

III

A Perfect World

Heading toward his house in the valley for the commencement of his annual winter hibernation, perhaps a bit lightheaded from beers, Wyl smiled with contentment for perfect riding conditions. The late afternoon sun drifted low and brilliantly illuminated the landscape with tinted hues while a crisp cool wind gusted and clouds of autumn leaves swirled across the road. With the first snows of winter mere weeks away, Wyl looked forward to the solitude in some ways but in other ways felt apprehension more immediately than ever before fearing boredom and isolation to an unfamiliar degree, and he pondered his fading enthusiasm for long spells of little activity and no human contact, long nights, long slumbers and fitful dreams.

Immediately upon settling into his house, Wyl prepared a large pot of vegetable barley soup upon which, combined with a loaf of bread, he would easily survive for at least a week. While encouraging weather prevailed, Wyl conducted long walks through the fields, woods and orchards on a daily basis, alternating each day between self-propulsion on foot and horseback. During his second horse ride the fourth day, Wyl wandered near three farmers in an apparently anxious condition and shortly thereafter, noticed two others speaking urgently, peering over hedges and pointing. Detecting an obvious state of excitement, Wyl scanned the horizon for indications of something out of arrangement then happened upon an old timer standing in the road. The old man squinted out into the distance then turned and repeated the action in the opposite direction as Wyl pulled his horse to a stop and asked, "What's up?"

"Witches." the old man declared in a near whisper with a hint of fear, "My neighbor over there says he seen them crossing that pasture then through the orchard, right out in broad daylight he says he seen them - Two of them."

Wyl raised his eyebrows and calmly inquired, "When?"

"He says no more than a quarter hour ago." the old timer replied then curling his lips, he raised his chin toward Wyl and inquired, "You militia, ain't you?"

"Yes. I'm militia." Wyl stated confidently then advised, "Tell everybody not to get hysterical. I'll go find the riders and help them to where they're going. Please go round up those folks over there and drag them all somewhere for a beer before one of them ends up spearing a cow with a pitchfork or something. Would you do that for me?"

The old timer shrugged, tilted his head and asserted, "I suppose I can manage that."

"Thanks." Wyl remarked with a nod then turned his horse and trotted out into the orchard. The idea of witches thrilled him beyond comprehension but Wyl simply scoffed at the reports of farmers and presumed the incident the product of superstition, hysteria, overactive imagination or any possible combination thereof. Guiding his horse the full length between two rows of cherry trees, Wyl glanced to his east and west at each gap between trees, and in fact, his direction of travel more than anything convinced him the sighting bore no credibility. The description of the course of travel placed the subjects on a route neither directly into nor out of the city of Edyn or any other significant population center for that matter and that simply did not make any sense to Wyl. Based on his militia experience, Wyl estimated with certainty witches would go somewhere for a reason as opposed to wandering aimlessly and in all probability would also use the roads. After reaching the end of the rows and entering a wider path dividing two orchards, Wyl peered across a large open field then intently scanned the full horizon and just as he turned to head home, he detected some distant motion from the corner of his eye. Spinning his horse urgently, Wyl glimpsed a vague hint of a figure slip into the edge of the woods.

Prodding his horse to a gallop across the field, Wyl felt sudden and unexpected exhilaration as he entered the tree line then again glimpsed motion at the other side of the woods. Twigs snapped and branches brushed across him while weaving swiftly through the trees and as Wyl emerged into an open meadow on the other side, he clearly observed at least one horse swing around a shrub thicket and toward deeper woodlands. Snapping the reins, Wyl propelled his horse into a sprint across the field then he pulled to a quick stop at the next tree line immediately convinced the subject or subjects spotted him and intentionally evaded him, for his pace steadily increased throughout the maneuvers and yet he gained no ground. The situation quickly escalated into a hot pursuit across several meadows and through a number of woods for almost an hour, gradually working into a westerly direction toward the Elbyrn Road running north and south. Nearing the road, Wyl guessed his subjects most likely ought to turn south because he held northward position on them and it appeared they avoided the roads in the first place then turning sharp under the canopy of a wooded hillside, he clearly spotted two riders emerge from the tree line and dart east across an open field. Wyl raced to a point to intercept the riders at a subsequent tree line but they looped around to the west and slipped back under the trees outflanking him to the north in the process. Doubling back, Wyl charged directly through the woods to the clearing on the other side but detected no sign of the subjects then sprinted north along the edge of the tree line convinced he could squeeze them out at the point at which the trees thinned but two horses suddenly bolted from the brush directly in front of him. With a squeal, his horse jolted and tossed him tumbling into the weeds and as Wyl struggled to his feet, two sword blades crossed against his neck.

