

Holding up a hand to silence Wyl, Claer then stated calmly, “I believe you. I’ll think about it, okay? Shut up now and don’t over-talk it.”

Tilting his head, Wyl impulsively asked, “Really?”

Scowling firmly, Claer forcefully stated, “I **said**,” with exaggerated emphasis then concluded almost inaudibly, “I’ll think about it.”

Wyl nodded compliantly then said nothing more about the subject.

The road wound around the face of a series of hills some couple hundred feet above the base of a valley and above the road, wooded slopes soared up to bare rocky heights but even so, the mountaintops loomed up even higher over the crest, glowing auburn in the morning sun. Aengys and Mara led a short distance ahead, not necessarily scouting, but merely creating a buffer in the event of some kind of surprise. Most of the morning passed uneventfully until the party approached a small village of some three dozen buildings on the edge of the woods. Aengys suggested observing for a moment before passing through so the party left the road, hid in the shadows under the trees and rested while watching and listening cautiously.

Some regular sounds from an average town echoed in the woods on occasion and after some time, horse hooves clattered on the road then a company of soldiers from Enet in the yellow and red uniforms numbering possibly two-dozen rode past toward the west. Aengys thought the idea of walking through the town out in the open less than appealing so the group stayed in the woods and went around the village then returned to the road a safe distance to the east.

At an intersection perhaps a mile distant, the party observed a pair of horse drawn wagons turn and move east toward Enet. A short while later, other lesser trails intersected, more traffic appeared on the road and the party increased their pace, gaining ground on the pair of wagons. In the afternoon, Claer observed a patrol of soldiers on horseback approaching from behind and she estimated they might have occupied a position to observe the party before she observed them so she subsequently suggested continuing casually on the road qualified as less suspicious than hiding. Continuing ahead, the group politely stepped out of the way to the side of the road as the patrol overtook them and the horses never even slowed down as the company thundered right past toward Enet obviously demonstrating little concern for the nature of any traffic. Claer and Aengys expressed relief as well as a degree of surprise then the party continued along the road with newfound confidence.

The patrol from Enet vanished into the distance and as the two horse drawn wagons ahead rounded a turn in the road, a group of six men emerged from the woods and gathered around the wagons then two of the men on foot pulled a man down and beat him until he crawled under the wagon. Some sort of exchange continued steadily growing more animated. Hugging the tree line, Claer hustled near and waited for a moment as her companions caught up then stepped back out onto the road and casually advanced toward the wagons. As the six men noticed the presence of newcomers, they bunched closely together and stepped back nervously. Claer came to a halt, squinted then shrieked as her companions also finally recognized the six men as no other than among those present at the inn the previous night.

Claer pulled both her sword and dagger then charged the six men with a crazed howl as they panicked scattering toward the woods with Claer in hot pursuit while one or two among the group might possibly have squealed in the process.

Aengys advanced two steps presumably to retrieve Claer but then turned to MaraDara and said, "Please go get her and bring her back here."

Breaking into a run, MaraDara closed at least a hundred foot deficit in barely more than the blink of an eye, caught Claer, tugged at her and then tackled her when tugging proved insufficient. Huffing and puffing, MaraDara presently returned with their prisoner in tow as Aengys scowled and scolded, "I'm disappointed, Claer. That was reckless, selfish and undisciplined. Would you like me to review everything that was wrong with it?"

Claer protested, "They're unarmed and all accounted for."

"No they're not." Aengys argued, "That was six out of nine... and how do we know the nine we saw last night aren't part of a larger group?"

Claer ridiculed, "Oh, okay. There are ten more of them heavily armed and hiding in the bushes, but they coincidentally sent out only six of the ones beaten and bruised at the inn last night to rob travelers on the road, **and** won't even lend them any weapons to do it. Shit like that doesn't have enough sense for discretion... and I gave them a warning! Now they think we're full of bullshit! We should be killing them right now!"

"We're going to Enet, Claer." Aengys stated calmly, "We have an assignment. We're not here for sport and entertainment or to teach the world a lesson."

"Yes we are." Claer argued.

Aengys sighed, turned toward MaraDara and inquired, "You want to go to Enet, right? Would you like some fresh fruit indoors for dinner tonight with maybe a nice lemon liqueur on ice, or would you rather spend the next couple days chasing those guys through the woods and killing them just for fun?"

