

The guards burst into hearty laughter over the cleverness of their captain then the orator marched off along the street with exaggerated deliberation and purpose while the captain immediately followed him a few steps behind comically stomping and swaying in mockery as his guards chortled.

Wyl huffed angrily as MaraDara tugged at him, whispering, "Come." "They go now." then successfully turning Wyl in the direction of the inn, MaraDara asked, "He is positive" "of his sensations?" "Yes?"

"Yes, I'm positive." Wyl replied then asked as though inconvenienced, "Why did we look for witches among kings and find a rabble rouser in rags? Why are we not going back to the palace now? If we found one, doesn't that mean--"

"-Where they find one," "no other they find." MaraDara stated authoritatively.

"Really? Why not?" Wyl inquired with obvious fascination.

Struggling to answer the question, MaraDara eventually asserted, "These they cannot to him explain now," "other than, eh, he will not find more than one" "because when more than one, one another each they will hunt."

Wyl shook his head perplexed and inquired, "-but... if you can't sense each other, how would one know when another is present?"

"How these one" "they know is present," "yes?" MaraDara asked in response with expectant expressions, "How hard they look?" "How long these takes them?"

Wyl only nodded in reaction immediately recognizing the answer as obvious.

Claer and Aengys greeted the threesome with some surprise to see them back so soon and Claer urgently inquired, "What happened? Did you run into trouble?"

"No." Wyl answered, "It's... uh, we... uh, I guess we're satisfied everything appears normal enough... or at least, southern normal."

"No suspicious characters then, huh?" Claer asked.

Wyl pushed open the front window, leaned onto the sill, looked intently out onto the streets and remarked, "I don't know I would go so far as that, Claer. I see nothing but characters so suspicious I'm not sure what the word suspicious means anymore." Turning, Wyl looked directly at Claer for a moment and stated, "I expected..." but then he paused struggling to discover appropriate words.

"What?" Claer prompted, "What did you expect?"

Continuing to struggle, Wyl nonetheless stammered, "I expected... big dirty hairy brutes fighting and stabbing each other in the streets -- mayhem, slaughtered animal carcasses laying on their doorsteps -- garbage in the yards - You know... savages!" Aengys and Claer both laughed and Wyl equivocated, "I'm exaggerating... but what I mean is... I expected at least the kind of savages that might... pick up weapons and climb the mountain looking for treasure or for someone to kill or both... I expected to find people that would behave at home, the way they behave when they come to our home... and what have we found here? Docile compliant domesticated townfolk?"

Aengys consoled, "I understand. It puzzles us all, but let's not fool ourselves. These are the owners of those bones up there in the pass. This is where they come from. Those docile compliant domesticated townfolk out there are precisely the kind of savages who climb the mountain looking for someone to kill. I guess that's what makes it all so monstrous. Think about it. If they behaved in their home the way they behave in our home, would they ever be able to organize enough to send out war parties? The only way to support that kind of activity is with a stable and domesticated home base."

Wyl shook his head and leaned back onto the sill, looking out onto the streets then Claer suggested, “We’ve got plenty of liqueurs up here. If we have no plans for the rest of the day, why don’t we get drunk?”

As the sun hovered low on the horizon, Wyl returned to the windowsill and leaned out gazing intently onto the streets with a somewhat bitter but mildly content and slightly inebriated smile while his companions lay about the room in various states of relaxation. Flexing his brow to peer into the distance for a moment, Wyl turned then exclaimed urgently, “Hey, something is going on out there near the gate - Some kind of disturbance or something.” As his companions stirred and looked his way, Wyl then announced, “I want to see what this is.” while scrambling for his boots and cloak.

Aengys advised, “I don’t know if going out of our way to get close to a disturbance is a good idea. It’s none of our business. We shouldn’t get involved.”

“I’m not talking about getting involved.” Wyl argued, “I just want to observe. We’ll never be so invisible as with the distraction of a disturbance. Besides, it might be something we should know. MaraDara?” Wyl added expectantly as the two rolled over, pushed themselves up and prepared while Wyl pressured them to hurry then he assured Claer and Aengys they would return shortly.

