

Lowering his sword to a neutral position, Aengys calmly instructed, “Let him go. Just walk away.”

“Give me the old man.” the subject demanded with increasing desperation and then he jolted nearly panicked as the longbeard approached.

Passively extending his hands, the old man advised, “I submit myself to your custody. Now let the boy go.”

“No. It’s not a trade.” the ringleader protested, “You come with us and-”

Gasping, the subject fell suddenly silent as Aengys clamped a hand onto his wrist while his focus on the longbeard distracted him and grappling for weapons, the subject indeed, although involuntarily, released the boy. Although the subject successfully placed a hand upon the hilt of a dagger, in the process Claer moved in and planted a knee into his groin sending him to his elbows and knees.

“Hold him up!” Claer then barked at Aengys.

Clutching the subject by the shoulders of his cloak, Aengys yanked him up onto his knees then Claer struck three furious blows to the side of his head, kicked him in the face and unleashed a wild roundhouse swing rocking his head with a blow landed square on his cheek as Aengys released him. Toppling over, his face planted into the road with his arms at his sides and his knees still bent underneath him so his rump pointed up in a near comical pose, then Claer kicked hard into the backside of the subject in a final humiliation. Even as the ringleader tumbled over onto his side, Claer attempted to stomp at his face until Aengys at last restrained her.

While the four men still standing over two feet pointed their weapons down in a gesture pleading for truce, Claer straightened out her clothing as if composing herself then addressing the four, she instructed, “Drop your weapons and run away.” As the men bolted even while their weapons yet rattled loose upon the road, Claer informed the two younger subjects, “You’re free to go with them but you have to leave any weapons here.” Compliantly, the two nearly threw weapons down and fled then referring to the two injured men on the road, Claer instructed Wyl, “Search them and take whatever they’ve got on them.”

Wyl stepped toward one of the men but hesitated as the man defensively recoiled then Claer shouted angrily, “Kick him!”

Reluctantly swinging back a foot, Wyl then sighed and instructed the men almost pleading, “Come on, get on your faces.”

Rolling over, the two laid face down on the road and Wyl stripped them of everything in their possession then moved on to the apparently unconscious Bol and the ringleader. At the conclusion of his search, Wyl held his hands out to show Claer some seven coins, a fistful of jerked beef and two small flasks of liqueur. Claer kicked, poked and prodded the two injured men until they finally staggered up to their feet and ran wobbling in less than a straight direction. While Bol still lay motionless, Claer glanced at him as if disgusted by such a pitiful performance then glanced at MaraDara as if with admiration for such overwhelming force. Pocketing the coins and liqueurs produced in the search, Claer along with Aengys then stomped all the weapons snapping each into pieces and scooped up then hurled the articles randomly into undergrowth along the roadside.

“Let’s get out of here already.” Aengys demanded, “We don’t know we’ve accounted for all of them and because we obviously took them by surprise, there might be others still out ahead of us.”

Glancing once again at Bol with obvious disapproval, Claer kicked him hard in the face for good measure, took the young boy gently by the hand, nodded at Aengys and inspected the road in both directions. The longbeard stood still studying his companions with his head tilted to one side and as Claer brushed past him, she inquired, “Are you still traveling with us?”

Waiting for the group to assemble and continue east, the longbeard turned slowly and followed at a bit of a distance. Aengys pointed at MaraDara and held up one finger then Mara joined him and they sprinted out ahead to scout for possible additional members of the would-be abduction party. Before advancing perhaps even as much as a mile, Aengys and Mara returned and signaled the others to hide in the trees, and very shortly thereafter, two men appeared moving quickly and hugging the tree line on the opposite side of the road. With two fingers pointed at MaraDara, Aengys motioned them to follow him then sprang out onto the road surprising the two men, one of whom nearly shrieked as they both backed away warily.

Aengys stated quickly and authoritatively, “Your companions obviously will not be joining up with you any time soon. If you intend to find them, keep going west but first, throw down your weapons and give us your money.”

The men froze for a moment then produced weapons but Dara moved swiftly on one of the two and thrust an open palm into his chin rocking his head backward as Mara pinched his weapon hand under her arm then kicked sideways into his knee and he collapsed howling in pain. Brandishing his weapon, the second man backed away apparently intent on extricating himself without a fight but Claer blocked his path as MaraDara spread apart and encircled him then he finally threw his weapon down and held up his hands.

