

Somewhat involuntarily, Wyl shook his head not so much in argument but in rejection of the beliefs in question and the longbeard appeared to sympathize but he looked Wyl in the eye to emphasize his seriousness and concluded, “You wish to convince men conditioned to indulge, worship themselves and pursue extravagance that indulgence, self-worship and extravagance are wrong. You would strip them of every last shred of purpose and meaning they have ever known or imagined in this world and to which they so desperately cling. Your faith sounds to them like a bleak and hopeless concession. You may argue all your life and never convince as many as one. Men that consider these beliefs absolute proof also consider all contrary absolute proof nothing more than beliefs, and that is a difficult anomaly to overcome.”

Staring vacantly for a moment, Wyl then impulsively asked, “Who are these ‘keepers of the faith’? What is the meaning of the name Patrais?”

Drinking from a liqueur flask, the longbeard leaned back as if to relax then with a surprisingly playful tone, he answered, “I wish not to spoil the entertainment value of reading these things for yourself in the texts of which I speak - Divulging too much of the premise or outcome tends to diminish the probability the prospective audience will ever actually read the work. I entertain every confidence you will acquire far greater meaning from your own discoveries than as the result of any explanations from me.”

Nearly moaning angrily, Wyl suddenly slapped his forehead and dug a journal out of his pocket exclaiming, “I should have taken contemporaneous notes!”

“Notes composed now also qualify as contemporaneous,” the longbeard consoled, “as well as perhaps notes composed even as late as tomorrow. Only after sufficient passage of time that the notes no longer accurately reflect the words verbatim, will the notes no longer qualify as contemporaneous.”

Expelling a short breath in exasperation, Wyl remarked, “Great! Yes. Thank you so much for the encouragement... You are some piece of work, longbeard.”

“Um, Wyl,” Claer stated somewhat under her breath, “... ‘longbeard’ sounds to me like something of a... derisive term.”

“That is precisely the intent of its originators, my dear, but it is of no consequence to me.” the old man advised, “I told you I have no name and I would insist on no name even were the truth contrary. You may call me longbeard, old man or cow dung if you please and in any event will inspire no offense by any term.”

Giggling in reaction and perhaps intrigued by reintroduction of the concept, Claer insistently inquired, “How do you have no name? Are you the dog-boy they talk about in those old faeries, separated from humans at birth, adopted and raised by dogs or something along those lines? Is that why you have no name?”

“Read the work I recommend and it will answer all your questions.” the longbeard advised once again reinforcing his assertion.

“This book will explain why you have no name?” Claer asked with obvious skepticism.

“Unequivocally.” insisted the longbeard then turning his attention to Mara as she sat nearest him on his other side, he studied her for a moment then commented, “This one, the quiet and introspective eastern girl... She understands and knows of what I speak. She conceals perhaps as much from you as she conceals from me. She is a wall of stone, cold, aloof, austere and unapproachable. She reveals nothing and yet on occasion, she displays indications of fleeting thoughts about love... What does it feel like? -affection, adoration, kisses... caresses...”

Turning her eyes slowly in his direction, Mara cast a brief but dreadful expression at the longbeard in an obvious attempt to restrain anger.

“D- don’t... provoke her.” Wyl urgently cautioned stammering in his haste, “You saw her kick that guy in the chin, right?”

The old man glanced at Mara then back at Wyl, shrugged with a slight grin then returned his attention to Mara and pled, “Please forgive my attempt at humor. I intend no offense, my dear Ma- Da- Lycae.”

In apparent acceptance of the apology, Mara bowed slightly but she also glared menacingly for a moment then continued to glance in the direction of the longbeard for quite some time thereafter.

For a full day, the party traveled on the road and hid in the woods on three separate occasions, twice when a cavalry company from Martillion rode past westward in the morning then eastward later and in between, after spotting a crude looking bunch similar to the men that attempted to abduct Claer, the longbeard or both. Anticipating the group of presumed bandits did not detect them, the party simply allowed the men to pass westward without incident then at the end of the day, set up camp in a deep ravine within twenty miles of Martillion. Stirring from his sleep late in the night as Mara returned from watch, Wyl pulled her close then stroked her hair, soon returning to sleep but he awoke again some time later, not because anything disturbed him but because the absence of Mara suddenly felt unusual.

