

The Wayfarers – Book Three

A Nation without Maps

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

The Wayfarers is turning out to be the most challenging project I have attempted to date. The “World without a Name” is by far the most complex I have ever tried to stage a series on and may even be too complex for fiction. Readers and writers alike expect their SF and fantasy worlds to be rich and imaginative, but if you compare them to the real world, you’ll quickly notice that the real world is always going to be far more complicated than any mere mortal can make up from scratch.

Fiction, whether mainstream or genre, can take place in the “real world” because we know our world and have grown up in it. The complexities are a given and we have been learning them all our lives. If you look carefully, a clever will actually only show what he needs of the real world to establish the setting. Readers can usually fill in the details for themselves, but when the world is entirely made-up, a fair amount of the writer’s time is taken up describing the setting and making the reader comfortable, or at least acquainted, with it. That’s where I may have bitten off a bit too much.

The world of *The Wayfarers* is not as complex as our own Earth is, but it is closer than most made-up worlds. Not only that, but I set another challenge for myself by deciding it could not be mapped. Okay, I admit it. I was being lazy. After devising maps for Maiyim and the world of *Gaenor’s Quest*. The idea of not having to draw a map sounded good at the time. So, as I’ve explained elsewhere, I chose to make various places culturally analogous to places on Earth in the 18th Century.

However, just because they are analogues, it does not mean they are identical. I carefully chose events and places from 18th Century history and rewrote them liberally. However, even the casual student of American history has got to recognize some of the events and situations in the following story. Those who are more than casual students will note I played fast and loose with the numbers of people involved and the time line. That’s because this is an analogue, not a mirror, of our world. I don’t think my versions of the events or the people involved are better or worse than the real ones. They are just different. If you want to know what the real facts were, I suggest checking out your public library and looking up the

Boston Massacre.

I did use some real details, mostly concerning the nature of 18th Century law and most of what I learned came from an excellent article on the subject by David Friedman entitled “Making Sense of English Law Enforcement in the 18th Century.” This was of inestimable value as I planned those parts of the story involving the “Lonport Massacre” and recommend it to anyone interested in the subject.

In the end, however, this story is not about the “Lonport Massacre,” or the trial it spawns. It’s about Raff and Emblem Cawlens. It’s about Kaz and Chanya and the other characters. The events are window dressing. This is a story that is primarily about the people and I hope you enjoy it.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
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A Nation Without Maps

Prologue

“It has been moved and seconded that the Central Hall of the Guild of Wayfarers be moved to Carais,” Grandmaster Giles Harton noted formally. “The matter is now open to discussion and the chair recognizes Master Michael Roark.”

“Fellow members of the Guild Council,” Master Roark began. “The Guild of Wayfarers was established here in Taundon over one thousand years ago so it was only natural that the Central Hall should have been built here. But we are more than the small collection of wayfarers who banded together to protect their interests after the fall of the Meni Empire. Our prestige and influence has grown vast and now encompasses most of the world. We have outgrown the hall in Taundon and we have outgrown the Green Lands. We need a location that is more centralized and where we will have room to expand.”

“Objection!” Master Pauls Forrent spoke up. “So you think moving the Central Hall a few hundred miles south will make it more centralized, Roark? First of all, Carais is an inland city. Her river is not navigable to ocean-going ships so the nearest port to your new Central Hall would be Belis and one or two days journey from the city under the best of circumstances. Further, I would remind you all that Carais is even more crowded than Taundon and the streets are even more narrow and twisting. Unless you plan to build your new hall in one of the satellite towns around Carais, you won’t find a suitable location without knocking down and rebuilding half the city. I should know, after all. I live there.”

“There are several good reasons to consider moving out of Taundon,” Master Piet Bachman commented when it was his turn, “although I must agree with Master Forrent that Carais is no better a location than Taundon. Location-wise Farnsdam in my native Dix would be more suitable than Carais. It is a major port town directly on the Dark Ocean and yet is a national capital of one of the leading Powers just like Taundon and Carais.”

“But no more centrally located,” Pauls Forrent argued.

“Well, no,” Master Bachman admitted, “and if you are looking for a more congenial climate, I would recommend Granas in southern Crace.”

“We live in a modern world,” Master Jahn Bennersen from Voland cut in. “Climate is hardly a consideration.”

“The Green Lands are a tropical paradise compared to most of Voland,” Roark pointed out, “but, my fellow masters, we need to consider the political situation far more seriously than the geographical one. The Green Lands are experiencing a period of disunity. Queen Julia is at odds with her prime minister, Mister Winn, and they are both attempting to influence this council to side with them.”

There was a low rumble of disagreement in the hall at that comment and Roark realized he should have kept silent on that particular matter. Too many of the Guild’s masters had already chosen sides in the political squabbles here in the Green Lands in spite of the Guild’s supposed neutrality.

“There have also been problems in the Ken Nation of late,” Roark tried to change the subject. “Elder Leraxa enjoyed a brief period in which to consolidate her new government, but now I understand she is having problems holding it together. Were we to move the Central hall, we might be able to aid her in bringing stability to the Kenlienta.”

“Stability is the last thing the Ken want,” Forrent argued with a harsh laugh. It was true. Humans had to live in the bubbles of unchanging habitats that were referred to as “Stabilities,” but Kenlienta could no more survive inside a Stability than humans could in the chaotic Wild.”

“I meant stability with a small s, Master Forrent,” Roark sighed, “not a capital one. We all know that for all their seeming love of change, the lifestyle of the average Ken is far more stable than what we humans enjoy. The Ken are our allies and Elder Leraxa has been asking for our help.”

“More specifically, she has been asking for Master Raff Cawlens,” Forrent pointed out. “Perhaps it is time Master Cawlens was reinstated to the Guild Council.” Forrent found the noise in the hall at that suggestion amusing. It was a loud combination of agreement and outrage. Raff Cawlens had both friends and enemies here, although to date the masters opposing his return had out-weighted those in favor.

“That issue is not under discussion at this time,” Roark snapped at Forrent.

“Then I formally propose it as an amendment to your motion,” Pauls replied smoothly.

“I object!” Roark cried.

“I second!” Master Bennersen called out at the same time. “Master Cawlens has repeatedly served the Guild above and beyond what we expect of any member. He and his wife were key to opening our relations with Corisa and in heading off the war between that nation and Kharasia. I would remind this

Council that he also..."

"Yes, yes," Roark interrupted, "Raff Cawlens is a fine wayfarer. We all know that." His tone of voice belied his words. "But he has also repeatedly demonstrated that he is incapable of working with his fellow masters. His placement on this Council would be a disrupting influence. I reject the amendment."

"Then I call the question," Forrent challenged, forcing a vote on Cawlens' reinstatement.

Roark glanced at Grandmaster Harton. The grandmaster shook his head almost microscopically and Roark understood that Harton did not care to test the matter at this time. "Then I propose we set my entire motion, amendments and all, aside for the period of..." he paused to glance at Harton again. The grandmaster was quietly tapping two fingers on his desk. "Two years," Roark continued, "to give us adequate time to research the issue of moving this hall and to consider the matter."

The council broke for lunch a few minutes later and Grandmaster Harton signaled Roark to meet with him. "I'm getting very tired of that," Harton admitted once they were in the privacy of his office. "Forrent and his lot have been using Cawlens to block a lot of our proposals lately."

"We could work toward removing Master Forrent as well," Roark suggested.

"For a Council member who was elevated less than a year ago you seem unusually anxious to remove other members, Michael," Harton noted. "You should try keeping those ideas to yourself just in case it gives other Council members ideas about you. Besides, if you remove Forrent, we'll only have to deal with Bennersen, Bachman and the rest of their side. Also removing a long-term master like Forrent would alienate the conservative masters and we would both find ourselves transferred to a colony in Sarlron. Keep in mind that the colonies are all short of wayfarers and your enemies would gladly volunteer your services. The best way to avoid that is to not make enemies needlessly."

"Besides, there is too much going on in the world right now," Harton continued. "I told you that before you started going on about moving the Hall. The Ken problem is just part of it. The Powers have been at peace with each other too long and are starting to grow contentious. Crace and the Green Lands have come close to war three times in the last five years, Holrany keeps trying to retake Pernatia, not that they can afford to move troops from their borders with Crace and Menino. The Cracian commoners are also showing signs of discontent with the nobility too. You know, moving to Carais might not be wise. If there is a rebellion there we would get caught in the middle. And the latest report says Salasia is starting to move her army into a position to invade Makrut yet again. It's a foolish thing to try, but the Salasians didn't ask any of us."

"They have their own wayfarers," Roark pointed out.

"Don't remind me," Harton grumbled. "Then there's this new guildhall in Senopolis. That's working out, but it is getting increasingly harder to keep Corisa's wayfarers unaware of our presence there. The worst of the problems, however, is in Varana. The colonies there are becoming increasingly contentious over their treatment by the Parliament of the Green Lands and everyone expects us to keep the peace. It's an impossible task, and with all that going on, Forrent and his lot keep proposing the reinstatement of Raff Cawlens. They know it's a good way to block almost anything."

"Maybe we should give them what they want?" Roark suggested.

"Since when do you like Raff Cawlens?" Harton asked suspiciously.

“I don’t,” Roark laughed, “but it seems to me that we could possibly solve two problems at once by giving Cawlens an impossible task or two. Give him and his wife jobs they cannot possibly succeed at. After one or two colossal failures their support will erode and Forrent and his bunch will lose their best leverage on the Council.”

Manrich

One

“Masters Cawlens,” a rich voice called loudly across the open quadrangle formed by the buildings of the University of Manrich in the Kingdom of Holrany. “A delight to see you both again. Have you been in Manrich long?”

“We just arrived, Doctor Starmetz,” Raff replied while Karl Starmetz kissed Emblem’s hand. “You’ve been well, I hope?”

“Moderately,” Starmetz nodded and shook Raff’s hand as well. “I just got back from a sabbatical in Meni. Are you here for the symposium?”

“We thought we might sit in on a few sessions,” Em informed him. “In fact, our timing was such that Doctor Harkermor could be here at this time.”

“Is it true he’s been to that floating city everyone’s been talking about?” Starmetz asked.

“Senopolis,” Raff supplied the name. “I’m not sure I would call it a floating city, but it does appear to be progressing through the Wild at an unprecedented rate. Doctor Harkermor has been taking his usual readings there and I’m sure he’ll be reporting on them in his address tomorrow. To tell you the truth, I think the historians will be taking more of an interest in Senopolis especially as the city comes closer. I won’t say their society has not changed since their city started roaming all over the world, but it is probably closer to ancient Tasea than any other culture today.”

“Certainly closer than modern Yug,” Em added. “So will you be lecturing this year?”

“Not this time,” Starmetz admitted. “I was supposed to be working while on sabbatical, but to tell the truth I spent more time on the beaches than I did in the libraries of Menino. I know that does not seem like me, but I like to think I’ve changed for the better since *The Shape of the World* conference. I’ve learned to take time off and relax.”

“Well, you had a close call when Doctor Merange was killed,” Raff recalled. Doctor Starmetz had been known far and wide as being disagreeable and when he and Doctor Merange turned out to be conducting parallel research, Starmetz had accused his colleague of plagiarism. So when Merange turned up dead soon after, Starmetz was the logical person to blame. Raff and Em had spent some time exonerating the Holran scientist, a task made all the more difficult when it turned out his alibi was of a delicate nature.

“I did, indeed,” Starmetz sighed, “but I have tried to make up for my past failings ever since. Would you two do me the honor of having dinner with me tomorrow evening, by the way?”

“We’d be honored,” Em replied instantly. Starmetz nodded before excusing himself and moving off to his office.

Raff and Em continued on in the opposite direction and a few minutes later arrived at the Wayfarers’ Guildhall in Manrich, conveniently only a few blocks away from the University’s campus. Em excused herself to go to their room, but Raff got corralled into the guildhall’s taproom where his fellow wayfarers insisted on hearing about his latest trip.

“Well, Senopolis is still deep within Corisan territory but it is headed rapidly for the border with Makret,” Raff reported. “Once over the border, I think we’ll be able to operate more openly in that city since the Gysel Chonyi likes us and has been entertaining the notion of allowing us a small presence in his country. Of course that could also be due to Salasia’s recent troop movements.”

“What troop movements are those?” one of the journeyman wayfarers asked.

“Makret has long been a buffer state between Salasia and Corisa,” Raff explained. “From time to time both of the larger countries have invaded, but while Makret is a lovely place to visit, it’s a terrible place to invade. The mountains make for treacherous travel and the locals know them well, while invaders don’t know them at all. Also it is not a rich country, although I think they do well enough for themselves, so after some time the invaders realize they are spending more trying to hold the country than they gain by doing so. The problem is, what one generation learns to its detriment, the next often completely forgets and this current generation of Salasians is an arrogant bunch. So they figure what with Corisa out capturing islands from Nillon, this would be a perfect time to expand Salasian holdings.

“I suspect they’re in for the surprise of their lives though,” Raff continued, “and Queen Julia has sent off a force of her army and navy to reinforce the trading colony there. In order to threaten Makret, the Salasian Maharajah has pulled nearly all of his troops out of southern Salasia and by the time they can get back from Makret, the maharajah or his successor is likely to be a subject of Her Majesty.”

“Do you know for a certainty that’s her plan?” a wayfarer asked.

“For a certainty?” Raff laughed, “How could I? I have not conferred with Her Majesty and in fact have not even seen her since she was a little girl, but it is what I would do in her place. With Salasia as a Green Lands protectorate, she’ll be able to brag that the sun never sets on her kingdom and in fact there are already those who are referring to the Green Lands as an empire.”

“A strange sort of empire, don’t you think, old man?” a fellow master asked urbanely. “I mean, in the past all empires have been contiguous collections of stabilities, haven’t they?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call them contiguous,” Raff argued. “There have always been large stretches of the

Wild in between and in the Wild there have been Kenlientan cities, you know.”

“But there have not been other human nations in between, have there?” the other master pressed. “Even the Cracian Empire, stretched out as it is, has nothing but Wild and water between her and her colonies.”

“It’s a new and modern world we live in, gentlemen,” Raff replied, “and we appear to have a new and modern definition of empire to go with it. On other fronts, the peace in East Kharasia is holding, but then I expected it to ever since Mu Feng discovered that he was actually in charge of his kingdom.”

“And what have you heard about the struggles in Varana?” another wayfarer asked.

“Varana?” Raff asked. “Nothing recently. I went in the other direction. I suspect you might know more of what’s going on in the western colonies than I do.”

“So you haven’t heard about the rebellion?”

“Rebellion?” Raff asked. “Last I heard, there had been a few incidents, but I wouldn’t classify them as an all-out rebellion.”

“Neither would I,” the other master agreed. “There is unrest in the colonies there, but nothing more. However, it seems to me Her Majesty might be better advised to send her troops there than to Salasia.”

“From what I understand of the situation in Varana,” Raff replied, “it might be better to decide whether she is directly in charge of the colonies or if Parliament is. Both claim the right to govern in Varana, but neither seem to want to do more than pass additional taxes on the colonists. Naturally the colonists resent it and with most of the regular armed forces in Meldan to the north, the people of Varana feel free to voice their concerns.”

“More than just their concerns, I hear,” the other master noted. “I understand an entire cargo of molasses was dumped into Lonport harbor in protest over your Parliament’s latest tax.”

“Ah, the infamous Varana Rum Punch Affair,” laughed another of the wayfarers. Several joined in the laughter. “A bit salty for me, but I suppose it’s an acquired taste.”

“I hadn’t heard about that,” Raff admitted.

“It happened last spring. You were probably on your way east by then,” came the reply.

“I was,” Raff confirmed. “Say, any news from the Southern Continent?”

“Fairly quiet there recently,” the other master informed him. “I suppose the entire world can’t all go up in flames at the same time, can it?”

“It probably can,” Raff shrugged, “but I’ll be just as glad that it doesn’t. How about the Cracian colonies?”

“Interesting you should bring them up,” the master replied. “Maceno seems to be quiet and peaceful, and also producing enough gold to sink a fleet of ships and Palendo seems comfortable in the Cracian bosom, but Lorendo and Salomania have been quietly petitioning for greater autonomy. It will be interesting to see how the king handles the matter, but it makes me glad to be in Holrany now that the far

colonies have become so interesting.”

“And Maggo?” Raff asked referring to the large Cracian colony on the Southern Continent.

“What of it?” his colleague replied. “It’s practically just an extension of the main kingdom, politically anyway.”

“I hear Crace has been departmentalizing Maggo,” one of the wayfarers at the back of the room told them. “They’re breaking it up into separately run provinces called departments.”

“They probably should have done that sooner,” Raff remarked. “The colony covers nearly half of the Southern Continent.”

“Very sparsely settled, I hear,” the master commented.

“By colonists, yes,” Raff agreed, “but there are quite a few natives and Ken between the colonial settlements. And a lot of it is desert too and does not support much of a population.”

“So tell us about Senopolis,” a young journeyman requested. “Is it really like stepping back into the past?”

“In some ways, yes,” Raff nodded. “The city was originally a part of the Empire of Tasea and they still speak Tasan, though even they think the pronunciation has changed over the millennia. A lot of their architecture is traditional, but they have absorbed a lot of small cultural elements in their journeys so I think the scholars are going to be debating for years just how close to original Tasanish society the citizens of Senopolis really are. They do seem to know all the old myths and quite a few more, but you have to realize they no longer worship any of the gods, nor do they worship the One God of the Meninan Church. As far as the people of Senopolis are concerned, all the gods abandoned them and no loyalty is owed.”

“The High Priest isn’t going to like that,” one of the wayfarers whistled.

“I don’t suppose he is,” Raff chuckled, “but if he wants to do something about it, I suppose he could send missionaries. It would be interesting to see how they fare against the stubbornness of the Senopolitans. My money is on the Senopolitans, by the way. If they’ve held out as long as they have as a wandering city, I don’t expect anyone is going to convert them to a modern religion easily.”

Eventually Emblem came back down stairs and dragged Raff out to eat before returning to the University for the opening speeches of the Annual Symposium of the Sciences.

Two

Unlike formal academic conferences, the Manrich symposium was always held in a more casual style, so while many academics were scheduled to deliver papers, there was also ample time allotted to scholarly discussions in which anyone could take part and others might be invited to present a paper or speak on a topic of interest on the fly. This happened to Raff twice over the next week, first on the second afternoon when Doctor Harkermor invited him to share the stage when presenting his paper and then several days later when the Nillonese scientist, Doctor Hideo Naga, arrived and used data Raff and Em had been collecting for him in the field for an impromptu addendum to his own paper.

"I thought you must have changed your mind about coming," Raff remarked to Doctor Naga after their joint lecture.

"Not at all," Naga replied, "but we ran into a bad storm in the mountains of Northern Menino. We got held up for several days and then had to backtrack a full day's journey when a bridge washed out."

"A bad trip then," Raff remarked sadly.

"Not so bad," Naga disagreed. "I arrived before the symposium ended."

"Doctor Naga," Em greeted him, "do you mind if I ask a question about your homeland?"

"Not at all, Master Cawlens," he replied affably, remembering to use the masculine title in spite of her gender. "What would you like to know?"

"It's about the Ikkito," she explained.

"Honorable people have nothing to do with the Ikkito," Naga replied with distaste.

"Except for the emperor," Raff added. "I understand they work directly for him."

"So it is said," Naga replied, "but it is also said they work for no one but their headman. I would not know for certain as I have never met an Ikkito, nor have I ever been invited to the imperial palace. To meet an Ikkito could be the last thing I ever did and the emperor only associates with his nobles. My station in Nillon is not worthy of imperial notice."

"I think that actually answers my question," Em decided. "Thank you, Doctor."

"You are quite welcome, Master Cawlens, but why did you want to know about them?" Naga asked.

"Raff and I ran into an Ikkito a few years ago," Em replied, "and I was wondering whether they were a part of everyday life in Nillon."

"Not at all," Naga shook his head. "The Ikkito are a people apart from all others. They rarely appear among the other people of Nillon and when they do all others stay at a respectful distance, but you say you ran into one? Not in Nillon, I'm sure."

"No we first met him in Kharaskva," Raff informed the scientist. "He was impersonating a Corisan ambassador."

"I never knew the Ikkito left Nillon," Naga remarked, horrified.

"I believe this was an extraordinary circumstance," Raff replied. "As best I can tell he was trying to keep Corisa so busy the High King would stop trying to invade Nillon. When we found him out, he tried to keep us from travelling to Ranyang, setting up a series of ambushes along the way and finally tried to assassinate the High King. We were forced to stop him."

"I'm surprised you survived," Naga shuddered. "The Ikkito are reputed to be able to be able to walk between the rays of light and strike faster than can be seen."

"They're good, but not that good," Raff replied. "Besides, it was Em who killed him."

"He made a simple mistake," Em remarked, "and forgot I was there."

"The Ikkito rarely make such mistakes," Naga told her.

"He had other things on his mind at the moment," Raff told him dryly. He was about to say something else but all around them church bells began to ring cacophonously. "What's that about?" Raff wondered.

The others shrugged but they only had to wait a minute or so before they found out. "The city is on fire!" Karl Starmetz reported as he ran into the large hall.

"Is the University in danger?" Em asked him.

"Not at this time," Starmetz shook his head. "The fire is on the far side of the city's center, but it may spread. Every able-bodied adult is needed to help form a bucket brigade."

The City of Manrich had a fire company, but almost all served on a volunteer basis. The only way to fight a large fire was to form as many lines of people between that fire and a source of water and fill large, collapsible leather buckets with water and pass them person-to-person from the water source to the fire and then back down the lines once more to be refilled. Raff and Em followed the people from the university across the city to where the fire was raging.

As they approached, they could not see open flames but a thick black column of smoke was gushing skyward while all over the city church bells continued to peal. Most residents of Manrich arrived with the three gallon buckets that had been issued by the city council nearly ten years earlier, but even people who had no buckets arrived ready to work.

Manrich was a city of wooden buildings and typical of northern cities in that respect. It stood along the Seiger River, but the river was over a mile from the site of the fire, too far to stretch out more than a single line of people, but at the same time the city had decided to issue fire-fighting buckets, they had also planned a series of small parks across the city and in each park was a small pond. The parks were visually pleasing but their main function was to serve as a source of water for the Manrich Fire Companies.

The fire was situated midway between two such ponds, a quarter of a mile from both, but with thousands of volunteers, there were still enough to form several lines from each pond. The bucket brigades had formed promptly, but the fire remained out of control in spite of their efforts.

"We're not making much headway," Raff commented sometime after midnight.

"It has been a very dry summer," Karl Starmetz told him tiredly as he passed yet another full bucket forward an accepted and empty one in its place. He reached for the next full bucket and stumbled to the ground.

"You need to rest, Doctor," Em told him.

"I can't," he replied stubbornly. "We could lose most of the city if this gets away from us."

"Pull back!" someone ordered from ahead. "We need to reform our lines."

"Again?" Raff wondered. "I was wrong, we're not making any headway, are we?" Just then flames could be seen bursting out of buildings at the other end of the block they were on. "I thought we were three blocks away from the fire."

"We were," Em replied. "We need to try something else, Raff." Ahead two buildings collapsed, sending flames and sparks high into the sky. The wind picked up, all rushing toward the fire and Em remembered that large fires tend to create their own weather. This one did not need a chimney, it was drawing all the air it needed all by itself.

"Master Cawlens!" a man shouted over the noise of the panicking bucket brigadiers. Raff and Em both turned and saw Jakob Einzer rushing toward them with the master wayfarer Raff had met in the guildhall earlier in the week. Both men were looking exhausted and covered in soot. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

"We've been right here, more or less all night," Raff replied. "Well actually I think we started out several blocks that way, but I guess you know how that goes."

"There aren't enough buckets in the city to put this fire out," Master Einzer told him. "We need to try something else before even more people die."

"Have there been many deaths?" Em asked.

"People have been caught in the buildings," Einzer replied, "and others have been trapped when buildings fell on them. I was thinking we need to form a water fountain, but the river is the only sufficient source of water and Noah here," he indicated the master beside him, "and I are not strong enough by ourselves to draw the water from it."

"I doubt I could do that by myself inside the stability either," Raff admitted. Wayfarers were capable of amazing feats when they employed their natural abilities to manipulate Wild energy, but the rules were different inside a human settlement and even the best master wayfarer was limited when working inside a stability. "It's going to take all four of us, assuming we're enough."

"We must get closer to the river," Em suggested, "but what about Doctor Starmetz? He's exhausted and needs our help too,"

"I'll take care of him," Doctor Naga assured her. The short academic put his shoulder under Starmetz's arm and partially lifted him up to help get him away from the reforming bucket lines. "Come along, Doctor," he told his protesting comrade. "Everyone else has had a chance to rest, it's your turn now."

With Starmetz taken care of, the wayfarers rushed down slope to the river, not stopping until they reached the base of a tall, but narrow stone bridge. “Raff, why don’t you guide us,” Em suggested. “You’re better at this sort of thing than I am.”

“Better than any of us,” Einzer admitted. “Yes. We’ll give you the power to work with. You show us how you want it.”

“We’re going to form a waterspout,” Raff decided. “It will sort of be like an artificial tornado – lots of swirling wind and water. Do you follow?” He didn’t wait for an answer and below in the wide river a large section had already started to flow in a circular motion.

As the others joined in, the section of the river began to glow a dull blue and as the water began to swirl ever faster, it also began to lift up into the air. Higher and higher the rushing water column grew and as it did, it began to hum and then howl with the sounds of wind and water. And then finally when Raff decided it was tall enough he directed it toward the fire.

By the time the water began to torrent down, a full one fifth of the city was ablaze and at first the wayfarer’s waterspout did not appear to have much effect on the growing inferno, but slowly, the fire began to go out in spots and by the time the sun rose the next morning, the fire had been reduced from a large swath across the city to several much smaller and more manageable fires.

“Raff, we need to take a break,” Em told him. “The buckets can handle this now.”

Raff looked up the hill and saw that the thick black clouds of the previous afternoon seemed thinner and grayer. “You’re right,” he decided. “Let’s get a few hours of sleep and then come back and see what we can do.”

The Way to Taundon

One

Even with the help of the wayfarers, the fires remained a problem for the next several days. Frequently a blaze that had appeared to be dead would come back to life when the heat would dry out the wood again, but Raff, Em and the others were able to raise smaller spouts of water to help quench those fires as they sprang up.

Raff and Em wanted to stay in the city to help with the aftermath, but Master Einzer told them otherwise, “I’m afraid I have your marching orders here direct from Taundon. They just arrived this morning.”

“Orders, Jakob?” Raff asked. “We’re freelancers. The Guild can request our services, it can refuse to give us a job, but it cannot order us about.”

“It’s just an expression, Raff,” Einzer told him tiredly. “The Guild Council is requesting your presence in Taundon at your earliest convenience to handle a matter of the gravest sensitivity.”

“Does the packet say what that matter is?” Raff asked.

“Sorry, no,” Einzer shrugged.

“Raff, we were planning to return to Taundon after the symposium anyway,” Em reminded him. “We promised Kaz to spend the summer with him. Remember?” Kazani Basan had been a refugee on the Southern Continent some years earlier when Raff and Em adopted him. Kaz was a naturally strong wayfarer in his own right and after their shared trip to the Far East, they had put him in school to complete his education. This fall he would be ready to start at the University at Dunbridge, but for the summer he would be continuing his Wayfarer’s Guild apprenticeship.

“We did,” Raff agreed. “Well, I suppose we can say our goodbyes and leave this afternoon.”

“Tomorrow morning, if you don’t mind,” Einzer put in. “I have a small party that needs an escort to the west and since you’re headed that way...”

“Of course,” Raff nodded.

They made their way back to the University, skirting past the area of destruction. The king of Holrany had issued military tents for the homeless following the fire in his capital city and the small parks were filled with them. “The only good part,” Rojer Harkermor commented when they finally found him, “is that we are just coming into summer. I fear we would lose far more than we did had this happened during the winter.”

“When are you returning to Senopolis, Rojer?” Em asked.

“Not until next summer at the very least,” he replied. “I have so many observations to tally up and there’s no time to get there and back again before the fall term commences. One sabbatical at a time,” he sighed.

“Well, have a good year and we’ll keep in touch,” Raff promised, shaking the scientist’s hand.

The travelers they were to escort were an assorted lot this time. Several were scholars returning home from the symposium, two were mechanics off to install a new printing press in Dix. They filled a large wagon all by themselves. There was also a group of musicians en route to Carais and a novelist from Yug who told Em he was headed to Taundon to do research for his next book.

“What sort of research?” Em asked as their carriage began to move. In front of them, Raff was driving the wagon filled with the musicians. They had decided to practice as they rode and the air was filled with a brisk marching theme.

“I want to get to know the city and the area around it,” the author told her. “And I am learning about all the countries I pass through on my way there as well. It will make my stories more interesting than if they all take place in Yug. People like to read about faraway places. I suppose I could just write about my journey, but I prefer to make up stories and set them in fascinating locations.”

“I’ve always thought Taundon was a fairly mundane sort of place,” Em remarked. “Very large, but fairly commonplace none the less.”

“Not to my readers,” he insisted. “To a person in Tartha, Taundon is quite exotic, indeed. It is a large and powerful city filled with strange people. Your customs and lifestyles are quite foreign to us, I assure you. Our city is filled with ancient ruins and monuments. Tourists come from other lands to see them, but we see them every day. To us they are nothing special. But the Bridge of Taundon is legendary to us.”

“Which bridge is that?” Em asked.

“Isn’t there a great bridge crossing the river into Taundon?” he asked.

“Several of them, actually,” Em replied. “And Taundon has neighborhoods on both sides of the Ruane River in much the same way Carais spans the Eaune. I suppose one might have more of a history than the others but I grew up in Crace. To me all the bridges are more or less the same.”

“Is perhaps one bridge larger than the rest?” he pressed.

“Well, they do vary in size,” Em admitted, “and, if pressed, I’d say the Middletown Bridge is somewhat grander than the others. You can judge for yourself when we get there.”

“Oh, I’m only travelling as far as Dix on this trip,” he told her. “I’m in no hurry. This way I can get to know a bit about each country I visit. After Dix, I intend to sail to the Green Lands and from there go home by way of Crace, Maggo, Tendolo, Tinap and Paknilan.”

“That’s quite a trip,” Em admitted. “You must be a very successful author to be able to afford to take so much time away from your writing.”

“I write as I go along and send stories back to my publisher in Tartha,” he told her. “Before I came to Holrany, I visited parts of Kharasia and Pernatia as well. I’ll have been away over two years by the time I get home. Maybe next time I’ll try to visit Varana or Maceno. The western colonies fascinate me, but the expense was beyond my means this time around. I did not wish to indenture myself just to see the new lands.”

“You could have traveled in steerage class on a ship,” Em suggested.

“I’m afraid I like my comfort too much,” he laughed.

The carriage Em was driving might have moved faster, but the two wagons were slower conveyances so it was of no surprise when on their third day out of Manrich a large black carriage with gold trim, drawn by a team of six large horses, caught up to them. The road they were following was just a narrow path of packed dirt and the ground beside that trace was too soft to handle the weight of the mechanics’ wagon so there was no passing on this part of the road, but that did not stop the driver of the carriage from making demands.

"Make way!" he shouted ahead to them. "I carry Her Grace, the Archduchess of Borrein and fiancée to the Dauphin of Crace. Make way!"

Raff looked over his shoulder and shook his head slightly. The carriage driver shouted his demands once again and Raff drew the lead wagon to a halt, stepped down from his seat and walked back casually toward the waiting carriage.

"How dare you impede the progress of Therese, Archduchess of Borrein?" the driver demanded. "Who do you think you are, fellow? Move your wagons or I shall whip you within an inch of your life."

"I'd pay good money to see you try," Raff replied. "I am Master Raff Cawlens of the Guild of Wayfarers, by whose grace Her Grace travels at all. The Guild's rules apply here in the Wild, not Her Grace's nor even His Majesty's. This road is too narrow and the shoulder too soft for us to pull off. You can wait until we reach a more favorable location."

"What?" the driver demanded angrily, raising his long horse whip.

"Silence, you fool!" a woman's voice snapped at the driver from within the carriage. "You have not the right to make such demands of your betters."

Just then a man opened the door of the carriage and jumped out. "My apologies, Master Cawlens," the journeyman wayfarer told him abjectly. "The driver did not realize he was addressing a Guild master."

"My rank does not matter in this case, sir," Raff responded coldly. "The road cannot support two vehicles driving abreast at this point. You know Guild law in this situation or if not, you ought to."

"I'm very sorry, Master Cawlens," the journeyman repeated. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," Raff told him, only slightly less angrily.

"Excuse me, Master Wayfarer," Archduchess Theresa asked, stepping out of her carriage, "is that true?" She was not a tall woman, perhaps a mere five feet tall in her stocking feet. As it happened her long heels kept trying to sink into the dirt. Her dress, while still entirely inappropriate for traveling in, Raff knew was fairly simple compared to what she might have worn in court. At first Raff thought she was wearing an elaborate wig, but in fact it was her natural hair piled up artistically on her head and he estimated that it had taken hours to arrange. Seeing two other women peeking out of the carriage, obviously maids, he realized who had done the work, although it struck him as a monumental waste of time and even more so when traveling. Most of all she was young, being at the most sixteen years of age, possibly much less. "Is all rank forgotten in the Wild?"

"Forgotten, your grace?" Raff countered. "No, indeed, but it does not count for much. Out here everything must be done fairly. First come, first served."

"How egalitarian," she mused dryly.

"It is done for reasons of mutual safety, your grace," Em put in as she approached, "but we are not entirely lacking in courtesy. Your driver could have requested space to pass us had your need been greater than ours. Had he asked politely we would have granted the request at our earliest opportunity. He did not ask, however. He demanded. He attempted to order a wayfarer, two wayfarers, actually, going about their business. Even a Guildmaster would not have attempted to order another wayfarer off the path for his own convenience."

“And you are?” Theresa asked.

“My wife,” Raff performed the introduction, “Master Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens.”

“L’Oranne?” Theresa asked. “You are related, perhaps, to Baron Orseilles?”

“My father,” Em admitted.

“Ah,” Theresa sighed. “I believe I have heard of you, Madame L’Oranne Cawlens.”