Mara and Dara actually appeared prepared to offer an affirmative to the chasing and killing just for fun but they ultimately could not ignore the mention of lemon liqueurs. "They like lemons." "Yes." the two finally proclaimed.

Aengys returned his attention to Claer, nearly jubilant and inquired, "What do you say, Claer? Lemon liqueur sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"

With a scowl, Claer evidently conceded the argument but nonetheless, sarcastically remarked, "Yeah, it sounds about as good as the stew back in clover-burgh." Inspecting the men in the wagons as they smiled nervously and thanked her for her assistance, Claer quickly admonished, "Don't get too celebratory too quick. You've only traded up for friendlier bandits. We still want something from you." While the men exchanged apprehensive glances then collectively focused their attention on Claer, she advised, "We want you to take us into Enet. We're pilgrims and we're unfamiliar with customs and procedures. We want you to bring us there and enter the city with us in your party."

From atop the bench of the nearest wagon, without giving the proposition any apparent consideration, the driver cheerfully replied, "Sure... Climb on up."

The party piled up into the payload of the wagon and adjusted crates to arrange comfortable seating then rolled smokes and relaxed on what quickly became a leisurely scenic tour of the countryside as the carts rumbled along the road.

Leaning with her elbows on the shoulders of the two men on the bench, Claer charmed them for a bit then motioned the other driver to pull alongside and raising her voice slightly to address all four men, she casually advised, "If we have any problems getting into the city... I'll kill someone... I'm not necessarily saying that's you... I'm just saying if it's a problem, I'll kill **someone**... and that **could** be you... so let's be reasonable and remember who helped who, okay?"

With affirmative indications from all four men, Claer relaxed into a reclined position as her driver turned with an affectionate smile and assured, “Don’t you worry about it, honey. We’ll get you into the city real good.”

Slapping his shoulder playfully, Claer retorted, “Okay... Real good.”

Markings on a crate caught his eye and Wyl subsequently examined it closely then directing MaraDara, he pointed at symbols and text on the side of the crate and they squinted at it then looked up at him as he leaned near and asked somewhat under his breath, “Do you read?”

Both the two stared for a moment with mouths hanging open then obviously offended, answered quite sharply, “Yes.” “They read.”

“All right.” Wyl replied defensively, “I’m just asking because I don’t know any better.” then tapping his finger on the markings, he instructed, “Look.” and traced symbols with his finger, asking, “It says ‘fruit & cartage’... and that looks like a lemon, doesn’t it?”

As MaraDara both raised their eyebrows, Wyl leaned forward by the bench and inquired, “Excuse me... What’s in these crates?”

The man seated next to the driver stated over his shoulder, “That’s lemon-flavored liqueur... flavored with real lemons from way down south where it don’t never snow.” then as if promoting a product to an audience, the man further declared, “That there’s the finest lemon liqueur you’ll ever taste like nowhere in the civilized world, no shit.”

“No shit?” Wyl replied.

“That’s no shit all right, sonny.” the man boasted.

“Do you think maybe we could try a couple bottles?” Wyl asked, “We’re real thirsty... and we got some money. Maybe we could buy a couple bottles from you?”

Digging under the bench, the man then turned and knelt, leaned into the payload and pried open one of the crates with a steel bar. Inside the crate, frosted glass bottles of lemon liqueurs nested in tightly stuffed cushions of straw, sparkled with a yellow tint in the sunlight and the man invited his guests, “Help yourself and don’t worry about no money... Consider it ransom.” Claer frowned slightly and in amendment, the man equivocated, “-or consider it commission or bonus or... whatever word you like best.”

Wyl passed a bottle to MaraDara and the two drank nearly half of it before passing it along then they slouched into a relaxed state among the crates. Farther along down the road, three men on horseback approached and slowed to a near stop at the wagons. As one among them opened his mouth to speak, Claer and Aengys stood up with hands resting on their weapons, and with an expression of surprise and disappointment, the three riders whipped their horses to a run and continued on their way without a word.

Claer leaned onto the bench and asked the driver and his companion, “How would you ever have made it into town without our help?”

“Those three riders probably would of proposed something along the lines of your deal,” the driver explained, “except-...”

