

IV

Apples & Oranges

Snowflakes fluttered against the window and twinkled orange and yellow from the light of the fireplace while Wyl made coffee then sat and stared at the fire while smiling at the thought of Claer and Aengys at a nice warm inn in Argael drinking Teaeren ale. With long thoughts of Jaenefyr, his sister and her family, Wyl wondered if he would ever see any of them again. Saccia stirred and shuffled about the room in the dark, preparing for another workday then sat near Wyl with a cup of coffee and asked as she worked on her boots, “Why did you stay here without your cousins?”

“Mara and Dara asked me to stay with them for a while longer.” Wyl replied, “I will catch up with my cousins later.”

“How will you find them later?” asked Saccia.

“I know where they are going.” Wyl asserted.

“Why were they in such a hurry to leave?” asked Saccia.

“They didn’t want to get stuck here for the winter.” Wyl answered.

“How do they know they will like the next place they find better than this?” asked Saccia in a tone that unintentionally demonstrated perhaps a hint of suspicion.

Hesitating for a moment, Wyl inquired, “Why are you asking me all of this?”

Carefully inspecting with some deliberation, Saccia inquired directly, “Where are you from, that Enet isn’t good enough for you? If you know of a place better than Enet, why would you leave it?”

“Anyplace in the world is better than Enet.” Wyl responded with mild restraint, “I don’t need to compare it to any other place to know that.” Saccia turned her face down and closed her eyes then Wyl paused and said apologetically, “I didn’t mean that as a recrimination. I’m sure I’m in no position to judge you.”

With a smile, Saccia finished her coffee then departed for work.

For several idle days, Wyl occupied the room with MaraDara, while nearly continuous snows fell under dark cloudy skies and at night, they returned with Saccia to the tavern and drank with the girls from the House of Raidda. The population of Enet meanwhile increased after the address of the king and evidently, a major portion of the army that assembled for the parade then remained in the city for the winter. Noticeably larger collections of men in yellow and red occupied street corners with greater frequency, and for three foreigners that essentially accounted as spies, so conspicuous a guard presence inspired a degree of anxiety.

Wyl reclined in a bundle of pillows and blankets next to the hearth on a particularly dark and stormy morning as thick clouds of snow blanketed the city and deposited deep drifts curling around corners and looming overhead on rooftops. MaraDara joined Wyl at the fireplace then Dara produced a slim tin box containing a fresh stock of pixie leaf and while Wyl studied her with a discreet smile, she rolled a smoke with the stuff. As Dara at some point noticed the attention, Wyl inquired, “Where did you find that?”

“Raidda girl friends of girl find for her these.” Dara explained.

“Vlaca said it is not allowed in Martillion.” Wyl remarked then inquired, “Is it also not allowed here?”

Igniting the smoke, Dara curled wisps from her mouth to her nose then exhaled and finally answered, “Yes.”

“Is that ‘yes’, it is also not allowed here?” Wyl inquired. Dara nodded impatiently in response and after a moment of consideration Wyl asked, “Why is that? Why do the constabularies insist on arbitrarily forbidding something?”

As Dara shrugged, Mara then shrugged in quick succession and turning his attention primarily toward Mara, Wyl speculated, “It is a uniquely underclass accommodation. The defenseless and most vulnerable do it in secrecy. The authorities call it prohibited but they don’t really enforce it or even appear to care, as if they do it just to assure themselves folks like Vlaca will always fear discovery, always doubt her integrity and always feel inadequate, reprobate or otherwise inferior. The prohibition shows her she is weak, unsophisticated, inferior, and she requires the guidance of someone wiser, someone who knows better what is best for her, someone superior. She should feel shame and conceal her weakness, and fear the consequences of her reprobate behavior.”

MaraDara raised their eyebrows and commented, “So many things he knows” “from single observations,” “yes?”

Impulsively, Wyl admonished, “Observation - A single observation is not plural.” then explained, “Yes, I know these things from a single observation because there is no other possible explanation for why any man should prohibit any other from something of so little consequence.” Glancing at the two alternately as if in challenge, Wyl suggested, “Name one other reason, even if you have to make something up.” Both Mara and Dara remained silent and Wyl interpreted that as agreement.