“Master, your grace,” Em corrected her. “The only title I use is my Guild rank. It’s the only one that has meaning to me.”

“Hmm, perhaps we should travel together for a while,” Theresa suggested. “As your husband suggested my business is not so vital that I must rush. My fiancé will wait an extra day or two. Would you like to travel in my coach?”

“Guild rules require that since I am driving I must stay with the travelers I am escorting. Since we are to travel together you can sit with me, however,” Em offered the young archduchess.

“But you are sitting on the driver’s bench in front of your carriage,” Theresa objected automatically.

“It’s not so bad,” Em chuckled. “I might even let you drive for a while.”

Theresa smiled in spite of herself, shrugged and followed Em back to the carriage. A few minutes later they were moving once again. “This is actually fun, is it not, Master Emblem?” Theresa asked.

“The novelty wears off after a while,” Em admitted. “So you are to wed the Dauphin.”

“Charles, yes,” Theresa nodded.

“The last dozen kings have been named Charles,” Em informed her. “I’ve never been sure why, but it does make memorizing the King List in Crace easier than in the Green Lands.

“And now they have a queen, Julia, no?” Theresa asked.

“Yes, poor thing,” Em sighed.

“Why do you say, ‘poor thing?’” Theresa asked.

“The king died suddenly in a freak hunting accident,” Em explained, “and Her Majesty was thrust on to the throne years, maybe decades, before she might normally have been. I would not wish that on anyone.”

“I see,” the archduchess nodded. “I have heard you were once engaged to the Duke of Bur.”

“He was not the duke at the time,” Em replied, “but yes, I was. If ever there was an incompatible couple that was us. The man is a beast, although I was no prize either. My father packaged me off to Bur with almost no notice and I spared no effort in expressing my displeasure. The old duke had the patience of a saint, but Henri is a very sick man and is only happy when beating someone else. I might have just

tried to run away had I known, but instead I goaded Henri until he lost control. He had been hitting and beating me here and there when the old duke could not catch him, but when I insulted him one day when riding near the edge of the Wild, he tried to kill me. The pain is what woke up my wayfarer abilities. In an instant the tables were turned on him. My temper can be as fiery as my red hair and I drew in the Wild energies and wove them around Henri in a way that abused his mind to the same degree he had been abusing my body.

“I didn’t know I was calling for help,” Em went on, “but a unicorn came to my aid and gored Henri with his horn, but I ran into the Wild and kept running until I ended up half-dead in Southern Voland. The old duke had hired Raff to find me and he did, but because I was such a powerful wayfarer he did not bring me back to Bur and instead sponsored me into the Guild. I am not the only noble-born Guildsman, you know, but there are only a handful of us. The noble life is one of great privilege and luxury and most of us do not care to put all that aside in favor of the life of a nomad, which is pretty much what a wayfarer in the field is, you know.

“Raff and I have a home in the Green Lands, but we spend very little time there,” Em admitted. “We adopted a young native of the Southern Continent, a boy with strong wayfaring talent and we got the home so he would have a stable place to grow up in.”

“But you don’t see him very often either, do you?” Theresa prompted.

“Not since enrolling him in preparatory school,” Em replied. “But he graduated this spring and will be going to University this autumn. That’s why we’re headed back to Taundon, in fact. We promised to spend the summer with him.”

“And you truly do not miss your old life?” Theresa asked.

“I would rather be dead than the Duchess of Bur,” Em replied, “and being a Wayfarer suits me. It’s hard work, yes, but satisfying and I have been places and seen things that few others have. I have riches no queen could ever have or afford, your grace. Why should I want to return to the life of a baron’s daughter where my prestige came from my birth and my potential marriage? Far better to have both rank and prestige I earned for myself.”

“I have heard it takes a lot of training to be a wayfarer,” Theresa commented.

“To be a master wayfarer, yes,” Emblem replied. “Although our training is as much about what not to do as it is about how to do it. A master wayfarer is capable of almost anything when in the Wild, but if we do not want to become monsters we must learn control.”

“Why?” Theresa asked. “What sorts of things can you do?”

“Out here?” Em countered. “Almost anything I put my mind to. I could make the path we are on shorter, for example. This path was forged by a master wayfarer, probably centuries ago. Whoever it was created it by impressing a thin line of stability into the Wild. It is what we are following, far more than the ruts in the road. If this were an emergency, I could make the path shorter. In essence I would be pulling the next town closer to us so we would not have to travel as far.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“There is a natural distance between all objects, your grace,” Em replied.

“Call me Theresa,” the archduchess replied. “We are traveling companions and as your husband said, rank counts for nothing in the Wild, does it not, Emblem?”

“Em,” Em corrected her and then went on. “The natural distance is that, which if left alone, two locations would be. A wayfarer can warp the Wild to make them closer, but they would eventually stretch back to their normal distance and if the wayfarer brings them too close together, his path might break when they recede to their natural distance from each other. If that happens people can be hurt or killed, so we rarely shorten the distance between two places and when we do, we are careful to limit ourselves that way.”

Theresa was silent for a few minutes, looking around at the Holran countryside. Then she told Em, “I do not understand this Wild. Why do we call it that. It seems perfectly normal out here to me except there are no people and no towns or cities.”

“There are, actually,” Em told her. “The Ken live in the Wild and they have many cities and towns and paved roads between them. But the reason you do not see the difference is that you do not have a wayfarer’s eyes. I can see many differences between the Wild and an area of stability. Above us, I can see the wind moving in a dozen strands of color. I can also see the Wild energy flowing around us, both preserving and changing the world. It is something a non-wayfarer can never see but which even the least talented apprentice can. It is part of what makes us what we are.”

“But what makes it Wild?” Theresa asked.

“That’s the wrong question,” Em replied, echoing one of her teachers. “The Wild is the natural state of the world. Humans make stabilities. Our very presence causes them to exist. The more of us who get together, the larger a stability becomes. That is why the area of a city is so much larger than that of a town. Towns can grow into cities if their population grows and they will get larger in area as well, and cities can grow smaller and disappear if the people leave. Stability is something we, and to a lesser extent our domesticated animals, carry with us naturally. Everything a wayfarer does comes down to changing stability into Wild energy or vice versa.”

Two

Archduchess Theresa continued to travel with them even as they passed the normal turning point that would have taken her directly to Carais and instead stayed with them as they entered Dix.

“What a delightful place this is,” Theresa remarked one morning as they traveled through an area of flower-covered hills. “I have heard that Dix is a land of flowers, but did not truly believe it until now.”

"Well, this isn't really Dix," Em remarked. "It's the Wild within Dix, but yes there are many flowers here and the Dixans have harvested and bred the Wild flowers into many new domesticated varieties for the last two centuries. Most of them are springtime and early summer flowers, however. The land looks very different, indeed, come autumn."

"Don't we all, Em," Theresa sighed, pausing to listen to the musicians in Raff's wagon.

"What do you mean?" Em asked her.

"We grow and change, do we not?" Theresa asked.

"I suppose," Em allowed, "I'm not sure it is something to obsess over. What are you really worried about?"

"Can wayfarers read minds?" Theresa asked suddenly.

"No," Em replied. "Some can detect whether or not a person is telling the truth, but we cannot see what someone is thinking. Even truth-telling takes a lot of concentration so it is not something one does as a matter of course and it is not as useful as you might think in any case. People delude themselves about many things and if they think they are telling the truth then no wayfarer in the world can tell otherwise."

"I am uncertain about my pending marriage," Theresa blurted out suddenly.

"Yeah, no kidding," Em chuckled gently.

"You knew?"

"It's not exactly a well-kept secret, Theresa," Em replied. "You have avoided talking about Charles or your marriage since we met and choosing to take this detour into Dix is not something an eager young bride is likely to do either. I understand your hesitation, but I don't think you have much to worry about. Charles is not Henri. He does not take pleasure from the pain of others. If you must be nervous it should be about becoming dauphine and later the queen of Crace."

"That does not worry me," Theresa told her confidently.

"It should," Em disagreed. "You are not Cracian and I doubt you truly understand the people of Crace just yet. That is something you can and will, no doubt, learn, but you must keep in mind there is a vast distance between the common people and the noblemen of Crace. As the daughter of a baron I did not realize how bad that situation was until I had been a wayfarer and living in the Green Lands for some years. In most countries, even your native Holrany, the commons, gentry, nobility and royalty are all part of the nation. Taxes are paid upward, but charity extends downward and while the privileged elite are much better off than the commons the life of a commoner is not really so bad.

"I should know," Em continued. "As a wayfarer, I must deal with people of all ranks and stations equally. A master wayfarer is not just a guide through the Wild, he or she must act as a judge when complete impartiality is required. We are the last refuge of anyone seeking justice. We can and will rule against kings in favor of beggars if that is the right of a matter, not that such cases come up very often, but we must be prepared to be blind to rank. If you ever must be judged by a wayfarer, Theresa, be advised that your rank in his court will be the same as it is here in the Wild."

"He would rule against me?" Theresa asked, disbelievingly.

“Only if you are wrong,” Em replied. “Try not to be wrong. Wayfarers must also, sometimes hunt down criminals. Master Wayfarers are very good at finding things and people who are lost. It is how Raff found me in Voland, but we’re off the subject. I’m warning you about Crace. The nobles, you will see, live such opulent lives they almost always fail to see the squalor many of the commoners must live in. There are more beggars in Carais than any other city in the world. Many foods are too expensive even for prosperous commoners to eat very often. The people pay their taxes, but get almost nothing for those taxes.”

“What do they expect to get?” Theresa asked, confused.

“The reason taxes are necessary at all,” Em told her, “are to pay for the protection of all. They pay for the city streets. They pay for the police and in those places that have fire companies. If you follow the chain of money far enough, they pay for at least some of our churches, since the money nobles donate has to come from somewhere, does it not?”

“Well, I suppose,” Theresa admitted.

“The taxes are also used to pay for public buildings, the building of the army and navy and the functioning of the government,” Em told her. “And some of those taxes, in most nations, come back to the people in the form of charity. My point is, in Crace there is less charity than anywhere else. Commons benefit less from the products of their taxes than in any other nation and it is my opinion that if that is not corrected, one day the nobility and the royalty will have to pay far more than a few coins to fix that.

“So, young dauphine-to-be,” Em concluded, “keep your eyes open. Do not take your sweet life for granted for it is granted to you by the labor of the commons. Learn to give back as much and more than you get, because so far with each generation the differences between the lives of the commons and the nobles becomes greater and just as there is a natural distance between two locations, there is also a natural distance between the commons and those who rule. If the distance is stretched too far the paths between you and the commons will break and people will die.”

“You overstate the matter, I am sure,” Theresa laughed nervously.

“Perhaps,” Em allowed, “but if I am wrong and you follow my advice anyway, no one will be hurt and many will fare better. If I am right, well, I have seen what happens if a path in the Wild is broken. I suspect fixing that is child’s play compared to fixing a broken society.”

Theresa nodded silently and a few minutes later went back to chatting about the flowers. The next morning she bid Em farewell and continued southward into Crace while the rest of the party headed west.

“I don’t think she understood a thing I said,” Em told Raff later that day.

“I’m not surprised,” Raff replied. “She hasn’t ever had to deal with commoners really, not outside her circle of servants. She has never had to actually see the people in the streets. From her point of view the commons are there to benefit her and keep her fed and comfortable. All her concerns are in dealing with other noblemen and women. As I recall, you were amazed at how blind you had been too.”

“I was,” Em admitted, “but I would like to think I would have opened my eyes had someone been there to help me, so I tried to help her that way. It just did not sink in, though. I may as well have been reciting fairy tales or describing Tamag Methin for all the relevance it had to her.”

“You don’t really know that,” Raff disagreed. “She may not have understood what you were telling her, but she might possibly remember it and, some years from now, maybe she will finally understand.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Em breathed. “Raff, why did the Guild ever allow Crace to become so top-heavy? Why are the nobles so disconnected from the commons?”

“The Guild can’t right all the wrongs in the world, Em. You know that,” Raff replied. “And we cannot step in where we are not asked to. No one has ever asked us to judge a case between the commons and nobility of Crace to determine a fair and equitable division of creature comforts. We’ve never been asked to judge such a case anywhere. I’m not even sure how such a case could be framed. The Cracian nobles are not breaking any laws. Certainly the division between them and their people is not fair, but not everything in life is fair, sad to say.”

They arrived in Dinnensburg the next day where the mechanics were to install their press. Dinnensburg was a fair-sized city, at least as large as the capital of Dix, Farnsdam. However, none of the buildings stood taller than three stories save for the large church at the center of the city. The streets of the city, however, were amazingly straight and one of the musicians commented on that.

“Dinnensburg is a fairly new city,” Raff explained. “It is less than one hundred years old and the early settlers here planned it carefully. I think it was originally a small town with a central marketplace, but when the population began to expand, the townsfolk evidently did not want their streets to wave around aimlessly like they do in some cities where no planning was involved at all. I believe this is where I’ll be losing you, by the way. But there should be another wayfarer to take you south within a few days.”

“We’ll be staying in town for a week at least,” the musician replied. “We’re well ahead of schedule which is why we did not head directly to Carais with the duchess. She did invite us, you know.”

“I think she enjoyed progressing across the countryside to music,” Raff chuckled. “So you plan to perform here?”

“Of course,” the musician replied. “Just as we have in each town we stopped in. But this is a larger settlement so it can afford to have us longer than most.”

They arrived at the local guildhall from which an apprentice guided the mechanics to their destination several blocks away and the musicians set off to find a place in which to perform. The writer and the three remaining scholars would be staying with Raff and Em overnight in the guildhall and Raff had hoped to be able to join Em in her carriage, but the local guild master had other ideas.

“I have a small party headed west to Wolterdam,” Master Hans Goelding. “Three merchants in their own wagon and a priest escorting a young girl to relatives there.”

“The priest and his charge can ride with Em,” Raff decided. “I’ll stay with the merchants. It would have been nice to ride with my wife, though.”

“You’re headed for Taundon, aren’t you?” Hans asked.

“We are.”

“Crossing from Wolterdam should allow you some time together,” Hans pointed out.

Raff and Em spent a quiet evening in the small guildhall and went to bed early that night. After a quick breakfast the next morning, they loaded their charges up and set off on the pathway west.

They stopped for lunch at noon near a busy canal. "I wonder why we aren't travelling to Wolterdam by boat or barge," one of the academics wondered.

"This canal does not go to Wolterdam," the priest, Father Johann, told him. "If we were headed for Farnsdam, we could go that way, however."

"Father, I've been unable to attend services since leaving Manrich," the scientist continued. "Master Cawlens has led us in prayers when we felt the need, but I would feel better if a priest conducted services."

"Of course, my son," Father Johann replied, with a note of uncertainty. "This evening, perhaps?"

"I was hoping we might do a 'service of the road' as we traveled," the man replied.

"Uh, yes, if you like," Father Johann replied. "You'll have to understand I have never performed a service while travelling."

Em raised an eyebrow in surprise, but got it back under control and replied, "It's really not so different, Father. We just recite the required prayers, sing a psalm as it seems appropriate and that's it. No sermon, no personal blessings or benedictions."

"Ah, I see," the priest replied.

"Well, let's clean up and we can be on our way. Katerin, would you help me rinse the dishes, dear?"

"Yes, Master Cawlens," the girl replied politely. "You don't want to wash them in the canal, do you? It doesn't look very clean."

"Not exactly, dear," Em replied. "There's a basin on the back of the carriage. Would you get it?" Katerin rushed off to get the basin and met Em closer to the canal a few moments later. "You might enjoy this," Em told her, and with an effort of will she used a bit of Kenlentan magic to lift a sphere of water from the dirty canal. Then, using her wayfarer's command over the Wild energy all around them, she separated all the mud and other foreign substances from the mass until all that was left was pure water, which she caused to fall slowly into the waiting basin. Another touch of magic warmed the water up to an appropriate temperature and she announced, "Now we can wash. Did you like that?"

"Indeed, Master Cawlens," the girl replied, but something bothered her. "Without soap?"

"I have some here," Em told her, producing a lumpy ball from a small pouch she had brought from the carriage.

Em rolled up her sleeves to work but as Katerin did the same, Em spotted a nasty bruise on the girl's left arm. "Oh my!" Em gasped. "That looks painful, dear."

"It's not so bad," Katerin denied quickly, rolling the sleeve back down again, but as she did in haste, she exposed a small portion of another large bruise on her shoulder.

"Why you're bruised all over!" Em exclaimed. "Who did this to you?"

“No one did,” Katerin told her nervously. “I fell down. That’s all. I do that a lot.”

“You do?” Em asked skeptically.

“Uh huh!” Katerin nodded and started washing dishes industriously.

Em said nothing else, but shot a glance at Father Johann, who appeared to be fumbling through a small book of prayers with the men.

“He didn’t seem very comfortable conducting services, Em. No,” Raff told her that evening when they could speak in private, “but not every priest leads services. Quite a few do other jobs for the Church, you know.”

“I’ve never met one who needed a book to conduct a ‘service of the road,’ Raff,” Em told him. “And I swear he was singing that psalm just a little behind the rest of you.”

“Melodies do differ from parish to parish,” Raff told her, “but I will admit, his Meni was a bit halting and heavily accented. Why are you worried, though?”

“Raff, you didn’t see Katerin’s bruises.” Em replied. “She claims she just fell down, but I’m certain somebody did that to her and she’s traveling with that priest.”

“She could be traveling with him for her protection too, Em,” Raff pointed out, “and they are in separate rooms, you know.”

“And Father Johann could walk down the hall at any time,” Em replied darkly.

“If it makes you happy, I can ensure they will both sleep throughout the night,” Raff sighed.

“I’ll do that,” Em told him decisively.

“You do the girl,” Raff told her. “I’ll do the good father. You’re already biased against him, but I know you’ll keep a light touch when putting Katerin to sleep.”

If either Father Johann or Katerin has suspected they had been knocked out the night before, they gave no sign of it the next morning. The party ate breakfast and then headed for the wagon and carriage.

“Don’t forget your bag, Katerin,” Father Johann reminded her.

“Yes, Papa,” Katerin responded and rushed back to her room.

Em shot a look at Raff, but he whispered, “It means ‘father,’ and you know some small parishes in Dix use that term instead.”

“Then why did he look so alarmed when she called him that?” Em asked equally softly.

“Keep an eye on them, Em,” Raff decided. “We have several days before we reach Wolterdam. There’s time to discern the truth, I think. These things are never as simple as they seem at first.”

She nodded reluctantly as they went to join the others.

Three

Eastern Dix was a land of low hills and placid rivers, but western Dix was all low country. A full quarter of the country was actually below sea level because of the vast levees that had been built, starting during the previous century to increase the amount of habitable land. The levees were still being built and many acres of land were reclaimed each year. While large tracts of this reclaimed land were technically in the Wild area, Raff and Em noted that it was, if possible, less Wild than those areas that were above sea-level.

The Kenlienta, the people who lived in the Wild, had in recent years complained that human actions had been polluting the Wild and causing it to become tainted by stability. Their complaints, Raff and Em knew, were valid and would need to be dealt with before too long, and this reclaimed land seemed to justify the claims of the Ken Nation. They could see that the pathways were more robust and wider. Normal paths were but a thin line of stability but these were as wide as any avenue in Carais and were almost enough for non-wayfarers to follow. And the area of stability their party carried with them was much larger than it had been while they were still in the hills.

There were no Ken settlements in these reclaimed areas, but some Wild animals had adapted to the area. As they came into the low country, there was a chorus of shrieks from above and before Raff or Em could do more than look up, a flock of seven red wyverns attacked the travelers.

Wyverns were winged, reptilian creatures, distantly related to dragons, although smaller and more gracile in build. There were several species of wyvern around the world, but the red ones were the smallest variety. Barely larger than a turkey a single creature was rarely a threat, but seven of them acting in concert were a danger to any small party.

Both Raff and Em started to draw on the Wild energy to defend the party, but before they could act, Katerin stood up in the open carriage and pointed at the attacking wyverns.

“Katerin, no!” Father Johann cried, aghast. But rather than desist, the girl continued to point as bright orange beams of power shot from her fingertips and struck each of the seven wyverns in turn. The creatures squawked angrily but she shot at them again and again and, finally, after one had fallen to the ground dead, the others screeched and half ran and half flew away as fast as they could.

“Katerin,” Father Johann moaned sadly.

“That was most impressive,” Em remarked, looking at the girl with admiration. “What else can you do?”

“Please don’t punish her!” Father Johann begged.

“Punish her?” Em echoed. “Commend her is more like it. Reward her if I can, but punish? Never! Katerin, how did you do that? Can you show me?” Katerin, remained standing in the carriage and stared at her own hand. She shook her head slightly and there was fear in her eyes.

“It wasn’t wayfaring,” Raff commented. “It was something else.”

“I think it was Kenlienta magic,” Em replied. “It’s very rare for a human to be able to use it naturally like this, though. That’s why I wanted to see it again. Katerin, is that why you have those bruises, honey?”

“We have to move around a lot,” Johann admitted, “but each time we do, something happens and we are found out. They call her ‘witch’ and blame her for every bad thing that has ever happened to them. We barely escaped with our lives last time. All because my Katerin saved a man falling off a roof.”

“Any wayfarer should have been able to recognize her abilities for what they were,” Raff noted. “Why didn’t the local guildhall shelter you two?”

“We never told them,” Johann admitted. “We didn’t know.”

“I can see the paths,” Katerin admitted.

“She can follow them with difficulty,” Johann added, “so we would sneak out to the next village and then quietly join a wayfaring party there so as to arrive in a new town in a normal-seeming manner.”

“The Guild would have given you sanctuary,” Em told them, “and seen to her education. Anyone who can use magic and wayfaring skills without formal training like Katerin can is wanted and needed by the Guild.”

“I did not know that,” Johann admitted.

“You are from a small village originally?” Raff asked. Johann nodded. “That would explain it. You never had a regular wayfarer stationed nearby, just the occasional party coming through, and when you looked for a new home you naturally stayed out of the larger towns and cities, opting instead for a place that reminded you of home.” Johann nodded again.

“Well, you’re both in our care now,” Em told him firmly. “And next time, young woman, don’t lie about your bruises. You’ll soon learn that any master wayfarer can tell when you aren’t speaking the truth. That’s something we’ll teach you soon enough too, I should think.”

“Really?” Katerin asked.

“Really!” Em confirmed.

“Let’s keep moving,” Raff decided. “Wolterdam is still another two days journey away.”

“Katerin, child,” Em invited, “why don’t you ride up here with me? Maybe we can teach each other a few new tricks, hmm?” The girl nodded shyly and joined Em on the driver’s bench. An hour later they were laughing and showing each other all sorts of things they could do by manipulating Wild energy.

Wolterdam was the second largest city in Dix and, situated on the coast as it was, seemed to rise up as they approached across the Dixan lowlands. Katerin sat, mouth agape, never having seen such a large area of stability. To a wayfarer, a stability from the outside looked like a dome of glass as if in the act of being shaped by a glass blower, save that it was not red hot. They could see the surface wobble and grow and contract as the population within moved around or left for other places altogether.

Cities had a sort of gravity all their own and smaller towns had a tendency to congregate near them so that as they approached Wolterdam they could see several smaller domes in the distance, not too far from the city. The very largest cities somehow caused those satellite towns to orbit them, completing a circular course every two or three decades or less. Such movement had a tendency to break wayfarer paths and kept the Guild busy in the larger cities, but Wolterdam had a feature that kept its satellites from completing a circuit.

Along its western edge, snaking somewhat from southwest to northeast was a long and tall artificial hill. It was one of the famous Dixan levees and it kept the sea from flooding the land mostly just by being a dam of earth and stone, but also with a touch of stability that must have been supplied by one or more master wayfarers. The harbor of Wolterdam was actually part of the levee in a wide bowl only partially enclosed by the huge earthwork which, to the northeast, stretched well out of sight.

“That always makes me sad,” Raff admitted to the merchants.

“What does?”

“The sight of the levee,” Raff explained. “It is artificial, it won’t last forever. Someday, centuries from now perhaps, hopefully, all this will be under the sea once again.”

“It looks strong enough to me,” the merchant opined.

“Oh, we’re in no danger,” Raff laughed. “With maintenance the levees may last a thousand years or more, but nothing man makes lasts forever. I’ve seen some of the oldest buildings ever made, they are nothing but ruins now. Someday when people no longer live here, that great artificial hill will be nothing but a long line of thin islands barely sticking up out of the sea.”

“Dix is a great nation,” the merchant argued. “One of the Powers. We have colonies on the Southern Continent and in the East.”

“And at one time you had a colony in Varana too,” Raff reminded him. “It belongs to the Green Lands now. All civilization rises and falls with its economy. As a merchant you ought to be in a position to appreciate that. Perhaps one day Dix will rule the world, or maybe she has seen her best days and is now in decline. Look at the Meninan Empire, or the Empire of Tasaea, both great Powers in their day. Now they are but memories. One day the Powers we know will go the same way. Perhaps the colonies will become the new Powers, or maybe I’m not being imaginative enough, sir. Who’s to say all men won’t come together in a single world government like the Ken. For now, however, all that is idle speculation. You have your business to take care of and I have places to go and things to do of my own. And it’s not a bad old world just now, don’t you think?”

“The best of all possible worlds,” the merchant agreed.

“The best?” Raff echoed. “I hope not. I’d like to think the best is yet to come.”

Four

“There are no ships headed for the Green Lands at the moment, Raff,” the local guild master, Piers Tounnerman, informed him. “I could give you a party to escort to Belis from which you are almost guaranteed instant passage to Denmouth, or you can wait here in Wolterdam until a ship comes in. It probably won’t be more than a few days. It usually isn’t.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Raff replied, “I’ll take a few days off and wait for the next ship headed our way. Except for a few days in Manrich, I’ve been on the move for months now.”

“Fine by me,” Piers nodded. “For once I don’t have a shortage of wayfarers I can assign. Enjoy your vacation.”

The vacation only lasted a few hours, however. The next morning, while Raff and Em were walking through the East Market, an argument got out of hand.

A crowd began to gather when two well-dressed men started shouting at each other. Neither Raff nor Em heard the actual argument, but when a pair of shots rang out and people started screaming and running in every direction at once, they fought their way to the center of the disturbance to find one man on the street with a bullet in his back and the other with a smoking flintlock pistol in his hand. A third man stood just in front of the man with the pistol looking totally aghast.

“What happened here?” Raff shouted over the shouts and screams in the area.

“I didn’t shoot him!” the armed man denied. “I didn’t.”

“Your gun has obviously been fired,” Em pointed out.

“Not at Nillson, I didn’t.”

“Nillson?” Raff asked. “The man in the black suit?”

“Makel Nillson,” the third man replied.

“And you two are?” Raff asked in no-nonsense tones.

“Jasson Goss, at your service, sir,” he replied. “My friend is Fredrik Mahon. Are you police?”

“Wayfarer,” Raff replied. “Master Raff Cawlens, at your service. My wife, Master Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens. You do realize the initial evidence is against you, Mister Mahon?”

“I did not shoot Nillson,” Mahon insisted. “I shot at the man who shot him. Willam Danson.”

“You shot him,” another nearby man accused. “I saw it.” There was the sound of police whistles on the other side of the market.

“No!” Mahon denied again. “We were arguing, yes, but it was Danson who shot him.”

“Where is this Danson?” Em asked. She turned to Jasson Goss and asked, “Did you see him?”

“I didn’t,” Goss admitted unwillingly, “but there were two shots.”

“Mister Mahon’s gun has two barrels,” Raff pointed out.

“But one is still loaded,” Mahon told him.

Just then the police arrived and took over the investigation. Mahon surrendered his gun willingly as the police arrested him and asked several others including Raff and Em to come with them to the city police station.

Two hours later they had just finished giving their statements and were on their way out the door when Master Tounnerman arrived at the station. “Raff, what are you and Emblem doing here?”

“We were on hand this morning when a man was killed,” Raff replied. “We started asking questions – force of habit, I suppose – and got rounded up with a handful of other witnesses.”

“So you saw what happened?” Piers asked.

“Not hardly,” Raff replied. “We saw a crowd gathering and then heard a pair of shots. That’s it. Since then we’ve been waiting our turn to say so. One hell of a way to spend a vacation.”

“Then I may as well ruin it a bit more. The Guild has been asked to help out on the investigation and I was going to ask you two to take the job,” Piers told him. “Since you were there it seems you already have a head start.”

“What the heck,” Raff sighed, “All this time off is bad for my health anyway, it seems.”

They followed Piers back inside where they learned the known details they had not yet discovered for themselves.

“Following a loud and public argument, the victim, a Mister Makel Nillson was shot in the back this morning in East Market,” the detective summarized. “The suspect, Fredrik Mahon, a local banker, was found with a double-barreled pistol in his hand that appeared to have been fired once, but he, of course, claims he did not kill Nillson. The witnesses we spoke to are mixed on whether Mahon shot Nillson. Some say he did, some deny it. Only Mahon and one other witness actually saw a second gunman. Mahon tells us the second gunman is Willam Danson, a travelling merchant. We sent out a pair of constables to question Danson, but they have not been able to find him, but even if there was a second man with a pistol and he was Danson, there is no proof that he, not Mahon, killed Nillson.”

“There is one way,” Raff pointed out. “Has the ball that killed Nillson been recovered from his body yet?”

“It probably deformed on impact,” the detective replied. “They usually do, so it won’t be easy to see if it would fit in the barrel of Mahon’s gun.”

“It seems to me that with adequate study, there is probably a way to estimate pistol ball size even after impact. If nothing else the volume of metal would be a fair indication,” Raff argued, “but the gun and the projectile had a close relationship and a master wayfarer can trace that relationship under certain circumstances and possibly use it to track down the person who fired the gun.”

“What circumstances?” the detective asked.

“Making the attempt as soon as possible is the most important,” Raff replied. “You see the gun and the ball leave a trace of stability that stays connected for a day or maybe two. It is similar to traces left by people as they pass. If you move the ball too far from the gun the trace will break and dissipate almost instantly, but so long as they have remained close enough, I can use the bullet to find the gun that fired it. If it Mahon’s gun you’ll have your proof. If not, you’ll have proof he did not kill Nillson.”

“I’ll have proof his gun did not fire the lethal shot,” the detective replied, “but not that he was not involved in the killing. He was seen arguing with the victim just prior to his death. You’ll need to find the owner of the gun that did kill Nillson. If it is this Willam Danson we will need to interrogate him in order to clear Mahon of any complicity in the crime. Nillson evidently issued several provocative insults to Mahon just prior to the shooting.”

“What was the relationship between Nillson and Mahon?” Em asked.

“As I told you, Mahon is a noted banker here in Wolterdam. He has business dealings with many people,” the detective replied. “Nillson is a business owner, a haberdasher, in fact. Mahon claims the argument involved the terms of a loan that was about to come due.”

“And Nillson was probably unable to pay,” Raff interpreted. “It would explain Nillson’s anger, but killing a man who owes you money is a good way to make sure you never get paid.”

“He was insulted, Master Cawlens,” the Detective pointed out. “Perhaps the insult was mortal. A man can lose his head in such a case and act out of passion.”

“Yes, I’ve seen it often enough,” Raff agreed, “but Mahon doesn’t seem like the sort. I thought his reactions were all wrong directly after the gunshots. They did not seem like the reactions of a man who had just killed, more like those of a man who had failed to save a life, I think.”

“I do not think Mahon was lying,” Em remarked. “I know that a wayfarer’s truth-telling is not admissible in court, but I think Mahon believes what he has said about the incident. I’m not entirely certain he has told the entire truth, however. I haven’t really had the opportunity to examine him.”

“That can come later if it turns out we need a clue or two,” Raff remarked. “First I want the ball that killed Nillson.”

Five

It took another hour but finally Raff had the amorphous slug of lead that had once been a pistol ball. The path between it and the gun that had fired it was thin and starting to fade, but Raff quickly concluded it had not been fired from Mahon's gun.

As he and Em rushed through the city they lost their trail several times. A person's trail had to follow the path he had actually walked or ridden, but this trace, because both objects had been moved from the East Market, tended to pass through buildings, and then finally sank into the ground.

"That's it?" asked Emblem.

"That does seem to be the case," Raff replied, "but unless I miss my guess, we'll find the gun in this storm drain." He pointed at a small rectangular hole that led to a hollow beneath the slate sidewalk.

Rain water in the low country of Dix really had no downhill to run to, so the clever Dixans had constructed large pits every so often to keep their streets from flooding. Raff looked around but could see no easy way into the drain, however.

"Looks like we'll need help for this," he remarked. "I could probably tear the sidewalk up myself, but I'm betting there's a trick to cleaning out one of these drains even if I can't readily see what it is.

The detective directed them to the City Engineer who in turn dispatched two men with the wayfarers. When they arrived at the drain, the two men simply used a block and tackle on the back of their wagon to lift two of the slate slabs that jugged out over the drain hole to reveal a round iron cover, which, when opened, revealed the drain pit.

"Dark down there," Raff remarked, "and a bit smelly."

"Let it air out a bit," one of the engineer's men advised, "then we'll light a torch."

"No need," Em replied practically and used a trace of Wild energy to form a spot of light sometimes called a Wayfarer's Lantern. Even in the heart of a large stability there was enough stray Wild energy about for an accomplished wayfarer to do this trick. She directed the light down into the pit and Raff instantly spotted the gun.

"Good thing it hasn't been raining," he remarked. "Now how to get it out."

"For that we have the claw," the engineer's man informed him. Using the same block and tackle, he

lowered a large round cylinder with triangular sections at the end. He let the device drop into the collected silt of the drain and then pulled a cable that closed the triangular sections up to grab anything that was now inside the cylinder. "We do have to empty these drains out every now and then," he explained.

The claw pulled up more than the gun and the surrounding silt. There also turned out to be bits of rotting garbage in the drain, which accounted for the bad smell Raff had detected. The smell, of course, became much stronger and the claw dumped its load in the back of the engineers' wagon. Raff reached into the stinking pile and pulled out the gun with an oil-soaked rag. Meanwhile the engineers decided they might as well finish cleaning out the drain now that they had started.

Examining the gun, Raff concluded, "The trail ends here. There's no strong connection between the weapon and its owner."