Claer poked at him with her sword and barked, “Face down!”

As the man dove onto the road, his companion shrieked, “Coward!” while struggling up to his feet and withdrawing a dagger from under his cloak.

MaraDara spun around, swooped in on the man and in more of a defensive reflex than an assault, he raised his arms with his dagger extended but even so, relatively effortlessly the two clutched his wrist, twisted his arm behind his back until the dagger fell loose then kicked his chin. Although his knees buckled, the man remained standing, thrashing his arms in panic but Mara and Dara each held him by a wrist and with their free hands, pounded fists against his face then abruptly released him and with four free hands, beat him so rapidly and severely, by all appearances only the momentum of the beating held him upright. As the man collapsed, MaraDara clutched his clothing from each side then swung and hurled him overhead off the edge of the road sending him crashing through thick bushes and tumbling down a steep bank into the shadows below.

Claer stripped the remaining subject of all possessions then pulled him by his collar and just as she relaxed her grip on his clothing, she swung with her other hand punching the side of his jaw. Stumbling, the subject spun and fell onto his hands and knees then as he struggled up, Claer kicked at his rump shouting, “Get out of my sight.”

Without looking back, the man limped away and eventually broke into a run westbound on the road.

“What about that one?” Aengys inquired with a motion of his head toward the bushes.

Claer snapped in half the weapons discarded or otherwise forfeited by the men then held still for a moment with an ear turned toward the deep shadows until evidently satisfied with the silence, she remarked, “He’s not coming out any time soon.”

MaraDara suggested, “They go now.” “Yes?”

The party continued along the road for some time and as sunset approached, Aengys reported spotting a small compound of abandoned rustic log cottages in a deep ravine then led the way to the cottage furthest back from the road. After covering the windows and preparing a fire, Claer sat first watch outside. Scrounging a bucket, Wyl collected water from a nearby creek then MaraDara cleaned up meticulously blotting blood spatters and droplets from their clothing eventually bundling blankets together and reclining by the fire with a flask of lemon liqueurs.

Eyeing MaraDara for a moment, Aengys suddenly admonished, “When I tell you to do something, I have a specific reason for it. Those men were ready to go on their way without event and when you came out of the trees, you disrupted the plan and placed Claer and me in an uncontrolled situation-”

“-No.” MaraDara contended, “They control situations.” Aengys huffed in exasperation over their insolence but unrepentant, the two further argued, “She says men are not free to go,” “yes?” “She says their monies she wants.” “In these, they do as she wishes.”

“She said that only after you came out of the trees.” Aengys argued.

“Man tells them” “girl he wants” “before out of trees they come,” “yes?” MaraDara countered, “They guess after man says girl he wants,” “fight is inevitable,” “yes?”

“It is a valid argument they present.” the longbeard declared.

“What do you care?” Aengys demanded with some irritation, “You’re not even involved in this. Your opinion doesn’t count.”

“He’s right, Aengys.” Wyl concurred, “They never moved until after that bandit said he wanted you to give him Claer. He changed the conditions, not Mara and Dara. Claer decided not to let him go. Mara and Dara only responded to that.”

“Since when are you an expert on scout protocol?” Aengys objected, “The point is not who said what and when, or who exercises what discretion. The point is they disrupted the plan and turned a controlled situation into an uncontrolled situation.” Focusing his attention on MaraDara specifically, Aengys patiently explained, “If you want to object, argue or change the plan, you wait for the appropriate time. We could just as easily have hunted them down and killed them all only moments after letting them go, understand? The difference is we all would have had a moment to plan our actions and understand our intentions. Deciding on an impulse left me guessing and that is not the proper way to treat a partner. Do you understand what I am telling you?” MaraDara both nodded subtly after a moment and gazed at him with obvious remorse then with a gracious smile, Aengys consoled, “Thank you. I accept your apology... and don’t say ‘monies’. Money is already sort of plural. It’s redundant...”

After a slight pause, Wyl suggested, “I say if something like that happens again, we all hide in the bushes and let Mara and Dara handle it... Did you see them kick that giant in the chin? They knocked him unconscious standing up and he fell over flat on his face like a sack of grain. He never even raised his arms to cushion the fall.”

“Wyl,” Aengys advised, “If they handle it themselves then they don’t need guides.”

