

The Wayfarers

Book One

A Land Without Borders

by

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Author's Foreword

I can think of at least one close friend who is going to read this and say, “*A Land Without Borders*? But this world is filled with borders.” Well, yes, that may be true, but “A Land Without Permanent Borders That Stay Where They Are and Never Ever Change Spontaneously” seemed like a rather cumbersome title. And that is pretty much the case in the world this series takes place on.

It all began soon after I had completed *Gaenor's Quest*. I was trying to design an entirely new world and spent an entire evening with a pen and pad of paper. The way I usually design a world is by drawing a map and then filling in the names of the major regions. Fine details usually get added in as I write. I don't think the pen ever actually touched the paper that night. No pun intended, but I was drawing a blank.

The next morning, however the phrase “A land without borders” was rolling around in my head. It took me a few hours to figure out what that would mean, but it was a start. I thought it meant I wouldn't need a map. After all, maps beyond the local areas I call “stabilities” on the world would be utterly useless. I was wrong. Cities and towns move around and even the landscape changes in a somewhat random manner, but I still needed a means by which to figure out where everything was when my characters happened on them.

I finally resorted to a map of Earth in which I filled in national names of my own. The world in this story, however, looks nothing like Earth, but in order to give some clues as to how far various places are, I left some clues in the form of names; both personal and locational. I also used a few matching cultural traits

as a handle on various nations, but I only did so in a fairly superficial manner so keep in mind that while I might use Portuguese names in Pangam and French names in Crace, these places are not Portugal and France. There are notable and intentional differences. At best these places are imperfect mirrors of the nations in our world and sometimes not even that.

Of course all that is just half the stage on which this story is set. Also, this is yet another attempt to bend fantasy genre rules. Historical fantasy is most frequently medieval in milieu. Sometimes it is set in an analog of the ancient world, once in a while it is in the Stone Age. Other than that it is set in the present or the future. This story is set in a period similar to the Eighteenth Century. Think of it as roughly 1760. I took a few liberties even there for the sake of the story, pushing a few things forward just a bit, but not terribly so.

All the rest is self-explanatory or should be. In fact, I think all of this ought to be discernable in the text, but since I am stretching the genre, it seems only fair that you know about it in advance.

Like all my books, I present this to you completely free of charge. However, if you like it and think it's worth a dollar or two, why not send a donation to your favorite charity. If you don't have a favorite, check out some of my other books for various chairtable suggestions.

Jonathan E. Feinstein, Westport, Massachusetts
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A Land Without Borders

Prologue

Kaz stiffened slightly. *He's staring at me again*, he thought. Kaz looked around and sure enough, the shaman was watching him intently. *It's not fair*, Kaz thought sourly, *I'm not doing anything special*.

However, Kazani Bassan knew full well why the shaman was always watching him. Kaz saw strange things; things no one else could see and Shaman Borani was always on the lookout for boys and girls with the talent.

Kaz was not certain he wanted to have the talent, though. He certainly did not like the shaman studying him so intently. He picked up his spear, adjusted his loin cloth and stood up. "I'm going hunting," he announced to anyone who cared to listen.

At eleven, he was encouraged to hunt around the outskirts of the village although his mother constantly warned him, "Don't go too far, Kaz."

It was good advice, Kaz knew. The Bush was the Wild area that extended everywhere just beyond the village limits. Over half of the farming area of Sarahn extended into the Wild. Had Kaz been civilized that would have amazed him. Civilized people did not realize it was possible to live off the Wild, but that was the way it was in most tribal towns of Teltoa, and the natives were half-Wild themselves or so the colonists from far-off Dix believed.

Kaz had no intention of wandering too far, however. He just wanted to get away from the shaman's gaze. He took his spear because it would have looked strange to go hunting without it. He might find a small animal – a rabbit or a hedgehog, perhaps – to bring back and if not, well at eleven he was not

expected to be a great hunter just yet. The spear was also essential, because in the Bush it was all too easy for a hunter to suddenly find himself being stalked. Kaz could often hear the growls of leopards at night when he was trying to sleep.

He did not go very far. He left the village on a well-used hunters' path, then took a few steps off the path and sat down beside a small stream, looking back at his village. What he saw was the reason for Shaman Borani's interest. Most of Kaz's people would have seen nothing unusual – just the rain forest, the fields, and the village, but Kaz saw the village as though it was within a large bubble. Inside the bubble, everything was normal and stable, but beyond the area was a mass of swirling colors. Outside the village Kaz could see the wind and he could see other creatures by their auras and with insects buzzing all around him, it was an ever-changing sight. Looking back at the fields, he could tell the area was only half-Wild. The air became less colorful and it was harder to see wind currents there. It was not half as interesting as what he could see in the Bush itself.

Kaz liked sitting here and looking back at the village, but he did not understand why none of his age-mates could see what he saw. He thought about that, as he usually did, but still came to no conclusions. He realized he could have had the answer readily, merely by asking the shaman, but he also knew that was exactly what Borani was waiting for. It would mean giving up his childhood forever and Kaz was not yet ready to do that.

Finally, around dinnertime, Kaz got up and looked around. There was a fair-sized turtle nearby – somehow there nearly always was something he could bring back to eat when he wanted it – so he picked it up and carried it back to his family's hut.

Kaz was still troubled as he went to sleep that night, but not knowing everything in his comfortable little world was about to shatter.

He woke up several hours later to the sounds of war-cries and frightened screaming. "Get up!" his mother shouted at Kaz and his younger sister. His father was already grabbing a spear and rushing out the door of their hut.

There was a thunderous roar and through sleep-blurred eyes, Kaz saw his father fall dead just outside the door and the hut was filled with the screams of his mother. Kaz kept his head, however, and poked a small hole in the grassy mat that made up the walls of his home. Through it he saw dozens of attackers covered in black Alono war-paint, their facial and body features outlined in white, giving them an eerie and frightening skeleton-like appearance.

Half the huts in the village were on fire and the attacking Alono were killing every man they found with spears and those strange metal terror sticks Kaz had heard about, but had never seen before. The terror sticks were the weapons the Dixans used to carve out their colonial land, but the village was several days walk from any Dixan town so until now these strange new weapons were just stories to him.

He followed his mother and sister out the door and into the night. Another shot rang out and his mother stumbled with a great bleeding wound in her leg. Even wounded, she still struggled to get her children to safety. "Go!" she rasped at Kaz and his sister.

Before they could move, however, an Alono warrior with a spear blocked their path. He plunged the spear into Kaz's mother's belly and she fell back to the ground, coughing up blood. Another vicious stab and she was dead. Then he tried to grab at Kaz's sister, but she bit his arm, leaving tooth marks through his skin and then kicked him between his legs for good measure. She evidently missed her second target for the warrior swung the staff of his spear around and cracked her skull. She fell to the ground,

motionless, even as Kaz looked on in frozen terror.

The warrior examined her, decided she was dead, and then looked around. His eyes slid right past Kaz several times as though he was nowhere in sight. Finally the warrior rubbed the bleeding wound where Kaz's sister had bit him and kicked her lifeless body before running off to another part of the village.

Finally, Kaz was able to move. He verified the deaths of his mother and sister and when several more shots thundered behind him, he ran for the edge of the village. He found that edge even before he entered the village fields, but he kept running until he reached the beginning of the jungle. From there he turned and looked back to see something that scared him even worse than the terror sticks of the Alono.

The bubble of stability that normally surrounded his village was shrinking rapidly. Kaz stared as the last traces of reality faded from his life and the bubble shrank to nothingness and he knew he no longer had a home. Everyone was dead or captured by the Alono. There had only been fifty-three people in Kaz's village and he knew each and every one of them. Now, everyone he knew in the world was dead. The realization was staggering.

Later he would wonder why he alone had been spared, but right now he was still dealing with the end of the world as he knew it. Deep in despair, Kaz continued to sit at the border of the field and the jungle until a soft sound behind him cut through the mental anguish. He was being stalked.

Kaz, turned his head quietly and saw the aura of a large cat in a tree above and behind him. Leopards hunted at night he knew and this one was hunting him. Unable to think straight, Kaz ran deeper into the Bush, hoping to elude the cat, although a part of his mind told him he might be better off if the leopard just caught him.

Still running in stark terror, Kaz slammed headlong into the side of a rhinoceros. Bouncing off, he fell to the ground even as the leopard came into view. Annoying a rhino was not normally the way to a long and happy life, but in this one case it worked out well for Kaz. As the rhinoceros turned to see what had hit it, only the leopard was in sight. Putting one and one together in a way that only works in the Wild, the rhino assumed the leopard was the source of its irritation.

Kaz, however, did not stay to watch the fight, but continued to run still deeper into the Wild.

Carais, Crace

One

It was a foggy morning on the docks of Denmouthport in the Green Lands where Raff Cawlens was attempting to find passage to Crace for the party he and his wife, Emblem, were escorting to Carais. The prospect looked to be all the more difficult because they had not yet met the final member of the party, a Doctor Honor Willmess, who was supposed to be here in Denmouthport. However travelers had failed to make connections before and the rest of the party had been with them since the previous day in Taundon.

Raff walked briskly from dock to dock, looking for a ship headed in the right direction. It should not have been difficult; normally half the ships in port were channel-hoppers, ships that routinely crossed the narrow passage of the sea that separated Crace from the Green Lands. This morning, however, it seemed as though everyone had just arrived the night before or else were headed for Dix, Voland or Holrany. One was even preparing for the great crossing to the Varanan colonies, although Raff wondered about that. Most ships making the crossing left from Haristol. Still, there was no law against leaving from Denmouth. It was just less convenient.

After two hours in the harbor district, Raff would have thought he could find someone going to Belis, the nearest Cracian port, but he still had half the docks to search on so he was not quite discouraged just yet. He was just about to enter another long wharf when he heard his name being shouted, "Master Cawlens?"

Raff turned to see who was calling him. The man was well-dressed in a fine woolen coat and trousers, ideal for the cool damp weather of the Green Lands at this time of year. His chin was clean-shaven, although he sported a wide and long-curved moustache, indicating to Raff that this was a man who had sufficient time to maintain such an affectation. "You have the advantage of me, sir," Raff replied when they were within speaking distance.

"Honor Willmess," the man introduced himself, "at your service, sir."

"And I at yours, Doctor Wilmess," Raff replied politely. "We had expected to meet you at the inn."

"I was about to go there when I spotted you, sir," the scientist replied. "I have been staying with a cousin while waiting for you and the rest of our party, although now that I think of it, I probably should have left a note for you at the inn. My apologies."

"No harm done," Raff shrugged. "I have not yet arranged for our crossing."

"No need, sir," Wilmess assured him, "I have already made the arrangements."

"You have?" Raff asked, somewhat surprised.

"I have been in Denmouth for several days," Willmess shrugged. "It gave me an excuse to get out of the house. Our ship leaves on the morning tide although the captain says he would wait for tomorrow evening if necessary."

"Unusually accommodating of him," Raff remarked.

"He owes my cousin a favor," Willmess admitted. "I am not as widely traveled as you are, Master Cawlens. Is a howker a ship of sufficient size for our purposes?"

"I should think so," Raff told him. "Howkers are generally small cargo ships. It won't have guest cabins, of course, but then we'll only be on board for a few hours and can sleep in Belis tomorrow evening. Well, why don't we confirm our reservations and then I will introduce you to the rest of our party."

The howker was a small ship with a rounded bow and stern and a pair of two-piece masts. The main mast was rigged with three large square sails while the smaller mizzenmast was lateen rigged. Examining the rigging further, Raff noted the long bowsprit held attachments for up to three jibs. It was nearly ninety feet from bow to stern and twenty-two feet across the beam.

“She’s not a fast bucket,” the ship’s wayfarer admitted to Raff, “but she doesn’t roll too badly in a rough sea, Master Cawdens, although with you on board perhaps we might be able to make the crossing in record time?” he added hopefully. Raff was a master wayfarer and a powerful one at that. Masters were capable of far more than guiding others through the Wild.

“We possibly could,” Raff agreed, “but this is a well-established route and any ill-considered manipulations could upset any number of natural systems in these parts.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” the wayfarer replied instantly. “I did not know.”

“No reason why you should, Geaff,” Raff shrugged. “I’ve had to learn the hard way that just because I can do something, it doesn’t mean I should. Reforging the path from Denmouthport to Belis might decrease the distance, but it could also harm the local wildlife, change the feeding habits of the fish in these parts or even the weather. It’s something master wayfarers have to be careful of every day.”

“Is that a danger anytime you wayfare, sir?” Geaffrey asked curiously.

“Potentially,” Raff nodded, “but only when I try to do something really big. The good news is that anything I do, I can generally undo or at least minimize the changes, but I need to do so quickly. To undo the sort of change you suggest I would have to travel the path a second time and I don’t really have the time to do that.”

Raff knew there were ways to forge new paths that were not as drastic as he made it sound, but only another master would have known that and it was a policy of the Wayfarers’ Guild to only forge new paths where necessary. Raff’s explanation avoided the necessity of refusing a direct request.

Raff returned to the inn with Doctor Willmess and introduced him to two other travelers and was about to buy a round of ale when his wife interrupted him. Emblem L’oranne Cawdens had been born to the nobility. Her father was the Baron of Orseilles and she had at one time been engaged to marry the heir to the Duchy of Bur. It was a life she had given up gladly when her wayfaring abilities awoke although her disdain for the noble life had developed well before that. Wayfaring was just the means by which she had escaped.

However, her upbringing still showed in her proud bearing and stature, so while she stood only five feet, four inches, to Raff’s five-eleven, when provoked one would think she could tower over him. She had startling green eyes, fiery red hair and an equally fiery temper that few besides Raff could withstand, not that he often invoked her rage. However, there was something about Raff’s deep brown eyes that could usually calm Em with a glance.

“Raff, we’ve been summoned,” she told him just as he was getting up to buy a pitcher of the bitter ale served at the inn.

“Summoned?” Raff asked. “By whom? The king? How does he even know where we are.”

“Not His Majesty,” Em shook her head, “If he wanted us, he could have asked while we were in Taundon all last week. No, it’s the local guildmaster.”

Raff considered that. “I doubt he has the seniority to summon me, but I suppose I can always remind him of that if this doesn’t turn out to be important. I was going to visit the local Guildhall this afternoon anyway. Gentlemen, I’m afraid we will have to leave you to your devices.” He placed a silver coin on the table. “Please have a pitcher on me.”

“A pitcher?” Em asked when they were finally on their way. “That was enough for two meals with change left over.”

“Who knows how long we’ll be gone?” Raff shrugged.

The streets of Denfirth were filled with horse-drawn carts and carriages. Here and there a horseback rider picked his way through the traffic, but most people in town were either delivering or picking up more than they could hold in their hands or a pair of saddle bags. The sandstone slabs of the sidewalks and the granite cobblestones that paved the streets had obviously been brought here from hundreds of miles away. The native stone was all chalk. Denfirth was an obviously rich city and one of the richest institutions there was the Wayfarers Guild.

The Guild Hall was a three story building that covered an entire city block in the middle of the business district. Built of wood and faced with red brick, it had ornate towers on its corners that rose an additional thirty feet into the sky. There were taller and more impressive buildings in Denfirth, but they were all churches.

Raff and Em approached the tall arched doorway as though they owned the place. A bronze plaque to the side of the large double door read, “The Ancient and Honorable Company of Wayfarers. Est. 972 YG.”

Raff chuckled, “If you believe that sign, you would think the building was almost eight hundred years old.”

“Looks less than ten to me,” Em opined.

“That’s right,” Raff nodded. “The old hall here was much smaller and burned down just over a decade ago. It was supposedly a chimney fire, but it seems to me any decent master could have stopped that before it spread. What a coincidence there weren’t any masters in town that evening!”

“That’s a terrible thing to accuse someone of, Raff,” Em chided him.

“It’s an even worse thing to do,” Raff countered. “Well, old Master Holcomb died two years ago so we’ll never know for certain now. Who’s in charge these days?”

“The note was signed by Master Michael Roark,” Em replied as Raff opened the door for her.

“Since when is he a master?” Raff asked skeptically. They started climbing a long, winding staircase to the third floor. “He was in one of my classes years back. I seriously doubt he ever improved his ability enough to do more than any senior journeyman.”

“Master is a political rank as well as one of ability,” Em reminded him pointedly.

“Most local hall masters who are not of master ability don’t use the title,” Raff countered irritably.

“True enough,” Em nodded, “but it is their right to do so if they choose. Besides, no one else has your level of mastery, Raff Cawlens. It isn’t fair of you to expect them to.” There was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“I don’t expect them to,” Raff explained easily, “but this one doesn’t even have half of your ability. He is

capable of guiding parties through the wild, but nothing more.”

“Perhaps he improved since he took your class,” Em suggested. “That was what? Fifteen? Twenty years ago?”

“Fifteen, I guess,” Raff shrugged. “It was definitely before my little adventure in the Dark Ocean.”

“Then there has been time for almost anything,” Em told him in tones of finality.

They reached the top floor, then started walking down a very long corridor. Raff grumbled about that too, but Emblem asked testily, “What’s gotten into you today?”

Raff thought about that for a few steps. “Feels like there’s a storm brewing,” he replied at last.

“A rough crossing tomorrow?” Em asked.

“I don’t think so,” Raff replied. “I don’t think it’s that sort of storm.”

“What then?”

“Can’t say,” Raff shrugged. “Maybe that’s what we’re here to learn.”

They finally reached the door of the guild master’s office and stepped in. There was a young man at the desk just inside the door. “May I help you?” he asked politely.

“Masters Cawlens and L’oranne Cawlens,” Emblem replied before Raff could, “responding to the summons from His High and Mightiness,” she added acidly.

Raff immediately relaxed, realizing that Em was as annoyed as he was, but the young man blanched and gulped nervously, “Masters, perhaps that invitation was worded a little too strongly.”

“That all depends on who wrote it,” Raff commented lightly. He looked the man straight in the eye and asked far more seriously. “Who was the author?”

“Master Roark dictated it to me, sir.”

“Then Master Roark must have had a pressing reason to overlook common courtesy,” Raff commented with a smile that could have meant anything but which made the young man even more nervous.

“Should we just go on in or is Master Roark entertaining?” Em asked blandly, her hand already on the doorknob. The young man was too nervous to reply so Emblem turned the handle and opened the door.

Inside, Master Roark was practicing with a putter and several white golf balls. He looked up, saw Em and Raff in the doorway and immediately straightened up, trying to hide the putter behind his back. “You need a lot more practice,” Raff observed, “if you can’t hit that cup from only ten feet away. New hobby?”

“The mayor is a member of the local association and has been inviting me to play with him,” Roark replied embarrassedly.

“I wasn’t aware there was a local association,” Raff replied. “I didn’t even know there was a course

closer than Hosinland.”

“You haven’t been in the Green Lands much this past decade,” Roark pointed out. “The game is getting quite popular.”

“The courses can’t possibly lie entirely within towns,” Em remarked. “Must be quite interesting trying to get around in the Wild without a wayfarer. Is that why they want you in the club?”

“The courses have been deep forged by master wayfarers from Hosin who specialize in building golf courses,” Roark told them.

“Even deep-forged paths don’t last for long without occasional use by wayfarers, Michael,” Raff told him. “Still I have no objection if you want to play golf in your spare time. What I do object to is being summoned to your office as though we were your lackeys. Not only are we freelancers and beyond the normal chain of command, but both Em and I have seniority over you within the Guild.”

“I wouldn’t say I summoned you here,” Roark replied defensively.

“I believe the wording, Master Roark,” Em told him firmly, “was ‘I instruct you to make your way to my office with all due haste.’ Sounds like a summons to me.”

“However,” Raff cut in, “we’ll forgive that lapse if you can explain why it was so vital we pay you a social call.”

“Not a social call, Master Cawlens,” Roark replied quietly, “not social at all. We’ve lost several wayfarer parties this month.”

“What do you mean ‘lost?’” Raff asked.

“They went missing without a trace,” Roark explained. “We have no notion what happened to them.”

“Hard to believe anyone could get lost in the Green Lands,” Em commented. “Some of your cities here are so close even an untrained wayfarer can find his Way from one to the next.”

“Oh, not here, no,” Roark shook his head, “but one party was lost in Crace and the others were in Holrany or at least we think they were.”

“You don’t know?” Raff asked incredulously.

“Well, some of those small mountain towns move about quite a bit you know,” Roark shrugged. “They aren’t firmly attached to Crace, Holrany, or Menino and tend to drift around coming closer to the population centers of one or the other.”

“Regardless of location, most of them pay their taxes to Holrany,” Raff pointed out. “So those parties were missing in the mountains?”

“Maybe,” Raff admitted. “We don’t really know, you see. They left one town and they were never seen again. Rescue parties were sent to look for them; after all it wouldn’t be the first time a wayfarer became ill or even died en route.”

“But they found nothing?” Em demanded. “Not even signs of having used the paths?”

“Only a master can detect such usage, you know,” Roark explained.

“Then why hasn’t a master looked into the matter?” Raff asked.

“How should I know?” Roark demanded. “It hasn’t happened in my region, but I haven’t had any masters I could just send out even if they had. Maybe that’s why it didn’t happen in Crace of Holrany either.”

“You’re a master, you could have gone yourself, and so could the masters there,” Em told him.

“Uh, well, yes, I suppose,” Roarke replied uncomfortably, “but a guild master does have other responsibilities as well.”

“And far too many masters earned their ranks through political maneuvering than by honing their skills,” Raff nodded.

“Are you saying...?” Roark began.

“You know what I’m saying Michael,” Raff told him. “Let’s not belabor it. You know I used to sit on the Council of Masters. I doubt much has changed since then.”

“I suppose not,” Roark shook his head.

“So is that why you asked us here?” Em inquired. “To tell us to be careful?”

“That and to keep an eye out,” Roark replied. “We honestly don’t know what’s happening. Perhaps the conditions in the Wild are changing or there have been attacks.”

“Attacks?” Raff asked disbelievingly. “By whom, sir?”

“Wild animals, perhaps?” Roark suggested. “I believe that happened to you in theDarkOcean or so you claimed.” Raff’s face turned beet red in fury at Roark’s implied accusation, but held his tongue. “Or it could have been the Kenlienta.”

“The Ken?” Em laughed. “They’ve never attacked wayfarers before.”

“Anything might change, you know,” Roark told her. “Well, that’s all I had to say. Now if you don’t mind, unlike you freelancers, I have other responsibilities.”

“Of course,” Raff replied blandly, thinking about the putter and the golf balls Roark had been playing with. He and Em got up and left the office, but as soon as they were back in the hall they could hear the sounds of breaking glass coming from behind them.

“What did you just do?” Em asked Raff.

“Caused a few of his golf balls to shoot around the room on their own,” Raff laughed. “I guess I got a bit clumsy. Not like me at all usually.”

“Oh you weren’t being clumsy,” Em laughed. “It’s just that I had pretty much the same idea. I guess our combined efforts were a bit more chaotic than normal.”

“We’ll have to work on that,” Raff chuckled.

“Cawlens!” they heard Roark shouting from the office, but neither of them turned back.

Two

It was necessary to wake before dawn the next morning in order to board their ship for Crace. On hearing they would be traveling on a howker, Em worried about the conditions on board. Many such ships were overloaded with cargo and poorly maintained by captains and owners attempting to get the most out of their investment with the least additional cost, but her fears proved unfounded for once. The little ship, while loaded with Green Lands woolens sat low in the water, but not beyond the point of safety and her sails and rigging were in obvious good shape.

She was surprised that the decks had been holystoned to a gleaming white, but on asking, it turned out the captain was a former naval officer and treated the little cargo ship as though she were a ship of the line.

Well kept she might have been, but she was not a fast ship and the tides were not particularly strong at this time of month, so after two hours, when the ship was still in the outer harbor, Raff took a hand and used a bit of a master wayfarer’s technique to speed the craft on her way. “It’s something you might be able to do as well, Geaff,” he told the howker’s wayfarer. It’s not really all that hard.”

“I thought you said we shouldn’t do this sort of thing,” Geaffrey replied.

“I’m not reforing our path,” Raff explained, “just sort of easing the Way for us.” He explained exactly what he was doing and encouraged the younger wayfarer to try. “Not bad for your first attempt,” he said an hour later. “Keep practicing and in a few trips you may be good enough to get a job on a larger ship.”

“I kind of like this one,” Geaffrey replied.

“You want to get paid better, don’t you?” Raff countered. “Well, if you are qualified for a larger craft, you can demand higher pay, even if you do stay on this one. However, once you’re under sail and there’s a wind blowing, you should generally let the sailors run the ship. You’ll find this can take a lot out of you.”

“I can feel that,” Geaffrey admitted. “I’ll sleep well tonight, I think.”

“I’m sure you will,” Raff laughed. “Now does the galley on this crate run to serving coffee?”

“Yes, sir,” Geaffrey nodded, “I’ll fetch you a mug.”

“How did you know he was capable of that technique?” Em asked Raff after Geaffrey was out of earshot.

“The same way I knew you were a potential master when we first met,” Raff admitted. “It’s a talent I’ve always had. Why?”

“I’m surprised the Council of Masters doesn’t exploit that more,” Em remarked.

“They don’t know about it,” Raff told her. “It doesn’t come up all that often. Why else do you think you’re just finding out after nine years of marriage? I haven’t kept it a secret from you intentionally. It’s just that I don’t often get a chance to make such an evaluation.”

“Ah, so that’s why you knew Michael Roark was only of master rank, not ability?” Em asked.

“Exactly,” Raff agreed. “With his ability he should never have stopped guiding parties from town to town. Still, someone has to do the paperwork and, frankly, I don’t have the patience for it anymore.”

“Did you ever?” Em laughed as Geaffrey returned with Raff’s coffee.

“Not really, no,” Raff chuckled, “but I was more tolerant of it in my youth. I suppose I was too young to know any better. My eyes have been opened to a lot since that night in the Dark Ocean.”

“You really shouldn’t dwell on that, dear,” Em told him. “It isn’t healthy.”

“I’m not really dwelling on it, Em,” Raff shook his head, keeping his eye on the horizon. “but one of these days I’m going to have to head back out that way. You’re the only one who believed my story.”

“You’ve convinced others,” Em pointed out.

“But not easily and most would still like proof,” Raff told her.

“Well, we’re not likely to find it in the Belis Channel,” Em replied practically, “and you have been back along that route as have many other wayfarers.”

“Yes, but I was forging a new path that night. It’s not something that happens often. Who knows what lies in the depths of the oceans?” he concluded.

“Ships have gone missing before,” Em replied. “We often blame it on the weather, but...” she trailed off and they both spent the next hour watching the water in a manner only a wayfarer could. They could see the currents of the air and the sea and within those currents the chaotic energy of the Wild as the howker continued her crossing within a small bubble of stability.

It was the middle of the afternoon when they docked in Belis. Raff thanked the captain and the ship’s wayfarer for a pleasant journey while Em herded their charges – five scientists on their way to “The Shape of the World” International Conference – on to the dock.

They made it to the end of the pier before an agent of the Crace Customs Service spotted them and waved them into the nearby station. Raff had been expecting the delay and, as he had in the past, wondered why the customs service didn’t build stations across the ends of the piers and wharfs since they must have missed the crews and passengers of many incoming ships. Of course they were far more concerned with the ships’ cargos which were not allowed to be unloaded until customs seals had been affixed to each item. Passengers, like Raff’s and Emblem’s party were inspected almost at random.

Relations between Crace and the Green Lands, while hardly cordial, were far warmer than they had been earlier in the century and the party had little trouble being passed into Crace. From the questions, it appeared the agents were only concerned about the smuggling of Green Land wool and whiskey.

“We’ll be staying in Belis this evening,” Em told them as they left Customs, “and leave first thing in the morning.”

“Are we taking a public coach to Carais, Mistress Cawlens?” one of the scientists asked her.

She did not correct his terminology. Female wayfarers were a rare commodity and generally used the masculine title, but as she worked with her husband almost exclusively the feminine form avoided confusion. “We may, Doctor Redway,” she replied. “It all depends on the coach service’s schedule. They only run three times a week, however, so if one is not available, we’ll hire a private coach of our own. It’s a bit more expensive, but it is all part of the Wayfarer’s service you paid for in Taundon. Now if my husband would just stop chatting with the captain we can be on our way. We generally stay in an inn on the south side of Belis, about two miles from here.” The scientists groaned at the thought of walking that distance. Em decided they were spoiled by having spent so much of their time in their universities. They were not used to walking anymore. “It saves time getting out of the city in the morning and if the coach is running it stops just outside our inn.”

It turned out, however, that the coach had just left Belis that morning and the next one would not be for another two days, so Raff hired a coach and team of four on the Guild’s account and drove them out to the inn where they arrived just in time for a cup of wine before dinner.

Two of the scientists ordered the local beer instead and were disappointed. “I tried to warn you,” Raff chuckled at their expressions. “Cracian beer doesn’t hold a candle to the slosh from the Green Lands, but their wines are first rate. When traveling, one needs to adjust one’s appetite to the local specialties, don’t you know.”

“I will bow to your expertise in the future,” laughed Doctor Willmess. “Do we get a choice of dinner?”

“Sometimes,” Raff shrugged. “I recommend whatever is fresh. You don’t want whatever happens to be left over from the other day. If it’s left over, it probably wasn’t all that good in the first place.”

“But what if today’s meal is next week’s leftovers?” another of the scientists asked.

“All life is a gamble, Doctor,” Em told him. “If you are not feeling adventurous, you can always have the sausage. That’s almost always available and doesn’t change much from batch to batch. Just don’t ask what’s in it.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“You really don’t want to know,” Em laughed.

The featured meal turned out to be a thick stew of fish and mussels served in a bowl with slices of heavy white bread. After dinner the scientists stayed up only another hour before retiring after their long day. With their charges safely in their rooms, Raff and Em finally relaxed and decided to get some sleep as well.

Raff woke up to the sound of a deep horn. Poking his head out the window he noted that it was foggy and local visibility could be measured in yards. “Close the window, dear,” Em requested, sleepily. “You’re letting the wet in.”

“Sorry,” Raff replied and closed the shutters again. “May as well get up though. It looks like rain today, unless you plan to skip breakfast.”

“I doubt my breakfast will have much effect on the weather,” Em grunted back at him, “but I take your

meaning. Give me a few more minutes, will you. I promise to be downstairs before your second cup of tea.”

“Coffee’s more popular in Crace,” Raff replied.

“I know, dear,” she replied sleepily. “I was born here.” Raff was about to reply to that, but was cut short when she started snoring softly.

Only one of the scientists, Doctor Redway, was awake when Raff entered the inn’s common room. “Good morning, Master Cawlens,” he greeted the wayfarer, looking up from his bowl of porridge.

“And to you, sir,” Raff replied. “Looks like wet weather ahead.”

“I believe it will clear by this afternoon,” Redway disagreed.

“How do you know?” Raff asked.

“I’ve been studying the weather for years,” Redway explained. “The conditions last evening would indicate fair weather nearly eighty-one percent of the time at this time of year.”

“A shame no one takes bets on the weather, sir,” Raff commented. “You could make a fortune, What about the other twenty-nine percent of the time?”

“Rain,” Doctor Redway shrugged. “It might sprinkle a bit this morning, but not much, if I am correct, of course. If people did bet on the weather, however, I imagine there would be many more keeping the same records I have.”

“No bad thing, I would think,” Raff told him. “I imagine you might be able to be correct over ninety percent of the time with more observations to go by, especially from different parts of the world.”

“Does it rain in the Wild?” Redway asked suddenly.

“Of course it does,” Raff responded. “Why would you think it doesn’t?”

“It just occurred to me I’ve never actually seen it rain while traveling,” Redway replied.

“You’ve just been lucky,” Raff laughed. “but if your luck holds out for the rest of the trip I won’t complain.”

Doctor Redway ate another spoonful of porridge while Raff called for a cup of coffee. “I’ve been meaning to ask,” Redway continued, “but why are two master wayfarers guiding five gentlemen to Carais? I would have thought it was a chore any competent journeyman might accomplish.”

“Just lucky again,” Raff replied with a chuckle. He accepted his coffee from the serving maid and ordered some toast.

“Is that all you’re eating?” Doctor Redway asked.

“I’m not usually very hungry in the morning,” Raff shrugged. Then he went on to answer the doctor’s question. “Em and I are going to the same conference. We’ll be presenting a paper on Wayfarer

Mechanics with Doctor Rojer Harkermor from Dix. So when we heard there was a party of scientists from the Green Lands headed that way as well, we volunteered for the job. It will be one way for us, but don't worry, you'll have a competent journeyman to guide you home again," he finished with a chuckle.

"I didn't realize you were a scientist as well as a wayfarer," Redway replied, showing his surprise. "Where do you find the time?"

"Oh, the usual places," Raff told him. "I've always been interested in more than just going from place to place, and some years ago I suffered a bad injury that caused me to lose control of my wayfaring abilities. I kept a journal of my progress as I recovered and later had the opportunity to discuss it with Roj Harkermor. We corresponded as often as our schedules would allow and one thing led to another. He developed some experiments designed to quantify what wayfarers do, and Em and I have conducted them for him. Actually it's been a lot of fun. I don't even mind the writing. It gives me something to do some evenings especially when Em and I are stuck in some out of the way spot where the local notion of entertainment is watching the grass grow. You'd be surprised how popular watching grass grow is in some places."

"I probably would at that," Redway agreed.

"So what's your specialty, Doctor?" Raff asked.

"Astronomy mostly," Redway replied. "I've made a study of the orbits of the certain periodic comets and how they are affected by the sun and planets."

"And how are they affected?" Raff asked, pausing to take a second sip of tea.

"It depends on how closely they pass by other large objects," Redway replied. "Orbits change when two objects approach each other. Of course, most of my observations have involved comets passing near the sun, so while I have been able to measure the effect of gravity on the comet, there has not been a measurable effect on the sun. Although calculations according to Sir Henrik Morton's equations demonstrate that the sun must be effected but so minutely we cannot detect the change. Similarly no large comets have been observed passing closely enough to planets to see any change in planetary orbits."

"But you have detected changes to the cometary orbits?" Raff pressed.

"Oh yes, of course. Once you know the mass of two objects that sort of thing is quite predictable," Redway agreed. "Of course we can only estimate those masses, but each observation gives us a better idea of that as well."

"That's fascinating," Raff told him sincerely. "You will be presenting your findings, of course?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure which day, however," he responded.

"I'll be there so long as it doesn't conflict with my own schedule," Raff promised. "It might seem like a stretch, but I think a lot of what you have learned may apply to my studies. You see, we believe mass has an effect on wayfarer abilities as well. It's hard to tell for certain just yet, since the experiment we've developed to test the hypothesis is so dangerous that I'm hesitant to try it. A study of mass interaction on the planetary scale may suggest something safer."

"Or on a still grander scale," Redway laughed. "I'll make a point of looking up your Doctor Harkermor. It sounds like we may have a lot in common and I'm certainly not above collaboration."

The others appeared by ones and twos over the next few minutes and Emblem kept her word, coming down the stairs just as Raff was about to start his second cup. They enjoyed a leisurely breakfast until Raff and Em decided it was time to push on to Carais. "The journey is going to take two days," Em informed the men, "but if we don't get started it will take even longer."

Three

"You handle the transition very smoothly, Master Cawllins," Doctor MacFaelen complimented Raff. "I've never traveled with a master wayfarer before. I could almost believe we're still within a town."

"Thank you, Doctor," Raff replied. "Actually the towns are so close to one another in this part of Crace, we're already within the sphere of influence of the next one."

"Really? I never noticed," MacFaelen admitted. "I have some small wayfaring ability, untrained of course, so I can generally see the edges of a town and the differences of the Wild."

"In this case, Doctor," Em replied, "I think you'll find that a master's field of effect is far greater than that of most journeymen you've traveled with. When towns are this close, we allow that aura to expand as far as we can comfortably to ease the transition between towns, so you just couldn't see where the Wild area was. Two or three towns from here, we'll encounter our first long gap and we'll need to control that effect tightly. You'll have no trouble seeing the Wild then."

"Why do you need to control that?" Redway asked.

"The creatures and people of the Wild can be harmed by exposure to stabilized areas and, to all extents and purposes, a wayfarer's aura is a mobile town. You don't really want to face a maddened gryphon or a unicorn and it is considered to be the worst possible insult to inflict such conditions on the Kenlenta."

"The fair folk?" Willmess asked.

"That is the term used within the Green Lands," Raff replied, "but among themselves, they prefer to be called the Kenlenta or simply the Ken. Nice people, really, once you get to know them."

"I've never noticed other wayfarers controlling their auras," MacFaelen commented.

"As you said," Raff nodded, "you have never traveled with masters before. Journeymen rarely have that sort of control. They also rarely need it for that matter, since their field of effect does not extend very far. They also cannot manipulate reality like this." He held his hand outward and caused a globe of light to form just above it.

"You can do that even within a town?" MacFaelen asked.

"All masters can to one extent or another," Em told him, "although it is far easier to do so in the Wild. And don't let my husband fool you, only he can do it with ease within a town."

"Isn't it unusual for two master wayfarers to marry?" Willmess asked.

"The Guild frowns on it," Em replied. "They like to have their masters as widely scattered as possible

and there is no proof that the ability is inheritable.”

“Then why...?”

“Why not?” Raff countered. “The Guild Council might not like it, but we didn’t consult them on the matter.”

“It was none of their darned business,” Em added firmly, bring the conversation to an abrupt close.

They continued on through the next few towns until they reached a wide area of the Wild. As they had described, Doctor MacFaalen was able to see the chaotic differences of the conditions of the Wild although none of the others had that ability and were incapable of detecting the differences between town lands and the Wild.

They spotted a small pack of blue tygers. The creatures had been frequently confused with the more solitary cats of the lands far to the east because of the similarity of their names. These creatures, however looked more like panthers with a sharp claw-like protrusion on their noses. Their fur was mostly blue-black, but it lightened to a bright blue on their bellies. It was a color that only existed in a few Wild creatures. They saw the tygers from a distance early that afternoon but, except to eat lunch, they only stopped when Raff and Em chose to parlay with a party of Kenlienta midmorning the second day after leaving Belis.

The Ken were thin, tall and silver-haired. Their skin was pale, almost white, and they were dressed in clothing that appeared to be made of very thin leather. One wore a simple wreath of ivy, that Raff and Em knew was being kept alive by what the Ken called magic. For all Em knew, it might have been magic since it was an ability few humans could master. Certainly she had never been able to. The living wreath marked this Kenlien as an elder among his people.

The Kenlienta equated age with wisdom and wisdom with their magical ability, so the actual age of a Ken elder was unimportant compared to his or her abilities. This particular elder, however, was indeed much older than the Kenlienta around him. His skin was wrinkled and his silver hair seemed to have lost some of its luster.

When Raff spotted the party of eight, they were walking parallel to the wayfarer path the humans were following, although several hundred yards to the north. Raff held his arm up and made a gesture that among the Ken was a request to parlay. The elder saw it and halted his party’s progress, but made no move to come closer to the wayfarers.

“Stay with the others,” Raff told Em. She nodded agreement. One of them would have to stay in the coach or the scientists might become disoriented in the Wild. It was possible they could even become sick, although they could normally take days of direct exposure.

Raff climbed down from the driver’s bench and walked almost casually toward the waiting Kenlienta. He stopped just a few yards from the elder who noted, “You control your baneful aura well, Wayfarer.” The Kenlientan language was almost musical with rising and falling tones that modified the meanings of their words. It was a difficult language for humans to learn because all the tones were conditional, dependant on the notes and inflections used before and after them. Raff, however, had learned it in his teens.

“Thank you, Elder,” Raff replied formally. “It is a control that came to me at great expense, but a price I would pay again to be here today.” The elder nodded and made a gesture that invited Raff to introduce

himself. That was not a common courtesy when Ken and wayfarers met. A Ken might agree to talk, but he rarely was interested in who the wayfarer might be and was often quite rude. Wayfarers, however, had learned not to be provoked by the rudeness. The Ken had few reasons to love humans. "I am called Raff Cawlens among my kind. Within the Ken nation I am..."

"Raufanax," the elder finished for him. The name, based loosely on Raff's given name, in Kenlientan meant "bringer of health." Some years earlier the Ken had suffered a virulent plague that threatened not only the lives of the Ken, but often impaired their elders' powers. Raff had rushed civilized medicines into the affected areas, saving countless lives and the Ken way of life. "You honor me with your presence. My name is Daltennis." It was even less usual for a Ken to offer his name to a human and Raff understood the respect he was being granted. "What may I do for the hero of the nation?"

"It's been a few months since I last spoke to any Kenlien, Elder Daltennis," Raff replied. "I was hoping to ascertain that all was well with your people."

"I would that were so, Raufanax," the elder replied sadly, "but there are great changes coming to the Ken. Your proposal of regular trade between our peoples is of interest to many, however, but how, may I ask, would that work?"

"Well, so far," Raff began, "trade has been somewhat haphazard. If we meet, we sometimes stop to trade. The problem, however, is that among my people only a master wayfarer is capable of approaching a Kenlien without causing harm, so such meetings have been necessarily brief and infrequent. It seems to me, though, that humans and Ken have much to offer one another and that if we could work out a system of signals, perhaps, we might be able to have more frequent contact."

"An interesting notion, Raufanax," Daltennis replied, "but there are as few Kenlienta who speak any of your languages as there are humans who speak ours. How would you overcome that barrier?"

"Eventually we could start learning each other's tongues as children," Raff replied, "but for now the signals need not be very complex. We could agree to meet at certain places outside the towns so when one of us has something to trade we could go to such a place and put our goods down then back away as the other inspects them. Then the other would lay down his goods as an offer. Signals could be used for accepting or rejecting offers. It wouldn't take much to add in modifiers for conditions such as 'I like this, but want more,' and so forth. It would be clumsy, but would give both peoples an impetus to learn more about each other. I believe we would both benefit."

"Perhaps we might," Daltennis allowed, "although at the moment there is some unrest within the Ken Nation. Our younger members chafe at the traditional rule by the elders. This is hardly new, but we live in a time of change and such times are always turbulent."

"Among the humans of Corisa," Raff remarked, "their literature often mentions a dreadful curse, 'May you live in interesting times.'"

Daltennis chuckled. It was the first sign of emotion he had given; elders rarely did, at least when in public. "Yes, I fear we live in very interesting times, Raufanax. There will be a meeting of the national Council of Elders in Yekrut soon to discuss this and other problems."

"I know the city of Yekrut," Raff noted. "It is not more than a thousand miles from here. Is there any chance I might be allowed to attend and speak before your meeting?"

"Were it my decision, Raufanax, you would be most welcome among us, yes. However while it is fair to

say that most elders hold you in high regard and would agree with me, there are some factions in our society who would resent your presence among us. They harbor no warm feelings for you or any of your people.”

“They are not entirely unjustified,” Raff replied.

Daltennis made a gesture of polite disagreement, “Perhaps, but I fear their behavior toward you might embarrass the Ken.”

“I understand,” Raff nodded. Hospitality was a matter of the highest honor to the Kenlienta. The guest of one Kenlien was a guest of all. Daltennis was afraid that some of his colleagues, in their distaste, might violate that basic rule of society. Not only would Raff be insulted, but the entire Ken nation would be disgraced. There were important matters, Raff realized, that Daltennis was not telling him about, but it would be impolite to pry. They talked about less consequential matters for another half hour before each party went on their way.

Four

Carais was a large city and the capital of the kingdom of Crace. The outer boundaries of the city pulsed detectably with the rise and drop of the city population. That was truly the mark of a city. A smaller town would not change population so greatly on a daily basis, but as a center of trade, many people would enter to do business during the day and then leave when the business was concluded. Consequently, there was no set border. Another difference a city exhibited over a town was that it rarely moved relative to other geographic features, although its close neighbors were known to orbit the city slowly, so that over the course of a year or two a complete circuit would be made.

That was one of the reasons why the Wayfarer’s Guild was so essential to civilized life. The associated towns to Carais were close enough that almost anyone could journey from one to Carais proper without formal guidance, but the Guild members were necessary to keep track of the direction one would have to go.

It was not unusual for towns to move around relative to one another. The Wild was malleable and subject to change and the size and nature of wild areas was constantly in flux, so it was not unknown for towns to gradually come closer to one another or drift apart. There were even cases every so often of a town drifting so far from its neighbors that it became completely isolated and new paths had to be forged by Wayfarer masters. At least once a decade a town became so lost that Wayfarers could not find it for months or even years until it managed to drift closer to another town, often in another country. However, such instances were only common among towns that were already far from the center of a nation. For the most part the mark of a nation was its ability to naturally hold its component towns together. And the very large cities, like Carais and Taundon tended to keep smaller towns in close proximity to them.

Carais was so large, in fact, that Raff and Emblem’s party entered its field of influence two hours before they saw the city. They rolled past farmsteads most of the way to a large winding river, then crossed over one of many bridges that connected the two halves of the city.

“The University is on the far side of the business district,” Raff told his charges, “but we should be there in time for your pre-dinner drinks.”

“You mean tea?” Redway asked.

“If you want,” Raff shrugged, “but in Crace, they tend to drink wine at this time of day.”

“I suppose I can adjust,” Redway admitted with a grin.

The streets of Carais were much wider than any in the Green Lands or even Belis, which a century earlier had been a part of the Green Lands until it started drifting across the narrow body of water that separated the Green Lands from Crace. Even with wider streets, the traffic slowed the travelers’ progress.

“Must be a market day,” Em decided when they spotted a large area ahead blocked by milling pedestrians. “We should probably go around.”

It turned out, however, that there was no easy way around the crowd. There were thousands of people quietly filling the streets for blocks in all directions. While they weren’t rowdy or obviously blocking traffic by intention, none of them seemed inclined to move out of the way either.

“It doesn’t look like a market day crowd,” Raff replied. “Too quiet and nobody seems to be doing much except standing around. Are we near anyplace of note?”

“The Count’s in-town home, I believe,” Emblem replied as they inched through the crowd. “I hope he’s not ill.”

“I’ll find out,” Raff told her. He leaned over toward a group of men they were passing and asked, “Pardon me, sirs, but what’s going on?”

“The Comptessa is giving birth, sir,” one of the men replied with quiet dignity. “If they raise a blue flag it’s a boy, a red flag means a girl. If the child is a boy we will have a new heir.”

“Then I know to whose health I’ll be drinking tonight,” Raff replied. “Thank you, sir!”

“You seem particularly happy there may be an heir to Carais,” Em noted.

“It’s getting people to step out of our way, isn’t it?” Raff countered. “Oh look, two flags are being hoisted. Sure hope that means two children.”

“Twins!” Em enthused as a joyous shout filled the area. “I must remember to send a gift.”

“You know the Comptessa?” Raff asked.

“Lita and I went to the same school, dear,” Emblem replied, reminding Raff his wife had noble blood.

“Can we afford that?” Raff asked.

“A pair of silver spoons?” Em shot back. “I should hope so.”

“That’s usually the traditional gift from one’s godparents,” Raff pointed out.

“Only in the Green Lands, dear,” Em corrected him. “Even there it is not a custom of the nobility. Here it will be a novelty. Happily, Carais is a perfect place to shop for silverware. I may even have the pair of spoons custom-made.” The excited crowd pressed closer to the Count’s home, leaving a path open for

Raff to guide the coach through.

“And engraved,” Raff added. “You ought to have their names engraved on the spoons.”

“Really?” Em asked. “That’s a nice idea. Maybe I’ll pay a social call tomorrow morning. That way I’ll know what names to have engraved.”

“Hopefully we won’t be presenting our paper then,” Raff commented.

“We’re only getting an hour-long session, dear,” Emblem pointed out. “I’ll have time even if that’s the case. Besides the conference does not start until day after tomorrow.”

Church bells were ringing all over the city by the time they reached the university. “Sounds like it’s going to be a wild night,” Raff commented as he brought the coach to a halt at the main gate to the grounds of the University.

“Can’t think of a better excuse,” Willmess replied. “Are you staying here too?”

“No,” Raff shook his head. “We have accommodations at the Guild headquarters. It’s a bit over a mile away, but the rooms are bigger and more comfortable.”

“And the Guild is the closest thing we have to family,” Em added, although none of the academics realized just how literal she was being. “We’ll see you all soon, I’m sure.”

“Actually we may be here later this evening,” Raff told them. “Possibly dinner too, but I’m not sure about that yet. We still have to report to the local Wayfarers’ Guild master. That’s normal procedure after every trip.”

They finished bidding farewell to the party before getting back on to the driver’s seat and continuing on. “Do you really want to go there this evening, Raff?” Em asked. “It’s been a while since we had a night to ourselves.”

“Well, I had wanted to make sure Roj arrived safely,” Raff replied, “but it can wait until morning, dear. As you reminded me, the actual conference doesn’t start until the day after tomorrow. How about we find a nice place to eat near headquarters and then maybe we can just stroll along the river. It looks like it’s going to be a nice night.”

“I’d like that,” Em told him, sitting a little closer and leaning her head on his shoulder.

The Carais Wayfarers’ Guild was housed in a building somewhat smaller than the one in Denmouth, but property was at a premium in the capital city of Crace, and there were many smaller offices in other parts of town and in the surrounding towns as well, whereas the Denmouth branch served the entire region from that single building.

However, what the Carais headquarters lacked in size, it more than made up for in its appointments. The Denmouth office was clean, and odor free, but Spartan in appearance while the walls of the Carais office were covered in murals and thousands of yards of hand-carved wood. The floors were tiled in marble and the corridors were wide and punctuated with statuary.

“We hired a coach in Belis,” Raff told the clerk who accepted their journey report. “It will need to be returned although it can wait until after the conference. The men we guided here will need conveyance

home after all.”

“It will simplify accounts if we treat it as a round-trip vehicle,” the clerk admitted.

“I’ve often wondered why the Guild doesn’t maintain its own carriages, carts and horses,” Em remarked.

“The Council has determined that this way is more economical,” the clerk replied automatically.

“It isn’t really,” Raff replied, “nor was that why we decided to do things this way. When I was on the Council we considered the matter and decided it was in the Guild’s best interest to use the services of the local communities whenever possible. It fosters good relations with our neighbors. We may be considered a necessary service in these parts, but there are other places where we are barely tolerated for those same services.”

“Civilization could not exist without the Guild,” the clerk protested.

“Strange,” Raff chuckled, “but civilization existed for a few thousand years before we came along. The Guild turned the art of wayfaring into a science, and took over a job formerly reserved for priests and witch doctors. But even without the Guild there would still be wayfarers. It is what we do best. I imagine one day the Guild will be replaced with some other institution, but there will still be wayfarers.”

“I suppose, Master Cawlens,” the clerk responded, “but who will organize us?”

“Why do we need a formal organization?” Raff countered. “Perhaps we’ll all be freelancers or priests again. I couldn’t say. It’s not going to happen tomorrow, but it will happen. History shows us that the Wild is the natural state of the world and while our towns may be stable, our society is not.”

“All things change in time,” Em added. “Right now I’d prefer not to dwell on such weighty issues.”

“Sorry,” Raff apologized immediately. “Why don’t we freshen up before dinner?”

“Now there’s an idea worth acting on,” Em laughed.

Five

“I’m thinking of buying a place on the East Bank,” Doctor Rojer Harkermor told Raff the next morning over coffee. “There’s a lot of new construction there and I’ve been coming into Carais more and more frequently the last two years, I might as well have a regular apartment to stay in.”

“Are you here long enough to get your money’s worth, Roj?” Raff asked.

“I’m usually here at least two weeks at a time,” Rojer replied, “and to tell the truth I’d probably let it stretch into a month each trip. Also the University has been offering me the chair in physics. I’m not sure I want to be pinned down like that, but I could probably be persuaded to teach some sessions.”

“I thought you left the University at Alons because you were getting too busy to teach,” Raff pointed out.

“Well, I resigned my chair, yes,” Rojer nodded, “but I still teach during the winter session.”

“Sounds like you’re just getting ready to trade one university job for another,” Raff laughed. “Last year you were considering traveling to Teltoa or East Salatia to take measurements in the Wild there.”

“I’d still like to do that, but maybe in another year or two,” Rojer replied, “especially if you and Emblem happen to be headed that way.”

“You never know,” Raff shrugged, “although our next journey may be to Catin. There’s been some problems down there over the last few months and the Guild has been considering a response.”

“What sort of problems?” Rojer asked.

“Darned if I know,” Raff shrugged. “The Council is being as closed-mouthed as ever. Nothing is said unless one needs to know and of course most of the Council either hate or fear me.”

“It’s hardly fair,” Rojer commiserated. “It’s not your fault the ship you were guiding ran into a sea monster.”

“Well, that’s the problem, don’t you know,” Raff replied. “It seems the council doesn’t believe in sea monsters.”

“I don’t see why not,” Rojer commented. “There are many monsters in the Wild on land. Why not at sea?”

“Well, they’ve seen rocs and gryphons and dragons,” Raff shrugged, “but sea serpents are something only superstitious sailors believe in. There certainly haven’t been a lot of them stopping in for tea lately.”

“Can’t say I remember that I recall the last time I had tea with a dragon, Raff,” Rojer replied.

“I believe they prefer cocoa,” Raff told him blandly. “Have you had any contact with the Kenlenta lately?”

“Not in over a year when I was with you, Raff. I’m not a wayfarer so any communications I get are usually very indirect. Why do you ask?”

“We ran into an elder on the Way from Belis. He tells me they’re holding a Council of Elders in Yekrut fairly soon, but didn’t tell me very much more. There’s a bit of trouble with the younger generation who want to make changes in their system of government.”

“Do they have a system of government?” Rojer asked.

“Oh yes,” Raff replied. “An elder is a sort of combination shaman and governor and they preside over the more local councils and act as a representative at national councils such as the one coming up. It’s not entirely unlike the democracy of ancient Yug.”

“It’s a republic,” Rojer noted.

“I suppose it is,” Raff agreed, “and to think there are scholars who claim such a government is inherently unstable. The Ken have been practicing it for over one thousand years.”

“Sounds like that might come to an end,” Rojer opined. “Still what goes on in the Ken Nation is their

own business. Nothing to do with us.”

“No?” Raff countered. “I’m not so sure of that. We always see the world as being divided into areas of stability and the Wild, but it’s still only one world when you get right down to it.” He took a sip of coffee, thought a moment and then asked, “How much of the world is stable?”

“How much?” Rojer echoed. “A bit over twenty percent of the land is stable.”

“Inhabited by humans,” Raff replied.

“Well, yes, of course,” Rojer nodded. “Remove all the humans from a town and the stability will collapse.”

“What about domestic animals? Don’t they contribute to the area of stability?” Raff pressed.

“They do, but not as much as people do, Raff. You know that.”

“I do,” Raff agreed.

“I’m sure no one has ever tried to round up enough domesticated animals to create a stability,” Rojer continued.

“Actually that’s not true,” Raff retorted. “Shepherds and cattle herdsman do it all the time. Many of them are probably low-level wayfarers, but a flock or herd of domestic animals can be grazed in areas that are normally Wild. Civilized people don’t do that for the most part, but some of the indigenous tribes in colonies like Teltoa and elsewhere still do.”