Atop two horses with long curly manes that swept about in the wind, two small girls each dangled both legs on one side of their respective horses in apparent preparation to dismount if necessary while posed as if in mirror image. Over tight golden clothing, loose outer garments with scarves and sashes fluttered and flapped in the wind like stardust trails, one in shades of mint green and the other in exotic oranges.

“Why them he chases?” “Yes?” the two angrily demanded.

Holding his hands open toward the pair, Wyl declared, “I’m not armed and I’m not chasing you. I’m just trying to offer assistance.”

Inspecting Wyl suspiciously, the two subjects slowly withdrew their swords and slid them into sheaths. Although light from the setting sun still filtered at a low angle through the trees, the moon also floated low on the horizon and as Wyl stared, for a moment he observed the moon centered perfectly between the two girls frozen in their mirror image poses and he fell silent leaning to a side then stumbled to adjust his balance. With thick sharp accents and rolled consonants, the girls inquired, “What assistance” “he thinks of him they require,” “yes?” as if the suggestion perhaps offended them.

“Uh... you-” Wyl stammered hesitantly then twirling his hand in a circular motion, asserted, “You avoided the road. You doubled back multiple times. It looks to me like you’re lost and just trying to avoid attention.”

The pair stared and scowled, perhaps displeased over the criticism of their navigational skills and while their garments sailed and fluttered in the wind, Wyl impulsively thought, ‘orange witch - green witch’. Glaring more intently, the one in green suddenly declared, “Witches!” concluding with a judgmental and protracted hiss.

“I didn’t say that.” Wyl protested.

“He does not say” “but he thinks,” “yes?” the duo suggested.

“What you sense,” Wyl insisted, “is local custom but not my personal sentiment.”

Perhaps mildly impressed by the etiquette, the two smiled briefly then stated, “For his assistance they thank him.” “Yes, they go now.” then immediately prodded their horses.

Reaching to clutch at their reigns, Wyl implored, “No. Wait!” and the two halted abruptly with surprised expressions as he calmly explained, “I am militia. I will escort you anywhere you wish to go. It will be dark soon and I live not far from here. Come with me and I will provide food and shelter for the evening... Are you hungry?”

Tilting their heads as if tempted by the offer, the two girls stated in tones Wyl could not immediately distinguish as predictions or questions, “He has herbs for smoking” “and cherries,” “and lemons,” “yes?”

“Yes, I have smoking herbs,” Wyl affirmed then further advised, “and cherries... but I don’t have any lemons.”

Leaning slightly, the two insisted, “He has lemons.” “Yes.”

Although shaking his head, the assertion prompted Wyl to recall two bottles of lemon liqueurs in his pantry Gaeryn gave him the year prior after happening upon possession of some number of crates while on patrol. Wyl ended up with three bottles, two of which remained stashed in his pantry on the top shelf. “Yes, I have lemon liqueurs.” Wyl advised then insistently urged, “Come with me and I will make you a hot meal and give you smokes and lemon liqueurs, and provide a warm comfortable place to sleep then tomorrow morning, I will escort you wherever you wish to go.”

Leaning and flexing their necks, the two nonetheless remained silent and Wyl perceived that perhaps he successfully cast a spell over them then gesturing with his hands to hold them in place as if they might flea with the slightest lapse in direct attention, he collected his horse and mounted up then motioned inviting them to follow him. Somewhat reluctantly, the two girls prodded their horses and Wyl led them on a route he estimated would keep them beyond sight of any potentially hysterical witnesses until after dark then approached his house from the fields opposite the road, burrowed through the high thick hedge in back and directly into the horse shed. Slipping in the back door, Wyl ushered his guests to a corner just inside the doorway, fumbled in the dark to ignite several candles and lamps then held chairs for them seating the two at his table, motioned with his hands to hold them in place then went to his pantry to recover the bottles of lemon liqueurs. Upon emerging from the pantry, Wyl discovered the Orange Witch kneeling on his kitchen counter digging glasses out of a cabinet while the Green Witch rifled his parlor desk presumably for smoking materials.

“No, please,” Wyl nearly shouted, “sit... sit.” then collecting and steering the two like stray cattle back to the table, he insistently explained, “You are my guests. You sit and relax. You tell me what you want and then I get it for you. Understand?”

The two girls examined Wyl perhaps a bit skeptically as if his invitation required cautious consideration but finally nodded compliantly then he returned to the kitchen, retrieved his vegetable barley soup from the icebox, stoked a blaze in the stove and placed the pot and a loaf of bread atop it. Filling two small glasses with ice, Wyl fetched a cold bottle of beer for himself, placed the three items on the table, opened a liqueur bottle, filled the two glasses then took a seat with his guests and rolled smokes from his stash. While the soup warmed, Wyl stoked a cozy fire in the fireplace and the two girls smoked, drank cold lemon liqueur and rolled their heads on their shoulders panting and sighing with apparent approval for the accommodations.