Opening the window, Dara lifted a leg up to rest on the sill as cool gusts rippled on the curtains and through her hair then scooping a bit of snow from the window ledge outside, she poked her tongue into it.

Wyl rolled up onto his knees and asked in a demanding tone, “What about the man in the dark robes?”

MaraDara exchanged a look and as if perhaps they never heard the question, advised, “With girl they speak.” “She tells them in winter times,” “king requires extra service” “and may consider use of old foreign man,” “even old foreign man that does not serve in military of king.”

Jolting slightly, Wyl repeated, “-‘old foreign man’... That refers to me? I’m an ‘old foreign man’?”

Scowling in apparent disapproval of the vanity MaraDara continued undiscouraged, “These she tells them” “these she may arrange.”

Pressing his lips tightly while pondering the implications, Wyl concluded, “You’re saying Saccia can arrange seasonal occupation for me? You want me to work on a schedule like her? You want me to work for the king?”

MaraDara smiled mischievously and with a tone of mockery, they inquired, “He regrets so soon his insistence he accompanies them?” “He would like they walk him to mountains tomorrow” “to meet his scouts and go home?” “Yes?” “He no longer wishes to assist them?”

“All right.” Wyl relented, sufficiently humiliated, “Whatever you say.”

Mara leaned close and instructed, “When tonight she returns, he will approach these with her at dinner tables, yes?”

Lowering his eyes, Wyl responded contritely, “Yes.” then added, “-and... there’s only one table - It’s not plural-”

Mara slapped Wyl on the top of his head, clutched his chin and stated in a serious tone, “He will remember, he will exercise caution what to her he says, yes? He will not tamper with her. He will not attempt to intervene in her life.”

“-‘Her’ ... who?” Wyl demanded, “You mean Saccia?”

“Yes. She means her.” Mara confirmed with a stern expression.

While Wyl nodded vigorously, Mara examined him carefully as if inspecting him for indications of dishonesty then finally leaned back to a relaxed position. Dara returned from the window and handed a small snowball to Mara as she lowered herself onto a pillow then Mara compressed the snowball in her fist and tilted her head to collect drops of water with her mouth then sucked on the snowball like candy. Examining the two for a moment, Wyl apprehensively inquired, “How come you almost never refer to or address anybody by proper names? Everyone is always they, them, him, her, he and she... I don’t think I’ve ever heard you even refer to yourselves in the first person either. Everyone is equally third person with you, including yourselves. Why is that? Is it just a habit or do you have a reason?” Both Mara and Dara sneered sarcastically in the apparent expectation of another invasive analysis. With an intentionally sympathetic tone, Wyl speculated, “Is it to impersonalize your relationships? -because you know you will always outlive everyone you ever meet? -or more likely, vanish after a short while without saying goodbye?” The pair sighed and turned their eyes toward the floor then Wyl snatched a liqueur flask from Dara, slapped it against his own chest and drank from it declaring, “He drinks... I’ll shut up now.” MaraDara smiled slightly and Wyl reassured insistently, “I’m not entertaining myself. I only want to understand you as best I can so I can be a tolerable or even helpful companion to you.” Handing the flask back to Dara, Wyl stroked his fingers through her hair and kissed the side of her mouth then embraced Mara and kissed her cheek and leaning back, the three reclined in silence.

Reconsidering the meaning of his thoughts, Wyl wondered the true age of MaraDara in terms of mortal perceptions of the passage of years, and it occurred to him they evidently felt genuine affection for Saccia, Vlaca, for him, Claer and even Aengys. Appreciating for the first time the fixed routine that occurred during their travels that Mara always occupied lead position and watch along with Aengys, Wyl realized the two spent a disproportionate amount of time together and he wondered if they spoke during that time and of what they spoke. Aengys had more opportunity for private conversation with Mara than Wyl or anybody else with Mara or Dara combined and Wyl wondered if the two loved each other or if they missed each other. Consequently, Wyl appreciated MaraDara would in all likelihood never see Aengys, Claer or Vlaca ever again, or Saccia or himself for that matter, after the arrival of time to part company. Wyl furthermore wondered then how many MaraDara loved in their time on the earth, perhaps hundreds, thousands or even millions and he imagined the love and separation of so potentially vast a number a pain beyond calculation. Wyl wondered if the two remembered every individual they ever loved or if the magnitude of numbers and the passage of time erased all memory of even the most cherished and beloved. In such a position Wyl then considered, his first defensive mechanism might perhaps account as something such as always referring to everyone in the third person, including himself or maybe even adopting some other annoying habits to make intimacy more difficult, such as misapplication of plurals...