"Recently purchased, do you think?" Em asked.

"Possibly," Raff nodded, "or it could have been sitting in a drawer unused for years. Let's take this back to the police and see where we can go from here. At least we've proven that Mahon didn't actually shoot Nillson."

The thanked the engineers and hurried back to show the gun to the detective. "It may be new," the detective admitted. "It might also be ten years old, however. No older though. You see the flintlock? It's a relatively recent invention and this style is even newer."

"So this is the latest style?" Em asked.

"Yes, it's become very popular on military muskets and private small arms like this."

"I wasn't aware many private citizens carried guns," Raff commented.

"There is no law against it in Dix and I believe you would find them quite common in our colonies," the detective remarked. "They make my job a bit easier and harder at the same time. There are fewer robberies because to get caught is likely to be fatal, but then incidents like the one this morning have become more frequent in the last few years as well."

"Assuming this was a recently acquired weapon," Raff asked, "where might Danson, or whoever shot Nillson have bought it?"

"There are several places in the city," the detective told him and started writing out a list.

The next two days were spent traveling all over Wolterdam and talking to gunsmiths. Raff was somewhat surprised that only two of the dozen men whose names he had been given were at all acquainted with their colleagues' work and said as much when the gun's manufacturer was finally identified.

"We're not a collegial lot in this town," the gunsmith, a man named Saan, admitted. "I understand there is an organized guild in Farnsdam, but here most of us never actually see each other. I originally learned my trade in Farnsdam, so I've made a habit of keeping my eye on my competitors, but as for associating with them, the only one who will talk to me is Ternman next door. Have you spoken to him yet?"

“Not yet,” Raff admitted.

“Why don’t we call him over, then,” Saan suggested. “This gun isn’t his work either, but perhaps between the two of us we can figure it out.”

“This was made in Farnsdam,” Ternman decided a few minutes later. “See this mark? It’s the maker’s mark of Master Golden. I’ve worked on two of his guns in the past year, but this is a new design for him, I think.”

“That’s what I thought,” Saan admitted. “The shape of the lock is different from any I’ve seen from his shop and was wondering if an apprentice had started getting creative.”

“Golden would never allow that from an apprentice,” Ternman disagreed, “but he wasn’t producing anything like this even a year ago. I would guess this was made sometime this year. I can’t say I like it, though. Engraving on the barrel is fine and I do a lot of that on the weapons I make, but I don’t like making the locks anything but strictly functional. This ornamentation... it makes you wonder if it will even work.”

“I may try some playing with the basic shape,” Saan admitted. “It’s possible Golden’s happened on an improvement and the ornamentation was a natural extension.”

Ternman wasn’t convinced and as they started to debate the matter, Raff thanked them for their time and, after two more stops, eventually made his way with Em back to the police station.

“The gun doesn’t appear to have been purchased here,” he told the detective. He went on to repeat what the two gunsmiths had told him, “so it was likely bought in Farnsdam fairly recently. Has there been any sign of this Danson chap?”

“He has not been in his home or office when any of my men have paid a call,” the detective admitted. “I’m afraid he may have left town.”

“No Guildsman would have conveyed him while such a cloud was over his head,” Em objected.

“Not all wayfarers in Dix belong to the Guild, my lady,” the policeman replied. “Here in the low country you may have noticed how much more pronounced our wayfaring paths are? Yes? Well anyone with a smidgen of the talent can follow one and there are a number of locals who make a modest living ferrying merchants and farmers back and forth to nearby villages. By now Danson may have made his way, one village at a time, half way to Farnsdam. I will send a message to the constables in the capital city to keep an eye out for him – let them know I would like to question the gentleman, but in the light of what you’ve told me, I will inform Mister Mahon that he is not currently under suspicion and that I am recommending his bailbond be returned to him, although I am not completely satisfied of his innocence. I have learned that Danson owed him a large sum of money, just as Nillson did. It is possible that he forgave Danson the debt in return for killing Nillson.”

“It is also possible that Danson killed Nillson in an attempt to pin the blame on Mahon,” Raff conjectured.

“So he followed Mahon around with a gun waiting for such a possibility?” the detective asked cynically. “It seems a bit far-fetched. Why not just shoot Mahon?”

“I suspect that’s why he was in the market that morning,” Raff replied, “waiting for a chance to kill

Mahon, but when he found him arguing and trading insults with Nillson, Danson changed his mind and took the opportunity that presented itself.”

“Well, that is a possibility,” the detective admitted, “but not a particularly elegant one.”

“The truth is not always elegant,” Raff replied. “It’s also possible that Nillson made enemies easily and that both men wanted to kill him, only Danson got in the first shot, but I actually do believe that Mahon shot at Danson – he did shoot at someone that morning – while Danson was shooting Nillson. He probably was trying to save Nillson’s life, but unless we find Danson, we’ll never know.”

“No, I suppose not,” the detective sighed.

“Hmm,” Raff considered, “I wonder if Mahon is completely innocent. Not of the shooting, but why would two local businessmen hate him so much. Not everyone who finds themselves in debt blames the banker, after all.”

“Some do,” Em remarked. “But I guess it all depends on the person and if they felt they had been cheated...” her voice trailed off.

“That’s what I had been thinking,” Raff agreed. “What sorts of rates does Mahon’s bank charge? Dix has anti-usury laws, doesn’t it?”

“Quite a few of them, actually,” the detective admitted, “and the initial argument was, according to most witnesses, about loan penalties. I think perhaps it is time to review a few of Mister Mahon’s contracts.”

Six

“So Mahon was not guilty of killing Nillson, but is now charged with usury?” Piers asked later that evening.

“That does seem to be the way of it,” Raff told him. “It seems, in spite of motives and intentions, Danson and Nillson were upset over the penalties they incurred over their late payments. If you ask me, they should have read their initial contracts considerably more carefully before signing, but while Mahon’s interest rates were within the limitations prescribed by the law, his penalties may not have been. I understand the law is a bit grey in the area of acceptable penalties in such a case, but the detective I was working with seemed to think these were somewhat over the top.”

"They must have been," Piers agreed. "I owe you a debt of thanks, Raff. That girl, Katerin, she's a wonder! I have her in classes with apprentices half again her age, but I think we'll be sending her and her father on to Farnsdam in under a year. I doubt our small school here is going to be able to keep up with her."

"What about her father?" Raff asked. "He was in fairly dire straits too, having to leave everything they owned behind on several occasions."

"Yes, but did you know he is a talented blacksmith?" Piers countered. "I hired him myself to work on the wagons and carriages we keep out back. I reckon we can keep him quite busy for as long as he cares to stay here. I've already authorized several improvements to our forge as he suggested. He'll be fine and can either stay here as an employee of the Guild or follow his daughter to Farnsdam when it's time for her to attend advanced classes."

"Actually I think she'll be going back and forth for a few years," Piers continued, "since she's way behind her age level in the normal academic subjects. So it will probably mean conventional schooling here in Wolterdam with special class sessions in Farnsdam every few months."

"Or you could request a wayfaring tutor from Farnsdam for her," Raff suggested. "Your other apprentices would likely benefit as well."

"That's a good idea," Piers agreed, "and maybe I can keep my blacksmith. Johann really is better than any of the local men, you know. Oh, and I have good news for you. The *Brig Margarete* landed in the harbor this morning and plans to continue on to Denmouth tomorrow evening."

"So I really only get one day off after all," Raff mused.

"True," Piers nodded, "but just in case, maybe you should stay inside the hall until it is time to leave, Raff. You seem to get into trouble when you wander about with nothing to do."

"The Council agrees with you, Piers," Raff remarked sourly.

"These days, I don't think they like much of anyone," Piers replied. "You used to sit on the Guild Council, didn't you?"

"A lifetime ago," Raff replied. "I prefer the life of a freelancer, but at the time it seemed like a responsibility I had to bear."

"Better to stay out of their sight, I've always thought," Piers told him. "Wolterdam is a fair-sized city and there's rarely anyone here who out-ranks me. So long as I do my job, the Council leaves me alone and I only occasionally have to go to Farnsdam to report to Master Haaper."

"Jan Haaper?" Raff asked. "I haven't seen him since I left the Council. How is the old boy doing?"

"He's planning to retire next year," Piers replied.

"Jan's been saying that for the last decade," Raff laughed.

"I think he means it this time," Piers told him. "He's coming up to the end of his current term on the Council and admits to being sick and tired of all the politics and other nonsense. All he wants now is a

pleasant home in a small town, but I'll bet you any amount you care to name that it will be a small town in Teltoa."

"Ha! Now that sounds more like Jan," Raff agreed. "He'll start off claiming to be retired, but will agree to serve as the local agent in whatever town he chooses. Within a year or two, he'll be the chief master in the whole colony. Want to bet on that?"

"I won't take that bet," Piers chuckled. "If I did, I might as well just hand you the money right now."

"Any news from Taundon?" Raff asked, changing the subject.

"In the last day or two?" Piers countered. "No. The *Margarete* is just in from Farnsdam and before that, from Voland. Nothing's docked here from the west since you arrived. You'll continue escorting your academics, won't you?"

"Are they still here?" Raff asked.

"Yes," Piers nodded. "The rest of what was left of your party decided to travel to Belis, but the two scientists opted to wait and travel with you. I understand they hold you in fairly high esteem."

"Em and I have been establishing ourselves as researchers in the scientific community for some years now," Raff admitted. "It started with my collaboration with Doctor Rojer Harkermor, but over the years others have asked us to take readings or try experiments on their behalves. It's fun and something to do while in the Wild. I'm surprised more wayfarers don't do the same."

"Most of our colleagues cannot be bothered to do any more than they absolutely must. You know that, Raff."

"We're no different than anyone else, I guess," Raff agreed. "Some are industrious and others just want to do what they have to and take the rest of the time off. Now do you see why I like being a freelancer?"

"And do you see why I like being the boss?" Piers countered.

"Oh, I see it, it's just that I have all the same benefits plus the ability to ignore the Council's orders when it suits me," Raff replied. "Well, I guess I should tell Em the good news and make sure she doesn't have anything else to do before we leave."

The *Brig Magarete* was a fair-sized ship with two masts, both square rigged. The size of her hull might have supported a smaller third mast, but instead the riggers had chosen to add a fourth course of sails to the masts she did have. Raff noted that ship rigging seemed to be growing rapidly in the last few years, getting taller and with more square yards of sails than ever before. The masts were secured by more stays than had once been the case, but, privately, Raff wondered if the hull had been reinforced as well. He had heard stories about some of the newer ships and might have felt more comfortable on a more time-tested design.

Clouds moved in just as they left Wolterdam's harbor and passed into the Wild seas and a few minutes later the rain was sheeting down, forcing anyone who did not have to be on deck below to their cabins. "Well, you really cannot complain too much, dear," Em told him. "The weather has been uncommonly lovely since before we arrived in Manrich, and spring time is known for the rain."

"It could have waited a few more days," Raff griped, peeking out their cabin's porthole. Then he changed his mind. "Actually I think this is just a passing squall. The energy flow doesn't look like something associated with a big storm. It will probably be a nice day tomorrow."

"We'll have to wait and see," Em remarked. "Conditions at sea can change fairly suddenly, you remember."

As Raff predicted, however, the next morning was warm and sunny. While salt spray and mist continued to occasionally blow across the deck, just as it might normally do when at sea, the high warm sun dried it off rapidly when it did.

Em came up on deck to find Raff pacing fore and aft across the length of the ship. "What's wrong, dear?" she asked.

"I'm not really sure," Raff admitted. "I think something may be up, but I'll be darned if I can figure out what it might be."

Emblem closed her eyes and cast her other senses to the winds. "There's a strange feeling to the Wild energy this morning," she decided, "but it could just be the aftermath of last night's storm."

"Perhaps," Raff nodded. "I hope you're right."

"But you don't think I am," Em concluded.

"I don't know," Raff shook his head. "It's not a feeling I've had very often. Well, let's drop it for now. It's probably nothing to worry about. I'm probably just nervous because every time I've had a chance to take a break lately something has come up."

"You're waiting for the other shoe to drop," Em laughed.

"I guess I am," Raff agreed wryly.

Try though he might, Raff could not shake the feeling of impending problems all day, but when he awoke the next morning the troubling feeling had passed. He continued to pace the deck, but now it was simply for the joy of walking.

"Look up there!" one of the scientists remarked, pointing upward and to the east. "What's that?"

"Hippogryphs," Raff replied. "Half horse, and half eagle. It's the sort of mix that can only exist out here in the wild. They would die quickly inside a stability. Three of them I see. Must be important Kenlienta. I wonder who they are. If they are riding hippogryphs they're probably from the east. Those are white hippogryphs which are native to the mountains of northern Salasia, so they're a long way from home."

"The natural habitat of the white hippogriff may be in Salasia," Em argued, "but I believe they are traded throughout the Ken Nation. The Ken of Tamag Methin in the Deep South breed hippogryphs, I learned when we were last there."

"Do they?" Raff asked, "I know they breed and train gryphons in Tamag Methin. I suppose they may also have some hippogryphs there as well, but I know from experience it takes a certain mastery of magic to be able to ride either one."

“But not all that much,” Em shook her head. “The main reason not all Ken fly them is that a trained hippogryph is very expensive. Do you remember Naratha, the artist whose design was being featured the day we arrived in Tamag Methin? She confided that she dreamed of one day owning a hippogryph of her own.”

“With her talent,” Raff commented, “she’s well on her way to accomplishing that. Well, whoever they are they will be in the Green Lands before us.”

“Only by a few hours,” Em laughed. “We’ll be landing near dusk this evening and should be in Taundon by this time tomorrow.”

“At last,” Raff breathed. “I never thought I’d say this, but I am really tired of traveling. We’re already taking the whole summer off. What do you say to spending the autumn at home as well?”

“That would be pleasant, I think,” Em told him.

“Good,” Raff nodded. “That’s settled then. An extended vacation.”

Taundon

One

It was the largest city in the world, human or Ken. Taundon stretched out for miles from both banks of the Ruane River and boasted several large bridges joining the two halves of the city. In addition there were no less than two dozen satellite towns and villages that orbited the great city at various speeds. Taundon and its subsidiary towns was a near chaotic system that the Wayfarer’s Guild had to keep an almost constant eye on, lest travelers become hopelessly lost in the complex system of movement.

It was necessary for a wayfaring party approaching Taundon to stop first in one of the satellite towns to get directions before proceeding inward. It was a routine matter and quickly taken care of. The routes through each town were marked and apprentice wayfarers were stationed to keep an eye out for approaching journeymen and masters and to hand them the latest directions to the various locations in

greater Taundon or assist in any other way they might.

Raff thanked the young apprentice, a sandy-haired young man in his late teens, and tipped him with a gold sovereign, mostly for the satisfaction of watching his eyes bulge out in amazement before continuing on without needing to stop the carriage.

Their path led through three other towns until they finally reached the Stonegate Burrow of Taundon. The entire city was divided up into twenty-six burrows each of which was the size of most normal cities. From Stonegate they made their way through Mirlington, Lensford, Listerbridge and finally Farington where the Guild of Wayfarer's kept its world headquarters, the Central Guildhall.

Central Guildhall was more than just a single building, but a large conglomeration of buildings that covered an area that, elsewhere in the city, would have been two or three city blocks and enclosed several courtyards and gardens, nearly a city unto itself. The buildings of Central Guildhall were half again as tall as any other in the city and there were castle-like towers at each of the four corners of the compound, the tallest of which stood on the northeast corner and boasted a clock on each of its sides with a bell that tolled the hours.

Raff took one look at the tower and commented, "Sleeping is never easy in this place. Well, gentlemen," he continued to the scholars and a trio of merchants, "we're finally here. Welcome home, have a nice stay or whatever applies. If you are continuing on, I suggest checking in at the main desk, just follow me. Otherwise, I'd say you are free to continue on, but unless you're in a hurry the Guild will be glad to deliver you to whatever destination in Taundon you like.

The merchants begged off and continued driving their wagon down the street while Raff drove the carriage he shared with Em and the two scholars through the main gate of the Central Guildhall.

"Raff! Em!" a young man with dark brown skin and black hair called out happily. He was wearing a loose, dark blue shirt with the seal of the Navigator's Guild embroidered over the left breast pocket in gold thread and light grey slacks. It was a sort of uniform worn by apprentices and non-wayfarer employees in the Central Guildhall. There were other uniforms for journeymen and masters, but in these modern times they were only worn on rare ceremonial occasions and during Guild Council meetings. "Welcome home!"

"Ahoy, Kaz!" Raff shouted back. "Good to see you!"

"It's great to see you two again too!" Kazani Bassan replied, reaching up to help Emblem out of the carriage. "It's been close to a year, you know."

"I know, dear," Em told him, kissing him gently on the cheek. "We missed you too, you know, but it couldn't be helped. Still we'll be here all summer and probably through the fall as well."

"Really?" Kaz asked unable to believe his good luck.

"If at all humanly possible," Raff promised. "Frankly, I'm tired of traveling for a while and looking forward to taking care of the garden."

"We have a garden?" Kaz asked skeptically.

"Well, we can always make one," Raff laughed, jumping down from the carriage as two apprentices approached to take charge of it. "Hey, you don't have to take our bags."

“Well, I’m really glad to see you,” Kaz replied. “And I’m assigned to you this summer. Aren’t masters supposed to have apprentices as aides when they’re in town?”

“Assigned to us?” Raff asked. “I don’t usually exercise that prerogative. You know that. What’s really going on?”

“Um, just glad to see you,” Kaz repeated.

“Relieved is more like it, Kaz,” Em observed.

“Well, three ships disappeared in the Belis Channel a few days ago and since you were due back...” he trailed off.

“Ah,” Em nodded understanding.

“What do you mean they disappeared?” Raff asked.

“Poof! Gone,” Kaz replied. “They never showed up at their destinations. Three channel-hoppers haven’t been seen since. Even if you weren’t on one of them, and the timing would have been right, I thought you may have gotten caught up in the investigation. Raff, it is the sort of thing you tend to stumble into.”

“Not this time,” Raff replied, grabbing his traveling bag back from Kaz. “I’m on vacation. And I don’t know that I’d be doing you any favors by letting you follow me around the garden in the guise of an assignment.”

“However,” Em cut in. “We did promise you this summer, so perhaps it’s not so bad if you stay with us. Besides most masters just have their apprentice-aides run errands when in town anyway. We don’t normally do that, but if it will make you happy...”

“Well, actually I’m only assigned to Raff,” Kaz told her. “You have your own apprentice assigned, I hear.”

“Oh dear,” Em worried, “I won’t be able to dismiss him if Raff doesn’t dismiss you.”

Just then a young woman raced up to them. Like Kaz, she was wearing the uniform of an apprentice wayfarer. Her skin was even darker than Kaz’s, although she wore her hair long and had taken pains to straighten it so that it might conform to Green Lands styles. Without pausing to catch her breath, she panted, “Master L’Oranne Cawlens... I am assigned... to you.”

“Chanya Sanai?” Em recognized the girl from Ronesia tentatively. She and Raff had sponsored her into the Guild and University, but in spite of maintaining a correspondence, it had been years since Em had actually seen her. “You’ve grown.” Chanya had been a short girl as many of her fellow tribesmen were, but in the intervening time she had grown as tall as any Greens Landswoman.

“It’s a bad habit, I suppose,” Chanya replied. “But I think I’ve managed to break it.”

“Funny,” Em remarked, “but you may have been spending too much time in the Central Guildhall. I suppose we can fix that, since we don’t live in the hall.”

“Any way I can be of service, Master Cawlens,” Chanya replied.

“Em when we’re not in the Hall, please,” Em corrected her. “Actually, I don’t mind if you call me Em here too, but some of the other guildsmen might take it amiss.”

Chanya nodded and looked around. Seeing that Raff was carrying his own bags, she correctly assumed Kaz was carrying Em’s. “That’s my job,” she told the younger man a bit sternly and held her hand out in silent demand.

“Play nicely children,” Em admonished them when it looked like Kaz was about to be stubborn, “or I shall carry my own bags.”

“But...” Chanya started to object. Em knew she was worried about not adequately accomplishing her required tasks. Some masters expected body service from their apprentices and, no doubt, Chanya had been assigned to one or more of them. However, Kaz shrugged Emblem’s bags off his shoulder and handed them to Chanya. She accepted them before Kaz turned to Raff and held his hand out in the same manner Chanya had demanded Em’s bags.

“Oh very well,” Raff acceded finally. “I don’t suppose you get enough exercise around here anyway.”

“No,” Kaz agreed with pseudo-solemnity, “They only keep us working twelve hours a day. What can I get accomplished if I only work half a day, I ask you?”

“And you say I have been here too long?” Chanya asked Em amusedly.

“Kaz is a special case. Raff and I raised him,” Em explained. “He never had a chance. Oh, Kazani Bassan, this is Chanya Sanai. You’re from opposite ends of the Southern Continent so there ought not to be any tribal rivalries.”

“I suppose we will make peace as we get to know each other,” Chanya smiled.

“Kaz will be starting his freshman year at Dunbridge this autumn,” Em continued, “and you’ve just completed your junior year if I remember correctly.”

“Indeed!” Chanya agreed, giving Kaz another look. He was short for a man, being the same height as Chanya, although slightly taller than Em, but not too short. “Well, if you’re going to Dunbridge, I suppose you cannot be all bad. Do you know what house you are assigned to yet?”

“He will be in Morrin, same as you,” Raff replied. “Since I sponsored both of you, that’s how it works. You’ll likely see a lot of each other.”

“Chanya,” Em asked as they moved along, “why are you wearing apprentice clothing? I thought you’ve been a journeyman for two years.”

All wayfarers were required to start out as apprentices regardless of their abilities. The more talented of them were allowed to earn the rank of journeyman by their sophomore year at University, but would still be required to work as a journeyman for a minimum of four years before being considered for the rank of master. Most remained journeymen for a decade or more. Even as masters they were obligated to work for the Guild until their educational bills had been paid, often another fifteen to twenty years.

“It’s a new regulation,” Chanya replied calmly. “Any journeyman or master who has yet to pay off their debt to the Guild will continue to wear apprentice garb while assigned to the Center Guildhall.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Em snapped. “What journeyman your age has paid off their debt? Who came up with this stupidity?”

“The Guild Council, Master Cawlens,” Chanya replied.

“They did it just after you left for Senopolis,” Kaz added. “It didn’t matter to me, of course, but there was a near rebellion by the affected journeymen. The masters had an easier way out. All they had to do was accept assignments outside the Guildhall, but journeymen who are still in school don’t have that option.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t tear the hall down,” Raff admitted. “I would have.”

“Most journeymen are better behaved than you were at that age,” Em replied with a smile.

“You didn’t even know me at that age,” Raff reminded her.

“Sometimes a wife listens to the tales her husband tells, no?” Em countered, bantering.

“I think I’m going to have a few words with the Council about this,” Raff muttered darkly.

“Yes? That should set the matter in stone, don’t you think?” Em pointed out.

“It would at that,” Raff noted ruefully. “Still it was a foolish thing to do. If one must wear a uniform it should be the one due his rank. Well, you two are assigned to us now, not the guildhall. Feel free to wear what you like. I always hated the uniforms anyway.”

“These apprentice suits aren’t too bad,” Kaz remarked.

“No, but the masters’ robes haven’t changed in a thousand years,” Raff told him. “The silliest sight you will ever see is the Guild Council in a formal meeting.”

“Chanya, how do your studies go?” Em asked.

“Very well,” Chanya replied. “I’m at the top of my class in Morrin House and my wayfaring skills progress similarly. My teachers tell me I should achieve master status a year or two after graduation if I continue to apply myself.”

“Very good,” Em nodded. “I’m sure you long to return to your tribe.”

“I fear that may be years away,” Chanya sighed, “but I have applied for a post-graduate posting in Ronesia, so I will be able to visit my family from time to time.”

“Raff Cawlens!” a short man in a long-flowing dark blue robe called to him. “Have you just arrived?”

“Pauls!” Raff called back, recognizing his old friend Master Pauls Forrent. Pauls was the chief guild master in Carais and a member of the Guild Council. “Is the Council in session?”

“We have been in session continuously for the last nine months,” Pauls replied. “I have had to

relocate to Taundon for the duration and leave my assistant in charge in Carais. I suppose I ought to let him have the hall there anyway, I haven't been there for more than a month at a time in years since you found Senopolis and the Ken decided to indulge in experimental politics. Come into my office so we can talk in comfort." He led the way through a door, then closed it after all four had entered, "and privacy," he added at last. "The whole council, I swear, gossips worse than a gaggle of housewives."

"I resent that, Pauls," Em told him tartly.

"You aren't a housewife, Em," Pauls shot back, "but all right, perhaps that was a bit unfair. Worse than gossiping, they all have their spies keeping an eye on each other. It's disgusting and now they're talking about moving Central Guildhall to Carais."

"Carais?" Raff asked. "To what purpose?"

"Politics, of course," Pauls shrugged. "What other purpose can there be?"

"The Council, as you know is divided up into several factions, not unlike the political parties of the Green Lands' Parliament," Pauls commented.

"Anytime you get two people together you are likely to have three opinions," Raff commented.

"I wish it were that simple," Pauls laughed.

"I always had the feeling the only two real factions were for and against me," Raff chuckled. "I hear that incompetent Roarke is on the Guild Council now as well, so I guess the side against me is one stronger these days."

"Ah, paranoia," Pauls laughed. "But then in a sense you are right, the council is divided when it comes to you. Your enemies would like to give you an assignment and your friends are reluctant to admit you are the only man for the job."

"No assignments for me, Pauls," Raff told him. "I promised Kaz here to take the summer off and I promised Em I'd extend that vacation until winter at least. I've barely stopped moving in years and I need a sabbatical."

"Sabbatical?" Pauls asked. "Do you mean that in an academic sense?"

"I have been working on a few papers," Raff admitted, "and I plan to use the time to complete some of them, at least, but mostly I just want to rest."

"The Guild needs you, Raff," Pauls told him gently.

"That's not fair, Pauls!" Em replied hotly. "No master works harder or has done more for the Guild than Raff. If anyone has earned a vacation it's him."

"I agree," Pauls told her easily, "but none the less, the Guild needs him."

"What in the world could possibly be so important?" Em demanded angrily.

Pauls noted a flash of red light in her eyes and realized she was gathering Wild energy without realizing it. "Calmly, Emblem," he cautioned her. "It's been a very long time since you lost control."

“What makes you think I’m losing it now?” she shot back. “My patience is waning, but not my control.”

“Aay,” Pauls sighed exaggeratedly. “Emblem, keep your patience and I’ll explain. There has been an incident in Varana.”

“Again?” Raff asked.

“Constantly, if you ask me,” Pauls replied. “This time it was in Lonport. Two and a half months ago a squad of Her Majesty’s army, while patrolling the streets there, ran across a large group of colonists protesting... well, I’m not sure just what they were protesting this time. Taxes, probably, that’s the usual excuse. Well, one thing led to another and the crowd started pelting the troops with insults, snowballs and rocks. Bricks too, would be my bet. In response the troops raised their muskets and opened fire. The soldiers are being held for trial and the Guild has been asked to supply a judge.”

“You don’t need me for that,” Raff denied. “Any master will do.”

“It’s not that simple, Raff. Varana is on the edge of rebellion over the incident. This is the second time this sort of thing has happened and they need a high-ranking and respected master to show them we take the colonies as seriously as their motherlands,” Pauls maintained.

“Then I’m out,” Raff laughed harshly. “Any Council member is higher ranked than I am.”

“But you are more respected in Parliament and to the colonists the mere fact you are a master is sufficient,” Pauls told him.

“No, Pauls,” Raff shook his head. “Not this time. You’ll need something a lot more immediate to get me to break my promises.”

“I thought as much,” Pauls admitted, “but I had to ask. Well, I suppose since I have you here I may as well debrief you. All wayfarers checking in to the Central hall must be debriefed these days.”

“It’s another new regulation,” Kaz remarked.

“A fairly stupid one, if you ask me,” Pauls commented. “But better I debrief you first before some of our colleagues, eh? You’ll have to go through it three times.”

“A written report used to be enough,” Raff grumbled. “Someone is getting power-crazed if you ask me. Very well, what do you want to know?”

“Let’s start with your trip and we’ll go on from there,” Pauls suggested. An hour later, Raff and Em were still talking and Pauls suggested to Kaz and Chanya they ought to fetch something for dinner.

“I think that’s enough for now,” Pauls told them after the younger wayfarers had left. “So you didn’t get a chance to stop in Yakrut?”

“No, we had Doctor Harkermor and several others in tow with us, at the time,” Raff replied. “It wouldn’t have been too polite to drop in with people who cannot control their stable auras.”

“Elder Leraxa would have probably forgiven you easily,” Pauls replied. “She’s been asking for your

help for months now.”

“Sure, now she wants my help,” Raff retorted. “She can’t say she didn’t have her chance back during their Grand Council meeting.”

“Are you still angry about that snub, Raff?” Pauls asked.

“Hurt is more like it,” Em told him.

“Disappointed, really,” Raff corrected them both. “Still, if I’d known she was asking, I’d have dropped in on our way to Senopolis. Why? What’s going on in the Ken Nation now?”

“We’re not at all sure,” Pauls replied. “The reports vary, but it seems Leraxa is finding out the perils of a permanent government. She had an easy time in office at first. She was newly elect Chief Elder of the Ken and everything was going her way. The problem is the position holds unprecedented power within Kenlientan society and now that it has had time to become institutionalized, there are other Ken who want it. At least half the senior elders want the position and if the reports are accurate they are spending more time jockeying for position than they are in doing what they can to keep the government functioning.”

“Can’t say I didn’t warn them,” Raff remarked. “Do you have any idea of who’s who within the Ken Nation?”

“Not really,” Pauls replied. “I think you’ll find, however, that those elders who were opposed to the new government in the first place are the ones most likely to support Leraxa now. They were always opposed to upsetting their own society. Of the ones who had supported Leraxa’s new government prior to its establishment, some may still support her personally, but the rest are the ones trying to take over now that she has actually managed to get it going.”

“Yes, it’s always easy to take over a government than to start one,” Raff commented.

“What we do know for a certainty is that three elders flew directly to the Central Guildhall here the other day asking for our assistance and support for them and their ideas for governmental revision,” Pauls continued.

“Must be the ones I saw over the Channel,” Raff nodded. “They didn’t get that support, did they?”

“Not the sort they really wanted,” Pauls told him. “We wrapped it up in a long and flowery speech but the quick summary was that we have no desire to meddle in Kenlientan politics, but hope to be able to maintain our traditional warm relationship with whomever the government of the Ken Nation chose as its leader or leaders.”

“That’s the summary?” Kaz asked from the doorway as he and Chanya returned with large trays of food. “The full speech must have required two intermissions!”

“My people have an annual religious ceremony that lasts from sun up to sun down and takes two shamans to conduct,” Chanya added. “How many masters did it take to deliver that speech?”

“This is why you have made enemies of well over half the Guild Council, Raff,” Pauls pointed out.

“I’ll take the blame for Kaz,” Raff admitted, “but I haven’t seen Chanya in years.”

"It doesn't matter," Pauls told him. "You're a legend in the Guild and nearly every new wayfarer these past two decades has tried to emulate you. This irreverent attitude is the new face of the Guild."

"As a benefit, however, the Guild is more popular and accepted by non-wayfarers than ever before," Kaz pointed out. "I looked up the records and we were tolerated at best last century."

"That might be true," Pauls allowed. "Please close the door, Mister Bassan. In any case we told them we would remain absolutely neutral in Ken politics."

"That may actually all they really wanted to hear," Raff noted. "Did they seem disappointed by the announcement?"

"They said a few things about hoping for a more active partnership," Pauls replied, "but none of them tried to press for anything more. At the time I thought they took the decision gracefully, but do you mean they just wanted assurances we wouldn't get involved?"

"You haven't even told me which elders were here," Raff pointed out.

Pauls recited the three names, "Suranax, Durinia and Gentax."

"I don't know them," Raff admitted, "so it's hard to say, but if forced to guess, yes I think they were just making sure we would stay out of the way. Leraxa has really been up against the wall ever since she made the mistake of pushing through her governmental reforms. The average Kenlien doesn't really care about his government. He likes and respects his elder, usually, but so long as the Grand Council of Kenlenta leaves him to his business, what they decide is the least of his concerns. The Ken populace was split over whether there should even be a new form of government, but most of them were not particularly vehement about it. Those opposed saw no reason to fix something that wasn't broken and those in favor liked it for the sake of change. You know how the Ken make a virtue of change."

"I do," Pauls nodded, "but do you think Leraxa's government is going to leave the common Kenlenta alone?"

"Leraxa's government will," Raff told him confidently. "Whoever comes next is another matter. Did anyone in the Guild Council think to ask where this trio of elders stood on the whole human pollution issue?"

In the past two decades the Kenlenta had become increasingly concerned about humans' effect on the Wild. They believed the Wild was becoming increasingly less so and was approaching a condition in which creatures adapted to the Wild would no longer exist. Some human scientists had taken measurements confirming the claim and went on to say that human stabilities were also becoming increasingly contaminated by Wild energy from Kenlentan pollution and that humans would not likely outlive the Ken by more than a century, but the claim was not widely accepted and neither Ken nor humans had done anything to correct the situation.

"Of course not," Pauls replied. "The council has yet to admit there is a pollution problem."

"Well, they had better get off the fence and make a decision soon," Raff told him. "The problem is real enough. Just take a look at the reclaimed land in Dix if you don't believe me. In another decade or less it won't take a wayfarer to travel from town to town. It doesn't even take training to do it now, just a touch of the talent. If something isn't done, not only will the Ken die off, but the council members will all

be out of a job at the very least.”

“Why don’t you tell them that?” Pauls asked quietly.

“Me? Have you forgotten they kicked me off the Council?” Raff asked.

“I remember they said that, but I’ve been reading some of the more obscure regulations of the Guild,” Pauls admitted. “They voted you off with a mere sixty percent majority. It should have been seventy-five.”

“Since when?” Raff demanded. “Changing the Guild Regulations only takes sixty.”

“That’s probably why they made that mistake,” Pauls shrugged. “You’re the only one they’ve tried to remove from the Guild Council in the past two centuries.”