After preparing the fire, Wyl served soup and bread then rejoined his guests at the table, and the party ate quietly while he struggled not to stare. Glancing constantly from the corners of his eyes convinced that every time he did so, one or both of his guests anticipated as much and already positioned their eyes to meet his, Wyl mostly stared nervously perhaps excessively at his soup. Consuming one bottle of the liqueur before and during the meal, and without further distraction of food, the two girls very quickly dispatched the second bottle. Wyl refreshed the ice supplies then produced a bottle of cherry liqueur, a commonly available cordial in the Highlands, along with another bottle of beer for himself and rejoined his guests at the table. With all activities dispensed, Wyl relaxed in his chair and indulged in a deliberate close inspection of the two girls while they produced a billowing cloud of herb smoke and drained the bottle of cherry liqueur. “You have suffered deprivation of small comforts in your travels.” Wyl remarked.

The pair acknowledged, “Yes.” “They suffer in their travels” “deprivations.”

While consciously concealing his entertainment over their speech practices, Wyl examining his guests intently and appreciated a captivating subtle and elusive beauty highlighted by petite dainty features and ancient hypnotic dark eyes with long delicate lashes and dramatic sharp corners. Under varying angles and lighting conditions their hair at times appeared the same dark black yet at other moments the hair of the Orange Witch might suddenly appear deep dark brown while the hair of the Green Witch appeared a rich almost unnatural scarlet that shimmered in an aurora of red tints. Establishing deliberate eye contact with one then the other, Wyl formally stated, “I am Wylmaer of Myelythbyrgh, farmer by birth, militia surveyor by choice. It would please me if you referred to me as Wyl.” The pair smiled pleasantly and almost imperceptibly leaned their heads in something of a bow then after an awkward anticipatory pause, Wyl eventually prompted, “-and you are...?”

“Yes.” “Etiquettes.” the pair declared jolting their eyes open as if without the queue, it might never have occurred to them to reciprocate introduction. “He forgives them their... eh...” “discourtesies.” “Yes?” “They are rustic hermits.” “They forget the etiquettes of men.” “They are” “Mara” “Dara.” they finally concluded as the Orange Witch turned and stared with an expression of disapproval at the Green Witch then inquired, “Why her name she must always state first, yes?” The Green Witch responded as if annoyed by such a petty complaint, “What differences to her these makes, yes? Only she that truly values such trivial preferences wastes efforts on complaint, yes?” The Orange Witch then argued, “Does she that contends such things not also waste efforts to address-”

“-I’m sorry.” Wyl interrupted as he stared in fascination completely baffled by which witch harbored which complaint and lost track of to which witch each name applied, “I’m confused. I lost track of which of you is which.” The two girls flexed their necks and glared with bent eyebrows and in reaction, Wyl defensively advised, “No. I said ‘which’... as in... which one of you is... M- Dara?”

Relaxing slightly and with apologetic smiles, the two repeated, “They are-” “-Mara” “... Dara.” the Orange Witch concluded with a tone that tapered to a nearly inaudible growl as she again turned and glared with disapproval at the Green Witch who drank from her glass, turned her head and vainly attempted to conceal a mischievous smile.

Wyl bent his eyebrows and intervened, stating, “I am very pleased to meet you both... Dara... Mara.” and the Orange Witch smiled appreciatively in his direction then cast one more disapproving glance at the Green Witch.

With a subsequent inspection, Wyl judged the two something less than identical but he entertained no certainty he might determine the difference should they depart the room, exchange clothing and return. For the time being, Wyl simply settled on a superficial mental note: *minty green* = *Mara*... (*the other one, Dara*).

“Mental notes,” “yes,” the pair commented, “These for him do not work.” “Upon next mornings, again their names he must ask” “and for him even in silence her names he arranges first.” Dara concluded the fragmentary string with an accusative glance.

Wyl guzzled down the last of his beer then fetched another along with fresh ice for his guests then returning to his chair, he stated, “I know the Red-” then stopped abruptly as Mara and Dara tilted their heads with cautionary glares from the corners of their eyes. Recovering from the near indelicacy, Wyl advised with exaggerated pronunciation, “I know Orna... and I know Antha... Do you also know these names?”

“Mm,” “perhaps yes,” “perhaps no.” Mara and Dara replied then shifting their eyes as if inspecting the room, they commented, “Very modest is he,” “no ornamentation nor trinket has he, yes?” “No meats in his box of ice.” “No children for him.” The two examined Wyl perhaps a bit suspiciously for a moment then inquired, “Why no children of men has he?” “Yes?”

Considering the question a bit invasive, Wyl equivocated, “I have a niece, Lyn. She’s six years old. She’s the daughter of my sister Myraen and her husband Rae. They have a farm in Myelythbyrgh. I grew up there. When my parents died, Myr and Rae-”

“-How their question these answers, yes?” Mara interrupted then Dara added, “Yes, of their intimate associations he inquires” “but invasive he considers their inquiries.” “Why he expects with him they confide” “when with them he only conceals,” “yes?”