When Saccia returned home, Wyl allowed her time to wash up, change her clothes and leisurely prepare a meal then as the party ate at the table, he awkwardly introduced his assigned topic, speculating, “-so... I guess it looks like we’ll be staying awhile. I’m sure it’s at least an inconvenience and more than that, a hardship in expense. I insist I do something to contribute but I am a stranger here and I need your advice. I will do anything you ask.”

With a gracious smile, Saccia even laughed slightly then innocently remarked, “What an unusual coincidence. Why, only just yesterday I think I may have mentioned something along those lines to Dara.”

“Hmm, yes, that is a coincidence,” Wyl concurred, “but perhaps a predictable one. Any appreciative guest should always offer to contribute to such a gracious host.”

MaraDara rolled their eyes and Saccia paid no attention to them then informed Wyl, “I am not particularly pleased that I feel compelled to ask guests to pay but on the money I earn, we will all starve to death long before the spring. We have had unusually early snows, and unusually heavy also. I think you should be able to get a regular schedule with the winter crew but you’ll have to lie to get it. They’ll assume you’re Raidda just because I introduce you but they need extra hands for the winter, so as long as you stick to the lie, don’t deviate and insist you’re not Raidda, they’ll use you out of convenience at least for the winter.”

When her scheduled day off arrived, Saccia escorted Wyl to the offices of maintenance services in an oppressive monstrosity of white stone with a dark red roof, dwarfed below the palace of the king, to which it connected. The palace towered up into the sky overhead and from turrets and pinnacles, immense banners flapped and snapped loudly in the gusts. Of all conditions that he observed during his tour of the south, Wyl considered Enet the most pronounced composition of all the peculiarities of kingdoms - The kings and the very concept of kingship always focused entirely on intimidation. Everything about kings in his estimation Wyl concluded demonstrated a particular preference for all things big, bright and loud. The houses of kings dominated the landscapes, they and their courts stood elevated above the common peasantry in ridiculous costumes that artificially enlarged their statures, huge doors creaked and clunked, great banners snapped and rattled in the wind. Military hordes, shiny and colorful, stomped their feet, light glared from their armor, and they wielded sparkly colorful banners and standards that swarmed like storm clouds. Kings and all devices of their enterprises assailed the population with an unrelenting spectacle of sight and sound, never allowing any forget for a moment, the enterprise is the epicenter, resistance is futile, no simple peasant might ever hope to loom so menacing overhead or blare so loud and the order is just too great to question.

Pulling Wyl into the vestibule of a clothing shop just short of the maintenance offices, Saccia urgently instructed, “Tell me the story once more.”

Speaking quickly and in a monotone, Wyl recited, “I’m a farmer from Harin Creek-”

“-No.” Saccia interrupted then admonished, “Look me in the eye and convince me.”

With an apologetic nod, Wyl started over and stated, “I’m a farmer from Harin Creek. It’s a small burgh north of Foulds. I lost most of my crops to a fire that burned down my barn, my grain shed and my house. Some men who cart grain in and out of Foulds told me I could maybe find seasonal work here in Enet. I’m here to work for food and shelter, and I’ll take any work available...” Saccia tilted her head with a skeptical expression then suddenly doubting his performance and intent on her satisfaction, Wyl extended the exercise with an improvised plea, adding, “I’m not proud or particular. Give me a chance to contribute and I promise you I won’t let you down-”

Saccia shook her head with a wince and inquired, “What is that?”

“What?” Wyl asked.

“Contribute?” Saccia replied, “We never discussed that.”

“I was just improvising, I guess.” Wyl explained.

“Well, don’t do that.” Saccia forcefully insisted, “Just stick to the rehearsed story.” Examining Wyl as his expression evidently did not particularly encourage her, Saccia then squinted and inquired, “Have you never done this before?”

Shaking his head, Wyl stated defensively, “I really am a farmer. I think I’ve told you that more than once... No, I’ve never done this before...”