“-except they would have wanted some kind of gratuity in exchange?” Claer guessed. The two men did not respond but reluctantly nodded. “Is that how you usually get into town?” Claer subsequently inquired. The men nodded again and Claer concluded, “Well, then I guess I’m about the best deal going, huh? Unless of course, I change my mind now that I know the routine.” The men smiled nervously and Claer reassured them with a laugh, “We just want to get into town, papa. We don’t care about money.” With a moment of further thought, Claer inquired, “What about that bunch we chased off?”

“Them fellahs wasn’t right in the head.” the driver asserted.

“This seems like a hazardous line of work.” Claer remarked.

“Everybody got to make money somehow.” the driver stated casually.

Claer leaned back into a relaxed position while Aengys smiled sarcastically and Wyl understood the irony - Perhaps the only reason the men stopped the wagons accounted as her deprivation of their weapons and money the previous night. Claer drank from the liqueur bottle nonchalant and observed the scenery like a tourist. As the wagons emerged from wooded terrain and rounded a turn in the road, the passengers immediately turned their attention to the city of Enet in clear view on the near horizon. A high wall with parapets and watchtowers encircled an enormous area. Large portions of the wall and many towers displayed prominent cracks and even broken and crumbled areas. Sections of the defensive structures, obviously still in use, connected to secondary and tertiary walls, further back inside the outer wall, forming a true encirclement significantly smaller than that of the outer wall. Many sections of the secondary wall crumbled as well and in the apparently abandoned areas confined within damaged and crumbling wall portions, stood hundreds of buildings, some as high as ten floors, and all of them obviously unoccupied for some time. Vegetation grew thick on some roofs and many windows and doorways gaped in large misshapen openings from the effects of weathering.

While the city presented an eerie and spooky ghost town appearance near the perimeter, further inside, an odd mix of worn and weathered buildings stood amongst impeccably maintained buildings, and smoke wisps curled in the low western sun from hundreds of locations all over the city. Several concentrations of stone and wood buildings in a state of virtual ruin lined segments of the road leading to the wall and even from a distance, the view served as ample evidence of the current state of affairs of Enet. Ages of constant warfare and a steadily declining population reduced Enet to a remnant cloistered within a polished ornate cocoon surrounded by the crumbling vestiges of a once mighty empire long since collapsed under the weight of its own bloated mass, a perpetual catastrophe of grandiose dreams plummeting toward oblivion. Claer, Aengys and Wyl like all militia, knew things about Enet but no story they ever heard or read adequately prepared them for the profound impact of direct observation of so immense a perpetual disaster, and they stared in awe at the grotesque spectacle.

A tense silence grew as the wagons approached the first concentration of ruins along the roadway and the drivers stood then exchanged signals while whipping the horses to a trot as several ragged men suddenly emerged from dilapidated doorways rushing the wagons and shouting. Men lunged as the drivers sped the horses to a run and maneuvered evasively along the road, bashing their wheels against the edges of rubble piles and overgrowth until rumbling past the edge of the concentration and charging toward the next where an even larger welcoming committee assembled blocking the road. The drivers veered into a field and the wagons shuddered violently over the rough terrain in a sweeping arc around the outside of the ruins as the mob charged out in pursuit across the field. Whipping the horses frantically, the drivers raced for a spot where some ditches and thick growth marked the extent to which the wagons could circle wide. As the pair of wagons reached the location, a few men at the point of the mob converged, leaping recklessly and clinging to the sidewalls, grappling to climb aboard. Aengys and Claer kicked at their hands, sending the men tumbling back to the ground as the wagons jolted down into the ditch then back up the other side steering back toward the road.

“What is this?” Claer shouted over the rumble of the wheels.

The driver shouted over his shoulder, “Nothing to worry about, just business as usual.”

Escalating the pace to a run, the drivers guided their wagons through and around another collection of ruins, dodging and evading another group of men then slowed to a trot after passing through as the ragged crowds on their feet fell hopelessly behind. A short stretch of open fields rolled up to the city walls and no further resistance occurred within sight the rest of the way. Claer carefully surveyed the parapets as the wagons approached the shadows of the walls, composed herself after the action of the chase, leaned close to the men on the bench then said, “Remember our deal.”