“Do you think those animals make a significant contribution to the amount of stabilized land?” Rojer asked.

“They might, but it wasn’t where I was going with all this,” Raff admitted. “So humans currently inhabit approximately one fifth of the known land mass of the world.”

“That’s a rough estimate,” Rojer warned him. “It could be a bit more or less. I could be off by five percent at least.”

“Five percent is a significant difference,” Raff noted, “but short of tracking down someone who’s actually done a census of the stabilized lands, let’s assume you’re correct.”

“I wonder if anyone has,” Rojer mused. “When you come right down to it, it is something I should know. I’ll ask around this week. If no one else has done it, maybe I will take that chair from the University and assign some students to the project.”

“Then you write the paper and take the credit?” Raff chuckled.

“I’ll share the credit if one of the students does more than merely assemble data for me. The credit belongs to the one who actually studies that data and draws conclusions from them,” Rojer replied.

“Indeed, but we’re getting off on a tangent again,” Raff told him. “Now I believe the current estimate is that some seventy percent of the world is water; oceans, seas, lakes, what have you.”

“I believe I’ve read that, yes.”

“So actually, out of the entire world, the stabilized lands are roughly, what? Six percent of the surface?” Raff asked.

“A little more, I think,” Rojer agreed, “but that’s close enough for argument. What’s your point? Six percent doesn’t sound like much, does it?”

“How much land was stabilized, oh say, five hundred years ago?” Raff asked pointedly.

“That would be in the middle of the Great Plague, so probably about the same as it is today. Maybe a bit less.”

“Okay, bad example,” Raff laughed. “How about one thousand years ago?”

“Oh, much less, I would think,” Rojer considered. “Has anyone done a study of this?”

“I don’t know,” Raff answered. “One could go over the various census rolls where they still exist and make estimates where they don’t. However, what I’m getting at is that the areas of stability are growing, Great Plague notwithstanding. I’m fairly certain the Kenlentan population is growing too, but while our population growth causes greater areas of stability, the Ken population does not have any effect on the size of the Wild. They pretty much have to make do in what is left.”

“Four fifths of the available land mass should be enough for them, don’t you think?” Rojer asked.

“Is it really that much?” Raff countered. “You know they have trouble crossing wayfarer paths and just because the land is Wild, it doesn’t mean it’s good for either farming or hunting. We get most of the really good land. Maybe our growth is starting to affect their own economy.”

“Do the Ken have an economy?” Rojer asked. “I thought their system was mostly based on charity and barter.”

“All people have an economy,” Raff replied. “Theirs may be based on barter and charitable redistribution of wealth, but you still need something to barter or give away. They also understand our money. They don’t have very much use for it, but they do understand it.” Raff paused to laugh. “They think we’re crazy to place so much value in a few small disks of metal.”

“I’m with the Ken on that,” Rojer chuckled. “We are crazy. But why don’t we go over to the conference hall and ask around. Someone there may actually have answers to our questions.”

They finished their morning coffee, then made their way to the University. While “The Shape of the World” conference was not due to start until the next morning, the conference hall was already filled with attendees, mostly meeting and catching up on personal news. As Raff expected, the main topic of conversation was the birth of the Compté’s children. However, before he and Rojer could do more than nod hello to some of their colleagues, an argument broke out on the far side of the hall.

“How dare you steal my research!” one scientist was demanding of another.

“I wouldn’t condescend to read anything you wrote,” the other replied haughtily. “You stole it from me!”

The conversations degraded rapidly from there and by the time Raff and Rojer could get there, the two

men were being held forcibly from attacking one another. "Gentlemen?" Raff asked. "This is most unseemly. What is going on here?"

In reply, both men started shouting at once. Raff couldn't make out much but the words "stole" and "life's work" from either of the two men. "Yes, yes. I heard that much from the other side of the hall," he replied when he could get a word in. "Now if you can keep your accusations down to a minimum, perhaps we can discuss this like gentlemen, because, gentlemen, at the moment your behavior would shame a fishwife."

"Master Cawlens," one of the men addressed him.

"Doctor Merange," Raff replied calmly, "am I to understand that you and Doctor Starmetz here are actually in agreement on something? I believe that could be one of the omens foretold to presage the end of the world!"

Several men in the area chuckled at that. Merange and Starmetz had been bitter opponents over the years on a number of subjects. It had been said that if one predicted the Sun would rise in morning, the other would give learned and heated debate over why it would not.

Doctor Merange looked back and forth between Raff and Doctor Starmetz several times before composing a reply, "It appears we both intend to present papers on the same subject," he finally said carefully and quietly.

"That's hardly unprecedented, Doctor," Raff replied reasonably, "especially when it involves two men with similar interests."

"We've never agreed on anything in our lives," Doctor Starmetz put in angrily. "He obviously came across my notes at the session in Menino two years ago."

"I certainly did not!" Merange shot back immediately.

"Whoa, gentlemen!" Raff halted them. "Why should Doctor Merange have come across your notes, Doctor Starmetz? How could he for that matter?"

"The notebook they were in was stolen there," Starmetz accused. "At the time I merely thought it had been mislaid, but now..."

"Sheer and utter nonsense!" Merange stormed. "You got the idea from that Holran student who graduated a year ago last spring. He must have seen what I was working on while in my office."

"I don't even know who you're talking about," Starmetz scoffed.

"Liar!" Merange shouted.

"Thief!" Starmetz returned.

"Ep ep ep ep ep ep ep ep!" Raff interrupted them both with a stream of rapid syllables. The technique, he had learned, worked equally well on academics and small children. Whoever made the last noise got to continue. "Gentlemen, I believe I have the gist of your differences in this case." Master wayfarers were frequently called upon to adjudicate civil cases between litigants and Raff instantly slipped into that position even without the two scholars requesting his service. "Each of you has a paper

to present and the two papers come essentially to the same conclusions.”

“And he’s intentionally scheduled himself to present his first!” Starmetz complained.

“As an organizer of the event that is my prerogative,” Merange maintained, “but I did not know the subject of his paper until now.” That set off another loud argument and this time Raff let them scream themselves out for a few minutes. “Are you two ready to set a good example for the students or should we go find a room and let the two of you fight it out?”

The suggestion was ridiculous and both men knew it. Doctor Merange was short and very skinny. He looked as if a stiff breeze might sweep him into the river. Doctor Starmetz was tall and well-built. In comparison he looked as though his greatest problem in such a fight was reaching low enough to be able to hit his opponent. Both men looked aghast at the notion of actually fighting, however.

“Master Cawdens,” Doctor Merange spoke at last. “You’re a wayfarer...”

“Why so I am!” Raff shot back with a tight smile.

“Would you be so kind as to act as an arbitrator and engineer a compromise?” Merange asked.

“How do you feel about that, Doctor Starmetz?” Raff asked.

“I will abide by whatever decision you come to, sir,” Starmetz told him after a short pause. “What is your fee?”

“No fee this time,” Raff replied. “I am doing this as much for my own peace as for yours and I believe we’ll all benefit from a peaceful conference.”

“That is very generous of you, sir,” Merange murmured.

“I’m a generous sort of person, Doctor,” Raff replied. “I will need copies of both of the papers at issue. I will read them this afternoon and give you my decision tonight during the opening reception.”

Six

“These papers aren’t really all that similar,” Emblem opined later as she and Raff enjoyed tea in the Guild hall.

“Their subject matter is the same,” Raff pointed out, “and they do share a significant number of conclusions.”

“Not all of them,” Em replied, “and the thrust of each paper is different. Complementary, but different. I really don’t believe this is a case of plagiarism.”

“Neither do I,” Raff agreed. “They never actually disagree with each other, but there are just enough differences that I think they came by their opinions honestly. Furthermore there is nothing in either’s history to suggest they have ever taken much note of each other’s work save to argue against it. All in all, it’s a clear-cut case.”

“Well, this is certainly one of the easiest cases either of us has had to decide,” Em declared, “but what are you going to tell Doctors Merange and Starmetz?”

“It is my considered opinion that you two should put your differences aside and present your papers together,” Raff told them a few hours later. “You two may not be old friends. Heck, you’re not even particularly happy to make each other’s acquaintance, but these two papers go together well. Each one examines details the other overlooks and helps to prove each other’s assertions. I don’t know that I can say the same for the two of you, but these two papers make a great team. Here.” He handed Starmetz’s paper to Merange and Merange’s to Starmetz. “Try reading each other’s and see what I mean.”

“You know,” Doctor Starmetz admitted a while later, gesturing at Merange’s article, “this isn’t bad. I never even thought about this.”

“Hmm? Really?” Doctor Merange asked leaning over to see what Starmetz was pointing at. “Oh that. It followed logically from the preceding paragraph. I never thought much about it, though. You like it?”

“Well, I think we’ll want to make sure the math really does apply. You admit this is derivative and you present it without proofs.” Starmetz replied, quickly adding, “not that you had to. It was only tangential to the point you were trying to make, but the whole point ties into my central argument. I’ll bet my equations will relate. Let’s get together later and see if we can put a coherent presentation together.”

“I think we should put it off a few days,” Merange considered, still reading Starmetz’s paper. “It will give us a chance to write a collaborative piece. This is going to be revolutionary. Where did Master Cawlens go?”

Starmetz looked up and spotted the wayfarer on the far side of the hall. “He’s dancing with his wife.”

“Lucky man,” Merange commented. “I couldn’t get my wife to these things if I paid her.

Across the floor Raff and Em also had academic concerns on their minds. “Rojer says he needs to talk to us about our presentation tomorrow afternoon,” Em told Raff. “Did you really promise to provide visual demonstrations?”

“Why not?” Raff asked as they started dancing again. “I’m not planning on summoning a dragon and creating a pool of Wild energy in the middle of the city. Just a few harmless illusions to illustrate the speech.”

“Those harmless illusions bother me more than if you did summon a dragon, Raff.” Em told him.

“Why?”

“It seems to me if you make them impressive, as I know you will, others will just try to keep doing you one better in the future. Eventually some fool will hire a wayfarer to really summon a dragon or create a pool of chaos or worse.”

“What master would ever do that?” Raff laughed.

“Can’t you think of a few greedy idiots on the Council?” Em pressed.

“A point,” Raff admitted, “Of course most of them would kill themselves in the attempt and that would probably benefit mankind in the long run, but I suppose no one would thank the guild for the deaths of

hundreds of innocent victims. However, I wasn't really planning anything particularly spectacular. Just a few pictures as though looking out a window."

"That should be safe enough," Em admitted.

"How did your visit with the compessa go this morning?" Raff asked.

"Lita's fine and her children are as healthy as the announcements make them out to be," Em reported. Then she suddenly stopped dancing and kissed Raff. She was not generally given to public displays of affection and the action surprised him.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"For getting me out of that life, dear," Em replied calmly. "Poor Lita, all she seems to know is parties and shopping these days. I must have been like that once."

"Not that I recall," Raff remarked.

"You wouldn't," she replied with a half-hearted laugh. "I was scared out of my wits when you found me. Come to think about it, I must have made a horrid first impression."

"Impressing a man was hardly on your mind at the time," Raff reminded her.

"I suppose not," Em replied. Raff and Em rarely discussed the circumstances in which they met. It was a part of Emblem's life she wanted firmly behind her. She was a wayfarer now and that was a far happier life than she had as the daughter of the Baron of Orseilles. The music ended and they left the dance floor to join Rojer at one of the small tables and spent the rest of the evening discussing their presentation.

Seven

"What's going on now?" Em asked as they arrived back at the conference for the plenary session that marked the official opening of "The Shape of the World" conference. There were several police carriages and wagons near the University gates and anyone attempting to enter or leave the campus was being held up for questioning.

The police were especially interested when Raff identified himself. "The lieutenant wants to talk to you especially, sir," a constable informed him and directed Raff and Em to the conference hall where the police lieutenant was directing his men.

"You're Cawlens?" he asked. "Good. I've been waiting for you. Is it true you arbitrated an agreement between Doctors Merange and Starmetz?"

"Starmetz," Raff corrected him, "but yes, that's correct. It was a fairly simple disagreement. What of it?"

"Doctor Merange was found dead two hours ago in an alley not too far from here," the lieutenant replied. "Considering how he and this Doctor Starmetz were fighting yesterday, we believe Starmetz is the murderer."

"It was hardly that sort of argument," Raff pointed out. "In fact they were getting along quite well when I

left them last night.”

“As an adjudicating party I’m going to have to ask you to come to the station and fill out a full report on the incident,” the lieutenant commanded rather than requested.

“Of course,” Raff agreed, “I’ll be happy to. If you like I can lend you my abilities as a master wayfarer as well.”

“That will not be necessary,” the lieutenant told him coldly. “The Carais Department of Police does not need any help in solving crimes.”

Raff kept his comments to himself, but agreed to be at the police station an hour later. When the lieutenant learned that Em had been consulted on the scientific papers, he insisted she be there as well.

“The conference is on hold for a few days anyway while this mess is sorting itself out,” Rojer told Raff. “Doctor Merange’s assistants need to come to grips with their new responsibilities and, well, we should hold our respect for Doctor Merange himself.”

“I can’t believe Doctor Starmetz killed Doctor Merange,” Em told Raff as they proceeded to the station. “They had actually put their differences aside last night and were behaving like old friends.”

“I suppose they had an argument after we left the hall,” Raff shrugged. “We’ll see about talking to Starmetz after we finish our report.”

“That policeman didn’t seem particularly interested in our help,” Em replied.

“He was about as hostile as any I’ve encountered,” Raff admitted, “but I wasn’t suggesting working for the police. Doctor Starmetz is going to need representation.”

“Surely a local lawyer would be more useful,” Em opined.

“In court, yes,” Raff agreed, “and I am more than willing to technically work for that lawyer, but the Guild has lawyers and we can find one for Starmetz. Remember he’s not a native and in Carais the court system assumes defendants are guilty until proven otherwise.”

“It’s the system I grew up with,” Emblem reminded him, “and I think it’s barbaric, though I didn’t until I got to see how such things were handled in other parts of the world.”

They entered the police station to see two constables standing over Doctor Starmetz while he sat, bound in chains, giving a statement to a bored looking investigator. As they entered the room, Starmetz looked up and called, “Master Cawlens! Tell them I didn’t do it! Please.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” Raff assured him as best he could. “I’ll see that the Guild takes a direct hand in the case. Have you charged my client yet?” he asked the investigator.

“Your client?” the man asked beligerantly.

“Yes, you heard him. He requested my assistance and I agreed, sir. The Wayfarers’ Guild is taking a very close interest in this murder case,” Raff replied confidently. Beside him, Em wondered if that would really be true once they got back to the Guild’s hall, but she held her tongue. “It involves two renowned scientists studying matters essential to our operations. Naturally, we are interested. Now, have you

charged him yet?”

“Not formally, no,” the policeman replied finally, “but we do intend to hold him until our investigation is complete. Then we will charge him and send him to trial.”

“Typical Cracian justice,” Emblem muttered derisively.

“And who are you, madame?” the investigator demanded.

“I am Lady Emblem L’oranne Cawlens, sir,” she told him haughtily. She didn’t care to add the rest, but she knew it would carry more weight than her name alone, “Master wayfarer and the daughter of Baron Charle L’oranne of Orseilles. Are we having a problem, sir?”

“No, m’lady,” the man replied hastily. The nobility of Crace still held sway in matters of justice there. As the daughter of a baron, Em could not simply order Starmetz’s release, and as the disowned daughter of that baron she could do even less, but she was confident that this investigator would not know her status regarding her father.

“Good,” she replied smoothly, “then when we are done giving our statements, my husband and I will be pleased to interview our client.”

“Well played, my lady,” Raff whispered to Em as they waited their turn to give a statement.

“I need a bath after that,” Em shot back. She shivered unconsciously.

“I’ll heat the water personally if you wish,” he promised.

“I’ll do it myself,” she told him. “Last time I let you draw a bath the water was still boiling half an hour later.”

“You said you wanted it hot,” Raff protested.

“I wasn’t planning to cook myself,” she replied with a quick wink to let him know the incident had long been forgiven. Actually it had occurred a year before their actual marriage while Raff was recuperating in Semlari after his encounter with the sea serpent. At the time his ability was still not quite under his control and the water in the tub would have remained at boiling temperature until the contents had entirely evaporated. Fortunately what one wayfarer can do, another sufficiently trained wayfarer can undo, and Em was able to cool the bath adequately within minutes even though she was only a journeyman at the time.

It took another hour before Raff was done giving his statement and he was allowed to talk with Doctor Starmetz. “You have just a few minutes before he’s transferred to the city gaol,” a constable informed Raff.

“Hopefully the accommodations will be a bit less cramped there,” Raff replied more to Starmetz than the policeman. The scientist had been installed in a small cell in the basement until his transfer.

“I shall settle for one in which there are puddles of something I can readily identify,” Starmetz replied dryly. “Something dry to sit down on would be in order as well.”

“They tell me Doctor Merange was killed sometime between midnight and dawn,” Raff began.

“We didn’t leave the hall until almost three in the morning,” Starmetz replied. “I remember hearing the hour toll just after parting company.”

“Okay, between three and dawn then. That cuts the possible time of death nearly in half. Where were you during that period? Back in your room?” Raff asked.

“Uh, no,” Starmetz replied embarrassedly. “I was out.”

“Out?” Raff asked. “Where?”

“I went for a walk,” Starmetz replied. “I walked for most of the night.”

“Did anyone see you?” Raff asked.

“No one I’m aware of,” Starmetz replied. “I walked for miles all over the city. It’s not unusual really. I often walk at night. It helps me sort out my thoughts. Many of my colleagues at the University in Manrich do the same. We say we’re walking off our thoughts.”

“I see,” Raff replied. “That is going to make this more difficult. You’re certain no one saw you walking?”

“I passed a few people on the streets, but nobody I knew,” Starmetz replied.

“Okay,” Raff shook his head, indicating it was anything but okay. “I’ll do what I can. You can expect to hear from one of the Guild’s legal counselors later today.”

“That really isn’t necessary,” Starmetz replied, “I can afford to hire one of my own.”

“Do you know who to call in Carais?” Raff asked pointedly. “If you want to pay your own bills, I’ve no problem with that, but part of the wayfarer service you bought along with passage from Holrany was continued guidance so long as you are in Carais. You may as well take it. Don’t worry, you’re still responsible for the legal costs, but at least you don’t have to worry about taking one of the men who hang out around the courts hoping to pick up desperate clients. They aren’t very good and on learning the situation likely wouldn’t take your case anyway and you really don’t want to represent yourself. You know what they say in Crace about men who do that.”

“They say it in Holrany too,” Starmetz admitted. “Very well, thank you, Master Cawlens. I’ll take whatever help you might offer.”

The investigator was just finishing up with Emblem when Raff returned to the ground floor. “Please stay in town until our investigation is completed, Master L’oranne Cawlens,” he instructed her just as he had said to Raff.

“I’ll inform the Guild that is your desire,” Emblem told him, knowing full well that if the Company of Wayfarers chose to send her off on a mission, the City of Carais had no power to stop them. However, the Guild would endeavor to meet such requests when possible. In this case, which involved a traveler from a foreign country, it was quite unlikely the Guild would send either Em or Raff out of the city.

“I think we’d better have a quick chat with Master Forrent next,” Raff told Em as they left the station. “He’ll need to know what we just got him into.”

“And he’ll no doubt take it better if we tell him before the police come to call,” Em added.

“You did the right thing, Raff,” Master Forrent told him an hour later.

“I doubt most of the Council would agree with you, Pauls,” Raff replied.

“Most of them aren’t here,” Pauls replied easily. “I am. Do you want me to assign any journeymen to this?”

“No,” Raff shook his head. “At least not yet. I wouldn’t know what to do with them just yet.”

“Well, if you change your mind just let me know,” Pauls told him. “I’ll put a team of lawyers on the case in the meantime. If nothing else, we’ll need to delay the trial until you can find evidence exonerating Doctor Starmetz.”

“You don’t think there’s a chance he’ll be released after the hearing?” Raff asked.

“In Crace?” Pauls laughed humorlessly. “Just be thankful the Church hasn’t decided this was in their bailiwick. The Inquisition never really came to an end, you know.”

“It hasn’t been indulging in public parades and scourging supposed sinners lately either,” Raff retorted.

“Just as well,” Pauls replied. “The stench must have been even more appalling than the sight. Thank God we live in a more civilized era.”

“Do we?” Raff asked seriously. “Oh, good. Have you ever been to Palenda?”

“Oh,” Pauls took his meaning, “the colonies don’t really count, I suppose.”

“Try telling that to the colonists in Maggo, why don’t you?” Emblem retorted.

“That should be safe enough,” Raff added, “They probably wouldn’t kill you.”

“Not more than once,” Pauls laughed. “Raff, I wish we could get you back on the Council. We need you there, you know.”

“You may be the only one on the Council who thinks that way,” Raff told him. “Besides, I’m not sure I want that anymore. I’m having too much fun as a freelancer. I get to travel the world, conduct scientific research, meet interesting people and see strange new lands. On the Council all I was able to do was fight with a group of idiots with brains that petrified decades ago.”

“Maybe I should join you,” Pauls replied.

“What?” Raff feigned outrage, “and cost me my best spy on the Council?” They both laughed. “I need to get back to the conference hall.”

“Are you planning to follow Starmetz’s trail from there?” Pauls asked.

“Eventually, yes,” Raff nodded, “but first I want to talk to Doctor Harkermor and some of the other scientists who knew Merange and Starmetz first. Yes, I know the trail is growing cold, but not so cold it won’t wait an extra hour or two.”

Eight

"I don't know the gentleman well," Rojer told Raff and Em that afternoon. "I'm not sure anyone here does. He has usually been fairly standoffish at these gatherings. I suppose he must have friends at home, of course, but among his peers he has generally been very hesitant to say much at all save in his presentations. I think he is worried about saying too much of whatever new course of research he is on at any given moment. It's a common enough attitude among academics, although it is a bit more pronounced in his case."

"He seemed very quick to accuse Doctor Merange of plagiarism the other day," Emblem commented.

"Hmm, yes," Rojer agreed. "As I said, that's not an uncommon attitude and I do believe I remember hearing that one of his students had stolen an idea of his some time back. That might make him more sensitive to the problem, wouldn't it?"

"It's a shame no one has done a scientific study of human behavior yet," Em remarked.

"There have been some attempts," Rojer corrected her, "but people are more complex than chemicals or the orbits of the planets; far less easy to predict, if we are really predictable at all."

"I'm fairly sure some of us are not," Raff added. "But when taken as a group it might be easier to predict human behavior. Or maybe not. Wars don't just happen and if people were all that predictable a smart ruler would know how far he could go without inciting a war."

"Perhaps, but we're talking about Doctor Starmetz right now," Rojer reminded them. "You might want to talk to some of his colleagues from Holrany. There are several of them here. Also this is hardly the first time he has caused a scene at a conference. He got into a big shouting match with Doctor Lenord Jarritz just last year at the Fiorozo conference in Menino. It was all anyone could talk about for days after. You might want to start with him."

They found Doctor Jarritz at a nearby coffee house with several other colleagues from the conference. "With everything postponed, there's not much else to do, is there?" Jarritz commented.

"You could go out and see the sights, Doctor," Em suggested.

"I've been to several museums, strolled through the artists' district, even conducted a seminar for the students at the university," Jarritz replied. "I'm ready for the conference."

"We all are," Raff told him. "Can you tell us about the fight you had with Doctor Starmetz last year?"

"Fight?" Jarritz laughed. "Yes, I suppose you might categorize it as such. I think of it more as just another academic argument."

"I understand it was rather vociferous, Doctor," Raff pressed. Several of the other scientists chuckled at the memory.

"So it was louder than most," Jarritz shrugged. "It was nothing unusual, especially if you're dealing with Karl Starmetz."

“Really,” Em murmured.

“Oh yes,” Jarritz laughed. “There are times I don’t think Karl knows how to debate if he isn’t shouting at the top of his lungs.”

“Has he ever been accused of plagiarism before?” Raff asked.

“Plagiarism? Karl?” Jarritz laughed again. “Good heavens! No. he barely talks to any of us about what we’re doing unless we attempt to critique one of his own presentations. There’s never been cause to accuse him of stealing ideas, well, until he and Doctor Merange came up with similar papers, but I thought you had exonerated him on that count.”

“I found no cause to suspect either Starmetz or Merange had access to each other’s research,” Raff admitted, “but I’m as fallible as the next man. I might have been wrong. It doesn’t hurt to verify my findings again.”

“Then, no,” Jarritz replied, “I seriously doubt Karl has ever stolen anyone else’s ideas to present as his own. There are two signature qualities to Karl Starmetz; the first is that he is scrupulously honest, the second is that he is never afraid of being bluntly outspoken.”

“A polite way of saying he is given to rudeness,” Raff translated. “Has he ever been given to sharing credit for his findings?”

“No. I’d have to say I’ve never seen him share credit at all,” Jarritz replied, “but then I’ve never known him to collaborate on a project either.”

“Any idea where he was last night after leaving the hall?” Em asked.

“No,” Jarritz replied. “He was still there when I went back to the inn. He was staying in the same one I was. Have you tried asking the inn keeper?”

“We’ll get there eventually,” Raff admitted. “He claims to have been out walking. How likely is that?”

“If he wasn’t in his room, it’s a certainty,” Jarritz replied confidently. “Most Manrich academics develop a habit of walking at night, but Doctor Starmetz walks more than any of us. He is probably known in every neighborhood of the capital city as the crazy man who walks,” he added with a chuckle. The others nodded agreement.

Before checking out the inn, Raff and Em interviewed several other scientists. It was apparent that Doctor Starmetz had managed to go through life without making many friends within the academic community and, in fact, Jarritz may have been the one man most positively inclined toward Starmetz in attendance at the conference. None of the others they spoke to had much to add to what they had already learned until they got to a rare female scholar from an obscure school in Eastern Pernatia near the Kharasian border.

“Do I think he’s capable of violence?” Doctor Halika Gubczik repeated Raff’s question. She was not a tall woman and moderately slim. She kept her dark gray hair short and wore academic robes even though most of the men at the conference did not. “He could be. I know he scared me badly five years ago when we were both teaching in Manrich.”

“Why?” Em asked. “What did he do?”

“Oh, it was in one of those afternoon tea socials the faculty meets at once a week,” Doctor Gubczik related. “He had some pet theory about phlogiston and how to produce pure oxygen...”

“Phlogiston?” Em asked. “What’s that?”

“Some scholars believe that metals are compounds of metallic earth and a yet to be isolated substance called phlogiston,” Doctor Gubczik replied.

“You’re obviously not one of them,” Em noted.

“No,” Gubczik shook her head with a tight smile. “I do not believe the experimental results support that particular theory. Of course, there are still quite a few proponents of the phlogiston theory and I swear they hold to it like a priest would to religious doctrine. I said something of the sort to Doctor Starmetz and he went off like a holiday rocket. He started shouting at me, his face turned red like a beet and he balled his hands into fists and threatened me.”

“Did he actually hit you?” Em asked.

“No, nor has he ever hit anyone to my best knowledge,” Gubczik replied. “In fact, he calmed down a few minutes later and apologized most profusely – offered to take me to dinner and sent me flowers every day for the next week until I told him he was forgiven. He was really quite charming after that.”

“So you get along these days?” Raff asked.

“Of course,” Gubczik replied. “Why shouldn’t we?”

Their next stop was at the inn where Starmetz had been staying. The inn keeper told them that Starmetz had not returned to his room until well after dawn, but after a few coins changed hands they were allowed to inspect the doctor’s room. “Looks pretty normal to me,” Em opined. “Anything in that journal?”

“The most recent entry was from the day before yesterday,” Raff informed her. “Starmetz’s notes from when he and Merange were talking aren’t informative either except from a scholastic standpoint. There are others we can talk to, but I know he was lying about something.”

“It’s impossible to lie convincingly to a master wayfarer,” Em agreed, “but he may merely have been hiding something he thought was personal but otherwise of no consequence.”

“Effectively the same thing this time,” Raff replied. “Doctor Starmetz told me he was out walking without a set destination last night. That part is not completely true. He had a destination, but I don’t know where it was.”

“You could have pressed him for the truth,” Em pointed out.

“I could have, but the police did not allow me to speak with him in private. He might be guilty, but I did not care to force him to condemn himself. It could be it is not important, but if that was the case, I doubt he would have lied about it. If we cannot find out for ourselves, we’ll have to force it out of him, but for now let’s see what we can learn for ourselves. I think it’s time we traced his route.”

“From the hall?” Em asked.

“No, the trail is freshest at this end,” Raff replied, “and we’ll save time if we just start now.”

“We skipped lunch,” Em pointed out.

“You’re hungry?” Raff asked only to receive a pointed look in reply. “Nevermind. There are always vendors on the street. We’ll pick up something to hold us over till dinner.”

“All right, but no sausage and bread this time,” Em warned him. “You want that, go back to the Green Lands or Holrany.”

“What then?” Raff asked.

Em eventually settled for a bag of roasted chestnuts even though it was late in the season for them. It gave her something to munch on as they followed Starmetz’s trail.

The ability of wayfarers to detect and use a path between stabilized areas is far more pronounced in masters. Such paths, originally forged by master wayfarers, are enforced by the passage of any human who follows them. Where journeymen can generally do no more than see and follow paths through the Wild, a master can also detect and follow the faint trails left by humans within a town. Most masters would have difficulty following such a faint trail after an hour or two. Others, like Emblem could follow them a day or two later, but Raff was better than the rest and would have been able to attune himself to the faint trail Starmetz had left for several days to come.

“So far,” Em pointed out as they walked through the streets of Carais, “I think we’ve proved the case against Doctor Starmetz rather than proven him innocent.”

“We haven’t helped him very much,” Raff admitted, “but you know there’s always the chance he really did kill Merange.”

“But you don’t think so?” Em asked.

“No, he told the truth about not killing Merange,” Raff replied.

“It’s too bad wayfarer truth-telling is not admissible evidence,” Em commented. “It would make things much easier. Any idea where we’re going?”

“Um, north,” Raff replied. “Looks like a fairly straight path into the heart of town from here.”

“So he wasn’t wandering around after all?”

“Too early to say. He was on his way back to the inn when he passed here. Wherever he had been he definitely knew where he was headed from here. You know, it looks like we’re going to go right past the police station,” Raff noted.

“Looks that way,” Em agreed. “Why? Did you have more questions for Doctor Starmetz?”

“Many,” Raff replied, “but by now he’s been moved to the gaol. Actually what I had in mind was talking to the coroner. The city’s largest hospital is just a block from there and, as I recall, the city morgue is attached to that complex.”

“We probably should see if there’s anything to learn from the autopsy if it’s been performed yet,” Em agreed.

“Okay, let’s take a detour,” Raff suggested.

The mortuary was redolent with the smells of death mixed with turpentine and camphor. Em wrinkled her nose as they entered and wished she hadn’t eaten any of the chestnuts. She doubted she would have much desire for the remainder of the bag.

The coroner was hesitant to even answer their questions until Raff identified himself as a master in the Wayfarers Guild. Then it was as though Raff and Em were the personal representatives of His Royal Majesty. “As you can see,” the coroner told them, “the victim was severely beaten. Massive bruises on his body and limbs suggest multiple strikes with a blunt weapon, although I believe the cause of death was strangulation. See these marks around his neck, they are consistent with other known cases in which the victims had been strangled.”

Em, feeling ill, turned away from the table and took a few steps away as Raff remarked, “This appears to be a remarkable number of injuries. Could all these have been caused by a single attacker?”

“I suppose that depends on how aggressive and determined the attacker was,” the coroner replied.

“Do you think these were caused by a single attacker?” Raff pressed.

“It’s possible,” he shrugged, “although it would have to have been a very angry attacker or a crazy one.”

“Strong as well,” Raff commented. “It isn’t all that easy to strangle someone. Those marks look like a rope was wrapped around his neck. People tend to fight in a case like that and an attacker can get thrown around pretty badly.”

“Unless the victim is already unconscious,” Emblem said weakly from the far side of the room.

“Well, yes,” Raff agreed, “but if he was attacked by a thief, would a thief worry about whether or not he was dead once he was no longer conscious before picking his pockets?”

“He was not attacked by a thief, sir,” the coroner informed him. “The police have the victim’s possessions, but I assure you his purse and notecase were both untouched.”

“Another fine theory shot to heck,” Raff sighed. “Have there been similar attacks recently?”

“There are a few every year,” the coroner admitted. “Not always combined with strangulation. Sometimes the victim is also stabbed.”

“Delightful,” Raff muttered darkly. “At least Doctor Starmetz cannot be blamed for those deaths. Have there been many arrests in association with those other deaths?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” the coroner shrugged. “My job is to determine a cause of death. What the police and courts do with my findings is not my business.”

“Aren’t you required to testify in murder cases?” Em asked.

“Very rarely,” the man shrugged again. “My written reports are usually sufficient.”

“We didn’t really learn much, dear,” Em told Raff once they were back on Starmetz’s trail. “I think Doctor Starmetz could easily have overcome Doctor Merange even if he had been conscious when strangled.”

“And some of those bruises might have been sustained in the struggle,” Raff added, “but none of that really matters. We know Starmetz didn’t kill Merange. Our job is to find proof that will be accepted in court.”

“Are we really back on the right trail?” Em asked. “I can’t tell.”

“It’s a very large city and the trail is almost obscured by the movements of other people,” Raff admitted. “I’ll be honest, I’ve lost the trail twice already but because he was still walking a straight line at this point I was able to find it again. If I lose the trail at a turn that will be it.”

“Unless you can trace it forward from the conference hall,” Em suggested.

“That will be even more difficult,” Raff replied. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

They continued on into a residential section of town in the fashionable west end of the city where the trail became easier to follow so there was no doubt of direction when the path trace took a sudden left turn up a narrow street lined with immense brownstone townhouses with ornate wrought iron fences and gates. Then partway down that street, the trail lead them up the steps of one of the townhouses.

“He went in here?” Em asked.

“He went up to the door, at least,” Raff replied. “Let’s see who lives here.”

“This is the home of Lord and Lady Sarenne, sir,” the butler informed Raff coolly. “May I asked who is calling, sir?”

“Master Wayfarer Raff Cawlens,” Raff replied, “and Lady Emblem L’oranne Cawlens. Are the lord and lady at home?” he added as the butler’s attitude warmed ever so slightly at Em’s title.

“I am afraid not, sir,” the butler told them. “If sir would care to leave his calling card...”

“I can do that,” Raff replied, reaching into a pocket of his coat for a small leather calling card holder, and then he paused, “although you may be able to help us. We were wondering if Doctor Karl Starmetz visited here yesterday evening.”

The butler stiffened noticeably and replied tightly, “I am sure I do not know to whom sir is referring.”

“I see,” Raff replied smoothly. “My mistake, I am sure. Well, we’ll leave our cards.” Both he and Em left calling cards with the butler and then walked back down to the street.

“You don’t need to be a wayfarer to know he was lying,” Em remarked.

“Mm? No,” Raff replied, “but then that’s why we don’t generally make that ability publicly known. It’s more useful when a subject is unaware.”

“It would also undermine the trust we have with the public,” Em pointed out.

“That too,” Raff agreed as they continued along Starmetz’s trail.

From the town house the trail headed back toward the university area but then petered out in a maze of other such trails after only a few blocks so there was no telling where else it might have led them. They went and reported their findings to the police but the lieutenant who had been conducting the case told them, “That is all very interesting, but I am sure we do not want to drag Lord and Lady Sarenne into this sordid affair, now do we?”

“What I had in mind was more along the lines of dragging Doctor Starmetz out of this affair by proving he was elsewhere at the time of the murder,” Raff countered irritably.

“But you have not done that, have you?” the lieutenant retorted. “Yes, you proved he walked up to the lord and lady’s door, that their butler has no recollection of a visitor especially at the ungodly hour at which he would have been there and that he then returned to his room. You have no idea at what time he might have been there. For all you could tell he might have been at the murder scene and then hurried out to the west end to try to establish an alibi.”

“I doubt that,” Raff growled.

“Well, it is your opinion, Master Wayfarer,” the policeman replied coolly, “and you’re entitled to it, but I have to deal with facts, not opinions.”

“What an unpleasant little man,” Em remarked as they left the station.

“A tired one,” Raff replied, “and one who has, I am sure, many other crimes to deal with. He thinks he’s finished with this one and has no desire to start over again. Tracking down the trail as we did may well be sufficient to protect Doctor Starmetz in court.”

Starmetz, however, denied having been to the townhouse, even when Raff pointed out the trail clearly led there. “I do not know a Lord and Lady Sarenne,” Starmetz maintained firmly. “You must have followed the wrong trail, sir.” Raff argued, but Starmetz stopped him, “Master Cawlens, I appreciate what you are trying to do for me, but I assure you this line of investigation will not help anyone.”

“That was odd,” Em commented as they left the gaol. “I think he would honestly rather die than admit he was anywhere near that house. What could have happened there?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Raff admitted, “but we’re at a dead end now. Why don’t we have dinner? Then we can stop by the conference hall and see if there’s been anything happening there.”

Nine

The Shape of the World Conference finally began the next day without the planned plenary session. Presenters were given their new schedules and Raff and Em learned their lecture with Doctor Harkermor would now take place the next morning, rather than the first afternoon.

“I really don’t know why they chose to reschedule everything,” Rojer commented, “but there you are. Maybe Doctor Meranne’s assistant wants to leave his own mark on the conference. It seems a rather

petty way of doing it, but I really don't care so long as we get our time, eh?"

Raff agreed and spent the rest of the day going to lectures with Em. The conference really was dedicated to determining the shape of the world. Everyone knew it was roughly spherical, but it was the very nature of the dichotomy between Wild and stable areas that most concerned the scientists there.

There was one almost revolutionary presentation by a Doctor Halfdansen from Volland in which a study of the Kenlienta was discussed. What interested Raff most was the man's proposal that somewhere in the very distant past the Ken and Mankind had a common ancestor. This caused an uproar in the session, but Halfdansen explained that the two species had obviously evolved apart as the Ken reached toward the Wild and humans strained for stability. Each generation, he explained, thereby became more accustomed to their environments so that the property among humans that creates stability grew in Mankind but atrophied in the Ken. The theory became the most hotly debated idea in the conference although Raff had to admit that he really was not in a position to formulate an informed opinion on the subject. However, Doctor Halfdansen's idea, that continual use of whatever property Man had to create stable areas would become stronger in successive generations through use, seemed to make a certain amount of sense.

However, he also kept what Doctor Gubczik, the female academic from Pernatia, had said about the phlogiston theory. It had at one time been widely accepted but now was starting to lose adherents because preliminary experimental results appeared to disprove it. It was possible that Halfdansen's evolution would turn out to have little or no basis borne up by subsequent research.

It was not until the evening after the third day of the conference that Em received a note in a plain white envelope when she and Raff returned to the Guild hall for the night.

"Dear Lady L'oranne Cawlens," the note began, "I am so sorry I was unavailable when you so kindly called on me the other day. Perhaps I can make it up to you over coffee at Le Petit Singe on the morrow at Three Post Meridian. I so look forward to meeting with you then. Yr obedient servant, Margaux Sarenne"

"She wants to meet you at a small monkey?" Raff asked. "I knew Cracians were eccentric, but..."

"Oh hush, you!" Em told him with a touch of fondness in her voice. "I suspect Le Petit Singe is a coffee house or a tavern or some such. It probably just has a picture of a monkey on its sign. I'll have to ask one of the local wayfarers."

It turned out that Le Petit Singe was, indeed, a café situated on the East Bank of Carais. This section of town, while built more recently than the rest, was not what Emblem would have thought of as an ideal social venue for two noblewomen to meet at. In fact, the streets had obviously been paved in a hurry and the few winters they had weathered had already caused more than a few cobbles to come loose in the streets, leaving great holes that not only jarred the passengers of carriages and carts, but caused nearby pedestrians to get splashed with mud when those holes filled with rain water.

The café itself was a little more promising as the floor was cleaner than Em had expected, although the sunlight that filtered in through the mullioned front window was only enough to keep one from stumbling around in the dark. While Em had never been here, she recognized it as a type of establishment that catered to the rich who for any number of reasons chose to visit what they thought was a low dive. There were far worse places in town, but the patrons of this café would probably never visit them. Evidently there was enough light for one's eyes to adjust to after a few minutes as she heard her name being called.

“Emblem!” Em turned to see who was calling her. There was a lady, well-dressed in obviously expensive but simple clothing sitting at a small table in one of the corners of the room. “Over here!”

“Lady Sarenne?” Em inquired.

“Margaux,” the lady replied. “Especially in here. Only strangers would use titles in Le Petit Singe and that would make us stand out a bit, I fear.”

“I see,” Em replied, “or maybe not.”

“Oh, when I got your card I knew immediately what it was about. Poor Karl! I really didn’t know what to do about it, but you’re a wayfarer. I knew I could depend on your discretion.”

“Well, I hope so,” Em replied cautiously. “Although I still don’t know why you chose to meet me here. I could easily have come to your home.”

“No, the servants have ears, dear,” Margaux replied quietly, but suddenly very nervous, “and I wouldn’t want any of this getting back to my lord. And if I had come to your Guild hall, it might have been noticed and since neither I nor my lord are planning to travel in the near future. . . Well, here we’ll just seem like old friends meeting for a bit of a chat. You see?”

“I see,” Em replied, privately amused, but determined not to show it. Lady Sarenne, while nervous and possibly mortified, was also secretly enjoying the intrigue. It seemed harmless, so Em indulged her. To Em’s surprise, a waiter appeared to take her order. It was too early for a glass of wine, she felt, although Lady Sarenne obviously did not feel that way. Em decided her own sensibilities might have been affected by her travels, but she ordered coffee anyway. The waiter soon returned with a small metal server filled with the dark, strong brew that was Cracian-style coffee and poured some into a demitasse cup for her before leaving the server on the table for her. Em sipped her coffee while waiting for Lady Sarenne to start. When she did not, Em remarked, “My husband was worried about my coming here alone. This is not the nicest part of town, I understand, not that I have spent all that much time in Carais.”

“You haven’t?” Margaux asked.

“No, I grew up in Orseilles,” Em told her. “It is almost a different sort of world at that end of the kingdom.”

“And even more different still in Salus,” Margaux remarked, displaying that she did have some knowledge of the rest of the great Power that was the Kingdom of Crace. There were only a few major Powers in the world as the most powerful nations were called. The Green Lands was one as was Crace and Pangam. Menino was considered another, but only because it was home to the Holy Church. Then there were the lesser Powers, like Dix, Holrany, Corisa and others. There were still other nations that while large and powerful within their own sphere, were not considered Powers because they had no colonies. These included Voland in the far north and Pernatia. “I’m much happier to be living in Carais. The Holy Church, may it be blessed, seems to be just a little too strong in other parts of the realm.” Em privately agreed, but kept her opinions to herself. As far as she was concerned, the Church held a bit too much sway throughout all of Crace and her colonies.

Em took another sip of coffee while waiting for Margaux to get beyond the polite chatter. “I looked you up, you know,” she told Em finally. “I needed to know I could rely on you to be everything a wayfarer is supposed to be.”

“And?” Em prompted her.

“I can,” she replied softly. “I should never have questioned the character of a wayfarer, I know.”

“Wayfarers are only human, Margaux,” Em told her. “Not all of us live up to the ideal. I’m not sure any of us do. Even my husband has his shortcomings and he’s the finest man I’ve ever known.”

“But you’re also a noblewoman, Emblem,” Margaux replied.

“Am I?” Em asked. “Father disowned me when I joined the Wayfarers. I only use the title ‘Lady’ because Raff insists on it. He says it helps smooth the way in places where wayfarers are not held in the same high repute we enjoy in Carais.”

“I am sure it does,” Margaux replied. “Why did your father disown you, though?”

“He wanted me to marry the Duke of Bur’s son,” Em replied. “Well, he is the duke now, but Henri was...” she paused to choose her words.

“The man is a beast,” Margaux finished for her. “I have met Duke Henri of Bur. His Duchess is a sweet lady, but thoroughly afraid of him.”

“She has good cause to be,” Em replied. “Henri is only truly happy when he is beating someone. Had I known that before I was sent to Bur, I would have merely waited patiently until our wedding night and poisoned his nightcap.”

“How did you get out of that marriage?” Margaux asked.

“As I mentioned,” Em replied, “I was sent to Bur before the wedding day had even been set. It was an old tradition in Bur supposedly to give a new bride a chance to get to know her prospective husband’s family. Of his family the only one still alive was the old duke. I liked him. However, I resented the fact that my father would just send me off like chattel and without more than a few days warning.

“I was insufferable,” Em continued. “You know what they say about redheads? I did my best to live up to those stories, but Henri was not deterred. I think it thrilled him, in fact. Whenever I spoke back to him, he would hit me. It was just a little thing at first, nothing that would actually leave a mark, but I was too angry at my father to see the warning signs for what they were. Soon, he started goading me into fits of bad behavior just so he could punish me. I was so bruised, I often could not sleep except for minutes at a time. I’m sure in time that treatment would have broken me, made me submissive and timid, but Henri made a great mistake.

“We were riding out near the border of the Wild one day. He liked to do that. He enjoyed riding out into the Wild unguided, knowing that no matter what he did, he would soon end up back where he started. Children behave that way too and I told him something of the sort. He flew into the rage and drew his sword. He hit me with the flat of the blade and knocked me off my horse. As soon as I hit the ground, he jumped down off his horse and started pummeling me, screaming incoherently as he did it.

“My wayfarer talent came alive that day,” Em told Margaux. “I didn’t really know what I was doing, but I drew the Wild toward us. It is something only a master wayfarer, or a potential master could do. I wrapped the wild around Henri in such a way he could not get out of it. You see, people normally do not go crazy in the Wild, because they bring a bit of the stability with them. I stripped that bit of comfort from Henri and gave him the Wild raw and unbuffered. That’s not all though. Had I known what I know now,

he would have died that day. As it was, he nearly did, although for different reasons.

“I was calling for help without knowing I was doing it and a unicorn came to my assistance. The creature took one look at Henri and tried to spear him with his horn. I understand he did twice, just not fatally. By then, however, I was on my feet and running.”

“Where to?” Margaux asked, enthralled by the story.

“Out,” Em replied flatly. “I didn’t know where I was going and I didn’t care. Clearly I was out of my right mind and running blind.

“Shouldn’t you have simply gone back to Bur?” Margaux asked.

“That doesn’t work for wayfarers,” Em chuckled humorlessly. “I didn’t know that either, but I didn’t really want to go back and any place that was not Bur was just fine by me.

“I wandered through the Wild for a week slowly starving to death,” Em continued. “I found water I could drink, but I didn’t know what I could eat out there. I tried a few plants. Many of them tasted horrid or burned my mouth so I would spit them out and continue on. Once, I found a wild apple tree although the fruit wasn’t ripe yet. It made me sick; I ate too much after not eating anything so most of it I could not keep down. I think the green apples would have made me sick anyway. To this day I can’t eat apples, though. I kept trying various plants. I think some made me delirious.

“Finally,” Em told her, “I stumbled down a hillside and collapsed. When I woke up, I was in a bed with Raff sitting next to me. He found me in the Wild. That’s another capability of masters, finding things and people. It’s how we found your house, in fact, although I left a far wider trail than the one we followed the other day. Raff brought me to the nearest town and took care of me.”

“Where were you?” Margaux asked.

“Southern Voland,” Em replied. “Just over the border from Holrany.”

“That far?”

“It’s amazing how great a distance you can go if you walk for sixteen hours or more every day,” Em replied. “Anyway I think it was almost another week before I started making much sense of the world again, but through it all, Raff cared for me and fed me. I think he would have dressed and undressed me as well, but the Volander women have very strong feelings about that sort of thing and handled the chore themselves.

“It turned out Raff had been hired by the Duke to find me, but as far as he was concerned the commission was completed once he got me to safety; forcing me to go anywhere was not even in the fine print. I was potentially too valuable to the Guild although that was secondary on Raff’s mind. Still, he gave me the option of joining the Guild and seeing if my talent could be trained. He warned me I’d have to actually be willing to work for a living. If he thought that notion might scare me off, he was wrong. Working in poverty is better than living as Duke Henri’s wife, not that we’re poor, mind you, but I’d have scrubbed floors for coppers to get away from Bur.”

“When did you marry Master Cawlens?” Margaux asked.

“That was years later and another story,” Em replied, “and right now it’s your turn. How do you know

Doctor Starmetz and why was he at your home the other night?"

Margaux took a deep breath. "I've wanted to run away too," she told Em. "Oh, Ricard doesn't beat me. He doesn't really pay attention to me at all if you must know. No, there's no need to go into all that. The why of the matter is not as important as the what, don't you think?"

"Doctor Starmetz was there to see you?" Em asked. It wasn't a sudden revelation. Em thought it was fairly obvious from the start but Em decided if she waited for Margaux to say it for herself, they would be there all week.

"Yes," Margaux whispered, "but the scandal. And it would hurt Ricard. I never wanted to do that."

Em kept her mouth shut, but thought *You should have considered that sooner*.

"Everyone knows you can trust a wayfarer to keep a secret," Margaux continued.

You can? wondered Em. *Where did that one come from?*

"And you were nearly trapped in a loveless arranged marriage too," Margaux pressed.

Em considered that. It was not the lack of love she had ultimately fled from, it was the abuse. She did not know Margaux Sarenne at all, but the feeling of helplessness was one she had known well. "I'll try to keep this discreet," she promised, "but Doctor Starmetz has already been charged with murder so the judge must be consulted and probably the prosecutors, maybe others. People in the Green Lands have a saying, 'Three people cannot keep a secret.' I don't think they mean it really cannot be done, but that the moment an additional person is brought into a circle of secrecy the chance of it getting out gets much wider. To keep a secret absolute you cannot make exceptions as to who is told because eventually the exception is someone who won't keep it at all."

"Will I have to make a public statement" Margaux asked weakly.

"Perhaps," Em told her honestly. "I do not know. I will only talk to the judge but from there it is his decision to whom he speaks. Even judges have to justify their decisions, you know. It is possible he will only need to talk to you in private."

"Please stress upon him the need for secrecy," Margaux begged.

"I will," Em promised.

Lady Sarenne, however, was spared the indignity of having to testify before a judge. The constables were buzzing around the university area like hornets from a disturbed nest and the news was all over the University when she returned to the conference. Another murder victim had been found several blocks away from where Doctor Merange had been killed. Another hour later the culprit had been found wounded in an alley half a mile away although it took another day before he finally confessed to the crimes and Em did have to speak to the judge briefly before Starmetz was released.

"You handled that well, dear," Raff commended her as they waited for Doctor Starmetz to begin his lecture.

"Merely waiting might have handled it equally well," Em replied.

“Perhaps, but the judge would not have been so willing to drop the charges had you not been able to add Lady Sarenne’s testimony to the evidence in Starmetz’s favor. You know, given his nature among colleagues, it’s hard to believe he and the lady had been having an affair for so long.”

“I think they both had something the other needed,” Em replied. “I never learned how they met and how it all started. I’m not sure I really want to know, but I imagine it was just one of those things. Oh, here he comes now.”

Doctor Starmetz seemed an entirely different person from the argumentative boor Raff had first encountered. Where before he had held himself upright and looked as haughty as a monarch, now he seemed to have relaxed a bit. He had gained some humility. *Well, no surprise at that*, Em considered, *several days in gaol would do that to almost anyone!*

He climbed up on to the podium and stepped to the roster and began his lecture, “I’d like to dedicate this paper to my late friend and co-author, Doctor Gerard Merange. Many of the key points are his and none of the astounding conclusions we came to could have been reached without his contributions.”

The Way to Catin

One

Strange news had been filtering in from the Southern Continent for days before “The Shape of the World” conference had concluded. On the final day, however official word came in from the Wayfarers’ worldwide headquarters in Taundon about a situation in the Pangamese colony of Catin.

One of the greatest problems with the colonies, in Raff’s opinion, was that they had been founded in places that already had a human population. That some of them also had displaced population centers of Kenlenta only compounded the error. Still, the existence of the colonies was a fact of life and had been since before he had been born. The colonists were not likely to leave and go home. For most of them, the colonies were home. However, much Wayfarer activity in the colonies revolved around colonial/indigene relations and this one sounded no different.

The native Catin tribes had been in an uproar, according to the Pangamese colonists and the Guild had been asked to step in once more. Because this was a growing problem, the Guild Council, or at least those members who spent most of their time in Taundon, had decided to ask Raff to handle the matter.

“If it were any other wayfarer,” Master Forrent told him, “you know they would have ordered rather than asked.”

“That they are even asking me is a sign it must be a worse problem than they’re willing to admit,” Raff sighed. “I’m surprised that in their desperation, they didn’t just send orders, Pauls.”

“Even though you no longer sit on the Council, my friend,” the elder wayfarer told him, “they still know better than to order Raff Cawlens around like a half-trained apprentice.”

“You know the fact they would send such orders, though, is resented by most of the journeymen and lower level masters, don’t you?” Raff asked.

“I’m well aware of that. It’s why I try not to be that blunt when assigning wayfarers. In your case, however, they know that by sending you, they also get Emblem. They may not approve of your marriage, but they do appreciate that you two make a formidable team.”

“I suspect that this time they would have been better off sending in a team of diplomats,” Raff countered.

“You two are that as well,” Forrent pointed out.

“Em’s better suited to that sort of thing,” Raff admitted.

“That’s why you make such a good team,” laughed Forrent. “You know your best Way to Catin will be to go overland to Pangam and then board a ship, right?”

“That sounds sensible,” Raff admitted. “You want us to guide a party to Pangam?”

“And possibly beyond,” Forrent nodded, “I’m not sure about that since the ship will have her own wayfarer, obviously.”

“Well, so long as it is not a very large party,” Raff shrugged. “I don’t normally mind large parties, but they don’t travel fast and this matter sounds urgent.”

“I have three scientists on their ways home from your conference,” Forrent told him, “a priest on his way to a parish in Salus, a young couple emigrating to Teltoa and a merchant from the Green Lands also on his way to the Southern Continent. I’m not sure I trust that last one, keep an eye on him.”

“Why’s that?” Raff asked.

“I think he’s a slaver,” Forrent replied. “He’s traveling with nothing but a bag filled with money.”

“How do you know that?” Raff asked. “We don’t normally search the luggage of travelers.”

“Of course not,” Forrent shook his head, “but he dropped it while en route and the clasp popped open. The wayfarer who was guiding him could not help but notice.”

“Well, I suppose he could be planning to buy his merchandise in Catin or Maggo and bring it back with him,” Raff remarked.

“I’m sure he is,” Forrent agreed. “That’s just what we’ve been discussing.”

“We can only stop him if he tries to buy slaves while under our guidance,” Raff remarked.

“I realize that,” Forrent admitted, “but there are wayfarers who do not belong to the Guild. They’re the ones I really want to know about. If it weren’t for them, there would be no slave trade.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” Raff promised, “though it’s not the first time we went looking.”