Clutching Wyl by his collar in her fist, Saccia pulled him close and stated clearly and firmly, “If he tests you at all, that is precisely the kind of test he will conduct and the only correct response to any test will be to stubbornly stick to the prepared material. Any deviation will expose you as a liar, understand?” Wyl nodded and Saccia instructed, “All right. Listen to me. Don’t interrupt me and don’t ask me to explain. Just do precisely what I tell you, say the words I tell you to say and don’t try to make any sense of it... You do not care about making any kind of ‘contribution’ to anything, you understand? You care about yourself and your selfish personal interests, and nothing else. You are here to make money and you don’t care what you have to do or who you have to hurt. If he offers you work beating children in the head with a club, you tell him you hope he has enough of them to keep you gainfully occupied all winter then you ask if you are allowed to eat the ones you kill. You are grateful for this man’s time and you consider yourself extraordinarily fortunate for this opportunity... You are greedy but not intelligent enough to steal... You are ambitious but not competent enough to promote... **and**... you **never** have any opinion about anything until after he explains the **correct** opinion to you... Do you think you can remember that?”

“Surprisingly enough,” Wyl declared, “that all actually has a certain simplistic clarity.”

Saccia smiled and exclaimed, “Excellent! Simplistic clarity.” then tugging Wyl forward, she instructed, “Hurry up and get in there now while it’s all still fresh in your thoughts.” and hustling Wyl quickly along the street without another word, Saccia pointed at a doorway and pushed him toward it as she slowed to a stop. Wyl passed through a dirty vestibule with a crusty layer of moist dirt caked on the floor then passing into the interior, encountered two desks occupied by attendants in a dusty and cluttered room. Approaching timidly, Wyl halted halfway between the two desks some four steps back and nervously glanced from one attendant to the other. One of the men eventually looked up with raised eyebrows then Wyl stepped closer to the desk and announced, “I was told to come here. I’m looking for seasonal work.”

Immediately apparently inconvenienced and perhaps even irritated, without a word, the man turned his chair, stood up and walked toward a doorway on the other side of the room. Wyl took a step to follow then hesitated and glanced at the man still in his chair, who by all appearances, did not yet notice Wyl present. Stepping forward then backward two times, Wyl finally concluded staying put accounted as the least presumptuous action that even if incorrect, ought in all likelihood provoke less serious recrimination than the arrogance of intrusion into restricted space. The man to whom Wyl spoke leaned into a doorway for a moment then without ever so much as another glance in the direction of Wyl, he returned to his desk and shuffled papers from one side to the other while scribbling numbers onto a sheet. Wyl awkwardly stared at the ceiling contemplating whether he should remain in place, sit down somewhere or back away and mill about the lobby. As discomfort quickly escalated to a level of excruciation and after what felt like half an hour, Wyl slowly and quietly backed away slightly and moved his head about in an attempt to demonstrate fascination with the floor, the ceiling and the walls.

A man with grey stubble on his head and chin and long grey partial beards down to his shoulders on either cheek finally emerged from the open doorway, performed a motion with his head then vanished back into the room. Wyl hesitantly advanced to the doorway and stopped on the threshold discovering the man at his desk occupied with some papers. Without looking up, the man said, "Sit down." with a wave of his hand in the direction of a chair. The gray-bearded man prominently displayed a red ribbon and metal emblem on his chest, commendations for a distinguished career of military service of which he reminded Wyl several times while questioning him about his origins and intentions. Wyl cautiously crafted each response as bland, boring, greedy and incompetent as possible while seizing on multiple opportunities to demonstrate awe and admiration for the old man, his impressive accomplishments and his leadership qualities.

The old man may have asked one or two questions designed to expose deception but with far less determination than Saccia practiced in the preparatory exercises and in short order, he ceased his inquiries abruptly due to apparent boredom. Saccia suddenly appeared in the doorway and as the old man turned his head in her direction, she respectfully inquired, "Excuse me, Captain, am I interrupting?"

"What is it?" the old man demanded.

With a courteous smile, Saccia asked, "Um, are there any openings left on roof crew? I'd be happy to take overtime call if you've got space for me on the schedule."

Turning his attention to Wyl, the captain asked, "You up for overtime?"

"Oh, yeah!" Wyl responded enthusiastically, "I'm up for any opportunity to make some money... anytime..."