The threesome made their way quickly toward the main gate and budged through gathering crowds as a commotion approached near the archway. Perhaps as many as ten guards emerged from a rowdy and jeering crowd, and as they passed by, Wyl identified the ‘longbeard’, the demonstrative orator, shackled and bound to a piece of timber carried by a number of guards. The procession passed outside the gate, lowered the piece of timber, removed the bonds and shackles then three guards pulled the old man to his feet, lifted him up and hurled him face first into the dirt. Another guard approached carrying the empty wooden crate podium, raised it over his head and smashed it on the ground nearly on top of the orator. Howling with laughter and taunts, the crowd then retreated inside the gate as a group of guards lowered their spears in formation barring the orator from reentry, and with that, the Crystiell tour of ‘longbeard’ the demonstrative orator evidently officially concluded.

Leaping to his feet, the old man raised his hands and shouted, “My blessings and best wishes to you all. May you find enlightenment and contentment in this lifetime.” then he turned and marched off eastbound with exaggerated deliberation and purpose.

Wyl turned to MaraDara and declared urgently, “We have to follow-”

“-They go now.” “Yes.” confirmed MaraDara before Wyl even completed his sentence.

Shaking his head, Wyl attempted to inquire, “You mean we have to-”

“-Yes.” “They go now.” MaraDara reemphasized pushing and prodding Wyl in the direction of the inn.

Wyl barged in the door back at the room and stated excitedly to Claer and Aengys, “We have to go now.”

“You mean right now? We haven’t even thought about supplies.” Aengys protested.

While casually gathering their things together, MaraDara addressed Aengys and Claer, instructing, “For supplies they go,” “yes? When they return” “then they go now.” In response, Claer and Aengys prepared and just before they exited the room, MaraDara asked, “They will get for them-”

“-Yes.” Claer reassured and with an affectionate smile, affirmed, “They will get for them all the lemon liqueurs they can carry, yes?”

Immediately after sunset, the party exited the city in the same fashion they entered and crossed the crop fields, traveled along the edge of a wooded line of hills then continued east some distance from the road throughout the night. Upon inspection after the sunrise, the party discovered under darkness, they in fact traveled even further away from the road than they anticipated and consequently spent most of the day working their way back to it through dense and tangled woodlands. From a high point near the road, MaraDara spotted the longbeard some distance ahead then the party worked their way downhill on a course to intercept him.

The longbeard rounded a corner striding briskly with a long walking stick in his hand muttering to himself and rocking his head from side to side, as MaraDara stepped out onto the road obstructing his course to some extent while Wyl, Claer and Aengys shuffled behind them. As if he never even noticed MaraDara until after nearly walking directly into them, the longbeard then came to a sudden halt and stated assertively, "I possess nothing worth the effort of taking. If you insist on proving as much to yourselves by force, I advise against it."

"We are only fellow travelers." Wyl advised, "We thought you might be hungry."

The longbeard immediately replied in a somewhat impatient tone, "I am never hungry, nor am I ever thirsty, tired or lonely."

"All right." Wyl conceded, "Be that as it may, we were planning on starting up a fire soon and having something to eat, and we extend an invitation to join us."

Conducting a perfunctory examination of the party, the longbeard quite deliberately stepped around MaraDara continuing on his way as he advised, "I am going where I am going - You are going where you are going and with that I will not interfere."

Exchanging a round of glances at each other, the five companions shrugged then followed the longbeard from a short distance as he resumed muttering to himself, perhaps not even aware of their presence. MaraDara shortly slipped off into the woods to scout ahead for a campsite while Wyl, Claer and Aengys plodded along behind the longbeard.

Aengys eventually whispered, "What is our interest in this man?"

Wyl glanced at Aengys and Claer then a bit hesitantly, asked, "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what, Wyl?" Aengys responded.

Wyl glanced about again then implored, "Look, don't ask me a bunch of questions. Just answer honestly and describe what you feel."

Evidently indulging Wyl, Claer admitted, "I feel a certain... charisma from them, but they are two pretty unusual girls, Wyl."

"Yeah." Aengys added, "The way they talk and the way they share sentences... It's pretty weird. Just about anybody ought to tell you they feel something about them... and as intimidating as they like to act on occasion, I think they're really a couple of pushovers for a compliment or an act of generosity. I confess I think it's all maybe a little bit cute in some strange way and I feel a kind of affection."

Wyl nodded then inquired, "-and what about him?"