“No,” Wyl countered, “they need us in the cities to interpret complex conditions, where not every issue can be resolved so conveniently as with a good swift kick to the chin, but out here where a good swift kick to the chin carries more weight, they’re the ones best equipped for the resolution of issues.”

“Okay.” Aengys conceded with a nod, “We’ll take it under advisement for next time.”

After Aengys climbed up onto the roof for his turn on watch, Claer rummaged through the house gathering flammable materials then eventually sat back at the hearth and casually broke up a collection of furniture and other scraps of flammable objects while humming a tune. MaraDara commented, “Very pretty.” “Yes.”

Perhaps a bit surprised, Claer stated somewhat apologetically, “I thought you were asleep. The song is pretty, you mean?”

“Yes, songs,” “very pretty also.” MaraDara responded.

Smiling appreciatively, Claer may have blushed but if so, the dim light of the fire concealed as much and she stated, “That is ‘The Lament of Geyrh-Gylraen’. It is a sad song. I love it for its desperate tragedy. You love music too, don’t you? When you made us dance, I sensed that.”

“Yes.” MaraDara admitted, “They love music.” “Why song is tragic?” “Yes?”

“The lyrics to the song are tragic,” Claer explained, “and the music is solemn and mournful. It is a story song. I guess most Highland songs are story songs, anyway.”

“She would sing” “for them these?” “Yes?” MaraDara inquired.

“I suppose.” Claer answered with a hint of reluctance, “I should really tell the story first. I guess the lyrics are obvious enough but the way we do it, the story comes first.”

Adjusting to relaxed positions, MaraDara reclined together on the floor as if children anticipating a bedtime story while in the process, Wyl and the longbeard also stirred and observed with curiosity, which only made Claer more self-conscious but at least the boy slept soundly in a state of apparent exhaustion. Motioning to MaraDara for a liqueur flask, Claer drank and lit a smoke then sat quietly for a moment in the glow of the fire.

Wyl rolled his eyes and remarked, “Good job establishing the mood.”

“Wyl, shut up and don’t mock me. You’ll ruin it.” Claer complained then adjusting slightly, she commenced, “Most that knew Geyrh-Gylraen, considered him an odd young man as he maintained no close friendships, never confided in anyone even his family and so accounted as something of a mystery to all that knew him. Past the age of thirty, he met and fell in love with a girl for the first time, the extraordinarily beautiful Maeryhe. Moreover, most considered Geyrh-Gylraen less than compelling physically and so even wondered how such a beautiful girl might love such a man but nonetheless, she evidently loved him in return, they married and shared a home, and some few visited on occasion and glimpsed their private life together. Those familiar said Geyrh-Gylraen pampered and served her as if an attendant, never allowing her to lift a finger while Maeryhe worked occasionally outside the home and years passed as the couple kept mostly private just as Geyrh-Gylraen previously kept mostly private.

Years passed uneventfully until some folks noted they did not observe Maeryhe for an unusual period of time and eventually, some folks called at her home to inquire as to her condition but Geyrh-Gylraen always greeted them, spoke only from behind the door just barely cracked open, never invited any in and told them Maeryhe had gone out. As more time passed, concern eventually turned to suspicion until a group finally addressed the Martial in the form of grievance and demanded he produce sufficient explanation then with two of his captains, the Martial accompanied the plaintiff group to the home of Geyrh-Gylraen. Once again, he attempted to pacify them from behind his barely cracked open door but the Martial and his captains forced their way in and discovered all things in apparent order until entering the bedroom where curtains covered the windows but even in darkness, they observed a figure clearly visible in the bed under the covers.

Although perfumes and fragrances enveloped the room, the militiamen immediately identified the scent of death then opening the curtains and pulling back the covers even to the frantic protests of Geyrh-Gylraen, they discovered there in the bed the earthly remains of the beautiful Maeryhe. The captains discovered no indications of unnatural death and despite any suspicion, none among the group believed Geyrh-Gylraen would ever intentionally harm her. Maeryhe apparently died of illness or some other natural cause and Geyrh-Gylraen attempted to preserve her body with waxes and oils as well as cosmetics and fragrances to mask the pall of death and the odor of decay.

