

The Wayfarers

Book Two

A World Without a Name

by

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Author's Foreword

Long-time readers already know I've been writing fantasy novels in non-standard time period analogues for years now. Word to the wise: want to get published? If writing fantasy, try sticking to pseudo-medieval milieus. It is also safe to write a fantasy set in a modern-style world. If you're feeling adventurous, try something in the Stone Age or the Roman Period. Really taking a risk? Try writing something set in a Bronze Age civilization. However, if you try writing something in a world analogous to the Nineteenth Century, you'll get letters from editors (assuming you don't just get form-letter rejections) advising you that coffee and cigars are not medieval. Editors are not ready for fantasies set in a pseudo-Regency or Victorian period.

That only applies to unpublished authors, of course. If you're already published (and you actually have time to read this?) you might try it once. Of course if the story does not sell, you'll be back to the same old stuff, but that's the publishing biz!

This series is taking place in another pretty much taboo milieu. It's sort of analogous to the Eighteenth Century – vaguely Georgian perhaps. Well, I guess it's only Georgian in the Green Lands and her colonies and even there I think it is obvious it is not a perfect mirror of that period. Basically the world is roughly similar socially and technologically to Eighteenth Century Earth, but there are forms of magic and their complement, called wayfaring, which, of course, is the basis of this entire series. There are some similarities in history and some major differences which should be obvious and just as in the first book there will be cultures that at first seem like direct analogs (such as Kharasia – Russia and Corisa – China) but which the more knowledgeable will soon realize I intentionally changed some aspects.

I tried to leave just enough similarities to give you, the reader a handle on these cultures without my having to go write an encyclopedia. Don't get caught up trying to figure all the Earthly equivalents of these nations, some don't have any and others just aren't there. I tried to keep the world self-consistent, so just take them as they come and enjoy the ride.

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Prologue

Nillon

Lord Mizuma sat in the wide garden-like area in which he preferred to hold court. By tradition he was required once each month to listen to any and all petitioners regardless of rank. So long as he let each one finish his plea, the lord was free to grant or deny the petition, but if he should interrupt the petitioner, said claimant was entitled to all he had come asking for.

That, of course very rarely happened and in fact it was a rare occasion indeed that any peasant's request was granted no matter how much or how little the petitioner begged for. Still, there was always the possibility a stray bit of dust might make its way into Lord Mizuma's throat and he would unconsciously cough to clear it. Or some other distraction might inadvertently cause the lord to interrupt the request.

It could have become a game, Mizuma thought to himself. Peasants might have chosen to come with the most ridiculous requests on the off chance they would be granted by tradition alone. In some provinces that was, indeed, the case. However, while Lord Mizuma was not required to allow the maker of a frivolous request to live, it had been over a decade since he had last imposed the death sentence on the day he held open court.

On this day it was usually only peasants who came forward, although there was neither a law nor a tradition that mandated that. Nobles and gentles did come forward on this day from time to time, but even they generally let the peasants have their one day each month unless something truly important came up. Gentles could enter court once each week after all and a noble could always have the ear of his lord. However, it was rare for nobles and gentles to stay away on open court days and the garden court was lined with upper-class observers.

It was just past the middle of the afternoon when it happened. Mizuma was growing bored as he listened to the man bowed before him. The peasant had folded himself up so that while his lower legs were both on the ground, his face, too, was in the dirt, not daring to look up as he asked for the right to water his cattle at a stream that ran through Mizuma's estate. It was not much of a stream. There was a somewhat larger one that ran directly by Mizuma's castle and through his water garden. Mizuma paused to listen to the trickle of water coming from that part of the garden and to admire the scent of rose blossoms on the air before turning his attention back to the peasant as he explained it was just that part of the lesser stream as it left Lord Mizuma's large estate that he wished to use.

Mizuma had already decided to deny the petition when a robe of midnight blue caught his eye at the back of the garden courtyard. The members of only one clan in all Nillon were allowed to wear that color. They were not noble, not technically, and they owned no land that anyone knew of, but they were the second strongest power in the Nillonese empire after only the Emperor himself.

It would not do to keep this warrior of the Ikkito clan waiting, Mizuma knew. "Yes, yes," Mizuma interrupted the peasant. "Water your cattle where you will. Now go!"

The peasant got to his feet amazed beyond words and bowed repeatedly as he backed out of the courtyard until he bumped back into the Ikkito warrior who had already started toward Mizuma. The peasant's face blanched when he saw whom he had bumped into and cowered on the ground in abject fear, but the warrior reached down and helped the man to his feet before pointing him toward the courtyard's exit. It was an action entirely unlike the Ikkito reputation that most people knew, but Mizuma had seen it before. The Ikkito were strong, therefore they could afford to forgive unintentional slights. A noble would have had the peasant killed or even done it himself, but an Ikkito had nothing to prove. He was strong and confident as none but his clansmen were.

He stopped just a few feet in front of the lord and bowed. It was not the groveling, face-in-the-dirt bow the peasant had used. It was not even the deep bow Mizuma's nobles would have used. It was just barely more than a nod of the head – the same sort of honor Mizuma might have used to greet another provincial governor. He maintained eye contact throughout the bow and continued to look directly at the lord afterward. The assembled nobles gasped and Mizuma concluded that while they had to have recognized what the color of the man's robe meant, few if any of his people would have ever encountered an Ikkito.

The Ikkito were a people apart from all others and rarely mixed with them on social occasions. There were rumors that the Ikkito acted on occasion as the Emperor's spies, slipping in and out of towns and palaces without their trademark midnight blue to assure the people, and especially the nobles, remained loyal to His Imperial Majesty. For all Mizuma knew, it was true. The Ikkito swore their fealty directly to the Emperor and would accept orders from no one else. Dressed in less identifiable robes, they would look no different from anyone else in Nillon.

As it happened, Mizuma was expecting this particular Ikkito and although the lord felt some annoyance that the warrior chose this particular day to appear, Mizuma was careful not to let any of that annoyance show as the Ikkito spoke, "Lord Mizuma." His voice was high-pitched for most men. In some circles it might have been a cause for amusement, but one look at the long curving sword belted across his back would silence the laughter of anyone not a complete fool. It was customary to disarm before entering the court of a provincial governor, but the Ikkito disarmed for no one, not even the Emperor. Mizuma took no offense. So long as the sword remained sheathed, that was as much respect as the Ikkito showed any mere lord.

“Lord Morata,” Mizuma replied, earning another gasp from the assembled courtiers. The Ikkito were always addressed as “Lord” unless they gave permission to drop the title. Failure to do so was an insult that was reputed to incur a blood debt. Mizuma would have thought his nobles knew that much at least, but evidently not.

“You requested my assistance, Lord Mizuma?” Morata asked politely.

“Yes, Lord Morata,” Mizuma responded, matching formality with formality. “His Imperial Majesty commands me to humbly enlist the aid of the Ikkito Clan.” Mizuma hoped that by invoking the Emperor, perhaps the Ikkito would not charge him as much for their help. Had the Emperor himself asked, they would have worked for free, but His Imperial Majesty rarely intervened directly in the running of his empire. Perhaps the ploy worked, but when the time came much later that day to talk of money, Mizuma still felt it might have been simpler to merely hand the Ikkito the keys to his treasury vault.

“Your need must be very great, Lord Mizuma,” Morata noted dispassionately.

“Indeed,” Mizuma agreed. He turned to his assembled court and dismissed them. “I will entertain no further petitioners this day.” The words earned him one final gasp. He was effectively interrupting the remaining fifteen peasants who had requested to be heard. They would each be granted whatever it was they had come to ask for. Mizuma felt the cost was worth it if it meant he could buy the Ikkito’s aid. “Come, Lord Morata. There are better places to discuss our business than a drafty courtyard. Let us walk in my garden.”

Morata nodded politely and even before the assembled court had left, the two lords were proceeding in the opposite direction. “The afternoon sun is warm and pleasant, don’t you think, Lord Morata?”

“It is a good day to be outside, Mizuma,” Morata replied. It was the subtle signal Mizuma had been hoping for. Morata was extending a great courtesy by addressing him without his title. It meant Mizuma was free to do likewise and also that Morata was interested in what Mizuma had to say. “This is possibly the nicest peony I had ever seen,” the Ikkito noted as they passed a flowered shrub. “Did you breed it yourself?”

“I am not so talented,” Mizuma chuckled, “but you have an excellent eye. This particular tree was developed by my honored mother. She built most of this garden, in fact. It is all I can do to oversee its careful maintenance.”

“And it was your mother who had this magnificent boulder place beside it?” Morata asked curiously.

“The boulder,” Mizuma smiled reminiscently, pausing to gaze at the sparkling mica crystals within the stone, “was a gift from His Imperial Majesty. He too admired the peony and believed it was meant to be joined spiritually to this stone from his own personal garden. Moving the peony would have endangered the plant or else I would have made a gift of it instantly, but instead the Emperor chose to give me the stone. It is perhaps the greatest honor I have ever received.”

“I envy you, my friend,” Morata murmured.

Mizuma recalled that every word used by an Ikkito was carefully chosen. Morata would not have called him friend lightly. The encounter was going very well, indeed.

They continued to discuss incidental trivia for the next half hour. This was the way of lords; no business would be conducted until after they had finished their first shared pot of tea. That tea was waiting for

them under a small wooden pavilion on an island in the middle of Mizuma's water garden. Finally Mizuma got to the problem that had forced him to call on the Ikkito.

"The Corisan barbarians have been raiding the southern islands," Mizuma announced finally.

"I've heard," Morata replied dryly. "You aren't suggesting sending Ikkito warriors to meet them." There was not even the hint of a question in his voice.

"No," Mizuma shook his head emphatically, "of course not! That would be a waste of your talents. The regular army of Nillon can drive the barbarians back into the sea."

"But the Corisans could easily return," Morata pointed out. "They do outnumber us." It was a gross understatement. For all its claims of imperial status, Nillon was a small group of islands, while Corisa encompassed one of the largest areas of stable land in the world. So many areas of stability could only be maintained by a high population.

Mizuma replied, "What I need from the Ikkito is to arrange for the barbarians to have reasons not to return."

"Do you have any idea of how you want that accomplished?" Morata asked. It was the first sign of uncertainty Mizuma had ever seen in an Ikkito warrior.

"I could make many suggestions," Mizuma admitted, "but I will rely on whatever means you decide will be most effective."

Morata smiled and politely responded, "I will be most happy to be guided by your wisdom, Lord Mizuma."

Tinap

One

Kazani Basan sat near the prow of a long, wide riverboat as it glided downstream into Lower Tinap. It seemed strange to think that just a mile or two beyond the banks of the mighty river Tin the land here was all desert. The Tinapians lived in a land that was nearly a thousand miles long, but only a few miles wide and had very few roads. He wondered about that aloud.

"That's because the Tin is their greatest highway," Emblem Cawlens explained. "Beyond the docks they need only streets in their towns and some packed dirt paths to count as roads for what little traffic needs them. Almost all traffic except the herdsmen and their flocks, of course, goes by river. That's why we haven't been walking hardly at all in weeks."

"It's nice to be able to just sit and watch the world go by," Kaz admitted.

"Isn't it though?" Em smiled. "Don't get too used to it, however. We travel by water when we can, but often as not we need to walk or ride just as we did from Modaga until we reached the Tin."

“Riding the horse wasn’t so bad,” Kaz reflected.

“I don’t recall you liking it all that much the first few days,” Em reminded him.

“I didn’t realize there was a trick to sitting on a horse,” Kaz admitted. “Even with Raff’s help it took me a while to get it right. I never even knew there were animals that could be ridden before, you know.”

“No, but you’re a fast learner,” Em smiled. “How are you doing with that book?” She had been teaching Kaz to read almost since they had met on the shore of the Eastern Ocean .

“I’ve finished this one,” Kaz told her cheerfully. It was a book of children’s stories. At first they had confused Kaz terribly. The magic in them did not work at all like what the shaman of his village had used. He strongly suspected the author knew nothing whatsoever of magic.

However, Em had patiently explained that the stories were called fairy tales and the magic was not to be taken so seriously. “It’s just a part of the story,” she advised early on. “Accept it at face value and enjoy the rest.”

He handed the book back to her and asked, “What else have you got? The stories are interesting, I suppose, but they’re not real, are they?”

“Some people like made-up stories,” Em replied.

“I suppose,” Kaz shrugged, “but I want to know what really happened. Aren’t there any story books that talk about real events and people?”

“Yes,” Em admitted. “History, biography, but I’m not sure you’re quite ready to read at the level those books are written at.” Then she caught the hurt expression on the boy’s face and added, “but there’s no harm in trying. We’ll see what we can find here in Tinap. I’m sure there will be a bookseller in Racca when we get there. For now, however, lessons would be over anyway. We’re coming into port.”

“Where are we?” Kaz asked interestedly.

“That city ahead is Nahapt,” Em explained. “It was the ancient capital of Tinap.”

“When was that?” Kaz asked. “It doesn’t look like much now.”

“You’re getting to be an expert on cities now, are you?” Raff Cawlens laughed from behind the two of them. Raff was Em’s husband of several years although they had known each other much longer.

“I didn’t realize you were back there,” Em commented.

“Just came up on deck,” Raff informed her. “So, Kaz, you don’t like the look of Nahhapt?”

“I just thought it didn’t seem big enough to be the capital city of any nation,” Kaz replied quietly.

“Well, it’s not,” Raff agreed. “Not anymore. But I imagine this was a real center of activity three thousand years ago or so. Nothing lasts forever, Kaz. But what you can see from here is the modern town. It’s just a lay-over spot on the river and would probably be even smaller if Green Lands and Cracian scholars didn’t find the ruins of the old city so interesting.”

“I don’t see any ruins,” Kaz commented.

“They’re to the north of town,” Em informed him, “but we’re going to be here for two days so tomorrow we’ll go take a look and see if they are as interesting as the scholars seem to think. Won’t that be fun?”

Kaz thought about it. He had seen ruined villages before, the thought did not cheer him in the least, but he smiled vaguely in the hope it would please Raff and Em. He had been pretty miserable by the time they had found him a few weeks earlier. He had been wandering all over the Southern Continent following the destruction of his home village by his tribe’s mortal enemies. At first he was running for his life, but after that he was no longer able to find his way home and the more he searched, the further from home he wandered. Some of the time he fed himself by hunting small game with a makeshift spear, but mostly he would sneak into other settlements and steal a bit of food before running back into the Wild in his attempt to get back home. A part of his mind knew and understood that he had no home any longer. His entire extended family had been killed or sold into slavery. He would likely never see or even hear of them again.

Raff and Em eventually found Kaz on the far side of the Southern Continent as far from his one-time home as he was likely to get without crossing an ocean. He was tired and hungry and while he believed Raff and Em were chasing him down to kill him, he was too tired to care any longer. It was only a week later as they were having a relaxed breakfast in the Wayfarers’ Guild building in Dinamanu, that he realized just how lucky he had been. Raff and Em had not killed him, but they were talking about adopting him and sponsoring him into the Guild of Wayfarers.

At first Kazani thought the word “Wayfarer” was just some strange foreign way to say shaman. It was true the Wayfarers filled many of the same functions his village shaman did. They too commanded great power and were respected by other people of their land. Wayfarers might also need to conduct certain religious ceremonies when the services of a priest were not available, but their primary responsibility was to conduct people from one place to another through the Wild.

Kaz’s view of the world had changed greatly over the last few weeks. Being from a small and remote tribe in the land the colonists from Dix called Teltoa, he had always known that there were relatively small areas in which humans could live comfortably and then there was the Wild. For a Sarahnian tribesman, the Wild was where he went to hunt and to farm. It was all part of the territory of the tribe. A Shaman might be needed to lead tribesmen to places they had never been, but while this was a rare talent, there were tricks even a non-wayfarer could use to follow a prepared path through the Wild. It amazed Kaz to learn that few civilized people ever learned them.

For the people of the civilized parts of the world, the Wild comprised those areas of wilderness that existed between the islands of stability called towns and cities. For them the Wild was a zone that was impassable to all but a Wayfarer or the member of a party he guided through the Wild. Kaz could hardly imagine areas of stability large enough to hold the people of a town or city and yet still have room for their crops and food animals.

Raff and Em had told him how a non-wayfarer would automatically return before long to the place from which he left his town if not accompanied by a wayfarer. But in Kaz’s experience only he and the shaman ever tried. Groups of hunters would travel the hunting paths together just as the whole village would go to the fields to tend the crops. Everyone knew that if enough people stayed together, they would carry enough stability with them to survive.

Kazani also knew about the creatures that lived in the Wild; lions, rhinoceros, hippogriffs and much more. Many of those animals were dangerous, but some were also delicious. There were also stories told

about the Wildmen who called themselves the Kenlenta or just the Ken for short. Em had explained that most of what Kaz had heard was wrong, but that the Kenlenta were real. So far, however, Kaz had not seen any Ken for himself.

However Kaz was coming to understand that the Guild itself did far more than merely ferry travelers from place to place. Master Wayfarers were often called on to negotiate treaties and settle disputes. The Guild was also the principal carrier of mail between towns and nations. The Guild was the only regular means of contact with the Ken Nation and was often the ultimate court of last resort for people who didn't even know they could ask for help.

The Guild, Kaz decided, had to be the most powerful tribe in the world. Members had social standing and ranks within the Guild, Kaz understood. That was not too different from life in Sarahnie, Teltoa. In his village everyone had his or her own status. In the Guild there were the novices, young members like Kazani who were just beginning their training, not yet having enough education to start their formal apprenticeships. Apprentices were those wayfarers who were being trained to develop their wayfaring skills. Any apprentice could travel a short established path through the wild and convey small parties with him. Some members never progressed beyond the abilities of an apprentice.

Journeyman comprised the Guild rank held by the vast majority of members. They could travel to more than just one or two locations. Most could cover most of their home nations and they could carry larger cargos and parties than apprentice-rank wayfarers.

Master wayfarers, however, could do much more. They could not only travel anywhere, but were capable of forging new paths between locations by manipulating the energy of the Wild and persuading those forces to remain stable. That was, in fact, the start of their power. The ability to directly manipulate the Wild energy could take many forms and no wayfarer knew everything that could be accomplished that way.

Masters were also the men and, occasionally women, who sat as judges, brokered treaties and conducted diplomatic missions. They were also the people who ran the Guild, although quite a few masters, Raff admitted to Kaz, owned that rank solely through political maneuvering and not by merit.

Beyond that ranking system and parallel to it, stood the freelancers of the Guild. In most occupations, the term would imply they worked on their own with no ties to the Guild, but within the Wayfarers Guild freelancers were those members who had worked off the indentures that had paid for their education and training and rather than taking a routine job within the Guild had chosen to fill a variety of niches. The Guild made good use of these freelancers who, while allowed to take or refuse a job, were usually quite willing to guide a party of travelers one week, repair or forge a new path the next and conduct delicate negotiations with the Crown of Holrany on the completion of the new path. Freelancers often filled in where regular wayfarers could not, whether because their abilities were not up to a particular job or because there were just no available regulars in the area.

The Wayfarers' Hall in Nahapt was not an elaborate affair. There was a desk in the front room to handle business and check wayfarers in and out, but behind that were several rooms including a dining room and a kitchen. The bedrooms, just a handful, were on the second floor. The inside of the building was clean in stark contrast to the rest of the town, although from earlier stops on their trip north, Kaz had come to expect that. He had no cause to argue with a bit of good honest dirt. The floor of the hut he grew up in was nothing but packed dirt, but his mother had always kept that floor swept of any sort of detritus he or his sister might have dropped which was an extension of his tribe's attitude toward garbage in general. Merely dropping the scraps of one's dinner outside the hut was not tolerated. Instead all such waste was carried to the village midden where it was composted and eventually made its way to the fields to help

feed the ground after the crop had been harvested.

In contrast, Kaz found the colonial cities quite filthy with bits of paper and other trash in the gutters and no real attention to neatness. It was only in the wayfarer hostels that cleanliness approached and surpassed the standards he had grown up with.

However it was the food that Kaz had the most trouble getting used to. While he was scrounging bites here and there in his wanderings, he had not really the time to taste and savor anything he found. It was mostly a matter of grabbing anything that looked like food and then eating it as he ran back into the Wild. He found food in the Wild too. His people had been accustomed to gathering many delicacies from just outside their village even if plantains were one of their staple crops, so Kaz was able to recognize some of the odd-looking plants he found as he traveled.

However, the further he went, the less frequently did he spot something he knew he could eat and only a fool would eat something completely unknown in the Wild. Em had admitted to him that she had once been forced to do just that so that by the time Raff had found her, she was sick and delusional in a village where the locals feared she might be possessed by an evil spirit. Kaz tried to imagine being so desperate that he might eat anything, even poison, and gave up. It didn't make sense in his world view.

Now that he was safe, however, Kaz had time to taste and consider the foods of the colonists. Some of them he quite liked, candies and pastries especially. Others he would have never tried had he not first seen Em or Raff eating them. He was still trying to formulate an opinion about an odd tasting porridge when it occurred to him that he had not thought about his family in a few days and that Em and Raff were now filling the void in his life that formed that awful night when the Alono murdered or enslaved everyone he had known.

"Are you ready to see the town, Kaz?" Em asked brightly, breaking through the haze of Kaz's introspection.

"What?" Kaz responded instinctively, "Oh, yeah. What's this stuff made from?"

"The porridge?" Em returned, "Barley and broth mostly and some milk. Your people drink milk don't they?"

"When we can steal a cow from the Alono," Kaz replied. "We aren't herders, you know. Cattle eat our crops."

"You could put a fence between them." Em suggested.

"Easier to just steal a cow if we want one," Kaz shrugged.

"My old ethics teacher is going to love you, Kaz," Raff laughed. "Well if we're done with this morning's philosophical debate, why don't we see how the other half used to live. By the way, Kaz," he continued as they left the dining room, "your language lessons are paying off. You're already using Cracian like a native. Can you do as well in Grundish?"

"Cracian makes more sense," Kaz replied with only a small stumble in the native tongue of the Green Lands.

"No argument from me, but since you'll eventually be going to school in Taundon, Grundish will be more important than Cracian at least for a while," Raff advised as they climbed into a waiting carriage.

“But why does it seem like every other word declines or conjugates differently?” Kaz asked.

“Well, leaving aside those are Cracian terms,” Raff chuckled in reply, “it’s because Grundish is a language that was formed by the influx of many different peoples into the Green Lands over the course of a millennium or two. The Green Lands used to be invaded on a semi-regular basis and each set of invaders brought their own language into the mix. There were early Cracians, Holrans, and quite a few Volanders. About the only nearby people who never attacked us were the Dixans and their language is enough like the Holrans that it might not have made much of a difference.

“But each of those languages has different word forms,” Raff continued, so if a word came into the language from Crace it will look one way, but if it was originally Holran it will be quite different. It’s amazing there are any words in the language left over from the days before the ancient Menins occupied the islands.”

The ruins of ancient Tinap were not as desolate as Kaz had been expecting. There were dozens of vendors near the entrance to the old city selling food, guide services, even some digging tools, which Raff explained were mostly rented by visiting nobility who in the last decade or so had taken to digging through the ruins with scholarly ambitions in mind.

It looked to Kaz as though the area had already been thoroughly picked over. There were many carved stone walls with murals and what Em explained was picture writing all over them. Kaz concluded this must have once been a very colorful place when he spotted occasional bits of paint in the corners of the carvings, although the stone itself was an amazingly unremarkable yellow in color.

The ruins, however, far from being deserted were filled with sightseers and guides. Em told Kaz, “I’ve never actually seen this before, although I have seen drawings and block prints of some of the walls. They never quite caught the majesty of the place, though, did they?”

“It doesn’t look like so much,” Kaz opined. To his eyes it was all so many yellow stone walls. They were very tall stone walls and there were certainly a lot of them, but by now he had seen larger cities.

“Really?” Em countered. “And you would have had no trouble cutting and carving all this stone. Lifting the large stone blocks into place, putting a roof on top and painting all the walls?”

“I don’t see a roof,” Kaz replied.

“It collapsed long ago and the debris was cleared away, although the larger blocks were probably reused to build modern Nahapt,” Raff told them both. “Quite a few of these walls were dismantled for that purpose. If you look beneath the plaster on the walls of most Tinapian buildings you’ll find the same sort of writing carved in that you see here.”

They continued on to the north side of the ruins where dozens of well dressed men and women were sitting under pavilions or kneeling in the dirt, digging with small shovels. In the distance one gentleman was working with several natives on a large pit and in another direction a man was pacing off various distances and then shouting them back to another who appeared to be drawing a map.

“Raff Cawlens, as I live and breathe, old boy,” a man shouted from a nearby tent. He was thin and bald, and wearing a suit cut in the style of the Green Lands, but made of the local off-white linen. “Jolly good to see you! Come on in out of that beastly sun and have some tea. What brings you to Nahapt? Are you here for the season?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Garth,” Raff replied. “Em, Kaz, this is an old classmate of mine from University. Garth Brewer, I present my wife, Emblem L’oranne Cawlens and our newest student and protégé, Kazani Basan of the Sarahnie Tribe. Garth, what are you doing here? I thought you were in charge of Guild Hall in Racca.”

“I am, old boy,” Garth laughed as he set three tea cups out from a wicker basket, “but the new governor, well he calls himself a bey, whatever that is. This Bey Achmed has been hounding me night and day. I finally decided to come down here and enjoy the season for a week or two.”

“What season?” Kaz asked curiously.

“The digging season,” Em explained. “It’s becoming quite popular, especially among the nobility of the Green Lands to come down here each winter and dig through the ruins.”

“Is that what’s been going on?” Kaz asked.

“They’re looking for souvenirs,” Raff told him. Meanwhile Garth poured tea into each of the cups and handed them out.

“And there I thought that maybe they were trying to learn about the people who used to live here,” Kaz replied looking around once more.

“That too, lad,” Garth assured him. “Most of the people here really are trying to learn about the ancient world, but they’re also looking for ancient treasures – things they can take back to the Green Lands and decorate their homes with.”

“So what does this Bey Achmed want from you?” Raff asked as he took his first sip of the tea.

“You name it,” Garth replied, shaking his head sadly. “Most importantly he’s been putting an army together recently.”

“Rulers seem to do that from time to time,” Raff noted. “Who’s he planning to fight?”

“The Sultan of Paknalan,” Garth replied.

“Something the Sultan said one night?” Raff chuckled.

“Just typical politics,” Em replied. “Nahap and Paknalan have been vying with each other for decades for control of this part of the world. I doubt either could hold the whole of Sasania for long.”

“Not without the Guild’s assistance,” Garth agreed, “and he has to understand the Guild does not play favorites.”

“We don’t?” Raff countered, highly amused. “Are we talking about the same Guild?”

“Oh, all right,” Garth threw up his hands in surrender. “You have me there, but we always claim not to play favorites and in this case especially the Council of Masters feels it is the best interests to keep the region at peace.”

“Best interests for whom, sir?” Em challenged. “Best for the Council, I agree. They always see more

profit in keeping the peace, but it's not out of their own benevolence. Keeping the peace is just another form of control and control is best exploited when it is used to maintain the status quo. Who are we to say this region is better off split between a dozen or so political and religious leaders all of whom claim to have the right to unite Sasania under their own control?"

"Well, that's just the point, now, isn't it, Master L'Oranne-Cawlens?" Garth replied with a gracious smile. "The Guild Council has decided that it's best for the Guild if nothing changes here. In this case, I tend to agree with their pronouncement that it is also best for the people here. The leaders in this region are all cut from the same cloth. They are ruthless men who will do anything to gain power and will do anything to keep it. They would engage in the mass murder of dissident populations under their control, and some of them have done just that.

"The Region is not as homogenous as they would have us believe, for that matter," Garth continued. "Some would have us believe that because the people here are all practitioners of the Malahn religion. Most of us from the Northern Powers think Malahn is just an offshoot of the Church of Meni and I suppose that it is, but Malahn is not a single religion. It developed schisms from the moment the Prophet Malah died so what we have now are three main churches and a handful of various local variants. All of which claim to be the true descendants of Malah and who also claim the others are vile heresies. If we weren't enforcing the peace in the Sasania region, this place would be perpetually at war just as it was two centuries ago."

"Garth has a point there, Em," Raff cut in when it looked like she was ready to argue. "The Guild has been pacifying Sasania since it started working in this area."

"And yet they still seem to have managed a few wars without our sterling assistance," Em replied flatly.

"Guild members are not the only people with the wayfaring ability," Garth reminded her, "and an army is larger than many towns. Even without a wayfarer it would not automatically return to where it started, so all they need is someone who can keep them from wandering aimlessly through the Wild. Look out there," he pointed at the excavators to the north. "Three of those natives have a hint of the talent. It's not enough to attain more than permanent apprentice status in the Guild, but it is enough with training to follow a path through the Wild. In the off season they come up here on their own to scout out potential digging sites to lead diggers to in season. Sometimes they find something worth selling themselves, but mostly they do better by playing native guide."

"This area isn't Wild," Kaz noted.

"Not during the season, that's true," Garth nodded. "There are enough people here to extend Nahapt's stable zone well into the ruins. That varies a little day by day. At the start and end of the season each year you can see the edge of the Wild cutting through the ruins, but this is the heart of the season when everyone who is an enthusiast is here. It pretty much doubles the population of the town. I'm not sure if there are any more profound cases that demonstrate how human presence creates a stability."

"My people used to have to move the village every ten or fifteen years," Kaz told him.

"Why's that, lad?" Garth asked.

"We were farmers," Kaz told him. "After a few years the crops would tire out the land and we would have to find a new place to plant them. Eventually we used up the land all around us and we'd move to a new location."

"I fear that doesn't make sense to me," Garth confessed. "If that's the case, why isn't Teltoa a desert after all these centuries?"

"Teltoa is predominantly made up of rain forest and swamp land," Raff explained. "It also isn't very heavily populated. Given enough time the land recovers, the jungle plants grow back and can be cut down and burned to fertilize the land for another go round. I've heard someone call it 'slash and burn' agriculture. It's not as efficient as the methods used in the civilized lands, but in an area with rich land and low population it works well enough."

"Interesting," Garth admitted, "I never knew that. Well to return to your first question. Bey Achmed wants Wayfarer guidance for his army so he can attack the Sultan's army before the Sultan is quite ready to do the same in reverse."

"Paknalan is no friend of the Guild, Garth," Raff pointed out. "The Sultan has repeatedly tried to expel us from the lands he controls. He would have by now too if his own native wayfarers weren't already more loyal to the Guild than they are to him."

"True," Garth nodded, "but the bey is an unknown quantity and if you ask me not likely to be any more grateful to us in the long run. So I came up stream to let the matter cool off for a while. Well, I've answered your question, it's your turn, old boy. What are you doing here?"

"Not much," Raff shrugged, "Just taking in the ruins at the moment."

"Funny," Garth replied flatly.

"Well, after 'The Shape of the World' conference last year, Em and I traveled south to look into some problems in Catin where the natives were getting restless and quite impatient with the former governor's treatment of them. In the process of straightening that out we learned that some of the young Kenlienta had taken up a new hobby and were raiding human settlements. That led us to visit Tamag Methin."

"Tamag Methin?" Garth echoed. "Lucky you. I hear it's one of the wonders of the Ken Nation."

"It's something to see," Raff nodded, "although by now I doubt I'd be able to recognize the place. Like any Ken city it's constantly changing and Tamag Methin changes more rapidly than most although I understand Yakrut is changing even more rapidly these days."

"You can say that again, sport," Garth laughed. "They're not just changing the architecture in Yakrut. They're trying to change the entire government of the Ken."

"Any news on that?" Raff asked. "I haven't really heard anything new since I spoke to Elder Saltaxis in Tamag Methin."

"They haven't quite started their constitutional convention," Garth replied. "I think that's what they're calling it."

"I thought it was just a special meeting of their Grand Council of Elders," Raff replied.

"I guess that depends on which Kenlientans you've been speaking to, old boy," Garth chuckled. "The conservatives who like the way things are call it a Grand Council. Those who want change, well, they're making the change sound like a foregone conclusion. The Ken aren't really all that different from humans when you get down to politics, you know."

“I suppose not,” Raff shrugged. “Anyway, in Tamag Methin we learned about a strange new path that fairly burned its way across the Southern Continent. It was doing all sorts of damage and it was the main reason those young Ken decided to get frisky when they did. So we promised Saltaxis that we would look into the matter and also do something to erase the danger of that path.”

“I heard about the path,” Garth admitted. “I hear some of the natives were calling it the ‘Line of Fire.’”

“It was fairly spectacular,” Raff confirmed. “Turns out it was being formed by a new potential master wayfarer whose power was just breaking out. That can sometimes be a little dangerous.”

“Sounds like this one was a bit more than most,” Garth opined. “So who was the young prodigy?”

“Oh, it was Kaz here,” Raff laughed. “I’m happy to say he’s been much better behaved since we found him. So now we’re headed back to Taundon where we plan to get him trained and educated.”

“Well, well,” Garth chuckled, taking a long look at young Kazani. “So perhaps he’ll soon be giving you a run for your money for the title of best wayfarer in the Guild?”

“It’s a possibility,” Raff chuckled, “though I would not wish that fate on anyone. Time will tell, but I think Kaz has a lot of potential.”

“Might even sit on the Council someday?” Garth suggested.

“God forbid!” Raff coughed out, inadvertently spilling his tea.

Two

“Well, old friend,” Garth continued a few minutes later after having refilled Raff’s cup and pouring more for the others as well, “maybe you could do me a favor while you’re in the area.”

“It’s been quiet lately,” Raff chuckled. “What do you have for us?”

“Well, it seems to me that my trouble with Bey Achmed is probably because on our first encounter I treated him like any other paying customer,” Garth replied. “He told me what he needed and for the asked-for price I arranged it. The thing is, old boy, at the time I didn’t know him from any of a dozen other faction leaders in the area. Now that he has managed to gain ascendance, he thinks he can command the Guild at will.”

“Can’t have that,” Raff agreed, “or it would be worse for us here than in Paknalan.”

“That’s how I see it,” Garth nodded, “which is why I’m playing the waiting game down here in the desert. But maybe I can assign you to his case. I’ll send you on ahead and follow up in a couple days. As you’ll be an entirely new face of the Guild for him to deal with...”

“Say no more,” Raff replied. “This shouldn’t be too hard. All I have to do to tell him ‘No,’ a few times when he asks for more than he has coming to him.”

“Thanks, old boy,” Garth told him appreciatively. “I’ll owe you one.”

They spent the rest of the day sight-seeing amidst the ruins and then re-boarded the river boat for the trip into Tinap's modern capital city.

Racca was the largest city Kaz had experienced so far. There were soaring pinnacles and large, rounded, mosaic-covered domes that Em explained were a characteristic feature of the local churches. The buildings were plaster-covered stone that was almost pure white and with the sun high in the sky it was difficult to find a place to look that was not blindingly bright.

The Wayfarers' Hall turned out to be a large sprawling complex within view of the river, although carefully placed above the seasonal flood plane. "It would have been foolish to build there," Raff told Kaz when they first had a chance to just stop and take in the scenery. "Once a year it gets very wet, and besides, it would be a waste of valuable farm land." That was something Kaz really understood. "These people have it pretty lucky," Raff continued. "They can plant and grow two crops each year and then in the Inundation season, the River Tin brings them a whole new batch of fresh soil to grow in."

"Is that why they never have to move the city?" Kaz asked.

"In this case, yes," Raff nodded, "at least historically anyway. When the ancients no longer had to keep changing fields every few years, they were able to build more permanent settlements. That's not the way it works everywhere, however. There are better methods of farming than your people used – better ways to fertilize and renew the soil so that a field needs to sit fallow for a year, maybe a few years, but not the twenty-five or so they need to in Teltoa."

"Sarahn," Kaz corrected him. "I lived in Sarahn."

"That's your word for it," Raff agreed. "Actually Sarahn is a part of what the Dixans call Teltoa, even if for you Teltoa is only those lands occupied by the Telts. It also includes the Alono's tribal territory and well as the colonies."

"I never saw any of the colonies," Kaz admitted.

"You didn't miss much," Raff assured him. "The Dixan colonists keep their towns cleaner than the ones established by Crace or even the GreenLands, but that may be their only defining characteristic. Mostly they're small towns filled with a wide range of people about half of whom are the merchants who supply the other colonists with what they need to establish plantations and the rest are either part of the local government or else all the failed colonials who found that merely showing up didn't guarantee an easy life owning a plantation. Those last are generally trying to scrape up enough money to head back to their homelands, although a few hardy souls will actually be trying once more to get established there. Aside from those statistics, the colonial towns aren't very much different than any other human settlement of the same size and you've seen enough of those."

While there was no longer a king in Tinap, his Royal Library lived on in the city of Racca and Em took Kaz there on their first full day in the city while Raff went to address Bey Achmed and explain that he had been assigned to the bey's account with the Guild. The library was filled with historical tomes and even a few ancient scrolls, lovingly restored or recreated as the originals wore out. However as fascinating as the old scrolls might have been, they were not in any language either Kaz or Em could read, so they stayed in the more modern section where most of the books were still about fifty years old.

"We won't be able to study modern science here," Em concluded, "but the histories should prove interesting. You did say you wanted to read stories that were real. And mathematicians may have broken

new ground since these books were published, but what's in them won't have changed."

"But we won't be able to take any of these with us, will we?" Kaz pointed out.

"Not from this library, no," Em laughed, "But there are dozens of book sellers in Racca. We should be able to find a few books to keep you occupied until we reach Crace. Now why don't you start with this book on the Meni Empire. It looks clear enough and doesn't seem to be as bogged down with flowery language or slanted writing as some of the others."

"Slanted writing?" Kaz asked.

"Some say history is written by the winners, Kaz," Em replied. "Actually it's written by the survivors, whether they win or lose a big conflict. Histories are the last chance for people to get a word in for their version of what happened in the past. As you read more and more histories, you'll notice they often disagree about the various aspects of the past. Some will argue over the significance of certain events. Some may even deny such events ever happened and if written by different nationalities they will certainly argue over why some things happened and what they meant to the people who came later."

"That doesn't sound very real," Kaz shook his head, looking confused.

"Oh, it's as real as it gets," Em told him. "It's just that if something happens that has little or nothing to do with you, it doesn't mean that it might not be important to someone else. By reading a variety of histories you will eventually be able to decide for yourself what really happened, although even then you may find you disagree with others over your conclusions. History is what happened, but it is also what people remember happening.

"There is a children's game I used to play in school," Em continued. "We would line up around the room and the teacher would whisper a sentence in the ear of the first student in line. Then she would turn to the one behind her and whisper it to that girl, who in turn would whisper it to the one behind her. By the time it got through our entire class, it often had only the most passing resemblance to the original sentence. That's because even in the short term, some people's memory is better than others and if they can't remember exactly their minds will fill in the rest. Sometimes the same meaning will be passed on, if not the exact words, and sometimes a word will be substituted for another that sounds almost the same. The end result, however, is that what went in had very little if any resemblance to what came out.

"History can be like that too," Em explained. "A story gets repeated and changed to better fit the writer's understanding of a situation. Many times that writer is working with personal accounts of the events and the people who wrote or talked about what they saw disagreed as to what happened, so the writer has to make a decision as to what really happened, although as often as not he may come up with yet another version that is no more accurate than the ones he was dealing with. However, you don't need to worry about that just now and, from what I can see; this text seems to be dealing with the subject matter in a fairly neutral manner."

"Or it at least agrees with what you think happened," Kaz added insightfully.

Em laughed. "Yes, okay. It at least agrees with what I've been taught. Actually this one does not seem to be making many value judgments concerning the rise and fall of the Meni Empire, just reporting the facts as the writer knows them. He isn't asking his reader to make any conclusions about historical significance or trying to imply that the fall was due to a lack of moral rectitude or over ambition on the part of the later emperors and anything like that. He's just reporting on key battles, elections, coups and various other events. It's a good place to start."

“What about the mathematics?” Kaz asked.

“These are all fairly advanced texts,” Em decided. “We need to start with the basics before you can hope to understand what’s here. I’ll put that on the shopping list.”

Kaz enjoyed their day together in the library, but, unfortunately, Raff could not say the same for his experience at the bey’s palace.

“They kept me waiting around all day, before informing me,” Raff lapsed into a deeply pitched parody of the functionary he had been talking to, “‘His Excellency is a very busy man and extends his apologies for not having the time to meet with you today. He does request that you return tomorrow morning.’ I didn’t like the answer when I asked what time my appointment was. It was just, ‘The Bey Achmed will meet with you at his earliest convenience.’”

“You should have brought a book with you,” Kaz suggested.

“Ha! I probably should have at that,” Raff agreed.

“Perhaps I should join you tomorrow,” Em suggested. “Perhaps the presence of two master wayfarers will be enough to get his attention.”

“Or perhaps the presence of one who’s prettier than I am will,” Raff nodded.

They left Kaz in the Wayfarers’ Hall the next morning with one of the resident apprentices who promised to help the lad with his reading and some basic arithmetic.

“I have to admit, that’s a fairly impressive palace,” Em noted as they approached the main gate.

“You’ll be even more impressed on the way out,” Raff warned her. “It’s a bit of a hike even after we get inside.”

“Which leads me to wonder why you didn’t requisition a carriage from the Guild,” Em commented.

Raff halted in his steps and looked at her as she walked another two paces before turning to see why he had stopped. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?” he asked.

“It didn’t even cross your mind, did it?” Em laughed.

“Do you think that might have been why I got snubbed yesterday?” Raff asked. “I walked yesterday because it was a pleasant morning and it wasn’t all that far. I walked this morning because I walked yesterday.”

“Well, that might have lowered your standing in Carais,” Em considered, “but I doubt anyone noticed it here. There aren’t many carriages around that I’ve seen so far. Mostly just farm wagons, in fact. I could be wrong though. Next time take a carriage. Then, if nothing else, we can take a more scenic route.”

Raff introduced himself to the guards at the gate. They were not the same as were on duty the day before and just as on his previous visit, he was eventually directed to a waiting room deep within the palace.

“Mighty trusting,” Em observed as they proceeded onward, “to let us traverse the palace compound on our own.”

“What makes you think we’re on our own?” Raff countered. “We’re being watched constantly. It’s laughable really.”

“Where?” Em asked. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Check the paintings. Notice how the eyes of the animals seem to follow you?” Raff asked. “A closer look will show you any eyes you see are behind the holes in the portrait.”

“That is funny!” Em laughed. “I think someone’s been reading too many ghost stories.”

“Maybe, but that sort of surveillance has been the norm here for at least two centuries,” Raff informed her. “I think this may be where it all started. They do it so clumsily, though.”

“I agree,” Em smiled. “A half-silvered mirror would be far more effective.”

“A cultural and religious peculiarity of the region,” Raff replied. “The depiction of a human figure is anathema.”

“Like the iconoclasts of the Tonalist Movement back in the Sixth Century?” Em asked.

“Only more so,” Raff explained. “The Tonalists still saw some value to being able to get dressed in front of a mirror, especially if you wanted to shave.”

“Doesn’t look like any men shave around here,” Em noticed.

“They don’t. It’s another one of their religious laws, I think,” Raff shrugged. “They don’t shave and don’t even trim their beards.”

“Never?” Em asked.

“Apparently not,” Raff replied. “That’s why they’re so long. They grow to their natural limits.”

“Can’t say I find it appealing,” Em commented sourly.

“Good thing I keep my beard trimmed when I’m growing one,” Raff laughed.

“I much prefer it when you’re clean-shaven, dear,” Em told him, “but I understand why you can’t be bothered while we’re on the road.”

“In some countries I’m taken more seriously when I let it grow,” Raff added. “It’s all a matter of the local style. Here, it hardly matters. They know I’m not a Malahnite, so there’s no reason to let it grow at least while we’re in town. You’ll notice Garth was clean shaven.”

“And not wearing the local clothing either,” Em recalled.

“Just as well,” Raff laughed. “Garth would look ridiculous in those black linen robes and I suspect the locals would think he was making fun of them if he tried.”

They eventually found the same room Raff had spent the day in the day before. It was richly appointed with fine drapes, furniture and hand-woven carpets. Also it was cool and comfortable, however Raff and Em spent the next several hours just talking until a palace functionary apologized that the bey would be unable to meet with them until the next day.

“Kaz was right,” Em concluded as they left the palace, “We should have brought a book.”

“More like an entire library,” Raff laughed without humor.

Three

Over the next two weeks, Raff and Em spent more time in that palace waiting room than they cared to keep track of. Some days Em stayed with Kaz, forcing Raff to keep the vigil by himself, but most of the time she stayed with her husband. At the end of the first week Guildmaster Garth Brewer returned to Racca and was quick to assess the situation. “He’s making you pay because I left town on him,” Garth summed up apologetically.

“Well, I don’t have to go back tomorrow,” Raff replied.

“We’d better be there,” Em told him. “Miss a day and he’ll only claim to be insulted because that was the one day he had the time for you.”

“You say that as if you think I should worry about this self-proclaimed bey,” Raff countered testily.

“I say it because it is true,” Em maintained. “He’s waiting for the day we don’t show up there. It’s all part of his game and don’t tell me you don’t recognize it, because it’s a dance we’ve been through before.”

“You’re right about that,” Raff admitted. “You would think these petty-minded fools could come up with something more original.”

Finally on the fourteenth day after Raff had started going to the palace he and Em returned from the palace to be asked into Garth’s office where he was debriefing a newly arrived journeyman. Both men were smoking short black cigars. Garth offered the box to Raff who accepted one. Before he could put it away, however, Em also helped herself to one of the fat, round tubes of tobacco. Emblem rarely smoked, but when stuck in a room filled with other smokers she would sometimes join in the same way one might enjoy a social drink at a party but not be partial to imbibing on a regular basis.

“Masters Cawlens and Cawlens, I present Journeyman Tomasso Gervassi, late of Menino. Tom here just got in an hour ago with a party of travelers from Ranaan.”

“Not an easy trek, I understand,” Raff acknowledged, shaking the man’s hand. “Getting a party through that desert takes quite a bit of talent and tenacity.”

“It’s not so bad, sir,” Tom replied modestly, while Raff started fiddling his belt knife to cut the tip of the cigar. Em did not bother using her knife, but gently bit off the end of hers. “We have some hidden cisterns of water along the way. The trick is being able to find them, but once you know what to look for they stand out as though someone left a gas light on over them.”

“Go ahead, Tom,” Garth encouraged the man, “Tell them what you just told me.”

“From what I saw, the Sultan is moving his army down into southern Ranaan,” Tom continued.

“What’s going on up there?” Raff asked interestedly. “Large fields filled with military tents?” He stuck the tip of a long wooden match, a sliver of wood with a blob of sulfur on the tip, against a sheet of phosphorous-coated paper in a small, carefully prepared tinderbox. The resulting fire set the wood ablaze and after the brimstone had burned off, he used the match to light Em’s cigar and then his own.

“Not quite, Master Cawlens,” Tom replied with a smile.

“No, that would be too noticeable,” Raff agreed, taking a puff on his cigar, “but you saw a lot more soldiers than normal, I take it.”

“Yes, sir,” Tom agreed. “They don’t have taverns like we do, you know, but they do have coffee houses and every such establishment in Lower Ranaan was filled with soldiers. That’s not normal, you know. Usually you won’t see them outside the major cities, but every town was filled with them. They’re being barracked in the homes of the locals and there are a lot of new buildings in the smaller towns.”

“It doesn’t take long to build with mud bricks, Raff,” Garth put in.

“No it doesn’t,” Raff agreed, “and it gives you more shelter from the sun and all you need is dirt, some grass and a supply of water.”

“Some wood for roof beams isn’t just a luxury, old boy,” Garth added.

“Yeah, okay, that too,” Raff nodded. “Well, we might not have realized it, but I think this is the break we were looking for.”

“What do you mean?” Garth asked.

“I mean as soon as Bey Achmed hears about them, he’ll be happy to see us,” Raff replied.

“And what if he doesn’t hear about it until too late?” Em asked. “That army in Lower Ranaan might just be for defensive purposes.”

“I doubt the Sultan would be moving that many men around just to defend his border,” Garth pointed out, “and he is being subtle or at least as subtle as warfare gets in this part of the world.”

“But will it take Tinap by surprise?” Em asked.

“Well, our men in Ranaan won’t agree to guide an army through the Wild for purely aggressive reasons,” Garth replied. “You know that as well as I.”

“And yet for all of our policy of not encouraging war,” Raff put in sourly, “Mankind seems to find a way without us. Armies don’t really need trained Wayfarers, all they need is the occasional rare individual with the merest hint of talent – just enough to discern the path they are trying to follow.”

“That’s not as reliable as having even a green apprentice wayfarer, old boy” Garth argued. He stubbed out the small butt that was left of his cigar and helped himself to a second.

“Maybe not, but it does suffice,” Raff replied.

“Crossing the border between Ranaan and Tinap takes more than a green apprentice,” Tom told them both, “but I suppose an army can carry its water with it?” he ended uncertainly.

“Yes,” Em agreed, “and they can use supply trains to bring more water up to the front. The passage of that many men through the Wild leaves traces anyone with even a hint of talent can follow for at least a week. Continued activity along such a route is almost enough to establish it as a forged path, if it wasn’t one already.”

“Well, without a master wayfarer to forge it,” Garth shrugged, “it would fade away in time, but even the best paths do that eventually if unused anyway.”

“Are there any Kenlienta along such an invasion route?” Em asked. “A sudden influx of a human army passing through would do them no good and it might renew some of the problems we’ve been having with their young adults lately.”

“Renew?” Garth asked. “I wasn’t aware the raids had stopped.”

“The Elders are doing what they can to rein them in,” Raff explained, “at least here on the Southern Continent. A lot is going to depend on what happens in Yakrut when they convene their Grand Council. Any news on exactly when that will be, by the way?”

“Not for at least a month, old boy,” Garth replied. “Why? Were you planning to attend? Taundon is in the wrong direction, you know.”

“I’d like to get there, but I don’t have an invitation,” Raff sounded slightly annoyed by that, “So unless I just happened to find myself in the neighborhood and needing hospitality...” he trailed off.

“Not this time around, old boy,” Garth laughed, “Well the real question is whether or not the bey is going to hear about the Sultan’s army in time. His own forces are scattered around the country and he has not managed to recruit all that many new men yet. Hasn’t been in power long enough and you just know he can’t trust half the officers from his predecessor’s army.”

“That’s probably why Paknalan is massing on its southern border,” Raff replied. “The bey is new and still consolidating his forces. Well we can’t exactly drop in and warn him about what’s happening even if it weren’t against our own Council’s general orders. The darned fool won’t see us.”

“We’ll have to get his attention in some other way then,” Em suggested. “Let’s not bother accepting his so-called invitation to return tomorrow.”

“I thought we discussed that,” Garth pointed out. “Achmed will use it as a point of honor.”

“Let him,” Em laughed, taking a last puff on her cigar. “Let him stand on his dignity all he wants. Eventually he’s going to hear about the Sultan’s army and then he’ll come to us.”

They did not have too long to wait. The next morning the streets of Racca were abuzz with the news that Paknalan was massing for an attack. “Did you let the news out?” Raff asked Garth quietly just after breakfast. Raff had been taking the opportunity to catch up on his correspondence – mostly reports to the Guild headquarters in Taundon. He was working in the large but now mostly empty dining room with three small stacks of paper and envelopes on the table in front of him. When Garth suggested a second

cup of coffee, Raff readily agreed.

“Not at all,” Garth replied. “You know I wouldn’t, but while we might be restricted from passing on military intelligence, the people we guide are not. I think half the travelers we’ve been escorting back and forth have been spies lately anyway.”

“Could be,” Raff shrugged, “and the Guild does not usually do a background check on anyone with cash on hand, although maybe we should be a bit more careful. For now, however, it’s working in our favor.”

Just then an apprentice guided a palace spokesman into the dining room. “Master Cawlens?” he asked. When Raff nodded the man continued, “His Excellency, the Bey Achmed ibn Musad is pleased to summon you forthwith into his presence.”

“Yeah?” Raff asked. “Really. Well, please pass along my regrets to His Excellency, but I am not at liberty to attend this morning.”

“But the bey commands!” the man insisted.

“Neither I nor this Guild of Wayfarers are subject to his commands, sir,” Raff countered coldly. “His Excellency has had ample opportunity to meet with me.”

“The bey is a very busy man,” came the predictable protest.

“And so am I,” Raff followed the script, noticing Em enter the room just then. He paused a moment then grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled down a long note while the bey’s messenger waited. Em helped herself to a cup of coffee and looked idly over Raff’s shoulder to see what he was writing. Then she smiled and sat down at the table.

When Raff finished a few minutes later he folded it up and placed it in one of the envelopes. Then, using just a touch of his wayfaring talent, he caused a small piece of sealing wax to melt over the tip of the envelope flap and then forced it to cool with a detailed depiction of an ouroboros impressed into the hardened wax. Raff did not have a coat of arms although his wife did, nor did he make a habit of using a signature symbol to stand for himself when using sealing wax. He usually just chose whatever seemed appropriate to the moment. In this case a symbol of a vicious circle seemed quite apropos. “Please give this to His Excellency.”

“What is it?” the messenger asked.

“It’s a letter,” Raff told him unhelpfully. Then he added, “I explained that I will be pleased to meet with him at my earliest convenience.”

“And when will that be, sir?”

“Not sure,” Raff shrugged. “I may have business soon in Ranaan. You know how it is. I go where the Guild Council commands. I may be free in a week or two, however.” Raff took a last sip of coffee before waving the sputtering man away.

“That might not have been wise, Raff,” Em told him.

“Nobody’s perfect, least of all me,” Raff shrugged. “So how is Kazani coming along? I’ve barely seen the lad this past fortnight.”

“Kaz is just fine and reading at a far higher level than I might have expected by now,” Em replied.

“Good,” Raff nodded. “I think, perhaps I should spend the day with him. Wouldn’t want him to think I’ve forgotten him and all that. Besides, I seem to remember promising to teach him how to make one’s way through the Wild without leaving a blazing path in his wake. Today is a good day for that, I think.”

“So you won’t relent when that messenger returns in an hour or so, old boy?” Garth asked.

“I won’t even technically be in Racca in an hour or so,” Raff replied lightly. “You can answer the summons if you want, although I recommend against it.”

“Oh no,” Garth laughed. “I assigned you to this mission. Play it anyway you like, and that will be my story if Achmed should happen to try summoning me. You are, for now at least, his personal representative in the Guild. Too bad he seems to have upset his representative, eh?”

“Such a shame,” Raff laughed. “Well, please excuse me, I have something to do first and then Kaz and I will strike out for the edge of town.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll miss Bey Achmed’s reaction?” Em asked playfully.

“I doubt I could miss it if we were on our way to Verana,” Raff laughed, referring to the colonies on the far side of the world.