Claer restrained herself from laughter and whispered, "We're following an old man in stained rags and staring at the back of his head while he talks to himself, Wyl. I feel a whole lot of things about it, okay? Is that the answer you're looking for?"

"I suppose that's fair enough." Wyl conceded.

Claer cautioned, "Don't overestimate feelings, Wyl. I'm not saying they're not real or you're imagining things. I'm just saying, maintain your perspective."

Just as sunset commenced, MaraDara suddenly reappeared on the roadside and as the longbeard approached, one of the two held out her hand toward him with a pouch of dried and spiced apple slices. The longbeard reluctantly came to a stop, turned around then with a slightly sarcastic smile, extended his hand as if to invite his three pursuers to precede him and they nodded politely then followed MaraDara as the longbeard fell in behind them. Entering an abandoned barn far from the road, the party set up a small fire in the center of the floor and ignited it as darkness fell then Dara climbed up onto the roof to conduct the first watch. Dropping suddenly to his knees, the longbeard sat on top of his heels and for a man that allegedly never felt hunger, he devoured an entire pouch of dried apple slices without much in the way of decorum, drank an entire flask of lemon liqueurs then sat quietly while the others finished eating, at which point he remarked, "You observed me in the city. Of what interest am I to you now?"

Wyl answered, "I don't know about interest. We saw you on the road and thought you might appreciate an offer of food."

The longbeard smiled clearly suggesting he thought otherwise then examining his fellow travelers with some deliberation, he concluded, "You are of the northern tribe, the clans that occupy the high places. Why have you come down from the mountain?"

The observation surprised the three a bit and Wyl subsequently saw no point in denying it then responded, "Conditions are changing. We are gathering information."

"-and what do you make of the conditions?" the longbeard inquired.

"Well, uh-" Wyl considered as Mara opened her mouth to speak but Wyl motioned to silence her and the longbeard observed it, casting a suspicious glance. Wyl then confided, "The abandonment of the countryside is a troubling development. I guess it probably suggests preparations for war... and the general demeanor-"

"-It is not preparation for war." the longbeard counseled, "It is war ongoing." Claer, Aengys and Wyl reacted with skepticism and the longbeard explained, "It is economic cleansing - War on the self-sustaining community. Agriculture is the staple of the remote countryside village and such a community might survive on its own without outside contact indefinitely. I suspect you may have noted the excessive concentration of crop fields in the immediate area of the city - That is enterprise agriculture. The volume and capacity of it renders the agricultural product of the remote areas obsolete. While those inhabitants might certainly have survived on their own food, with nothing to market, they quickly fell delinquent on their obligations and taxes then they forfeited their lands and possessions. They all live within the walls of the city now and an entire population relies exclusively on enterprise product, no self-sufficiency, all dependent."

Turning his attention to Mara, the longbeard casually inquired, "Might I trouble you for more of that liqueur, my child, if it does not exhaust your supplies?"

With a sympathetic smile, Mara dug out a fresh flask from her bag then extended it toward the longbeard as he nodded graciously and said, "Thank you."

"You are welcome." Mara responded.

The longbeard froze and stared at Mara for an excruciatingly long moment while she shuffled nervously in her bag for smoking materials then he finally relaxed, drank from the flask, turned his attention back toward Wyl and pondered, "This one is not of your clan. Why does an eastern accent travel with the northern tribe?"

Aengys cleared his throat and stated, "We maintain more diverse relationships now."

"This is... Lycae." Wyl stated, "She is Seilvhanian."

While nodding agreeably, the longbeard yet shifted his eyes suspiciously as Wyl politely gestured and advised, “I am Wylmaer and this is Claer, and Aengys.”

Bowing slightly in succession at each throughout the introductions, the longbeard then inquired, “-and the other... on the roof?”

“Um, yes, she is...” Wyl stammered.

With a mischievous smile, the longbeard stated, “Names are of no great importance.”

Wyl immediately leapt at the invitation to forego the naming process for Dara and quickly inquired, “-and what is your name?”

“I do not have a name.” the longbeard asserted so immediately, he nearly interrupted.

Wyl squinted, shook his head and asked, “You have never had a name?”

“I have never had a name.” the longbeard insisted. Wyl, Claer and Aengys alternately stared or glanced at the old man skeptically then he stated in addition, “I am dirt, air and water. I am a plant, and plants do not have personal names.”

