

“I’m sorry.” Claer stated after a moment, “I didn’t mean to imply-... I just hate oranges and lemons.” The expression of such a sentiment for fruit surprised MaraDara, perhaps particularly because of their own personal sentiment for the specific fruit in question. With a patient and sympathetic smile, Claer further explained, “I hate what oranges represent. I hate the way so many people in my country consider them such a prize and a treat. That’s the way economies work. That’s how they defeat you. They never win militarily but every once in while, you end up with a box of oranges or lemons, forbidden fruits, exotic treasure from distant lands... Once you develop a taste for exotic treasure, you’re compromised. Suddenly, trade and commerce doesn’t sound like such a bad idea after all. Oranges and lemons don’t grow naturally in our country, and we don’t trade, so there’s only one way a box of them gets there once in a while. Oranges and lemons are plentiful down here where they fight on the road and kill for money, lock everyone inside city walls and make them work like slaves... and for what? -for convenience and indulgence. It’s weakness. We don’t fight on the road or kill for money. We don’t collect taxes. We issue one warning at the border and then we kill everyone present. We kill them just for showing up or for trying to bring oranges and lemons. I don’t want their poison in my country. We’ve got more than we need. We don’t need oranges and lemons, and we don’t need a taste for exotic treasure. We don’t need commerce and economics. Oranges and lemons are the greatest threat there is to the survival of our way of life.”

Claer stared a moment then smiled and stated in an apologetic tone, “It’s nothing personal against oranges and lemons. I just don’t like the activities and circumstances that make them available.” Concentrating on MaraDara, Claer stated as if perhaps the significance of it never before occurred to her, “I have never seen the tree from which lemons or oranges come. In fact, for all I know, they might come from vines or a bush. What do you suppose are the conditions in those distant lands without seasons where oranges and lemons grow? Why is there so much of it that it is so plentiful in these places where it doesn’t even grow naturally? I bet such an abundant supply of it involves a lot of work... Wouldn’t you think?”

MaraDara nodded in acknowledgement and reassured, “They understand her” “but they love lemons” “and they must eat.”

“I know.” Claer stated accommodatingly and added with a smile, “That beef stew was good. You missed out on that.” MaraDara smiled in response and Claer inquired, “Why don’t you eat meat?”

“They do not kill the animals.” Mara explained.

“-but you kill people?” Claer countered.

“Yes,” “but not to eat them.” MaraDara replied.

Claer laughed slightly then playfully challenged, “-so, it’s okay to kill as long as you don’t eat what you kill?” Apparently amused, MaraDara grinned in response then Claer suggested, “You’re saying self-defense is different.”

“Yes.” “Yes.” MaraDara acknowledged.

As if to share a secret, Claer leaned and advised under her breath, “A lot of Geaelen don’t eat meat either. Some of us believe when people die they occupy the bodies of animals, and gods occupy animals as well, so when you eat meat you might be eating a relative or a god... Is that what you believe?”

MaraDara contemplated the question for a moment but before they offered any answer, Wyl asked them, “What about bacon? Have you ever tasted bacon?”

As if astonished by the question, MaraDara inquired, “These are meats?” “Yes?” then insistently repeated, “They do not eat the animals.”

Claer giggled and Wyl inquired, “-but have you ever tasted bacon?”

“Eh,” “no.” MaraDara emphasized, “They-”

“-because... if you tasted it one time,” Wyl equivocated, casually dismissing the objections, “you might change your minds. I hardly ever eat meat. I eat meat pretty much only if someone makes food for me and that’s the only thing they make... but when it comes to bacon, there are no rules.”

“Why for bacons” “no rules applies,” “yes?” MaraDara inquired suddenly curious over so uninhibited a declaration.

“-because bacon is really good.” Wyl explained, “It’s so good, I think maybe anyone who doesn’t eat meat might change their minds if they tried it. Bacon is so good you would break your own rules to eat it.”

MaraDara strenuously insisted once again, “They do not eat the animals.” “They would never like his bacons.”

Wyl thought for a moment and attempted another angle, commencing, “-but-”

“-That’s enough, Wyl.” Claer interrupted then addressing MaraDara, she informed them, “He’s teasing you.”

In a fashion indicating they comprehended the humor, MaraDara smiled with apparent appreciation but then glanced suspiciously at Wyl nevertheless.