“As I recall they also voted to suspend the rules that counted that day,” Raff recalled. “I believe you will find one of the rules they suspended was the seventy-five percent threshold. They can do that, you know.”

“They can,” Pauls nodded, “but they cannot suspend the six-month cooling off period. Face it, you were not removed from the Guild Council legally. You could walk back into the Council Hall anytime you wanted.”

“I don’t want, Pauls,” Raff told him. “I like being a freelancer.”

“We need you on the Guild Council again, Raff,” Pauls told him.

“You also need me to go to Varana and to Yakrut,” Raff pointed out. “And I need time off. Guess who wins this time.”

“I didn’t say we needed you to go to Yakrut,” Pauls replied.

“You hoped I had been there,” Raff pointed out. “By the way, by telling those three elders we would stay out of Ken politics may have signaled the end of Leraxa’s administration. Her opposition has probably been behaving themselves only because they weren’t sure how the Guild would deal with anyone who overthrew her. She was elected legally, after all. This lot may or may not be playing fair. I don’t know and neither does the Guild Council. But now that it is known we’ll deal with anyone in charge there, anything might happen. I should probably send a message to Leraxa if I can figure out what to tell her.”

“You could do so as a Council member,” Pauls suggested.

“Pauls, you’re a dear old friend, but you haven’t been listening,” Raff told him. “I’m on vacation.”

Two

It was another two days before Raff and Em had finished their debriefing at Central Guildhall. “Are you really spending this long with every wayfarer who passes through Taundon?” Em demanded near the end of an interview that was conducted without Raff being present.

“No, Master L’Oranne Cawlens,” her final interviewer, Master Michael Roarke replied. “Most wayfarers coming here have not been on the road as long as you have.”

“It is still a bloody waste of time, Master Roarke,” she responded. “Everything worthwhile I had to report could have been said in fifteen minutes and did appear on my written report.”

“Just a few more questions and then you can leave.”

“No, I think we are done,” Emblem told him and got to her feet. “No more questions.” There was a red flash in her eyes that matched the color of her hair.

“I really must insist,” he told her firmly missing the warning signs.

“No,” she said with finality. There was a fiery red aura forming around her.

“Very well, Master L’Oranne Cawlens. Your reluctance will be duly noted.”

“Good! Make a note that I also spared your life just now. You really ought to be more grateful,” she replied. “And what penalties do you think you can enact on me? I am a freelancer. The Guild does not own me and I have enough money that I am not dependant on the Guild for a living. Make a note of this, however. I have been a loyal and industrious member of the Guild ever since I joined and to be treated this way after years of long service angers me. I will expect a full apology before accepting another job. Do we understand each other, Master Roarke?” The fiery aura grew ever so much brighter.

There was a flicker of fear in Roarke’s eyes, but not his voice as he replied, “Good day, Master L’Oranne Cawlens.”

“I don’t know that you needed to threaten Roarke, Em,” Raff told her as they road out of Farington a while later.

“I lost my temper,” she admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me, Em,” Raff laughed, “and I wouldn’t suggest apologizing to him. A waste of time if I ever heard one. If he had gotten me angry, though, I doubt I’d have given him any warning.”

“I don’t think you would have lost your temper,” Em told him. “Oh, you’re as much of a hothead as I am, but you have more patience with that sort of thing. Also I think Roarke’s afraid of you. He never

took classes from me, but he did from you.”

“He’s a journeyman-class wayfarer at best,” Raff remarked. “But he’s a master of politics. He got appointed master of Denmouth. He may have trouble guiding parties, but he can do paperwork. Then he used that position as a stepping stone into the Guild Council. You remember that golf course he had deep-forged by master wayfarers? He used it to make contacts among the Houses of Lords and Commons alike, and those contacts eventually got him on the Council.”

“Someone ought to do something about that sort of abuse,” Em commented.

“Maybe someday someone will, but for now, there is nothing Roarke or anyone else can do to us,” Raff assured her.

“They could rewrite the regulations to do away with freelancer status,” Kaz commented.

“That would be a mistake,” Raff told him. “Three quarters of the masters either are freelancers or are qualified to be if they weren’t permanently stationed in their halls. Half the journeymen in the field are too. The Guild would suddenly be faced with their first workers’ strike if they tried that.”

“Okay,” Kaz nodded, “what if they just instituted bonuses for non-freelancers?”

“Freelancers are allowed to negotiate for their services, Kaz,” Raff explained. “We normally accept the going rates because they are generous, but if the Guild started paying bonuses, the freelancers would demand the same. If they didn’t get them it would be the same as if the Guild tried to re-indenture them.”

Raff’s and Em’s home was three miles away from Central Guildhall in the Royal Borough of Weslington. While Weslington was dominated by the palace, it was also a place of luxurious townhouses and stately parks and gardens. Their home was in a row of townhouses, near a large park and with a private garden in the rear.

“How does a house get dusty when there’s no one here to let it in?” Raff wondered as they stepped through the front door. “Maybe those scientists who believe in the spontaneous creation of matter are right, do you think?”

“Or maybe we let it in ourselves when we were here last,” Em replied, “and it had time to settle while we were gone. Sounds more likely to me. I’ll see about hiring someone to clean tomorrow.”

“Oh, we’ll do that,” Chanya volunteered.

“We will?” asked Kaz, shooting an exasperated look at Chanya. The older student pretended not to notice.

“Good idea,” Emblem decided. “We can make it a hobby, yes?”

“I really liked the idea of hiring someone better,” Kaz remarked.

“We’re only going to be here for a few months,” Em pointed out. “I don’t think it would be fair to hire a maid and then let her go so soon after, and you’ll be better off for having done it yourselves, I should think.” Kaz look unconvinced so she continued. “Perhaps you forget I am a baron’s daughter, Kaz. Until I became a wayfarer I had servants to do everything for me. I never had the satisfaction of making a home for myself.”

“And I never had the opportunity to be waited on before I became a wayfarer,” Kaz retorted. “It still doesn’t seem all that bad to me.”

“Then I guess you won’t miss it,” Chanya told him smugly.

“I’m out-numbered here, aren’t I?” he asked in surrender.

“I think the first places we should start will be the bedrooms,” Em decided, “unless you like sneezing yourself to sleep. Oh cheer up, Kaz, I didn’t say you couldn’t use your talents to clean up.”

“Oh?” Kaz perked up a bit. “I thought, well, at school the most common punishment was usually helping the cleaning staff for a few hours. We had to do that strictly by hand.”

“Really?” Em asked, raising a single eyebrow. “And how many times did you have to help the cleaning staff?”

“Um,” Kaz squirmed. “Well, I made friends with a lot of them...”

“Never mind,” Em sighed. “Try to behave better at Dunbridge. They do not give detentions, just warnings, two I believe, before they expel a troublemaker.”

“Come, Kaz,” Chanya suggested suddenly, “Why don’t we clean your room together and then you can help me with mine. It will go faster that way.”

Kaz shrugged and led the pretty upper classman upstairs. “This is the master suite.” He told Chanya as they passed the rooms Raff and Em used when at home. “The next door is my room. I guess you may choose either of the two guest rooms. They both overlook the street, not a bad view, but not as quiet as the back rooms come morning.”

“My first dorm room was not quiet either,” Chanya told him. “There are not many colonists from the Southern Continent at University, you know, and even fewer natives like us. From this distance we are all like one tribe and ought to stick together. I will help you through your first year at Dunbridge, I think. It is better to not try toughing it out with wayfarer talent when some idiot tries playing the snob or bully.”

“Yeah, I noticed that back at prep school,” Kaz replied, tossing his bag down on the bed and noting there did not seem to be as much dust up here. He took Chanya’s bag and carried it down the hall. “How else did you think I got to make friends with the staff?”

“I suspected as much,” Chanya nodded. “It is not easy to look so different from your classmates and they thought I talked funny as well. At least you do not have an accent.”

“Of course I have an accent,” Kaz laughed. “I talk like Raff, but yeah, I see what you mean, but at school that didn’t make it any easier, you know. Then the taunts were about how I must be part parrot to be able to sound like a Green Landsman. Even so, it isn’t an upper-class accent, so there were always snobs. Doesn’t matter. After my first year the snobs learned to keep their distance and I was able to make friends.”

“Well, we’ll see to it that you don’t have to go through that again,” Chanya promised. “It helps to know someone who has already been in the house for a while.”

“And it can’t possibly hurt to be friends with a pretty upper-classman,” Kaz remarked suddenly.

Chanya stared at him for a moment, her face unreadable, before laughing lightly. “Oh, you! I would almost think you mean that.” She kept laughing, leaving Kaz to wonder whether he had been making a pass at Chanya or just stating the obvious. She was pretty in an exotic sort of way, but she was also several years his senior. Maybe a bit too late he decided to laugh with her.

“Do not worry,” she chuckled. “I will be like your older sister there. Quite a few students have older siblings to guide them through their freshman year. It really does help.”

Pauls Forrent stopped in the next afternoon for tea. He tried once again to recruit Raff to stand as judge for the trial in Lonport but to no avail.

“Why is it always Varana that’s having such trouble and threatening to rebel?” Chanya wondered.

“The colonists in Varana,” Raff tried to explain, “the original ones, that is, went there to get away from the Green Lands for one reason or another. Many went to escape religious persecution, others went for the right to own property, but nearly all went because there were opportunities not to be found at home. And the Green Lands for a long while ignored the colonies there. Several failed within a few years for a variety of reasons and those that succeeded did so through their own hard work and determination. Neither king nor Parliament helped them out nor even took much notice of them save to demand taxes once the colonists actually started earning enough to be able to pay. In the last several decades, Parliament has changed their minds about Varana and our other colonies and have felt that armed troops to keep the peace and insure taxes were collected was a good idea. To the previously ignored colonists of Varana, who had learned to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps, this is intolerable, so they entertain thoughts of rebellion. It is possible that the colonists of Meldan might join them.”

“I doubt that, Raff,” Em told him. “Meldan was once a colony of Crace and not all that long ago. The army of the Green Lands had a job squashing rebellion there when Crace was forced to give up her colony in the north. Perhaps that is why so many more troops are now stationed in Varana. By the time they were done either subjugating the Meldan colonists or driving the incorrigible out to Salomania, the rest were unlikely to rebel again especially after the new Green Landsmen, hand-picked colonists, arrived and took over most facets of colonial governance.”

“Well, I think they ought to withdraw at least half the troops in Varana as a good will gesture,” Raff opined. “There are too many over there already and that’s not helping to keep the peace. It’s making the matter worse. We don’t have enough barracks to house all the soldiers and many private homes have been commandeered for that use. That’s just wrong. If it was tried here there would be rioting in the streets. If anything the Varana colonists are showing remarkable restraint so far, but that is not going to last.”

“See?” Pauls told him. “That is why we need you there. We need a judge who is sympathetic to the needs of the colonists but who will also guarantee the accused soldiers a fair trial.”

“Why not you, Pauls?” Raff countered.

“My accent,” Pauls replied, “Eet is a beet too theeck, is it not?”

“You’re exaggerating it outrageously, Pauls,” Raff accused. “You speak Grundish like a native.”

“Like a noble or at least a gentle native,” Pauls pointed out. “It’s an upper-class accent I have. You

sound like one of the people and would be better accepted in Varana.”

“See?” Raff told Em, “I’ve always said you married below your station.”

“I know, dear,” Em chuckled, “but it’s been more fun this way.”

Raff continued to resist Pauls’ requests, however, although after a few days, Em could see her husband was starting to show signs of being tempted. She also knew, however, he would not break his promise to stay on vacation unless something far more urgent arose. That urgency became evident before the end of their first week home.

Three

The formal procession of a Ken elder is a magnificent sight to be seen for certain, and it is one few humans had ever observed. Fewer still had ever seen such a thing on the streets of Taundon and none within living memory. So when a party of Kenlienta slipped through the edge of Taundon’s huge dome of stability and began walking calmly toward the center of the city, the word spread rapidly and the city folk turned out to watch.

The elder, dressed in long, flowing and almost opalescent robes carried a staff that while entirely straight, was covered in bark and from the upper end of which three delicate branches grew, covered with green leaves that revealed the staff had been made of ash and that it was miraculously still alive even without the benefit of roots. His entourage of six Kenlienta men and women stood tall, dressed in ceremonial armor and also carrying staves, although these, while covered in bark, were obviously not still living plants.

The residents of Taundon stood silently at the sides of the street to watch them pass and even carriages and wagons, pulled over to give them room to continue walking in the middle of the street. Every once in a while, the elder stopped the procession to ask a bystander for directions. On receiving an answer, an honor guard would deposit a few gold coins into the hand of the one who had answered and the party would proceed onward leaving a stunned citizen behind staring at an amount that was the equivalent of a common worker’s wages for nearly three years.

Word of the arrival of the elder finally spread to Farington and the entire Guild Council came out to greet the elder as he approached the Central Guildhall. The elder listened to their greetings politely but did not seem impressed by all the words. “Thank you for your greeting,” he told them at last, “but I seek Masters Raff and Emblem Cawlens.”

“They are on vacation, Revered Elder,” Grandmaster Harton replied, “and I understand they do not wish to be disturbed.” That last was added with a trace of satisfaction. “I am sure one of us will be able to help you.”

“I am not,” the elder replied. “Please inform them that Elder Coraxis is here to take council with them on a matter most grave.”

Master Pauls Forrent stepped forward and told the Kenlienta smoothly, “I have just this moment sent an apprentice to their home in Weslington to tell them of your arrival, Elder Coraxis. It is a few miles away and will take some time for them to get here, but you may wait comfortably in my office if you like.”

Coraxis noticed that several of the other Master Wayfarers shot Pauls angry looks, but replied, “Comfortably? That is difficult within this stability, but I thank you for your hospitality. It will be easier if we sit.”

It was nearly an hour and a half before Raff and Em arrived at Central Guildhall with Kaz and Chanya in tow, but when they got there Coraxis wasted no time explaining his problem. “Raufanax, Lady Emblem, there has been a murder in one of our towns in what you call the Toplands of Hosinland.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Elder” Raff replied instantly in the formal Ken language. “What can I do to help?”

What he really meant was, “What do you need me for?” and Coraxis understood the unspoken question completely.

“The problem is that the murder victims were a human mother and child,” Coraxis explained.

“Interesting,” Raff admitted. “What were they doing in a Kenlientan town?”

“Living,” Coraxis replied simply. “They wandered into the town a few years ago and asked to stay. They were able to control their stable auras so the townsfolk saw no reason to refuse the request.”

“Unusual,” Raff murmured.

“Quite unlikely,” Pauls commented suspiciously.

“Not really, Pauls,” Raff argued. “We find people with small amounts of talent all the time. Normally they don’t know what to do with it and just manage to get themselves lost in the Wild. Maybe in this case they stumbled across a Ken road and followed it into a town. Somehow they managed to figure out how to pull in their auras. That’s the only truly remarkable part, you know. But, Revered Elder, humans in a Kenlienta town are subject to Ken law. Why did you feel the need to come here?”

“We do not know who killed them, Raufanax,” Coraxis explained. “There are some who would blame the human man, Peter Bridger, for the deaths of his wife, Sarah, and son, also named Peter.”

“And you need me to track him down and bring him back to stand trial?” Raff asked.

“I do not believe Peter Bridger is guilty,” Coraxis replied, “but, yes, we do need you to find him. At the very least he should know of the deaths of his family. Peter Bridger left just hours before the murders were committed. That is why he is a suspect, of course.”

“Where did he go?” Raff asked.

“I do not know,” Coraxis admitted. “Does it matter?”

“Maybe,” Raff replied. “Probably. It would certainly make it easier to find him. Don’t you even know where he was supposed to be going?”

“I am sorry, Raufanax,” Coraxis replied. “I did not know to ask. I have heard of how master wayfarers can find people through the Wild. I thought that would be enough.”

“Not always and only if it has been a few days,” Raff replied. “After that the trail grows cold. It lasts longer in the Wild, but only when someone is not pulling their aura in. Bridger knows how to do that. If he didn’t, you probably would have seen him and his family escorted back into a stability. I doubt he left a trail.”

“But he might be in a stability now,” Coraxis pointed out. “Can you follow him using your own wits and logic?”

“Maybe,” Raff admitted. “I do not always rely on wayfaring in these matters.” He glanced at Em. She nodded back microscopically. “Oh, very well. I never could deny an honorable request from the Ken.”

The Way to Marnas Nokit

One

“You changed your mind all of a sudden,” Em remarked after Raff promised to meet Coraxis to the north of Taundon the next morning.

“It’s like I said,” Raff admitted. “I’ve never been able to refuse a request from the Ken.”

“I’m thrilled as hell to be going to another Ken city,” Kaz admitted, “but I don’t get it. Just the other day you were telling everyone how you were on vacation. What’s the difference?”

“The Ken have never asked me to do something they could do for themselves, and they’ve never betrayed me,” Raff replied. “Do you have any idea of how difficult it was for Coraxis to come here? His pride and dignity were only the first casualties. It meant admitting to his people that he could not solve this problem. An elder is supposed to be wise in all matters. In this case he was forced to show his wisdom by knowing when to admit he was stumped. Then there was the trek from his capital city, Marnas Nokit, that means ‘The Peak of the North,’ by the way. Roughly five hundred miles south through the Wild areas of the Green Lands. That’s no straight course. He must have threaded his way around Ebor, Niss, Harriton and a host of smaller towns, carefully passing himself and his honor guard over wayfarer paths and then walking into Taundon itself. He not only had to constantly ward himself against stability but his honor guards as well. Then he had to beg for help. He did it with dignity and grace, but it was a plea of last resort. No one, not even an elder, does all that lightly, Kaz. So if Coraxis felt it was worth it to come here, there was no way I could ever deny his request.”

“I have never visited a Kenlienta city,” Chanya admitted.

“I’ll show you how to pull in your aura,” Kaz offered. “It’s not hard to do, but you have to remember to do it constantly while we are among the Ken or even if on one of their roads. They feel our stability desecrates a road.”

“I suppose it might if we leave a trail,” Chanya commented. “One of my teachers mentioned that once, but I got the impression that very few wayfarers get the chance to visit among the Ken.”

“Very few take the opportunity,” Em told her. “For all our friendship with the Ken, most of our contacts with them have been in the form of brief conversations along our pathways and when they want to talk. We rarely go to them.”

“We should though,” Raff told them all. “The friendship between the Ken and the Guild of Wayfarers has gotten very strained of late. The biggest problem is the human effect on the Wild and its mirror, the increase of Wild energy in the stabilities. Neither side wants to take responsibility for the problems, but we both need to act together.”

“Are they two different problems?” Chanya asked. “It seems to me that if the Wild is becoming stable and the stabilities are getting Wild, maybe there’s a common cause.”

“In a sense there is,” Raff told her. “It’s pollution. Many human cities are beginning to industrialize. It’s most pronounced here in the Green Lands, but most other countries are building up too. The Ken are doing likewise. They like to think their magic is cleaner than human technology, but their new magics use many of the same fuels our technology does and there are by-products that leak out into the environment every bit as much as coal smoke and other waste products do.”

“So do we ride on horseback to Marnas Nokit?” Kaz asked.

“I normally would,” Raff answered, “but Coraxis expects us to travel with him. We could shield the Kenlienta from the horses’ auras, or Coraxis could, but it would be a breach of etiquette to use horses if the Ken are on foot.”

“We’re walking five hundred miles to the north?” Kaz asked.

“That’s nothing compared to the three thousand mile chase you led us on in the Southern Continent, Kaz,” Em told him.

“That’s not fair. I didn’t know you were following me,” Kaz replied defensively, “and I didn’t know where I was going either for that matter.”

“Three thousand miles?” Chanya asked. “You’ll have to tell me about that sometime.”

“Maybe on the walk to Marnas Nokit,” Kaz replied. “It sounds like we’ll have plenty of time.”

It turned out, however, that the Ken had not walked all the way from Marnas Nokit. They found the elder’s party, as expected, two miles to the north of the edge of Taundon’s stability. In a small town they might have waited much closer, but cities the size of Taundon, with a large daily change of population coming and going between the city and her satellites, grew and shrank in size at their edges and a location safely outside the limit might not be a few hours later.

The Elder had brought an even dozen large creatures. They stood six feet tall at the shoulders with large bull-like heads and horse-shaped bodies, although their legs were much thicker than any horse’s might be, and they were uniformly covered by long, light brown hair. “What are those?” Kaz asked as they approached.

“Hippotaurs,” Raff explained. “Yes, this makes much more sense, and they will speed up the trip considerably.”

“Really?” Kaz asked. “They don’t look very fast.”

“They do not have to be, Kaz,” Em told him. “They can walk at a constant rate for two full days on only a few hours sleep. It looks like some of us will have to double up. Those large basket-like saddles will hold two of us, though. Kaz, you and Chanya will ride together.”

“Those hippotaurs might be able keep walking all night,” Chanya commented, “but we can’t. We’re going to be very tired if we don’t stop every so often.”

“You can sleep in the saddles,” Raff told her. “They are actually very comfortable, much more so than any horse and actually quite hard to fall out of by accident. Elder! Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“No need to apologize, Raufanax,” Coraxis replied. “I’m sorry I did not realize you would have students with you and your gracious wife.”

“We can ride double,” Raff shrugged. “It is not a problem.”

“No, I insist you each have a mount of your own,” Coraxis replied.

“Only for Em and myself, then” Raff negotiated. “The students can share.” Coraxis nodded and one of the honor guards dismounted and walked over to another of the huge beasts.

Kaz watched as Raff climbed up into a saddle and then tried to emulate him. What Raff did with the grace of experience, however, did not come easily to Kaz and when about halfway up, he fell off. “Whoa, easy there,” Chanya laughed, catching him in her strong arms. “Why don’t I help you up, and then you can help me?”

Kaz nodded and after another try, finally managed to get up into the large, padded saddle. He then leaned over and offered Chanya a hand. She took it and, compared to Kaz’s own clumsiness, seemed to

almost float up the side of the beast and finally come to rest just behind him. “That’s really not fair, you know,” he told her. “You make it look easy.”

“I got to learn from your mistakes,” she told him. “Also I noticed there are foot and handholds to grab onto on the way up. I’ll show you next time we’re on the ground. How do we steer this magnificent beast, though? There are no reins.”

“With your mind,” Coraxis told her. “But you need not worry about that now. Hippotaurs are herd animals and one will follow the others unless ordered not to.”

“Just enjoy the ride, kids,” Raff told them.

Hippotaurs did not run, they plodded along at a constant speed just slightly faster than a comfortable walk. They had a gentle rolling gait that after a few minutes began to relax Kaz and he started to nod off until Chanya suddenly slipped her arms around his waist. “Uh! Huh?” he asked, slightly startled by the almost familiarity of the act.

“It’s more comfortable this way, Kaz,” Chanya told him. “Does it bother you?”

“Well, no, not really,” Kaz admitted, “but since my people were killed, I’ve sort of gotten used to the ways of the Green Landsmen.”

“Yes, they do seem to be so very... uh... proper, don’t they?” Chanya chuckled. “But I would think nothing of holding my brother like this.”

“I would often hold my younger sister,” Kaz recalled dimly. “That was a long time ago, a lifetime.”

Chanya noted a slight catch in his voice and told him, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bring back bad memories.”

“Not bad,” Kaz told her. “Not really. I loved my family very much. But my tribe, the Sarahnie, was at war with the Alono. There were raids on various villages, but not mine, not until one night.

“The shaman wanted me to learn the ways of the spirit world,” Kaz seemed to change the subject suddenly.

“Of course,” Chanya nodded. “Most shamans, I’ve learned, are wayfarers to some extent. He probably recognized the talent in you before you did.”

“I didn’t want to be shaman,” Kaz replied. “I knew he was just waiting for me to ask certain questions, so I just didn’t ask. I guess I would have in time, but... Anyway, I didn’t. Sometimes I wonder if it would have made a difference. Maybe not.

“It was late one night when my mother suddenly woke my sister and me up,” Kaz went on. “The village was burning and there were odd, ghostly warriors screaming all around us. The Alono like to cover themselves in white paint, you see and then mark themselves in black and red. It makes them look Wild, I guess, and scary. It’s scary enough to see a warrior attacking you with his spear. They had guns too. One of them shot my father. Another stabbed my mother and killed my sister, but I was able to get away. At the time I didn’t know why the Alono ignored me. But now I think I had hidden myself in a curtain of Wild energy. They could not see me until I moved. I got out of the village and watched it die.

“Have you ever watched a stability disappear, Chanya?” he asked. “It’s like watching a soap bubble get gradually smaller and smaller and then it suddenly pops and it’s gone. My family was lucky.”

“Lucky?” Chanya asked disbelievingly.

“The survivors were carried off and sold,” Kaz explained. “That’s why the village stopped being a stability so suddenly. The Alono killed or captured every one and dragged them away and then when there were no longer enough people to maintain the stability, it just vanished, leaving the burning huts part of the Wild.” Kaz could feel Chanya shudder behind him. “I ran for my life that night. There was a jaguar stalking me so I couldn’t stay put, and then I ran head-long into a rhinoceros. That got the jaguar off my tail, actually, but I don’t think I was thinking rationally for a week or more. I just kept moving and moving. I think I was trying, somehow to get back home, but I had lost my way. By the time I was no longer thinking crazy I was out of the area my people lived in, what the Green Landsmen call jungle, and up in the mountains. I didn’t recall going there, but I must have walked, right?”

“And I was forging a path as I went. It wasn’t a very good path. I guess it was a very dangerous one. Raff told me that some of the natives were calling it a trail of fire and it really got the attention of the Ken, but I was too dangerous for them to approach so they asked Raff and Em to find and stop me.”

“I remember the fire path,” Chanya recalled. “You came close to my village.”

“I might have actually come inside,” Kaz admitted. “I stole bits of food from a lot of places. Near home I would have known what I could or could not eat, but once out of the jungle none of the plants were the same. I also didn’t realize that I didn’t need to make a path. I just thought I was supposed to because everyone knows paths keep Wild animals away.”

“Your path kept almost everyone away,” Chanya chuckled. “So how did Raff and Em find you?”

“That was easy,” Kaz replied. “I’d left them a path, remember? Well, I finally reached the end of the world or so I thought. I had crossed the Southern Continent and was on the far east side on a beach onto which there was only one way on or off, especially since I didn’t know how to swim. I was tired and miserable and trapped. But Em came and instead of attacking me, she talked. I think that’s what got my attention. A lot of people shot guns and arrows at me. They threw spears if that was all they had or just chased me off. Well, I was stealing food and tools and stuff like that, so I can’t really blame them, I guess, but Em just talked and Raff stayed back at the edge of the beach. I saw him there. He was blocking my only route off the beach, but neither of them attacked.

“So I listened and finally, after I don’t know how long, I began to calm down and when they said I could join their tribe – well that’s how I thought of the Wayfarers’ Guild at the time – I knew I could stop running. I think I slept for most of the next week after that, but gradually we made our way north to Tinap and were about to come to Taundon when Raff and Em were asked to go to Kharasia to help the Emperor stop a war with Corisa. We eventually had to go to Corisa too. I still hear from Mu Feng. We write back and forth two or three times a year.”

“Who is Mu Feng?” Chanya asked.

“The High King,” Kaz replied. “He’s my friend and we spent a lot of time together there. I didn’t know who he was at first, though. He’s not stupid, but not as smart as he might be either so the Corisan Order of Wayfarers had been running the country in his name, leaving him bored and isolated in his palace. That’s changed now too and he’s been taking a more direct role in the running of his country and since then Guild wayfarers have been allowed in Corisa, although only if escorting non-Corisans or

carrying mail or some such. It's more than we had before. Raff and Em had to stand trial by combat when we went."

"They had to fight?" Chanya asked. "Who?"

"Each was to face three masters of the Corisan Order," Kaz replied. "I wasn't there. Raff had sent me on with a party of merchants, but from what I understand, Raff so thoroughly intimidated them they chose not to make Em fight too."

"You've had an exciting career for an apprentice, Kaz," Chanya remarked. "And to be friends with the High King of Corisa... it must make you valuable to the Guild."

"It might," Kaz allowed, "if they knew about it."

"Why don't they?" Chanya asked.

"It's none of their business," Kaz told her firmly. "Sure he's the High King and, politically, a man of interest, but he's also my friend and I'm not going to let the Guild use my friendship as leverage against him. You know that's how the Council thinks, don't you?"

"Yes, I have noticed that," Chanya admitted. "Wayfaring is such a joy and I like the fact that one day I can use it to help my people, but until I pay off my debt to the Guild I must take whatever assignments they give me."

"Me too," Kaz replied. "Just because I'm the adopted son of two rich freelancers doesn't mean I'm not every bit as indentured to the Guild as you are. We must work off the cost of our training through service, you know. It's not a hard debt, really, but the only way to pay it off sooner is to work harder and longer."

"Well, we'll be paying part of that debt off on this mission," Chanya remarked.

"We will?" Kaz asked.

"Oh yes, I've seen it in the regulations," Chanya replied. "Students following their masters or teachers on an extraordinary mission gain credit for the service as though they were the masters themselves. This mission is definitely extraordinary, don't you think?"

"I do, but will the Guild?" Kaz wondered.

"I don't think they'll have a choice," Chanya told him. "This will hardly pay off both our debts, but it will still count."

"Only if we succeed, I think," Kaz remarked.

The hippotaurs plodded northward away from Taundon where traffic on the wayfarer paths was heavy and eventually came to a place beyond the range of satellite towns. Then they turned westward for an hour until they came across a cobble-paved road that was at least as well-built as any city street and turned north to follow that road.

"The Kenlienta build good roads don't they?" Chanya observed.

Kaz had been snoozing in the saddle when he heard her voice in his ear, “Uh?” he grunted. Suddenly waking up in Chanya’s arms like that and feeling her warm breath against his neck left him entirely unprepared to deal with the range of emotions he was feeling considering she professed to thinking of him as a younger brother. “Uh, what?” he asked again to give himself time to remember where he was and what they were doing.

“Oh, did I wake you?” she asked. “I’m sorry, Kaz. Go back to sleep.”

“I doubt I can at the moment,” Kaz admitted. “What did you say?”

“I was saying the Ken build really good roads,” Chanya repeated. “You can see they must drain well when it rains and they are very well maintained.”

“They are, yes,” Kaz agreed. “We got lost in a blizzard on the way to Kharaskva and lost our path in the storm, but we found a Kenlienta road and followed it to a village, Therin Kal I think its name was and stayed there until it was over. That’s where I started learning a little Kenlienta magic. There was a Ken girl, Faisha, who showed me how to do a few basic spells, like clearing away snow. It was very different from wayfaring although it uses many of the same forces. But where in wayfaring you make things happen, by magic it’s more like you merely encourage them.”

“Oh, could you show me how to do it?” Chanya asked.

“Sure, but not while we’re riding. Later,” he promised.

“Thank you, Kaz,” she hugged him.

“Time for a break!” they heard Raff call to them.

“I thought the hippotours could walk for two days at a time?” Kaz asked, noticing his mount had come to a halt.

“They can, but we need to stretch our legs every now and then,” Raff laughed. “Hungry? Hmm, stupid question, of course you are. Well, walk off your stiffness for a few minutes and then we’ll have a quick bite to eat before moving on.”

Two

Traffic on the Kenlienta road became heavier as they progressed northward. The Ken drove vehicles that bore a passing similarity to human carriages and cabriolets, carts and wagons, that were mostly drawn by onagers, Wild and distant relatives of horses, but some were also pushed ahead of a hippotaur or two. The hippotaurs, they learned, preferred to push rather than pull a cart. There were also several others riding hippotaurs and once they were passed by a Ken couple riding male griffins.

The male griffin differed drastically from the female of the species. Both bore the heads of eagles on the bodies of lions, but where the females were lighter and winged, the males were more heavy-set and had a row of spines down their backs. Those spines were trimmed off to make room for a rider's saddle, but still sprung out of most of the creatures' backs.

"Traffic's pretty heavy here, isn't it?" Kaz remarked to Raff. "I mean the Ken roads we traveled on in the East didn't have this many people on it."

"No one but a wayfarer travels in the winter if they can avoid it," Raff chuckled, "and that includes the Kenlienta. Besides, we only traveled a short distance on their roads."

"You mean we got lucky?" Kaz translated dryly.

"You know, you were more adorable as a wide-eyed boy," Raff remarked sourly. Kaz laughed at that. "And you have to agree there were a lot of people coming and going from Yakrut."

"There is that," Kaz admitted. "So this much traffic is normal?"

"It seems so to me," Raff told him.

On the second afternoon they stopped in a Kenlienta town called Gamat where the local elder signaled to Coraxis, causing the chief elder to bring the precession to a halt. "I greet you Coraxis, Revered Elder!" the local elder called to him.

"And I greet you in return, Elder Norax," Coraxis responded. "All is well in Gamete, I hope?"

"There is a matter about which I seek your counsel," Norax replied. "If I might serve as host to you and your party we could confer in comfort."

Coraxis nodded his consent and introduced Raff and Em to Norax who seemed to cheer up considerably on learning who they were. The Honor Guards stayed outside, but Kaz and Chanya followed the elders into a house with Raff and Em.

"Something very strange and unprecedented has happened, Elder Coraxis," Norax told him when they had all been seated and were sipping at cups of chilled mead.

"Tell us about it, Elder Norax," Coraxis urged, "and perhaps together we will find a solution to this problem that bothers you so."

"A few days ago," Norax informed them, "one of our children's pets, a cat imported from a nearby human city, started screaming at the edge of town."

"Cats can live in the Wild?" Chanya asked.

"Cats are not as domesticated as some animals," Raff replied. "They live where they wish. What

happened, Elder Norax?”

“Several of us rushed to see what the matter was,” Norax replied. “We found the poor creature mewling with pain and with one leg bent out of shape.”

“Broken?” Em asked.

“No,” Norax shook his head. “It was beside what I can only describe as a pool of stability. No doubt it saw the odd formation and we think it must have tried to bat at it with one paw. But the interaction caused the leg to elongate and bend back on itself painfully. I healed the cat’s wounds as best I could although it still walks with a limp even though it no longer evinces any other sign of pain.

