

After craning their necks to examine the skies a last time, Aengys and Claer stared at each other for a moment until they each eventually nodded then Aengys addressed his party instructing Mara and Dara to travel at the rear and Wyl at the center. "Let's do it." Aengys declared then immediately broke into a gallop as his companions fell into a single file behind him spaced by intervals of approximately fifty feet.

By custom, those intending to cross the pass always exercised final judgment in determining whether or not to enter as the passage even under the most favorable of conditions always accounted as a potentially life threatening proposition. The roundhouse station rested on the Geaelen side of the pass and at the south end, the watchtower stood on a crest that divided the high pass from the mountainside descent into the other world. A relatively level natural low channel between two approximate ridgelines ran fifty-six miles as measured in a straight line on a map over the length of the high pass but in accounting for turns, obstacles and the contours of the terrain, the actual distance from the station to the watchtower exceeded the map measurement by at least double. Even in the most favorable of summer conditions, portions of the passage lay under permanent fields of ice. Under ideal weather conditions on horseback, competent riders routinely traversed the pass uneventfully in as little as six hours but regardless of season, weather conditions frequently changed dramatically and unpredictably, instantly transforming a potentially uneventful ride into a dire survival situation. Many journals in fact chronicled regular occasions upon which, scouts might discover the remains of entire companies of foreign adventurers emerging from melting snows during hot periods in the summer, some perhaps after hundreds of years of frozen internment judging by examination of clothing, weapons and other articles.

Over the first half of the ride, two ice fields lay across the course and close to an hour elapsed during the crossing of each. Crevasses and other treacherous formations bordered narrow traversable areas and any more than a walking pace easily accounted as reckless then during the second half of the ride, the party crossed a third and final ice field far greater in magnitude than the other two. Nearly two hours elapsed in the crossing of the greater ice field but otherwise the passage occurred over relatively smooth stone surfaces separated by occasional swales of large rock and loose rubble. On three separate occasions, gale force winds howled while dark clouds gathered and twice, thick flurries of snow blew nearly laterally across the landscape but ultimately, each threatening weather occurrence dissipated without consequence while in more than one place along the way, the party observed skull and bone out in plain sight scattered about the floor of the pass. At sunset, the riders dismounted and stumbled alongside their horses at a snail pace over the final mile into the watchtower, all equally exhausted with the possible exception of Mara and Dara.

A thirty-foot high wall encircled a watch station sufficient in size to accommodate up to fifty or so militia, and the observation deck of the tower reached another twenty feet over the wall, which nestled against a steep rock face. Only a narrow strip of reasonably traversable land squeezed between the wall and an opposing rock face, and even by dark, an easily detectable sudden and dramatic drop defined the margin. The mountainside below descended into Pellysia, from which hostile characters climbed the narrow gap for ages beyond count, some of whom on occasion successfully crossed and ran amuck into the countryside, while as a direct consequence the clans of Geaelen massacred, hacked and crushed others attempting the ascent in the narrow confines below.

A savage wind screeched up over the crest like an anguished howl and Wyl shivered over thought of the places he would traverse the next day. Wyl never before traveled into the pass but he intensely disliked the place, everything for which he thought it stood, and he knew what there he would observe. No more than a dozen scouts stationed at the watchtower prepared to depart for home within mere days and their imminent return home would in all likelihood account as the last crossing of the pass until spring. Two scouts on watch closed the gate behind the party as they entered, while all others immediately gathered for dinner with their guests. As the party prepared to retire to their bunks after dinner, Mara or Dara squeezed Wyl on his elbow with a reassuring smile but in spite of her encouragement, he slept restlessly and awoke several times sure he heard howling from the passages below.

Parting with his horse in the morning, Wyl nearly cried unable to recall any occasion during which they separated for more than a couple days in the previous six years and he impulsively wondered if Mara and Dara might miss their horses, return for them some day or simply find new ones when the time came for new ones. Even though the two demonstrated obvious affection for their horses, upon departure they simply turned, walked away casually and appeared as if they perhaps no longer even remembered the horses once no longer in sight, and the observation reinforced an understanding Wyl long held that witches did not experience attachment or separation the same as other men.

The scouts at the watchtower wished the travelers good luck as they exited the gate then walked over to the crest and looked down into the chasm between two steep rock faces that sloped into each other forming a narrow passage in the base of the concavity, which tumbled down sharply on a rough and rocky bed.