“Don’t go too far out of your way, Raff. The situation in Catin is more important.”

Unlike in Belis, the Guild supplied two large carriages with two wide benches each for the travelers. They were still hired from a local service, but neither Raff nor Em had been required to hire them

themselves. They would be turned in on their arrival at their destination in Pangam. This was the more usual way conveyance was found for travelers.

The travelers met for breakfast at the Guild's hall. The Ancient and Honorable Company of Wayfarers traditionally served breakfast at the outset of each journey. Mister Ethan Geston, the man Master Forrent suspected of trafficking in slaves, however did not show up for the meal and arrived with his single bag only moments before the party was to leave.

"Mister Geston," Raff hailed him. "You almost missed the boat. I hope there is nothing wrong?"

"Just some last minute details with my partner, Master Cawlsens," Geston replied evasively. "I assure you, I'll not make a habit of this."

"Here, Violette," Emblem offered a hand to the young woman who with her husband, Tobie, was emigrating to Teltoa, "Please let me help you." Without waiting for an answer, Em lifted one of Violette's bags and slung it up into the boot or storage compartment of one of the carriages.

"Thank you, Mistress Cawlsens," Violette told her.

"You're very welcome, Madame Baston," Em replied, "but my title is 'Master.' I know it sounds odd to those who do not belong to the Guild, but we all use masculine titles regardless of our gender."

"But wouldn't that make it confusing for travelers with you and your husband?" Violette asked.

"Then just call me Emblem or Em," Em replied practically. "If you truly wish to be formal, it is Master L'oranne Cawlsens and Raff is Master Cawlsens, "but we shall be traveling together for over a thousand miles yet. I think it's likely we'll be friends by the end of the trip, so why not start out that way as well?"

"Then please call me Vi," Violette replied with a shy smile.

"Vi, dearest," Tobie called from inside the carriage, "your seat is waiting."

"I'll be right in, dear," Violette replied in a perfectly loving voice, although she rolled her eyes slightly for Em's benefit.

"Gentlemen," Raff greeted the three scientists who had tarried inside the Guild's dining hall for a last few sips of coffee, "I hope you enjoyed the conference."

"Quite," a dark skinned gentleman from Granas in southern Salus replied. "I particularly liked the presentation you made with Doctor Harkermor, sir. I never realized there was so much to wayfaring."

"With so much more to learn, sir," Raff replied. "I may know how to do what I do, but we still have much to learn about the mechanics of the process. Father, don't you have any luggage?" he asked the priest who had been standing by the carriage while everyone else boarded.

"Nothing but the clothes on my back, Master Cawlsens," Father Earnest replied. "and a small purse with which to meet expenses as I travel."

"I knew you had taken a vow of poverty, but did not realize it was so absolute," Raff remarked.

"Priests assigned to wealthy parishes might live like nobles," Father Earnest replied, "but it is not on their

own money. It is customary when traveling to a new parish for a priest to take just his clothing and enough money to get him there. Once there, my needs will be met by the parish even as I labor on the parishioners' behalves. If I had been a senior priest here in Carais, my purse would likely have been somewhat heavier, but as I am a junior priest just off to my first senior assignment, this is what I get."

"It will be more than enough, I should think," Raff assured him, "especially since your passage includes all meals."

"Well, now that we are all here," Em told them practically, "perhaps we should be off?"

The carriages had been built with long distance travel in mind. Their wheels were wide and had iron tires. The spring suspension was designed to minimize bumps even on the rough dirt roads they had to travel on in the Wild. The seats were upholstered in thickly padded leather and a wide canvas roof protected passengers from sun and rain alike.

With two carriages to conduct, Raff drove one and Em handled the reins of the other. Violette started the journey sitting in the back, cuddled with her husband, but after lunch, which was eaten as they traveled, she climbed forward to sit with Em. "How long before we enter the Wild, Em?" she asked.

"We're there," Em informed her. "We passed beyond the limits of Carais at least an hour ago."

"It doesn't look all that different," Violette noted. "I mean there aren't any buildings or paved streets, of course, but I expected... well, I guess I don't know what I expected."

"It only looks normal because you aren't a wayfarer," Em told her. "I can see the ebb and flow of Wild energy all around us. The differences are especially noticeable in the distance where I can see swirls of color almost as if the wind was visible."

"Why can't non-wayfarers see it?" Violette asked.

"Some can, but only those who have some natural wayfaring talent," Em informed her. "Maybe one out of every hundred people have the talent and we try to train as many of them as we can. Still there are those who find a vocation in other walks of life, but more often than not if you can see the Wild energy, you're a wayfarer. But there are other differences. Look up there." She pointed toward a trio of birds circling high above them.

"What sort of birds are those?" Violette asked.

"Hawks," Em replied. "Wild falcons, if you'd rather."

"They're quite vicious birds, aren't they?" Violette asked nervously, "attacking other creatures and all."

"I suppose," Em shrugged, "but we don't need to worry about them. They're too small to attack us. That sort goes after mice and other small creatures. They might go for something as large as a squirrel or rabbit, but certainly not a person or a horse. We might run into a dangerous creature, but you really don't need to be afraid of that either. See that rock over there?"

Violette turned her head to see a large boulder on the side of their path. Em made a lifting gesture with her hand. The large rock lifted into the air and then flew several hundred feet away before coming to rest. "I could have aimed as well as simply thrown it," Em explained, "although more often than not I do not need to be so physical. I can use the energy of the Wild directly to fend off attackers."

“Will we see many Wild animals along the way, Em?”

“I’ll be disappointed if we don’t,” Em laughed. “Of course more often than not it will be something like a rabbit or maybe wild sheep and goats. The chance of seeing something truly fantastic like a dragon or a satyr is much less, but it could happen and probably will somewhere along the way. Don’t worry though, you’re as well protected as you were in Carais.”

“Bad things happen in the towns and cities too,” Violette pointed out worriedly.

“Yes, they do,” Em agreed. “I’m glad you’ve noticed. Vi, life is always a risk. We try to keep the dangers as far away as possible, but the only way to be completely safe is to be prepared for absolutely every eventuality. We’re only human so we can’t do that, so we try our best instead. Most of the time, I think, we manage well enough.”

“And the rest of the time?” Violette asked.

“The rest of the time is what you need to be worried about.”

Two

The first of the travelers left the party two days later as they passed through Falierre, a town best known for its wines and the small school of the same name. After bidding farewell to the professor who taught there, the party continued on their way and managed to pass through two more towns before nightfall.

Em’s prediction that they would see some of the more fantastic creatures of the Wild came true the next morning when a silvery white creature stepped out from the edge of a nearby forest. It looked like a cross between a horse and a goat although somehow the combination seemed to glean only the noblest features from both creatures and while much larger than a goat, it was still the size of a pony. Its thin, horselike head, which sat atop a goatlike body, boasted a long white beard dangling from its chin and a long ivory horn that protruded from the center of its forehead. It also had a long flowing mane and tail that appeared to have been spun from the finest gold.

“A unicorn!” Violette breathed, afraid to speak any louder. “I’ve always dreamed of seeing one.”

Father Earnest, sitting behind Raff, had another opinion about the creature, “Filthy beast!” he muttered. “A creature of the devil, sent to deceive with a semblance of beauty, but in truth only lures people into sin!”

“Surely not, Father,” Raff disagreed. “They’re skittish creatures at best. I’ve seen a fair number of them over the years but rarely one this close. They usually run to avoid wayfarer parties.” As though the unicorn had understood Raff’s cue, it suddenly turned and bolted back into the woods and disappeared an instant later. “See? He’s more afraid of us than we are of him.”

“Because he recognized that I represent the power of God and against me he would not stand a chance,” the priest replied confidently.

“Nonsense,” Raff laughed. “It’s an animal. If it thinks anything it’s that we look too much like the Kenlenta, who hunt its kind for food. Although it may also have been spooked by our combined aura.

Many creatures of the Wild cannot tolerate conditions of stability. Oh you may occasionally have a wild bear enter a town looking to forage through a garbage heap if it is hungry enough or a mountain cat or a wolf might attempt to steal a lamb or a goat, but the more fantastic creatures cannot even bear to approach a stability.

“Some of our own so-called tame animals are not fully domesticated for that matter,” Raff continued. “Dogs rarely venture out into the Wild, that is true, nor do sheep or cattle, but I’ve had cause to believe that house cats can navigate the Wild and the towns with equal ease. Sometimes I don’t know if they can even tell the difference. Did you know they are the only creatures that both humans and Kenlienta keep as pets?”

“Cats?” Father Earnest asked suspiciously.

“Indeed,” Raff assured him, “and they must not be inherently evil creatures since I know for a fact that the Archpriest of the Holy Church in Menino keeps two cats as pets.”

“He does?”

“Absolutely,” Raff assured him. “Father, there is nothing evil about the Wild, not in its nature at least. There are good Ken and wicked Ken just as we humans are fallible in the same way, but nothing out here can be immediately recognized and allied with the Devil. I’ve read the Bible through on numerous occasions, so I know there is nothing within it that condemns the Wild. This is how God created the world, after all.”

“It is not for laypeople to interpret scripture,” Father Earnest told him sternly.

“I am not as lay as all that, Father,” Raff replied. “You will find that most wayfarers have had some religious training. We are often the only ones around to offer sacred services in an emergency.”

“Ah, but the Bible is not the only set of holy scriptures,” the priest continued.

“You’re referring to the various books of the Karnabash?” Raff asked. “Did you know that ‘Karnabash’ is a Kenlientan word. It means ‘Book of Mysteries’ and the Ken study it for the same reasons the Holy Church does.”

“Surely it is not the same collection of scripture?” Father Earnest asked.

“As far as I can tell it is,” Raff told him. “I haven’t been allowed to read entirely through Church copies, just bits and pieces, but the Kenlienta do not restrict the book as we do. I have spoken with a number of religious scholars and to date have not discovered anything in our version that is not in the version venerated by the Ken.”

After that, Father Earnest was lost in thought and remained mostly silent for the next two days until they reached his new parish.

They arrived in Madrena, the provincial capital of Salus the next morning. Salus was the largest and most important province of Crace and Madrena was the only place in which it was still allowed for the ancient royal flag of Salus to be flown although it was only flown when the king was in residence, which he evidently was that day.

Madrena was a fairly large city dominated by an ancient castle that looked down on the rest of the area

from the side of a nearby mountain. In the heart of the city was an enormous church that had been built with such grandeur, Raff had often thought that the Holy Church had done so in order to remind the king, who built Salus Castle, that his accomplishments were the work of Man, but that the Church did the work of God. As a lad, Raff had often wondered why the priests didn't think God could do his own work.

Even though they had entered Madrena before midmorning, they stayed there the rest of the day. The remaining two scholars parted from them there, one because he taught in the University at Madrena and the other because his Way led in another direction than the one Raff was headed in. He joined a party headed south toward his home in Granas just after noon. The remainder of the party stayed in the Wayfarers' Guild hall until the next morning.

Raff and Em used the time to acquire and load fresh provisions for the remainder of their trip into Pangam and to also turn in one of the carriages. Now that the party was down to only five people, there was no need to use more than one vehicle.

While the travelers ate in the Guildhall, Raff and Em decided to take an evening off and found an inn half a mile away in a section of town most frequented by artists. The inn was crowded and noisy, but they liked the smell of the rich and spicy food coming out of it. They stayed to dance after their meal and then remained still longer as they shared a bottle of dark red wine with another couple who lived two doors down from the inn.

They were on their way out of the inn when a young artist, in his late teens or early twenties, stopped them to hand Emblem a sheet of thick paper on which he had been sketching her face in profile. Raff's face was also evident, but more as a background to Em and in not as much detail. Em tried to pay the young man for his work, but he refused. They thanked him and returned to the Guildhall.

"Be careful on your Way," a fellow master wayfarer warned them as they prepared to leave the next morning. "There has been trouble on some of the roads of late."

"What sort of trouble?" Raff asked, leading the man away from his party.

"We're not really certain yet, but there have been stories of small parties going missing," the man reported.

"On the Way to Pangam?" Raff pressed.

"Well, not Pangam, no, but just last week we were expecting a party up from Granas. It never showed up."

"Maybe there was no one headed this way and the wayfarers got assigned to a different route," Raff suggested.

"A distinct possibility," the other master admitted, "but there have been other, similar incidents all over Crace and Holrany; all concerning small parties like yours."

"I doubt many small parties are being conducted by two masters," Raff pointed out.

"No, that is unusual to say the least. I hear the Guild is considering only sending out large-sized parties for a while though."

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it,” Raff admitted “Well, I’ll stay alert, just in case. Thanks for the warning. Oh, by the way, have you heard anything about the Kenlienta Council of Elders meeting coming up?”

“Not so much as a whisper, old man,” the master replied. “Is there a Council of Elders meeting coming up?”

“So I’ve been told,” Raff replied.

“By whom?”

“A Kenlien elder I met on the Way to Carais before the conference,” Raff replied.

“Ah, well that may be why I haven’t heard then,” the other man replied easily. “I haven’t been out of Madrena in three years.”

“I made a report in Carais, and I know that report got sent up to Taundon,” Raff replied. “I’m surprised the Guild council hasn’t been spreading the word.”

“Other things on their minds, no doubt,” came the reply. “So what should I know about this Kenilenta meeting?” Raff told him what he knew. “Political troubles within the Ken nation, huh? Extraordinary to say the least. I always thought their system was so stable.”

“Nothing lasts forever,” Raff replied, “not that I’m not concerned. Up until now their council has only met once every five years or more often when under states of emergency. Their younger elders seem to think they should meet almost continuously.” He went on to repeat some of the other details he knew.

“Ridiculous!” the other man replied. “Even sending proxies, how could the people be properly represented by men who almost never went home?”

“I couldn’t say,” Raff admitted. “Who represents the people of Crace?”

“The nobles, of course.”

“How can they represent the commoners properly when they barely have anything to do with them?” Raff asked pointedly.

The party continued on, passing through various small towns until they at last reached the first border town of Pangam. Pangam was separated from Salus and the rest of Crace by a steep mountain range. Consequently while the people of Pangam were similar to those of Salus province, they spoke a different language and over the centuries had developed a unique culture.

Pangam was a small country in both population and number of towns, but even so, it was considered a Power in the world because of its colonies on the Southern Continent and Norillia as well as the trading colonies in the Deep East. The Pangamese were renowned for their navigational skills on the sea and the ability to wayfare occurred more frequently among the people of Pangam than in any other nation.

Raff allowed Em to guide the carriage up and then back down the treacherous mountain trail into Pangam. “You do this better than I do,” he told her openly. She rewarded him with a tight smile as she negotiated the tight curves of the path that switched back down into the heart of Pangam.

“And you can probably persuade those bears who have been following us to try looking for food

somewhere else,” Em replied.

“I think other travelers have been persuading them by dropping food,” Raff noted, looking back over his shoulder where three bears were trailing along behind the carriage.

“Stupid of them,” Em remarked. “That only makes the problem worse.”

“True enough, but it’s not the fault of the bears,” Raff remarked.

“Can’t you just make them go away like Em threw that rock last week?” Violette asked worriedly.

“I can, but I don’t really want to hurt them,” Raff explained.

“They’re bears!” she protested. “Vicious wild creatures!”

“They’re bears,” Raff confirmed, “but they aren’t anywhere as nasty as some stories would make them out to be. A mother bear will defend her cubs against any attacker. I’ve actually seen one drive off a dragon, and they will attack lone humans and small parties, but usually they only do so when hungry. We aren’t the easiest prey. These bears are used to being fed by passing wayfarers. It was foolish of them to have started, since bears are fairly intelligent for animals and once they learned to associate carriages with food they were bound to follow them as these are. In essence those fools trained these bears to hunt travelers. Ah well, there’s not much I can do about that at the moment.”

“I intend to have a few words with the next Guildmaster we run into,” Em told him acidly. “That was just plain cruel and inhuman.”

“Not as cruel as what they used to do to bears a few centuries ago,” Raff reminded her, “but I’ll be as gentle as possible. Vi, you had a good idea, although I don’t need to throw them.”

Raff did not actually need to make gestures as though he was lifting the large animals on the path behind them, but he felt better doing it. After all these years on the road, he found hand gestures helped him to concentrate when manipulating the Wild essence.

He reached outward toward the bears and lifted them up and off the ground. They sailed up rapidly and, for the bears alarmingly, but not painfully. Then he gestured again as if moving them away and placed them gently down on the neighboring mountain. They flew away and out of sight. “They’ll be back, I’m sure,” Raff reported, “but by the time they get here, we’ll be long gone.”

“I’m impressed, Master Cawlens,” Geston told him. “I could use a man of your talents on the Southern Continent. I don’t suppose...”

“Sorry, no,” Raff told him blandly, remembering Pauls Forrent’s warning that Geston might be a slaver. “I have a prior engagement.”

Three

One look at the City of Bonoa, the capital city of Pangam, and a visitor would immediately understand

that the people who lived here were dependant on the sea. From the tall hills over the city, Raff, Em and company could see Bonoa spread out before them, a teeming metropolis that began where the hills left off and only ended where the sea became so deep it was no longer feasible to build wharfs for all the ships that called on the port.

The population of Pangam, in general, was low; the nation was mostly composed of small towns on the inland, but here on the coast most settlements were cities, although none were larger than Bonoa. From their hilltop vantage point the party could see several large churches, the royal palace, and the thousands of buildings in which the majority of the people lived and worked. And beyond them was the harbor area which began at the edge of a wide estuary and extended over half a mile out into the brackish water all the way down to the mouth of the river.

Some of the docks held fishing boats. Fishing was an industry that not only fed the people of the city but which also helped to make the city rich. Most of the fish caught were dried, salted and exported all over the world, especially to inland towns where even a salt cod or bacalhau was a rare delicacy.

As they entered the town, it became apparent that most buildings, once they had left the city's outskirts, were four stories tall and some few were even taller. "No wonder the fields begin so far from the heart of town," Em remarked. "The people live more vertically so the available growing area is larger."

"It's likely the shape of things to come," Raff told her. "When we were in Taundon, I heard several landlords discussing the construction of six-story buildings. Who knows? By the time we get back there, we may not recognize the place."

"And I thought only Kenlientan villages changed that rapidly," Em commented. "Where is the Guildhall in this city?"

"Down near the harbor," Raff informed her. "Steer us to the north of the palace though."

"Isn't that a little out of the way?" Em asked.

"It will keep us out of a rough neighborhood," Raff explained. "I took the direct route through here a year or so before we met and had to fight off a few young gentlemen who took it on themselves to form a special welcoming party. I tried to teach them a lesson that would last long enough for their grandchildren to still remember it, but there's no need to take chances."

The Bonoa Guildhall was a tall affair but with many more guestrooms than had been available in Carais.

"You'll have to wait a few days for an available ship, Master Cawlens," the journeyman acting as secretary to the Bonoa Guildmaster told him. "There is a ship headed for Catin and parts south and east, but she'll be loading cargo for another few days."

"I can use a few days of leisure," Raff remarked. "It will make a nice change."

"I know Master Arrauda will want to hear whatever you have to report, sir," the journeyman told him.

"Only until he actually hears my report," Raff told him bluntly, "but he will hear it."

“Bears?” Master Arrauda echoed the next morning as Raff and Em gave him their journey report.

“Bears,” Raff confirmed. “It appears someone’s been feeding them in the Canamau Pass. I’m sure it solved a problem at one time, but in the long run it has only made the animals bolder.”

“Master Cawlens,” Master Arrauda replied, “Not every wayfarer has your degree of mastery. The Way through the pass is well worn enough so that any journeyman can conduct parties through it. We cannot all throw the bears away with the ease of skipping a pebble on the water, you know. Throwing a bit of food to the bears was a clever means for the journeymen to protect their parties.”

“It won’t work for much longer,” Raff predicted, “and I note you have not made it clear to the Guild that this is the way you have chosen to handle the problem. Consequently you also get wayfarers who are not aware they should be carrying extra rations for the animals along the Way. It won’t be long before you have big trouble up there, sir.”

“I will take that under advisement,” Master Arrauda replied coldly. “But perhaps you need to stop trying to be the little friend to the world, Master Cawlens.”

“I beg your pardon,” Raff replied, surprised.

“You do have a reputation for stepping in and solving problems, Master Cawlens,” Master Arrauda explained, “and I do believe it has gone to your head. Not every problem you perceive is truly a problem nor is it yours to solve.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Master Arrauda,” Raff replied stiffly. “I wasn’t aware that being eaten by a pack of ravenous bears was considered a normal occurrence in Pangam, but I assure you I’ll file that datum away for future reference.”

Master Arrauda blanched, but shot back, “I was not talking about the bears! You have a bad habit of jumping in wherever you go and helping people who would get along just fine without you.”

“I am aware, sir, that the Guild Council no longer approves of my policies. Precious few agreed with me when I was on the council for that matter,” Raff laughed mirthlessly, “But the Guild has a responsibility to the people it serves.”

“The Guild’s responsibility is to conduct travelers to and from their destinations,” Arrauda snapped.

“Including armies?” Raff countered. “There are a lot of wars that could have been avoided had we simply told the two sides they would have to make their own Way to the battlefield,” Raff pointed out.

“That is not our place,” Arrauda replied coldly.

“Perhaps it should be,” Raff maintained. “You say it is our responsibility to guide travelers. We are all traveling to the future and a bit of guidance might be in order along that Way as well.”

“And are you so great that now you can see the future, Master Cawlens?” skepticism dripped from Arrauda’s voice.

“No mortal can see what will be,” Raff replied quietly, “but any fool can see what ought to be.”

“So you’ve said before,” Arrauda retorted. “But that does not make it so. The members of the Guild are mortal as well. Who are we to say what the shape of the world ought to be?”

“We’re the ones who are going to shape it,” Raff told him. “Whether we shape it through our benign actions or through self-absorbed inaction, we will still be the ones to carve this world into its new shape, but do not doubt for a moment that the world will change. Chaos, or the Wild, is the world’s natural state. You know that. It was one of the first things you learned as a wayfarer. Change is inevitable. What is not inevitable is what that change will bring. The world is a lathe,” Raff paraphrased his early religious training. “It shapes us all to God’s will. The world is also on a lathe and we can shape it to ours.”

“But is it our responsibility to shape it?” Arruada demanded.

“Who then?” Raff asked in reply.

“Surely it is the job of the royalty and their nobles to lead us all,” Arrauda replied.

“It is?” Raff countered. “I grew up in the Green Lands, but I’m not really considered a Green Lander any more. I’m a wayfarer and while you may not have realized it yet, wayfarers cannot afford to belong to any one nation. It would be in conflict to our greater loyalty to the world.”

“And that, Master Cawlens,” Arrauda concluded, “is why you no longer sit on the Council.”

“Perhaps,” Raff replied easily. “I was dangerous to those who found it easier to act on behalf of the people who lined their pockets. Keep that in mind when you attend your next Guild Council meeting. Now was that really the reason you called me in to report without my wife and partner?”

“I always debrief wayfarers separately,” Arrauda informed him.

“Then you’d better be prepared for a repeat of this session,” Raff laughed suddenly, “because she’s even more incensed about those animals than I am.” He didn’t add that while he was the more powerful wayfarer, she was far more ruthless once she was angered. In a strange way, Raff was glad not to have to be there when Master Arrauda interviewed Emblem. The Guildmaster was in for more than a few shocks.

“I’m sure I can handle it,” Arrauda told him with false confidence.

“I’ve warned you,” Raff replied. “Can’t be much fairer than that. So is there much going on in Bonoa I ought to know about?”

“What do you mean, sir?” Arrauda asked suspiciously.

“Are there any neighborhoods I should stay out of? Topics of conversation I should avoid? That sort of thing.”

“Oh, well, King John David had been annoying his nobles of late and the arguments are filtering down to the street, I hear,” replied Arrauda. “There are several political factions starting to grow, but the one thing all but one party agrees on is that it is time to establish a Congress of the Nobility like the Green Lands has had for centuries.

“Oh? Is that what all the colored banners were about?” Raff asked “We saw them on the way into town but decided they were just some decorations for a local holiday.”

“I think you’ll do well to stay near the harbor. Most of the foreigners have been doing just that, so while you’ll see a few of those banners in shop windows, most of the merchants down here are staying firmly neutral,” Arrauda explained. “I doubt you’ll find a tavern where politics are even being discussed, at least not within a few blocks of the docks.”

“How unusual,” Raff laughed. “Normally I’d expect that would be all I’d hear the locals talking about.”

“Well that’s just the point,” Arrauda told him. “The locals are not meeting down here. The parties have their own meeting places in other parts of the city and I advise you not to go looking them up. Those places get fairly rowdy as they try to whip themselves up toward an encounter with one of their rival parties.”

“Exciting,” Raff laughed again. “I’ll be sure to be guided by your wisdom on this. The last thing I care to get involved in is local politics.”

“It’s not local, it’s national,” Arrauda corrected him.

“That’s local to me,” Raff replied.

Four

“We’ll be leaving on the morning tide, Master Cawleys,” Captain Machado informed him and the rest of the party as they boarded the ship. It was still early in the evening and they had enjoyed the traditional farewell dinner at the Guildhall before bringing their belongings to the dock.

“Then why are we boarding now?” Violette’s husband, Tobie, asked. “Wouldn’t it have been better to sleep in a real bed tonight.”

“The tide will be turning just after midnight tonight, Mister Baston,” Em informed him before the captain could. “With a bit of luck, we’ll be able to set sail by dawn. Of course I suppose you might still have been able to catch up to the ship, but you would have had to swim.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that,” Tobie admitted.

“No reason you should most of the time,” Raff assured him. “You just have to realize that when it comes to the tide, a mariner cannot afford to speak with anything but precision. If we were to catch the tide wrong, we could be mired out in the middle of the harbor for an extra day or two, so when we say the morning tide, we are not necessarily referring to one that occurs after sunrise.”

“Now, Master Cawleys,” the captain interrupted, “you were saying something about being able to guarantee we could clear the harbor in one tide tomorrow.”

“Yes, it’s a masters’ trick,” Raff replied. “I can sort of push us along just enough faster to make sure we’ll be at sea before the tide turns on us. Actually I won’t be pushing, it’s more like I’ll be encouraging the Wild to pull us for a way. In theory it can be done against the tide, but that’s rather difficult and I would rather not have to try. Of course, there’s no guarantee there will be sufficient wind to fill your sails beyond the harbor, but we’ll be in place if there are.”

“Is it something you can teach my wayfarer?” Captain Machado asked interestedly.

“Only if he is a potential master,” Raff replied. “A lot of laymen think that wayfaring is a matter of knowledge, training and experience, and without those things I could not do what I do, but the ability to wayfare is not equal in all those who possess it. If the journeyman assigned to this ship is capable, he will be able to pick up the knack fairly easily. If not, no amount of training will be sufficient. Where is he, by the way? This soon before casting off, I would think you would have your entire crew on board.”

“I sent him into town on a little errand,” the captain admitted.

“If he isn’t complaining, I won’t either, but do you always send your wayfarer on errands, Captain?” Raff asked.

“This was more along the lines of a friendly wager,” Captain Machado admitted, “but don’t worry, everyone will benefit. You see I mentioned to him how my cousin’s wife made the best *linguiça* I ever tasted and I brought some back to the ship with me. He countered that he felt it would have to go a fair way to beat some he had in an inn here in Bonoa, so I sent him off to buy some. Tomorrow evening we’ll see which is better.”

“What is *linguiça*?” Tobie asked curiously.

“It a local sausage of Pangam,” Raff told him. “It ranges from moderately mild to very spicy and almost always quite tasty. Captain, I look forward to tomorrow evening’s dinner.”

“And for a few days to come, I’d wager,” the captain chuckled. “We’ll have quite a bit on board, but I suppose most of it will be used in stews.”

“That can be quite good too,” Raff replied. “Well, since we have a few hours before we cast off, I’m going to try to take a nap in my cabin for a bit. I’m not going to get much sleep after midnight.”

“Ahoy, the *Senhora de Aldoa* !” a voice from the dock shouted. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Permission granted,” Captain Machado replied automatically.

A man and a woman, each carrying a full sea bag, crossed the almost level gangplank from the dock and stepped down onto the deck. “The Wayfarer’s Guild told us to come here,” the man announced. “Oh, Master Cawlens! Are you traveling on this ship as well?”

“I am, sir,” Raff replied formally. “Have we met?”

“Doctor Gerhard Hollsen, sir. My wife Geneve,” Hollsen replied. “We heard you speak at the conference in Carais, although we were not formally introduced.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t travel here with us,” Raff remarked.

“Well, we came here the long way,” Doctor Hollsen replied.

“We were on our way back to Voland, Master Cawlens,” Geneve Hollsen cut in, “but in Belis we received a message from my sister in Maggo. Her husband died a few years ago and she’s been trying to run their plantation on her own. She’s decided to come home, however, and we’re going to help her pack and move.”

“Well, it is nice to meet you two at last,” Raff replied politely before excusing himself. Years of wayfaring had taught him how to sleep when and where he could, so after kissing Em, very little time passed between the time he laid down and the time he actually fell asleep. Two hours later, he woke up to find the cabin empty, however, and went back up on deck to see how preparations were going.

“You’re awake,” Em observed.

“Can’t put anything past you,” Raff winked.

“I thought you were going to sleep a bit longer.”

“So did I,” Raff admitted. “I guess that’s all I needed. Did I miss anything?”

“Not really. The crew has been filtering back on board all evening. Pretty much anything that needs to be done is already done,” Em remarked.

Raff was about to say something in reply when a great flash of light lit up the harbor, followed a moment later by the roar of an explosion. Turning to the east they saw a ship on fire. It was a brig, similar in construction to the *Senhora de Aldoa*, and sat at a wharf a quarter of a mile away, but even from their vantage point they could see the flames racing up the tar-covered masts of the stricken ship. Then the sounds of shouting reached them even as they joined several sailors of the *Senhora* as they ran to investigate the disaster and to help put out the fires, if possible. Alarm bells were ringing in the city by the time they reached the dock of the burning ship and by then the flames were already too intense to get very close.

“A water fountain?” Em suggested to Raff.

“That’s essentially a tar fire,” Raff considered. “It could make it worse. On the other hand we don’t really have anything else at hand.”

Together they joined their wayfaring abilities and used the traces of Wild energy that flowed even through areas of stability to cause the water of the harbor to suddenly spurt upward and fall down on the burning ship. A vast cloud of steam burst outward and upward, but they kept the salty deluge coming for another few minutes until only a few wisps of steam rose over the ruins of the brig. It was only after the fire was out that a corps of Bonoa’s firefighters reached the docks and by then Raff was already getting answers.

“She was the *Esmeralda*,” one sailor informed him, “just made port from Palendo yesterday morning with a cargo of tobacco and cocoa.”

“What happened?” Raff asked.

No one really knew although there was a lot of uncertain speculation until it was time for the *Senhora* to cast off. The captain was not on board at the appointed time and did not arrive back until almost an hour later. He gave orders to his crew and they immediately released the hawsers that secured the brig to the cleats on the dock. That done, they returned to the ship and waited as the tide slowly pulled the ship out and into the harbor.

"I hope you will still have time to perform your miracle, Master Cawlens," Captain Machado told him as he stood near the helm with the *Senhora's* wayfarer.

"I should," Raff assured him. "Did you learn anything about the *Esmeralda* while you were out?"

"How did you know I was trying to find out about that?" the captain asked.

"Why else would you have been away from your ship at that time?" Raff asked pointedly.

"A point," Machado admitted. "The *Esmeralda* did not catch fire on her own."

"I would have been surprised if she had," Raff replied, "but I assume you mean it was set deliberately?"

"So I believe. Several men dressed all in black were seen boarding the ship an hour earlier. They evidently stayed on board just a few minutes before hurrying away."

"Where was the crew?" Raff asked.

"In town getting drunk, of course," the captain replied.

"They just got into town with a valuable cargo and no one was watching the ship?"

"Men are often foolish after a long crossing from the colonies," the captain replied. "And while Bonoa has her dangers, having people intentionally burn your ship is not one of them."

"Until now," Raff replied sourly.

Across the water they heard the sound of alarm bells again. "Is that another fire?" asked the *Senhora's* wayfarer.

"Where?" Raff asked.

"Up on the hill," the wayfarer replied, pointing. "To the east of the palace."

"Looks like a fire to me," Raff commented. "What the hell is going on in Bonoa tonight?"

"I fear we won't know for weeks or months now," Captain Machado replied, "There's no going back easily now. Still I wonder if the two fires are related."

"Can't say from here," Raff remarked. "Have there been any similar troubles lately?"

"Not since the great earthquake a decade ago. It's been a fairly quiet town," the captain admitted.

"Someone's trying to make up for lost time, then," Raff noted. "Of course, this may not be in anyway related to what happened to the *Esmeralda*. If it is, however, these things don't normally come out of nowhere. It usually starts with a group of disaffected people who try to make their discontent known through less violent channels. This sort of thing comes later after it turns out that peaceful requests are ignored."

"If you say so, sir," the captain replied. "I'm rarely in Bonoa often enough to be aware of such things."

“Well, if we’re lucky, this is the last we’ll hear of this,” Raff decided.

“So when are you going to start rushing us toward the bay?” Captain Machado asked.

“I started the moment we slipped our hawsers,” Raff informed him. “I know it doesn’t look like we’re moving very rapidly, but we’re already out in the middle of the harbor channel. I doubt you’d normally be this far from the dock for another hour or so.”

“Well, that’s true enough. In daylight, or even if the Moon was up, I’d consider setting sail by now,” the captain admitted, “but it’s too dark to work in the rigging safely. We might set sail in these conditions if we were in the midst of an emergency, but it can wait until dawn.”

The fire in the city continued to burn and the prevailing winds caused it to start spreading to the west. In the outer harbor, they could hear the sounds of alarms as firefighters were pressed to find a way to extinguish the blaze. Then, just before dawn, it began to rain. The rain appeared to fall just in time to save the palace, although from the *Senhora de Aldoa* the men and women could no longer see the city through the fog and driving rain. It was another mystery they would have to wait to learn the truth about.

By the time the skies started to lighten, the rain was still cascading down, but there was also a healthy wind and the sailors could finally climb the rigging and set half the sails on the ship’s two masts.

Five

The *Senhora de Aldoa* reached her first port of call in the Town of Tabat in colonial Maggo a few days later. The Hollsens left the ship in that port to travel overland to the east, but Raff and Em took the Bastons out to eat at an inn not too far from the harbor.

“Is food in Maggo always this spicy?” Violette asked after she had sampled her meal.

“It all depends on where you are,” Em replied. “We’re in Upper Maggo right now and yes the food is highly spiced here. Personally I like it, but I suppose it might be an acquired taste. You’re traveling to Lower Maggo and that’s entirely different.

“To the south of Tabat is mostly desert with sand dunes, hard-packed dirt and almost no vegetation. The few creatures that live there are mostly nocturnal and almost all are carnivorous,” Em continued. “The natives of Tabat and the nearby towns like their foods hot and spicy, although you’ll notice there are foods here that are also very sweet. The sugar cools off the heat of the spices, so definitely try some of the melon if your mouth is burning.

“You’re going to a town in Lower Maggo,” Em went on, “and that’s as different from this as night is to day. Maggo is a very widely dispersed collection of colonies and native villages and towns. I suppose it should be considered three or more different colonies, but Crace has chosen to administer her colonies on the Southern Continent as a single political department. Consequently one is never particularly specific when talking about Maggo as a whole.

“Now Lower Maggo is not a desert at all,” Em explained further. “It’s mostly tropical rain forest, more similar to Teltoa or Catin than it is to the rest of Maggo. The foods, you’ll discover, are different there as well. You may still find them to be exotic to your tastes, but the locals there use a different combination of spices and go a bit more sparingly with them as well. It is still a hot climate, however, and I find that the

food in most hot climates tends to be more highly spiced than that of the cooler lands. It's probably to help cover the taste of meat that has started to get a little gamey. Foods spoil faster in the tropics after all and the spices keep it palatable longer."

"The food is spoiled?" Violette asked weakly, unable to put another forkful into her mouth.

"Not spoiled so much as it is not absolutely fresh. It may have started to develop a taste that presages spoiling. It's still quite safe to eat at that point and spicing it up masks the bad taste," Em assured her. "Believe me, there are a lot more immediate dangers to worry about here than a little rotten food."

Violette shivered in spite of the heat, "Maybe we should go home, Tobie," she almost whispered.

"Home, dearest? But we've used all our money to get us here," Tobie protested. "Even if we want to..."

"I want to," Violette insisted.

"We cannot pay for it. We'll have to work for a while just to pay for our passage," Tobie explained.

"Vi," Em cut in, "life in the colonies is not all that bad, you'll see. Oh, it's a rougher life than you're probably used to and it may take a few weeks to adapt, but as Tobie says, you have invested your life savings to get here in the hopes of finding a fortune. Well, no one is going to hand that fortune to you. You have to work for it. You've already arranged to purchase a plantation, is that correct?"

"A small one," Tobie agreed. "My cousin has already bought the land for us and has agreed to let us pay him back from the proceeds."

"What do you plan to grow?" Raff asked.

"Cotton to start with. That's what is there already, although my cousin recommends we use the profits from the first year to purchase some cacao seedlings and work toward eventually growing mostly cacao. He says it's becoming a more important crop."

"It is a luxury item," Raff replied, "so it commands a high price as well, but people don't have to drink cocoa. They do have to wear clothing, so I think you're right to start out with the cotton. You're going to arrive in the right season for planting too. Much later and the dry season would hit before the bolls are fully ripe."

"Dry season?" Violette asked.

"In the tropics you don't have the same seasons you're used to in Crace," Em explained. "There is no winter, you'll probably never see so much as a flake of snow so long as you stay there."

"I can live with that," Violette admitted. "I mean snow is so nice to look at early in the winter. By spring, however, I'm always sick of it."

"You might miss it by and by," Raff chuckled.

"Anyway," Em took over again, "with almost every season feeling like it is summer, they differentiate them into wet and dry seasons. In the wet season it's going to rain a lot. It might rain every day for weeks on end. Actually it will more than likely rain almost every afternoon but then be sunny again the next

morning. There are times during the wet season when you'll be able to set your clock by the rain, but then will come the dry season in which it hardly rains at all. The green grass all turns golden at that time and the wild animals find themselves at odds to make space for themselves at the water holes, although the dry season in Lower Maggo is not as severe as elsewhere and doesn't last as long. Just long enough for the cotton crop to come in and give you a bit of rest before the next growing cycle begins."

"But are we doing the right thing?" Violette asked worriedly.

"That's not for me to say," Em replied. "What is right for me is to be a wayfarer. No one can say what is right for you, but you. Still you've already taken the leap and you're committed to stay here for a season or two regardless of what you eventually decide, so you may as well make the most of it. You may even come to see this as the best possible life for you."

"Will I?" Violette asked almost plaintively.

"Stranger things have been known to happen," Em shrugged.

The *Senhora* picked up several more passengers in Tabat, but neither dropped off nor picked up any cargo so she was back at sea the next day. Hugging the coast, it was another week before the port of Kadar in Ritan came into view.

Ritan was a colony of Pangam and one of the oldest such colonies in the world, having been first settled by Pangamese some three centuries earlier. However, Pangamese colonies were not quite like those of Crace or the Green Lands, so while there were Pangamese-built cities such as Kadar, their primary purpose had been for trading with the natives and each other, not conquest. Not that the Pangamese had never indulged in conquest over native populations. Their colony of Norillia on the far side of the Dark Ocean was guilty of all the usual subjugation of native populations.

In Ritan, however, a different path had been pursued and the local population had been welcomed into colonial society and had promptly become an integral part of the culture. That model had been attempted in other Pangamese colonies, but had not enjoyed the same success it had here. Most native populations would have preferred if the colonists from the Powers had never come to their lands at all.

Unlike their stopover in Tabat, the *Senhora de Aldoa* stayed in port several days as she offloaded books from Bonoa and rum from the far off islands of Tamir off the coast of the Green Lands' colony of Varana. Then the crew filled her holds with gold and iron products.

It gave the travelers several days to explore the port town and for Raff and Em to stop by the local Wayfarer's Hall. Ethan Geston disappeared their first day in port with his one bag and was not seen again until a few hours before they were due to leave, but the Bastons spent as much time with Raff and Em as they could. Both of the young people were having second thoughts about colonial life, even though both Raff and Em assured them it was natural to do so after taking such a big step. So far they had seemed to take turns having doubts and Raff privately wondered what would happen if they ever became doubtful at the same time, but decided it wasn't really his business to meddle unasked.

On their first full day in port, however, Raff and Em disentangled themselves from the Bastons in order to pay a visit to the local Wayfarers' guildhall. As they were still technically in the middle of a mission, there was no obligation on their part to do so until they reached Catin, but Raff was hungry for news on so many counts that he could not resist reporting in.

"In Bonoa itself, you say?" Master Gonsalves asked. "It doesn't sound good, but it's the first I've heard

of the problems. The two incidents may not be related you realize, Raff.”

“I realize that, but the reports of men dressed all in black on the *Esmeralda*, if true, are a clear sign of some sort of conspiracy,” Raff replied. “Of course, they could just as easily been from a competitive shipping firm.”

“I hadn’t heard the business was quite that cut-throat,” Gonsalves replied dryly.

“Just trying to prove I’m not seeing assassins in the woodshed,” Raff replied.

“I’ve known you a long time, Raff,” Gonsalves replied with a laugh.

“I know you have, Tom,” Raff replied. “I thought the Council knew me too.”

“They do,” both Tom and Em told him together. Tom continued, “the problem is you were better than most of them even before you lost control. They resented that, once you retrained, you were better than any two of them. Heck, Raff, you can do stuff now that none of us even dreamed of. Face it. They’re afraid of you. Your friends on the council still trust you, but you never had more than a few true friends there anyway. The rest wake up screaming from bad dreams in which you return and take over the Guild single handedly.”

“I’m enjoying myself too much the way I am,” Raff pointed out. “Why would I ever want to be the grandmaster?”

“You wouldn’t,” Tom told him. “You know it, so do we. Problem is, they don’t. They don’t have the imagination necessary to realize it because they all know they’d love to be the king of the guild and they can’t imagine why anyone else might not.”

“I can’t help what those fools think, Tom,” Raff shook his head.

“I never said you could,” Tom retorted.

“Well this conversation is getting us nowhere,” Raff noted. “I still have questions, though. How about we go find something to drink. I’d love something ice cold with bubbles.”

“In this climate?” Tom laughed. “Around here they consider the beer to be cold if it’s under sixty-five degrees.”

“I can fix that,” Raff promised.

“Well, heck,” Tom shrugged, “we have a keg in the social room. There’s no one there this time of day. Let’s go see how cold you can make it.”

“I could have frozen it solid,” Raff explained a few minutes later as he took a sip of his cold beer. “Is this Holranian beer?”

“Dixan,” Tom replied. “I sweet-talked a captain on his way down to Teltoa.”

“Good slosh,” Raff admitted. “Did you see how I chilled it?”

“I was watching,” Tom replied, “but I think you made it look easier than it is.”

“Not really,” Em told him. “It’s not all that hard to transfer heat energy from the keg to something else. Effectively it’s the same way we use the talent to make a fire. You just need more control is all, and a little practice, of course.”

“Practice with water,” Raff suggested, “and don’t transfer the heat to something flammable and you’ll be at least a step above me when I first thought of this trick.”

“Sounds like a nice way to get ice in my whiskey,” Tom commented. “So what did you want to know?”

“Have you heard about the Kenlientan Council of Elders meeting?” Raff asked.

“No,” Tom replied. “What happened?”

“Nothing yet,” Raff replied. “It takes them months to plan a meeting. Unlike human nations, there is only one for the Kenlienta and it’s everywhere in the Wild. It takes a while just to get the word out.” He went on to describe what little he knew.

“How did you hear about it?” Tom asked.

“A Ken Elder told me on the Way to Carais,” Raff replied. “Why hasn’t anyone else reported this? I know I’m not the only master to talk to the Ken.”

“You’re the only one the Kenlienta respect without reservation, though,” Tom informed him. “Weren’t you adopted by the Ken?”

“Em was too,” Raff nodded.

“Yes, well, it was their way of thanking you when you rushed to their rescue,” Tom remarked. “The point is you’re the only ones who did. Oh, others might have, had we heard. I’d like to think I would have, but regardless of intention of all those who knew what was happening, you’re the only ones who acted. The Ken are going to be appreciative. Did you know that on the few occasions they approach a wayfarer, you’re the first ones they ask about? They’re especially interested as to whether you have had children yet.”

“Has anyone explained to them that wayfarers are rarely interfertile?” Raff asked.

“The Ken are matrilineal,” Tom reminded them. “Your heirs, Raff, would not be Em’s children to their way of thinking and vice versa.”

“I’m aware of that,” Raff admitted. “Theirs is hardly the only culture that reckons descent through the line of mothers. Quite a few human cultures do as well.”

“But no civilized ones do,” Tom noted. “For most of us, it’s an alien way of thought.”

“Maybe we should be recruiting among the tribes,” Em suggested. “They have Wayfarers too you know.”

“Most are their witch doctors, Em,” Tom replied.

“Shaman is a less insulting term,” Em corrected him primly.

“Of course, my lady,” Tom replied with a touch of irony in his voice.

“Well, how about the trouble in Muenta?” Raff asked Tom.

“Is there trouble in Muenta?” Tom asked.

“Aren’t any guildmasters talking to one another anymore?” Raff asked, astonished. “I knew the Council didn’t want to tell me much when they requested my assistance. I figured that they just didn’t want the word spreading throughout the rest of the Guild in the north countries, but if you haven’t even heard, it could be they didn’t know either. Okay, well there’s some sort of big problem and the master in Muenta called for help, saying it was more than he could handle.”

“Who is the Muenta master at the moment?” Tom asked.

“Master Antoine Gomes,” Raff replied. “Do you know him?”

“Can’t say I do, but then it’s a big continent and Muenta is over twenty-five hundred miles away,” Tom pointed out. “For all I’ve heard lately, I’ll have to take your word for it that there even is a town named Muenta. I have heard some news however, and some of it may even make you happy.”

“Do tell,” Raff invited him.

“The Colonial Congress of Varana has passed a ban on the import of slaves from other parts of the world,” Tom announced.

“It sounds promising on the surface,” Raff agreed. “I notice you didn’t say they banned slavery outright, though. Sounds like slavery is still legal there. They just aren’t accepting new ones from the Southern Continent.”

“Or Norillia, Macena, Palendo nor anywhere else,” Tom agreed. “I had hoped they would follow Selomania’s lead and abolish it outright. It looks like Lorendo will be, but I guess we should be thankful for what we can get.”

“Sounds to me like it is more likely to make it all the harder for slaves to buy themselves free,” Em commented.

“How do you figure that, Emblem?” Tom asked.

“With no influx of new slaves, the slave owners will be all that much less willing to allow any of the ones they have go free,” Em replied. “The only way owners can get new slaves is for children born into slavery. It may sound like the Colonial Congress is clamping down on slavery, but I think in the long run it will become even more firmly entrenched.”

“I hope you’re wrong, Emblem,” Tom told her.

“So do I,” Em replied.

“Also in Varana, I hear one of their northern cities, Haston suffered a major destruction by fire. They lost over half the city and several hundred men and women were killed in the blaze.”

“Haston wasn’t much of a city,” Raff remarked. “It had a lot of old wooden buildings that were long overdue for replacement. I am sorry about the people, though. Any happy news?”

“It depends,” Tom replied. “Do you have any close friends in eastern Holrany or Kharasia?”

“I know people in both nations,” Raff replied. “I don’t wish any of them ill. Why?”

“It seems they’re headed for war again,” Tom informed him. “It may not come to that. I hope not, but there have been angry words shot back and forth across their common border.”

“We could stop them,” Em told him. “Why is the Council even considering allowing wayfarers to get involved?”

“It’s not that easy, Em,” Raff replied sadly. “The Guild exists by royal charter in the countries we serve. One of the provisions of that charter is political neutrality and the obligation to guide troops in times of war. The Guild is very well compensated for such services, well above our normal rates.”

“Although the guiding wayfarers themselves don’t get paid any more for the hazardous duty,” Tom added sourly, “and the political neutrality is a joke. We are every bit as involved in local and international politics as the nobility, more so in some cases.”

“Our anti-slavery stand is just an example of that,” Raff added, “but generally once two nations go to war we have to make sure their troops get where they are supposed to be. You’re wrong about the neutrality, though, Tom. Yes, we meddle in a sense, but don’t forget we are also the mediators in most if not all major disputes.”

“But we’re constantly interfering in local politics and I know there have been cases in which our wayfarers have decided which side would win a war,” Tom insisted.

“And every time that happened, we hung the responsible parties out to dry,” Raff pointed out.

“Not every time,” Tom insisted. “I don’t recall anyone on the Council being brought up on charges, and whether they admit it or not, they set our policies. Which brings us back to our earlier conversation. Sooner or later, the Council is going to have to clean house or have it done for them. That’s why you frighten them so, Raff. You could do it, if you so decided.”

“I don’t have any plans or desires along those lines, Tom,” Raff told him.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Tom agreed, “but there may come a time when you don’t have a choice either.”

Six

Em took Violette shopping the next day. The large bazaar of Kadar with its hundreds of stalls fascinated the Cracian colonist although between them they only bought a few cheap trinkets including a necklace with a silver bangle that caught Violette’s eye and which, after a few minutes of haggling, was less expensive than she might have dared to dream.

“Are all markets like this on the Southern Continent, Emblem?” Violette asked as they made their way back to the *Senhora de Aldoa*,

“Pretty much,” Em replied. “Yes. Some are larger and some are smaller, but if you need to buy groceries or almost anything else for that matter, this is the sort of place you’ll come to.”

“I can get used to that,” Violette told her cheerfully. “This is fun!”

By the time the *Senhora* left Kadar, both Violette and Tobie were once again cheerfully looking forward to their new lives in Lower Maggo. Geston returned to the ship a few hours before it left the dock, accompanied by two tough-looking men who Captain Machado refused to let on board until their passage had been paid for.

“My passage was to include bodyguards, Captain,” Geston insisted.

“Not on this ship,” Machado countered. “Not the way I heard it. You were to be given passage to Saddra and I was paid for one person and his luggage. Those two don’t count as luggage. You can pay up or find another ship.”

Geston continued to argue and the Captain was about to throw him off the ship when Raff and Em came up on deck to see what the commotion was. “Master Cawlens, I believe we need you to arbitrate this,” Captain Machado called.

“What seems to be the problem?” Raff asked.

“Master Cawlens,” Geston replied first. “My contract with the Wayfarer’s Guild was to include the passage of up to two servants.”

“I was only promised to be paid for him,” Captain Machado maintained.

The two started arguing again and Raff ignored them. “Em? Where did we put our own copy of the contract?”

“It’s in the brief-holder, dear,” Em told him. “I’m fairly certain it’s in my Way-bag. I’ll get it.” She returned a minute later with a sheet of paper which stated the terms by which she and Raff were to convey party members.

Raff looked at it for a few minutes while Geston and Machado continued to argue loudly. “Gentlemen, I have your answer,” Raff began, but neither man would stop to listen. Drawing on his Wayfaring abilities, Raff caused a microburst of wind to accompany his voice as he shouted “Gentlemen!” The effect seemed to amplify the word and the four men in front of him were visibly buffeted by the sudden gust. They turned to face him. “Oh good,” Raff said more pleasantly, “I seem to have your attention now. This is the contract everyone in the party signed in Carais before we started off. As you will be able to see most clearly, the contract called for us to guide only those people listed and their luggage.”

“But I negotiated for servants as well,” Geston protested.

“What you negotiated for and what you agreed to are obviously in conflict, Mister Geston,” Raff told him clearly.

“Let me see that,” Geston demanded reaching out for the contract. Raff shrugged and let him take it. “What’s this right here about the addition of party members? It says others may be added to the party along the way to Muenta.”

“That is at the discretion of the Guild,” Raff explained, “such as the Hollsens who traveled with us from Bonoa to Tabat. If you want to add these gentlemen to our party you need to arrange it with Master Tomaso Gomes, here in Kadar. You’d better hurry, though, because the tide turns in two hours and I doubt Captain Machado is particularly interested in delaying the voyage on your behalf at the moment.”

“I’ll be back. Where is the guildhall here?” Geston asked.

“Off in that direction,” Raff gestured. “I’ll show you the way.”

Tom was surprised Raff had been so accommodating to Geston and said so once passage had been arranged for the two men he had hired. “I don’t know this one, but I’ve run into ones like him,” Tom told Raff as Geston and his men left the hall.

“So have I,” Raff admitted. “I could say I’m just living up to the ideals of the Guild, but actually I was hoping you would have the same low opinion of the man I did. I was even hoping he might be known to the authorities here.”

“Odds are he’s never tried to run slaves through this colony,” Tom replied. “If he had, he wouldn’t have been so eager to make an issue of demanding passage for his thugs. Still, I don’t trust him and I think I’ll send their names and descriptions down to our people in Saddra.”

“It may not do any good,” Raff replied. “We’re leaving within the hour, you know.”

“There are faster ships than that brig you’re on, Raff,” Tom reminded him. “Also you’re making a stop or two along the way. Saddra may be only half way between here and Muenta, but that’s still a fair distance. Besides, even if this is the first time any of them will be in that town, my little note will insure they are being watched.”

“If he is a slaver,” Raff replied. “He could just be headed there to buy gold and other commodities and felt the need for a bit of protection.”

“He could have hired them in Saddra and not gone to the bother he did here,” Tom replied.

“People are unpredictable,” Raff remarked. “Who knows how he was thinking. Maybe he expected to be attacked as he left the ship.”

“Maybe he deserves to be.”

Raff returned to the *Senhora* just as the hawsers were being unlashd from the cleats. “Cutting it a bit fine, aren’t you, Master Cawlens?” Captain Machado asked.

“Not really,” Raff laughed. “Unlike some of your passengers, I could have caught up anytime while you were still in the harbor. You saw how I guided the ship out of the last few ports? Imagine how fast I can make a dinghy move.”

“Does that make a difference?” the captain asked.

“A big one,” Raff assured him. “Well, we have a nice wide channel here and not too many ships in the harbor. I imagine we’ll be under sail in less than an hour.”

“The wind is favorable,” Machado replied. “We’ll be raising a jib or two as soon as you clear us of the dock.”

They made two more brief stops as they made their way down the coast before running into rough weather. The captain decided to stay in the port of Tonal for a few days until it had blown over. Tonal sat almost directly on the equator and was not normally reputed to extended bouts of storminess, but there were exceptions to everything, Raff knew, and he and Em took the opportunity to show the Bastons features of everyday life in Lower Maggo.

“Maggo is a large colony by anyone’s standards,” Raff told them, “and your stop, Faless, is a few hundred miles away yet, but there are certain similarities among the towns all along the coast. The major differences will be among the natives with whom you’ll have to deal from time to time, but most of the Cracian colonial towns are pretty much the same, at least on this continent.”