“We quickly erected a fence around this new oddity,” Norax continued, “to keep others from blundering into it, but it moves. It does not move very rapidly, but it does move and it did not need to move very far before it was a danger once again. Two onagers were killed in its vicinity and a child tried to play with it and was thrown some twenty feet away. He broke a few bones, but he’ll mend soon enough.”

“That doesn’t sound like an effect of stability, Elder Norax,” Raff considered, “but I think I need to keep an open mind at least until I can see it for myself. Does this pool still exist or has it dried up since then?”

“It has grown a little in the last few days,” Norax replied, “and is not far from here. Please finish your mead without haste and then I will show you this terrible thing.”

A short while later they stood near a ten foot wide, oddly-colored spot on the ground. It did not really look like water. It was partially ground, grass and whatever else that had entered it since its formation, but it also had the shimmer of quicksilver that seemed to flow between and within the other components of the swirling pool in concentric waves. Looking to the south and east they could see a trail it had left as it moved with the ground churned up but solidly packed in its wake, which apparently grew wider, the closer to the current pool it was.

“I can honestly say I’ve never seen anything like it,” Raff admitted. “But I don’t think it’s a stability in any form.”

“It harms Wild creatures like a stability might,” Norax explained.

“No amount of stability would have thrown that child,” Raff countered, “and cats can live in stabilities as comfortably as in the Wild.”

“Perhaps this is extra-concentrated stability,” Norax suggested. Raff could tell the elder was not trying to be argumentative, but he had obviously made up his mind as to what this strange occurrence was.

“It seems like a concentration of Wild energy,” Raff opined as respectfully as he could.

“It might be both,” Kaz remarked.

“Huh?” Raff turned his head to look at his adopted son.

“Please explain, young Kazani,” Coraxis requested.

“Well, I’ve heard several master wayfarers and Kenlienta elders speculate that stabilities and the Wild are actually two sides of the same coin,” Kaz replied. “I know from my classes in the Guild that there is always some Wild energy available within even the largest stability and that a master wayfarer can create an area of stability in the Wild. Well, that last is easy, it’s basically what we do when we forge a path. I’m fairly sure I could form a stability this size if I needed to, although I wouldn’t within a Ken town, of course.”

“Perhaps you should form a small patch of stability, Kazani,” Coraxis suggested, “so we can see the difference.”

“As you wish, Revered Elder,” Kaz replied, “if my master approves.”

“Of course,” Coraxis nodded. “Raufanax?”

“Go ahead, Kaz,” Raff encouraged him, “but keep it small.”

Kaz nodded and stepped away a few yards from the others. Then he turned back, and lifted his arms from his sides. As he did so, a small dome of stability rose up from the ground and soon enveloped him. A moment later, he stepped out of the dome and turn back around to watch. The dome flattened quickly, but its apex remained a foot about the ground. “I can’t make it any flatter,” he reported.

“Raufanax, can you make it look more like this other thing?” Coraxis asked.

“No,” Raff decided a few minutes later. “The more I concentrate the stability, the taller the dome gets, it’s just the way it works. Let me try it the other way.” He concentrated on dissipating the stability and instead bringing a large amount of Wild energy together in a single spot. Like Kaz’s small stability, it was colorless, but it bent light strangely making the area Raff affected seem to shake and shimmy, but it did not turn silver, regardless of what he tried. Presently, they allowed that to disappear harmlessly as well.

“I see you tried both wayfaring and magic,” Coraxis noted. “Please allow me to try a few things as well.” Raff nodded and guided everyone a few steps away from the elder. Coraxis worked for the next half an hour but was unable to duplicate the odd, growing pool. Finally he turned and cast a spell that caused the pool to slowly turn black and then fade away. “I believe this was more Wild than stable,” he told them at last, “but I am unable to determine what caused it.”

“So you do not think this was the result of a waste product from a human city?” Norax asked.

“It is just as likely to be the byproduct of a Kenlienta factory,” Coraxis replied. “Young Kazani was correct in his guess that this might be both Wild and stable. I will, however, write a report on the matter and send it to my representative in Yakrut. Perhaps this is a problem others have had and have come to understand.”

“We must learn what caused this, however,” Raff insisted. “If it was formed by human pollution, the Guild needs to know immediately.”

“I hate to say this to such a good friend, but we have given your Guild proof before this of stable damage to the Wild and to date they have done little to correct the situation,” Coraxis pointed out.

“All the more reason to keep showing them proof,” Raff told him. “The Guild can influence human

nations, but it does not control them. And not all the council members believe the Wild is becoming stable.”

“It is hard not to see what is clearly in front of you,” Coraxis commented.

“That’s a polite way of calling them fools,” Raff laughed. “I have often done the same thing, without bothering to be polite.”

“I’m starting to think that the Wild and the stabilities are actually the same thing,” Kaz remarked. “The thing is they are like ice and steam. Both are water, but are diametrically opposed states. We call it Wild energy, but under human influence it behaves in a stable manner. Away from human settlements it is more chaotic and what we call Wild.”

“Where did you learn that?” Chanya asked him.

“I’ve been reading books on wayfarer theory,” Kaz admitted. “I figured to get a head start on college. Of course there’s no clear consensus on just what Wild energy really is, so that’s just an idea I’ve been working with. “I think I need to learn more math, though.”

“Really?” she asked. “I’ve found history and similar studies about people were more helpful.”

“That’s practical knowledge,” Kaz replied. “I need that too. But if Wild and stability are actually different states of the same thing we should be able to switch them back and forth.”

“We already do, Kaz,” Raff told him. “It is called wayfaring and magic.”

“But we don’t know why it works,” Kaz told him, “but if we did, maybe we could use the knowledge to resolve the stable encroachments in the Wild. It might also tell us why only some wayfarers are capable of Kenlienta magic.”

“I think that last is a matter of belief,” Raff told him, “but I don’t know if you’ll find anyone at University to help you on that. It’s a new idea, possibly an extension of what Doctor Harkermor and I have been working on. When we get back to Taundon, you should try writing to him. I think he will find that idea interesting and he might be able to suggest avenues of research for you.”

“It sounds like a project for a doctorate,” Chanya considered.

“There’s no reason a wayfarer cannot also be a doctor of physics,” Raff remarked.

Marnas Nokit

One

Marnas Nokit, the “Peak of the North,” really had been built on top of the tallest mountain in the Green Lands region. Deep within the Hosinlandish Toplands, it crowned and was built into the heart of that mountain.

Kenlienta instinctively loved change and especially liked to work at changing their living places constantly, but the one permanent structure in Marnas Nokit was the great central tower of Coraxis’ regional Council of Elders building. The tower had originally been intended as just another temporary addition to the ever-changing city, but it had been built at the very top of the mountain and, when completed, the view of the surrounding countryside had so entranced residents and visitors alike they had decided to adapt all future designs to accommodate it.

They arrived in the city late on the fourth evening after leaving Taundon and the city lights illuminated the mountain so that it stood out plainly in the night sky from miles around.

“It is late,” Coraxis observed as they rode through the city, “and the scene of the crime, as I believe you would call it, is on the far side of the city. We will rest tonight in my home and go there in the morning. By now, even I am tired of sleeping on the back of a hippotaur.”

“Evidently the kids are getting real cozy that way,” Raff remarked amusedly, noticing that even though the hippotaurs had come to a stop, both Kaz and Chanya were fast asleep in their shared saddle.

“Well, let’s get them inside,” Em decided. “It’s a bit chilly up here in the mountains.”

Both students woke up easily enough and were able to grab their bags and march a bit further uphill to Coraxis’ home, but neither remained awake any longer than it took to be shown to their respective rooms. When Em poked her head into Kaz’s room an hour later, the young man had evidently failed to get undressed, but instead had fallen asleep the moment he touched the bed.

Raff stayed up another two hours, talking to Coraxis about his city and the people in it and also asking questions about the troubles Chief Elder Leraxa was currently having in Yakrut.

“Yes,” Coraxis told him, “I think she underestimated the enormity of her undertaking when she established her new permanent government. Previously, we had no political parties in the way you have in your Parliament. We did have many cases in which elders would band together in the Council to accomplish something none could do alone, but such alliances were as temporary as our architecture. No groups tried to establish long-term goals or tried to gain a permanent majority over the others. It would have been a useless gesture when we only met every few years. Now, however, we are always in session or our representatives are and we are forced to consider not only tomorrow’s votes but next year’s as well. I find myself forced to deal with compromises I would never even have had to consider in the past. I do not like it.”

“Well, I’ve always said there was a good reason we used the same word to indicate coming to an agreement as we do for potential damage to ourselves and our honor,” Raff replied. “Who are these three elders trying to replace Leraxa?”

“Oh, there are many more than that,” Coraxis told him. “Over half the council is attempting to gain ascendancy. Pretty much anyone who voted in favor of the new government. Which three did you have in mind.”

“The names I was given were Suranax, Durinia, and Gentax,” Raff replied.

“Ah, them,” Coraxis sighed. “Their regions are immediately adjacent to Yakrut. I am not surprised you did not know them, however, as they are all relatively new to their positions. They are also among the most militant elders on the subject of possible human pollution. You’ll note I call it only ‘possible pollution.’ Even our own scientists are divided on the immediacy of the problem although our younger people have embraced it to their hearts as I’m sure you know.”

“They seem to have stopped attacking wayfarer parties and human settlements since the changes in Yakrut,” Raff pointed out.

“Here in the west and on the Southern Continent, yes,” Coraxis nodded, “but to the east in Salasia and Myanistan and in western Corisa I have heard the incidents have become more frequent recently. That strange moving city has alarmed us all in the last few years as well.”

“Senopolis,” Raff supplied the name. “It was wreaking havoc with wayfarer paths when I first found it, but we’ve established a small Guildhall there and the wayfarers stationed there have been working to minimize the damage as it passes. So far as I know there are no Kenlienta settlements in its direct known path for the next few years.”

“What about that town it destroyed two years ago?” Coraxis asked.

“That was terrible, but we were able to give the residents nearly a year’s notice before it happened,” Raff replied. “The problem was the Ken there all waited until Senopolis was less than a month away before they bothered to start packing.”

“I hadn’t heard that they had so much warning,” Coraxis admitted. “Well, at least it happened during the summer and they had tents to sleep in. Ken build fast. We’ve had to learn how in order to keep our cities in a state of flux. With a year’s notice they could have simply built another town and moved in before this Senopolis had passed.”

“I believe the argument was that the site of their town was sacred,” Raff remarked, “and that they would have preferred to defend it from being desecrated.”

“All Ken settlements are sacred sites, Raufanax,” Coraxis replied. “They are sacred, however, because Ken live there, not the other way around. I think some people forget that.”

“It’s an easy enough mistake, I think,” Raff yawned. “Oh, excuse me, maybe I ought to get a bit of sleep too. I notice we’re the only ones still awake.”

The next morning Coraxis guided them down the mountain to the house in which Peter Bridger and his family had lived. “Technically,” Coraxis explained, “this is a separate township and not a part of Marnas Nokit at all, but except in terms of administration, most Ken overlook the fact there are actually

several towns on the outskirts of the regional capital. This town is called Sotz Marnas, or in your language, the ‘Side of the Peak.’”

“Appropriate,” Em noted. “Where did it happen?” She looked around trying not to stare back at the curious Kenlenta who seemed to have stopped doing everything as Coraxis and the wayfarers passed. She was not sure if it was the presence of the honor guards that made everyone stop to look or the humans. She was fairly certain the elder did not make a habit of parading through every town in his region on a regular basis. Nothing would get accomplished that way and if he had the time to do that, he could represent himself in Yakrut.

“Just down the hill from here,” Coraxis told her.

“Just down the hill” turned out to be on the edge of the Ken town another mile away. The Bridger home did not look much different from any of the other houses in the town. It was a small wooden structure with slate tiles on the roof and glass in the windows, although those windows were, at present, shuttered shut.

“We have kept the home and the victims frozen in time since they were discovered,” Coraxis told them. “They have not yet had a chance to decompose.”

“How did you manage that?” Kaz asked interestedly.

“Magic, of course,” Coraxis replied, slightly smiling. “Between magic and what you call wayfaring, there is little that cannot be accomplished. This is a particularly advanced spell, however, and a team of magicians have had to come renew the spell every day since it was first cast. I’m sure they will be relieved to be able to go back to their more normal projects.” He paused to dispel the magic that kept the house and all within it sealed up in a single moment.

Inside, the house was kept in an orderly manner and in one most human. A Kenlentan home would have been covered in carvings, or layers of paint and new wallpaper. The furniture might have shown signs of frequent reupholstering, but this was obviously a human home. While well-maintained, the walls had been repainted only often enough to keep them looking good, the chairs at the dining table exhibited small signs of wear around their edges and there were slight marks in the pine-wood floor boards where those chairs had been moved. The marks were not so great as to be unsightly and were, in fact, barely noticeable. It was just that in a Ken home, surfaces would have been refinished too often for such wear marks to occur.

“The bodies are in the bedroom,” Coraxis informed them.

The bodies of Sarah Bridger and Peter Junior were to be found on a blood-soaked bed. Chanya took one look at them and with faint retching noises, ran back to the front door. Em and Kaz took a closer look at the corpses while Raff noted, “This window is broken.”

“Yes,” Coraxis agreed. “We believe the murderer shot them from outside. If you open the shutters, you will note that this window faces the surrounding woods. No one could have seen the incident as it happened. They did, however, report hearing two gun shots.”

Raff opened the window as instructed and saw that was, indeed, the case. “Nothing back there but their well, I see. They were shot? What with? Not an arrow or bolt. I wasn’t aware the Ken used gunpowder weapons.”

“Very few have an interest in human weapons,” Coraxis agreed, “but the neighbors all heard the shots.”

“But there was no one to be found by the time they came to investigate, right?” Raff asked. Coraxis nodded. “Very well, I guess the first thing to do is to find out what sort of weapon was used and where it got to. Your spell appears to have preserved the traces of stable paths within the house too. That may turn out to be useful.”

“Kaz,” Em asked, “will you help me with the bodies, we need to see if we can find a ball or bullet and determine a precise cause of death.”

Raff turned slightly green at the thought and told Em, “I’ll just leave you to that, I should think.”

“Yes, dear,” Em replied softly. “Poor Raff,” she told Kaz when Raff had left the room, “for all his strengths he really does not have the stomach for this sort of thing.”

“I’m sure Chanya left him room to be sick outside,” Kaz replied, showing no signs of discomfort around the bodies.

“It doesn’t bother you, does it?” Em asked.

“I’m a primitive, Em,” he replied. “We’re all savages, don’t you know.”

Em looked at him strangely. “Just what have they been teaching you at that school?” she asked, a trace of anger in her voice.

“The school?” Kaz echoed. “What they are supposed to, I should think. My letters, some basic mathematics, philosophy, history, how to lie convincingly; the usual subjects. But I know what you are asking. It’s not the teachers who have given me a hard time. Teachers seem to delight in having a student actually learn what they are trying to teach. Given the nature of some of my classmates, I’m sure they found it a novelty. But it’s those same classmates who taught me the lessons you’re asking about.

“Em, no matter how well I’m dressed,” Kaz continued, “how well I speak, how well I learn my lessons, in fact, some of my fellow students would never let me forget that my skin and hair shouts to the world that I am not a Green Landsman in their eyes, nor can I ever be. No, don’t worry about that. I would have had the same problem if I had white skin and red hair but spoke with a Cracian accent like you do. The point is, I’m different. So what? I made friends among those with whom friendship was worth something. As for the rest of them, if that is what conformity does for you, I’m glad to be as different as possible.

“Chanya tells me it is not quite so bad at University, although even there the snobbery comes out in the unworthy,” Kaz went on, “so maybe it will be easier there or not. Chanya is a very pretty woman even from a Green Lands standard of beauty. That might have made the difference, or maybe the students there are a bit more mature than those in prep school. Well, actually I hope so. I like having intelligent discussions about the news from the colonies, new scientific breakthroughs, philosophical ideas and stuff like that. It’s why I’ve taken every opportunity I could within the Guild. The apprentices are more serious than high school students.”

“They’re mostly college age,” Em pointed out.

“That’s probably it, then,” Kaz chuckled in unconscious imitation of Raff. “It’s not all beer and chips

within the Guild either, of course. I notice a lot of apprentices, especially those who are not likely to advance beyond the rank of journeyman, are jealous and can be as petty as the idiots I dealt with at school, but must Guildsmen don't care what color my skin is. Strangely I seem to get on best with the most and the least talented of apprentices. It's the ones in the middle who don't like me."

"It is jealousy, as you say," Em replied. "Most will grow out of it and of those who do not, well, you won't see them very often in the field. Besides, I think there's a good chance you may sit on the Guild Council one day. Then they'll all change their tunes I am sure."

"Why would I want to be on the Council?" Kaz asked. "It doesn't sound like fun at all."

"It is not suppose to be fun, Kaz," Em told him. "It's a serious responsibility and one which some day may summon you. I think it will, too. In spite of your talk of having fun, I know you take your responsibilities quite seriously."

"Yeah, well, maybe," Kaz replied uncertainly. "So what about these two? I think it's obvious they died from some sort of gunshot."

"A musket, I believe," Em replied as she used a trace of Ken magic to lift a spent lump of lead out of Sarah Bridger's remains. "No, unless I miss my guess this was shot by a rifle, probably a gun designed for hunting."

"Rifle, musket," Kaz shrugged, "What difference does that make? Dead is still dead, isn't it?"

"True, but the sort of weapon used could be important, Kaz," she lectured. "A musket could be and likely would have been a military-issue gun. It doesn't need to have been, of course, but probably would have been since muskets are designed to be loaded relatively rapidly. In a rifle you sacrifice fast loading in favor of accuracy over distance. The barrels of a rifle are grooved to make the bullet spin as it comes out. Spinning makes the bullet more stable in flight so it is more likely to hit what you aim at. I believe I can see the marks rifling grooves made on this bullet. Look for yourself. See right here?"

"Okay, so someone shot them with a hunting rifle," Kaz replied. "Who around here has a hunting rifle?"

"That is what we need to find out," she told him firmly.

Two

"It's all right," Em told Raff and Chanya, "We're done in the bedroom for now. Did you want to examine the bullets?" She stepped out the door to discover a large and angry crowd had gathered outside.

"Want to meet the neighbors, Em?" Raff asked lightly.

"I wondered why you didn't try to come back inside and tough it out," Em commented, seeing Elder Coraxis talking to the assembled Kenlenta. "What's the trouble?"

"It seems the Bridgers were not universally loved in Sotz Marnas," Raff replied, "at least not after the fact. I get the impression they were liked by their neighbors but these people have already convicted Peter Bridger in their minds. The incident is invoking all sorts of anti-human prejudice and they resent that the elder chose to bring in still more humans to investigate."

"Do they think we'll be prejudiced toward Peter Bridger?" Kaz asked. "We're wayfarers, damn it! We don't play favorites. And you two are Raff and Emblem Cawlens, the honored heroes of the entire Ken Nation."

"Most of these kids weren't even alive during the Great Plague, Kaz," Raff pointed out. "They may have heard our names, but it might be coming as a surprise to them that Raufanax is just another human."

"It's still a very cold courtesy to demand our expulsion from the town," Chanya remarked.

"Is that what they're demanding?" Kaz asked. "I was sort of worried they were going to attack."

"They may yet," Raff told him, "but I doubt it. Coraxis has placed his body and honor between them and us. They aren't likely to attack the highest ranked elder in the region."

Just then one of the young adults in the crowd threw a rock at the humans. Kaz lifted his hand almost lazily and stopped it in mid air. Coraxis roared with anger and with several gestures lifted himself three feet into the air and hovered there. "Who threw that?" he asked quietly into the stunned silence.

There was a very long pause, but Coraxis did not need to ask a second time. Finally a teenager, a year or two younger than Kaz, stepped forward looking ashamed of himself. "Forgive me, Revered Elder," he said quietly and fell abjectly to his knees.

"It is not to me that you owe your apologies," Coraxis told him sternly.

The young man lifted his head just enough to see the humans standing just outside the cottage door. He gulped visibly and got slowly to his feet. He took several steps and finally stopped about ten feet from the wayfarers. "I am sorry, honored guests," he told them quietly. "I have breached hospitality and am dishonored."

It was enough for Raff, but evidently not for Coraxis. "I don't believe everyone heard you," he told the youth.

The young man repeated what he had said loud enough for all to hear, adding, "Please allow me to alleviate my shame by serving you for as long as you abide among us."

"The apology is enough, son," Raff told him.

“No, honored guest, I have dishonored not only myself but my entire town and the Ken Nation as a whole,” the young man insisted. Having started to apologize, he was throwing himself into it whole-heartedly. “Please allow me to serve you.”

“Perhaps we could use a native guide,” Em suggested. “Someone to show us around and introduce us to the people we need to speak to?”

“Yes, yes!” he told her eagerly, “And I will bring you your meals and have your clothing cleaned if you wish and...”

“What’s your name?” Raff asked, as much to stop the embarrassing gushing as to have something to call the teenager besides, “Kid.”

“Theraxin, honored guest,” the teen responded.

“Raufanax or just Raff if you would rather,” Raff corrected him and introduced the others while the crowd quickly dissipated.

“Didn’t you sort of change your mind a bit quickly?” Kaz asked Theraxin a short time later.

“I was angry and lost control,” Theraxin explained.

“Well, you’re young yet,” Kaz laughed. “I imagine you still have a chance to grow out of it.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Theraxin shook his head. “You are the guests of Elder Coraxis and therefore guests of us all. It does not matter that I did not invite you or that I did not want you here. By throwing the rock, I dishonored us all. I am ashamed.”

“Except that you threw it with your arm, it wasn’t much of a surprise,” Kaz remarked. “Why not use magic? I might not have had time to stop it that way.”

“I have not been chosen for that training,” Theraxin admitted, “and I pretty much showed you why not today.”

“I can show you how to do that,” Kaz offered.

“Not until I have been chosen by an elder,” Theraxin told him. “It would profane the art, Kazani.”

“Well, I won’t force you,” Kaz told him. “So, let me get this right. Everyone turned around and left quietly because you threw one rock?”

“They are ashamed too,” Theraxin admitted. “They are ashamed because I threw it and they are ashamed because they know they might have done the same thing.”

“In Taundon if someone had started throwing stones it probably would have started a riot,” Kaz remarked.

“I do not think I would want to go to this Taundon of yours,” Theraxin replied.

“Without training in magic, the stability would probably kill you,” Kaz noted. “Well, come on, let’s

see what Raff and Em have found out so far.

“There’s still a connection between the bullet and the rifle that shot it,” Chanya told Kaz in a whisper when he joined her and Coraxis in the Bridger house, “but it’s just a trace, so we need to be careful to not disturb Em and Raff while they work.”

“What are they doing?” Theraxin asked.

“Shh!” Chanya snapped.

A wayfarer’s ability to see the flow of Wild and Stability is not something that can be turned off and on, but after a while most learn to ignore the odd sensory effects engendered by the ability so Kaz had to switch mental gears to see what Raff and Em were looking at. The two bullets Em had retrieved from the bodies were sitting on the kitchen table and almost invisibly thin green lines of energy ran from each one toward the far wall. As he watched, the lines became slightly thicker and brighter.

“That’s a bit better,” Raff commented, picking up one of the bullets. “The rifle in question can’t be too far away. Let’s see where this trace leads us.”

“Where are we going,” Theraxin asked.

“Well, you can’t see it, but there’s a trace of energy between the bullets and the gun that fired them,” Kaz explained as they went back outside behind the others. “We’ll follow that trace and find the gun. With a bit of luck it will also lead us to the killer.”

They walked around the house toward the woods in back, then turned right and kept walking until they reached the well. “I was afraid of that,” Raff remarked. “Whoever did that, threw the gun down there.”

“Too far down to lift by magic,” Em remarked “and wayfaring would be dangerous to nearby Ken.”

“We could stand away,” Coraxis offered.

“It’s not a deep well,” Kaz noted, looking down the open hole. “Less than thirty feet. You could lower me down and I’ll retrieve it.”

“It’s a bit of a tight fit,” Raff replied, “We can get you down there and back up easily enough, but I’m not sure you’ll have the room to move around and we don’t know how deep the water is down there.”

“About three feet,” Theraxin told him. “That’s how deep the water is in all the wells on this side of town are at the moment. I’m smaller than Kazani, why don’t you let me go down there?”

“All right,” Raff decided. “But if the water level is higher than you think, I want you to say so immediately. We’re not trying to drown you, after all.”

“I’ll go look for some rope,” Kaz volunteered.

“Why are you still using open bucket wells like this, Coraxis?” Raff asked while waiting. “Pumps of human manufacture aren’t all that expensive or your own artisans could make pumps of your own.”

“I’m not sure,” Coraxis admitted. “In most things we love to embrace change, but sometimes we do

things a certain way just because we've always done them that way."

Kaz soon returned with a length of rope and, together, the wayfarers lowered Theraxin into the well. "Found it!" the Ken teenager called up shortly thereafter. They pulled him back up and found him soaked to the waist, although he denied needing to dry off. "It's a warm day," he told them. "I'll dry off soon enough."

"This is a dead end," Raff announced a few minutes later. "At least, there is no trail leading beyond this weapon. Well, this is a Kenlienta town. I didn't expect there to be. Not so much as a trace from here to the house, either. You would never know humans lived here, but then if you did they probably would not have found the place nor been allowed to stay. We'll have to do this the hard way, I fear."

"This is interesting," Chanya noted as she wandered near the window through which Sarah Bridger and her son had been killed. "There are fresh footprints here. Have there been many people investigating this?"

The others came closer to have a look. "Human-made boots," Em noted. "The soles of human boots differ greatly from those generally made by the Ken."

"So do you think the killer was human?" Chanya asked.

"Someone wearing human boots, perhaps," Raff replied. "There are a lot of foot prints out here. For all we know, Bridger may have been repairing the window just before he left town. However, it does argue he may have killed his wife and son."

They spent the next few days talking to neighbors and pouring through Peter Bridger's scanty business records. It turned out he had found a way to make a living by importing select human goods into Kenlientan towns and cities. The Ken might not be able to tolerate a human stability, but there was no prejudice against human foods and manufactured goods when they could get them. "So much for those foot prints being proof against Bridger," Raff sighed. "Human-manufactured footwear is evidently one of his most favored products here. And I see he also traded Ken products among human towns and cities. Bridger's certainly made the most of his natural wayfaring talent," Raff admitted. "Not bad for an untrained wayfarer."

"Well, if he can travel Ken roads as well as follow wayfarer paths," Kaz remarked, "he can get to a number of places."

"Including Haristol seaport," Raff added. "He evidently makes an annual trip to Varana for items he can only find in the colonies and that is where he is headed right now."

"Do you know where exactly?" Em asked.

"No, but he's made a regular circuit there in the past. This journal we found is several years old. I imagine he has a more current one with him. We can try catching up to him, though, assuming he still goes to the same places. We have a list of his business contacts. But first we do need to talk to potential witnesses."

The people in the neighborhood mostly had good things to say for the Bridgers. A few admitted to never having approved of having humans for neighbors, "I have nothing against humans, of course," was a common remark, "but I never knew if they would forget to control their auras." This was usually accompanied by a hasty, "It's not like they were trained to do so, you know."

The Bridgers' closest neighbor, was effusive in his praise of the humans, however. "A nicer couple you could not hope to meet," he told the wayfarers. "I'll admit I had my doubts when they first moved in, but they were open-hearted and adopted Ken ways of hospitality and kindness as if born to our people, always sharing what they had freely and participating in our local charities. It's such a shame. They were a vital part of our community and I don't know how we'll go on without them. I miss them already."

"Do you have any idea who might want to harm them?" Raff asked.

"Harm them?" the neighbor echoed. "Of course not."

"I used to think he was a witch," Theraxin said of the Bridgers' neighbor after Raff had finished interviewing him. "All the kids did. He lives alone and usually shoos us away from his property when he thinks we get too close."

"I recall there was an older man where I grew up that had a similar reputation," Raff told him. "Generally such folks just don't like to be disturbed, but they are harmless nonetheless."

"Yes, I've decided that too," Theraxin admitted.

While Raff interviewed the neighbors with Kaz's help, Em and Chanya were conducting interviews of their own, but their results were similar. Theraxin guided them to all the townsfolk willing to talk about the murders and introduced the wayfarers as though they were long-time friends. While some few Ken admitted to having been nervous to have humans living so nearby, they all had to agree that the Bridgers were good neighbors and a benefit to the community.

The Way to New Ebor

One

"Well, I can't see any way around it," Raff admitted at last. "We're going to have to track Bridger down. Our best bet is Varana. According to his records and the neighbors, he goes there every year about this time."

“Varana’s a big place,” Em remarked. “Can we pin it down a bit?”

“Well, he generally lands in New Ebor and goes to Bonford,” Raff replied, “although sometimes he takes passage directly to Bonford and once went by way of Lonport. Sometimes he lands first at the more southerly port of Pacidelphia. As best I can tell, though, he generally takes the first ship he can. Once in Varana, he stops in at all the usual places before coming back here.”

“So we can do the same,” Em suggested. “We ought to go by way of Taundon, though. Kaz and Chanya don’t need to come with us to Varana.”

“The crossing only takes a fortnight,” Kaz pointed out. “It’s a bit faster on the return trip because of the prevailing winds. With a month and a half to investigate we can be back in time for the fall semester.”

“Or you can send us back early if need be,” Chanya argued.

“Two of them,” Em sighed. “No, I really think you two need to stay here.”

“Going to Taundon will slow you down,” Kaz predicted.

“Not by much and we won’t be traveling back by hippotaur,” Raff told them. “Too slow. We’ll ride to the nearest human town and hire a carriage and a team of horses, then change the horses whenever they start to tire. This is a chase after all and time is of the essence.”

“All the more reason not to go by way of Taundon,” Kaz retorted.

“We’ll only lose a day,” Raff insisted.

“It could be an essential day,” Kaz argued.

“I’ll take that chance,” Raff shot back.

The nearest human town was only an hour away and they were soon racing back south to Taundon.

Having left in the middle of the afternoon, they were forced to stop in Ebor that evening, but rather than checking into the guildhall there, they stayed in an inn well outside the ancient city walls and were on the move again under a rosy false dawn sky the next morning.

They progressed southward so rapidly that Kaz suspected Raff was doing something with the path. Master Wayfarers did, at need, condense pathways to make for shorter trips, he knew, but when he looked, it seemed all Raff was doing was driving the carriage.

Around noon they spotted a flock of colorful birds overhead with bright red, orange and yellow feathers and a strange glow about them. “Firebirds,” Em explained when Chanya pointed them out. “They are somewhat related to the phoenix of Salasia, but are much smaller and only live about five years before dying in flames and being reborn from their own ashes. Or, at least that is what the ancients thought. We know now that they are not actually reborn, but that each bird, whether male or female, holds from one to five eggs in a special pouch and the heat of their immolation is an essential part of the incubation and hatching process. It only seems as though they are being reborn. Phoenixes, of course, only hold one or, rarely, two eggs, so the illusion of their rebirth was harder to discern until the firebirds were studied more closely.

As Kaz predicted, they were held up in Taundon when Master Pauls Forrent, once again, tried to press Raff into taking the assignment in Lonport.

“Haven’t you sent someone there yet?” Raff asked. “You’ve put it off too long, you know.”

“The Guild Council cannot come to a consensus on whom to send if you won’t take the job, Raff,” Pauls told him.

“Very funny, Pauls,” Raff retorted flatly. “Now give me the truth.”

“It’s politics combined with fear, Raff,” Pauls replied.

“Makes for a dreadful cocktail,” Raff shot back.

“It does,” Pauls agreed. “Besides, I’m not the one who’s really pushing for this.”

“By God, Pauls!” Raff burst out laughing. “If this is not pushing, I would truly hate to be in the way of something you really wanted.”

“None of your friends want to give you this job, Raff,” Pauls insisted, “but most of your enemies do.”

“I’m a big boy now, Pauls,” Raff replied. “I don’t have enemies, just people who don’t like me.”

“Then Masters Einst, Courant and Hartone really, really do not like you,” Pauls retorted.

“All three of them, huh?” Raff asked. “What are they up to?”

“You know they don’t confide in me,” Pauls reminded him “but if I had to guess, I’d say they see this as a lose-lose situation for whoever takes the job. If the accused soldiers are convicted, the Guild, especially the ruling judge, is in danger of running afoul of both Her Majesty and her Parliament. If they are found not guilty, the colonies are likely to go up in flames. None of them care to take the blame for that themselves, but we both know they’d love the opportunity to dump that sort of thing on your shoulders.”

“Friends in high places,” Raff laughed ruefully. “So why do you keep asking me to take the damnable job?”

“I have faith in you, Raff,” Pauls tells him. “If there is anyone who can come through this in a manner pleasing or at least tolerable to all parties, it’s you.”

“Gee, thanks,” Raff remarked dryly. He thought about it for a bit. “Okay, I’ll do it, but it’s going to cost them dearly.”

“What’s your price?” Pauls asked interestedly.

“A blank cheque,” Raff replied firmly. “You tell them that if I pull this off, they’re going to owe me anything I want.”

“Anything?” Pauls asked, amazed.

“Absolutely anything,” Raff nodded. “And I want that in writing. I don’t trust those stoats and I’m not going to do this on a handshake deal. You tell them my offer. If they don’t like it, tough. This is not a negotiation; take it or they can do it themselves.”

“Oh, they’ll take it,” Pauls laughed. “They’re as greedy as they ever were and they really don’t see how you can pull it off.”

“And you do?” Raff asked. “If so, you might want to toss a clue or two my way because I haven’t the foggiest notion.”

“I have faith in you, Raff,” Pauls repeated chuckling.

As Pauls predicted, the Guild Council accepted the deal almost instantly and Raff found himself being whisked off to the palace so Queen Julia could formally invest him with the office of High Justice.

“I am not certain such an official position is necessary, Your Majesty,” Raff told her when she was finished.

“We are, Master Cawls,” the young queen replied. “We want the colonists to know they are our subjects and that we care for them every bit as much as we do for those who live in the Green Lands. They may owe us their loyalty, but we owe them our industry and protection. We want it known that they are safe from all enemies and, if the soldiers of our army hurt them, those guilty parties are to be punished to the full extent of the law.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Raff nodded. “I will undertake this trial to the best of my abilities and keep it completely fair and open. I assume you do not want it held in private?”