Aengys looked over his companions for a moment then asked, “Ready?” and as they all offered affirmative indications, he instructed, “Follow me then.” and then commenced the descent down the final stage of the pass.

Mara and Dara followed Aengys while Claer and Wyl trailed at the rear and the descent actually accounted as easier than it may have otherwise appeared from the crest above. Though rugged and rocky, plentiful spaces of evenly textured gravel spread out between the larger stones, and the sharp decline made every step nearly effortless. The party descended for most of the morning in silence but for the ever-present howling winds and the sounds of the mountains growing old.

Over the passage of the morning, the rock faces rising up at either side leaned in dramatically steeper until two distinct spires rose up straddling an especially narrow bit of terrain that squeezed in between and as the party drew nearer, Wyl identified some of the shapes scattered about the landscape. Although he noticed the articles for some time, Wyl intentionally diverted his attention but occasionally almost tripped over objects directly in his path, which he could no longer avoid identifying as bones. With conscious effort, Wyl concentrated on breathing, inhaling and exhaling in deep even cycles, and squinting to blur his vision, he focused only on each step placement immediately before him. A sudden noticeable difference in the terrain occurred where the rock faces rose up sheer on either side like the walls of a house and soared so high, the tops reached a point not clearly visible. For a moment, forward motion stopped and looking down, Wyl fully appreciated the surface consisted exclusively of bone like a mixture of sand, gravel and stone highlighted by skulls, whole, partial and fragmented then he slowly lifted his eyes to peer outward and below, with impulsive morbid curiosity, upon the bone stairway.

The name, 'Bone Stairway' in fact originated from southern lore where it lived in infamy while some Highlanders literally never heard of it and even though the name left nothing to the imagination, a number of scouts told Wyl over the years no words accurately described it or sufficiently prepared any human of reasonable sensitivity for the spectacle. Gazing down into the descending chasm, for as far as he could see, over a span of perhaps two-thousand feet, Wyl observed the entire traversable surface ranging from fifty to a hundred feet wide between sheer walls, littered solid with bone and skull, and he keenly appreciated the profound accuracy of prior descriptions of a sight beyond accurate description. Pieces and remnants of weapon, gear, armor and shield, bright and sparkly objects lay sprinkled over the surface and glittered in slivers of sunlight that sifted through cracks in the clouds. Wyl sucked in a deep stammering breath and his head reeled back as he froze then he closed his eyes and teetered while wind gusts moaned and whistled over eye socket and empty marrow cavity like a ghoulish symphony.

Claer said softly and gently, "Wyl."

Dragging his eyelids open, Wyl discovered Claer directly in front of him, two steps below with her hand extended before him while Mara and Dara stood some paces below both staring up like mirror images of a statue, and Aengys down below them. Wyl raised his hand, placed it in hers and closed his eyes again then Claer repeated after a slight pause, "Wyl." and he reluctantly reopened his eyes as she gently advised, "You have to open your eyes and walk."

"Don't let go." Wyl urgently whispered.

"I won't" Claer replied, "but you have to open your eyes and walk. I am right here. I'll be with you the whole way down."

Wyl nodded then with an obvious degree of embarrassment, he sighed, looked Claer in the eye and said in a plaintive tone, "I'm sorry."

Claer smiled and reassured, "Don't be sorry. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Just open your eyes and walk for me."

Claer pulled him gently toward her then Wyl executed a step and then another as Claer turned her attention forward to continue ahead and Wyl stared at her hair sailing and rippling in the wind while the surface underfoot appeared only through the haze of his lower periphery, yet he cringed occasionally as every footstep crackled and crunched. The passage down through the gruesome scene felt to Wyl as if it lasted hours but in fact, probably no more than a quarter of an hour elapsed in the descent then suddenly, the surroundings noticeably changed. The rock walls leaned away at gentler slopes and the compacted white rubble gave way to actual stone and plant growth. Glancing about quickly, Wyl observed some concentrations of bone remains heaped up in clusters in low spots, the way pebbles might collect into patterns washed by rain on the street and he turned his eyes back to his feet still hand in hand with Claer.

With an abrupt enough halt that Wyl bumped into her, he looked up to encounter Claer with a pleasant smile on her face then he glanced about briefly and sighed with relief upon observing no obvious indication of bone or skull.

"Are you all right now?" Claer inquired.