The statement inspired a moment of silent contemplation then Wyl eventually leaned slightly and inquired, “How does that square with what you said to those people in the city? You told them their actions are of value and that means they have value, so how do you reinforce that by reducing yourself to a plant?”

“Those things do not apply to me... and furthermore, do not underestimate the value of a plant.” the longbeard admonished, “Do I require a personal interest in order to believe or in order to pursue a cause?”

“Of course not.” Wyl conceded, “It’s just... most people-”

“-Yes. Most people.” the longbeard repeated, “Most people care only about those things that directly affect them personally and do not appreciate the relevance of those things that directly affect others, as if all things are unrelated. Most people believe their conditions as well, occur independently and no relationship occurs with the conditions of others. Consequently, most people believe they might define their own personal reality that occurs independently and shares no relationship with the conditions around them, as if the things that comprise their reality simply sprout from out of their ears and never coincide with any other reality or origin. Is that what you mean by ‘most people’?”

“Uh, yeah, pretty much, I suppose.” Wyl confirmed with a nod, “I guess most people around these parts are kind of... stupid-”

“-I do not know I would describe it quite as simplistically as ‘stupid’.” the longbeard speculated, “A number of people listened to me in the city. A number of people always listen to me wherever I go. They all recognize reason when they hear it and they know nothing in their world is real. They most simply no longer believe anything can ever change it and wish not to subject themselves to the torment of a truth they can only dream. Those that listen may suffer for it as they conduct their compulsory routines but even if they take no action and nothing changes but their belief, that much makes my life of value and that is the only value I will ever know.”

In the form of near argument, Wyl inquired, “Why do you consider your conditions alone, so bleak and hopeless? You said our actions will have value in the afterlife. Why wouldn’t you also deserve the value of your actions in the afterlife?”

“I never said bleak and hopeless... nor did I say I am alone in it... nor did I limit anything to the afterlife.” the longbeard corrected then responding to the questions, he explained, “I speak in the context of the afterlife because if I refer directly to life here and now, I violate local ordinance prohibiting subversive incitement.”

“Subversive incitement?” Wyl repeated impulsively.

“Precisely.” the longbeard casually confirmed, “To suggest my audience ought reject the institutions and policies under which they live subverts those policies by definition and allegedly incites or solicits acts of sedition. Framing my speech in terms of the afterlife by slim technicality avoids overt violation of that ordinance but I apply it as a loose metaphor for this life here and now, and they all know it. As for bleak and hopeless, that is a matter of perspective. I did not say I do not deserve an afterlife, I simply suggested I will never go there. It is not about what I deserve. It is about what I am. It is about our origins. I played no part in my origin. I am the product of creation, and for creation, there is only one possible conclusion.”

“-and what conclusion is that?” Claer inquired.

In response, the longbeard inquired, “What is ultimately the only possible conclusion for the clay bowl you create?”

“You are suggesting you will perish like an object?” Claer guessed and after the old man affirmed with a nod, she inhaled then inquired gingerly, “Why would I, but not you, go to the afterlife? Am I not also creation?”

“No, you are not.” the longbeard stated with absolute conviction. Claer even covered her mouth to conceal laughter with apparent apprehension for any potential offense but unaffected by her skepticism, the longbeard elaborated, “You are the product of both nature and creation, and so you are always potentially like me and potentially opposite. You live with one foot in each world. Through one eye, you see a world of superficial material reality with no greater depth than surface appearance, while through another eye, you see infinite reason and meaning behind material reality. You think in the abstract and you know it, therefore, you prove the abstract true and you recognize the dishonesty in the intent of any that would tell you the abstract is not real because material reality does not prove it so. You recognize the dismissal of abstract belief as an abstract belief, and the hypocritical insistence of those that propose such concepts confounding, even though you yourself doubt because your actions are so similar to the actions of those you oppose, and so you suspect it may stand to reason your motives are likewise similar. Never resent or reject doubt for it is the evidence of your abstract belief - No plant would ever engage in such an exercise and so you know at least, you are something other than a plant. Your physical actions in the material world will never establish or revoke your abstract belief. Motive defines your identity and determines your destiny. Only through the exercise of abstract belief will you ever find redemption both in life and in death. Those that reject the abstract and revere only the material condemn themselves to it and thus experience both the life and the death of a plant.”