The men nodded then Claer repeated herself a little louder so the men in the other wagon could hear and they nodded discreetly as she rubbed her palm on her sword handle. Two enormous yellow and red banners with the emblem of the house of Enet fluttered over opposite sides of an entry arch and a number of uniformed soldiers stood about the parapets atop the walls while others appeared separated by relatively even intervals along the walls in both directions. The men on the wagons waved and some of the soldiers briefly held up their hands as the wagons passed under the arch and into a street lined by buildings balanced precipitately in jagged pinnacles of ruin surrounded by twisted rubble heaps. Other structures rose up behind, covered in sprawling vines with gaping scorched holes and large portions crumbled away.

Horse hooves and rumbling wheels on cobbled surfaces echoed eerily from the empty hollows and spaces of the skeletal structures as the wagons passed under another manned archway in the secondary wall into another collection of ruins and then through an archway in the third wall after which, the streets sloped steadily uphill. Some inhabited buildings occupied the area and appeared unnatural in the surroundings, as if plucked by some force from another time and set in the wrong place. There, the first signs of humanity, other than guards atop walls, milled about the streets.

Claer and Aengys swiveled their heads urgently examining the scenery in all directions and reacting with obvious surprise. “That’s it?” Claer finally inquired, “No questions? No inspections? No taxes?”

Casually shrugging his shoulders, the driver stated in affirmation, “That’s it, honey. No inspections, no taxes. You’re in the free trade state of Enet now!”

Sighing in something along the lines of exasperation, Claer rolled her eyes then asked with an obvious degree of annoyance, “-and it never occurred to you to mention any of this while I threatened your lives over the procedures for entering?”

“You **said**,” the driver responded defensively, “**if** there’s trouble.”

“Okay?” Claer countered with raised eyebrows.

“-so, that was no trouble, huh?” the man concluded perhaps even somewhat jubilantly.

Claer sat still for a moment with her jaw open then she nodded in an exaggerated fashion and conceded, “Right! ... No trouble.”

Turning a corner, the wagons lumbered into a bustle of activity on a grand boulevard, each side lined with beautifully groomed stone buildings in a diverse mix of short structures on grade and tall buildings several floors high with balconies and turrets. Yellow and red banners and ribbons hung from every lamppost like a row of trees along the edge of the street and some sort of emblem hung in virtually every window. Horses and foot traffic hustled about and as the sky darkened, attendants scurried along the sidewalks igniting streetlamps with torches on extension poles.

Glancing about to survey the scene, Claer advised, "We'll get out here."

The wagons rumbled to a stop and the passengers climbed out while Claer circled around and slapped all of the four men on their knees then thanked them and they all nodded, smiled and wished her well while the driver of her wagon even affectionately winked then they rolled along down the street. With a glance back and forth at the shops and storefronts, Claer then strolled along the sidewalk, peeking in windows while her companions followed. Claer exhibited apparent comfort that her group did not appear particularly suspicious given the relaxed form of entry as evidently, anyone carrying goods qualified as authorized for entry. Pausing at a window, Claer stared inside for a moment then declared, "This one." as she hopped up the step inside.

The party passed through the doorway into a comfortably dim and cozy interior warmed by two separate fireplaces. The space burgeoned with an overabundance of extravagantly ornate and lustrous carved wood and stone, plush carpets and draperies, and cushioned chairs. An arrangement of sturdy tables spread throughout the room with round tops assembled of four mirrored quadrant segments so the wood grains formed symmetrical starburst patterns. Selecting a table in a corner near a fireplace, the group approached then slouched into soft oversized chairs as a young boy showed up almost immediately to gather drink requests.

Claer inquired, "Do you have lemon liqueurs?"

"Yes madam." the boy replied dutifully.

"Do you have orange liqueurs?" she asked.

"Yes madam." he again answered dutifully.

"We would like two bottles of each please, for starters." Claer informed the boy with a gracious smile. Initially reacting with wide eyes, the boy immediately composed himself and stated, "Yes madam." as he bowed and scurried off.

After the liqueurs arrived at the table, Claer asked Wyl somewhat playfully, "What occurs to you as the obvious first observation in here?"

Wyl discreetly inspected the room for some time, thought about it a moment and then inspected the room again finally answering, "No young men."

"It took you way too long to figure that out, Wyl," Claer concluded, "but you are at least correct... What does it mean?"

With a moment of cautious consideration, Wyl then guessed, "Militia -- or guard or army, or whatever they call it here. The younger men are all militia."

"-which means?" Claer prompted.

"Compulsory." Wyl concluded.

Nodding with satisfaction, Claer inquired, "Who do you suppose makes up that rule?"