With a nod, Wyl gratefully stated, "Thanks, Claer." then stepped to his side and sat down atop a large rock.

Claer turned toward the others as they continued ahead then shouted, "We're going to rest here for a moment."

Mara and Dara stopped and stared evidently somewhat surprised by the announcement but quickly sought out suitable rocks upon which to rest and break out smokes. While Claer examined the heights with a look of fascination on her face, Wyl stared at her then after some time, asked, “How long have we been here, Claer?”

“About barely long enough to sit down.” Claer answered with a casual tone.

Shaking his head, Wyl asked, “No, I mean how many centuries have we been here?”

Claer responded sarcastically, “About barely long enough to sit down.”

Wyl smiled appreciatively and patiently rephrased his question, “How many centuries did it take to pile up all those bones? How long has this been going on? How and why did it start and why does it continue? Don’t you look at that and wonder, who are we?”

Looking Wyl in the eye with sincere compassion for some time, Claer finally stated with detectable sternness, “We are the Geaelen, Wyl. We live up there. That spectacle is not something we went out of our way to gather up and store here in a collection. It came here.” Adjusting slightly, Claer reminisced, “You know, when I first came to live in Edyn with my aunt, she decided to build an extra room onto her house for my bedroom because her house was pretty small. I helped her as much as I could. I was only about eight years old and I think she mostly thought it was kind of cute that I wanted to help... so we were opening the wall where my door would go and as we peeled away the outer surface, behind it we opened up this cavity. It was vertical, like a tube, and at the top, a horizontal cavity intersected with it. It was a mouse tunnel, the horizontal part, but the vertical part was just this random natural cavity that happened to be there. It was filled with what looked like dozens of mouse skeletons. I guess over the years, unfortunate or even inattentive mice tumbled down in there, and once they were in, there was no way out, so they just died in there. Eventually the cavity filled up enough that later generations of mice walked casually right over it, probably oblivious to the disaster below.”

Wyl stared at Claer quizzically then laughed gently, appreciating she attempted to help him resolve his mortal issues but simultaneously, her anecdote thoroughly baffled him.

“So my point is, Wyl,” Claer continued with a nod acknowledging the skepticism, “what does this image of a mouse skeleton collection suggest about me and my aunt?” Wyl squinted in reaction and Claer concluded, “It suggests nothing. It’s just a random natural hazard we happened to discover. My aunt and I felt pity for all those mice that died such a lonely death, but we didn’t feel guilty... The stair doesn’t prove anything about us. The stair doesn’t define us. It is just a random hazardous place that unfortunate and inattentive men keep coming back to, like that cavity in my aunt’s wall. The bone stair doesn’t teach any lessons except maybe... pay attention, be attentive... and exercise some kind of caution around hazardous places.”

Shaking his head, Wyl argued, “That is a totally inapplicable analogy, Claer.”

“How’s that?” Claer demanded somewhat contentiously.

“The mice fell into the cavity.” Wyl explained then emphasized, “It was an accident. That mess up there is no accident. Somebody killed those men on purpose.”

“Who built the wall with the cavity that trapped the mice, Wyl?” Claer argued, “Was that an accident?” Pushing herself up to her feet, Claer punched Wyl on his shoulder informing him, “Mara and Dara are getting impatient. Come on.”

Glancing downhill as he stood, Wyl observed Mara and Dara staring up at him in mirror image with their hands folded against their hips and their heads tilted to the sides.

“All right, we’re ready.” Claer stated rather casually.

Without comment, Mara and Dara turned and continued downhill and perhaps a half an hour later, directed primarily toward Mara and Dara, Wyl said, "Sorry about the delay."

"Is all right." "Only minor inconvenience." Mara and Dara graciously reassured.

"I guess that's an example of what I told you about the frailties." Wyl remarked then inquired, "Remember that?"

"Yes." "They recall his frailties." Mara and Dara replied.

"Well, I didn't mean any frailties specifically, actually." Wyl commented, "I just mean the concept of frailties and the inconvenience they can cause."

"They understand subtleties involved," "yes?" Mara and Dara patiently advised.

"Of course." Wyl concurred somewhat apologetically then further speculated, "You appreciate then what I said about frailties -- that they are unpredictable or maybe more like they are inevitable?"