Despite shock and grief, all present only consoled Geyrh-Gylraen and in consideration of his known love for Maeryhe, they understood that in all, he intended no harm but when the militiamen attempted to remove the body for a proper Geaelen burial, he wailed in anguish while others present restrained him. Only days after the burial, during a fierce thunderstorm, a farmer wandered out to his barn late at night only because the storm awoke him, convinced he heard loose items banging about in the wind. For this reason alone, upon all of the earth, one man occupied a position to observe Geyrh-Gylraen walk along the road with a shovel in his hand and something slung over his shoulder.

All by then heard the astonishing tale of Geyrh-Gylraen and his desperate love for the dearly departed Maeryhe and so the farmer drew conclusions then alerting neighbors along the way, visited the Martial the next morning and once again while Geyrh-Gylraen wailed in anguish restrained by others present, militiamen removed the body of Maeryhe for a second proper Geaelen burial. The Martial then interred the remains at a militia burial site and built a guard kiosk near the grave then established a constant watch but Geyrh-Gylraen soon abandoned the home he shared with Maeryhe and constructed a new home, little more than a shed, almost neighboring the graveyard.

And for the rest of his natural life until he grew too old and feeble, Geyrh-Gylraen slept during daylight then from sunset to sunrise, stood sentinel a short distance from the grave of his beloved and beautiful Maeryhe, and he stared motionless with fists clenched firmly around the staff of a shovel. And the guards that stood watch, overwhelmed by sympathy for so wretched a sight called out to him, invited him to share food and drink, but Geyrh-Gylraen never spoke a word and only stood lonely sentinel with his shovel, watching, waiting, for that one opportunity guards might dose off then he might recover his beloved and beautiful Maeryhe.” Claer hummed the tune again for a moment then sang...

*I watch over your grave and would stay here forever
your warm hands in my hands I would always remember
my green fields, my bride's hair, my love will endure forever
no smell of earth nor cruelty of weather ever will keep us not together
'til I breathe my last breath or lose sense of my head
alone I would hold you in the warmth of my bed
crying out your name with mournful tears beyond fathom
for the grief of this world and the depth of this chasm
those near who might wander would behold they with dread
for my love I would shelter beyond even dead
in the cold of your grave, in the warmth of my bed
I will love thee forever, my love, live or dead*

“That is just revolting.” Wyl commented as Claer cast a disapproving eye in reaction.

“It is beautiful.” “Yes.” MaraDara whispered with moistened eyes.

While the longbeard offered no comment, he clearly also appreciated the composition.

Subsequent to an appropriate and courteous pause, Wyl remarked, “That is a classic example of the optimistic and joyful traditions of Geaelen song and storytelling.”

“You’re so clever, Wyl.” Claer snipped.

“I’m serious.” Wyl protested, “All our stories are always morbid and bleak. We don’t have any happy stories, at least not any that I’m familiar with.”

“That’s all a story is, Wyl.” Claer hypothesized, “What else would it be? A story is the history of an anomaly or disarrangement. If I told you I did the exact same things every day for eight years and nothing that ever happened didn’t also happen the day before and was always predictable, would you call that a story? It’s not a story; it’s just the description of a passage of time without event. What would ever constitute an event other than something anomalous?”

“I heard a story in Seilvhan about nothing but an exceptional harvest, and they wrote songs about it too.” Wyl countered, “The story is about this exceptional harvest that occurred five-hundred years ago, it describes the weather throughout the four seasons and then concludes with an exceptional harvest and lots of really good food for the next year. It’s a happy story about pretty much nothing.”

“No it’s not about nothing. An exceptional harvest is also an anomaly.” Claer insisted, “It’s the same story, it’s just less dramatic. The disarrangement is the three seasons before the harvest. The food supply is in doubt until the harvest, that is the source of tension and the exceptional harvest resolves the tension. It sounds a bit boring but it’s pretty much the same story as Geyrh-Gylraen and his morbid obsession for his deceased lover.”

“If you say so.” Wyl remarked with a skeptical expression.

A dark and overcast morning dawned while a cold wind blew in occasional strong gusts that swayed and rustled the trees scattering brightly colored autumn leaves skipping and swirling about the surface of the landscape. Great hills and valleys rolled above and tumbled below the roadway while in the distant north, the Alaepys Mountains dominated the sky, cloaked in brilliant billows of cloud.