In the faintest glow of smoldering embers from the fire, Wyl observed two figures hunched close together and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he observed Mara and Dara whispering while evidently focused intently on the longbeard sleeping nearby. For reasons he did not fully comprehend, Wyl suddenly feared for the safety of the old man and sensed from MaraDara a predatory demeanor that caused his heart to rush with dread. With a jolt, Wyl reached then clamped a hand onto a wrist and Mara spun around glaring at him both angered by the interruption and surprised by his assertiveness. Shaking his head firmly, Wyl whispered, “No.”

For a moment, MaraDara stared at him then reluctantly settled back into their blankets and Wyl again pulled Mara close, wrapping his arms around her, not so much for comfort or companionship but more or less in the hope of preventing her from any further covert activities until daylight.

A cool fog slowly dissipated as the party stood upon the road peering in both directions and listening intently while the first rays of the rising sun burned through blue mists. Prior to commencing the walk, the longbeard addressed his companions and advised, “Patrols will pass this way and back at least twice today. I recommend you leave the road now. Make south and east to the lake then follow the shoreline to the city. I will enter at the main gate just before sunset. In any event, I imagine you would enter the city successfully on your own but if you wait until dark, the attention I attract will make your entry more convenient.”

Reaching suddenly, the longbeard clasped Wyl by the hand and stated, “In a world with so little in which to believe, faith is most worthy of trust.” then he clasped Aengys by the hand and slapped his shoulder. Turning his attention to Claer, the old man gently held her hand and kissed it while the boy appeared quite dejected by the developments and as the old man knelt in front of him, just as he opened his mouth to speak, Claer tugged at his shoulder pulling him back to his feet.

The longbeard stared at Claer a moment then she suggested, “The boy should go with you. In order for us to help him, we will have to drag him with us for some time and that will cause both him and us additional hardship and hazard. I would trust leaving him with no one in this country. That leaves you.”

Rocking his head back slightly, the old man closed his eyes and sighed deeply, stared at Claer for some time then finally kneeling in front of the boy again, he asked, “Would you like to travel with me for a little while?”

The boy nodded enthusiastically in response then the old man returned to his feet, glanced at MaraDara for a moment then dropped to a knee, held each by a hand and kissed them with something of a bow. Returning to his feet, the old man and MaraDara held a long gaze until he finally stated in a cracking whisper, “I may well one day disappoint you but that will never occur in the lifetime of this boy.”

MaraDara each begrudged a slight smile and with that, the longbeard stated, “Fair well and good luck in all endeavors.” then he clasped the boy by the shoulder, and as the two turned and marched off eastbound on the road with exaggerated deliberation and purpose, the longbeard raised his walking stick overhead and shouted over his shoulder, “Journey well, fellow travelers.”

With lingering fascination, the five original members of the party watched for some measure of time as the pair traveled a considerable distance then Claer stated, “That is one odd fellow.”

“The man with no name with the boy with no name.” Wyl remarked whimsically.

Shrugging his shoulders, Aengys turned toward the woods as the others followed and after traveling perhaps a mile, the party stopped on the edge of a clearing to survey the landscape. Hills to the south rolled down to a sprawling lake a couple miles away that glittered in the sun from windblown waves and brilliantly colored foliage in the final stages of autumn washed over the hills in between. To the east, patterns of tended open fields squeezed out diminishing ribbons of woodland and Martillion lay beyond sight but only just over the next crest of hills. From the clearing, the group continued through scattered woodlands descending toward the lake all the while and as they approached the edge of a tree line, they observed an apple orchard on the opposite bank of a shallow stream that ran alongside a narrow swath of weedy meadow. After carefully surveying the conditions, Dara crept to the edge of the stream and sprang from the undergrowth landing one foot atop a rock protruding from the surface of the water then subsequently leapt across the dry tops of exposed rocks in the stream until landing atop one that rolled out from under her. Conducting an amazing recovery, Dara stretched to a nearby rock balancing doubled over with one leg and both arms extended out horizontally. Upon regaining her balance, Dara danced across three more rocks onto the opposite bank with dry feet intact then ran low through the weeds into the orchard emerging a short time later with a sack full of apples over her shoulder then retraced her steps back across the stream with the exception of the one unstable rock. After quickly devouring a multitude of apples and casting the cores deep into the woods, the group continued downhill toward the lake and the balance of the afternoon passed uneventfully as winds steadily increased in intensity and duration while proportionately descending in temperature.