Raff and Kaz borrowed a small carriage from the Guild and road quickly to the edge of Racca. “Why are we stopping?” Kaz asked, noticing they were right at the edge of the Racca Stability, but not actually riding into the Wild.

“We’re going to take a walk in the Wild,” Raff explained. “What I’m going to show you would only be harder if you have to account for the horses and they wouldn’t like being left on their own in the Wild, so we’ll leave them here. That way we won’t have to walk back.”

“What if someone steals them?” Kaz asked.

“Only a wayfarer could do that, lad,” Raff replied. “I’ve used a bit of the Wild energy to lock the wheels and I put the horses to sleep. They won’t wake up until I or another master wakes them so if a thief wants them, he’ll have to carry them away. Come on. Let’s hike.”

They walked for a few minutes, before Raff decided they were far enough into the Wild and away from any established wayfarer paths. Turning back toward Racca, Kaz stared for a moment at the large dome of the stability – a sight only a wayfarer could see. Between them and the dome he could see the wind highlighted by a faint iridescence. It was something he only saw while in the Wild, but even now, he never got tired of it.

“What are you thinking, Kaz?” Raff asked him a minute later.

“I used to do this back home,” Kaz admitted. “I used to like going just outside the village and looking back. I tried to show what I saw to some of my friends, but none of them could see anything unusual. They thought I was crazy, so I stopped talking about it, but I think the shaman knew. He watched me all the time when I was inside the village. I think he was waiting for me to go to him.”

“Why didn’t you?” Raff asked.

“I didn’t like being different,” Kaz told him after a long pause. “I didn’t want to be a freak.”

“Doesn’t that still bother you?” Raff asked.

“In the village I would have been the only one, well, except for the shaman. In the Guild I’ll be among many others like me. I won’t be a freak.”

“I would have thought being the next shaman would have given you more status than anyone but the headman,” Raff suggested.

“Yeah, maybe and that would have been good eventually, I guess,” Kaz admitted, “but I’m just a kid and shaman training is tough. I wasn’t ready yet.”

“Are you ready now?” Raff asked.

“I’m ready to be a wayfarer,” Kaz replied.

“Good,” Raff nodded approvingly. “Now we haven’t discussed this before, but I have been wondering. When you left your village you started forging a path. It wasn’t very well made and would have caused a lot of damage if Em and I not diffused and erased it. But why did you do it?”

“At first I didn’t realize I was,” Kaz admitted. “I was scared and running for my life. But we all learned we had to stay on a path if we wanted to go anywhere, and when I saw how I had made that path, I kept doing it because that way I was always on a path and would be safer that way.”

“Well, I suppose you were,” Raff laughed, “but not for the reason you thought. That path of yours would have harmed anyone not a wayfarer or a Kenlientan elder and we would be spared only if we were careful. Nothing of any danger to you was likely to get close enough. So you think you have to use a path to make your way?”

“That’s what the shaman taught us,” Kaz replied.

“Then where’s the path we followed to get here?” Raff asked pointedly.

Kaz looked around. “No path?” he asked.

“You didn’t make one every time you left your village did you?”

“I never went all that far from the shaman’s path,” Kaz told him, “I thought maybe I was still on the edge.”

“I doubt it,” Raff told him. “I have to tell the truth here, though. We always leave a trail wherever we go. It’s very faint and doesn’t last long and also it’s easier to see in the Wild, but it’s there nonetheless.”

“Then where is our trail?” Kaz asked.

“I erased it,” Raff told him. “Just as I erased that blazing path of yours.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see how you were creating the path,” Raff explained. “By the time we found you on that beach you weren’t doing it any longer and this way I can see without any other paths or trails around. Go ahead and make a path for me. A short one will do.”

Kaz concentrated for a moment and then started walking. Behind him Raff could see sparks of Wild energy shooting in every direction randomly as a blindingly bright line of stability was carved out of the substance of the Wild.

“All right, that’s enough.” Raff told him. “I see what’s going on. Take a look at your path. It’s very ragged and you put far too much into it. If properly made, a path with that much energy would probably not only last for millennia but would likely also etch itself physically into the ground.”

He quickly erased Kaz’s path. “Now watch how I do it,” Raff continued. Even before he started to move, Raff was surrounded by a clear white light. Then just as he started to walk, a bright white path glowed a few feet in front of him. Rather than the sparks Kaz’s effort had thrown off, Raff’s energy seemed to be made of many smooth even threads, the ends of which he wove back into the path he was constructing. When finished he had a circular path about thirty feet in diameter. “There were two main things you were doing wrong aside from the overuse of power. First of all you allowed the energy you did use to go every which way. You need to take the loose ends and weave them back into the structure of the path.”

“It looked like the way I would make a woven cord out of bark fibers,” Kaz replied. Seeing a puzzled look on Raff’s face he continued. “Well, if I need some sort of cord, I can take a piece of the inner bark of a tree, a fig, perhaps, and then separate some of the fibers which I could then braid together.”

“Why not just roll them up?” Raff asked.

“That’s not as strong, and also it would limit me to the length of the piece of bark I started with. By braiding, I can keep adding new pieces and make the cord as long as I need,” Kaz explained.

“Sounds reasonable,” Raff agreed. “Well, building a path is very much like braiding a cord except that the material is as long as you need it to be. The other mistake is that you were forming the path behind you. I guess you could do it that way, but it’s ever so much easier to work when you can see what you’re doing. Now watch as I erase this path.”

Once more the glowing white light formed around Raff, but this time instead of weaving threads of energy together, he took them apart and let the power dissipate gently back all around him. “That’s actually more dangerous and difficult to do correctly than making the path in the first place,” he told Kaz. “You have to make sure the energy returns to the Wild state in a gentle and natural manner. Any mistake and you’ll harm anything the loose energy touches.”

“Like a fire?” Kaz asked.

“Very much,” Raff agreed, “except fire damage would be the least of it. Animals and plants might be injured in any imaginable way. For example a fruit that was once delicious might suddenly become poisonous. Stability and Wild energy are really just two sides of the same coin, Kaz. It’s really the same stuff. So when you release the energy bound up in something that is stable, like a path, you need to make sure it returns to the natural state it takes in the Wild. Now I’d like you to try to make a path again, but this time watch what you’re doing and keep the power down.”

Kaz nodded and a moment later he was surrounded by a bright greenish-yellow glow. “Less power than that, Kaz,” Raff suggested and the glow lost most of its color although it remained a faint yellow. Raff decided that was good enough. Most of his colleagues were unable to work with a pure white aura. The white color meant he was using all the energy around him equally and in a neutral manner. Even Em’s glow when doing this sort of work was faintly bluish. It was something he would explain to Kaz sometime in the future, but for now the boy appeared to be showing a great natural ability. Certainly he was better than Raff had been at his age.

Kaz worked slowly and deliberately but after half an hour he completed a circle similar to the one Raff had made.

“Not bad for a first attempt, Kaz,” Raff commended him. “Now let’s go over the details. The weave needs to be tighter and more even, but that will come in time with sufficient practice which you will get once you start your real lessons with the Guild. I’m showing you this now because there may come a time before then when you may need a path for some reason. This way you’ll be able to create one that doesn’t harm anyone or anything.”

They spent the next hour discussing Kaz’s path, with Raff showing him how to stabilize it further and then letting Kaz try it for himself. Next they erased Kaz’s first path together so Raff could catch the parts he knew Kaz would inevitably miss on his first attempt. Then they went through the whole process once more.

Kaz’s second attempt at both creating and erasing a path were much better than the first, and Raff decided that was enough for one day. “We’ll try to find time to do this again sometime soon,” Raff promised, “but in the meantime I don’t want you to try it for yourself. Apprentices are never allowed to do this sort of work unsupervised anyway. You can hurt yourself and anything else around you.”

“I’ll be good,” Kaz promised.

“I wasn’t asking for that,” Raff laughed to Kaz’s confusion. “Just don’t try this sort of advanced wayfaring alone.”

Four

“You missed the last four demands for your presence,” Garth told Raff smugly over dinner. The local guildmaster had ordered a vast variety of the indigenous foods for them and all the other resident guildmembers to enjoy as a way of celebration. “Some more wine, old boy?”

“I have enough for now,” Raff replied. “I knew we’d get a rapid response, just not that many of them. What did you tell the bey?”

“The truth,” Garth laughed. “That you had just left Racca and that I didn’t know where you had gone nor how long you would be out of town.”

“I’m surprised Bey Achmed didn’t demand to see you instead of Raff,” Em commented.

“Oh, he did,” Garth laughed, “and I even took a trip to the palace, but I explained that since Master Cawlens had been assigned directly to the bey’s account, the matter was out of my hands. Raff is a freelancer, after all, so technically he reports directly to the Guild Council.”

“Technically in theory,” Raff replied, “but in practice, you did assign me yourself. You could easily take the job back.”

“Of course I could,” Garth laughed, “or I could assign half a dozen others to the task as well even if you had taken this assignment from the Council. But Achmed doesn’t know that, and none of us are likely to let him in on the secret, are we? Anyway, yes, there were no less than four messages delivered here, although the last one was a request to let him know when you returned.”

“Send a messenger to the palace around three this morning,” Raff suggested. “Let the bey know I’m back in town. If he doesn’t jump fast enough or if he’s still making demands, we’ll tell him my business forced me to leave town again.”

“That might be playing too hard to get, dear,” Em commented.

“We cannot afford to let any leader think the Guild exists to serve his every whim. Even the High Priest in Meni wouldn’t attempt to command us as Achmed has,” Raff replied.

“The High Priest knows we would probably give him anything he requested,” Em countered.

“Only because he understands what he can and cannot ask for and in what circumstances we would agree,” Raff came back. “The Church is always diplomatic with the Guild and never asks for what we would deny. It’s a good relationship. Achmed just has to understand we are not his subjects.”

Garth sent the message to the palace as Raff instructed, but the journeyman who delivered it reported that he had only been allowed to leave the written message at the gate. “Suits me,” Raff decided after waking with the sun two hours later. “It will give us time to enjoy breakfast.”

He only had time to take a sip of coffee, however before an apprentice escorted in the same palace messenger as had been there earlier arrived. “Master Cawlens,” the messenger addressed him, “Bey Achmed bids you greetings,” and then handed Raff a sealed envelope. “He asked me to await your reply.”

Raff opened the envelope and read silently, “Bey Achmed ibn Musad, Governor of Tinap sends courteous greetings to the Most Esteemed Master Raff Cawlens of the Ancient and Honorable Guild of Wayfarers. Dear Master Cawlens, The Province of Tinap now stands at the threshold of annihilation at the hands of our traditional enemy, the Sultan of Paknalan. That the province of Ranaan has ever been in dispute between our two nations cannot be denied, but never before has one power attempted to destroy and annex the other....”

“What’s it say, dear?” Em asked when he had gotten that far.

“So far he’s giving me a somewhat inaccurate history lesson,” Raff explained and went on to read that section aloud. “In truth Tinap and What is now Paknalan have been at each other’s throats for as long as history has been recorded and there are instances when each occupied the other. However, it is true that Ranaan has always been claimed by both countries, even on those occasions when Ranaan was governed by its own or a third power like Meni or the ancient empire of Zagan. He’s also trying to call himself a Power in the modern world, but we’ll let that pass.

“He continues, ‘We humbly request you to consider extending the assistance of your noble Guild of Wayfarers in the defense of Tinap. We promise that that assistance will be used for defensive purposes

alone and will not extend at this time toward the reacquisition of our Province of Ranaan. We are eager to meet with you on this subject at your earliest convenience.' Well, that's more of a concession than I expected," Raff noted. He turned to the waiting messenger, "Please extend my compliments to Bey Achmed and inform him that I will meet with him in his palace just as soon as we have finished breaking our fast."

"Sounds like you got through to him," Em noted when the messenger left.

"Indeed," Garth added. "The man is obviously wiser than I've been giving him credit for."

"Well, you're still going to have to watch him like a hawk," Raff predicted, "and you will occasionally find yourself forced to remind him who is dependant on whom. Besides, this may not yet be over. There was a baron in Holrany about ten years ago who made a similar sort of concession, but when meeting with the Guild member involved, attempted to take him prisoner with an eye toward making demands for his release."

"What happened?" Kaz asked interestedly.

"The baron's second cousin proved to be far wiser than his predecessor," Garth laughed. "Yes, I heard about that one. The master wayfarer who met with him did not even wait to see the inside of the cell the baron ordered him to. He killed the baron outright and about half the guards who attempted to retaliate. Then he simply walked out of the baron's manor and waited. There were protests, of course, but the Holran king wasn't about to upset the Guild and on investigation declared, and rightfully so, that the baron had been a fool and promptly by-passed the man's son for succession to the baronial seat, installing his cousin instead. There hasn't been any trouble between Holrany and the Guild since."

"Wow!" Kaz breathed. "We can do that?"

"With discretion, lad," Raff cautioned him. "It never pays to be a bully. Normally we treat each and every person with the same respect we expect to receive ourselves. Tell you what, after breakfast you may join me as we attend the bey and find out how much he is willing to pay for the Guild to escort his troops to the border."

In contrast to Raff's previous visits to the bey's palace, this time he was escorted directly to the room Achmed had chosen to use as an office. It was on the third and top floor of the central building of the palace and while not a particularly tall building, it was still the tallest in Racca so that office, a large round room with twelve windows evenly spaced around its perimeter, had a magnificent view of the city.

Raff was sorely tempted to make a comment about being able to see his house from there, but instead after murmuring the usual polite greetings and introducing Kaz, who stood quietly and politely at Raff's side, merely continued, "May I be of assistance, Your Excellency?"

Bey Achmed ibn Musad stood up from behind his desk. He stood a full foot shorter than Raff, although his shiny, black beard was over a foot long, disappearing against his dark robe. "Thank you for coming, Master Cawlens," he told Raff in a surprisingly deep voice. "I must apologize for the way I treated you on your earlier visits."

"Think no more about that, Your Excellency," Raff replied. "I believe you will find the Guild will always act in a manner that will protect the welfare of the people of Tinap."

"As do I, Master Cawlens," Bey Achmed replied, "but please have a seat. I have ordered some coffee."

It was customary in Tinap, Raff knew, to discuss all major business deals over coffee. “We shall share a pot and work together to save my dear Tinap and her people.”

Five

Kaz kept his silence save when the bey asked him a direct question, but carefully listened to what both men said. He understood that when Raff said the Guild would look out for the welfare of the people, it did not necessarily mean the government of that land would benefit. He also noted that the bey had understood that as well. However, what made the greatest impact on Kaz was that Raff never acted as though he had been insulted by the bey and his behavior. If Kaz had not known better, he might have believed this was Raff’s first visit to the palace.

Kaz asked about that as they walked back to the Guild hall.

“It’s just like I told you earlier, Kaz,” Raff explained. “It never pays to be a bully. I played tough with Bey Achmed because I had to. A wayfarer’s first loyalty is to the Guild, after all, and he was trying to make the Guild act like one of his subjects. That wouldn’t do. However, once I made my point that we were a power to be respected, I was more than willing to accord him the same respect. Everyone wants to be respected. I told you that yesterday. It doesn’t matter if you’re a village shaman, the king of Crace or a beggar on the streets of Taundon. Everyone deserves to be treated with respect.”

“I see,” Kaz replied. “I think. But aren’t there some people who would only take advantage of you if you try to treat them fairly.”

“No one worth knowing,” Raff replied. “Besides the most important thing you get out of giving others the respect they want is that you can continue to respect yourself. If the occasional miscreant takes advantage of that, I think it’s worth the price. They can rob you of your money, but they can only rob you of your self-respect if you allow it.”

They were still discussing the encounter with Bey Achmed when they arrived back at the Guild hall to find the entire building abuzz with excitement. “Master Cawlens!” the apprentice at the front desk called to him. “Master Brewer would like to see you in his office immediately.”

“Thank you,” Raff acknowledged. “Let’s go see what’s up now.”

“Everyone in sight seems, uh, busier than usual?” Kaz tried to put the scene into words. The normally quiet and organized Guild hall was certainly not normal right now. People were running back and forth between rooms or sitting at tables in the dining room, pouring over large charts that had been spread out on the tables.

“They’re probably studying the various paths from here to the border with Ranaan,” Raff told Kaz. “There’s going to be a lot of activity between here and there in the coming weeks after all.”

It turned out Raff was only half right. Some of the wayfarers were boning up on the paths to the northeast, but most were speculating on the situation that caused Garth to send for Raff.

“Courier just arrived directly from Taundon, old boy,” Garth told him when Raff and Kaz joined him and Emblem in the office.

“Urgent communique,” Em amplified, handing Raff an oilcloth pouch. “It seems we’ve been ordered to travel to the capital city of Kharasia and consult with Emperor Pavel Alexander.”

“Ordered?” Raff asked, a dangerous note in his voice. “It was bad enough dealing with Bey Achmed, but the Guild Council of Masters ought to know better than to order a freelancer.”

“Two freelancers,” Em reminded him. “However given the situation perhaps they forgot their manners.”

“Why?” Raff asked. “What’s happened?”

“You remember how a while back we learned that Kharasia had marched through Pernatia and was at war with Holrany?”

“Of course,” Raff agreed. “Has the Kharasian army broken through to Manrich? I can understand how that might get the Council upset, but I don’t see what they expect us to do about it.”

“Not that, old boy,” Garth told him. “The details are in that pouch, but what it comes down to is that the High King of Corisa decided that since His Imperial Majesty was at war with the Holrans, it would be a good time to invade and capture Kharasia’s eastern provinces.”

“Really?” Raff asked. “No, I don’t doubt your word, but the implications... Yes, I can see why they forgot to say please and thank you.”

“Why?” Kaz asked. “What are the implications?”

“The Guild has offices around the world, Kaz,” Em explained. “We’re in every colony in the Southern Continent as well as in the Western Colonies...”

“Meldan, Varana, Solomania Lorendo, Palendo, Maceno and Norillia,” Kaz recited.

“And also Kharasia’s one colony, Maska,” Em added. “But the only one of the Eastern Nations that allows us to establish offices within her borders is Kharasia. Kharasia extends all the way to the Bright Ocean, but with Corisa occupying the eastern half of Kharasia that cuts Maska off from the rest of Kharasia and also forces the Guild to leave as well. That’s a lot of land to lose influence in. Naturally the Guild Council is excited.”

“Why do we have to leave just because Corisa owns the land now?” Kaz asked.

“Corisa is one of the lands in which we are not allowed to do business,” Raff told him.

“Their wayfarers all work directly for the High King’s government,” Garth added, “and part of a religious order, or so I’ve been told.”

“They’re celibate?” Em asked.

“No,” Raff shook his head. “If our own scientists are right, that would be a good way to eventually run out of people with wayfaring ability. But marriages are all arranged and boys with the wayfaring talent are taken from their families and trained in special schools.”

“Boys only?” Em asked. “What about the girls?”

"I don't know for certain," Raff admitted, "but the rumor is they're killed if they show any sign of talent. In practice, I'm sure the girls are taught to not even try to use the Wild energy."

"Sometimes that can't be helped," Em recalled her own break-out as a wayfarer.

"True," Raff agreed, "but that would be a death sentence if caught." Raff paused to glance at the papers in the pouch. "There's lot here to read," he commented dryly, but I suppose we'll have time to memorize it along the way, since the immediately important part seems to be right at the top of the first page. We're to leave immediately. Let's get packed. Garth, do you have any parties scheduled to head north to Ezekia?"

"Ezekia?" Garth asked. "not that I know of. You're planning to go by sea?"

"It doesn't sound like we can expect safe passage by the overland route through Paknalan, does it?" Raff countered.

"There have been cases of Piracy on theInnerSea ," Garth warned him.

"Then it's a matter of choosing possible danger over almost definite danger," Raff considered. "I think we're still safer going with the pirates."

"You may not say that if you run into some," Garth pointed out.

"I wouldn't be all that pleased to get held up at the Ranaan border if the Sultan's troops decided we seemed suspicious," Raff shot back. "Look, we're not your average wayfarers, Garth. Em and I can defend ourselves and Kaz here was able to make his way across the Southern Continent on his own, not all that long ago."

"Maybe I should spare a drop of pity for the pirates then," Garth chuckled.

The Way to Kharaskva

One

Ezekia had been a major port city for over two millennia and was best known for the tall lighthouse that could be seen over thirty miles away at sea. Very few, however, knew that it was not the original lighthouse that the ancients described in several books. That structure had toppled during an earthquake just a century after its construction and was replaced by a second tower. The second fell during a storm after sea level had risen to undercut the foundation. The current lighthouse would have been two hundred yards inland when the first was built, but now, due to the rise in sea level, was right on the waterfront.

"It's a shallow and treacherous harbor," Journeyman Dmitri Kalkos told Raff and Kaz as the sailors of the brig *Star of Kapi* cast off from the dock. "The channel is narrow for the first hundred yards or so."

"Why is that?" Kaz asked.

"A thousand years ago, this was still part of the city," Dmitri explained. "If you look down through the

water you'll be able to see stone blocks and broken statues where they were abandoned as the water rose."

"Why did the water rise?" Kaz asked puzzled. If he had not grown up in a small village well inland in Teltoa he might have assumed it had something to do with the tide, although even then he would have been wrong.

"The world is an ever-changing place," Raff explained to him. "It is what the scientists call a dynamic system. The ground is always moving. It moves very slowly so it's hard to measure, but it does move. Normally it moves in one direction, north for example, but other times it moves upward, that's how mountains are formed. In this case the ground around here subsided. It moved downward. Of course it happened slowly enough that to the people living here it actually looked like the sea was rising, but actually sea level stays pretty much the same except for the daily influx and outflow of the tide."

Then as Raff explained the concept of tide to Kaz, the *Star of Kapi* reached the outer harbor and, in an area in which there was more room to maneuver, was able to set sail at last. Em, having stowed her gear in the cabin below, came up on deck and joined them. "Did you get any suggestions on the best route to Kharaskva, dear?"

"Last night in the hall," Raff replied. "You went to bed early, but I stayed up with some of the boys."

"Drinking, of course," Em laughed.

"You know wayfarers," Raff returned her laugh. "Anyway, they were pretty insistent we stay away from Pernatia. With Kharasia pulling her army completely out in order to fight the Corisans, Holrany is casting hungry eyes on Pernatia."

"I pity the poor Pernatians," Em remarked. "They always seem to be caught in the middle."

"Geographic placement is everything, I guess," Raff shrugged. "In any case the Holrans are fortifying their frontier towns and sending increasingly more men into them. I would guess they're planning to occupy Pernatia just as the Kharasians had been doing."

"I doubt that will last long," Em predicted. "Once Kharasia pushes Corisa's armies back across the border, His Imperial Majesty is likely to turn his eyes westward again."

"Possibly," Raff shrugged, "but it's all a matter of how quickly and easily he can drive the Corisans out. Corisa's population is very high, while Kharasia is sparsely populated, especially in her eastern provinces. Depending on how many men Corisa threw into eastern Kharasia, it could be years before the emperor can even consider retaking Pernatia. In the meantime, however, Pernatia appears to be trying something new. Her nobles are banding together and establishing a diplomatic corps. It's an interesting strategy when you think of it. Most Pernatian who were trained as soldiers were conscripted by Kharasia to go to the eastern front, so they don't have more than an honor guard in uniform around any of them, but if the Pernatians have learned anything over the last few hundred years as a buffer state between Holrany and Kharasia, it's how to argue convincingly. I imagine right now they are giving the Holrans all sorts of good reasons why occupation would be a waste of time and money."

"So you think they'll remain independent of both powers?" Em asked.

"It's hard to say," Raff shrugged, "but this may be their best chance for years to come. I think they may have to choose a leader from among their ranks to pull it off, though. In any case, I decided that our

fellow wayfarers are right and we should avoid traveling through Pernatia, so once we land in Tartha, we'll change ships and sail on to Donnessa. Too bad the timing is so abysmal, though. This is definitely not the right season to travel to Karaskva. Still, I'm sure that's part of why Corisa attacked when they did. It will take at least two months, probably longer, for the emperor to get enough troops in the Eastern provinces before he can even start fighting back. By then the Corisans will be fairly well entrenched, I imagine."

"That's why we were called in," Em reminded him. "His Imperial Majesty is hoping for a diplomatic solution."

"We'll try for that of course," Raff agreed, "but the Corisans aren't known for making concessions. They kind of remind me of a stubborn old housecat. What's mine is mine; what's yours is mine and so forth. They're arrogant and greedy and believe the gods, or whoever they worship, I never have understood their religion much, gave them the entire world to own. The rest of us are just too stupid to understand that."

"This ship seems amazingly well-armed for a merchantman," Em opined, changing the subject.

"Twelve guns is a bit more than the average commercial ship," Raff agreed, "although it's not a strong defense if they were to encounter a man-of-war. However, we were warned that piracy is active on the Inner Sea."

"Will we see pirates, do you think, Raff?" Kaz asked.

"It's a possibility," Raff conceded, "but it's just as likely we might not. If every ship were attacked, then no one would be sailing and the navies of all the nations who border the Inner Sea would be out patrolling. No, pirates do not go after everything in sight. That would only lead them to having to fight the regular navy. Instead they pick and choose their targets. They want to get in and get out as quickly as possible. With a brig like this that is fairly well-armed, they'll probably decide to go after easier prey."

"Unless they're desperate," Em amended.

"Pirates are almost always desperate," Raff retorted. "It isn't exactly the way to a soft and pampered life. In any case I've heard, a man turning to piracy is doing so because he doesn't feel he has any honest options left."

"Oh, I imagine greed may play a big part as well," Em added. "Laziness too. It's easier to steal a rich man's money than it is to earn it honestly."

"There is that," Raff agreed, "and from what I heard last night many of those pirates claim to be privateers."

"What's a privateer?" Kaz asked.

"A matter of situational ethics," Raff replied. "Some nations pay or at least license the captains of ships to attack and plunder merchant ships flying the colors of enemy nations. Of course the victim, assuming he survives, rarely reports he was attacked by privateers. To him they're pirates regardless of whether or not they have letters of marque. In addition to that, some nations, like Yug, tolerate the piracy even if they have not authorized it so long as the pirates keep their hands off the right ships. From what I was told most of the pirates stay away from Yugan ships, or at least so far they have managed not to get caught. In any case you have to realize that a high incidence of piracy is probably one percent or more of all ships

being attacked.”

“Well, hopefully we won’t get to see for ourselves,” Em told him.

The next few days were quiet as they crossed the Inner Sea. Em and Raff continued Kaz’s lessons in several subjects, not the least of which were in the various languages of the places to which they were headed. However, on the fifth day, while in sight of the island of Navenos, the lookout, perched in a crow’s nest high up on the main mast, spotted two warships flaying Yugan colors approaching from opposite directions.

“We should be safe,” Dmitri told Raff confidently. “This is a Yugan merchantman after all. They’re probably just checking us out to make sure we’re who we seem to be. That’s not uncommon. We’ll heave to for an hour or two and then after they’ve had a chance to inspect the cargo, we’ll be on our way again.”

“Has Yug been buying foreign-made ships lately?” Raff asked as he took a closer look at the approaching ships.

“No, of course not,” Dmitri shook his head. “Yug has some of the finest shipwrights in the world. Why do you ask?”

“Because in spite of the flag of Yug,” Raff replied, “the ship off to starboard is of Cracian manufacture and unless I’m completely ignorant of the subject the one to port was built in Paknalan.”

“That’s odd,” Dmitri admitted, “but one is a first-rater man-of-war. The other is a sloop-of-war, a sixth-rater, but still better armed than we are. Where would pirates get such well-armed ships?”

“The same way they probably get any other ship,” Raff replied. “They steal them. If they could afford to buy a ship, especially one of that size, they wouldn’t need to resort to piracy. Of course, sometimes a crew will mutiny and kill the captain and any man loyal to him, but I suppose that’s a form of theft as well.”

“I’d better go warn the captain,” Dmitri decided.

Just then the Cracian man-of-war opened fire with twenty five canons going off at once. “I think he might be suspicious by now,” Raff informed him.

Most of the initial volley missed, but one salvo of canister shot shredded most of the sails on the mizzen mast and a ball shot got lucky and snapped off the mainmast just below the top of the mainsail. A second volley, this from the Paknalan sloop hit the hull just at the waterline. It was a long shot, too far to send the ball crashing through the hull, but the planks were badly cracked, seams were split and water started seeping into the hold although that was not readily apparent to any on deck.

The crew members of the *Star of Kapi* were making too much noise with their own shouting to hear their orders. However, they were well drilled and didn’t actually need to hear the call to battle stations. The guns of the *Star of Kapi* were small, but quickly loaded and the first return volley was fired, albeit raggedly, before the pirates could fire their second.

A lucky shot hit a gunpowder magazine on the sloop-of-war and the resulting explosion took that ship out of the fight. Flames shot up and enveloped the sails. By then, however, the first-rater was firing again.

Raff and Em's wayfaring abilities were sorely tested as they used the Wild energy to divert the approaching cannon shot. They managed to stave off the next two volleys as the man-of-war approached with a glowing golden halo of energy that surrounded the merchantman, but there was a wayfarer on board the large warship too and while Raff and Em were occupied with their defensive measure, he used Wild Energy in its most basic form to punch a hole in the hull in the same place the first cannon shot had cracked the *Star of Kapi*'s hull planks.

Kaz reacted before Raff or Em could and sent a similar blast of energy right back at the man-of-war, disintegrating most of the pirate ship's hull. What was left of the pirate ship fell abruptly into the sea. Turning to see what had become of the sloop, the wayfarers saw the last of the flames being extinguished as it too, slipped into the salty water of the Inner Sea.

"This ship is listing," Raff finally noticed. "Were we hit?"

"Just at the waterline," Dmitri informed him. "We need to find a way to cover that hole or we'll be swimming all too soon."

The ship abruptly tilted over in the opposite direction causing the hole to swing up and out of the water. "I can't hold her like this for very long," Raff grunted.

"Get something to cover up that hole!" Em shouted. The *Star*'s bosun leaned out over the gunwale and saw what had happened and immediately started shouting orders. Several planks were quickly fitted over the hole and nailed to the hull. Then Em directed a few tendrils of Wild energy to warm the tar and other caulking materials and to cause them to flow just enough to seal the larger gaps between the hull and the makeshift patch. As soon as they were done, however, Raff collapsed to the deck and the ship rolled heavily back and forth.

Two

Raff came to several hours later in the cabin he shared with Em. Emblem was not in the compartment, but Kaz was. The boy looked up as Raff grunted and tried to sit up in bed.

"Em says you are to stay in bed," Kaz told him.

"Nonsense," Raff scoffed, and sat up abruptly. A moment later he had cause to regret the move as a wave of dizziness washed over him. "I hate it when she's right," he groaned, lying back down again.

"Stay there," Kaz advised. "I'll get you some hot tea and something to eat."

"Tell Em I'm up, please," Raff requested.

"Well, yeah," Kaz retorted sarcastically. "She'd use me for bait if I didn't."

Kaz left the cabin quickly and on looking around Raff realized the reason it was so dark was that Kaz had left the oil lamp burning low. Leaning over from his cot, Raff adjusted the wick and the room brightened immediately. "Better," Raff grumbled to himself, "now if I only had something for this headache. Haven't felt this way since... Oh, I really hope it's just a headache." As he was finishing that spoken thought the door to the cabin opened

“Hoping for a headache, dear?” Em asked. “Not your usual optimism.”

“I was just noting I feel a little the way I did when I was recuperating on Semlari,” Raff admitted.

“Well, that’s understandable,” Em nodded. “You over-exerted yourself when you were attacked by the sea-serpent and this time you did it, by heeling the ship over while the repairs were being made. Honestly, dear you really ought to learn when to ask for help.”

“It’s hardly the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do,” Raff told her.

“Did you realize you were still maintaining our defense against canon shot?” Em asked.

“I was?” Raff asked.

“I suppose it slipped your mind, dear,” Em told him gently. “I didn’t dare try to interrupt you at the time- afraid what might happen if you suddenly lost control of what you were doing. I suppose you may be the only wayfarer who can do things like that without realizing it.”

“Control is the whole key, though,” Raff sighed. “That’s why I had so much trouble after Semlari. It took a long time to retrain myself. What if I have to do that again?”

“Then that’s just what you will do, Raff Cawlens,” Em told him. “However, I think you’re just tired right now. Later, after you’re completely, rested you can try a few simple tricks and see how they work for you.”

“It will be best to wait until we’re on land,” Raff decided. “If I lose control it could destroy what’s left of this ship and I don’t feel like swimming the rest of the way to Yug.”

“I doubt you’ll lose control,” Em assured him. “This doesn’t feel like it did last time. This is more like those occasions when you tried to work when too tired.”

“That’s when I start losing control,” Raff reminded her.

“Exactly,” Em nodded, “that’s why you need to rest. I hear Kaz returning. Don’t scare him any more than you already have today.”

“I brought you some sort of fish stew,” Kaz announced, “and a pot of tea.” He had also brought half a loaf of a thick-crust bread and an orange.

“Thank you, Kaz,” Raff told him, pouring some tea into a cup. “So are repairs to the ship complete?”

“We’re not sinking any longer,” Em reported as Raff took a sip of tea and then turned toward the fish stew, “but I think we might be moving faster if we swim. We’re low in the water although there’s a bucket brigade of sailors working on bailing out the hold, but even when they get out all the water we may have to get out and push. We haven’t got an intact sail and only one mast is left standing. They’re working on jury rigging the ship, but I suspect we’ll be sailing at a crawl from here on out.”

“Good thing we’re in Yugan territorial waters already,” Raff commented around a spoonful of the stew.

“We are?” Kaz asked.

“We were in sight of Navenos,” Raff explained. “That’s half owned by Yug. Paknalan claims the other half.”

“So that’s why the pirates that lived started swimming that way,” Kaz decided. “I wondered why none of them came toward this ship.”

“They would have been killed if they tried,” Raff explained, tearing a piece of bread off for himself.

“Oh, yeah,” Kaz nodded. “That makes sense too. They were trying to kill us, weren’t they?”

“Just not doing a very good job of it,” Raff agreed.

It took another week to limp into Tartha. Raff was tempted several times to reforge the path or sea lane they were following in order to shorten the time and distance they would need to travel. The Wild was flexible that way and a master Wayfarer could bend it to some extent to lengthen or shorten distances. However, as Raff had to remind himself, being capable of an act did not give him free license to actually perform it.

There was an art to forging a path and only an accomplished and experienced master could judge exactly how much a path could be compressed or stretched without repercussions to the Wild environment around it. The Wild was malleable, yes, but the creatures within it would suffer if it were bent too much. In this case it would probably harm the local fishing grounds only, although the food supply of a million people was no small consideration. It could also draw two traditional enemies, such as Yug and Paknalan closer together and thus facilitate warfare between them.

Raff idly studied the sea path and saw that it was fairly taut, meaning the areas of stability it connected had drifted apart since it had been forged. When a path became too taut it could break and a rapidly deteriorating path was often more harmful than a drastic reformation of that path was likely to be. However, in Raff’s consideration, it had not been stretched to dangerous limits just yet. A path, whether on land or sea, was a very strong construct and would not break easily.

He made a mental note to report the path’s condition when they reached Tartha, but kept his hands off of it, secretly wondering if he was doing so out of prudence and concern for the state of the world in general, or out of fear of losing control. Then, because it bothered him to have to think that way, he tried a simple task, the creation of a wayfarer’s lamp.

A wayfarer’s lamp was really nothing more than a small light produced from the Wild energy in the area. It was, in fact, such a simple and easy ability that even most apprentices could accomplish it and anyone who reached journeyman status could produce such a light within a stability. A moment later a small, bright light, exactly as he had envisioned it, appeared and he was able to relax.

With that off his mind for now, he went to find Kaz to see if the boy could learn the same trick.

Three

Tartha was an ancient city that had been founded long before the Church of Meni had been the gleam in any mortal’s eye. The remains of temples to the ancient gods, lovingly maintained by the locals, still stood on a high plateau overlooking the modern city, although the largest building in town was the Church that had long since replaced them.

On checking in at the Guild hall, the wayfarers learned that it would be at least a week before they could sail on to Donessa. Raff was briefly tempted to requisition a carriage and continue on land, but realized that would force him to travel directly through the disputed territory in Pernatia.

“Well, I guess we have a week for sight-seeing,” Em shrugged. “The Lord knows there is a lot to see in Tartha.”

“Actually,” the local Guild master, a middle-aged gentleman from Lower Crace named Pedro Baleron began, “I had hoped I could co-opt the services of both you and your husband in a judicial matter that has come up recently.”

“What sort of matter?” Raff asked.

“It’s an inheritance case,” Pedro replied. “That’s not normally something that requires a tribunal of masters to decide, I know, but the heirs are insisting. In fact it’s the only thing they seem to agree on.”

“I imagine a lot of money is involved in this,” Raff noted dryly.

“Of course,” Pedro agreed.

“And all the heirs are claiming the money has nothing to do with it?” Raff continued. “They just want some keepsakes of their beloved family member?”

“Actually, no,” Pedro replied solemnly. “It’s all about the money and none of the heirs are bothering to try and hide their greed.”

“That’s refreshing,” Raff chuckled.

“You wouldn’t think so had you been here for their first go-round,” Pedro sighed. “The will has been lost, if there ever was one, and in Yug, the state only gets the estate if there are no heirs. In Crace, of course, they could rant all they wanted and the money would just go into the King’s pockets. I tried suggesting that all claimants split the inheritance evenly, but both parties want it all and insist on a tribunal. It’s their right, of course, to have the matter settled by three master wayfarers, but it’s so rarely invoked that I’ve never heard of anyone going that far.”

“I have,” Raff admitted, “but the last case I heard of was in the Green Lands over a century ago – well before any of us were born.”

Guildmaster Baleron suggested, “If you’re willing to hear the case, we can begin tomorrow morning.”

“Will that afford the claimants enough time to arrange their cases?” Em asked with concern.

“They’ve been demanding this for over a fortnight,” Pedro sighed. “If they aren’t ready now, they should have kept their mouths shut. I’ll send some apprentices out to inform them they have a date in court. If one party fails to show up, it will make our decision all the easier.”

Just as in Racca, Em arranged for Kaz to train with the local apprentices. That was an advantage of having to stay for a while in a major city. Before they had reached Racca, the boy would have been forced to be on his own had something come up that she and Raff had to deal with. Being alone was not a great hardship to Kaz. Much as he had tried to fit in with his age mates, he was always a little different.

Among his people, it was not a difference that brought shame, but the other children naturally kept their distance because even though they did not understand it, they knew deep down that Kaz would eventually undertake shaman training. Just as one did not cozy up to the shaman – he was a man who stood apart and was respected, honored, and even feared to some extent – one also did not try to get close to an acolyte, even when the acolyte did not yet know what he was. The only true closeness and love Kaz had known had come from his family, especially his mother and sister, although his mother's brother had also spent a lot of time with him which was understandable because in their matrilineal culture, Kaz was the man's direct heir. Kaz's father also remained close to the boy even though by the rules of their culture his heirs would be the children of his sister.

These were not cultural values shared by Em or Raff, so when they naturally started treating Kaz in the same way his mother and uncle would have, he naturally began to think of them as family too. He preferred to spend his time with them. The path-forging session with Raff outside of Racca had been one of his happiest moments since being forced to run for his life from the Alonu, but he understood Raff and Em had their own business to attend to. So when thrust into classes with apprentices almost twice his age, he went willingly, eager to learn the things his new adoptive parents wanted him to.

And he did learn quite a lot even if some subjects were beyond him just yet. In Tartha, the teacher gave him some beginners' texts when he was teaching a subject at the university level, but he was amazed at how well Kaz could pick up the wayfarer techniques they all practiced in their laboratory sessions. There, at least Kaz could hold his own and, in fact, performed better than apprentices with years of experience in some exercises.

While Kaz was spending time with the apprentices, Raff and Em joined Pedro in hearing the inheritance case Pedro had asked them to assist in. There were only two contestants. One was a noble from Menino and the other lived in southern Crace, but both claimed to be the closest living descendant of a Yugan count who had died nearly two months earlier.

Em was very skeptical that a nobleman would not have left a will and was certain that somewhere there must be a piece of paper with instructions as to how his estate should be disposed of, but Pedro explained that while that was the norm in both Crace and the Green Lands, here in Yug, estates went, by default to the closest related survivor so only when that was not the wish of the deceased would a will be drawn up. "The unusual part of this case is that we know of no immediately close survivors," Pedro explained.

"But both parties are definitely related," Raff asked. "There's no chance that either or both of them are claiming fraudulently."

"You'll have the chance to examine the proof personally," Pedro assured him. "In fact that, according to the regulations I've read, should be the first matter we consider."

"Why are we going to the house of the deceased?" Em asked. "Aren't these matters generally conducted in the Guild hall?"

"Not in Yug," Pedro replied. "Here it is customary to hold the hearings on the disputed estate. And to tell the truth, the home in question is quite pleasant. If it were not threatening to rain this morning, I'd suggest we hold our court in the garden."

Both claimants turned out to be genuinely related to the deceased count, although both were cousins of the third degree. "Neither of you were closely related to Count Gregor Theron. I'm amazed there are no closer members of his family ahead of you," Raff observed.

“May it please the court, your honor,” the Meninan, Lord Guillermo Otasso, began, “our family is not large and those few relatives who might have stood before us in line to this estate passed away at an early age.”

“That is not unheard of,” Em allowed, “but it is also not common for a third cousin to solely inherit a man’s estate.”

“It is also not common for the third cousin to be the closest survivor of such a large estate as that of Count Theron,” the other claimant, Jaime Honorie, replied. Em had heard of the Honorie family. They were a noble family who lived in the mountainous border region between Upper and Lower Crace, however she had never met any of them. This Jaime was a second son and while his father had provided for him generously, he obviously desired more. A careful check through his genealogy showed that his elder brother had died, leaving that estate to his son so that Jaime’s claim to be the closest descendant of Count Theron superseded that of his nephew.

There was also no denying why either man was so eager to claim the count’s estate. Gregor Theron had not only been a noble peer of the Court of Yug, but an exceedingly rich man. Either aspect of the estate was appealing to the two men, and together Em and Raff imagined the chance at inheritance was irresistible. However, in this case, at least, their motives for making their claims were not in question. Even if the money could be split, the title could only be held by one person. The King of Yug might choose to declare the title vacant, of course, but to date he, too, had decided to wait on the Wayfarers’ Guild decision.

“Lord Otasso,” Raff asked on the third day of the hearing. “When was the last time you saw your cousin, the count?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Otasso demanded.

“Did you ever meet him?” Raff asked. “Have you ever even been to Yug before this?”

“No, I haven’t, but Count Theron visited us in Menino on numerous occasions until he became too old to travel,” Otasso replied.

“Well, at least I used to stay here all the time,” Jaime maintained. “I used to come with my family every summer.”

“And our mutual cousin abhorred you,” Otasso commented acidly. “He used to laugh about you all the time.”

“That’s a lie!” Jaime shouted back. “He loved us and invited us back frequently.”

“Then why is this the first time you’ve been in Yug in fifteen years?” Otasso shouted back. After that Pedro decided they needed to break for the rest of the day.

“We’re not really getting anywhere, are we?” he asked Raff and Em after the contestants had left the estate. “Are either of you capable of truth-saying?”

“We both are,” Raff replied, “but that won’t help us here. We already know they’re telling the truth about their relation to the deceased, and whether or not he liked one better than the other doesn’t really have much to do with it. I’m sorry I brought it up, actually, the initial question just slipped out of me.

You've told us yourself, though. According to Yugan inheritance laws the estate goes to the closest surviving relative unless specifically stated by the deceased."

"Does that statement have to be in writing?" Em asked.

"There are cases when bequests have been made on the deathbed," Pedro admitted. "Two witnesses are the standard number, but there have been cases in which a single witness to the bequest was considered sufficient."

"Let's talk to some of Count Theron's friends," Em suggested. "I imagine he must have had some and perhaps he said something to one of them about what he expected to happen to his estate."

"We're running out of time, Em," Raff reminded her. "We only have three days left. After that our ship leaves with or without us."

"Then let's not waste time," Em retorted. "We can talk to the head servant and the others too. They ought to know who visited most frequently."

Raff and Em spent the rest of the day and evening and then the entire next day speaking to various friends of Count Theron. None of them were of much help. The count had evidently never discussed his estate nor how he expected it to be disposed of, nor had any of his friends ever asked about it. As one had told them, "It would have been unforgivably rude, you know. Asking about that sort of thing just is not done."

"But people do occasionally talk about their heirs, don't they?" Em asked. "I know we do in Crace."

"Some do yes, and if I were to bring up the subject of my son's inheritance I suppose it would be polite of someone to ask further questions to a point, although unless I volunteered details there would only be so far such questions could go, don't you know." That turned out to be the most informative person they talked to.

Finally, on the fifth day of the investigation, Raff, Em and Pedro met once more with the contestants. They had pretty much decided that unless something new came up they would be forced to split the estate evenly and leave the matter of the title to the king's discretion. It was the title they decided to discuss first.

A curly, blond-haired young servant boy, about Kaz's age, was serving coffee while Raff spoke, "As you are both equally close to the deceased there is no clear decision regarding the county title and we are ruling that is strictly up to the king. Even if we ruled in favor of either of you, it would still be up to the king, of course. The Guild of Wayfarers has the power to make judgments in civil cases when both parties agree in advance to submit to arbitration. We even sit in judgment over some criminal cases when requested by the proper authorities, but we can only make recommendations concerning the disposition of noble titles. Even if one of you had a clearly stronger case, we could not award you the county. Being the situation is what it is, we will be making no recommendations to His Majesty. Now as to the rest of the estate..."

"What is that you're wearing, boy?" Lord Otasso demanded of the young servant, interrupting Raff's speech. Otasso grabbed the boy by his right arm and pulled him closer, forcing him to drop the coffee pot on the floor. "By all that is holy! You're wearing my cousin's ring."

"The old count gave it to me, my lord," the boy protested.

“Lying little snipe!” Otasso snarled, hitting the boy with a sharp back-handed slap.

The boy fell to the floor but even while getting back to his feet he replied, “No! It’s true. He told me it was mine now. Told me to keep it.”

“You stole that ring, didn’t you?” Jaime joined in the harangue.

“No!” the boy cried and the two contestants both tried to take the ring from him.

“Stop!” Raff shouted. Using a bit of Wild energy, he backed up his command with the sound of a rumble of thunder and brilliant flash of light. “Unhand the boy. Lad, come here please. What’s your name?”

“Petros. my lord,” the boy replied.

“Did Count Theron really give you that ring?” Raff asked gently.

“Yes, my lord,” Petros insisted.

“He’s lying!” both Jaime and Otasso denied vehemently.

“Am not!” Petros maintained.

“May I see it, please?” Raff asked, ignoring the protests of the two contestants.

“Here, my lord,” Petros held out his hand so Raff could see the ring, although the boy kept his hand clenched as though afraid Raff might try to take the ring away.

“God in Heaven!” Pedro swore, “It’s the count’s signet ring.”

“And a time honored means by which to designate a successor,” Raff added, “assuming young Petros here is telling the truth. Em? You’ve got a gentler hand at this than I do.”

Em got out of her seat and approached the boy, who stepped nervously away from her. “Don’t worry, dear,” she told him softly. “This won’t hurt. I promise.” Then she put her hands on either side of the boy’s head, feeling his blond curls flatten under the gentle pressure. “Now, relax and please tell me again. Where did you get the count’s ring?”

“His Lordship gave it to me just a few days before he died, my lady,” Petros told her more calmly than he had been just a moment ago. “He said it was mine to keep.”

“Did he tell you anything else, Petros?” Em asked.

“No, my lady,” he shook his head. “He was very tired and fell back asleep almost immediately.” Jaime and Otasso started their protests again, but Em paid them no mind.

“Thank you, Petros,” Em replied. “Will you do something for me, please?”

“Yes, my lady,” Petros nodded eagerly. “Anything!”

Em smiled. “Please get the head servant for me, will you dear? I’d like a word with him.”

“Yes, my lady,” Petros told her happily, “and I’ll get another pot of coffee for you. I’m sorry I dropped the other one.”

“That’s all right, Petros,” Em smiled again and watched the boy race out of the room.

“You’re going to listen to a servant?” Jaime demanded, echoed by Otasso.

“He was telling the truth, gentlemen,” Em confirmed. “Count Theron did indeed give the boy his signet ring on his deathbed and if it means what I think it does, that servant is the sole heir to this estate.”

“Nonsense!” Jaime exclaimed

“Preposterous!” Otasso shouted.

“Theron might have given the ring to Petros for some other reason, you know,” Raff told her. “Merely giving someone a ring, even one with your arms on it, does not necessarily make the recipient an heir to anything more than the ring itself.”

“It does if the giving of that ring is meant to be something more than a simple thank you gift,” Em maintained. “I’ve been looking at the portraits in this house for several days now and maybe I’m wrong, but I detect a certain resemblance between that boy and several of the faces in those paintings.”

“Good thinking, Em,” Raff commended her.

“Impossible!” Jaime argued.

“Even if Count Theron was his father, the boy is obviously a bastard and not a legitimate heir,” Otasso told them heatedly.

“A man may choose to recognize an illegitimate child as his legitimate heir, gentlemen,” Pedro told them. “I will wait for the head servant.”

From there it was simple to prove that the boy was, indeed, the illegitimate son of the count by way of one of the maids. None of the servants had been aware of the gift of the signet ring, but the only one who did not know of the relationship between Petros and Count Theron was Petros himself.

“It seems unlikely that the count would have chosen to give the ring to the boy, Petros, if it were not Count Theron’s intention to recognize Petros as his only son,” Raff decided in a formal statement two hours later. “We hereby award the entire estate to Petros Theron. As I said earlier, it is not within the power of the Guild to grant titles of nobility, but if His Majesty decides to act as his predecessors have, the boy will inherit the county as well. This case is now closed.”

Jaime and Otasso continued to complain and argue, but in the end, their protests fell on deaf ears. “You may appeal to the king if you like, gentlemen,” Pedro told them, “but this is the final word of the Guild of Wayfarers to which you agreed in advance. No court is likely to reverse this decision.”

Four

With the inheritance case settled, Raff and Em had only one day to tour the ancient temples with Kaz, and then the next day they were back at sea and on their way to Donessa, Kharasia's one port on the Inner Sea.

The ship they boarded was a howker, or as it was pronounced in Yug, a hourque. Two-masted, the main mast carried three large square sails, but the mizzen mast was lateen-rigged. It was a broad, clumsy-looking vessel with a rounded bow and was steered by a tiller fitted over the bulwarks on the stern. This hourque differed from the howkers Raff was familiar with in that it was both larger and had a few cabins to accommodate passengers. However, she was primarily a cargo ship and boasted no armaments.

"No pirates from here on?" Kaz wondered aloud.

"Possibly not," Raff shrugged. "When a merchant ship sails without so much as a single large gun, it's usually because the owner doesn't expect trouble. Sometimes he's right and other times not so right. However, according to what Pedro told me, most of the pirate activity is to the south where we had our encounter."

There were no pirates to be seen anywhere along the way, but Kaz did spot dozens of fishing boats as they headed for a narrow strait that connected the main body of the Inner Sea with a somewhat smaller extension. "This passage we're in," Em told Kaz as they sailed, "is called the Zagrani Highway. Over three thousand years ago the Emperor of Zagran attempted to conquer the world, but when he got to Yug, although it was called Tasea in the ancient world, the Tasea navy was too strong to attack directly, so instead the emperor marched his army across this passage by lining all his ships up and filling this strait with them. Supposedly the decks were filled with dirt to the gunwales so it really was like marching on a highway."

"Must have been amazingly calm water that day," Raff added. "Not like today. Actually according to the story, it took three days to get his entire army on the other side and then he lost over half the ships when a storm blew up before they could get them separated and cleared of the artificial highway on the decks. However, he was able to continue the march on Tasea although he eventually lost the war and was forced to retreat."

"Yes," Em agreed, "it was considered one of the pivotal moments in history when the Zagran advance was halted in Tasea. After that their empire retracted back to its traditional borders and was in turn conquered less than one hundred years later when the Taseans made their attempt to conquer the world."

"Did they?" Kaz asked.

"No one has ever completely succeeded," Raff told him, "but they did reach halfway to Corisa and that's about as well as anyone has ever done."

The hourque was a slow ship and it took nearly another week travelling north from the Zagrani Highway before they made port in Donessa. Kaz was glad to be able to stop sailing at last, but groaned when he learned it was still another eight hundred miles to the Kharasian capital city.

Donessa looked strange not only to Kaz but to Em and Raff as well. The city was a strange mix of architecture from the Northern countries with boxy buildings topped with steeply pitched roofs beside round spires and towers with onion-shaped domes, all brightly colored and highlighted with gold leaf.

The Guild's hall in Donessa had one of the most garish of the onion domes in the city and it was there,

after one night of rest, that Raff acquired a small carriage with excessively wide, iron-shod wooden wheels built especially for driving through mud and snow and a pair of horses for their trip northward to Kharaskva.

“It’s cold,” Kaz complained as they set out the next morning. “How can you stand it?”

“You get used to it after a while,” Em assured him. “Isn’t your coat warm enough?” On their arrival in Donessa, she had purchased a trio of bulky fur-lined and trimmed coats for all of them along with the strange-looking furry hats and gloves that were stylish among the locals. Kaz wasn’t comfortable with the hat and kept taking it off.

“The coat’s fine,” Kaz reported grudgingly, “but my hands are still cold even with the gloves on.”

“Then stop taking off the hat,” Raff advised from the driver’s seat at the front of the small carriage. “It makes a big difference if your head is uncovered.” Kaz looked unconvinced, but he put the hat back on without further comment. An hour later, white flakes started falling gently out of the sky.

“What’s that?” Kaz asked. Having grown up in the tropics, snow was an unknown quantity to him. Nothing like this happened even in all the strange tales told by the shaman.

“It’s called snow, Kaz,” Em told him. “This is what rain looks like when it freezes.”

“Freezes?” Kaz asked. “You mean like the ice you put in your drinks sometimes?” He had been amused by Raff’s and Em’s desire to make their water and tea unnaturally cold on a hot day by adding clear pieces of what they explained was frozen water. It took Kaz a long time to accept that ice really was nothing more than very cold water and only after watching several pieces of ice melt and eventually evaporate was he convinced Raff and Em were not just having him on.

“That’s right,” Em agreed. “Although in this case the water freezes high up in the air, while it is still a mist. Then it forms these crystals you see floating down.”

“Sometimes they do more than just float down,” Raff added. “Sometimes they smash down like a tropical rain storm, but frozen like this, with high winds and lots of blowing snow. When it’s like this, snow is all very pretty, but in what we call a blizzard, it can be lethal to get caught outside.”