Since joining the party, the boy spoke not a word and in fact spoke no word during the encounter with his original party either but while walking casually, the longbeard asked, “Who are those men to you?” The boy shrugged and the longbeard inquired, “You do not know? How long have you been in their custody?” Again, the boy shrugged and the longbeard asked, “-as long as you can remember? Do you remember from where you come or how you ended up in the company of those men?” The boy shook his head and the longbeard asked, “Do you know your name?” The boy again shook his head and the longbeard came to a stop, knelt to look the boy in the eye then spoke softly to him and patted his shoulder in reassurance after which, the boy actually smiled slightly as the party continued along the road.

Some time later, Wyl asked discreetly, “What did you say to him?”

“I told him the earth is his home and the gods know his name.” the longbeard replied.

Aengys occupied a lead position while Dara trailed behind and the journey progressed uneventfully over the morning until about noon, Aengys suddenly appeared from under the trees at the side of the road and as the party regrouped around him, he informed them a number of riders he presumed soldiers headed their way on horseback.

Crawling into the woods, the group huddled under the shadows and peered out toward the road until hooves rumbled near then a group of some couple dozen trotted past all in green and red uniforms with metal armor and helmets. After some time, Aengys shrugged and continued eastward then the rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully and as sunset approached, winds grew fiercer and the temperature descended. Leaving the road, the party wandered deep into the woods, spent some time searching for a place suitable to conceal a campfire and finally settled into a pocket surrounded by dense vine. After a light meal, Wyl made a small fire and Aengys crept out to conduct watch while the others quietly sipped liqueurs around the fire for some time.

Directed toward no one in particular, Wyl remarked, “The uniforms on those riders are not the same as the uniforms in Crystiell.”

“They are the cavalry of Martillion.” the longbeard advised, “We are roughly halfway between the two cities. Both militaries patrol the area and contest it occasionally.” With a casual glance about, the longbeard then inquired, “I expect that is your destination?”

Considering it no great secret and obvious enough as well, Wyl affirmed, “Yes, I imagine so at least for now.” then inquired, “I assume that is your destination also?”

“My destination lies in a far greater obscurity than Martillion but if Martillion lies in the direction we travel then it is as good a destination as any for now.” the longbeard replied with characteristic verbosity.

“Right,” Wyl acknowledged, “so, you are familiar with Martillion then? Do they allow strangers to enter?”

“They allow strangers prepared to conduct business to enter,” the longbeard replied then equivocated, “which is to say they will not allow you to enter, presuming that is the intent of your question.”

Wyl pondered for a moment then asked, “-but you expect to enter?”

“They will anticipate my approach from a distance and an audience will gather at the gate. The king and his guard will allow me to pass to avoid the appearance of openly oppressing a public figure of some popularity among his adoring subjects. They will watch carefully and punish me if I violate ordinance, as is the case in Crystiell.” Pausing briefly, the longbeard addressed Claer and Wyl in particular, commenting, “It is good to find the clans of the north in this place.” then with a glance at Mara, he asserted, “I suspect we pursue the same interests and consequently, I suggest it will work to your convenience if we part ways before we reach the city. My arrival will serve as sufficient diversion to facilitate your entrance from some other less conventional location.”

Wyl and Claer exchanged a glance then Claer inquired, “What interests are those?”

“A perfect world.” the longbeard answered in a near whisper, “Beware the pursuit of a perfect world, young journalist, disciple of the one in red. Never consider it an ambition or a goal, or it becomes just another economic strategy.”

Wyl concealed a degree of surprise over such intuition but he believed the longbeard some sort of relation to witches, and intuition on the part of witches never surprised him to any degree. Working up a facade of casual skepticism, Wyl inquired, “How would you know of whom I consider myself a disciple?”

“By any number of means I would know but I might state as most obvious, a simple process of elimination.” the longbeard replied then further explained, “You are not the disciples of civilization as is the tradition of your tribe and there are only two kinds of disciples in this world.”

With a shrug, Wyl bent his lips in concession of the obvious after all but the longbeard nonetheless in good measure further advised, “Last night you spoke of disarrangement as the source of every story and in Crystiell, you pondered the paradox of civilized man in all his primordial splendor. Whether you know it or not, you are a disciple of the one in red. It is a calculated guess based on your reluctance and remorse that you in fact know her, and if you know her, you are her disciple. Is that not inexorable truth?”

