

Wyl scoffed in exasperation then asked, “That’s it? Zombie slaves?”

“They believe for her” Mara and Dara explained, “anything he would do, yes?”

“Her, who?” Wyl demanded suspiciously and as the pair remained stubbornly silent, he forcefully asked, “Are you zombie slaves of the Red Witch?”

Obviously perplexed by the question, Mara and Dara recoiled slightly but Wyl repeated with greater deliberation, “Are you her zombie slaves? -or do you coincidentally and independently share a common purpose?” The two shifted and leaned in what appeared substantial effort to consider the challenges. Wyl allowed but a moment then stated more directly, “I am not under a spell. I am already a zombie slave paralyzed by a world with disarrangements so profound, I don’t know how or where to begin to contribute but I want to make a constructive contribution nonetheless. I can’t figure it out by myself but I know what side I am on. I may not be able to contribute in any way other than following instructions but that doesn’t mean my loyalty is mindless. If I hear an instruction I know I object to, I’ll let you know. I want to actively participate in something more meaningful than my own personal comfort and contentment. I understand that means discomfort, risk and compromise. I make this offer fully informed and I don’t care about consequences. I just want to be a constructive part of... whatever it is all you witches are up to.”

Squeezing their eyelids until only narrow slivers of eye remained visible as if again struggling to restrain anger, apparently due mostly to his use of the word ‘witches’, Mara and Dara nevertheless maintained their composure then Mara alone advised Wyl, “These are not for him. Neither authority nor wisdom has he, he tells them, to instruct or inform them. How then does he presume authority or wisdom to determine making of maps less than meaningful and constructive contributions, yes? Every contribution is meaningful and less than spectacular action does not diminish value thereof. He wishes not for constructive contribution, for these he already does, and these he knows. For what he wishes is contribution other than that with which he is familiar or that which he considers routine and in these, him they will not indulge. They will not indulge thirst for heroic action and romantic adventure.”

Wyl stared mesmerized not only by the accent he considered so exotic and compelling but by the complexity and clarity of the comments as well. The brevity of their shared phrases in what seldom amounted to much more than sentence fragments lulled Wyl into low expectations of the two but the sudden uncharacteristic sophistication demonstrated by Mara surprised him. Collecting his thoughts and absorbing the meaning of the words, Wyl opened his mouth to object but Mara silenced him with a wave of her finger and in apparent concession, she stated, “They suspend for now their instruction he goes home, yes?” then Dara rejoined as they both further admonished, “To Martial first they speak.” “His words they promise they will consider but they advise him,” “set not too high his expectations.” “In all likelihood their feelings on these” “do not change for any reason... but they will consider,” “yes?”

“Fair enough.” Wyl replied then spoke no more of the subject.

With appreciative smiles, the pair then drank another round while quietly inspecting the interior details of the Edyn Inn and after emptying their glasses they placed them onto the tabletop with two soft thuds and declared, “They go now.” “Yes.”

“Yes, they go now.” Wyl confirmed glancing at Mara then Dara as they stood from their chairs and leaned to readjust articles subsequently turning his eyes away with an apologetic expression when the two cast sudden cautionary looks in his direction.

Upon return to the office of the Martial, the threesome entered to discover Jaenefyr present and as she looked up toward Wyl she remarked, “I thought that was your horse out there-” but then abruptly fell silent and gawked for a moment as she turned her attention to Mara and Dara.

Extending his hand in a formal gesture toward his guest nearest him in mint green outer clothing, Wyl smiled politely and announced, “Jaenefyr, this Ma-”

“-She is Dara!” Dara stated forcefully.

Wyl collected himself and continued, “Yes. This is Dara, and this-”

“-So... finally comes her names first, yes?” Mara taunted.

“Mara... please.” Wyl admonished then attempting to conclude the introductions, he continued, “This is Dara and this is Mara... They are...-” As both the pair tilted their heads and rolled their eyes up toward Wyl, he hesitated to characterize them then desperately declared, “-foreign travelers... and they wish to meet with you.”