Wyl surveyed the room again, and with the young man situation clearly squared away, a subsequent obvious observation emerged. Several couples occupied other tables and the service counter, most consisting of a young girl, some perhaps barely beyond their teens, and obviously significantly older men. Wyl concluded, "Old men make up that rule."

Claer extended the exercise inquiring, "-but, don't old men start out young men?"

"Then that much more reason to preserve such a tradition." Wyl speculated, "That rabble outside the wall is all men, at least as far as I can tell. We're short on young men in here but overstocked on girls. It's a population of fat well-dressed gray haired men and younger girls, and a steadily declining population. Most men here die young. The reward for survival is a faerie story ending."

“-and they all lived happily ever after.” Claer concluded sarcastically with a cringe as her eyes bulged for a moment in a combination of amusement and revulsion.

A young girl arrived at the table then recited the menu, the longest and most complicated any present ever heard then after concluding a more than satisfactory meal, the party drank more liqueurs, slouched in their chairs and relaxed. Claer resumed her observation exercise with the inclusion of MaraDara as an ostensible part of their cultural indoctrination, and they entertained themselves with observations of ornate metallic buttons and clasps, jewelry, spectacles on ornate metal frames, silk clothing, old men, girls of all ages, and boy child servants. By appearances, everyone that worked in any way accounted as a girl or child boy, pampering and indulging the privileged gentry of presumably old army veterans. After working out the bill, accommodations and more liqueurs, the party ascended a stair at the back of the dining hall up to the forth floor above the street and entered a room that equaled in every way, the extravagance of the dining hall with polished ornate wood carving appointments, carpets and draperies.

Aengys informed his companions as they prepared for turns in the bath, “I spent at least a quarter of our money on all of this. That means we’ll run out of money in about three days unless maybe we picked the most expensive place in town.”

“-or, maybe we picked the cheapest place in town.” Claer countered then suggested, “Tomorrow, I’ll take Wyl with me to find Raim’s cousin and we’ll scout a little. One way or another we’ll have to find more practical accommodations or find more money.”

Concluding the last turn in the bathroom, Wyl laid in the hot water with his eyes closed for an exceptionally long time then returned to the room to discover Claer and Aengys already slept while MaraDara evidently sat first watch stretched out on the floor in front of the fireplace sipping liqueurs and smoking herbs and pixie leaf.

Wyl drank a glass of liqueur and nestled between the two, resting his head against Mara on her thigh. “So, these are some pretty luxurious accommodations for some simple peasants and rustic hermits, aren’t they?” Wyl asked, hoarse and groggy with fatigue.

“Yes.” “They are.” MaraDara acknowledged.

With his eyes closed, Wyl inquired, “Where do lemons come from? Have you ever been there?”

“Yes.” MaraDara replied, “They have.”

“What is it like there?” Wyl inquired.

“Is very beautiful,” MaraDara stated, “and warm all year.” “Trees and flowers are very different there-” Wyl fell asleep before the two completed the sentence but he dreamed about exotic far off places that stay warm all year.

Wyl and Claer wandered the streets shortly after sunrise amid an almost exclusively girl representation of pedestrian traffic, and a soldier in yellow and red occupied a post on nearly every street corner. A couple hours of investigation established the neighborhood the inn occupied as an apparent showcase of the city, as most other areas paled by comparison in a bizarre and spooky mix of meticulously crafted marvels, neglected and dilapidated wrecks only partially occupied, and crumbling ruins pocked with burnt out openings and blasted out battle scars.

Traffic volume steadily increased and Claer stopped to linger under shadows in an alleyway then studied the populace on the street for a time and mentioned as if it only just occurred to her, “We should have asked those girls lighting the streetlamps last night about Raim’s cousin.”

“What?” Wyl inquired confused by the comment.

“Raim said his cousin works for the king’s maintenance crew or something like that.” Claer explained, “Lighting streetlamps seems like a ‘maintenance’ kind of thing to do, doesn’t it? She might have been right there in front of us for all we know. If we don’t see anything that looks like an obvious maintenance crew today, we should probably wait for dusk and then approach one of them when they light the lamps.”

“I think that sounds like an excellent idea.” Wyl concurred and after a moment of thought, he inquired, “Why risk then wandering around out in the open now?”