Redirecting his attention to the papers on his desk and never looking up at either of his guests again, after a protracted moment, the old man waved a hand in the general direction of Saccia and instructed, "You show up tomorrow morning after sunrise. Saccia here will tell you what to do and when to do it. You follow her instructions and when she works overtime, you work overtime. If she complains about you one time, you're gone."

"Thank you, Captain." Wyl nearly shouted as he sprang up to his feet, "I swear you won't regret this."

Saccia turned away and Wyl followed then as he crossed the threshold of the doorway, the captain grunted in apparent acknowledgement. Wyl caught up with Saccia and almost ran into her as she came to a stop at the two desks then pointed discreetly and after an instant of confusion, Wyl stood still and faced the desk, guessing her intent, and shuffled in awkward discomfort. Saccia departed and the man at the desk finally stood up, stepped over to the back wall and selected a key from an array of hundreds neatly arranged in a stone niche in the wall. Returning to his chair, the man scribbled something onto a small rectangle of card paper, pushed it along with the key to the corner of the desk and again occupied himself with his papers without another word or glance toward Wyl.

Reaching slowly, Wyl gathered the card and key then after a pause, he rotated and shuffled two steps toward the door then stopped and hesitated. As both men at their desks evidently no longer noticed his presence, Wyl took two more steps toward the door and when neither man objected, he continued to the door and exited. Half a block or so along the street, Saccia stepped out from under a canopy and bumped into Wyl then they continued along the street together. With a huff, Wyl advised, "Those are the two rudest assholes I've ever encountered in my life." Saccia giggled and Wyl immediately asked, "Does 'overtime' mean what I think it sounds like it means?"

“Yes... Yes, it does.” Saccia replied as if accommodating a child.

“Why would you do that?” Wyl inquired, “Don’t you work enough as it is?”

“I did it because it ingratiates me with the captain, because it places you with me and because it gets us on the schedule for roof crew,” Saccia explained, “and that is probably your only chance of performing well enough to avoid dismissal.” Wyl nodded in acknowledgement then Saccia stated in addition, “Besides, we need all the money we can get. We’re working for four.”

Tilting his head in contemplation, Wyl then suggested, “Uh... well... maybe Mara and Dara can also-”

“-No they can’t,” Saccia stated firmly, “and you and I both know that.” Halting abruptly, Saccia stepped back against a wall and holding Wyl by his forearm, looked into his eyes with a sudden vulnerability then confided, “Look, I can easily see they would never get through the office process, and they would probably attract way too much attention anyway. I’m doing this for companionship and entertainment. More important than the money, just perform well enough to keep your assignment and keep the arrangement intact and discreet. That’s all I’m asking.”

Wrapping a hand on her shoulder, Wyl reassured, “I understand. I’m working for you, not the king. I’ll do everything I can to please you. Never hesitate to tell me what you want me to do, at work or at your room.” Saccia nodded gratefully as the two turned and continued down the street then pushing his hands into his pockets, Wyl felt the card and key, pulled them out and asked Saccia, “What is this for?”

“That’s your room.” Saccia informed him.

“-but I don’t need a room.” Wyl remarked.

“They don’t know that and we don’t want them to know that.” Saccia advised and as Wyl opened his mouth intent on another question, she explained, “It doesn’t matter. You get an address whether you want it or not. It’s not an option... and before you get a chance to comment how thoughtful and generous that is of them, understand they will charge you rent and deduct it from your pay. That is why it’s not an option.” Leaning against Wyl, Saccia stated insistently, “No one can know you are staying with me. This goes for all three of you. You need to be discreet about going in and out my door. If the wrong people find out any of you are there, I will have to pay back rent and penalties too. In Enet, you pay by the person, not by the room. They monitor rent because if you’re not earning money and paying obligations, they don’t want you inside the walls.”

The couple walked faster as a snow flurry steadily intensified and when they finally entered the archway at the street level of her building, Wyl rested his hand on Saccia over her shoulder and said, “Thanks, Saccia... for everything. You are decent people, you, Raim and the House of Raida. I’ll always consider you kin from now on.”