Wyl struggled to conceal discomfort with a subject he considered deeply personal and private, while in addition, he considered the associations of his tribe a jealously guarded secret. Begrudging only the slightest nod in acknowledgement of at least the factual accuracy of the guess and perhaps with intent of merely changing the subject or perhaps out of burning curiosity, Wyl inquired, “-and what then is the other kind of disciple in this world? What does it mean to be a disciple of civilization?”

The longbeard smiled a surprisingly self-indulgent smile in apparent satisfaction with the accuracy of his analysis or perhaps even with satisfaction for the exposure of deeply personal and private conditions, or even jealously guarded secrets, and even though he appeared somewhat surprised by the question, in response he inquired, “Are you not familiar with the tradition of Ome’?”

Exchanging a glance, Claer and Wyl both shook their heads and the longbeard raised his eyebrows for a moment then advised, “Ome’ goes by many names under pretense of many origins as determined by cultural interpretation but every disciple of civilization, whether they know it or not, observes the faith of Ome’. Disciples consider it sacred, the word of god transformed to the word of man preserved forever in the inflexible perpetuity of the written word. In all likelihood, you are not familiar with it only because copies of it on paper are exceedingly rare and the disciples of civilization rarely speak of it openly as is otherwise so frequently the custom in its practical scholarly manifestations of politics and economics. Along with rather traditional if not predictable creation mythology, Ome’ preserves a moral philosophy that is every bit as counterintuitive as it is remorselessly inflexible and unyielding. Find and read the texts of Ome’ and it will answer all your questions about anomaly, disarrangement and the worship of economic civilization.”

Shaking his head in obvious skepticism, Wyl inquired somewhat contentiously, “Are you suggesting what is wrong with men is what they believe about gods?”

“That is an assumption inspired by your cultural predisposition and it is most certainly not at all what I suggest.” the longbeard counseled, “I specify anomaly, disarrangement and the worship of economic civilization as the subjects to which you will find answers. By more experience in translation of cultural context or perhaps by greater familiarity with me and my peculiarities, you might otherwise understand the subject to which I propose you will find answers is not what men believe about god... but what men believe about men... for preserved within the texts of Ome’ is the origin of the motive of men.”

Both Claer and Wyl stared speechless perhaps somewhat mesmerized, and it occurred to Wyl as ironic that like those hapless hypnotized civilized masses mesmerized by the esoteric gibberish of an eccentric old man upon an empty wooden crate in the city of Crystiell, they too should experience so similar a condition. Even moreover, Wyl keenly appreciated in his personal cultural interpretation, he considered the gibberish of the eccentric old man nowhere near all that esoteric after all. As if sensing the thought, the old man smiled a subtle smile evidently pleased his insight and intellectual challenges might inspire such vigorous contemplation.

Producing his pipe, the longbeard solicited herb blend from Claer without spoken word then she along with Wyl stared in fascination as the old man alternately labored and relaxed with his indulgence while MaraDara rolled eyes impatiently as if somewhat irritated by the audacious declarations of the longbeard.

Apparently satisfied his pipe no longer demanded his full concentration, the longbeard relaxed slightly then counseled, “The name is a subterfuge to conceal the true name and implications of its true intent. Ome’ is the tradition of the great creator god Patrais who saw the potential for order, reason and meaning even in the great chaos of the domain of the careless and fickle gods of nature. Patrais first questioned then came to oppose the random disorganization of nature and in response as a balance against chaos, Patrais created man in the image of god with a mind for order and reason opposed to the chaos of nature.” The longbeard paused then with excruciating deliberation, carefully explained, “Understand now, the meaning of the words, ‘*created man in the image of god*’, for in these words, the keepers of the faith intend not to imply the creation of *the man kind* in the image of god but the creation of the man *gender* in the image of god, and these words are intentionally deceptive.”