“The food doesn’t seem exotic here at all,” Violette noted on their second meal in Tonal together.

“Well, colonists tend to bring as much of their homes with them as they can,” Em told her, “and one of the easiest such bits of home to carry are recipes. I think you’ll notice small differences, but on the whole food in the colonial towns will be similar to food in Crace.”

“But even as we traveled southward in Crace, the food was very different,” Violette pointed out.

“And you’ll find those same sorts of differences here,” Em assured her. I imagine this inn’s cook came from somewhere in or near Carais. So the food tastes like home. Elsewhere the recipes may have been adapted from those of Bur or Salus. If you want something truly exotic, however, try sharing meals with the natives you’ll no doubt hire to work on your plantation.”

“Will I want to eat with them?” Violette wondered, exposing a strong prejudicial streak.

“People are very much the same everywhere, Violette,” Em told her firmly. “Customs, foods, personal values and languages differ, but when you cut through all of it, we all want to be treated with respect. Don’t get obsessed with the notion of station. It doesn’t really mean very much. I should know. Treat the people who work for you like people you respect and they will treat you the same way. I think most of the problems colonies have from time to time with indigenous populations is that the colonists look down on the indigenes. The natives are different; their lifestyle may seem primitive to you, but they value those lifestyles no less than you value your own. Don’t forget that, ever.”

“I won’t, Emblem,” Violette seems to shrink visibly back from Em’s lecture. “I promise.”

“If so, I think you will do very well in Maggo,” Em told her.

Finally the weather cleared and they made their way further down the coast to Saddra. They entered the harbor there on a hot and hazy morning that promised all the comfort of an oven by midday. There was barely any wind and Raff and Em both supplemented the *Senhora*’s velocity as she entered the port.

“This is horrid,” Violette complained as her clothing stuck to her body uncomfortably.

“You need to wear lighter fabrics, Vi,” Em suggested, “and less clothing too. This isn’t Carais, you know. You don’t have to wear so many layers and if you are going to continue to wear long sleeves, you need cotton or linen that isn’t woven so tightly. Clothing has to breathe in the tropics.”

“Bare my arms?” Violette asked, scandalized. “In public?”

“It’s practical,” Em told her.

“Tobie would never approve,” Violette replied.

“I notice Tobie has rolled his sleeves up,” Em commented dryly.

“That’s different,” Violette replied. “He’s a man.”

“And you’re both in the tropics right now. Well, don’t take my word for it,” Em told her. “See how you feel about it when you get to your new home. There are two sorts of colonial women, I’ve noticed. Those who cling to all the conventions of home even when those conventions are meaningless or even bad for the health such as this might be. Too much heat can kill you, in case you don’t know. The others keep a clever eye on how the native people cope and adapt new customs from them. Remember, the natives have been here since before anyone thought to record history. They know a lot more about this land and how to live in it than you do.”

“You always lecture me so,” Violette complained.

“Only because I do care what happens to you, Vi,” Em replied. “Besides, the lecture will be ending soon. Our next port of call will be Faless. You’ll get off the ship there while I will continue on to Muenta. However, maybe some day I’ll have a chance to visit you in Maggo and you can tell me where my advice was wrong.”

“Will you visit?” Violette asked.

“If I can,” Em assured her, “and we can always write to one another. When you get settled, send me a note with your address through the nearest Wayfarers’ Hall. It will find me, wherever I am at the time and I promise to reply. I’m sure my letters will find you sooner than yours will me.”

Seven

The *Senhora de Aldoa* glided smoothly into her berth at the end of the long wharf in Saddra. The port, unlike most of those in this part of the world, boasted a pilot who was necessary because the harbor channel was treacherously narrow, but with two decades of experience he was able to guide the brig in until she came to a smooth halt just beside the wharf.

Ethan Geston was disappearing into the town with his two bodyguards even before the *Senhora*’s hands had finished lashing her to the cleats.

“Why is he in so much of a hurry?” Tobie wondered. He and Violette were observing from the brig’s rail beside Em.

“Off to conduct the business he came here to do,” Em replied evasively.

“Do you think he’s hurrying so that he may be finished before we’re ready to leave again?” Violette asked.

"I think he's trying to hurry out of sheer greed," Em told her. "The one thing I can assure you of is no matter what means he uses to leave Saddra, it will not be the *Senhora*."

"How can you be so sure, Master L'Oranne Cawlens?" Tobie asked.

"The *Senhora* is not a slave ship, Mister Baston," Em explained. She had given up much earlier on getting him to call her by her given name. "We're fairly certain that Geston is a slaver. He came down here with almost nothing but a large bag of money, hired a couple of thugs and is now rushing off to... well, if I'm right, to pay a tribe of the natives to raid nearby villages of other tribes for men, women and children who can then be sold into slavery. At one time I would have said they would end up in Varana, but the colonial government has outlawed the importation of slaves, but there are still plenty of other markets available."

"He might not be dealing in slavery," Tobie argued.

"No, he might merely be smuggling gold, gems or precious artifacts out of the colony," Em replied. "Not as morally objectionable, I'll admit, but just as illegal. In either case this ship is headed in the wrong direction so he won't be returning. However, the main reason we think he's a slaver and not a smuggler, is that he only bought one-way passage from Carais."

"So did we," Tobie pointed out.

"Yes, but he isn't a colonist," Em replied. "A smuggler would have bought return passage; not necessarily on the same ship or with the same guides, but through the Guild nonetheless. A slaver wouldn't. Not only would he get caught for certain that way, but the Guild won't guide slave ships. He fully intends to leave this land by other means."

"Isn't there any way to stop him?" Violette asked.

"We're working on it," Em assured her. Raff came up on deck, waved at her, and hurried off into the city. "Raff's going to follow their trail," she explained. "In the meantime I need to stop in the local Guildhall. I do hope you'll excuse me. We'll only be in town for two days so there really isn't any time to waste."

She hurried off the wharf and turned right at its end before continuing on. She hadn't been in Saddra before, but she knew the Guild's hall was two blocks up from Harbor Street. The hall was no more than a storefront office here, but she found it easily enough.

"May I help you, Madame," a young man asked as she entered the front office.

"Master Emblem Cawlens," she introduced herself, "en route from Carais to Muenta."

"Yes, Master Cawlens," the man nodded respectfully. "Apprentice Dupres at your service. Master Gerarde is not in at the moment, but is there anything I can do for you?"

"I mean no offense," Em replied, "but, I'm afraid my business requires Master Gerarde's attention."

"He's currently out in the Wild, Master. Does it involve the communiqué from Kadar?" Dupres asked.

"It does," Em confirmed. "It got here ahead of us after all, then."

“Yes, ma’am. That’s why Master Gerarde is in the Wild. He went to get someone who can positively identify the man you call Ethan Geston. From the description we believe he may really be Jean Marten Parice.”

“And who is that?” Em asked.

“A known slaver, as you and your husband suspected, at least if it is him. His two companions could be anyone, Master Gerarde tells me. There are a dozen known criminals who match their descriptions and still more men who have never done much more than gotten into bar fights.”

“You seem remarkably well-informed for an apprentice, if you don’t mind my saying so,” Em observed.

“There’s only the master and me in the office on a regular basis, Master Cawlens,” Dupres replied. “That’s why he had to go out personally and leave me in charge. I should be a journeyman by next year though.”

“I didn’t mean to disparage you or your abilities,” Em assured him. “I just have not run into many apprentices who were even capable of running a Guild office.”

“Well, it’s not much of an office, ma’am.” Dupres admitted modestly, “and we don’t usually have much traffic come through here, although we have been short of journeymen to act as guides lately.”

“Send a request to Taundon,” Em suggested. “If you don’t ask, you don’t get, you know.”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re right. I’ll talk to Master Gerarde about it,” Dupres told her.

Just then the door opened and Raff walked in. “I followed him to a tavern on the north side of the town,” he announced after Em introduced him to Apprentice Dupres. “He got a room there, so I’m fairly certain he’ll be here for another day or two.”

“He’s probably waiting for a guide into the Wild, sir,” Dupres told him.

“We ought to be able to put a stop to rogue wayfarers,” Raff growled.

“They aren’t wayfarers, sir,” Dupres replied, “not real ones. They’re mostly natives with the talent.”

“Well, I didn’t think they were Guild members,” Raff snapped. “When is Master Gerarde due back?”

“Tonight or tomorrow, sir,” Dupres replied. “Would you like me to arrange for a room for you and your wife?”

“We’ll stay on the *Senhora*,” Raff decided. “We’re only here for a couple days as well. Damn! I hope your Master Gerarde really will be back by then. Why don’t you have any journeymen assigned to this office?” he demanded.

“We have several who work a circuit of offices in this part of Maggo, Master Cawlens,” Dupres explained. “They’re all out right now and I don’t know when they’ll be back.”

“Does that happen a lot?” Raff asked, his flash of anger slipping away as quickly as it had appeared.

“Too often, according to Master Gerarde, sir,” Dupres replied. “We have an agreement with the other

nearby offices to try to keep our journeymen evenly distributed, but you know the Guild has a policy against guides traveling on their own.”

“Damned Guild stinginess,” Raff shook his head in frustration, “but port town offices are always more active than the inland ones. Em, remind me to write a report and send it up to Taundon. This sort of thing is unacceptable. Master Gerarde shouldn’t have had to go out himself. Apprentice, I’d like you to do me a favor.”

“If I can, sir, it would be my honor, sir,” Dupres told him anxiously.

“It’s not that great an honor,” Raff laughed at the apprentice’s eagerness. “Just let me know when Gerarde gets back into town. I’ll either be on the *Senhora* or around town. If I’m not on board, just leave a message and I’ll scoot up here as soon as I can.”

“Yes, sir,” Dupres agreed.

“We’ll also stop in here if we’re in town, just in case,” Em added.

It was just past midnight that Raff and Em were awakened by an insistent knocking on their cabin door. Raff nearly fell out of bed and stumbled over to open the cabin door. “Master Cawleys!” Dupres told him breathlessly. “Master Gerarde has just returned! He says he will wait up for you unless you would rather wait until morning.”

“No, we could lose Geston if we do that,” Raff decided. “Tell him, I’m on my way, please. I’ll follow along as soon as I’m dressed.”

“I should go too,” Em remarked as he closed the door.

“No need, dear,” Raff told her. “We won’t be able to do anything until Geston leaves his room. It’s always possible we’re wrong about him, you know. If so, it wouldn’t be fair to go bursting into his room.”

“Assuming he’s still there,” Em replied.

“He was a few hours ago,” Raff remarked. “This would have been a silly time to enter the Bush. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Be careful!” Em warned him. She was unable to get back to sleep after that, however, and eventually lit a lamp and read until dawn.

When Raff still did not return after the Bastons woke up, Em suggested they get breakfast at one of the harbor-side inns. They had learned during the trip that while many such establishments were rough haunts used by sailors and fishermen to let off steam, there were always one or two that catered more to travelers who were only looking for a good meal or a quiet drink. Such places usually cost more than the others, but Em found them worth the additional price. The Bastons, traveling on a shoestring so as to save as much of their dwindling reserves as possible for unforeseen expenses once they reached their new home, had at first tried to frequent only the less expensive places, but Violette’s discomfort soon persuaded Tobie that the moderate extra expense was one he would have to accommodate. Emblem privately thought he was even more uneasy in the rougher pubs and taverns than his wife, but was determined to put up a brave front for her sake.

Meanwhile even this distraction was not enough to take Em's mind off Raff's absence. It was silly of her, she knew. Over the course of their nine-year marriage and especially over their long courtship, they had been separated on numerous occasions. She knew this time was really no different, but every so often she felt a flash of worry course through her when they were working on separate projects. Emblem did not believe in precognition, but she did worry that the day would come when they were both needed but only one of them would be on hand. She had just decided to leave the remaining portion of her breakfast untouched and go looking for Raff, when he walked through the inn's door.

"Well, that's taken care of," he announced, sitting down at the table between Em and Violette.

"You arrested him?" Tobie asked.

"Me? No, but the colonial police did. It appears our Mister Geston has broken no laws in Saddra, but is wanted for bribery and extortion in a number of towns just inland from here. One of his companions, that tall blond one, did try to defend him and give him a chance to make a break for the door. He had a primed pistol in his hand as he came down the stairs, but he was a lousy shot and managed to miss the floor and everyone on it."

"You had something to do with that?" Em asked.

"No, my attention was on Geston. I didn't know his guard was there until the gun went off," Raff admitted to Em's horror. "He was just that bad. Turns out the local constables knew him very well indeed. He killed one of their men on his last trip to Saddra. Frankly, I'm surprised he survived this encounter. The other one jumped out of the second story window of the inn and promptly broke his leg."

"So they just gave up quietly?" Tobie asked.

"Not hardly," Raff laughed. "They each fought like devils in their own way. They just never had a chance and when Geston tried to run out the door, he discovered that master wayfarers can do a lot more than guide travelers."

"You were showing off again," Em accused him.

"I was," Raff confirmed.

"What did you do?" Violette asked.

"Well, it's a bit technical to describe, but you know how when you walk out of the town and into the Wild, if you keep walking, you'll eventually come right back to where you started?" Raff asked.

"I've never actually tried it," Violette replied.

"I have," Tobie answered. "It's a boy's game. We would dare each other to try it and see how long it would take to return."

"Every so often a large enough group of boys – usually fifteen to twenty or so – try that stunt together and discover that the larger the party, the longer they will remain beyond the boundaries of their town," Em cut in. "When the group is large enough, they effectively establish a small town of their own and can't return without wayfarer guidance."

"Does that happen often?" Violette asked.

“Several times a year,” Em replied.

“It’s a good example, however, of why armies need wayfarers,” Raff added. “Anyway, one of the little tricks a master wayfarer can accomplish is what we call the summoning of the Wild. In effect what I did was to cancel the stability of this town in the immediate vicinity of Geston so that every time he tried to leave the inn, he found himself running right back in through the door. He got off easy, I could have done much worse. After a few go arounds like that he gave up. I doubt we’ll be hearing much from him. Too bad he probably won’t get convicted of slavery.”

“Why not?” Violette asked.

“Convictions take proof,” Raff explained. “I think the constables would like to be able to prove it, but the natives who colluded with Geston in the past aren’t likely to admit it. They never do and since we can’t very well track down the people he sold into slavery, the worst sentence he is likely to get is about five years. But that could be as lethal as a hanging. If he doesn’t keep his past a secret, his fellow inmates will kill him themselves. A lot of those men are natives, you see, and there’s not a native tribe that hasn’t been raided by slavers. Well, enough of him, we have our own lives to live, don’t we?”

Eight

Raff and Em bade farewell to the Bastons in their next port of call. The ship only stayed in Faless for ten hours at which time they dropped off and took on several bags full of mail. Two new passengers, a priest and a small girl in his care, headed for the colony of Narvo, also boarded at Faless. Em was immediately suspicious, but after getting to know them reminded herself that sometimes people really are exactly who they say they are. She decided that the incident with Geston had just made her overly suspicious. Two days later as they were sailing along the coast of Teltoa, however, her concerns became far more immediate.

It was Raff who noticed the tension building among the crew members first and he asked Captain Machado about it. “I don’t like the looks of that ship,” he told Raff.

Raff looked out beyond the *Senhora*’s stern and saw another ship a little over a mile behind them. It was difficult to tell at this angle, but Raff thought it had three masts, the foremost of which was square rigged and the other two lateen-rigged. “Looks like a xebec,” he opined. “Smaller and faster than the *Senhora*. How long has she been following us?”

“The last three bells,” the captain replied. Because no one had yet managed to invent a mechanical time piece that would measure accurately on a ship, time on board was measured with a half-hour glass. Every time the sand ran through the glass and it was tipped over to start again, a bell was sounded to mark the change. Eight such changes marked the end of a sailor’s watch, so Raff had no trouble translating that into “an hour and a half. “So far they’ve been keeping pace with us, but she’s a much faster ship and not loaded down as we are. She should have caught up to us and passed us long ago.”

“So they’re in no hurry,” Raff remarked lightly. “It’s early yet. Let’s see how this plays out. I take it there has been trouble in these waters lately?”

“Aye,” the captain replied tiredly. “It’s been getting worse the last few years. The Colony of Teltoa doesn’t have an ocean-going navy to speak of and what few boats and ships they do have concentrate

on policing the Teltoa River .”

“That’s a big job all by itself,” Raff commented. “Perhaps Dix should send a few men-of-war south to patrol.”

“They should, but that’s not helping us at the moment,” the captain replied.

“No, and piracy is a growing problem in the colonies on both sides of the Dark Ocean ,” Raff noted. “They use native wayfarers, often by force, or sometimes they just find someone with the talent who has not been trained. As long as the coast can still be seen an untrained wayfarer is sufficient to keep you safe at sea in the Wild.”

“They can’t use a compass that way,” Captain Machado pointed out.

“No, but they don’t need one,” Raff replied. “Their greatest danger is getting stuck in a fog bank, and even then if the crew has half a brain between them, they’ll just drop anchor and wait for clear weather. Of course, that’s why you rarely hear of pirate ships crossing the ocean. They almost never have a trained wayfarer unless it’s a colonial indigene. Of course, there aren’t many of them and the slavers snap most of them up. They really need to be able to cross oceans for the most part.”

“A lot of pirates do both,” Captain Machado pointed out. “It all depends on whose ship they steal.”

“Really?” Raff asked. Pirates and slavers were just a part of the world to him, It had never occurred to him to wonder where the ships they used came from.

“Before the Wayfarers’ Guild issued its policy against slavery, slave ships were owned by honest merchants. All right, not particularly moral merchants, but they were breaking no laws,” Captain Machado explained. “When your Guild changed its policy, most civilized nations followed suit and outlawed the transportation of slaves. About half the colonies still allow the practice, but none here on the Southern Continent, so there’s no one working that trade legally any longer.

“Also, you didn’t think pirates had enough money to afford to buy ships, did you? There are some along the northern reaches of the Eastern Ocean who use large boats that are oar and sail-driven. Those are fairly cheap to build, but brigs, xebecs and other ships are expensive. It’s a lot cheaper to steal one than buy it, you know.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Raff admitted. “I just never thought about that side of it. And I suppose if you’ve already decided on piracy, stealing a ship is one of the smaller crimes you’re likely to commit.”

“That xebec isn’t all that much of a ship.” Captain Machado told Raff. “I doubt they have more than six guns on board, but we don’t have any.”

“No, but you have me,” Raff replied. “I could stop them from here, but until we know for certain they really are pirates, that would be wrong.”

“Fair enough,” the captain replied. “They are flying Teltoan colors after all and could be out here on legitimate business.”

They continued on down the coast, keeping an eye on the ship behind them, but nothing changed for the remainder of the morning. Early in the afternoon, however the sailors on the xebec put on additional sail and the gap between the two ships began to close. The xebec had narrowed the distance between the

two ships to four hundred yards when a second ship appeared from out of the haze ahead of them.

“One mast,” the captain commented, looking through his spyglass, “with two square sails and a jib in front and a large sail attached to a boom in the back. Too much sail for a craft its size if you ask me.”

“Sounds like a Green Lands Navy Cutter,” Raff opined. “If so, she has a very deep draught to offset all that sail. What’s she doing down here, though?”

“She could be headed north from Sogarland,” the captain replied, referring to a Green Lands colony at the far end of the Southern Continent.

“If that’s the case, our backdoor neighbor is likely to turn aside any time now,” Raff remarked.

The xebec continued to close in on the *Senhora*, however, but it was the approaching cutter that turned broadside and fired her guns first. Two puffs of smoke blossomed from the side of the cutter, both splashing wide of the *Senhora*, causing Raff and the captain to think they had been aiming at the xebec. The xebec, however, came along side and fired a single canon at the *Senhora*. That shot scored by sending a ball crashing through the side of the brig’s hull.

“A little help, Master Wayfarer,” the captain requested tightly, “if you don’t mind.”

“Right. Em!” Raff shouted to his wife. “See about the damage to our hull!” She nodded and ran to the portside gunwales. Then the cutter fired again, but Raff was ready for it and he reached forth with tendrils of Wild energy and redirected the ball shots toward the xebec. Raff’s aim was better than that of the gunners on the cutter and both shots struck the xebec. They could hear screams from the xebec, now fifty yards off the *Senhora*’s port beam. A moment later, flames burst forth from the hold and the people on the *Senhora* heard a loud whuffing sound.

Raff then turned his attention toward the cutter. They were now close enough that the pirates on board had stopped trying to load the guns and were preparing to board the brig. Raff once more bent the Wild energy all around them and used it to warp the planks of the cutter’s hull. With water rapidly filling its hull, the cutter turned and tried to head toward shore.

The xebec had fallen far behind the *Senhora* when it suddenly exploded. “Are we turning around to pick up survivors?” Raff asked the captain.

“That would be a good way to give them a new ship,” Captain Machado replied. “We have no way to hold them captive safely. Taking captives is a luxury only military ships have.”

“Well, I can’t say they would have come to our rescue either,” Raff shrugged. He looked over at the stricken cutter, now also to their stern, and saw that it was very low in the water and listing heavily toward port. Men were jumping overboard into the warm tropical seas while a few kept their heads and deployed a life boat.

“Master Cawlens!” a sailor called from the starboard gunwale where Em was leaning out over the water, held back from falling off the ship only by two crewmen. Raff rushed over to see what had happened. When he got there he realized why Em hadn’t called him herself. She was too busy, keeping the *Senhora* from sinking as well. The shot from the xebec had smashed a hole at the waterline of the brig and Em was using her talent to bail out the hold as rapidly as it was filling.

Raff, knowing he would be better at that than Em, took over and was able to keep water from going

through the hole at all. "I'll only be able to keep this up for a short while," he told Em, "I need you to find a way to patch that hole."

"Right," Em gasped as she was dragged back to the deck and started looking around for something to close the hole with. She spotted some of the debris from the xebec and used her talent to drag a section of the xebec's hull toward the *Sehora*. "We'll need some hot tar," she told the crewmen nearest her who raced off to comply with her request.

Then she bent herself to shaping the wood into a patch that would fit over the cannon ball hole. The wooden planking was all wrong at first and she used Wild energy to warp it into the proper shape. She needed to dive over the gunwale for the next step, but once in the water, she took the wooden patch and held it up against the hull of the *Senhora*. Finally she encouraged the wooden fibers of the patch and the ship's hull to interweave with each other. In effect, she organically welded the two pieces together.

"How's that?" she asked Raff.

"Well, it isn't perfect, but the tar will make it so," Raff replied, "and I can hold on indefinitely now."

"Good," Em replied. "I don't suppose someone could throw me a line or something?" A moment later three crewmen, who had been watching her work, lowered a rope ladder over the side and she climbed back up on board the ship.

Looking around, she saw the survivors from the Xebec clustered around various sized chunks of debris, although some were fighting with each other for space in a pair of life boats. The cutter had slipped beneath the waves while she was working and the men from that ship were either in or swimming next to the single boat from it. Here and there were various sized pieces of flotsam with men clinging to them, most of whom appeared to be attempting to swim toward the distant shore. It was several miles away and she wasn't sure any of them would make it, but as she started directing men to seal the remaining leaks below with tar, she found she didn't much care if any of the pirates survived.

Catin

One

Pangam was not on friendly terms with Dix at that time and the makeshift patch appeared to be holding well, so there was no need to try to make port in the Dixan colony of Teltoa. Instead, they continued on to Muenta, arriving in that harbor a few days after their encounter with the pirates.

As the *Senhora de Aldoa* came to rest along side a long pier at the west end of the harbor there was no sign of the trouble in Muenta that had caused Raff's and Em's journey to this distant colonial town. Together they bid farewell to Captain Machado and the others they had come to know aboard the ship and headed uphill toward where the Wayfarer's Guildhall was supposed to be.

Instead of the local Guild offices, however, they found a land agent at the address at which they had been instructed to report. It was the heat of the afternoon and nearly all businesses in town had been closed. They would reopen around sunset and stay open late into the night, but for now, Raff and Em were left without an office to which they could report.

“Pardon my intrusion,” a passing constable told them as he approached, “but you two look lost.”

“It’s a unique experience for us,” Raff laughed, “but it appears we’ve been misled. Could you tell us where the Wayfarers’ Hall is?”

“Yes, sir,” the constable nodded. “You were not misled, I’m sure. At least not deliberately. The new hall is seven blocks that way at the corner of Bread Street and Weavers Lane . The Guild just moved in two weeks ago.”

“Thank you, Constable,” Em smiled.

“My pleasure, Ma’am,” the constable assured her. “I’m more or less headed in that direction. I would be honored to show you two the way.”

“You’re very kind,” Raff replied.

“Are you new to Muenta, sir?” the constable asked as they started walking again.

“Our first trip here,” Raff confirmed. “Seems like a quiet town so far.”

“Generally so, sir,” the constable agreed, “although some of the bars down in the harbor district get rowdy at night.”

“That’s predictable at least,” Raff chuckled. “So has there been any trouble in town here? Something out of the ordinary, perhaps?”

“No, sir,” the constable shook his head. “I ought to know. I’m out on the streets everyday. As I said sometimes the sailors get rowdy and we have to haul a few off to gaol for a day or two, although generally we let them go once they have sobered up. Sometimes we let them go even before if their captain or another ship’s officer comes by to collect them.”

“Doesn’t that just encourage them to get drunk again next time they’re in town?” Em asked. “I mean they know they’ll just be released after a brief stay in gaol.”

“After their fine has been paid, and I understand their captains often dock their pay well in excess of what we charge should they have to be bailed out. It is not a free ride, ma’am,” the constable explained.

The Guild Hall in Muenta was a sprawling affair on the border of the business and residential areas of the town. It had been built with the idea of catching any stray breeze and had a large central courtyard surrounded by the rest of the two-story building, making it look like the upper-class houses in the area although much larger. Raff and Em thanked the constable for his guidance and went on in to report.

Master Marko Danicci was a thin man in his thirties. As many of the local heads of office, he was a master by rank, but not necessarily by ability. Heads of local offices were usually picked more for their political talents than their abilities as wayfarers and the true masters rarely referred to such men by their titles when they were not present. However, Master Danicci was a better wayfarer than most of the men permanently stationed to his guildhall. That too was necessary to maintain a semblance of discipline.

On hearing they had entered the hall, Danicci had them sent directly to his office rather than allowing them to settle into a guest suite, as courtesy would normally be extended to visiting masters. Raff

understood it as a sign of his desperation. "I'm glad you're here at last," Danicci told Raff and Em after they had been seated.

"We hurried down as fast as our ship could carry us," Raff replied easily. "There were a few delays along the way. This wouldn't be about pirates off the coast of Teltoa, would it?"

"Pirates?" Danicci asked, confused. "No. Why would I worry about the conditions in Teltoa? I would think that's the job of the men in Teltoa, isn't it?"

"Pirates are everyone's concern," Raff replied, "but let's leave that aside. Why did you call for us?"

"The Cata are on the warpath," Danicci explained.

"The indigenes?" Em noted questioningly. "I thought the colonists had treaties with them."

"We did," Danicci replied, "but they are breaking them now."

"It's been my experience that most indigenous populations do not break their treaties with colonists until the colonists themselves have proven they are incapable of living up to the deals they made. So what have the Catin colonists been doing to upset the Cata?"

Danicci looked back and forth between Raff and Em. "Well, I suppose, there have been some minor encroachments on lands that traditionally the Cata consider their own," Danicci replied.

"You suppose?" Raff echoed. "Have the colonists been grabbing more than the treaties allowed or not?"

"Well, that depends on how you read the actual treaty agreements," Danicci replied carefully.

"Master Danicci!" Raff reprimanded him tightly. "We are not lawyers nor is this a legal debate. Furthermore, you may have forgotten that the Guild is supposed to be neutral. We are supposed to be fair and unbiased judges. We are most especially not here to take a protagonistic stance for one side or the other in disputes between the natives and colonists. Now did the colonists encroach on tribal lands or did they not?"

"They did," Danicci admitted.

"Of course they did," Em told him acidly. "It's always easier to steal an established stability than to carve one out of the Wild from scratch."

"It happens in other colonies," Danicci retorted, "not just this one."

"And natives rebel in other colonies where it happens," Raff replied. "It's well established that when one person breaks a contract the other party feels he has been hurt by the action. Some of the colonists may be too greedy to remember that, but Wayfarers see it all the time. So is that why we are here to broker a new peace agreement?"

"Well, I had hoped..." Danicci began.

"That isn't going to be easy," Raff warned him. "The colony is going to have to make reparations one way or other. So what was the actual incident that infuriated the Cata?"

"I don't know," Danicci admitted.

"You don't know?" Raff asked. "Didn't you at least try to find out for yourself. Didn't you go and talk to the Cata elders or the Chieftain or whoever is in charge?"

"As master of the hall I am required to stay in Muenta," Danicci replied with a shred of dignity.

"There are exceptions to that policy," Raff told him. "An insurrection between colonists and natives is one of those exceptions. You could have solved the problem by yourself when this first started, but now it's been going on for weeks or months I imagine."

"No helping that now," Em decided. "How have the Cata been responding to these incursions?"

"They've been attacking colonial settlements," Danicci replied. "A month ago they even staged an attack on Muenta, not two miles from here."

"Strange," Raff mused, "I wonder why the constable didn't mention that when I asked."

"He probably didn't want to alarm you," Danicci replied. "There were no colonial deaths. There haven't been any so far in the entire colony, in fact, thank God!"

"Excuse me?" Raff asked menacingly. "Did I hear that correctly? The Cata have been staging peaceful protests and you called not one but two master wayfarers down here to handle it?"

"They weren't all that peaceful," Danicci replied. "The Cata came in from out of the Wild and started threatening colonists with their spears. I'm sure there would have been many deaths had the colonists not been armed with superior weapons."

"No deaths among the colonists," Raff mused, "and how many Cata have been killed?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Danicci replied. "Does it matter?"

"Are you that ignorant?" Em asked scathingly. "Of course it matters. Don't you know anything about the behavior of the indigenes in Catin? Did you think the Cata are such incompetent warriors they don't know how to use those spears? For that matter did you really think none of them had guns?"

"Madame, it is illegal to sell guns to the natives in Catin," Danicci told her sternly.

"Which only raises the price for those natives who care to purchase one," Em shot back, keeping a tight rein on her anger. "If the Cata have not killed any colonists, then that was obviously not their intention."

"Our weapons are more formidable than theirs, Madame Cawls," Danicci replied.

"You haven't been listening," Em accused. "You also haven't been doing your job very well and gotten to know very much about the Cata. It's a good thing I did have time to do a bit of research along the way then."

"Warfare among the Cata, as it is for many of the tribes on the Southern Continent is defined by a fairly rigidly prescribed set of rules," Em continued. "Before going to war, the Cata leaders will first attempt to find peaceful redress for any wrongs done to their people. Failing this, they will then embark on what one researcher refers to as 'threatening behavior.' It is very common for two groups of warriors to stand

within shouting distance of each other and call insults back and forth. They may keep this up for hours. It's a matter of letting off steam and some of the time, this is all they need to do in order to feel vindicated. If that's not enough they will start making threatening gestures with their weapons. This often escalates all the way up to one or more warriors actually throwing spears toward the other side. Once again, this is not meant to actually harm anyone. It is considered very bad form to actually hit someone with a weapon this early in the procedure. It is very common for a so-called war to end right there with only one spear thrown by either side. The spears are left where they land and both armies walk away. This does not make them friends, but it does put an end to hostilities.

"Repetitions of such encounters, however, will come continually closer to actual violence," Em remarked. "The next step is to try to actually hit an enemy warrior. When that happens, it is usually the end of fighting for the day. At this point there still hasn't usually been anyone killed and after several days of this, nearly all warfare comes to an end. Oh, and sides alternate as to which side takes an injury each day while it is going on. In some rare occurrences, however, nothing short of a real all-out war will suffice in which case both sides really will be trying to kill the other, enslave the others' women and children and so forth. It doesn't happen very often, not between Cata tribes anyway, and only after prolonged cases in which the lesser measures proved insufficient to resolve their differences."

"Of course," added Raff, "the rules are often different when encountering non-Cata tribes, but it sounds to me like they were giving the colonists the benefit of the doubt and handling the matter by their own rules of engagement. Congratulations," he added bitterly, "your colonists have managed to give them a lesson in 'civilized' warfare. No doubt, in the future they will understand they can skip past all the tedious preliminaries and cut straight to the fun stuff."

"What I need to know, however," Raff continued, "is just what set them off? Why are they attacking and didn't they present their grievances to the colonial governor before doing so?"

"They may have," Danicci admitted.

"May have?" Raff echoed.

"Oh all right. Yes a party of Cata elders and their chieftain came to meet with the governor," Danicci admitted.

"And?" Raff prompted him.

"Governor General Lorenz ignored them. Left them waiting on his doorstep and refused to speak with them," Danicci told them.

"I take it his appointment had nothing to do with his reputed wisdom," Raff muttered angrily. "Why are you defending him?"

"I'm not," Danicci protested.

"You're making us pull this out of you one piece at a time," Emblem told him. "Where do your loyalties lie, Master Danicci?"

"With the Guild, Master L'oranne Cawlens!" he shot back hotly.

"Then start doing your job," she snapped at him. "You aren't here to ease the life of the governor, you know, no matter how often he invites you to dinner." The look on Danicci's face proved she had struck

the heart with that shot.

“I, uh...” Danicci began. “The governor made a mistake. I told him that at the time.”

“Not strongly enough, I dare say,” Em told him. “You do realize that he needs us more than we need him, don’t you? Do you have any notion what he would do if he couldn’t find a wayfarer to guide colonists anywhere in Catin?”

“He would have me shot,” Danicci replied instantly.

“It would mean his own death and if he doesn’t know it, I’ll be glad to let him know,” Raff replied. “If I were feeling particularly vindictive I would personally drag him back to Pangam and throw him at the king’s feet. Either way, he wouldn’t survive the experience.”

“You wouldn’t!” Danicci gasped.

“Of course I would,” Raff laughed harshly. “It wouldn’t be the first time either. Did the governor threaten you? Well, if you do not feel up to handling the matter yourself, I suggest writing a letter to His Majesty then. Point out to him that a public apology is in order or you will be forced to suspend all Wayfarers’ Guild activity in Catin. Send a copy of the letter to Taundon. The Guild will back you up and, trust me, King John David will have a new governor general in place as fast as a ship can get him here.”

“Exactly,” Em agreed. “Why the hell did this Lorenz man ignore the Cata emissaries, though?”

“Well, you know,” Danicci began. “They’re primitives. Their warriors are no match for the colonial army.”

“Except that they outnumber all the colonists by at least ten to one,” Em pointed out. “Didn’t anyone think of that?”

“Besides,” Raff added, “they may have started out with their traditional spears, but as we agreed earlier, the Cata have guns at their disposal should they decide to use them and they can always get more. They can raid towns, strip the bodies of enemy dead or buy them outright from traders from other colonies. It may have already been too late for us before you even called for help.”

“Maybe not,” Danicci replied. “It’s been quiet for the last two weeks since I let it be known you were on your way. The Cata are waiting to hear what a master wayfarer has to say. They are willing to allow you to arbitrate negotiations with the colony.”

“How about the colony?” Raff asked.

“They’ll go along with what we tell them, you said so yourself,” Danicci reminded Raff.

“Yes, they will, or at least the new governor general will,” Raff replied.

“Do we really need to demand his resignation?” Danicci asked.

“Do you honestly think he’s learned his lesson?” Raff pressed. “It’s not likely. If he was foolish enough to allow it to get this far I doubt the Cata will be satisfied by any agreement that does not include his resignation.”

“They would accept a public apology and other reparations,” Em put in.

“Possibly,” Raff nodded, “but could they trust the governor to abide by a new treaty if he so readily broke the original one? I wouldn’t, nor could I advise the Cata to do so in good conscience either.”

Two

Raff and Em met briefly with Governor General Lorenz before leaving Muenta to seek out the Cata chieftain. “Well, that was a waste of time,” Raff commented as he and Em checked the cinches on their horses’ saddles. Lorenz had denied any knowledge of problems with the Cata previous to the recent raids.

“We had to at least get his side of the story, Raff,” Em replied. “I didn’t completely trust Danicci’s story and I would have hated to ruin the governor’s career if it hadn’t been called for.”

“You’re right,” Raff agreed, “and I thought Danicci was too much of a whiner to trust completely. He was giving us the straight story, but I’ll bet he doesn’t actually send that letter as I suggested.”

“Well, let’s see how well we do with the Cata,” Em suggested. “We may not actually need to topple the colonial government this time around.”

“That takes all the fun out of it,” Raff grumbled, mounting up.

There was no choice of transportations for them. Without knowing precisely where they were headed, there was also no way to know whether they would be following established routes or carving new ones of their own, so a cart or carriage was out of the question. In Crace and Pangam the Wild areas still had touches of civilization, but they were entering the true bush now where even the horses they were riding would eventually have to be left behind in one of the interior towns. For this leg of the journey, however, they would save time by riding.

They rode west out of Muenta and through the farming area that surrounded the large colonial town and finally beyond the area of stability and into the Wild. So far, they were still following a well-established colonial route. It had been forged nearly two centuries earlier by a team of master wayfarers. The forging of a new road was not merely a matter of power but of very fine control as well. A person with the potential of a master might create a path through the wild, but without the proper training it would be unstable. Such a path would only last a year or so but it would also be dangerous to the environment, and harmful to wild animals and Kenlienta. Kenlienta had reported a wide variety of illnesses after crossing raw paths created by untrained wayfarers, and wild animals have been found dead along such paths. In contrast, creatures of the Wild found properly created paths uncomfortable to cross, but they could do so without being harmed or suffering any long-term effects.

As they rode, Raff studied the path they were on as he often did. Most master wayfarers would make a habit of inspecting the paths they traveled, looking for signs of degradation. As paths through the Wild aged, they had a tendency to return to the Wild and, if not maintained, would begin to become unstable and potentially harmful not only to Wild creatures but humans who traveled along them as well. Raff was pleased to discover the path they were on was both stable and looking almost new to his wayfarer’s senses.

They reached the nearest town, Tirallo, three hours later and would have continued on toward a second

had there not been a crowd of people surrounding the town's administrative offices. Raff and Em rode up to the town hall and dismounted, hitching their mounts to a nearby post.

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" Raff asked a likely colonist near the edge of the crowd. The man was obviously well-to-do, dressed in a business suit of local manufacture, but obviously well-made, if a few seasons out of date, compared to what was being worn in Carais.

"There's been a killing on the northern outskirts of town," the gentleman replied. "We think he was attacked by the Cata."

"Really?" Raff asked. "That doesn't sound like them."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" the colonist protested. "They are savages. Human life means little to such creatures."

"I believe you would be surprised, sir," Raff told him. "I won't tell you that Cata warriors would never kill another man, but at a time like this it would have been more likely for a band of warriors to attack and they would have done so openly and tried to kill more than just one."

"How would you know that, sir?" the colonist asked.

"When they go to war, they want their enemies to know it. Just as civilized nations are supposed to send formal declarations of war, before actual hostilities, the Cata would not work so clandestinely," Raff opined. "Well, not without provocation, I suppose. If the victim attacked a Cata warrior, the Cata would have fought back, of course."

"Besides, aren't the Cata supposed to have agreed to wait for Wayfarer arbitration?" Em put in. "Maybe we should find out more about this."

"And who are you two?" the colonist asked. Several of the others echoed his question.

"We're the wayfarers who were sent in to arbitrate," Raff told them. Then without saying anything else, he and Em headed for the door of Town Hall as the assembled crowd parted to let them pass. *Being a wayfarer*, Raff mused silently, *does have some advantages!*

Town Hall in Tirallo was a simple two-floor building in the center of the town. As Raff and Em entered it, however, it turned out the halls of the building were nearly as filled with clerks as the street had been filled with citizens. Finding the right person to talk to, however, was not as simple as merely walking in and out. Of all the town officers, only the accountant was in his office. He suggested that Raff and Em try talking to the police.

The police confirmed that there had been a body found on the outskirts of the town, but that it was a stranger and that they were still attempting to identify it. Having gotten this far, Raff agreed to view the body and look for evidence that might only be visible to a master wayfarer even though he warned the police chief that such occurrences were rare.

The deceased had been a man in his late twenties with light skin and hair; definitely a colonist. The indigenous population had dark brown skin and black hair with entirely different facial features. "There's a lot of bruising here," Raff noted. "It looks to me like he was beaten to death."

"Some of these marks could have come out after death," the local doctor, who also served as coroner,

informed him, “but so far as I can tell I do believe he was beaten.”

“What’s that mark on his chest?” Em asked. “It looks like a burn except it’s a perfect circle.”

“He was wearing a bronze medallion of some sort,” the doctor told them. “it was the same size as that burn.” He opened a drawer and pulled out a shiny bronze circle on a leather thong. “If this had burned him, however, I would have expected the thong to be burned as well.”

“Unless the burn happened earlier and then he took to wearing the thing,” Em replied.

“Why would he do that?” Raff questioned. Em just shrugged. Raff took a careful look at the piece of bronze. It was flat and smooth on one side and held a circular knotwork design on the other. “I think this is Kenlientan in manufacture. I’ve seen that particular motif on objects in their villages.”

“Do you think he was attacked by a Kenlien, Raff?” Em asked.

“Possibly,” Raff replied slowly, “but normally I’d say that was even less likely than by the Cata. There are Ken who don’t like us, but they avoid us, and the Cata would have wanted us to know they did it. I also don’t like the fact that nobody here knew this man.”

“Perhaps he was a wayfarer?” Em suggested. “We should ask the local office to have a look.”

“Is there a local Guild office?” Raff asked the doctor. It turned out there was, but no wayfarers were stationed permanently in this town. The office was attached to the post office and people wishing to travel would register there and be notified when a wayfarer was in town. The postmaster came to look, however, but he too was unable to identify the man who had died.

By that time it was too late to travel on, so Raff and Em got a room in the town’s only inn and set out again early the next morning. They rode through two more villages the next day until they came to a town large enough to have a fully functional Guildhall. They reported what had happened in Tirallo and suggested to the senior journeyman in charge that someone should go there and make sure the man was not one of their own.

“I’ll handle that personally, Master Cawlens,” the man replied without hesitation. “I know all the wayfarers who work regularly in these parts. Most of the regulars would too, but this way I’ll know for certain.”

“He might have come from elsewhere, like we did, and was just passing through,” Raff warned him.

“That’s possible,” the journeyman nodded. “He had no papers on him?”

“None that we’re aware of,” Raff replied.

“I made a sketch of his face,” Em reported, handing a piece of paper to the local Guild office chief. Em had drawn it as though he had been still wearing the medallion in the hopes it would make him more recognizable. “Maybe it could be copied and sent around to the neighboring towns.”

“Good idea, Master Cawlens,” he replied to her. “I’ll drop it off at the printer on my way to Tirallo tomorrow morning. He can copy and print it with a description on a broadside. Maybe the man lived and was known in these parts after all. I can’t say I know him from the sketch, though. Still the only way to be sure is to go look for myself.”

Then the discussion turned to their current mission and the journeyman had advice for them there as well. “You can’t approach the Cata chieftain directly, you know.”

“We can’t?” Raff asked.

“No, it’s what’s called a taboo.”

“Taboo?” Em asked, unfamiliar with the word.

“It’s a word from some of the languages of the tribes of the Bright Ocean,” Raff explained. “Surely that isn’t the Cata word for it.”

“No, they don’t really have a word. The closest they use is ‘forbidden.’ That’s accurate enough, I suppose, but it lacks the social and religious overtones. The point is, you will not be allowed to approach him until he agrees to it and that includes going directly to his village.”

“I see,” Raff nodded, “so even though he knows I’m coming, I can’t just go and meet him?”

“That’s the shape of it, yes,” the office chief replied. “Oh they might forgive you for your ignorance, but it wouldn’t be making for good relations with the rest of the Guild, would it?”

“So what sort of hoops do we need to jump through?” Raff asked, “because if I get too many roadblocks, I’m likely to decide on a solution nobody will like but which they’ll all be forced to live with.”

His irritation showed visibly as though the room had gotten slightly darker behind him. The local wayfarer wouldn’t know what it meant, but Em did. Every so often, when annoyed Raff came close to losing control of the Wild power. In another master that would merely mean he couldn’t accomplish much until he had calmed down. Raff, however, was different that way. He had suffered a severe injury years earlier during an attack in the Dark Ocean. Ever since, his powers were far beyond most other masters, but his control was required to keep them from becoming destructive. Since retraining he had never quite lost control, but there had been several near misses. Em put her hand on his arm and he calmed down immediately and the room brightened once more.

“Well, it’s not so bad, I don’t think,” the local wayfarer replied, unaware of the exchange between Raff and Em. “You just need to approach one of their shamans. If you gain his assistance, you’ll be talking to the chieftain in no time. There’s a Cata village just a day’s walk to the south, in fact, that will do you just fine. You will have to walk, though. The horses would have to be led through the jungle paths.”

“We expected that,” Raff admitted.

Three

Tribal villages were never the same as civilized towns. People like the Cata, who were farmers and who also hunted and gathered some food as well were also better adapted to the Wild than those who grew up in the towns and cities of the civilized lands. There were cultures considered even more primitive who did not farm at all and subsisted entirely on hunted and gathered food. Bands of these people were the smallest possible human population units that could exist.

It was not really a matter of a greater percentage of people having wayfarer abilities. There are tricks to exploiting the Wild that anyone can learn if they grow up in close proximity to Wild conditions.

The Cata village Raff and Em approached was stable and ordered in the same way that any human population center was, but because there were fewer people who lived here, their farmlands laid partially beyond the stable area in which their homes were built. "How do they tend their fields if they are in the Wild?" Em wondered out loud.

"Farming is a communal activity," Raff explained. "The entire village comes out here to plant and harvest. In that way they can keep the Wild away from them, so to speak. They also weed the fields in a similar manner, although a dozen people are enough to keep them from getting lost and anyone can take a few steps out into the Wild if they have to. It's just a bit disorienting when after doing something, like pulling a weed or picking a gourd, your next step brings you right back into the village. With a communal effort that doesn't happen. None of these villages stays put for more than twenty or twenty-five years for that matter. After a while they use up the soil's nutrients in an area, even with their primitive notion of fertilization, so they need to move and allow the land to go back to the jungle for a few generations at least. Of course, farming doesn't account for their entire diet. The Cata keep chickens. They could keep pigs, but their religion forbids it. They also gather Wild food and hunt as well."

"Do they hunt communally as well?" Em asked.

"Not generally, although for extended expeditions hunters usually take their shaman with them," Raff replied. For short hunting trips they actually make use of the Wild's ability to send them home. A hunting party of five or six can stay in the Wild for several hours, following a long and curved path out and eventually back home. Food gathering can be done the same way."

"What about even more primitive people who neither farm nor tend animals?" Em asked.

"They tend to be nomadic families; uncles and cousins and such," Raff replied, "They will wander from time to time either seasonally or on some other less defined cycle. With only a dozen to maybe twenty in a village, however, most if not all of their subsistence activities are in the Wild and bands of such people will often unite for at least part of a year in order to increase the size of their stability."

"The Cata aren't that primitive and there are several dozen people in any given village," Em remarked. "It still seems like a rather fragile lifestyle."

"It is," Raff agreed, "but even our own civilization is fragile in its own way. Most of us wouldn't know how to farm if we had to, for example, and if trapped in the wild wouldn't know what we could and couldn't eat."

"Yes, I do remember that," Em replied tartly.

"Sorry," Raff apologized instantly. "I wasn't thinking of you when I said it. Besides, you've gone out of your way to learn that sort of thing since we first met."

"Survival instinct," Em replied, still looking at the Cata fields. "Are they growing maize?"

"Looks like it to me," Raff observed.

"But doesn't that come from the other side of the Dark Ocean?" Em asked.

“It does,” Raff confirmed, “but it is traded throughout the world these days and the Cata aren’t fools. Maize is an excellent source of food, although if we approached from another direction, we’d probably be picking our way past fields of yams and stands of banana trees.”

“Bananas?” Em asked. “If they’re subsistence farming they’re more likely to be growing plantains.”

“Plantains, bananas,” Raff shrugged. “What’s the difference?”

“The choice between a staple crop you can live on and a nice dessert in a café,” Em told him. “Plantains are more starchy than sweet and need to be cooked before you eat them. They also have more food value per crop. I guess they’re all bananas technically, but which you plant can make the difference between being well fed and starving. Plantains are to the tribes of this part of the Southern Continent what manioc is to the indigenous people of Norillia.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time I ponder how to plant the garden,” Raff replied dryly. “Anyway, this is probably the median state of Humankind. Until we started building towns and cities, I imagine all our ancestors lived like this and before that we were probably all hunters and gatherers.”

“That’s not the way the Church teaches history,” Em remarked.

“Two hundred years ago,” Raff retorted, “the Church’s leaders swore by all they held sacred that the sun was in orbit about this world and accused anyone who said otherwise of heresy. These days they say the same of anyone who wants to believe the world is older than four or five thousand years, but if you try asking the members of certain tribes of natives in Palendo and Maceno, they’ll gladly tell you their traditional calendars go back nearly seven thousand. Now you might say that perhaps those primitives got it wrong, but there are ancient monuments on which the years have been counted as they passed and they agree with the native claims.”

“So the Church has underestimated just a bit,” Em suggested uncertainly.

“Ask most priests and they’ll tell you that the Holy Book is the literal word of God and that to question it is heresy. Does the accusation sound familiar?”

“God save me!” Em replied, only half seriously. “Is my own husband leading me into heresy?”

“You have a mind of your own, Em,” Raff told her. “I’ve never told you what to believe. Anyway the sad truth of the matter is a thousand years ago or so some minor priest read his way carefully through scripture and decided that God created the world four thousand two hundred and sixty-five years ago. Since then the Church has re-evaluated that and decided it was actually four thousand nine hundred and ninety-one years ago. I could look up the exact date and time if you like. I believe they decided it happened at precisely three o’clock in the morning, that being the earliest worship service.”

“I do believe I heard all this back in school when I was a child,” Em replied. “Why does it sound so ridiculous now?”

“It is ridiculous,” Raff replied. “The Holy Book never really says when various events happened. It talks about generations, but there are gaps in the lineages recorded and some ridiculously long lives attributed to some of the people mentioned. I’m sure that some day we’ll learn how to measure the age of the world and we’ll learn it is actually far older than the Church believes. Maybe two or three times older.”

“You could be right, dear,” Em told him, “but please do me a favor and don’t get into an argument on

that point with any priests. We'd have to move in with people like the Cata if we were excommunicated, and while I'm sure I'll like them well enough, I'm still on speaking terms with a few members of my family."

"I wasn't really planning on debating the date of the Creation with any representative of the Church," Raff assured her. "They hate it when it turns out I know more of their holy scripture than they do."

"How do you know more than they do?" Em asked. It was something she knew was true, but had never managed to find the words to form the question properly. "I mean I know, as wayfarers, we have to demonstrate a fair knowledge of scripture and be able to perform various ceremonies from a number of religions in times of emergency, but..." she trailed off.

"You remember that wretched little island where you found me after my ship was attacked?" Raff asked.

"It wasn't a large island," Em replied, "but I don't recall it being particularly wretched. Rather pleasant, actually, with the palm trees and coffee plantations."

"And almost no reading material," Raff added. "The only books I could get hold of were through a young scribe from the scriptorium there. Needless to say none of them were light fiction, unless I care to slip into true heresy. Well, you know how I am about books."

"You can barely get to sleep without a book in your hands," Em remarked, smiling.

"And I was strapped to that bed for three months before they were certain I wasn't a danger to them or to myself," Raff continued.

"Mostly them," Em laughed.

"Well, yes," Raff agreed, "but I was still struggling with what had happened so their fears were justified. Anyway, during my rational moments, which included most of the time I was awake, I had nothing to do but read. Since the only truly literate soul I could talk to was that scribe who spent hours a day copying ancient religious tracts."

"Why was he doing that?" Em asked. "If the books are worth copying, why not use a printing press?"

"The oldest copies of the ancient holy texts were written on vellum scrolls. I don't know how many originals are left, if any," Raff told her, "but the scribes copy them meticulously for those churches where the rites specify reading from a scroll instead of a sewn and bound book. That one scriptorium made the scrolls for every such church on that side of the Dark Ocean, but they had the texts in bound form as well. That was to verify the handwritten texts; to make sure there were no errors. So he brought me some of them to read. You know I have a pretty good memory."

"Pretty good?" Em laughed. "You can remember every word you ever read!"

"Not quite," Raff shook his head, "but with nothing else to read I memorized a lot of rather obscure texts above and beyond the ones they teach to every student. I can see why they don't usually insist people read all the texts, though. A lot of stories get retold in the so-called 'texts minor.' Some are just from a different point of view but others are completely different. I imagine aspiring priests must get a lot of headaches trying to sort out the inconsistencies."

"And you didn't?" Em asked.

“You know me too well to think I would be bothered by something like that,” Raff reminded her. “I just came to the conclusion that God didn’t write those texts personally.”

“That’s not quite heresy,” Em replied.

“No, there are quite a few textual scholars who debate that point, but the only other choice they offer is that the authors were human, but were all divinely inspired,” Raff replied. “I’m not so certain about that either.”

“Why not?” Em asked.

“I keep going back to the Church’s original stance on the shape of the solar system,” Raff replied. “We’re taught that God is infallible, right? I can accept that without reservation, actually. However, the Church claims to speak with the voice of God so by extension the Church too is infallible. Just ask any priest, they’ll tell you the same thing. The problem is the Church was wrong when it said the world was the center of the universe, so why should I believe it is right about the age of the world? Or anything else I can’t verify for myself?”

“You shouldn’t,” Em decided.

“Huh?” Raff asked, surprised.

“The Church isn’t infallible. I’ve known that most of my life,” Em remarked. “We’re almost in the village, but remind me some time to tell you about the religious upbringing the Church tailors to the nobility.”

“Is it really all that different?” Raff asked.

“The emphasis is slightly different, but the difference is critical,” Em replied. “I sometimes wonder if the Church realizes how many agnostics there are among the Wayfarers’ Guild.”

“They probably see us as a necessary evil,” Raff laughed. “Besides they have worse problems than us. There are several regional variants that all threaten to break off from the central Church in Menino. Frankly, I think they did years ago, but none of the priests on any side dare admit it, but enough about that for now.”

They had just entered the center of the Cata village. The grass huts that surrounded the open central area looked simple at first view, but considering their walls and roofs had to have been woven tightly to provide shelter from the almost daily tropical rains, Raff knew they were cleverly designed and difficult to build without years of practice. Most of the huts were oval-shaped and large enough to accommodate extended families of eight to ten people, although there was a somewhat larger and longer building where the bachelors, boys and young men from the age of about ten years and up, lived until they were married. Girls and young women lived with their families. There was also a small hut sort of shaped like an onion with a peaked roof that both Raff and Em knew was the mark of a shaman’s home.