Approaching Jaenefyr, Mara and Dara each raised one hand to her face and caressed her cheeks in mirrored images of one another while Jaenefyr appeared to swoon slightly then regained her balance as they stepped back. “Of course. Yes. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Jaenefyr stated extending her hand toward the table inviting them to sit.

Shuffling around the table, Wyl attempted to handle the chairs and Jaenefyr smiled graciously while Mara and Dara looked him up and down somewhat suspiciously, rolled their eyes and smirked apparently growing a bit weary of his courtesies perhaps sensing his conduct concealed a somewhat self-serving motive.

“Would you like something to drink?” Jaenefyr asked.

Raising their eyebrows, Mara and Dara guessed Jaenefyr might also possess lemon liqueurs then Jaenefyr directed Wyl to a cabinet behind her desk and he prepared service for four with ice, rounded up a couple of ashtrays and returned to the table.

Mara and Dara smiled politely, sipped from their drinks then confided, “To neighboring cities they intend to travel.” “With information, map and instruction,” “Edyn may assist them in these they expect.” “Rustic hermits are they and unaccustomed with local conducts and courtesies,” “yes?” “Edyn would perhaps assist their acclimation, yes?”

Jaenefyr opened her mouth and stretched her eyelids speechless for a moment then in a desperately encouraging tone, she stated, “Of course.”

Intervening, Wyl asked, “Jaenefyr, with your permission?”

As Mara and Dara touched her hands with their fingertips, Jaenefyr smiled slightly and adjusted in her chair then nodded toward Wyl and he exhibited a passive expression for a moment then proceeding delicately, he commenced, “Mara, Dara-”

“-One times,” Dara interrupted, “her name he says first... then immediately-”

“-Dara?” Wyl admonished leaning in her direction and looking into her eyes then inquired, “Could we focus on the subject?” As Dara petulantly wobbled her head in apparent affirmation, Wyl remarked, “Thank you.” then advised, “I presume you would prefer to exercise some modicum of discretion in your travels and you probably wish to avoid spectacles such as the group of excited farmers you encountered yesterday as well. You want us to show you how to blend in and avoid attracting too much attention, is that it?” More by abstinence than positive indication, the pair intuitively indicated an affirmative and Wyl nodded then concluded, “I think it may require more attention than you appreciate. You can make a number of immediate and significant improvements with some minimal instruction but... uh-”

As Wyl struggled to equivocate, the two girls stared blankly until Jaenefyr intervened to counsel, “We can give you maps, supplies, clothing and materials, and as Wyl says, we can certainly give you plenty of advice. We don’t know what your plans are or how much time you expect this to take but in all good conscience, I have to tell you, if you are planning on blending inconspicuously into a population, it will require more than a day-”

“-Two days?” Mara asked.

“No, I’m afraid not.” Jaenefyr replied sympathetically then explained, “Winter arrives soon. If you stay here until spring, we can prepare you quite thoroughly,” Mara and Dara appeared immediately distressed but Jaenefyr calmed them with a hand gesture and concluded, “or if you can’t wait that long, we can provide you with guides.”

Appearing genuinely humiliated by the suggestion, Mara and Dara stiffened then confidently protested, “No.” “Alone they travel.” “In day or two,” “they learn what in day or two they learn, yes?” “Then they go now.”

