous reptile beasts many times his own size pursued Nan-Jahir and he only barely escaped to the other shore where he climbed a steep bank then at the top, looked out upon endless sand wastes and he knew he stood upon the extents of the condemned world of the Dimir on the edge of the forbidden lands. Following the direction of the rising sun for several days, Nan-Jahir hunched over motionless in daylight with a garment held over him for shade, struggling just to breathe in a punishing heat beyond reckoning, and shivered from frosty cold while traveling in the darkness of night. Low on water, Nan-Jahir lost count of the days and finally staggered in delirium, convinced he would surely soon die but he saw from the crest of a sand ridge, a shape not of natural materials high upon a sand mound.

In all his many days in the desert, Nan-Jahir observed nothing but repeating patterns of sand formations but this object clearly rose up out of the sand in another color and did not consist of sand so he stumbled down the slope, crawled up the other side and discovered there a girl buried in sand nearly up to her breast. Transparent robes and tails wrapped loose around the girl, fluttering and snapping in the wind, and Nan-Jahir stared for some time perhaps convinced he observed a stone statue or perhaps a vision no more than the product of delirium but then from his water flask, he rubbed drops into his eyes and cast droplets from his fingertips onto her face. To the surprise of Nan-Jahir, eyelids slowly rolled open, the girl turned and they stared at one another for some time then she rose out of the sand and settled down next to him.

The two figures sat in silence as the wind howled and only after the sunset hours later, the girl spoke and stated, 'I am Dina, watcher of the desert and you have traveled into the forbidden land. You will tell me why you are the one to release the banishment and if your answer satisfies me, you will lead the Dimir to the other world where you will rule as King of all and restore the ancient glory of old.'

To this, Nan-Jahir reacted with great reluctance, for though he wished for passage to the world, he never expected a position of privilege might accompany redemption and he responded, 'No. Why me?'

Dina then explained, ‘-because you are the only one that ever asked, why me? For all the ages I have waited, all that found me and answered my question always described their descent from the blood of kings and those qualities that made them worthy to rule. All others told me why they were different, why they were special, what made them superior and what qualities prepared them to rule as king. None of those others ever passed beyond this place nor ever returned home. Your punishment is the consequence of the arrogance of your ancestors and those that desired my offer of kingship still carried that contamination. You alone recognize the proposal as preposterous and so now I know you have discarded your arrogance and proven yourself worthy of redemption.’

This is the ancient tradition of the Dimir and accounts for the migration, the arrival in Seilvhan and the merging of the clans.” Arieth concluded the story suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly, as Wyl estimated then as he prepared to ask a subsequent question, Arieth explained in conclusion, “The reason I tell you this story is to demonstrate that perhaps the number of years we are talking about is irrelevant. Maybe what really separates ages is not history or mythology, or even an absence of past consequential events. It might simply amount to the quality of the past events. Our current histories may focus on war but we clearly identify the source and cause of all war as something external that imposes itself upon us as if beyond our possible control, and we establish what we perceive as the first of these events as the basis for counting our years. The traditions we all dismiss as without credibility tell vaguer tales of action and consequence, offense and punishment with greater concentration on cautionary lessons than the assignment of guilt and innocence.”

Wyl inhaled slowly, flexed his brow and inquired, “Are you saying we’re trying to keep secrets from ourselves?”

“I am saying I have no way of knowing that with any certainty,” Arieth replied, “and that makes me suspicious. I am saying maybe we are entirely innocent and nothing of any significance occurred prior to our formal histories... or... maybe we are trying to keep secrets from ourselves because we want to believe we are innocent and nothing of any significance occurred prior to our formal histories. I am saying we should always exercise some degree of skepticism for the stories we tell ourselves and in any event, we should appreciate that perhaps sometimes, that which we do not know is of greater consequence than that which we do know.”

“Then what about this fight we’re going to fight?” Wyl wondered, “How do we know we’re innocent or guilty?”

The question appeared not to distress Arieth and she reasoned, “We have told ourselves and each other we are going for the purpose of preventing future war and possibly even preventing immediate war. It appears sincere to me and I trust it even if I am wrong.” She looked in his direction and establishing eye contact for emphasis, she stated, “The stories of divine intervention and instruction, punishment and redemption in the eyes of god are the best reasons to suspect we are trying to deceive ourselves. When you find yourself convinced of something because you believe the gods ordain it or you pursue divine purposes; that is the time to entertain the greatest suspicion of yourself. The traditions of Seilvhan and the Dimir define our ancient pasts as ordained by gods and I imagine your own traditions rely on gods or some form of extraordinary character to explain your past actions as beyond your own control.”

“Then gods are just an excuse for questionable motives and actions?” Wyl inquired.

“-or,” Arieth stated as if completing his thought, “the gods ordain our motives and actions. I am not saying it is beyond the realm of possibility, I am only pointing out mythology is the most likely and most convenient way to keep secrets from ourselves, and we should therefore, rather than ever assume the truth of such stories in any literal sense, simply appreciate the cautionary lessons it conveys. I suspect that has always been the true intent of all those that contribute to mythological tradition.”

Wyl shook his head somewhat vigorously and commented, “Life sure is complicated.” then glancing at Arieth, he inquired, “Have you spoken with Fae much yet?”

“A bit.” Arieth responded.

“-so I guess you probably enjoy his company pretty much?” Wyl suggested and although Arieth did not answer, she smiled in apparent appreciation of the thought.

As the company commiserated in a circle around the campfire and his seniors spoke, Wyl remained nearly silent, rolled smokes and watched Orna intently from the corners of his eyes, noticing she also remained quite silent, perhaps even suspiciously silent. Wyl wondered if Seilvhanians considered her Seilvhanian or if she explained herself to them in the same kind of vague terms with which she explained herself to him and other Highlanders. On random impulse, he congratulated himself once again for conducting so lengthy a conversation with Arieth while never once even almost saying the word ‘witch’, and immediately he felt a chill as he considered the word then shifted a glance to discover Orna staring at him mischievously from the corners of her eyes. With perhaps just a hint of a discreet smile, Orna redirected her attention to the campfire and Wyl wondered if her timing accounted as mere coincidence or if she in fact exercised some form of extraordinary power over him sensing his thought of the word ‘witch’ but neither theory seemed any more or less credible to him than the other.