Tugging at Mara as they straggled a bit, Wyl stated under his breath, “You were talking about killing him, weren’t you?” but when she failed to respond, he speculated, “-because he embarrassed you? -because he talked about your thoughts and violated your privacy?”

Rolling her eyes, Mara even laughed slightly as she shook her head. “If for these she kills old man, for many previous similar offenses she kills also him, yes?” Mara inquired with a nod that identified Wyl as the perpetrator of previous similar offenses.

Nodding appreciatively in acknowledgement, Wyl insistently inquired, “Then why?”

With a disapproving glance, Mara asked, “He trusts them, yes? These he says, yes?”

“Yes.” Wyl asserted.

“Then he trusts for his questions he will understand answers when answers to him makes sense, and not when impulsively he demands.” Mara insisted.

Compliantly indicating affirmative, Wyl nonetheless felt disappointment and frustration even though he insisted many times since initially he encountered Mara and Dara that he trusted them unconditionally and wished only to assist as it occurred to him Mara might well present his own statements to silence his inquisitions any time at her convenience potentially forever. Smiling sympathetically in apparent anticipation of his thoughts and perhaps as a gesture of appeasement, Mara leaned close and elaborated, “Fond is he of longbeards and she appreciates his appeal as well. Old man speaks words sympathetic of his tribes and opposes the civilizations of men but this may not necessarily always remain so. The day may just as easily come that longbeards stands alongside arrogant men and perhaps even one day leads armies across mountain to his homelands, yes?” Wyl gawked in disbelief and Mara nodded in confirmation of her convictions but she also conceded, “For now, longbeards serves their cause so him she allows on his way to go, so they do not upset their guides, yes? These he appreciates as accommodations for him and of his sensitivities, yes?”

“Yes.” Wyl acknowledged appreciatively then added, “Thank you.”

Favoring tree lines and denser groves, the five travelers reached the heavily wooded shoreline of the lake and immediately paused to splash their faces in the cold water then continued along the shore through the woods, eventually coming to a halt at the edge of some high growth alongside a trail hugging the shoreline just shy of the city wall.

Standing perhaps thirty feet high, the wall coiled up and around the hillside away from the shore while on the lakeside, it continued some twenty feet out into the water then terminated at a tower another ten feet or so higher than the parapet. The trail turned uphill then intersected with the road quite some distance from the shoreline where two bulky round towers marked the location of the main gate and even from such a distance, an obvious concentration of guard and field labor traffic bustled in and out. The lakeside presented the most favorable point of entry so the party relaxed and polished off all stocks of liqueurs in preparation for a swim they expected to account as at least brisk while the sunset over the western horizon of the lake sparkled brilliantly on the water and reflected bright golden flashes onto the underside of the canopy overhead. All the while awaiting the cover of darkness, MaraDara smoked, sighed and softly muttered something occasionally including the word ‘lemons’.

After dark, the party stripped down to underwear, held gear overhead then waded into the frigid water and stumbled along the rocky bottom while a howling wind drove waves that splashed up to their necks and faces. Around the inner side of the tower, conditions dramatically improved as the wall shielded the shallow water from wind and wave. A maze of boats tied to pillars supporting piers above sprawled out from imposing walls and foundations into the harbor. Climbing into a small fishing boat, the five intruders dried off as best they could then dressed shivering violently all the while.

Along the shoreline, narrow bands of natural growth choked with tree and underbrush occasionally interrupted concentrations of two and three floor high wood frame structures that congested the confines between dark and narrow streets and alleys that ran uphill at random angles. Favoring the darkest shadows, the party navigated several blocks in and uphill from the shoreline where they quickly discovered an inn and after snooping around it, Claer determined the guest rooms occupied space accessible through a courtyard in the rear then she and Aengys departed to arrange a room while the other three crept around to the courtyard in back. Prior to dividing into two groups, just as MaraDara opened their mouths, Claer assured the pair of her awareness they depleted their stocks and assured she would secure a supply of liqueurs, preferably lemon.

Circling around an alley into the courtyard where a long low wing stretched away from the main building, Wyl and MaraDara observed perhaps a dozen door and window openings evenly spaced along the length of the wing and dim light illuminated a couple of the windows from within. The threesome leaned against a low garden wall in the shadows watching the rear door of the inn and after what felt to them like too long a time, Aengys and Claer finally emerged then walked the length of the wing all the way to the last door. Just as Wyl attempted a step, Dara slapped the back of her hand against his chest and he froze in place realizing a shadow spilled from the light onto the stoop of the rear doorway then a moment later, a man with an apron leaned onto the doorjamb and watched as Claer worked the key at her room.