"Yes," "they appreciate his arguments," Mara and Dara counseled, "but not necessarily his conclusions," "yes?" Although Wyl demonstrated obvious intent to conduct yet another equivocation, Mara and Dara conducted a preemptive response by inquiring, "Does scout girl have also human frailties," "yes?"

At the conclusion of a formidable silence, Claer inquired, "Scout girl? ... Are you referring to me?" Both Mara and Dara blushed perhaps a bit self-consciously but Claer nevertheless sympathetically advised, "My name is Claer." then confidently stated, "No, I have no frailties." With a pause, she asked, "Why would you suspect me of frailty?"

Intervening, Wyl asserted, "You eat food, Claer."

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" Claer demanded, "I eat too much food?"

"No!" Wyl protested, "The point is food is a necessity, and necessity compels us and influences our conduct, so... that's a frailty."

"I think that is somewhat liberal use of the word." Claer countered, "If every necessity is a frailty, why do we have the two different words? The mere fact that we have the two different words clearly suggests they mean two different things."

"All right." Wyl conceded in the hopes of merely concluding the conversation, "Frailty, necessity... whatever you want to call it, I'm just trying to point out that we all have certain vulnerabilities."

"Frailties, necessities, vulnerabilities?" Claer enumerated then inquired, "How many different words are you going to try to string onto this, Wyl? What are you trying to prove with this anyway?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." Wyl concluded.

With an assertive glance at Mara and Dara, first one then the other Claer proclaimed with confident finality, "I have no frailties."

Throughout the remainder of the day, occasional bone bits appeared scattered in places but after the party reached a tree line, vegetation covered those remnants that remained, if any then under a dark canopy of pine forest, they continued downhill until sunset. Aengys identified a favorable location to set up camp surrounded by high tree stands unlikely to allow the escape of any light then he struck a fire while deep purple mountain shadows immersed the surrounding terrain. The party maintained single watches overnight and otherwise all slept soundly. A tranquil day followed the descent of the mountain as the party continued to descend a rough dirt trail that weaved down steep slopes through forest and mountainside meadow then alongside a stream of cold crystal water that splashed its way down to the lowlands on slopes that rolled away in shallower inclines.

With the approach of sunset, the party held a position upon the base of the mountains where rugged hills and slopes still tumbled out some distance below but the crossing and descent of the range for all practical purposes concluded. Aengys came to an abrupt halt as the rest of his group crowded behind him then he pointed out an excellent hollow for a campsite and as the party prepared a fire, Aengys advised commencing immediately they conduct a serious watch throughout every night. After a quiet and relaxing meal, Aengys addressed Mara and Dara, advising, “Crystiell is to the west and Martillion to the east. Crystiell is a little closer and the terrain that way a bit easier to cross.” Mara and Dara stared at Aengys as if considering interesting trivia offered by a tour guide then Aengys flexed his eyebrows and stated, “We are your guides.” and when that failed to produce results, he stated directly, “We need you to tell us where you want to go.”

With a moment of consideration, Mara and Dara inquired, “Their guides is he,” “yes?”

Aengys inhaled deeply then patiently and somewhat delicately asked, “You want me to decide for you?” As the pair remained silent with expectant expressions, Aengys sighed, paused and with a continuing patient tone, instructed, “Help me out here... -so evidently, you don’t have a specific immediate destination in mind... which would mean this is more about something you are doing than somewhere you are going?” The pair both nodded and when they failed to elaborate on their own, Aengys prompted, “I am saying we have to decide whether to travel east or west tomorrow morning. If you want us to decide for you, we can do that but we need to understand something about your intentions or else we’re just making uninformed guesses.”

Wyl observed the exchange somewhat amused but intervened at a point he believed he possessed helpful information and addressing Mara and Dara, he stated, “The purpose of guides is to assist you, not to think for you.”

A long awkward silence followed and Wyl recalled all the previous conversations since he encountered the two in the orchard then concluded, “This is why you said you don’t want guides, right?” Establishing brief eye contact with both Aengys and Claer to solicit their support, Wyl assertively advised, “You are in the wilderness with three guides who are here under no more than a general understanding you need our assistance. This proves you can trust us. We’re not going to judge or interrogate you. We only need just enough from you right now to determine whether to turn left or to turn right, that’s all.”

Detecting a hint of frustration from Aengys and mostly addressing him directly, Wyl stated, “I think their primary difficulty is they’re trying to keep us out of whatever they’re doing. They’re not incoherent. They just think they’re protecting us and if they tell us too much, we’ll get involved then it will be their fault.” then returning his attention to Mara and Dara, he asked, “Do I have that right? You already told me that, remember?”