Wyl insisted, “You are here. You asked for assistance and you have found it-”

Jaenefyr pressed a hand against Wyl on his shoulder to silence him then leaned onto her elbows, clasped Mara and Dara each by a hand and as if speaking to children, she asked, “You came here for Edyn Martial and council you know you trust, correct?” Mara and Dara both nodded somewhat reluctantly then Jaenefyr stated gently but firmly, “Do one of the two things I advise or your travels will bring you only frustration.” The two stared for a moment then lowered their eyes evidently signaling a degree of acceptance, and in reinforcement or perhaps denying them the opportunity to change their minds, Jaenefyr quickly advised, “I can arrange a party for you equipped and prepared to go in no more than a day or two. You are of course welcome to stay until spring but if you elect to go with scouts, I advise the sooner the better. A freak snowstorm in early autumn is always a possibility. One good storm can seal off the passes for the season and that can delay your travels by weeks. I will arrange a scout party and in the meantime, if you change your minds and decide to stay a while, we can always call it off, all right?” Mara and Dara smiled gratefully even though obviously less than enthusiastic but Jaenefyr in addition sympathetically consoled, “Don’t worry. I assure you, whoever I arrange for you will be very discreet and very committed. I promise you will be pleased.”

Although they obviously felt disappointment that might continue to sting for some time, Jaenefyr also just as obviously reassured Mara and Dara with gentle persuasion and quiet confidence, and they ultimately appeared resigned to the conditions.

Surprising Jaenefyr to a degree with presumably continuing involvement, Wyl stated directly to her, “I suggest Claer and Aengys.”

“Aengys?” Jaenefyr responded.

“I think this will interest him and if so, you won’t find a better candidate for something like this.” Wyl explained.

Jaenefyr stared at Wyl for a moment and appeared to restrain a smile to some extent then asked, “Am I to assume your third nomination is as obvious as it appears?”

“Yes.” Wyl confidently answered. Mara and Dara shifted their eyes suddenly between Wyl and Jaenefyr but before they might speak or ask a question, Wyl insisted, “Jaenefyr, assess my nomination of Claer and Aengys for them, please.”

Looking the pair directly in their eyes, Jaenefyr informed them, “I can think of no one else any better qualified or prepared for such a thing. You will find them both quite discreet, very helpful and very loyal. They are excellent recommendations.”

Mara and Dara demonstrated confidence in the judgment and even responded, “Very well.” “Yes.”

Jaenefyr then further advised, “Although in every other way, his qualifications are excellent, I am compelled to inform you that he is technically not a scout and his experience is limited to a single year as an apprentice, and that, more than twenty years ago. However, two companions as competent and experienced as Claer and Aengys will easily compensate for any lack of specific expertise in that area, and as I say, by all other criteria, he is an excellent nomination that will account for a well rounded party to act as your guide.”

Mara and Dara glanced at Wyl with an obvious degree of surprise or even skepticism then Dara impulsively asked, “Of him she speaks?”

Nearly interrupting, Wyl asked Jaenefyr, “You approve then of my nominations?”

Before Jaenefyr responded, Mara and Dara angrily admonished, “Of these to him they already speak” “more than one times!” “Yes?”

“-and you said you would give me fair consideration.” Wyl reminded them then redirecting his attention he implored, “Jaenefyr?”

“I approve of this.” Jaenefyr reaffirmed, “This is my recommendation. We won’t try to force anything on you and you are more than welcome to reject any or all three of my recommendations but as I’ve said, I don’t think any alternates I consider will ever account as any better guides for you.” If anything, continuing resistance on the part of Mara and Dara would only contradict the council of the Martial, which accounted as the very reason for their presence and consequently, after a moment staring in silence, the two tentatively appeared to accept the proposal. Jaenefyr then concluded, “I will send for Claer and Aengys, and we’ll all meet at the Edyn tomorrow night. If after meeting with your party you have any reservations, tell me and we’ll do whatever we have to do to make you comfortable with the arrangements.” With submissive smiles of apparent concession, Mara and Dara both nodded without further question or comment then Jaenefyr pushed herself up as she announced, “Very well then, tomorrow night at the Edyn, which means I have to say goodbye for now and go work on preparations.”

The group followed Jaenefyr outside then Mara and Dara each placed the backside of a hand on her cheeks, slid them down and around her shoulders into a brief embrace then she departed along the street. The moment they judged Jaenefyr beyond range to overhear, Mara and Dara spun and scowled at Wyl then informed him in a relatively intimidating fashion, “Aware of their concerns is he.” “Him very closely they watch, yes?” “If them he displeases, home they will send him.” “Yes?”