“We are in agreement,” Julia told him. “This trial could disaffect our colonies against us. If all are not satisfied by the fairness of the outcome we could lose far more than just Varana. So, yes, please keep the trial scrupulously fair. The concept of a predetermined outcome is repugnant to us.” She stood up from the table they had been seated at, forcing Raff to rise as well. It was clearly a dismissal. “We look forward to greeting you on your return, your honor,” she told him in farewell.

“Oh I wish I had been there to see you invested,” Em gushed when he told her about it over dinner with Kaz and Chanya.

“You may accompany me when I turn in my robes of office,” Raff grumbled. “I don’t care what she said. This trial does not have to be presided over by a royal appointee. I’m a wayfarer. It ought to be enough.”

“For the colonists and the accused, perhaps,” Em replied, “but Her Majesty is correct. She needs to show her concern as well.”

“Maybe,” Raff allowed and turned to Kaz and Chanya. “Well, kids, it looks like you’ll be coming with us after all. As a royal judge I need a staff to help with all the additional paperwork and other nonsense that comes with the office and, while I could have older journeymen assigned to me, I’d prefer to stick with the aides I know. God only knows who the Council would try to assign whether as spies or saboteurs.” Their doorbell rang just then. “Now what?” Raff asked no one in particular.

“I’ll get that,” Chanya volunteered. She returned a few moments later with an elderly gentleman behind her. “Master Cawls, Prime Minister Richard Winn to see you, sir,” she announced formally.

“Might we confer in private, Master Cawlens?” Winn asked.

“This is my home, Mister Winn,” Raff replied. “My wife, Master Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens, my son, Apprentice Wayfarer Kazani Basan and my wife’s aide-de-camp, Journeyman Wayfarer Chanya Sanai. They are my judicial staff so you may speak in confidence in spite of their presence.”

Winn looked uncertain but eventually made up his mind. “Very well, I am here to confer with you concerning the trial in Lonport.”

“Really? I was unaware the prime minister was concerned with the conduct of a trial presided over by Her Majesty’s justice,” Raff remarked.

“I am concerned about the consequences for Her Majesty’s Royal Colonies in Varana, sir,” Winn replied stiffly. “Don’t you realize what is at stake in this trial?”

“I understand that it is essential the trial be fair and open, sir,” Raff replied.

“Of course,” Winn harrumphed. “The colonies could rebel if it is handled wrong.”

“So I have been advised,” Raff assured him.

“Ah good, then you understand fully why the accused soldiers must not be found guilty,” Winn continued.

“Huh?” Raff responded clumsily.

“Quite clearly if the soldiers are found to be in the wrong it will discredit Her Majesty’s army not only in the eyes of the Varanan colonists, but all over the world, sir,” Winn insisted. “The revolutionary factions within Varana would feel justified in their feelings of disenfranchisement and would soon engage in open rebellion.”

“I believe their feelings of disenfranchisement, may have more to do with Parliament’s insistence that colonists not be represented within that august body, sir, but yet that Parliament rules the colonies,” Raff argued.

“That is not at issue here, sir,” Winn told him coldly.

“It seems to me that it is and if it had not been, the current trial might never have been necessary,” Raff replied. “However, even if I were inclined to agree with you, how could I go about to affect the outcome and yet keep the procedure completely fair as I have been charged by Her Majesty?”

“As Her Royal Majesty’s High Justice,” Winn replied confidently, “it is within your power to determine the form of trial, do you not? The accused are soldiers and you have the power to grant them courts martial.”

“I might have that power, sir, under normal circumstances” Raff replied, “but I am not a military judge. Furthermore the colonial governor has already ordered a civil trial. The matter would be out of my hands even if I wanted to hold courts martial.”

“Very well,” Winn replied, showing signs of graciousness. “You are an honest man, sir, and an

honorable one, I can see. I wish you all the best, but please keep my warnings in mind.”

Prime Minister Winn was not the last to visit Raff in the hopes of persuading him as to how to conduct the trial. Several masters of the Guild Council all arrived over the next two hours to have their own words with Raff until he had finally had enough and ordered Kaz and Chanya to load up their carriage. “We’ll leave the city tonight,” he decided.

“We don’t have to go too far,” Em pointed out. “An inn in Camgate would be enough to keep anyone else from tracking us down once they realize we are no longer at home.”

Two

They arrived in Haristol the next evening, where the military third rater, the *HMS Defender* was waiting to provide them swift passage directly to Lonport. “We’ll be casting off at four bells past midnight, sir,” the Captain informed Raff as the others made themselves at home in their cabins.

“Interesting time to leave,” Raff noted, “I assume that’s the way the tide is running?”

“Precisely, sir” Captain Boronis agreed. “You have sailed before, then?”

“Quite frequently, actually,” Raff admitted, “but not often on a military ship.”

“Our guest cabins, you’ll find, are as comfortable as any commercial ship’s,” the captain told him proudly.

“Possibly more so,” Raff laughed. “I have traveled on some very uncomfortable ships. Since we’ll be leaving so late, I suppose we might as well go ashore for dinner, though.”

“Of course, sir,” Boronis agreed, “and would you care to be my guest on the bridge as we cast off, or would you prefer to sleep through it?”

“I have a fortnight to catch up on my sleep,” Raff chuckled. “I’d be honored to join you, Captain.”

Raff took the others out for dinner at a local chop-house he’d found some years earlier. “We’ll be eating a lot of fish in the coming days,” he told the others, “far too much salt pork and precious little fresh meat. The last time I was here the lamb was very good, but by the time we reach Varana any fresh meat will seem like a luxury.”

“It’s only two weeks,” Kaz commented. “I’ve survived on grass and roots longer than that.”

“But you would have traded them all for a single bite of a wildebeest steak,” Raff pointed out.

“Actually, those critters looked too weird to eat,” Kaz told him. I’d never seen one before and thought they were cattle that had been cursed and I didn’t have a chance of catching a gazelle on my own at the time.”

“Well, you’ll find neither wildebeest nor gazelle on the menu, but they’ll probably have venison,” Raff replied.

“I’ll stick to the lamb,” Kaz remarked.

“How do you know they have it tonight?” Chanya asked.

“This is the Green Lands,” Kaz laughed. “Lamb is part of the state religion.”

“Oh, the Theology Department is going to love you,” Chanya shot back.

“Is that a required subject?” Kaz asked a bit more seriously.

“It is for wayfarers,” Chanya told him. “Didn’t you realize we are often required to act in the place of priests and other religious leaders while escorting parties through the Wild?”

“I knew that,” Kaz told her, “but didn’t realize I needed to actually take classes in theology. It’s not the same as actually conducting services, you know.”

“But people will ask religious questions, Kaz,” Em told him. “You need to be able to answer based on the religion of the person asking you. Your people’s religion involved the belief of animalistic spirits, but mixed them with Malahnism, which the stricter followers of the Prophet Malah would consider a heresy. Since coming to the Green Lands, I know you have attended services within the Church of the Green Lands, which is a form of the Church of Meni, differing mostly on the subject of divorce. I get the feeling though, you don’t take religion as seriously as most of your colleagues.”

“I think I’m a devout agnostic,” Kaz replied.

“You would go on crusade for the right to be uncertain about God?” Raff asked, obviously amused.

Kaz thought about that one and saw the trap. “Maybe,” he answered at last.

“Raff?” a woman asked from a nearby table. “Raff Cawlens?”

Raff looked over and recognized the face, “Yasmin? What are you doing in Haristol?”

“Guiding a party, of course,” she replied. Yasmin was a short woman with a deeply tanned complexion and her long hair was streaked with grey. She wore a plain dark blue dress that was currently more fashionable in southern Crace than it was in the Green Lands.

“Em, this is Yasmin bint Sadi, originally out of Paknilan. We were in the same class at Dunbridge.” Raff went on to introduce the others. “So are you coming or going?”

“Both,” Yasmin replied. “I’m on the way to northern Voland with a party from Teltoa and Maggo, tourists wanting to see the midnight sun.”

“Sounds pleasant enough, even if it is a long trip,” Raff commented. “So did you just get in to Haristol today?”

“Two hours ago,” Yasmin nodded. “I dropped them off at the guildhall and decided to take the night off. It may be my last chance for the next month or more. So where are you headed? Taundon?”

“Headed for Varana,” Raff told her.

“Guiding a party of colonists?” Yasmin asked.

“No, for a change it’s a party of all wayfarers,” Raff replied.

“How unusual,” Yasmin commented. Then she thought of something and added, “Something’s up. Can you talk about it?”

“Quite a bit is up and I think I can trust you to be discreet,” Raff replied and went on to tell her about the murders in Sotz Marnas and the upcoming trial in Lonport.

“Raff, you always did get all the dirty jobs, but this time you may be out of your depth,” Yasmin told him. “I’ve heard about the incidents in Lonport; not surprised it’s happened more than once, but I am surprised they managed to sucker you into playing judge on this case. The murder case is only marginally better. You do realize that even if Bridger is guilty it could be argued that he was effectively beyond Kenlientan reach the moment he returned to any stability?”

“I did consider that,” Raff admitted. “I also considered that it could be argued that nowhere is completely beyond the Ken Nation. Anyway I’m not the judge in that case and it isn’t my job to decide whether he is beyond extradition. I just have to find him.”

“While conducting the trial of another alleged murder case?” Yasmin challenged him. “Raff, I’ve stayed out of Guild Council politics all my life, but even I know more of the Council has it in for you than not. I’m really surprised your friends didn’t try to protect you from this folly.”

“My friends seem to have encouraged me to take the case, Yasmin,” Raff replied.

“With friends like that, you don’t need Guildmaster Harton, Raff,” Yasmin laughed harshly. “Of course, you’ve always thrived on this sort of stupidity.”

“If you don’t watch out, I could get you on the Council,” Raff laughed.

“God forbid!” Yasmin swore. “You wouldn’t do that to an old friend, would you?”

“Depends on how desperate I was,” Raff chuckled.

“Good thing you aren’t in a position to pack the Council with your own picks, then,” Yasmin told him.

“So what’s new on the Southern Continent?” Raff asked. “Any news out of Tamag Methin?”

"I've never been that deep, Raff," Yasmin replied. "I did run into another friend of yours not too long ago. Elder Nienta sends her love to you, Emblem and Kazani. I found her along a path in western Maggo."

"A little out of her usual territory," Em commented.

"I got the impression she wanted to make sure you got her message," Yasmin replied. "Is that some sort of private code?"

"None I'm aware of," Raff replied, "but she must have had a reason to go that far out of her way to get the message to us. We're on good terms, but we've only met twice. I have more of a history with Saltaxis of Tamag Methin."

"It could have something to do with what's been happening in Yakrut," Kaz commented.

"Leraxa got herself in trouble," Raff told him. "She's been asking for my help in the last few months, but I haven't been in a position to help directly. Hmmm, where are you headed after Volland?"

"I thought I would escort my charges back to their homes," Yasmin replied, "but I don't have to. I didn't have to come with them all this way. I just thought it might be nice to see the midnight sun for myself. There are other wayfarers headed south. Did you have a destination in mind?"

"Yakrut," Raff told her. "I think maybe I ought to send Leraxa my love."

"That's a long way to go just to deliver a love letter," Yasmin remarked dryly.

"I was just thinking a declaration of my support, might keep the wolves from her door," Raff explained, "and it might be what Nienta was suggesting obliquely."

"Exceedingly obliquely," Yasmin considered.

"She's a very subtle lady," Raff told her.

"And since when is Leraxa such a good friend, Raff?" Em asked.

"She was a bit full of herself when we met," Raff admitted, "but I do think she honestly had the best interests of her people in mind. So do I and I don't think it would be to anyone's benefit to have Leraxa removed from office at this time. The Ken like knowing who their leaders are. The thing about following one's elder is that you know who he is. And the Ken elders are chosen for their wisdom."

"Usually," Kaz cut in.

"Usually," Raff agreed. "They're as fallible as we are, after all. I think Leraxa made a mistake when she formed this new permanent government. She was trying to fix something that wasn't broken and that almost always leads to trouble. Well, now she has it. If I thought she was the only one who would suffer from her ouster, I might not be as concerned. But while I didn't know Leraxa very well before she got herself proclaimed Chief Elder, at least she was chosen by their Council of Elders in the traditional manner and the Ken knew it was coming as much as a year before it happened. These other people trying to take over are trying to do so suddenly. There has been no long-considered discussion as there was before the permanent government was established. They just want to take over and start running

things and I suspect they're planning to do so without warning. At least that's the way it sounds.

"It took me a while to come to that conclusion," Raff admitted, "and my current obligations prevent me from paying the visit Leraxa is asking for. Frankly I'm not sure how much good a visit would do. We weren't exactly embraced in Sotz Marnas. The plague was a long time ago now and too many of the so-called 'Elders' are relatively young. But I can try, at least. That's why I want to send a public letter and I'd feel more confident of it getting there in a reasonable amount of time if an old friend promised to deliver it."

"I've never been that far to the east, Raff," Yasmin demurred. "I don't know the way to Yakrut."

"The guildhall in Gaharenar does," Raff assure her. "That's part of its main function, you know, to keep a contact point for the Kenlienta on that side of the world."

"I'm beginning to think I should have just kept my mouth shut when I saw you," Yasmin commented, "but okay, I'll take your proclamation to the Ken."

"Proclamation?" Raff asked.

"That's what it is, isn't it?" Yasmin countered. "A proclamation from one of the most honored heroes of their nation, an honorary elder?"

"I hadn't thought of it like that," Raff told her. "I'm not telling the Ken what to do, just demonstrating my friendship with the leader of their government."

"I don't suppose you have this demonstration written yet, do you?" Yasmin asked. "I do have to leave in the morning."

"And we leave just after midnight," Raff told her, "a little over three hours from now."

"You'd better start writing then," Yasmin retorted.

Three

"Cutting it rather fine, aren't you?" Captain Boronis commented when Raff and the others boarded the *Defender* sometime past midnight. "The tide starts to turn in less than twenty minutes."

“Sorry about that, Captain,” Raff apologized. “I had some responsibilities that came up on shore. But we’re here now and I assure you I have no intention of getting off the ship until we reach Lonport.”

“Well, my father always used to say that ‘almost late’ is another way of saying ‘on time,’” Boronis relented. “You just had me worried, is all. Even my latest crewmen were back on board an hour ago.”

They went down to their cabins, but Raff arrived on Boronis’ bridge just as the crew was casting off all lines. Watching a large ship leave a dock is not usually an interesting sight. Even after the hawsers have been slipped and the craft is free of her mooring, it rarely moves away rapidly. In fact, even had the wayfarers arrived fifteen minutes late, they probably could have jumped on board with very little effort.

The tide had just begun to turn, after all, and the ship was massive. There was little wind so even the raising of two staysails were not enough to propel her into the harbor with any particular haste, but gradually the ship moved beyond the docks and could be maneuvered out into the main channel. The sails were set and they began to make way toward the harbor mouth. Had the wind not picked up a bit, they might have been forced to drop their anchor and wait for the next tide, and as it was, dawn found them still just barely inside the stability of Haristol.

Then, however, they crossed into the Wild and the conditions changed. A light, but steady breeze began to blow and they rapidly picked up speed. One of the *Defender*’s two wayfarers, took over the helm and Captain Boronis established routine at-sea watches.

“I thank you for your company, Master Cawlens,” Boronis told him once everything seemed to be set. “It is traditional to share a drink once the course has been set, but it’s time for breakfast and the sun won’t be over the yardarm for a good long time. This afternoon, perhaps, sir?”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Raff yawned. “Hmm, maybe just a bit of breakfast and then straight to my bunk.”

He woke the next afternoon to find himself alone in the cabin and after dressing quickly, went up on deck. Em, it turned out, knew the day watch wayfarer at the helm in the same way Raff had known Yasmin and they were catching up on the intervening years since their apprenticeships. Kaz and Chanya had found a place in the stern where they would be out of the way most of the time and also less prone to get splashed by stray wisps of salt spray. “What are you two up to?” Raff asked when he found them sitting close together with a book between them.

“Studying,” Kaz replied. “Chanya’s tutoring me in the subjects I’m likely to have this fall and I’m helping her with her math.”

“Sounds like a fair deal,” Raff noted. “Do you really have that much trouble in mathematics, Chanya?”

“I get top marks in most tests,” she admitted, “but it does not come easily to me. Kaz already could pass my senior year class if he were allowed to take it.”

“Whereas Chanya has convinced me that I need to get a head start in history, philosophy and religion,” Kaz added. “I don’t know why those are called soft subjects, though. They’re hard to me. Give me chemistry and physics any time.”

“People are more complex, Kaz,” Raff told him. “However, you’ll also find that there is less concern for correct answers in history and philosophy and more on consistent ones. You need to get the facts

right, of course, but a lot is open to interpretation. The trick I found was to keep my interpretations consistent with the known facts. Don't throw out a fact that doesn't fit the argument; come up with a new argument that fits the facts. It's just a different way of thinking."

He paused to look out over the gunwales at the sea all around them. There was a dark gray smudge behind them that he assumed was the Isle of Dabin. It would be the last land they saw until they came within sight of Varana. Then to the south he spotted a small series of fountains. "Hey, kids, want to see a pod of whales?"

Kaz got to his feet and looked in the indicated direction. "I thought whales were larger than that," he remarked.

"They're called pilot whales," Raff told him, "or sometimes, blackfish. They're a bit larger than most sorts of porpoise, and they live together in these extended family groups called pods. Well, I think they're extended families," he corrected himself. "That's the current belief. For all I know they may be more like elephants and the females may form the pods while the males roam about, solitary creatures until mating time."

"Have they been swimming alongside like that for very long?" Chanya asked seeing the sleek, black bodies gliding through the water.

"Hey, I just got here too, remember?" Raff laughed. "I don't know. They may follow us for a few days or it could be coincidence they're headed in the same direction we are. They're Wild creatures, but seem to like following wayfarer paths in the ocean, though you won't see them actually swim through one. They'll dive underneath if they have to cross, otherwise they've been known to follow paths for days just by swimming parallel to them."

"Do they follow a path because they like to?" Chanya wondered, "Or because it is more comfortable than crossing one?"

"I couldn't say." Raff admitted. "A lot of land-bound animals will avoid crossing a path if they can, but oceanic pathways are on the surface only, give or take the height of the waves. It does not take all that much effort to go beneath one, especially for something that can hold its breath for as long as a whale can. The paths don't seem to stop fish from swimming anywhere they please and seals cross back and forth all the time, although many species of seal can tolerate stability, so maybe that's a bad example."

They stood there watching the pilot whales for a few minutes, but then, almost as if they realized they were being stared at, the whales suddenly turned southward and swam away.

The next few days were quiet. Kaz and Chanya continued their on-deck studies during the day and in one of their cabins during the early evenings. Raff spent a fair amount of time with the captain and the other wayfarers assigned to this ship, but also in studies of his own. Before leaving Taundon, he had borrowed a book on Varana Colonial law and was doing his best to memorize the laws as they were in Lonport's colony of Bournset Bay. The laws of the United Colonies of Varana were anything but homogenous. They were based on Her Majesty's Laws of the Green Lands and on basic points there were many points of commonality, but there were a lot of differences when you got into the details. Each of the Varanan colonies had different rules of order for their legislatures, for example, and a crime that might be considered a misdemeanor in the Colony of Farring, might carry a felony's burden in the Colony of Charlesia.

It was Em, who pointed out, however, that Raff did not need to memorize all the differences between

the Varanan colonies and the Green Lands, nor even the variations that existed between the colonies. “Just bone up on the laws as pertain to the coming trial, dear,” she suggested. “None of the soldiers have been accused of theft or extortion, at least not in the charges we received. I’m sure the arguments you’ll be forced to consider will be more along the lines of whether they were justified when they shot into that crowd of civilians. I certainly think you can ignore the laws concerning deep sea fishing rights,” she added noticing the page Raff had open at the moment.

“The fishing laws are actually more interesting,” Raff replied defensively.

“I’m sure they are,” Em replied, “but it’s highly unlikely the soldiers were trying to land a net full of lemon sole that evening. Hmm, that does sound good. I wonder if it’s called lemon sole from the color or the flavor.”

Raff shrugged and replied, “Probably the color, but I’ve never seen one that hadn’t already been filleted.”

“Well, stick to the laws concerning murder and the military, I should think. I seriously doubt the subject of fishing is going to come up, do you?” Em asked pointedly.

“Probably not,” Raff admitted. “Though we are talking about Lonport. It’s fairly important in cod and flatfish landings.”

“None of the victims were fishermen, Raff,” she told him.

“You looked that up?” he asked.

“Well, I wasn’t really concerned about their occupations,” Em admitted, “but that was listed. If any of them fished, it was with a rod and reel for the fun of it.”

The ship rocked a bit more than usual just then. “Is that a storm?” Raff asked.

“It’s been threatening all day,” Em told him.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Raff shrugged.

“I’d be surprised if you had,” Em laughed. “You’ve had Kaz bring in your last five meals and with the oil lamp burning you really don’t care if the deck prisms are delivering light or not.” Open flames were dangerous on wooden ships, although oil lamps and candles were used, especially at night. During the day, however, light was drawn below the deck by large glass prisms, hexagonal in cross section and set flush into the planks that made up the deck.

“There’s only one prism in this cabin,” Raff pointed out. “It barely produces enough light to show me where the port hole is.”

“Funny,” Em told him flatly. “You really ought to get up on deck occasionally. You don’t really have to memorize those laws as assiduously as you’re doing, you know. “The prosecutors and defense attorneys are going to quote them to you, chapter and verse, almost constantly. Just take notes as they do so and if something sounds a bit fishy from one, the other is likely to be happy to point it out to you.”

“There you go with fish again,” Raff chuckled.

"You really have been down here too long," Em replied. As she said that, however, a rumbling noise could be heard from the deck above. "But not this afternoon. I'd say it's a bit moist up there just now."

"Sounds like a downpour," Raff opined.

"I think we're headed into a hurricane," Em replied over the sound of the torrential rain.

"It's a bit early in the season for that sort of weather," Raff shook his head as the ship started rocking with the waves.

"Not really," Em disagreed. "Storms like that are more common in the late summer, but they can occur anytime during the season and well into autumn as well. I don't think this will be a very strong storm, perhaps not technically a hurricane, but it's not going to be pleasant for a bit." Kaz and Chanya arrived just then. "You two are very wet," she noticed.

"It's raining outside," Kaz told her.

"I'd have never noticed," Em told him blandly. "You two are leaving a puddle on my floor. Go dry off and change your clothes."

"A little rain won't kill them, Em," Raff told her after they had left to follow Em's orders.

"The decks are all going to be wet before this is over," Emblem replied, "I just didn't want ours to get too much of a head start."

The ship swayed heavily again and began to rock back and forth constantly. "You may want to check in on Chanya," Raff suggested. "She was seasick several times during the first few days of this trip. She might have gotten her sea legs for normal waves, but..."

"I'll go right now," Em decided. "Why don't you secure anything that's loose in here or they may go flying about. That includes those legal treatises, by the way."

They spent the next three days rocking back and forth in the storm, but while the swells grew alarmingly, the *Defender* was never in any real danger, although Kaz got thrown against a bulkhead early the second day and developed a mild concussion, making him feel sicker than anything Chanya had to endure.

Finally the storm blew itself out and the seas calmed down. By then Kaz was on the mend and Chanya was feeling much better, but on deck, it was Em who noticed what was wrong. "Where's the path?" she asked her former classmate.

"Nowhere in sight," he replied. "Oh, don't worry. This happens all the time. Haven't you ever sailed in stormy weather?"

"Nothing so great we lost sight of the pathway," Em replied. "How do you know where to go?"

"Well, our compass won't work in the Wild, of course," the ship's wayfarer told her, "but we know where the sun is, so we can keep headed due west and be certain to reach land eventually. Actually we'll find a path first since the main shipping lane along the east coast of Varana is very hard to miss, but of course that wouldn't tell us whether to turn north or south. However, that's what the sextant is for. After dark I'll take a set of sightings on the pole star. From that we'll know our latitude and will be able to turn

north or south to find our path as appropriate.”

“I should have thought of that,” Em remarked. “I have sailed often enough and watched the navigators take their sightings.”

“You’re a landlubber, Emblem,” he laughed. “You may have watched us doing it, but the significance never sunk in. So long as we don’t lose the path, our latitude is irrelevant and we don’t have an accurate way to measure longitude at sea. I understand there are scientists working on that and when they manage to figure it out we may not need pathways at sea at all, imagine knowing precisely where we are without the benefit of a path.”

“That could put us out of work,” Em remarked.

“No, it still takes a wayfarer to move through the Wild,” he disagreed.

“Depends on the ship,” Em told him. “One this size has enough people on it that it would not automatically return to a stability, so if the pilot could know where he was and you obviously don’t need a compass, why use a navigator?”

“And how would you determine your direction when the sky is cloudy?” the *Defender*’s wayfarer laughed.

“Okay, I grant you that would be a problem,” Em chuckled.

The sky was not fully dark when they determined they needed to turn southward, but by dawn they found their path and continued on to reach Lonport precisely fourteen days after leaving Haristol.

Four

Lonport was a busy harbor with a narrow channel that necessitated the use of a pilot to guide all ships coming and going. The *Defender* came to rest at the edge of the harbor’s mouth, just inside the stability and the captain ordered the anchor set.

“Hope you aren’t in too great a hurry,” he told Raff an hour later. “They usually give preference to military ships, but last time we were here, the pilot didn’t get to us until the next morning.”

“Normally, I’m not in too great a hurry,” Raff replied. “This time, though, my mission is a bit more

urgent. I can wait a day if need be, however.”

“Well, you could borrow one of the lifeboats,” the captain offered, “and row ashore.”

“Well, I’m not in that much of a hurry,” Raff laughed. “How I’ll feel tomorrow morning, though, is another matter.”

“Is that the pilot coming now?” Kaz asked, pointing toward a small sailing dinghy. The boat had a white lapstrake hull. It was about fifteen feet long, narrow in the beam and hosted a single triangular sail. As it approached the *Defender*, the pilot swung the tiller around to bring the small vessel into the wind, expertly struck the sail and attached a line thrown down from the ship to the bow of his boat before climbing the rope ladder to the deck of the *Defender*.

“Thank you for attending to us so promptly,” Captain Boronis told him politely.

“You’re welcome,” the pilot replied. “I’m under orders to get all military ships berthed promptly in case you’re carrying the judge.”

“Then you’re in luck,” the captain laughed. “This is him, right here.” He introduced Raff and Emblem. The pilot nodded and then went to work, guiding the up the narrow and twisting harbor channel. It was another hour and a half before they arrived at their dock, but once the gangplank had been extended, Raff wasted no time in thanking the captain for the trip and then rushing his party off to the local Guildhall.

“I was starting to wonder if the Council was ever going to send anyone,” Master Francis Longe, told them in his office, “The locals were starting to press me to sit in judgment, but I’m only a master in rank.”

“Your wayfaring abilities have nothing to do with your capability as a judge, you know,” Emblem told him.

“Perhaps, but it’s widely known that I’m only a journeyman by talent. I like to think I run a good Guildhall,” Longe told her, “but I’m no true master. We only have a few real masters stationed in Varana so we make do. Besides, this trial is going to be a sticky business, I think, and the locals all know me. They might say they want me to act as judge now, but whichever side I rule against is going to make life miserable afterward. When you’re done here, you’ll go back to Taundon and that will be that.”

“It’s not all that simple for me either, you know,” Raff grumbled. “The Guild Council, most of them anyway, gave me this job, hoping I would fail. They want someone to blame and they’d rather it was me.”

“But, you’re Raff Cawlens, sir!” Longe protested. “Arguably the most accomplished wayfarer alive.”

“Arguably?” Raff echoed with a chuckle. “You can argue anything you care to, I suppose. Yes, that is me, but I suspect some of the tales have taken on a life of their own and grown well beyond the realm of reality. I used to sit on the Guild Council, you know.”

“I do,” Longe nodded.

“I was their biggest headache,” Raff went on, “and they were glad when I had my accident off the coast of Semlari.”

“That’s where you fought the sea serpent?” Longe asked.

“It wasn’t much of a fight,” Raff replied. “It attacked the ship I was on and I tried to defend us. Next thing I knew I was in what passed for a hospital on a tropical island. They told me I had been found by myself in a lifeboat.

“Well, I suppose I couldn’t have chosen a better place to recover had I planned it,” Raff went on, “but then I discovered my talent had gone rogue. It was way out of my control and it was a long time before I could train myself so I could be safe to be around. The Guild Council used my extended absence to vote me off. At the time it didn’t look like I’d ever be in fit shape to attend a meeting anyway. Besides, I was obviously crazy. Who believes in sea serpents these days?”

“I do,” Longe told him. “I think you’ll find a lot of wayfarers in the colonies who believe. There’s an area to the south where a lot of ships have gone missing over the last three centuries. I suppose some of those disappearances can be chalked up to storms and carelessness when attempting to navigate too close to a reef, but we think there’s something out there and maybe in other seas as well. Ships do go missing without explanation, you know.”

“There were three that disappeared in the Belis Channel just before we left,” Kaz added.

“I heard about that,” Raff admitted, “but piracy is as likely an explanation as monsters. Look. I know what I saw in the Gulf of Palendo, and I suppose it’s refreshing to speak with someone who believes me, but that’s in the past.”

“So you wouldn’t want to go hunting for another sea serpent like the one you fought?” Longe asked, sounding slightly disappointed.

“Master Longe,” Raff told him seriously. “The creature nearly killed me and I don’t even remember much about how. I would have to be insane to go out of my way to look for him... or her, I suppose,” he added belatedly. “This trial I’m supposed to preside over is likely to be just as dangerous in its own way, so if it’s thrills I’m after, Lonport is as good as Semlari. Now as important as the trial is, I do have other business in Varana.” He explained about the death of Sarah Bridger and her son. “The trail is cold, but there’s no need to wait until Bridger decides to head off for some other part of the world.”

“Assuming he came back here at all,” Longe remarked.

“He bought passage to Bonford,” Kaz supplied. “We know that much at least.”

“We do?” Raff asked. “When did you learn that?”

“In Haristol,” Kaz replied. “While you and Em were unpacking your bags, Chanya and I went to some of the shipping companies with offices in the harbor area. We got lucky and found what we needed to know on the second try.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Raff asked.

“I was about to at dinner that night,” Kaz told him. “You were busy hustling us back ashore for a meal anyway and I figured we could spring the news over port and cigars or whatever. Then you met your old friend and the rest of us had trouble getting a word in edgewise. After that, it sort of slipped my mind. It wasn’t all that necessary to know for sure since we were coming this way.”

“It would have been one less worry,” Raff told him.

“Kaz,” Em told him sternly, “next time try not to be so clever by waiting for the right moment. Just tell us. Just tell any partner you’re working with, that’s what teamwork is about.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kaz replied, chastened.

“And you, young lady,” she rounded on Chanya. “What’s your excuse? Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I thought Kaz had,” Chanya admitted.

“It wouldn’t have hurt to make sure,” Em replied. “This isn’t school where cleverness earns you points.”

“We don’t have a point system at Dunbridge,” Chanya replied instantly, then just as instantly regretted saying it.

“You know what I mean,” Em growled. A faint spark of light in her eyes told Chanya to keep her mouth firmly shut. Instead she nodded quickly. “Well, now you know your study buddy here likes to be a bit flashy.”

“I could tell that from the way he dresses,” Chanya chuckled, earning another glare from her master.

“Both of you,” Em told them. “No more secrets. No more little ploys to seem clever. You will tell us where you are going and you will report anything you’ve learned immediately on your return.”

“What if we just slip out for lunch?” Kaz asked.

“I’ll expect to hear about the full menu on your return, young man,” Emblem told him.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied contritely.

Raff looked like he was about to say something, but quickly changed his mind and instead turned back to Master Longe. “How long do you think this trial is going to run? I’m going to need to go after Bridger fairly soon.”

“That depends on you, I would think, sir,” Longe replied. “I think you can count on the defending attorney to ask for a continuance. His name is John Baker, by the way and he almost always does.”

“A continuance?” Raff asked. “A continuance for what reason?”

“To allow him to better prepare his case,” Longe explained.

“He’s had months!” Raff exclaimed. “How much longer does he want?”

“I suspect the gentleman would like just enough for his clients to die of natural causes,” Longe replied dryly.

“Not bloody likely,” Raff growled. “By what possible justification could he claim he needs more time?”

“Really? He’ll want to know more about you, of course,” Longe laughed. “Unless you came here by

way of the town commons and made an announcement, he probably doesn't know you're here yet, and even more probably he does not know who you are. Naturally he's going to want to know how you tend to handle trials and what sorts of arguments are best suited to agree with you."

"I doubt he'll learn that from my dossier," Raff laughed, "but I imagine that's why it was included in the packet I just gave you. You'll also find similar documents for Em, Kaz and Chanya. It ought not to take him more than an hour or two to go through them. Have one of your apprentices make copies of them, in case he asks, please."

"Of course. You do realize that granting that continuance would give you time to pursue this Bridger fellow," Longe suggested.

"I'll give him three weeks," Raff decided, "but that's it."

"Will that be long enough, do you think?" Longe asked.

"Damned lawyer should have had his case prepared weeks ago," Raff growled.

"No," Longe shook his head, "I meant will that be sufficient time for you to track Bridger down?"

"It will have to be," Raff shrugged. "I don't have a nice convenient trail to follow like I usually do. We only know he took ship to Bonford. Either he's still there or not. If he isn't we'll have to travel to some of the other places he regularly stops on business; Pacidelphia, New Farrington and New Ebor."

"That's halfway across Varana," Longe objected.

"Bonford is just two or three days ride down the coast," Raff remarked. "If we learn he's headed south we'll just have to book passage on a packet ship or anything else headed our way that will be faster than walking."

"Hmm," Longe considered. "If you have to head south of New Ebor, better make sure your assistants keep their passports handy. The southern colonies still keep black slaves you know and any white man can demand to see their papers."

"We really need to do something about that soon," Em remarked.