Clearing her throat with a stretch of her eyebrows, Claer nodded politely then delicately inquired, “You’re saying... you and I... are of different origins and therefore will experience different dispensations?” The longbeard nodded sharply as if pleased she paid such close attention to his commentary then Claer acknowledged his affirmation with a slow nod of her head and asked, “Why should I take your word for this?”

“The one that insists you should take his word for it is always the last one whose word you should take for it.” the longbeard advised, “You should not take my word for it, and if you would only believe subsequent to the presentation of sufficient material proof then your belief is of no value. Belief in the literal word of another is of no consequence. Only by your own sincere belief will you make of yourself something other than a plant.”

“Okay.” Claer stated reassuringly almost as if accommodating a child, “I feel pretty confident about making myself something more than a plant.” Suddenly apparently apprehensive over potentially offending the longbeard with too cavalier a dismissal of plant life, Claer apologetically stated, “I don’t mean to imply-”

“-I understand.” the longbeard insisted with a comforting nod then he suddenly produced a crudely carved wooden pipe from under his clothing, peered into the bowl, twisted a finger into it and swiveled his head to stare at Mara. Leaning away from the old man slightly with a defensive expression, Mara finally comprehended his intent then dug into her bag, produced a pouch of smoking blend and handed it to him. After stuffing his bowl full and compacting it with a finger, the longbeard then plucked a flaming stick from the fire and alternately puffed frantically then swirled smoke in his nose and mouth with apparent relish. While the old man smoked otherwise oblivious to their presence, Claer, Aengys and Wyl stared just as did his audience in Crystiell, mesmerized by either his speech, or his bizarre behavior and mannerisms, or some combination thereof.

With the rising sun in their faces, the three scouts walked together in silence a few paces behind the longbeard as he muttered softly to himself and jostled his head. Mara and Dara led and trailed the group by some distance in either direction as they continued east meandering uneventfully through wooded hills until late in the day after rounding a corner they discovered MaraDara sitting together under a great oak tree.

With a glance into the west, MaraDara advised, “They have companies.” “Yes?”

“What companies?” Aengys asked.

“Behind them. Six perhaps.” the pair reported, “On roads they follow them.”

“Do you mean they’re following us, or they just happen to be going in the same direction?” Aengys asked.

Squinting in contemplation, MaraDara turned their heads quizzically then inquired, “How these they would know,” “yes? They travel on roads behind them.”

“Right. Well, you see,” Aengys explained, “if they deliberately followed us, one of them might occasionally run up to a high place and look in our direction or they might pace themselves to stay a constant distance behind or to gain on us. Understand?”

“Mm.” “Yes.” acknowledged Mara and Dara.

“-so,” Aengys prompted, “did you notice anything like that then?”

“Eh... these they do not” “now remembers,” “yes?” MaraDara confessed.

“All right. That’s all right. You saw them and we know they’re behind us.” Aengys concluded then after a moment of thought, he inquired, “Now, did you both see this?”

“Eh, no.” “She sees them.” “Behind them she travels.” “In front of them she travels.” “She does not see them,” “yes?” the two explained.

“All right.” Aengys responded with a childish smile, “It’s just that, the way you described it, it sounded like you both saw it-”

“-Aengys,” Claer interrupted, disrupting the exercise, “what is your obsession with picking on the way they talk? We all understood what they said. You understood it. You’re ridiculing them just for amusement and it’s really starting to irritate me.”

“Sorry.” Aengys insisted, turning his head and scratching his cheek in an attempt to conceal his mouth while Wyl also turned his face toward the woods to conceal a smile.

Claer sighed impatiently and advised, “All right, I say let’s quick pace until sunset then find a place far off the road to camp.” Addressing the one of the pair nearest her, Claer prompted, “Ma-... Da-”

“She is Mara.” Mara advised gently as she reached and squeezed Claer reassuringly by her hand.

“Oh!” Wyl exclaimed then sarcastically remarked, “How gracious of you to so patiently assist her in correctly identifying your name-”

“-Shut up, Wyl.” Claer demanded then redirecting her attention, instructed, “Mara, you and I will trail and if we see them again, maybe we’ll detect their intentions, all right?”

Staring off dispassionately into the wilderness throughout the entire conversation, the longbeard suddenly turned and asserted, “You said her name is Lycae.”