“Yes. I understand.” Wyl acknowledged, “That is all I ask. If at any time you should change your minds about me, I expect you may strike my heads and I accept that as the consequence of my action.”

Glaring menacingly, the two leaned near and softly muttered, “In any event,” “they will at their convenience” “strike his heads.”

With the understanding his reference to ‘striking his heads’ qualified as an admission to spying on them in the washroom, Wyl nodded submissively and pled, “I’m sorry about the spying. I swear, I had no devious intent. I just thought you sounded so cute and I expected to hear you talking about cosmetics or something. You know... girly stuff.” Clearly only more agitated, Mara and Dara panted angrily while glaring menacingly. In near panic, Wyl concluded, “Uh, they go now, yes? They also have things to do.”

Perhaps distracted by the change of subject, Mara and Dara inquired, “What things” “have they also to do,” “yes?”

“First we will take our horses over to the stable” Wyl explained, “then we’ll go to the warehouse and put together our traveling gear.” Acknowledging a reaction of curiosity, Wyl added, “You’ll understand when we get there.”

After stabling the horses, the party walked the few blocks to the warehouse where pursuant to an awkward exchange of greetings and introductions with the attendant on duty, Wyl rummaged through several closets and storage rooms with Mara and Dara. First assembling pack gear and supplies, Wyl then ushered his guests to the weapons storage room where they selected small short-range bows suitable for concealment within or under packs or cloaks then last and perhaps most crucially, the threesome visited the clothing storage. Trying on several changes of standard issue dull attire, Mara and Dara resoundingly rejected all and even appeared outright horrified by the fashions.

Ushering the pair onto a bench for consultation, Wyl patiently advised, “I understand your lack of enthusiasm for our clothing styles and I personally can think of nothing more offensive than burying you under such uncomplimentary articles but the reaction you encountered from our farmers yesterday is funny by comparison to the reaction you will encounter in the south. The people here are not afraid of you, they are afraid of the traditional superstitions you represent to them. They will hold distance, run, hide and talk about you later but they will never obstruct or confront you. You enter a population center in the south dressed in these beautiful orange and green gowns, they will scream ‘witch’ from a mile off and everybody able to run on two feet will come after you with every weapon they can carry fit to burn you at the stake. In the south, ‘witch’ always means ‘Highlander’, and the only thing on this earth they hate more than a Highlander is a Highlander Witch. You have to work with me on this. Explain to me what you want and if we make some compromises, I’m sure we can settle on something you will consider less than repulsive. That is the best I can do for you. If you want to spy in the south, you have to do this, all right?” The two reluctantly nodded even if only just barely then Wyl instructed, “Now, calmly explain to me what you don’t like about the clothing.”

Mara and Dara nearly interrupted each other continuously as they enumerated their litany of objections to the available wardrobe, explaining, “Too heavy are these materials,” “yes, and too thick like wet rags” “binding their legs like blankets tied in knots” “yes, like sack of grain they feel in such bags,” “these tangle, constrict and suffocate, yes,” “and so hideous are these colors-”

“-All right. One thing at a time.” Wyl advised then remarked, “I hear complaints about constriction of legs so let’s start with that then we’ll address the next complaint.”

The tight golden pant garment Mara and Dara wore fit like stockings up to their waists and buttoned at each hip to the underside of the golden blouses which flared down over the pants to just barely the top of the thigh like a very short dress. After a series of rejections, Wyl succeeded in talking the two into thin green skirts that buttoned with the pants inside the blouses then flowed out from underneath down to the knees, and having accomplished that, he quickly moved on to footwear while he detected a moment of cooperative spirit. With even less effort than the skirts, Wyl talked the pair into tight brown girl boots that laced halfway up the calf without a cuff then encouraged by the developments, he quickly moved on to over shirts selecting an assortment he expected ought to fit somewhat loose and baggy over Mara and Dara.