The Cata in the village had been working on food preparation or hut maintenance, but as Raff and Emblem stepped into sight, everyone stopped working to study the newcomers.

“Stop!” a voice shouted at the wayfarers from inside the shaman’s hut. “What is your business here?” The shaman stepped out of the hut and stood before them. He was not a tall man, none of the Cata stood taller than five and a half feet, but his bearing was proud. His bowl-cut hair was light gray and he was

missing a few teeth, but those were the only signs betraying his age. Em would have expected the shaman to be carrying a ceremonial staff of some sort, but instead his hands were clasped around the many stone and wooden beads on the necklaces that adorned him.

“My wife is Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens and I am Raff Cawlens,” Raff began. Among the matrilineal Cata, he had learned, it was proper to introduce one’s wife first. “We understand there are problems of grave importance between your people and ours and are here to try to solve them.”

“I am Tuenté,” the shaman replied. “So you are the great shamans the land stealers sent for?”

“We call our shamans priests and healers,” Raff replied calmly. “We are what we call wayfarers. We...”

“I know of your wayfarers, forrigner,” Tuenté cut him off antagonistically. “I can do everything you can and more.”

“All right,” Raff replied easily, “I can live with that.” He could see the shaman was trying to lead up to a duel, but from Raff’s point of view it was all so much of a waste of time. “I did not come here to fight you or anyone else.”

“Hah!” Tuenté laughed at him. “I know your kind. You say you want peace, but only until you can steal yet more Cata villages.” He waved his hands in what Raff thought was probably considered an impressively mystical gesture and suddenly the sky turned bright green with yellow swirls. The rain forest around them turned multiple shades of red and yellow and out of that jungle a large and furry, carnivorous-looking creature stepped.

The creature had dark blue fur and long ivory horns. It had long, pointed teeth that seemed to fill its mouth to overflowing and glowing yellow eyes. It stood bipedally almost eight feet tall and was like nothing either Raff or Em had ever seen and Raff privately gave points to Tuenté for originality, but he knew it for what it was. “Nice illusion,” he admitted. Then he shrugged and wrestled control of it away from Tuenté.

Raff was impressed that Tuenté managed to resist Raff’s attempt to hijack the illusion for a few seconds. It showed the Cata shaman was very well trained, indeed, but he was no match for Raff. Finally, with full control over the illusion, Raff picked up a stick and told the monster, “Here, boy, fetch!” and threw the stick into the rain forest, directing the critter to follow. Then, feeling and seeing swirls of Wild energy that indicated Tuenté was trying something else, Raff decided to call a moratorium on all such activity.

He reached out with his greater mastery of wayfaring power and calmed down the swirls and eddies of Wild energy the shaman was attempting to kick up. He waited for several minutes while Tuenté tried a number of other tricks that obviously must have worked for him in the past, but was able to defeat every single one of them, without showing any sign of exertion in contrast to the increasing frustration of the shaman.

Em realized her husband was showing off again. She knew how he was doing it, but it wasn’t as easy as he made it look. She might have been able to do the same thing, but it would have eventually left her exhausted, just as fighting it was tiring out Tuenté. In the end such a contest would have been decided by whoever lasted longer. She was afraid that Raff might eventually lose his temper if Tuenté continued on too long and once again, she rested one hand on Raff’s arm.

Raff stepped calmly up to Tuenté and then in a whisper only they could hear, asked, “Are we done playing yet?” Tuenté stared at Raff in amazement while Raff continued, “Enjoyable as this little diversion

is, we both have more important business at hand, sir, and just between you and me, we're setting a rather bad example for your people. At least I assume you would prefer they think of you as an adult. Why don't we put this silliness aside and get down to the problem at hand, hmm? So go ahead, make a pretty speech that will make it look like you were only testing me. That shouldn't ruin your standing, should it?"

Tuente thought about it for a few moments, then nodded. "You are both powerful and worthy, Cawlens," Tuente replied at last, adding, "You pass the test. Let us go to my home and discuss the matter over a meal."

Raff nodded formally and with Emblem, followed Tuente back to the onion-shaped hut. "Thank you," Tuente told them once they were in relative privacy.

"For what?" Raff asked.

"You could have destroyed me in front of the tribe," Tuente pointed out. "Not only did you show mercy, you also showed me respect."

"Destroying a leader, I've found, rarely endears one to the people who followed him," Raff remarked. "Besides, friends working together can accomplish much more than enemies."

"You speak with the wisdom of great age," Tuente told him formally. It was common among the tribes of the Southern Continent to equate wisdom and age.

"It takes an equal amount of age and wisdom to guide your people as you have," Raff returned the compliment. Two women entered the hut with cups and clay pitchers filled with coffee. Good coffee didn't grow this close to sea-level, Raff knew. If they had coffee here, the Cata evidently had a fairly good trading network that stretched out hundreds of miles away from their territory at the least. "However, in my case, I think most of my wisdom is borrowed from my wife."

"Then I have you to thank as well," Tuente told her politely. "I think if my wife were still with me, I might be wiser too." Instinctively, Em reached out and took Tuente's right hand in both of hers and held it there for a moment. It was a gesture of compassion and condolence that Tuente had no trouble understanding. He smiled at her and poured the thick, black coffee into a cup and handed it to her. She thanked him and took a sip while he also poured for Raff and finally himself.

The coffee was stronger and darker roasted than she was used to, but it was also filled with exotic spices and a lot of sugar or honey or perhaps some other sweetener. She made a mental note to get the recipe if she could. Once they had all finished their first cups Tuente began to talk of the Cata's troubles.

"Your people are not our only problem, Cawlens," Tuente told them, "although we are distressed by the breaking of the treaties we signed in good faith."

"Understandable," Raff assured him. "I was brought up to believe that a promise must always be kept even when it later turns out to be against one's best interest. I have not had the chance to fully read the treaty that was signed with the Cata, however. Is there a possibility of an honest misunderstanding? Did the treaty, perhaps, specify regions where colonists might settle that Cata villages have since been founded?"

"There were no such words in the treaty," Tuente responded. "It spoke only of respecting Cata settlements and leaving the crops and animals which belong to the Cata to the Cata."

“Sounds like a fairly standard clause from most such agreements I have read,” Em replied. “I doubt there was anything in writing that would allow an encroachment on Cata territory. What exactly started this?”

“You were not told?” Tuenté asked.

“We were sent out with very little information,” Raff explained. “I think that may have been done to prevent us from being prejudiced toward one side or the other. It may not be immediately apparent to you, but the colonists are not of our people either.”

“You are from a tribe that is neutral?” Tuenté asked. “Yes, there is wisdom in that. The trouble began during the last dry season. We lost two villages to colonists.”

“Lost them?” Em asked. “How?”

“Men arrived with the terror weapons you call guns. They killed the headman in each village and any warrior who attempted to oppose them. Then they forced the rest of the people in those villages to leave,” Tuenté replied, “except for the young women. They forced them to stay.”

“I want to visit those villages now,” Em told Raff grimly.

“I may just let you, dear,” he replied, “but I doubt you’ll thank me for it afterwards. Tuenté, no member of our guild would have guided those men to your villages. We have laws against what they did.”

“I went to Muenta with Chieftan Harunte,” Tuenté told Raff. “Your... I mean their governor refused to listen to us. He said there was no proof we were telling the truth.”

“That governor is an idiot,” Em growled. “He should have investigated at the very least.”

“He may have been in collusion with the men who attacked your people,” Raff admitted. “Whether he was or not, and I promise to get to the truth of that, you went to the wrong people, Tuenté. You said you know of our wayfarers, but I suspect you’ve only heard of what we can do. Our place in the colonist society is to act as more than mere guides through the Wild. We also act as mediators when absolute neutrality is required,” Raff continued, “and we also have sufficient influence to make sure our decisions are adhered to.”

“You wayfarers actually rule the colonists?” Tuenté asked.

“No,” Raff shook his head. “Do you rule the Cata? Of course not, but you can persuade Cheiftain Harunte in many matters that concern the Cata, right?”

“I see,” Tuenté nodded his understanding, “but if the governor sent those men to steal our land and women, how can you persuade him to change his mind?”

“What would happen to the Cata if you and all the other shamans chose to stop acting as spiritual leaders and physical guides?” Raff countered.

“Life would be difficult,” Tuenté replied, “and most people would be confined to their villages, but most do not leave their village for long anyway. They would survive.”

"I think you're selling yourself short, but yes, the Cata are better adapted to living in proximity to the Wild than the Pangamese colonists are. The colonists rely on wayfarers for more than merely moving from village to village," Raff told him. "Their lives rely on goods being moved in that way. If the Wayfarers guild refused to work, many colonists would die."

"Could not warriors force a wayfarer to work?" Tuenté asked.

"A single wayfarer?" Raff considered. "Yes, that is possible. Even the most accomplished wayfarer can be coerced, but not all of us. There have been attempts by kings and princes to force wayfarers to do things they did not want to do. They succeeded, but not for very long. Other wayfarers joined their powers and taught those rulers a lesson that has never been forgotten. You know as well as I do that illusions are not all that can be accomplished through the use of the Wild."

"Yes, I tried some of them against you," Tuenté admitted. "You are very powerful to have been able to stop me."

"It was power gained at a tremendous cost," Raff replied. "I did not seek it, nor would I do so again."

"Power may be a gift, but it is also a burden," Tuenté replied sagely.

"That it is," Raff agreed.

Four

"I will do what I can to return your land and people to the Cata," Raff promised. "It may take a short time to accomplish or it may take somewhat longer. It all depends on whether we can convince the current governor to act or if we will have to replace him. But restitution will be made."

"Thank you, Cawlens," Tuenté replied. "For my part, I will keep my people from engaging in further attacks on the colonists. I am not sure how long I can hold them back, however, just as you are not certain how long it will take to keep your promise."

"Then I will promise you," Em told him, "the women of those villages will be returned to you before the moon is full, if I have to go and free them myself."

Tuenté said nothing, but bowed his head toward Emblem respectfully. There were no female shamans among the Cata, but there were women with the power who practiced healing and guided travelers. There were also some witches of both sexes; people with the power who used it to their own ends or to help others harm their enemies. Some few were as powerful as any shaman and all were respected for their abilities if not always for what they did with them.

"You told us, however, that you had two big problems," Raff remembered. "What was the other problem?"

"Do you know of the Wild people?" Tuenté asked in return.

"The Kenlienta?" Raff asked.

"Yes, that is what they call themselves," Tuenté replied. "They have also been raiding our villages."

“The Kenlienta?” Raff asked disbelievingly. “Are you sure?”

“They are easy to recognize. They are tall and thin compared to us,” Tuenté replied.

“This is unheard of,” Raff replied, deeply troubled. “The Ken almost never interact with humans.” Not wanting to insult the shaman he refrained from saying “primitive tribes of humans.” When Kenlienta chose to meet with humans they usually met with those who were civilized. “They normally will only talk with wayfarers who at least have the ability to keep from harming them inadvertently with the stability that surrounds all humans.”

“There are a few Kenlienta who have so mastered the Wild they can enter a town without being harmed,” Em added. “All Kenlienta can practice Wild magic, as they call it, to one extent or another but their few wizards are the counterparts of human wayfarers and they can do more than most of us.”

“I have spoken with several wizards,” Raff added. “They do more than just the master wayfarer tricks we do. I’ve listened to their explanations and have even cast some of their spells. If it isn’t truly magic, it will do until something better comes along. We’re getting off the subject, though. How are the Ken raiding your villages? They can’t possibly be invading the actual area of stability.”

“No, but they can burn our crops because the fields are not entirely within our village and they can shoot arrows at us from outside,” Tuenté told him.

“How many incidents have there been?” Raff asked. “And how many people have been killed?”

“Fortunately there have only been a few deaths,” Tuenté replied. “The Kenlienta always stop when the first human is wounded. It is much the same way the Cata practice warfare except we are unable to retaliate, although our shamans are able to fight back.”

“Yes,” Raff nodded, “just as we can summon the Wild energy, we can also create a temporary area of stability.”

“Yes,” Tuenté nodded. “The Kenlienta always retreat if we can do that.”

“Stability can kill them as dead as any arrow,” Raff agreed, “but why are they attacking you? Have the Cata attempted to build a village too near a Kenlientan settlement?”

“No,” Tuenté shook his head. “We have always respected the Kenlienta and kept our distance from them just as they have from us.”

“That’s something we’ll look into as well,” Raff remarked. “We can’t just consult any Kenlien, however. We’re going to have to seek out the local elder and I’m not even sure where to find him. Do you know, Tuenté?”

“I’m sorry, Cawlens,” Tuenté replied sadly, “but I do not. There are some Kenlienta villages within a day’s walk from here, but I do not know which, if any, their elders live in.”

“There will be an elder in each one,” Raff replied, “although the term is not particularly accurate. Elder is the term they use for headman or woman. Some aren’t all that old. Also, there are elders and then there are elders. There are elders of small towns, elders of large towns and cities and then there are those who are the equivalent of regional governors. It’s that last sort we need to find.”

“I’m afraid I cannot help you,” Tuenté replied.

“No problem,” Raff assured him. “The Guild will have records I can use. Besides I need to confront Governor General Lorenz before I go tracking through the Bush for a Ken elder.”

Raff and Em wasted no time on their return to Muenta in confronting the governor. Without bothering to stop by at the Wayfarers’ Hall they went directly to Catin House, a large building in the center of Muenta, where the governor general lived and worked. “Don’t bother announcing us,” Raff told the guards at the front door as they walked quickly past them, although Em knew he was only amusing himself. In order to gain access to the governor more quickly Raff had used a wisp of Wild energy to hide the two of them from the guards’ eyes. They weren’t truly invisible, but light bent around the guards so that they saw nothing unusual, even if most others in the vicinity saw Raff and Em clearly. The two guards were still able to hear him, however, and visibly started when he spoke. They looked around, saw nothing and began to swing their arms around as though trying to catch something. By that time, however, Raff and Em were well inside Catin House.

The guards at the front door were mostly ceremonial although had Raff and Em barged past them visibly, they might have raised an alarm and if they hadn’t, the man and woman at the desk just inside the door would have. However, Raff kept up the illusion as they strolled past them as well. He let it drop as they climbed the long winding staircase to the second floor. There were too many lower functionaries scurrying up and down to hope they wouldn’t have a collision and once inside it was not likely their presence would be questioned.

On the upper floor they made their way down the long hallway to the governor’s office. There was an administrative aide seated just outside and several men were obviously waiting for their turns to see the governor. Raff turned to the man at the desk and informed him, “His Excellency will be tied up for the rest of the day. Please reschedule his appointments.”

“But...” the aide protested.

“Now!” Raff barked as Em opened the office door. They walked in where the governor general, a rotund gentleman dressed in formal business attire totally unsuited to the tropical climate, was speaking with a pair of men who also looked like they worked in the colonial government. “Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen,” Raff told them coldly. “His Excellency will be happy to reschedule at his earliest convenience.”

“What is the meaning of this, Master Cawlens?” Governor General Lorenz demanded.

“Scoot!” Raff barked at the other two men when it appeared they were frozen to their seats.

“Cawlens! Get out of my office now or I will see you in gaol!” Lorenz shouted.

“Good trick,” Raff smiled. “I’d pay good money to see you try. Now sit down and shut up! And you two, get the hell out of this office!”

“Sorry for the inconvenience, gentlemen,” Em told them as she escorted them to the door, “but not very,” she added after closing the door and turning back toward Raff and Lorenz.

“The Guild will hear about this outrage!” Lorenz warned them angrily.

“Oh don’t worry on that account,” Raff chuckled. “I’ll be reporting you personally. Now tell me about those two Cata villages.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lorenz denied.

“Really? Then you’re either a liar, sir, or incompetent. Which is it?” Raff demanded.

“No,” Lorenz protested, fear beginning to show in his eyes. “I really don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“Two Cata villages!” Em took over. “Your colonists invaded them with guns, killed anyone who didn’t run fast enough, except the women. They kept the women for themselves. That, Your Excellency, is slavery or worse and the Guild won’t tolerate it. You know that as well as I do.”

“Oh, all right. Yes, I heard about it, but what can I do?” Lorenz admitted defeatedly.

“You’re the bleeding governor, for God’s sake, man!” Raff exploded. “You have colonial troops to call on. They can be sent to clear those people out, rescue the Cata women and allow the other Cata to return to their homes.”

“The men who did it are colonial troops,” Lorenz sagged as he said that.

“What?” Em asked quietly. Raff braced himself. When Em got that quiet. It was for the same reason the sea retreats from the shore just before a tsunami strikes. “I must have misheard. Do you mean to say your own troops did this?”

“Not my troops!” Lorenz denied. “My title may be governor general, but it’s the colonels who really command.”

“Time for some new colonels,” Em replied grimly. “If you like, I’ll be more than happy to explain it to them.” Just then several men in colonial uniforms burst into the room, muskets in hand. Em simply summoned the Wild and used it to yank the guns out of their hands. Then she noticed the rank insignia on one of the men. “Is this one of those colonels. Lorenz?”

“What is this?” the colonel demanded. “Why can’t I move?” he asked a moment later.

“I thought this discussion might be a tad more civilized, old man, if you weren’t in a position to, uh, take action,” Raff informed him urbanely. “I find that sort of thing does get in the way of civilized conversation, don’t you?”

“Who the hell are you?” the colonel demanded.

“Master Raff Cawlens, sir,” Raff replied, not bothering to get out of his chair. “Wayfarer. And you?” The colonel kept his mouth shut. “So is this one of the men you were telling us about, Governor? Did he authorize the murder and rape of the Cata?”

“No,” Lorenz shook his head vigorously. “Not him.”

“What’s this about the Cata?” the colonel asked.

Raff released him. “Have a seat, Colonel. If the governor general is telling the truth, you should be part

of this discussion.”

“Your men can wait out in the hall, however,” Em added, “and keep us from being interrupted again.” She allowed then to retrieve their muskets as they filed out on a gesture from the colonel.

“So, Colonel Costa,” Raff continued after introductions had been made and their previous discoveries had been summarized, “do you know who might have authorized the attacks on the Cata?”

“I had not even known there were attacks on them, sir,” Costa replied, “but I can make a few guesses.”

“Do tell,” Raff invited him, “or would you like to spill it, Governor?”

“It would be Colonels Moniz and Franks,” Lorenz informed them.

“Franks?” Raff asked. “Not a Pangamese name, is it?”

“Not all our colonists come from Pangam, sir,” Colonel Costa replied. “And not all officers worked their ways up through the ranks. Colonel Franks arrived here five years ago and was instantly elevated to colonel.”

“I see,” Raff replied. “Did he pay well for the rank, Governor?” Lorenz sputtered, but said nothing. “I imagine he would have had to, unless he had something to hold over your head. Well none of that matters now. The most important thing is making reparations to the Cata. For starters, I suggest public trials for both Colonels Franks and Moniz. Oh, and even if found not guilty, I seriously suggest shipping them back to Pangam, because nothing less will appease the Cata.” Governor General Lorenz nodded so Raff continued, “Next, the men who invaded those villages... they were all military? Then you’ll need additional courts martial. I realize it is likely they’ll be let off lightly because of following orders, but there is also the issue of rape and slavery, and no orders will forgive that. I suggest the stiffest possible sentences. If it turns out some are found not guilty, they should be reassigned to other colonies, but don’t send them all to the same place. Oh, and don’t forget to take testimony from the Cata women. You see, I have been in colonies before and I know how these things go sometimes. You’re going to have to be scrupulously strict. Nothing gets swept under the carpet.

“The Cata will be allowed back into their villages and now let’s discuss compensation,” Raff took a deep breath. So far neither Lorenz nor Costa had protested his terms. He suspected that was about to change. “Just what is the going rate of compensation for murder in Catin?”

“Murder is a capital offense, sir,” Costa replied. “However, I imagine they will plead this was a military operation, so while we can easily charge the commanding officers with murder, their men were following orders.”

“Orders to commit a crime can and should be lawfully disobeyed,” Em replied tightly.

“Yes, Madame Cawlens,” Costa agreed, “but it’s not that simple when you’re a soldier trained to follow orders into battle.”

“He’s right there, Em,” Raff agreed reluctantly, “however, any orders to commit slavery and rape are clearly illegal even to a private soldier. There cannot be any leniency here or the Cata will rise up and throw the lot of you off the continent. However, you’re not going to get off with just an apology. The Cata have lost men, they feel their women have been injured in the same way you would feel if this had happened to your sisters and they need assurances this will never happen again. Words aren’t enough,

you need actions. I suggest meeting with Shaman Tuente and Chieftain Harunte as soon as they can conveniently accommodate you. Make no mistake, you need to go to them. That's an important symbol, and pretty much give them anything they want. I imagine it's a debt with interest after you ignored them last time."

"I can do that," Lorenz muttered after a long interval.

"What was that?" Raff asked. "I'm not sure I heard you."

"Anything they want, sir," Lorenz replied more clearly.

"And you might want to consider extending them the chance at colonial citizenship," Em suggested.

"What?" both Lorenz and Costa asked, startled. "Admit savages as colonial citizens and subjects of His Majesty?" Lorenz continued. "Unthinkable!"

"Think about it," Raff suggested. "I doubt they'll accept it. They think of themselves as a nation apart from you. The offer will count for more than you think."

"But what if they were to accept?" Costa asked.

"Colonel," Em replied, "the Cata know more about this land than you ever will. They live far more closely with it. Any alliance you forge with them will only strengthen this colony."

Raff cut in, "Gentlemen, the Cata aren't really asking all that much. They want to be left alone. They want the same respect any person wants and if they demand payment, you're likely to be amazed at how little it will cost you in monetary terms."

"I doubt the Colonial Legislature will agree to some of the terms you are forcing on us," Lorenz commented sourly.

"From what I understand of your government here, they don't have to," Raff replied. "They pass laws that only affect the colonists. Dealings with other nations such as the Cata are beyond their scope."

"The separation of powers is not that clearly cut in practice, sir," Lorenz replied.

"It never is," Raff told him. "But cheer up, this is one of those rare cases you really can tell them it's none of their business."

"They'll insist on their own investigations into the matters, both with the military and the Cata," Costa added.

"Let them," Em retorted. "Maybe it will keep them out of trouble. If you play it honestly, their independent investigation will only show that anyway."

Raff got out of his seat and Em followed suit. "I think that pretty much covers all I had to say this afternoon," he told Lorenz and Costa, "but, gentlemen, please do not think you can ignore this after I leave the colony. Before I do leave, I will compose a full report to be on file with the Wayfarers' Guild both here and in Taundon and if you don't deal in good faith with the Cata, that report will be sent to His Majesty who, I guarantee, will have you both back in Bonoa on the fastest available ship. Even kings don't ignore the Guild easily."

“Oh, and gentlemen?” Em got their attention sweetly. “In case you need a reminder...” She pressed her hand down on the governor’s heavy wooden desk and using a tightly controlled burst of Wild energy to back her up, pushed her hand half of an inch deep into the surface. Acrid smoke issued furiously from that spot as she lifted her hand. “If by some chance King John David doesn’t choose to deal with you... I will.”

She then joined Raff and left the room while behind them both Governor General Lorenz and Colonel Costa continued to stare at the deep handprint burnt into the desktop for a long time afterward.

Tamag Methin

One

“I don’t think Governor Lorenz will be giving you any further trouble,” Raff told Marko Danicci. “Neither of us bothered letting him know that most wayfarers couldn’t do that trick Em did with her hand and you will do yourself and the entire colony, I’d wager, a favor if you don’t enlighten him.”

“Just don’t let him bully you,” Em suggested.

“Easy for you to say, Emblem,” Danicci replied. “I couldn’t even do what you did in the Wild.”

“You haven’t been listening,” Em chastised. “He doesn’t know that. Let him think you’ve just been very patient with him. Besides you have a copy of our report. Feel free to hold it over his head if he doesn’t keep his word.”

“Just be careful not to abuse the power,” Raff warned him. “I don’t think the governor will need very many reminders and we are supposed to be neutral.”

“We are,” Danicci agreed. “So I should only use the leverage to enforce the agreement with the Cata, right?”

“And to keep Lorenz from trying to pressure you into something,” Raff added. “Also you’ll note we have recommended that additional journeymen be assigned to Catin. Unless you’re dealing with some sort of emergency, you ought to have at least two in Muenta at any given moment.”

“Thank you,” Danicci replied. “I have asked, you know.”

“Well, maybe this will do the trick,” Raff commented. “Now, our job is only half done. We still need to find out why the Kenlienta have suddenly started attacking human settlements.”

“There are several Kenlientan cities in Catin,” Danicci replied thoughtfully, “but you really need to find the elder in charge of their regional capital, Tamag Methin.”

“Tamag Methin,” Raff echoed. “Flower of the Deep? Interesting name for a city. And where is that?”

“About a week’s journey to the southwest,” Danicci replied, “and a long way from any human town.

Like most of the Wild it never actually moves, of course, but human towns do so it might seem like it's in the wrong place. You'll find it in the large uncolonized region between Catin, Rahia and Sogarland, but you'll be well off to ask for directions as you get closer."

"That's going to be a long walk," Raff commented.

"No," Danicci disagreed, "you ought to be able to ride all the way. Tamag Methin is surrounded by savannah. You will be able to ride the established paths as far as Azera and by then you'll be past the rain forest. This year's dry season is just starting officially, but the rains ended a month ago down there, so the water holes are already drying out. It might be a tough season for the Wild beasts, but it will ease your travels."

"We'll leave at first light," Raff decided.

"Better yet," Em told him. "Let's enjoy a leisurely breakfast and leave around midmorning."

"You don't normally sleep in, Em," Raff countered.

"Well, I'm not normally up late packing for a long trip," she retorted.

"Why should we be up all that late?" Raff asked.

"The Way to Tamag Methin is not going to be a normal trip, dear," she replied. "It won't even be a Way as we normally think of it. We can't go from inn to inn. After the first few days we're going to have to camp out. That means we need to carry more with us than we normally might, like a tent, mosquito netting and bedding. Not to mention we'll want to pack some food for once we leave the established paths."

"That's a good point," Raff agreed. "We'd better get packing."

It was raining the next morning as they rode out of Muenta. "Nice dry season," Raff remarked.

"If it weren't for the town here, this would be rain forest," Em reminded him. "It is relatively drier than during the wet season, but it still rains once in a while."

"I suppose," Raff agreed grudgingly.

"What is with you this morning?" Emblem asked.

"I'm not sure," Raff replied. "Maybe it's a full moon."

"That was last week," Em countered. "Come to think about it, you often grumble at the beginning of a trip."

"It's been a while since we had a vacation," Raff reminded her.

"Why would we need a vacation, dear?" Em asked. "We're on vacation more days than not."

"Other people travel on vacation," Raff remarked. "It only seems right that we should stay put for one."

"You're right," Em agreed. "Next time we're in some pleasant locale we should take a week or two off."

You weren't planning to start that today were you?"

"Of course not. We have important business to take care of," Raff came back. "Why else do you think I'm grumbling."

Em ignored him and his grumbles as she usually did. It had taken a few years, but she had come to the conclusion that Raff tended to grumble for the sake of it every so often and so long as she let him vent he would be fairly cheerful the rest of the day.

The rain only lasted another half an hour after which the clouds parted to let the sun come through. In a town such clouds would have been pushed away by the wind to be replaced by partly cloudy conditions that Em and Raff experienced after the showers, but weather was more active in the Wild and they could see the clouds dry out and shrink rapidly until they were just small puffy patches of opalescent white against a sky that, while predominantly blue, had hints of all the colors of the rainbow in it as well. It was a vista only a wayfarer could see. Those without the talent would never notice anything out of the ordinary.

"It's a shame it's going to take so long to get to Tamag Methin," Em remarked late that afternoon.

"I agree," Raff told her. "If we weren't headed for a Kenlienta city, I'd be tempted to forge a new path and shorten the trip to two or three days."

"That would be extremely bad form on several counts," Em remarked.

"Don't you think I know that?" Raff asked, chuckling. They had both had sufficient contact with the Ken to know and respect their beliefs and customs. They had, in fact, only once forged paths to Kenlienta settlements and that had been a very special exception to the rules. Carefully constructed wayfarer paths caused Kenlienta discomfort when they crossed them. Poorly made paths could kill. It was a dreadful insult to forge a path intentionally to a Ken town or city.

Several scientists, including the Cawlens' colleague, Doctor Harkermor, had tried to discover the mechanics of how wayfarers actually forged paths and how some were able to actually bend space so that some straight lines between two points were shorter than others between the same two points, but so far all they had managed was to prove that it had, indeed, been done.

"This path is starting to come undone," Em commented on the second day after leaving Muenta. "I can handle the repair as we go, but I need to slow down a bit. If you help out we can keep moving at a normal pace."

"Sounds good," Raff agreed. "You take the left edge of the path, and I'll handle the right."

"Take a closer look, dear," she laughed, "If it were just a matter of the edges I could handle it on my own. This path has been badly neglected. It has potholes."

"Potholes?" Raff asked, half laughing. He looked at the condition of the path, the threads of stability that held a path together in the Wild were dissolving. Normally a path was made of a tight weave of such stable threads, but here there were large gaps where the weave had loosened and the Wild was beginning to reassert itself over the path. "Good description," he decided. "All right. I'll handle the basic construction and you pick up the loose ends."

"Okay," she nodded, "but if this damage extends too far, we'll change places." Emblem knew Raff was

much better at this sort of work than she was, but she refused to let him carry the heavier load. She had to take an equal share of the work if at all possible.

“You’re on,” Raff chuckled. He knew very well that she would struggle to take the portion of the job he had chosen, but he also knew she would handle it even if it meant slowing down a little. It was part of what made Emblem the woman he loved.

Raff stretched out his mind and began tightening the weave of the path. As they worked, he could feel Em assisting the process, mostly around the edges so that as they passed, the path or Way looked, to wayfarers senses, like a single lane pressed into the dirt. It was hardly distinguishable from the Wild landscape around it.

The condition of the path, however, continued to worsen until Raff declared, “It would almost be easier to just forge a new path altogether.”

“It would be, dear,” Em agreed, “but what would you do with all the left over traces from the old one? This is not just the Wild, here, but the Bush. There are too many Wild creatures that would be harmed if we let the old path disintegrate.”

“You’re right, but look how wide this Way’s traces have grown,” Raff told her. “Let’s stop here for a bit and I’ll see if I can do something about that. It’s getting too difficult to just work as we ride, anyway.”

They dismounted and Em set up a small alcohol stove to heat water for tea while Raff surveyed the path ahead. A wayfarer path was not an act of Wild energy being directed, but was an imposed, tightly confined line of stability; a small zone in which Wild energy had been banished. As had been agreed on at “The Shape of the World” conference, the Wild was the natural state of the world, in fact. Otherwise no path would ever need to be reformed. Because stabilities were not natural the Wild energy all around them constantly fought to reclaim those areas it had lost. In towns and cities, the presence of humans was more than enough to keep the Wild at bay, but just as weather and other natural forces would eventually destroy a road in a town, the Wild would do the same to Wayfarer paths.

Raff used his senses to explore the path ahead of him and discovered that this path was very close to completely coming apart, so he sat down on the ground and concentrated on the problem of bringing it back together. It was slow, excruciating work and a job only a very experienced master might have accomplished. He had been correct earlier. It would have been easier to simply form a new path in the direction they were going because he wouldn’t have had to worry about the stray and harmful traces of stability left over from the old path.

Then as he brought the path back together working ahead toward the next town, he found the cause of the degradation. Someone had cut a hole in the path about two miles ahead. “Are you sure?” Em asked when he reported it.

“The end is too abrupt for it to have been natural,” Raff told her. “And the gap is only a few feet. There! I’ve forged a bridge between the two sections of path and the far side is starting to heal a bit. Let’s move on and clean up the leftovers as it were. What’s this?” he asked noticing the tea cup next to him for the first time.

“Very cold tea,” Em told him. “I made it for you two hours ago.”

Raff drank the cool liquid quickly, noting that while it was not hot, it was not all that cold either, although here in the tropics that was not much of a surprise. They remounted and continued on, Raff had not

completely healed the path with his work, but he did bring it down to where normal maintenance was sufficient.

“I see what you mean about somebody cutting it,” Em told him as they reached the portion Raff had forged from scratch. “Why would anyone do that? Who could do it for that matter?”

“Only another wayfarer could,” Raff told her, “or a Kenlienta magician, although I cannot say why anyone would. Cutting a path is very dangerous and likely to blow up in your face. It’s safer to play with gunpowder.”

They were tired by the time they reached the next town, a small hamlet of colonists on the edge of the savanah with only a tavern with two guest rooms for them to stay in. They had planned to press on to Azera that day, but decided it could wait until they were awake. By all accounts it would have been close to midnight by the time they arrived as Azera had been slowly moving further south in the last few years.

That was another cause for damage to wayfarer pathways, although in most cases the paths ensured that towns did not move too far away from each other. The paths were much like a ship’s hawser that could be stretched taught, but which would also pull the ship back into place at a pier. Paths stretched more than ropes and cables, however, and every so often they stretched beyond their breaking points if one of the towns they were attached to was being pulled by something with greater than normal power.

Just what that something might be was another mystery of wayfaring and the part of the reason the conference had been named “The Shape of the World.” The world was roughly spherical, but its geographical features were constantly in flux and, while changes were not especially fast most of the time, they could be seen easily over the passage of a decade or less.

Raff and Em arrived in Azera early the next afternoon and decided to get a room for the night. “It will be our last night in a real bed for a while,” Em reminded Raff when he said something about pressing on until dusk, “And we still need to buy a few provisions. Being able to live off the Wild is a useful talent as we’ve both learned the hard way, but being prepared to not have to will speed our trip a bit.”

Azera was a large town, almost as large as Muenta, although the Wayfarer office there consisted of a small storefront and was run by a local woman named Galia who possessed no wayfarer ability. Raff decided that was not a bad idea, especially here where wayfarers were scarce and one did not need to be able to guide a party in order to run an office.

“So where are all the wayfarers?” Raff asked Galia after he and Em had introduced themselves and reported the damage to the path they had repaired the day before.

“Out, sir,” Galia replied. “Azera is not a common destination for travelers so most wayfarers are merely passing through as you two are.”

“I meant where are they in Catin altogether?” Raff clarified. “Except for in the town offices, we haven’t seen another wayfarer anywhere in the colony.”

“Well, it’s a large and very sparse colony, sir,” Galia told him, “and we don’t really have enough to go around. I can’t even go out,” she added almost apologetically.

“Actually, I think hiring you was one of the smarter things anyone did around here,” Raff assured her. “We would have more active wayfarers out guiding parties if we hired more people like you to man the offices.”

“Thank you, sir,” Galia replied. “May I ask where you’re going next? I have some people waiting for a guide, you see...” she trailed off.

“We’re bound for Kenlienta territory,” Em explained. “Special mission. None of your waiting clients would or even could be going there. We’ll have to travel without a Way.”

“Is that possible?” Galia asked.

“It is, but it’s not the safest way to travel,” Raff admitted. “That does remind me, though. Would you happen to have the current whereabouts of Tamag Methin listed?”

“Tamag Methin?” Galia asked. “Is that a Ken village? I’ve never even heard of it.”

“Actually, it’s considered a city,” Em corrected her, “the regional capital of the Kenlienta nation.”

“Let me check the files,” Galia told them. “There may be something there. I just haven’t had to look at the Ken files since I started working here.” She disappeared into a back room and returned with a few sheets of paper a few minutes later. “According to this it’s exactly in the middle of Kenlienta territory due southeast of here. It may have moved though. This report is five years old.”

“No, Kenlientan towns do not move,” Raff told her. “They change in almost every other way, but they definitely do not move. Not unless the Ken pick them up on their shoulders and cart them off somewhere. Of course, Azera may have moved since then so I suppose it might seem like the same thing.”

“It’s a long way to go without a path,” Galia noted.

“Sometimes a wayfarer has to be his own path,” Raff told her.

Two

Traveling overland was something very few wayfarers ever did, so there was a common misunderstanding that the only roads in the world were built by humans. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The fact of the matter was that some of the finest and longest lasting roads had been constructed by the Kenlienta, but few humans had ever had the opportunity to see one.

There were many reasons for that. First of all, no Kenlientan road would ever be built across a wayfarers’ path. The path would do no harm to the road, but the potential damage to those following a Ken road was too great to take a chance on so the Ken never built a road within sight of a wayfarers’ path.

Accordingly, a trained wayfarer would never travel on a Ken road lightly. While forging a long lasting pathway is something only a true master might accomplish, any human can establish a temporary path merely by walking through the Wild. Most, of course would soon find themselves back where they started, although someone with wayfaring talent would just keep going. To leave such pathway traces on a Ken road would defile it for the Kenlienta. Only one with absolute control over his abilities could walk a Kenlientan road and neither endanger nor insult the Ken.

Of course, very few wayfarers ever had the need to travel to Kenlientan settlements, but Raff had done so on numerous occasions and while most masters would stay off the ken roads, he knew he could travel along them without inadvertently defiling them.

They had traveled due east out of Azera for several hours before they found a relatively nearby road that seemed to heading in the right general direction although Emble had reservations. "There's no telling if this road is going all the way to Tamag Methin," she reminded Raff. "Just because Ken constructions don't move, the terrain does change over time. We could easily run into a mountain or a river gorge before we get there."

"And we probably will or come across some other major obstacle," Raff replied cheerfully. "However, we will most likely find other Ken towns before that happens and we can always ask for directions."

"Really?" Em laughed challengingly. "When was the last time you asked for directions?"

"Last time I needed to find the loo," Raff retorted.

"Or a stiff drink, I'll wager," Em shot right back at him. "How about while working?"

"When was the last time I needed to?" Raff asked mildly.

"Let's see," Em considered. "We've been married for eight years, right? Well, it was probably just before that. Since then you've pretty much relied on me to do the asking."

"But you do it so well!" Raff told her.

"Right," Em was unconvinced. "Well, I see a chance for you to start just up ahead."

"What?" Raff asked and looked up. Just ahead, climbing a hillside a few hundred yards away, was a small party of Kenlientan travelers. Unlike Raff and Em, they were walking. The Kenlienta had few domesticated animals at their command and only a few, very rare specimens were suitable for riding and most of them would never deign to merely follow a road.

The Ken did have dray animals that had been trained to haul carts and wagons, but such animal were never ridden either by temperament or Ken tradition and usually only the Kenlien driving the wagon would ride except for the very young, the elderly and the infirm. Any normal Ken who was able to would walk where he needed to go.

The Kenlienta Raff and Em were trying to catch up to, like all their kind, were tall and thin, but unlike the Kenlienta Raff and Em had met in the Wild within Crace, these Ken had dark brown skin and black hair, although the dominant color of their eyes was green. The people of the Green Lands and, in fact in much of the north, referred to the Ken as the "Fair Folk" but in reality their skin shades varied as widely as did their human counterparts.

There were two Kenlienta in the party, however, who did not have black hair. Their hair was gray and the light flowing robes they wore were embroidered ornately. These two were elders, male and female.

Finally when they were close enough, Raff and Em rode to the side of the road and dismounted. Getting off the road when encountering an elder was a sign of respect. Any Kenlien on the road would have done likewise unless he was an elder. Dismounting was a sign wayfarers used when they wished to parlay with Kenlienta. The elders could continue on and ignore the wayfarers if they chose. That was their

prerogative, but Raff had rarely been snubbed that way and he did not expect to be this time.

The elders and their party turned around and approached the wayfarers, but then stopped just a few feet away. The younger ken were obviously an honor guard, carrying spears tipped with points beaten from native copper. The Ken had not used such weapons in millennia, but they still carried much ceremonial meaning. The honor guard rearranged themselves around the elders as the elders turned to face Raff and Em.

“Magnificent beasts,” the female elder told the wayfarers.

“Suitable for human riders, perhaps,” Raff replied deprecatingly, “but not worthy of a Kenlien.”

“They are still pleasing to look at,” she replied pleasantly, “And much larger than their wild cousins.”

“Are there many wild horses around here, elder?” Em asked curiously.

“No, but I have traveled,” she replied. “There are some closely related animals in these parts; asses and zebras mostly. The zebras are very pretty, but we don’t use them. May I touch one?”

“They carry a bit of human stability with them,” Raff warned her.

“Yes,” she agreed, “I saw that, but I doubt it will hurt me.” Raff stepped aside to allow her to pet the horse. She stroked the fur on the horse’s neck and made comforting, crooning noises at the beast. “Thank you,” she told them at last. “I am Turanxi and this is my husband Farax.” Raff and Em introduced themselves. “An honor to meet you both,” Turanxi told them warmly.

“We don’t meet your people on the road very often,” Farax observed.

“We’re on our way to Tamag Methin,” Raff replied. “Are we on the right road?”

“From here? Yes,” Farax told him, “although you will need to change roads twice in towns along the way. We are traveling there as well, perhaps we can travel together?” It was very rare for a Kenlien to offer to travel with a human.

“You honor us,” Raff bowed his head toward Farax and Turanxi.

“Not at all. My wife and I gain great honor by having traveled with you two,” Farax told him. When they started walking again, Farax continued, “May I ask what urgency sends you to Tamag Methin?”

“There have been reports of troubles between the Ken and some humans hereabouts,” Raff replied. “I’m hoping to resolve what few differences may have brought them about.”

“You definitely need to go to the capital,” Farax confirmed, “but I may be able to answer some of your questions. We live in a time of great change,” he continued sadly. “Our younger adults have come to resent all humans and your effect on the Wild.

“We’re pretty much confined to our own towns and cities, which comprise a small percentage of the world,” Raff remarked. “There has always been room for both of us.”

“Ah, Raufanax, but in recent years humans have begun to effect the world even well beyond their so-called stabilities. You burn coal for heat, don’t you?”

“Well, of course, and wood too,” Raff nodded.

“The smoke poisons the air for many miles down wind and your garbage thrown away in the rivers pollutes the water. The polluted air and water are as painful to Kenlenta as your pathways are, Raufanax,” Farax explained.

“Why haven’t you presented your grievances to the Guild?” Raff asked. “We’ve always been able to handle problems that way in the past.”

“I believe we should have done just that,” Farax agreed, “but the younger men and women chose to take matters into their own hands. Young people often behave rashly, but they also resent the recent growth of Wayfarer pathways through the Wild.”

“They should have come to the Guild about that too,” Em commented. “We’ve always tried to keep our pathways down to a minimum, but if you thought we were encroaching...”

“The elders, for the most part, don’t feel that way,” Turanxi told her, “but the young hotheads do. In spite of our attempts to control them, they have taken to attacking small Wayfarer parties in some parts of the world, for example.”

“The missing parties in the Green Lands and the rest of the north!” Raff exclaimed. “We had wondered. We found a pathway that had been deliberately damaged not far from here. Might one of them have been responsible for that?”

“No one but a sorcerer of great power could do something like that,” Farax replied.

“And someone like that ought to know the danger of doing so,” Raff added. “Could one of the angry young men have that sort of potential, though? It was difficult to tell because I don’t know how long ago it happened, but it looked to me like it may not have been done with very much precision, just a short burst of power.”

“I have examined your Ways, Raufanax,” Turanxi told him. “That would take a lot of power and would be very dangerous to us as well.”

“But,” Farax cut in, “a younger sorcerer, trying to establish himself, might try it, although the backlash of energy released might have killed him.”

“If he or she was so foolish as to attempt such a thing, we’re probably better off without him,” Turanxi retorted harshly.

“The immediate dangers are nothing compared to the long term ones,” Em added. “That path was coming apart rapidly and would have made the area around it lethal to those of the Wild for several years at least.”

“It would?” Turanxi considered. “If they were looking for an incident to drum up anti-human sentiment, that sort of thing could have done it. Although they then would have had to wait for someone to stumble across it.”

“It would have lasted a while if we had not come along when we did,” Raff replied. “Only our highest-ranked wayfarers could have repaired the damage when we did and it would have been far more

difficult and time consuming in a month or so.”

“Wouldn’t it have inhibited the travel of your own people?” Turanxi asked.

“Not immediately,” Em replied. “The gap was only a few feet long. Any journeyman capable of guiding others could have seen ahead to where the path picked up.”

“What about one of your own masters?” Farax suggested. “Could you have not damaged the Way yourselves?”

“We could have,” Raff admitted, “but that would have meant that one of our master wayfarers is trying to cause enmity between our peoples. It goes entirely against Guild policy and while there is always some matters of disagreement among the masters, I don’t know anyone who does not value our friendship with the Ken.”

“The Ken nation does not count all wayfarers as friends, Raufanax,” Farax told him, “only the noble ones such as you and your wife. You have proven your friendship. However, we do not think of the others as enemies either.”

“But your points are well made,” Raff admitted. “A wayfarer could have cut the path and would have been in no immediate danger in doing so. But why, if your younger generation is angry at the wayfarers, are they attacking the Cata who have never had much of anything to do with you nor have they caused any of the problems you are having?”

“Most Kenlienta do not realize there is more than one sort of human,” Farax replied.

“We all look alike to you?” Raff asked.

“In a sense,” Farax smiled. “You must remember that there is only one Ken Nation. No matter where you go in the world all Kenlienta are of the same nationality. Some have black skin, some are white, others have skin tones in between, but we are all Kenlienta. This is perhaps the most profound difference between us and humans, is it not?”

“You have many nations,” Farax continued. “There are the Cata, the Green Lands, Dix, Crace, Holrany, Kharasia, Corisa, Nillon and all the rest, not to mention your colonies. It may be those colonies that alarm the young people the most, you know. It is an expansion unlike any we have ever seen before.”

“The Ken Nation has grown as well,” Raff pointed out. “Your people are more numerous than ever and you occupy more of the world than we do.”

“That is true,” Farax agreed calmly, “but we do not exploit every bit of it as your own kind does. There are places we never go, not because there is anything wrong with going there but simply because we do not need to, or because we find them beautiful and know our presence would mar that beauty in time. In that we are not so different from humans, you know. Some of our scholars believe there was a time in the unknowably distant past when Kenlienta and humans were one people.”

“I heard that theory proposed at ‘The Shape of the World’ conference,” Raff replied. “It caused quite a ruckus when it was proposed.”

“Did it?” Farax laughed. “We both have two arms and two legs, we walk bipedally and fully erect. Our skeletons are very similar even if that of an average Kenlien is longer and more delicately formed than

that of a human. But if you find that is hard to believe, you will scarcely credit that some of our scholars believe that we are distantly related to the apes.”

“The apes?” Em considered. “Well, yes, there are some similarities, but our religion teaches us that God created all the creatures of the world as he saw fit. That would sort of imply that no two species are truly related save by having the same creator.”

“I did say you might not credit it,” Farax replied mildly. “Actually it is quite controversial among the Ken as well and very few of us take it seriously. If true, of what possible use could it be?”

“No knowledge is ever completely useless,” Raff noted. “Eventually everything can be applied even if only indirectly.”

“There is some truth in that,” Farax allowed, “but it is fortuitous that you are coming to Tamag Methin at this time. The problem we are having with our younger generation is not confined to our relationship to human lands. It is also causing turmoil among the Ken.”

“How so?” Raff asked.

“Our younger elders are not satisfied with the way in which the Ken Nation is governed,” Farax replied.

“They have a problem with a system that has been stable and beneficial to all for over a millennium?” Raff asked. “Don’t want much do they?”

“They believe they know a better way,” Farax replied, “and intend that it be considered in a meeting of our Council of Elders to be held in Yakrut.”

“I’ve heard about that meeting,” Raff told Farax. “I thought it was to be held very soon.”

“Soon is a relative term, Raufanax,” Farax replied. “It will not be for some months yet. First our local councils must meet and come to a consensus on the issues before our leaders can represent us in Yakrut. That is why we are going to Tamag Methin.”

They continued on until the sun nearly set. Then the Kenlienta set up camp on the side of the road. Raff and Em decided to pitch their tent and picket their horses on the far side so their inherent stability would not affect the Kenlienta. While awake they could control it, but not while they slept.

Three

Tamag Methin lay sprawled in a wide valley between two lines of mountains so that Raff’s and Em’s first view of the city was from above. Even from that distance Tamag Methin was a vast array of activity. At least half the structures in the city were under construction or being torn down to make way for something new. There was a lot of work being done on the city streets as well where sections were being painted to represent safe places to cross against traffic or being paved in a whole new color simply because the city planners found it pleasing to do so.

Raff was reminded that Kenlienta loved change of this sort. Once in the city it became apparent that houses were being repainted in new and lavish color schemes, gardens were being not just maintained, but overhauled and completely replanted and many of the office buildings at the heart of the city that had

appeared to be under construction turned out to merely be receiving facelifts, with new and exciting facades being applied. No wonder the younger Ken wanted to change their system of government. It was a wonder it had lasted this long. It also seemed ironic to Raff that the Kenlientan observation, "We live in a time of great change," was most often a complaint.

However, he also reminded himself, that the Ken, in spite of their seeming embrace of constant change, had rules as to what could be changed and how it was to be brought about. The rules were complex and difficult to understand for someone who had not been brought up within Kenlienta society, but they were also strict and unbending. One of those rules was that great changes were made up of little ones and that in order to effect a great change it was necessary to undertake each small change one step at a time. That seemed fairly easy to understand. Where the confusion arose was in how to define great and little changes.

To a degree, some of that was obvious from the activity in Tamag Methin. Everywhere streets were being repaved, houses repainted and buildings refaced, but only a few buildings were actually being torn down completely and most of the new construction was being added on rather than started from the beginning. Up close, it gave many of the Kenlientan buildings a patchwork look although it seemed to Raff that much of what was being done was to smooth over obvious differences between new and old work.

It took several hours to reach the center of the city, which Raff realized was roughly the same size as Taundon, the capital of the Green Lands. He looked over at Em who seemed to only have eyes for the city. That was no surprise. Not only had she had less experience among the Ken, but no two Kenlienta cities were alike and this was a regional capital, as close as the nation came to a capital city for all Ken, so the local people would feel honor bound to keep it truly unique.

"A lot of activity, huh?" Raff commented to Em.

"I'll say," she responded. "I haven't seen anywhere near this much building going on in any other Ken cities and towns I've visited."

"This is fairly normal for a large capital," Raff explained. "Life moves on a slower pace in the towns. Also the last time you were in any of the Ken capitals was during the Great Plague. With people dying everywhere it was understandable if they didn't really feel like painting the lawn or diapering the windows."

"A healthy Kenlien is an active Kenlien," Turanxi added. "Inactivity is usually a sign of sickness among the average Kenlienta."

"Even elders are constantly doing things," Farax explained, "although it may not seem that way since our primary job is to think. Still, it is good to have a few hobbies."

"That isn't what most of this activity is, is it?" Em asked, "Hobbies?"

"The gardening and home maintenance is," Turanxi replied, "but much of it is industrial and a form of status competition among Kenlientan business persons."

"All this for status?" Em asked.

"I find it silly too," Turanxi admitted, "but remember I am just a minor elder from one of the outlying towns. This sort of thing is almost as foreign to me as it is to you. Still I find it interesting to see what new

things the people of Tamag Methin are coming up with. My own town is usually a year or two behind the times, fashion-wise, so this is an opportunity for me to see into the future. See that building over there? The tall one with seven floors? The carvings along the roofline are new to me. It seems unique right now, but if it becomes popular, maybe half the buildings at home will have similar carvings in a couple of years.”

“Where are we going to stay?” Em asked Raff a while later. “The Kenlienta have inns, but we couldn’t stay in one. Even if our rooms were sufficiently isolated, the horses could be dangerous to the people here.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask sooner,” Raff replied. “During the Plague we never stayed in a city long enough for that to matter.”

“I am sure Elder Saltaxis will be delighted to arrange for your needs, Raufanax,” Farax told him. “You honor us all with your presence. The least we can do is honor you in return.”

Raff thanked him, but privately he remembered, *I’m never comfortable trading on generosity*. But there was no choice in this case. It was late in the day and they would not be able to conclude their business tonight assuming Elder Saltaxis was even in town at the moment. He was about to express his reservations to Em, but she was too busy playing tourist. He looked around and realized she had the right of it. A Kenlientan city was certainly worth looking at no matter how many times you saw it.

“This street is new,” Turanxi noted as they turned right and entered a lane paved with red and yellow painted cobblestones.

“The painted stones, you mean?” Em asked.

“No,” Turanxi laughed. It wasn’t something she had done often on their journey together. Em decided Turanxi should do it more often. It did wonders for her appearance. “The cobbles have probably been used a hundred times or more. I meant that last time I was in Tamag Methin there was a long building here. It’s been removed and this street was put in its place.”

“It must get confusing, with even the streets changing all the time,” Em remarked.

“My dear,” Turanxi laughed again, “how boring your cities must be if they never change.”

“I wouldn’t say they never change,” Em replied defensively. “Human society is hardly that static and there is new construction as needed. We just don’t make changes for the sake of difference. But doesn’t all this get inconvenient? I mean, you can get lost if the streets change too much, can’t you?”

“There’s a knack to making your way around a city you have not visited recently enough,” Turanxi replied. “Don’t worry. Things haven’t changed all that much since my last visit.”

“I’m not sure I understand, though,” Em admitted. “Can anyone just decide to demolish a building or building where a street used to be?”

“Not at all,” Turanxi replied. “In fact all changes are approved of and scheduled by the municipal planning board. In my own town all such changes are planned and coordinated over ten years in advance. I would think the plans here are at least that well thought out.”

“So people need to give that much advance notice just to paint their houses?” Em asked.

“Not at all,” Turanxi replied. “That is a little change. A person may change the color of his house every day if he so chooses. If it were possible he could demolish it every day so long as it did not inconvenience his neighbors. It’s the big changes that have to be planned. The street plan is constantly being revised, but that affects everyone so it has to be coordinated. Builders wanting to build in new areas must have approval. In the business sector of the city there are few buildings that do not have more than one tenant, same with buildings whose landlords rent living space. Major changes to those buildings also affect more than the owner so they can only be accomplished with adequate warning to all tenants, although there are times when all the tenants of a building voluntarily opt to join in for a major change. Those are the exceptions. Of course, a tenant may make any nonstructural change within his own walls.”

“It’s all too much for me,” Em admitted. “I think it would be nice to have a home that I could count on as always being the same.”

“We could do that,” Raff told her. “Where would you like it to be?”

“You don’t have a home?” Turanxi asked, shocked.

“We move around too much for a home to be sensible,” Emblem admitted. “Although there are times I think it would be nice not to have to move for a year or two.”

“Maybe it’s time we established a home base, Em,” Raff suggested. “Other wayfarers do, you know.”

“We’re freelancers, Raff,” she reminded him. “We have to move around to where we are needed.”

“Em,” Raff replied, “we’re freelancers, yes, but it also means we’re allowed to pick and choose the jobs we take. We travel because there’s always someone who needs us, but we don’t have to always go wherever. We can stay in Crace or the Green Lands, if you’d like, or maybe just take time off between jobs. Our work has a lot of free time blended in, but we haven’t really stopped since before we were married.”

“We were moving around so much,” Em reminisced, “we only found time for the ceremony while shipboard en route to Verana.”