“It’s springtime now,” Em assured Kaz and the world is starting to warm up. “You saw all those pretty flowers in Tartha. Soon it will look and feel like that here too, but the warm weather comes later here in the north. There’s still a fair chance, however that we could get caught in a late-season blizzard so we have to be careful.”

The snow turned out to be just a light flurry and an hour later the sun came out and started melting the small drifts that had piled up at the edges of the road. It wasn’t for another week that they encountered their first really bad weather.

It started out as another light flurry with just a few flakes in the air, but after a few minutes, the flakes became smaller, dust-like and began to fall heavier. Another few minutes later they were unable to see more than a few dozen yards ahead and there was already half an inch of snow over the path and the wind was picking up.

“We need to find shelter, Raff,” Em called out from the back of the carriage.

“Good idea,” he replied dryly. “Problem is the last village was half an hour behind us and, if reports are accurate, the next is about twenty minutes ahead.”

“Probably longer in this weather,” Em fretted.

“Can’t you do something about the weather?” Kaz asked.

“You know something about wayfaring that I don’t, sport?” Raff asked with a chuckle.

“I just thought you could use the energy to keep it away or something,” Kaz replied. “You know, like with the cannon balls?”

“I can keep the flakes from hitting us, but that’s not likely to do a lot for us, since I can’t keep them from falling altogether,” Raff explained. “There are some forces even a wayfarer is powerless against.”

An hour later, however, with five inches of snow on the ground and no end in sight, they still had not found the next village and Raff reported, “I think we’ve strayed off the path.”

“How did we do that?” Kaz asked. “I thought we were following a line of stability imposed on the Wild. That’s how you described it.”

“It’s not as easy when there’s something on top of the path, Kaz,” Em explained. “A path is constructed on the surface. It doesn’t matter if it’s on the surface of the land or the sea, but when something gets on top of it. It’s hard to see. You’ve already seen how paths look different on the water. But water is transparent, you can see through it. Snow is opaque and when you get too much of it, you can no longer see through it. We can use our abilities to see through a few inches, maybe even a foot of snow, but it’s not easy and it doesn’t take much to lose the path that way.”

“The good news is the land is fairly flat around here,” Raff. “If the snow would let up, we could probably see the village we’re looking for.”

“It’s getting very windy, Raff,” Em commented. “We need to find shelter soon.” Just then the wheel of carriage hit a small bump and the carriage rocked back and forth as the horses pulled it over. “What was that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Raff replied, “but I have a sneaky suspicion we just found a road.”

“A road?” Kaz asked. “Out here in the middle of nowhere? Who would build a road here?”

“The Ken,” Raff told him and reined the horses to a halt. “Hold up a sec, I’ll find out for sure.” He jumped down from the carriage and kicked the snow aside with his feet. “Yep. It’s a Kenlientan road. I think we’d better follow it. We’re more likely to find a Ken village ahead than we are a human one if we go on looking for the path.”

“Just get us moving again, dear,” Em told him with an edge in her voice. “It’s getting very cold out here even with wayfarer tricks to keep us warm.”

Raff climbed back into the carriage and drove on. It was an hour later with close to a foot of snow on the ground and the horses laboring to move on, that they spotted the buildings of a small Ken town just ahead. “Looks like everyone has their fires going today,” Raff observed.

“The Ken don’t tolerate cold any better than we do,” Em reminded him. “We need a safe place for the horses and a place for us as well. Does this village have an inn of some sort do you think?”

“I would think so,” Raff replied. “The Ken travel between towns and cities even more than humans do. The inn would also be a place to socialize in the evenings. You know as well as I do that the Ken aren’t all that different from us. Well, they prefer wines and still meads over beer in general, and their distilled spirits are like nothing else in the world, but they still like to sit around a fire on a day like this and shoot the breeze, swap lies and listen to news from places far away.”

“Sounds like you’re well qualified,” Em chuckled. “But what about the horses? We can shield our stable auras and I’ll help Kaz with his until he gets the hang of it, but you may recall we needed the help of Elder Saltaxis when we visited Tamag Methin.”

“We didn’t need his help,” Raff denied. “I just let him damp the horses’ auras out of courtesy. He’s a better magician than I am, but that’s a fairly simple spell.”

“So long as we don’t insult or injure our hosts,” Em replied. “Now, Kaz, you need to learn how to control your own aura of stability.”

“Why?” Kaz asked.

“Because the stability humans rely on to stay healthy is actually harmful to our Kenlienta friends,” Em replied. “It’s not really all that hard to do, but a wayfarer’s aura tends to be stronger and naturally extends farther from his body than that of a normal human and your aura is very strong, so you need to think about pulling it back in toward yourself. Let’s practice now before we actually find the inn.”

Kaz had no trouble following Em’s instructions, but his attention tended to wander and his aura would expand back to normal whenever he stopped thinking about keeping it contracted which was almost immediately after working to get it nicely contracted. Em decided she had better keep him close by for the first few hours at least.

The inn was as Raff expected at the center of the town, but before they even came to the driveway to the carriage house in back, a dozen curious Kenlienta had come out of the inn to see the humans driving up the street.

“I greet you!” Raff shouted to them over the storm. The words seemed a bit stiff because he used the formal mood of their language, but that having been said, he dropped into the informal mood as he continued. “Would there be a room for the night for three cold and weary travelers.”

“Certainly!” a tall elderly Ken man in an apron replied. This was obviously the landlord. “We don’t get many humans here.”

“Ha!” Raff laughed. “That sounds like the end of an old joke!”

“You’ve heard it?” the landlord asked, laughing a bit himself.

“Or one very like it,” Raff allowed. “Let me put my horses in your stable and we can tell old jokes at length if you like.”

“Are they safe to leave with animals of the Wild, sir?” the inn keeper asked.

"I'll make sure they are," Raff assured him. "Kaz, you want to help me with the horses?"

"Sure," Kaz agreed.

"Em, why don't you go on inside and start warming up?" Raff suggested. He and Kaz had no trouble finding a spot for the horses and the carriage, but Raff gave Kaz a bit more coaching at aural control before they joined the others inside. The boy was still having trouble, but he was doing better before they entered the Kenlientan Inn.

The inn looked, for the most part, like any human inn or tavern Raff had visited in the world. It had two large rooms on the ground floor, each with a fireplace providing heat. One of them was also being used to keep a large pot of soup warm although the actual cooking seemed to be going on in the kitchen.

As Raff and Kaz entered, they could hear Em performing a Cracian folk song to the delight of the locals and two young men were attempting to accompany her on their own musical instruments, a flute and a small lap harp. Human music used different scales than Kenlientan music did however, and the resulting mix had a strange, otherworldly sound to it.

"Welcome back Raufanax," a older Ken woman greeted him as he shook the snow off his boots and started unbuttoning his heavy fur coat.

"We've met, revered elder?" Raff asked in reply.

"Thanks for the honor, but I'm no elder," the woman replied with a smile. "Not the way you mean it. But we did meet some years ago. You were here during the plague."

"Was I?" Raff asked. "I seem to have been almost everywhere that year, but I don't recall a lot of details."

"Hmm," the woman considered with a smile. "Yes, I imagine after the first hundred towns or so we all look alike. I was somewhat younger, but was one of the few healthy ones left at the time you arrived. I recall you were very tired and I served you a cup of coffee."

"And put me right to sleep," Raff recalled, "Yes, I remember now. Was there something in that coffee?"

"Water," the woman, who introduced herself as Diarla, informed him. "There are times even coffee will not keep you awake. You slept almost twenty-four hours, grabbed a quick meal and then you were off again. I'm the one who put the dried meat sticks in your saddlebags, though. You obviously had not been eating regularly."

"True enough," Raff laughed as a young Kenlientan girl about a year or two older than Kaz, brought him a large mug of something hot and steaming. "Cocoa?" Raff identified the liquid uncertainly.

"Yes, Revered Raufanax," the girl told him and then turned to give Kaz a similar mug adding, "Careful. It's very hot."

"I wasn't aware the Ken had colonies in what we call Palendo," Raff commented.

"There are not many of us in any of the lands across the Dark Ocean," Diarla admitted. "Just a few towns and very small cities. However we do occasionally trade with humans and this cocoa came from a merchant who passes through on a regular basis."

“There aren’t many merchants who can even reach Kenlientan towns,” Raff commented.

“This one stumbled across us with a wayfarer a few years ago in much the same way you must have,” Diarla informed him. “There’s a wayfarer path just a few hundred yards to the east of the village and our road comes even closer, so it is understandable in a snow storm if you cannot tell one from the other. Anyway, that was about seven years ago now and while they were here, the merchant found he had a market among us, so he has been stopping by several times a year ever since. We didn’t like the tobacco. Well, most of us didn’t, but the cocoa was a new delight to us. We, of course, have had coffee and tea even longer than humans have.”

“The Ken are a single nation,” Raff observed. “It’s understandable that you will have trade that extends as far as you do. Humans are split into dozens or hundred of different nationalities, some of which do not get along with the others.”

“Your world is more complicated than ours is, Raufanax,” Diarla laughed, “although even we cannot entirely escape politics.”

While Raff and Diarla were talking the Ken girl who had brought the cocoa sat down next to Kaz. “Hi,” she greeted him in the informal mode, “I’m called Faisha. Welcome to Therin Kal.” Kaz had only learned a few words so far in the Kenlientan language and what he did know was heavily accented by his own native tongue. He was having trouble following what Faisha said, but the girl picked up on that quickly and switched over to Kharasian, which at least Kaz had been practicing for the last few weeks. “So what’s your name?”

“Kazani Basan,” Kaz replied, “although most just call me Kaz for short.”

“I like the sound of Kazani,” Faisha smiled. “It’s like speaking music and it goes well with your skin color. Such a beautiful rich brown, like strong dark tea. I’m told the Ken of the Southern Continent have that color skin too, but I’ve never met any.” Curiously, she reached out with her hand to touch Kaz’s.

He yanked his hand nervously away, then looking and sounding embarrassed, he explained. “Em warned me I’m not in complete control of my aura yet. The stability I create could hurt you.”

“No it won’t, silly,” Faisha laughed, her long light brown hair swung back and forth revealing her slightly pointed ears and the small gold earrings with green stones set in them attached to the lobes of those ears. “Although you don’t know me, so you wouldn’t. . . Anyway, I know all about human stability, but I’m in training. The elder has accepted me as his student. If I learn all my lessons well, I may be an elder myself someday. One of the first things I learned was to protect myself and others from stabilities. It’s usually my job, in fact, to take care of the animals that come with the merchant who sells us that cocoa. Good, isn’t it?”

“Very good,” Kaz admitted. “I’ve never had this before.”

“No?” Faisha asked, “but it’s a human drink.”

“Not among my tribe,” Kaz informed her.

“I don’t understand that,” Faisha admitted. “Why are there so many different human tribes and nations? Wouldn’t it make more sense to live together as a single people?”

"It might," Kaz admitted, trying to come up with an explanation that would make sense even to him, but finally settled for, "That's just the way it is."

"Isn't it strange, Kazani?" Faisha asked. "We Ken live in the Wild and make a virtue out of almost chaotic change, but we are one people united. Whereas you humans live in stabilities, and far from being a single people are broken up almost chaotically into so many different nationalities."

"Maybe if our stabilities were all directly connected like the Wild is, we would be one people too?" Kaz suggested.

"I doubt it," Faisha laughed. "The Ken love change. For us change is life. Look over in the other room, Even on a day like today we're repainting the walls in there and my brother is carving some designs on the furniture. For those who stayed at home instead of coming out in the storm, they are making similar changes to the places they live in. However, for all our love of change, most of us aspire to a life that will stay the same from day to day."

"Unchanging change?" Kaz asked confused.

"Change is something we do to our external world, not to our inner selves, Kazani," Faisha explained. "Humans are just the opposite, I think. You live in stabilities and rarely change the places you live except for when you have to, and yet your lives are so chaotic. Maybe that's it," she decided. "You live in stability, so change must come to you in other ways. Interesting. I'll have to ask the elder about that when he gets back from Yakrut."

"Yakrut?" Raff asked interestedly. "Has the Grand Council of Elders started yet?"

"Not yet, Raufanax," Faisha informed him. "Elder Sheronax just left a few days ago. Is that where you are headed?"

"I'm afraid I haven't been invited," Raff admitted.

"Surely that was an oversight," Faisha opined.

"Perhaps not," Raff shrugged. "A change in your system of government is a matter for Kenlienta to consider. Humans, no matter how friendly and honored, probably ought to allow the Elders to make decisions for themselves."

"That will be a first for you, Raff Cawlen," Emblem laughed as she joined them. "You've been trying to find an excuse to attend the Council since we first learned about it while in Crace."

"I have," Raff admitted, "but maybe I shouldn't have."

"Easy to say that now that we'll be in Karaskva while the Elders meet in Yakrut," Em chided him.

"Yes it is, isn't it?" Raff laughed. "So how are Elder Leraxa's proposals being viewed here?"

"I think she has some interesting ideas," Faisha replied before anyone else could, "but I'm not certain how it will work if all our elders are expected to spend so much time away from their towns and cities."

"I believe Leraxa expects that most elders will select someone to speak for them most of the time," Em told her.

“But the ones who live closest to Yakrut will probably be able to speak for themselves,” Faisha pointed out. “Won’t that give them an unfair advantage? We always defer to our Elders. It’s the way we are brought up.”

“Then at least one of us is going to have to be a little naughty,” Diarla laughed. “Better get used to it, dear. In a year or three or four, that might be you representing us in Yakrut.”

“I’m too young,” Faisha denied with another shake of her head that exposed her finely shaped ears.

“You won’t be for long,” Diarla pointed out. “That’s the problem with being young. It doesn’t last forever.”

“Life is change,” Faisha replied sententiously.

“See?” Diarla laughed. “You’re sounding like an elder already.”

Faisha blushed furiously but noticed that Kaz was staring upward. “Something wrong, Kazani?” she asked.

“The ceiling,” he breathed. “How did I miss that before?”

The ceiling had been built with wide wooden beams spaced every six feet. The beams had been ornately carved and as Kaz studied those carvings he detected designs carved into the wider lines of the over-all design, but when he took a second look it seemed there were finer lines sketching out yet another set of designs inside the internal design. He wondered if perhaps there was still smaller work he could not see or if the entire set of carvings were part of a much larger piece he was too close to detect.

However, it was not the carved wood that caught his eye but the frescos swirled into the plaster between those beams. Each panel was a different sort of painting. The panel directly overhead was a meticulously painted night sky, complete with a moon, some days shy of being full. Kaz tried to remember what the current phase of the moon was and thought it might be precisely at it was painted on the panel.

Another panel depicted a forest canopy and a third was the view of the rooftops of a small town. Kaz assumed it was Therin Kal, but he had not been able to see enough of the town to be sure. A fourth panel seemed blank until a second look showed it was textured like canvas. It was the roof of a tent, he decided.

“My brother’s work,” Faisha told him. “He did the trees just last week, and finished the carvings again just yesterday, but he redoes the moon every day. I think he’s starting to tire of that, however. It’s been two years since he first did the night sky. Before that it was a daytime vista and along with the sun there was a bird that flew back and forth over the course of a fortnight. It’s probably just as well if he does get bored, though. He’s run out of space to do his carvings up there. We’ll have to replace the beams so he can start all over again.”

“But why?” Kaz asked. “Why replace the beams? They’re gorgeous.”

“Life is change, Kazani,” Faisha told him. “That is the central core of Kenlientan belief and philosophy. According to that, we try to change something about our homes each day, but sometimes the only way to change is to start over again. If it were not so disruptive, we might well tear the entire building down and

rebuild it from scratch. That will happen eventually, but this inn is only ten years old. That makes it middle-aged by this town's standards. In another ten years we'll think it's ancient."

"We rebuilt our homes in Sarahn every year at the end of the wet season," Kas told her.

"Every year?" Faisha asked delightedly. "How positively Ken!"

"Well we built them with woven grass walls and thatched roofs," Kaz admitted. "It's best not to let grass dry out too much, you know."

"I suppose," Faisha agreed. "The homes of my grandparents had thatched roofs, although I seem to recall hearing such roofs lasted longer than a year if we wanted them to. However, there were incidents of fires because a burning coal ignited the thatch. Slate-tiled roofs are so much safer. And we can repaint them every day in the summer if we feel like it."

They continued discussing a wide variety of subjects until dinner time and then Kaz and Faisha talked a few more hours into the night until both were yawning uncontrollably.

Five

"When you come right down to it," Diarla told Raff and Em later that evening, "Elder Leraxa's plan of a permanent government may do the Ken Nation some good. To date the Council of Elders has not really accomplished much beyond maintaining our unity."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Raff asked pointedly.

"Yes, of course," Diarla agreed readily, "but human culture and technology has been changing rapidly for over two hundred years now while the Ken nation has remained stable for over a millennium. Our system worked well until recently, but our air and water supplies are being affected by human actions and the pollution causing that is starting to have a stabilizing effect on the Wild itself. These changes are endangering all Kenlenta and we need a means by which we can react to and correct such situations. A stronger central government might be the answer to that."

"Maybe," Raff nodded, "but strong governments have a tendency to try to get stronger still by making the people they govern less able to control their own lives."

"I can't deny that Leraxa may be taking a good idea a little too far," Diarla admitted, "but if we don't do something, there may not be a Wild left after a century or two."

"Elder Nienta from the Southern Continent gives it a bit longer than that," Em replied. "She estimates that in two centuries seventy percent of the world would be stable."

"But how much of the Wild will be in the middle of the oceans?" Diarla asked. "How much will be in areas no one is capable of living. I imagine the areas in which are capable of supporting Kenlenta will have disappeared long before that."

"Of course, you do realize that Kenlenta pollution affects the stabilities as well," Raff pointed out.

"But not as extensively," Diarla maintained, "and it's really just another good reason for finding a way to

respond to unfavorable changes sooner. We can clean up our own environmental pollutants, but we have no control over what humans do.

“You have your relationship with the Wayfarers’ guild,” Em pointed out. “You know the Guild will do what it can.”

“We know that, although there have been emissaries to the Guild and so far there has been no improvement,” Diarla pointed out.

“I hadn’t heard you’d been to the Guild,” Raff commented. “The first I heard about this was when we were on the Southern Continent.”

“You don’t sit on the Guild Council anymore, Raff,” Em reminded him.

“I don’t. No,” Raff shook his head, “but I’m not completely cut off and I still have one or two friends on the Council. I’d have expected to hear about it from them. Diarla, I promise you I’ll look into this as soon as I get back to Taundon. Now, more than ever, I wish I could be in Yakrut. At least that way I could see the Kenlentan concerns are known to the Guild.”

“I imagine Leraxa and her crowd will find a way for the Guild to get the word,” Diarla told them.

“But will the Guildmasters like their choice of language?” Raff countered.

When they woke up the next morning it was to find that three feet of snow had fallen overnight. “That’s a lot of snow,” Em admitted when Faisha opened the front door to show how the snow had piled up.

“We’re used to it,” Faisha shrugged, “Although we usually have the elder here to help clear the streets. Magic helps, but while most of us know the spell, I’m the only one here who can do it better than if I just pick up a shovel.”

“We’ll help,” Em offered. “I know we cannot use our usual wayfaring tricks while here, but I’ve had a little magical training and Raff is much better than I. Maybe you can teach Kaz how too, although be careful, he still doesn’t have complete control of his aura.”

“I know,” Faisha laughed. “It’s kind of childlike and endearing.”

“You’re both still children, dear,” Em reminded her. “It’s all right to be childlike.”

“Everyone else is working on clearing the street, Kazani,” Faisha told him a little while later, “but we need a path to the carriage house and then to the street, at least if you want to move on before spring.”

“Spring?” Kaz asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s the season things start to warm back up again,” Faisha explained.

“Is it more like the wet season or the dry?” Kaz asked.

“Both and neither,” Faisha laughed. “You come from the tropics, Kazani. I’ve read about how it is there, but here we have four seasons. Winter is the cold season. We’re nearly at the end of that. Spring is the time in which it starts to warm up, although you can still have a big snowfall or two in the early spring. Then it’s warm and even hot in summer and in the autumn it starts to get cold again.”

“Sounds horrible,” Kaz decided.

“No,” Faisha disagreed. “Just different. Now, I know you know how to manipulate Wild energy.”

“That’s wayfaring,” Kaz replied.

“Yes, but wayfaring is not magic,” Faisha told him. “You use the energy to create a stability. In essence, you tame the Wild. In Ken magic we do not try to force Wild energy to do anything, but we do try to persuade it. You’ve learned how to change the nature and properties of the Wild, Kazani, but we don’t want to change it. We just want it to help us while at the same time staying as Wild as it was before we started.”

“How do you do that?” Kaz asked.

“It’s easier to show than describe and if you were a Ken, I would do just that, but Em warned me that wayfarers will tend to do it wrong. What I’m going to do is only use that energy that is already predisposed toward moving the snow away as I want it to. Knowing that, watch what I do.”

It was not wayfaring. Kaz could see that. When a wayfarer manipulated the Wild energy, another wayfarer could see it being brought together and forced to act in the manner desired. What Faisha did, however, was to release forces that naturally worked along the vectors she desired, but Kaz could see a lot of potential energy that was left unused. At first he was not sure how she did it, and then he realized that all the forces were equalized in their natural state. They were all pushing against one another and cancelling one another out. What Faisha was doing was encouraging the forces to kind of go around each other.

“You’re letting the forces push the snow both ways off the path,” Kaz observed.

“That’s right,” Faisha agreed.

“But why aren’t opposing forces continuing to push against each other?” Kaz asked.

“It’s not the forces I’m playing with, Kazani. It’s the snow,” Faisha laughed. The potential energy is there already, I’m just keeping the flakes from hitting each other. Look. There are forces that want to push the snow. You see that, right? But for every flake being pushed off to the left, for example, there is one being pushed to the right that’s getting in the way. I’m allowing them to miss each other”

“One flake at a time?” Kaz asked skeptically.

“No, many at once,” Faisha told him. “Here watch me again, I’ll do it slowly. Then you can try.”

It took the better part of the next hour, but Kaz began to get the hang of it and to Faisha’s surprise he eventually improved to the point at which he was moving more snow than she was.

Even so, it took three days to finish clearing the streets of the town and for Faisha to help Raff and Em clear a way to the nearest Wayfarer path. By then the snow had started to melt and was now not as deep as it had been. Another day brought warm air which melted the snow still more and allowed the wayfarers to travel on.

Once back on the wayfarers' path, Raff, Em and Kaz took turns clearing snow ahead of the carriage and so their progress was vastly slowed for the next few days. Once, unable to make it to the next village, they had been forced to turn back to stay in one they had passed two hours earlier. Passage through the villages on their way slowed them down even more because the Ken magic would not work well there and the wayfaring techniques they might use were equally suppressed by the villages' stability. However, after four days of slowly breaking their way through the heavy snow, they reached an area where not only had the snowfall been lighter, but where subsequent melting had nearly cleared the path.

"I hope it doesn't melt too much," Raff commented. "The paths in Kharasia turn into quagmires every spring with the wheel of carriages and wagons digging deeper and deeper ruts into the ground. It generally takes half the summer for wayfarers to repair those areas and make them passable again."

"So, go around the soft areas where that happens," Em suggested.

"You can't always do that," Raff replied. "Journeymen are rarely capable of leading a party off the path and then finding it again, but more often those places occur in narrow valleys or inside otherwise impassable forests where travelers are forced to make their way in the same ruts others have left, or if they try to go around, the ground next to the morass is just as soft and after a few carts just becomes part of the general mess. We don't have to worry about that right now though. The snow might be melting but the ground is still frozen. Too bad we can't build paved roads through the Wild like the Kenlenta do."

"Why can't we?" Kaz asked.

"There aren't enough Wayfarers to go around now as it is," Raff told him. "I think you'd need several on every road you built. Also keep in mind our stabilities might look like they're stationary, but they do move. The thread of stability we call a wayfarers' path is flexible and can be stretched or compressed. A solid road would buckle or break. Even if they did not, eventually a road would not go where you wanted it to."

"Then how do the Ken build roads?" Kaz asked.

"Human stabilities move around in the Wild like pieces of wood on the surface of a lake," Raff explained, not for the first time, "although much, much slower, of course. That's why we always have to ask for directions when in a town with a Guild office. The way to the next stop might change. Kenlentan settlements, however, do not move. No features of the Wild do. Mountains might slowly collapse or new ones might gradually grow up. New rivers might begin to flow or old ones dry up and other geographical features might change with time and they do, but nothing actually changes location save through the natural geological forces that are at work even within a stability. They just seem to work faster in the Wild is all. However, while the way to Karaskva may have changed since we got our original instructions, the towns and cities of the Ken Nation are where they've been since the Kenlenta built them."

"So stabilities move around," Kaz summed up, "but the Wild is steady as a rock?"

"Ironic isn't it?" Raff chuckled.

In the distance they could hear a pack of wolves howling. “What’s that?” Kaz asked nervously.

“Wolves,” Em replied. “It sounds eerie but there’s nothing to be worried about.”

“Wolves rarely attack wayfarers unless they are completely desperate,” Raff added. “Very few Wild animals will go near a path and if forced to cross one will do so as quickly as they can.”

The howling seemed to follow them for the next two hours which did nothing for Kaz’s piece of mind, but they stopped following as the wayfarers reached the next human town.

It snowed hard again a few days later, but this time they did not have to travel far to reach the human city of Martisgrad. “I think this may be winter’s last gasp,” Raff opined as they warmed themselves up by the fire of the inn they found on the north side of that city.

“Maybe so, sir,” the innkeeper replied, “but if you’re headed for Kharaskva, you’re both going north and will have to make your way through the mountains. The cold and snow hangs on longer up there.”

Raff agreed that was a good point and they stayed in Martisgrad an extra day beyond the time it took to clear the streets before continuing on to the capital.

After that the weather remained cold and dry as they climbed up into the mountains that stood between Martisgrad and Kharaskva. The sky was a clear blue with only a few puffy clouds in sight, but Kaz’s ears pricked up as he thought he heard a rumble of thunder.

They had just managed to make their way over a wide saddleback and were headed back down when Kaz spotted the movement off to their right. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Oh dear!” Em fretted.

“Avalanche,” Raff explained. “Sometimes when the snow falls it is not particularly stable. When that happens it might stay in that unstable condition for a while until something like the wind or a loud noise or a rockfall dislodges it, then it will start falling down a mountainside, often picking up more snow, rocks, trees and, well anything in its path and all that comes falling down. We aren’t in its path, fortunately, but we may have to do some more path clearing later on.”

“We’re not in the path of that avalanche,” Em told him, “but there’s a human town in the valley that is. And there are probably Kenlenta down there as well. We need to do something.”

“We might be able to divert the fall,” Raff replied, “but there’s no proof it might not then hit someone else we can’t see. Still if we just let it go, we know there will be deaths in that town. Join with me to summon as much Wild energy as we can.”

Em and Kaz instantly joined in, using all their ability to harness the energy that flowed all around them, but it was Raff who then took that energy flow and directed it toward the avalanche and pushed it to the east of the valley town below them. Then once past that danger, he redirected the power to slow the material of the avalanche down until it stopped. Left unchecked it might have gone much further, but as Raff slowed it down the entire mass came to rest. Once certain the danger was over, Raff released his hold and sunk back into the driver’s seat of the carriage, thinking, *I don’t remember standing up*, before he collapsed with exhaustion just as he had on board the *Star of Kapi*.

Em just sighed and requested, “Help me get him in the back seat, Kaz. He overdid it again.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Kaz asked.

“Very,” Em replied. “But that’s the way Raff works. He does what he has to and worries about the consequences afterward. He’s going to be weak and his control may be uncertain for a while like it was after that pirate attack, but he has time to recover before we get to Kharaskva.”

“Maybe we should take an extra day off in the next town?” Kaz suggested.

“Good idea,” Em agreed.

Raff only woke up enough that evening to find his way to his room in the next inn and then slept until the next afternoon. By then he was anxious to get going, but Em put her foot down and told him. “No. We all need a break. That avalanche and then taking care of you wasn’t easy on us either you know. We’ll stay here tomorrow as well. Then we can leave on the day after.”

Raff looked like he wanted to argue the point, but one glance into Emblem’s eyes told him it would be a losing battle this time. They stayed the extra day before moving on and it turned out to be a good decision. It began to warm over the next week so that by the time they reached the capital of Kharasia the air was clear and warm, the snow was melting and thousands of daffodils could be seen poking their heads up through the snowy gardens as they rode through the streets of Kharaskva.

Kharaskva

One

Kharaskva was another city filled with colorful onion-shaped domes although these were built with interesting textures to go along with the colors. However, the over-all color of the city’s buildings seemed to be charcoal gray. The bricks were all that dark, almost black color and even the paving stones in the street while a lighter shade of gray left the overall impression that this was a city without color. Kaz decided that might explain why so many homes were decorated with brightly painted doors and window sills and while there were so many of the yellow and white daffodils in all the gardens. In a city that looked this dark any splash of color had to help.

However, even with the brightly painted woodwork and the flowers almost everywhere in sight, Kaz’s mind only seemed to register the dark grayness of the city. He found himself longing for a green leaf or two on the trees, but unlike in his home in Teltoa, the trees here were deciduous, dropping their leaves in the autumn and spring had not yet managed to wake the local trees from their annual hibernation.

The Guild hall in Kharaskva stood out as a flame of color in an otherwise dull-looking city. The Guild had chosen to use light yellow bricks for the walls of their building and had painted the trim dark red. Kaz was not sure why, since this was not a color scheme he had seen in other Guild halls, but after all the dark gray sameness, it was a relief to see something this different.

The hall was a large, more active place than even its counterparts in Racca and Tartha. It stood six stories high and the first three floors were all offices with people hurrying back and forth on business. “Have we walked into another emergency?” Kaz wondered out loud.

“No,” Raff laughed. “This is what the big halls are always like. Wait until you see the main hall in Taundon. It takes up two whole city blocks and rivals the palace in size. Well, let’s check in and find out what we’re supposed to do next.”

“You’re late!” Master Lazar Ravensk accused them an hour later after they had managed to find their rooms and submit their Way reports.

“The weather got in the way, Laz,” Raff shrugged.

“Yes, I can see that,” Lazar noted, picking up Raff and Em’s report. “You lost the path and ended up in a Kenlienta town?”

“We got lucky,” Raff chuckled.

“I’ll say you did,” Lazar told him sternly. Then his expression warmed just a bit. “Still, if any party of wayfarers could be expected to survive a blizzard, I’d put my money on you two. So how are our friends in the Ken Nation?”

“A bit worried about the affects of human pollution on their environment,” Raff replied.

“Yours is not the first report I’ve received on that,” Lazar admitted. “Any news on what’s going on in Yakrut?”

“I was going to ask you that, Laz,” Raff replied.

“You’re the one they call Raufanax, the ‘Bringer of Health,’ Raff,” Lazar reminded him. “The rest of us they respect if they’re in the mood or need something, but you they actually hold in high esteem.”

“Regardless of how I’m held in their minds,” Raff responded, “I wasn’t invited to Yakrut. I can tell you this much. The Ken of the Southern Continent are skeptical about Elder Leraxa’s plan for a stronger centralized government that meets on an almost perpetual basis. I think she’s learned too many of the wrong lessons from human civilization, but maybe that’s part of our pollution too. In Therin Kal, we spoke to an older Ken who admitted that while she thought Leraxa was taking a good idea a bit too far, the notion of a more active and vital government was probably a good thing. Obviously, I haven’t been in a position to take a poll of the entire Ken Nation, but from what I learned from Elders Saltaxis and Nienta, Leraxa probably has enough of her fellow elders persuaded that she’s going to get her way on all the important parts of her proposal.”

“If she’s as good a politician as I hear,” Lazar sighed, “she’ll have all sorts of extra stuff in the proposal she makes that she doesn’t care about – items she can bargain away so she can get a new constitution, or whatever they call it, written precisely as she wants it.”

“Sounds about right,” Raff nodded. “What’s been happening in the rest of the world? We’ve been out of touch since leaving Tartha and didn’t really have time to catch up either there or in Tinap.”

“I see that,” Lazar noted. “I don’t know any other master wayfarers who seem to attract so much activity around them.”

“The legacy of a misspent youth?” Raff suggested.

“Possibly,” Lazar chuckled in spite of himself. “On the other hand you may be setting yourselves up for an instant pass into Heaven if all this work is your penance on Earth.”

“We’re not that good, Laz,” Raff replied seriously. “No mere mortal is.”

“There are supposed to be saints, Raff,” Lazar shot back, “but, no, neither you nor Emblem is one of them. Okay, well the major problem is what brings you to Kharaskva. While His Imperial Majesty was busy bullying the Holrans, the High King of Corisa decided to stroll off with half the Kharasian Empire. Kharasia recalled every last soldier from Pernatia and the eastern provinces of Holrany and is sending them off to the captured provinces as fast as we can get them there. Timing is everything and Corisa attacked at the end of the summer so word didn’t even get back here for months. Ever try to march an army three thousand miles through the Wild in the dead of winter?”

“Can’t say as I have or even would,” Raff replied.

“Right,” Lazar nodded. “They don’t call it the ‘dead of winter’ without full and good reason. But Emperor Pavel Alexander had to move fast or give up half the kingdom and that quite likely would have been just the start of his losses.”

“And the major stalling point is not having enough wayfarers to escort those soldier to the east?” Raff asked. “Is that why we’re here? To escort Kharasia’s army?”

“No,” Lazar shook his head emphatically. “By now the number of men who have marched east would have been enough to engrave a path even had one not been there before. The path, in fact, has been so reinforced that anyone with even a mere dust mote’s amount of talent could follow it. We don’t need masters of your capabilities for that.”

“Then why are we here. It isn’t very often that the Council sends Em and me together on a mission,” Raff pointed out. “More often than not they try to pull us apart.”

“Perhaps they’ve finally given up,” Em put in hopefully. “After this long they really ought to know better.”

“They sent you both because I told them I needed the most prestigious master wayfarers available,” Lazar told them. “I like to think I’m a good local Guildmaster. I run one of the largest Guild halls outside of Taundon and Carais and I think I do it well, but Pavel Alexander knows me all too well. I’ve been here for years since I was a journeyman and I worked my way up almost exclusively in Kharasia. Before that Pavel Alexander and I were classmates in Erasmzburg. He likes and respects me, but in any negotiations with Corisa, he’s going to expect me to demand everything and give nothing. We all know negotiations are a matter of give and take, so while I started the process, I knew I’d need someone highly ranked that the emperor had not known back in school.”

“Negotiations?” Raff asked. “With whom?”

“Corisa, of course,” Lazar replied.

“Isn’t it a little late to go walking into Ranyang and suing for peace?” Em asked skeptically.

“By the time we get there, Corisa is going to have held eastern Kharasia for nearly a year,” Raff added.

“Actually, the High King’s emissaries are here in Kharaskva,” Lazar told them.

“How convenient,” Raff commented. “I hope they were at least subtle enough not to start making demands before the news from East Kharasia arrived.”

“They’ve only been here for a month, and they came from Myanistan at His Imperial Majesty’s request,” Lazard explained. “It was a foregone conclusion they would come quickly. It’s standard procedure for Corisa to invade a territory then send in the tax collectors.”

“And the High King expects Kharasia to pay taxes?” Raff laughed. “Now that’s something I would have paid good money to see. Sorry I didn’t get here sooner.”

“Not taxes,” Lazar replied. “Tribute.”

“Even less likely,” Raff retorted.

“No arguments here,” Lazar chortled. “But that was just their opening gambit.” They’re offering to sell back some of the occupied provinces, but not the ones bordering theBrightOcean .”

“That will keep Maska isolated from the empire, won’t it?” Em asked.

“I believe that’s Corisa’s intention,” Lazar confirmed. “The invasion ofEastern Kharasia was not exactly bloodless and the loyal Kharasian subjects aren’t making life easy for the occupying army. I understand nearly everyone has developed a fascination for black powder lately.”

“It’s makes for a horrible cosmetic,” Em commented dryly.

“It isn’t doing much for the Corisans’ complexions,” Lazar laughed. “However, the High King has soldiers to spare and if the Kharasian locals make too much trouble he is likely to just orderEast Kharasia cleared of Kharasians.”

“If Corisan emissaries came at all, however, it means they know that can’t holdEast Kharasia for long without harming themselves,” Raff commented.

“You wouldn’t know it from the way they’re thrown down demands,” Lazar told him.

“Corisans have always had a reputation for arrogance,” Raff replied.

“Their reputation falls far short of reality,” Lazar shook his head, “but why should I ruin your first night in Karaskva? They’ll do it for me tomorrow morning.”

“Terrific,” Raff muttered. “I suppose that’s to be expected. From what I’ve been told, an emissary from the High King speaks with his voice and by their traditions he is a demigod. I’m getting too old for this.”

“Nonsense, Raff,” Em chided him. “You’re only forty-six. You’ve still got a good year or two in you,” she added teasingly.

“Oh good, plenty of time to get my rocking chair warmed up,” Raff sighed. “Kaz, you’ve been abnormally quiet.” He turned to look at the boy who had insisted on following him and Em into this meeting.

“He’s asleep,” Em whispered. “Maybe we should continue this in the morning, hmm?”

“Forget it,” Raff replied flatly. “His Imperial Majesty is not going to pay tribute to your king...”

“High King,” the head of the Corisan legation corrected him.

“Whatever,” Raff shot back instantly. In the week since he had joined the negotiations his temper with the ambassadors had been growing increasingly short. They continually refused to consider any Kharasian proposal and their reaction to any counter offer Raff put before them was to ask still more.

“The High King, then,” Em cut in. Her own patience was not fairing any better than Raff’s, but by taking turns, as they often did, they gave each other some respite. So far had neither flown off the handle and done or said something they might regret. “The High King is not going to get tribute from Kharasia. Neither should he expect to receive taxes or even a willingness for His Imperial Majesty to recognize that Corisa owns so much as a square inch of East Kharasia. Since you refuse to consider any respectable offer, I have a demand for you. Get out of East Kharasia. Now!”

“With all due respect, Mrs. Cawlens,” the same legate replied. “East Kharasia belongs to the nation who can hold it. We’re there so it belongs to us.” It was actually an improvement over earlier conversations when he refused to speak to her at all because she was a woman.

“Mister Ambassador,” Em replied coldly, “You captured East Kharasia at a moment when her armies were occupied in other parts of the realm. Now, however, those armies are moving rapidly to expel the invading forces. I guarantee it won’t be as simple or as bloodless as evicting an unwanted tenant.”

“They may try, woman,” the legate responded haughtily, “but they will find the army of Corisa is the largest in the world.”

“Ants come in large armies too, Mister Ambassador,” Em shot back, “But I have no trouble stepping on them.” The legate started to splutter so Em pressed her point home. “It is widely known that for all its size the army of Corisa is not the best trained. Karasia’s army, on the other hand, is one of the best in the Northern Lands.”

“Gentlemen, you do not allow the Guild of Wayfarers to operate in Corisa,” Raff took up the argument, “so perhaps you think we are partisan on behalf of Kharasia, and it is true that we are negotiating on her behalf, but the Guild holds loyalty to no king. We are politically neutral. We don’t take sides. We are the judges of last resort. So while His Imperial Majesty is paying us to argue on his behalf, we are here to see that a fair and just deal can be arranged. If we cannot come to an agreement that is equitable to both parties, there will be carnage in East Kharasia to a degree I doubt any of you have ever seen”

“East Kharasia is a province of the High King now,” the legate maintained stubbornly, “and none of your meaningless bluster is going to change that. If the so-called emperor wants his land back he’s going to have to either fight for it or buy it outright.”

“Why in Hell are you even here?” Raff asked suddenly. Em placed a hand on his arm, a gesture that would normally calm Raff down, but this time he barely noticed. “Did you come here to increase the chances of war. Is it your precise aim to make sure thousands, perhaps millions, of people on both sides of your border are slaughtered? Because if not, I must say you are the least diplomatic diplomats I have ever encountered, and I have encountered quite a few.”

“Perhaps we should stop for the day,” Em suggested, cutting off the legate from issuing further insults, “and all cool off a bit.” The Corisans all nodded their agreement. “Good, then we will meet again on the morrow. However, gentlemen, please keep in mind that where I come from it is the tenant who pays rent for the use of another’s property, not the landlord.” She left the room with Raff close behind her before the Corisan legate could respond.

As they had on each of the previous days of the negotiation, they proceeded directly toward the emperor’s personal wing in the palace. However, they were joined halfway by Pavel Alexander who stepped out of an adjoining corridor as they passed. “A thoroughly irritating people aren’t they?” the emperor observed, quickly gesturing Raff and Em not to bow or curtsy. They did, however, nod respectfully in response. “Has Corisa only expanded by conquest?”

“I’ve only read a few of their histories, Majesty,” Raff replied using the short form of the emperor’s title, “but that is probably the case. It’s hard to learn about Corisa’s past. They don’t write histories the way we do.”

“They don’t start at the beginning and eventually arrive at the present?” Pavel Alexander asked.

“No,” Raff told him, “Not really. They tend to skip around and their writers seem inordinately fond of what our authors call a flashback. Also I’m not sure if anyone ever wrote a history of all Corisa. All I found were stories about particular events. I got the impression that, in spite of having fielded six or seven dynasties and a handful of confusing interregna, they seem to think that they live in the same kingdom founded by Wen Li three thousand years ago and that nothing has changed appreciatively in that time. It’s a laughable claim considering they have been conquered by the warriors of Hontolia at least once and there was an entire dynasty of Hontolians that lasted for centuries. One of their more stable periods from what I can deduce, although it’s hard to tell since as I said if they’ve written a study of their entire history as we might, I have not seen it. Of course, I’m not an expert on Corisan history or much else about that country.

“You seem to know more than most of my advisors, Master Cawlens,” Pavel Alexander observed.

“The Corisans don’t seem to like associating with those of us in the Northern Lands, Your Imperial Majesty,” Em added as they finally reached the emperor’s compartments. He waved them inside and they were soon seated comfortably around a wooden card table with Pavel Alexander and Queen Margharita.

“That last is true enough,” Pavel Alexander admitted. “They rarely accept our emissaries although they do love our merchants.”

“So I’ve heard, but they buy very little and expect the merchants to pay whatever the asking price of whatever a Corisan wishes to sell,” Raff added. “None of their products are cheap and ours are of little value to them.”

“A ruse, I’m sure,” Pavel Alexander replied tightly. “If they didn’t really want our goods, they wouldn’t allow any imports. It’s just that they want to export more than they import.”

“Merchants need to make money in both directions if they are to prosper,” Em noted.

“I don’t think that matters to the Corisans,” Raff told her. “I wonder what Kaz is up to at the moment?” he asked changing the subject.

“Still playing with the prince and princess would be my guess,” Em laughed.

“Ah, the Triumvirate,” Pavel Alexander laughed. “That’s what the servants have been calling them, or so I hear. They do seem to have been up to mischief this past week.” He smiled at the thought.

“I hope Kaz hasn’t been causing trouble,” Em fretted.

“No, just children being themselves,” Margharita assured her. “They started out as most of us did, by sneaking cookies and the like out of the kitchen, but I fear they’ve been escalating their activities and I did have to stop them from pulling pranks on the palace guards. They’ve been much better behaved today.”

“How so?” Em asked.

“I’ve heard barely a peep out of them,” Margharita responded. “Oh... that might not be good, would it?”

“Hard to say,” Em replied. “Do you know where they are?”

“That’s why it may not be good,” Margharita fretted. “I don’t, you see.”

“Well, let’s go find them,” Em sighed. “It shouldn’t take too long.”

“The palace is filled with all sorts of hidden passages,” Margharita explained. “It could take longer than you think.”

“That’s how I’ve been keeping track of your negotiations, after all,” the emperor admitted.

“I knew it was something like that,” Raff chuckled.

“Wayfarers have a special advantage there,” Em smiled at the queen as they stood up. “Where did you last see them?”

They left Raff and Pavel Alexander to continue discussing the day’s talks and moved deeper into the royal chambers of the palace. Finally the queen led Em to a large empty room where various toys were mounted on the wall or laying on the floor. “They were in here playing chess,” Margharita told Em.

“And they left through this wall,” Em added. “One of the secret passages?”

“Not so secret these days,” Margharita laughed, “but I suppose that is what they were supposed to be originally. The switching mechanism is right here.” She pressed a spot on the wall, which sunk into about an inch and the section of wall swung open silently.

“I’ll go first,” Em decided.

The hidden passages were illuminated, albeit dimly, by cleverly placed pin holes and glass lenses, such as those used on ships to direct light to the lower decks. Em walked rapidly through the passage following the trail Kaz and the royal children left unwittingly behind them. Twice she had to double back and try again when it turned out the children had been all through the narrow spaces between the palace walls, but after twenty minutes she and Margharita found them apparently listening to someone in an adjoining

room.

Kaz gestured at them to be as quiet as possible and so Em and Margharita listened with the children, who also allowed them to take a look through one of the peep holes.

The room they were watching was in the apartment that had been afforded to the Corisan legates. Inside the Corisans were arguing with each other. "I don't understand their language," Em whispered to Margharita.

"I do," the queen replied and started translating. It turned out her knowledge had some large holes in it, but she was able to explain that the two men in the next room were arguing about a barbarian who was giving them orders. "I thought they called us the barbarians." Margharita added.

"They call every foreigner a barbarian," Em replied.

"Ah, that explains it. They keep arguing about the 'one from Nillon.' I didn't know the Nillonese had any interest in the rest of the world."

"They control a fair number of islands in the Bright Ocean," Em noted, "but they generally stay off the continent, or have until now. However, this particular Nillonese could just be the exception. It does seem odd that they would allow a foreigner to give them orders, however."

"Their High King told them to listen to that guy," Kaz whispered to Em.

"You understand Corisan?" Em asked him.

"I've learned a little," he admitted. "Nick and Tudi taught me."

"Sounds like I had better start catching up," Em decided. "What else have they been saying?"

"They aren't here to talk about peace," Kaz told her. "Their job is to keep Kharasia from sending the army in until Corisa can sufficiently reinforce their own people."

"Wouldn't they have done that as part of the invasion?" Em wondered.

"They were in a hurry to capture the eastern provinces," Kaz told her, "and many of their troops were busy in Nillon and places they called the South Countries."

"That would be places like Makret, Tyanmar and Hochimar, I think," Em guessed. "They have an army in Nillon, but the High King ordered his emissaries to follow orders from a Nillonese?"

"Sounds wrong to me too," Margharita admitted, "but the Corisans are so used to following orders blindly, I'm sure it never even occurred to them to wonder about it. I wonder what the Nillonese is up to, though."

"Do you know any of his native language?" Em asked.

"No," Margharita shook her head.

"Never mind," Em told her. "I think Raff does. Kids, stick around and listen for a little while longer but don't be late for dinner. I think we need to let Raff and His Majesty know about this."

Three

“We cannot order the search of the head legate’s belongings,” Pavel Alexander told Raff after dinner. “It would be a horrible breach of protocol.”

“It would indeed, Majesty,” Raff agreed. “It would be ample cause to declare war on you. Oh wait, Corisa’s already done that, haven’t they?”

“Your tone is not becoming, Master Cawlens,” the emperor chided him, “but you do have a point. However, regardless of the state of affairs between our countries. We can still not order such an invasion, not because we care about what Corisa might think, but because of the message it would send to our allies. It would be disastrous should they learn we had breached diplomatic immunity.”

“You don’t have to actually order it, you know,” Raff suggested.

“We will not even give tacit permission to do such a thing,” Pavel Alexander shook his head vehemently.

“Well, I can’t say I expected otherwise,” Raff sighed. “Just once, though, I’d like to do something the easy way.”

“Easy way to do what?” the emperor asked.

“Expose the Nillonese as an agent of his emperor,” Raff replied.

“Oh that’s simple,” Pavel Alexander laughed. “The Nillonese are fanatically loyal to their emperor. The Corisans believe their High King is a demigod, but the Nillonese have dropped the demi part for His Divine Imperial Majesty. It’s no wonder he has little to do with the day-to-day running of his miniscule empire. With a title like that it’s amazing if you can get past saying good morning before it’s time for the morning coffee.”

“I think they drink tea,” Raff commented.

“Same thing,” Pavel Alexander shrugged. “You wayfarers are an odd lot, aren’t you?”

“None odder,” Raff replied. “Why do you say so, though?”

“Oh you’re polite enough, I suppose,” Pavel Alexander shrugged, summoning a servant forward. “Brandy, please.” Then he turned back to Raff, “But everyone else we speak with feels compelled to practically breathe one of our titles or terms of address with every sentence. You come as close to treating us as an equal as anyone has since we ascended to the throne. Do you wayfarers all think yourselves the equal of kings?”

“Not at all, Your Majesty,” Raff replied smoothly. “Most of us are commoners by birth. My wife is one of the rare exceptions, but the Guild is a special exception to the rules. It’s in our charter and that charter has been signed by every monarch in the Northern Countries and their colonies, your royal self included.”

“We do not recall having a lot of say in the matter, Master Cawlens,” Pavel Alexander told him. “As a matter of fact, our ministers told me that if we did not sign, the Guild would boycott the empire. They went into great detail as to how that would ruin us all.”

“And has the Guild ever made such a threat to you?” Raff asked.

“You could not operate without a royal charter,” Pavel Alexander replied. The servant returned with a crystal decanter filled with a deep amber liquid and a pair of large snifters. He poured bandy into each of the glasses and then bowed and backed away from his emperor. Pavel Alexander picked up the snifters and handed one to Raff.

“Your health, Majesty,” Raff toasted the emperor.

“And yours, Master Cawleys.”

“Thank you,” Raff inclined his head. “It’s true the Guild needs a charter to operate in any civilized nation, but so far as I know we have never coerced any monarch to charter us.”

“But if you could not do business here, we would have no wayfarers of our own,” Pavel Alexander pointed out.

“Well, I suppose you might have trouble for a while,” Raff shrugged, “but a few of your neighbors do not allow the Guild to do business within their borders; Myanistan, Salasia and Corisa most notably. Although while we cannot open Guild halls or recruit members in those lands, it is only in Corisa that we are not allowed within their borders except under extraordinary circumstance. They all seem to get from one place to another without us.”

“But we have no trained wayfarers that are not Guild members,” Pavel Alexander pointed out. “Trade would grind to a standstill, nor could we move troops around to protect our people and borders without you.”

“And has our arrangement really been so onerous?” Raff replied taking a sip of the brandy. “Very nice, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Pavel Alexander replied automatically. “And though we have both prospered the Guild somehow stands apart from titles and political loyalties.”

“We have to, Your Majesty,” Raff explained. “Where else can anyone turn for a fair hearing when no other court can stay entirely unprejudiced? Who else is needed to act as an arbitrator between employers and their workers? Why else did you ask for us to negotiate with the Corisans in the first place? Because you knew that we would seek the fairest deal for both parties.”

“I had also hoped the Corisans would be negotiating in good faith,” Pavel Alexander admitted.

“Me too,” Raff agreed, “but they aren’t, so now my job is a bit different than the one I thought I had. Well, I’m a big boy and it isn’t the first time I’ve heard so-called diplomats lie. So what is your easy way to expose the Nillonese if he’s an imperial spy?”

“Ask him to swear a blood oath against his emperor,” Pavel Alexander replied.

“What good would that do?” Raff asked. “If he’s a spy, he’ll speak the words, but he won’t mean them.”

“You don’t know the Nillonese, Master Cawleys,” Pavel Alexander told him.

“It’s another place I’m not allowed to go under most circumstances,” Raff admitted.

“I told you, they are fanatically loyal to the emperor,” Pavel Alexander reminded him. “I have entertained Nillonese a handful of times. Nillon is technically a neighbor and we have a trading colony on their northernmost island. Well, they’re a neighbor when Corisa isn’t cutting us off. Anyway, the one thing you will not get a Nillonese man to do is insult his emperor, not in jest, not even to save his own life.”

“Okay,” Raff nodded, finishing his brandy. “It’s worth a try.”

He and Em met with the Corisan legation again the next morning. Raff decided demanding a blood oath outright would be a bit heavy-handed, so instead he raised his coffee cup as though it contained the finest brandy and declared in the Corisan language, “To the health of the High King.” The Corisans all smiled and raised their cups of tea to take a sip and Raff added “And a thousand plagues on the Emperor of Nillon.”

Em braced for trouble, but Raff thought the reactions were comical. The three sub-legates calmly finished taking their first sip of tea, but the head lead legate himself immediately spat out the hot liquid, spraying Raff and Em with a fine mist of tea. Raff calmly used his napkin to dry off his face and noted, “A problem with the tea, Mister Ambassador? I understand that is the same blend you have been requesting each morning.”

“I humbly beg your pardon, Master Cawlens,” the legate replied with a sick smile on his face. “There was a tickle in my throat and I could not help but cough.”

“Of course,” Raff nodded politely. The man had definitely not coughed, not even belatedly in an attempt to cover up his reaction, but Raff let it pass. “Better now? Good. Then I’m sure you’ll be glad to join me in a drink to the health of your High King?”

“Yes, naturally,” the legate replied.

“And to the misfortune of his most traditional enemy?” Raff continued.

“I do not like to drink to the misfortune of any worthy,” the legate replied after a slight pause.

“Commendable,” Raff commented with another polite nod of his head. “I do notice, however, that your colleagues have no problem wishing misfortune on an enemy.”

“That is their prerogative, of course,” the legate responded.

“Really?” Raff asked as the sub-legates all shot questioning looks at the supposed leader. “As loyal subjects of the High King aren’t you supposed to take an oath against all his enemies?”

“An oath, yes,” the legate parried the question, “but it is, of course, up to one’s own conscience on how to live up to the oath.”

“Interesting notion,” Raff responded. “And are you not also required to swear to obey his orders without question? Yes? So I must assume that since the High King has ordered numerous invasions of Nillonese territory, that he does not consider their emperor a friend. In fact was there not a statement just last year proclaiming the emperor an enemy of the High King?”

“What are you getting at, sir?” the legate asked stiffly.

“I know you are from Nillon, sir,” Raff told him.

“I was born there, yes,” the legate admitted, “but I do not live there now.”

“No, at this particular moment, you are living in the Winter Palace of the Emperor of Kharasia,” Raff pointed out. “Next week you may be ‘living’ on the way back to Corisa. Don’t try twisting words with me, sir. I know all the tricks of circumlocution. Now are you a loyal subject of the High King or a . . .” He used a word neither Em nor any of the Corisan legates had ever heard. The Nillonese, however, knew it far too well and jumped up from the table and reached over his back as though trying to draw a sword. He was not wearing a sword, however, but when he tried next to attack Raff unarmed, he found himself unable to move. It was an old master wayfarer’s trick to use ambient energy to hold someone or something motionless. It was the most frequent way used to hold criminals caught in the Wild. Half the masters in the world, however, could also do it inside a stability and Raff was better than most.