“-because it may not be so much of a risk.” Claer replied. “We’re already out here. If we get nervous, we can head straight back to the inn but I’m curious about things here and I think since we’re already out, we might as well observe what we can observe.” then after a moment of thought, Claer asked, “Doesn’t the military presence seem odd to you? They’re everywhere, on almost every corner and crawling all over the countryside, but they don’t do anything. They don’t supervise the gate. They don’t protect traffic on the road. They rode right past us out there like they didn’t even notice us.”

“It is strange.” Wyl agreed.

Continuing their tour, Claer and Wyl inspected a significant portion of the inhabited area of the city until working their way onto the lower streets closer to the defensive walls then rounding a corner, they discovered a ghost town of burned out shells and ruins. Tall once grand structures towered over the street on both sides, bush and shrub grew in the street and at the sides of the buildings, rubble piles of brick, stone and timber lay scattered about and the wreckage of partially collapsed buildings choked portions of the street, almost completely blocking it off in places.

Streets wound into a narrow maze of dead ends and alleys then Claer became frustrated and wished to return quickly to the inhabited area of the city so she attempted to retrace her steps but at some point, nothing appeared familiar and she resorted to simply working her way back uphill. While stopped at an intersection to study the streets to either side, Wyl squinted as motion ahead attracted his attention and he immediately recognized yellow and red uniforms then clutching at Claer by the collar, he pulled her down behind a pile of stone and thick overgrowth, pointed in the direction and whispered, “Soldiers.”

“I don’t like this.” Claer stated.

“Neither do I.” Wyl concurred, “Let’s hide.”

Crawling on hand and knee to the nearest window opening, the pair crept over the sill and inside then rushed for a dark place out of sight. In a corner, a doorway opened to a stair and Claer pulled Wyl in then they ascended to the next floor, crept to a window and peeked out from the shadows as the soldiers passed quietly below the window in something of a formation moving close to the walls and looking into the interiors.

Claer moved her hand under her cloak toward the hilt of her dagger and Wyl clamped both hands on her wrist then shook his head. In no position to risk the commotion of wrestling with Wyl over control of the weapon, Claer glared in disapproval. Wyl slipped a hand around her waist, leaned into Claer pressing her against the wall and he kissed her hard on her lips then kissed her cheek, the full length of her neck and nestled into the top of her collar, kissing her chest. The actions evidently shocked Claer to some degree but apparently at least mildly amused her as well and as Wyl kissed her mouth again, he dug his fingers into her hair, caressed her cheek, rolled his head around pressing his face into her hair and gently kissed the edges of her ear and her neck behind the ear.

As Claer inhaled and exhaled deeply, Wyl leaned against her then slid slowly to his knees, rubbed his face from side to side down her chest and stomach, slid his arms around her waist, lifted her blouse and kissed her belly above the top of her skirt. Resting her wrists on his shoulders, Claer breathed loudly as Wyl kissed and nibbled at her waistline then she pushed up against him to lean him back and gain his attention. As Wyl looked up in response, her voice cracked as Claer advised, "They're gone."

"I know." Wyl acknowledged while wrapping a hand around her thigh, then nudging Claer with his nose along the waistband of her skirt.

With a sigh, Claer wriggled her hips and then lifted a knee into his chest with a soft thud pushing Wyl backward then she pressed two crossed dagger blades against his neck, one of which belonged to him. With lips pursed in a sly smile, Claer whispered, "Never come between a warrior girl and her weapon, Wyl... Next time, I'll kill you."

"We'll see about that." Wyl retorted as Claer withdrew the blades then slapped the flat side of his dagger against his chest and Wyl reluctantly assumed possession of it. With her free hand, Claer twisted up a fistful of his collar and pulled Wyl up to his feet then examined the scar on his neck, currently only perhaps an inch long with a narrow dark scab. "It seems your cut is healing nicely." Claer concluded.

"Is it?" Wyl inquired rubbing his fingertips over the scab as he sheathed his dagger then remarked, "I don't know why I even carry weapons. Anyone else, like you for instance, is probably more likely to use it than me."

Gazing into her eyes for a moment, Wyl pulled Claer close by the waist, rubbed his fingertips across her neck and pressed his lips on her cheek, near her ear until Claer slowly raised an elbow and pried Wyl away, stating, "All right... Let's go find the inn now... I've had enough adventure for one day."