As if measuring comprehension or reaction, the longbeard alternately peered at Claer then Wyl for such duration, they both awkwardly nodded in obligatory fashion, guessing he solicited some form of confirmation then he finally asserted, “In these words resides a faith of equality ordained by a loving creator god that bestows upon all that would believe, a significance of meaning and greater purpose for their lives but those deeper meanings conceal interpretive intuitions not in a *world of man* but in a *man world* of order and reason, bound by unwavering faith in the lofty cause and noble struggle against the tyranny and chaotic anomaly of nature. These contexts define the agenda, not of *man* but of *men* in the image of the *gender* of the great creator god that subsequently and only incidentally created the unfortunate yet inevitable necessity of the inferior gender of woman, the product of the waste materials of creation and the earthly representative of the careless and fickle gods of nature. In these contexts, god ordains not *man* but *men* with divine cause and bestows legitimacy on their contempt for nature and woman. In these contexts, god wills in the creation of men a multitude of creator gods, destined to achieve equality with god through imitation. The divinely ordained destiny therefore of men consists in conducting grand enterprise to manufacture a world in which nature is subordinate and only material accomplishment establishes any meaning or value of life. In the foretold conclusion of the divine struggle, men at last ascend to the status of god with the final and irrevocable defeat of nature by the accomplishment of artificial immortality thus rendering irrelevant once-and-for-all the careless and fickle gods of nature. The purpose of men and the meaning of life ordained by the great creator god of Ome’ are not the revelation of one god but the revocation of all god, the dismantling and destruction of all nature, and the final reward of a manufactured cosmos ruled by men attended by subordinate inferiors in the lesser image of men.”

Pausing for a series of deep breaths as if perhaps winded, the longbeard then looked Wyl directly in his eyes and stated ominously, “That is why the kind of men that would construct such advanced cities with such impressive edifices, produce and practice such sophisticated accommodations and conduct themselves in such domesticated orderly and compliant fashion are precisely the kind of men that would pick up weapons and climb the mountain looking for treasure or for someone to kill.”

Wyl nodded in appreciation of the point then squinted and stated with a nearly accusative tone, “You never heard me say that. I said that inside the room at the inn while the guard carried you out to the gate. You weren’t there when I said, ‘pick up weapons and climb the mountain looking for treasure or for someone to kill-”

“I detected it.” the longbeard contended, “You said it in a thousand other words in our subsequent conversations on the road together. Do not begrudge an old man the insight and wisdom of his experience.”

Wyl stared suspiciously but he also appreciated insight and wisdom as a fair defense for an old man, and as his focus meandered back to the tradition of Ome’, he asked, “Then you’re saying the anomaly, the... *disarrangement*... in the world of men is all the consequence of words in some book?”

“Disarrangement is the effect of cause.” the longbeard stated with a hint of impatience, “The disarrangement is the consequence of action, not words. The words do not cause the effect, they are the effect of the cause.” In addition, the longbeard then declared, “As I detected your sentiments for those that would pick up weapons for treasure or to kill, I detect now from the stubborn and combative warrior girl, ‘the old man talks a lot of bullshit just as easily the product of an overactive imagination’ -”

“-Well, I could have guessed that!” Wyl countered as if to diminish the intuitive quality of the insight.

Without reaction to the attempted levity, the old man countered, “I suggested before and I always insist, never believe me. Study, observe and form independent conclusions. Find and read Ome’ for yourself. Only then, will you fully understand and appreciate that which you oppose. You do not oppose men or the actions of men; you oppose their belief, and belief transcends the individual man. That is why generation upon generation of presumably civilized men repeats the same actions with the same results in spite of such optimistically contrary expectations. Disciples of Ome’ tradition, never learn from their experiences, they learn always only exclusively from their beliefs, and that is the very first most essential principle Ome’ instructs. To resolve the disarrangement, you eradicate the belief. You will never resolve anything with the mere defeat of men unless of course, you defeat all men, in which case you defeat your own cause - A bitter irony, yes? You pursue the cause of the eradication of cause-”

“-This is preposterous.” Wyl objected, “These beliefs you describe are ridiculous and no one would ever believe them-”

“-You underestimate the power of wishful belief.” the longbeard countered, “You call these beliefs ridiculous, but as is so often the case with the very best of lies, it is so very nearly the truth and that is why it so stubbornly endures.”

Wyl cast a skeptical look then the longbeard leaned a bit closer and advised with obviously sincere conviction, “Appreciate the limited alternatives of your opposing faith. What attraction does your faith offer men conditioned, encouraged and rewarded by innumerable generations of tradition to seize the status and exercise the power of god? What does your faith offer as compensation for the abandonment of such compelling and inspirational visions held by men conditioned by a lifetime of reinforcement to always expect immediate material compensation for every action and for every belief? -the banal and monotonous repetition of idle modesty and an uneventful life? -self-denial and self-sacrifice for the benefit of others? -- but enterprise, contest and boastful accomplishment all sound so much more appealing and rewarding, not to mention, entertaining.”