After some discussion in the morning and an assessment of the situation including the uneventful night, Claer and Aengys determined breakfast inside the inn might offer more information with which to judge the conditions and at least, a meal indoors ought to qualify as a pleasant way to commence the day. The friendly matron served Claer, Aengys and Wyl bacon, toast and eggs while MaraDara ate oranges and lemons, accompanied by orange and plum liqueur in their coffee then the party packed up and prepared in the room while Aengys conducted a quick walk around the four streets that bordered the inn. Upon his return, Aengys reported everything appeared quite ordinary and perhaps even pleasant outside.

After a moment of consideration, Claer suggested, “I say we walk out right on the road, unless you want to wait until dark but either way, they’re definitely already watching us. We might as well be casual about it. Maybe we can coax them into a casual attitude and they’ll be happy to just negotiate a tax without a fight... or even better yet, I say we just walk up the hill to that mansion, knock on the door and ask them if they would like to collect a tax from us before we go.”

Aengys appeared to consider the suggestion seriously but ultimately concluded, “There are too many unknowns. I have no idea where I am. We might be the only Highlanders that have ever been here before. The most suspicious thing about this place to me is how comfortable I feel here. Nothing in the south is ever this passive. We’re misinterpreting something because of our unfamiliarity. I don’t trust my judgment or yours. I say we assume it’s a fight and behave that way.”

“I read a story once.” Wyl interjected, “It was only about two pages long and it was real old. I found it buried in these loose papers in the Martial’s office, in this odd collection of scraps without known authors or time of origin. The story read like faerie with all the usual dramatics. It was about some small fiefdom in the south, and somewhere out towards this end of the mountains too...”

This group of travelers stops in a small remote village and everyone there is very well mannered and hospitable, but when the travelers leave, the lord and his company follow them out of town and stop them on the road. They ask for a tax and they appear reasonable about it and accept whatever the travelers offer to pay without argument then the lord asks the travelers to surrender their weapons, explaining it's only policy and the guard would have requested it earlier but never noticed the travelers until after they left town. The lord tells the travelers he'll settle for just their bows and escort them to the border of his territory. The compromise seems reasonable enough so the travelers surrender their bows but the moment the lord has their bows in his possession, his men draw their own bows and fire on the travelers. As the travelers flee into the woods, the lord calls out to them and says he'll go home at sunset but until then, whoever he captures will be his dinner then he hunts them all day until sunset. Half the travelers get away, but the lord captures or kills three or four of them then carries them all back to his mansion and eats them."

"Thank you Wyl." Aengys stated graciously, "-so, you're supporting my position?"

"I don't know." Wyl answered, "I just think the similarities are a little spooky. Fae told me more than once he was convinced all faerie is based on some truth, and most of the time the places, characters and general demeanors are the most accurate elements."

"It's not a geographic guide; it's a cautionary tale for children." Claer argued, "The flesh eating indulges childish imaginations and emphasizes the lesson. It's the oldest trick in the books - The extraordinary and shocking consequences help children remember the lesson; don't be casual and inattentive just because something appears harmless."

"I appreciate that, Claer." Wyl stated.

Without reaction, Claer immediately added, "I'm an adult and I've already learned the lesson. The locals might kill us; we already knew that. I don't care what anyone does to me after they kill me. They can't kill me any more than once. I'm either going to fight or I'm not. I say we go knock on the door." then addressing MaraDara, she asked, "What do you think?"

"They do what guides recommend." "Yes. They are not afraid." MaraDara replied.

Aengys raised his eyebrows and stated firmly, "No one's afraid, honey. We just don't want any trouble. Trouble gets trouble. If we get enough of it, we'll have to beat it back home, and then you'll have to stay with us until spring or go your own way."

"Yes." "His concerns they understand." MaraDara insisted, "They do not insult him."

Aengys stared for a moment then reassured, "All right, I know."

"Then we go to the door?" Claer concluded.

"I didn't say that." Aengys countered, "My instinct says rush the woods, take cover and run to the river then use it to break our scent trail. They like dogs a lot down here. So let's compromise - We won't knock on the door but we'll walk out casual on the road. That makes dogs a non-factor. We go for the negotiation, and if we have to fight, we got them where we want them. We'll at least face fewer of them on the road than at the door." Claer nodded without further argument and Aengys concluded, "I'll do all the talking."

Claer quickly suggested, "I think Wyl or I should do that."

"Why?" Aengys demanded apparently surprised by the suggestion.