“Yes.” “Correct.” Mara and Dara confirmed.

Wyl then suggested, “Give us as vague a general description as you can. If that doesn’t help us decide which direction to go, I’ll ask another question and as soon as we figure out a direction, I’ll stop asking questions.”

After staring at each other for a moment, Mara and Dara explained, “In cities of south” “they search for” “eh...” “... suspicious” “characters,” “yes?”

Aengys raised his eyebrows and grunted, “Suspicious characters? In the south? That doesn’t narrow it down much. That’s pretty much everyone-”

“-Aengys,” Claer interrupted, “we’re getting somewhere. Don’t ridicule them now. Go ahead, Wyl.” she instructed with a reassuring smile toward Mara and Dara.

Wyl then asked, “What do you mean by suspicious? Can you expand on that?”

Squinting and bending their lips, Mara and Dara finally responded, “When these they find,” “they will know, yes?”

Aengys obviously struggled to conceal exasperation but Wyl immediately asked, “-and ‘cities of the south’ is all you know, so you have no reason to favor one city over another?” Mara and Dara both nodded then Wyl asked, “Tell me everything you can about ‘cities of the south’. Is there anything more to it than that?”

“Cities of south” “on Alaepys divide.” Mara and Dara replied.

“Good.” Wyl responded with an encouraging tone, “That applies to both Crystiell and Martillion... -and you don’t know of any reason to suspect one over the other?”

Mara and Dara shook their heads in respond then Wyl addressed Claer and Aengys, concluding, “That’s it then. Both are on the divide and that also applies to Enet. We could possibly visit all three so we might as well start furthest west and work our way east.”

Readdressing Mara and Dara, Wyl informed them, “That means Crystiell.” The two both nodded with apparent relief and the issue appeared resolved but after a moment, Wyl asked, “Do you know specifically who you are looking for or are you looking for someone only by description?” In reaction, Mara and Dara stared at Wyl perhaps a bit skeptically then he explained, “This also helps us plan our destinations.” and after they nodded slightly perhaps even with some hesitation, Wyl inquired, “Is it someone you know? Someone you don’t know? One? More than one? A group?”

“Yes.” “Yes.” Mara and Dara answered.

With a respectful pause, Wyl prompted, “Which is it then?”

“One” “or possibly more than.” Mara and Dara answered, “Perhaps they know,” “perhaps not.” “If more than one,” “not in groups.”

Wyl glanced at Claer and Aengys, neither of whom exhibited any immediate interest in additional information then Wyl concluded, “Okay. We go to Crystiell then wander east until we bump into either somebody you know or somebody who stands out as obviously particularly suspicious. Does that work for you?”

“Very good.” “Yes.” Mara and Dara replied.

Scribbling in a journal by dim firelight, Wyl sat out his watch and while the others slept, he often glanced impulsively in the direction of either Mara or Dara in her blankets next to him until near the end of his watch she suddenly stirred slightly settling into a position that stretched her blouse, exposing most of her chest. Although forcing his eyes away, even in spite of apprehension over his invasiveness, Wyl occasionally gave in to urges to glance in her direction. After managing to focus his attention exclusively on his journal for some time, he felt the hair on his arm stand up then glancing to his side he jolted to discover two eyes staring at him. Evidently preparing for a turn on watch, either Mara or Dara propped herself up on an elbow staring in his direction then she dug into her bag ultimately producing smokes and liqueurs while Wyl continued writing as she smoked and observed with an apparent degree of curiosity then eventually inquired, “Why in journals no one will ever read he writes?”

“Maybe, some day, someone will read.” Wyl responded and as she returned but an expectant stare in reaction, Wyl sensed perhaps curiosity for a more comprehensive explanation so he motioned her to sit next to him that they might speak discreetly without awaking their companions. Wrapping a blanket over her shoulders, she repositioned immediately next to Wyl nearly leaning on his shoulder as he put away his journal.

Leaning slightly closer, Wyl opened his mouth to speak but she suddenly pushed her hand with a liqueur flask against his arm and instructed, “He drinks.”