“Good thing a ship’s captain can always perform the ceremony,” Raff noted. “I always thought we should have gotten married exactly on the equator, though.”

“Romantic!” Em accused. “We would have had to wait another year had I agreed to that.”

“There are times I would love to be able to wander all over the world, doing great things and helping people,” Turanxi told them, “but my duty is to the people of my town so I stay there except for those rare occasions my duty brings me to Tamag Methin or anywhere else the regional council decides to meet. Ah, this is the palace of the Chief Elder of our region. If you think our cities change rapidly, this should really turn you around.”

Ahead of them stood the oddest structure either Em or Raff had ever seen. The palace was roughly triangular, although Farax and Turanxi assured them even that was not a permanent feature although the external appearance changed slowly. One third of the triangle was covered in scaffolding and on another third there were some scaffolds in place as well, but not as many and even these were being dismantled and work continued on that section of the building. The third and final section had no workmen doing anything on it. Each section had a door, but it was through the door on the obviously finished section

toward which Farax and Turanxi led them.

“Our horses,” Em protested.

“Ah yes,” Turanxi smiled. “I had nearly forgotten them. Tether them to this lamp post.”

“But they’ll be potentially dangerous to any Kenlien who gets too close,” Em explained.

“I can handle that at least temporarily,” Turanxi assured her. The Kenlien woman closed her eyes for a moment and then brought her hands gently together in front of her face. Then she opened her eyes and slid her right hand off her left until it faced palm forward toward the horses and puffs of green light seemed to waft toward the beasts. Even before they finished their slow progress, Turanxi duplicated the gesture with her left hand as red sparkles trailed off that hand and drifted toward the horses. The green puffs and red sparkles clung to the horses’ fur for a moment and then began to spread out and cover them. As they joined, they formed a dull white glow that slowly seemed to sink into the horses’ bodies. “There,” Turanxi told them, satisfied, “that should keep them safe for a few hours. Later, after you have been formally announced there is a stable inside the palace for those few animals we do keep for transportation. They’ll be safe to everyone, including themselves, in there.”

As they approached the door of the palace finally, Em noticed that Turanxi’s and Farax’s honor guard intended on remaining outside. “Yes, it is not our custom for guards to accompany elders into the palace,” Farax explained. “They will find their rooms for the night and then be at liberty until we need them again for the journey home.”

“You will likely see several of them here in the palace later,” Turanxi added, “without the ceremonial spears of course. The palace is open to all Kenlienta and most visiting the city for the first time like to visit here.”

Walking through the door into the palace transported them into a world of crystalline splendor. There were mirrors covering large portions of the high walls and the floor and ceiling appeared to have been made of a translucent, quartz-like material. There were pillars of glass that ran from floor to ceiling and there were numerous colored glass bowls suspended from the roof that were filled with light, casting many-colored shadows and highlights everywhere to be reflected and refracted by the mirrors and crystal surfaces.

“Exciting,” Raff murmured.

“Quite unusual,” Turanxi admitted, “even for us. I must congratulate the artist. I wonder if he or she would like to submit a design to our hall. It would last a bit longer.”

Em was about to ask what Turanxi meant but just at that moment a tall, elderly Kenlien with a long white beard approached. “Farax and Turanxi!” he called happily across the hall. “And you brought friends?”

“Elder Saltaxis,” Farax greeted him formally. “We have the honor of presenting Raff and Emblem Cawlens.”

“Not so great an honor as I have in greeting them,” Saltaxis replied. “Raufanax, it is good to see you again. And a delight to meet you at last, Lady Emblem Cawlens.”

“Have we met?” Raff asked.

“I was in Halaganrulin when you arrived with the medicine. We were not formally introduced, of course. As you said at the time, the circumstances made it necessary to waive the usual polite niceties.”

“Did I say that?” Raff asked. “I must have been very tired.”

“I do not believe I’ve ever seen anyone who looked as tired as you were,” Saltaxis smiled.

“You should have seen me two months later when I finally returned to the Green Lands,” Raff replied.

“He slept all day for the next three weeks,” Em laughed, “then he’d be awake all night. It made traveling... uh interesting.”

“Fortunately most of that was by ship so I was back to a more normal schedule by the time we reached the colonies in Maceno,” Raff added.

Saltaxis smiled. “We often tell stories about our heroes, like you two, but I don’t think many ever consider what happens after the stories come to their happy endings.”

“I usually find that even before one story had ended another has begun,” Raff replied.

“We call that life,” Saltaxis nodded. “It is rarely as well ordered as a work of fiction, is it?”

“It might be nice to live happily ever after,” Raff shrugged, “at least for a few months anyway. I must say this is a spectacular palace you have here.”

“Today’s wing is quite extraordinary,” Saltaxis replied. “Would you like to meet the designer? She is just on the other side of the hall, doing something with the lights, I think. She’s been adjusting them all day in fact.”

“What do you mean by ‘Today’s wing’?” Em asked.

“You may have noticed that there are three wings to the palace,” Saltaxis explained, as they strolled across the large reception hall. “We move from wing to wing each day and every time we use a wing it has a new design.”

“You mean each design only gets used once?” Em asked.

“Exactly,” Saltaxis replied. “Today at sunset we will open the next wing and begin to close this one, although we will leave this one open until midnight because many Kenlienta have asked to be able to view it after their normal business hours. Normally this wing would be closed as the next one was opened. Fortunately the builders tell me they will not be unduly pressed to finish the redesign before this wing opens again so I am happy to allow this one those extra hours.”

“It must be truly magical at night,” Em remarked.

“It is,” Saltaxis replied. “I was so enchanted by it last night I spent two hours just admiring it. Sadly only a few people were here to see it at the time, but since the word has spread, more and more people have been flocking in to see today’s design.”

“This doesn’t look very crowded,” Em opined. There were about two hundred Kenlienta milling about the entrance hall.

“Most people are working,” Turanxi told her.

“In another hour, I doubt there will be room to breathe in here,” Saltaxis chuckled. “Raff and Emblem Cawlens, this is our honored designer of the day, Naratha.”

Naratha was a Kenlientan woman approaching middle age. Her curly black hair was showing traces of gray and she bowed respectfully to Raff and Em. “I am honored to meet the two greatest heroes of our nation,” she told them.

“Oh no,” Em disagreed, “We are honored to be able to witness the work of such an artistic genius.” They traded complements back and forth for the next few minutes until Naratha excused herself to make another adjustment to the lights. Em followed for a bit to watch her work. “I designed this as a dynamic work of art,” Naratha explained, “but I was unable to perfect a way to make the changes automatic in time for the opening, I only had three years to work on it after all, so instead I’ve been making the planned adjustments since last night.”

“You do look a bit tired,” Em noted. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Emblem Cawlens,” Naratha replied. “Just a little tired. I’ll be fine. In a way I think this is better than automatic changes. It makes me part of the exhibit.”

“And your point was to make change the very theme of the design, wasn’t it?” Em asked, starting to understand.

“Yes!” Naratha exclaimed. “That’s it exactly. All life is made up of changes. The palace itself is a reflection of that, but each design is usually static over the course of the day. I wanted mine to keep changing and yet still not lose the message. I’m so happy you could see that.” Impulsively, Naratha flung her hands around Em and hugged her. “Oh! I’m so sorry. Humans and Kenlienta aren’t supposed to hug, are we?”

“Only because being in such close proximity to most humans could harm you,” Em told her. “But if you didn’t feel any pain, then I have myself under control. It’s always acceptable for friends to hug.” Then she suited actions to words. When they broke the embrace, Em added, “But I’ve taken up too much of your time already. Perhaps we can meet for lunch or dinner after you’ve had a chance to rest up from today.”

“Really?” Naratha asked eagerly.

Em nodded. “I’ll be here at least through tomorrow. Maybe longer, but I’m not sure yet.”

“I would love to have dinner with you, Emblem Cawlens!” Naratha told her.

Em wanted to say that her friends called her simply “Em,” but the Kenlienta had no concept of nicknames. A person or even an object was always referred to by its full name. The name was a symbol of the person it referred to and to change that symbol was to change the significance of the person. The addition of the title “Elder” was just such a change although a positive one and one which many elders modestly did not insist on. Raff had been another special exception and his Kenlientan name was recognition of how the Ken thought of him. “Find me through the palace when you wake up,” Em told her. “If I’m not here, I’m sure someone will know where I am.”

“I will!” Naratha told her.

Em looked around and saw Raff and Saltaxis talking near a door on the far side of the hall. Farax and Turanxi were no longer in sight, however, and Em asked about them on joining Raff and Saltaxis.

“Tomorrow will be a very long day for us all,” Saltaxis replied. “They have gone to their rooms to prepare. Come this way.”

“What’s tomorrow?” Em asked as she followed Saltaxis through the door.

“Tomorrow begins the meeting of our regional Council of Elders,” Saltaxis replied, “and from what Raufanax has told me, it is good you two are here to attend as well.”

“We’re not elders,” Em pointed out.

“Attendance at council meetings is not always restricted to elders, Emblem Cawlens. We frequently invite others to attend and to testify. And you bring news about which we will be discussing.”

“The attacks on the Cata?” Em asked.

“And other matters as well,” Saltaxis replied. “We are all quite anxious to hear of the proceedings of ‘The Shape of the World.’ None of us were able to attend, obviously, but we are always interested in what our human counterparts have discovered. I also want your advice about the proposed changes in Kenlientan governance.”

“Yes,” Em agreed, “we heard about that from Elders Farax and Turanxi. Yakrut is a long way from here.”

“Indeed,” Saltaxis nodded. “Too far to walk, I fear.”

“How will you get there then?” Em asked. “Will you go by ship?”

“There are very few Kenlientan ships,” Saltaxis replied. “We make poor sailors, most of us. No I will have to fly when the time comes to leave.”

“Fly?” Em asked.

“I have a well-trained *toraladi*. It is what I believe you might call a gryphon. Flying on her is a rather exhilarating experience and perhaps a bit more exciting than a man my age ought to experience, but I must say I am looking forward to the trip none the less,” Saltaxis replied.

“Are there many trained gryphons in the Ken nation?” Em asked.

“A few,” Saltaxis replied. “They are very rare, but the elders of other regions have different means of speedy transportation. To tell the truth, I’m glad mine is as sedate as it is.”

“You call flying on gryphon back sedate?” Raff laughed.

“Compared to a phoenix?” Saltaxis countered. “Definitely. Rocs are fairly unpredictable as well. They have a tendency to swoop down for a quick meal no matter how tightly you try to rein them in. At least a gryphon rarely needs to feed in the middle of a trip and I understand that steering a flying whale is nearly impossible.”

“Flying whales?” Em asked. “Do they really exist?”

“I have never seen one,” Saltaxis admitted, “but it is told that two centuries ago the Elder Horanax flew one around the world.”

“Why?”

“To see if it could be done,” Saltaxis replied, “or so I imagine. For all I know the real story could be that he didn’t know how to get off the beast.”

“Getting down off a whale,” Raff mused. “Can’t say it’s a problem I ever had.”

“Speaking of transportation, though,” Em suddenly remembered, “our horses...”

“Already taken care of,” Raff told her. “By now they’re grazing in the garden.”

“They eat a lot, they could do a lot of damage to the plants there,” Em worried.

“They’re being picketed in a part of the garden where the gardeners plan new work tomorrow anyway,” Saltaxis told her. “And even so, we’ll move them into the stables later this evening after their stalls have been prepared.”

“And our bags have already been delivered to the room we’ve been assigned,” Raff told her.

“Through here,” Saltaxis opened a door for them. It turned out to lead into the next wing of the building. Suddenly the decorative motif changed from mirrors and crystals to trees and flowers. The floor had been carpeted with freshly cut sod and the walls were covered with tree bark. There were forest flowers everywhere and the ceiling had been replaced with a dome of glass Raff thought was impossibly large, but which gave an unimpeded view of the sky. None of the interior walls reached up to the ceiling so every room and corridor opened upward into a vast open space except for a large section they could see near the middle of the building in which several floors worth of offices and living spaces had been stacked up on top of each other.

“Our rooms are up there?” Raff asked.

“For tonight,” Saltaxis told him. “We’ll be rotating with the design schedule of course, but don’t worry, your bags will be in the right room each evening. Ah, Elder Garanhix! Are we ready for the opening?” he addressed a very elderly Kenlien.

“Yes, Elder Saltaxis,” Garanhix nodded enthusiastically. “The staging has been removed and everything is in place. I am a little concerned about the lighting in the entrance hall for tonight, though, and I’m having some extra light globes hung from the larger branches.” He looked up at the sky, which was starting to darken. “But I think we have plenty of time. In fact I was just going to see if the workmen had finished that.”

As they walked toward the front of the wing, Saltaxis introduced Raff and Em to Garanhix. It turned out that Garanhix had never actually served as an elder to anyone save his immediate family, but by virtue of having his design chosen for the palace he was accorded the title as though a true village elder.

Garanhix was thin even for a Kenlien and his hair was pure white, but, in spite of his advanced age, he

seemed as frenetic as a school boy. This single coming day was the highpoint of his entire life and the fact that Raff and Em were there to admire it made it even more special if that were possible. He excitedly pointed out various features to Raff and Em, explaining the inspiration for his idea and what he hoped to accomplish.

Em particularly liked the long circular staircase to the upper levels which had seemingly been built around the trunk of an amazingly wide tree. "Ah!" Garanhix sighed. "That was a particular challenge. The pillar had been left from a previous design and had to be left in place for the next three designs to follow. I couldn't have it removed. Originally I wanted to use a lifting mechanism to bring people to the upper levels, you see."

"I hadn't realized there were restrictions on what you could do," Em remarked.

"Oh yes!" Garanhix exclaimed. "Many restrictions! An artist submits his design and then if it is good enough, it gets placed into a lottery system so we never know if we'll be chosen even if our designs are acceptable, although it was an honor just to have been found acceptable. Then once chosen by lot, the design committee decides just when a winning design will be implemented. They try to arrange it so there will be little danger of not finishing in time, but very often, I understand, there are features that must remain in place and that is why we are given as long as possible in order to decide how to accommodate such features. Also sometimes a planned addition is incompatible with the designs before and after one's own, so a designer must figure out how to work around that too, although that was not a problem for me. I had plenty of time to work everything out."

"Naratha, today's winner, told me she was not able to work everything out," Em remarked, "and had to make manual adjustments she had originally planned as automatic."

"Ah, isn't Naratha's design wonderful!" Garanhix replied. "She has such ingenuity and imagination. She is truly gifted, but some of her plans were even more ambitious than she could account for. She will no doubt work them out in time for other design jobs. I understand there are many others who intend to hire her."

"Surely your work will bring you offers as well," Em told him.

"Offers, perhaps," Garanhix replied, "but I am an old man and I think this will be my final and finest work. I doubt I will take any offers even if I receive any. Oh, they left that ladder. Excuse me, please. I must make sure it is removed. Will you be at the dinner tonight?"

"They will, Elder Garanhix," Saltaxis assured him.

"Oh good," Garanhix replied. "I will see you again then, perhaps?"

"Doesn't all this constant change get inconvenient at times?" Em asked Saltaxis as they continued on.

"Yes," Saltaxis agreed, "but then they always get better too, Not all change is for the best, Emblem Cawlens, but it is inevitable. Not to change means to die."

"I'm more curious as to what sort of design is being applied to the third wing," Raff wondered out loud.

"Clouds," Saltaxis told him. "I would take you to see it, but the boy who won that day is very busy and we should not get in the way."

“A boy?” Em asked.

“Yes,” Saltaxis nodded. “He is only twelve years old. Very young, I’ll admit, but we do like to include Kenlenta of all ages. The young seem to come up with the most amazing designs, possibly because they have little sense of the impossible. In any case, this lad’s notion was to make the hall seem as though it was entirely made up of clouds. Fortunately, he has never been flying so he doesn’t know how wet and uncomfortable clouds can truly be.” Behind them a bell sounded as they reached the base of the staircase. “Ah, this wing will open in a few minutes. That is the warning. I’ll leave you to find your rooms for the night, my friends. You’re on the top floor near my rooms, in fact. There will be someone up there to guide you. If you will excuse me, I have some official duties to perform but I will see you at dinner.

Four

The meeting of the Council of Elders began the next morning directly after breakfast even as the dishes were being cleared away. The dining hall was also the meeting room and the attendees remained seated at their tables as Saltaxis made an opening statement of welcome and introduction. Raff was amazed to see only a little over one hundred elders in the hall. “I thought you had more towns in this region than that,” he commented to Saltaxis after the opening speech.

“No, these are representatives of each city in our region,” Saltaxis confirmed. “Many are husband and wife co-leaders as well and some smaller towns band together to send a single representative, so some votes here will count for more than others.”

Then the real business of the meeting began. Raff and Em were not sure if the leadership style Saltaxis used was typical of the Kenlenta in general, or of only Saltaxis himself. But all debates were held in the form of polite discussion. There were not many dissenting voices but they too delivered their opinions politely and respectfully and what they had to say was considered fairly by one and all in the room. Sometimes the dissenter’s views were accepted by the council and sometimes not and then other points would be made.

However, the biggest difference between this and meetings Raff had once had to endure in the Wayfarers’ guild was that all business seemed to be discussed in a form of questions and answers. There were no formal reports or proposals as such, just calm and orderly discussion of the world around them which was often a rambling journey through a number of topics. One example of which was the way in which the problems some Kenlenta had been giving the Cata were discussed.

“Yes, there have sadly been incidents of this sort in many parts of the world,” Saltaxis admitted. “I had hoped our own younger people would have been more understanding of our neighbors, but the young of all people are sometimes quick to judge and quick to act. In haste we make mistakes.”

“In this case,” Raff pointed out, “I believe they attacked the wrong people. The Cata have done nothing to harm the Kenlenta. It is possible that some of the colonists have, but not the Cata.”

“The attacks should never have been carried out regardless,” another elder added to the conversation. “Yes, there have been encroachments, minor ones but troubling, on parts of our territory. But we have always been able to discuss these things in the past before resorting to violence.”

“This is a large world and there is room for everyone,” still another elder added.

“But we deserve to live in our own homes and not be driven out by the noxious water from human cities upstream of us,” a female elder added.

“Agreed,” Raff nodded. “The colonists need to learn to control their waste better. They don’t live here alone.”

“That is still no reason to attack the humans who call themselves Cata,” Saltaxis concluded. “Nor is it cause for any of us to attack and kill humans making their Way from one place to another.”

“That has not happened here?” Farax asked. “Has it?”

“There have been no reports of missing parties in this part of the world,” Emblem confirmed, “although we discovered a section of one of our paths that had been deliberately cut. It was starting to become unraveled and would have been dangerous to anyone who lives in the Wild for a long time had we not repaired the break.”

“How do you know it was a Kenlien who cut it?” an elder enquired.

“We do not,” Em replied calmly, “but I do know that among us only a wayfarer would have the ability to do so and it would not be in the interest of any of us to do it.”

“Nor in our own interest,” the same elder pointed out.

“Obviously,” still another elder added, “whoever did it had priorities not being considered here. Young people of high magical potential might not be sufficiently experienced to understand the full ramifications of cutting a human path. Also it is unlikely that a human wayfarer of sufficient ability would be so inexperienced, so it seems to me that, while it is distasteful to admit it, such damage must have been done by a Kenlien.”

The notion was considered and debated. After an hour or so it was decided that the elders should, on their return home, point out to the younger members of their towns and cities that cutting paths would endanger Kenlienta more than humans. There were also promises to try to keep the younger people from attacking human settlements. Saltaxis pointed out that elders were entitled to impose penalties on transgressors in their society and that perhaps the threat of such penalties would curb the unfortunate activities of the younger Kenlienta.

“What about that horrible new wayfarer path in the north?” one of the attending elders asked suddenly.

“What path is that?” Raff asked.

“There is a path that has been fairly burned across the land to the north of the territory of the Cata,” Saltaxis informed him. “I flew out to have a look at it myself just a few days ago. I have never seen such raw power used in the formation of a pathway. I am considered an accomplished magician among my people, but even I was unable to completely shield myself from the effects of that crudely made path. I had aches and pains all over for two days after my exposure and there are others who are still healing from the excruciating experience of trying to cross that path.”

“That path is what set our younger people off,” an elder added.

“It does not even seem to be going anywhere,” another told them. “It just wanders around the landscape.”

“And I’ll bet it’s more than merely inconvenient,” Raff concluded. “This is the first I’ve heard of it, but I promise that as soon as this is over, I will investigate this new path, smooth over the rough edges that are giving you such pain, or maybe I will erase it altogether. It does not sound like a normal path at all.”

“It could be like the one I first forged, when you found me, Raff,” Em suggested.

“Could be,” Raff agreed, “but it sounds much worse. We’ll need to see and handle it ourselves.”

“It is almost like a fracture in the world itself,” a Kenlien told them.

“I hope not,” Raff replied. “I’m not sure I’m up to healing that sort of fracture.”

Two days later the council finally got around to directly discussing the upcoming Grand Council meeting in Yakrut. Actually they had been discussing it all along, but there had been very few references to the meeting, only to various bits of business to be handled there. “We meet so infrequently,” Saltaxis explained for the benefit of Raff and Em, “that there is usually a wide variety of topics to be covered. Ostensibly the main reason for this next meeting is to discuss what to do about the tensions that have been building up between us and humans, but in reality Elder Leraxa has called this meeting to propose a new system of government for the Ken Nation.”

“What sort of government?” Em asked.

“A more permanent one,” Saltaxis told her. “As things stand now the chief elders of the Ken meet only once every five or six years. In spite of our love of change, there are some things a Kenlien likes to know will stay the same.” There were murmurs of assent from all over the room. “Our way of life is the most important of these things. The government is a part of that way of life and it is supposed to protect our way of life. That is why we so rarely change the way the government works.”

“So how does Elder Leraxa want to change the government?” Em asked.

“She wants the council to meet more frequently,” Saltaxis replied. “It is something she has been working toward all her adult life, in fact. What she really wants is for the Great Council to meet in almost permanent session.”

“What elder has that sort of time that he or she can spend away from his city or region, I guess it would be?” Raff asked.

“No one can,” Saltaxis replied. “That is why her ideas have not been widely agreed with until recently. But she has a way around that as well. Instead of the elders meeting themselves, she says we can and should send proxies to represent us in council.”

“She wants representatives of the representatives of the people to meet?” Raff could not entirely keep from chuckling. “Sounds a bit convoluted to me.”

“And to me as well,” Saltaxis agreed. “Unfortunately I may not be in the majority on that view. She has gradually brought others over to her point of view and with the recent problems we have all been facing, many elders are willing to try something new. They are calling this the ‘Great Experiment.’”

“A stronger centralized government isn’t the sort of experiment you’ll be able to just dismantle after a session or two,” Em opined. “Once established, I think it will only grow stronger and gain increasing

control over the lives of your people. Human governments have done that for over two thousand years. At the fall of the Empire of Meni thenorthern provinces became split into a collection of petty kingdoms and tribal areas.

They did not stay that way for long, though,” she continued. The small kingdoms went to war with one another in some cases or chose to merge peaceably in others, but they gradually became larger and absorbed the tribal areas. And with each passing year the power of the governments as vested in their monarchs became stronger and less likely to relinquish power. The kings and their nobles became so powerful, in fact, they controlled most aspects of the lives of the common folk.”

“I know it is not as bad as all that these days,” Saltaxis smiled. “So how did that change?”

“No one, save the kings, had the power to change that from inside the system,” Em explained, “and that was hardly in their interest, but after a millennium of monarchic power consolidation, nature hit the northern world hard with a killing fever. It was as least as potent as the plague that affected you a few years ago. To this day our doctors are arguing over just what it was, but by the time it had passed over a third of the human population had died. That disaster had two positive results. The first was that society was disrupted sufficiently that a new social structure formed in which more people have come to have control over their own lives.”

“What was the second?” Turanxi asked.

“That we had learned enough about diseases that we were able to formulate a cure for your own plague when it happened,” Em replied. “It wasn’t perfect as we all remember, but it was enough that only a small percentage of Kenlenta died. The thing is that once a government starts getting stronger, it starts a cycle in which it just keeps getting larger and more controlling until something happens to cause it to lose its balance and fall. The Kenlenta, however, have managed for the last thousand years or better to have a system that has done its job fairly well, but has not been allowed to control the lives of the Kenlenta in return. Would you want to change it?”

“Thank you, Emblem Cawlens,” Saltaxis told her warmly. “You have put into words concepts I was having trouble expressing. However, you have given us only one example to prove your case.”

“Good point,” Em replied, “Let’s look further back into the past. The Empire of Meni. It started as a single country that gradually conquered and absorbed most of the northern kingdoms and the far northern reaches of the Southern Continent. It was most of the world they knew about and they controlled it. They held control, too, until the economy collapsed during a famine in Tientra where most of the Empire’s grain was coming from. Once again, it was nature that caused the change. Grain factors and their investors lost fortunes, trade routes were abandoned and, in the confusion, provincial governors used the opportunity to declare themselves kings and break free of the empire, although almost half of them claimed to be the legitimate heirs to the emperor.

“Corisa’s government is totalitarian in nature and everyone’s place in society is dictated by the, well, supposedly by the emperor, but in practice it is the bureaucratic administrators who decide who people will marry, what they’ll do for a living and such and their empire has been in existence for thousands of years. Unless they suffer a major disaster they are likely to stay that way too, if you ask me,” Em concluded and sat down.

“Quite a speech,” Raff told her while the Kenlentan elders continued to discuss the matter.

“You didn’t think I had it in me?” Em asked.

“Not when you aren’t angry,” Raff chuckled. “Then you do go on. Usually long-winded speeches are my job. I must wonder, though, where you learned your political theory. Most of our kings are still claiming to have the personal favor of God Almighty.”

“I don’t know how much longer this conference is going to go on,” Em replied, changing the subject, “but I think we’ve accomplished as much as we came to do.”

“I agree,” Raff whispered back. “We need to get back to Catin, let the Cata know the elders of the Ken are as concerned as they are about the recent attacks and will bring them to a halt if at all possible.”

“We also need to report in Muenta on everything we’ve learned,” Em told him, “and then finally we need to investigate this new dangerous path for ourselves.”

“And somehow one job leads to another and each new favor we do brings new obligations,” Raff noted. “Dear, I know you want a vacation, but it looks like we’ll have to put that off just a bit longer.”

“Well, really now,” Em replied and then realized the entire hall had gone quiet and the elders were amused to watch Em and Raff go back and forth like that, “what would I do on vacation if you got right down to it. Sit back and relax? Sounds nice for an hour or two but after that both of us would get bored and go looking for trouble. At least this way we know where to find trouble in advance for a change.”

The Way to Modaga

One

“Are you so certain this path was created by a wayfarer?” Em asked Raff as they surveyed the wide and ragged pathway when they finally found it, where it meandered its way through northern Catin.

The path looked like a constantly burning fire of Wild energy. It would have been lethal to Wild creatures if it didn’t drive them away by its radiating energy long before they could reach the path itself. That it was radiating and still not in any immediate danger of dissipating was a sign of just how much power had been incorporated in the path’s construction. This path, however, wasn’t just dangerous to people and creatures of the Wild. It was also dangerous to humans and their domesticated animals as well. The energy radiating off the path was fully capable of twisting reality on a number of levels.

“How else?” Raff countered. “The feel of this is not essentially different from what I came up with shortly after my illness. I think we’re encountering another wild talent. One that hasn’t had much, if any, training.”

“Which way do we follow it?” Em asked.

“It goes roughly eastward for at least three hundred miles,” Raff replied, “probably more, but the other end is only about one hundred miles into Teltoa. From what I can tell, that’s the beginning and whoever caused this went east. Part of me wants to rush eastward, but we promised Saltaxis we’d clean this mess up. To do that we need to start at the beginning of this path.”

“Where it starts may tell us something about the wayfarer who did this,” Em agreed. “At least we can

ask the people of his town or village.”

“Good point,” Raff agreed. “It might give us a notion as to just what sort of person did this. A trail like this could have been done maliciously or in a state of extreme agitation. Or the person could be sick and needing attention just as I did in Semlari.”

“Hopefully not that,” Em replied as they started walking toward the beginning of the path. “At least you stayed in the hospice area. This person seems to be wandering all over the continent if what Danicci told us is true.”

“Well, we suspected something of the sort from what we heard in Tamag Methin,” Raff pointed out.

“Yes, but the report in Muenta was at least two weeks more up to date,” Em told him. “We should start cleaning this path away, you know.”

“Not completely, or at least not just yet,” Raff disagreed. “It will be easier to find our Way back here, by following the path. For now, let’s just disperse most of the excess power and neaten the path up. Who knows? It may turn out to be useful, and if not, we’ll dismantle it completely on the way back.”

“I wish we still had the horses,” Em complained.

“They would have been more trouble than they are worth in this country,” Raff pointed out. “We had too many rivers to cross to get here including the Catin River itself. That ferry only handled foot traffic, remember.”

“It didn’t handle that very well, either,” Em noted critically. “I wonder how many times a day the oarsman crosses the river.”

“No more than he has to, I suspect,” Raff laughed. “It’s a very wide river and I think he would have rather been fishing.”

“Probably,” Em agreed. “Several hundred miles is a long way to walk, you know. We probably ought to get more horses. Is there a town or city near here?”

“Not to speak of,” Raff replied. “I think there’s a colonial town about halfway between here and where I sense the trail’s beginning. We can leave the path when we get closer and see if there are a couple of stout horses available.”

“We can and will,” Em told him firmly. “Whoever made this path may be on foot, but if we walk along behind him, we may never catch up.”

“Oh we’ll catch up,” Raff told her confidently. “This is not a normal path. It wasn’t forged at a consistent pace and it is not particularly straight either. It’s almost as if a skittish young animal had created it.”

“That can’t be,” Em told him. “Animals can’t forge pathways.”

“Almost, Em,” Raff repeated. “No, this can only have been created by a human or a Kenlien. But I’m fairly sure a Kenlien wouldn’t have survived the experience.” They walked on as together they worked on the rogue pathway, turning it from something lethal into something that at least could not kill on contact.

By the time the sun set that evening, Em looked back on their handiwork and realized they had traveled much further than they should have. “Did you do something while we were walking?” she asked Raff. “I’d swear we’ve gone over forty miles since we got on this path.”

“I had to do something with all that energy,” Raff told her, unslinging his pack from his shoulders and starting to untie their small tent from it. “So I let it bend space a bit for us. We won’t be able to do that in the other direction since we’ll need to obliterate the path completely, that’s somewhat slower work, but I figured we might as well take advantage of the power we had at hand and this will save a few days of travel time. In fact had we reached the path a bit earlier we could have slept in real beds tonight. That town I mentioned is just a few miles from here.”

“We’ll eat breakfast there instead,” Em decided.

The town was just another small colonial outpost with a non-wayfarer taking travel reservations when necessary, but he was a bundle of news for them. “Have you heard about what’s happening in Holrany?” he asked them.

“No, Dieter, “we’ve been in the Wild for most of the last few weeks. Has the king decided he isn’t really a direct descendant of Emperor Menius after all.”

“Hah! No, I think he still claims that,” Dieter laughed. “But he’s gone to war with Kharasia.”

“You’re kidding?” Raff asked.

“Maybe it’s the other way around,” Dieter shrugged. “It all started with that territory both nations claim, I hear”

“Pernatia?” Em supplied.

“That’s the one,” Dieter confirmed.

“The Pernatians like to think they have nothing to do with either of their powerful neighbors,” Em replied.

“I don’t think they have much choice in the matter at the moment. The Kharasian Imperial troops slogged on through Pernatia two months ago with hardly any resistance according to the dispatches. Mostly just official protests from their figurehead of a king.”

“Well, he pays Kharasia well for Pernatia’s nominal independence,” Raff noted. “I can understand why he would protest.”

“And why he would limit himself to words in such a protest,” Em added. “So then what happened?”

“Well, I guess the Kharasian emperor was really after the western parts of Holrany,” Dieter continued. “I mean what was there to gain from Pernatia? He had that already, really, so his army just kept going until Holrany responded. Since then it sounds like it’s been grinding to a halt somewhere around the Holran capital city, Manrich. Unless the dispatches have gotten confused, the city has changed hands at least twice since this started.”

“Any idea of what might have set this off?” Raff asked, “Or did one of the kings just get greedy?”

“The two nations have been grumbling at each other for years,” Em noted when Dieter did not have a

ready answer.

“No doubt we’ll hear more about it in the next city,” Raff remarked. “Right now we need a pair of horses and have to get back to that rogue pathway.”

“I’ll arrange for the horses,” Dieter offered, “and what’s up with that Way? I’ve been getting complaints about it for weeks now.”

“You’ve passed those complaints onward?” Raff asked. Dieter just nodded. “We didn’t hear about it until we were in Tamag Methin. The Kenlienta are infuriated by it.”

“Are they?” Dieter asked. “I had heard rumors about attacks further south.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Raff admitted, “and why we cannot take a party of travelers with us. We’re not actually going anywhere they would want to be.”

They were back out of the small town before noon and with horses to carry them, they made their way back to the path quickly enough. Surging on ahead, they reached the head of the rogue path a few hours later.

“Raff, there’s nothing here,” Em observed.

“Not anymore,” Raff agreed. “The path just comes to an end. But these plantains look like they were deliberately planted here. See the straight rows?”

“Well, they might have been straight once,” Em replied. “I think they may have been moved a bit by Wild changes.”

“Not much, though,” Raff told her. “The rows are too straight to have happened by accident. I think we’re in the farm area of a native village.”

“Cata?” Em asked.

“No, we’re too far north, I think,” Raff told her. “I think there are several tribes in this part of Teltoa; the Alonu and the Telts are the two largest I’ve heard of, although there are some smaller populations like the Sarahnie as well.”

“How do you remember all that?” Em asked.

“If you ask some of my old teachers, they’d tell you I’m not using my brain for much else, so I might as well remember trivia.”

“Not so trivial at the moment,” Em retorted.

“It will be by this time tomorrow, I would think,” Raff told her. “Let’s get past these trees and see what lies in the direction our path-maker was coming from.” A minute later they walked past the line of trees and found a large open area with the charred and rotting remains of what had once been a small, prosperous village. “I think they were raided,” Raff opined.

“There’s a normal pathway to the east of here,” Em noted a minute later. “I think it’s starting to dissolve from lack of use.”

Raff stretched out his senses. “Yes, but it’s doing so in a normal and fairly safe manner. We can leave it to fade away on its own. Well, this is depressing.”

“And more than a bit creepy,” Em added. “There are bones everywhere. I think the scavengers had a good time once the stability here failed.”

“Probably,” Raff agreed bleakly.

He closed his eyes and for a moment nothing happened. Then the ground began to shake gently, a consistent vibration that hummed rather than the rumble of a tremor and Em felt herself being lifted an inch above the surface. She looked around and saw all the traces of the village sink beneath the surface; the burned wood of the former homes, the bones of the people and everything that had once been alive here were soon covered by the earth.

“There,” Raff said at last as he set himself and Em back down to the ground. “Everyone deserves a decent burial. Let’s get out of here. There’s work to be done.”

Two

“They’re all females, except for some of the young colts,” Em noted.

“Adult male hippogryphs tend to be solitary creatures,” Raff told her. “They only approach a herd during the mating season.”

A hippogryph looked as though some capricious deity had sewn the rear half of a horse to the front of a giant eagle. There were similar composite sorts of creatures in the Wild. Gryphons, for example, had females that appeared to be half lion and half eagle. Their males, however, were far more leonine in appearance save for the long spines that protruded from their backs. Creatures like this were often offered as conclusive proof that any two species could, under the correct circumstances mate and produce viable offspring, although no human scientist had yet discovered a method that could duplicate the process. The best anyone had come up with were hybrid creatures of closely related species that were sterile mules.

“I wonder why the Kenlenta don’t attempt to tame and ride these creatures,” Em remarked.

“They do, but not in these parts,” Raff explained. “These are tawny hippogryphs, which I suppose is obvious from the color of their fur and feathers. They don’t take very well to training. There are black hippogryphs in the mountains of Lorendo which I understand are quite docile, although there aren’t many Kenlenta in Lorendo.”

“Why not?” Em asked.

“I don’t know,” Raff admitted. “They don’t think of themselves as colonizers. Each new city is as much a part of the Ken Nation as the oldest are. There are no special colonial governors or laws that apply to Kenlenta who live there that don’t apply to all the Ken. However, just because there is only one Ken nation, it doesn’t mean you’ll find Kenlenta everywhere. There are no Kenlenta on the islands of the Bright Ocean for example although there are humans.”

“Are there?” Em asked. “I’ve never been on the Bright Ocean, you know.”

“I know,” Raff replied. “Well, yes, there are humans who live on those islands. Some are very friendly and inviting. Others are rather blood thirsty. It’s important to know which are which before landing.”

“I can imagine,” Em told him dryly. “Anywhere else I shouldn’t bother to look for Kenlenta?”

“I don’t think there are any north of the Arctic circle,” Raff replied. “Probably none south of the Antarctic circle, but I’m not sure if there’s any place to live there.”

“Who would want to?” Em asked.

“There are some towns to the very far north,” Raff replied.

“Of course, and we’ve seen the midnight sun together in some of them,” Em smiled, “but we can walk or ride there. If there’s any land in the deepest south, it’s a long ship voyage to reach it. Doesn’t seem worth the trip to me.”

“Maybe we should tame a pair of hippogryphs of our own,” Raff suggested. “Then we could fly there.”

“That would still be a very long flight,” Em replied. “And cold.”

“We could do with a good chilling breeze just about now,” Raff pointed out. “I don’t really enjoy tropical heat all that much.”

“You pine for it in the winter,” Em retorted. “Anyway, you said these hippogryphs aren’t very trainable, and the black variety is someplace we haven’t been since we met.”

“There’s always the white hippogryphs of northern Salasia,” Raff suggested. “Very trainable and as domesticated as animals that live in the Wild can get. I understand the Ken schools in the vicinity of Salasia use them both for racing and in some sort of flying sport. I haven’t seen it played, but it sounded something like tennis played a hundred feet off the ground.”

“What do they bounce the balls off of?” Em asked.

“Their rackets,” Raff laughed. “Obviously that high up there’s not a lot to bounce the ball off. In fact if it hits the ground, or even a nearby mountain, after you have hit it the other side scores.”

“But what’s the point of it?” Em asked.

“To win, of course,” Raff chuckled.

“So the players have to try to hit directly to each other, while on hippogryph back? It sounds like the only way to win is not to lose,” Em commented, seriously trying to figure it out.

“Well the same could be said for almost any game,” Raff told her.

She was about to say something when the solution to her problem suddenly presented itself. “You made that up!” she accused him.

“Only part of it,” Raff admitted. She summoned the Wild to throw a small clod of dirt at him, but he

“caught” it and let it drop to the ground. “The white hippogryphs are real, though. They’re not pure white, more a very pale beige with a darker mane of feathers and a brown line of fur running down their backs, but they are much lighter than other species. And they really do race them. I’ve seen that. The idea of a flying tennis game frightened them, though. I guess flying animals of that size don’t exactly stop on a pinhead and they aren’t all that maneuverable either.”

“Not to mention falling off one is bound to do more than just tickle, even if they fall onto a net,” Em commented.

“A rider could be strapped on the back,” Raff pointed out.

“And if two collided or a mount went lame?” Em countered. “Souds like an easy way to die to me.”

“That’s what they told me too,” Raff sighed.

“So what was it like, riding on the back of one of those things?” Em asked.

“What makes you think I rode one?” Raff asked.

“I know you better than you know yourself, Raff Cawlens,” Em told him tartly.

“I know,” Raff admitted. “Frightening, isn’t it?”

“At times. Well?”

“It was amazing!” Raff told her. “Not exactly a comfortable ride, though. I’m used to riding a horse and I know how to move with one to keep from walking away bruised, but in spite of the look of a hippogryph, the movements it makes are completely different. Thirty minutes in the sky were paid for with days of stiffness. Also, the act of gliding is not as smooth as it looks sometimes. You can be just going along sweetly and then you hit a thermal updraft or a cross wind or something and suddenly you’re all over the sky, or doing your best not to become part of the landscape.”

“But you still enjoyed it?” Em asked.

“Sure!” Raff told her enthusiastically. “What other human do you known who has ever flown like a bird? Actually that was pretty much the problem. They may have the back end of a horse, but they still have the brains of a bird. Birds don’t just glide and soar, they swoop and dive and perform all sorts of other fancy maneuvers in the air. Hippogryphs do all that as well.”

“Sounds like fun,” Em told him. “Next time we’re in Salasia you’ll have to take me flying.”

“Em, it’s very dangerous,” Raff told her.

“So you’ve said,” Em replied.

“I mean it is really dangerous,” Raff repeated.

“Right, I heard you,” Em nodded. “You don’t think I’m going to let you do something I haven’t, do you?”

“What if I told you I made that up too?” Raff tried.

“I wouldn’t believe you, dear,” Em replied. “Now promise me that one day we’ll go flying together.”

“If the opportunity presents itself,” Raff told her carefully, privately telling himself that he’d just have to make certain that opportunity never came up. “I think we’re getting near a colonial town.”

Em closed her eyes as she always did before taking a closer look at the Wild landscape. Raff had asked her about that and she had told him it helped her concentrate on the features of Wild energy around them. Otherwise she found that she tended to see the world as a non-wayfarer. Raff envied her the ability to ignore the Wild energy all around them. He, on the other hand, had to concentrate sometimes just to see where he was going because the Wild currents would drift past his eyes visibly in many layers. It had not always been that way for him, but with his greater mastery of the Wild came that small disability and as such disabilities went, he figured it was not all that bad.

“I see what you mean,” Em told him a minute later. “There’s a large area of stability a short way off the path. Let’s finish dispersing the path until just past, then head on in. We need to buy more provisions and report that destroyed village we found anyway.”

They continued on for the next few miles until they found a side path headed toward the nearby town they had detected. “Looks like whoever he was took a detour and stopped in here for a brief spell,” Raff commented.

“Why here?” Em wondered.

“Quite possibly for the same reasons we’re stopping,” Raff replied. “We need provisions and while we’re here we may as well have a civilized meal as well.”

“We can ask the local Guild representative if he might have been in the office,” Em suggested.

“How would the local Guildmaster know who he was?” Raff countered.

“I meant if a powerful master had been here recently,” Em clarified. “This had to have been someone of master rank. Right?”

“He’d have to be of potentially master rank,” Raff agreed, “but I doubt he’s been trained. This trail he blazed is just too nasty. And I seriously doubt he would have stopped by the Guildhall.”

“Why not?” Em asked. “The Guild helps wayfarers even if they are indigenes and not officially members of the guild.”

“Most of the natives in these parts have never even heard of the Guild, Em,” Raff replied. “I doubt he even entered the town openly, although we can ask. Most likely he stole some food and whatever else he needed then moved on. Remember, that was definitely not a colonial town in ruins.”

“Not unless the colonists had really gone native,” Em agreed.

The local Wayfarers’ Guildhall master here was a senior journeyman, which was normal for a small posting on the Dark Continent, although there were two other wayfarers in town as Raff and Emblem arrived. “There have been a lot of hostilities between the Alonu and Sarahnies of late,” one of the wayfarers, a man named Feodor, told them. “The Alonu have been heard boasting they destroyed the heart of the Sarahnies, in fact.”

“The heart?” Em asked.

“The home village of the tribe, ma’am,” he replied. “The natives call such villages the heart of their tribe. From what you say, I would guess that village you saw may have been Sarahn. It was in the right place, more or less. I’ve never been there, mind you, but that is about where it ought to have been.”

“Did you know about that path we’ve been following, sir?” Raff asked.

“The path? Sure, everyone knows about *that* path. It’s been raising holy...” he glanced at Em and stumbled over the next word and replaced it with, “vengeance all over this part of the continent. It cuts through several normal paths, making it devilishly hard to guide travelers safely.”

“Why didn’t anyone report it?” Raff asked.

“We did report it, Master Cawlens,” the senior journeyman replied. “I sent a report down to the main office in Rotolin weeks ago. They sent a reply just a few days ago that a master was looking into the situation.”

“Would have been nice if they had told the master who was looking into it,” Raff grumbled.

“That does explain why the Muenta office didn’t know about it, though,” Em pointed out. “The report went to Rotolin and then probably got forwarded to Taundon.”

“Where it isn’t likely to arrive for another week or two,” Raff commented. Then they’ll send out a message to all the offices down here, who by the time it arrives will have already seen the path for themselves or else heard about it from passing wayfarers. And we had to hear about it from the Kenlienta in Tamag Methin. Something’s going to have to be done about getting emergency messages out that cuts through the chain of command. Muenta should have heard officially before Taundon. This path is too dangerous for wayfarers to learn about the hard way.”

“Not the mention the fact that the Ken are upset by the path and some of their younger people are trying to take it out on humans,” Em added. “And they don’t care which humans they take it out on. In Catin, they’ve been raiding Cata villages and wayfarer parties when they find them.”

“Ma’am,” Feodor asked, “I heard there have been missing parties even up north. Is that true?”

“It is,” Em confirmed, “Elder Saltaxis admitted the younger Kenlienta all over the world have been making trouble of late.”

“That does it!” one of the other journeymen exclaimed. “I have a gun to use against Wild animals. Next time I see a Kenlien, I’ll shoot him too.”

“You will not!” Raff barked at him. “That will only make matters a hell of a lot worse. The Ken elders are reining in the young hotheads in trade for our cleaning up that path. If you go out and start picking additional fights with them, I will personally hunt you down and deliver you for justice in Tamag Methin. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” the journeyman replied meekly, “but what if they attack first?”

“You have a right to defend yourself,” Em told him. “Just make sure you’re actually being attacked. A

Ken magician may wave his arms about to attack you or just to protect himself against your human aura. You aren't likely to know the difference, just by looking until after the spell has been cast. For now, we're still at peace with the Ken so assume the latter. It's okay to summon the Wild to protect yourself against possible attack, but, let them make the first move."

"I don't know how to summon the Wild," the journeyman told her. "If I did, I wouldn't be stationed in Teltoa."

"Just don't be the one to shoot first," Raff warned him.

"One shot may be all you get though," one of the others pointed out.

"Look!" Raff shouted at him. "We're on good terms with the Ken nation elders at the moment. If you go shooting their young, however, that isn't likely to last and if they decide to fight back we will be in a world even more filled with troubles than we are now. Hands off the Ken!"

"But..." Feodor started another objection.

"No exceptions!" Em snapped at him even harder than Raff just had. It effectively cowed them all. Up until that moment Emblem had been the calming influence. If she was losing her temper, everyone was in trouble.

"No exceptions," Raff echoed in a softer tone. "Just smile and wave as you pass Kenlienta, if you see them at all."

"What if they want to talk?" Feodor asked hesitantly.

"Try listening," Raff replied. "It's always worked for me."

Three

"Another colonial town?" Em asked a few days later after the path had crossed southward into Catin. "Talk about getting away from it all."

"I don't think this is a town," Raff replied, "not the way we normally think of one. Too small, but the size of the stability is large for it to be a Catin village. Also the path seems to go right up to the edge of it. Let's check it out, though. Maybe I could buy a new pair of shoes."

It looked a bit like a town as they entered the bubble of stability, but the buildings had not been built with any sort of permanence in mind. They were just shelter from the daily rains of the wet season and the hot sun of the dry season and just barely did their jobs on those counts.

"I would guess there are about four dozen men working here," Raff noted to Em, "Maybe five dozen. No more."

"Men, yes," Emblem replied. "I don't see any women yet."

"It's a mining town," Raff told her. "There's only one shop and probably owned by the mining company. There's a tavern too, but it's probably just a place for the men to get drunk on company liquor. There

may not be any women here. The men will go to the nearest real town for that.”

“Doesn’t sound very healthy,” Em commented.

“It isn’t really,” Raff agreed, “but greed for the riches they’ll earn drives men who work in these towns. Most of them end up either giving it all back to the mining company for food and drink or else spend and gamble it away when they go to town.”

“We’d better be on our guard, then,” Em suggested.

“Oh I doubt there will be any need for that,” Raff replied. “We’re just passing through, after all. I just want to seek out the foreman and see if he knows anything about the path and the one who formed it.”

“The foreman?” Em asked.

“There won’t be a wayfarer stationed here,” Raff replied. “They probably have one come through once every week or two, maybe, bringing new miners in and taking old ones out.”

The foreman’s office was a grimy little box of a building with enough holes in the walls that not only the wind but small to medium-sized wildlife could get inside without a challenge if they could stand the smell of the interior. His desk, if that was the correct word for it, was a packing crate on its side and a wide plank of wood on top. The desk was cleared of paperwork when Raff and Em entered, but only because most of it had obviously been blown off and left on the floor. That floor, was currently hidden from sight, but Em decided it must have been built without bothering to include supports under the boards because the builders thought the ground was flat enough. Certainly it was not all that flat because under the scattered, oil-stained papers the boards groaned with every step. The building had no windows, but they were hardly necessary and had it not been for the tin roof, a person standing under it might well have gotten only slightly less wet in a downpour by standing outside the shack.

“Who the hell are you two?” the man they found inside demanded. When he stood he was of medium height although powerfully built and with dark brown hair and a beard that looked to be of only three weeks’ growth, which Em decided must have been the last time he had made it into town.

“Raff Cawlens,” Raff replied, “Master Wayfarer. This is my wife, Emblem.”

“You’re here early, wayfarer,” the man replied gruffly. “The last one was just here a few days ago.”

“We’re not part of the regular schedule,” Raff told him. “We’re following a trail and the one who made it may have been here briefly a few weeks ago.”

“No one’s here briefly, wayfarer,” the foreman told him. “Men are here by contract. A year is the shortest term, though most choose for two. The pay is better for longer term workers.”

“I imagine it would be,” Raff commented. “This wouldn’t have been a colonist, at least we don’t think so. More likely an indigene.”

“A what?”

“A native,” Raff clarified.

“Why didn’t you say so then?” the man asked belligerently.

“Sorry,” Raff replied, “just a slip of the tongue. Has anyone seen any native hanging around town. If he stopped in, he may have stolen some food or tools.”

“Yeah, there was bit of pilfering in the mess about a month ago. Thought some of the boys had been sneaking out extra rations. That might have been your native. Why? What’s he wanted for?”

“A few minor offenses,” Raff shrugged, “Mostly just bothering the Kenlienta. I promised to make him stop.”

“Why not let the Ken stop him if they want him to stop so much?” the foreman wondered.

“We do try to be good neighbors from time to time,” Raff replied blandly. “Well, if that’s all you can tell us, we’ll be on our way.”

“Wait!” the foreman replied hastily. “Why don’t you talk to the cook? He’s on shift in the mine for another hour or two, but he might know more.”

“That’s a point,” Raff decided, “Yes, I guess we can wait until he gets off shift.”

“No need,” the foreman told him. “I’ll send a man in and tell Cook to come out early.” He went to the door of his shack and shouted the necessary orders, finishing with, “Tell Cook we’ve got company. There,” he told them as he returned. “How about a drink while we wait?”

“Sure, why not,” Raff agreed.

“Just a drop,” Em replied, sensing the man would be insulted if she did not at least taste his whiskey.

“Good!” the foreman replied happily. “Good.” He turned to a cabinet and rattled around in it to find three glasses and a bottle of something.

Em was trying to silently question Raff as to why he thought staying here even another hour was worthwhile, but his hunches usually proved out, when the foreman offered her a much fuller glass than she had wanted. She merely thanked him and took it. She was about to take a sip, but the smell of the harsh liquid reached her nose and along with the raw alcohol, she detected something else she was not able to identify.

Many years earlier, the gardener on her father’s estate had been caught making brandy on his own still. Distillation was not illegal, but stealing some of the young wine to use was. It turned out he was not only making raw brandy, but was “aging” it with a number of things that did smooth out the flavor, but which made Emblem sick just to think about. The amber fluid in the ceramic beaker she held smelled like a close relative to the gardener’s brandy. She decided not to drink any of it and wait for a chance to dispose of it discretely.

Raff, on the other hand, sipped the whiskey and coughed slightly, but then took yet another sip and asked the foreman, “So what are you mining for here?”

“Gold, mostly,” the foreman told him. “We get a bit of silver out of the mine and some veins of copper, although we don’t get much call for the copper.”

“Really?” Raff asked. “I’m surprised. Gold and silver are for the jewelers and coin makers, but copper

is always needed in brass and bronze. Ship fittings rely on it.”

“Well, we don’t find all that much of it, if you want the truth, but if we have enough for a smelt we’ll sometimes do a copper run.”

They talked on for half an hour and the foreman refilled Raff’s cup twice and Em’s twice, after she found a hole in the floor boards beneath all the paper. By then Raff’s voice was slurring and Em doubted it was the strength of the whiskey that was doing it. She had seen Raff drink much more than three whiskeys before getting this drunk. Before she could put her own drink down and see what was wrong, however, there were other men at the door.

“You said we had company?” a muscled man with a beer belly asked at the door. There were over two dozen other men behind him.

“Yeah,” the foreman smirked. “They ought to be ready by now. Put her with the others. Just kill him.”

“What?” Raff asked blearily. He got out of his chair and fell flat on his face. As the men surged toward Emblem, however, she also stood up and summoned what tendrils of Wild energy she could to act as a shield between her and the men. It wasn’t much, but she was able to push them back, even as she used some of the energy to break a hole in the wall of the shack. The men jumped toward her, but by now she had a clearer notion of what she wanted to do.

In most cases when a master wayfarer summoned the Wild, they were only working with the few stray tendrils of wild energy that existed even in human towns and cities. When near the edge of a stability, a wayfarer could draw on the power that existed outside of the area of human influence. In some rare occasions, however, some wayfarers had the ability to reach down into the depths of their souls and draw the full-powered might of the Wild into the heart of a stability and use it as though a thousand miles from the nearest town.

The men were pushing through her shield, but not being wayfarers, they could not see the tentacles of the Wild flowing down the mining town’s one street. She filled the shack with wild energy, banishing any trace of human stability.

The shack exploded, killing two of the men trying to get inside and injuring several others as well as damaging several nearby buildings. The windows on the buildings next to the shack shattered and Em heard female screams coming from one of them, but she was too intent on what she had to do.

She looked around. All the men were disoriented, bumping into each other and swinging fists and clubs. She caught sight of the foreman. He was bellowing like a wounded bull and shouting defiant insults, while trying to kick Raff, who was lying still on the floor. A moment later she forced wild energy into his body, driving out whatever it was that made him alive. He was dead before he even started to fall.

Two men, less disoriented than the rest, had pistols in their belts. They were priming the flash pans when Em caught them at it and gave them the same treatment she had the foreman.

Many of her erstwhile attackers were now either milling around confusedly on the street or still swinging wildly at real or imagined targets, but the rest were lying on the ground. Another, who also appeared to be less disoriented than the rest, managed to prime a pistol and fire it at her, but Em caught the motion just in time and used the Wild to bend reality, as she thought of it, to make the ball miss her. Even so it was a near thing and she heard it whistle past her left ear. Quickly, she gave this one the same treatment she had the other gunmen.