"You can come off a little... inflexible sometimes." Claer delicately explained, "We need finesse for this."

"Inflexible? Finesse?" Aengys repeated as if with disbelief.

“Aengys,” Claer scolded, “don’t prove my point for me... Let the ostensibly passive handle the ostensibly passive.”

Under a bright blue cloudless sky, brown leaves rattled loudly in the breeze and the peaceful atmosphere of the town did nothing to increase apprehensions or suspicions. Some small number of villagers went about chores and moved on the streets, and most of them hardly noticed the strangers. Smoke drifted from chimneys and filled the air with the smell of firewood, bacon and bread. At the edge of town, the party turned east on the road and traveled without event for a couple hours while Mara drifted behind a short distance to keep a rearward watch. As the party stopped for a short break in a dense patch of woods where a number of steep ravines tumbled south from the edge of the road, Mara suddenly appeared out of the brush and advised, “They have companies.”

Aengys scanned the area and asked, “How many?”

“Mm, dozens?” Mara responded.

“Dozens?” Aengys repeated with some alarm, “How many dozens is that?”

“Eh, ones?” Mara answered.

“Thank you.” Aengys stated with an exaggerated nod then addressing both Mara and Dara, he instructed, “If necessary, one of you stay with Claer and Wyl and head south toward the river with a one-day double-back, the other stays with me for diversionary purposes.” MaraDara both opened their mouths as if to comment and Aengys stated firmly, “Please humor me now and argue with me later?” then added with a hint of irritation, “-and... we really need to talk about your use of plurals.” and after a moment of thought, he complained, “I mean... as a matter of practicality-”

“-Aengys,” Claer interrupted, “you just asked them to save it ‘til later. Save it ‘til later.”

While the party shuffled about nervously on the roadside, the sound of horse hooves thudded closer then ten metal clad men clattered over a rise in the road, pulling to an abrupt halt as they approached. Two of the men carried banners on long spears, one red with gold symbols and trims, one white with a green clover symbol and golden fringe, and the riders stared menacingly as a man in brilliantly polished golden metal cladding prodded his horse out in front. A long glossy green cape with golden tassels and fringe flowed off the shoulders of the golden clad man and a tail of white feathers waved from the top of his helmet, illuminated like a halo in the sun. Raising his eye cover to reveal a somewhat boyish and slightly chubby face, the sufficiently agitated golden man glared then barked angrily, “What business exempts you from tribute? Who is your sponsor?”

Clasping a wrist in one hand, Claer bowed slightly then contritely declared, “We beg your pardon, my lord. We are strangers and are unfamiliar-”

“-Ignorance is no excuse!” the man shouted. “You don’t know, so you think you can just walk on by without finding out? It is your responsibility to inquire! Who are you? Who is your sponsor?” Addressing Claer specifically, the man instructed, “Move your fat ass over here and turn out your pockets.”

Standing firm, Claer dug into her exterior pockets producing a pouch of smoking mix and a handful of dried apple slices in a paper wrapping. The golden clad man appeared clearly less than pleased with the results and he addressed the party in full, demanding, “I want to see something of value, right now. The conversation is over. Produce something appropriate or pay the consequences.” As the guard shuffled and fidgeted with weapons, the golden clad man glared at Claer and shouted, “I told you to move your fat ass over here. How many more times do you think I am going to repeat myself?”

Claer patiently explained, “I’m sorry, but I can’t comply with that. We are happy to pay you whatever you require but I won’t take positioning instructions.”

With eyebrows raised in astonishment, the man in gold glanced at his men with a smile and huffed in exasperation then mocked, “Won’t take ‘positioning instructions?’” Rhetorically the man inquired, “Where do you think you are? What ‘position’ do you think you are in to explain things to me?” and lowering his voice, the man stated with a deliberately threatening tone, “You will take whatever instructions I give you, positioning or otherwise. You can take the instructions I issue from up here or the instructions I issue from down there... and from down there, I’ll probably have a few more ‘positioning instructions’ for you.” Surveying his guard, the man in gold smiled boastfully as they dutifully cackled and chortled in unison.