"It's not like this from the lack of our trying, Master L'Oranne Cawlens," Longe protested, "but the colonists there consider slavery a 'cherished and peculiar institution.' I hear that phrase all too often, I fear."

"Peculiar I'll agree with," Em remarked.

"In this case it means one that is a unique and integral part of their society," Raff explained. "The usage is a bit archaic, actually, but I've been to southern Varana before. A lot of their thinking is archaic there. Peter Bridger is not likely to be down there anyway this time. According to the journal we found in his home he usually either lands at Bonford and travels southward to New Ebor or the other way around, or else he lands in Pacidelphia and travels northward to New Farrington. His records didn't include the last few years; he probably has a newer journal with him, but from what I could tell it was one or the other, but not both. We don't have time to track him down to New Farrington in any case. If we don't find him by the time we're done in New Ebor, we'll have to race back here assuming, Mister Baker doesn't persuade me he needs the next ten years. I doubt he can. I'm not that complex a person to

know.”

“One thing you haven’t explained, though,” Longe requested. “Wouldn’t you be able to just stop in the Bonford Guildhall and ask where Bridger went next?”

“Ah, now that is the trick, isn’t it?” Raff returned. “It appears our Mister Bridger is a natural wayfarer and so were his wife and son.” He went on to describe how they had come to be living among the Ken.

“Quite remarkable,” Longe commented.

“I suspect Bridger could well be a master wayfarer were he to join the Guild although from his records it sounds as though he makes a quite comfortable living as a trader. If there were any Ken settlements on this side of the Western Continent, I’d be tempted to look for him there.”

“Well, I’ve heard there is a Ken settlement a day or three to the west of New Ebor,” Longe informed him. “It’s not a real city or even a town by their standards, though. It’s more of a scientific station from what I hear. They’re mining coal out there. It seems they’re working on developing steam technology.”

“And they’re burning coal to do it?” Raff asked, amazed. “And to think they complain about our pollution. What sort of steam technology?”

“They have a notion they can build an engine that will propel a ship or a very large cart,” Longe explained. “It would be a grown up version of those toy engines that have gained popularity every few years since the middle of the Meninan Empire.”

“They’ve never been very efficient,” Raff remarked.

“Apparently the Ken believe they can fix that,” Longe told him. “If they succeed, it will revolutionize travel.”

“It will, indeed,” Raff agreed. “No more waiting for the tide to leave a harbor and no more worrying about getting becalmed at sea.”

“Travel on land would be faster too,” Kaz speculated. “You wouldn’t have to worry about wearing out your horses. You could build a horseless carriage or wagon, I suspect.”

“Steam engines require a relatively large tank of water,” Raff told him. “No matter how efficient they make it, movement is still achieved by pushing hot water vapor through valves or pistons so you’ll only move so long as you have water to boil and fuel with which to boil it. Water is heavy and so is coal. I doubt you’ll be able to build such a thing small enough to power a normal wagon as we think of it. Probably something more like a land-bound ship with wheels, would be my guess. I also suspect we’re a long way from that sort of thing becoming common.”

“You never know,” Kaz shrugged. “Once they come up with an engine that can power a ship whether ocean-going or land-bound, I imagine there will be a demand for such means of transportation. Factories will spring up to build more such engines and they’ll probably get better as more are built.”

“But first one needs to build a workable model,” Raff argued. “I might live to see such a thing, but I doubt it will become very common in my lifetime.”

Five

“No, Mister Baker,” Raff told the defense attorney late the next morning, “I will not grant you a three month continuance. You have already had nearly four months since the incident for which your clients are on trial. In that time you have had a preliminary hearing that has established beyond any reasonable argument that there is probable cause that a crime was committed and that your clients may have committed it. You have been through your pre-trial motions, one of which was to bring me into this to replace the local judge with whom you had been dealing and today we have conducted the pre-trial conference. Unless you care to indulge in plea-bargaining, which you have stated you will not, I am within my rights, in fact, to instruct you and your colleagues of the prosecution to begin the process of jury selection and then go directly into your opening arguments.”

“Surely your honor would not want to have Her Majesty’s loyal soldiers rushed into an unfair trial,” Baker replied smoothly.

“By my calendar, Mister Baker,” Raff told him. “Four months cannot be considered rushing by anyone’s standards, and as for calling the trial unfair, I will remind you that I expect civility within my court. If you care to appeal my ruling after the fact that is one thing, but I will not tolerate charges of unfairness before the trial has even begun. Do I make myself clear, sir?”

“Yes, your honor,” Baker replied coolly. “Do you wish to start herding jurors in from the street now or after lunch?”

“I was not aware that it was customary in Varana to select jurors from whomever just happened to be standing in the town square at the opportune moment,” Raff told the rotund little man. “No, Mister Baker, we will do this by the Queen’s own laws and summon citizens of Lonport and the surrounding towns until we have a sufficiently large pool of potential jurors from which to choose a fair and impartial jury. To that end I will grant you three weeks during which the colonial government is instructed to summon potential jurors.”

“The colonial government may not be favorably disposed toward my clients,” Baker remarked.

“From what I hear, the colonists are not particularly fond of your clients, but the government is likely to have other affections,” Raff replied. “However, that being the case, I will allow you and your staff along with Mister Prescott and his staff to supervise the summoning procedure in order to ensure no undue bias is applied. Does that satisfy you, Mister Baker?”

“Yes, your honor,” Baker replied, “if it means I have the power to veto a summons.”

“It does not, nor is there any precedent for a defender or a prosecutor to be able to do so. However, you may make note of any irregularities and report them to me in three weeks,” Raff told him. “However, in case you have yet to notice, I am a pig-headed fool and stubborn beyond all reason. If you choose to protest the means by which jurors were summoned, you had very well better be able to demonstrate the illegality and unfairness in the manner in which it was done. Wasting my time is grounds for Contempt of Court charges, sir, and I will not hesitate to impose such charges should I feel anyone is holding up this trial needlessly.

“Very well,” Raff continued when it became apparent there would be no further objections from either of the attorneys. Actually most of the objections had come from John Baker. Themis Prescott, the prosecutor, had added very little to the procedural hearing so far. Raff suspected he was waiting for the actual trial to begin, or else he felt he had enough of an advantage that he could outwait any of Baker’s tirades. “The Colony of Bournset Bay is hereby instructed to summon a sufficient number of potential jurors. Mister Prescott, I will trust you to work closely with Mister Baker to ensure complete fairness to both his clients and the victims of the alleged shootings. We will reconvene in three weeks.” He rapped his gavel and got up from the bench.

Raff had been given an office in the courthouse and he had arranged for Em, Kaz and Chanya to share an adjoining office, but they did not stay in them any longer than was necessary to deposit various paperwork before leaving by the courthouse’s rear door and stepping directly into a waiting carriage. Fifteen minutes later they were on the edge of town on the way south to Bonford.

It always amazed Kaz that while the boundary between the Wild and a stability was clearly visible to his eyes, none of his other senses could detect the difference as he passed through. Had his eyes been shut, he would not have known they had left Lonport.

But then why should he close his eyes? Even as a child Kaz had delighted in observing the chaotic play of energy only a wayfarer or a Ken magician could see in the Wild. Above him the winds blew in smooth reds and golds and the river they crossed a few minutes later seemed infused with sparkles of silver. After a day or so these additional colors and textures faded from view as he acclimated to the Wild. He could see them again if he concentrated, but only did that when it was necessary. As much fun as it was, it was also a distraction and distractions in the Wild were dangerous even to the most seasoned wayfarer.

While Kaz himself had never been endangered by the swirls and dazzles, the Guild drummed dozens of object lessons into the minds of their apprentices.

There were many small towns and villages between Lonport and Bonford and the network of paths was complex, but the Guild kept accurate track of where all human settlements were. They kept the charts up to date. Wayfarers in the Northern Continent were expected to memorize their routes, but elsewhere, such as on the Southern and Western Continents, the Guild issued detailed instructions. Directions in the Wild changed and the difference between north and south, east and west could be hard to determine much of the time, but up and down, right and left were absolutes, so wayfarers learned to look for landmarks along their paths so they would know where to turn when a choice came up.

The only problem was that landmarks had a tendency to change in the Wild. Some mountains eroded and rebuilt back up like slow-motion waves. Lakes might form and then in a year or two drain away again. And then there were mountains that did not change and bodies of water that were as reliable as the sun and moon. No one, neither human nor Kenlenta knew why that was so although both had spent innumerable hours researching the subject.

So, wayfarers had to keep track of the landmarks they were given and report on any changes they observed along the way. For their own parts, the Ken tended to build their cities where the geography did not change radically. Marnas Nokit would likely stay the “Peak of the North,” for as long as there were Ken to live there, although in the Wild, one never really knew when permanence would evaporate.

“Are you sure we’re still on the right path?” Kaz asked Raff an hour after they had expected to arrive in a town called Mastsett. It was toward the end of their second day on the road since leaving Lonport.

“I’m willing to admit we may have taken a wrong turn this morning,” Raff told him. “It would have been an easy mistake. We never did see that big boulder we were supposed to at the first turn.”

“I thought we should have kept going straight,” Kaz remarked.

“No,” Em disagreed, “we had already gone too far. What bothers me is we should have come across a town by now.”

“We’re obviously on the express route to somewhere,” Kaz replied.

“I think I see a town coming up ahead,” Chanya commented.

“All I see is a big hill,” Kaz told her.

“Chanya’s right,” Raff commented. “There’s a dome of stability on the other side of that hill. Finally! We can find out where we are and get back on course.”

Geselton was a large town. Smaller than Lonport, but larger than most of the farming settlements they had passed through along the way. Farming towns tended to cluster populations near their centers, often in multi-floored houses in order to leave as much farmable land available as possible still within the stability. With larger populations, however, the large area of stability was sufficient to support the town without having to build homes practically on top of each other. Geselton was almost a city and having been built on a navigable river meant traffic came to it both by land and water.

“Maybe we can ride downstream?” Kaz wondered.

“Only in the wrong direction,” Em told him. “Even if the river was going our way for a bit, taking a river boat would slow us down since we would have to leave the carriage and horses here and buy new ones further on. Also I doubt we’re all that far off course, so it would hardly be worth our while.”

“Too bad,” Kaz sighed. “I like river boats.”

“Some other trip,” Raff told him. “The Guild office in this town won’t have rooms for us to stay in. We’ll have to find an inn then check in at the Guildhall.” He continued to drive the wagon into the heart of the town.

“What’s that pole for?” Chanya asked as they rode through the town square.

The pole stood about thirty feet tall and looked as though it might have served as the mast from a ship that had been stripped of its riggings and then sunk part way into the ground. Along its length were small brass and silver medallions, although there were far more in the lower third of the pole than above. It stood in the center of the square in a neatly trimmed circle of grass that was further ringed by slabs of

slate as though it was a circular walkway. At the top of the pole, a long pennant blew in the breeze. A long and twisting snake had been painted on the pennant along with the words, "Freedom or Death."

"That's a Freedom Pole," Raff told her. "I'm surprised you haven't noticed them until now, although I must say that's a far more impressive pole than most I've spotted and far more visible. The people of this town are either very brave or have been ignored by Her Majesty's army."

"Is it illegal?" Chanya asked.

"Not exactly," Raff replied. "Some soldiers think it ought to be, however. You see the presence of that pole means there are probably a fair number of the Brothers of Freedom living here."

"And the Brothers of Freedom are...?" Kaz prompted.

"I guess that depends on your perspective, Kaz," Raff replied. "They see themselves as patriots and the Queen's Army sees them as revolutionaries. They desire to recreate Varana as an independent nation. That's a pretty revolutionary idea, you know. No colony has ever separated from her motherland in the history of the world. Some have been stolen away, such as the way the Green Lands took Meldan from Crace, but the Cracian colonists in Meldan did not put aside their loyalties to the Cracian crown willingly and in fact many of them migrated to other Cracian colonies or back to Crace herself rather than declare their loyalty to the Green Lands.

"I can't blame them, really," Raff admitted. "One should be loyal to one's country and crown."

"Unless you're a wayfarer," Chanya added. "Aren't we supposed to be neutral?"

"We are supposed to be neutral in our dealings with all people and nations, Chanya," Emblem told her, "but our hearts go where they may. It is permissible to feel loyalty to your family and country so long as you do not allow that loyalty to affect your job as a wayfarer. It can be difficult, I know. I had quite a bit of trouble with living in the Green Lands at first. It took a while to stop thinking of Green Landsmen as enemies."

"Even Raff?" Kaz teased her.

"No, but I have never actually thought of Raff as a Green Landsman in my heart. He has always been the man who saved my life when my wayfaring abilities first broke out. Chanya, keep in mind, that should you have trouble with conflicting loyalties you can always request a transfer to a new station where those loyalties will not come into play, but I think you'll not have too much trouble. Very few do."

"But these Brothers of Freedom?" Chanya tried to reframe her question.

"What they want is not technically treason," Raff replied. "I do believe they would rather secede from the Empire of the Green Lands on friendly terms. Most of them were originally Green Landsmen who came to Varana for a variety of reasons; religious freedom, economic opportunities, even the thrill of discovery. They came because their lives in the Green Lands were lacking in some way and believed that here it would be different. The colonies of Varana are diversified, but rich and vital lands. Naturally Her Majesty would like to keep them as her colonies, and the colonists, now quite self-sufficient, desire to go their own ways."

"Should they?" Chanya asked.

"I'm not really in a position to say," Raff admitted. He spotted what looked like a prosperous inn in the town square and started driving toward it.

"Actually, Raff, you're precisely in a position to say," Kaz told him. "This trial you're presiding over not only involves alleged members of the Brothers of Freedom, but is the whole Varana question in a nutshell. What you decide is likely to determine what happens here next."

"I was really hoping nobody else had noticed that," Raff admitted. "However, my job is to provide a fair trial. What the Brothers of Freedom and their sympathizers do next is entirely up to them." He pulled the carriage up to the inn and added. "I think this is as far as we need to travel today. We got a late start yesterday, but should be in Bonford by lunchtime tomorrow."

The inn was, as Raff hoped, clean and orderly inside and he was able to quickly negotiate for their rooms and board after which he and Kaz decided to relax with tankards of the local ale while Emblem and Chanya visited the local Guild office to update their directions. The tap room took up half the ground floor and was only attached to the inn's restaurant by a single door. It was a much louder and fuller room than the restaurant side of the building they had originally entered, but a sudden silence swept the room as the two wayfarers entered.

"I think we've been seen," Kaz chuckled.

"Good day, gentlemen," Raff told the crowd, "and ladies," he added a moment later as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. "Don't mind us, we're just here for the beer." He led Kaz to a vacant table and ordered a pitcher for the two of them as the conversations in the room slowly resumed.

"Welcome, strangers," a thin, tall man with sandy hair told them as he helped himself to a seat at their table. He had been holding a tricorne hat in his hand and he hung it off the back of his chair. "The name's Fanchon, James Fanchon. And you, sirs?"

"Raff Cawlens," Raff introduced himself. "My son, Kazani Bassan. So you drew the short straw, did you?"

"I beg your pardon?" Fanchon asked, uncertain of Raff's meaning.

"I mean you got tagged with the chore of finding out who we are," Raff explained. "Ale?" he offered.

"Thank you, sir," Fanchon smiled, "and yes I suppose the job did fall to me, although we did not draw straws for the honor."

"You're the mayor?" Kaz guessed.

"Me?" Fanchon laughed. "No, sir, I'm just a simple cobbler." Raff forced himself not to laugh in turn. This Fanchon might, indeed, be a crafter of footwear, but he was obviously an educated man as well and held himself with the bearing of a leader. "So," Fanchon went on, "did you just arrive?"

"A few minutes ago, sir," Raff responded easily. "We're wayfarers headed south to Bonford. We'll be gone in the morning."

"Fair enough," Fanchon allowed, "and you've answered my next two impolite questions. If I might be allowed one more, might I ask your business in Bonford?"

Raff considered that, and then decided, "I don't see why not. I'm likely to be telling half of Bonford why I'm there. There was a murder in a Kenlientan city in Hosinland recently. I'm not sure if the man I'm looking for is the culprit or just the husband and father of the victims, but that's going to be part of my job to find out as well."

"If this happened among the Ken, how is that Wayfarer business?" Fanchon wondered.

"The victims and the accused are humans, sir," Raff replied, "and the Ken asked me to take the assignment personally."

"They must think very highly of you," Fanchon noted, "if they chose you from among all wayfarers."

"I did them a great service some years ago," Raff shrugged. "They made me an elder of sorts among them. Since then I have often found myself obligated to assist the Ken when I could."

"You did them a favor and that obligates you to do still more?" Fanchon shook his head.

"He saved their lives," Kaz cut in when it seemed Raff was being reluctant to get the story out. "There was a plague among the Kenlienta and he organized and conducted most of the rescue mission to get them the cure. Naturally my father is too modest to brag of such things."

"Ah, I see. That makes a bit more sense," Fanchon admitted. "You feel responsible for them and what they, in turn, do. Is that not what is called a 'Corisan obligation?'"

"It's called that," Raff agreed, "although the concept is more native to Paknilan than Corisa."

"So tell, me," Fanchon requested. "Is it true that the Guild of Wayfarers has sent a master to sit in judgment of the murdering soldiers in Lonport?"

Raff shot Kaz a meaningful look and replied, "Yes, a master wayfarer has arrived in Lonport and will preside over the trial."

"How does the Guild view the massacre of last spring?" Fanchon asked.

"The Guild, of course, views all unnecessary killing with distaste, sir," Raff replied, "but in this particular case it holds itself neutral pending the results of the trial."

"And this master who will be the judge," Fanchon continued, "have you met the gentleman?"

"I have known him a very long time, in fact," Raff replied, "and I think I see where you are going with this. He has been charged directly by Her Majesty to preside over a trial that absolutely must be fair, not only to the accused, but to the victims and their families."

"The queen said that?" Fanchon asked, he soundly mildly skeptical.

"She is still a relatively young lady and very idealistic, I understand," Raff replied. "She very much sees it as her duty to protect all her subjects, whether they live in the Green Lands or her colonies."

"I see," Fanchon replied, sounding troubled. He looked like he was about to say more. Then, noticing he had still not taken a sip of his ale, he lifted his mug and said, "Your very good health, gentlemen."

“And yours, sir,” Raff and Kaz chorused. They all drank deeply and Raff noticed that the few remaining eyes that had been watching them now turned away. “So did we pass your test?” he asked.

“Hmm?” Fanchon’s eyes opened wide. “Oh, yes, I suppose I should have realized a wayfarer would notice.”

“We’re not here to spy on the Brotherhood,” Raff smiled. “Oh, don’t look so surprised. You gave yourself away several times and that pole out there was the biggest clue all of. However, it’s as I told my son before we stopped in. The Brotherhood’s goals are not automatically treasonous in spite of what some of the members of Parliament say.”

“If only we could send our own representatives to Parliament,” Fanchon sighed, “but they do not allow any colonials to sit among them, you know. Instead, Her Majesty sends her royal governors to lay down the law and collect our taxes. Taxes levied by Parliament, sir, but without anyone to represent us and speak to our needs.”

“Oh, come now,” Raff scoffed. “Varana has her friends among the Lords and Commons.”

“But their voices are in the minority, sir,” Fanchon insisted, “and while we value their friendship, we have had no say in choosing them. Is representation really too much to ask for?”

“Not to me,” Raff admitted, “but that’s not for me to give you. You’re just a simple cobbler? Well, I’m just a simple wayfarer going from place to place, doing my job as best I can. As a wayfarer I have no more representation in Parliament than you do.”

“But the Guild is strong enough that it can influence the Parliament, sir,” Fanchon replied.

“In matters that pertain to the Guild, yes,” Raff agreed, “but to me personally? Not a chance.”

“But Varana does not even enjoy that much influence, sir,” Ranchon continued the debate.

“I’ll grant you that point,” Raff admitted. “Parliament ought to be more responsive to the needs of Her Majesty’s colonies. They should be at least as willing to listen to colonial concerns as they are to reap the profits through taxation.”

“Perhaps your guild should be telling that to Parliament, Fanchon suggested.

“Perhaps they should,” Raff agreed, “but the Guild Council no more listens to me than Parliament listens to you.”

“Aye,” Fanchon agreed sadly.

Six

“It’s getting loud outside,” Em remarked later that evening when she and Raff had gone back to their room.

Raff looked out the window toward the town square. There were over one hundred people, mostly men to judge by their clothing, standing around the Freedom Pole. Many were holding torches and the multitude of flames illuminated the scene in an eerily flickering manner. “I’d say the Brothers of Freedom are having a meeting. It looks like Mister Fanchon is making a speech, in fact.”

“Who is Mister Fanchon?” Em asked. “Is he that cobbler you told me about?”

“That’s the one,” Raff agreed. “I suspected he was one of the leading voices in the Brotherhood, but now I know for certain. Wish I could hear what he was saying from here, but while I’m fairly sure I passed whatever test he administered, having a strange face in the crowd, especially mine, might not be the wisest thing to do. Oh no.”

“What’s wrong, dear?” Emblem asked.

“Kaz and Chanya got curious too,” Raff replied. “They just crossed the street and are headed directly into that rally. Chanya has the hood of her cloak up and Kaz is wearing one of those three-cornered hats the colonists like so much – I wonder where he got that – but it’s them, right enough.”

“Those hats are simplifications of the ones popular among the Cracian nobility,” Em remarked. “Perhaps I should go bring them back.”

“Or I should,” Raff sighed.

“No,” Em disagreed. “This Mister Fanchon knows you, as does everyone who was in the taproom this afternoon. But he has not met me. I may be a stranger down there, but perhaps I can get in and out without too many people noticing. No, Raff,” she stopped a stillborn protest. “Stop trying to protect me. You know I can take care of myself. I will be back as soon as possible,” she promised, sliding a cloak over her shoulders. “And you can watch from here, just in case, no?”

Raff nodded and Em quickly left the room. A few moments later he saw her on the street and headed into the on-going rally.

Emblem looked around, but it seemed that everyone was either wearing their hoods up or else had on a tricorne hat this cool summer evening and from behind there was nothing to distinguish Kaz and Chanya from the other attendees. She could not help but listen to Fanchon’s impassioned speech even as she made her way through the crowd.

“If Parliament does not allow us to represent ourselves, it has no right to levee taxes on us!” he told the cheering crowd. “Our own colonial legislature agrees, but now the Royal Governors of Bourneset

Bay and Farring have disbanded their legislatures for saying so. Can the Colony of Cobbsland be far behind?"

"No!" shouted the crowd.

"And now, just two years ago," Fanchon continued, "Her Majesty's army was sent to occupy Lonport. They tell us it is to keep the peace, but why? Because the brave men and women of Bournset Bay dared speak up for their rights is why!

"My friends," Fanchon continued as Em finally spotted Kaz and Chanya halfway around the circle of spectators, near the back, barely visible in the flickering torchlight. "I promise you that I will be in Lonport when the trials begin. I will witness for myself just how fair to us they are. And then we shall all know whether the Queen really cares about her colonists or if we are just another source of revenue!"

"All right, you two," Em whispered from just behind the two students. "Back to the inn."

"But..." Kaz began.

"Shh! Not a word, not an excuse," she told him. "March."

They both nodded dejectedly but quietly circled the rally crowd just ahead of Em and returned to the inn. Behind them. Fanchon continued to speak, but so far as Em could tell, he was repeating himself.

"And just what do you two think you were doing?" Em demanded once she had them safely in her room.

"Em," Kaz began, trying to sound reasonable, "we thought..."

"Epp!" Emblem silenced him with a sudden bark. "I think I should hear what our senior classwoman has to say first. Miss Sanai?"

Chanya took a deep breath and tried to look both Em and Raff in the eyes and failed. "It seemed like a good idea to know what was happening," she replied uncertainly.

Emblem's eyes did not flash – they rarely did – but the look on her face was as stormy as any hurricane. Seeing that, Raff stepped in. "Chanya, Kaz, there are whole cemeteries filled with people whose last words were, 'It seemed like a good idea at the time,'" he told them softly.

"Yes, sir," Chanya replied, but Kaz had a strangely thoughtful look on his face.

"Kaz?" Raff asked sternly.

"How could those be their last words?" Kaz wondered aloud. "I'd have thought it was more like, 'Hey, look at this!'"

Raff scowled. "Well, effectively that's what you just did. Tell me, though. There were two wayfarer students in Lonport who were told not to go anywhere without reporting to either Em or to me. Who was that? You?"

"It was, sir," Kaz replied, abashed.

“Kaz, for an intelligent young man you have been making some incredibly stupid decisions lately,” Raff told him calmly. “You were there when we spoke to Mister Fanchon this afternoon. You knew he suspected we were spies.”

“Yes, sir,” Kaz admitted.

“Chanya, do you have anything to say for yourself?” Em asked her in the same calm tones Raff had been using.

“No, Master L’Oranne Cawleys,” Chanya replied, “but you shouldn’t blame Kaz. It was my idea.”

“Oh?” Em asked. “Would you care to explain that?”

“Well, it’s as Kaz said, we thought we should know what the Brothers of Freedom were saying and doing,” Chanya replied. “The Guild should know.”

“The Guild does know,” Em shook her head. “There was nothing being said in the town square that hasn’t been published in hundreds of newspapers and broadsides, nor was there likely to be. The Brotherhood isn’t keeping secrets from the general public, not about their beliefs and goals in any case. If they’re planning secret activities it is the smoke-filled backrooms of taverns like the one downstairs or in private homes. They are certainly not going to shout their plans to anyone who might come walking by.”

“Both of you,” Raff ordered, “to your rooms.”

“Wait,” Em stopped them. “This is the second time we have had to reprimand you two. This is your last chance. Probation. One step out of line between now and our return to Taundon and the reprimand is official. It won’t get you kicked out of the Guild, but it will be a long time before you can wipe the black mark off your records and you may as well forget about being a journeyman, either of you, until you work your ways back up.”

“But Chanya already is a journeyman,” Kaz protested.

“It isn’t permanent until after graduation,” Em snapped, “If I’m forced to place an official reprimand, you will both be apprentices for years to come. This time I really mean it. From here on in, Chanya, you will stay by my side and, Kaz, you’ll be with Raff unless we give you leave to be elsewhere. Now go to bed!”

“Wasn’t that a bit harsh, dear?” Raff asked after the students had left.

“Not really,” Em replied. “Chanya was lying.”

“About what?” Raff asked.

“She took the blame for tonight’s excursion, but I could tell. It was all Kaz’s idea,” Em replied, “and he allowed her to do it. I’m not sure which angers me more; her lying, or him taking advantage of it.”

“I suspect Kaz is just trying to impress a pretty young woman,” Raff laughed, “and maybe, just maybe, he succeeded.”

“I don’t mind the two of them falling in love, if that’s what it is,” Em replied, “but I suspect she’s trying to protect him as an older sister might. I will not, however, tolerate him trying to use her. He should

have admitted the blame right then and there.”

“He should have,” Raff agreed, “but he’s still young yet. I’ll talk to him about it first chance I get.”

“Don’t put it off,” Em warned. “You won’t be doing him any favors, you know.”

“I know,” Raff agreed.

They ate their breakfast as the sun rose the next morning and were back in the Wild before most of the townsfolk were up and about.

Bonford was a city, even by the standards of the Green Lands. Capital of the Colony of Charlesia, it was situated on a long thin island in the middle of the River Bon, which was navigable over one hundred miles upstream. Like the great cities of the Northern Continent it had several satellite towns that hovered on either side of the river. A fort at the north end of Bonford’s island created a small stability that allowed for a permanent bridge to the east side of the river, although the west could only be spanned by ferries.

Bonford had been planned out carefully and built on a grid system even where the local geography had to be drastically altered to accommodate the streets. They rode across the bridge at the north end of the island, down past the large fort and then finally South into the actual city.

“The Guildhall is supposed to be on Water Street,” Raff told the others, “which, if the streets were named like most of their counterparts in northern Varana, will actually be the second street up from the river.”

“That’s odd,” Kaz remarked.

“Not really. The closest street to the harbor is named Front Street,” Raff replied. “You’ll find the same is true of Haristol, Denmouth and various other port towns in the Green Lands. In southern Varana, the names are more similar to those used in Hosinland although the colonist founders there did not duplicate the names anywhere as exactly.”

“Wasn’t this originally a Dixan colony?” Chanya asked.

“That’s correct,” Em agreed. “They called it Nieu Farnsdam.”

“Then shouldn’t the street names be in Dixan?” Chanya asked.

“The Green Lands colonists changed the street names at the same time they changed the name of the town,” Emblem explained.

“There are a few street names that have survived since then,” Raff added, “but there was a major fire a few years after the colony was sold to the Green Lands and nearly all of what was left was eventually rebuilt to the new plan.”

“Well, it’s been over a century since then,” Kaz commented. “I suppose we should expect a lot has changed here.”

“It is one of the oldest settlements on this side of the Western Continent,” Em replied. “The Cracian colonies on the western coast and down to the south of Varana are even older, but only a few of the settlements are from the original colonists. This is Water Street, dear,” she added to Raff.

“So it is,” Raff agreed. “Long street,” he added noticing the numbers on the nearby doors.

“It’s large city,” she replied.

The Guildhall in Bonford was nearly identical to the one in Lonport, with offices on the ground floor and two floors above for the permanently stationed and transient wayfarers to stay in. “Even the paint on the walls is the same,” Kaz noted as they waited to meet with the local hall master.

“Nearly all the larger Guildhalls in Varana look like this,” Master William Craftor replied from his office door. “It was a directive from the Guild Council about twenty years ago.”

“Those were only supposed to be guidelines, Bill,” Raff told him.

“I wasn’t here at the time,” Bill pointed out, “but I imagine the Guild masters in the colony decided it was easier to follow the instructions to the letter rather than actually bothering to think creatively. How have you been, Raff, Em? I haven’t seen you two since that time in Rivenpool. When was that?”

“About four years ago, I think,” Raff replied. Em smiled, but rolled her eyes over the memory of the occasion. “You had just been posted here and we were celebrating. When I woke up the next morning, though, you had already left. I was impressed. I didn’t expect you to be able to move until the next afternoon.”

“I didn’t, really,” Bill admitted. “Someone loaded me up in the back of a wagon and I woke up somewhere between Rivenpool and Haristol. I didn’t really recover until just before I boarded the ship and then I got seasick for the next week. Horrid trip, old boy, and I haven’t sailed again since.”

“I don’t imagine you’ve had to,” Raff remarked.

“I won’t either,” Bill told him. “I find Varana suits me perfectly well. I plan to retire here some day. Look, why don’t you all come into my office. I imagine you have a report to deliver.”

“What makes you say that?” Raff asked, following Bill back into the office.

“You’re supposed to be in Lonport presiding over a trial,” Bill replied. “If you’re suddenly in Bonford, it must be something important.”

“We only have a routine journey report for you,” Raff answered, “but I do have a few questions you may be able to answer for us.” He paused to introduce Kaz and Chanya then went on to tell Bill about their search for Peter Bridger.

“I should know if he landed in Bonford,” Bill admitted, “but if he’s a natural wayfarer, I won’t know where he went from here.”

“I hope to talk to his known business contacts,” Raff told him, “though I suspect he’s on his way south to New Ebor.”

“Closer to southwest these days,” Bill corrected him, “but it is down the coast. The journey is starting to get a bit dangerous these days, you know.”

“Actually, we don’t know that,” Raff replied. “Why don’t you tell us about it?”

“The paths are the same as ever, of course. No one would dare anger the Guild, especially here in the colonies, but the army is starting to take steps against the Brothers of Freedom,” Bill explained. “The Brotherhood is out erecting their Freedom Poles as fast as they can dig the holes for them and the army is out tearing them down nearly as fast.”

“Stupid move,” Raff commented. “The poles and the rallies around them are harmless. Just a bit of blowing off steam, really. If they’re out knocking over the Freedom Poles, it’s only going to make things worse. Oh, no. Is that what led up to the shooting incident in Lonport?”

“That’s where it all started,” Bill told him, “when the army decided to chop down a particularly beloved tree in the city commons because the locals referred to it as the Freedom Tree. I think that’s where the Brotherhood got the idea for the poles, if you must know.”

“And yet the pole we saw in Gesselton seemed to have been left unmolested for some time,” Emblem remarked.

“The army isn’t everywhere, Em,” Bill told her, “and Cobbsland is not under as close a scrutiny as Bournset Bay and Charlesia. As of this morning there were two poles standing in the harbor area right here in Bonford, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they were kindling by now. Doesn’t matter there’ll be more this time tomorrow. If every pole the Brotherhood erected here still stood, the island would be covered by them.”

“They must have depopulated a forest for them already,” Kaz remarked.

“Not every pole gets destroyed,” Bill told him. “Some are merely knocked over.”

“And very few are the size of the one we saw in Gesselton,” Raff added. “Most poles are much thinner, especially since they expect them to be knocked over.”

“The poles are just a warning sign anyway,” Bill remarked. “The shooting in Lonport is the worst violence to date, but to my eyes it looks like the army is intentionally trying to anger the populace. They don’t have their own barracks which means they can use an old colonial law allowing them to house the soldiers in private homes. One or two per home and you have an effective spy network all across a major city.”

“Are they doing that all over Varana, Bill?” Emblem asked.

“So far just in the major cities of the north,” Bill replied. “I’m sure the officers don’t want open insurrection, but they do seem to be getting lots of little incidents. That shooting in Lonport was just the worst. There have been innumerable protests which the army gets to break up, and of course you know the legislatures of Charlesia and Bournset Bay have been disbanded by the colonial governors.”

“I had heard about that,” Raff admitted. “I thought that was supposed to be a temporary measure.”

“Maybe it is,” Bill replied. “I know new delegates are being hand-picked by the governor here, but not in Bournset. I doubt there will be any form of representative government there for some time to come.”

“No wonder the people are rioting,” Raff shook his head. “I would be too. Remind me to have a word with Her Majesty’s governor when we get back there.”

“You can’t do that, you know,” Bill reminded him. “We have to stay neutral. Now if the governor is foolish enough to consult you, that’s another thing, but I doubt he wants anything to do with you. At least, he’s been avoiding contact with the Guild in general for the last year.”

“I wish Longe had told me that,” Raff grumbled.