The legate struggled to break free for a moment and then to Raff’s surprise he suddenly stepped out of the Wild bindings that held him tight and ran toward a nearby window. There is always some backlash of power when a wayfarer breaks out of another’s grasp that way and Raff suffered a horrible headache in that instant. Em concentrated on fending off a second attack by the Nillonese. Consequently, no one was prepared to stop him as he crashed through a nearby window. Em ran to the window to see the Nillonese disappear around a nearby corner.

“What’s going on?” the first sub-legate demanded. As far as either Em or Raff could tell, that was the first time they had been directly addressed by any of the sub-legates.

“How long have you known that man?” Raff asked as he pushed the pains in his head aside.

“He came to our embassy in Myanistan not too long after we first heard of the invasion of East Kharasia,” the first sub-legate replied. “He presented his credentials, which appeared to be in order and told us that the High King had sent him personally to head this mission to Kharasia.”

“He knew Emperor Pavel Alexander was going to invite you here before the invitation came?” Raff asked suspiciously.

“Myanistan is the nearest country in which we have a regular mission,” the first sub-legate responded, “and it seemed reasonable that the emperor would ask us here rather than send his own emissaries to Ranyang.”

“Or he intercepted the invitation and got to you first,” Raff added. “It’s too cold in here with that window open. Let’s find a warmer place to talk about this.”

Exposing the Nillonese spy was not enough to bring peace between Kharasia and Corisa, however, and, in fact, only complicated the matter. Once it was known that the head legate had been a spy, the sub-legates were no longer certain that they did, indeed, speak with the High King’s voice and admitted to being convinced they had never received permission to negotiate with Kharasia.

“We’re going to need to send our own legation to Ranyang,” Pavel Alexander told Raff tiredly that afternoon. “In the meantime the war in the eastern provinces continues.”

“At least you had not ordered the army to wait,” Raff pointed out.

“No, although we had been tempted,” the emperor admitted. “It would have been the sort of thing a monarch would do in good faith.”

“Corisa would have seen it as a sign of weakness, Your Majesty,” Em told him.

“True,” Pavel Alexander agreed. “So now we need to appoint an ambassador in whom we have our complete trust.”

“Good luck on that quest, Majesty,” Raff told him. “Politicians and diplomats are a slippery lot that way.”

“Actually I have two people in mind already, and neither is a politician nor a diplomat,” Pavel Alexander replied, looking them both squarely in the eyes. “In fact they are two of the most bluntly out-spoken people I have met to date. They almost treat me like an equal.”

“Oh no,” Raff stepped back, seeing where this was going. “We were headed home to the Green Lands.”

“So this will be a slight detour,” Pavel Alexander commented.

“Of several thousand miles and back again,” Raff retorted, belatedly adding, “Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Think of it as completing your original mission to negotiate peace between Kharasia and Corisa. I am sure the Guildmasters would see it that way,” the emperor added.

“I’m sure they would,” Raff agreed sourly, silently thinking, *and they wouldn’t mind if I made it a one-way trip*. “But aren’t we forgetting Corisa doesn’t allow foreign wayfarers to practice within her borders?”

“You said they would under extraordinary circumstances,” Pavel Alexander recalled. “We do believe this qualifies.”

“His Majesty has a point, Raff,” Em told him.

“And we are willing to pay the Guild twice the going rate for the extension of this mission,” Pavel Alexander told them.

“That will get Lazar packing our bags and shoving us out the door,” Raff moaned, “and he’s an old friend.”

“I thought that might be the case,” Pavel Alexander replied.

“Dropping the royal ‘we’?” Raff asked archly.

“The plural form is used when speaking officially only,” Pavel Alexander explained. “My thoughts are my own and therefore expressed in the singular.”

“There’s a mighty fine line between them,” Raff observed.

“I only get to use the singular with friends,” the emperor replied with a smile.

“Very well, Friend Pavel,” Raff sighed. “We’ll accept this new mission and have Lazar rush someone over with the usual ream of paper for you to sign. In the meantime We’d better get packed and ready to leave. If nothing else, I suppose someone is going to have to escort the triplets home.”

“Triplets?” Pavel Alexander asked.

“The three sub-legates,” Raff explained. “I keep getting them confused with one another. Probably because they refuse to use their own names.”

The Way to Ranyang

One

“And why don’t you use your own names?” Raff finally asked the three Corisans as they left the stability of Kharaskva.

The warmth of spring was rapidly approaching the capital of Kharasia, but the best route to the city of the High King, they decided, was still the southern one. The roads would not only be more passable as the ground thawed, but they would be able to avoid the regions in which the armies were by now fighting for possession of East Kharasia. The war might actually be over, in fact, before they reached Ranyang, but both Raff and the emperor seriously doubted that. It was a war that was likely to last for years with all too many deaths on both sides if not brought to a diplomatic conclusion soon.

“A legate speaks with the voice of the High King,” the first sub-legate explained, “therefore it would be hubristic in the extreme to use one’s own name while speaking in his voice.”

“I don’t agree with that,” Raff replied, “but it’s at least internally logical. However I can’t keep saying, ‘Hey, you in the red,’ or the like every time I want to talk to one of you.”

“You may address us by our numerical designation,” the first sub-legate told him.

“One, Two and Three?” Raff asked disbelievingly.

“That will be acceptable,” One replied.

“And do Numbers Two and Three speak for themselves?” Raff asked.

“In negotiations only the ranking diplomat is allowed to speak,” One replied.

“We’re not in negotiations now, are we?” Raff asked pointedly.

“No,” One admitted. “Negotiations are on hold until we arrive in Ranyang. At that time we may not even be the ones to whom you will talk. Your point is valid.” He turned to Two and Three and told them, “You may speak freely as we journey.”

“If we are not negotiating,” Raff continued, “why continue being called by the numbers?”

“Until we report to His Majesty’s Prime Minister,” One replied, “we are obligated to use those designations.”

Raff looked like he was about to argue some more, so Em merely remarked, “When in Meni...” and Raff decided to shrug it off. The Corisans’ customs were their own and it was no concern of his in any case.

“This is a very nice vehicle,” One remarked a few minutes later. “You have installed some sort of shock absorption system in it, haven’t you?”

“Not me personally,” Raff replied with his more normal sense of humor, “but yes. We find that springs take the bumps out of the road as we ride along. Also it makes for a more comfortable ride both because of that and because riders are less prone to motion sickness than in a vehicle without the springs.”

“We do not have such things in our conveyances,” Two put in, “but our roads are smoother, better built than yours so perhaps we do not need springs.”

“I’ll try to take notes while I’m in Corisa,” Raff told him dryly. “Maybe our road-builders will benefit from your experience and you’ll travel more comfortably should you have to return.”

Two failed to catch the sarcasm and replied, “That would be very considerate of you.”

“In our land, however,” Three added, “only the High King is allowed to travel in a vehicle with a roof.”

“Interesting custom,” Raff remarked flatly. “Why is that?”

“It’s the law,” Three replied seriously.

“Well, we’re not in Corisa now,” Raff replied. “At the moment it’s a lot warmer with the roof up. By the time we reach the Corisan border, the weather should be hot so we can lower the roof.”

“You can do that?” One asked.

“Yes,” Raff replied. “This is a drophead coach, or as the colonials call it, a convertible. We can raise or lower the roof as it suits us. So if none of your carriages have roofs, what do you do when it rains?”

“We get wet,” One replied simply.

“Of course,” Raff sighed, bringing the topic to a close.

“Four thousand miles to Ranyang,” Em murmured softly.

“Hmm?” Raff asked. “Yes. Much further and it would have taken less time to take the long route through the Southern Continent and the Eastern Ocean.”

“I would have opposed going that way,” One told him flatly.

“You get seasick, huh?” Raff guessed. “Well fortunately for you I chose not to, but get this much straight. Unless you have wayfaring skills of your own, you’ll go the way I choose or you’ll stay behind.”

“This is unacceptable!” One protested. “We are paying you for this service. You will do it the way we tell you.”

“Try reading the not-so-fine print on your contract, One,” Raff snapped at him. “I’m bound to get you safely to Ranyang. How I do it is entirely up to me. Your only cause for protest is if I refuse to take you there or see to it that another wayfarer will do it for me. Further, should Emblem and I become unable to complete our mission, the Guild of Wayfarers is obligated to return your money and return you to Ranyang at its own expense. That is the long and short of our agreement with you. However, just as the captain of a ship is the highest authority on that ship, Em and I are the highest authority so long as we are in the Wild.”

“Then I demand that you turn around and take us back to Kharaskva,” One responded.

“No,” Raff shook his head stubbornly.

“Master Cawlens!” One protested loudly. “I release you from the contract to take us to Ranyang. Now turn around and take us back.

“No.”

“What?” One demanded.

“If you wish to default on your contract,” Raff explained. “I am obliged to drop you off in a stability. Any stability in which there is a Guild hall, that is. Now under a normal contract you might convince us to go back to Kharaskva, but we have also been hired by His Imperial Majesty to represent him in Ranyang and since the decision of where to leave you is up to us, it will be the next major stability.”

“Unacceptable!” One nearly screamed.

“Who promised you life would be fair?” Raff asked

“Yeah,” Kaz chimed in. “If life were fair, I’d still have a family. You’re worried about which way we go? Try having to make your way across three thousand miles of the Wild with nothing but a belt knife and the clothes on your back.”

The three Corisans stared disbelievingly at the dark-skinned boy. “Better listen to him,” Em advised. “Kaz knows what he’s talking about. If your biggest worry is in not being allowed to set our course, you’re in line for a long and happy life compared to most of the people in this world.”

“You should have at least provided us with a military honor guard,” One continued. “We are the emissaries of the High King and should be treated as if His Holy Majesty were honoring you with his presence.”

“If he were, I still wouldn’t take orders from you or from him for that matter,” Raff shot back. “Did you have a military guard on the way to Kharaskva?”

“One could not be arranged in Myanistan,” One replied. “It was most insulting.”

“Not as insulting as I’ll get if you keep making ridiculous demands,” Raff told him coldly.

“If you really want soldiers to escort you,” Em told them sweetly, “you can recruit some in Ranyang and

then go back to Kharaskva and start this trip over. Preferably with different wayfarers.”

They reached the next major stability two days later by which time the Corisans had forgotten about cancelling their contract and restricted their demands to dealing with people other than the wayfarers.

On checking into the Guild hall in Taharak, the local guildmaster had a request. “I have a party of priests requesting escort into Salustan,” he told them.

“Salustan?” Raff asked. “I wasn’t aware there were any congregations of the Church of Meni there.”

“There aren’t yet,” the guildmaster replied. “They’ve been given a mission.”

“Better them than us,” Raff laughed. “Then again they’ll probably have an easier time of it than I will with those Corisans.”

“Tough trip?” the guildmaster asked sympathetically.

“I think I’ve aged two years in the last few days,” Raff replied.

“Don’t worry, it will feel good when it stops.”

“Terrific,” Raff shook his head. “Well, in my experience, priests are generally interesting traveling companions and if they can survive the Corisans, I suppose they’ll not only establish a congregation in Salustan, but be up for sainthood to boot.”

“Also, I’d like you to stop in Keshon in northern Myanistan along the way,” the local master added.

“Keshon isn’t precisely on the way,” Raff pointed out, “but I don’t suppose it will add more than a hundred miles or so. Something important going on there?”

“I got a report a few days ago that there are some Meninan merchants from Pana stranded there. Like you, they’re trying to get to Ranyang. Normally we can only guide them to the border, of course, then the Corisan wayfarers take over, but since you’re headed to Ranyang, yourself...”

“Sure, I’ll get them there if someone else hasn’t already responded,” Raff assured him.

“I doubt anyone will have. We just don’t have people going that way very often.”

“Like the old Kenlienta joke,” Raff chuckled and quoted, “We don’t get many humans here.”

“And at these prices...”

Two

The weather warmed up rapidly over the next two weeks as they continued toward the Myanistan border. As Raff had predicted the three priests turned out to be excellent company and well informed as to what had been happening in the Northern Lands during Raff’s and Em’s absence.

“You’ve been missing the most interesting changes in the Green Lands, Master Cawlens,” Father Henri

told him on their first day together. With a rapidly growing party of travelers, Raff had attempted to requisition an additional carriage, but was informed the merchants he was to meet in Keshon would have their own wagon. Raff decided that was just as well. Unlike in the Green Lands or Crace, he could not simply rent a carriage or wagon on the Guild account. Here in Kharaskva, there was no one in the business of loaning vehicles to travelers so all such vehicles Raff might use were owned by the Guild and if it turned out he didn't find the merchants waiting for him, he would have been forced to sell it.

"I hadn't heard," Raff replied to the senior priest. For a bit of privacy from the Corisans, they were speaking in Ancient Menin which continued to be the language of the Meni Church. The other two were much younger, being just out of the seminary. "What's new in Taundon?"

"King Reginard may be having second thoughts about the restructuring of his Parliament," Father Henri explained.

"What sort of second thoughts?" Raff asked concernedly.

"Well, I suspect he'd sorely like to have Lord Richard Winn executed," the priest replied.

"His Prime Minister? But why?"

"Possibly because over the last couple of years it may have slipped his mind that he is His Majesty's Prime Minister," Henri laughed. "As you know His Majesty rules his colonies *de jure*, but when one gets right down to the *de facto* it's been Parliament as led by Lord Winn that has been passing the laws under which the colonists must live."

"Well, that is what Parliament is for," Raff commented, "although in the case of the colonies they're only supposed to pass laws as the King commands."

"Yes, so I understand," Father Henri nodded. "A strange system, but it seems to work for you, or it has until now. You are aware of the war last decade that Varana fought against an alliance of the Cracian Colonists and the indigenes?"

"The New War, I think they called it," Raff nodded. "Yes, it was in all the papers."

"Amusing," Henri admitted dryly. "Are you aware of the Paper Act?"

"Can't say I am," Raff admitted, "I've been out of the Green Lands since shortly before the 'Shape of the World Conference.'"

"That long?" Father Henri asked. "Well, it was quietly passed a few months before that, but no one really noticed it until the colonists started protesting. As you no doubt know, the New War ended when Crace formally surrendered Meldan to the Green Lands in exchange for being allowed to keep Solomania. War is not cheap even to the side that wins, of course."

"Victories have been known to topple the government of the winner," Raff agreed.

"Exactly," Henri nodded. "And who paid for that war?"

"The subjects of the Green Lands, of course," Raff replied. "I don't recall anyone was too happy about that, but that's the cost of having a colony."

“Lord Winn evidently would not agree,” Father Henri shook his head. “He felt and evidently convinced King Reginard that since the colonies were the primary beneficiaries of that war, the burden of paying for it should have fallen to the colonists. However, because of the way your tax laws worked, colonists were exempt from most of the current taxation. The Paper Act was an attempt to redress that.

“What it did,” Father Henri continued, “was to require that all legal documents, all publications in fact, published with the purpose of making a profit, like newspapers, and, by extension, all printed paper products must be printed on special watermarked paper issued, for a fee naturally, by agents of His Majesty’s government.”

“Surprises me Reginard still has any colonies,” Raff remarked.

“It’s amazing what people will put up with,” Henri replied, “although it was a tolerance gained through fear. The first test case involved the manufacturer of playing cards who was tried and convicted and subsequently thrown into debtors’ prison for the crime of selling cards that were not on that special paper.”

“Makes me wonder what those fine colonists are using in their outhouses,” Raff conjectured.

“I hear one enterprising fellow did buy a fair quantity of the paper and, in turn, sold it for such a usage, complete with instructions. He made quite a bit of money from people buying it for the novelty, but he also made the mistake of sending a case to Lord Winn to be used in Parliament.”

“Lord Winn is not reputed to have much of a sense of humor,” Raff commented.

“He lived up to his reputation,” Father Henri replied dryly. “However, a Mister Peter Daniels, a gentleman farmer in Varana, wrote a series of eloquent and popular essays decrying the Paper Act after which a series of protests spread through that colony, forcing His Majesty to send troops down from occupied Meldan to keep the peace.”

“I have friends in Varana,” Raff commented. “Most Green Landsmen do and I doubt any of us like the idea of our friends and family being under martial law.”

“Can’t say as I blame you, my son,” Father Henri replied. “So Lord Winn had parliament repeal the Paper Act, but replaced it with a collection of tariffs on just about everything imported into the Colonies of Varana and Meldan.”

“Not those on the Southern Continent?” Raff asked. “No, I suppose not or I would have heard about this before now.”

“If forced to guess,” Father Henri replied, “I would say those tariffs were imposed on Varana because of her reaction to the Paper Act and on Meldan because, while pacified, it has still been less than a decade since the New War. So far it has not done anything to calm the colonists down and just as I left Meni, I heard of a protest in New Farrington that ended when a group of soldiers fired their muskets into a crowd of protestors, killing six of them.”

“And has Mister Daniels written a series of essays about that too?” Raff asked.

“He probably has,” Father Henri replied, “although I had not seen anything as of the time I left. However, he and a handful of literate colleagues did have a lot to say about the tariffs that replaced the Paper Act.”

“I’ll have to try and remember to look the gentleman up next time business takes me to Varana,” Raff decided. “It’s amazing what you can miss when you go away for a year or two and it’s more likely to be three or four before I get back. Have you heard anything about the Kenlienta Grand Council taking place in Yakrut.”

“Sorry, my son,” Father Henri replied, “but aside from their existence, I know next to nothing about the Ken. They don’t really live in our world, now do they?”

“Didn’t God Almighty create the world as He saw fit, Father?” Raff asked.

Father Henri looked as though he was about to rebuke Raff as a layperson attempting to interpret scripture for himself, then a strange look passed his face and he smiled. “That’s right, I forget you Guildsmen are not technically laymen, are you?”

“There have been times I have been the only person available to administer final rites and other sacraments,” Raff replied.

“Of course,” Father Henri replied. “Well, this should be a refreshing conversation then. I have been able to engage in a religious debate so rarely since leaving the seminary. At first I was a junior priest required to listen to his elders and then suddenly I was the elder. I do not often get a chance to discuss these matters with someone who is at least technically an equal.” He looked elated at the prospect. “Usually only those stationed in Menino have this luxury.”

“All right,” Father Henri continued. “Yes, I suppose God Almighty did indeed create the world as he saw fit. And he divided the darkness from the light and the Wild from the stable. By those words we understand that what is of the light is apart from the darkness and the Wild is apart from the stabilities in which we live. Further the stabilities are the right and proper place for humans to live and all that which is Wild is separate from us and that we have no part of it.”

“But a wayfarer is naturally a part of both the Wild and the stable,” Raff argued, “and we too are as God Almighty made us.” Father Henri was silent for a long while so Raff continued, “and I would say that human lives are not entirely separate from the Wild.”

“Leaving aside those so-called primitive people whose villages are so small they must grow or hunt their food in the Wild, even the most civilized societies go hunting and fishing. Why is there no prohibition from that if scripture tells us we are no part of the Wild. Also I would argue we are a part of the Darkness. While we do sleep at night by nature, most of us do have chores that are done after the sun sets and there are those whose jobs require them to keep hours the opposite of most, staying awake at night and sleeping during the day. I would agree that we should endeavor to be good and not evil, but I cannot agree that the Good is Light and Stability and Evil is Darkness and the Wild. It is sloppy thinking that causes us to attempt to divide everything about the world into only two parts that are ever in opposition to each other. Some might even argue that Light and Darkness are but two aspects of the same thing as Stability and the Wild are two aspects of the World in the same way that land and water are. The world is too complex for every issue to have only two sides. So many issues can engender dozens of different arguments. It’s not all right versus wrong or good versus evil.”

“Good points, my son,” Father Henri admitted at last, “although it almost always comes down to us versus them, doesn’t it?”

“It does, Father,” Raff agreed, “but if you look closely there is almost always more than one them and

sometimes there's more than one of us as well."

Father Henri allowed that Raff was right about that as well and they spent the rest of the next two weeks happily arguing various theological issues until they at last reached the border of Myanistan.

Three

While the Corisans had behaved themselves after Raff's initial threat to abandon them in the next town with a Guild office kept them in line for a while, once they crossed over into Myanistan, they returned to their old bad habits. "They're playing games," Raff explained to Father Henri one morning when they were forced to stay put in a Myanistani town because of the weather. "I told them I was obligated to get them to Ranyang or, if released from the agreement, the next town with a Guild hall."

"Ah, I see," Father Henri nodded knowingly, "and from here on out there are no Guild halls, are there?"

"Yes, they think they're safe from being stranded," Raff agreed, looking out an open window at the soft warm rain coming down outside. A few minutes earlier it had been a downpour and probably would be again so, but for now it was almost pleasant. "And no," Raff finished. "There is a Green Lands trading colony in Salasia and another a few hundred miles further down the coast. If they really anger me, I'll take them to Nillon and where there is a small Dixan trading colony, according to their contract, any of those will suffice to fill the terms of safe conduct."

"Then why don't you put an end to their nonsense by informing them of that?" Henri asked.

"I'm trying to see if I can come up with a more permanent solution," Raff replied. "Even if they pretend to get the message, they will only revert to their rather obnoxious characters once we cross over into Corisa."

"Only the Lord works miracles like that, my son," Father Henri replied with a wink.

"I'd hate to waste a miracle," Raff chuckled. "What bothers me most, however, is the way they keep ignoring anything Em says to them. I realize that in their society women are the lowest of the low. They hold no status of their own. Okay, it's not exactly perfect in the Northern Lands either, but at least in Crace or the Green Lands, or even in Voland, women are not the chattel they are in Corisa."

"And that offends me as much as it does you, Raff," Henri told him, "but there is not much either of us can do about it."

"Oh, in spite of the insult, I can keep my temper," Raff replied. "Well, most of the time, but I'm much more worried about Kaz. What he might do, especially here in the Wild..."

"Your ward from the Southern Continent," Henri nodded. "He seems a bit young to be dangerous just yet."

"That's only because you didn't see the destructive path he personally carved through the Wild across the Southern Continent. And when I say across, I mean it. That damned thing wandered almost from sea to sea. It harmed plants, animals and even some people it touched, and that was just because he didn't know what he was doing. We've been giving him lessons since then and... well, I'd hate to wake up one morning to find the Corisans as three identical piles of ash. Although if Em ever loses her temper, they'll

only wish Kaz had gotten to them first.”

“Yes, I think we’ve all heard what women with red hair can be like,” Father Henri replied.

“No offense, Father,” Raff laughed, “but hair color has nothing to do with it. In Em’s case, I’ll admit it’s just fair warning about her fiery disposition, but otherwise it’s just a strange notion people get.”

If you say so, my son,” Father Henri responded. “It sounds as though you have a real problem there.”

“No advice, huh?” Raff asked.

“The Church doesn’t give that sort of advice,” Henri chuckled.

The next day, however, the Corisans started to realize how much they needed the wayfarers when the party was ambushed by bandits while making their way through a foggy mountain pass.

The Corisans were complaining about having been rushed through their breakfast when the sound of musket fire split the air. A hail of musket balls smashed through the bushes just ahead of the carriage and the horses bolted in panic. A second round was fired and several shots would have hit the carriage and its passengers had Em not quickly summoned the Wild energy and used it to deflect the projectiles. It was not an easy trick and she was not sure she could keep it through even another volley, but when more shots did not suddenly ring out, she realized the ambushers were out of preloaded weapons.

A blood-curdling ululation caused by thirty or more screaming men reached them just before the men themselves appeared from out of the fog. That the men hadn’t bathed in a dog’s age was obvious from thirty feet away, but as Raff continued fighting with the horses, Em had little trouble with their attackers. Bullets were hard to stop, even by a master wayfarer. They were impossible to see and mistakes were easy to make. People were much easier targets and this lot was all coming from the same direction. One of the easiest defenses for a wayfarer was to simply overwhelm an opponent with Wild energy.

Humans and domesticated creatures had a low tolerance for the Wild. They could survive in the Wild for a while, but after a short time a non-wayfarer, if forced to remain outside an area of stability, would eventually sicken and die. Travelers survived partially because of the minimal tolerance, but mostly because a guiding wayfarer could establish enough stability to maintain the health of his charges. It was, however, even easier to remove stability when in the Wild.

Once before, when in a rage, Em had removed the inherent stability from a number of men so forcefully, they had been dead before they even started falling to the ground. It wasn’t necessary to be so deadly, however. A sudden buffet of Wild energy would usually cause any human or domesticated beast to lose consciousness.

Suddenly all the attackers fell flat on their faces and Em began to relax even as Raff finally got the horses under control. “Who are they?” One asked.

“Does it matter?” Raff asked in return. A moment later another sharp shot rang out. “Rifle fire!” Raff shouted just after the bullet zinged past them. The Corisans started screaming in panic, but Kaz kept his head and fired back a blast of Wild energy that sizzled as it shot outward, followed immediately by a loud explosion not too far away in the fog. “I think you got whoever was shooting,” Raff told Kaz after a few tense minutes, “but I don’t suppose you’re up to cleaning up your own damage yet.”

“What damage?” Kaz asked, puzzled.

“Look downward,” Raff advised. “Your energy blast was so powerful, it cut the path, lad. If we just leave it like this the rest of it will start coming apart in fairly short order.”

“We saw something like this on the South Continent,” Em added.

“Did I do that there too?” he asked worriedly.

“Not the time Raff is talking about,” Em replied, “although you did cut quite a few other paths, but we were never so far behind you that we couldn’t repair them before there was too much damage. That other one had been cut at least a month and a half earlier. Raff, dear, why don’t you make sure Kaz got that rifleman, while I reforge this path.”

“I’ll be right back,” Raff promised.

Kaz watched what Em did carefully and they discussed it for the next hour once they had started moving on again. Raff didn’t want to worry the others needlessly, but while he found the rifle, there was no evidence of the person who had fired it.

Four

They reached Keshon late the next day and quickly found the inn where the Meninan merchants were supposed to be staying, but instead of the merchants, they found a note.

“What does it say, Raff,” Em asked once he had time to read it through.

“It’s from Zoltan Pokany,” Raff replied. “I’ve never heard of him, but he’s apparently a journeyman. ‘To whom it may concern,’” Raff read aloud, “‘I found Saverio Panatti and his party here in Keshon. He explained that he was en-route to Ranyang and insisted on my escorting him further even though I will be going no further than Gaharenar in Salustan. If you are looking for Merchant Panatti he and his party will probably be waiting for you there.’ Well, I guess we made this side trip for no good reason.”

“You should not have come here at all,” One told him angrily. “This was not on the way to Ranyang.”

“It is if I say it is,” Raff reminded him. “We’ve been through this. We’ll move on to Gaharenar in the morning. It’s the only city in Salustan in which we’ll find a Guild hall; probably the last one between here and Ranyang.”

“I didn’t realize there was a Guild hall there,” Father Henri commented.

“It’s not much of one,” Raff admitted, “but while Salustan does not have much use for the Guild, it does allow us that one office.”

“Why would they have such little use for us?” Kaz asked.

“Most working wayfarers there are self-employed,” Raff explained. “And they charge less. You do get what you pay for, however, and the last time I was here I noticed that they have few if any master wayfarers among them. They’ll get you from one place to another, but if you’re trying to cross the kingdom, you may well have to hire a new guide every other town. There’s a knack to learning the way

to places you've never been and most of the wayfarers there never learned it. Guild members have better training and every so often the king there decides he can use our services, but not very often."

They stayed the night in Keshon and were just starting to load up the carriage the next morning when several dozen thugs came at them from across the narrow street, brandishing clubs. Defenses such as Em had used in the mountains were more difficult inside a stability, but Em and Raff were able to fend off two thirds of the attackers before they got close enough to try using their clubs. That was when Kaz got a surprise.

Father Henri and his junior priests had been carrying what Kaz believed were carved, but ornamental walking staves. Such a staff was a mark of their priesthood, Kaz had been told, but he had not expected them to be serviceable weapons as well. While Raff and Em were still picking off their attackers as best they could, the priests swung into action and in close quarters turned out to be even more effective at defense than the wayfarers. Once Kaz managed to soak up that bit of illumination, he too started defending the party and a few minutes later he was helping Raff and the priests haul some of their erstwhile attackers from in front of the carriage.

In the battle, Kaz realized, only the Corisans had been dead weight. The High King's legates had yelped when the attack started and were found cowering behind a nearby bush by the time the area was quiet once more.

They were about to get in the carriage again, when Kaz spotted a familiar figure down the street aiming some sort of musket or rifle at them. "Raff," Kaz shouted pointing down the street. Raff turned just as the weapon was fired and managed to "catch" the musket ball and sent it back at the man with the gun, but aiming such a projectile by Wild energy manipulation took longer than merely pulling the trigger and to everyone's surprise the man drew a sword in time to knock the musket ball out of the air.

"That was the head legate!" One gasped.

"I'm getting so I would like to relieve him of that head," Raff growled.

"I don't think we should call him Head Legate any longer," Two remarked in a rare show of independence.

"Yes, but then what?" One asked.

"I'll just think of him as the Nillonese spy for now, if you don't mind," Em told them.

"He's a wayfarer, isn't he?" Kaz asked.

"Looks like it," Raff commented. "I don't think any normal man could have stopped that bullet with the sword. Not so deliberately anyway."

"Not necessarily true," One disagreed. "There are stories of a clan of warriors in Nillon. They call themselves the Ikkito and it is said they are capable of almost anything."

"Sounds like the sort of story they would want to spread far and wide," Raff opined. "That's the sort of thing that makes the uninformed afraid and consequently would make their own jobs of intimidation the easier. He might have been able to leave Kharaskva with a non-Guild member, but unless he were a wayfarer himself, he would never have gotten this far this fast. Besides, have you ever tried to hit a bullet coming at you with a sword's edge?"

“I have heard of such things being done in a circus,” Father Henri commented.

“Illusionary tricks,” Raff laughed. “My favorite is the one in which someone catches a musket ball in his teeth. A master wayfarer might manage it if he was very lucky, but for someone without the talent it would be certain death to even try. Even with the talent, I wouldn’t do it willingly. Too easy to make a mistake of timing. In a circus it would mean two or three shows a night. I doubt anyone could keep that up for long if doing it for real.”

“Then we have a rogue wayfarer to deal with,” Kaz commented grimly. Not that long ago he too had been a rogue, and Raff and Em had been forced to track him all across the Southern Continent.

“Technically, most wayfarers hereabouts are rogues,” Raff told him. “There’s no Guild in Myanistan, remember. We’ll keep an eye out for our Nillonese friend, but for now, let’s start off for Salustan.”

Travel through mountainous Myanistan was slow and twice over the next week, they spotted the Nillonese at a distance as he tried various attempts to attack the party. Raff had to admit that the landslide the Nillonese started one morning might have been effective had Kaz not seen it coming and that Em had been lucky for all of them when the next day she spotted a glint of light off the approaching arrow the Nillonese had shot at them. However, by the time they reached the Salustani border, they had not seen the Nillonese in days, although Raff suspected the spy had crossed the border well ahead of them.

They never knew if the Nillonese had anything to do with the attack by a company of Salustani raiders a day before they reached the border. It had been quiet after they left Myanistan and crossed briefly back into Kharasia, but there had always been minor incidents along the Salustani-Kharasian border with both sides conducting raids back and forth.

A company of mounted musketeers is hard to hide in the steppe-like environment they were now traversing and the Salustanis were not making their presence a secret. At first, the carriage Raff and his party were in seemed to be ignored by the Salustanis, but then a trumpet sounded and they started riding hard toward the wayfarers and their charges.

“They may not be attacking,” Raff told the others. “They might just be curious about us.” A moment later, however, a musket shot rang out. “So much for that idea. Em, shield us while I drive.” He urged the horses into a full gallop while the Corisans cowered in the back of the carriage and the priests, wisely stayed low in their seats, although over the sound of the racing carriage, Raff thought he heard Father Henri complaining about not having brought his own guns.

The musketeers were only a few yards behind them when they came up and over a low hill and found them facing a large contingent of Kharasian cavalry. The mounted soldiers needed neither instructions nor orders. They all knew what to do when attacked by invaders from Salustan.

Raff and Em both raised the Wild energy as a protective shield while they were caught between the two forces, but Raff drove on, straight at the Kharasians. The Kharasian army parted to let Raff drive the carriage through, and then rejoined ranks to drive the Salustanis off.

It was a messy battle, but in all just a typical border skirmish that the Kharasians were used to dealing with. “Sorry to have led them your way, Colonel,” Raff apologized once the Salustanis were in rout.

“I’m not,” the colonel told him. “Better to deal with them now than later. None of my men were killed, just a few minor injuries. We did lose two horses, though, but managed to gain five of theirs. Their beasts

aren't as well fed, but we can fix that right enough. Are you headed into Salustan, sir?"

"En route to Ranyang by the orders of His Imperial Majesty," Raff replied.

"I'll see you safe to the border then," the colonel told him. "Just give us an hour or so to get into order and we'll be off."

Raff thanked him and a day later they were safely within sight of the Salustani border. "We'll cause more trouble than good if we get any closer," the colonel told him, but the way looks clear. "Good luck, Master Cawlens."

"Thank you, colonel," Raff replied formally. "Perhaps sometime we'll have the opportunity to look back at the last day over some drinks in a comfortable inn in Kharaskva."

"I'd like that."

Raff drove the carriage up to a customs booth at the Salustani border and was immediately stopped by the agents stationed there. "Please get out of the coach," one of the agents instructed them, "and enter the buildings while we search."

"Search for what?" Kaz asked in spite of himself.

"Contraband, undeclared valuables, illegal weapons," Raff told him as he stepped out of the driver's seat.

"We don't have any of that sort of stuff," Kaz remarked while Raff helped Em down.

"They don't know that yet," Raff replied unconcernedly.

The customs house was somewhat larger than Raff would have expected on such an infrequently crossed border, but he decided that there may have been a time in which Salustan and Kharasia were on friendlier terms, although by the time they left, he had other suspicions for the reason it had so many rooms.

There was a warm fire in the main office room and the Corisans instantly gravitated to the fireplace to warm themselves up, although Father Henri pushed One and Three aside to offer a near space for Em to use. She smiled at the priest, but shook her head and gestured he should warm himself first.

For the next hour the customs agents went over the carriage in a methodical manner before coming back inside the building. "Everything in order?" Raff asked.

"Oh, we're just getting started," the agent told him.

Next the agents spoke to each of the travelers one at a time, asking names, where they were coming from, going to, how long they expected to stay in Salustan, whether they knew anyone in the country and if so what their relationship was and finally if they had anything to declare.

When they were not finished at the end of the day, the agents locked the travelers in three different rooms for the night. "What did we do wrong?" Kaz asked Raff and Em. "Why did they put us in jail cells?"

“This is pretty comfortable for a jail cell,” Raff told him, looking out the window. “I suppose we could stroll right out, but let’s see how this plays. Those customs men seem to have decided to completely dismantle our carriage.”

“I got the impression they wouldn’t be satisfied until they had dismantled the two horses,” Em remarked sourly.

“If they can manage to put them back together safely afterward, I’ll see they all get jobs with the Guild,” Raff told her.

The problem turned out to be the fault of the Corisans once again. While in Kharasia, they had bought a fair number of diamonds and gold jewelry and hidden some of them in false bottoms in their luggage. Raff made a mental note when he learned of that to give the Corisans a bit of additional personal grief over that. Not only did they endanger the entire party, but Raff personally thought the use of a false bottom was both unimaginative and such an old trick they were bound to be caught.

The purchase of the jewels and jewelry by itself was not a problem, but the agents demanded to know why they had not been declared. “We are an official legation from the High King of Corisa,” One maintained, “and therefore exempt from paying tariffs on any items we carry with us.”

“You do not have ambassadorial status in Salustia,” the agent informed him, “but you would have been allowed to carry these items freely had you not attempted to hide them from us. Since you have, we are duly confiscating them.

That turned out to engender an argument that lasted the rest of their second day at the border. Raff and Em had not been aware of the Corisans’ transgressions until the chief agent mentioned it to them that evening when interviewing them for the third time. “I don’t think much of some of your charges, sir,” the agent began.

Raff, thinking that one or more of the priests had said something the man had taken offense to replied, “Well, they represent a religion with only a very small following in Salustan, sir, but I’m sure they meant no offense.”

“No,” the agent shook his head. “The priests are quite acceptable both in demeanor and their religious message, at least from what little I know of it. I did not discuss theology with them, nor did they attempt to do so with me. They were polite and accommodating and I feel they will be a pleasant addition to Salustan. It’s the Corisans I’m having trouble with. They act as though they are Holy God on His heavenly throne, except as I was taught, God is neither proud nor arrogant.”

“At least their High King is too busy in East Kharasia to have invaded here,” Raff pointed out.

“Salustan is a poor country compared to Corsia and Kharasia,” the agent replied. “I doubt we are worth their while. Oh, they have both invaded from time to time, but neither power has found it worth the bother to stay for very long.”

“What about tribute?” Raff asked. “I would have thought anything would be better than nothing at all.”

“It’s very expensive to occupy a country,” the agent replied nonchalantly. “Armies need to be fed and housed. A puppet government must be backed both militarily and financially and even tame politicians will try to funnel as much of the tax revenues into their own pockets as will fit. There just is not enough

here to cover their expenses. The last time it was Corisa. They demanded tribute and sent an army to collect it once. That was one hundred and seventy-five years ago. They never came back.”

“That surprises me,” Raff admitted. “I understand Corisa is big on collecting tribute.”

“What is there to take here?” the agent replied. “I tell you, it cost their army more to get here than they were able to take back whether we gave it to them or they took it by force. Salustan is sparsely populated. We only have a little over a dozen large towns and only our capital, Gaharenar, is large enough to be called a city.”

“Sometimes it’s good to be small,” Raff remarked.

“So, anyway, I’ve decided to let you all go on your way, but you, Master Wayfarer, have to make me one promise.”

“And that is?” Raff asked with some trepidation.

“Get those Corisans out of this country as fast as you possibly can.”

Five

“Salustan might be sparsely settled by humans,” Raff told the others the next morning once they were underway, “but there are several Kenlientan cities and quite a few smaller towns. The land is not as poor as the Salustanis think, but the Ken got here first. There are a few places like this where the Ken have the best land, but there are also quite a few where humans got the better deal. It all evens out, I think. Our route won’t take us near there, but the largest of all Kenlientan cities, Yakrut, is in Salustan near the border with Myanistan and yet very few locals are even aware of it.”

“It is as I told you before,” Father Henri reminded Raff. “The Ken almost live in a different world from us.”

“Actually at the time you said they did live in a different world, Father,” Raff replied.

“You convinced me you were correct,” Father Henri admitted. “I’m only human,” he added with a smirk. “So how did the Kenlienta get the best lands here and why haven’t the Salustanis tried to take it from them.”

“Part of that is due to a treaty the Guild brokered back when it was just getting established itself,” Em explained. “There was no Salustan back then and Myanistan was mostly unsettled as was western Corisa and Kharasia had not yet extended her borders much beyond Karaskva, so this was fairly empty land. The Ken came to the Guild and asked us to represent them before what was left of the old Meni Empire and those provinces such as they were around here at the time. And the richer lands of Salustan were ceded to the Kenlienta while humans got other prime lands like those in Zagran and Paknalan and eastern Kharasia.”

“Why have I never heard of this treaty?” Father Henri asked.

“The treaty was primarily between the Emperor of Meni and those Eastern provinces that had recently begun to gain some autonomy. None of those governments exist any longer,” Em told him. “If not for the

Guild that treaty would have been dead by now, but even without it the Ken do not encroach on human lands and they do have ways to keep us from encroaching on them, although out here they don't usually need them, because the Guild of Wayfarers still enforces the treaty. That's why we still have a guild hall in Gaharenar. It was part of the treaty even if the current government of Salustan doesn't understand why we're here. That hall is older than Salustan. It was here when the first Salustanis came here. They may not allow us to charter new halls, but that one will be here as long as the Ken want it to be and the King of Salustan knows it even if no one else in his court does."

"There are rich lands here?" One asked quietly.

Raff didn't like the look on his face and told him harshly, "and you'll best serve the High King by never telling that to another soul. You may think Corisa is a mighty kingdom, but there are more Ken within your borders than there are humans. Try to steal their lands, and there will be no Corisa by the time they are through. The treaty protects you as much as it does any other human on this world. Never forget that."

Later that day, they came across a party of Kenlienta standing beside the wayfarer path. As was the custom, Raff reigned in the horses and got out to parlay with Em and Kaz. "The rest of you better stay in the carriage," he advised.

"Is there a problem?" Father Henri asked, looking curiously at the Ken.

"Could be," Raff replied, "but actually I'm asking you to stay here because you are not capable of controlling your naturally stable aura. You could inadvertently harm these people."

"I see," Henri nodded.

"I will get out and stretch my legs," One announced imperiously.

"You'll sit there if I have to tie you to the seat," Raff told him tightly. One tried to get up and Raff pushed him right back down, and then used Wild energy to knock him out. "I assume no one else feels the need to stretch his legs? Good."

Raff took a deep breath then turned around and flashed the waiting Ken a broad smile before approaching them with Em and Kaz. "I greet you," he told the Kenlienta. "I am called Raff Cawlens, my wife Emblem L'oranne Cawlens and our ward Kazani Basan."

"You walk with greatness, Kazani Basan," one of the Kenlienta a tall man with a touch of gray around his temples. "It is an honor to meet you, Raufanax, Emblem Cawlens. I am Dalartax."

Raff nodded modestly. "How may I be of service, Dalartax?" he asked.

"I'm afraid we have an embarrassing problem," the Ken admitted ruefully. "None of us is an elder and we are stranded on this side of your path."

"Most Ken can cross a wayfarer path," Raff replied with concern. "Has something changed?"

"Perhaps," Dalartax shrugged. "We normally have an elder with us when we travel, or at least a student proficient in magic, but all our men and women with that ability are currently on their way to Yakrut or perhaps they are already there. We have crossed two other paths recently without them, but this one seems a bit more... well, I suppose angry or hurtful may describe it."

Raff and Em studied the path until Em noted, "It does look like someone may have reinforced it somewhat recently."

"Someone who could use a bit more training," Raff agreed, "but come. I will help you cross the path and then we'll calm the anger of this path down." He put his arms out and the small band of Kenlenta crossed the path comfortably.

"Thank you, Raufanax," Dalartax murmured with a respectful nod of his head. "Is there anything we might do for you in return?"

"I'd appreciate anything you could tell me about the Grand Council meeting in Yakrut," Raff requested.

"There is not much to tell yet," Dalartax replied. "The Elders will have only begun to deliberate Elder Leraxa's revolutionary ideas."

"How do Kenlenta around here feel about such changes?" Raff asked.

"Life is change," Dalartax shrugged. "Our government has gone without change for a long time. Perhaps Elder Leraxa is right and that her new centralized Council of Elders will bring prosperity to the Ken Nation. It will certainly benefit those of us who live in and around Yakrut and it should also be good for those, like me, who live not too far away. A large city needs food and fuel and the nearest towns and cities will be where it comes from."

"Be careful Yakrut doesn't take too much," Raff warned him. "Just between you and me, I've always admired the old Ken government and wished my people could adopt one like it. But all things change," he concluded. He knew those words were part of a Kenlenta religious ceremony.

"And change is Life," Dalartax and his companions replied automatically in unison, bowing stiffly.

"Are you on your way to Yakrut?" Em asked, noticing Raff had already started smoothing out the path in front and behind them.

"No, Lady," Dalartax shook his head. "We are just on our way to visit my wife's sister. Word came a few days ago that she has given birth to a new daughter and we go with gifts."

"Marvelous," Em breathed. "Please convey our best wishes to your sister-in-law and your niece."

"Thank you."

They spoke for a few more minutes and then both parties continued on their way. "I wonder who reinforced this path," Raff mused as they rode. "I think Kaz could have done a better job of it."

"It's not poorly made so much as built a little too well," Em noted. "Someone put more energy into this than they needed to. Humans wouldn't have trouble with it, but any creature of the Wild would."

"It has a few loose ends, but as I look at more of it, I think I'm starting to see a pattern to it. It's more like a stylistic difference and it reminds me of something..." Raff trailed off for a moment before adding, "but I'm not sure what."

They reached Gaharenar a few days later.

The capital of Salustan barely qualified for the title of city in Raff's opinion. It was certainly the largest settlement they had seen in Salustan, but he doubted there were more than twenty thousand people living here. The streets were obviously unplanned and varied in width every few blocks.

It had been his and Em's plan to check into the Guild hall before dropping the priests off in their new church, a modest building that had been built by the handful of Meniites who lived here, but when their carriage was forced to detour around a street too narrow to accommodate it, they found the priests' destination before their own.

While unloading Father Henri's belongings one of his new congregation came by to help as well and after getting the priests' belongings inside, he offered to show Raff the way to the Guild hall, about half a mile away through a maze of twisty little streets.

"I'm not sure I could find my way back to the church," Em remarked as they finally drew the carriage into an alley beside the Guild hall.

"It's not so hard," their guide told them. "I brought you by the short route, but if you go two blocks south of here there's a much wider road that encircles the inner part of Gaharenar. Visitors usually make their way to that and then ride around until they are closest to where they're trying to get. It doubles the distance or better, but it is an easier route."

"Well, thank you for your kind guidance," Raff told him as he helped Em down from the carriage.

"No," the man shook his head. "Thank you for bringing Father Henri!"

The Guild hall in Gaharenar was a modest affair, although still larger than Em had expected for such a remote outpost. In fact there were only two wayfarers in town. The local master, a man named Jarne Garanch who modestly admitted he was at best a senior journeyman by ability and who did not use the title "master" when dealing with fellow wayfarers and a senior apprentice who was manning the front desk as Raff led the others in.

"Has a Saverio Panatti and his companions checked in here?" Raff asked the young man after arranging rooms for everyone.

"Uh..." the apprentice stammered. "Perhaps you had best discuss that with Master Garanch."

"A problem?" Raff asked.

"Could be," the apprentice admitted, "but the master prefers to handle such matters personally, begging your pardon, Master Cawlens."

"So long as Master Garanch is in town, I don't mind," Raff replied.

"He is, sir," the apprentice nodded, "although he just stepped out for a late lunch. Why don't you make yourselves comfortable and I'll let you know as soon as he returns."

They did not have long to wait and, predictably, the moment Raff sat down on a large chair in the room he was sharing with Em, there was a polite knock on the door. “Master Garanch is back now, sir and madame,” the apprentice informed them, “and anxious to meet with you.”

Jarme Garanch’s office, unlike that of most hall masters was on the first floor of the building, the upper two floors being devoted to accommodating visiting wayfarers and their parties. It did have an interesting view of a park-like yard behind the building where daffodils were already in full bloom.

“So you’re looking for the Panaian merchants?” Jarme asked. “Those idiots.”

“What’s happened?” Em asked concernedly.

“They got tired of waiting for a wayfarer who could take them to Ranyang,” Jarme replied “and hired one of the local talents to guide them along. Trust me, that’s not a way to a long and happy life.”

“Isn’t that how most Salustanis get around?” Raff asked.

“Indeed, yes,” Jarme agreed, “but the locals know which ones are dependable. The one Signor Panatti hired... Well, let’s just say I’ve heard of him and let it go at that.”

“You tried to stop him, didn’t you?” Raff asked sharply.

“Of course,” Jarme replied unfazed by Raff’s tone. “It appears that Signor Panatti is a very stubborn man and even after all my warnings chose to believe this other wayfarer would guide him into Myanistan and along the southern caravan route.”

“A bit out of the way,” Em remarked.

“Yes,” Jarme agreed, “but it is a more reliable way to go if you know you’ll have to keep hiring local wayfarers every so often. That’s the usual way into Corisa, in fact.”

“We could have taken him directly in,” Raff commented, “but then it’s not like anyone here could have known we were on the way. By the way, please send my personal commendation to Journeyman Zoltan Pokany. He thoughtfully left a note for us in Keshon when he agreed to take Panatti and his crew here. We were coming here anyway, but without that note we wouldn’t have known the merchants were here.”

“I’ll tell him personally next time he stops in,” Jarme replied. “I usually see him two or three times a year.”

“That’s good too,” Raff nodded, “but I had something a little more official in mind. I intend to send a written commendation for him to Taundon. I think young Zoltan’s idea of leaving notes in such cases is a good one and it ought to become standard procedure. We could have lost weeks looking for Panatti’s party otherwise.”

“Zoltan’s always had a good head on his shoulders,” Jarme admitted. “Like me, he’ll never be a master because of talent, but he’ll be a good hall master one day.”

“High praise,” Raff agreed. “I, on the other hand, would make a terrible hall master. That’s why I stayed a freelancer even when I was on the Guild Council. Besides, there are too few masters to keep them all shackled to the halls. We’re needed to maintain the pathways and deal with the Kenlienta and a hundred other chores only we can.”

“Hall masters who have that ability do all those things you mention too,” Jarne pointed out.

“Yes, but when they do, they have to leave their halls for long periods of time,” Raff countered. “It’s a bad system, you know. I realize it’s worked for hundreds of years, but even the Ken are changing their system of government. Change is Life, you know.”

“And Life is change,” Jarne responded. “That reminds me. The Kenlienta Grand Council should be starting any time now. I would have thought you of all wayfarers would have been there.”

“I wasn’t invited,” Raff told him, “although not for lack of trying. I guess the Ken are keeping it private this time. I don’t blame them. They have a right to reform their system of governance without human interference.”

“And if you just happened to be near Yakrut just now would you still be able to stay away?” Jarne asked shrewdly.

“Why do you ask?” Raff asked.

“It seems to me if Signor Panatti went where we think he did, I believe you’ll find him stranded in Thanok about one hundred miles to the southeast of here. From there you’ll only be two days out from Yakrut. You’ll come even closer if you continue on from there to Corisa.”

“I have too many charges to conduct to Ranyang,” Raff replied, knowing he would truly love to have an excuse to go to Yakrut just now. Emblem shot him a glance that told him she knew it as well. “The Merchants might behave themselves, although their record so far doesn’t exactly speak volumes in their favor, but the Corisans would be truly obnoxious. I would never subject our friends in the Ken nation to them.”

“Just as well,” Jarne nodded, “because you’re going to have to rush after Panatti in the morning. The local talent who led him to Thanok, if that’s where they went, doesn’t work alone. We know that bunch all too well in Gaharenar. They’re low-level journeymen class at best and can only guide anyone to a few select towns. That’s why I’m guessing Thanok. It’s pretty much the limit of their range. By now Signor Panatti is stranded in a strange town and is likely quite a bit poorer for his troubles. That’s their favorite trick. Tricking travelers into following them wherever and then stranding them in the middle of nowhere while running off with whatever money they might have on them. Panatti was carrying quite a few valuables. God Almighty alone knows how much he may still have.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to go find them,” Em sighed. “Were they here recently enough that we’ll be able to follow their aura trail?”

“Panatti and his daughter stayed in your room,” Jarne informed her. “If you can distinguish their traces from yours, you’ll have their trail.”

Seven

“You’re not heading toward Corisa,” One complained as they reentered the Wild on the path south out of Gaharenar.

Kaz shot the Corisans an annoyed glance. He always enjoyed the abrupt change in scenery only a wayfarer could see as they entered the Wild and the Corisan whining bothered him terribly. Then he amused himself for a moment imagining them trying to hunt with a spear as he had when his village was still alive.

“How can you tell?” Raff challenged him.

“My compass says we’re headed south,” One replied.

“We’re in the Wild now,” Em laughed harshly. “Compasses don’t work here. It would make as much sense just now to say it reads orange.”

“However, you are absolutely correct,” Raff told One. Raff realized he missed Father Henri’s pleasant conversation. They had not really agreed on very much, but they respected each other’s opinions and maybe that was better than agreement. Whenever the Corisans decided to be obstreperous, Raff found he could ignore them by talking to Henri. “We are not headed for Corisa at the moment. We are going to find Signore Panatti.”

“Our agreement was for you to take us to Corisa,” One complained.

“Have you been listening to anything I’ve been saying the past month or so?” Raff demanded. “We go my way and when I say. Right now we have travelers who are probably in distress and we are going to find them. If you want, I’ll turn around and bring you back to Gaharenar. Maybe I’ll be back that way and maybe you’ll have to wait for the next wayfarer headed for Ranyang. Can’t promise you if we can even come back this way. It all depends on what we find in Thanok. Now do you want to sit around in Gaharenar?”

One refused to answer at first and Raff assumed the Corisan had decided on discretion, but just as Raff began to relax, One replied, “Take us to Corisa.”

“In my own sweet time,” Raff growled.

“Now!”

“No!”

“This violates our contract,” One argued.

“Take it up with my boss,” Raff retorted.

“What’s his name?” One demanded.

“Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens,” Raff replied, winking at his wife.

“Do we have a grievance, gentlemen?” Em asked lightly. All three of the legates stared at her, but remained silent. “Well, if you can’t overcome your cultural bias against women, you’ll just have to shut up.”

For a while, at least, that brought peace to the carriage.

Thanok was not much of a town. It was, in fact, little more than a pair of crossed roads lined with

various buildings. The outer zone of stability was, in fact just barely enough accommodate the fields for barley and to graze flocks of sheep, although Raff saw signs that there were times that the stability shrunk leaving the outer edges of those fields under Wild conditions. His guess was it might be during the winter when more people were huddled together in town.

Em quickly realized the town was also not accustomed to the arrival of strangers when she noticed that people came out of every building in town to watch the carriage ride down the street. Finally, when they reached the center of the town, three men, dressed in clothing typical of Meninans stepped up to the carriage.

“Signor Panatti?” Raff asked.

“Yes?” one of the men replied. He was taller than Raff by two inches and had gray hair and a beard. His long coat was heavily embroidered with colorful designs and ornately carved buttons in contrast to the sheepskin pull-over coats worn by the local people. “Are you from the Guild?”

“Master Raff Cawlens,” Raff introduced himself, then turned to introduce the others. “Are you ready to leave this place?” he asked finally.

“I would dearly love to move on, Master Cawlens,” Panatti replied, “but my daughter, Cella, is missing.”

“What happened?” Raff asked worriedly.

“The men who brought us here,” Panatti explained. “There were three of them. When we woke up here five days ago they were gone and they had stolen my Cella.”

“Five days,” Raff considered. “This is going to be difficult. Do you have anything she owns I can study. The closer the connection to her the better.”

“Perhaps I had better do that, dear,” Em told him. “Her undergarments will probably fill the bill admirably, but it’s only right we respect her modesty.”

“I don’t care about that,” Panatti told them anxiously. “Just please bring my Cella back to me. She’s just a young woman of seventeen years. Anything you need that will accomplish that is yours.”

“Let’s take a look then,” Raff suggested. “Where are you staying here?”