Speculating the gesture possibly accounted as an opportunity for ingratiation by accommodating her personal etiquette, Wyl sipped from the flask and immediately recognized grain spirit redistilled with bitter berry and botanicals, a concoction he held in particular disfavor throughout the duration of his lifetime. With a shiver, Wyl winced as he swallowed while she smiled, perhaps a bit amused. Pushing the flask back at her, Wyl leaned close then in barely more than a whisper, confided, “My lifetime might have occurred just a little too early or just a little too late but I believe I am living in or near an exceptionally significant time in human history. Maybe ages from now, what I write today might alter the course of that history... or maybe not so much alter it but just help people remember what is important and essential.”

Wyl suddenly felt a bit embarrassed appreciating his words as perhaps somewhat grandiose even while his audience flexed her eyebrows with apparent skepticism for such an audacious proclamation. Acknowledging as much with a nod, Wyl then scanned the horizon and explained, “Look around you. Animals live in a material world in which nutrition and survival account for all of their reality. Plant life needs sunlight and moisture, elements of a material reality. We live more in the abstract and the imaginary than in the material reality of animal and plant. I might observe the necessity for nutrition and survival then conclude we should therefore obviously use our intelligence in a cooperative fashion such as the craft of agriculture, to make the material reality part of life as easy and effortless as possible while somebody else somewhere else might just as easily conclude we should therefore obviously use our intelligence to involve ourselves endlessly in the construction of nonfunctional symbolic ornamentation. These abstract ideas are every bit as real to both of us in the scenario but one of us obviously has to be profoundly incorrect. Animals and plants don’t do that. They don’t live in a world of competing abstract ideas. They all live in one constant uniform material reality in which ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ are never in question and always universally obvious.

I think of our condition as more likely a consequence than a random occurrence, like maybe we’re confused about why we have intelligence, what we’re supposed to do with it or even who we are because of some past event or mistake that happened long enough ago, we don’t even know anything about it anymore. I think just maybe in my lifetime, I will observe some corrective action that will address that mistake because when I look at the state of humankind, I think we all have a long overdue revelation coming our way... and even more than all this,” Wyl leaned closer and looked directly into her eyes then asserted, “I believe my world is currently occupied by some obscure and rare kind of humanity that is apparently exempt from all familiar reality.”

In reaction, she recoiled slightly and Wyl quickly reassured, “Don’t get defensive. I’m not accusing you of anything and I’m not challenging you to deny or explain anything... Remember the topic of conversation - I’m not assessing the state of humanity or drawing conclusions about your identity, I’m just explaining why I write journals.”

Perhaps even appreciative of the subtle humor, she nodded with an encouraging smile then Wyl further confided, “I think you know the answers to all my questions but you can’t explain it to me because the truth is just too fantastic and you suspect I will never believe it anyway or even worse I will believe it and then come up with some pretty scary ideas about what to do about it, and you don’t want that to happen either.”

Wyl remained silent for a moment as she examined but then with no detectable reaction, she simply pushed her flask against him and instructed, “He drinks.”

After a draught from the flask, Wyl exhaled with a slight cough then immediately declared, “I furthermore suspect that my lifespan is just a brief fragment compared to yours so if you explained things to someone like me, you would have to explain it over and over again to a great number of people like me over a long period of time, and each time you would do it without knowing the consequences until after the explanation then it would be too late because you would already have created the monster. For all these reasons, you can’t explain anything to me or anyone else, and we’re all probably better off figuring things out for ourselves anyway, so you can’t help us with any of that but the one thing you think you can do is correct whatever it is that went wrong with humanity. That’s why you’re here. You’re not happy with it and you don’t like meddling in the affairs of humankind but you’re stuck with it, and you won’t give up on us until you make this right.”

With a cautious pause, Wyl detected virtually no defensiveness in reaction to any of his assumptions and intent on continuing without further delay, he opened his mouth to speak but she nudged him and once again instructed, “He drinks.”

Hesitating slightly, Wyl then stated, “Actually, I don’t really like that kind of-”

“-He drinks.” she insisted in a somewhat intimidating fashion with a firm nudge.

Forcefully seizing the flask, Wyl gulped from it compliantly, winced and shivered then handed the flask back to her as she nudged his elbow with a smoke in her hand, insisting, “He smokes.”

“I’m sorry,” Wyl objected, “but I have to draw the line there. I am unaccustomed with the indulgence and it is a very difficult and laborious activity for me.”

As if perhaps offended or at least incredulous, she declared, “He learns.”