Wyl stared at the table and sighed then stated, “All children are my children. I have no child of my own because I won’t choose this life for any other and I don’t want the helplessness and immobility of placing myself in a position with a single child to protect. I choose the protection of all children equally and with it, the freedom of motion so that I might always remain available to make a meaningful contribution without the restriction of commitment to a specific place or individual.”

Mara and Dara raised their eyebrows as if presuming he expected the declaration to impress them but Wyl sensed something perhaps more closely related to apprehension as the two further inquired, “No other associations then has he?” “No specific places or individuals to restrict his mobility?” “Yes?”

Wyl interpreted the inquiry as an invitation to earn confidence by demonstrating confidence and in addition considered the question quite trivial in nature so without hesitation, he stated, “I have three, maybe four intimate friendships but they don’t need my protection, so they don’t restrict my mobility.”

Mara and Dara stared expectantly and Wyl paused then guessing they desired more detail from him, he elaborated, “I’ve known Aengys and Gaeryn since I was seventeen, my first year in the militia. Neither of them are militia anymore. Gaeryn lives in Edyn and spends his time studying flowers, herbs and stuff like that, and Aengys mostly brews beer with his sister and their cousins but every once in a while, he does something with the militia for a season if some unusual activity looks interesting to him. Claer is a scout I met while conducting map surveys about five years ago.”

Raising their eyebrows slightly, Mara and Dara asked, “Scout girl does not restrict his mobility?” “For her he feels no commitment to specific place or individual?”

“No, I’m not in love with her if that’s what you’re intimating.” Wyl responded then immediately sensing doubt, he explained, “I am very fond of her, I admit, but she’s somewhere around fifteen years younger and would have no interest in someone like me. If I was younger or she was older, maybe-”

“-Maybe?” Mara repeated as both she and Dara leaned and stared.

“Yeah, maybe,” Wyl conceded, “but that doesn’t mean-”

“-About her he would tell them, yes?” Mara instructed.

Wyl huffed, folded his arms then rolled his eyes with a sigh and in capitulation, he stated, “She’s smart and witty, and surprisingly strong. You wouldn’t guess looking at her in a blouse or overcoat but her bare arms are muscular, she’s a bit stocky maybe and disproportionately wide in the hips and thighs but firm as a rock, and she’s real tough. I think she could crush a skull between her thighs and thrash half the men she crosses in a fistfight but even so, she’s still feminine and pretty. Not obvious pretty in a way that would draw the eye or account as immediately desirable at a glance but a discreet kind of pretty you have to pay attention to appreciate. That’s what’s so special about it. Appreciating her beauty is like knowing a secret that not just anybody can figure out... and she’s got this dark red hair-”

“-Quite fond of her is he then, yes?” Mara asked.

Perhaps a bit embarrassed by the intimacy of his comments, Wyl nevertheless composed himself and reiterated, “Yes, I am fond of her as I already stated.”

“But for her he would never commit to place or restrict his mobility?” Mara asked.

“Well, I’m not saying it would be painless-” Wyl admitted then argued, “This is all hypothetical anyway because we’re not in love or anything-”

“-For what meaningful contribution he preserves his mobility?” Mara inquired.

“I’m not sure exactly.” Wyl answered, “We expected some kind of new age of war to occur some time ago but it never happened or at least not yet anyway. I don’t have a plan, I just always wanted to be ready at a moment’s notice, and something like children would prevent me from involvement.”

“Involvement in what?” Mara pressed, “At what moment of notice, yes?”

“I don’t know.” Wyl insisted, “I thought maybe one day someone would come along-”

“-Someone?” Mara asked. “Come along?” Dara added then they both continued, “Whom he thinks might some day” “come along, yes?” “What this someone will do” “involving his mobility, yes?” “For his Red Witch he waits?” “Yes?”

“-or something like that.” Wyl equivocated.

“-or someone like that?” Mara asked. Before Wyl might respond, Dara remarked, “Three are these.” Wyl turned his attention to her and she reminded him, “-‘or four’ he tells them, yes?”

“Right.” Wyl acknowledged, “The fourth would be Jaenefyr. She’s the Martial, 46th Martial to be precise. I’ve been acquainted with her most of my adult life but I’ve known her personally since she became Martial about ten years ago. Pretty much everything I do in the militia involves direct contact with her. She’s about the nicest human I’ve ever known in my life-”

“-Tomorrow he will see Martial, yes?” Mara asked abruptly.

“Actually no.” Wyl informed her, “I may not see the Martial again until spring in fact.” then with a moment of consideration, he inquired, “Do you want me to see the Martial tomorrow? Is that why you’re here? You want to see the Martial?”