In the morning, Saccia and Wyl prepared and went to work at sunrise then spent the day driving horses with wide board contraptions behind them that pushed the snow off the street like plows in a field, and they shoveled by hand what seemed to Wyl, mountains of snow. Never before, did Wyl work so hard for so long in one day in all his life and he staggered struggling to keep moving the second half of the day. The endurance of Saccia amazed Wyl and at sunset, they made their way back toward her room as Wyl wobbled stiff and sore. Saccia stopped at the tavern to allow Wyl a rest and he drank two beers quickly then as he nursed his third beer, he remarked, “I don’t know how I am going to do this again tomorrow. I feel like I’ll be too sore to walk.”

Saccia reassured, "You'll survive. Tomorrow, we'll work at whatever pace you can. In a couple days you will be used to it and it won't be so bad." Studying Wyl for a moment, Saccia inquired, "Have you never done a day's work before?"

"Yes, I think so," Wyl answered, "but only because I was doing something I wanted to do, and I did it at my own pace. I know what a workday is - I just don't have a lot of experience with it, at least not under these expectations."

Shaking her head slightly perhaps even with a bit of a giggle, Saccia demanded, "How can that be? Are you royalty, aristocracy or something like that?"

With sudden apprehension he might indirectly expose something, in an intentionally bland interpretation of the truth, Wyl explained, "We are farmers. We live in huts we build ourselves. I can tell you anything I want but I'm too sore to lie - We don't come from any fantastic paradise. We're just plain and simple. We don't have a king or a big city. We do what we need to do for ourselves and we don't make each other do anything or make each other borrow money or pay obligations. That is why I've never worked on a schedule. We're here just because of recent bad luck and we're hungry."

"All right." Saccia reassured, "You can trust me, you know."

"I believe you." Wyl asserted and after a moment of reflection, he inquired, "Why is our presence here so improbable to you? Why are you here? Why would you leave your home to come to the one place you should revile above all other places?"

Saccia sighed and struggling to explain, confided, "I don't really know why any more. Initially I liked to think of myself as a spy but several years later, I can see I never really served any purpose in that capacity. I think Raim tells us we are spies to make us feel less guilty and less ashamed of abandoning the clan. I guess I thought some stability and comfort would make me... happy... but it only domesticated me and I don't know how I can ever go home now. I belong nowhere now... and I'm still not even happy anyway. It is disappointing to realize how complicated and elusive happiness is after all."

Looking Saccia sternly in her eyes to stress his point, Wyl insisted, "Happiness is overrated, Saccia. Only the dimwitted and morally deficient ever experience happiness. No one with intelligence or a conscience would ever wish for such a selfish and pointless indulgence. You should take comfort in the knowledge you are too intelligent to find such ignorant bliss so easily. The greatest indulgence of all is suffering. Nothing exceeds the euphoria of suffering."

With a sigh, perhaps even a bit of a gasp, Saccia asserted, "That is not at all comforting to me." Although Wyl shrugged apologetically, without further discussion, Saccia stood up, pulled him from his stool, and advised, "Let's go home while you can still walk. Tomorrow is another day. You'll need to rest up."

Contemplating another day just like the one that just ended, Wyl found the idea considerably unappealing. Returning to the room, Wyl discovered MaraDara lounging at the fire with a bottle of lemon liqueur and he immediately threw himself down, snuggled up against Mara then fell asleep.

By the conclusion of his third workday, Wyl believed he would not last the week but over the next two days, he experienced an unexpected resurgence of endurance. At the end of the sixth day, Wyl accompanied Saccia back to the office below the palace of the king and they collected their wages. The attendant handed Wyl a small bag of coins less the rent for his room and although he had no idea of the value of the coins, Wyl emptied the bag into his hand and it seemed to him, a respectable collection.

Along the way home, Saccia steered Wyl into to a shop where they purchased a stock of food supplies then they collected MaraDara and went to the tavern, staying nearly all night, drinking and dancing. Wyl slept late on his day off and after waking, rifled through his pockets and with a degree of shock, realized his entire collection of coins vanished. Saccia served coffee and biscuits, smiled sympathetically at his obvious disappointment and reassured Wyl his coins were still present in the form of food and drink, which would last a couple more days. Nevertheless, Wyl expressed sufficient discouragement that his hard-earned coins purchased no more than a night of entertainment and two days of provisions but Saccia reassured the exchange satisfied her expectations and accounted as adequate supplement to her wages.