At the rear doorway, the man continued to observe even after Claer and Aengys entered the room and closed the door behind them then Wyl whispered, “Maybe we should go around to the other side and see if we can sneak in a window from the street?”

MaraDara nodded in agreement but even so, waited for some time until the man in the rear doorway evidently satisfied his suspicion or his curiosity, or perhaps simply lost interest altogether then turned and vanished back into the inn. Circling around to the street, the threesome spied from a distance for some time then hastily crawled in through the window to discover Claer wrapped in a robe with damp hair reclined on the couch in front of a roaring blaze in the fireplace while Aengys occupied the washroom. A bucket filled with ice held two bottles of lemon liqueurs on the table alongside a huge loaf of wonderful smelling bread with a shiny glaze on its surface in a basket filled with apples and oranges, and even a couple of lemons.

While MaraDara took their turn in the washroom, Wyl wrote in his journals and by the time he finished his turn in the bath, Claer and Aengys already curled up under blankets and slept. MaraDara huddled together on the couch in their robes drinking liqueurs and smoking, and Wyl crumpled down next to them leaning his head against Dara.

“He does not get too comfortable.” Mara cautioned.

“Why not?” Wyl asked a bit apprehensively.

Evidently referring to Claer, Mara explained, “For room and food she tells them gone are half their monies. More monies they need and these they must urgently find.”

Somewhat alarmed, Wyl asked, “Did you talk to her or Aengys about this?”

Without responding to the question, Mara inquired, “Does he not suggest in matters requiring no sophistication, they should conduct actions, yes?”

“Well, yeah” Wyl conceded, “but-”

“-He identifies likely locations of monies then these they find, yes?” Mara insisted, “If trouble occurs, who most likely might escape and return undetected to rooms, yes?”

“I agree with all that.” Wyl assured, “I’m just uncomfortable with the idea of doing it without talking to Claer and Aengys about it first.”

“He writes to them notes, yes?” Mara countered, “-or he wakes them to consult. In either case, monies they need and must find.”

“Okay, I’ll write a note.” Wyl concurred if not somewhat reluctantly.

As Wyl he sat at the table composing his note, Mara placed her hands on his shoulders and advised, “For short time he relaxes while they prepare then they go now.”

Exhaustion overwhelmed him and sensations such as the soft couch, the rustling leaves and whistling winds, the distant gentle splashing of waves on the shore and the warm fire more than inspired Wyl to drink down some liqueur then fall asleep without further delay as he found the idea of going directly back outside completely unappealing. Sprawled out on the couch for what he considered no more than a breath, Wyl jolted awake as MaraDara instructed, “He dresses.” “They go now.”

Rubbing his eyes then looking up, Wyl flinched at the compelling sight of two chestnut-haired beauties with shiny lips and dramatic cosmetics leaning over him in dark grey loose flowing clothing with tight stockings on their legs and dark green Highland outer cloaks. “Good.” he remarked, “I’m sure this won’t attract any attention.”

Dara peeked out the window while Wyl dressed then the three climbed out and hustled down the street wandering somewhat aimlessly for quite a while. Although some illuminated windows and doorways scattered slivers of pale light onto corners and protruding features, most of the city loomed overhead in silhouettes of high towers and rooftops that soared progressively taller further uphill and proportionately exaggerated the incline of the terrain. Subsequent to inspection of myriad storefronts and buildings of indeterminable function, Wyl confessed, “I have no idea what I’m looking for.”

“They observe what they observe,” MaraDara advised, “When that they seek,” “they observe,” “he will know, yes?”

Eventually wandering into an area in which everything appeared somewhat run down and in a state of disrepair, Wyl seriously doubted the likelihood of identifying an obvious target for burglary. Shutters and loose metallic components and trims on buildings creaked and banged in the wind but otherwise an eerie quiet prevailed in the apparently deserted streets until horse hooves clapped loudly on stone surfaces from around a corner and the threesome instinctively ducked into an alley to hide in the shadows while a horse and rider passed by. Not until after the rider turned a corner and the sound of horse hooves against the cobbled streets faded, did the three emerge from the alley then continue along the street. Stopping suddenly at a corner, MaraDara held their noses up and tilted their heads as if attracted by a scent then peered into the shadows of a narrow alleyway cluttered with crates and barrels in which, scraps of loose waste materials swirled around in the wind currents and music softly echoed from the depths. In a dimly lit doorway, two men appeared to converse for a moment then one turned and headed off in the opposite direction while the other vanished back inside. Mara and Dara advanced cautiously toward the doorway while Wyl followed and they stopped just shy of the sphere of light that spilled out into the alley, peeked inside to observe only dim vague shape and color then Mara prodded Wyl and whispered, “He goes first.”