Emblem summoned the Wild one more time and wrapped it tightly about each one of the survivors. Then, leaving each of them wrapped in the chaos of the Wild, she attempted to send what she no longer needed back beyond the mining town's limits. It only made it half way however and she realized that over half the population of this settlement were now either dead or incarcerated in their own private Wild prison and therefore no longer contributed toward the stability area.

When she tried to relax, the Wild came flowing back inward again. Had she depopulated the town too much for it to continue to exist or was the Wild rushing back in to the area it had owned just a few seconds earlier? Em wasn't sure, but just as it was possible to convert a stable area back to the Wild, it was also possible to create a stable area. In reality all a wayfarers' path was, was a small line of stability surrounded by the Wild. Now Em had to create the widest path she could.

She began by forging a small area of stability and then let it grow outward. Progress was slow, but she continued to push outward until she had formed a round stable area almost as large as the mining town had originally been. Behind her she heard male and female voices, but as she turned to see who was there, she collapsed, exhausted.

Four

When Emblem next opened her eyes, she found a woman with a round, dark brown face and curly black hair looking back at her concernedly. The woman asked a question but Emblem was unable to understand it. "What?" she asked in reply.

"Oh, sorry," the other woman apologized, "I asked, 'How are you feeling?'"

"Tired," Em replied. "Stiff and sore. What am I lying on?"

"It was the best bed we could find for you, Great Lady," the woman told her sorrowfully. "Please forgive us."

"You did fine," Em assured her. "I don't know if I'd be comfortable on a down mattress right now. I feel like I've been asleep for a week."

"Just two days, Great Lady," the woman told her. "You must be hungry."

"Quite," Em agreed. "and what's with this 'Great Lady' talk? My name is Emblem."

"Yes, Great Lady Emblem," the woman replied.

Em sighed. *So it's going to be one of those encounters.* Since leaving the nobility for a life among the Wayfarers' Guild she had found herself increasingly less comfortable with such honorifics. Wayfarers rarely used their own titles, although it was considered polite to call a master by his or her title when being addressed directly or referred to in the third person. She had become comfortable with the less formal atmosphere of a Guild hall and certainly no one had ever called her "Great Lady" when she was just a baron's daughter. She guessed it was a literal translation of an honorific in the woman's native language. "So what's your name?"

"Ashaki," the woman replied, adding, "Great Lady Emblem."

“Please, Ashaki,” Em tried again, “Just Emblem or Em if you would rather.”

“Yes, Great Lady,” Ashaki replied. “I’ll get you something to eat and drink.”

“Wait!” Em stopped her as she was about to leave. “Where is my husband?”

“The clean man?” Ashaki asked. “He is in the next room. Sleeping. Do not worry, Great Lady. We did not kill him.” Then Ashaki closed the door behind her.

Did they kill the others? Em wondered. *Well they would not have survived long anyway.* She tried sitting up and felt a bit dizzy so let herself lie down again. However, stubbornness would not allow her to just wait for Ashaki to return and she tried twice more to sit up, succeeding on the third attempt. Looking around the room, she saw it was small and crude, but the bed she decided was not as bad as she had at first thought. From her perch on the side of the bed, Em could see out the now glassless window. She was in the larger building next to where the foreman’s shack had been. The remains of the shack had been gathered up and piled up on what was left of the floor, and the bodies of the men Em had killed had been taken elsewhere.

Ashaki returned a few minutes later with two other native women who carried a pot of tea and a bowl of some sort of warm cereal. Em told herself it was porridge, but decided it tasted better than most porridge she was used to. The tea was weak and not very flavorful, but she made appreciative noises because it seemed to please the women. Finally, once she had some food inside her, she started asking questions.

“My husband?” she began.

“He is well, Great Lady,” Ashaki assured her. “We did not harm him although the other men tried to. We could tell he was not one of them. Too clean. The men here were dirty; like pigs.” She said that as though there were no greater insult and Em remembered that the religion that was most prominent in the area made the eating of pig flesh anathema. As they had no other use for the animals for which they could not use substitutes, the animals themselves were banished from the area, although there were many wild pigs throughout the region. “He slept for a few hours until the potion the headman gave him wore off. Then he woke up all stiff, sore and with a bad taste in his mouth.”

“Poor soul,” Em replied dryly. “Normally he would have had a good time before that happened. But he really is well? No broken bones?”

“No, Great Lady Emblem,” Ashaki shook her head. “Some bad bruises but he will be better in a few days. How are you?”

“Still a little dizzy,” Em replied. “I don’t expect you know exactly what I did, but I fear put a little too much of myself into it.”

“Your magic, Great Lady?” Ashaki asked. “We know of magic although among the Telti only men are allowed to practice it. A woman who does is either a witch or a great lady. Although there are few great ladies and the men try to banish them when they are found. Women protect them. You are most...” she struggled for a word, “most... not a witch.”

“How do you know?” Em asked. It was a risky question. Witches were evil men and women who poisoned or cursed people. She had certainly killed enough people to qualify if Ashaki chose to see it that way.

“Because you freed us from slavery,” Ashaki told her.

“What?” Emblem asked. “Those men...”

“Bought us from slavers who raided our villages,” Ashaki told her in a matter-of-fact manner. “It happens all the time.”

“Can you return to your village?” Em asked. She remembered hearing how on the other side of this continent a woman who had been sold into slavery would never be allowed home again because she had been defiled.

“Yes, we will have to undergo purification before we can enter the homes of our families once more. It is a long ritual taking place over a month in which we will be isolated from the rest of our people, but after what we have been through, I would prefer years of isolation to that, Great Lady Emblem.”

“Please let’s drop that ‘Great Lady.’” Em asked again. “It’s a heavier weight than I can carry at the moment.”

“I doubt that, Emblem,” Ashaki shook her head. Em thought she could still hear the honorific there, spoken or not, but decided she could hardly quibble with something left unsaid but thought of.

“The men who were here,” Em asked finally. “Are they all dead?”

“Enough of them, I think,” Ashaki replied. “We killed as many as we could find.” Em frowned at the thought. “Should we have left them for you, Emblem?” Ashaki asked.

“No,” Em replied, “I had seen enough of them already.”

“A few got away, we think,” Ashaki told her. “We women knew all of them and some have not been seen.”

“They didn’t get away,” Em told her. “Not unless they were in the mine at the time. Those you did not find have been banished.”

“Banished, Emblem?” Ashaki asked.

“I trapped them in the Wild in such a way they can not get out again,” Em told her.

“You can do that?” Ashaki asked. “Even the shaman in my village could not do that.”

“He might have been able to,” Em replied, although she doubted it. She had not been sure she could do it. It was just something Raff had told her about once. It had been considered the ultimate punishment of an offender in Corisia over a thousand years earlier.

“No, Gre... Emblem,” Ashaki shook her head. “If he could do something like that, he would have threatened to do so when people did something he disapproved of. He made other terrible threats, to maim and kill, why not to banish?”

“I suppose,” Em agreed. “It’s a horrible thing to do to someone. Worse than killing him. The men I did it to cannot really see where they are going. They see things that are not there and see things that are

nearby, but in the wrong places, but all of it looks to them as though they are viewing it through a pool of water. Nothing is where they think it is and they cannot think straight either. It's as though they have a high fever that way. In time they will starve to death or die from thirst if they don't fall off a cliff first."

"Good!" Ashaki replied fiercely. "They deserve it and worse if possible. It is still not as bad as what they did to us."

Emblem was about to ask what that was, but suddenly realized there were only two things the miners would have wanted from female slaves, but one of their own had done the cooking. She looked around at the other women, who had been sitting on the floor quietly while she and Ashaki talked. It was not obvious at first, but beneath the dark brown of their skin, they had large bruises on their arms and one had a blackened eye. So the miners, or at least some of them, had beaten the women as well. Emblem couldn't think of anything worse she could have done to the men, but she stopped feeling guilty about their punishment.

"This town will not remain habitable for long," Em told Ashaki. "There are no longer enough people here."

"I wondered about that," Ashaki admitted. "My village is small, but we have more people than are left here."

"How many are left?" Em asked.

"With you and your husband," Ashaki replied, "fourteen. I have heard of the small people who live in a desert to the south of here. They supposedly live in groups of ten to twenty. Is that possible?"

"Barely," Em replied. "They must not be farmers. They probably only hunt for their food, both plant and beast. You need more people than that to be able to sustain a farm. With a group that small, though, they need to stay very close to one another unless wayfarers or shamans are more plentiful among them."

"I have heard the men hunt together and the women find plants to eat together," Ashaki commented.

"Even then, it is dangerous without someone who knows how to find the Way," Em replied. "The men and women could wander away from each other and not be able to find their spouses. Still they must have a way to find each other in the Wild or they would not exist at all. I've never met people like that, so I've never been able to ask. The only ones I know who live so close to the wild are the Kenlienta."

"You have met the Kenlienta?" Ashaki asked.

"I've visited their cities from time to time," Em told her.

"But they hate humans," Ashaki stated.

"Some do, but not most," Em replied. "For the most part they are usually friendly and hospitable. They are people, just like us, but different. Only the foolish ones forget it was humans who made the medicine that kept them alive during the plague that swept through the Ken Nation a few years ago."

"What plague?" Ashaki asked. "They can get sick?"

"Oh yes," Em replied. "The Ken are as susceptible to disease as we are. Anyway, it started in a small Kenlientan town in the Wild areas near the towns and cities of Myanistan. At least I think that's where it

started. A Kenlien traveling from one place to another went to the town intent merely on finding a place to rest for the night and found everyone in the town dead.

“I imagine he must have been scared out of his wits,” Em continued, “I know I would have been. He rushed out of that town and found his way to the next one as fast as his legs could carry him. He reached the next town around dawn the next morning exhausted and incoherent from fear. It had to have been fear, because the next Kenlienta to fall ill did not do so for several days. That was time enough for men and women of several other towns to investigate the one in which everyone had died and then go home to spread the disease. The first man to find the dead made it to at least another town before he started having symptoms and by then thousands of Kenlienta were infected even if they did not know it yet.

“Weeks passed and the disease that had once been confined to a single town had spread to over half the Ken Nation world-wide. What was worse is that over half the Kenlienta who caught the disease died from it. The Ken are ahead of humans in many ways,” Em told Ashaki, not mentioning that they were probably technologically ahead of Ashaki’s people in every way. “However, humans are better at some things, and our medical knowledge surpasses that of the Ken, so several Kenlienta elders came to the city of Taundon. That’s the capital of the Green Lands and it is also where the headquarters of the entire Wayfarers’ Guild is. They begged for our help. I’m ashamed to say that although many of the Guild’s masters were sympathetic to the Kenlientan plight, they were not particularly willing to rush to their aid. “Raff, my husband, had just barely finished healing from a terrible injury of his own.”

“What sort of injury?” Ashaki asked.

“That’s another story,” Em replied, “but he was badly hurt and took several years to fully heal although when he did, he was stronger than ever before. Anyway, he was disgusted by the attitude of the other master wayfarers and he went with the Ken elders to see the problem for himself.”

“You went with him, didn’t you?” Ashaki asked.

“I was on my way back from Verana at the time,” Em told her. “While Raff was recuperating, I still had to work occasionally. Being a master wayfarer pays well, but it’s not the sort of work you can do in a single workshop. I usually only took jobs that wouldn’t take me away from Raff for very long, but that particular one paid enough to keep us comfortable for over a year and a half. Five months apart seemed like a good deal at the time.

“So Raff traveled with the Ken elders and saw the devastation for himself. Then he rushed back to Taundon and made an impassioned plea to the Guild Council. Well, the council is always willing to help so long as it doesn’t inconvenience them too much. In this case they were willing to hire several leading doctors, healers if you like, to go and study the Kenlientan disease. Raff once again returned to the nearest afflicted Ken city, this time with experts in medical healing. They examined their patients, took readings and samples and returned to Taundon where they worked day and night to develop a cure.

“It wasn’t just the medicine, of course,” Em continued. “It was also the regimen of associated treatments and by the time my ship docked in Denmouthport, the first batch of medicine was ready to be taken to the Ken. Raff rushed the medicine to that same village himself and instructed the Ken on the treatments. Then he stayed just long enough to see it was starting to work. By the time he got back to Taundon again, I was preparing to take the next batch out, but Raff pointed out that we couldn’t keep going back and forth from Taundon.

“So along with the medicine and instructions on how to use it, we also started carrying the instructions of how to make more. Raff managed to find a few more master wayfarers willing to help and we all went

out into the Wild to rush medicine to Kenlentan towns and cities and to various doctors in the human world to get them to make still more of the medicine.

“No one did more for the Ken than Raff, though. There are ways of bending the Wild to make a trip shorter and he used all of them to get the Ken their medications. However those tricks of travel can also harm the areas through which you pass. It can make them harmful to the Ken and to the animals of the Wild, so not only did Raff hurry to each Ken city, he also went back again to clean up the damage he caused. But he still went to far more cities than any of the rest of us.

“Toward the end,” Em remembered, “Raff was exhausted, but he refused to admit it, so I had to accompany him to make sure he didn’t harm himself in his zeal to help the Ken. Finally we reached the last city. Raff collapsed there and I have to admit I was not in much better shape. For a few days I was afraid we were catching the disease, but it turns out it could not be transmitted from Kenlien to human. We were safe on that count, but we were also not in any shape to move on for the next week.

“We finally managed to recover enough to travel, but the Ken have not forgotten what we did for them. Even in those parts of the Ken world where the plague never reached, we are regarded as heroes of their nation. Nearly all Kenlenta know our names and tell their children about us. Fortunately the Ken are not given to building statues or other permanent monuments or I would probably be too embarrassed to ever enter a Ken town.”

“I understand how they feel, Great Lady,” Ashika told Emblem, forgetting Em’s request to drop the title. “I will tell my children and grandchildren about you too, and sing songs about you to my village on my return home.”

Five

“We can’t leave them here,” Raff noted, looking around the remains of the mining town. The buildings were already starting to fall apart. The shoddy construction must have required almost constant maintenance and without people to shove a stray rag to plug up a hole in the wall or nail an additional board over a leak in the roof, the elements were having their sway far sooner than if the buildings had been made correctly in the first place. “That temporary stability you created is starting to unravel, Em. If they wait until the next regular wayfarer arrives, they may be reduced to huddling just inside the mine. I doubt anywhere else will be habitable.”

“We’ll have to take them with us to the next town,” Emblem told him practically.

“We don’t know where the next major town along that path is,” Raff objected.

“But we’ll lose a week if we head toward Muenta or the Teltoan capital,” Em objected, “and most of these women belong to the Telti tribe. Both capitals are deep within the territories of their enemies. We wouldn’t be doing them any favors dropping them off there. Besides, we’re limited to the amount of food we can carry.”

“I realize that,” Raff nodded. “Well the only other course is to follow the regular path to the north. We will come to a Wayfarer outpost eventually.”

“These women require reparations, Raff,” Em told him. “That’s Guild policy when we encounter slavery.”

“What did you have in mind?” he asked her.

“Why not give them the gold mine?” Em asked. “The mining company owes them big for allowing this, you know.”

“There is that,” Raff admitted, “but we can’t just leave them to it, there aren’t enough of them, and they don’t know how to mine gold.”

“No, we will have to find someone to teach them,” Em replied.

In the end, Raff journeyed northward with Ashaki who, it turned out, was considered the leader among the women. The next Wayfarers’ Guild office turned out to only be a day’s journey away, and Ashaki’s village only another day away, so that by the end of the week, Ashaki’s shaman and another dozen tribesmen returned to the mining town with several colonists who could show them how to work the mine. It would be a smaller town than before, but it also allowed the women an ideal isolation place while the shaman performed his purification rituals. The old buildings were being demolished in favor of native huts and lodges which were better suited to the climate and by the time Raff and Em left, there was talk of considering this a new tribal village into which any non-Telti women would be adopted unless they chose to go home.

Finally, after a small Wayfarers’ office was commissioned in the new town, Raff and Em were ready to leave. “One of them will have to be trained in Guild paperwork eventually,” Em remarked as she and Raff headed back to the rogue path.

“Several of the women seemed eager to learn how to read and write,” Raff observed. “Even after a few classes from you, they are doing well in practicing the letter forms and they are making out some of the easier to read words. I think they see it as a form of magic.”

“In a way it is, Raff,” Em replied.

“I suppose so,” Raff chuckled. “But I wonder how the men will feel when they realize they’ve allowed their women to learn a form of magic even the shaman does not know.”

“What makes you think the shaman won’t know it?” Em asked. “Remember, he brought his acolyte with him on the second trip. The younger man is actually well-trained and nearly ready to serve as shaman himself. He will be the religious leader of the new town and he started learning his letters with the women too.”

“Good, I think,” Raff remarked. “If he doesn’t get it in his head that it’s something only for shamans to do, that could end up being the start of a whole new tribe.”

“We have certainly given them the means to build a new life,” Em agreed. “Maybe someday we’ll be able to return and see what they’ve made of it.”

“Meanwhile, we need to see what’s been happening to that rogue path,” Raff remarked. “The trail is getting colder every time we hit a delay and it was not all that fresh when we started. Whoever made the path was a month or so ahead of us when we got here if that foreman was telling the truth, but now it’s nearly twice that long.”

“This isn’t a race, dear,” Em reminded him. “I doubt whoever it is realizes we’re following him. I’ve

already noticed places he stopped for a few days at a time. I don't think he's headed anywhere in particular. He's already well beyond his tribal lands."

"Or she," Raff added, "and only if he or she is Sarahni as we suspect, but that probably is the case. And I think you're right; he isn't going anywhere in particular. Just going from place to place. I wonder what he's looking for?"

"A home," Em suggested. "It could even be that he or she does not know it yet, but whoever it is, is looking for a home. Deep down that's what I was doing when I ran away from Bur; looking for someplace I could be. I was looking for someplace where I did not have to be what I was told to be. I was lucky and found it through you, dear, but to tell the truth, at the time the way I was thinking about it was not that clear in my mind. I doubt it's clear in his either."

"You may be right," Raff agreed, "but we still have to find him and get him to stop starting reality fires all over the continent."

"Reality fires," Em echoed. "An interesting choice of words. Did you just make that up?"

"Pretty much, yes," Raff admitted, "but the description has been rolling around in my head since we first saw this path. It is very much like a bright and ragged line of Wild fire burning its way through the landscape. If allowed to continue, its effect may be even more disastrous than a normal fire, though. The path is wider than it was when we first found the mining town. It's starting to spread. Hopefully we won't have too many more delays because I'm afraid that as it starts to break down the process will accelerate until even together we cannot stop it."

"Hopefully there won't be many more places like that mine," Em replied.

"Unfortunately there probably are, but we're not actively looking for them and I'm not certain how many others would be foolish enough to attack a wayfarer," Raff replied.

"They succeeded well enough," Em commented. "There aren't many female wayfarers, you know. I think they thought I was just a traveler and with you out of the way I'd be easy pickings. That's why the wayfarers who visit that camp never bring female travelers with them. Most journeymen would have been able to defend themselves had the miners attacked."

"I know," Raff admitted, "but I don't know how they knew they had to drug me first."

"They were trying to drug both of us," Em pointed out. "It's also possible that foreman had seen what even most journeymen could do in the Wild and wasn't taking chances. Next time someone like that offers you a drink though, maybe you ought to purify it first." It was another wayfarer trick that came in handy when in the Wild. Most wayfarers could use the Wild energy to remove pollutants from water. It would not help in crossing a desert, but with so many human and Kenlentan towns built beside lakes and rivers, it was a necessary skill to have.

"Purification would have removed the alcohol too," Raff replied sourly, "leaving me with tepid water. "Is that what you did?"

"No," Em laughed. "One sniff of that mess brought back all sorts of horrid little memories. I poured my drink out while he wasn't looking."

"Oh. I had wondered," Raff told her.

“You could have asked.”

“I just did.”

The path squiggled around and then headed back into Teltoa and the terrain went from hilly to mountainous. However, the path, while it twisted and turned about, stayed on easy to pass through terrain. “Well that makes sense,” Raff told Em when she commented on it. “He’s just walking along here after all. He didn’t come to go mountain climbing. In fact he’s really just wandering from place to place. The path could easily loop back to that town we started in, but I doubt it will.”

“Why not?” Em asked. “Do you think he’ll stay away from there because of the bad memories?”

“Partially,” Raff shrugged, “that could be the case, but mostly I think he doesn’t know the way back. I think he’s lost in the Wild. He doesn’t know where he’s going because he’s never been out here before, not this far from home, so there are no landmarks that he can recognize and of course the Wild is constantly changing so the little details would never be the same by now anyway.”

“And he’s at least a month ahead of us,” Em noted sadly.

“Probably further,” Raff replied. “However, I think he’s starting to get a bit of control over himself and his path forging. Have you noticed what’s different?”

“He’s still using a lot more power than he needs,” Em replied, “but I think he is gradually learning how to do it with less effort.”

“Yes and the path is slightly better constructed,” Raff nodded. “The strands of energy are more tightly bound. He still has a long way to go, but as he gets better, our job should also get easier. To bad he is still cutting through established pathways rather than just overlaying them. But then he may not be able to see them.”

“What do you mean?” Em asked. “If he can create a path he can surely see one.”

“I agree,” Raff told her, “but with the amount of energy flowing through him to create this path I think he’s blind to any lesser energy usage. It’s like looking at the sun for a few moments and then when you look away everything is much darker.”

“Oh, the brightness of his path is overshadowing any of the others?” Em restated the thought. “Yes. I could see that happening. What are we going to do when we find him, though?”

“That all depends on who he is and why he is doing this,” Raff replied, “and whether or not we can believe he won’t do it again.”

“And if he refuses to stop?” Em asked. Her question seemed to hang in the air as their horses continued to plod on.

“You know the answer to that, dear,” Raff told her quietly at last.

“We’ll do what we have to, won’t we?” she replied just as quietly. “Why does that bother me? I was not this bothered by killing the miners.”

"I know you better than that," Raff told her. "It hurt you as much as it would have hurt me, but it was us or them. You didn't have the time to think about it, just to act. The person we are tracking down is different from the miners, I think. At least that seems likely to be the case. He or she is probably the last survivor of that village we saw. He's hurt maybe physically, maybe only emotionally, but all this is because he's been hurt and he doesn't have any other means of expressing it."

"Maybe all he wants is to kill those who killed his people," Em conjectured.

"Perhaps, but if so, he's going the wrong way," Raff noted. "That may be a good sign, though. By now even some one who is lost would have turned back if all he had on his mind was revenge. I would expect his trail to be crisscrossing all over eastern Teltoa where the landscape is mostly swampy. Face it, Em, no one is likely to mistake a mountain for a swamp."

"Especially not someone with the senses of a wayfarer," Em agreed. "Okay, so for now we just press on and worry about who we're following when we find him."

Six

The path continued to burn its way in a wide arc through southwestern Teltoa until finally it made a sharp turn from a vague northwest heading toward the southwest. It climbed up a steep hill to a saddleback ridge between two mountains and dropped directly down into a Wild area in which the towns of the Green Lands' colony, Rahia, floated about.

Raff smiled as he thought of the bubble of human stability floating around on a sea of the Wild and he realized that this was, indeed what was happening. Just as smaller towns and villages slowly circled around large cities like Carais, even the large cities wandered about slowly drifting through the chaotic Wild world. However, while an orbiting village might circle its primary stability in a year or two, the cities moved far more slowly in most cases. The movement of cities had been a hotly debated subject at "The Shape of the World" conference, but in spite of all the scholarly debate, everyone had to admit that until a means of reliably measuring longitude could be devised, all such movement could only be measured relative to other cities.

Some scientists speculated that the very surface of the world was constantly in motion and that the areas of stability moved relative to each other mostly due to swirls and eddies in the Wild energy all around them. Others felt the surface was steady and the cities moved relative to the surface. With the Wild areas constantly changing it was difficult to ascertain which was affecting which and what forces were truly dominant and which might really be illusions.

From the ridge that defined the border between Rahia and Teltoa, Raff and Emblem could see several colonial towns in the distance and a handful of smaller stabilities which they assumed were indigenous villages.

"Doesn't look like our quarry is headed for any of them in particular, does it?" Raff remarked as he directed his mount down slope.

"No," Em agreed, "not from here, but then he could be going to every one of them."

They continued following and clearing off the raw path and over the next two days it became apparent that whoever had been forging this path was studiously avoiding native villages. "Perhaps he's afraid they

are enemies,” Em speculated.

“It’s possible,” Raff nodded, “although he didn’t worry about approaching colonial towns.”

“His people were not at war with colonials,” Em pointed out. “He was not worried about being killed on sight, perhaps? He went into the next town as a matter of fact. Let’s stop early for the night. I’m a bit tired of sleeping on the ground and in a tent and I really need a bath.”

“I thought you didn’t want any further delays,” Raff observed.

“This is only for a few hours, not several weeks, Raff. Come on, admit you would like a civilized meal for a change.”

“I would, but I’m not sure we’ll get one here,” Raff replied wryly.

“Why not?” Em asked.

“You know Green Landsmen are not known for their culinary accomplishments,” Raff pointed out.

“Well, after travel rations for the last two weeks, I’ll settle for bangers and mash if that’s all I can get,” Em told him.

Rahia was mostly a colony of plantations and the town Raff and Em entered was a plantation town. Accordingly, most of the people who lived there were actually natives who had been hired by the plantation owners and there were only three families of Green Landsmen in the area. Workers’ living quarters were clustered together near the center of the small town with the plantation manors just on the town’s outskirts, leaving the wide expanses of stabilized area open for the crops.

“Looks like they’re growing cotton around here,” Raff noted as they rode between two wide fields. There were a few workers in the fields, weeding and inspecting for pests and diseases, but since it was not near harvest time, the others were working elsewhere.

“As far as the eye can see,” Em agreed. “Is that the major cash crop in Rahia?”

“One of them from what I recall,” Raff replied. “I had a classmate back in school whose family decided to try their hand at farming here.”

“Looks more like trying their hand at managing farmers here,” Em observed.

“Well, yes,” Raff agreed. “There’s only one real city in Rahia unless someone’s started a new one in the last five or six years. It’s possible, but probably not very likely, since the plantation owners only need a city to bring the crops to. They sell to various concerns there who then ship it north to be sold in the Green Lands to spinners and weavers. The cloth will then be sold all over the world.

“I think they also grow coffee here,” Raff continued, “although probably not in this town. The ones a bit closer to the mountains would be better for that. They also grow bananas and sorghum as cash crops and I hear there’s talk of growing tea and pyrethrum in these parts, although I don’t know if anyone has done that yet.”

“Pyrethrum?” Em asked. “What’s that?”

“A sort of daisy,” Raff replied. “Fairly pretty as cash crops go and it has the unusual property, for a flower at any rate, of being capable of killing insects. It’s been traded from Corisia for centuries, but given its valuable properties the Corisians are understandably hesitant to sell any seeds.”

“If the price is right eventually someone will smuggle some out,” Em told him. “That’s how it was with saffron. It was impossible to get the bulbs for the saffron crocus out of Salasia for centuries and then a few bulbs were brought to Salus. Now it’s a major crop there.”

“You’re probably right,” Raff chuckled, “although in that case it was a wayfarer who smuggled the bulbs. The Corisians don’t approve of the Guild and watch us like hawks - the few of us they even allow into the country. Their own wayfarers are mostly priests and monks although theirs is a very different sort of religion from those of the Northern Realms.”

“I know,” Em agreed. “I had that pretty much drummed into me during wayfarer training. Their wayfarers do not approve of us. They don’t believe we are worthy of the gift.”

“They’re entitled to their opinion, I suppose,” Raff shrugged. “I met the priestly wayfarers of Corisia once before, about twenty years ago. I found their hospitality less than impressive. I can live with their low opinion of me.”

“None of the wayfarers in the Deep East are particularly welcoming to Guild members,” Em pointed out.

“Some are far more hostile than others, though,” Raff replied. “Most are merely curious as to whether they have more mastery than we do. The ones in Corisia are afraid to let their people know there are other wayfarers than themselves. They think it might break down their hold on the reins of government for one thing and so far their emperor allows them to be the power behind his throne. I suppose he finds it easier than having to appoint each functionary personally.”

“There are many people living in Corisia,” Em noted. “I suppose they need a highly bureaucratic government.”

“It doesn’t need to be made up of Wayfarers,” Raff retorted. “However, if that’s what they want, they’re welcome to it. I’d much rather be doing this.”

“I don’t know that the Guild Council would agree with you,” Em laughed.

“It’s been a very long time since the council and I agreed on much of anything,” Raff shot back. “If it weren’t for the few councilors I still respect, I’d have left the Guild when they chose to remove me from their ranks because of my accident.”

“I never quite understood their reasoning there,” Em admitted. “Most of them never leave Taundon anymore and others have been ill in the past without being forcibly retired from the Council.”

“I was a troublemaker, Em,” Raff reminded her.

Emblem laughed merrily, “What do you mean ‘was’? Raff Cawlens, you are still the biggest troublemaker I have ever known.” She paused to see if he would have a comeback to that. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she concluded.

“Thank you, dear,” Raff replied, “although as far as that goes, you’ve been a very good student.”

“If I hadn’t been, I’d be the Duchess of Bur today,” Em pointed out. “Believe me; I’d rather be on the Council long before wanting to be a Duchess. Hmm, not much of a town is it?”

There was a single narrow street that ran through the town with a few small shops and offices for those few colonists who did not have the means to buy a plantation of their own. Instead they had chosen to supply the plantations with what they needed. There were two import/export agents from the colonial capital, Nipo, and a bank agent of the Bank of the Green Lands. There was also a general store, a blacksmith and a few other small businesses, all obviously geared to keeping the plantations running. What there did not appear to be in sight was an inn or a pub.

“I didn’t expect much,” Raff shook his head, looking around. “You’ll probably find that some of these businesses are being manned by the natives, which is very different from the norm. For some reason the Green Landsmen who colonized here on the Southern continent chose to hire the natives as workers rather than enslave them.”

“Most of the slaves in Varana and the other West Continent colonies came from the other side of this continent,” Em noted. “That could be part of the difference.”

“It could be,” Raff allowed. “I’m not sure the indigenes are all that much better off, this way. Those who accepted the jobs gave up a lot of their own culture and traditions. Still, there are many more who kept to the old ways. For the ones who didn’t there are schools for their children and the most gifted ones are sent to the Green Lands for university.”

“That’s not all bad,” Em told him.

“I don’t know that it is bad at all,” Raff agreed, “but I don’t know that it is to the good either. What the heck are we doing here, Em? Why are we colonizing lands already owned by others?”

Em had no ready answer. Colonization had been the norm for two centuries now, since long before either of them were born. Until she became a wayfarer, it had seemed like the natural order of things to her. She was spared from having to answer when they found the local Wayfarers’ Guild office.

“Welcome, sir and lady!” the dark-skinned man behind the desk greeted them as they stepped through the door. He had a thick native accent, but spoke the colonial language very well and his manners were the same as any typical Green Lands gentleman. This man had obviously been to school in or near Taundon. “How may I be of assistance?” Raff and Em introduced themselves and the man’s face opened into a broad, bright white smile. “Ah! The Masters Cawlens! You two are legends, you know.”

“Try not to believe everything you hear,” Raff laughed. “I doubt we’ve done half the things you’ve heard attributed to us, sir,”

“Even half, sir, is more than most,” the man told him. “I am Mori Obote, journeyman, at your service, sir and lady. What brings you to this part of the world?”

“We’re doing a bit of clean-up work,” Raff replied wryly, cocking his head vaguely in the direction they had entered the town from.

“Ah yes, the strange path,” Mori replied. “We have been getting complaints from the regular journeymen who pass through here. I had wondered when something would be done about it.”

“How long has it been there” Raff asked.

“Oh,” Mori considered. “Just over a month, I would think. Not much more.”

“Oh good,” Em commented. “We’re starting to catch up again. We’ve been as much as two months behind whomever created it.”

“Why would anyone wish to do such a thing, Lady Cawlens?” Mori asked, puzzled.

“I am not sure,” Em replied and described the ruined village they had seen. “I think the shock may have awakened an untrained wayfarer talent,” she added at the end.

“That could well be,” Mori nodded. “It would explain the way in which this one was made. But if that is the case, this is a very powerful wayfarer, is he not?”

“It would seem that way,” Raff replied. “Tell me, though, were there any reports of theft or some items going missing mysteriously about the time that path appeared?”

“Nothing unusual,” Mori replied. “People do not normally come here to report such things. We’re here merely to provide a means by which people and goods flow to and from this town, don’t you know. I would probably have heard if something large or expensive had gone missing though. Why, Master Cawlens? What sort of theft were you expecting?”

“Oh, just food and maybe a knife or other small tool,” Raff admitted.

“There’s no shortage of food here and tools go missing all the time,” Mori replied. “No one would do more than shrug at such a thing.”

“I suppose not,” Raff agreed. “It was taken more seriously in Teltoa.”

“It would be,” Mori laughed loudly. “Dixans have a reputation for, uh, shall we say monetary prudence?”

“Miserliness, you mean?” Raff countered. “Well, yes, there is that, but they aren’t as bad as all that, although the Dixans who colonized Teltoa have often needed to be careful with their money. The people who came here from the Green Lands were mostly wealthy second sons looking for a piece of the world to carve out for themselves. The Teltoan colonists were more like the Veranans, out to seek their fortunes rather than just trying to invest them.”

“That could explain the especial differences in eastern Rahia,” Mori observed. “There are no plantations there, you know, just native villages with whom Green Landsmen trade. Not really a colony at all as you would normally think of it. Here in the north, life is similar to the way it is in Ronesia and Neyka, although even here you will find most native towns rely on their trade with Green Landsmen.”

“What do they trade?” Em asked.

“Ivory mostly,” Mori replied, “some gold, of course, and grain. The soil here is very fertile, volcanic soil usually is, so the maize and corn and other grains they grow here almost always produce surpluses which they sell for steel tools, more seed and various other goods they either need or want. The life of most natives is still at the subsistence level, but we are all much better off with the trade.”

“Is that why you joined the Guild?” Em asked. “To facilitate that trade?”

“Not at all, Lady Cawlens,” Mori replied. “My parents work on a plantation not far from here. When it turned out I had the wayfarer talent, the guild offered to pay my way through school. It was an excellent deal and one I would make again. With my high grades, I could have worked anywhere within the Wayfarers network, but I asked to be sent here to be able to help my people from within the Guild. My people are plantation workers, don’t you know, and we have been for three generations.”

“I see,” Em nodded. “Well, perhaps you can help us in another small matter.”

“And how is that, Lady Cawlens?”

“A real bed for the night and a hot bath,” Em replied, looking him straight in the eye. “Not necessarily in that order.”

Seven

The interior of northern Rahia, through which the path cut, was a mixture of steep mountains and thick rain forests. After traveling a few miles from the plantation town, Raff and Em were forced to turn back, sell their horses and once more set out on foot. Not only was the going tough, but after the first night in that part of the bush they found they would have to take turns sleeping just to ensure the leopards would stay away.

Now that whoever had laid down the rogue path was getting better at path forging, leopards turned out to be a recurring problem especially at night when they would try sneaking up on the wayfarers. Raff and Em were lucky on the first night out when Raff, having brushed against a thorny vine was kept awake by an annoying itch so he heard a tell-tale snap of a twig under the big cat’s padded foot. When awake neither of them had any trouble keeping the cats away from their small tent, but it meant they had to get by on a lot less sleep for a while. After several nights of leopard watch, however, they were both so tired in the morning that they nearly walked too close to another beast.

Generally Raff and Em would talk almost constantly as they traveled, but after several nights they weren’t in much of a mood to talk while on the trail. Consequently neither they nor the gorilla were particularly aware of one another until they entered the clearing. For a very long moment, Raff and the large silverback male stared at each other just a few feet apart. Then Raff moved his arm slowly, signaling to Em that they were to back up slowly. Just as he started to move back, however, the great ape screamed and raised his arms. Raff took another step back and the ape pounded his hands on his chest. Raff froze and again the ape studied him and Em, although Em was still carefully backing away.

Suddenly the gorilla charged at Raff and just as suddenly stopped a foot from Raff’s face. “Hey there,” Raff spoke softly. “Easy, big guy.” It was the wrong thing to do. The ape reached out and pushed him back hard, sending him flying several feet. Em immediately summoned the Wild to try to confuse the gorilla, but, being a creature of the Wild already, it was a minor nuisance. Then the ape turned slowly and walked away into the jungle. A few seconds later there was only the sound of moving leaves to mark his passing.

“Raff?” Em called quietly. “Are you alright?”

“I seem to be the one collecting bruises this trip,” he replied.

“I’m not going to offer to trade, you know,” Em told him.

“I wouldn’t ask you to, dear,” Raff chuckled. “Help me up, would you?”

“You were lucky,” Em commented, “I understand why he wasn’t affected much by my use of Wild energy, but shouldn’t the path have hurt him?”

“Some animals are natural wayfarers,” Raff replied. “I wasn’t aware gorillas were, but evidently that gentleman is, even if most of his kind might not be. I doubt he would have bothered us normally, but we startled him as much as he did us. That, plus we got too close.”

“Of course,” Em replied with a smirk. “I’ve seen you behave in pretty much the same way when someone tries standing too close.”

“I’ve never done that to you,” Raff protested.

“No, but I’d like to think I’m an exception to that rule,” Em laughed.

“You’re exceptional, all right,” Raff chuckled.

“It’s still strange that creature was able to stand so close to the path,” Em decided.

“Like I said, he’s a natural wayfarer,” Raff told her. “Some creatures can cross paths or enter stabilities without experiencing discomfort, and this path is not as ragged as it was a few hundred miles ago. Either our unknown wayfarer went through here in a hurry or he’s getting better or both.”

“Both, I would guess,” Em decided. “Between the leopards in the area and brutes like that one, I don’t imagine he was inclined to stay here any longer than we are.”

“Maybe not, but we can’t rush through here,” Raff remarked.

“No, of course not,” Em agreed. “We have to do this the right way. The fact this path is better built, however, does make it harder to erase.”

“Not so hard we couldn’t do it from horseback, if we were able to ride through here,” Raff noted. “If he gets much better, though, we may have to find a different way to handle it. Of course, much better and we could probably just reduce the power levels and stabilize this as a normal path.”

“A normal path that meanders through jungles and over mountains,” Em retorted. “Who would want to follow such a pathway?”

“I’m not as concerned by who would want to follow it as much as who or what would want to cross it,” Raff told her.

They continued on and another week later finally came to the end of the mountains that marked the border between Rahia and the Royal Colony of Ronesia. The path had started climbing one of the larger peaks and then suddenly circled around it when only halfway to the summit, much to Em’s relief.

From the far side of the mountain, they were able to look down into a vast grassland. There were no human cities in sight from that vantage point, although Raff thought he could detect some small villages near the horizon, but the path they were following appeared to be headed down to the shore of a wide lake.

Reaching the lake shore they looked out and saw the path continued across the bright blue water. “Did he swim?” Em asked Raff.

“I seriously doubt it,” Raff told her looking eastward across the lake. “I can’t see the far side and it’s a clear day. It must be at least twenty miles wide.”

Em turned her eyes on the path and observed, “He went straight across. We can’t see the far side, but we can sense it. There’s a city out there. New Ebor, if nothing has moved around too much.”

“There are probably men who fish on this lake,” Raff conjectured. “I suspect some of them may have had to walk home.”

“A single boat out here on its own?” Em asked. “Without a wayfarer to guide the Way?”

“The boat’s owner may have a touch of the ability, or a member of the Guild went out for a sail, perhaps,” Raff shrugged. “The fact is, our rogue crossed the lake, but we’re going to have to do it the hard way. Which direction is shorter, do you think?”

“The path goes to the east-northeast,” Em noted. “Maybe going around the north end of the lake will be shorter.”

“Let’s try it then,” Raff suggested.

They pitched their tent that night on top of a small hill that overlooked the lake. Raff had thought at first it might be their first full night of sleep since leaving the plantation town, but then he caught sight of a pride of lionesses a quarter of a mile away. He didn’t spot any males, but he knew there were usually a pair of males associated with any pride. If they weren’t in sight, they were likely to be nearby. The group of females were just sitting together in the last light of the day, but Raff realized they would soon be hunting and decided that as much as he liked housecats, one of the few pets common to both humans and Kenlenta, he would prefer not to make the acquaintance of the interiors of several of their larger relatives.

“I’ll take the first watch,” he told Emblem as the sun set.

“Don’t be a hero. Wake me up on time for a change, dear,” she told him fondly.

They did not need a fire for warmth, but Raff felt better with one in any case. However, in their hurry to get to the far side of the lake, they had neglected to collect firewood and the nearest tree was a large acacia a few hundred yards away, just on the far side of where he had seen the lions. “Oh yeah, that works,” he muttered to himself.

Then he realized that he didn’t really need to burn wood, so he used Wild energy to craft a campfire. There wasn’t anything really burning there, but the energy was being released as light and a bit of heat so it looked and felt like a real fire except there was no bed of coals beneath it and the chance of a grass fire catching from it was nil. Then he pulled a hand-bound book out of his pack. It was one of two treatises he had been asked to read by scholars at the conference. He had not been inclined toward reading either of them lately, with his mind on tracking down the maker of the rogue pathway and prior to that, he figured he had plenty of time before they expected his comments. But now he reminded himself that any commitment, regardless of how trivial it might seem in comparison to others, was something to be filled.

Both writers had requested that along with his comments, especially on practical wayfaring in relation to the theorizing they had done, that he attempt some carefully planned experiments to prove or disprove certain hypotheses. These experiments were the real reason why he had been procrastinating. Experiments should be done in a carefully controlled environment. Merely sitting back by a campfire in the Bush or while rocking with the waves on the poop deck of a brig was not in keeping with his notion of a controlled environment. However, it had also been too long since he had promised to read the books, so he pulled one out, decided to read it through and worry about the experiments later. At least that way he could write some comments with promises to do more later.

It was soon too dark to read comfortably by the light of the fire and he created an additional light just over his shoulder, one that did not flicker as the simulation of a campfire did.

The book he had chosen, by coincidence, had been on proposed navigational techniques within the Wild. One of the main problems in navigation, especially for small parties of humans was that magnetic compasses, which never pointed in any direction other than north in a human stability, were notoriously unreliable in the Wild. The author of this particular book spent a lot of time discussing the various reasons why this should be, coming to the uncertain conclusion that Wild energy was at least partially magnetic in nature. In spite of having put it off, Raff found it an interesting read and pulled out his own compass at various time to observe the same phenomena the author had, although in Raff's case, he had to pull in his innate area of stability in the same way he did when encountering Kenlienta.

In spite of his intention to only read the book through and perform the experiments later, he found himself doing some of the simple exercises the author had suggested in some hand-written notes in the margins and found he could easily make the compass point in any direction of his choosing, but that if he extended his area of stability to its maximum the compass would settle down once more and point toward the north.

There were other experiments suggested in the margins and soon Raff found himself making notes of his own. Ink and quill, he had discovered, were impractical while in the Wild and after two incidents in which he had spilled his ink supply into the ground years earlier, he had started carrying a small supply of pencils while traveling.

The pencil was an invention of the Green Lands where the only known mines producing pure graphite could be found. The makers cut the graphite into thin sheets and then into thin square rods. Those rods were then inserted into hand-carved wooden sheaths and sharpened for use. When the graphite had first been discovered two centuries earlier, the miners thought they had struck a vein of lead ore as the graphite looked and acted very much the same and so the pencils' filling had been called leads and the name stuck even after it was discovered that graphite was a form of carbon, and not a lead compound at all.

The pencils were more commonly used in drawing than writing because the "leads" were so soft and their markings smudged easily. They had rapidly gained popularity over the older silver styluses both because they were more economical but also because the marking surface did not need to be as carefully prepared. Raff, however, had found them more convenient for writing in the field than quill and ink, although Em still carried a couple of tempered quills and a small pot of ink in her pack.

"Nice fire," Em told him a few hours later when she woke up. She looked up at the sky. "Why didn't you wake me two hours ago?"

"Hmm? Oh, sorry, I lost track of the time," Raff apologized.

“Hah! A likely story,” Em laughed. “And you’re repeating yourself. You used that excuse just a few days ago.”

“Maybe, but this time it’s true,” Raff told her. “I’ve been working on the suggested experiments in Doctor Henschuler’s treatise.”

“Good,” Em replied. “Verifying your results will give me something to do until dawn. I’ve run out of yarn to knit with anyway.”

“We’re not likely to need the mittens or scarves anytime soon,” Raff remarked.

“I can always send them to my sister,” Em replied, “or to one of your siblings. Yes, that might be a better idea. It gets much colder in the Green Lands than in southern Crace.”

“Perhaps you can ship them off from New Ebor when we get there,” Raff told her.

“And buy more yarn,” Em added.

“It will be expensive here,” he warned her as he started into the tent. “Even the native cotton is expensive since it doesn’t get spun into thread or yarn until it is sent to the Green Lands.”

“There must be someone spinning it locally,” Em disagreed. “The natives make most of their own clothing.”

“In which case they’re probably making just enough for themselves,” Raff told her as he stretched out. “But if you want more yarn, go ahead and buy it. We won’t find it as cheap as the last batch was for months to come.”

Emblem allowed Raff to sleep an extra hour until the hot tropical sun made the tent too uncomfortable. In fact, she was still reading the treatise and making her own notes, although with ink and in a notebook of her own, when he finally crawled out of the tent.

“Did we camp on an ant hill?” he asked, scratching himself in several places.

“They didn’t bother me, dear,” Em told him. “Maybe they like their meat tough and aged.”

“Thank you,” he replied sourly. “Oh look, our ride has arrived.” He pointed toward the lake where the men on several small fishing boats were casting nets. The boats’ masts were rigged with single lateen sails, but they were also equipped with two sets of oars. Raff recognized the design as one he had seen on other lakes. The sails were used to get to the best fishing grounds, but the oars were used to cast and then gather up the large nets.

“If they notice us,” Em replied, but they hastily packed everything up and went down to the shore of the lake, waving and shouting toward the boats. It took nearly half an hour, but finally someone noticed them and a boat was rowed toward them.

“Strange place to meet two lone travelers,” the helmsman said by way of greeting. “This isn’t exactly a good picnic area either. Too many lions. Harry Noltan, wayfarer, at your service.” Raff and Em introduced themselves in return. “That explains why you weren’t Wild-mad anyway,” Harry laughed. “But what are you two doing out here?”

“We’ve been following and erasing that rogue path that’s been cutting its way all over the continent,” Raff replied.

“It is a bit raw on the nerves,” Harry commented, “but if you could just smooth it out on the lake, the boys here would really appreciate it. We don’t normally have a path to follow, you see. Sometimes that means we have to just go until we find a lake shore and then follow that home. Guess wrong and it adds hours or even days to a fishing trip. In the last three weeks since that path has appeared, it’s saved us having to guess several times and it leads almost directly to the best fishing spot here.”

“Well, there’s no reason we can’t just stabilize it into a normal path if it’s that useful,” Raff told him. “Makes me wonder why no one has done it before.”

“The usual sort of reasons, don’t you know,” Harry replied. “There are more important things for masters to do. I get that sort of reason all the time. I would have forged the path myself if I had the ability, but then if I had the ability, I probably would be doing something more than guiding the fishing fleet, right?”

“Could be,” Raff admitted, “but fishing is important too. It feeds a lot of people, I imagine.”

“It’s approximately one fifth of the food supply of the City of New Ebor,” Harry replied.

“Well that certainly sounds significant,” Raff nodded. “Sure, we’ll refine the path on the lake.” They spent the rest of the morning on the boat watching the men catch fish. Raff was not watching closely, but he suspected Em was helping them by herding the fish into the waiting nets because all the boats were full by noon and they started sailing back. “Do you want a path coming all the way here?” Raff asked Harry.

“That won’t be necessary,” Harry replied easily. “We fish all up and down this stretch of coast. The path as it is will be fine.”

Reforging the raw path into a less active construct was far easier than dissipating it. The work was closer to the repair of the unraveled path Raff and Em had discovered on their way to Tamag Methin than the obliteration of the rogue path and safe dispersal of its energy had been. It was something either of them could do with ease and with both taking a hand in the task the path would be woven tightly enough to last for decades.

“It’s amazing,” Harry remarked as the eastern shore of the lake came into view. “before us the path looks as though it is made of fire, but behind us it is so solid I could almost believe it was made of stone. I’ve never seen a path look so dense.”

“Whoever forged the path used a lot more power than was necessary,” Raff explained. “However, in this case it will work in our favor. We are binding the path to itself. Many think of this as reweaving the threads of energy. It’s a pretty image, I suppose, although what we’re really doing is redirecting the energy into the purpose of maintaining the path. Whoever forged it in the first place formed a path, but gave it no instructions regarding the long term. It would have fallen apart relatively soon and caused a lot of damage in the process. We’ll still need to dissipate the rest of it once we make shore, but...”

“Master Cawlens, the path ends in New Ebor,” Harry told him. “I thought you knew that.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Raff told Harry. “This path is three weeks old? If our path maker stopped here it will be the first place he’s done so. Frankly I don’t think a native from Teltoa would be all that comfortable living off the streets of New Ebor. There won’t be anyone who speaks his language for one thing unless he gets very lucky and runs into a wayfarer who used to work on the other side of the continent.”

“I don’t suppose any indigenes speaking a strange language have been arrested lately?” Em asked.

“You’ll have to ask Master Warvath when we get to New Ebor,” Harry replied. “He might know and if not, the local constables will tell him. I doubt they’d give me the time of day.”

New Ebor, to Raff’s surprise, was larger than most colonial towns. He had seen some very small colonial towns indeed calling themselves cities simply because they were the largest settlement in the colony. New Ebor was, in fact, almost as large as the ancient city it had been named for. This was even more surprising for an inland colonial city, since the norm was for the larger settlements to grow in port cities along the coast.

Ebor, in the Green Lands, was encased in a tall meandering city wall, but New Ebor was, like most modern cities, wide open since modern weapons had long ago made castle-like walls obsolete as a defensive measure. This much younger city had been built three to five stories tall in wood, but with wide straight streets that spoke of urban planning.

The fishing boats docked along wharves near the center of town, and Harry led Raff and Emblem to the local Guildhall. The hall was as large as the one in Muenta had been with room for a dozen visiting wayfarers. Unlike the hall in Muenta there actually were wayfarers stationed there. Harry called greetings to several colleagues as they walked upstairs to the Master’s office.

“I haven’t seen a hall this active since we sailed from Bonoa,” Em remarked.

“New Ebor is on the junction of several pathways,” Harry told them, “so it’s not all that surprising that it would have grown as a trade nexus. Ah, here we are,” he concluded as they reached the door to the Master’s office. He knocked lightly then stepped into the room and held the door for Raff and Em.

“Harry! You’re back early,” an older man said from behind a desk, “and who is... Raff! Good God, man! It’s been years.”

“Hi, Giles,” Raff replied, “Good to see you again too.” He introduced Emblem, then continued, “I hadn’t heard you had been stationed here.”

“My own idea, actually, Raff,” Giles Warvath replied. “I was getting tired of northern winters and even more tired of Council politics. I figured I had done enough for the Guild and this would be a nice place to spend my retirement, so why not move here and take a decade or so to get established before I actually retired.”

“Good thinking,” Raff agreed. “And this way if you decide the place isn’t for you after all, you can always move back.”

“Or try one of those delightful islands Captain Cowper found in theBrightOcean,” Giles replied. “I understand the natives on some of those islands are very friendly and the women usually go topless you know.”

“They do around here too, I hear,” Raff chuckle.

“Not since the bloody missionaries got at them,” Giles replied. “Typical priests. They go tell the indigenes that something like dressing appropriately to a climate is sinful and the indigenes actually believe them. Now tell me why they always start with clothing? You’d think the old ‘Thou shall not murder’ commandment might have been a healthier starting point.”

“It might be tougher to explain why killing an enemy is a bad thing,” Raff replied dryly. “So how long have you been here?”

“Five years,” Giles replied. “It seems to be working out so far. Harry, are you just reporting in from the fishing trip?”

“Yes, sir. Is there any more work for me today?” Harry asked.

“I doubt it,” Giles replied. “I didn’t expect you back before dark. Good fishing, I take it?”

“Amazingly good, sir. Plus I found Masters Cawlens and Cawlens on the western side of the lake.”

“Very good,” Giles replied. “Take what’s left of the day off. If you’d like a break from fishing, I think there’s a party looking for guidance south tomorrow.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry replied. “I think I’d like that.”

“Good,” Giles nodded. “Go enjoy the free time, then. Good lad,” he added after Harry had left the office, “although he does seem to have a thing for forging a path to the fishing grounds. I simply haven’t had the time to do it.”

“Well, he has one now,” Em replied.

“Oh, you mean that nasty thing that cuts through the lake?” Giles asked.

“We smoothed it out a bit,” Raff explained. “It ought to last a long time now, and you’re welcome.”

Giles laughed, “Thanks, but what brings you two out of the Wild and from the wrong direction?”

“That same path, Giles,” Raff told him. “We’ve been following from somewhere in Teltoa.”

“Why?”

“Well partially because it’s dangerous,” Raff replied, “but mostly because it’s causing trouble with the Kenlenta and because we promised we’d get rid of it safely. Oh, and we need to track down whoever forged it for the obvious reasons.”

“Better you than me, Raff,” Giles shuddered. “These days I’m just as happy if I’m not part of an adventure.”

“Could be worse,” Raff chuckled, “We could both still be on the Guild Council.”

“Don’t talk dirty like that, boy!” Giles told him with mock sternness.

“Young Harry there tells us the trail ends here in New Ebor though,” Em cut in. “If so, our path maker could still be around here.”

“That’s right,” Raff agreed. “Any sudden rash of petty thefts of food and small tools?”

“In a city of this size?” Giles countered. “Who would notice unless they caught the thief in the act.”

“You have a point,” Raff agreed. “How about any natives in gaol? One who doesn’t talk the native tongue?”

“I can ask,” Giles told them, “but I doubt your boy is anywhere around here anymore. The path may have ended in New Ebor, but I received a report just this morning that it starts up again almost two hundred miles north of here. I imagine the one you’re looking for left here on an established pathway. The report is almost one week old, so I suppose he could have doubled back here, but why?”

“One week?” Em asked. “We’re starting to catch up.”

“Sounds that way,” Raff nodded. “We ought to buy another pair of horses. I understand we’ve mostly grasslands to travel through in that direction.”

“Mostly,” Giles confirmed. “You’ll find an occasional forest up in Neyka and even more in Ahnin if you get that far, but nothing as impassable as what you went through west of here.”

They stayed in New Ebor an extra day, stocking up for the long trek north and also enjoying a few of the tastes of home and civilization, but with the gap between them and the rogue wayfarer narrowing, there was little time to waste.