“There is only one inn in Thanok,” Saverio Panatti replied. “But it is not very full.”

“Good,” Raff replied. “We’ll hire rooms for the rest of the party, then Em and I will go looking for Cella.”

“I am coming with you,” Panatti insisted.

“I mean no offense, Signor Panatti,” Raff told him, “but you will only make it harder for us to get her back. We need to move fast and we need to have free reign to use our talents as master wayfarers.”

“Such as?” Panatti demanded.

“Such as our ability to track your daughter by her aura,” Raff replied calmly. “Had she been taken just a day or two ago, I could have followed her through the largest metropolis in the world. It’s been nearly a

week, however, and her trail will have faded to the point where only a handful of masters could find her.”

“And you’re one of them?” Panatti asked, skepticism alloyed with hope.

“We’re two of them,” Raff replied.

Half an hour later, Raff and Em were on the path headed northeast out of Thanok. They drove the horses at a fast canter but stopped every so often to make sure they were still on her trail. The trail she had left was faint, but Raff and Em noticed three other aural traces woven in with Cella’s and even when they could not find Cella’s trace, they could find one or more of the other three.

They followed the trail all day and for two hours after sunset until Em pointed out they were both too tired to continue on. “We won’t do her any favors if we’re too tired to see straight when we catch up to her, dear,” she told Raff. They set up a small tent and slept for a few hours. By the time the eastern horizon was beginning to sparkle with the harbinger rays of the on-coming sun, a view one could only see in the Wild, they were on their way once more.

The trail abruptly left the path four hours later. They followed the traces north for only one hundred yards until they came across the remains of three men dressed in sheep skins. “They’ve been shot,” Raff reported after a brief look.

“Musket shot?” Em asked.

“No,” Raff replied. “These men were shot by crossbows.”

“The people around here are still using crossbows?” Em asked.

“The humans use rifles and longbows... well, not real longbows, I guess you would call them recurve bows. They’re shorter and easier to carrying around although they don’t have the range. However, the Kenlienta still prefer to hunt with crossbows all over the world.”

“I know the younger Ken have been attacking some human settlements,” Em recalled, “but I thought that had settled down.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of such a thing in months,” Raff agreed, “but remember those missing wayfarer parties we learned about last year? I haven’t heard anyone mentioning that again lately either, but it’s possible those incidents just have reached this far.”

“Until now?” Em asked.

“Maybe,” Raff replied, “or maybe this is something different. Cella continued on northward from here. Seemingly alone, but then the Ken don’t leave an aural trail.”

“Why would the Ken kill the men and take the woman?” Em asked. “It cannot be anything sexual. They’re a different species.”

“True and there’s never been a case of sexual attraction between human and Ken,” Raff agreed. “Besides, she’s not a wayfarer, her aura would hurt any Kenlienta but an accomplished elder.”

“So why did they take her?” Em asked again.

“Let’s find out,” Raff suggested.

Over the next two hours Raff was glad for the carriage’s wide and sturdy iron-shod wheels and he guided the horses across the Wild until they reached a Kenlienta-built road. Like most Ken roads, this one had been paved with carefully cut cobblestones and had been banked to allow good drainage. The road, Raff knew, was probably centuries old and had been built so well, it needed only occasional maintenance. In the warming springtime weather, Raff was glad to find the paved surface since he and Em had been forced to “assist” the horses through some of the muddier patches.

On the Ken road, they had a different task, that being to keep from inadvertently defiling the road with their own aural traces, although Raff noted that no one had done anything about the traces Cella was unconsciously leaving in her wake. “Maybe the Ken aren’t as sensitive about that as we’ve been led to believe?” Em suggested when Raff pointed it out.

“Or maybe they were in too much of a hurry,” Raff countered. “You have figured out where this road is going, haven’t you?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Em admitted. Just then they got to the top of a long hill and a large, gleaming city stretched out below them.

“Is that Yakrut?” Kaz asked. The boy had been quiet during this leg of the trip. So much so that Raff kept forgetting he had come with them. Kaz, a normally talkative child, had been too busy watching everything Raff and Em did as they tracked down Panatti’s daughter.

“It can’t be anything else,” Raff chuckled.

Eight

“It doesn’t look anything like it did last time I was here,” Raff admitted, “but I’d be tempted to have a word with the city planners if it did. You remember what Tamag Methin was like.”

“Oh yes,” Em replied. “Everything was being built up, repainted, remodeled or being torn down. Ken cities are in constant flux, aren’t they?”

“Some more rapidly than others,” Raff nodded. “The larger cities change most rapidly of all. Kaz, when we were in Tamag Methin, we visited their Council of Elders. The Council Hall was a three-part building only one of which was open at any time while the other two were being remodeled. Every day, the open section would close and the next section would open up. No section was used with the same design twice. It also meant that since we were staying in the Council hall itself, we had to change rooms every day to keep up with the progression.”

“The designs were truly spectacular,” Em told Kaz. “One was an ever-changing display of light, another was built to look like a large tree, still another was like a castle in the clouds and so forth. I got to talk at length with the artist who designed the light display. She’s a remarkably talented young lady.”

“I don’t recall any Kenlientan city having perimeter walls though,” Raff commented as they started their approach. “Doesn’t quite have the comfy, welcoming feel I usually associate with Ken cities.”

“I wonder why they did it,” Em considered.

“If this were a human city,” Raff replied, “I’d say, ‘to keep invaders out,’ but this is not a human city and there is no real outside of the Ken Nation.”

“Could it be to keep everyone in?” Kaz asked.

“No, that doesn’t make any more sense than keeping others out,” Raff replied. “More likely it’s an artistic statement. Probably something about it being all one world united or something like that. The one constant about Ken architecture is that it always changes, so I really doubt they expect that wall to stand forever, although I must admit it looks more permanent than the average Ken structure.”

To Raff’s and Em’s further surprise, there were guards stationed at the gate that led into the enclosed city. “Humans are not welcome here at this time,” one of the guards explained, sounding genuinely apologetic after Raff performed the introductions. “Not even you, Raufanax.”

“I would have normally respected that,” Raff replied, “but we are following the trail of a human woman. She is not a wayfarer, but she seems to have been brought into Yakrut.”

“Is that true?” the guard asked, sounding puzzled

“There are traces of her aura directly below your feet,” Em replied.

The guard jumped involuntarily, but his companion commented, “I did hear a rumor about that. Maybe we should ask about that inside. Honored Raufanax, I’m afraid you must remain outside Yakrut at this time, but I would offer you the hospitality of the gatehouse while you wait.”

Raff thanked him and the wayfarers followed him into the building that was set into the city wall. Then the first guard hurried into the city, but when he returned two hours later, two Elders accompanied him.

Among the Ken society the title of elder sometimes had very little to do with age, so while one of the elders, a Ken named Saltaxis who had flown to Yakrut on hippogriff back from Tamag Methin, deep in the Southern Continent, was quite elderly with a long flowing white beard, his companion, a woman named Nienta, was mature, but could hardly be described as old. As Elders, however, they were both highly honored and accomplished magicians and the representatives of the people in their region. Raff and Em had met them just a few months previously while on the Southern Continent. Saltaxis walked with a staff of oak from which live leaves grew even though it had no roots. A living orchid entwined around Nienta’s left arm. Both the plants were the marks of an elder. Only an elder among the Kenlenta was capable of keeping a plant alive outside its natural environment.

“We came as soon as we heard you were here,” Nienta told them in a musical voice. “And who is this fine young man?” she asked, spotting Kaz.

“This, Elder, is Kazani Basan, our ward and the young troublemaker who caused that path of fire that ran through your region last year,” Em replied.

“I’m sorry about that,” Kaz added politely. “I know better now and hope you will forgive me, Elder.”

“Of course, Kazani,” she replied, reaching out to ruffle his hair with her hand. “And next time you are in my territory I do hope you will be polite and stop in to say hello?”

“I will, Elder,” Kaz promised.

“So, Raufanax,” Saltaxis observed wryly, “you found your way to Yakrut in time for the Grand Council after all. I must say our fellow elders are all abuzz about the news of your arrival, but there is no clear consensus as to whether you should be allowed to attend our sessions.”

“While I would love to do just that, old friend,” Raff replied, “I’m afraid we’re on a different and more immediate mission. When I’ve seen to that, I’d like to attend the meeting, for a brief time at least.”

“Yes, we’ve heard about the trail you are following,” Saltaxis replied. “Although until we approached this gate house we were unaware of it.”

“It’s very faint,” Raff replied. “It’s a few days old at least and the woman we’re following is not a wayfarer so her aura will be growing fainter. If we do not find her in time, she will grow increasingly weaker until her heart stops. Normal humans can no more tolerate the Wild than normal Ken can tolerate a stability.”

“Then all due haste in finding this woman must be made,” Nienta told them.

“We cannot take you into the innermost city,” Saltaxis informed them. “There is another wall around Leraxa’s proposed new government center, but we can accommodate you in the same complex in which we are staying. I will see to the stabling of your horses just as I did in Tamag Methin and then Nienta and I will see about finding the woman you seek.”

It turned out they would stay in the spacious apartment Saltaxis had been given on his arrival in Yakrut. It had quite a few rooms and as he had arrived without an entourage, he could hardly use all of them. Nienta, by contrast had arrived with her husband and two children. Kaz and the children were approximately the same ages and they spent time together the next day while the Elders went to the Council Meeting.

When Saltaxis and Nienta returned later that afternoon, they had a barely conscious Cella Panatti with them. Em immediately rushed to the Meninan woman’s side and worked to gently infuse some needed stability into her where the Wild energies had started to take hold. It was a delicate task, not only because Em could harm her if the process worked too fast, but because she had to be careful not to create an excess of stability that might injure their hosts. She was not worried about Nienta or Saltaxis since they were accomplished elders who could readily protect themselves, but Nienta’s children would be especially vulnerable to stability. Even Kaz’s proximity to them might have been dangerous had the lad not learned to control his aura so thoroughly.

“How did she get here?” Raff asked.

“She was found by Elder Thorenaxis and his entourage,” Nienta explained. “It was obvious that while she was in the company of wayfarers of a sort, she was not there willingly. Thorenaxis’ honor guards attempted to intervene peacefully, but the wayfarers in question resisted and, in fact, attempted to attack, so they were killed and the woman was brought here for her safety.”

“Thorenaxis apologizes,” Saltaxis added, “but he was not aware of the long-term effect of the Wild on humans. So few of us ever have the chance to meet non-wayfarers after all. It was an honest mistake. I’m sure he would have normally delivered her to the nearest human settlement, but he was already late to the Grand Council and thought it could wait until after we had finished here.”

“No harm done, apparently,” Raff shrugged. “So now that I’m here, is there any chance of being

allowed to speak before or at least attend a session of the Grand Council?"

"Had it been our choice to make, Raufanax, you would have been here from the start," Saltaxis replied and Nienta nodded her agreement. "However, not every elder on the council feels that way."

"But Raff saved the lives of countless Kenlienta," Em protested.

"As did you, Emblem Cawlens," Nienta replied. "It will be of no comfort, I am sure, but the situation really has nothing to do with who you are. It's a matter of politics. Leraxa is not just proposing a new government, she is also attempting to establish her own supremacy. She's using you two as a test of her power. If she can keep you from being allowed before the Grand Council, her own election as the Chief Elder of the entire Ken Nation becomes almost a certainty."

"It's an easy issue for her, since most elders had already agreed that no humans should be invited to this meeting," Saltaxis continued the explanation "Even most of those who would otherwise gladly have had you among us and reticent about making exceptions."

"We should know for certain if you will be allowed before the day is out," Nienta told them.

"I'm not going to hold my breath waiting," Raff told her, "I can already see where this is going. It's too bad. There are other elders I would have liked to have a chance to talk to."

"Yes, several old friends of yours have expressed a similar interest in speaking to you," Saltaxis informed him. "I took the liberty of inviting them here after the session this evening."

It was a bittersweet evening. As much as Raff and Em enjoyed meeting old Kenlientan friends, by then it was certain that neither Raff nor Em would be allowed to enter the council meeting chamber. To rub salt in the wounds, Elder Leraxa sent them a letter of greeting.

"Leraxa, Elder of Yakrut," Raff read aloud later that evening, "sends greetings and welcome to our great friends Raff Cawlens, known also among the Ken as Raufanax, and his noble wife Emblem L'Oranne Cawlens. My heart rejoices that the two greatest heroes of the Ken have chosen to visit the capital city of Yakrut. All Kenlienta owe you a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid. Therefore it pains me beyond words to inform you that I will not be able to meet with you at this time and I must, in fact, request that you leave my city until the conclusion of the current meeting of the High Council of Elders. I hope that I will soon have the opportunity to personally welcome you back to Yakrut."

"Doesn't waste words much, does she?" Em observed dryly.

"That show of rudeness will cost her," Gentaxis, the elder of the Ken in the Green Lands area predicted. "We cannot reverse the vote, but even those who voted with her will have second thoughts when the contents of that letter are known."

"Better not," Raff advised after thinking it through. "I don't like getting the bum's rush out of Yakrut, but I am flattered that it was at least a close vote. However, I don't want to be the cause of a major division in the government of the Ken Nation."

"You do not need to worry about that," Zerenia, the Elder of the Ken in the region within Holrany told him. "This Grand Council has never been truly united. Leraxa's proposals look like they will be accepted, but probably only by the same one vote that keeps you from joining us tomorrow. We'll give her

proposals a chance because the Ken have always accepted our ideal of majority rule, but if it does not work out as I feel it will not, then the Council will vote for change back to the old way soon enough.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be that easy to go back once this new government is established,” Raff warned her. “The elders in charge are going to want to stay in charge and from the sound of this letter, I’d say Leraxa expects to be the new Chief Elder of the Ken. Well, we all expected that anyway, but I’ll warn you with human experience. The stronger a government becomes, the less likely it is to be the servant of the people it governs. Leraxa may not be trying to become the Queen of the Ken Nation, but she may well end up like that unless you are very careful to establish a system of check and balances.”

“I don’t see a lot of that in human nations,” Gentaxis pointed out.

“That’s true,” Raff admitted freely. “Most of our countries have monarchs who have the final word on governance, but you’ll notice that the king of the Green Lands has ceded much of the law-making power to his Parliament. There are still provisions under which he could retake the power, but there have been proposals that would make that nearly impossible. In the Green Lands colonies, the people have taken it a step further. King Reginard is still their monarch but they have a representative colonial government that rules in his name. The members of that government, while not directly chosen by the people, are chosen by politicians elected by those people. I believe that is the beginning of a trend toward a more representative government.”

“Which is what we are moving toward as well,” Nienta told him.

“Yes, but you’re doing it in a different way and for different reasons,” Raff replied. “Your way may be better. I don’t know for certain. None of us do and we won’t until after we’ve seen it in action. All I’m saying is be careful, because what you start will have the same sort of momentum that an avalanche does and once in motion it’s going to be very hard to stop.”

Nine

Cella Panatti recovered sufficiently overnight so Em told Raff, “There’s no reason for us to stay here and I suspect Saltaxis and our other friends will appreciate it if we leave quietly. Once we’re gone they can use our leaving for their own political gains.”

“Don’t you love being a pawn?” Raff asked.

“I wish we had more time to see the city,” Kaz remarked. “I’ve never seen anything like this. I didn’t even get a chance to meet many Ken my age.”

“There will be other Ken cities,” Raff assured him, “and Therin Kal is more typical of Kenlientan settlements than Yakrut is. Cities like Yakrut and Tamag Methin try to be more Kenlientan than normal. They take the Ken delight in change to the limits and keep trying to outdo each other. For now, however we have our own jobs to do and that involves going to Corisa. Miss Panatti, are you ready to rejoin your father?”

“Yes, Master Cawlens, I never realized how dangerous the Wild could be,” Cella replied.

“The men who abducted you were far more dangerous,” Em told her. “Are you certain they didn’t harm you?”

“I think they planned all sorts of things, but I got away from them soon after we left Thanok. I didn’t know where I would go. I always thought I would just automatically return to Thanok.”

“Not once you were in the Wild,” Em informed her. “You might have wandered into a stability had you gone far enough, but it would have been by accident.”

“I never had the chance,” Cella replied. “They followed and caught up to me the next day. One of them hit me and I started screaming. That’s when the Ken killed them and brought me to their city, although by the time we got here, I was already starting to feel ill.”

“Fortunately, that’s one sort of sickness that you recover from quickly,” Em told her.

There were fifteen armed Kenlienta waiting for them outside the building in which Saltaxis was staying. “Can’t wait to get rid of us?” Raff asked sourly.

“Not at all, Honored Raufanax,” the leader of the small unit replied. “The Elders Saltaxis and Nienta assigned us to be your honor guard. Had you been staying it would have been our privilege to escort you as you went about your business here.”

“Thank you,” Raff replied, feeling somewhat embarrassed for lashing out at the man who was, after all, only doing his job. Then he thought of something. “Are all the elders going everywhere with their honor guards?”

“Yes, sir,” the Ken soldier replied, nodding.

“Doesn’t that get a bit crowded on the way to the Council meeting?” Raff asked.

“Very much so, yes, sir,” the Ken sighed.

“Hmm, maybe things won’t change all that much after all,” Raff speculated.

“How so, sir?” the soldier asked.

“With a crowd like you have here, everyone must be all trying to get inside at once, I suspect it takes hours just to get all the elders seated,” Raff laughed.

“We don’t all go into the chamber itself, but you are not far off, sir,” the Ken admitted.

There had been very little notice of the wayfarers’ entrance into Yakrut, but on the way out hundreds of Kenlienta lined the street watching as they passed and sometimes applauding politely, making Raff suspect Saltaxis or one of his other friends might have made sure his presence was known throughout the city. The fact that he was leaving without speaking to the Grand Council was bound to be noted by Ken of all walks of life.

“The real insult,” Raff commented once Yakrut was several miles behind them, “is that Leraxa would not even meet with me. Maybe she was afraid it would make her look like she was being weak, but the least she could have done was tell me to leave face-to-face.”

The trip back to Thanok took three days, but they arrived there without further incident. In their absence the Corisans had been making nuisances of themselves, so that by the time the wayfarers’ carriage rolled

down the street, a crowd of angry locals met them and demanded that they take their charges and leave the town immediately.

Raff didn't bother to listen to One's inevitable excuses once the man started claiming that he had a right to demand gifts as tribute from the locals. Instead he just wrapped a wisp of Wild energy around the man and force-marched him into the back of the carriage. After that it only took a mild glare to get Two and Three into the carriage without protest. While that was going on, Cella and her father were tearfully hugging each other. The other two members of their party finished loading their wagon and they were able to leave Thanok while there were still two hours of light before sunset.

"Sorry about this," Raff told Signor Panatti as he rode with the merchants. He didn't like leaving Em to deal with One, Two and Three by herself, but it would be easier if they were each in one of the vehicles. Then he remembered she had Kaz with her. If the legates annoyed the boy too much he would probably start making suggestions that would curl their hair. The Corisans thought they were from the only civilization in the world, but until they encountered Kaz, Raff doubted they had ever met a true barbarian.

"I've been driven out of towns before," Panatti laughed. "At least I have my Cella back." He gave the young woman a hug. He had not let go of her for more than a few seconds since their reunion, barely an hour earlier.

"Well, I'm afraid we're going to have to travel all night," Raff remarked. "The next town is a day's ride away, assuming my information is accurate, and it feels like it's going to be a cold night."

"They're all cold around here, Signor Cawlens," Panatti replied. "It may not look like we are in the mountains, but we are fairly high above sea level."

"It's called a plateau," Raff remarked. "I've been in these parts before, but it is already colder than it was last night. I think we have a cold wind coming down from the north. It may bring snow with it, even if the spring flowers are in bloom. I don't like the look of those clouds."

"They don't look so bad to me," Panatti remarked. "They're high and a bit fluffy."

"They're very high," Raff agreed, "but you don't see them with a wayfarer's eyes, do you? To you they are light white with the clear blue sky behind them. In the Wild, however, I can see all sorts of things normally invisible in a stability. I can see the wind up there, for example. It's a collection of iridescent blue ribbons, but among them is a thread of energy that connects those clouds to ones much larger and thicker but which are still over the horizon. I can't yet tell how far away they are, though."

"How can you tell they don't just connect to other light clouds like these?" Panatti asked.

"Years of experience," Raff replied calmly. "Well, there's nothing we can do about that now except to keep moving. So long as we don't encounter any delays, we should be in the next town before the storm breaks."

"So you think a storm is coming?" Panatti asked.

"I could be wrong," Raff replied. "I'm spectacularly good at being wrong sometimes. Also, while those clouds are moving, well, so are we. It's possible that we won't be where the storm is headed."

"Or we're headed right into the heart of it," Cella added.

“Could be,” Raff agreed.

The sky clouded up over night and when dawn came it brought an oppressive iron-gray light to the day and they still had not found the next town before the first few flakes started drifting down out of the sky. “Why are we stopping if we’re worried about a storm?” Panatti asked when Raff suggested giving the horses a break.

“We could all use a rest, the horses especially,” Raff replied. “And some hot coffee wouldn’t be wasted about now.”

The coffee might have been hot, made over Em’s small alcohol stove, but the food they ate was cold bread and cheese. “Just enough to be getting going for now,” Cella suggested as she brought some to everyone.

“What is this?” One asked disdainfully, pointing at the cheese.

“It’s cheese,” Cella explained. “Made from sheep’s milk.”

“You eat spoiled and hardened old milk?” One asked, not bothering to hide his disgust.

“If you don’t like it,” Em told him harshly, “give the cheese back. Someone else will eat it.”

“Why is there no tea?” Two asked. He wasn’t quite as demanding as One, but it was obvious that he, too, still expected his whims to be met.

“I didn’t make any this morning,” Em replied. “This isn’t an inn and we don’t have the time. You can have a real breakfast with tea if you want when we find the next town.”

“The barbarians around here don’t know how to make good tea,” Two grumbled.

“You mean they don’t like the same sort of tea you do,” Em translated. “If you can ever learn to speak with a civil tongue, maybe I’ll let you teach them. Everyone back into the wagons. We can eat and drink as we travel.”

“Good thinking,” Raff agreed. “The snow is starting to pick up. We had better move on while we can still see our path.”

“I wouldn’t mind staying in a Kenlienta town again,” Kaz commented.

“Only in an emergency,” Em told him as they climbed back into the carriage. “It is not polite to go barging in for no cause at all. They leave us alone, so we should accord them the same courtesy. Cella, would you like to ride with us? It might be nice to have another woman to talk to for a change.”

Cella smiled and climbed up to sit next to Em. She, too, had spent most of her time recently traveling entirely in the company of men and as Em had suggested it was nice to have someone else to talk to. Em was used to being one of the boys when working with other wayfarers, but from Cella’s eager acceptance of Em’s offer, it was obvious the Meninan woman was somewhat lonely while traveling with her father.

“This is my first time outside of Pana,” Cella admitted. “It’s exciting and different, but I think Mama was right. It’s better to be home. I’m not sure I’ll travel with Papa again, at least not this far. She glanced at

the Corisans in the rear of the carriage and added, in Liturgical Meni, “The people around here don’t seem to like women.”

“Oh, I think they like women well enough,” Em laughed, replying in the same language. “They just don’t appreciate that we can think for ourselves and resent when we actually do that.”

“Their loss,” Cella shrugged. Then they slid back to a modern language and went on to discuss a wide variety of other topics.

The wind was already howling above them and the snow was being blown in thick white sheets when they found the next town an hour later.

Ten

The late spring blizzard lasted for over three days and when it had finally blown itself out, there was over three and a half feet of snow covering everything. However, the weather warmed up again rapidly and soon everything was melting. Rivers formed in the roads of the town they had taken shelter in and even after the snow had melted, the wayfarer paths were too soft to drive on, so Raff kept them there another two days before he finally gave in to One’s demands that they move on.

“We really should have waited a bit longer,” Raff decided a few hours later. The extra-wide wheels of Em’s carriage were getting by well enough, but the wheels on Signor Panatti’s wagon kept getting mired in the mud and Raff had to use various wayfarer tricks to get them moving again.

Travel was slow the next few days as they encountered swollen rivers and muddy pathways. Finally Raff and Em decided their best route would be to head south and travel through Myanistan, Salasia and Makret until they could enter Corisa from the south. “Weren’t we already in Myanistan?” Kaz asked Raff as they started southward. When Em and Cella started riding together habitually, Kaz started alternating between riding with them and with Raff and the merchants.

“It’s a big country,” Raff explained, “and it partially wraps around Salustan. So we passed through the northwest arm of Myanistan and then turned around, you may recall, and followed our friends here into Salustan. Actually the two countries used to be one.”

“Why did they split up?” Kaz asked interestedly.

“I’m not sure,” Raff admitted. “It could have been politics, but it could well have been because the towns of the old united country drifted too far away from each other.”

“Huh?” Kaz asked.

“The Wild is malleable, Kaz. You know that. It changes. Areas of stability float around in the Wild in the same way icebergs float around in an ocean.”

“Icebergs?” Kaz, the boy from the tropics, asked.

“Never mind,” Raff sighed, “like driftwood on a lake. Understand?” Kaz nodded. “Well normally towns don’t move very far or very fast and one of the hallmarks of a nation is that the constituent towns and cities tend to stay near one another even as they move about. Sometimes a town on the edge of a country

will drift away from the others and become part of another. That doesn't happen often, but it does happen from time to time. And really large cities like Carais or Taundon will have smaller satellite towns and cities that circle them every few years."

"So Kenlientan cities move around too?" Kaz asked.

"No," Raff replied, shaking his head. "The Wild changes but it does not actually move around, just as that lake I mentioned with the driftwood in it doesn't actually move even though the wood itself does. Mountains will seem to melt in the Wild, rivers will cut canyons in the land and new mountains will grow up. Deserts form to be replaced by grasslands and swamps, given a few centuries. The terrain changes but does not actually move. Kenlientan cities are, in a sense, a part of the terrain; therefore they do not move either.

"However, that doesn't answer your question," Raff continued. "As you know, most religions in the Northern Lands and the Southern Continent are monotheistic and they pretty much all worship the same God whose true name is never spoken. The differences between those religions are in ritual practices, scriptural interpretation and things like that. If you go back far enough into the past they were once all a single religion, but over the years new prophets and differences of opinion, especially among the various priests, have resulted in schisms and new religions.

"The principal religion in Salustan and Myanistan is such a descendant of that ancient religion, but it is one in which the adherents follow the teachings of a man they believe was God's favorite disciple. His name was Myan Salusta and his religion is a very much stricter and more fanatical interpretation of scripture than, say, the Orthodox form of the Church of Meni."

"How so?" Kaz asked.

"Well for example you probably noticed the various headgear the men wear in Salustan and Myanistan. They are worn because Salusta interpreted a certain passage about a man's head not extending to heaven to mean that one should keep one's head covered lest others think he is trying to extend his head to heaven."

"That's silly," Kaz laughed.

"They don't think so," Raff warned him. "Each type of hat, turban and headscarf is a symbol of a person's rank and status."

"I think they all look a bit funny," Kaz replied.

"Try not to laugh while any of them are watching you," Raff replied. "They take those hats very seriously and are likely to try and kill you if they think you're being sacrilegious." Kaz started laughing. "What's so funny?" Raff asked.

"God created the universe, right?" Kaz asked.

"That's the way I learned it," Raff replied.

"Me too," Kaz agreed. "So if He did that, don't you think He would have more important things to worry about than whether I'm wearing the right funny-looking hat?"

"I think so," Raff admitted, "but in this case what I believe doesn't really count."

“I think even the most serious of the Salustanis and their cousins can forgive Kaz his amusement,” Signor Panatti told them from the front of the wagon. “It was the Corisans’ derision that really set them off back in Thanok. Those three insulted everyone and didn’t bother keeping their feelings to themselves.”

“Yeah,” Kaz agreed. “They call everyone barbarians. Is Corisa all that marvelous compared to the other countries?”

“Their High King lives pretty well,” Panatti laughed, “but the rest of the people aren’t any better than anyone else in the world.”

It was Em, however, who finally brought the three Corisans up short the next evening as they ate dinner in an inn in North-central Myanistan. The Corisan legates were talking among themselves in Corisan, pointing at the locals and some of their traveling companions, and laughing derisively. Finally Em had enough and turned to them. “You know,” she told them in their own language, “the rest of us all understand everything you say. Now as I understand it, ‘barbarian’ is your word for foreigner, right? Well, boys,” she continued on, using a word that connoted over-familiarity and extreme immaturity, “outside of Corisa you’re the barbarians. Just thought you might want to know.”

They behaved better for the next few days, but a week later One was arrested in another Myanistani town for blasphemy. Raff and the others were just finishing up breakfast when Two and Three came in and gave him the news.

“What did he do?” Raff asked.

“Nothing,” Two told him. “These barbarians are crazy.”

“You barbarians are crazy too,” Raff snapped back at him. “Now what did One do?”

“Nothing at all,” Two replied stubbornly.

“You three are lucky I’m an honorable man,” Raff growled at them. “Most wayfarers would tell you he had brought whatever he did on himself. Given the way you three have behaved, he probably treated one of the local maidens like a prostitute. Now are you going to give me a better answer? No? Fine, I’ll go find out myself, but frankly if he really did break the local laws, I very well may just let him rot.”

“You can’t do that,” Two protested. “We have a contract.”

“Did you read any of it?” Raff demanded disbelievingly. “That contract does not protect you if you commit a crime along the way.”

Raff took Kaz with him when he went to the local magistrate who was also the head priest in the local church. “That man is guilty of blasphemy,” the priest-judge told Raff.

“Doesn’t surprise me in the least,” Raff replied with a long sigh. “May I ask just what he did?”

“He entered the church during our morning devotions,” the priest explained. “At first we were happy to welcome him there. Very few outsiders join us in prayer, nor are they expected, but it is always a joy on those occasions when they do. God is great and God is love. We truly believe that we are all his children even if we do not all agree on the proper way to worship him.”

“Amen,” Raff agreed. “I take it he wasn’t there to pray?”

“Sadly, no,” the priest replied. “He interrupted our prayers by walking up onto the high place and then picked up a solid gold incense shovel. This is a specially consecrated object. If anyone who is not a priest touches it, it must be purified again and that is a long and involved process.”

“We have similar artifacts,” Raff admitted. “I understand the offense.”

“Oh, if that was all he did,” the priest-judge continued, “we would have probably laughed it off as the unintentional act of an ignorant fool. Children will sometimes desecrate a holy object in the same way. It’s an innocent act on their part and punishments are generally light so long as they learn quickly not to make a habit of it. Foreigners are like children that way and we understand that objects that are sanctified in our practice are not necessarily treated the same way elsewhere.”

“That sounds remarkably understanding,” Raff nodded. “So what else did he do?”

“He tried to buy the incense shovel,” the priest replied, “for a few pieces of silver.”

“He tried to buy a solid gold holy object for a few pieces of silver?” Kaz asked, astonished. “Is silver more valuable in Corisa than it is here, Raff?”

“No,” Raff shook his head. “It’s less valuable there, in fact. Well, I can understand why you’re so upset, Father.”

“I would have let him off with a fine,” the priest-judge admitted, “but he compounded the insult by refusing to give us his name when brought before me for judgment. He told me he was not required to give me his name, that he was an emissary of the High King and that our laws are not binding on him.”

“Well, he was partially right, Father,” Raff admitted. “He is an emissary of the High King although not to Myanistan. I think he may have been part of a trade delegation to the Priest-King in Korut some months ago. That doesn’t excuse him from his crimes and it does not excuse his foolishness. By Corisan tradition he is not supposed to use his own name again until he has returned to Ranyang. However, he should have been capable of explaining that politely.”

“I might have chosen clemency had he bothered to explain,” the priest admitted.

“Well, I can’t say he doesn’t deserve some punishment,” Raff replied, “but I understand that the usual punishment for blasphemy is execution. Would it be acceptable for me to plead on his behalf for clemency even now?”

“A good man may always plea on another’s behalf,” the priest nodded, “but if he gets off without punishment I fear it will only encourage him to commit worse acts elsewhere.”

“Fools rarely improve with age,” Raff noted.

“Well said,” the priest said admiringly. “Is that a proverb among your people?”

“No, just an observation,” Raff replied modestly. “So is there a fine I could pay perhaps?”

“I can tell you are a righteous man, my son,” the priest replied. “I do not want you to pay for this fool’s actions.”

“But he is under my protection so I am responsible for what he does,” Raff told the priest-judge, “How about he forfeit all his money? I’m not sure how much he actually has with him, but taking away his pocket change will keep him from repeating this particular offense.”

“I cannot commute a death sentence for the price of a few coins,” the priest told Raff.

“Then maybe we can devise a punishment that will be just severe enough to reform the fool,” Raff suggested. “I understand caning is a common practice for certain crimes in these parts. I know I’ve wanted to hit him with something for weeks.”

The priest smiled. “All right. All his worldly goods except the clothes on his back and he will be caned until he clearly repents his actions in a manner that is sincere to my ears.”

“With a minimum of one strike with the cane,” Raff added.

“What?” the priest-judge asked.

“I think he’s going to start trying to apologize as soon as he sees the caning rack,” Raff replied. “I don’t really approve of corporal punishment, but as you implied, letting him go with a warning won’t do anyone any good.”

At Raff’s further suggestion, the Priest left One in his cell until early the next morning when Raff had Two and Three deliver all the money in the Corisans’ possession along with several expensive trinkets they had evidently acquired along the way. It was technically more than Raff had promised the priest, but when Two and Three tried to claim that none of them actually owned anything they were carrying with them, Raff decided the only way to solve the problem was by giving it all away.

“That belongs to His Holiness, the High King!” Two protested.

“Then what are you lot doing spending it?” Raff demanded.

“We are using it on his behalf,” Two replied.

“Well, then so am I,” Raff told him. “Should I deliver you up for punishment as well?”

The next morning One was led out of his cell and into the town square. As Raff predicted, he took one look at the caning rack and started to break down. He was weeping openly as he was lashed to the rack and started shouting abject apologies even before the cane touched his bared bottom.

Raff caught the priest-judge’s eye and saw the man nod back at him approvingly. Finally the executioner picked up the cane and brought it down in three slowly measured sharp strokes. One screamed in agony even as the priest-judge held up his hand to stop the caner and One renewed his apologies once he had caught his breath. He was still blubbering and apologizing half an hour later as Raff helped him into Panatti’s wagon when it became apparent that the Corisan would not be sitting comfortably for some time. The caner might have only hit him three times, but he did not hit him lightly and One would be traveling lying on his stomach for some time to come.

The pathways dried up and became firm enough to travel on without using wayfaring tricks with Wild energy to keep the wagon and carriage from getting mired in the mud. After the caning, the Corisans all behaved themselves and Raff was finally able to relax on that account at least. But traveling through the Myanistani mountains was not without incident.

It was two mornings later, while making their way up a mountain along a long switch-back path, that they heard a low pitched grumble swell into an ear-splitting shriek. A moment later three odd creatures suddenly leaped at them from above as they were traveling on a steep and winding mountain road. The creatures were large, nearly half again as tall as a man and three times more heavily built. Their bodies looked like bears, but they were covered with glistening feathers and all had long, hooked eagle-like beaks.

Raff and Em attempted to drive them off with the usual manipulations of Wild energy, but these creatures were somehow resistant to the wayfarers' defenses. Signor Panatti and his fellows drew out their long rifles and started shooting, managing to kill one of the odd beasts immediately but the others, while wounded, were also enraged and even more dangerous than they had been before,

The two surviving creatures attacked the merchants' wagon, tearing off a side and breaking one of the wheels before Raff attempted a bit of Kenlienta magic. He had no time to be subtle, but the magic, which worked directly on the creatures' minds, confused them and they started attacking the side of the mountain instead of the travelers, giving the party a chance to escape, although the merchant wagon had to be left behind. They had barely enough time to release the horses.

Once safely away from the odd feathered creatures and the wagon horses had been recovered, Signor Panatti pointed out, "We need to get my wagon back. Without it I won't be able to conduct any business in Ranyang."

"Well, I seriously doubt those things are going to eat your cargo," Raff admitted. "Let's sneak back and see what we can do."

"What were those things?" Cella Panatti asked after Raff and the merchants left to recover the wagon.

"Byadoms," Em replied, still trying to catch her breath after the incident. Wayfaring was not an effortless activity and she had been throwing around enough energy to power Taundon for a year if it could have been so harnessed. "In the language of Makret that literally means 'bird-bears' but that sounds silly. They're very much out of their usual range. I've never heard of any this far west, in fact."

"Could it be all the bad weather lately?" Cella asked.

"I suppose that's possible," Em allowed, "but the weather has not been all that unusual around here for this time of year. Of course, it is also possible that we don't know all there is to know about byadoms. Perhaps they do come this way each year and we just never heard of it. They don't normally attack travelers, not in wagons anyway. They do not attack anything larger than they are, although at their size, there is not much around aside from the stray elephant that is larger than they are."

"There are elephants around here?" Cella asked looking back and forth.

"Not here exactly," Em laughed. "But further south in Salasia and in parts of Makret."

"I've never seen an elephant," Cella commented.

“They’re large and they’re gray,” Em described. “They have very long prehensile noses called trunks and two great teeth made of ivory called tusks that stick out of their mouths. The ones in Salasia and there about are smaller than the ones in the Southern Continent, but they’re also half-domesticated and are used for hauling, building and in a few cases, transportation. You’ll see for yourself soon enough, I’m sure.”

“You’ve been almost everywhere, haven’t you, Emblem?” Cella asked.

“Not hardly,” Em laughed. “This will be my first trip to Salasia, Makret and Corisa, for example.”

“But you sound like you’ve been there before.”

“The Guild has a large library of books on geography,” Em explained. “That’s very important to a wayfarer and we’re encouraged to study in our off hours. There are lazy ones who don’t, of course. They’d rather sit back in the evening and drink beer, but they’re the ones who also don’t want to really see the world. They’d rather just make the same trips over and over. Well, there’s a need for regular routes, of course, but the best wayfarers are the ones who can take you to places even they have never been before.”

“But you’ve been to a lot of places, haven’t you?” Cella pressed.

“Well, I’ve been all over the Northern Lands,” Em admitted, “and to their colonies across theDarkOcean . And most recently I was traveling around much of the Southern Continent, but I haven’t been to theBrightOcean or done more than see the western shore of theEasternOcean . Maybe someday, but I do have to take the jobs that come my way.”

Just then there was another half-roar, half-shriek behind them followed by a lot of loud snarling. Em looked behind the carriage but only saw some trees moving in what might have been the breeze. “I think our byadoms are fighting each other now,” she told Cella. “They might be fighting the men, but I think your father would be trying to shoot them. You know, that might have been another odd thing. I don’t think they hunt in packs. I always got the impression that except during the mating season they were solitary animals.”

“Is this the mating season?” Cella asked.

“I don’t think so,” Em replied. “Besides, those three were all males. You can tell from the bright feathers. Like many birds, the feathers of the females are a bit drab.”

Raff and the merchants made their way carefully toward the abandoned wagon where the byadoms appeared to be picking through the remains of one of the chests that had been thrown from the back during the initial attack. “Is that the box you were keeping food in?” Raff whispered to Signor Panatti.

“Some dried meat,” Panatti replied, “and we had some bread and cheese in there at the start of the trip, though not recently. Just things to get us through when we couldn’t stop in a town, you know?”

“That’s what I thought,” Raff nodded.

“Is that why they attacked us?” the merchant asked.

“I doubt their sense of smell is that acute,” Raff replied, “but hunger is one of the main reasons an animal

will attack. Defending themselves or their young is another, although this bunch is not in their usual territory. Many animals act differently in strange surroundings and maybe that's something, too. Or maybe they're sick, though they look healthy enough to me. All I know is they're resistant to Stability. That's a rare trait in a Wild animal and it makes me wonder why the people of Makret don't have more trouble with them."

"We'll have to ask when we get there," Panatti suggested. "Maybe they just leave food out for them?"

"I suppose," Raff shrugged, "though I'd have thought that would encourage them to come into the towns. It does give me an idea, though."

Reaching out with his mind, Raff commanded the Wild energy all around him to surge toward the food box and push it several feet away and off the pathway. As it moved the byadoms moved with it until one put its clawed foot down heavily on the already broken box. The other byadom protested the first's action with a growl and a shriek and placed its own foot on the box as well, so Raff stopped trying to move the box for a few minutes until the two byadoms relaxed enough to go back to their eating.

After a little more time he "pushed" the box again. This time the byadom's feet stopped the box after it had moved only half the distance it had the first time. Raff had no choice but to continue to be patient. This time he waited even longer before trying to move the box again and was rewarded by getting it almost as far as on his first attempt. After that the byadoms would only let it move a foot at a time.

"Smart critters," Raff sighed. "They're learning all too fast."

"What are you trying to do?" Panati whispered.

"I want to push that box of food over the cliff," Raff explained. "A few more feet and it will roll down to the next leg of this switch back and from there we'll probably be safe to work on your wagon."

It took another hour in all, but finally the box fell over the edge and crashed its way down-slope with the byadoms in hot pursuit. Then the merchants quickly removed the wagon's broken wheel. While the rest were attempting to repair the side wall in back one of Panatti's men went ahead to lead the horses back.

Eventually, however, they decided the wall was not in good enough shape to be worth saving and they had to lash everything down in the back of the wagon. That took an additional two hours as they reloaded the entire wagon and carefully tied the contents up so they wouldn't fall off as they moved. "We'll have to get it repaired in a town," Panatti commented. "Should we turn back to the one we stayed in last night?"

"Only if you think we can get past the byadoms," Raff told him. "They're in our way if we turn around."

While the merchants made their repairs, Raff had continued to watch and make sure the byadoms wouldn't come back. They seemed content to rummage through the food box and paid no attention to the noises the men made while fixing the wagon even if the growls and shrieks from below sounded like the same noises the beasts made while attacking.

Finally, they drove the wagon back to where Em and the others had been waiting. The repaired wagon creaked uncertainly as they moved and Panatti decided that something else may have broken during the attack, so they continued on at a careful pace.

Hearing the growls and shrieks of the byadoms behind them for the next hour, Em put Kaz on watch

duty to make sure the creatures weren't stalking the travelers. The byadoms, however, for all their noise and fury were not seen again.

In the next town, Panatti decided to trade in his wagon for a new one. He later admitted, "It wasn't the best deal I've ever made but it was worth it to know we won't have to stop for repairs every other day."

Twelve

Another fifteen days' progress brought the two-vehicle caravan to the head waters of the Sala River. The Sala was truly one of the world's great rivers and while not as long as the River Tin of the Southern Continent nor as wide as the Graniam River of the Pangam colony of Norillia, it was the second longest river in the world. At this point the river was little more than a mountain stream, but as they followed it southward it would soon swell with the water of dozens of tributaries.

"What sort of land is Salasia?" Kaz asked Raff. During their journey the weather had gone from frigid to hot and humid. This was more like the weather Kaz had grown up with, but by now he had grown used to more temperate conditions.

"It's a kingdom, I guess you could call it," Raff replied. "The ruler, however, is called the Maharajah and his territorial princes or rajahs are closer to what I would call a governor. Salasia is not a Guild kingdom and we are only allowed two trading colonies here. The Maharajah tolerates us, but only if we restrict our business to other foreigners."

"Doesn't Salasia have its own wayfarers?" Kaz asked.

"Of course," Raff nodded, "but they all work directly for the Maharajah. That's not much of a distinction since in theory everyone works for the Maharajah, but, in their case, they are all part of his government and no one can travel from one place to another without their express permission and assistance. It makes the monarchy absolute and not a particularly pleasant place to live unless you happen to be lucky enough to have the right parents."

"What do you mean?" Kaz asked.

"The population is divided into some six different castes. The upper caste are the nobles who rule in the Maharajah's name and their families. The lowest caste are those who clean garbage from the streets, bury the dead and just about every other unpleasant task you can imagine. In between those polarities, each caste has its own rank, set of duties and privileges. A person may only marry a member of his own caste and the only way someone might change castes is by being a wayfarer. Wayfarers are members of the second highest caste regardless of the caste they were born to, but since less than one in every hundred people have any wayfaring talent at all and only one in several thousand has sufficient talent to satisfy the local requirements of being in the wayfarer caste it's the smallest of all the castes."

"In practice that's not all that different from the way you've described the Green Lands," Kaz observed. "You said people are expected to go into the same trade as their parents."

"But there are exceptions," Raff replied, "and one's social standing is not institutionally static. You can increase your standing through hard work and success."

"You never mentioned that," Kaz replied.

“I never thought I had to, Kaz,” Raff told him. “We tend to take the systems we grew up in for granted. Anyway, while I may not like the society here, there are scientists here who are respected all over the world. The largest celestial and solar observatory can be found just outside of Malhi, the capital of Salasia.”

“Sounds interesting,” Kaz decided.

“Speaking of Malhi,” Signor Panatti cut in. “I would appreciate a lay-over of two or three days there to conduct business.”

“I don’t know,” Raff hedged. “We still have a long way to go.”

“But we’ve been traveling for weeks and it will probably be at least another week before we reach the capital,” Panatti pointed out. “I think we could all use a break from traveling.”

“You do have a point,” Raff agreed. “I’ll have to discuss it with Em, this is our mission together, but I doubt she will be opposed to a few days off.”

“But how will we keep the Corisans out of trouble?” Kaz asked dryly.

“They’ve been remarkably quiet lately,” Raff pointed out. “I think they’ve finally learned the meaning of the word discretion.”

“Adding to their vocabulary and having them actually improve their behavior are two different things, you know,” Panatti commented.

Malhi was an ancient city of marble spires and mud-brick homes. Kaz had been fascinated with the mud-brick buildings he saw in Tinap. After having watched one being made, apparently with blocks of nothing more than dried mud and straw, the resulting buildings seemed both sturdy and comfortable even in the heat of the day of the Tinapian desert. Those buildings were also erected far faster than Kaz would have thought, although he wondered what would happen if it rained.

“They melt if they get too wet,” Raff had explained, “but it doesn’t rain here very often and they rebuild every few years anyway. It doesn’t take much to level a mud-brick building. In fact you’ll notice that most towns seem to be built on hills? That’s because when they knock down an old house, they build the next one right on top of it. After a generation or two the mounds or tells as they are called get high enough that the locals need to build ramps and staircases to get to the level they are living at. You can tell how long people have been living at a site, by how tall their tell is, in fact.”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to move the town?” Kaz asked, trying to imagine going up and down a large hill every day just to get water from the river.

“They do that too,” Raff chuckled.

The mud-brick homes in Tinap were built differently than the ones in Salasia. In Tinap, Kaz had noted the roofs were thatched, having been made of river reeds. Here the locals used thin sheets of a dark gray stone, Em explained. It was called slate and that these stone roofs overhung the mud-brick walls.

“It rains here more than it does in Tinap,” she told him when he asked. “They build the roofs that way to help protect the walls.”

“But if it rains that much, why not use something else to build with?” Kaz asked.

“Mud is inexpensive and easy to use,” Em replied, “and the people here know when it’s going to rain most of the time. They call it the monsoon season and it’s not all that different than the wet season you’re used to.”

“Then why don’t these walls melt in the rain?” Kaz asked.

“Sometimes they do,” Signor Panatti told him, “but these buildings are more different than the ones in Tinap than they look. The mud is not holding up the roofs here. Each of these buildings has a wooden frame and that frame is covered in mud brick. The mud makes the interiors more comfortable in the hot dry season, but even if all the mud disappeared the frame and roof would stay intact. Besides, most of the time, repairing the mud-brick walls is a chore accomplished in a single afternoon.”

“There wasn’t a lot of city planning here,” Em observed as they snaked their way through the streets of Malhi.

“No,” Raff agreed. “It just sort of happened. It’s not unlike a lot of towns and cities in the Green Lands. Come to think of it, the streets of Carais don’t exactly show anyone thought beyond the paving stones.”

“Yes, but at least the streets in northern lands cities are fairly even,” Em replied. “These seem to widen and narrow at random, like someone decided to get more room by extending his building out into the street itself.”

“That’s probably exactly what happened,” Raff nodded. “Signor Panatti,” he called ahead to the merchant wagon. “Where are you taking us?”

“Not much further,” Panatti shouted back. “There’s a large central market we can set up in and there are inns to stay in there as well.”

“I thought there was a Guild trading colony here,” Em remarked.

“Not in Malhi,” Raff replied. “They’re on the coast a week or more from here.”

“I should have known better,” Em replied with a smile. “I knew this wasn’t a Guild country. I shouldn’t have expected a guild hall right in the capital.”

“Salustan isn’t really a Guild country either or wouldn’t be if not for the ancient treaty with the Ken,” Raff pointed out, “but, yes, since we left Gaharenar we’ve been on our own and will be until we get back to what we laughingly call civilization.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Emblem admitted.

“Homesick, Em?” Raff asked. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It isn’t,” she growled back instantly. “What I meant was, when was the last time we actually used the same carriage this long?”

Raff thought about that. “I can’t say I ever have. During the great plague, I was on horseback the whole time. Why?”

“How often are we supposed to check the bearings and the undercarriage or whatever other parts we’re supposed to check for wear?” Em asked.

“I ought to know that, shouldn’t I?” Raff agreed. “Well, I don’t. I guess it comes from never having actually owned one. So how often are we supposed to do that? Your family must have owned its own carriage.”

“Several,” Em replied, “but we had servants for that. I think there was a regular maintenance schedule and when I was a girl I would occasionally watch our blacksmith shoeing the horses and repairing the carriages, but I’m ashamed to say I never really worried about it much.”

“No reason you would have had to,” Raff told her, “but you have a point. I’m sure your smith checked the carriages after every use or at least on a regular schedule. There’s never any lack of work for a good smith and as many apprentices as he can accommodate, so this must be something that needs doing a lot. I wonder if we’ve just been very lucky this trip.”

“Probably,” Em nodded. “I don’t think we ought to go on trusting that luck though. Maybe tomorrow we should seek out a local smith and have him look this rig over?”

“I’ll handle that,” Raff told her, “and I think it will do Kaz some good to learn what to look for as well.”

“No, I’m definitely coming with you,” Em told him stubbornly. “I’m every bit as much of a wayfarer as you are, Raff Cawlens. This is part of my job.”

“I hope the natives don’t take offense at a woman who does a man’s job in their eyes,” Raff commented, knowing full well it wouldn’t matter one whit to Em if they did.

He needed not worry on that point. The smith they found, just a few blocks away from the central market square, was very polite, calling Raff *Sahib* and Emblem *Memsahib* with almost every breath. If he was taken aback by Em’s interest in the mechanical working of a carriage, he gave no sign of it.

“You have been very lucky, *Sahib*,” the smith, who introduces himself as Harshad, told Raff not too long after he started inspecting the carriage. “You see this spring here? It is starting to crack under all that rust. These springs have not been replaced in many years. How old is this vehicle?”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Raff admitted. “I bought it a few months ago. It seemed well built at the time although we have been driving it in all sorts of weather ever since.”

“Hmm,” Harshad considered. “As I said, *Sahib*, you have been very lucky. I think this damage must have been there when you bought the carriage, but it was hidden below the rust.”

“Springs always get rusty,” Em pointed out.

“Indeed, *Memsahib*,” Harshad agreed readily, “but the careful and discerning buyer will scrape off the rust, at least in those places that take the most strain. Come. I will show you both the places to check next time you are in the market and then we shall talk about the repairs over tea.”

Harshad spent the next hour showing Raff, Em and Kaz how to properly inspect a carriage not only when considering a purchase but while it is in use as well. “This is a very well-built carriage,” he told them as he finished his inspection. The body is in excellent shape and has been well maintained. I really

like the wheels. We do not make wheels like this. So wide. Must be very good in the mud.”

“And in the snow,” Raff added.

“Snow,*Sahib*?” Harshad asked, briefly perplexed. Then he flashed them a bright smile and added, “Oh yes, I have heard of that. In the mountains, of course. We do not suffer such calamities here. How can people drink their tea if it freezes?”

“By heating it,” Raff chuckled.

Harshad nodded happily and continued, “I found damage on the springs of both sides,*Sahib*, although the damage on the left is minimal. I won’t know for certain until I dismantle the assembly, I but I think I can replace one of the leaves of the spring. The right side is too far gone, I’m afraid, and I will have to rebuild it completely. The bearings have not been greased in a long time either. They are starting to wear.”

“How about replacing both sides and replacing the bearings?” Raff asked. “Would that give us a more even ride? We have a long way yet to go.”

“You are traveling home now?” Harshad asked.

“No,” Raff shook his head. “First we must go to Ranyang.”

“In Corisa,*Sahib*? That is a very long way. If you were going straight home, I would think the bearings would hold out, but to expect you to go to Corisa first? No, I would not send my worst enemy out like that. Yes. You will be best served with two new springs and bearings. But I will give you an allowance for the steel of the old springs. The steel of your country, I have seen, is better than the metal we manufacture here. Oh, you need not worry for your wagon, our steel is properly tempered for that use, it’s just that yours is harder and holds an edge better. The steel from your springs will make many good belt knives and kitchen utensils.”

Raff and Harshad made their bargain quickly and settled down to an extra cup of tea before the wayfarers let Harshad get to his work.

While in Malhi, the Corisans decided to visit the Corisan embassy there. Raff suspected they were looking for an excuse to not return to Ranyang with a barbarian wayfarer, but while they did not look happy when they returned, they said nothing about what happened when they consulted their ambassador.

On their second day in the city, however they encountered some of the local wayfarers. As Raff had explained to Kaz, all the wayfarers in Salasia were members of the second most highly-ranked caste, just below the nobles and were, in many ways, seen as nobles themselves by everyone except the Maharajahs and his regional rajahs. Consequently they were an arrogant lot and the commoners of Salasia did their best to avoid angering any members of the wayfarer caste.

However, while the locals knew a wayfarer on sight by his clothing and arrogant bearing, Em and Kaz were too involved in their shopping to notice the two approaching men and how everyone else in the market rushed to get out of their way, while also attempting a respectful bow in their direction.

The Salasian wayfarers wore midnight blue robes trimmed with gold. They also wore thick gold chains around their neck, each of which supported an improbably large sapphire pendant. Em learned later

those robes and the pendants were a wayfarer's badge of office in Salasia. However, given the size of the stones, she suspected the sapphires had been manufactured by Wild energy manipulation although it was not until some years later that she and Raff figured out how it was done.

Emblem was busily admiring a small ruby pendant and trying to figure out what she should offer for it, so she did not see Kaz accidentally back up into the path of the on-coming men in dark blue. However she did see him come suddenly flying forward and into the display of jewelry after one of the men backhanded the boy.

"How dare you?" she demanded, turning to see who had done it. Until now the local people had seemed friendly and accommodating. That anyone would hit a child out of hand offended her deeply.