“Uh, no. I meant her.” Wyl protested, pointing at Dara.

“That was not her.” the longbeard responded.

“Oh,” Wyl explained, “well, I was wrong then. Uh, I get them confused-”

“-Why did she not correct you?” asked the longbeard.

“I don’t know. I think they just get tired of correcting us all the time.” Wyl replied. “Isn’t that right?” he inquired in the direction of MaraDara.

“Yes.” “Correct.” Mara and Dara confirmed in so obligatory a fashion, Wyl interpreted it as a virtual concession they abandoned the ruse, if ever they considered it seriously in the first place.

Referring to Claer, the longbeard countered, “She said, ‘Ma- Da-’. That does not sound as if she was about to call either one of them Lycae.”

“No.” Claer intervened, “That was ‘d-uh’... You know, like, stammering.”

“Okay, well let’s get going then,” Aengys suggested, “before they catch up with us already.” then turning toward Dara, he stammered, “d-uh-Lyc-” as she rolled her eyes and cast an expectant glance. “Yeah,” Aengys continued, “why don’t you run out ahead and see if you can scout us a nice place to camp for the evening, indoors if possible?”

As Claer headed rearward with Mara, Dara sprinted ahead forward while Aengys and Wyl hustled at a quick pace urging the longbeard along, who by all appearances merely humored his unsolicited companions in accommodating their pace. As the sun plummeted toward the horizon and deep shadows crept from the woods to envelop the road, the party came to a stop nearly surprised to find Dara almost hidden under the low hanging branches of a pine tree. Pausing for a moment as her party caught their breath, Dara then turned back into the woods as the threesome followed her down into a steep and rocky ravine. Although she found no indoor shelter, Dara discovered a cozy nook in the woods with a soft bed of pine needles.

The party set no fire and kept double watches over the night then in the morning, Claer and Mara trailed again to watch for the group that possibly pursued and after no more than two hours, they rejoined the group and Claer announced, “They’re closer now. They must have traveled some after dark or before sunrise because they gained on us overnight, and they look like they’re intent on catching up with us.” Addressing Aengys primarily, Claer asked, “What do you want to do?”

“Give me more information.” Aengys demanded.

Claer summarized, “We think we count ten, but they’ve kept two at lead so maybe another two we haven’t seen yet still trail. I guess they at least appreciate they’re not the only men in the world with weapons, and that establishes some degree of competence.”

Looking the longbeard up and down, Aengys asked, “Do you fight?”

“Only in the defense of others and never with weapons.” the old man responded.

Aengys nodded and inquired, “-and in this particular situation, that means, what?”

“This is not defense.” the longbeard stated.

Aengys might have advanced more than one argument to oppose the assertion but he simply nodded and accepted it uncontested.

The group of men came to an abrupt stop and defensively bunched together as Aengys and Claer stepped out onto the road, and Aengys stated cheerfully, “Hi. How are you?”

Although the men shuffled nervously, when no ambush immediately occurred, they regained some confidence then one smiled slightly and asked, “You traveling alone?”

Aengys responded, “Yeah, just like you. We’re all traveling alone.”

The subject impulsively looked behind him at his group as if to confirm they indeed traveled alone then returning his attention to Aengys, he asked, “You got money?”

“Do you?” Aengys replied.

The man shuffled his feet and glanced again at his companions then smiled nervously and stated, “It don’t matter to you if we got money-”

“-They have money.” Claer stated insistently.

“Shut up, Claer.” Aengys said through gritted teeth.

Suddenly emboldened, the man shouted, “Yeah. Shut up, Claer! I don’t think you understand how this works. You don’t ask me questions; I ask you questions-”

“-Okay, ask me questions.” Claer challenged, “What do you want to know? You want to know if we’re alone and have money? What else do you want to know?”

Clearly incredulous, the man stammered and shook his head then Aengys stated calmly, “We don’t have money. Look at us - We’re peasants. You’re wasting your time on us. Let’s just call it even and move along, all right?”

Scowling strenuously, the subject nervously rubbed his fingers across his face then inhaled deeply and stated with contrived confidence, “Yeah... um... just give us the girl then.” as he motioned with his hand.

Aengys exhibited surprisingly little surprise then glanced at Claer then returned his attention to the man and advised, “You can have my permission all you like but at the end of the day, you still have to go over there and get her, and I can’t help you with that. This is a proposition of diminishing prospects, pal. I advise you move along. You can still go on your way without any resistance from us.”