Not needing to work on the path one way or another, Raff and Emblem were able to travel at a much faster pace and early on the fifth day after leaving New Ebor, they found the new pathway. While their mysterious path-maker was improving his technique, he still had not learned how to forge a path safely, but as Raff reminded Em, “He hasn’t had to and he also probably hasn’t had anyone show him how. Odds are he’s learning this as he goes along, but we’re still about two weeks behind him, you realize.”

“Worry about that later, dear,” Em replied. “Right now we still have a path to dismantle.”

They continued on for the next week, staying in the Wild the entire time because the path never came near any human settlements. “Wonder what he’s been living on,” Raff commented.

“Maybe he had a bow and managed to shoot a gazelle or something,” Em replied.

“Could be,” Raff relied. “I doubt he’s living off the land anymore. The food plants around here look nothing like what he ought to be used to.”

“Well, we have been following this trail for nearly two thousand miles, you know,” Em pointed out.

“Have we really?” Raff asked.

“It’s been four months, dear,” she reminded him. “I know you’re enjoying yourself, but...”

“Not all that much,” Raff admitted, “but I’m glad I took the time to write to Doctor Henschuler about

her thesis. I'll need to get a good look at the one Rojer asked me to look at for that scientist from... where was he from?"

"Nillon, dear," Em replied, "but I believe he's been living in Menino for the better part of the last decade. That would be Doctor Hideo Naga. I thought he was a nice man, although he seems to bow a lot."

"A cultural mannerism," Raff explained. "It's a way of showing respect, saying thank you and stuff like that. I'm told the depth of the bow is indicative of both the amount of respect and the relative status between two people. It's all very complex and only someone born to the system can understand all the fine details."

"Have you ever been to Nillon, dear?" Em asked.

"No, can't say I have," Raff admitted, "but we have sent wayfarers there on trade expeditions. The country is mostly closed to such trade, but Dix and Pangam have trading colonies on one of the Nillonese islands, so ship-board wayfarers are needed. I'm told that the safest way to answer a bow is with one of approximately the same depth unless you are addressing a noble, in which case make sure your bow is a bit deeper than his."

"I'm not sure I'd want to visit Nillon, though," he continued. "Aesthetically it sounds lovely, but the culture has a steely edge to it all regarding relative status, and foreigners are assumed to have no status at all, that is unless one of the locals want something of you, in which case they will pretend you have status until they get what they want. Also a foreigner is expected to behave in all ways in keeping with the Nillonese customs, including speaking only their language while in their country. Translators for business purposes and audiences with nobles are not allowed."

"I didn't detect any of that from Doctor Nago," Em commented.

"Well, in all fairness, the few who leave their nation feel it is required of them to adopt our customs and language when they are here," Raff explained, "so I guess they are consistent, at least, in that behavior. I think much of that may come down to their inherent isolationism. Before contact with Pangamese and Dixan traders, the only other people they met in trade were the Corisans and the far eastern Kharasians, both of whom they despise and consider dirty barbarians. I'm fairly certain they feel the same way about us in general," he added. "As a culture they are as arrogant as Corisa, but with a lot less to back them up. They are ruled absolutely by their nobles and above them sits an emperor who is so bound by their cultural rules that he lives in almost perfect isolation from the rest of the people. Treaties, such as they are, can only be signed with the Emperor's spokesman, who tends to change at random, depending on which noble is currently dominant and, of course, treaties signed by earlier spokesmen are rarely honored by the next."

"Interesting way of life," Em remarked, "and I thought you Green Landsmen were crazy."

"We are!" Raff chuckled. "Ask any Nillonese."

Nine

"I never realized how tall they were," Em commented the next day when they woke up to see several giraffes grazing near their encampment."

“They are a sight,” Raff admitted, “but perhaps we were a bit foolish not to sleep in shifts last night. If we have those silly looking critters, we’ll still be in lion country and while the lions are like as not to ignore us, the leopards who like to perch in those trees will see us as a convenient snack.”

“So tonight we go back to sleeping in shifts,” Em shrugged. “How do you think our mystery wayfarer is surviving out here?”

“That path of his will scare off a lot of wildlife,” Raff admitted. “Come to think about it, that may have been what kept us from becoming cat food last night. But I wouldn’t want to rely on the path as a means of protection. Well, let’s finish packing up and ride on.”

They didn’t see any lions on that leg of the trip, but the next morning they did encounter a large herd of elephants. Upset by the nature of the rogue path, the queen of the herd challenged Raff and Em when they got too close, forcing them to take a wide course around the creatures. There were elephants in Salasia and points east where the elephants were naturally resistant to the effects of human stabilities and could therefore be domesticated, but this variety was entirely Wild.

It was more difficult to smooth the path from the distance they were forced to stay at, but once they were done, the elephants were able to continue on and Raff and Em could get closer to finish dispersing the pathway’s energy. “It must have been blocking their migration route, if they do migrate,” Raff conjectured.

“Do they migrate?” Em asked.

“I’m no expert, Em,” he replied, “but that seemed like migration behavior to my untrained eye.”

“You could be right, dear,” Em told him. “I suppose we could ask at the next village or plantation. I think we have one coming up very soon.”

“About time too,” Raff commented. “We were running out of food, so I can only imagine about the one we’re following.”

The plantation town they found was similar in most respects to the one in Rahia. It was still early in the day, so they paid a quick social call on the local Guild office, bought some food and were back on the trail within an hour.

They started running into plantations more often as they approached the Neyka border a week later, although three times the path led them directly into native villages, mostly belonging to the Sanai tribe. Neither Raff nor Em knew enough of the Sanai language to do more than greet people and use the local word for ‘wayfarer,’ so the people would know who they were, although in one village there was a young man who had learned the colonists’ language.

“No, we didn’t see any strangers coming through the village,” the man told them when they asked, “although the shaman noticed the new path about ten days ago.”

“Was there anything missing about that time?” Raff asked. It was becoming his most frequent question.

“A little food, some bananas and some dried meat, nothing we could not afford to give a guest. Had the stranger stopped to ask, it’s likely we would have given him much more,” the man answered.

“That’s good to know,” Raff nodded.

“Who is this stranger?” the Sanai man asked.

“We’re not very sure, but we think he may be the sole survivor of a raid on a Sarahnie village about two thousand miles from here, had he walked a straight line.”

“And of course he did not,” the man laughed. “See that mountain to the west? We call it Falanaga and we teach our children that it has been there as long as anyone remembers because it bends the Wild around it.”

“An interesting notion,” Raff admitted. “It may well do just that. I detect from your accent that you must have gone to school in the Green Lands. Cornwealth?” he asked naming one of the more prestigious schools.

“Dunbridge, if you don’t mind,” the man told him.

“I don’t mind at all,” Raff laughed. “I went to Dunbridge myself, Morrin House, Class of Thirty-five.”

“Windon, Fifty-two,” the man replied naming his house and year of graduation. “Garó Sanai, sir, at your service.”

“Raff Cawlens, at yours.” They shook hands. “Anyway, there are scientists I correspond with on a regular basis. They might be interested in your mountain. I was just at a conference earlier this year where this sort of thing was under debate, in fact.”

“The Shape of the World!” Garó exclaimed. “Yes, I have ordered a copy of the proceedings, but it has not arrived yet. There are times I believe the old tales about Falanaga. It is said that no one who can see Falanaga is capable of walking a truly straight course. Do you think it might really be true?”

“There are mountains the Kenlienta talk about as being eternal,” Raff commented, “but I don’t know if they have ever been investigated scientifically.”

“Perhaps I could do that with Falanaga,” Garó decided.

“You’re certainly in the right place for it,” Raff replied.

“You must stay the night, my friends,” Garó told both Raff and Em. “My people will hold a feast in your honor and I want to hear all about the conference.”

“We really ought to be moving on,” Raff replied reluctantly, but Em came to his rescue.

“No, Raff, we ought to stay,” she insisted. “We could both use a full night’s sleep. That’s certainly nothing we can do in the Bush.”

“You’re right,” Raff agreed. “We’ve had to sleep only four or five hours each night for far too long. The chance to sleep a full eight without have to get up to keep the predators away will be welcome.”

Raff managed to spend two hours with the village shaman, with Garó translating, while Em spent some time with the women. It was not unusual among the Sanai for women to develop a wayfarer’s abilities and unlike in many of the tribes on this continent, it was not a discouraged talent.

So when Em was introduced to a young teenager who had recently begun to show the ability to see the Wild energy flow, she took the girl just outside the village to show her how to use some of her nascent abilities. By the time they were done, Em decided that the girl showed master-level potential and deserved the best training she could get.

“We need to get her to university, Raff,” she told him that night in bed.

“She may not want to attend,” Raff pointed out. “The Green Lands are a long way from here.”

“She could go to Crace,” Emblem suggested.

“She’ll be more easily accepted by the colonists here if she goes to a school near Taundon,” Raff argued. “I could sponsor her into Dunbridge, I suppose.”

“She has a few years before she’s old enough, but I think the Guild should pay her way through a private school,” Em decided.

“All right,” Raff nodded. “God knows we need more master wayfarers. I’ll talk to Garo in the morning and make sure he gives her language lessons. The other kids will laugh at her accent otherwise.”

“Only until she teaches them a few lessons,” Em pointed out, “but better not to put her in that position. I’ll talk to her in the morning. I think she wants to learn more and the thought of traveling, like Garo did, fascinates all the children and young adults in the village.”

“Then I imagine she’ll be amenable,” Raff replied.

The next morning they discussed the matter with the girl, her parents, the village chieftain and the shaman and everyone was pleased to hear about the opportunity. “She’ll have to work for the Guild for at least ten years after graduation,” Em explained, “but she can pretty much choose where she wants to serve the second half of that, so she can in time come back to the village if she wants.

“The village needs a wayfarer,” she told Em confidently. “If I am needed, I will return.” Em promised a Guild representative would be in touch with the girl, whose name was Chanya, and also promised to visit her in the Green Lands whenever she could. Raff and Em stayed in the village until noon, but finally decided they had better get moving. They were still a week and a half behind the path maker, and as pleasant as sitting around the Sanai village was, it wouldn’t get them any closer to the person they were chasing.

The path turned to the northeast and entered the colony of Neyka. As though the horses knew something had changed they started acting skittish one afternoon a week after they had left the Sanai village. “What’s wrong?” Raff asked out loud.

“Maybe they smell a lion or a leopard,” Em conjectured.

“They haven’t acted like this before,” Raff pointed out, “and we’ve been down wind of several prides over the last few weeks.”

Just then a large flock of colorful birds took flight from out of a large acacia two hundred yards ahead and turned to the left. A moment later the horses tried to break into a gallop with Raff and Em doing their best to calm them down. Finally the ground began to shake and the horses bolted in blind panic.

The deep-pitched rumble lasted over a minute and the horses ran on as Raff and Em struggled to bring them back under control. The large acacia toppled and a surprised leopard fell out of the tree as it came down. Raff caught the cat's motion as it rolled back to its feet, but was too busy to actually watch as it wandered confusedly around the fallen tree as the world finally stopped moving.

The horses calmed down enough to be brought back to a canter and finally to a halt. Raff and Em looked behind them to see the churned soil behind. "Liquefaction," Raff noted calmly. "No wonder the horses were panicked. They were sinking into the dirt even as they tried to run."

"They're exhausted now," Em commented. "We should probably walk them for a while." Just then the world rumbled again just for three seconds and the horses did not panic this time.

"Too tired to react, I think," Raff noted, "or else they're getting used to it."

There were occasional rumbles throughout the day, but nothing spooked the horses after that shock. Later that afternoon, Raff and Em found another Sanai village where the natives were cheerfully cleaning up from the small quake. "No one was harmed," a spokesperson told Emblem, "there was just a bit of shaking and some homes need some minor repairs. The homes, mud-brick huts with thatched roofs, were still fairly intact. Most of the repairs involved re-thatching the roofs, although a few walls had crumbled and people were already making new mud-bricks and letting them dry in the sun.

The wayfarers politely turned down the offers of hospitality and continued on. The tremor had turned out not to have caused extensive damage and, as they continued to follow the raw path, there were fewer and fewer signs anything had happened at all. "We may have been at or near the epicenter," Raff decided as they rode into another plantation town that evening.

"Lucky us," Em replied. "Well, no harm done and we have both lived through worse than that. Nothing in this town looks damaged."

"They probably just had their dishes rattled is all," Raff commented.

The Guild office in this town had been closed for the evening, and like so many similar towns, the local taverns did not have rooms to rent, leaving Raff and Em knocking at the manor door of one of the plantations. They had been given hospitality this way several times in the last thousand miles of the trip even though most nights were spent in the Wild. In most cases all they asked for was permission to pitch their tent somewhere on the estate, but this time they got lucky.

"Nonsense!" the plantation owner, a tall, sandy-haired Green Landsman named Francis Wrent, told them. "My youngest son is a wayfarer and I wouldn't think of making his colleagues camp in the fields. Come in, we were just having drinks before dinner."

"I fear we may be a bit dirty from the road to sit at your table, sir," Raff pointed out. He knew full well that after the last few days without a bath, his horse probably smelled better than he did.

"Don't worry about that," Wrent assured him. "I'd be a poor host indeed if I didn't offer you a shower, unless the lady would prefer a bath?"

"Anything to get clean just about now would be wonderful, Mister Wrent," Em replied.

"Francis," he corrected her, "Beth!" A young woman in her late teens appeared. She had long light

brown hair and an eager smile. "This is my daughter, Elizabeth. Beth, please show Mrs. Cawlens where the women's showers are, then tell your brothers to take care of their horses."

It turned out her brothers were just out of sight, curious about the early evening visitors. "It's been so long since we had guests," Beth told Emblem. "I hope you can stay an extra day or two."

"We'll probably have to be gone in the morning," Em told her. "Raff and I are trying to catch up to someone. Staying still won't accomplish that."

"Who are you trying to catch up to?" Beth asked interestedly. Em gave her a short version of what she and Raff had been doing while she took her shower. "I'm surprised the water is still that hot," Beth marveled in the middle of Em's story. "We finished bathing and turned off the heaters an hour ago."

"I'm cheating a bit," Em admitted, and explained how she could use traces of Wild energy to heat up water and do various other small things like that, even in a town.

"Wow!" Beth gasped, "I've never met a master wayfarer before. Dickie is only a journeyman."

"No shame in that," Em told her. "Most wayfarers are journeymen, the rank is a mark of innate ability, not experience. If he stays with the Guild beyond his contract, he could well end up in charge of a hall one day. Where is he stationed?"

"Way up north in Tinap," Beth told her. "He writes that he gets to see the ancient Tinapien monuments practically every day. It must be wonderful. I hardly ever get out of this town, although next year," she added in an excited whisper, "Mom and Dad are sending me to University in the Green Lands."

"Really? Which one?" Em asked as she started drying off.

"I have an offer from Ebor, but I'm still waiting to hear from Cornweath," Beth explained. "I hope to get in there. Too bad I was turned down at L'academie de Carais. That would have been exotic, but I understand they do not accept many foreign students."

"They only accept one in ten Cracian students for that matter," Emblem told her as she selected a blouse from her pack. "It is very hard to get accepted there unless you are very lucky or born to the nobility."

"You went there, didn't you?" Beth asked insightfully. "There's something about the way you said that..."

"Yes, I was accepted there," Emblem admitted. "A baron's daughter does not normally have trouble matriculating at L'academie, although I fear my presence there might have kept another more talented student from attending."

"Not if you're a master wayfarer," Beth told her breathlessly.

"I did not know I was at the time," Em admitted. "That came much later. Still Carais is not that far from the Green Lands. Perhaps you'll have the chance to visit while on holiday. Neyka is too far to come home every year."

"I know," Beth replied sadly. "I love Neyka and I'll miss it terribly. What is snow like? I can see it on top of some of the mountains, but it never gets that cold here in town. Oh, I love that skirt. What is that crisscross pattern?"

Em smiled as she stepped into the long skirt. Beth's thoughts were bubbling every which way, just adding to her adorability. She decided to answer the final question and ignore the rest. "It's a Toplands plaid," she replied. "Actually it's an imitation in cotton. The real ones are in heavy wool which would be far too warm this evening. I bought this when I was in Carais a few months ago. The pattern is very much in fashion or was at the time. It's the first time I had a reason to wear it since then, however. Normally, I wear wayfarer's trousers, just like the men, when I'm on the Way." Then a thought occurred to her. "Would you like it? It's really just taking up a lot of room in my pack."

"Oh, I couldn't," Beth replied instantly, but turned around just as quickly. "Really?"

The veranda had been enclosed with mosquito netting, which gave Emblem a closed-in feeling, reminding her of how easy she really did have it as a wayfarer. There were tricks even journeymen could use to keep stinging insects away in the Wild. Of course these insects had adapted to stable lands, so only a master could drive them off here. The netting did the job with much less effort. They talked for a few hours until Francis Wrent decided it was time to get some sleep.

Ten

Em and Raff woke up the next morning to the sounds of rifle and musket fire. Only half dressed, shirt in hand, Raff sprang out of the bed and raced toward the scene of the commotion. The shots were coming from somewhere to the west on the far side of the Wrents' wheat fields. In Neyka two crops could be grown each year. If it was not for the dry season it could be three. It was late in the season for the current crop and the stalks had turned to golden yellow. Far ahead, however, Francis Wrent, his sons and several native men were loading muskets and hunting rifles and well beyond them the field was on fire.

"What happened?" Raff shouted his question as he finally donned the shirt.

"The bloody Ken!" Wrent swore, still trying to reload his rifle. "They set the fields on fire."

"What makes you so sure it was the Ken?" Raff asked. "It could have been some upset indigenes too, you know."

"Nah," Wrent replied disgustedly, "Nadif here saw them, didn't you Nadif?"

"I did, Mistah Wrent," Nadif replied. "They were taller and thinner than most men and they used fire magic."

"Hold your fire," Raff told Wrent. "I'll go investigate. I doubt you would hit anyone from here anyway."

Not waiting for a response, Raff rushed ahead. The burning fields in front of him were still at issue and he had to detour around the leading edge. He wasn't sure about Kenlienta fire magic, but the wind direction was suspiciously convenient for burning most of the Wrents' crop. Sprinting around the edge of the burning area, he soon found himself behind the leading wall of fire and thankful he had taken the time to put his boots on before leaving the Wrents' manor. Even with his feet protected, the zone was still very hot, but cooling rapidly as Raff got away from the still burning wheat.

Then he reached the edge of the Wild and found himself face-to-face with five young Kenlientan adult

males. "What's the meaning of this?" Raff demanded in the Ken language.

"We don't have to explain ourselves to humans," the obvious leader spat at him.

"Oh yes, you do," Raff replied with deceptive calmness.

The leader made a signal to his companions that Raff translated as "Get him," but none of the Ken were able to move. "What have you done?" the Kenlentan leader demanded.

"I know your magic better than you do, kid," Raff replied, smiling.

"You're a wayfarer," the man growled.

"I am," Raff nodded. "Raff Cawlens. Normally I might say, 'at your service,' but for you I'll make an exception."

"You're Raufanax?" one of the other men asked.

"I am," Raff confirmed. "And for the record, wayfaring isn't magic although it does tap into the same energy. I just happen to be one of the few who can do both."

"I've heard you are one of the world's great wizards," the second man told him.

"Not hardly," Raff shook his head. "I'm just a duffer at magic, but I'm very good at wayfaring. But the fact that I'm holding you here by magic and you can't get out ought to tell you something. Now for starters I want you to turn off the wind."

"Why should we?" the leader asked.

"Let's call it a gesture of good faith, kid," Raff told him. "Do that and I'll consider letting you go back to your town under your own power. I sort of doubt your elder will appreciate having me dump you at his front door, but I'll do it if you insist."

Even with Kenlentan magic, turning off a wind spell was hardly instantaneous. The young man who had cast the spell, possibly the only one he or any of the others knew as none of them were old enough by Ken law to have been allowed to study magic, had to work even harder to stop the wind flow than he had to start it.

While that was going on, however, Raff summoned the Wild, something far easier to do in the Wild area, and used it to find every loose drop of water in the area and caused it to rain down in large droplets on the burning wheat. The fire was out and there was more steam than smoke coming out of the ground there when Em rushed up to join Raff.

"What happened?" she asked Raff breathlessly.

"A young Kenlentan gentlemen's social club appears to have developed a particularly unhealthy hobby," Raff told her dryly.

"I see," Em replied, "I think I see, anyway. What's wrong with you kids? Didn't your mothers teach you not to play with fire?"

Most of the Kenlienta appeared embarrassed, but the leader looked like he was about to say something. “Don’t,” Raff advised him.

“What?” he asked.

“Don’t say what you’re thinking,” Raff clarified. “If you do I may not be able to keep my promise to let you return to your town on your own.”

“But,” the leader began, then he caught on to what Raff was saying. Among the Kenlienta there were songs and stories about Raff and Emblem Cawlens. Raff was often portrayed as a laughing warrior who fought only when necessary, but Em’s red hair and fiery temper were her two most frequently mentioned characteristics. That neither of them totally lived up to their reputations did not matter to Raff at the moment. His wife’s reputation was enough to keep these young men in a receptive mood.

“Now I suppose you thought you had good cause to start that little fire or were you just practicing your ability to fan the flames?” Raff asked harshly.

“The humans are destroying the world,” the leader told Raff.

“Are we?” Raff countered. “And how do you figure that?”

“The smoke from your fires doesn’t stay inside your towns and cities,” the leader pointed out. “The waste you dump in rivers flows into our lands.”

“The smoke has never been a problem before and Ken cities produce as much or more,” Raff countered. “I’m not sure anyone has done a study of human waste on the environment, but for the sake of argument I’ll admit that might have an effect. Of course there are human towns and cities downstream from Kenlientan settlements, aren’t there? How sure are you that your problems aren’t being caused by that?”

“That might be so, Raufanax,” the leader admitted reluctantly, “but our people have always been harmed by exposure to your people and lands.”

“And our people do not tolerate the Wild much better than you tolerate the stabilities,” Em argued.

“With the exception of wayfarers,” Raff pointed out to both of them. “What sort of problems have you been having?”

“This odd path that burns through the world with a sickness that can cripple us,” the leader told him.

“We are taking care of that,” Raff assured him. “We’ve been dispelling it as fast as we can and are tracking down the one who forged it by request of Elder Saltaxis. Do you know him?”

“I have heard of him,” the Kenlien replied, “but this is not his region.”

“Strange storms have been developing in our lands,” one of the others added.

“What sorts of storms?” Raff and Em asked as one.

“They are very small storms, but powerful,” that Kenlien replied. “The winds are very strong and often there is lightning involved as well. They rip through the Wild and leave plants and animals twisted in their

wake.”

“Twisted?” Em asked concernedly. “How?”

“Different, odd, sometimes,” he replied. “Sometimes they are merely wounded with terrible open sores that won’t heal for weeks, even with our best healers working on them.”

“Have any people been harmed?” Em asked.

“Not as far as we know, not yet,” the leader took up the story, “but that is why our healers are so concerned. It is one thing for an animal to be so wounded but far worse if a person were to be. But that is not the worst of it. The nature of plants and animals are changed by these storms. Animals that were once docile herbivores become vicious meat eaters. Food plants become poisonous and, yes, there have been deaths from that.”

“Have carnivorous animals been changed into plant eaters?” Raff asked.

“It’s possible,” the leader replied evasively.

Raff decided he had enough of an answer and continued, “How about the plants that are inedible becoming edible too?”

“Who would know that?” the Kenlien countered. “We don’t go eating poisonous plants to see if they have suddenly become good.”

“But the changes have been random, haven’t they?” Raff asked. “Not necessarily all bad?”

“Raff, I don’t think that’s the point,” Em took the Kenlienta side. “The environment has gotten dangerous in the vicinity of these storms. How many have there been?”

The Kenlienta looked uncomfortable. “We’ve only heard of two,” the leader told them at last.

“You’ve heard of them?” Raff asked. “Do you mean to say you haven’t experienced them first hand? Where did they happen?”

“In the land you call Maggo,” the leader answered.

“That only narrows it down to one third of this continent,” Raff commented “and none of it within a thousand miles of here. Could it be the stories have grown in the telling? Okay, maybe something has been happening. I’ll start asking about that. I also have friends in the scientific community who may be interested in examining the problems you point out. It could be that this is a serious problem for both our peoples. However, you have to learn there are other ways of solving problems than resorting to violence. Do you really think your elders would approve of what you tried to do today? Do you realize your fire could have not only destroyed the crops and livelihood of the people who live here, but could have killed them too? Are you proud of being attempted murderers?”

They looked rebellious for a full minute until the leader whispered, “No, sir. I guess we weren’t thinking it through. We know our elders often talk to wayfarers when there are problems but none of us can enter one of your cities.”

“You don’t have to,” Em told him. “You could have stopped beside a normal path and waited for one to

come to you. We always stop to parley when a Kenlien asks. Of course that takes a bit of patience and from what I have seen today, you need to work on your patience.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. “I’m sorry. We’ll make restitution.”

“Better than that,” Raff suggested. “Go home and find a way to act responsibly and constructively on these problems. One of you has an interest in magic, obviously. Apprentice yourself to an elder and when you are legally old enough, learn how to enter a stability so you can negotiate with the Guild of Wayfarers and other humans directly. Work toward better understanding and trade between the Ken and humans all over the world.”

“You are laying a heavy burden on us,” the leader noted.

“I’m going easy on you,” Raff replied. “What do you think your elder would do in my place?” None of the young men dared to answer.

Eleven

“Well, at least it was just a bit of wheat,” Wrent commented. “They didn’t harm any of the coffee trees.”

“I doubt they’ll be back,” Raff told him, “but if they do return it will be to talk, so try that before shooting next time. I know it’s a natural thing to do to protect your holdings like this, but those kids were misguided. They understand they did wrong and won’t do it again. Think of this as a truce. For now the fighting is over, but if you shoot first, the truce is off.”

“I get it,” Wrent told him, “I don’t find what they did forgivable, though.”

“Well, no. I wouldn’t expect you to,” Raff replied, “but they were young and we are all a bit foolish in our youth. They wanted to pay for the loss of your crops, but I gave them something even harder to do, something that’s likely to take the rest of their lives.” He explained what had happened just inside the Wild.

“That helps a bit,” Wrent admitted, “if they actually do it and weren’t just saying they would.”

“Human kids might just say something to get me to let them go,” Raff explained, “but not Kenlienta. It’s a cultural difference between us. Lying is considered pathological behavior among the Ken. They might refuse to speak or not tell the whole truth, but they won’t tell an outright lie either.

“Well, thank you for the hospitality,” Raff continued, “Except for the wake-up this morning, Em and I enjoyed our stay, but we really need to push on.”

They continued northward from the Wrent Plantation and picked up the path once more north of the town. For the next two weeks they continued to alternate between coffee plantations, Sanai villages and savannah regions as the path wove its way out of Neyka and into the even more mountainous Holy Colony of Ahnia.

Ahnia was claimed by the more northern country Menino although except for a few trading colonies along the coast, most of the Meninans there were priests, monks and nuns. Two centuries earlier the Meninans were renowned for their mastery of trade and Ahnia and the neighboring colony of Modaga

had been staging areas for large ventures into the eastern realms like Myanistan, Corisa and Salasia. Now, however, the Meninan traders were content with dealing with those eastern merchants who came to them.

Menino had always been the center of the Holy Church of Meni which ruled the religious life of over half of the North and continued to influence even those more liberal churches that had schismed off over the last few centuries, and her colony towns often seemed like large open-air churches as well. Raff, not having grown up in the strict Church of Meni always felt uncomfortable in Meninan towns. Em's discomfort in Meninan towns was a bit less direct in cause, however. She had been tutored by Meniite nuns before attending L'academie and one of the basic lessons they tried to teach was obedience; obedience to God, obedience to the king and obedience to her father. All three amounted to pretty much the same thing since they were able to quote scriptural passages to reinforce that obedience. By extension she was also required by the Church to be obedient to her husband to be and, in the eyes of the Church, Emblem had broken that basic rule on all levels when she ran from Bur. Most of the time it did not bother her in the least, but on their first step into an Ahnian church town the guilt came rushing back at her.

Fortunately they weren't required to stay in any of the towns and in fact when not pitching their tent, they more often accepted the hospitality of Ahnian natives, most of whom were coffee growers in the southern parts of Ahnia they traveled through.

"Coffee is native to our land," a village chief explained to them over tiny cups of the thick honey-sweetened brew. "My people have been drinking it longer than anyone else in the world."

"What I've never been able to figure out," Em admitted, "is how you decided it was edible and that you had to roast it to get the flavor. I've seen raw coffee beans and have to admit they aren't all that appetizing."

"Ah, we have a story about that," the elderly man smiled. "There was once a young goatherd who took his flock into the hills where the coffee even today grows wild. Being young and foolish, he fell asleep one afternoon when he should have been watching his goats and when he woke up several were acting strangely. They were jumping around and running in the heat of the day where their companions were content to walk. On closer investigation he discovered that the animals had been eating the berries of a Wild bush he had been instructed to keep them away from.

"He returned to his village expecting the errant goats to die from what he believed were poisonous berries, but it turned out that they survived just fine and after several trips in which he intentionally brought them to those same trees, he discovered that they really weren't poisonous at all, at least not to goats. He told others about it and his shaman went to investigate. The shaman picked as many berries as he could reach and after treating them as he would any potential medicine, decided that the beans inside the berries were what was causing the frisky behavior among the goats.

"There are many different versions of what the shaman then did to discover that roasting brings out the delicious flavor of coffee," the chief continued, "most of which are based on similar food and medicinal treatments and for a while we thought of coffee as strictly a medicinal potion to give us energy. I'm not really sure when we started drinking it as we would any favored beverage, but there you are."

"I've certainly heard stranger stories," Em admitted. "Thank you for telling me that one."

"You are very welcome," he replied, taking another sip. "May I refill your cup?"

The next day Raff and Em learned they were only a few days behind the path maker when they entered

another mining town. Along with building missionary schools in church towns, the holy colonists had also discovered rich copper and silver mines in Ahnia along with an occasional stray vein of gold, all of which was processed and sent to the trading colonies on the coast from which either the profits or the precious metal itself went directly to the central parish of High Priest Garanus in Naisa, the capital of Menino.

“You know, it’s somewhat ironic that while the missionaries of Meni are so plentiful here, many of the cities of Menino are quite secular in nature,” Raff remarked one afternoon.

“Perhaps the church doesn’t feel the need to preach to the faithful in their own country,” Em suggested.

“I doubt that,” Raff laughed. “I’ve never met one of their priests, or one from the Green Lands for that matter, who did not prefer preaching to those who already believed unquestioningly. Makes their lives a lot easier, you know.”

“I can see how it might,” Em agreed. “I thought we were getting into the rainy season again. Why is it still so sunny?”

“The weather can be strange like that,” Raff commented. “If the Monsoons are a little later than usual this year, it just means we can make better time. Once it starts raining we’ll be traveling at a crawl.”

“So will our rogue, though,” Em remarked. Raff nodded, but before he could comment further, Em observed. “Some Kenlienta just beside the path ahead. Looks like they want to talk.”

“Good,” Raff replied. “Let’s clean this path up a bit more and then sit around and chat for a while.”

The Ken party had obviously been there a while as a small pavilion had been erected beside the path and several men and women were inside waiting. Raff and Em waved at the Kenlienta standing just outside the tent. When they were closer, they tied the horses to a nearby tree and finally approached the tent. As they did so, Raff and Em continued erasing the path for nearly two hundred yards up the road.”

“Thank you, Raff and Ember Cawlens,” a woman said from inside the pavilion. “I was keeping the effects of that foul path from hurting us, but your way makes it easier on all.”

“It seemed the least we could do,” Raff replied as he and Em entered the tent, “considering you’ve obviously been waiting for us.”

“How do you know that?” the woman asked.

“If you were merely looking for a place to pitch your tent you could have done it a hundred feet or so from the path without having to actively protect yourselves,” Raff chuckled. “Instead you camped right next to the path and no Kenlien in his or her right mind would have done so unless waiting for someone to come along. You might not have been waiting for us specifically, but since you knew who we were and I’m fairly certain we’ve never met, obviously you were waiting for us.”

“You have me there,” the woman admitted wryly. She was tall and thin, like nearly all Kenlienta and as did all the Ken on the Southern Continent had dark skin and long straight hair. Her eyes were brown but sparkled with the most unusual blue and green highlights. The others with her represented a wide range of ages from adolescents to white-haired elders, except their clothing was all uniformly light blue. Hers was also predominantly light blue but was edged in silver embroidery and she wore a living orchid entwined around her left arm. Both Raff and Em realized that in spite of her relatively young age, she was the chief elder of the region and that these others were members of her honor guard. It was a large contingent of

Kenlienta, but not unusually large. "But please forgive my lack of courtesy," she continued. "My name is Nienta."

"Please to meet you Elder Nienta," Em replied. Raff nodded his agreement. "What may we do for you?"

"I was still technically a child when the Great Plague fell on my people," Nienta replied, "and you both proved yourselves to be heroes among the Ken Nation. You saved my life and that of my family. It is a debt I can never repay, and yet I find myself having to ask even more of you. But please, won't you share a meal with me and we can discuss it in a more civilized manner."

It was a request that would be difficult to refuse politely, but Raff felt honor-bound to try. "It's a tempting offer, Elder Nienta," he replied, "but we have important business at the far end of that pathway."

"I am aware of that, Raufanax" Nienta replied patiently, "and I can tell you something about the one you seek."

"If that's the case," Raff shrugged, "we'll be happy and honored to spend whatever time you care to share with us."

Nienta laughed. "The time I would like to share with you is much longer than the time I actually will, although I hope you will someday visit my city again. Please sit and we can talk for a while before it is time for dinner."

Nienta might be promising not to hold them too long, but she also did not seem to be in any hurry to get to the reason she wanted to talk. However, Raff knew the Kenlientan customs full well in this case. Nienta, before she could ask any favors of the wayfarers, before she could even relay information she was offering in exchange for their help, first had to eat with them. In times of dire emergency a Kenlien in such a situation would quickly break out a loaf of bread or a piece of fruit and share it and thereby follow the letter of the custom if not the full observance. Nienta, however, was obviously intent on honoring them correctly. So instead of getting right down to business, they discussed only inconsequential topics for the next two hours until it was time to eat.

Both Raff and Em had many questions they wanted to ask but most, they feared, would be breaches of politeness, since the questions they wanted to ask the most involved the recent changes within the Ken Nation. In fact, Raff could only think of one question that he was sure would not directly relate to Nienta's business with them. "So how did you know who we were and that we would be here?" he finally asked an hour later.

"I got a message from Elder Saltaxis," Nienta replied. "I believe he wrote to every chief elder on the continent, letting us know you were here and handling the problem of this very raw pathway. It was welcome news even though the path had not yet reached here at the time I got the message, but we will discuss more of that later. Tell me how your king and queen are, though. I understand a new prince or princess is on the way?"

They continued to discuss trivialities including a brief knitting lesson by Em, which fascinated Nienta, until after dinner when finally they were able to get to the heart of the matter.

"First of all, I can tell you that the person you are chasing is just a boy. He's just a few days ahead of you. The Ken are aware of him, of course, but we dare not approach him. He is wielding such raw power than even an elder such as I would be at risk. We no longer believe he is doing this out of malice,

although until we saw him for ourselves we feared we had a terrible new enemy. Be gentle with him; I think he must have suffered horribly.”

“He’s probably the sole survivor of a destroyed village on the western side of the continent,” Em told her. “Actually I’m surprised he’s still wandering all over the place. We think he may be lost.”

“Possibly,” Nienta replied, “I doubt he realizes just how far he has walked or how to return, but I sense he is wandering more because he does not know where he wants to go. It is unlikely a boy could have crossed this continent as he has without many near disasters. Large cats, treacherous terrain and unfamiliarity with the food plants of an area are all dangers he must have faced along the way and much more besides. He’s a brave lad, I imagine, but he must also be a very scared one as well.”

“We’ll approach him carefully when the time comes,” Emblem promised.

“Good,” Nienta nodded. “The world needs more master wayfarers and, with training, that is exactly what he can be. That leads me to another problem, however. There is much happening in the Ken world right now and in the world of your people as well. Until now we have been able to keep our two worlds at peace with one another, but I fear the time may be coming when we will be hard pressed to continue together in peace.”

“The Guild of Wayfarers has always respected Kenlenta and their rights,” Raff assured her, “and as the Guild goes so too do all the nations in which we exist.”

“Yes,” Nienta agreed warmly. “Your Guild has always been a great friend of the Ken. I do appreciate that, but that may not be enough to keep our peoples from engaging in a war of mutual extinction one day soon.”

“How soon?” Em asked worriedly.

“A century, perhaps,” Nienta replied, “maybe more, or maybe much less. Are you aware of the problems being caused primarily by the younger adults of the Ken Nation?”

“As a matter of fact we had an encounter not too long ago,” Raff told her and explained what had happened.

“You handled it very well,” Nienta complimented him. “Unfortunately there are many more such young men and women who believe they have a legitimate grievance with humankind. The reasons they gave you are not fabrications, of course. The nature of Kenlentan land, that which we both call the Wild, is gradually becoming increasingly less wild. Many of us believe it is human pollution causing the problem. We note your society is starting to industrialize and pollution will become a greater problem as that increases.”

“Kenlenta also create pollution,” Raff countered, “and that pollution is entering our stabilities and making them less stable.”

“I see no reason to disbelieve that,” Nienta allowed, “although this is the first I’ve heard of it. But you see, the danger to humans in such a situation is much less than it is to the Ken. Your people can tolerate small amounts of the Wild, but among my own, only accomplished elders can resist the damage stabilities cause us and we cannot do it while we sleep. It would mean our doom.”

“There is that,” Raff agreed. “I can suggest the Guild advocate finding ways to keep our pollutions from

spreading. The Council does not listen to me as much as it once did, but I can try.”

“That may not be the primary cause of the problem,” Nienta continued. “My own studies suggest the root problem may all come down to population.”

“What do you mean?” Raff asked.

“The more humans there are, the more area becomes stabilized,” Nienta replied. “As your population rises, the Wild will suffer. I estimate that at the current rate of change, seventy percent of the world will be stable in two centuries.”

“That much?” Em asked. “Less than five percent of the world is stable now.”

“You’re including the oceans,” Nienta replied. “If you only count landmass areas it is approximately twenty percent of the world. And of course that includes land that suits neither Kenlenta nor humans.”

“That is still a large change,” Raff noted. “You expect the human population of the world to expand by three and a half times in a mere two centuries?”

“No, but I expect it to more than double,” Nienta replied. “The increase in population together with added industrialization will bring about added areas of stability.”

“I hate to say it,” Raff replied, “but while I agree with you that this would not be a good thing, most humans would welcome a world in which stability was the norm and the Wild was confined to the oceans and a few remote pockets.”

“It would also be at the expense of your own livelihood, wayfarer,” Nienta countered.

“I’m sure the Guild will agree with you, Elder,” Raff smiled, “but if I thought it was for the best, I would gladly take up a new trade.”

“But do you think that would be for the best?” Nienta asked.

“If the erosion of the Wild is due in any significant part to human pollution,” Raff considered, “the stable world that would be created would hardly be fit to live in. Dirty air, dirty water; it might not kill us as quickly as it would you, but it would kill us just as certainly.”

“Few humans would realize that, I fear,” Nienta sighed.

“On the contrary, Elder,” Em replied, “most would see the danger, but the real problem is that they would assume they could either stop the damage before it affects them or that their descendants would find a way to deal with it in time.”

“No,” Raff disagreed, “many would assume one or the other, but most would decide the solution was up to someone else to come up with. It would be best for us all to find a way to avoid the problem before it actually begins. I promised those young men in Neyka I would try to get some human scientists interested in studying this matter. Perhaps you should correspond with them directly.”

“Perhaps I should,” Nienta agreed. “It is possible my estimates are wrong. I had to make a lot of assumptions, you understand.”

"I do," Raff nodded, "Is this subject on the agenda for the upcoming Council of Elders in Yakrut?"

"You know about that too," Nienta commented. "Good. Yes, it was the spreading areas of stability that triggered the call to Council, although it also gave certain members of the Council the excuse to push forward their own agenda."

"You mean the establishment of a permanently convened Council?" Raff asked.

"Yes," Nienta agreed. "The elders of this continent are not in favor of such a thing, but those of the east like the idea and the northern elders could go either way. The elders in the rest of the world are split, so we expect it to be hotly debated. I expect that no matter how it goes, there will be changes. The idea of a permanently meeting Council is too radical, but compromises will be made."

"Just remember," Raff warned her, "that the word, 'compromise' which you are using to describe the settlement of differences is the same word that gets used when your security is breached."

"A very good point, wayfarer," Nienta agreed. "I just wonder how many of my fellow elders will see it that way."

Twelve

Kazani Bassan woke up scared, hungry and miserable. In the months since his village had been destroyed, he had stumbled from one disaster into another. At first he had hoped to find another Sarahnie village, but he did not know where any were, nor did he know how to follow a wayfarers' path. That was something only the shaman had known. He wished, not for the first time, that he had allowed the shaman to teach him while he had the chance.

The only thing he knew how to do was to push on through the Wild, hoping to find people who might take him in. The first few places he had found were Alonu villages, however. They would have killed him on sight, he was certain. He would steal a bit of food and hurry onward.

Then he found the towns of the northern colonists. They were a marvel to him. Tall buildings with two, three or sometimes four floors, wide, packed-dirt streets and each one with more people than he had seen in his entire previous life. He had heard about the colonists, of course, and once one had visited his village, but somehow the stories of their towns had always fallen short of the reality.

The problem was they did not know how to speak a proper language and Kaz couldn't talk to them; so once again, Kaz would hurry back into the Wild. After a while the land around him got stranger and he found himself facing tall mountains and deep valleys - terrain completely foreign to a boy who had grown up on the flat land near a river's flood plain.

The creatures around him got increasingly stranger as well and while it was obvious the lions were not safe to stay near, he didn't know whether the large gray beasts with the tusks and long noses were more frightening than the creatures that were half bird and half animal. He even found himself shying away from herds of zebras and gazelles, because they were so unlike anything he had known at home.

Home. It was becoming a distant memory hidden behind his more recent terror. In time he realized there was no home for him to return to even if he knew how and he just kept going because he was unwilling to just die.

In spite of his misery, the mountains had fascinated Kaz and he wanted to find out what lay behind them, but it turned out to be more colonial towns and foreign villages in which none of the people knew his language, so he took to stealing food and whatever else he needed by night and then returned to the Wild in the mornings. Sometimes he was caught in the act as he ran for freedom. Thunder would roar behind him and strange small projectiles would smash into the trees around him. He knew these were the same terror weapons the Alonu had used to kill his people. He was always much more careful after such an incident, but also all the more convinced that everyone was an enemy.

By the time he reached the second mountain range he was exhausted, never having slept for more than a few hours. Kaz found a cave and stayed there several days until one morning he heard more of the terror weapons nearby. Carefully creeping closer to the noise, he saw one of the strangest sights since leaving his village of Sarahn.

A group of twenty light-skinned colonists were shooting at two other colonists. That two groups of the same people would fight like this was foreign to Kaz. Oh sure, there were small arguments between people in Sarahn, but none of them ever led to violence. Didn't these people have a chief or a shaman to settle their differences? What matter could possibly be so important that they would try to kill each other? Then he saw something even stranger.

The two colonists who were being attacked were shamans. At least Kaz could see they were summoning the Wild in the manner his shaman had described when the children asked about it. The other men – the ones who were shooting at them – somehow never hit their targets and then, one-by-one, they were falling to the ground, dead. The sight was too frightening to Kaz and he ran away from the scene as fast as he could.

He ran out of the mountains and changed direction as well, hoping none of the colonists would be able to follow him, and for three days, he neither saw nor heard any sign that he was being followed. He had barely been eating in his flight and now he had to find another place to sleep as well.

There was a small colonial town nearby and he found a shack on its outskirts that appeared to have been abandoned. The roof leaked and it smelled bad, but he was able to sleep as long as he needed to and at night he was able to go out and look for food. On the third night, however, he returned to see several men going into the shack. He didn't stay around long enough to find out why, but obviously he had been very lucky once again.

Returning to the Wild, he nearly ran into the two light-skinned shamans and the men with terror weapons they had been chasing. He wished he knew what they were saying, but he decided this was no place to stay and ran back into the bush, leaving the sounds of gunshot behind him once again.

"Damned bandits!" Raff swore as he and Em chased down their erstwhile attackers.

"At least they're following the rogue path," Em told him consolingly.

"It's probably the only path their wayfarer can see right now," Raff returned. "He can't be much of a wayfarer though."

“Enough to have kept them from harm while waiting by the raw pathway,” Em pointed out.

“Did he?” Raff countered. “I think they’ve all gone a bit crazed if you ask me and not just because they’ve been trying to kill us. They ought to be running in some other way. This path is harmful.”

“It’s not as bad as it was at first, dear,” Em pointed out. “And their wayfarer is a journeyman at best, he’s probably untrained altogether. Following an existing path would be the best he can do and if he is untrained, he wouldn’t know a good path from a bad one. Also we’ve been erasing the path just ahead of us as we go, so that might be making it easier for them.”

Another shot rang out and they applied themselves toward defense and counter-attack. There were only five bandits left now, and one of them shouted out, “Go away! Leave us alone, you bastards!”

“Can’t do that,” Raff replied. “You’re on our path!” It was as close to a final warning as he was likely to give. He also was not particularly disposed toward showing mercy to men who had ambushed them and killed their horses.

“Then find another path to Hell!” the man shouted and started shooting again. Five shots later, when all guns were empty, the five desperate bandits attacked Raff and Em with machetes. It was no contest. None of them came within ten feet of the wayfarers.

“I think one got away,” Em told Raff a few minutes later. “I can sense someone about half a mile ahead on the path.”

Raff checked for himself, “Maybe, or it could be our path maker. The pathway itself only goes half a mile from here, but it is still growing. Let’s press on, he’ll have to stop soon. Forging a path takes a lot out of a person. He can’t go as fast while doing it as we can while working together to erase the path.”

Raff was correct, but he underestimated Kazani’s desperation. For the next three days, half a mile was the closest they came to their quarry and sometimes Kaz was as much as two miles ahead. Finally Raff told Em, “The heck with the path. Let’s run ahead and catch the kid, then we can come back and clean up his mess.”

A mile ahead of them, Kaz found himself on a wide beach overlooking a strange smelling lake. The lake, he thought, must be tremendous because he couldn’t see the other side at all even though the visibility was perfect.

Kaz lowered himself down a steep incline that was the only way to reach the beach from where he stood. Then he ran up the beach to discover his way was blocked by a cliff that he could not climb. Panicked, he ran back the other way, but once more found himself blocked. He had never learned to swim, there had been no opportunity and until now any need to cross a river had been done either on foot or in a stolen boat. Kaz’s blood ran cold when he realized he had run out of places to go. The beach was wide, yes, but there was no other way off of it except for the narrow path he had followed to get here. It was as though he had reached the edge of the world.

He was about to try climbing back off the beach, but realized he had been there too long. If he was being followed as he feared, he was trapped. Feeling very sorry for himself, Kaz slumped down to the sand and stared out at the water. After a few minutes tears came to him for the first time since he had left his home and he just sat there crying.

Raff and Emblem hurried forward until they came to the path down to the beach. "He's just ahead," Raff told Em as they came up over the rise.

"I see him," Em confirmed. "Poor thing."

"Poor thing?" Raff echoed. "After all he's put us through."

"He didn't know what he was doing," Em replied understandingly. "Look at him. He's miserable. I'll bet he's hungry too." She unslung her pack and took out a few pieces of bread and dried meat and then started down to the beach. "No, Raff," she stopped him. "You stay here for a bit."

"Be careful, Em," Raff warned her. "He could be very dangerous, you know."

"I can handle a young teenager, dear. You watch our packs, hmm?" Em kissed Raff on the cheek and quietly made her way down to the sand, while Raff sat down on a rock to keep an eye on both of them.

The boy was still sniffing a bit as she walked quietly up behind him. "Oh, you don't look happy, do you?" she asked in her own native tongue. The boy, startled, shot to his feet. "Gently, dear," she continued in what she hoped was passable Sarahnie. "You're safe."

The boy looked around wildly and spotted Raff sitting up next to the only viable exit from the beach. Summoning the Wild, he ran toward where Raff was seated, but Em stopped the lad with Wild energy and gently disrupted his hold on it. "We're not going to hurt you," she told him quietly, "but we are going to talk. If I let you go, will you sit and talk a while?"

Kaz nodded dumbly. What choice did he have?

"Are you hungry?" Em asked, holding out the bread and meat. The boy looked at it as though afraid it was some sort of trick, so Em broke the bread in half and took a bite before offering the rest back to him. Finally Kaz accepted the bread and in what Em understood was a profound act of trust, some of the meat as well. "Slowly," she admonished him gently. "We wouldn't want to choke, now would we? I'm Emblem Cawlens, what's your name?"

"Kazani Bassan," he replied after a long pause.

"You're a long way from home Kazani Bassan," Em replied.

"I have no home," Kaz told her bitterly.

"I know," she nodded. "I'm very sorry. We saw."

"Filthy Alonu!" Kaz cried. "They attacked us for no reason. None of us did anything to them, but they killed everyone. I saw them. They killed my whole family and all I could do was watch."

Em opened her arms slightly and Kaz fell into them weeping once more. They stayed like that for a long time until he had finally cried himself out.

"That had to be the most uncomfortable rock in the world," Raff commented from behind them

suddenly. Kaz pushed his way out of Em's arms and tried to get up again. "Whoa, kid," Raff chuckled. "Sorry about that. I wasn't trying to scare you."

"Don't kill me!" Kaz nearly screamed.

"Why would I do that?" Raff asked quietly.

"You killed those men," Kaz replied.

"Which men were that?"

"Several days ago," Kaz reminded him.

"The bandits," Raff nodded. "Yes, we did kill them. Do you know why?"

"They were using magic, like me?" Kaz answered hesitantly.

"Magic?" Raff considered the word. "What we do, lad, is not magic. Magic is something else entirely."

"What is it then?" Kaz asked.

"We call it wayfaring and we call ourselves wayfarers," Raff explained. "One of those bandits was a rogue wayfarer, someone who uses the ability illegally, but that's not why we killed them. We killed them in self defense. They tried to kill us and the only sure means we had to defend ourselves was to kill them first. We didn't have to chase them down and we would not have done so, but they kept attacking us." Raff decided not to mention the fact the bandits only failed to run away because the only path they could follow was the one Kaz himself formed. It was too heavy a burden to place on the boy. He might figure it out for himself eventually, but by then he might be old enough to understand the necessity.

"But the real reason they had to die," Em continued, "is that even had we not killed them, they would have gone on to kill still others. That's what they did. They waited for travelers to kill and rob."

"Am I?" Kaz began, then tried again, stumbling over the unfamiliar words. "Am I a rogue?"

"Well, technically, I suppose you are," Raff chuckled, while Em put a comforting arm around Kaz. "That path you forged - it was harmful to the local flora and fauna."

"The what?" Kaz asked.

"The plants and animals," Raff repeated using Kaz's language. "The Kenlienta didn't much like it either."

"Who?"

"The Kenlienta," Raff repeated. "They're the people who live in the Wild."

"The witchfolk?" Kaz asked.

"Your people might have called them that, but witch in your language means poisoner and killer by magic, doesn't it?" Raff asked. Kaz nodded. "Then no. The Ken are not evil or at least not any more good or evil than any person is. Your pathway hurt them because it was built all wrong. If nothing else we'll have to teach you how to do it right."

“You’ll teach me how?” Kaz asked. “Even though I’m a rogue?”

“If you join us, you won’t be a rogue, Kazani,” Em assured him.

“And besides,” Raff added, “You haven’t actually killed anyone...”

“I would kill all the Alonu for what they did to my people!” Kaz told him fiercely.

“Then I suppose we will have to keep you away from them,” Raff laughed. “Well the nearest Alonu is about two thousand miles to the west of here – you really led us on a long chase, you know that – and I wasn’t planning on returning to the Green Lands by way of Teltoa anyway.”

“So, Kazani,” Em asked gently. “Would you like to come with us and learn how to be a proper wayfarer?”

“The Green Lands,” Kaz wondered, “that’s one of the Powers, isn’t it?”

“It’s one of the greatest nations in the world,” Raff told him proudly.

“And I’ll be allowed to live there?” Kaz asked. “As long as I want?”

“When you aren’t working as a wayfarer,” Raff replied. “We travel all over the world, you know. Most of the time we don’t have to walk, though.”

“But I’ll always have a home I can return to?” Kaz asked earnestly.

“Of course,” Em assured him.

“I’ll go with you,” Kaz decided, relaxing for the first time in far too long.

Epilogue: Kharasia

His Imperial Majesty Pavel Alexander Meninov, a normally quiet man in his middle years, was in his personal library in the Winter Palace when the wayfarer/messenger arrived at the military headquarters for all Kharasia. The man had ridden from the Corisan border as fast as a relay of fresh horses could carry him. As fast as he had traveled, the news he brought was still nearly a month old, but Grand High Marshall Klemet Worrانov and his generals bolted into action as though they were getting it moments after it had happened.

Worrانov wasted no time in rushing the wayfarer directly to the Winter Palace. His Majesty would want to hear about this directly from the man who carried the message and not as anyone, not even his most trusted advisors, might rephrase it.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Worrانov greeted his monarch, bowing deeply, “pray forgive the intrusion, but a matter of the gravest urgency...”

“Speak directly, Klemet Konradovich,” the emperor commanded him. “If it’s that urgent we’ll dispense with the etiquette for now and just tell people we went through the motions.”

“Yes, sire,” Worrarov replied. “The Corisans have crossed the border and are attempting to annex the eastern provinces.” Then he let the wayfarer, still covered in mud from the roads and in clothing that had obviously been worn far too long, give his report once again.

“Have you ever been to the eastern provinces?” Pavel Alexander asked dryly. “If it were not for the loss of prestige, I would be tempted to let them have them. If they had offered to buy them I probably would have let Corisa have them for a song.”

“Your Majesty,” Worrarov objected. “We cannot let this insult go unanswered.”

“No,” the emperor shook his head, “I suppose we cannot. And too many of our troops are deployed in the conflict in Holrany, aren’t they.”

“I believe that is why the Corisans chose to move at this time, sire,” the marshal replied.

“Yes, yes,” Pavel Alexander agreed. “Quite clever on their part. Well, I don’t see that we have a lot of choice. Pull our forces out of Holrany and Pernatia and send every man we can spare to drive the Corisans back across the border. You warned me not to invade Holrany, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sire,” Worrarov admitted carefully. Saying, “I told you so,” to the emperor was not the surest way to a long a happy life.

“Well, you were right,” Pavel Alexander admitted. “I suspect we’ll lose our hold on Pernatia as well, but we have never formally claimed that kingdom so while we may lose a bit of influence there, it will be nothing compared to what we will lose if Corisa steals half the empire.”

“Yes, sire,” Worrarov repeated.

“So we go from a punitive conflict to full scale war,” the emperor mused. “May God help us all!”

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