Claer smiled sarcastically but remained silent standing her ground and in reaction, the golden clad man glared with bulging eyes as his face reddened then he shouted, “Dumb fat bitch.” Stirring in his saddle, the man reached for his sword but before drawing it so much as halfway from its sheath, Mara suddenly swooped under his horse, boosted his leg up and over his saddle then toppled him over the opposite side where he landed with a metallic crash almost square on his head while his horse jolted and ran. Clutching the feather tail sprouting from atop the golden helmet, Claer pressed the tip of her dagger to the nose of the gold clad man then shouted to the rest of his metal clad company, “Back up or your prince dies! If you don’t care about that, take one step in my direction.”

Obviously quite distressed by the developments, the riders stirred on their horses but reluctantly held up their weapons then Aengys instructed, “Throw your weapons on the road and go away.” Dara held a bow drawn and aimed at the next-best-dressed metal clad man and Aengys calmly appealed to the man directly, “Go on, Captain. We can kill him any time we want. You throw your weapons; we don’t have to kill him. It’s as favorable as it’s ever going to get for either of us.” The captain stared and gritted his teeth as Aengys implored, “Just throw them down, and go back a little way down the road. You can come right back for them. We can’t carry them all. Just give us a little bit of a head start. If we kill him, I’m sure you will show us no mercy. If we let him go right away, then you have something to think about. You don’t even have to pretend to agree to anything. Just give us a little bit of a head start and decide what you want to do later. I’m willing to do this without killing anybody. I’m offering you a chance to think about it and save your prince’s life... I bet there might even be a reward in it for you.”

The captain considered the proposal then instructed his men to drop their weapons and though they followed the instruction, they dropped only the weapons they held in their hands, which at least accounted for all the bows.

Electing not to contest the issue any further, Aengys stated, “Good.” with a nod then instructed, “Now head back west. We’ll leave when we’re comfortable with the distance. I don’t expect you to go so far that the prince is beyond your sight.”

With a gesture from the captain, the guard shuffled about slowly glaring all the while then watched from over their shoulders while cautiously commencing their withdrawal.

“Wait!” Claer shouted digging into what pockets she found on the slim bits of clothing accessible in between the armor on the prince and discovering a collection of coins in a hip pouch, she declared, “The prince carries money; that means you might carry money. I don’t care what you throw but I want to see every one of you throw something that looks like money from where I’m standing, next to that rock over there.”

More than one of the men sneered and shook their heads but Claer laid a sharp edge of her dagger to the prince across the bridge of his nose, suspended perilously close to his eyes then scowled. Maneuvering their horses in succession, the guards angrily cast coins, or at least articles that appeared similar to coins from where Claer stood, toward the rock she identified even though most of them threw no more than two objects then as they stomped back down the road slowly, Claer shouted, “You will see my fat ass in your dreams tonight... and you will wish!”

While the metal clad men withdrew to a safe distance, Claer gathered their coins by the rock and threw them into the woods as Aengys sarcastically commented, “You were right, Claer. It was good that you handled that. I probably never would have exercised that kind of finesse and flexibility.”

Claer glanced at Aengys with a scowl and Wyl observed that she turned to face her companions while squatting to collect the coins, appearing to do so with some self-consciousness, and Wyl stated in a supportive tone, “The prince has shit for brains, Claer. You don’t have a fat ass.”

Without reaction, Claer stood and watched the progress of the riders while Aengys inspected the prince, who in fact made no sound nor even moved since striking the ground, and reported, “He’s breathing... so at least we didn’t kill him... We’ll let them decide when they’ve reached their limit. When they stop and refuse to go any further away, we’ll head into the ravines. If they want to follow us down in there with their metal on, it will be their mistake.”

The riders finally slowed to a crawl then stopped, apparently having discovered their limit and would not move any further as they spread out across the road perhaps some two-thousand feet away at a bend, which would have obscured their view of the prince had they continued any further. Claer turned and glanced at Aengys then he nodded and she snapped all the bows in half but as the group turned to head into the ravines, she pulled her dagger and cut the feather tail from the helmet of the prince, folded it quickly and stuffed it somewhere inside her clothing then kicked the side of the his head.

Thudding horse hooves converged up at the road before the party rushed any more than a hundred feet down into the ravine then they crept swiftly through the woods until reaching a riverbank that cut deep at the bottom and most of the banks ended in twenty to thirty foot vertical drops down to the water surface. Aengys led the way following the river in a southeasterly direction for the rest of the day until near sunset and consequently none in the group knew if the riders in fact pursued.

Settling into a deep hollow as night approached, Aengys and Mara climbed into the branches of trees to conduct watch while the others huddled together in the underbrush.