Mara nodded quite subtly then both she and Dara appeared immediately pleased as Wyl assured them, “I can take you to the Martial tomorrow.” then he added after a moment of thought, “We should leave before sunrise so-”

“-so his rustic farmers do not panic upon observation of witches?” Mara anticipated with a sarcastic tone.

“I in fact intended to avoid the mention of any such indelicate characterization,” Wyl responded, “and I was going to say, leave before sunrise so we can get there before noon because the morning is the best time to find her in the office.” Mara appeared slightly embarrassed by her pessimistic expectations but Wyl nonetheless consoled, “I apologize on behalf of any of my people that may have offended you in your travels through my country. If they understood they were hurting your feelings, they wouldn’t do it.”

“She does not say her feelings they hurt.” Mara countered.

“All right.” Wyl responded, “Hurt, offended... I’m not trying to pick words for you. I’m apologizing for any less than courteous treatment.” Both Mara and Dara smiled graciously and Wyl asked, “Would you like to know anything else?”

Mara and Dara considered for a moment then concluded, “They will let him know” “if more to them something occurs,” “yes?”

“Yes.” Wyl repeated then considering his confidence test concluded, he revisited his initial question, inquiring, “Orna and Antha... Do you know these names?”

“Mm,” “perhaps yes,” “perhaps no.” Mara and Dara replied.

Wyl blinked slowly, drank the last of his beer from the bottle, nodded then stood and informed them, “I am going to prepare your sleeping accommodations now. I have but one bed, but it is not a particularly small bed and I imagine it should comfortably accommodate the both of you if this meets with your satisfaction.”

The two guests glanced about the room and asked, “If he prepares for them” “his beds,” “where he sleeps,” “yes?”

“I assure you I will be more than comfortable on the couch.” Wyl insisted, “Please refuse no accommodations from me. It is bad etiquette to refuse a host.”

Mara and Dara bowed politely then Wyl retreated to his room, stripped down the bed and remade it with fresh linens, tidied up quickly and stopped in the washroom to wipe down all the surfaces with a damp cloth then he laid out fresh toweling and soaps.

As Wyl returned to the parlor, Mara and Dara commented, “To them he is very kind and generous.” “His hospitality they appreciate.”

While stirring the fire, Wyl glanced toward Mara and Dara over his shoulder and observed them in mirror image one of the other with legs dangled over the arms of the chairs. As his eyes drifted up length of legs to faces dressed in cosmetics worn thin and a bit smudged from travel, dark ruby lips and tints around eyes with pronounced shapely lines, Wyl thought it curious perhaps even odd the two might engage in such a fragile practice in so rugged and rustic a place as his homeland. Twisting their necks and tilting their heads, the two examined Wyl somewhat deliberately as he passed close behind Dara on return to his chair and inhaled discretely through his nose detecting the remnants of intoxicating floral fragrances then glancing again at their faces as he lowered himself to a seat he pled, “Forgive me, please. I know I scrutinize perhaps to a point of intrusiveness, and I am aware you notice it. You are both very beautiful and quite compelling. If I thought I could do as I please, I would stare at you for hours. I apologize for any discomfort or offense and ask only you consider my fascination complimentary.”

Mara and Dara both in fact appeared only to attempt to conceal appreciative satisfaction in modesty, and they bowed slightly indicating no offense, finished off their smokes and drinks then announced, “They sleep now in preparation” “for early departures, yes?”

Springing to his feet, Wyl escorted his guests to the bedroom where they turned their faces over the bed, inhaling the scent of fresh linens, smiled fondly and remarked, “He spoils them,” “fresh linens,” “smoking herbs,” “liqueurs,” “cherries,” “lemons...”

Wyl bowed his head slightly, exited the room and curled up on the couch half expecting the presence of two witches in his bed to taunt and torment him throughout the night but to his surprise, he slept soundly.

Awaking well before sunrise, Wyl prepared quickly and silently in the washroom, stirred the embers in the fireplace stoking up a small blaze to prepare brew and as the water approached boiling point, muffled voices accompanied lamplight that flickered from under the washroom door. Focusing on his immediate tasks, Wyl prepared brews while voices combined with occasional splashing, clinking and rustling of object continued within the washroom. A compelling curiosity to know of what two witches might speak in a washroom in the morning lured Wyl in spite of attention to mundane task and finally giving in to impulse, he crept over and leaned near to decipher in mid sentence, “-how then they otherwise will find Martial, yes? In woods they will wanders lost and them he will again find. To Martial he will escort them and these they cannot avoids.” “To where they go he will then knows.” “With Martial only they will speak then where to they go he does not know.” “How she knows Martial does not tell him?” “Martial they ask not him to tell, yes? Martial they tell he follows them and these Martial must prevents. To him Martial will speak while in other rooms they sneak out windows, yes?” “No. Them he follows even if out windows they sneak. What time she thinks these delays him? His country he knows. He catches them and follows. These yesterdays he does. These again he will do.” “They will then strike him on his heads and leave his country while on roadsides he sleeps, yes? What else she will do? He catches them now and with these they must contend. To Martial he will escort them and they determine then how him they make go home, yes?” “Beyond his mountains he will follow them. Him she hears say for them many years he waits.” “What to her she suggests, yes? They invite him? These she knows they will not do.”