"Silence, woman!" the man told her and proceeded to try hitting her as well. Em didn't need training as a wayfarer to deal with that however, and she nimbly ducked under the blow, while sticking her leg out to trip the man. He fell flat on his face and Kaz, angry beyond words, picked himself up and started toward the man that was still standing.

That man, however, didn't see Kaz as he was busy dealing with Em. However, when Kaz noticed he was summoning the Wild to him in the same way Raff and Em had when necessary, Kaz fired off a first shot – a blast of fiery Wild power that Kaz did not intend to actually touch the man, but to distract him.

It was a successful distraction, but the Salasian wayfarer, enraged that anyone would attack him and his companion, attempted to "force thrust" the stability out of Kaz. The attack was lethal when successful, but Em stepped in the way and shielded Kaz and herself.

The man Em had tripped got back to his feet and started firing off blasts of energy that splashed off Em's shield and set fire to the canvas booths around them. Kaz was torn between firing back the same at the two local wayfarers and putting out the fires they were causing and in the end he remembered what Raff had told him about the duties of a Guild member.

"We are guardians, not destroyers," Raff had explained. "It is our job to uphold justice and protect those who cannot otherwise defend themselves. We are the last refuge for people regardless of their station in life. So long as they are unfairly beset, the Guild is there to support them."

With that in mind, Kaz turned his efforts toward extinguishing the blazing canvas. It was a simple process. In the Wild even a rank apprentice could accomplish it. In a major stability only a wayfarer of potential master-class could do it, but Kaz was as good as Raff and Em thought and had no trouble bleeding off the heat of the fire into the cobbles of the street.

The display of wayfaring talent, however, only served to further enrage the two locals and they escalated their attacks above and beyond anything Kaz had yet observed. Suddenly, both Em and Kaz had trouble breathing as one of their attackers removed the air from around them.

Kaz responded by force-thrusting Wild energy, not into the local wayfarers but into the ground beneath them. The ground burst upward, throwing the two men several feet away from each other. Em was tempted to strike them while they were down, but hoped instead they would get the point and stop trying to bully them.

Her hopes were dashed a moment later when both men attempted to incinerate her and Kaz. Only Em's shield protected her as she struggled to hold up under the assault and Kaz continued putting out fires. It was only after they had been trading blows that Em finally noticed the Salasian wayfarers' weakness.

These two men were so used to being able to bully the common people of Salasia, they were putting no effort at all into their defenses. That was why Kaz's few efforts, when he wasn't busy protecting those few people around them who hadn't run for cover, had been so successful. Kaz was a promising young student, but he was still a clumsy wayfarer. In time he would grow out of that, but even rudimentary defenses should have rendered his counter attacks useless.

Knowing that, Em started using Wild energy to throw stray objects at the local wayfarers. They tried to reciprocate, but by now even Kaz knew how to block a physical attack and as he parried whatever the Salasians threw at them, Em continued to press her attack.

Gradually, the local wayfarers started giving ground before Em's assault and were taking involuntary steps backwards whenever another object came at them. Then, when they were perfectly positioned, Em used a mighty gust of wind to push them into the fountain that stood at the center of the market square.

One of the Salasians got up and ran away, but the other, still standing in the fountain snarled and attempted to force-thrust raw Wild energy into Em and Kaz. The first time he had tried that against Kaz, Em had been taken by surprise. This time she was ready for it.

As the tsunami of Wild energy came at her, she took control of it and used it to "pull" any trace of the Wild away from the Salasian. So, while surrounded by a large bubble of Wild energy, that energy was entirely under Em's control and it blocked him from mentally reaching out for more to continue to fight with. He was effectively cut off from his only source of power.

"Wow!" enthused Kaz. "I didn't know you could do that."

"Neither did I," Em admitted. "It just came to me." Then she looked at the local wayfarer, still dripping wet as he slowly climbed out of the fountain. She looked at him dismissively and told him, "Shoo!"

At first it looked like he would do just that and Em and Kaz turned the other way to continue their shopping trip. However, with their backs turned, the local wayfarer, still cut off from the Wild, drew a long curved knife out of his belt and ran toward the woman and boy. Kaz caught the man's motion out of the corner of his eye and ducked under the man's reach and, as he attempted to stab Em, threw him off balance with a combination of Wild and muscle power that sent him flying.

He landed with a yelp and a gurgling noise and when Em turned him over it turned out the Salasian wayfarer had fallen on his own knife and was rapidly bleeding to death. The local people crowded around but none of them attempted to help the dying wayfarer. From the profusion of blood coming out of his wound, Em thought that was because it was obvious he had no hope of recovery. It was only later that she learned that by Salasian law and tradition it was a capital offense for commoners to touch a member of the wayfarer caste.

The market place was a mess after the battle, but the merchants quickly straightened up and the jeweler whose pendant Em had been admiring, made a gift of it to her in spite of her protests. Others offered them food and drink, but Em, worried about repercussions from the encounter, decided it would be best for her and Kaz to leave the area immediately.

Signor Panatti reported that evening that four other local wayfarers had come to the central market an hour later, but that none of the merchants gave them a truthful answer. Most claimed not to have seen the fight and the few who did own up to being witnesses had all seen Em leading Kaz off in the wrong direction. "No one likes the local wayfarers here," Panatti observed.

“I wonder why not,” Em replied sarcastically, “and with such sweet dispositions. However, I think it might be best if Kaz and I stay in the inn for the remainder of our stay here.”

Thirteen

It took Harshad a day longer than he estimated to finish the repairs, but when he was done, Raff thought the carriage rode smoother and quieter than ever. Taking a quick look, Raff noted Harshad had not only replaced the bearings but made some minor repairs to the iron tires, so he paid the man half again what they had agreed on as a price for the extra care. In response, Harshad threw in a pot of bearing grease so Raff could keep the bearings lubricated as he traveled.

Signor Panatti was thrilled at the extra day the carriage repairs had given him to do business in Malhi and gleefully ordered a banquet for the entire party on their last night in the city. He also reported that the local wayfarers were still out looking for Em and Kaz, so they decided to leave just before sunrise.

The sun was just rising as they left the center of the large city and while there were men dressed in the midnight blue and gold of the wayfarer caste, none of them seemed to notice Em and Kaz sitting in the rear of the carriage as it passed. Finally, when they made it to the surrounding fields without incident, Em began to relax.

“What’s that?” Kaz asked pointing to his right. Today he was riding with Raff and the Corisans in the carriage. Em was keeping Cella company in the wagon. Most of the time Raff and Em took turns as to which vehicle each rode in. It was easier to guide their charges through the Wild that way, although every once in a while they chose to sit together in one vehicle or the other.

The objects that caught his eye looked like a collection of large staircases, upside-down arches, large white bowls, closely-laced pillars and other constructions for which he had no adequate words to fully describe.

“That,” Raff explained, “is the observatory I told you about. That large red staircase is actually the second largest sundial in the world.”

“We have a larger one in Ranyang,” One told them.

“And that is the largest in the world, yes,” Raff allowed. “But the Ranyang Observatory is not as extensive as this one. The Ranyang Observatory is devoted exclusively to the sun, but the Malhi observatory was also used to study the stars and planets. That is why there are so many large instruments here. That sundial is accurate to less than half a minute. Yes,” he stopped One from interrupting, “I know the Ranyang dial is accurate to one quarter of a minute, but can it measure the progression of the zodiac? Can it be used to calculate the accuracy of the North Pole Star? The progress of the planets? No, I think not. The Ranyang Observatory was in its day the most important instrument for measuring time and the solar seasonal progression. But this one here in Malhi added so much more to our knowledge of the world and the cosmos in which she swims.”

“Added?” Kaz asked. “You mean no one uses this place any more?”

“Only for picnics,” Raff replied.

“What a waste,” Kaz decided.

“Well, perhaps we should stop and look around a bit,” Raff decided. He shouted ahead to the merchants’ wagon to come to a halt and they spent the next hour looking at the various observatory instruments, climbing some of them and even comparing the time on the great sundial with that shown on a small pocket-sized one that Raff carried with him. They were just about to explore the set of twelve zodiacal instruments, a series of sundial-like constructs, but ones set at far different angles and heights, when they heard a voice accuse, “You!”

Looking to their left, they saw three Salasian wayfarers in their blue and gold robes. One of them was pointing directly at Em, “You’re the woman from the other day. You attacked me and killed Bhushan”

“Proud of that, are you?” Em shot back.

“And your buddy killed himself,” Kaz told him coldly. “He fell on his own knife.”

“That was an accident, Kaz,” Em told him quietly, but it was already too late, the three men were attacking. This time, however it was Raff they had to deal with.

Raff threw up a shielding wall of Wild energy with no apparent effort as he strolled out directly in front of the Salasian attackers. “I’ll give you all one chance to turn around and walk away peaceably.” His offer was met by three large fireballs splashing impotently against his shield. “I warned you,” he sighed. He paused to summon the Wild energy to him. A moment later the sun seemed to turn deep red even though it was still high in the sky. The Salasians looked worried, but rather than run away they renewed their attacks. Then just as suddenly as the sun turned red, it returned to normal and as everyone in Raff’s party blinked and tried to adjust to the suddenly brightened landscape it became apparent that the three Salasians were lying motionlessly on the ground.

“Are they dead?” Panatti asked, still blinking at the renewed sunlight.

“Of course not,” Raff replied. “It’s as Em told all of us the other night. These Salasian wayfarers are weak on their defenses. They’re too used to being the bullies no one else can fight. I did the same thing to One on our way to Kharaskva in fact, although I must admit that I expected this lot to put up a bit more of a fight. Well, they’ll be out for an hour or so. We may as well get on the road.”

“Uh, Raff,” Kaz interrupted him. “Is that a familiar face over there by the sun dial?”

Raff looked over where Kaz told him, but before he could reply, One identified the man standing there, “It’s the former chief legate.”

“Looks like him to me too,” Raff agreed, but before he could do anything about it, the Nillonese man seemed to disappear before their eyes.

“How did he do that?” Signor Panatti asked.

“Oh, a number of ways.” Raff shrugged. “He probably simply used Wild energy to project an illusion to cover his escape. That’s the easiest way to do it. He might also have bent the light around him. That’s

harder inside a stability, but not impossible. I suppose he also knows how to instantly transport himself from one place to another. I don't know how to do that. I'm not even sure it's possible, but I don't know everything."

"But wouldn't that mean he's a wayfarer too?" Panatti asked.

"Yes, of course," Raff replied and started herding them all back to the carriage and wagon.

"How long have you known?" Panatti asked as they hurried along.

"Well, actually I came to that conclusion a while back," Raff admitted, "but in retrospect I think it's been obvious all along. How else could he have just walked into a Corisan embassy, claiming to be in charge of a legation from the High King and then picked a few sub-legates without having a written document to prove it? We know he was behind the bandits who attacked us outside of Keshon, although that was before we found you too. I suspect he may have been causing some of our other problems. We had an encounter with some Salustani raiders near their border with Kharasia and those byadoms were unusually far out of their native territory. The clincher, however, is that there aren't all that many wayfarers who could have escorted him this far from Kharaskva in the time it took us to get here. In fact I'd say it would be impossible to arrange unless he was a wayfarer himself and a pretty darned good one for that matter.

"Journeyman are limited not only in what they can do but where they can go, Even some masters have trouble going places they've never been before without detailed instructions. You won't have been able to see all the paths we crossed on our way here, but, believe me, the world is covered with a network of paths and it's very easy to get lost without directions. Also, it's possible to lose sight of a path you've never traveled. I did that myself during a blizzard a while back, and it's even easier for an apprentice or journeyman. For him to be here and now, he has to be a master wayfarer."

"That complicates things, doesn't it?" Panatti asked.

"No, it does add complexity to the way I perceive them, however," Raff replied as they reached the carriage and wagon.

Fourteen

Raff half expected to have more trouble with the Salasian wayfarers. After two weeks, however, they had passed dozens of the local wayfarers as they made their way through Salasia, and none of them gave Raff and Em's party so much as a second glance. Raff finally decided they had put that problem behind them.

The weather started to cool back down as they headed north out of the central plain of Salasia and into the forest-covered foothills, although now that it was late spring, the days were still warm even though the nights tended toward comfortably cool. It was a reminder, however, that they were headed north and into the mountains once again.

Kaz was riding in the carriage with Em and the Corisans when he spotted a large animal through the trees. "Em," he told her nervously, "there's a large cat keeping pace with us."

"The tiger?" Em asked. "Yes, I saw him. Magnificent beast, isn't he?"

“Is he safe?” Kaz asked.

“I think the locals have been over-hunting his species,” Em commented dryly, “but there are still quite a few like him left.”

“I meant is he a predator?” Kaz clarified. “He’s larger than the leopards that live near where I grew up and they were always dangerous.”

“I knew what you meant,” Em laughed. “If we were not wayfarers we would have to be a more than just a bit wary of tigers, but we are and while that gentleman will probably follow us for a while he won’t actually attack unless we stop and get out of the carriage. Even then we can keep him away from us. Unlike the byadoms, tigers are easily handled by the usual wayfaring tricks.”

“How do you know that?” Kaz asked. “I thought you had never been here before.”

“It’s part of why I read so much when we are in towns with Guild halls,” Em explained. “A wayfarer planning to enter a new territory needs to know as much as possible not only about the paths he has to follow but about the hazards he’ll encounter on the way. Tigers were mentioned in several books. They were quite a problem two or three centuries ago, but they are smart critters and have learned not to attack parties of wayfarers while we’re on the move.”

“But they attack if we stop?” Kaz asked, taking another look at the black and orange striped cat.

“Not immediately unless they’re starving or sick,” Em replied. “That fellow looks healthy to me. If we were to stop it is most likely he would stop as well and watch us carefully, waiting for one of us to walk too far from the caravan. Then he would pounce. However, we’re not planning to stop until we reach the next town, so we’re safe.”

“What if the wagon breaks down or something?” Kaz asked.

“Raff or I will drive him off if it became necessary,” Em assured him, “but it’s always best to leave Wild creatures alone so long as they leave us alone.”

Kaz continued to watch the tiger for the next hour until it finally decided to turn and stroll off deeper into the bamboo forest. It was not the last tiger they saw, however, and for the next two weeks both in Salasia and after crossing the border into Makret, Kaz would occasionally see the big cats either pacing the caravan, just sitting and watching them pass by and once he saw one swimming across a stream.

Tigers, however, were not the only wildlife they spotted along the way. Kaz had been used to seeing monkeys and chimpanzees near his home village, but the monkeys he saw in the bamboo looked funny to his eyes. Their bodies were smaller and their faces had different shapes, although they were almost familiar to him compared to the colorful birds that flew overhead. He never saw the animals that made the dog-like howls in the distance at night, but he did see several breeds of squirrels as they moved from one place to the next.

However, these were just the creatures that presented themselves to him. Em and Raff rarely gave him all that much time to just sit and watch the road go by. He was busily reading various textbooks or learning to speak and write the languages he would need to know as they traveled. Even One, Two and Three assisted him when it came time to learn Corisan.

At first Kaz wondered why the trio were being so uncharacteristically helpful, but then he realized that

they felt their native tongue was the only truly civilized one and that anyone who could not speak it was beneath their notice. It did not bother Kaz to think the Corisans had a low opinion of him. The feeling was mutual, but he also knew that it would help Raff and Em if the other Corisans thought well of him.

It was difficult to know precisely when they left Salasia and entered Makret. Even the Salasians and Makretans disagreed on where one country ended and the other began. This was not really all that unusual in a world where the towns and villages floated around, especially at the periphery of their spheres of influence, but in this case there was a broad stretch of Wild land in the mountains that kept Makretan towns from mixing with Salasian ones.

Raff informed Kaz that there were a number of fair-sized Kenlientan settlements in the region, however, and as though he had summoned them to prove his point, a few minutes later they saw a small party of Ken walking alongside the Wayfarer path.

As he always did when encountering the Ken, Raff stopped the caravan and got out to stand on the side of the path to see if they wanted to talk. In his experience, the Ken usually only desired conversation about half the time he met them along a wayfarer path. While the paths could be dangerous at times to the Ken, they were also useful routes they too could follow, especially when in the company of an elder.

Raff knew the Kenlienta elder who was walking here with his honor guard was obviously a relatively minor one or else he would have been in Yakrut at the Grand Council. Either that or he had chosen to boycott the event, but if so, he would have been the only one Raff had found who would. Even opponents of Leraxa's proposals had gone to Yakrut to resist them.

The elder spotted Raff and smiled. Like all other Ken elders, he carried a living plant, sustained by his own mastery of magic. In this case it was a green bamboo staff with a profusion of leaves on one end. Raff knew from experience that bamboo was possibly the easiest plant to do this trick with, although the Ken did not compete with each other over the perceived status of their living symbols of rank. Quite a few senior elders from this part of the world chose to use bamboo staves. It was a mark of their territory as much as it was one of rank.

"We do not see many Guildsmen on this pathway," the Ken elder greeted Raff. It was the elder's option whether or not to give his name and it would have been unforgivably rude for Raff to ask, but he did introduce himself and his companions in the hope that the elder might do likewise. "You are Raufanax? I have heard of you. I must say all the Ken Nation has heard of you, but I would not have expected to find you this far from the Guild Lands unless another dire emergency has cropped up."

"Not so bad as the last time, Elder," Raff replied, "but two of our larger countries are at war and I'm hoping to negotiate a settlement."

The Elder nodded and asked, "Have you heard any news from Yakrut, Raufanax?"

"Very little," Raff admitted. "I was there very briefly on business and was encouraged to complete that business quickly and leave. I was certainly not allowed to speak before the Grand Council."

"That is odd," the elder shook his head. "You are our most honored living hero."

"I'm informed it was strictly politics," Raff shrugged the matter off politely. "The conservative faction in favor of keeping the government as it is wanted me there, so Leraxa's faction blocked it. It was an early show of their power. I'm told it means you can count on a stronger central government and those opposed to it are working on minor ways to moderate that strength now."

“I believe we will all benefit from a strong central government,” the elder commented, “but it seems a shame that we must snub a great man in the name of accomplishing such a feat. It does not speak well for our hospitality.”

“Well, if I’m the only one whose feelings are sacrificed to the betterment of the Ken Nation,” Raff replied diplomatically, “it was a small enough price to pay.”

They spoke for another half an hour, but it turned out that the Ken elder had merely desired news from Yakrut so after a few more pleasantries, the elder and his guards crossed the path and continued on their way.

“Just wanted the news?” Em asked.

“So it seemed,” Raff replied. “We’re not going to hear anything else out of Yakrut until they’re done there.”

“I wouldn’t have expected anything this soon anyway,” Em told him.

There were no customs stations between Makret and Salasia so it was not until they arrived in the town of Ximu that they knew for certain where they were. Makret was a country entirely defined by mountains. The pathways were steep and Raff and Em had to “help” the horses up and over ridges where the air was thin and cold on a regular basis.

“This is part of Corisan territory,” One told them several times.

“The Makretans would not agree,” Signor Panatti finally laughed one evening. “The truth of the matter is that your armies invaded here about five centuries ago and demanded tribute. They do that everywhere they go and they trample anyone who refuses to pay. Makret is probably the only country that did not resist. They knew better. Instead, they agreed and gave you a few paltry bags of gold and jewels. That was the last anyone saw of the Corisans here. The place is too remote, too hard to get around and too poor to be worth Corisa’s while. Your High Kings figured that one fairly quickly. About fifty years after Corisa came and left, Salasia tried the same thing. They too left after a very brief occupation. It just wasn’t worth anyone’s bother to occupy this land and if the Makretans had wanted to make a fight of it both sides would have been decimated.”

“Corisa’s armies are mighty,” One insisted.

“Then why did they leave after less than two years?” Panatti asked pointedly. One had no answer to that. “Since those two invasions, the Priest Kings of Makret have ruled without outside interference and in spite of having a land of limited resources, they’ve done very well.”

The journey through Makret was slow, but human settlements were closer together here than in Salasia so they never had to camp beside the path and take precautions against any of the wild creatures in the region.

They saw byadoms again twice from a distance, but unlike their earlier encounter these beasts stayed away from the caravan. They did however have trouble with a family band of yetis.

The caravan was once again making its way upslope through a mountain pass when Raff caught sight of movement above him. Looking up he saw a large boulder rolling downslope. It was a temptation to use

Wild energy to deflect the stone, but in practice it was even easier to just reign in the horses and let the boulder pass by in front of the wagon. Looking upward, he saw several brown and white-furred humanoid shapes that stood out against the green trees behind them. They were working together to roll another large boulder down on the travelers so Raff pushed back on the stone.

The confused reaction of the yetis amused Raff, but left alone they would eventually push the stone back again. Em had a better idea and simply caused the boulder to dissolve into a pile of sand. The yetis were looking frustrated and Raff was worried they might attack the wagon more directly than rolling a few rocks down, so he used Ken magic to create a bright flashing light and a roll of thunder. The creatures screamed in panic and instantly disappeared.

“What were those?” Kaz asked him as they started forward once more.

“Yetis,” Raff replied. “They’re apes and fairly intelligent ones at that. As you can see, they can hunt cooperatively, although I’m not sure if rolling boulders on passing travelers counts as hunting.”

“Then why do they do it?” Kaz asked. “Defense?”

“Perhaps,” Raff shrugged. “Or maybe they just think it’s fun.”

“Fun? They’re just animals, aren’t they?” Signor Panatti asked.

“Animals, some of them anyway, can have fun,” Raff replied. “You should watch the members of a wolf pack playing with the cubs.”

“And chimpanzees and gorillas play with their young too,” Kaz added, remembering the creatures that lived near his home.

“Well, these yetis are not too distantly related to the other great apes,” Raff told them. “Actually I might have had trouble seeing them, but their winter fur, the white layer, hasn’t entirely grown out yet. Much like ermines and some foxes, their fur changes color with the seasons. Brown is a better camouflage color in the summer, but the white makes them nearly invisible against snow in the winter. They’re fairly shy and easy to spook though.”

“I saw that too,” Kaz remarked.

“So do these yetis do this sort of thing often?” Panatti asked.

“Not all that often,” Raff replied. “I’ve heard of it, but I’ve not been this way before.”

“I have, but I’d never even heard of the yetis before,” Panatti admitted.

“I’m told not many see them,” Raff replied. “That may be because they usually blend in well with the background. It could also be because they are reputed to be shy of humans and Kenlenta alike.”

“That family wasn’t particularly shy,” the merchant argued.

“No, they weren’t,” Raff agreed. “It’s possible they’re just very rare so we don’t encounter them often, or maybe this bunch is bolder than the rest of their species.”

“Or maybe this is something new?” Kaz suggested.

“Maybe,” Raff shrugged.

They remained on alert, but nothing else happened for the next week until they arrived in the Makretan capital city, GnasRi .

Fifteen

Since joining Raff and Em, Kaz had seen many human cities and before that he had seen still others as he made his way across the Southern Continent. GnasRi , however was unlike any of them.

The roofs of the towers were tiered, often boasting five or more layers to them and they all had eaves sticking out from the surface at each tier. However many of them were built inside hollows and caves set in the cliffs of the surrounding mountains and some buildings that they soon learned were temples had been carved directly into the stone of the cliffs.

There were no guards at the gates to the city, but a few minutes after they had entered, several men in ornate uniforms approached the vehicles and signaled for them to stop. “You have just arrived in GnasRi ?” one of them asked officiously.

“We have,” Raff replied. “Most recently from Malhi and en route to Ranyang. Is there a problem?”

“Probably not,” the official replied blandly. “We normally ask these questions. Your names?” Raff introduced everyone in the party. “You are of the Brotherhood of Wayfarers of your native land?”

“We call it the Guild where we come from,” Raff corrected the man, “but yes, that’s correct.”

“And are you expecting to stay in GnasRi long?”

“Only a day or two,” Raff replied. “We’ll be buying supplies and moving on after tomorrow.”

“I might want to do business here,” Panatti added.

“What sort of business?” Panatti told the official what he was selling and what items he was interested in buying. “Before starting, be sure to visit our tax collector and fill out the proper forms,” came the reply, followed by instructions on how to find his office. “Have a nice stay.”

“Isn’t that sort of thing best handled at the border?” Panatti mused once they were left to their own devices.

“I suppose this system works for them,” Raff replied. “Especially since there doesn’t seem to be a clearly defined border, or maybe they only tax those businesses that operate in the capital. I thought you had been here before.”

“Not in Makret,” Panatti replied. “I usually approach Corisa through Kharasia.”

Gnas Ri was a city of temples and the travelers were still looking for an inn an hour later when another official came bustling up to them and announced, “His Holiness, Gyel Chonyi, greets you worthy travelers and bids that you take comfort with him in his palace.”

“He wants us to stay with him?” Kaz asked, not certain he had heard correctly.

“Just so,” the official replied. “Please follow me.” He turned and hurried up the street as Panatti started up his team.

“I dare say this will be more comfortable than whatever inn we may have eventually found,” Raff mused.

There was a great deal of ceremony attendant on being conducted to the priest king. First the visitors had to take a ceremonial bath in a natural hot spring, which they were informed was necessary for anyone entering the palace. “I don’t need a bath,” Kaz grumbled.

“Oh yes you do,” Em told him firmly.

Men and women normally bathed together in that spring, but when Cella squirmed at the idea, she and Em were allowed to do so in private before the men had their baths. Soap and towels were provided in the small building that had been built around the spring leading Em to conclude that bathers were expected to do more than merely dunk themselves in the sanctified water. As it was her first hot bath in weeks, she had no complaints whatsoever.

After the bath, the visitors were given new clothing and assured their other clothes would be washed and returned to them later. From the spring they made their way to the entrance of the palace and there went through a number of rituals, most of which involved striking a drum, banging a gong, or jingling some bells at various stations in the hallway.

“This must be a very noisy place some days,” Raff observed.

“Only those on their way to meet His Holiness need to do everything,” their guide informed them. “Those merely here on other business need merely use the bath.”

“The building seems quite warm,” Cella observed. “Is that from the hot spring as well?”

“Yes, indeed,” the guide nodded. “We have some fireplaces in the palace, but most of His Holiness’ heating needs are filled by the sacred spring.”

They finally climbed a set of stairs and a large door swung open before them. “Your Holiness, Gyel Chonyi!” the guide announced clearly, his voice reverberating in the cavernous hall they now entered. “I have the honor to introduce Masters Raff and Emblem Cawlens of the Guild of Wayfarers, Signor Saverio Panatti, master merchant, his daughter...” the man went on to name each member of the party. The Corisans seemed annoyed to have been mentioned last after Kaz, but they held their tongues. Raff guessed that the Corisan invasion of Makret had not been entirely forgotten over the centuries.

“Greetings, Honored Raufanax!” Gyel Chonyi told them, getting up from his throne to meet them. “I have heard much of you and your beautiful wife from our mutual friends among the Kenlienta, although I never expected to be able to meet you in person. Please, let’s go make ourselves comfortable. All the ceremonial is over and we can just be ourselves.”

The Gyel had, at first, seemed aloof and elderly on his throne, but as he approached, it became apparent he was a young man in his mid-twenties and his anxious friendliness bespoke a man who was also somewhat lonely and eager for visitors. He rushed them from the throne room and out into a large garden where there were more than enough comfortable chairs to sit in and drink tea.

“You’ve come a very long way to get here,” Gyel Chonyi observed. “You must be tired of traveling by now.”

“A break is nice every one in a while, Gyel Chonyi,” Raff replied politely.

“Just Chonyi here,” the priest king corrected him. “Gyel is my title and we only use it on formal occasions. It’s so nice to have visitors from afar. It gives me such a grand perspective of the world, but to meet someone of whom I’ve actually heard.... Well that is a rare honor indeed.”

“As is the one you grant us,” Em told him.

“It’s nothing, Master L’oranne Cawlens,” Chonyi responded, “See? I even know enough to use the masculine form of the title. That is the correct usage even with a woman, is it not?”

“It is, Chonyi,” Em replied, “but if I am to call you by your name, it is only fitting you call me Emblem or Em.”

“Emblem or Em it is then,” Chonyi chuckled, leaving Em to wonder if he would keep using both names for her. He went on to greet the others in turn and showed what seemed to be genuine interest in each person, even the three nearly identical Corisan legates, who seemed quite uncomfortable with a monarch who insisted on treating them as dear friends. He was most interested in Kaz, however, “I don’t believe I have ever met a native of the Southern Continent, young Kazani. What is your tribe?”

“I was of the Sahranie,” Kaz told him proudly, “but now I am of the Wayfarers’ Guild.”

“Well said,” Chonyi approved, “and I can sense there is much potential in you. Not many people know this, but I am a wayfarer too. It’s required.”

“Why does a king need to be a wayfarer?” Kaz asked.

“Ah!” Chonyi smiled as though Kaz had asked a question the king had been waiting for all his life. “You see, I’m a king, but it’s not a hereditary office as it is where you come from.”

“How did you get to be king then?” Kaz asked.

“I have always been the Gyel of Makret,” Chonyi replied, “but no one knew it until I was found. We believe that when the Gyel dies, he is reincarnated almost immediately into the next acceptable child. The child must have a certain amount of wayfarer potential, so our monks have learned to specialize in detecting the talent in infants. Even so, it took them three years to find me. They brought me here and began my training all over again.”

“What about your parents?” Kaz asked.

“They came with me, of course,” Chonyi replied. “It’s a special honor to be the parents of the gyel. Better than being gyel, actually. All the glory and none of the actual responsibility. Not only do I govern this country, but I am also the religious leader. That’s why I love to meet visitors like you. It’s such a delightful break in what, sadly, is a monotonous routine. So tell me, Raufanax, what are our friends up to in Yakrut?”

“I wish I knew,” Raff admitted. “When I was there I was encouraged to leave almost before I actually

arrived. Had my presence not been a matter of life and death, I doubt I'd have made it past the city gate."

"Since when does Yakrut have a city gate?" Chonyi asked.

"I'm not sure when Leraxa built it or the wall it's set in," Raff replied. "It's supposed to have some deep symbolic meaning although even the elders who were talking to me didn't completely agree. The most common explanation is that it was a representation of the world and how it is one, although Elder Nienta privately admitted she had been looking for alternative exits from the city since her arrival. I think she was worried she might have to leave surreptitiously one evening."

"Ha!" Chonyi laughed. "I don't know her, but she sounds like a lady after my own heart. Where is she from?"

"The Southern Continent, in or near Modaga," Raff replied.

"Such a pity," Chonyi sighed. "I do travel from time to time, but never that far. I don't suppose you could convey an invitation to her for me?"

"I could try," Raff allowed, "I don't know if or when I may see her again, but I could forward it through the Guild network. It could take a year or more to get to her, but she would get it eventually."

"Why not?" Chonyi shrugged.

"I'm surprised you have anything to do with the Ken," Em opined. "You're probably the only ruler who does."

"We do engage in some small amount of trade with the Ken Nation," Chonyi admitted, "and it's always useful to be on good terms with one's neighbors. But even if there was nothing to be gained, I like the Ken. They're a wonderfully open and mystical people."

"Leraxa hasn't been too open so far," Raff commented.

"There are always exceptions, I suppose," Chonyi shrugged.

"I've never noticed that the Ken are all that different from humans," Em commented. "There are nice ones, selfish ones, nasty ones, wise ones and all that. Their cultural values differ, but no more so than Makret differs from the Green Lands. That said, though, I agree with you, they seem like nice people over all. What do the local Ken think of Leraxa's proposals?"

"They're more curious than anything else, from what I can tell," Chonyi replied. "Leraxa's idea is a big change and you know how the Ken view change?"

"Change is Life," Em replied.

"Precisely," Chonyi agreed. "I must say it would be interesting to see how her form of democracy works out for them."

"But their system has worked so well for so long," Raff argued.

"Life is change," Chonyi shrugged. "Nothing lasts forever and who are we to say they shouldn't make

mistakes of their own choosing if that's what it should turn out to be."

"It's going to be a close vote," Raff told him, "but when we were there, it was widely believed Leraxa would have her way on all the big points. Her opponents were looking for likely concessions and not overly hopeful about them."

"I have met Leraxa," Chonyi admitted. "She came here two years ago to discuss her ideas with me."

"Here?" Em asked, "Inside the city?"

"Accomplished Elders are capable of entering a stability and remaining for a time without harm," Chonyi reminded her. "However, after she entered I accompanied her back to the edge of the city and into the Wild. We met three times over the next week before her own duties called her back to Yakrut."

"So you encouraged her?" Em asked.

"Not really, but I did not discourage her either," Chonyi replied. "I let her do most of the talking and in the end I told her that only she could decide what was right. That might have been a coward's answer, but what the Kenlenta do, really is none of our business."

"Not necessarily," Raff cut in. "There has been tension between us and the Ken nation in the last few years. Wayfarer parties have gone missing without a trace, young Ken adults have been raiding some human settlements and the Ken are justifiably concerned about the effects of human pollution on their habitat."

"I had not heard of the violence," Chonyi admitted.

"Well, it seems to have quieted down since the Elders began to meet in Yakrut, at least from what I have learned," Raff admitted, "but it could also be that the incidents have not been taking place all over the Ken Nation, but there have been such cases in the Northern lands and the Southern Continent. I stopped one myself."

"Really?"

"It was an attack on a plantation in Neyka," Raff replied. "A group of young Kenlenta men set a field on fire. They were upset about human waste in the air and water of the Wild. Evidently there is a real problem there and the young of any people are more prone to action than words."

"What's the problem?" Chonyi asked.

"Pollution we create makes the Wild more stable," Em replied. "And of course dirty air and water is as bad for the Ken as it is for us."

"Of course there is waste from Kenlenta industry too," she continued, "and that is starting to have an effect on our stabilities, but according to Kenlenta calculations it will be anything from twenty years to two centuries before there is no Wild anymore and the Ken and all other creatures of the Wild will die out. I'm not all that certain we'll be all that well by then either. It seems to me that such pollution might kill us too and I'm also not entirely certain stabilities can truly exist without the Wild. We could end up with a world that is both entirely stable and Wild and only God knows how that would turn out."

"It is a problem to be considered for sure," Chonyi agreed, "but we humans don't have a Council of

Elders that can decide issues like that for all of us. We're divided into many nations and what one would agree to, the others might not."

"Agreed," Signore Panatti put in. He, like the others had been quiet for a long time. At first Raff was annoyed by the interruption in the conversation, but then he thought it would do him some good to hear what everyone here thought. "Although I must say it is probably more likely others will not. Our wayfarer guides here are on their way to Ranyang to negotiate a peace between Corisa and Kharasia. I assume you've heard about the war? Our Corisan friends were in Kharaskva for similar negotiations. But even if those two powers agree to a truce, who's to say such an agreement might not be counter to the interests of still other nations? In fact there are only two unifying forces in the Northern Lands and their colonies. Our shared religion and the Guild of Wayfarers. We may have religion in common but there are marked regional differences of practice and interpretation. The Guild, however, is a constant. That's why we all rely on it so much."

"And there I thought it was because that was the only way you could get from town to town," One remarked.

"Not at all," Cella snapped at him. "The countries where the Guild does not operate have wayfarers. In some cases all they do is escort people from place to place and in other cases like in Salasia they are part of the government."

"Here too," Chonyi added.

"Here they are also priests, monks and other religious leaders," Cella told him. "It's a moderating effect. In Salasia the wayfarers are arrogant bullies. Here there is spirituality and I don't see common folk running in fear because the local wayfarer is coming down the street."

"No, I wouldn't countenance that," Chonyi agreed gently.

"In Salustan, we made the mistake of not waiting for a Guild wayfarer," Cella continued. "We hired a local to guide us. They stranded my father and the rest of our party in a small town not far from where we hired them and tried to kidnap me. The Lord only knows what would have happened had the Kenlienta not rescued me.

"But everyone knows you can trust a member of the Guild," Cella continued. "They are more than merely guides through the Wild. They also serve as arbitrators and judges. If you cannot get a fair hearing anywhere else, you can always demand to have the Guild settle a matter for you. Our Guildsmen also have religious training, did you know that?"

"No," Chonyi admitted. "I didn't realize that."

"Sometimes the only one who can be around to conduct services is the wayfarer you travel with," Cella told him. "The Guild does all that and more and yet they do not try to run any government or bully the common folk. When you deal with the Guild, you know you can trust them."

Raff listened with amazement. Cella's opinion of his fellow Guildsmen was higher than his own by quite a few degrees. It was true that Raff had tried to tell Kaz these same things but for Raff it was an ideal to strive for. He rarely felt any wayfarer actually realized the goal. None of them were so close to perfection as Raff well knew.

"Our wayfarers are most of the government," One told them. "The leaders are anyway, well, except for

the High King. He inherits the crown, of course.”

“Except for that and its aggressive stance toward foreigners,” Chonyi replied, “Corisa is not very different from Makret. Even our religions are similar, but where Makret is content to live in peace with her neighbors, Corisa desires to rule us all. Your wayfarers are trained in religion too and they are also required to enter government service. Here that is a choice, not a requirement. Here we teach our wayfarers to help others in the much the same way the Guild behaves. Corisa’s wayfarers have no such moderating influence. They do not guide in Corisa, they rule. Their role is more similar to what it is in Salasia, except they are even more arrogant.”

“Arrogance is natural when you really are better than anyone else,” One maintained.

“See how they have you indoctrinated?” Chonyi pointed out. “You are not a wayfarer at all and yet you are happy to dance to their every tune, and power is not what makes one person better than another. The Guild, as I understand it, has used that power to guide the people. I have always attempted to do that as well. The Corisan wayfarers and those of Salasia use it to control.”

“You say religious training and entering the government here is by choice?” Kaz asked, changing the subject slightly.

“Yes, that is so,” Chonyi replied.

“What about you?” Kaz asked. “You weren’t given a choice. You were found and brought here and pretty much forced to be gyel.”

“I too had a choice, Kazani,” Chonyi told him. “It’s just that my choice was made many lifetimes ago.”

Sixteen

They stayed with Gyel Chonyi an extra day, resting up, and with Em and Raff learning as much as they could about Corisa from him. “I think you will be best served if you stay in my embassy in Ranyang,” Chonyi told them as they prepared to leave GnasRi. “The Corisan government will not allow you to stay in the palace, I don’t know why, and they are not likely to take you seriously if you stay in one of the local inns. I have written a letter of introduction for you, two of them, in fact. One for my ambassador instructing him to treat you as the honored guests you are and to also help you in whatever way you require and the other to the High King.”

“We’re already carrying credentials from Emperor Pavel Alexander,” Raff told him.

“And so you will have credentials from two rulers,” Chonyi smiled. “It may not help. Our Corisan brothers think a lot of themselves, maybe too much, but also it will not hurt.”

“Well, I suppose the added prestige may be of great benefit,” Raff nodded, accepting the letters from the gyel. “Thank you.”

“It is my great pleasure,” Chonyi assured him. “And I hope we have the opportunity to meet again. Perhaps sometime when we can both relax and spend as much time as we would like. But I am holding you up now. You still have some sixteen hundred miles to journey. I wish you well. May peace be in your soul.”

“And in yours as well, Chonyi,” Raff added as he climbed up into the carriage beside Em. They waved back once more then rode out of the palace courtyard.

None of Makret’s borders with her neighbors were clearly defined and the one between the Makretan and Corisan spheres of influence was even fuzzier than that Makret enjoyed with Salasia. There was, however, a broad stretch of very steep mountains with only a few stray human settlements between them, a sort of geographical no man’s land in which the wayfarer path they followed seemed to move with the Wild changes even as they followed it.

“I have heard of this,” One commented, when Raff complained about the conditions. “It is said that only the local people can properly guide one through the mountains.”

“If their paths are this unstable, I can see why,” Raff grumbled. “Kaz, I think it’s time we showed you how to maintain a path. See how fuzzy this one is? It’s not as bad as some we’ve encountered, it isn’t coming apart in a dangerous manner, but there aren’t very many people traveling this way and the path is starting to fade. It’s gradually returning to the native Wild state. Maintaining a path is not as difficult as forging a new one and it is every wayfarer’s duty to see to proper path maintenance as they travel.”

“You are not wayfarers here,” One told him.

“I am a wayfarer no matter where I go,” Raff told him calmly. “Now, Kaz, watch how I strengthen this path.”

To Kaz it looked as though he was pressing the faded and sagging line of stability together. As Raff did so the line grew brighter and more distinct to his wayfarer sight. “It looks like it is floating a few inches over the ground,” Kaz noted.

“It is,” Raff agreed. “I think this path must have been originally forged when there was a light covering of snow in this pass. A path is always formed on the surface, whether on land or sea and it tends to stay in the same position relative to the surface as well. If you were to get a thousand men here to remove a ten foot layer of dirt from beneath this path it would automatically lower until it was once more just a few inches above the surface.”

“It’s a bit more flexible over water where waves will splash over a path frequently, of course,” Raff continued, “but paths are not as bound to the surface of water as they are to land. In fact, there are some who believe that paths over lakes and oceans are actually connected in some way to the bottom of the body of water not the top. Sometimes a path will break when it is subjected to a great amount of stress whether over time or, more often, a single event like a large quake or the formation of a volcano. However that sort of damage is not common and it takes a wayfarer to erase a path just as it takes one to make one in the first place.”

“It looks easy enough,” Kaz noted, “may I try?”

They spent the next few hours taking turns repairing the path until they reached a junction with another path. After that point the path seemed to be in good repair and they could spend the rest of the day watching the world go by.

They saw neither humans nor human settlements for nearly a week, but they did run into several parties of Kenlienta. As he always did, Raff stopped to talk to the Ken each time they met, but these were just people going from one place to another. None of them had much knowledge or even interest in the

Council of Elders going on in Yakrut. "That's elder business," one of the Ken told Raff. "It doesn't have much to do with us." Raff could see quite a few problems with that attitude, but saw no point in debating the issue. The Ken were free to support, oppose, or even ignore Leraxa's plans for the Ken Nation. *And*, he thought to himself, *it's possible that the day to day life of most Ken will remain unchanged regardless of what the elders do.*

They finally discovered they had reached Fan Province, a part of Corisa that bordered Makret, when they entered a small town and were accosted by a customs agent. The agent was a short man who demonstrated no interest in the party except to imply that if they did not bribe him, they would not proceed any further into Corisa.

"How dare you threaten an emissary of the High King and his entourage!" One demanded finally. He had been content to let the petty official badger the merchants and the wayfarers. The others were obviously barbarians, but the legates were native to this land and were also higher ranked.

"I have only your word that you are a royal emissary," the agent snapped back. "Do you know the penalty for falsely posing as a member of His Holiness' government?"

"It is death, being torn apart by four horses each one attached to an arm or leg," One replied calmly. "Do you know the penalty for delaying His Holiness' business? I assure you it is nothing so pleasant."

"You have credentials, my lord?" the agent asked, only slightly more polite.

"Here," One thrust an oilcloth packet at the man.

The man examined the contents, bowed to One, Two and Three and handed back the credentials, apologizing profusely. "And you will give me the money you just collected," One told him.

"But," the agent protested.

"Or I will have you before His Holiness' magistrates," One warned him, holding his hand out expectantly.

"Very well, my lord," the agent agreed reluctantly, handing him the bag of money he had collected from the others. "Of course, my lord."

"That was very well done," Em told One as they left the town a few minutes later.

"He angered me," One explained. "He was little more than a highwayman wearing a governmental token of office."

"And I'm sure Signor Panatti will appreciate the refund," Em replied, holding her hand out in the same gesture One had used on the customs agent.

"What refund?" One asked defiantly, although Cella caught a fearful look in his eyes.

"The refund you extracted from that official highwayman," Em told him, her hand still out. "I know Raff and I will appreciate our share as well."

"Master Cawlens," One protested. "You do not understand. This is honestly collected, I just wanted to ensure it arrived at His Holiness' treasury in Ranyang."

“Yeah, right,” Em replied coldly. “And do you often extort bribes from foreign ambassadors? Oh fine, keep the money if you like. You forget I’ll be talking to His Holiness himself. I’ll just ask him about it.”

“That money belongs to the High King,” One blustered.

“It does not,” Em replied, “but if you want to keep it you and your mates here can get out and walk.”

“What?” One demanded.

“Walk,” Em repeated, bringing the carriage to a halt. “Pay up or get out.”

“But we’re in the Wild,” One protested. “We would die. You’re contracted to see us safely back to Ranyang.”

“I am,” Em nodded. “But I’m not contracted to let you ride all the way. Frankly I’m tired of the way you three have been sitting back and letting the rest of us wait on you. You will give us our money now, and from here on in, you will be helping prepare meals when we have to camp out, you will help load and unload the carriage and wagon and you will do it without whining or you can walk all the way back to Ranyang. By my estimate that’s still almost fourteen hundred miles. So what’s your choice?”

One shut up and handed the money bag to Em. She said nothing, but handed it to Cella and got the carriage moving once again. “After all this time,” she added sweetly, “I thought we understood each other better by now.”

The major different between Fan and Makret was the language of the people and the clothing they wore. Had it not been for that, Kaz might never have noticed the difference. Even the mountains had begun to look the same to him. Finally, one afternoon, the caravan came down the last of the mountains and the travelers found themselves on the great central plain of Corisa and Peng-Gi Province .

Fan province had been very much an isolated border region, but Peng-Gi was truly a part of Corisa, One told them. “Here we will find all of the amenities of civilization we have in Ranyang.”

“The buildings do look bigger here,” Raff noted.

“And in much better repair,” One told him.

“This may be a good place to do some business,” Panatti opined.

“It would have been, yes,” One agreed.

“What do you mean?” Panatti asked.

“You do not have a license to do business in Corisa yet,” One told him. “It is death to do business without a license.”

“A bit extreme,” Panatti winced. “I would have thought merely confiscating everything would have been sufficient.”

“Same thing,” One shrugged. “They take everything including your life. Do you mean to say your life is not your most valuable possession?”

“I would like to think my daughter is more dear to me than my own life,” Panatti replied indignantly.

“Barbarian,” One commented without heat.

“Why can’t the local government issue me a license?” Panatti asked.

“Only His Holiness can do that,” One informed him.

“Must be bloody hard to do business if every merchant in Corisa must first travel to Ranyang before he opens a shop,” Panatti observed harshly.

“Oh, local merchants don’t need to do that,” One replied. “Only barbarians like you are so required.”

“I thought you had been to Corisa before?” Raff asked Panatti.

“Not precisely. I have been to Salasia three times and twice I visited Tyan and Hochimar, which Corisa claims as provinces even as it does Makret,” Panatti explained. “This is my first trip into Corisa proper. Had I known it was going to be this filled with complications, I would have gone back to Hochimar again, but both times I went there I heard how the people of Corisa were so much richer.”

“And how the streets are paved with gold?” Raff asked, chuckling.

“Well, I never believed that,” Panatti admitted, “but other Panaian merchants have done well in Corisa, so I figured, “Why not me?””

“I see,” Raff nodded sympathetically. “Well, at least you’ll be able to sell your goods all the way back from Ranyang. Or perhaps you can make some deals with local merchants to meet you somewhere between here and Menino.”

“Perhaps,” Panatti echoed with a sigh.

They were sitting in an inn drinking rice beer because One had decided this was the only establishment in this particular town that was worthy of his presence. It looked no different than the other two they had poked their heads in before finding this one, not to Raff or Em, but One had insisted this was the best of the three. It was the first time in a week since they had been able to sleep in real beds and get hot baths and Raff was just as glad to not have to sleep in shifts so he didn’t question One’s insistence as he normally might have.

Panatti ordered a second pitcher of the cool rice beer and a large bowl of sesame noodles for them to share, but before it arrived two men wearing bright red Corisan coats embroidered with gold thread walked in and seeing the pitcher and bowl headed for the traveler’s table ordered the serving woman to leave the beer and food at their table.

“Whoa, buddy!” Raff got up to protest. “You can wait your turn.”

“We thank you for your kind gift,” one of the men in red replied haughtily.

“Lunch is never free,” Raff snapped at him. “Pay for your own meals.”

“Master Cawlens!” One whispered urgently, “Those are voices of the High King. Wayfaring monks of

Corisa rank above mere legates.”

“I don’t really care,” Raff told him, raising his voice to be certain he was heard. “Their rank is nothing to me and none of my party are buying dinner for a pair of over-pampered bureaucrats.”

“My ears must have misheard you, barbarian,” the Corisan wayfarer commented dryly. “It must be that preposterous accent.”

“Or maybe you just don’t have the vocabulary,” Raff growled.

“Master Cawlens!” One protested again. “Please, honored sirs,” he turned to the men in red and gold. “He is just a foreigner and doesn’t speak our language well.”

“You’d better teach him better then,” the Corisan wayfarer told him, “if you have the intelligence to do so.”

“Yes, honored sir. This unworthy will strive to do better,” One told him obsequiously.

“You don’t like the way I talk?” Raff stood up from the table. “Well, I don’t like the way you listen but I’ll be most happy to teach you how.”

“Barbarian, you might look like a man, but you prattle on like a monkey and are as hairy as one too,” the Corisan wayfarer retorted.

Raff laughed at the attempted insult. It was true he had a close-cropped beard while traveling. When in any one place for an extended time he would shave as was generally the fashion these days, but on the trail, he did not have the time to shave every morning and found it easier to let the beard grow out since it did not take as long to trim it every few days as it did to shave it off completely every morning. Most male wayfarers wore beards for the same reason. It was easier to look civilized with a short beard than with three day’s growth.

Raff’s reaction was not quite what the Corisan expected and he tried another predictable tactic, “But I suppose barbarians aren’t man enough to even know when they are being insulted.”

“I wonder why some men seem to think they’re the only wayfarers in the world,” Em commented suddenly, barely bothering to take notice of the Corisan wayfarers. She turned to One and asked. “Don’t you have any women here who can wayfare?”

“That is not a woman’s place,” the Corisan wayfarer who had been doing all the talking told her angrily.

“It is where I come from,” Em told him confidently. There was no law against female wayfarers, that was true enough, but there were still only a few in all the Northern Lands. Most women who could, never actually used their talent.

“Barbarians!” the Corisan spat and he gestured to his companion and they strolled out of the inn.

“They could have at least returned the food and drink,” Raff commented as he went to their table to retrieve the pitcher and the bowl.

“You really should not upset the wayfarers here,” One warned them both. “They could have killed you with a thought,”

“Only if I was the one to think it,” Em snapped at him.

“Their order ranks higher than anyone but the High King himself,” One tried to explain. “Even if he didn’t try to kill you, which would have been his right, he could well have you arrested for showing disrespect.”

“I think your local wayfarers need a short sharp lesson in humility,” Em opined. “I wish they had tried to arrest me. I would have sent them into next week.”

“Master Cawlens!” One gasped at her disrespect.

“If they were lucky,” Em added confidently.

“One does have a point, Em,” Raff stepped in. “We’re here to negotiate a peace for Kharasia and I don’t think we’d be able to do that very well from inside a Corisan dungeon.”

“We represent Emperor Pavel Alexander of Kharasia,” Em countered. “Arresting us would be an act of war.”

“Lady, we’re already at war,” Two reminded her quietly.

Seventeen

Two weeks later they were traveling through the rolling hills of Ganlin province when they came under attack again while on a narrow ledge between a steep hill and a clear blue lake. Aside from the encounter with the Corisan wayfarers, the trip had been largely uneventful since leaving the capital of Makret, but the quiet was shattered when a shower of arrows suddenly fell on them, killing one of the horses on Panatti’s wagon and wounding two of the junior merchants.

The arrows were instantly followed by a volley of musket shots. A pair of cries from the back of the carriage told Em that at least two of the legates had been hit, but at the moment she was more concerned with the next volley. Raff, looking up on the hill above them spotted a line of gunmen holding muskets with barrel lengths much longer than anything he had seen before. He was about to do something to stop them when a series of explosions rang up from among the musketeers.

A second glance, using his wayfarer senses, showed him Em had set off all the gunpowder they had. Only two of the men fell down, wounded or dead, he could not tell. The rest were attempting to knock another round of arrows on their bows, but Raff decided to put a quick stop to that. It was too far to do much had they been in a stability, but out here in the Wild it was child’s play for Raff to snap each of the bow strings.

That should have been the end of it, Raff thought, but he was mistaken. The attackers drew long curved swords from over their backs and, screaming at the tops of their lungs, charged down slope toward the crippled caravan. Raff was about to tell Panatti to start driving the wagon again, but the dead horse was still harnessed to the wagon and the carriage could not get around the wagon even if they wanted it to.

Raff and Em had the same idea even though they had been unable to communicate directly and the roughly three dozen men suddenly found themselves being forcefully propelled right past the caravan and over the ledge and then down a very steep slope only to fall into the deep lake one hundred feet below.

With them out of the way, Raff and Em took stock of what had happened. In the excitement Kaz had been thrown out of the carriage, but he picked himself up and looking up the hill, saw a familiar face. "If we didn't know he was a wayfarer, 'we'd know it now,'" Kaz commented.

"Who's that?" Raff asked him while Cella and Panattis started tending to their comrades' wounds.

"That Nillonese guy," Kaz replied. "I just saw him up there, but he was on a horse and he's riding away as fast as he can."

"We could use another horse for the wagon," Raff commented.

"There are quite a few of them up there," Kaz informed him, "two are harnessed up to a wagon. We would need a horse accustomed to hauling, right?"

"Right," Raff agreed. "How did you know that?" Kaz's people did not keep horses so there had been no reason for him to grow up knowing that horses needed to be trained to their tasks.

"Signor Panatti mentioned it a few months ago," Kaz replied.

"Raff," Em called him. "One and Three are dead. As far as I can tell, they got hit by the same musket ball."

"We'll have to bury them," Raff sighed, "and the horse too, I guess. Signor, how are your fellows?"

"They'll live," Panatti reported. "Isodoro got shot in the arm and Alberto took one in his right leg."

They made quick work burying the two legates by the side of the road, "Are there any special observances we should make?" Raff asked Two as they lowered the bodies into the two matching pits.

"We should mark the graves," Two decided. "Their families might decide to hire someone to bring them back to their home towns."

"I'll need their real names to put on the stone," Raff told him as Em used Wild energy to roll a pair of boulders to the head of the graves.

"I still cannot tell you that," Two replied. "But I'll be able to report which one is which."

"What if something happens to you?" Raff asked pointedly.

Two's face blanched visibly at the thought, but he replied, "Deliver the papers in our trunk. They will reveal who we are."

Raff nodded and with casual ease caused the Corisan symbols of "One," and "Three" to become etched into the stones behind their graves. He said a few words, because merely walking away would have seemed wrong, but finally he filled in the graves and they prepared to leave.

"Where did we get all the new horses from?" Raff asked, noticing for the first time that Panatti's wagon now had three horses instead of two hitched to the front and another eighteen were standing around the two vehicles.