“What do you think, Wyl? Were they going to make bacon of us?” Claer asked.

Wyl replied, “I don’t know... Are you convinced they wouldn’t have?”

“No, I’m not.” Claer replied, “Whatever they wanted had nothing to do with tribute.”

“He desires her.” Dara stated, “These she knows.”

“Thank you for the encouragement, Dara,” Claer remarked, “but I’m not real concerned about how the prince feels about me. It’s not much of a compliment to know some pervert miscreant wanted to molest me.”

“Did you eat any of the bacon, Claer?” Wyl inquired after a pause.

“Enough with the bacon already.” Claer insisted, “You don’t make bacon out of human flesh anyway. I imagine if they cooked anything with humans, it would be the stew.”

Wyl and Dara shared the last watch before sunrise then returned to the camp and woke the others just as a predawn glow illuminated the eastern skyline. The southern wind no longer blew and a colder wind from the west swayed the treetops while a shower of brown leaves fluttered under the canopy.

As she packed up, Claer casually remarked, “Just for the record, I’d like to point out that based on the prince’s statements, he expected us to knock on the door just like I suggested. I think we should include that in our report as the local custom.”

“I don’t know about that.” Aengys speculated. “I don’t think it’s that automatic. I think they wanted to kill us for sport or capture us for... who knows what... That’s why he kept asking about our ‘sponsor’ - He wanted to confirm we are unauthorized so no neighboring authority with an army would ask questions about us later.”

“I’m not saying we should recommend everyone should always go knock on the front door.” Claer equivocated, “I don’t imagine any exchange at the front door going any differently than it did on the road. I’m just saying they expect travelers to present themselves and we need to note at least that much.”

“What about cannibalism?” Wyl inquired.

Rolling her eyes, Claer huffed, “We don’t know anything about any cannibalism, Wyl. It’s pure speculation... Probably more like superstition.”

Wyl nodded then wrote on his map at the approximate location, ‘*cannibalism?*’

With forward progress over the morning, the depth and frequency of the ravines diminished and the group continued east over a hilly, rocky and mostly wooded terrain until spotting a major road running north and south near mid-afternoon then turning north, they followed the path of the road from a distance. Near sunset, the northbound road intersected with the road from the west upon which the party traveled out of the town of the cloverleaf and met the golden prince the previous day and there, a small village straddled the intersection.

Aengys advised against entering the town but nonetheless in need of provisions, he reluctantly suggested, “Just Wyl and I will go in tomorrow morning and see if we can spend our money while we’re still somewhere it might be any good.”

“No. I should go with you, or Mara or Dara.” Claer contended, “It could be a fight.”

“I’ll fight if I have to.” Wyl insisted.

“No you won’t.” Claer countered.

“No.” Aengys insisted, “No girls. That will be too easy an identification. Wyl and I will go in before sunrise. We might not automatically qualify as the fugitives the prince hunts. We’ll pick a shop and go in the moment someone opens the door. We’ll be in and out before anyone can respond, and our direction will only be a guess.”

“I can handle myself.” Wyl insisted for good measure.

“No one’s calling you names, Wyl.” Claer reassured, “I just don’t want more trouble.”

MaraDara requested after a short pause, “Eh,” “they will get for them-”

“-Yes.” Wyl anticipated, “They will get for them lemon liqueurs or something like it.”

The party again camped in the woods without a fire, due to the close proximity of the road and habitation then Wyl and Aengys crept into the village well before sunrise and staked out a general shop. An elderly gentleman unlocked the door at sunrise and Aengys entered so quickly, he almost pushed the man through the doorway then while Wyl gathered supplies, Aengys smiled at the man continually but maintained just a bit of an intimidating manor and the shopkeeper remained quite cooperative as a result.

As Wyl headed toward the door with an affirmative signal toward Aengys, to the apparent surprise of the shopkeeper, Aengys thrust a fistful of coins with the stamp of Martillion onto the counter and the shopkeeper even called out, “Sir, your change—” as the pair of intruders prepared to exit.

In response, Aengys nodded politely then he and Wyl rushed out the doorway and ran back to the campsite. After reassembling, the group hurried north, again some distance from the road then at noon, they stopped for a break and just as they prepared to continue, Mara called their attention to the road where a group of riders trotted north. Two banners, one red and one white fluttered in the wind while metal cladding sparkled in the sunlight and at the front of the formation rode one in brilliant gold with no feathers on his head.