Subsequent to lengthy perhaps somewhat tense pause, one voice lamented with a sigh, “Why do not they leave him in bushes? Why to his home they follows?” “Cherries... lemons.” the other contended. “Mm, yes, lemons... With treats he lures them. Of her weaknesses he takes advantages.” The other voice scoffed and countered, “On all of earth, she is not only witch fond of lemons, yes? Of lemons, she also is equally fond. Him they both follow for lemons and for exclusive blame neither is responsible, yes?” “Mm, yes, yes.” the other reluctantly conceded yet then continued in recrimination, “For dark she tells her wait. If for dark they wait, they travel on roads and them he never sees.” “Why so obsessed is she with assignment of blame, yes? In daylight yesterday they travels, them he sees, him they follow home for lemons and in his home are they today. To Martial he will escort them and what yesterday they do, they do not today undo, yes? He follows them now and for these they must make plans. They do not prevent him from following them today by arguing about lemons and yesterday-” “-Shh!” one voice abruptly silenced the other.

With a sharp gasp, a voice angrily declared, “He listens!”

With flushed face and racing heart, Wyl dove and lunged at the fireplace then poked at the embers frantically attempting to appear casual. The bathroom door clicked and swung open as one of his two guests stepped out and scanned the room then focused on Wyl at the fireplace. Turning casually Wyl observed one of his two guests in stiff posture with hands on her waist glaring at him in her tight golden clothing and mint green transparent fabrics. With a smile, Wyl said cheerfully, “Good morning, Ma-”

“-She is Dara!” she barked angrily as she turned her head slightly to examine him up and down from the corners of her eyes then finally remarked sarcastically, “He must for himself make today new mental notes, yes?”

Flinching with a submissive and compliant nod, Wyl said softly, “All right.”

Mara joined Dara in the doorway and the two froze still like statues glaring at Wyl while he breathed nervously then finally with concocted innocence, asked, “What?”

After glaring silently for an excruciating duration, Mara and Dara then demanded, “Why on them he spies, yes?” “Why for he sneaks?”

Wyl shook his head and protested, “No. Spy? No. I’m not spying on you.”

As Mara and Dara bent twisted lips in skepticism, Wyl stood and extending his hand toward the table, he insisted, “Please, come sit down. Relax and have breakfast.”

Reluctantly breaking their stare, the pair turned their heads, glanced at the table and instantly their faces relaxed as their shoulders sagged. On the table, Wyl arranged two plates and utensil sets around a large bowl of chilled apple and pear slices with cherries, a basket with a loaf of hot bread, a steaming carafe of herbal brew, two mugs, cream and sweet syrups, and at least twenty smokes neatly rolled and arranged into a carrying tin. With jaws dangling, the two breathed heavily then turned and stared at Wyl with childlike innocent eyes, and whispered, “He spoils them.” “Yes.”

“Yes.” Wyl repeated, “He spoils them.”

Wyl cleaned up after breakfast then went to the shed to prepared the horses, returned to snuff out the fire, closed up the house then led his visitors out to the backdoor and extended his hand as they remarked, “They go now,” “yes?”

With a smile, Wyl repeated, “They go now, yes.” then stood alone in the kitchen for a moment before exiting, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose savoring intoxicating floral fragrances and herbal smoke aroma he appreciated as the uniquely compelling trace indication of the presence of witches.

The rising sun peaked over the horizon and warmed the cold morning air as the party traveled west along the road. Producing the carrying tin of rolled smokes from a pocket or pouch, Mara then passed it to Dara and they both rolled their heads on their shoulders as they smoked in apparent affirmation of their pleasure and satisfaction while glancing at Wyl over their shoulders with sweet appreciative smiles in mirror images.

In an apparently relaxed and content mood, Mara and Dara commented as if only to each other, “Upon them he frequently stares.” “Yes, curve of waist and hip swaying atop horse,” “firm and shapely feminine legs-”

“-I already said I apologize.” Wyl protested, “You are shapely, feminine, yes, all that. I confess. I am only human and it is natural for me to admire natural beauty.”

“Mm, natural he contends.” the two mocked, “Yes, natural... and so convenient is nature.” “Yes. Not responsible is he for his actions.” “Nature is to blame.” “Perhaps also nature is to blame” “when on them he spies behind closed doors” “of washing rooms in his home?” “Yes?”