With a sigh, Wyl patiently explained, “Maybe I can learn but I’m not going to learn right this instant, you understand? It takes more acclimation than that.”

Initially staring suspiciously, she appeared to relent slightly but Wyl nevertheless pulled the smoke from her fingers, drew from it and inhaled then exhaled, wheezed and handed it back to her as she smiled briefly then relaxed evidently satisfied with his compliance at least for the moment.

“-that is why I write journals.” Wyl concluded, “I believe you are not going to be here forever and after you correct whatever this is that went wrong with men, we will never know anything about you ever again. We probably never should have known. I think this correction is going to be a spectacular event no one should ever forget and maybe I will witness it then ages from now, someone will read my journals. They’ll live in a time when they will never know anyone like you so it will be even harder for them to believe their lives are a part of any greater meaning, and I suppose they probably won’t even believe any of my bullshit stories but maybe they’ll appreciate the things we felt, thought and said. Maybe they’ll understand that what we believed was something very different and if they trust the sincerity of our beliefs, maybe they will appreciate that we saw a different world and if they don’t believe the stories we tell, maybe they’ll conclude they see the same world and then maybe they will understand they can see the same different world. Just maybe that will be just enough that when men tell them about their plans to accomplish great things together, they will know men that say that always only mean to harm them, and maybe that will be just enough to save them.”

With eyebrows flexed and head askew, his audience stared at Wyl for quite some time perhaps somewhat impressed by the depth of his conviction or at least engrossed by his audacious expectations but in any event, she extended the flask in his direction and he drank from it without any coercive inducement.

Smiling contently as she turned the cap back over the mouth of the flask, she suddenly and bluntly inquired, “Why in vulnerable positions he desires her, yes?” Wyl flinched slightly and she elaborated, “Upon her backsides he looks as in chairs she prepares to sit. Upon her breasts he looks as in lights of campfires she sleeps while clothing stretched most of her chests exposes, yes?”

Sagging slightly as if under a weight, Wyl responded, “You know, you really are right about the rustic hermit thing. You appear to sense my thoughts at times with remarkable accuracy but you don’t really know what they mean, do you?” Seizing the liqueur flask, Wyl drank from it then firmly nudged her elbow and commanded, “She drinks, yes? -then to her his humanity he explains, yes?”

Swiping the flask from his hand, she drank from it and stared menacingly, obviously not particularly pleased with his mimicry but Wyl gazed at her sympathetically until pacifying her to a degree then stated, “What you are sensing is an involuntary impulse. At any other given moment, I might simply appreciate your beauty in something more along the lines of an intellectual exercise, but when incidental circumstance places you in a vulnerable position which I might observe, I experience a visceral reaction to the physical conditions. I do not desire you **because** you are momentarily vulnerable, like some kind of predator with an opportunity to victimize some defenseless prey. I already desire you and the vulnerable position stimulates my imagination because in my mind, you would trust me and feel comfortable with me in vulnerable positions... because...”

Suddenly far less comfortable with the subject than he expected, Wyl fell silent and she tilted her head with a quizzical expression then he reluctantly continued, convinced she might honestly benefit from the lesson, confiding, “In my imagination, you would want me to desire you and to touch you, and you would consider no position vulnerable. What you refer to as vulnerability is what I imagine as intimacy between us, and that is the impulse you sense. It’s not voracious aggression - It’s whimsical fantasy. Do you appreciate the distinction I am making and how it relates to my sentiments for you?” As she thought about it a moment and before she responded, Wyl asked, “What is it like to be so compelling and beautiful, to sense everyone around you wants to be near you and wants to touch you? What does the world look like from in there?”

Initially appearing to consider the question seriously, she eventually formed an expression suggesting she ultimately judged it preposterous after all then asked, “How she would know differences, yes?”

“I don’t know.” Wyl conceded, “Like I said, I think you know all the answers to everything. I guess I expect that to apply to every little nuance of experience as well.” With a pause to consider her reactions, Wyl asked, “Don’t you feel desire? Do you ever look at someone like me maybe, and impulsively imagine intimacy between us?” but long before any opportunity to respond might occur, he urgently insisted, “Don’t answer that! I don’t want to know... unless the answer is yes... but then no answer means no... and I don’t want to know that... so just don’t answer it at all-” Staring with wide eyes, she laughed gently evidently fascinated by such mental contortions and in his defense, Wyl stressed, “I’m serious. Don’t react at all.”