“You probably shouldn’t have taken their money and taunted them with your fat ass, Claer.” Aengys commented, “That looks like a group with a grudge. Maybe you shouldn’t have taken the feathers off the golden boy’s helmet either.”

“Don’t blame me.” Claer protested, “So I took his precious feathers. He threatened us and we defended ourselves. It was reasonable.”

The metal clad men trotted by heading south then north again near sunset just as the five fugitives bedded down but continuing north the following day, no sightings occurred until spotting a small outpost village late in the afternoon. Recently provisioned, nothing compelled the group to consider entering the town but in the morning, Claer insisted they sneak around the outskirts just to assess conditions and as they crept near under the cover of the woods, they discovered the golden prince and his company present in the village causing a significant disturbance. Barging in and out of houses, the prince and his men eventually regrouped at the edge of town with four young pretty girls with wide sturdy hips and legs, bound by wrist and strung together to a horse.

Claer whispered, “Enough is enough. We’ve given them every opportunity to be reasonable. Now let’s go kill them all and get it over with before they mount up.”

MaraDara immediately nodded firmly and stated, “Yes.” “Enough are enough.”

Claer charged from the bushes so quickly, the man tying up the girls barely noticed her until her dagger plunged into the side of his face then he squealed and collapsed while MaraDara knocked two others from their horses as their blades whistled and clanked, and pieces of metallic men detached and fell loose. The four girls screamed and struggled against their bonds while Wyl hacked at the ropes tethering the girls to the horse, and just as the horse kicked and panicked, he cut through and set the captives loose then they fled to a nearby house. Footsteps clanked behind Wyl and he turned to find a wild-eyed and bleeding rider no more than perhaps two steps away. The man swung back his sword but Wyl charged into his chest and plowed him over onto the road then bashed the handle end of his dagger against the side of his helmet until the man lost hold of his sword. Returning to his feet, Wyl quickly surveyed the scene to observe the golden prince and five of his men on horseback run away, already a few hundred feet down the road.

Claer shouted, “Wyl!” and he turned just in time to face again, the same wild-eyed metal clad man back on his feet with his sword. Wyl backed away as Claer crashed into the man and toppled him then knelt into his back, ripped the helmet off his head, clutched his hair and then sank her dagger into his skull from underneath his chin.

Springing back to her feet, Claer scolded, “Wyl, if you’re not going to stab anyone in the face, at least stay out of the way.” then she and Aengys rotated around the perimeter quickly to determine their next course of action.

Glancing about to assess the situation, Wyl suddenly noticed Dara lying on her side and with a gasp, he rushed to her, knelt and gingerly turned her discovering a wound on the side of her head.

“No touch!” Mara barked as she urgently approached.

Turning his attention toward Mara with some surprise over the instruction, Wyl flinched as she shrieked, “No touch!” and the urgency so alarmed him, he instinctively fell away from Dara onto his backside. In a sudden swirling rush of motion, before Wyl even comprehended the situation, Dara faced him back upon her feet frozen still with her arm extended in his direction. A blade sparkled and the tip of it extended so near his neck, Wyl could not see it then with sudden and extreme discomfort, he winced and gagged. Mara fell to her knees next to Wyl and wrapped her hands around his neck, squeezing a finger and thumb on the blade then gently pulling it away from Wyl. With eyes wide in shock as if she just awoke from a dream to find herself somewhere unexpected, Dara recoiled then put her blade away and fell to her knees rummaging frantically into her pack. Wyl thought he vaguely detected in the periphery of his vision, a spray of dark fluid as his head rocked and bright lights washed out his vision but Mara slapped him and he stared at her as the two leaned him onto his back then exchanged a look with one another.

A dagger swirled close as a warm gush of blood splashed onto his cheek then Mara pressed her wrist against the side of his neck while Dara fumbled in her pockets and Wyl closed his eyes. When next Wyl opened his eyes, he discovered Aengys and Claer leaning over him behind Mara and Dara as they inquired, “How he feels?” “Yes?”

Flexing his neck and turning his head from one side to the other, Wyl reached up and felt bandages wrapped around then exclaimed, “I feel just fine!”

“What happened?” Aengys demanded with obvious displeasure.

“Uh, she accidentally cut me.” Wyl volunteered, “I think I stepped into her swing.”

“What was she swinging at?” Aengys asked with a somewhat suspicious tone.