"I couldn't let them wander around in the Wild," Kaz explained. "Besides, when I went to replace the one that got shot the others just sort of followed me back."

"Most horses can withstand the Wild," Raff replied. "They're still half Wild themselves, but if they followed you, it must have been your aura. As creatures that have been brought up in a stability they will feel more comfortable in one. Out here a wayfarer's aura or a path is the closest they're going to find. Well, I hope they continue to follow us, because this is far too many to just hitch up to the back of the wagon or carriage and hope they'll walk along with the rest of us."

"They don't look particularly well fed either," Em observed.

"And we don't have much to feed them," Raff commented, "but we should have enough to reach the next town. Let's put a few miles between here and there before some of those guys down by the lake decide they ought to try coming after us again. Hey, Two, did you recognize any of them?"

"No, they are just the sort of brigands who live in these hills, I think," Two replied.

"Ah the joys of civilization," Raff muttered as Panatti got his wagon moving again. "I guess you can buy anything here. So our friend from Nillon just hired a small army to attack us."

"I know that tone of voice, Raff Cawlens," Em commented as the carriage started out again as well. "You're tired of waiting for him to try something else. You want to ride out, find him and put an end to this nonsense already."

"Don't you?" Raff asked her.

"Yes, but I realize how impractical that is," Em replied. "I know you could take one of those saddle horses and follow his trail, although if he's as good a wayfarer as I suspect, even you won't find anything to follow."

"Except hoof prints," Raff interrupted.

"Odds are he got on this same path a mile or two ahead of us," Em speculated.

"Planning some other trouble, no doubt," Kaz added.

"I don't think he's quite that devious," Two told them. He was almost cowering in the back of the carriage, but he leaned forward a bit as he spoke. "I worked under him for some months, remember. He plans things out very well, but he does not have a back-up plan ready when things don't work out the way he expects them to."

"He's too confident his plans will work in the first place?" Raff guessed.

"I got the impression that normally all his plans work out the way he wants," Two replied. "He was very troubled when you started negotiating. You do not think as we do. You don't think even as the Emperor's people do. He thought he was doing well in keeping our talks on track."

"He wasn't accomplishing anything," Raff pointed out.

"We were not supposed to," Two admitted. "It was our job to stall until we could bring reinforcements into our new territories. But you somehow cut right through all that and forced us to move on to easily

solved matters. You made points we had no choice but to concede in order to not seem to be stalling.”

“I don’t have the patience to be a diplomat,” Raff laughed. “Had you started arguing over what shape the table we sat at should be, I’d have probably just cut it up into whatever shape you liked. Had you then said it was too small, I’d have probably made the whole thing crumble into dust and told you, ‘Fine. No table. Start talking.’ I don’t put up with that sort of thing and I never did, even when I was on the Guild’s Council of Masters.”

“That didn’t exactly endear you to some of your colleagues, dear,” Em recalled.

“I wasn’t trying to win a popularity contest,” Raff replied. It was an old argument. “I just wanted to get through one of those interminable meetings before it was time to go to bed. In any case, I quickly learned ways to push a discussion to its logical conclusion, although while we were in Kharaskva it didn’t seem like I was getting anywhere at all.”

“You made us run out of excuses,” Two admitted. “I think that’s why our Head Legate was getting so frustrated.”

“Sure,” Raff agreed. “If we came to an agreement, that would leave Corisa’s army free to return to harassing Nillon and he couldn’t have that, could he?”

“Do you really think that’s what he was up to?” Two asked.

“What else?” Raff asked. “If he could get Corisa and Kharasia involved in a bloody enough war, both nations would be too weak to bother Nillon for a very long time. I wonder if the war was his idea from the start. How long had he been posing as a Corisan?”

“I don’t know,” Two replied. “I got the impression he had been among us for a few years, but he might have just been making up stories.”

“Maybe not,” Raff shook his head, “but that might prove you right about how deliberate a planner he is and why we only seem to see him or the results of his machinations every few weeks. Well, I imagine he’s going to start getting desperate as we get closer to Ranyang. Maybe we’ll catch him next time, although, I would have thought we killed him once or twice before.”

“Better not underestimate this one,” Em commented.

“You will get me home alive, won’t you?” Two asked suddenly, all the worry coming out in his voice.

“We’ll try our best,” Em replied. Weeks earlier she might have been more reassuring, however, she had never had to escort anyone such a long distance and with so many attempts on their lives along the way.

“I just want to go home,” Two said miserably to no one in particular.

“We’re working on it,” Em told him.

The merchants also changed their attitude after that and kept their own weapons – flintlock hunting rifles - loaded, primed and nearer to hand. A similar attack would hereafter be met shortly by return fire. The long rifles took longer to reload, but they were more accurate. In spite of the stories of highwaymen and the monsters of the Wild, weapons were rarely needed in the Wild save to find meat for the pot.

Kaz noted the new grimmer mood of the party and he, too, started getting somber as they moved ever deeper into Corisa. The central plain became more frequently punctuated by hills and valleys. Every time they were forced to enter a pass between two steep hills or into the sharp-sided ravine of a river valley, Kaz would tense up and prepare to fight in any way he could. He started asking Em and Raff about new ways to use Wild energy until they became alarmed at his apparent fascination with power in the same way parents worried when their children started playing with fire.

Their next big problem, however, had nothing to do with bandits, monsters, angry Kenlienta or, in fact, anything they had ever heard of.

Eighteen

“What’s happening to the path?” Kaz asked one morning over a week after the most recent attack by the Nillonese wayfarer and his allies. Kaz had taken to a wayfarer’s path-watching responsibilities with full enthusiasm, but now the path wasn’t just fading. It was flashing brighter and dimmer. As he took a second look, it looked like a tight cable that was starting to untwist.

“It’s coming undone,” Raff told him a moment later. “See how the edges are showing little thread-like tendrils of energy that whip back and forth? This path as been cut somewhere ahead and it happened very recently, I think. Maybe less than a hour ago. Em!” he shouted back to the carriage. “Look at the path!”

“I see it!” she shouted back. And together they started repairing the path as they continued to ride.

“Kaz, I’d let you help, but a recently cut path is difficult to deal with,” Raff told him. “Watch me, though. This doesn’t happen very often and it could be decades before you see something like this again.”

“Master Cawlens,” Signor Panatti asked, “should we stop the wagon.”

“Uh uh,” Raff shook his head. “Keep us moving forward at the same pace. Good thing we sold all those extra horses last week, though. With that many, there’s always one that decides to panic when things like this happen. The ones we have are good sensible beasts; they were trained to haul load at a nice steady pace, but those saddle horses were trained to run. It would only have taken one excitable one to set the others off. If that happened they’d be pulling us every which way.”

“I’m surprised Two didn’t insist the money we got for them belonged to the High King,” Panatti commented.

“He was in shock, I’m sure,” Raff chuckled. “But he can give his share to His Holiness if he likes although I think One’s and Three’s share should go to their families. I’m going to have to get rather quiet for a while, though. This path is getting very wild and I need to give it all my attention.”

They continued onward around the edge of a large, low hill, but a mile later as they finally finished circling the hill, the wayfarers saw the tall, wide dome of a human city directly on their path. “That’s odd,” Raff commented. “There isn’t supposed to be a town anywhere near here.”

“Look’s like it’s moving,” Kaz noted. “Could this be what cut the path?”

“Maybe,” Raff allowed. “You’re right, though. It’s moving and pretty quickly.”

“Doesn’t look all that quick to me,” Kaz observed critically. He felt he could easily walk faster than the dome of stability that surrounded this strange city.

“What should we do?” Panatti asked.

“Go on in,” Raff replied. “It’s right on the path anyway. It’s strange the buildings aren’t all that far from the edge of the Wild, no more than a quarter of a mile. Maybe it’s got a lower population than it looks or maybe it’s because of the high rate of progress.”

“I still don’t think it’s moving very fast,” Kaz told him.

“I’ve never seen a town or a city move this fast, Kaz,” Raff told him. “Even the fastest moving village doesn’t seem to move merely by looking at it. To tell the truth, I wouldn’t have thought life was even possible under these conditions.”

“Maybe it isn’t,” Panatti suggested. “Maybe this is just some great bubble of stability shooting through the Wild.”

“Not very likely,” Raff shook his head as they prepared to enter the moving city. “You need human life to create a stability of this size. Even a large herd of domesticated animals wouldn’t do this and without the human life, the stability would disappear instantly.”

“Can’t a master wayfarer create an area of stability in the Wild?” Kaz asked.

“Not this large,” Raff told him as they rolled into the city. There was a strange shudder as the wagon crossed the line as though something had briefly attempted to tip it over but quickly gave up and went off to try something else. “And such a stability would fade rapidly. Maybe a small intense area might last a year or two, but that’s it. And something like this? It would take every member of the Guild working together to accomplish a stability of this size and it still wouldn’t last very long.”

“Then what is this?” Panatti asked.

“I don’t know,” Raff admitted. “Let’s find someone to ask. You know that city ahead really looks out of place.”

“It looks like some of the ancient buildings in Meni,” Panatti noted, “except these aren’t ancient.”

“They do look fresh and clean,” Raff noted.

“And colorful!” Kaz added enthusiastically. “Those are the most colorful buildings I’ve ever seen.”

“Painted marble,” Raff remarked. “The buildings have been faced with white marble, but the carvings that adorn them have been painted in bright colors. Very pretty. I understand this was very common two millennia ago. Actually the style of architecture looks like something from the early Meninan Empire, maybe a bit earlier.”

“But why would such a city be built here in the middle of Corisa?” Panatti asked.

“Maybe an army of Meninans got lost. That can happen to an army easily enough if their guiding wayfarer dies in action. An army is large enough to support a fair-sized stability, but without a wayfarer,

the members of that army are doomed to wander around until they find a stability by accident. Generally, commanding officers are trained to only search for a town for a short time and then just set up camp and wait to be found. A master wayfarer can usually find a lost army in short order so long as they haven't gone wandering all over the landscape, but when they choose to keep looking... Well, there have been cases when armies were never found. Not many, and it's a more common fate for ships, but it does happen. We seem to be driving across a field of barley, though. That's probably not the best way to make friends with the locals."

"I see a road off to our left," Kaz announced.

They turned directly for the road and then continued into the heart of the strange city. Once among the buildings they began to see people inside the buildings and walking on the sides of the street. They were dressed in archaic clothing, simple tunics and flowing dresses. Raff had long thought the cloth of such clothing tended to be white, but these people appeared to favor blues and greens, although there were also some striking reds, yellows and earth tones and most garments were trimmed with colorful embroidery and beadwork.

"Hello!" Raff called out to come of them in a several different languages, waving in a friendly manner. A few of the people waved back uncertainly, but none of them replied. "Very strange," he muttered.

"It looks like something from out of an old painting," Panatti commented.

As they continued on, more and more people stopped to watch them pass through. Somehow the word was out there were strangers in town and it seemed everyone wanted to see them. Finally, a young man ran up in front of the wagon and gestured for Raff and the others to follow him. He wore a strange-looking, long red over-garment, for which Raff had no ready name, over his woolen tunic. The red garment seemed to be pinned together near the top and then was belted loosely at his waist so that a large fold hung down from the belt obscuring it. It was sort of like a tabard, Raff thought, but the way in which it was worn made that an only vaguely accurate description.

Following the man, the caravan soon arrived in a large open area in the center of the city. "Ah, the central market," Panatti breathed, looking around at the impressive and colorful buildings.

"No," Raff disagreed. "Well, I suppose you're right it is a marketplace too, but I think the more accurate term might be *forum*."

"What? You mean like the forum of ancient Meni?" Panatti asked. "There's some resemblance I'll grant, but you tried talking to them in Meni, didn't you?"

"I did," Raff admitted, "but who's to say what language these people speak? They don't look like Meninans, do they?"

"I don't look like the ancients of Meni either," Panatti pointed out. "Several barbarian invasions mixed up the blood lines of Menino pretty well at the fall of the old empire."

"There is that," Raff admitted "and it's probably been at least fourteen hundred years they've been here. Possibly much longer."

"It still looks like a forum," Raff insisted. "The *fora* of ancient Meni were marketplaces after all. We just think of them mostly for their use as places in which political speeches were made. The major reason I think of this as a forum is that large rostrum sort of thing ahead of us with the men in... well they're not

really *togae* are they? Well, the place where the men in what looks like some kind of formal clothing are waiting.”

They tried several more languages with the people as they parked the two vehicles, but it was Em who finally made verbal contact with one of the City Fathers in their odd robes.

“Hail, strangers!” one of the men greeted them. “Welcome to Senopolis!”

It took Em a moment to understand what was being said and the language it was said in. “Tasin! You speak Tasin!” she blurted out, causing some amusement among the City Fathers, but most of them nodded happily. “Uh, I mean, Hail! This is a long way to come to find someone speaking your language.”

“Indeed,” the spokesman agreed, “and we got here the long way, I assure you. It has been so very long since a stranger spoke our language.”

“I’m not surprised,” Raff cut in. Now that Em had identified the language he too was able to twist his mind around words he had not attempted since leaving University. Anyone with a classical education had some training in Tasin, but outside of those classes and the occasional dusty tome, it was a dead language and one whose pronunciation, one of Raff’s professors had warned his students, was not entirely certain. Even now, Raff could not be sure if the citizens of Senopolis had not also changed their pronunciation in the millennia since having been cut off from their native land. “I think you would have trouble finding someone who speaks it even in Yug today.”

“Yug?” the man, whose name they learned was Stylianos, asked curiously.

“It’s what the natives call Tasea these days,” Em replied, “and they have for the last fifteen centuries, I think.”

“We’ve been lost for over two millennia,” Stylianos replied. He performed the formal introductions and then suggested, “It is chilly and windy out here and it is time for the mid-day meal. Will you join me somewhere far more comfortable?”

The residents of Senopolis ate their heaviest meal at what Raff and Em thought of as lunch. That was not completely foreign to them as the people of Menino and modern Yug did the same, but when traveling it was usually faster to just eat something light at noon and save the heaviest meal for after they had stopped for the day. Raff wondered if the people here ate such banquets everyday and decided that the arrival of strangers who could speak the native tongue, however haltingly, was probably a cause for celebration. Even so they did not learn the full story until later that afternoon.

“We were once a typically prosperous city in the Empire of Tasea,” Stylianos told them over cups of the local tea. It was a sign they were not entirely cut off from the world around them. Then one day our ancestors angered the god of the sea, whom we call Carses. Perhaps you have another name for him?”

“The Meninans called him Thanunus,” Raff replied, “but we no longer worship the old gods.”

“Neither do we since they abandoned us to our fate,” Stylianos replied. “Perhaps later you can tell us of the gods you worship now. Carses cursed our city. We don’t really remember what the original offense was, but Carses was ever an unpredictable god. Perhaps he just decided it would be fun to pick our city up and see how far he could throw it.”

“You can’t just pick up a city,” Raff commented. “It’s too large. It would fall apart.”

“Forgive me, I was being metaphorical,” Stylianos told him.

“No, please forgive me, I spoke out of turn,” Raff apologized. “Please continue to tell the story as it pleases you.”

“It would please me far more to have never had to have told it at all,” Stylianos told him, “but regardless of how it was done, one morning we woke up to discover our city had moved. We had been on a plain to the west of Tartha and north of Guthenos,”

“I think that may be where Guthenos is these days,” Em told him. “All stabilities move to one extent or another and over two thousand years, well who’s to say any of our cities have stayed put entirely?”

“Ah,” Stylianos replied, “but Senopolis more than all the rest. Our ancestors wrote that we have been cursed to wander through the world forever. Certainly we have been doing so a very long time and by our own measurements, we have circled the world several times now.”

“Do you follow a straight path?” Raff asked.

“Senopolis moves to the north and to the south along her path,” Stylianos replied, “but our progress is ever to the west, never eastward. Some of our more poetical citizens say we are running from the sun, as futile as that may be.”

Kaz’s brow furrowed at that. He had been gradually picking up the ancient language through the same wayfarer technique by which he had learned several others so far. “That’s only true first thing in the morning. At noon you could say you are in a race with the sun and at sunset that you are trying to catch up.”

“An interesting point,” Stylianos agreed with a broad grin. “Fortunately, I’m not one of the poets who say that. Crossing oceans is difficult for us but mostly because we are forced to change our subsistence patterns. Our little stability floats over the sea and we can go fishing merely by casting lines and nets over the edge.”

“Don’t you get flooded by large waves?” Raff asked.

“That is a strange thing,” Stylianos admitted, “but while some water does wash up over our fields in a great storm, even the tallest waves do not quite reach the buildings of our city. That can ruin the crops some seasons, but a fresh water rain is usually enough to wash the salt out and then we can plant again.”

“And your grains may have evolved to become more resistant to brackish water,” Raff replied.

“Evolved?” Stylianos asked. “I don’t know that word.”

“Sorry,” Raff apologized. “There’s no reason you should. It’s a relatively new theory. We have found the remains of animals and some plants that used to live in the world but do so no longer. They don’t, however, look entirely unlike the ones that live here now so we have sought explanations for that. The most accepted one is that a parent animal or plant can pass on adaptations to its young, so for example if a parent manages to stretch its neck to reach leaves a bit higher on a tree, the young will have necks that are already slightly longer and if they too stretch their necks it will be that much easier for the next generation.”

“An interesting notion,” Stylianos agreed.

“Well, not everyone agrees that’s how it works, but it’s the most accepted hypothesis at the moment,” Raff told him. “Anyway, regardless of the mechanism, it’s possible your crops are more resistant to salt water than they once were.”

“But wouldn’t they lose that resistance after we had been landlocked for several years?” Stylianos asked.

“That is a good point too,” Raff admitted.

“Also we have always made it a habit to buy local grains and other crops when we could, since we felt it would be best to grow those things best adapted to the climate we were in and it can take over a decade to cross an ocean.”

“I’m surprised no one has noticed you moving through the neighborhood before,” Em remarked.

“It is like the old fairy stories of a town that only appears once every hundred years,” Cella added.

“Senopolis might be how those stories got started,” Em speculated. “The city moves fairly rapidly so that after a month or so, it would be nowhere to be found.”

“We do not move at a constant rate either,” Stylianos told them. “However, our scientists have predicted our progress for the next eight years and we expect to move to the west-southwest and perhaps move some one thousand miles in that time.”

“Hmm,” Raff considered, “Right down into Salasia or Myanistan I’d guess. How accurate are those predictions?”

“For the next year, probably fairly accurate,” Stylianos shrugged. “After that, well who can plan that far in advance what one is going to want for dinner?”

“I was just thinking a colleague of ours, Em’s and mine that is, would be fascinated by Senopolis,” Raff told him.

“Yes!” Em agreed instantly, “Doctor Harkermor would love this place and talk about the readings he could take here!”

“This Doctor Harkermor is a scientist?” Stylianos asked.

“He is,” Raff confirmed. “Is that a problem?”

“No at all,” Stylianos shook his head. “Perhaps he could find a way to break our curse.”

“I’m not certain how it started in the first place,” Raff admitted. “It might have been a capricious god, but these days we are taught there is no God but the one Lord at least that’s what we believe in the Northern Lands. Religion differs in these parts.”

“I’m sure we would all gladly worship whatever god could bring our town to rest once more,” Stylianos replied and a murmur of agreement passed through his fellow City Fathers.

“Well, I won’t promise something I have no control of,” Raff told them, “but on our return home, I will speak to Doctor Harkemor and some other interested scientists. I’m sure many of them will want to visit you at the very least. Your city will vindicate a lot of theories, I think.”

“And cause many others to be discarded,” Em added. “A city moving at this speed will completely disprove one hypothesis I heard at ‘The Shape of the World’ last year. That it moves independently of another city or nation will be revolutionary enough.”

“What is this ‘Shape of the World?’” Stylianos asked. “I understand the words, but you use them as though they are a proper name.”

“An academic conference we attended not too long ago,” Em replied. She went on to describe the lectures and theories that had been proposed and discussed and that discussion lasted off and on well into the night.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be in too much of a hurry to stop moving though,” Raff advised sometime before dinner. “From everything you say I would guess it will be some thirty or forty years before you are in an area with a culture compatible to yours, maybe longer.”

“We are an adaptable people,” Stylianos told him. “Stopping. Breaking our curse; that is the important part to us. Besides, if we learn how to stop, perhaps we can learn how to control our progress.”

“Couldn’t you just leave this city?” Kaz asked. “You know, just move away to other places?”

“But this is our home,” Stylianos replied simply.

Nineteen

They left Senopolis the next morning just after sunrise and a light breakfast provided by Stylianos. While loading up the carriage, Raff had another idea. “Stylianos, I told you about our Guild of Wayfarers last night.”

“You did,” Stylianos agreed. “Why?”

“I was just wondering if the City fathers would be amenable to a Guild hall being established here,” Raff told him. “Your city causes more than a bit of damage as it cuts through our pathways and I can only imagine how it affects the Kenlienta.”

“The Fair Folk?” Stylianos asked. “Do they truly exist?”

“Oh, they’re real enough,” Raff chuckled. “Who knows, maybe they’re the ones who started your world tour, but I doubt it. Still, there are things their magic can do that no human science can explain. Anyway, if we had a hall in Senopolis, we could repair the pathways as they get cut and also keep you a bit more open to the world as you progress through it.”

“We would be willing to talk of such a possibility,” Stylianos told him.

“Good enough,” Raff agreed. “I’ll inform the Guild that they should send a delegation of masters to discuss the matter with you. Who knows, maybe some day I’ll be able to repay your hospitality in

Taundon.”

“I would like that,” Stylianos told him, “and I look forward to meeting your fellow Guildsmen. The new things Signor Panatti has sold us are quite exciting and I think we will all do well with further trade.”

“You also had quite a few unique artifacts,” Panatti told him. “I will be back, I promise you.”

They left Senopolis by the east gate to minimize the jolt as they left the moving stability. Even so the transition to the Wild spooked the horses as they stepped from the spot of moving ground attached to Senopolis to the stationary Wild lands.

“Where the heck are we?” Raff wondered out loud.

“I think we left the path somewhere around those hills,” Kaz pointed to the eastern horizon.

“That’s about five miles away,” Raff noted. “Well, we had better go find where we left off. There’s going to be a wide break in the path and one side is coming apart in the worst possible way.”

It took three hours to find the part of the path Raff had stabilized just before they had entered Senopolis and when they did, there were two caravans stranded at the point where Raff’s and Em’s party entered Senopolis. “Why didn’t you just continue straight on until you found the other side of the break?” Raff asked one of the local wayfarers. Unlike the two they had met earlier the red clothing of the ones here were plain, lacking any of the gold embroidery. Raff assumed it meant these were not master-rank wayfarers, but even an apprentice should have been able to lead a party to the other end of the path.

“None of us can forge a path,” came the response, “and we’re not allowed to travel without one.”

“That is the law,” Two told Raff.

“Darned stupid laws,” Raff remarked. “You could have been stuck out here for weeks. Two, is anyone going to try to arrest me for re-forging the path?”

“Only one of the masters can do that,” a local wayfarer protested.

“Is that the law?” Raff demanded. “Is it written down like that anywhere? No? Good. Followme.” He got down out of the wagon and started walking forward at a relaxed pace. As he went, Kaz could see him bending the Wild energy to his will. A bright golden glow surrounded Raff and flowed into the ground, leaving a freshly forged pathway in his wake. It took three hours to reach the other side of the gap that had been cut in the path by the passing city and Raff had to stop every so often to rest and drink some water, but finally they reached the far side of the break and Raff reattached the two ends of the path together.

“That was well done, dear,” Em commended him quietly as she helped him into the carriage, “but perhaps I’d better finish the maintenance on the frayed section. You really ought not show off like that.”

“I’ve forged pathways before,” Raff told her.

“Not at that pace,” Em laughed “and certainly not trying to make it look that easy, and you don’t normally try to deep forge them like you did this one.”

“The old one was pretty deeply forged,” Raff protested.

“I doubt that,” Em laughed as she got the horses moving and passed Panatti’s wagon. “It think it was just well traveled.”

“Well, maybe, but I didn’t care to hear one of the locals complaining I didn’t know how to build a path.”

“I doubt those two are even going to mention it,” Kaz told him. “They were worried about the trouble they’d get in if it became known they traveled on the path you made.”

“What difference would that make?” Raff asked irritated.

“They weren’t sure,” Kaz laughed. “One of them was afraid this wasn’t a legal path and the other one was equally worried about the penalties for not getting their parties to Ranyang on schedule. They eventually agreed to say nothing about it. But they did wonder whether or not we would even be allowed into the city.”

“Why not?” Em asked almost absently and Kaz realized that most of her concentration was on the frayed path she was repairing.

“Well, only the local wayfarers are allowed to work here,” Kaz told them. “You know that. You told me.”

“Yes, but we’re also ambassadors from Kharasia,” Raff reminded him.

“I know that,” Kaz agreed, “but I don’t know if that will make a difference to their Order of Wayfarers.”

“Order,” Raff mused. “Yes they do call themselves that.”

“It’s a religious order of monks and priests,” Two told him.

“Celibate?” Raff asked. “Sounds like they would run out of wayfarers after a while.”

“The lower ranks of the order are celibate,” Two replied, “but the masters are allowed to have as many women as they wish.”

“Yes,” Em replied in a very dangerous voice, “I’m sure it’s considered quite a sensible arrangement.”

Two started to nod agreement, but caught Kaz’s grin and instantly replied, “It’s never seemed right to me, Lady.”

“Nice save,” Kaz whispered to him.

“But they do guard their power jealously,” Two remarked. “Foreign wayfarers are not allowed to practice here. I think you should be an exception, given the special situation, but...” he trailed off.

“But what?” Raff demanded.

“Well, if you had only escorted us, the legates, that is,” Two stammered. “I’m sure that would have been all right, but you’ve also been guiding Signor Panatti and his people, you see.”

“But they aren’t Corisan,” Raff replied.

“That makes a difference in Salasia and Makret,” Two replied, “but not in Corisa.”

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?” Raff asked.

“I thought you knew,” Two explained. “You seemed to. And maybe I’m wrong. One thought it would be acceptable so Three and I could hardly disagree out loud, now could we?”

“You Corisans live by some pretty stupid laws, you know that?” Raff told him harshly. “Where we come from it’s not illegal to be a wayfarer without joining the Guild. It’s darned hard to get a decent job without Guild membership, but no one is going to arrest you just because you aren’t paying your dues. In fact the only unaffiliated wayfarers I know of are apprentice-class workers who only go between two towns, but no one would harass them if they could find their way to other places.”

“They just couldn’t get a job,” Two commented.

“The Guild doesn’t stop them,” Raff explained. “It’s just that people prefer to deal with the Guild. They know they can trust us. Can you say the same for your wayfarers?”

Two had no answer for that and instead settled back to sulk which Raff took a nap.

Ranyang

One

The bright red multi-tiered roofs of the capital city of Corisa came into sight half a day before they actually reached the city gates. Ranyang sat on a wide plain almost entirely surrounded by distant mountains, so they were able to look down into the city as they made their approach.

Ranyang, as Raff expected, was a large city, similar in size to Taundon and Carais and like those two cities, it had several satellite towns that circled around it every few years. The travelers had stayed in one such town just the night before. However, that town was not moving anywhere near as fast as Senopolis had been and Kaz was surprised to not feel the same jolt as they entered and left that area of stability. It did bother him, as it continued to do so that they called towns, villages and cities stabilities, but the rest of the world was the Wild. And yet it was the stabilities that shifted around from place to place, while Ken settlements in the Wild stayed in the same spots unless the residents decided to pick them up and physically move them.

Kaz doubted the Ken had ever done such a thing, but it was the only way one of their towns or cities were likely to change location. He chuckled thinking of the Kenlenta of Therin Kal dismantling every building in the town and reassembling them on the opposite sides of the street just for the sake of variety. “What’s so funny, lad?” Raff asked him.

“Oh, nothing,” Kaz replied, unable to adequately describe what he had been thinking of.

“Well, keep that sense of humor,” Raff advised. “It will serve you well.” Raff meant to say it would serve Kaz well all his life but it turned out a fading sense of humor was all the boy had to rely on for the next

few days.

The merchants were passed into the city with ease. Corisans were used to dealing with foreign merchants. Signor Panatti was directed to an office a few blocks away and warned not to do any business until he had filled out all the forms, but other than that his entrance into the city was a simple matter. Two presented his credentials and was passed quickly as well, but Raff and Em were stopped immediately.

“What’s this?” Raff demanded, although he already knew full well what was happening.

“You’re unlicensed wayfarers,” the officials at the gate told him. “You’ve been guiding travelers within Corisa. Both are serious crimes. You will be held for trial.”

“We’re also the duly appointed ambassadors for Emperor Pavel Alexander of Kharasia,” Raff argued.

“His Imperial Majesty should have shown better judgment in his choice of spokespeople,” the official retorted. “You are under arrest.”

Kaz was being ignored, however, and Raff signaled silently to the boy that he should enter the city with Signor Panatti’s people. Kaz didn’t like abandoning Raff and Em, but when Raff ordered him, he was well enough behaved to obey for now at least.

There was nothing but Raff’s and Em’s acquiescence to keep them under arrest, but their mission on behalf of Kharasia was too important to do the sorts of things they would have just then to avoid a prison cell.

“I’ve seen more comfortable accommodations,” Em remarked sourly from her cell. They had been placed in neighboring cells, the dimensions of which had been carefully calculated so that anyone inside could never quite stand up or lie down without curling up at least partway. To make matters worse there were no mattresses or any other form of furniture in the two cells and the doors were so small both Raff and Em had been forced to crawl inside.

“I’ve seen more accommodating prisons,” Raff retorted. “Hold on a moment.” He concentrated and the adjoining wall between the two small rooms dissolved into dust which then flowed into one of the corners and turned back into rock. “I’d make the ceiling higher, but they’d probably accuse us of trying to escape.”

“At least we can stretch out now,” Em commented, “though you would think they could afford to throw us a pillow or two.”

“I don’t think our comfort is their first priority,” Raff replied dryly.

“Remind me to not to recommend this place to our friends,” Em shot back, wrapping her arms around her husband in an attempt to get comfortable.

“I was thinking of sending the Guild council a note,” Raff told her. “Something quick and simple like, ‘Having fun, wish you were here.’ I mean there are several people on the Council I’d like to enjoy this sort of hospitality.”

“I can think of one gentleman from Nillon I wouldn’t mind having for a neighbor just now,” Em told him.

“Not sure I’d feel like inviting him in for tea,” Raff considered, “but I can think of several topics of conversation that I’d find enlightening. Speaking of tea, do you think they’re going to feed us?”

“I’d hate to think what they would feed us if they plan to,” Em remarked. “Why?”

“I haven’t eaten since breakfast,” Raff remembered. “I figured on having a good meal once we had settled in at the Makretan embassy.”

“Next time don’t skip lunch,” Em advised.

They were roused just before dawn and marched several miles across the city. “What’s going on,” Em demanded. Their guards were all carrying quarterstaves and one of them swung the staff at her warningly, but Raff held his arm out to block the staff and it dissolved into dust the same way the cell wall had the night before.

Another guard turned on him angrily. “You want to make something of it?” Raff asked him belligerently. The guard stopped and simply signaled for them to move again. “No, I didn’t think so,” Raff growled.

Finally they were guided into a large arena about half-filled with men in red clothing. “Ah, they’ve brought out the Order to greet us,” Em muttered dryly. Normally she and Raff took turns holding each other back, but from the tone of her voice, Raff realized that the Corisan Order of Wayfarers might be setting itself up for a bad day, or else Mr. and Mrs. Cawlens were. He wasn’t entirely sure which, but after the night in that cell and the long walk to this arena, he wasn’t really worried about it.

Five red and gold-clad wayfarers sat in what looked like seats of judgment at the middle of the arena. “Hello!” Raff greeted them with cheerful informality. “I’ll be your defendant today.”

“Silence!” the judging wayfarer in the middle snapped at him.

“Why?” Raff asked challengingly.

“You are charged with wayfaring without a license, without having been inducted into the Order and forging an illegal path, and of attacking legitimate wayfarers in Peng-Gi Province. Those are all serious offenses.”

“I don’t see why,” Raff commented. “We came here as ambassadors from Kharasia. We also hold diplomatic papers from Makret, but perhaps Corisa has not yet learned the phrase ‘Diplomatic immunity?’” There was a murmur of anger from the crowd in the stands. Raff had just called them all ignorant barbarians. “But leaving that aside, we found your pathways poorly maintained and we repaired them as we went along as any wayfarer of sufficient talent should. And yes, I also re-forged the path that had been cut. Would you really have preferred I just left it the way it was? It was coming apart rapidly and, given the cause, I imagine you all must have been having your hands full lately making similar repairs.”

“There have been a lot of broken paths lately,” the spokesman admitted. “You know the cause? Tell us!” It was an imperious command and precisely the wrong tact to use with either Cawlens.

“Uh uh!” Raff shook his head. “That would be telling and I only share knowledge with friends.”

“You will tell us!” the judge demanded.

“No.” Raff replied with calm defiance. “Now as for attacking your fellow Order members, actually we were only defending ourselves and our property, or are you telling me your people are supposed to steal food off the table of strangers and insult anyone they encounter, even those who speak for kings? Is this the treatment you expect your own ambassadors to receive? If so, I’ll be glad to spread the word so special tiny cells like the ones you housed us in last night can be built for them.”

“Those cells were designed to hold wayfarers who had transgressed,” the judge explained.

“Then your wayfarers must be really poorly trained,” Raff snapped back at him. “The only reason I’m here is my own good will and my promise to Emperor Pavel Alexander. Now, why the hell are we in an arena!” Those last words rose in volume to a shout. Normally Em might have placed a calming hand on Raff’s arm, but not this time.

“We are giving you the benefit of the doubt, barbarian,” the second judge from the left interrupted. “This is your trial, but it is also the test you must undergo for a license to operate in Corisa.”

“In an arena?” Raff asked. “What are you expecting me to do? Forge a path inside a stability?”

“The test is a trial by combat,” the judge told him, “in the ancient art we call Lü-ke.” The Judge sounded unbelievably smug.

“Sounds like we might be Lü-ke to get out of this unscathed,” Raff whispered to Em.

“Ouch,” she reacted to the pun. To the judges, she asked, “What is this Lü-ke?”

The judge looked at her as though she had committed a gross offense, but one of the others leaned over and whispered something to him and he replied, “It is the martial art involving what you outlanders call wayfaring,” the judge told her. “You will each face a series of opponents, unarmed, save by what your talents provide. If you defeat everyone you face, you will be set free and will earn a license to practice.”

“Sounds fair enough,” Raff commented, not feeling the confidence he was trying to show. “I don’t suppose you plan to serve breakfast before we start.” The judges looked at him as though he had started speaking in tongues. “Guess not,” Raff sighed. “Okay, let’s get on with this.”

There was a stone bench for Em to sit on while Raff took his turn. His first opponent was a tall and muscular man who circled Raff twice before closing in to fight.

Raff was possibly the most powerful wayfarer in the world, but Lü-ke was not just wayfaring. There was a lot of unarmed combat involved and his large opponent was using his talent to deflect Raff’s attempts at attack while striking Raff repeatedly with wicked blows delivered by his hands and feet. Only Raff’s own wayfaring abilities at healing and shielding kept him from being a quick job for this Corisan wayfarer.

A gong rang after two minutes of this punishment and the Corisan bowed formally to Raff and backed up. “Is that it?” Raff asked.

“No, that is merely the first round,” the judge replied. “You fight for two minutes, take one minute to rest and then fight again. You keep that up until one is defeated.”

“You could have told me that before,” Raff accused.

“You should have asked.”

“Raff,” Em advised him, “I think you’re trying too hard to emulate that guy’s style. It’s pretty and highly disciplined, I think, but it also must have taken years to learn. Try something less stylized and that you’re more comfortable with.”

“Is there any rule saying how I’m suppose to use my hands and feet?” he asked the judges as he prepared for the second round?

“There aren’t any rules to that effect at all,” came the reply just as the gong rang again.

Five minutes later, Raff felt he had been holding his own a bit better in the next two rounds. He had finally managed to land a few good shots on his opponent, although the Corisan was still leaving more bruises on Raff than Raff was on him. Then Raff realized that the Corisans had been holding out on him. “Just what are the explicit rules of this combat?” he asked the judges.

“What rules?” the middle judge replied. “Use any ability you have. Fight to submission or disablement if you can.” The judge’s tone implied Raff was probably about to enter his last round.

“Any ability?” Raff asked incredulously. He wondered if he had been playing too fairly.

“Any,” the judge echoed.

“Okay,” Raff nodded as the gong rang yet again. He turned to his approaching opponent. “I’m prepared to discuss the terms of submission,” he told the red-robed man.

“You are giving up?” the man asked, suddenly betraying confusion over what Raff might be up to.

“Don’t talk dirty!” Raff laughed. “I’m giving you the chance to withdraw honorably.”

For a moment the large man looked at Raff disbelievably. Raff, himself, was certain no one had ever asked his opponent to surrender. Then the large man started to laugh uproariously. It occurred to Raff he might have used that laughter as a distraction for a new attack, but it was hardly necessary. Raff had already won the bout.

Getting hold of himself, the Corisan, shrugged his way into an attacking position and attempted to force-thrust at Raff. So far neither of them had actually scored with direct attempts to hit the other with raw Wild energy, but it was a move that had to be countered, leaving one open to different forms of attack. This time, however, nothing happened. In fact he was entirely unable to get out of the crouch into which he had sunk himself.

It was the trick Em had taught him, using a bubble of Wild energy to isolate a wayfarer from the source of his power. The paralysis was a twist of his own, however. Raff held him there until the next gong and asked, “Give up yet?”

The man could barely move his head, but he nodded agreement and when Raff removed the restraining force, he got up, bowed deeply and then walked out of the arena.

“That was the first bout,” the middle judge announced, “won by the barbarian. Next!”

Raff’s next opponent was a lean man who leaped down from the stands and shrugged off his robe, leaving himself garbed only in the bright red and gold trousers. Raff tried the same technique he had used

on the first man, but was not surprised when the second blocked it. It had been the sort of thing that would only work if your opponent did not expect it and Raff seriously doubted any of the wayfarers were failing to study him closely.

Raff discarded that initial tactic but almost too late realized the second man had been trying it on him. However, before the trap could be sprung, Raff “grabbed” at just enough Wild energy to be able to siphon more into the bubble the second opponent was forming. Then using everything he had, Raff punctured a large hole in the bubble that enclosed him and watched as the lean man struggled to avoid the Wild energy backlash.

For the next four rounds Raff and the second wayfarer/fighter sparred, looking for weaknesses in each other’s defenses. They seemed evenly matched now that Raff had learned how to recognize the physical fighting styles the men seemed to favor. It was highly stylized, but also quite disciplined. The two men he had fought so far did not have identical styles, but each had their own strengths. But as Raff knew, for every strength there was a weakness. He no longer tried to emulate the styles he saw but stuck to his own form of fisticuffs. Green Lands’ boxing styles were not as flexible as what Raff faced here, but it turned out Raff was better off sticking to what he was accustomed to.

Finally in the fifth round with the second opponent, Raff tried a surprise move. Technically, it was a Wild energy force-thrust but instead of pushing it at his opponent, he pulled it in sharply, to hit the other man from behind. It was a successful move and had he been fighting to the death he would have killed the Corisan instantly, but judging the difference between lethal force and merely enough to incapacitate an enemy can be difficult and Raff preferred to err on the side of mercy and the Corisan wayfarer was able to roll away. Then the Corisan reached out toward the stands and a quarterstaff flew through the air and into his outstretched hand.

“Hey!” Raff protested to the judges, “I thought this was supposed to be unarmed combat.”

“Who said that?” one of them asked complacently.

Raff thought about that and realized that he had been told he would be armed only with that which his talent could provide. It did not mean his talent couldn’t provide a weapon. “That does it!” Raff growled. He briefly considered getting or even creating a staff of his own but decided at the last moment there was a better solution.

Raff concentrated on the staff, instead of the man holding it. Pushing Wild energy into the staff, Raff reached deep and brought it to “Life.” Tedrils burst out all along the length of the staff and twisted themselves around the Corisans arm. Raff stretched down for the staff and quickly rooted it into the ground and the staff continued to grow. The wood was not really alive, but there was always a certain potential to organic matter and Raff exploited all of it.

The staff grew rapidly, further entrapping the hapless wayfarer in its trunk as it grew around him. It only took thirty seconds but when Raff was done the staff had been transformed into a forty-foot tall oak tree. It was a dead tree and, in fact, it was more stone than wood, but it looked like a tree and Raff’s opponent was trapped inside about halfway up with just enough of a hole left to breathe through.

However, the Corisan was not yet ready to admit defeat and he used the Wild to burst out of the tree explosively. It was a mistake. As he fell out of the hole toward the ground, Raff caught him in a structure of insulated Wild energy, effectively cutting him off from all further power in the same way he had stopped the first man.

The man was still defiant, however, so Raff also cut off his air supply. It took another few minutes, but soon the Corisan had passed out and Raff allowed him to breathe again although he did not release him from the cage of insulated energy and instead put him down in an out-of-the-way corner of the arena.

“Next!” Raff called even as the judge did himself. The gong rang yet again and Raff’s third opponent alighted in the arena some fifty feet away from Raff.

The third master wayfarer was an old man. Raff estimated as best he could that the master was at least seventy-five years old. It was hard to be sure, however, because his view of the man was obscured by the halo of Wild energy that encircled him. It was so powerful that it fairly crackled with excess energy.

It was an impressive show, but Raff realized after a minute or so that it was not a natural way to walk around even if the man was naturally so powerful that he could always keep that much energy harnessed. The elderly Corisan had to be having as much trouble seeing Raff as Raff was at seeing him. Raff had not attacked the man immediately because the halo was not something he had ever seen before and he wanted time to study it and so as the old man did not take the initiative, Raff was safe in holding back.

As he studied the energy construct, Raff realized that any attack he might make himself will automatically open himself up to a counterattack. Realizing the old master had to be having trouble seeing what Raff was up to, Raff decided this was a game of patience and settled back to wait and see what would happen next.

The two men slowly circled each other for over a quarter of an hour during which time the gong never rang. “Longer rounds this time?” he asked the judges.

“The bout does not officially start until one of you attacks the other,” the middle judge replied.

“Suit yourselves,” Raff remarked calmly and continued to circle the elderly master. Each man was waiting for the other to make the first move. Suddenly Raff realized what was happening. The old man was even more visually impaired by his aura of energy than Raff was. Gradually Raff devised a plan and continued to circle and wait.

After a very long time, the old man was forced to lower his guard to see just what Raff was doing. The look of astonishment on his face nearly made Raff lose control for the laughter. Raff was just standing there. For a very long moment the Corisan just stared at the obviously unprotected Raff. Raff smiled at him and on a whim, waved impudently.

Finally, the Corisan tried a direct attack, throwing a vast amount of raw Wild energy at Raff in one of the strongest force-thrusts either Raff or Em had ever witnessed. However, an instant later the old man was forced to deflect the entire force thrust which was now flying directly back into his face. The power of the blast hit the far wall of the arena, demolishing it instantly.

The old master turned back and stared at Raff astounded beyond words. Raff however, was not beyond words, “Want to try again?” he asked cheerfully.

In response the old man shook his head slowly and bowed to Raff respectfully. The battle was over.

Em stood up immediately and confidently. She did a quick gymnastic flip and tumble, jumped up gracefully and performed a dance spin that she had once learned in a small village in Pernatia where the locals danced with far more abandon than the more reserved nobles of her native Crace. “My turn!” she announced enthusiastically. “Who’s first?”

The Corisan judges hesitated. The one in the middle held up his hand for time while they conferred. After a long discussion they decided on discretion and conceded without forcing Em to fight anyone.

“Just as well,” Em whispered nervously to Raff. “It was sheer bravado on my part.”

“Don’t knock it,” Raff laughed. “It worked. I just wish I could have gotten off that easily.”

“You’ll have to show me how you did that last trick,” Em told him.

“Ah,” Raff replied nervously. “I cheated. That was Kenlientan magic. They call it an energy mirror.”

“Well it’s maybe about time I started learning magic, then,” Em decided. “Is that how you accomplished the thing with the tree?”

“That was a combination of magic and wayfaring,” Raff replied, “but mostly wayfaring.” He stepped over to the tree and placed his hand on the trunk. The tree immediately collapsed into dust and spread itself evenly over the arena floor except for a collection of loose wooden fibers that Raff willed to form a six-foot long braid and then adhere to itself, resembling an interestingly carved staff. Next he caused one end to curl up so the whole thing looked like a very long cane. “That should do,” he remarked.

“For what?” Em asked.

“I owe an old friend a gift,” Raff told her. “You remember Master Frederick Gosnald?”

“You apprenticed with him, right?” Em guessed.

“Right,” Raff confirmed. “When we were in Taundon, I heard his leg was giving him a lot of trouble and he had started using a cane. I figure I can cut this to size when I give it to him. I’m sure he’ll love the story behind it.”

While they had been talking, the Corisans were slowly leaving the arena, but the five judges approached them respectfully. “Masters Cawlens,” the head judge who had sat in the middle, addressed them. He introduced himself as Xun Hui and added, “We hereby extend you honorary membership in the Order of Wayfarers, giving you free license to work anywhere in Corisa.”

“Thank you,” Raff replied graciously.

“I don’t suppose you might release Master Weng,” Master Hui requested.

“Hmm?” Raff look over his shoulder. “Oh, sorry, I forgot about him. The elderly gentleman was far more of a challenge.” He waved dismissively and the hapless Master Weng fell flat on the ground.

“Master Fong,” the judge told him. “I don’t believe he has ever been defeated.”

“He was very good,” Raff replied, not wanting to admit that after the fact it proved to be the easiest of the three fights. “So we will now be allowed to complete our mission?”

“Of course,” Master Hui told him. “You are here to negotiate a peace treaty on behalf of Kharasia.”

“Yes, we are here to confer directly with the High King,” Raff replied.

“That will not be necessary,” Xun Hui told him. “The Order handles all such matters for His Holiness.”

“That will probably be our first point of negotiation then,” Raff replied. “We are under direct orders to speak to His Holiness. However there is a matter that is far more pressing.”

“What is that?” Master Hui asked.

“Breakfast,” Raff replied. “We haven’t been allowed so much as a glass of water since we got here. Honestly! Don’t you people ever eat?”

Two

“That just is not done!” Master Xun Hui told Raff and Em two days later when they insisted yet again on talking to the High King. “No one speaks to His Holiness.”

“Yesterday you told us that special arrangements had to be made,” Em pointed out.

“And the day before that, you told us only masters of the Order could approach him,” Raff recalled. “Technically, that includes us. You said so yourself. What’s the real explanation? Are you just playing more games while you send troops up to reinforce that pitiful excuse for an army your sent into Kharasia.”

“How do you know how small...” Hui stopped and tried again, “I mean...”

“It’s called military intelligence,” Raff interrupted. “It’s a form of spying, I suppose, but rather than infiltrating a man into an enemy force, all it takes is a trained scout with a pair of working eyes and the ability to count into the thousands. Look. We all know you didn’t send enough to actually hold out against what His Imperial Majesty is sending. So you have to be trying to get every spare unit up there, especially the ones that have practically made a tradition out of invading Nillon. You probably ought to give up on that bunch of islands; after a thousand years I think you’re just wasting lives and a lot of energy there, but that’s none of my business. What’s happening in Kharasia is.”

“It seems to me you could stall us still more by allowing us to present ourselves to your High King,” Em suggested, “but instead you keep coming up with new excuses.”

Master Hui looked like a defeated man. “Do you promise that what I am about to tell you will not leave this room?”

“We’re wayfarers,” Em replied. “Part of what the Guild does best is to keep others’ secrets.”

“The High King,” Master Hui replied as though the words were being forced out of him, “His Holiness Mu Feng, Master of all Corisa and heir to a dozen monarchs is the final member of his dynasty.”

“Why?” Em asked. “What’s wrong with him? Is he old and dying without an heir?”

“The blood of the Mu Dynasty has turned sour,” Master Hui replied sadly. “The king is a young man of twenty-four years and should be in the prime of his life, but...”

“Crippled?” Em asked gently.

“His body is whole,” Master Hui told her, “save that he appears to be sterile. He can sire no children.”

“Is there no adoption in Corisa?” Raff asked. “Have him pick a close cousin to succeed him.”

“In time that may be what is done,” Master Hui admitted, “But His Holiness has the mind of a child, he is unfit for ruling. That is why the Order now rules Corisa more completely than ever before. We have always been a part of the government. Now we are the government, issuing proclamations on behalf of His Holiness.”

“We’re still going to have to see him,” Raff pointed out. “It’s not that I doubt your words, but I have to be able to report that any agreement we come to was in good faith. I have to know His Holiness is incompetent to make his own decisions.”

“Come,” Master Hui told them, “I will show you.”

He led them through the large palace complex until they finally came out into a small garden scented with jasmine flowers. In the center of the garden a slightly overweight man in golden robes was playing some sort of board game with Kazani. There were several servants standing around the garden, but none came within ten feet of the pair and their game.

Kaz had been waiting for them at the Makretan embassy when they returned from their trial by combat. Signor Panatti had offered to take care of the lad, but Kaz knew where Raff and Em would eventually end up, so he stayed with the Makretans. Since then, however, he had been unwilling to let them out of his sight unless absolutely necessary and after the first full day of negotiations, they found Kaz was such a bundle of nerves it seemed best to take the boy to the palace with them. The wayfarers of the Order assured them that Kaz would be watched and helped with his lessons which had recently turned to literature. Corisa had a vast collection of stories in her literary heritage, they were assured, and Kaz would benefit from learning those stories as well as the ones from the Northern Lands.

“Your Holiness,” Master Hui announced softly, “I have the honor of introducing Masters Raff and Emblem Cawlens, ambassadors from Kharasia.”

“Really?” the man in the golden robes asked, getting up and turning around.

“You’re the king?” Kaz asked.

“You didn’t know, Kaz?” High King Mu Feng asked in reply.

“You just said your name was Feng,” Kaz protested.

“It is,” the High King replied and turned back toward Raff and Em who had stopped in mid-bow when Kaz started talking. “I’ve heard so much about you both,” Feng told them. “Please come in and make yourselves comfortable.” Master Hui coughed slightly. “Oh. Is this a formal occasion? I never can get those straight. How about we just talk?” Feng sounded almost desperate to make a good impression. “We can have tea.”

“Tea would be lovely, Your Holiness,” Em replied, finishing her curtsy at last. Several servants left the garden. “Kaz? What are you doing here?”

“Playing Wei Chi,” Kaz replied guilelessly. “Feng is teaching me.”

“I meant why are you bothering the High King?” Em clarified.

“It’s no bother,” Mu Feng replied. “In fact, Kazani is a very good companion. I don’t get to meet very many new people and... well... I was bored before he arrived. This is much more fun.”

“Your Holiness,” Master Hui interrupted, “Masters Raff and Em need your reassurance that I speak for you on matters concerning Corisa and her conquests.”

“That’s what you’ve always told me,” Feng replied.

It was not quite the response Master Hui had been hoping for, but he continued as though it were, “There, you see?” he told Raff and Em, “I speak for His Holiness. You may negotiate with me.”

Raff and Em exchanged a look that spoke volumes, but neither challenged the situation. Raff did however reply diplomatically, “Then I suppose we can return to those negotiations after tea.”

Negotiations are almost never a speedy process and certainly are not when the two sides are diametrically opposed on key points with neither willing to make concessions. Raff and Em spent the next two weeks meeting with Master Hui everyday. All the while soldiers from both countries were moving into East Kharasia and while no reports of casualties had yet arrived in Ranyang, Raff and Em knew it was only a matter of time.

As talks stalled, Raff became increasingly irritable and Em became increasingly unwilling to calm him down. The result was a series of very tense discussions with Master Hui and members of his staff that on some days degenerated into veiled and sometimes not so veiled threats.

While Raff and Em were engaged in the moral equivalent of shouting at a stone wall, although Raff privately felt he could have accomplished much more with the wall, Kaz spent his days with the High King. They played games, walked through the many gardens of the palace and once even walked through the great marketplace of Ranyang.

Kaz spotted Signor Panatti’s stall in the market and they went in and asked how he was doing. “Very well, thank you,” Panatti replied. “I think I’ll have sold everything we brought with us soon and then I can start buying goods for the trip home.”

Then a flurry of customers arrived and Kaz and Feng got out of the way. It was only then that Kaz realized he had never introduced Mu Feng to Signor Panatti. He also noticed that no one else in the market seemed to know who the High King was.

“Aren’t the people supposed to bow down to you or something?” Kaz asked. His own experience was not particularly wide, but life in the imperial palace in Kharaskva seemed so much more formal than what he experienced with Mu Feng.

“I’m sure they would,” Mu Feng replied, “if they knew who I was.”

“Why don’t they?” Kaz asked.

“No one’s told them,” Feng shrugged. “And since I don’t wear the royal robes in the city – I think it’s because they would get too dirty here – no one recognizes me. It’s nicer that way, I think. We can all be

friends.”

Friendship was something sorely lacking in the young king’s life. The Order had kept him isolated as much as possible, probably, Kaz thought, because His Holiness was really not the most intelligent man he’d ever met and they were worried what might happen if it became known that the High King was not the model of perfection he was supposed to be. Kaz thought that was silly. No one was perfect. He knew that from his own early religious training and, if there was only one point of commonality between that and what he had learned from Raff and Em, that was it. There should be no shame in admitting one was not perfect, he knew, but evidently that pearl of wisdom was not supposed to apply to his friend Mu Feng.

Kaz felt sorry for Feng and did his best to be a good friend to the lonely young man. They played Wei Chi for hours on end and told each other stories. Feng was not as stupid as the Order’s wayfarers seemed to think. For example, he could read and when Kaz saw the ideograms that passed for writing in Corisa, he wondered how anyone could memorize all those different symbols. It was bad enough learning the twenty-seven letters of the Green Lands’ alphabet and then figuring out how to properly put them together to make words that were spelled correctly, but here there were thousands of little stick figures and combinations of those figures that made up the local written language. Kaz was sure he could never learn them all, but while Feng had trouble with a word every now and then, it was often a word that whichever servant he asked to help him with had trouble with too.

So they read stories to each other and Kaz showed Feng some of the simple algebra Em had given him to practice. Feng had trouble with the unfamiliar symbols, but had no problem understanding the concept of keeping an equation balanced, something it had taken Kaz a while to grasp. In all, Kaz wondered just how badly the Wayfarer monks and priests had underestimated their High King.