“Why me?” Wyl demanded.

“He is their guides!” MaraDara declared, “Entry and initial inspection of conditions is sophisticated operation” “for which two brutes such as they are unqualified,” “yes?”

With a tentative step over the threshold, Wyl flinched as a girl suddenly appeared and passed by carrying a tray with several bottles and glasses upon it then he turned and stated, "I guess it must be some kind of tavern or something."

MaraDara poked and pushed Wyl further inside then turning a corner, the three passed from a vestibule into a larger room filled with a dense fog of sweet aromatic smoke occupied by many low tables, each with an assortment of pillows spread about the floor and surrounded by circular wood paneled low walls, just high enough to serve as backrests. Curtains suspended from above encircled each booth like tents and soft exotic music issued from somewhere in the maze of gently swaying fabrics. Continuing forward propelled by unrelenting nudging of knuckles from MaraDara, Wyl glanced into the curtained booths from the corners of his eyes, trying to avoid eye contact with the occupants within then he came to a stop, turned and whispered, "I think-" only to realize MaraDara paused some ten steps behind him to stare into one of the curtained booths. Shuffling back to MaraDara, Wyl looked over their shoulders into the booth illuminated within only by a single candle on the table. An exotic beauty of a slender girl with shiny long straight hair as black as coal lounged on a bed of pillows cloaked in colorfully patterned silks, a scarf and a sash. Rich dark and glossy color glimmered on her lips and cosmetics dramatically emphasized the shapes and shadows of her eyes as she handled an object in front of her on the table with dainty slender hands and long fingernails painted shiny scarlet. Wyl stared appreciating the obvious effort with which the girl converted herself into nothing less than a living breathing work of art.

Looking up suddenly and perhaps a bit startled, the girl tilted her head and gazed at MaraDara as if immediately under an enchantment then the two slipped slowly into the booth and descended onto the pillows on either side of her while Wyl made his way down on the opposite side next to Dara.

"I am Vlaca." the girl stated with a welcoming nod.

"They are-" "-Mara," "Dara." the two responded with a conspicuous absence of any protest from Dara over the order in which the names occurred in the introduction.

"I'm Wyl." Wyl added self-consciously as he leaned slightly.

Directing her attention to Wyl, Vlaca responded with a sincere smile then reached in front of her and lifted a slender glass tube with a small bulb at an end, held it over the candle until a dark sticky substance within the bulb smoldered, placed her rich dark scarlet lips on the other end and gently inhaled. Holding her breath, Vlaca extended the glass tube toward Mara, and she suspended the bulb over the candle then smoked from it, handed it to Dara and she inhaled from it quickly then handed it to Wyl. Drawing no smoke as he puffed on it, Wyl held the bulb against the flame until it smoldered within then inhaled cautiously from the tube immediately appreciating the incredibly sweet taste of the smoke, which reminded him overwhelmingly of roses. Holding his breath for a moment, Wyl then exhaled a small cloud of smoke and restrained a cough just as a girl with a tray leaned in from the aisle. Vlaca motioned to the girl with four fingers while inhaling again from the glass tube then as wisps of smoke curled from her mouth, she concluded, "You are foreigners."

"Yes." MaraDara replied, "They are" "rustic hermits."

With a short burst of laughter, Vlaca coughed and expelled a concentrated cloud of smoke prematurely then assured the pair, "Well, I can say with some confidence, you are at least not constabulary spies."

The girl with the tray reappeared and placed on the table four short spherical glasses containing a bright green liqueur on ice along with a small plate of lemon and lime wedges then gathered a number of coins from a collection on the table and departed. Dara placed the glass instrument on the table as she held her breath then leaned to exhale toward the ceiling but Vlaca gently grasped her chin then leaned close forming her rich dark scarlet lips into a circle and inhaled a stream of smoke from Dara as she exhaled, incidentally pressing their lips together in the process.