“She was injured and confused.” Wyl responded defensively, “I think she didn’t realize we were done fighting.”

Aengys turned toward Dara, looked her over then demanded, “What is your injury?”

“Is only cuts.” MaraDara replied dismissively, “She is fine.” “Yes. They go now.”

MaraDara pulled Wyl to his feet and with some surprise, he discovered not only did he feel just fine but he also felt even better than before Dara injured him. The party moved quickly back into the woods and during the remaining daylight, followed a trail into the east out of the outpost then camped again in the woods without a fire and commencing with the sunrise, continued east along the trail until encountering at midday, a smaller and even more rustic outpost village. In a soft layer of thick grass under tall swaying trees, the five travelers held a close watch over the outpost all afternoon observing none but obviously local traffic and most conspicuously, no indication of the golden prince or his metal clad cohorts.

Aengys finally sighed and stirred in the grass concluding, “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m just about ready for some indoor living, hot food, cold beer, warmth and maybe even a hot bath... I feel like an animal.” Claer shook her head slowly as she considered and Aengys reinforced his suggestion asserting, “The golden boy isn’t going to chase us any further. This is too far out of his territory and he’s probably off somewhere thanking his luck just to be alive at this point - Let’s go indulge.”

Even if a bit reluctantly, Claer relented but first insisted on an inventory and the party rummaged their pockets and gear, producing a healthy five fistfuls of various coins then Aengys and Claer circled around, entered the village from the north and arranged a room at a small inn behind a general store. Wyl crept near through the woods with MaraDara and hid behind the inn until Aengys signaled from a rear window. Claer secured a basket of bread, a few apples and pears, and a bottle of orange and plum liqueur, and Wyl immediately recognized the design and marking on the bottle as identical to the bottles in the village of the green clover, which clearly suggested the isolation of the place perhaps failed to measure up to initial expectations. However, once comfortably settled indoors, none in the group considered the circumstances worthy of an early departure and they rotated through turns in the washing room, ate, drank then settled in to sleep.

Mara awoke her companions just before sunrise and informed them with a whisper, “Old friends come to visits them.”

“What?” Claer demanded angrily as she bolted up and delicately maneuvered the curtains to peek out the window then turned and faced the others in the room with an almost comical expression of exasperation and astonishment.

Wyl peeked out and to his mutual astonishment observed directly across the street six metal clad men on horseback slouched in their saddles, staring intently at the door. One in the group wore brilliant shiny golden armor, a long green cape and a short stub of partial white feathers at the top of his helmet. Claer struggled to restrain mounting rage and as the party quickly prepared for a hasty exit, she instructed Wyl to open the door swiftly and fully on her signal as she, Aengys and MaraDara prepared bows and blades.

“Wait!” Aengys barked in a loud whisper then addressing Claer in particular, he admonished, “We don’t practice grudges. They came here angry with a grudge. They made a big mistake. Don’t do them a favor and make the same mistake.”

Claer inhaled deeply and whispered, “All right. Thank you.” then turned her attention to Wyl and he nodded indicating his readiness then Claer instructed, “Hit the latch hard and with authority. No fumbling... Now!”

Pounding his palm against the latch, Wyl hurled the door back against himself as MaraDara fired two arrows then streaked out the doorway, leapt up at two horses nearly running off the flanks onto two other horses and all four riders doubled over or fell bleeding, three of whom never even drew a weapon, as the horses kicked and jolted. The golden prince and his remaining rider simply attempted to bolt but in maneuvering around the others, the golden prince rushed initially in the direction of the door and Aengys dove at him, clutched at a foot and dislodged it from the stirrup as Claer knocked the other rider from his saddle with a swing of her sword. The prince bounced as his horse ran and he slowly rotated awkwardly to the side of his loose foot then lost balance, tumbled and crashed into the dirt. Moaning and panting hard, the prince struggled onto his hands and knees, his metal cladding creaking with every motion then attempting to flee in panic, he thrust himself up, took two steps then immediately tripped over his own feet and crashed again onto the road.

Striding swiftly in the direction of the prince, Claer shouted angrily, “How stupid are you? Yeah, you... golden boy. You’re not yet convinced of your vulnerability, are you? In case you haven’t figured it out yet, the lesson is, if you are going to insist on antagonizing a superior opponent, do it with stealth and ambush... and never... ever... under any circumstances... engage in a fair fight.”