

27. Souvenirs

In the winter of Edyn year 460, Ethaeldra died suddenly and quite unexpectedly while preparing herbal brew in her kitchen one morning at the age of forty-three years old. Helaena stayed near Fae during his mourning and at commemorative services for Ethaeldra, he clearly comforted her. Although he exhibited obvious despondence, Fae did not cry, at least not that anyone observed and not that anyone knew.

Shortly after Ethaeldra died, Fae retired in full from the militia and spent the duration of his years drinking to what some considered excess. Although his old friends might spot him on occasion and exchange some pleasantries, Fae tended to sit alone in silence and while some that knew him less than well might have thought him pitiful or pathetic those that knew him treated him with quiet dignity and respect.

In the end, Fae himself stated he considered it yet fair and just that he should not escape mortality without punishment. On a cool bright and windy autumn morning in Edyn year 463, an innkeeper discovered Fae dead in an alley at the age of fifty-one years and an honorable militia burial laid Fae to rest at the side of his beloved Ethaeldra. Those most intimate attended the commemoration in privacy and though most Highlanders knew his name as unofficial 46th interim Martial and hero of the eastern expedition, most would probably never know Fae on sight and knew nothing of his passing as well.

In the parlor of the house in which Ethaeldra and Fae resided, Helaena, Wyl and Gaeryn stood together in a moment of silence keenly appreciating the eerie similarity between the room and militia quarters Fae maintained in the latter half of his life. Three pieces of furniture and an ashtray, empty walls with age stained images of things that once were occupied the otherwise empty space, except at the fireplace where Fae hung his sword and dagger over the mantle in the crooked cross of the scouts. An object upon the mantle however attracted his attention and on inspection, Wyl discovered a small stuffed cuddly bear, the property of an anonymous young child long dead. The guest bedroom appeared nothing less than a memorial to Ethaeldra with all of her clothing, cosmetics and personal things stored neatly perhaps reverently in closets and drawers, decorations and knick-knacks upon walls and shelves as if perhaps awaiting her return.

The compartmentalized world of Fae - Everything in its right place.

*what value has reward without punishment
and what value have deeds without faith
which one or the other is more worthless
without everything in its right place*

At his own quarter in militia housing, Wyl maintained a familiar appearance with modest accommodations that demonstrated an even more conspicuous modesty still, with minimal simple furniture, empty walls, and an obvious absence of material possessions. Over his fireplace however, in the crooked cross of the scouts, Wyl hung the sword and a dagger Fae carried for his thirty-one years as a scout, and upon his mantle below rested a small stuffed cuddly bear, the property of an anonymous young child long dead.

*in an otherwise empty room these are my souvenirs
souvenirs of faith and sacrifice so I might go through all this every day
and always remember the necessity of faith and the reward of sacrifice
once I wished for treasure
but now I am cautious for what I wish and I am cautious of what I dream*

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On the eve of autumn festival in Edyn year 464, Wyl occupied a table next to a window at the Edyn Inn sipping punch and watching the sunset while a cool breeze chilled his face and hands in contrast to the warmth of the fireplace on his back. Jolting slightly in reaction to a firm poke to his shoulder, Wyl smiled at the sight of Gaeryn and Aengys as they joined him at the table and glared at his half empty drink.

After a moment of silent discomfort, Gaeryn finally commented, "You've always been weak on protocol, Wyl."

Wyl emptied the contents of his glass then argued, "You're taking the idea of the toast too literally. It doesn't have to be everyone's first drink of the day. Besides, I'm not even scouts anymore. I'm not here to toast my survival, I'm here to toast your survival."

"We're all here to toast **our** survival, Wyl." Gaeryn insisted, "Survival is survival and it doesn't matter who is and isn't a scout -and it **does** have to be the first drink of the day. That's the tradition. That's the way I did it with Fae for fourteen years. That's the way he did it for thirty years."

"I hate to break it to you, Gaer," Wyl advised, "but Fae always lied about that. He never waited for anybody. He always came straight here within an hour of arriving in town and if anyone was late, he faked his first drink with them later. I saw him do it."

"Bullshit." Gaeryn grumbled.

Aengys raised his eyebrows and inquired, "-so, when I came in late last year, you guys already drank without me?"

"Last year was a long time ago, Aengys." Gaeryn replied, "Nobody remembers an obscure detail like that a year later."

The threesome paused and smiled gratefully as a host placed three fresh glasses of punch on the table then all three stared at their drinks in silence for quite a long while, each in his own way contending with the harsh reality of his first annual survival toast ever without Fae present.

Gaeryn finally clutched his glass forcefully and lifted it then Wyl and Aengys followed and tapped their glasses together as Gaeryn stated with an uncharacteristically shaky voice, "Another year survived in a world of dangerous men."

Gulping their drinks half empty, the threesome resumed their silence for some time until Aengys suddenly blurted out, "We're done."

Wyl looked up slowly and asked, "Huh?"

"We're done." Aengys repeated, "We both just finished our last patrol."

"Really?" Wyl responded.

Aengys explained, "It's already been a good five years longer than ever I planned."

"This was my fifteenth year." Gaeryn advised, "I figure I've done more than my share. I've had enough of the other world and dangerous men. I'm getting too old for this shit."

Wyl nodded and asked, "-so what are you going to do now?"

"Make beer." Aengys replied.

"I'm going to grow cherries for a little while, at least for now." Gaeryn announced.

Both Wyl and Aengys glanced at Gaeryn mildly surprised by his answer.

"How about you, Wyl?" Aengys inquired.

With only a moment of thought, Wyl responded, "No. It's life for me."

Clearly surprised by so unequivocal a declaration, Gaeryn remarked, "You know, of everyone I've ever known in the militia, I always figured you least likely to stay with it."

“Me too.” Wyl concurred. Although his own resolve accounted to Wyl as unexpected and something that simply developed organically without conscious evaluation or intent, nothing he ever felt, thought, said, experienced or encountered ever surprised him again in his lifetime but for the enduring shock and disorientation of the hideous meanings he sensed in words such as freewill, liberty, prosperity and individualism, and conversely, the reassurance of the profound comfort he derived from words such as responsibility, obligation, sympathy and sacrifice.