Upon introduction of the shirts, Wyl encountered immediate stiff resistance but he reassured, "Calm down. I'm not going to try to tie these around your necks." and even while Mara and Dara recoiled at the mere sight of every garment, after some trial and error, Wyl eventually selected two over shirts, one green and one gray, with thin tasseled waist strings and long tails. After cutting the sleeves off at elbow length, Wyl slit the undersides of the sleeves up to the underarms so the flaps of remaining material simply dangled loose from the shoulders without actually enclosing the arms. With the over shirts unbuttoned and tied loosely by the waist stings, the tails overhung the bottoms of the golden blouses, which then protruded slightly over the green skirts. While ultimately still dressed in the golden clothing, the stock articles essentially covered up and disguised the most overtly witchly superficial appearances of Mara and Dara yet not so much in the confines of actual proper clothing. Examining the finished product in mirrors, Mara and Dara sighed and grimaced but nonetheless reluctantly settled for the outfits as an apparently minimally acceptable compromise and in fact even conceded smiles of gratitude toward Wyl in appreciation of the sensitivity of his consultations.

"Beautiful." Wyl exclaimed then addressing his next concern, he again first coaxed the two onto a bench and delicately advised, "Even more than the clothing, the cosmetics will inspire the most extreme reactions of all." As Mara and Dara nearly gasped in despair, Wyl held their hands and explained in a cautiously reassuring tone, "There's no easy way to say this - The intent is to purposely make you as unattractive as possible. You are simply too desirable and alluring. The more attractive, the more conspicuous and the more conspicuous, the more people will stare, think and talk... and that's why problems will occur, so I want you to go into the washroom and remove your cosmetics so I can size you up the way you will appear in your complete disguises."

Mara and Dara nearly cried but cooperated most likely out of sheer humility and the embarrassment they would no doubt experience from any greater demonstrations of vanity. Upon emerging from the washroom, the two even tilted their faces down as if humiliated or perhaps even ashamed but Wyl held each by the chin, turned them to face him then backed up a few steps and even provoked them to blush as he declared, "You are without a doubt the most conspicuously attractive, desirable, alluring pair of girls I have ever set sight upon in this lifetime and nothing will ever disguise that." With a sigh of resignation, Wyl exclaimed, "That is disappointing." but then immediately concluded, "It's all right. That's the best we can do. You're two pretty girls and that's that, but there's no reason for anybody to leap to the conclusion there is anything automatically supernatural about a pretty girl."

Just as Mara and Dara appeared to relax with relief in the expectation their ordeal finally concluded, Wyl announced, "One more thing now." The two sighed deeply and sagged in near exhaustion as Wyl hustled them to the cloak closet where immediately, the most contentious of all challenges ensued when Mara and Dara nearly ran shrieking from a collection of large bulky cloaks and long coats. After carefully examining every one of some two-hundred articles in the closet, Mara and Dara settled on the two least large and bulky overcoats in the collection, removed wide leather belts and replaced them with strings then pulled the sleeves up to elbow height buttoning them in the highest positions possible. With the torturous episode at last concluded, Wyl hugged Mara then Dara and kissed each on the forehead then placed all the other equipment and supplies they assembled onto a shelf and departed the warehouse.

Initially, Wyl led his two companions in the direction of his quarters but impulsively altered his course slightly to accommodate a visit to the Giant Oak Tavern intent on subjecting the two natural beauties to a test exhibition. At the tavern, the party ate fruits, nuts and an assortment of biscuits and cheeses for dinner then drank an entire bottle of cherry liqueur while contributing significantly to an apparently permanent cloud of smoke that nearly obscured the beams and ceilings. Throughout the evening, virtually everyone present at some point stared at Mara and Dara but Wyl easily determined the ratio of stares heavily favored a masculine influence and he concluded in fact the interests most likely accounted as simple appreciation of two remarkably pretty girls and curiosity over total strangers clothed in scout outfits. Although appreciation of beauty in all likelihood would never diminish with exposure to varying culture, certainly in the south Wyl calculated no one would differentiate ‘scout’ clothing from any other clothing and so that element of curiosity would not occur. In addition, Wyl judged any suspicions of witchery he detected most likely directly related to the element of unfamiliarity and in the less cloistered communities of the south, unfamiliarity did not account as so unfamiliar an element and so that automatic assumption he concluded also less likely to occur. Overall, Wyl consequently considered his test a pleasantly surprising success.