Considering the empty room for which he paid whether he needed it or not, Wyl inquired, "How would I avoid starvation if I actually had to live here on my own?"

"You wouldn't." Saccia replied.

Rubbing his eyes, Wyl advised, "I don't understand. Why would I stay here then?"

"You wouldn't." Saccia again replied, "You would sink deeper into debt until you owed money on payday, then they would run you out of town."

Recalling the hordes of crazed men in rags in the ruins outside the wall, Wyl shook his head with consternation then asked with growing aggravation, "When they're short on bodies, why don't they pay the men outside the wall?"

"-because they haven't served in the army." Saccia explained, "That's why they're out there - They're not allowed in."

"What about me?" Wyl countered.

"I already explained." Saccia contended, "You are too old for military service - They need bodies now - Later, when they don't need you anymore, they will drive you into debt then chase you outside."

"-and what's to stop me from coming right back in the next time they need bodies?" Wyl inquired out of nothing more than curiosity.

"Your clothes." Saccia answered.

"My clothes?" Wyl responded.

"Yes, your clothes." Saccia repeated then elaborated, "A man in raggedy clothing is unlikely to earn or spend money and is therefore not allowed inside the wall."

"-so, if I wore rags outside the wall," Wyl hypothesized, "and I saw somebody in decent clean clothing, jumped him and took his clothes, the guards would let me pass?"

"Yes." Saccia confirmed and as Wyl flexed his eyebrows and shook his head, she smiled and patiently explained, "To the men of Enet, money is a wiser and greater authority than even the king. They consider it a natural element with natural properties like the downhill flow of water. The guard exercises random personal judgment at the gate - If you look like you even might have money, they let you pass - It doesn't even matter if they guess wrong. Anyone who enters without money or runs out of money will either leave or loiter. If you loiter, the guard will figure that out soon enough then they'll chase you out the gate or kill you if you give them too much trouble."

With a contemplative sigh and a pause, Wyl reluctantly inquired, "What about you?"

"What about me?" Saccia responded then guessing the intent, she confided, "I am a girl. They want me inside but only under continuing duress. Eventually, the support of a financially secure retired military man will grow more attractive to me than I will marry, live in privileged comfort and produce little future military men."

Wyl shuddered and asked squeamishly, “-and will you? -eventually, that is?”

“Don’t make me think about it.” Saccia admonished.

Wyl nodded and considered the conversation concluded but after some consideration, his curiosity got the better of him and he tentatively inquired, “What will happen if you never do marry? I mean, eventually, you will-”

“-I said” Saccia emphasized and then pronounced each word with deliberated precision, “don’t - make me - think - about it.”

Again, Wyl nodded and slowly blinked nearly bowing in contrition but with further thought on the subject, he immediately conjured a bleak and dismal vision of a potential future for Saccia. As she grew older and not so attractive as the steady supply of young girls, Wyl guessed her debt would spiral out of control then and the men would finally expel Saccia to the great outdoors. With nowhere else to go, perhaps Saccia would then return to the valley... or she would need to die first...

Weeks passed and several snowstorms smothered the city under accumulating blankets and drifts. Enet occupied a low hilltop on the eastern end of the Alaepys range and the prevailing winds heaped mountains of snow on the city after descending the last peaks. In the daily routine with Saccia, it seemed to Wyl they rarely did anything other than move mounds of snow from one spot to another and he recalled the conversation about debt concluding that if his labors only concentrated on such pointless repetitive activities, it oddly made a kind of sense that he should only accumulate debt for his effort.

When exceptionally heavy snows fell, they buried roofs under tons of drifts that hosted massive icicles and as Saccia predicted, she and Wyl drew assignment on a roof crew with only two companions. Saccia in fact considered the duty among the most desirable of assignments because it involved small crews rarely subjected to any direct supervision, the work always progressed at a snail pace without particular difficulty, and accounted for spectacular views. The heights terrified Wyl the first time he ventured onto a roof but he agreed with the assessment of the view and to his utter surprise, he appreciated the city as actually quite beautiful from above, under a brilliant blanket of snow.