The pair worked their way back uphill through the narrow streets as a thick cloud cover developed and produced a flurry of snow. The streets twisted in a disorganized maze and perhaps an hour passed as Claer and Wyl weaved a course up to the hill and the inhabited areas, hiding twice in the process along the way from guards then finally standing in the opening of a narrow alleyway before reentering Enet society. Across the street, the windows of a shop illuminated from within and some foot traffic passed by. A guard stood at a nearby corner and Claer waited until he turned his head in the opposite direction then pulled Wyl out to the street mixing with the traffic. Perhaps as much as another hour passed before the two found the inn and long shadows already darkened the streets by the time they made it to the doorway at the back alley. Eagerly seeking warmth, Claer and Wyl huddled in the dim glow of the fireplace with MaraDara while Aengys gathered all the swords and daggers up on the table for sharpening.

"How did it go?" Aengys inquired, "Did you find Raim's cousin?"

"No." Claer answered, "We got a little bit lost -- more than once -- and by the time we made it back here, the street lamps were already lit, so we didn't even get a chance to talk to the lamp lighters. Tomorrow, we'll just wait for dusk then go out and talk to them when they show up." Addressing Aengys specifically, Claer stated, "I'm sorry. It was really surprising how easy it is to get lost."

"It's all right." Aengys reassured.

MaraDara asserted, "They go now." "Is their turn?"

"You mean you? It's your turn?" Claer responded, "I don't know about going out after dark. They might have rules about it."

“They light lamps at dark,” “yes?” MaraDara countered.

“Well,” Claer speculated, “we don’t know if that’s to make the streets passable or easier to spot violators.”

Aengys leaned on the window for a moment then commented, “It’s pretty dark now and I see people walking around out there.”

Subsequent to a moment of consideration, Claer addressed MaraDara, insisting, “I want you to take Aengys with you, and if anybody has to talk, let him do all the talking.”

MaraDara shrugged their shoulders and nodded in response then Wyl and Claer ate bread and fruit while the three prepared for departure. MaraDara advised Claer not to leave the building until they return even if more than a day should pass. Claer exhibited a degree of apprehension but Wyl reminded her he accompanied MaraDara on a multiple day excursion in Martillion during which they avoided any serious trouble. Claer nodded after a moment of deliberation and as the threesome departed, despite all reassurances, Claer cautioned, “Be careful... and pay attention.”

Smoking quietly at the fireplace for some time, Claer then threw the stub of her smoke into the flame, stood up and announced, “I’m using the bath, Wyl.”

While Claer occupied the bath, Wyl rolled smokes and wrote in his journal until she reemerged dressed in a gray gown with damp hair then he took his turn in the bathroom.

Upon returning to the parlor, Wyl discovered Claer quite relaxed with some orange liqueurs, leafing through his journal by firelight in a bundle of pillows and blankets. Sitting down next to Claer, Wyl drank some liqueurs and ignited a pixie leaf smoke then sarcastically reprimanded, “You know, you’re supposed to ask permission before reading someone else’s journal.”

“I guessed you would say it’s okay.” Claer replied then remarked after a moment, “I noticed you wrote some pretty complimentary stuff about my torso while I was in the bath... I figure that means you expected me to read it.”

Wyl bent his eyebrows and sneered as if he found the suggestion illogical, pointing out, “-but you wouldn’t know that until after you looked.” Claer stared blankly and Wyl altered his argument slightly, stating, “-and if I didn’t expect you to read it, I otherwise would have written about your fat ass?”

“Something like that.” Claer affirmed.

“Do you want me to prove I mean it?” Wyl asked impatiently then as if a dare, he insisted, “Read the very first page.”

Thumbing to the first page, Claer glanced at it but did not read it then closed the cover and smiled, assuring, “I’ll take your word for it.”

Wyl shook his head and inquired, “How come scouts are never curious about anything? I mean, somebody suggests to me I read something, I read it. It’s an uncontrollable impulse once someone suggests it. Anyone would do it... but not scouts... I would guess none of you would.”

“Scouts are never curious, Wyl, because we always already know everything.” Claer explained patiently. Wyl sneered contentiously, considering the answer too predictable and Claer stared for a moment then rolled her eyes and asked with a tone of resignation, “Do you want me to read it? You seem so proud of yourself. I don’t want to spoil it for you. I’ll read it if you really want me to.”

“Sure,” Wyl stated with confidence, “just so you can be assured I wasn’t plotting against you while you were in the bath.”