“No he can’t.” Claer stated forcefully. Raising his eyebrows, the subject nearly smiled as if he interpreted the comment as intent to abduct him perhaps as a love slave but then he flushed with disappointment finally recognizing it as sarcasm. Addressing the full group, Claer advised, “You’re free to go... except for him... He stays here.”

Addressing the belligerent subject directly, Aengys intervened and countered, “Go ahead and leave with your friends. I’ll deal with her.” Suddenly stirring, the group of men repositioned as they realized Mara, Dara and Wyl stood on the road behind them along with the longbeard a bit further away.

Aengys glared angrily and shouted, “I told you to stay in the trees! The reason they didn’t fight is because they didn’t know where you were. Now they know.”

“Sorry, Aengys.” Wyl pled, “I couldn’t stop them.”

Shaking his head with a furious scowl, Aengys glared at MaraDara and advised, “We’re going to talk about this later.” then turning his attention back to the stranger, composed himself and informed the man, “It’s still okay with me if you move along.”

The man rubbed his lip without response then Aengys looked over his shoulder and asked of one of his counterparts particularly youthful in appearance, “How old are you?”

“-Don’t answer him!” the chief man of the group immediately barked.

Aengys smiled and asserted with a nod, “He’ll run... That one too.” he added pointing to another. Both subjects turned their eyes down for a moment virtually confirming the predictions and Aengys concluded, “You don’t have the advantage you thought you had. It’s not worth it. We don’t have anything you want. It’s all risk and no gain.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” the man responded as he motioned with a hand toward the youngest of all his companions, a boy by all appearances no more than perhaps eight years of age and as he stepped within the reach of an arm, the man grasped the boy by the shoulder then turned him in the direction of MaraDara, Wyl and the longbeard. The boy stared for a moment then turned his eyes up toward the man with a nearly imperceptible nod after which, the man glanced at the rest of his companions with a sly smile they all greeted with apparent satisfaction. Returning his attention to Aengys, the subject stated, “I’ve changed my mind. Give us the old man and we’ll let you go.”

Nearly reeling in shock, Aengys twisted his head as if to inspect Claer then quickly turned his attention to the longbeard as if conducting a comparison and with a short burst of laughter, he rubbed his jaw then opened his mouth to speak but fell silent as he noticed the young boy nudge the man with an elbow.

With raised hand, the boy appeared to attempt to point discreetly at Mara and Dara then another man in the group barked at the ringleader, “What’s the kid pointing at?”

“Nothing!” the man shouted as he pushed the offending hand downward.

Obviously less than reassured, the counterpart growled, “You never said nothing about three of them.”

“-and I ain’t saying nothing about three of them now neither.” the ringleader responded then with growing apprehension, he yet stubbornly maintained his confident demeanor and more in the direction of MaraDara, he forcefully repeated, “Give us the old man and you can go your own way.”

Mara stepped forward slightly then stated, “To him she proposes counterproposal. To her she proposes he gives boy then on his own way he goes now, yes?”

In quickly mounting anger the subject shouted over his shoulder, “Bol!” and an unusually large man rippling with massive muscles that nearly burst out of his clothing stepped from the group in the direction of MaraDara. In turn, Dara stepped in front of Mara and swung up two fists in an obvious offer to limit any ostensible clash to a fistfight. Freezing in his tracks with an unexpected yet genuine smile, ‘Bol’ evidently appreciated so bold and sportsmanlike a challenge but nonetheless he flexed massive muscles in his monstrous neck while even muscles on his face bulged then he reached for his weapons. MaraDara leapt, one swinging her foot backside and heel first into his jaw, while the other propelled the sole of her foot upward into the underside of his chin then his arms instantaneously fell limp and empty handed to his sides as Bol toppled over into a motionless heap.

Two men produced swords and rushed MaraDara but almost immediately dropped their weapons and stumbled away moaning and bleeding after a brief exchange, while four others that initially prepared to engage quickly reconsidered the circumstances and backed away brandishing their weapons defensively. The two younger subjects Aengys predicted would run did not in fact run but they never reached for weapons and simply backed up showing their hands while the ringleader of the group clutched the young boy by the shoulder and handled a weapon in a threatening fashion.