Ushering Mara and Dara into his quarters after dark, Wyl immediately prepared hot water for baths then ran to the icehouse with a bucket and the party took turns in the bath then lounged in front of the fireplace. Mara and Dara spoke very little throughout the evening, and Wyl sensed disillusionment and displeasure from them with the reality of their situation. Sensing recognition of their awkwardness and need for guidance humbled and embarrassed Mara and Dara, Wyl appreciated as well the suspension of conversation most favored avoidance of revisiting the indelicacy of his eavesdropping on them while they occupied his washroom. Wyl furthermore estimated the longer he avoided revisiting the incident, the more favorable the probability the two might forget about it altogether and the more likely he might then avoid the beating he so surely deserved.

First to awake in the morning, Wyl prepared accommodations similar to the previous morning, which appeared to generate a positive effect and the girls seemed more comfortable and content again. Wyl sat by the fireplace while Mara and Dara lounged on the couch with hot brew and smokes, clothed in identical gray sleeping gowns that exposed generous portions of upper chests, shoulders and legs. Glancing at him from the corners of their eyes, they commented, “He-”

“-stares.” Wyl guessed, “Yes, you must have been paying very close attention to observe such a subtlety.” The two smirked in response and Wyl changed the subject, informing them, “I would like you to change out of those gowns and stop tempting me into embarrassing myself then change back into those hideous clothes we selected from the warehouse yesterday then they go now, yes?”

“To where they go now?” “Yes?” Mara and Dara inquired somewhat suspiciously.

“Absolutely nowhere,” Wyl explained, “I just want to try out your disguises in daylight and I figure we could make it a nice walking tour of the city of Edyn while we’re at it. How does that sound?”

Mara and Dara sighed slightly then responded, “They will humor him.” “Yes?”

The threesome spent most of the daylight hours wandering the streets, mostly near the lakeshore under gray cloudy skies that swirled overhead while a strong and crisp wind blew all day whipping impressive waves that pounded the rocky shores and beaches.

To his surprise, Wyl determined Mara and Dara actually enjoyed the tour to an extent. Even more, the conditions accounted for his very favorite kind of autumn day while given the circumstances and the company, Wyl concluded perhaps it even qualified as the single finest day of his life and he smiled contently at the sight of Mara and Dara as their hair waved in the wind. Late in the afternoon, the threesome rested on a stone bench in a park on the shoreline and Wyl stared from the corners of his eyes while Mara and Dara drank cherry liqueur from a flask and smoked.

With a glance, the two again caught Wyl staring and they inquired, “Why at them even in disguise they all stare?” “They are all natural?”

“No.” Wyl answered impulsively then equivocated, “Well, yes, they are probably all natural and stare because you are pretty but probably more because of-”

“-Suspicious?” “Yes?” Mara and Dara speculated after recognizing his reluctance.

“Yes.” Wyl nonetheless reluctantly admitted.

“Why of them” “they are suspicious,” “yes?” Mara and Dara inquired.

“Well, last night and today are a little more complicated than the reactions you encountered from those farmers.” Wyl explained, “The difference is the clothing.”

“Of clothing” “they are suspicious?” the two inquired with obvious surprise.

“Not the clothing directly,” Wyl replied, “but what they think it represents. When those farmers saw you in the green and orange, they immediately identified you as foreigners, and they are suspicious of all foreigners so their imaginations run wild as they try to sort out why you are here and what you might want. Now, the people that observe you today are suspicious mostly just because they can’t figure out who you are even though they’re comfortable with your clothing. I don’t think that will be a factor in and around the bigger cities of the south because they see strangers every day, and maybe they will stare only because you are pretty and for no other reason.”