Observing the exchange, Wyl quickly drank half the contents of his glass and although he never before tasted lime, he immediately concluded he in fact just did as he savored a flavor nearly identical to lemon but substantially sweeter. While passing the glass tube several more times around the table, Wyl observed in addition that Dara and Vlaca touched one another a number of times that clearly occurred with a quality and frequency far greater than incidental. With the subject of a perfect world fresh in his mind after recent conversations with the longbeard, Wyl composed a mental note of significant priorities for the formation thereof commencing with exotic music, dark sticky substances in glass bulbs, lime liqueur and beautiful girls in colorful cosmetics but Mara disrupted the exercise pushing a pouch of smoking herbs toward him.

While rolling a number of smokes, Wyl quietly and casually monitored as MaraDara glanced at the coins and remarked, “She has monies,” “they observe.”

Obviously amused, Vlaca smiled slightly and affirmed, “Yes. All the money in the world I have, you observe in front of me on the table.”

“She knows then” “were they might find monies?” MaraDara innocently inquired, “Rustic hermits are they” “in need of monies.” “If monies she helps them find,” “of these, half to her they give,” “yes?”

“Then you are not in town to conduct business, I presume?” Vlaca concluded. MaraDara stared vacantly and with a sympathetic smile, Vlaca gently informed them, “You realize... money is not something you... ‘find’? If caught ‘finding’ money you could possibly be sentenced to death... and if you identified me as an accomplice-”

“-These they do not fear” “nor would ever they do.” MaraDara insisted.

“That is reassuring,” Vlaca remarked, “but I fear it.” Subsequently staring alternately at Dara then Mara for quite some time, Vlaca suddenly heaved a protracted sigh, rubbed her nose then collected her things from the table packing them into her pockets. Rising up, MaraDara held Vlaca each by a hand, lifted her to her feet then the foursome proceeded out into the alley. Primarily working with hand gestures, Vlaca led her guests up the hillside through dark alleys while the buildings loomed taller and larger as the ascent progressed. Eventually coming to a halt in a dark alley, Vlaca pointed to a window on the third level up from the street and compensating for howling winds that whistled in the narrow confines in between massive structures, she nearly shouted to MaraDara, “Up there. I know he keeps money inside but I don’t know where or how much. He might have a bodyguard with him or nearby... I can’t go with you... If anyone knew I-”

“-They understand.” MaraDara reassured then instructed Wyl, “With her he stays.”

After scurrying across the street, MaraDara conducted an awe-inspiring display of acrobatics scaling the side of the building, climbing up and over each other, using windowsills, downspouts and ornamental details for hand grasp and foothold until they slipped in an open window.

Leaning close to Vlaca, Wyl asked, “Who lives here?”

“I live here,” Vlaca answered, “on the top floor. The man inside that window manages the property. I pay him most of the money I earn to live here and I always owe. Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to pay off my debt with money robbed from his own purse. He prefers to rent spaces to girls like me... girls he thinks cannot pay, and he threatens those that fall too far behind on payments to throw us out on the street, or offers repayment plans involving favors instead of money to satisfy debts... I hate him...”

“I hate him too.” Wyl concurred, “I hope they beat him.”

Not long after MaraDara crawled through the window, a faint glow flickered from inside then immediately extinguished. The window remained dark for a short time then the glow reignited, moved from one window to another then some sort of frantic motion flashed across the window as the glow immediately extinguished and momentarily reignited, remained steady for quite some time then again moved from one window to another until finally extinguishing once more. Wyl held his breath growing apprehensive but a latch clicked then a door creaked open across the street and MaraDara emerged carrying some sort of small case, immediately raced to the alley and barely slowed down enough to bark urgently at Vlaca and Wyl, “They go now.” “Yes.”

Back at the smoking den, Mara placed the case under the table out of plain sight and pried at it with the candleholder while Dara held the candle. When Mara successfully forced the lid open, Vlaca glared with bulging eyes then with a gasp, declared, “That is more money than I have ever seen in one place in my lifetime.”

Glancing about anxiously, Vlaca restored the candle and its holder to their correct state, scooped out eight or nine coins and pushed the case back under the table just as the girl with the tray appeared. Vlaca then asked for more lime liqueurs and after the girl departed, Mara removed the hood from her cloak, wrapped obviously more than half the coins into it then pushed it at Vlaca. The balance of the coins, MaraDara packed into gloves they produced from their pockets, bound them tight to prevent rattling then concealed them in undisclosed places on their persons.