Could it all have come down to the fact he could not have children? Kaz understood how that might cause problems in the long run, but Mu Feng appeared to be healthy even if he was somewhat fat. Kaz thought it was because Feng wasn’t allowed to walk enough and that perhaps he ate a bit too much. That theory seemed to be borne out over the next two weeks as the High King worked to keep up with the naturally energetic boy from the Southern Continent. Mu Feng was still overweight, but his robes seemed just a bit looser now and his face slightly thinner and less boy-like. It was a subtle change and not immediately noticed by anyone who saw him every day, but one afternoon when Master Hui conducted Raff and Em to join them for tea, an almost daily event it turned out, Kaz thought he caught Hui staring at his king as though seeing him for the first time.

Master Hui looked especially concerned when Mu Feng asked cheerfully, “And how are our peace negotiations going?” Then the master looked at Kaz with the same concerned expression on his face and the next morning there were several new servants in the garden with Feng and Kaz.

Master Hui’s concerns were not entirely without basis because even without meaning to, Kaz was teaching Mu Feng how to assert himself. It was not that Kaz made any demands on others. As a matter of fact, the boy was unfailingly polite and never forgot to say, “Please,” and “Thank you,” a habit which had not been Mu Feng’s but one which the young man quickly picked up, especially when it appeared that the servants seemed to be all the happier to do his bidding when he used those phrases.

Mu Feng very much wanted the people around him to be happy. He did not like the thought that men in his armies were being sent to die in the cold lands to the north. He didn’t even much like the fact that he was at least technically at war with Nillon, although after Kaz told him about the Nillonese spy who had been stirring up all the trouble between Corisa and Kharasia, he felt that his armies might better serve the interests of Corisa with another invasion of Nillon, although he was an innocent enough soul that he felt

once the lesson had been taught, the Nillonese could be friends with Corisa. Kaz decided not to argue that point. Politics, he had learned, was always a complex issue but maybe his friend was right.

One day, however, the battle reports finally started arriving at the palace and in spite of the Order trying to keep Mu Feng isolated and happy, the news could not be kept entirely from the High King. "I don't like this," he told Kaz. "Why can't we get along with Kharasia? Why do they hate us?"

"Well, it was your army that started it," Kaz replied.

"What do you mean?" Feng asked.

"Well, it started last year when your army was sent to capture all of East Kharasia," Kaz told him.

"Why did we do that?" Feng asked, puzzled. It was immediately apparent to Kaz that no one had bothered to explain it to their High King.

"Well, from what I understand, Kharasia was at war with a country named Holrany, so most of her army was at the far end of the empire," Kaz explained.

"But why did we invade?" Feng asked again.

"Um," Kaz fumbled for an explanation. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed two servants suddenly rush out of the garden. "Because you could, I guess," he decided.

"But that doesn't make sense," Mu Feng shook his head. "Was that land ours once and we were just taking it back?"

"I don't think so," Kaz replied, "but maybe. If so, it was a very long time ago."

"How long?" Mu Feng asked.

"Long enough that neither Raff nor Em knows about it," Kaz told him. The boy didn't know that for certain, but it seemed to him that one of his guardians would have mentioned it if the disputed land had once belonged to Corisa.

"I think we should give the land back then," Feng decided.

"That would probably solve a few problems," Kaz commented. "And I think you'll make more friends if you're not at war with them."

"Is the emperor a nice man?" Mu Feng asked.

"He was to me," Kaz replied.

Mu Feng was silent for a long time then he decided, "Let's go tell Master Hui." He got up and started walking toward the exit from the garden.

"Tell him what?" Kaz asked, following the High King.

"To stop the war," Feng replied.

They soon arrived in the chamber where the negotiations were going on. “Your Holiness,” Master Hui started as the High King and Kaz entered the room. “You should not be here.”

“Who’s the king in Corisa?” Mu Feng asked mildly.

“You are, of course, Your Holiness,” Master Hui replied instantly, “but negotiations like this are beneath your august personage.”

“Nonsense,” Feng replied. “I suppose endless games of Wei Chi are more in my province than the ruling of my country?”

“Well, uh,” Hui responded uncertainly, “that is what the Order does for you.”

“Maybe it’s time I did a bit of that for myself,” Mu Feng replied calmly.

“But it’s dangerous for you to be here,” Hui protested. “Your word is law, after all and if you should happen to misspeak yourself and make a concession you don’t mean to, we would all be bound by it, even you.”

“Then we’ll just have to take that chance,” Feng replied firmly. “Masters Raff and Emblem, here’s the deal I am willing to make. Corisa will remove her troops from East Kharasia immediately and a state of peace will exist between us and Kharasia.”

“There is a matter of paying for damages done by your army,” Raff countered. “Many people were killed.”

“There have been deaths on both sides, Master Raff,” Mu Feng replied. “I did not start this war. If you really wish to sue for damages I suggest taking that up with the Order of Wayfarers since they are at fault. My only offer is the return of Kharasian territory and an offer of peaceful coexistence. Take it or we remain at war.”

Kaz had come to know his friend better than anyone else and understood that Mu Feng was not throwing that out as a point of debate. The man had been marginalized; kept isolated from the day-to-day politics of his kingdom. So he had no experience with negotiations. His offer was genuine, but it was the only offer he was likely to make.

“We’ll take it,” Kaz told him firmly before Raff could try to make a counter offer. Kaz turned to face Raff and Em and shot them a challenging look, but after thinking it through, Raff smiled his approval of Kaz’s promise.

Three

In the coming days, the sudden ascendancy of their High King was a shock to his many ministers, but one which after getting over his own shock, Master Hui worked to ease the government through. It had been a long time since the High King had taken such an active role in the governance of his kingdom and even Mu Feng’s father and grandfather had been content to let the Order make most of the decisions and then carry them out. Mu Feng, however, wanted to know everything and while he had to admit to Kaz that he would have to trust his ministers to run the minutia of the kingdom, he found this far more interesting than even the best Wei Chi game.

“In a way, this is like a very large game,” Feng told Kaz. “I am using my stones to establish my territory over the government and my ministers are fighting back by trying to just hold on to their own. The difference is that it is such a large board that I’m still discovering where all my stones are and it turns out that I already control more than I realized.”

“Well, sure, you’re the king,” Kaz laughed. “Your ministers are trained that everything is done at your command.”

“Up until now they were the ones making those decisions and saying they were mine,” Feng pointed out.

“Yeah, but they’re now caught in a trap of their own manufacture. They’re so used to doing anything presented as your orders, that now that you actually give the orders they follow without thinking twice.”

“I want them to think,” Feng told Kaz. “Most of them are smarter than I am. What? Did you think I didn’t know? The ministers are chosen because they’re very good at their jobs. I got mine by having the right father. Naturally they’re better at their jobs than I would be if I tried to do it all myself. Also there’s too much for any man to do himself. You don’t have to be smart to know that. I’ve been thinking a lot about this the last few days. I think my real job is providing guidance. It’s up to me to tell my ministers what I want for Corisa and it’s up to them to see that it happens. Do you think I might be right?”

“Pretty much,” Raff laughed, entering the garden with Em. “Of course the trick is in knowing what’s right for all of Corisa. To do that you’ll need to listen more than you speak. Probably many more times than you speak and you’ll need to listen to every one regardless of rank. It’s the only way you can know what’s best.”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” Feng sighed.

“Might be the toughest job in the world,” Em nodded, “but it’s one you chose for yourself. You could have just kept playing Wei Chi.”

“No,” Feng sighed again, “I don’t think I could have. When I was a young boy, I had a teacher who told me that there comes a time in each person’s life when they suddenly realize that they are no longer a child. When that happens they can no longer do childish things, nor can they ever go back. I didn’t understand it at the time, but I do now, It took me longer than most, maybe, but I have reached that time and can’t go back to being a child. I can only hope I don’t make too many mistakes.”

Kaz heard a soft sound from the bushes behind him. It was almost inaudible; just the breaking of a twig, but it was out of place and Kaz’s ear picked it up as distinctly as though it had been an explosion. Turning around, he was just in time to see a narrow bamboo tube poke out less than an inch beyond the waxy leaves of a privet. There was no time to think. He sent off a surge of Wild energy toward the tube. The energy manifested as a sheet of flame and the tube abruptly fell as a man dressed in a robe of the deepest midnight blue burst out from behind the privet. His clothes were singed and smoking, but he ignored that and drew a long sword even as he silently ran directly at Mu Feng.

Kaz was still closest and he thrust a heavy rattan chair in the attacker’s path, tripping him up just enough for Em to push Mu Feng out of the way. However, it was Raff who stood between the assassin and the High King. “Well, well, Chief Legate or whatever your name really is. I was wondering if you would turn up again.”

“I am Morata of the Ikkito,” the assassin replied. “You have proven worthy enough to know that. It is a

pity. There is so much we might have learned from one another. However, duty is all.” As he said that a door slammed shut well behind Raff. It was the only exit from the garden.

“You know I won’t let you do this,” Raff told him evenly as he started to summon the Wild.

“You are good, Raff Cawdens,” Morata replied, “but you are not Ikkito.”

“You keep saying that like it’s supposed to frighten me,” Raff replied, ready to act, but just as in his duel with Master Fong, he understood that patience was among his greatest weapons. “I have heard of the Ikkito. You’re great warriors. It is said you can walk through walls and cause men to die with but a word. They say there are none that can stand before you and when you decide a man must die, he does. But you know something? They say the same sorts of things about me, but I know how much of it is true and how much is not. All the rest are scare images, but they don’t scare me just as I don’t frighten you.”

“I can cut you in half with this sword,” the Ikkito warrior replied calmly. It was not bluster or threat but a cold statement of fact.

“You’re welcome to try,” Raff told him. His natural instinct was to counter one threat with another, but this time he really would need to keep all his effort on countering that sword. Morata had already made a big mistake. He should have followed up with his attack on Mu Feng, but his own peculiar code of honor had forced him to stop and acknowledge Raff and give him the time to prepare. Raff understood Morata had given him the time to arm himself, but Raff needed no sword. Even a gun would have been less effective than his own natural powers. Finally, however, because Morata needed a sign that Raff was ready, Raff fashioned a sword for himself. It was just the visible manifestation of the Wild energy he had “summoned” to himself and was only a small part of what he had at his disposal, but it was enough to make Morata understand.

Instantly Morata swung his sword at Raff’s head and Raff turned to block the blow. As the physical sword struck the one of Wild energy sparks flew and there was an almost blinding flash of light. In that moment Raff realized that Morata was not really fighting with the sword either; not completely. The sword was a prop for Morata. It was the item on which he focused his own wayfaring skills in this battle so that the edge of steel was firmly encased in a much stronger edge of Wild energy.

Morata was highly skilled with the sword, far more so than Raff who had never used this form of the weapon before. He had fenced some years earlier with saber and rapier, but while Morata’s sword was light enough to be wielded one-handed, he used both hands and his attack was fully backed up with his mastery of the Wild.

Raff had learned much of the Eastern Realms’ martial arts in his duels on his arrival in Ranyang, but Morata was doing things he had never seen before and the blows were coming in faster than Raff’s eye could follow. However, Raff was not relying on his sight to protect himself. Morata might have been wielding a Wild sword, but Raff was shielded by Wild armor. Raff’s sword was there as a distraction at best, but he did not really need it. He was using Wild energy the way he knew best, by direct mental manipulation.

The two men battled for half an hour. Morata tried to circle around Raff twice to get at Mu Feng, almost succeeding the first time, but Raff pulled him up short on the second. However, try though they might, neither managed to score a hit on the other. The battle was not restricted to sword play, there were dozens of Wild energy force-thrusts. Raff, growing tired of Morata’s sword, drew the Wild out of the blade and then caused it to fall apart into a shower of iron filings.

Morata, in turn, used his own talent to fling the iron dust into Raff's face. Raff was ready for the move and forced it back at Morata, who was forced to abate his attack to divert the blast of iron filings.

Raff followed that up with a cage of insulated Wild energy, the same trick that had worked so well in his first duel in Ranyang, but Morata stepped through the cage as though there was nothing there. "Nice trick," Raff commented, unable to keep a hint of admiration from his voice.

"The force-box will not work on one who keeps a reserve of energy at hand," Morata replied. Then he dropped to the ground and did an odd spin. The ground of the garden shook violently as though a tsunami of dirt were flowing through it. Everyone fell to the ground under that assault, but Morata was back on his feet before the others. He jumped past Raff and headed for Mu Feng. A tree fell in his path and he tripped over it.

"Stay out of this, Kaz," Raff told the boy. "My apologies, Morata. We have been teaching him teamwork, but have not yet progressed to the traditions of your people. I do not believe he realized this was supposed to be single combat."

"That's stupid," Kaz commented acidly, but neither Raff nor Morata paid any attention.

"It is nothing," Morata replied although not without an edge in his voice. "The young often make mistakes, although he did take me by surprise. That does not happen often."

"It's a shame you won't be able to see him grow up then," Raff replied.

"Yes," Morata agreed although for different reasons than Raff had in mind.

"You are ready to procede?" Raff asked.

Morata did not answer directly, but instead he formed a pool of quicksand under Raff. Raff only sank a few inches, however, and then floated up and out of the soft sand and water mix. "You can do better than that," he laughed.

Morata cast a bolt of Wild fire, similar although far more intense than the one Kaz had used to expose the assassin, but Raff countered by flinging sand and his own Wild power up as a shield. Then he sent a force-thrust at Morata, complete with the now molten sand.

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. A scientist in Holrany had recently proven that mathematically, but it was a verity that every wayfarer knew in his heart. However, it had slipped Raff's mind that he was currently floating in mid-air. His force-thrust sent the sand and Wild energy at Morata, but it also sent Raff sailing backwards and into a stout tree.

Raff's head hit the trunk and the impact dazed him, but Morata did not press his advantage. Instead he looked around the garden for his real target, the High King Mu Feng. Mu Feng was just behind a tree in the far corner of the garden. He was well-hidden from normal sight, but a master wayfarer can see things that others cannot.

One of the basic abilities of a master was to be able to find people and things. People and objects of stabilities left a trace as they moved. It was a sort of miniscule version of a forged path; nowhere as deep or as lasting, but in this case the High King had not been in that corner very long and Morata had no trouble finding him.

The assassin rushed toward the corner and then suddenly fell to the ground. There was no style or grace to the movement. It was as though his soul had suddenly decided to leave his body in mid-step and proceed to the next life wherever that might be. That was, in fact, essentially what had happened. In the next moment Em appeared beside Morata's body. "It only takes one mistake," she remarked emotionlessly.

"What happened?" Mu Feng asked.

"It was what we call a force-thrust," Em explained. "Very much the same as what he and Raff were trying on each other. I literally drove all the life directly out of him as easily as you might snuff a candle. It is not difficult for a master wayfarer to counter such a blow, but he forgot I was here, you see."

"You were invisible," Mu Feng commented.

"Not really," Em replied. "I was hiding behind an illusion. The results are the same, but you could have seen me had you been in the right place. Raff?"

"I'm fine," Raff replied, getting back on his feet. "A pity we can't say the same for His Holiness' garden." Many of the trees and shrubs had been knocked over in the tussle between the two wayfarers and two topiaries had been destroyed beyond recognition.

"I can replant the garden," Mu Feng told him. "It has been a long time since the gardeners have been able to be truly creative, or so I am told. They may even like that once they get over the shock of seeing the garden like this."

"I thought you said this was single combat," Kaz objected.

"It was," Em told him, "but it stopped being single combat when Raff was disabled. Morata might have killed Raff, but he was too intent on his mission against the High King."

"And that was Morata's mistake," Raff added. "The moment I was down, he should have realized he would have to fight Em next."

"And me," Kaz told him.

"Thank God it didn't come to that," Raff grinned.

Just then the door from the palace crashed open and several ministers with Master Hui in the lead fell into the garden area. "Your Holiness!" Hui exclaimed. "What happened?"

"It appears I've had an unwelcome guest," Feng replied, pointing at Morata.

"Master Ru?" Hui identified the body.

"He called himself Morata," Raff informed Master Hui, "and he was of the Ikkito Clan of Nillon."

"He was the second Sub-Minister of Agriculture," Hui replied.

"A good excuse to be away from the palace for extended periods of time," Raff noted. "He was also the Head Legate in Kharaskva and I wouldn't be surprised if he was behind the initial decision to invade East Kharasia."

“But I have known him for years,” Hui protested.

“How many years?” Em asked pointedly.

“Well, nearly five,” Hui replied. “We have had a spy in the palace for that long?”

“So it appears,” Em nodded.

“Master Hui,” Mu Feng asked sternly, “how long before we can withdraw our army from East Kharasia entirely?”

“I suppose we could have them back in Corisa by the end of the year,” Hui replied, “but we really should keep some in place until His Imperial majesty signs the treaty.”

“I think not,” Feng decided. “We have far more important things in mind for our army. Please have them withdraw to at least our traditional boundaries as soon as possible. I suppose we will need to leave a certain amount on the Kharasian border, of course. It’s not that I do not trust Masters Raff and Emblem to have negotiated in good faith, but I also wouldn’t want some obscure Kharasian minister of war getting any funny ideas of invading us in return especially since our army will be busy in another part of the world.”

“Doing what, Your Holiness?” Hui asked.

“Well, it seems to me that Nillon has sent a spy and an assassin among us and in return I would like to send that man’s head back to Emperor Kin along with as insulting a letter as you can possibly draft demanding the most ridiculously high tribute anyone has ever demanded. Make it so high that it is remembered among the Nillonese for the next thousand years or more.”

“They’ll never pay it, Your Holiness,” Hui advised him.

“I would be very surprised if they did,” Feng laughed. “In fact I would rather they didn’t, because what I really want is when our army returns from Kharasia, they should pay a little visit on our Nillonese neighbors.”

Hui and the other ministers were stunned and looked at their High King as though they had never seen the man before. Feng caught their change in attitude and reminded them, “You don’t have to be a genius to be king, you know.”

The Way Home

One

It was late summer when the wayfarers finally left Ranyang. On learning that Signor Panatti was nearly ready to leave the Corisan capital, they waited an extra few days then set out on a warm and sunny morning.

The carriage was nearly as weighed down with gifts from Mu Feng as Signor Panatti's wagon was in goods. The High King had wanted to give them far more in thanks for what they had done, "You not only saved my life," he had explained, "but gave me a new and more interesting one. All this is nothing compared to the value of a king's life."

"But your friendship is worth more than all of this," Kaz had assured him with wisdom far beyond his years.

The gifts were truly priceless. Many of them were made of gold, although the one gift Em treasured above all was a large box used to store tea. It was covered in finely beaten gold and silver and inset with a number of gaudy gems, but it was the contents she valued over all the precious metals and gemstones. Inside were several pounds of a very special tea that was only given to the High King himself. The young leaves of the *Camellia sinensis* plant had been gathered by hand from special gardens reserved only for His Holiness and sewn by hand into tiny bundles each just large enough for a single cup. Then those leaves were rolled into a small round ball that opened like a flower when dropped into hot water. And there was enough tea in there for some years to come.

With peace breaking out on Corisa's northern frontier and the warm summer weather, they decided to travel back by the northern route. "I know you're headed back to Pana," Raff told Signor Panatti, "but we need to go to Kharaskva. You shouldn't have any trouble getting Guild guidance westward from Gaharenar."

"I'm sure you're right," Panatti agreed, "and we may want to spend a few days in the market there to sell and buy."

However, even by this route, Gaharenar was two thousand miles away, although the journey was far more uneventful than it had been to Ranyang. In fact, for the next month almost nothing of note happened at all. They spotted a plethora of Wild animals all of whom kept their distance now that there was no one to drive them toward the travelers. Every so often the weather would turn bad and they would take refuge in the nearest town until the storm passed and they could continue on. So the only noteworthy event in the first month of their return travel occurred a few days after the storm.

"There used to be a bridge here," Raff noted as they arrived at a swollen river. "You can still see the path over the water and I think there are still some of the foundations in place under all that water." It was difficult to see through all that whiteness, but Em decided Raff was correct. There had to be something down there causing the water to get so roiled up as it flowed past.

"So what do we do now?" Panatti asked as he pulled his wagon along side the carriage.

"I suppose we'll have to work our way upstream and hopefully we'll find another bridge," Raff remarked. "I'm a bit surprised there isn't a path headed that way."

"There's one on the other side of the river," Kaz informed him.

"So there is," Raff agreed. "You're getting very good at spotting paths. Well, there's no help for it. We could go back a day's journey to the last village or press on. The next two are supposed to be a few miles away although on the other side. Maybe there will be another bridge as well."

Making their way over land was difficult without the path to follow. Neither Raff nor Em needed pathways to find their way through the Wild, but pathways were kept clear of trees, brush and other undergrowth. Here they had to weave their way between trees and occasionally stop to remove patches

of briar and other obstruction so it was very slow going and they were forced to set up camp that night in the middle of the forest.

The next morning they came out of the woods along the side of a Kenlienta road. "That's funny," Raff noted, "these roads aren't normally so near human settlements."

"Human settlements move," Em reminded him. "I think we'll want to follow this one. It's headed the way we want to go."

"I agree," Raff told her, "but let's stay on the shoulder."

"Wouldn't we make better time on a paved surface?" Panatti asked Raff as he got out of the carriage and climbed up into the wagon.

"Sure would," Raff replied, "but we don't travel on Ken roads unless we have to. It's a matter of courtesy and respect for their religious beliefs. The Ken believe the traces of stability humans leave in their wake will make a road unfit to use."

"What nonsense," Panatti scoffed.

"Not really. There is some basis to their belief," Raff told him as they started off again. "We do leave traces unless a master wayfarer is very careful to obliterate them and those traces can harm Kenlienta. Some are very susceptible to stability even as some of us are allergic to animal fur."

"But you're a master wayfarer," Panatti pointed out.

"I am and when I must travel on a Ken road I'm careful to clean up after myself," Raff replied. "Last winter Em, Kaz and I got lost in a blizzard and ended up on a Ken road. Then I had no choice but to use it since we might very well have died had we not found the Ken town it led to, but it's most courteous to stay off a Ken road unless invited to use it." That last wasn't strictly true. It was acceptable for a wayfarer to use a Kenlientan road when going to visit the Ken, but this explanation was simpler.

"The Kenlienta are an odd people, aren't they?" Panatti observed.

"Not really," Raff disagreed. "They're just people. Take away their pointed ears and tall stature and you probably couldn't tell them apart from us. They say the Ken and Humans once had a common ancestor, you know, but that we grew apart."

"Is that possible?" Panatti asked. "Didn't God makes us all as he saw fit?"

"Who's to say what mechanism God used to make us that way?" Raff countered.

An hour later they found a wayfarer pathway that crossed on a stone bridge over the Kenlientan road. "Who built that bridge?" Panatti asked.

"The Ken did," Raff replied. "It's impossible to have so many wayfarer paths and Ken roads in the world and never have them cross one another. By treaty with the Ken, they will either build their own road over a path where that happens or build a bridge for us when we must forge a pathway that crosses a pre-existing road."

"Why haven't I seen one before?" Panatti asked curiously.

“Just lucky, I guess,” Raff shrugged. “Very few Kenlienta are seafarers so most of their settlements are well inland. Very few of their roads ever go to the coasts, so if you’ve mostly traveled along the coasts, you won’t have had too many opportunities to see one of their roads.”

“Ah, yes I have mostly sailed when I could,” Panatti noted.

“Also, you probably have passed under quite a few Ken roads without noticing,” Raff told him. “I can think of at least three since I found you, in fact. They tend to be disguised. One was hidden within a bamboo thicket and the other two looked like mountain tunnels. They try to keep their roads from showing so curious humans won’t go exploring, but sometimes, like in this case, there is no easy way to hide the road.”

“Raff!” Em called back to him, “This path goes north and south and we want to go east. Which way do you want to go?”

“Let’s go south for a bit,” Raff suggested. “If the path goes where I think it does we’ll be on a major caravan route in a few hours.” Raff turned out to be right and soon they were on a path running through one or two towns each day.

Two

A few days later as they entered western Salustan, they stopped to talk to a caravan headed eastward. It was common enough to stop and pass on news of the path conditions and to ask about other matters in the same way seafarers would stop to talk to other ships when they encountered them on the ocean. Raff and Em had stopped several times on the way to Ranyang, but this was the first time they saw other travelers on their way back.

“Coming in from East Kharasia?” the wayfarer of the other party asked.

“From Ranyang,” Raff replied.

“Too bad,” the other man replied. “Gregori Halb at your service.”

“Raff Cawlens,” Raff replied.

“Really?” Gregori asked. “There were some Kenlienta asking for you and your wife a few days west of here. As far as I know they’re still waiting there for you.”

“They got lucky,” Raff commented. “I’m only on this path because a bridge got washed out.” He gave Gregori the location of that bridge but added, “If you’re headed to East Kharasia, though, it’s probably not along your way.”

“No, but it’s good to know,” Gregori replied, “I was hoping to find out where the armies are, or aren’t as the case may be?”

“Corisa should have withdrawn her army by the time you get there,” Raff told him and explained about the treaty.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Gregori sounded relieved. “I was worried about this mission, but I needed the money. We’re not going very far east, but when there’s a war going on I would have preferred to go the other way.”

“Well, you’ll still get your hazard pay,” Raff told him, “and without being in any more hazard than usual. Any idea what the Ken wanted with me?”

“They weren’t saying, just asking if you had been through there yet,” Gregori replied. They went on to trade road conditions for another few minutes, wished each other well and then continued on their separate ways.

“Why do you think the Ken want to talk to us?” Em asked him as he sat down next to her in the carriage.

“I guess we’ll find out in a few days,” Raff shrugged, “assuming they don’t give up and settle for some other wayfarer to talk to.”

Two days later they heard about the waiting Kenlilenta twice more and then once a day for the next week until they finally saw two Kenlienta men and a woman waiting for them by the side of the path. “We’re looking for Masters Raff and Emblem Cawlens,” the female Ken told them.

“I’m Raff Cawlens,” Raff replied, “My wife, Em.” He went on to introduce Kaz and the others on the wagon.

“Honored Raufanax, Lady Emblem,” the Ken woman proclaimed formally, “Leraxa of Kenlienta, Elder of Elders requests you attend her at your earliest convenience.”

“She could have spoken to us a few months ago when we were in Yakrut,” Raff told the spokeswoman bluntly. “Instead she let us know she had nothing to say. Yakrut is hundreds of miles out of our way. Why should we answer her summons now when she could have given us a quarter hour of her time while she had the chance?”

“Raff,” Em interrupted while the Ken were looking at each other uncertainly, “I think we should go to Yakrut.”

“Why?” Raff asked.

“Leraxa was rude, yes,” Em replied, “but it doesn’t mean we should stoop to her level.” She said that loud enough to be certain Leraxa’s emissaries heard her clearly. “Besides we have always been friends to the Ken. If that’s about to change I think we’ll need to know about it as soon as possible.”

“I should hope you will both always be friends of the Ken,” the woman told them.

“That all depends on your Elder of Elders,” Raff remarked, then added, “What a stupid title. Wasn’t Chief Elder good enough for her?”

“I was not privy to that decision,” the woman told them stiffly. “You will have to leave the rest of your party behind, however.”

“No,” Em replied stubbornly. “Kaz is our ward and these others are under our protection. If Elder Leraxa wants to see us in Yakrut so much that she felt she had to send you out to look for us rather than

coming to look for us herself, she will have to condone their presence as well.”

“But humans are not allowed in Yakrut,” the woman told her.

“Then evidently we’re not allowed there either,” Em countered. “Wayfarers are just as human as anyone else.”

“Wayfarers are different,” the woman insisted.

“Does Ken law define how we are different?” Em asked. “Is there even a law prohibiting humans from entering Yakrut or any other Kenlienta city? That would be very new, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, it’s not actually a law as such,” the woman admitted, “but traditionally…”

“Traditionally the Guild has agreed not to conduct humans into a Ken city except when absolutely necessary. Right now it is absolutely necessary.”

“Excuse me, Master L’Oranne Cawlens,” Signor Panatti interrupted. “but we are, by my reckoning, only a few days from Gaharenar. Since we were planning to part company there in any case, perhaps it would be best if we go there first. Then you will be free to visit Yakrut.”

Em wanted to force Leraxa to meet them on their own terms, but the merchant’s idea really was best. “Very well,” she sighed at last.

“Tell Leraxa we’ll be just a few days behind you,” Raff told the Kenlienta. They nodded and started walking south without any further comment. “Talkative bunch,” he remarked. “Most Ken usually stop and chat a bit with us.”

“Most of the Kenlienta we talk to are Elders or part of an Elder’s honor guard,” Em replied. “I think these were Leraxa’s employees. Much like royal servants, I think, who are often prouder than the royalty they serve”

“That could well be,” Raff nodded. “I hate to think what sort of report they’re going to give Leraxa though.”

“No doubt we’ll hear all about it when we get there,” Em told him.

They made it to Gaharenar a few days later and checked into the Guild hall for the night. Neither Raff nor Em were feeling particularly sociable on their first night back in a Guild establishment in months, but when Master Garanch asked to see them, they agreed and, after bathing, presented themselves with Kaz in the master’s office. “Welcome back,” Jarne greeted them. “It’s been a while.”

“That is has,” Raff agreed. “Any news from the Northern Lands? We’ve heard precious little since we were here last.”

“You’ve missed quite a lot,” Jarne replied. “As we all expected, Holrany invaded Pernatia once it became apparent that Kharasia really had pulled out. However, they got the surprise of their lives when the people of Pernatia elected a king of all things and then started fighting back. The Holrans hold a few towns and cities in northeast Pernatia, but that’s been disputed territory for centuries. After that I doubt Kharasia will be all that anxious to go back in.”

"I was planning on advising the emperor to stay out of Pernatia anyway," Raff admitted. "I wasn't too sure he'd listen to me but if the Pernatians are getting feisty he may see the wisdom of making friends and allies rather than subjects there. What else?"

"Menino has another new government," Jarne replied, "but it hardly counts. It looks just like the last three except a different family is in charge. In Crace the King's mistress died a few months ago."

"Madame du Puits?" Em asked. "Oh that's sad. She was only twenty-four. Both the King and Queen must be devastated; they loved her so much."

"In the Green Lands, King Reginard isn't making any friends in Parliament," Jarne continued.

"We heard he's been stripping Parliament of some of those prerogatives his father granted," Raff told him. "It might have been you who told us, in fact."

"I doubt that, old man," Jarne shook his head. "I'm sure I hadn't heard about this last time you were here."

"Maybe it was Father Henri, then," Raff shrugged, "and evidently there have been a lot of new bills that directly affect the colonies, especially as it regards the taxes they pay."

"Yes, there have been a few voices of protest from across the Dark Ocean," Jarne agreed, "and they seem to be getting louder."

"Problems there?" Raff asked.

"A few maybe," Jarne replied. "There have been the whispers of an uprising in parts of southern Verana against allegedly corrupt colonial officials. Also I hear some of the indigenes have the backing of Crace and have been fighting with the Colonists again. It's not the all-out war it was a couple of years ago, but sometimes a series of small raids can be more unsettling. I think Crace would like to take Meldan back."

"I daresay they would," Em laughed, "but the reason Crace could not hold on to Meldan is that her hands were already too full with all her other colonies."

"You already know the news from the east better than I could," Jarne pointed out and Raff proceeded to bring him up to date with Em's and Kaz's help.

"Any idea what happened in the Grand Council of Elders in Yakrut?" Raff asked. "We're headed there next."

"Before you report to His Imperial Majesty?" Jarne asked.

"It seems Leraxa feels the need to talk to us now that we're about as inconvenienced as we are likely to be," Raff replied acidly.

"I had been hoping you could tell me," Jarne told them. "In fact, that was the main reason I invited you in. It seems there are Kenlienta all over Salustan and her neighbors asking for you."

"So she didn't just get lucky," Raff remarked. "I had wondered how she knew we'd be on the road her people finally found us on. Oh well, I guess I'll just have to wait until we get to Yakrut to find out what's been going on."

“Well, I know of one thing that has been going on,” Jarne told him. “Kenlienta have been raiding smaller human settlements again. That stopped during the Grand Council, but it’s started again and I hear there has been some interference with wayfaring parties. Please see what you can do about that while in Yakrut.”

Three

Kenlientan cities are models of change, so none of the wayfarers expected Yakrut to look precisely as it had on their last visit. However, the city was undergoing even more extensive remodeling than usual as they caught their first glimpse of the city. “It’s like they’re completely rebuilding everything,” Kaz remarked.

“Pretty close,” Raff agreed. “I see they have a lot of tents set up which argues for a lot of major changes. It looks like they’re redoing the city streets almost from scratch too.”

“And that large complex of buildings on the western side of the city?” Em asked. “Do you think it’s for the new government?”

“Almost has to be,” Raff replied. “The Ken don’t worship in churches or temples and if it were for games and sports it would be an open arena.”

“At least most of that big wall around the city is gone,” Kaz remarked. “That made the whole place seem like a prison.

“I can still see a lot of that wall,” Em told him, “but now there’s as much outside the wall as there is inside and it looks like they’re making a parks of the area where the old Grand Council met.”

“It was Leraxa’s regional council hall,” Raff remarked. “Saltaxis told me it was a bit cramped for the Grand Council of Elders. Given the amount of progress, however, I’d say Leraxa had all these changes planned for the moment the vote went her way. They were probably already tearing down the old hall before the last elder made it to the door. I wonder if any of them are still in the city?”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Em replied. “You know most of them won’t have the time to stay away from their people long enough to attend to the government. I’d say they all went home to choose their proxies.”

“What’s a proxy?” Kaz asked.

“In this case it will be a representative who will represent the elder and, by extension, the people of his region in Yakrut when Leraxa’s new permanent government gets underway,” Raff replied.

“It’s not going on now?” Kaz asked.

“I doubt it,” Raff told him. “The major part of all their negotiations was to decide what sort of system they would use during the interim between the recent meeting and the first permanent session.”

“So what sort of system are they using?” Kaz asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Raff admitted. “We’ll find out once we get into Yakrut proper.”

There were no guards at the gates as they entered the city this time, and in fact, there were no gates, nor was there anyone whose job it was to question their appearance in Yakrut. “I guess that was just part of the silly ceremonial that went with the Grand Council meeting,” Raff remarked, “This is more normal, though usually there’s someone who isn’t too busy to talk and give directions.”

“They are all rather frantic,” Em observed. “The Ken aren’t usually this collectively excited. We’re going to need to ask someone for directions to Leraxa.”

That turned out to be unnecessary. A minute later, a young man bearing a living staff – the mark of an elder – and three honor guards approached them and instructed them to follow him.

“No offense intended,” Raff told him, “but you seem a bit young for an elder.”

“I am not, honored Raufanax,” the young man replied. “I bear this staff because I speak for Elder Leraxa.”

“That’s new,” Raff commented.

“Change is Life,” the young man replied calmly.

“Customs and traditions are not normally that malleable among the Ken,” Raff replied. “I thought the bearing of a living plant was traditionally reserved to an elder.”

“And Life is change,” the man continued stiffly.

Raff decided to drop the matter for now, since it was obvious their escort was not about to answer questions. They followed the elder’s proxy to the western edge of the city and to the door of a large white canvas tent near where the new large complex of buildings was being erected.

“Ah, Raufanax!” a beautiful Kenlientan woman greeted him as he stepped through the tent flaps. “We meet at last!” She sounded happy and cheerful at the prospect. She was seated in a throne-like chair of living rattan. At first Raff thought she had chosen that as her mark as an elder, but on second look she also wore an orchid on her shoulder. There were a large number of other Kenlienta standing around her and they had been deep in conversation as Raff, Em and Kaz entered the tent. She turned to them and said dismissively, “You may go. We’ll meet again in the morning. So much to do,” she added to the wayfarers. “And this must be Master Emblem Cawlens, a delight, my dear and young Kazani Basan.”

“You’ve heard of me?” Kaz blurted out.

“I heard the Masters Cawlens had adopted a new apprentice, yes,” she replied. “I am Leraxa.”

“The Elder of Elders,” Raff added, trying unsuccessfully to not sound accusatory.

“That title was a bit pompous,” Leraxa laughed. “I have decided to discard it. The title of my office will be High Elder, but I think it best if I am addressed as any other elder is. Did not one of your ancient emperors prefer to rule as the greatest among equals?”

“Several have, Leraxa,” Raff informed her. “Some of them even meant it.”

"I hope you will find I mean it as well," Leraxa replied. "Please sit with me. We'll have tea. We have much to discuss tonight."

"This time you're giving us an entire night?" Raff asked.

"And as many days as we need," Leraxa replied, "but I think we'll be able to cover everything in an evening." She sighed and tried again. "I'm sorry I had to rush you all out of the city last time you were here. I assure you there was no personal slight intended. I owe my life to you, Raufanax, and that is a debt I can never fully repay, but your appearance was poorly timed."

"I had not intended on disrupting your Grand Council," Raff told her, "but when legitimate business brought me here..."

"Yes, that poor human girl," Leraxa sighed. "I understand, but you see you arrived on the eve of the one truly critical vote. Not only that but you have made your own opposition to my plan well known among the Ken."

"I don't oppose it," Raff argued. "How the Ken govern themselves is their business, but I have questioned whether such a change is really for the best of all Kenlenta."

"Change is Life," Leraxa quoted.

"True," Em nodded, cutting off Raff, "but sometimes change is not for the best."

"I believe the Ken Nation needs a stronger central government at this time," Leraxa told them. "If it does not work out, we can always try something else."

"It's not that easy," Raff warned her. "A government is like a Wild creature. It has a mind of its own and is nearly impossible to domesticate. If it becomes too strong it will enslave the people it governs and the longer it remains strong, the harder it will be to dismantle."

"Nonsense!" Leraxa laughed. "We could take this new government apart with a single vote."

"Remind me to ask if you believe that in a few years," Raff told her. "So is this complex next door for the new council?"

"Yes," Leraxa nodded, obviously relieved to move on. "At the moment we're calling it simply 'Council Hall.' There was a movement to name it after me, but I'm really not trying to be a living demigod among the Ken. I don't need buildings and cities named after me. You must believe that everything I've done recently has been for the benefit of the Ken Nation. Had it been solely for me, I could have remained a territorial Chief Elder and let others do all the work. And there really is so much to do."

"Our most pressing problem is that of human pollution," Leraxa continued.

"So I've been told," Raff replied.

"You don't agree?" Leraxa asked.

"I can't argue with the proof," Raff allowed, "but Kenlentan pollution is nearly as harmful to humans. This cannot be a one-sided solution or one of our peoples will become extinct."

"I sincerely hope not," Leraxa told him. "There is a delicate balance between stability and the Wild. One cannot exist without the other. No," she corrected herself, "that's not quite true, but life as we know it depends on that balance. Most Kenlienta believe they must avoid all touches of stability and most humans believe they cannot exist long in the Wild. The truth is far more complex. You know that humans and Ken had a common ancestor?"

"I've heard the theory," Raff admitted. "So far it isn't being accepted among human scientists."

"It will be," Leraxa told him confidently. "It is truly a theory, not merely an hypothesis dressed up to impress. A theory has proof to back it up and we do have fossil evidence of that claim."

"I can think of a few scientists who would be interested in seeing your proof," Raff remarked.

"Bring them here," Leraxa challenged him. "I will show it to them personally. But for now, please accept what I say for the sake of argument at least. We had a common ancestor. We both diverged from a species that was half Wild and half stable. You know some species have a tendency toward one or the other. Many Wild species can tolerate stability, after all, or there would be no animals in your towns and cities. As the Kenlienta split off from those early human-Ken ancestors we became less tolerant of stability, while humans began to actually generate their own fields of stability. However, there is still some small amount of stability within the Ken just as there is a bit of the Wild within humans.

"I believe that combination is inherent in all life," Leraxa continued. "I think as we learn more, we'll discover that life is not even possible without some of both within each living creature."

"But stability hurts Kenlienta," Kaz pointed out.

"And the Wild hurts humans, Kazani," Leraxa agreed, "and yet Kenlienta still need a tiny amount of stability within them and humans need a tiny amount of the Wild. It's what makes wayfaring and magic possible. You cannot manipulate the Wild without some stability to hold it with."

"Now that's an interesting idea," Raff remarked. "I have a colleague who would be even more interested in that theory or is it just an hypothesis?"

"It's not as well-proven as our assertions of evolution," Leraxa admitted, "but it does follow on from it."

"Human scientists have no trouble with the concept of evolution," Em noted, "except that they believe humans, and by extension the Ken, are exempt from it."

"No," Leraxa laughed, "we have all evolved. Change is Life. Evolution is that change. Now let's get down to the real business. Whether or not you agree with the scientific basis for how it is happening, you admit that human and Kenlienta pollution is slowly poisoning the world?"

"We're dumping our wastes into the rivers," Raff agreed. "We both burn wood and coal."

"The effects on the Wild-stability balance from smoke is unproven," Leraxa admitted, "but the by-products of such burning are probably not good for anyone."

"On the other hand until recently we weren't burning anywhere near as much as we are now," Raff told her. "We seem to be taking each other's arguments, but I notice you aren't trying to tell me the danger is entirely to the Ken."

“It isn’t,” Leraxa shook her head. “I think the Ken would die out before humanity, but I wouldn’t give your people more than an extra century at the outside. Not only do we have to act soon, but we’re going to have to act together.”

“We?” Raff asked. It wasn’t a challenge nor did Leraxa take it as such.

“The Ken Nation and the Guild of Wayfarers, Raff Cawlens,” Leraxa told him. “The Council of Elders can now make binding decisions for all Kenlenta in a relatively rapid manner.”

“How rapid?” Em asked curiously.

“It depends on how quickly I can convince them my solution is the right one,” Leraxa replied. “I’m the High Elder, but I’m not the queen. I do not reign over the Ken. I can only try to guide my fellow elders. That is why I have worked so hard for this new government. I know we aren’t ready to come to a consensus yet, but meeting every few years would have meant dithering until it was far too late.”

“The Guild does not rule the human nations,” Raff pointed out. “The Guild doesn’t even do business to the east of here.”

“You have Guild halls in roughly two thirds of the world,” Leraxa commented. “I know that. You are a unifying force in the human lands.”

“Try telling that to Corisa,” Raff replied, “especially their Order of Wayfarers.”

“And yet now you two are honorary members of the Order,” Leraxa pointed out, “and by extension so too is your ward.”

“How did you know about that?” Em asked.

“I have my sources too,” Leraxa smiled. “I believe we have a mutual friend in Makret and sometimes good news travels as rapidly as the bad variety. You did well in Corisa, and accomplished more than you may realize. That brings me to a related matter.

“There is a dangerous stability racing though Corisa right now,” Leraxa continued.

“The city of Senopolis,” Raff identified it. “It used to be a part of the Empire of Tasea a very long time ago. What do you expect us to do about that?”

“Do about it?” Leraxa asked. “I don’t know that there is anything you can do about it other than repairing the damage it does as it passes. Did you mention it to the Order?”

“No,” Raff replied. “I probably should have.”

“Maybe,” Leraxa shrugged, “and maybe not. The Order tolerates the Ken Nation, but to them we’re just the barbarians who live in their midst. We do not have the warm and close relationship with them that we do with the Guild or the Gyel. Believe me when I say I wish to continue to have that relationship with the Guild. However that great moving city is going to disrupt many of your paths as it sweeps across the world.”

“What about your roads?” Kaz asked.

“We can cleanse our roads as it passes by and can even rebuild cities on the unusual chance should any stand it its path,” Leraxa replied. “This is not the first time we have seen that stability. Our records speak of several encounters over the last two millennia.”

“So why hadn’t the Guild heard of it before?” Raff asked.

“Last time it came by, your Guild had not yet expanded its influence beyond the Northern Lands,” Leraxa pointed out. “And before you ask, we never mentioned it before because most Kenlienta don’t remember it either. I only know because our historians brought it to me recently.”

“Well, the people of Senopolis are interested in hosting a Guild Hall,” Raff remarked. “If the Guild agrees, we’ll have wayfarers on hand to repair paths and what not.”

“Good,” Leraxa nodded. “I was hoping you might do that.”

“That’s assuming the Guild agrees,” Raff repeated. “Most of the Guild Council members don’t like me. Worse, they distrust and fear me. If I push for a hall in Senopolis too hard, it won’t happen, but that’s easy compared to the rest of what you’re proposing. The Guild does have influence in the lands in which we operate, but we have to pick our issues carefully and we must pursue them with patience. We’ve been calling for a ban on slavery for nearly a century and so far we’ve only had partial success. Getting humans to change their methods of disposing of waste strikes me as even harder to accomplish.”

“I imagine it will be,” Leraxa agreed. “I don’t expect results over night. I’m very much a realist. This sort of thing is going to take generations to accomplish, but we have to start now. Merely getting the Guild to add environmental cleanliness to its agenda should be sufficient for now.”

“You’re still over-estimating my influence,” Raff told her.

“I think not, Raufanax,” Leraxa told him. “Your Guild Council may no longer hold you in high esteem, but the fact that you are accepted as an elder among my people means they will at least listen to you.

“An elder who was not allowed to attend the Grand Council,” Raff pointed out.

“I have apologized for that,” Leraxa replied tightly.

“You have, and I accept the apology,” Raff admitted, “but it doesn’t undo the fact. I’m not the only master wayfarer your people talk to. The Council will know I was here and banned from the proceedings.”

“How will they know?” Leraxa asked, “I don’t plan to tell them.”

“They’ll know in the same way you know about what happened in Corisa,” Raff replied. “People like to talk. They especially like to gossip and it doesn’t matter if those people are Kenlienta or human. We really aren’t all that different when you come right down to it.”

“No, we are not,” Leraxa agreed. “So do I have your support in this matter?”

“Let’s make sure I understand what you want,” Raff told her. “You want the Guild to work toward maintaining the balance between the Wild and the stabilities.”

“That’s right,” Leraxa nodded.

“You realize that first we’re not only going to have to prove to the Guild Council that there is a problem, although that part I suspect will be easy. If there were no Wild, they’d be out of business. Getting them to agree on the cause, well that’s something else. Your scientists don’t completely agree on causes. I understand that some think the growth of stabilities is just a natural cycle and that soon it will reverse itself. Our scientists are just starting to really investigate the Wild properly and in ways even your people haven’t thought of, but it’s a new study and they haven’t completely figured out on a definition of the Wild.”

“A definition?” Leraxa asked, surprised. “I could give it to them in a single sentence.”

“But not mathematically,” Raff replied. “They are arguing whether the Wild is merely the absence of stability, the stabilities are an absence of the Wild, or if the two areas are each something different from each other. Or they could actually be the same thing, but different aspects of that thing. As I said it’s all very new. They should probably meet in some way with your scholars. We have international scholastic conferences from time to time where they discuss these ideas and many others.”

“Like the ‘Shape of the World’ last year,” Leraxa nodded. “I heard of that. Perhaps with Guild help we can hold such a conference for both human and Kenlienta scientists. It would be problematic, but I think we could manage it.”

“I’ll bring that possibility up too,” Raff told her, “or maybe I’ll let a friend of two suggest it for me. It will be a hard sell, you know.”

“As long as you do, indeed, sell it,” Leraxa told him.

“But you’ll have to reign in your militant younger generation,” Em told Leraxa. “I know incidents had been down since the start of your Grand Council, but they’re up again and the younger Kenlienta have started raiding human settlements and attacking wayfarer parties again.”

“I can no more control our youth than you can the human nations of the East,” Leraxa replied.

“Now I think you’re under-estimating yourself,” Em told her. “You’re the High Elder and one job all elders hold in common is to set the model of behavior for their people. If you want Guild help, you’re going to have to do what you can to stop those attacks.”

“I can only talk to those youths in my own territory,” Leraxa replied.

“Maybe,” Em shrugged, “but you can talk to the elders of other regions and advise them to do likewise. Remember the Guild protects not only its own, but all humans in the lands it operates in.”

“I am aware of that,” Leraxa told her. “I will do what I can to try to convince the young not to lash out.”

Neither Em nor Raff failed to catch the fact she was being very careful about the promises she was making, but decided to try to move on from there. They spent much of that evening discussing the data Leraxa had about the dilution of the Wild areas and the other issues they had outlined so far.

The next day as the wayfarers left Yakrut, Kaz asked, “Is it always like this? One job after another?”

“Sometimes. Yes,” Raff told him. “One job leads to another and then another. And this time it looks like we have a job that’s going to last for years.”

Epilogue – Taundon

Richard Winn the Younger, Member of Parliament, stepped in the office of his father Richard Winn the Elder, Prime Minister of the Green Lands. He looked around the office to make sure no one else was there with his father and then he spoke, “His Majesty, King Reginard III, is dead.”

“That’s nothing to joke about, Dickie,” his father admonished him. “As much as we have opposed His Majesty politically...”

“It’s no joke, Father,” Dickie replied. “I just got the word. It was a hunting accident in Hosinland. He was gored by an enraged stag.”

“How unusual,” Winn the Elder murmured. “How did it happen?” Just then the flat and somber sound of church bells being struck with leather-clad clappers could be heard. One bell at first but rapidly followed by every bell in the city until the air of Taundon was thick with the sound. His son was so caught up in the moment he had to repeat the question.

“Hmm?” Dickie replied, coming out of his trance. “An odd sound, isn’t it?”

“One I’ve heard too often,” the Prime Minister told him. “I believe most people will think it is for the Queen Mother, or would she be the Queen Grandmother now? I don’t know if the situation has ever come up before. The woman may well out-live us all. About Reginard - how exactly did it happen?” he asked once more. “His Majesty’s aim was generally better than that.”

“Anyone can make a mistake, Father,” Dickie shrugged. “From what I was told, the beast was disabled on the first shot and went down immediately, but as His Majesty stepped forward to put it out of its misery, it suddenly got back up with what must have been its very last effort and drove his antlers into the king’s belly. Must have been a lucky, or rather an unlucky hit, but Reginard died while they were rushing him back to Somerfield Castle.”

“A tragedy for all Green Landsmen,” Winn the Elder commented sadly.

“Practicing for your own public statement, Father?” Dickie asked. “You detested the man and said so repeatedly.”

“Our disagreements were purely political in nature, Dickie,” Winn replied, “but he was still my king. But this will set us back too, you know.”

“I don’t see how,” Dickie replied. “With Reginard III now blessed in Heaven, the major opponent to a stronger, more autonomous Parliament is out of the picture.”

“Have you forgotten his daughter, Dickie?” Winn the Elder asked. “Julia is a strong young woman and of age, if only just barely. She will reign for a very long time and you know how Parliament always gives a new monarch whatever he... or she wants at the beginning of a reign. It’s a honeymoon is what it is. No one is going to want to tell her, ‘No.’ Not at first anyway.”

“But she’s just a woman,” Dickie scoffed. “What can she possibly understand about politics and governments?”

“You obviously have not met this particular woman,” the Elder Winn replied.

“Of course I have,” Dickie argued. Were the bells outside starting to diminish or was he just growing used to them? “We go to many of the same parties. She’s as vapid and shallow as most of the ladies she keeps company with.”

“Then you haven’t discussed any matters of weight with her,” Winn the Elder concluded. “Behind that vapid façade is a shrewd and calculating mind, Dickie. What’s worse is that she not only agrees with nearly all of her father’s policies, but I suspect she may have helped put them to words. King Reggie was a fine chap, but he knew enough to leave the writing to others. Our new queen is literate in every conceivable way and knows, with the certainty of youth, exactly what she wants and how she plans to get it. It’s a powerful combination.”

“Julia?” Dickie asked as though he had never heard anything so preposterous in his life.

“Her Majesty, Queen Julia of the Green Lands and all her colonies,” Winn corrected him. “Better start thinking of her like that or you’ll soon be giving her the world along with the rest of Parliament.”

“The world she may have,” Dickie replied, “but it should be her Parliament that rules it.”

“Well said,” Winn agreed. He stepped over to a shelf where he kept a crystalline decanter filled with the finest Hosinland whisky, filled two small glasses and handed one to his son and toasted, “The king is dead. Long live the queen!”

Winn the Younger joined in on the latter half of the traditional cheer and as one they downed their drinks, then Dickie refilled his glass and commented, “You’re right. We’re going to have to fight hard to hold on to all the gains we got from her grandfather.”

“Those we did not lose back to her father, yes,” Winn the Elder agreed. “Reggie had to be slow and careful about stripping Parliament of those powers he wanted back, but until Julia makes enemies of her own, she’ll just smile ingratiatingly and half the Lords and most of the Commons will toss concessions her way like roses from besotted lovers.

“We’re the ones who will have to be careful now, though,” the Elder continued. “Saying no to the new and beautiful young queen, especially while she is still officially in mourning, is not something we can do with grandiose speeches and Parliamentary tricks. No, it’s going to be all smoke-filled rooms and whispers for years to come, I fear.”

“That’s not entirely bad,” Dickie replied. “It means the voters won’t be as aware of it and we do have voters to keep happy too.”

“Dickie, we have a great power in our hands, but it is also a trust,” Winn the Elder sighed. “We should no more dismiss the voters so lightly than we would Queen Julia herself.”

“Queen Julia,” Dickie mused once again, “I still have a hard time wrapping my mind around that one.”

“I don’t know why not,” Winn the Elder snapped. “You practically grew up with the girl. You knew she was the King’s only child and had to have realized she would one day be queen.”

“On the intellectual level perhaps, Father,” Dickie admitted, “but you don’t know her like I do.”

“I’m beginning to think you don’t know her at all,” Winn replied. “Oh good the bells are starting to die down. You’re right about one thing, though. I’ll have to make some sort of speech in Parliament in a few hours and the newspapers will want copies to run for their late editions.”

“You know, maybe we need to look outside of the parliament for allies,” Dickie remarked, taking another sip of the whisky.

“Such as?” the Prime Minister asked. “I cannot see looking to the foreign powers for that sort of help. Can you imagine what Crace would have to say if we suddenly started talking alliances with them. Dix, perhaps or Voland...”

“No, not them,” Dickie shook his head. “The Wayfarers’s Guild.”

“Huh?” Winn the Elder grunted as though his son had finally lived up to his potential. “You may have something there. The Guild is politically neutral, but they have a lot of influence when they choose to exert it.”

“They’ve been pushing us to ban all slavery for some time now,” Dickie observed.

“We saw to it that no new slaves could be brought into Varana and Meldan,” Winn replied. “What more do they want?”

“Full emancipation, I imagine,” Dickie replied. “We both know members of their Guild Council, after all. We’ve both had dinner with them often enough where they harangued us on the subject.”

“We did all we could on that point,” Winn the Elder replied. “The Colonies do have some autonomy, especially on that matter.”

“Yes, but we can levy taxes on related trade,” Dickie responded. “You know, make the ownership of slaves less economical?”

“Possibly,” Winn nodded, “at least trying would get the Guild to support us. And once they’re with us on that point, we can urge them to support other parts of our agenda. If we’re subtle enough, we might even gain some control over the Guilds’ policies...”

“And he who controls the Guild of Wayfarers,” Dickie smiled, “controls the world.”

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