The sun drifted low on the horizon and Wyl stood up then suggested, “We should get going. Let’s see if Jaenefyr successfully rounded up Claer and Aengys. It will be just about dark by the time we make it to the inn from here. They go now, yes?”

Tugging Wyl back onto the bench, Mara and Dara advised, “Not just yet,” “yes?” then abruptly and forcefully demanded, “What makes him think anticipation of overhearing ‘girly stuff’ in washing rooms” “they determine any less offensive than anticipation of overhearing sensitive witch secrets,” “yes?” “Does his expectation of ‘girly stuff’ not occur to him as potentially even more offensive motivation” “or even greater degree of personal intrusion,” “yes?”

Bowing his head, Wyl immediately and unequivocally asserted, “Yes, it does.”

“-and does it then consequently occur to him,” Mara and Dara immediately inquired, “these they may consider most accurate indication” “of quality of trustworthiness and discretion from him they might expect” “in his performance as their scout,” “yes?”

“Yes, it does occur to me.” Wyl conceded then with a deep sigh, he argued, “My performance as a scout and any fascination I feel for you personally are unrelated. I understand you may consider it inconvenient and I apologize for that-”

“-Unrelated?” Mara and Dara countered, “How any part of his conduct” “is unrelated to his performance as scout,” “yes?”

“Please do not allow one moment of human frailty to determine your overall impression of me.” Wyl desperately pleaded, “If I get scared or angry, my conduct might also falter. I never suggested you can expect flawless conduct from me. I am not flawless.”

With mischievous smiles, Mara and Dara inquired, “Human frailties...” “natural...” “how long he thinks these excuses provide for him covers for his indiscretions,” “yes?”

“Uh... forever?” Wyl apologetically replied.

“Forever?” one of the two girls exclaimed while both indicated obvious shock from so provocative an answer and consequently they inhaled in apparent preparation to respond.

“-All humans have frailties.” Wyl forcefully asserted intent on disruption of additional question or comment from Mara and Dara then he further contended, “I will always be human and so I will always have frailties. This will always apply to every human and the only thing that will change from one human to the next is the nature and quality of the frailties. You could easily end up with worse frailties in a traveling companion. Instead of somebody that admires your beauty and peeks at you when he thinks you’re not looking, you could have somebody that constantly picks his nose then wipes off his fingers on your clothing... You could definitely end up with any number of far more inconvenient and undesirable frailties in a companion than physical attraction to you.”

In reaction, Mara and Dara bent their lips as if deep in contemplation then finally giggled and casually asserted, “They go now,” “yes?”

At the Edyn, Wyl and his guests drank cherry liqueurs while waiting for Jaenefyr, and within an hour, she arrived accompanied by both Aengys and Claer. Subsequent to a brief exchange of pleasantries, Wyl paused in the hopes that in the awkward silence, Jaenefyr ought to recognize her Martial obligation compelled her to conduct introductions but evidently, so unimaginative a ploy failed to prompt her to perform and consequently, Wyl reluctantly stated, “Aengys, Claer... this is... Dara-Mara-” saying the names in quick succession without motioning to either. In reaction, Mara and Dara bent their eyebrows and glared at Wyl with obvious disapproval.

After a moment, Aengys asked, “Which is which?”

Mara and Dara then glared at Aengys in reaction but Wyl advised, “He’s not calling you names. He means ‘which’ as in which one of you belongs to which name?”