Perhaps for no reason other than to change the subject, Wyl advised, "It's washing 'room', by the way. I only have one - It's not plural." The two both stared at Wyl over their shoulders with disapproving expressions as if he disparaged their heritage and he mitigated the ostensible insult explaining, "I noticed you do that a bit, unnecessarily pluralize-" but as his explanation obviously only agitated, he simply cut his commentary short and conceded, "It's only a trivial technicality. Your speech is articulate and clear, and that's all that really matters. It's just a bit unconventional by Highland standards... That's the only reason I bring it up."

Mara and Dara smiled, tilted their heads then inquired, "Why to themselves and their country do they refer as, 'Highlander' and 'Highland', yes? Do they no longer remember traditional tribal names Geaelen and Tearen?"

"No." Wyl replied, "We still recognize those as our only formal names. A long time ago, we somehow adopted the 'Highland' thing as an informal name. We use it pretty much like a nickname I guess but in any kind of formal context like titles on a map, we would never call our country 'Highland'."

"They realize," Mara and Dara further inquired, "origin is derogatory?" "Neighbors to them refer as 'Highlander' in crude oversimplification," "eh... refusal to accommodate formal name," "as insults, yes?"

"Oh, yeah, we know that." Wyl confirmed, "I guess the first to use the name did it out of mockery, sarcasm or something along those lines. We call ourselves 'Highlander' in good humor the way we call ourselves 'rustic'. We know we're rustic but we're not ashamed of it and in fact consider it an essential preservative component of our culture. I suppose calling ourselves 'Highlander' is a sort of extension of that tradition." Pondering for a moment, Wyl then inquired, "You do realize your reference to yourselves as 'witch' is pretty much the exact same thing?" Both Mara and Dara raised their eyebrows and flexed their chins in appreciation of the point then Wyl inquired in addition somewhat playfully, "You furthermore recognize that your use of the word also answers my question about your association with Orna and Antha, right?"

"Mm, not necessarily." the pair argued, "He does not know personally" "every single individual of his clans, yes?" "He furthermore recognizes his gross assumption" "that clan name proves personal associations" "as yet another insult, yes?" "Yes?"

With a sigh, Wyl conceded, "Yes. You're right. Again my apologies."

Leading his guests into the city through the horse yard and the side gate into the militia compound having traveled through the woods around concentrations of homes and shops at intersections, Wyl estimated he in fact delivered his provocative visitors inside the city walls with complete discretion but perhaps for three militiapersons within the compound. Subsequently navigating overgrown alleyways and rear yards to approach the office of the Martial from the back opposite the streets, by midmorning Wyl closed the horses into the side yard then entered the office from the backdoor only to discover it vacant.

While Wyl prepared a pot of brew, Mara and Dara wandered about examining the office and as they leafed through a stack of maps on a drawing table, Wyl looked over their shoulders and commented, "That's what I do. I make maps. I made most of those."

With gracious smiles, Mara and Dara inspected the maps fingering the paper edges gingerly and then appeared to lose interest completely and suddenly. Eventually sipping brew at the table, the pair inquired, "How long for Martial" "they wait," "yes?"

"She'll be here sometime." Wyl assured then asked, "Are you in a hurry?"

“No.” “No hurries.” the two answered, “They merely inquires.”

Wyl reinforced, “She always shows up sometime every day and when she’s not here first thing in the morning that usually means she’ll show up sometime before noon.”

Mara and Dara smiled politely in response and drank their brew but Wyl easily detected mounting boredom and he suggested, “If you would like, there are several nearby inns. We could go to-”

“-They have” “lemons, yes?” the two immediately inquired.

Flexing his brow skeptically, Wyl advised, “They probably won’t have lemons, but I can assure you with every confidence they will have cherries.”

“They go now.” “Yes?” the two immediately responded.

“They go now. Yes.” Wyl compliantly affirmed.

Three horses gated into the fenced side yard served as indication of the presence of visitors to Jaenefyr should she arrive in their absence so Wyl consequently escorted Mara and Dara on foot along the sidewalks toward the Edyn Inn only a few blocks from the office. Although Wyl appreciated a visit to the Edyn in broad daylight immediately cancelled out all previous efforts at stealth, he primarily concerned himself with avoiding panic in the countryside. In the city, while most residents would predictably react to the appearance of witches, the presence of militia balanced apprehensions enough to prevent disruptive overreaction.