Exposure to elements on the roofs demanded several layers of clothing as defense against the screeching winds, and the crew worked with harnesses and safety ropes. Strategically placed metal rings, bars and poles for tying off ropes equipped every roof, at least all of those covering occupied buildings. The crew tied off and slid slowly down the slope of a roof in a seated position with feet pressed against a broad plowing board secured by rope to a harness, and thus cleared the roofs of the heavy burden. Only two at a time ventured onto a roof while two stayed in an access hut operating the safety ropes, and they rotated the two duties frequently to minimize exposure to the freezing winds. The huts housed winches to crank those on the roof back to the peak in between each run to the eave and after clearing a roof, two of the crew worked along the eaves dislodging icicles with hand axes. Wyl appreciated the work for all the reasons Saccia enumerated and welcomed it as a relief from the backbreaking labor of the shoveling that occurred at street level and especially enjoyed the icicle removal portion of the work because of the thrill of watching the giant spears of ice crash and shatter on the streets below. The crew worked at casual and comfortable paces, took generous breaks, and even drank and smoked in the rooftop huts. Wyl grew quite comfortable with the routine and at night, he and Saccia stopped at the tavern, drank beer with the girls of the House of Raida and talked about all his great adventures and thrills of the day on the rooftops of Enet.

As series of snowstorms buried the city, Wyl and Saccia ended up on the roof of the palace of the king for almost an entire week then it almost immediately transitioned to a continuing daily routine. In the performance of the duty, the crew required access to the inner workings of the palace, an amazing labyrinth of service corridors, stairways and tunnels. Wyl familiarized himself with the kitchens and service operations of the palace even though the place easily accounted as too much of a maze for intimate familiarity. Nonetheless, Wyl convinced himself he could always find his way around at least through a general understanding of the basic arrangements and layout.

Wyl and Saccia spent all of their time together and developed a genuine affection for one another. Consequently, MaraDara ended up unaccompanied most of the time and occasionally spent their days scavenging the fringes of Enet society for sources of smoking materials not available in the street front shops, and they accumulated a personal warehouse of cured leaves, tars, gums and powders. At night, the foursome visited the tavern or lay by the fire with liqueurs and exotic smoking materials.

Saccia adored Dara and when together, the two nearly always maintained constant direct contact with each other. Wyl gravitated toward Mara as a result and whenever time to sleep neared, they inevitably found themselves paired off in intimate conversations. Night after night, Wyl told Mara stories of Highland lore and history or even just faerie for entertainment and to his surprise, the material appeared to fascinate her. Although Wyl occasionally fondled, caressed and kissed her, Mara almost never responded or reacted to affection and superficially appeared somewhat cold and stiff but she never gave any indication of displeasure or discouragement and Wyl in fact, considered it oddly charming as well as mildly amusing. From his initial impression, Wyl always considered Dara more compelling than Mara due to her more humorous, engaging and volatile personality but with greater intimacy, he developed comfort with the dependable predictability of Mara and appreciated her sense of humor even more on the less frequent occasions she might exercise it.

Late in the night, as Wyl and Mara curled up close to the fire, she instructed him in whispers to tell Saccia in the morning he did not feel well enough to work. Although Wyl asked why, Mara only repeated the instruction and he agreed without further inquiry. In the morning, Wyl informed Saccia he felt too ill and he even acted the part sufficiently to convince her. Saccia glanced at MaraDara perhaps a bit suspiciously but Dara reassured her then she departed for work evidently confident the situation accounted as less than exceptional. While Wyl leisurely prepared coffee, MaraDara occupied the washroom then to his surprise, they emerged wrapped in dull dark green Highland cloaks with hoods pulled up nearly concealing their faces. Mara instructed Wyl to prepare a small emergency traveling pack he might conceal under his cloak and with a degree of shock, he exclaimed, "We're leaving? Right now?"

"No. They do not leave right now," MaraDara reassured, "but they prepare to leave in hurry" "if situation necessitates," "yes?" Wyl obviously intended to ask additional questions but the two interrupted him instructing, "He dresses now." "He dresses as if he may travel" "and he packs small emergency bags," "yes?"

Following the instructions, Wyl offered no further resistance but as he prepared a bag, he looked up with a mischievous grin and impulsively inquired, "Did you mean one bag? -because you said 'bags'... should I pack more than-" then a threatening gesture from Mara silenced him and he finished his preparations as MaraDara scowled.