Aengys smiled, nodded awkwardly then clasped each girl by a hand probably expecting them to state their names in the process but both merely smiled innocently then stared at Claer, who smiled pleasantly but also appeared to stir somewhat awkwardly. Mara and Dara briefly embraced both Claer and Jaenefyr then Jaenefyr abruptly ushered the group to a table and briefly explained to Claer and Aengys their guests intended to visit cities in the south and required guides. Aengys and Claer evidently figured out very quickly, the quality and caliber of communications they might expect, and appeared comfortable enough with it. In the absence of a precise destination, the scouts at least determined they might ride to the southern pass then leave the horses there and travel by foot. Claer and Aengys expressed apprehensions that horses would make stealth difficult, not to mention the improbability of bringing four horses uninjured down the descent side of the pass but traveling by foot meant smaller lighter packs and restocking along the way. The militia possessed only a small stock of foreign coins and that meant some form of collecting money while traveling, which meant in all likelihood some form of robbery and that accounted as a relative risk but still generally conformed to a stealth strategy. Claer and Aengys entertained little or no concern over the lack of a destination as the several days that would elapse in the process of simply descending the pass, would no doubt provide more than sufficient time to work out details. In addition, Wyl detected Mara and Dara equally approved of both Claer and Aengys as he anticipated they would.

Upon conclusion of dinner, the party relaxed at the table over drinks and smokes but three musicians occupied the corner nook and after exhausting a bottle of cherry liqueurs, Mara and Dara forced Jaenefyr and Claer to dance with them. While Wyl and Aengys watched in fascination, Wyl speculated Mara and Dara deliberately engaged in such a spectacle just to provide onlookers with something to remember. The gossip and legend that would no doubt spring from the occurrence would live for hundreds of years and always grow only more outlandish and spectacular by the decade.

“*The Legend of the Rhokwychen and the Massacre at the Edyn Inn*” Wyl said aloud, convinced that Jaenefyr entertained the same idea as he observed her laughing while she twirled in the arms of Mara then Dara appearing perhaps intoxicated by pixie dust and well on her way to mythological immortality.

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The Black Creek Ferry militia station represented a modest destination for the first day and the party traveled for most of the available daylight to get there. The location lied on the southern extents of the farmed areas that sprawled out from the city of Edyn and so the first day of travel occurred as nothing more than a leisurely sightseeing trip. As traffic reduced to a trickle during autumn season, the party discovered the station predictably unoccupied while plenty of daylight remained upon their arrival so they kindled up fires in the fireplaces and relaxed for a meal. In their Highland issue scout apparel, Mara and Dara appeared nearly identical and consequently their three guides carefully constructed the content of all their communications to avoid any use of proper names.

The daylong ride to the Morland Crossing station at the entrance to the southern pass presented a dramatic change in scenery as the road weaved along the edges of the vast marshlands of Morland sprawling off into the west while forests of high pines stretched away from the road into the east and south toward the mountains. In the wilderness area, the party observed not so much as a single other human along the way while the Alaepys Mountains soared higher all day and in the early evening, towered overhead as the party made their way up the slopes to the station. The ascent did not exceed a thousand feet and an established trail with a gradual incline in the valley between two peaks accommodated a less than arduous approach. Winds screeched and howled in the heights along with occasional creaks and moans from the stone masses, the sleepless sound of mountains forever aging, while clouds swirled and streamed around the peaks and spilled over ridges. Darkness fell just as the party reached the station, which consisted of a stone roundhouse with a short tower that reached only barely over the peak of the main roof. Three scouts occupied the station and welcomed their guests with a prepared hot meal ready for immediate service, as they observed the approach of the party up the incline at least two hours prior to their arrival then the five travelers bedded down almost immediately after the meal in preparation for a predawn start the next morning.

Packed, mounted and ready to commence, the party stepped onto the trail under complete darkness and then sat still in their saddles for more than an hour as the first light of sunrise slowly spread across the sky in streaks broken by the mountain peaks. Aengys, Claer and the scouts posted at the station surveyed the sky in all directions for indications of potentially threatening weather while the sun crept up from behind the surrounding peaks then turning in a complete circle for a final inspection, a scout declared, “All right. To me, this looks as good as it ever looks.” then addressing Aengys and Claer, he stated, “It’s your decision now.”