The two strangers accounted as a curious sight on the streets of Edyn and a militia escort probably served to decrease suspicion but not curiosity, and if anything, the presence of Wyl as escort most likely accounted as the greatest curiosity of all. Virtually all bystanders and passersby that noticed the threesome at least stared, some even altering course to avoid them. Scattered conversations within the Edyn crashed to silence and all eyes stared as the three stepped through the doorway but Wyl nonetheless, surveyed the room and offered a pleasant smile. In fact, Wyl derived great pleasure perhaps even a degree of pride that any should observe him in the company of two such remarkably beautiful girls and he relished the thought of the gossip it would surely inspire. Leading his two companions to a table, Wyl held chairs for them and they required a moment to adjust weapons, accessories and miscellaneous articles of clothing, but finally lowered themselves to sit, smiling up at him in appreciation while he watched with fascination as they lifted their legs up, pulled on and adjusted their stockings and extremities. Slowly raising their eyes in the direction of Wyl as they lowered their legs into place, Mara and Dara commented, “Upon their feminine legs he looks” “and upon backsides while in vulnerable positions,” “yes?” “These are natural also?” “Yes?”

“We’ve already been over this, right?” Wyl inquired then reminded them, “I said you should consider it a compliment.”

“These excuse forever every indelicacy then, yes?” Mara asked while Dara asked nearly simultaneously, “This is suggestion or is instruction, yes?”

Wyl patiently replied, “No it does not excuse everything forever” looking Mara in the eye then redirecting his attention to Dara, advised, “nor is it an instruction.” then alternating between the two, he equivocated, “I have no authority to issue instructions to you or the wisdom to determine you might even benefit from as much. I have simply explained the nature of my compulsion to you. It is an admission and an apology. I neither defend myself nor instruct you to accommodate my continuing indiscretion and lack of self-control but merely humbly ask for tolerance and patience.”

Both Mara and Dara shrugged dismissively then inquired, “They are beautiful?” “Yes?”

Crossing his arms and squinting in an expression of confusion, Wyl inquired, “Are you insecure about-” but a host interrupted and he silently thanked his luck for it then requested cherry liqueurs for his guests, a beer for him and a basket of assorted nuts and pastries as well.

The party ate and drank in silence for a little while then Mara wiped her fingers on a table towel, dabbed at her lips and stated casually, “After to his Martial they speak, they thank him for his assistance then home he goes, yes?”

Wyl nodded and inquired nonchalantly, “Where else would I go?”

Mara and Dara carefully examined him for a moment apparently skeptical then advised, “Them he does not follow.” “Yes?” “To his Martial they speak” “then to his home he returns,” “yes?”

“All right. Yes.” Wyl assured then with obvious sarcasm, he asked, “Is it okay if I stop for groceries or to visit friends along the way or do you mean immediately?”

Mara and Dara both flinched, exercising an admirable degree of composure if not an excruciatingly uncomfortable duration of silent facial contortions but then leaned near on their elbows and calmly but firmly reinforced, “These he promises.” “Yes?”

With a sigh of frustration, Wyl snapped somewhat irritably in response, “Yes. I promise I will go away. I get it. You don’t have to rub it in.”

With eyebrows raised in apparent surprise over the reaction, Mara and Dara then exchanged looks with each other and advised, “Eh... These for his own safety” “they tell him.” “Yes?” Wyl shook his head prompting them to confide in addition, “If them he follows” “harm these causes him.” “Him they would not cause harm.”

“The world is a hazardous place, my dear innocent ones.” Wyl argued, “I can find a thousand ways to get hurt without your help.”

With a pause, the two asked delicately, “Eh, why for with them” “he is angry?”

Smiling sympathetically and with a conciliatory tone, Wyl explained, “I’m not angry. I’m sorry if I upset you. You wouldn’t understand. We don’t have to talk about it anymore. I will introduce you to the Martial then I will go home.”

Mara and Dara nodded slightly then impulsively added in their defense, “Him they do not chase away in rejection.” “He spoils them” “and these they appreciates.” “They wish only” “they do not harm him.” “Yes?”

“Yes.” Wyl acknowledged, “I appreciate your concern but what harm do you fear? You don’t know I won’t get killed by wolves on my way home.”

The hypothetical premise appeared to confuse Mara and Dara, and they subsequently inquired, “Eh, do wolves in autumn seasons,” “prowl his countryside?”

Attempting to conceal laughter in concern the two might interpret it as ridicule, Wyl stated, “I didn’t mean that literally. It’s just a joke... uh... an improbable exaggeration to emphasize a point... and um... ‘autumn seasons’ is another example of an unnecessary plurality. ‘Autumn season’ is sufficient. We only have one autumn season...”

The two stared at Wyl with blank expressions for a long period then blinked a number of times, flexed their necks and informed him, “Of wolves,” “groceries” “and visits with friends” “they do not speak.” “Yes?” “They wish only...” “eh...”

“What?” Wyl prompted.

“They would not,” Mara and Dara struggled to conclude, “eh...” “make of him...” “They would not make of him” “zombie slaves,” “yes?”