Wyl awoke after sleeping restlessly as Mara shuffled about the room gathering up fresh supplies of ice, lemon liqueurs and smoking materials then set up a cozy campsite in front of the fireplace. After preparing a cup of coffee, Wyl sat down next to her and stared fascinated while she smoked rose scented substances from a small and slender delicate glass instrument, an unfamiliar instrument, not the one in possession of Vlaca the previous night. Apparently, Mara carried her very own personal slender delicate glass instrument along with all of the other magical and mysterious things she and Dara appeared to produce at will from their traveling packs.

Mara extended the glass instrument toward Wyl and he smoked from it then leaned near her and gently ran his fingertips around the edges of her face, on her neck and her shoulders, nestled his nose in her hair and kissed her cheek as she tilted her head and leaned back slightly with a sigh. The latch on the washroom door clicked and Dara emerged in her sleeping gown, inspected the room suspiciously from the corners of her eyes then inquired, “Why for he shows affections for her, the austere one that intimidates him, yes? Why he does not kiss the impetuous amusing one he considers more humorous and reassuring?” The questions while in fact ironically impetuous and amusing caused Wyl discomfort mostly due to accuracy and with a mischievous grin, Dara only increased his discomfort concluding, “-because old man longbeards guesses her starved for attention? -he thinks perhaps he teaches aloof and unapproachable one to love?”

“All right,” Wyl protested, “we all appreciate your insightful cleverness and irreverent sense of humor already. Give it a rest now, please.” Glancing about the room with a sudden sense of urgency, Wyl inquired, “Where are Claer and Aengys?”

“On shopping spree they go,” “for foods and supplies.” MaraDara advised, “Very impressed are they with rustic hermits,” “their resourcefulness and collections of monies.” “They tell them” “these for weeks lasts them.”

“Good.” Wyl responded then inquired apprehensively, “-so... they weren’t mad about the note and leaving while they were asleep and all that?”

“Eh, no.” “Very angry are they over protocols.” MaraDara informed Wyl then in addition remarked, “Scout man berates them” “and admonishes never again” “do they conduct actions without first informing companions.” “Also, monies he tells them are plural.” “Most angry though are they with him.” “These he knows better” “as militia and former scout” “they tell them,” “yes?”

“Great.” Wyl responded with a sigh, “Thanks for throwing me under the wagon.”

MaraDara squinted with obvious confusion then inquired, “Why he says” “under wagons they throw him,” “yes?”

“It’s an expression,” Wyl explained, “a metaphor. It means you ratted me out instead of covering my ass.”

“Ratted him out?” “Covered his ass?” MaraDara stated, obviously only more confused, “How he is ratted” “and with what they cover his ass,” “yes?”

“I’m sorry. That’s more metaphors.” Wyl explained, “You see, ratting out is when you expose something-” but to his relief, Claer and Aengys returned, at least to his relief as it applied to the tedium of explaining metaphors to MaraDara, although he encountered no relief at all in his expectations of the harsh discipline he would no doubt face for his violation of protocol.

With a cheerful smile, Claer and Aengys immediately set out supplies on the table then sat with MaraDara for the commencement of a feast. Wyl self-consciously joined the party and as they ate, Claer mentioned, “The longbeard was right about his visit here. It’s pretty much the only thing we heard anyone talk about. I guess he’s got a following but even the ones who claim they disapprove of him talk about him like some kind of celebrity. The whole city is in a fit over him. We saw him on a street corner earlier making a speech from on top of an old crate box. This crowd gathered around him and stared with their mouths hanging open like they were hypnotized even though some others jeered and shouted at him. The guards were real tense and the whole thing practically turned into a riot.”

“We’re sure he noticed us,” Aengys added, “and it looked like he winked at Claer.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” Claer countered, “It could just as easily have been dust in his eye or something like that.”

With an apprehensive glance at Claer then Aengys to measure their moods, Wyl delicately stated, “Sorry about the protocol thing. I just didn’t want to disturb your sleep as exhausted as you were and everything...”

Claer glanced up and with a flex of her brow, mumbled through a mouthful of bread, “What are you talking about?”

“The note.” Wyl replied, “Mara and Dara said you were mad and you berated them.”

“We didn’t berate them.” Aengys declared defensively, “We just mentioned for future reference, we would prefer next time they wake us.”