“It shouldn’t make a difference for the trial,” Bill pointed out, “and he may have been trying to keep you neutral. It’s also possible he assumed you knew. Don’t go too hard on Frank, Raff. He’s balanced on a very thin cable in Lonport. My job here is tough, but his is nigh on impossible.”

“You say these poles have been erected and torn down all over the north?” Em asked. “What about South Varana?”

“Oh, the north is full of problem children, but the south is better behaved,” Bill remarked. The colonists up here came for religious freedom, escape from the law and a chance to turn over a new leaf. Well, not entirely, but a significant percentage of them did and the rest behave as though they did. In the South the primary motivation was their personal economy. The rich landowners down there are quite comfortable on their plantations run by slave labor and are not likely to do anything that might upset their cozy little world.”

“What about the less fortunate ones who can’t afford to own land or slaves?” Chanya asked.

“They don’t count there,” Bill replied. “Well, they don’t really have a lot of say anywhere, not even in the North. A lot of poor folks have been joining in the protests, but those protests wouldn’t be happening if the business-class artisans, lawyers and such weren’t in an uproar. I’m not saying the South would never rebel, just the opposite in fact. They are not particularly happy with those anti-slavery laws the Guild pushed through the Green Lands Parliament a few years ago. No new slaves to be imported. It doesn’t stop them from being born here, though, and to tell the truth, I’m rather suspicious of the slave auctions that still go on in the South. They claim the ones being sold are born either here or in the southern islands, technically considered part of Varana although held by Crace, but I hear there are still ships plying the triangular trade route.”

“Triangular trade route?” Kaz asked.

“I doubt a slave ship could make a profit if it had no cargo for half the trips,” Bill told him. Down in the far south and on the islands they grow sugar cane. The cane is harvested and turned into molasses. Some of the molasses is turned into rum. The rum and molasses is shipped to the Green Lands. Well it goes all over the world, here too, but the ships that also carry slaves most often dock in Haristol and Denmouth. Then they load the ships with trinkets and books. All sorts of stuff really, but the religious books seem to be the one item most notable. They take this cargo to the Southern Continent and sell it there and use the proceeds to buy slaves which they bring back to the islands. The slaves can be sold there because Crace still allows it. Those slaves can later come here because the Green Lands claims those islands even though we will probably never hold them. It’s an all too convenient set of circumstances if you ask me. Um, you’re not headed into that part of Varana, are you?”

“Longe already warned us to keep the kid’s passports handy,” Raff told him, “but we don’t have time to get that far before the trial anyway. Well, all this is suitably depressing, but we really have to start looking for Bridger. God only knows where he is by now, but with luck I should pick up his trail here.”

Eight

“He was here?” Raff asked a silversmith two days later when he and Kaz found the shop several blocks away from the Guildhall.

“Yes, sir,” the smith replied. “Mister Bridger stops in once every year or two and buys some of my finer pieces. He was here about a month ago, I would think. Do you need the exact date?”

“Probably not,” Raff admitted. “I don’t suppose he talks about his business much, does he?”

“Sometimes,” the smith admitted. “Actually he can be quite talkative. We generally talk over a pot of coffee. It used to be tea, but that’s gotten quite expensive here in the colonies of late. What do you want him for?” The smith was suddenly suspicious.

“Bad news, I’m afraid,” Raff admitted. “It’s about his wife and son.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” the smith replied. “Peter talks about them a lot. He’s even shown me drawings he’s made of them. He loved them so much. Disease?”

“Murder,” Raff told him. “I’m sorry, but I cannot go into the details.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t care to hear them,” the smith replied. “What can I tell you that would help?”

“Any idea where he was headed after leaving Bonford?” Raff asked.

“He did say he planned to make his way south to New Ebor,” the smith volunteered. “He generally makes several stops along the way. He’s mentioned them from time to time, but New Ebor is the first city to the south from which he might return to the Green Lands.”

Raff thanked the man and left soon after.

“You should sail down the coast,” Bill suggested a short time later. “If he’s headed for New Ebor, you don’t need to check every town and city between here and there. Besides, it’s been a month. It’s conceivable he might already be on his way back to Hosinland, you know.”

“Possible,” Raff admitted, “but his business trips are usually longer than that. You’re right about New Ebor, however. If we can catch a ship leaving today, we’ll go there that way.”

“It’s bit late for that, but I know of a packet ship headed south tomorrow morning,” Bill told him.

“All right,” Raff nodded, “that will still be faster than driving a wagon, I suppose.”

The *Morency* was a slim, shallow-draft vessel ideally suited to hugging the coast and slipping in and out of the most treacherous harbors. She only had a few small cabins and with only a single vacancy, Raff

and Em were forced to share it with Kaz and Chanya. That was a situation Em regretted. Having kept Chanya practically sewn to her side for the last week, she had been hoping to give the young woman a chance to show she had learned from her mistakes in Lonport and Gesselton. She was not likely to get in trouble on board the ship, but now she could not even get away while sleeping. Well, it's only for a few days, Em thought to herself. I'll find an excuse to give her an unsupervised errand or two in New Ebor.

The weather was foggy along the entire coast and mist constantly soaked anyone who attempted to stand up on deck, but the crew seemed unusually cheerful because of it although it was not until the third day that the wayfarers learned why.

The *Morency* was just rounding the southern cape of the Colony of New Rossey when they were hailed by a large Man of War and ordered to strike sails and heave to for inspection. The packet ship was small, but seemed even smaller against the side of the large first rater. "I think three or four *Morency*s would still leave room in the hold of that thing," Kaz remarked.

"Not if she's as full as she looks," Raff replied. "Of course most of her cargo is probably gunpowder and cannon shot, but that's another reason our captain obeyed orders."

"What are they doing?" Chanya wondered.

"Looking for contraband, I would imagine," Raff replied. "There are all sorts of goods that need to be stamped or sealed by customs before they can be distributed among the colonies. If this were a larger ship one could argue they had not yet made port, but I doubt that argument would fly too well today. So they're looking for things like tea and cocoa or rum above and beyond anything they could expect the crew to drink or anything else in high demand in the colonies but which might have been smuggled in."

"And they think the *Morency* is a smuggler?" Chanya asked.

"I would be quite surprised if she was not," Raff remarked lightly. "Most of these packet ships have something in the cargo the Queen will never see a penny of revenue from. They were built to carry mail primarily, but they see as much use acting as smugglers, if you must know the truth. They are fast and can slip into bays and unofficial harbors that would scrape the keel off that first rater. That's actually why the crew was so happy about all the fog, you see. It made them harder to find."

"Now the question is whether or not the captain of this tub was being careful or greedy. If he was careful and his crew particularly clever about hiding the contraband, we'll be allowed to go on in few hours. If he got greedy and loaded up too heavily in illegal goods, the *Morency* may not even be still floating in an hour or two."

"The navy will sink us?" Chanya asked worriedly.

"They'll scuttle the *Morency*," Raff replied. "Then they'll have to give us a ride to New Ebor because if they don't I'll make sure that ship never sees port again. They won't give us trouble, though. We're just passengers. It's the captain and his crew who are in danger."

"Can we afford to sit here that long?" Kaz asked pointedly.

"Well, I would hate to find I had missed Bridger because we were held up," Raff admitted. "I'll have a word with the captain of that ship."

"We are on Her Majesty's business, sir," the Navy captain replied haughtily. "You will have to wait

until we are finished here.”

“No, Captain,” Raff replied, handing him a copy of the papers investing him as a justice. “You are following the Admiralty’s orders. I am on the Queen’s business and cannot be delayed.”

“This says you were to preside over a trial in Lonport,” the captain noted suspiciously. “Why then are you on a ship going in the wrong direction?”

“I am also on the business of the Wayfarers’ Guild,” Raff told him.

“What sort of business?” the captain demanded.

“You know better than to ask that question, Captain,” Raff responded coolly.

“If you do not tell me, I have no cause to allow this ship to proceed.”

“If you do not allow us to proceed, I will order all wayfarers from your ship, sir,” Raff told him.

“They are sailors, you cannot do that,” the Captain blustered.

“They are also Guild members and I am a master in that Guild,” Raff came back. “I rank you in several ways, Captain. If you care to lodge a protest with the Guild you are welcome to do so, but my business is too important to be held up by a minor case of suspected smuggling.”

“Can you assure me, sir, that there is nothing illegal in the hold of this packet?” the captain asked, starting to relent.

“Of course I cannot,” Raff replied. “I wasn’t on board when it was loaded nor have I inspected the cargo for myself.”

The captain weighed all the arguments and decided, “Very well, Master Cawlens, “I will allow you to proceed without further obstruction, but I suggest you warn the captain of the *Morency* that I will be keeping an eye out for her.”

“I would have been very disappointed in you if you didn’t,” Raff chuckled.

A short time later, as the *Morency* continued on, Kaz pointed out, “We aren’t on the Queen’s business at the moment,” Kaz argued. “And the argument that we’re on Guild business is shaky at best. We’re on Kenlenta business, remember?”

“Well, as Her Majesty’s high justice, I could make a good case for anything I do to be her business,” Raff replied, “and the Guild Council did request that I help Coraxis out as best I could.”

“Very tacitly,” Kaz smirked. “I was there and don’t recall anyone but Master Forrent speaking to you.”

“Well there is that,” Raff laughed, “but I doubt the good captain is likely to lodge an official protest.”

“Could you really have ordered the wayfarers on that ship to stand down?” Chanya asked.

“It’s in the regulations,” Em explained, gesturing her to walk toward the bow of the ship with her. “As

a journeyman you should have read through them.”

“Several times,” Chanya agreed, “but I was instructed that unless I were to enlist, the regulations pertaining to military service would not really apply to me.”

“Well, I guess you know better now,” Em told her with a smile. “If you’re going to be a master wayfarer, you’ll be well-advised to memorize all the regulations.”

“They fill an entire wall in the library of the Central Guildhall,” Chanya pointed out.

“Don’t I know it!” Em laughed. “But most of them have been superseded by new versions. That big set you’ve seen is more useful if you’re trying to write a history of the Guild. The so-called “Abbreviated” set contains everything that is current and can be purchased at a reasonable fee. I’ll buy a copy for you when we get back to Taundon.”

“Thank you, Master L’Oranne Cawlens,” Chanya replied.

“Chanya, it’s all right to call me Emblem or Em when we’re not in a guildhall, and even then if we’re in private,” Em told her.

“And if you aren’t angry with me,” Chanya added.

“If you’ve figured that out, you should be clever enough to not make me so angry,” Em laughed. “Chanya, I was most angry the other night because you were lying to me. Haven’t they tried to teach you about truth-telling yet?”

“No,” Chanya admitted. “I did not even know it was possible, well, until Kaz told me about it. That was after we left Gesselton.”

“Sounds like some of your teachers have been holding back techniques for themselves,” Em noted. “Maybe I’ll teach you how it’s done.”

“Would you?” Chanya asked hopefully.

“Perhaps,” Em replied. “Yes, I think I should, but you’ve got to promise to stop cheering Kaz on. He’s always been a very enthusiastic boy and doesn’t seem to have grown out of that yet. In some ways I doubt he ever will. He’s a lot like Raff that way. The difference is Raff has managed to grow up. Kaz is still working on it. He’s come a long way since we first found him on the shore of the Eastern Ocean, but he has somewhat further to go still. He’s a good boy, young man, really, but his youthful enthusiasms sometimes cause him to do things without thinking, especially when a pretty young woman is involved.”

“I haven’t been leading him on, Em,” Chanya protested. “He is like a brother to me.”

“I realize that,” Em agreed, “and I think Kaz knows that too, but he cannot help but try to impress you. He’s been showing off and, being a wayfarer, that makes it far more dangerous than normal. He needs you to set a better example and especially, stop lying for him, at least not to Raff or me.”

“Yes, Em,” Chanya agreed.

“Now let’s start you on truth-telling,” Em suggested.

“Does Raff, uh, Master Cawlens know how to do this?” Chanya asked suddenly.

“Of course he does,” Em replied. “Why would you ask?”

“Well, Kaz mentioned that he had never known Master Cawlens to do it,” Chanya responded.

“Raff does not really like doing it,” Em explained. “We, most of us that is, do not really read another’s thoughts. What we see, and I will teach you how to see, is a variety of stresses and strains to one’s surrounding aura of stability, which, with training and a lot of practice you can learn to tell whether people are trying to hide the truth behind their words. It is a subtle art and difficult to master. I am trusting you implicitly by showing you this, because while it is difficult to read another’s intentions, it is quite simple to use it to hide your own.”

“I won’t betray you, Em,” Chanya replied instantly. “I promise.”

“I know, dear,” Em nodded. “Raff is a bit different from the rest of us, though. He can see directly into someone’s mind and read their thoughts. He considers it a curse and refuses to use the ability, calling it the ultimate betrayal of one’s fellows. I agree, most heartily, by the way. If I could see another’s thoughts I would resist the power with every inch of my being. It is a detestable invasion of privacy.”

“I understand,” Chanya nodded.

“One more thing, Chanya. You are not to teach this technique to Kaz.”

“Why not?” Chanya asked.

“Another regulation. It is not to be taught to anyone beneath journeyman rank. Now, are you ready to start this lesson?” Em asked. Chanya nodded and they began.

Skethit

One

"I sent every apprentice in the hall out while you were sleeping, Raff," Master Louis Dulass gave him the news. "They managed to cover everyone on your list in an hour and a half."

"That'll save a little shoe leather," Raff admitted. "Thanks, Lou. What did they learn?"

"Peter Bridger left town just yesterday," Lou replied, "but he didn't take ship for Haristol. Instead he headed inland; at least that's what he told several merchants. Obviously, he didn't come to the Guild to guide him, but evidently he placed orders and told them he'd be back to accept delivery. You know for a murder suspect, he isn't doing much to cover his trail."

"I'm fairly certain he didn't kill his family, Lou," Raff told him. "I know you can't ever really tell for certain, but it seems very unlikely he'd be conducting business as usual if he had. I think it's more likely he would have gone somewhere new and not left a trail in people's memories even clearer than a wayfarer's path."

"Well, I hope you're right. Everyone he's dealt with seems to like him," Lou remarked. "And he seems to have made a habit of showing them his drawings."

"I noticed that too in Bonford," Raff admitted. "It's another reason I doubt he did it. You say he headed inland. Any idea of where?" He can keep from leaving a trail, so I can't just follow him that way.

"Didn't I say?" Lou asked. "Well maybe I didn't. He's headed for Skethit."

"Skethit? That's not a Grundish name," Raff remarked. "It's not native Varanan either. Kenlienta?"

"That's right," Lou nodded, "I'm not sure what it means, though."

Raff thought for a few moments. "It's not a common word, but I think it means, 'Place of Science.' Wait a minute. Is that the research colony where the Ken are working on steam power?"

"I hadn't heard that," Lou replied, "but they're mining coal a few days to the west of here. I have directions though I haven't had to send anyone out there. There aren't any Ken roads out there, but you'll be able to follow one of our paths most of the way."

"A few days you say?" Raff asked. "That could be cutting it a bit fine before I have to be back in Lonport."

"They aren't likely to start the trial without you, Raff," Lou laughed, "but there's a packet ship headed there on the afternoon tide. You can send a note on ahead saying you may be a few days late. I'm sure Frank will let all relevant parties know."

"Good idea, even if I do think I can make it in time," Raff told him.

"What's with your apprentice, by the way?" Lou asked, changing the subject.

"Is there a problem?" Raff asked.

"Maybe not," Lou allowed. "It's just that I asked him to be one of the lads I sent out to talk to those merchants and artisans on your list, and he told me he wasn't allowed to leave the hall without your permission. I thought he was having me on for a minute or so, but realized he meant it."

“Oh, that,” Raff laughed. “Kaz has been a bad boy the last few weeks. He’s been trying to impress Em’s assistant, Chanya, and making a few wrong decisions because of it. Em finally laid out the law for them and told them they were not to leave our presence without prior permission. You could have pulled rank if you needed to and I wouldn’t have been bothered if Kaz had just gone along with your orders either. Was he at least polite about his refusal?”

“He was very polite,” Lou chuckled, “but I could see he wasn’t going to leave the hall without your say-so.”

“I’d better tell him that while in a Guildhall he’s subject to the master’s orders,” Raff decided.

“Why?” Lou chuckled. “Are you planning to keep him on probation for the rest of his apprenticeship?”

“I wouldn’t call it planning so much as keeping my options open on that account,” Raff laughed. “Kaz is a very intelligent, powerful and talented wayfarer. He’s also very enthusiastic and hasn’t quite learned to think his way through to the consequences of his actions yet. He’ll be okay, but he needs to learn to think before he acts.”

“Well, at least he isn’t looking for ways to go around your back,” Lou pointed out.

“There is that,” Raff allowed. “Any other news?”

“All is not bucolic peace and joy among the southern colonies of Varana,” Lou reported. “Groups of men have formed what they are calling Comitati Vigilantes or Vigilance Companies. There’s some talk they are trying to organize still further into a single united group, but I don’t know how far that has gotten. Since the colonial legislature did not have the funds available to build a sufficient militia to suppress banditry, capture escaped slaves and what not, the colonists, especially in the back country, have decided to organize themselves to the task of regulating the peace. Late last year the legislature of Julia…”

“Julia?” Raff asked.

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” Lou asked. “It used to be South Kensing, but they changed their name to honor our beloved queen, don’t you know. North Kensing is now just plain old Kensing, of course. Anyway, the Julia Legislature decided to legitimize the Vigilantes and passed a bill doing just that. They’re probably having second thoughts about it just about now, though. I hear a Comitatus Vigilantes decided to break into the superior courthouse in Hesterton and wreak havoc. I suppose they didn’t approve of the job the judge and the attorneys were doing as they chased the judge off the bench and into the Wild, beat a defending lawyer to within an inch of his life and dragged the attorney general through the streets and eventually put him in the stocks for three days until he collapsed. Um, the judge wandered back in an hour or two later, of course and quickly barricaded himself in his home until help could arrive.”

“Help in the form of the militia or the Queen’s Army?” Raff asked.

“Her Majesty’s brave men in green, of course,” Lou replied. “I suspect that particular group of Vigilantes are in for a very bad time. The rest of them are going to have to be very careful as well.”

“I should say,” Raff agreed.

“We got some news on the latest transoceanic packet,” Lou went on. “I hear the Dauphin of Crace got married to one of the princesses of Holrany.”

“Em and I met her on our way to Dix,” Raff admitted.

“I hope she’s a good influence on her new husband,” Lou remarked. “Word has it he’s quite the boor.”

“I found her shallow and she probably should have stayed in school until graduation,” Raff remarked. “Em got along with her and tried to give her some advice about the Cracians, but I doubt much of it sunk in.”

“Captain James Carter has landed in New Dix and has claimed it for Her Majesty, Julia,” Lou reported.

“Carter?” Raff asked. “Isn’t he a wayfarer?”

“Never made it past journeyman grade and barely that,” Lou replied, “but I understand he’s a decent naval officer and having a bit of the talent doesn’t hurt when you’re sailing in new waters without a pilot’s log.”

“So did he cross the Bright Ocean to get there?” Raff asked.

“That he did,” Lou confirmed. “He was island hopping most of the way with a master wayfarer on board and claims to be the first to land on the eastern shore of New Dix. I wonder how the Dixans will take that.”

“Oh, they’ll take it,” Raff predicted. “Their colonial aspirations already have them over-extended and they may have claimed New Dix, but have never attempted to colonize it. Of course there are native humans there already and the Dixans are more prone to trade with natives than colonize next to them.”

“That might be a healthier attitude,” Lou told him.

“They don’t often trade fairly,” Raff remarked. “You may recall they bought Bonford’s island for about thirty crowns worth of beads, trinkets and a few pots and pans.”

“Yes, but they didn’t buy it from the tribe who claimed the island,” Lou laughed.

“What?” Raff asked. “I never heard that.”

“Really? It’s no secret,” Lou told him. “The people they found there were from somewhere to the north, but had come south to hunt. The Dixans offered them all these pretty, shiny things for the island and they figured there were enough rabbit and deer on the mainland, so they took the goods and left. A few months later the actual owners came back for the winter and the Dixans had to make another deal.”

“That one is news to me,” Raff admitted. “You’re having me on, right?”

“Not at all. Oh, and there’s a new maharajah in Salasia,” Lou told him, “and get this, the Grundish Salasia Company pretty much has him in their pockets.”

“And the Guild owns a controlling interest in the company,” Raff recalled. “that’s going to bring about

some changes and the first to suffer are likely to be their local wayfarers. They're an arrogant lot so I haven't much sympathy for them."

"Our boys aren't exactly humble and lovable most of the time, Raff," Lou reminded him.

"We are compared to them," Raff replied. "We don't actually run the countries we're in or go out of our way to bully the people either."

"We've been pulling a lot of the strings that get countries to run the way we want them to," Lou told him. "Oh, come on, Raff, you were on the Guild Council. You can't say you didn't know."

"I always fought against that sort of behavior," Raff replied.

"That's probably why you aren't on the Council anymore," Lou pointed out.

"It's certainly part of it," Raff sighed. "But it's not as bad as you say. If it was, I'd have to go back and do something about it."

"Would you?" Lou asked.

"I would have to," Raff told him seriously. "The Guild does a lot of good for the people of the world and I won't have that ruined. Oh, I hear Paknilan has gone to War with Kharasia now."

"I didn't see that in the news packet," Lou replied.

"I'm surprised," Raff told him. "The news was just hitting the Green Lands about the time I left. The war, it seems, is being conducted at sea and Paknilan is trying to force Kharasia out of the Middle Sea, but they miscalculated badly and the Emperor of Kharasia sent a fleet from one of his northern ports around Crace and into the Middle Sea the long way. He's also allied with Yug and together I hear they're burning the Paknilan fleet whenever they can find them."

"Makes me glad to be in Varana," Lou remarked. "Now why do you think the Guild is enabling all those countries to go to war?"

"Because they pay for the privilege," Raff replied and if we didn't they'd go ahead and fight anyway. It's been pointed out to me that you don't need a wayfarer to find your way through the wild. If you have enough humans moving together you can guide them by keeping your eye on the sun and the stars. It's not very accurate, but it will get you headed in the right general direction."

"A lot of armies would get lost," Lou argued.

"Possibly," Raff nodded, "but it seems to me there may be other ways to navigate without wayfarers. What if you string out an army's soldiers as far as you can without losing the unified stability? With a thousand men or more you could certainly search over a fairly large amount of territory, it seems to me."

"Then why has no one ever tried?" Lou asked.

"Perhaps I am the first to think of it," Raff replied. "Armies have gotten lost and been forced to form their own stability in the Wild until found and led back home, but they have stayed put because it has always been part of their general orders. 'Don't go wandering around if you get lost. You can't navigate in the Wild without a wayfarer.' I think we have encouraged that. Maybe not intentionally. To tell the

truth it's always been something I took for granted, but I have had the time these last few years to question many of my beliefs. Some grew stronger in the process and others got dropped by the wayside."

"Gone philosophical, have we?" Lou chuckled.

"Quite," Raff agreed. "I am probably not going to live as long as I have already. In fact I would say it is quite unlikely. The fact gives me pause for thought. I don't think I've wasted much of my life up until now, but I do wonder if I could have done even better, so I think things out a bit more than I did in the past. Our world is a wonderful place in many ways, Lou, but it's also in danger. We've been ignoring the Kenlenta's warnings about our wastes affecting the Wild. Frankly I think they're ignoring their own pollution, but they are right even if they are blind to their own mistakes. There are strange new things appearing in the Wild these days.

"Did I tell you about what I saw in Gamat?" Raff suddenly asked. "No? The Ken thought it was a pool of stability that had spontaneously formed in their town. I thought it acted more like a patch of concentrated Wild energy and Kaz pointed out that Wild energy and our stabilities may actually just be two states of the same thing. He's not the first to say that, of course. It's something I've speculated about and I think one of my teachers back at Dunbridge used to think along those lines as well. Kaz did have a new thought and that was to wonder whether we could use that dichotomy to re-establish a balance between the Wild and human stabilities and stop or at least manage the leaks that have been occurring between them."

"Interesting," Lou admitted, "but how?"

"I don't know yet, but it's an avenue to be investigated," Raff told him. "Anything else I ought to know?"

"You? Probably more than I'm capable of relating, Raff. You may read the packet for yourself, but I imagine you won't have time to more than glance at it. You do have a trail that's starting to cool and I see Emblem has finally come down the stairs for breakfast. Shall we join your good lady?"

Two

"That smoke ahead must be Skethit," Kaz remarked as they rode their horses over a tall hill. While there were no well-built roads of stone pavers as the Ken usually built, there was a trace of packed dirt that led from the coast to the Kenlenta town of Skethit. The wayfarers had not followed that road its

entire length, however, and had instead followed a wayfarer path to a human town called Hedley. From Hedley they had turned south, ridden cross-country and after a mile found the Kenlienta trace.

“Either that or a forest is burning,” Chanya replied.

“I think Kaz is right,” Raff decided. “That smoke is coming from the right place to be Skethit.”

“It could be Skethit that’s burning,” Emblem added lightly. “In a sense it probably is. I can’t say I like the smell of the air out here. It’s as bad as in Taundon, if you ask me. Worse, really since out here in the Wild you expect fresh air.”

“There are a lot of people, both Ken and human, who think of this as the smell of progress,” Raff replied.

“Some progress!” Em scoffed. “Filling the air with poison. It won’t just stay around here, you know. It will eventually travel all around the world. Disgusting.”

“It doesn’t seem too bad just yet,” Raff replied. “Hopefully we will be wise enough to stop before it kills us. Perhaps someone will invent a cleaner way to produce energy.”

“There is Kenlienta magic,” Kaz pointed out. “Why are they burning coal when they can use their magic?”

“The Ken are as technologically minded as we are,” Raff reminded him. “Wayfaring in its purest form is a manipulation and concentration of energy too, but we do not rely on our wayfarers to provide warmth for our homes or energy for our great projects. The Dixans use windmills to drain their Low Country, for example. They are not all that efficient, however, and if the wind stops, the water levels start to rise again.”

“The same thing happens when the winds get too strong for the mills,” Kaz replied, “and storms have flooded the Low Country twice since they started to reclaim the land there.”

“Right,” Raff agreed, “and that’s why the Ken’s new steam technology may turn out to be important. A pump that can keep working without the wind or people to drive it will help the Dixans immensely. Such an engine will revolutionize our ships and maybe even land vehicles, though that might be decades away yet.”

“If they smell like coal smoke,” Em told him, “I’ll be all the happier that they are decades away. I would hate to have to grow used to this.”

“Em,” Kaz told her, “you already have gotten used to it in Taundon.”

“It’s bad enough to have to breathe this in the cities,” Em replied. “But out here? No, it is not good.”

“Well, let’s keep our prejudices to ourselves for the next day or two,” Raff suggested. “I don’t think it would be all that polite to go in and tell the Ken their town stinks.”

“I’m sure they’ve already noticed that,” Kaz put in.

“Perhaps,” Raff admitted.

Skethit was nestled into the side of a long mountain that stretched to the western horizon and beyond. The wayfarers caused a stir as they entered the town and Kenlienta stopped what they were doing to watch the humans ride up the street.”

“I’d guess they don’t see many humans here,” Kaz remarked.

“There are not many humans who visit Kenlientan towns anywhere,” Chanya reminded him.

“And definitely not this many at once,” Raff told them.

“Good day,” Emblem greeted a small group of children who had rushed up to see them.

“You!” a woman behind the children exclaimed. “You are Emblem Cawlens. True?”

“I am,” Em replied, reining her horse in so she could stop to speak.

“You saved my life during the Great Plague, Master Emblem,” the woman told her. “And this is the great Raufanax?”

“Guilty,” Raff admitted.

“Welcome to Skethit,” she told them. “How may I assist you?”

“We’re looking for a human named Peter Bridger,” Raff replied. “We heard he was here.”

“He may be,” the woman replied. “You should probably talk to Elder Nearlina. She is the head scientist and the leader of this settlement.” She gave them directions and they rode on.

Nearlina’s home was uphill from the entrance to the town and not far from a building with a tall chimney from which the black smoke was belching. “Elder Nearlina?” Raff asked when she opened the door.

“Hardly an elder,” Nearlina laughed.

“I’m told the people here call you their elder,” Raff replied and introduced himself and the others.

“We do not really have a word that describes me, Honored Raufanax,” Nearlina replied, “but I am the leader of the scientific team here and other administrative duties that normally fall to an elder seem to have accumulated on my shoulders as well. I suppose I might be an elder if we were closer to the rest of the Ken Nation, but I have never been invested with the title and office.”

“I suspect you were,” Raff disagreed. “Just not in the usual way. Well, that’s neither here nor there. We’re searching for another human.” He went on to tell her of their mission although not why they were looking for Peter Bridger.

“Oh, yes, he’s here,” Nearlina replied. “He arrived yesterday. I can find out where he is and show you around our community here at the same time. We’re all very proud of what we are accomplishing and would love to share it with you.”

She led them to the large building with the smoke stack. Inside the building most of the offices and laboratories were immaculately clean, although there was coal dust over everything in the large engine

room. There, while waiting to hear about Bridger's whereabouts, Nearlina showed them the large water tank that the coal fire was heating. And under the steam pressure, a huge piston was chugging back and forth, turning a toothed wheel, which in turn turned another two wheels to move a slow conveyor belt loaded with coal that workers could shovel into the fire."

"It's still not efficient enough to use industrially," Nearlina explained, "but, as you can see, we have managed to get it to the point where it can feed the fuel for its own fire."

"It's like the grown up version of those steam toys that have been around for the last fifteen hundred years or more," Raff remarked. "They've only been a curiosity for human scientists, though."

"And for us as well, Raufanax," Nearlina replied, "but we had to start somewhere. We have improved on the gaskets, but need to make them better yet and we're still working on getting the gear ratios optimized. Our mathematics, it seems, does not want to account for the wearing out of the materials used in the machine. We obviously need better mathematics. We have a number of smaller engines, most of which are driven by alcohol. Ideally we would like to drive the big engine over an alcohol fire, but the power needed to produce the alcohol in pure enough form is too great and would be even less efficient than coal even if much cleaner."

"I had wondered why you chose to use coal," Raff commented.

"For the efficiency," Nearlina told him. "It burns hotter than wood, you see, although I think with a more efficient engine we could use wood. We are also investigating other fuels but so far coal is the best. And we do not need to dig too deeply into the mountain to find it. The seam we have been following is at the level of the mine entrances and so far we have only excavated a few hundred yards into the stone."

"But the smoke smells so bad," Em protested.

"It is not my favorite smell, either," Nearlina agreed. "The coal around here has sulfur in it, but we chose the location before we realized that. Our initial mining samples had much lower amounts of the sulfur. For the purposes of this great experiment it will suffice and we do have a team working on means of sulfur extraction."

Just then a messenger arrived and told them that Peter Bridger was down in the main coal mine.

"What's he doing there?" Raff wondered.

"Working a shift, I imagine," the messenger replied. "He does that when he visits. He frequently works with us at any number of projects while he is here."

"We have improved our mining techniques amazingly with his help," Nearlina told Raff and the others enthusiastically. "This would be a good time to show you the mine while we go to where Mister Bridger is working."

"Um, yes, I suppose so," Raff replied, suddenly remembering he was here to either tell the man his family was murdered or possibly to arrest him for the crime. "Best to get on with it, I suppose," he added quietly.

If Nearlina noticed his hesitation, she didn't show it, but as they started out toward the mine, there was a deep rumble and the ground beneath them shivered. "A tremor!" Nearlina exclaimed, "and a bad one." A loud bell began to ring from the entrance to the mine and was echoed by several others in the

town. A puff of black dust shot out of the entrance to the mine and she shouted. "We must hurry! Everyone to the mine!"

"What's going on?" Kaz asked on the run.

"A cave-in, probably," Raff replied, between huff and puffs. "The tremor must have damaged the supports inside the mine and the tunnels or galleries or whatever they are called will have collapsed. Well, some of them anyway. If we hurry, we may be able to save lives, though."

"How many were on the shift?" Nearlina asked the mine's foreman as they arrived.

"Thirty men, in the collapsed gallery" he replied. "All the others are safe and working on the rescue."

"How bad a collapse was it?" Nearlina asked hesitantly.

"It's hard to tell just yet," the foreman replied. "It could just be part of the passage headed toward the working face, or it might have been the whole thing. We won't know until we get there. It's going to be slow work as we need to resupport the gallery as we go or risk losing the rescuers as well. I think we lost several pillars on the Long Hall."

"We'll need wood for beams and props, then," Nearlina replied. "I'll organize that. Do you need more help up here?"

"The current shift is over in two hours," the foreman replied. "We'll want a relief squad on hand by then."

"I'll see to that too," she promised.

"We'll stay here and help out as we can," Raff offered.

"You'll need masks inside," the foreman told them. "I have some in my office. Then I'll show you the way."

"I notice no one seems to think it odd that two women are here shifting rubble," Chanya noted a short time later as they joined the rescue teams. It turned out there were three collapsed tunnels all headed for the same working face so there was plenty of room for them to work without getting in the others' way.

"The Kenlienta do not make that distinction," Em replied, picking up as large a rock as she could handle and passing it to Chanya. Chanya, in turn, handed it to a Ken man behind her and the rock made its way up the line to a cart that would be used to haul the rubble away. "If a woman chooses to do what humans would call 'man's work' she does it and no one thinks anything of it unless she does it poorly, but then they would think the same of a man doing something poorly as well."

"Why are we working on three passageways at once?" Kaz asked Raff a few feet away in the language of the Kenlienta. "Wouldn't it be faster to work on just one?"

"We do not know yet which of the three is in the best condition, young man," a nearby Ken man told him. "We are hoping it will turn out that one has not been as damaged as the others, at which point we can concentrate our efforts there."

There was a loud cracking noise from just above and someone shouted, “Hold up here! We need to set a couple of beams here before we can go any further.”

They moved out of the gallery to allow the support-building team to move in. “We’ve been at it two hours,” Raff noted, as a shift bell rang from above. “Time passes quickly. I think I’ll stay to help the next shift but maybe you three should get a bit of rest.”

“I’ll stay,” Kaz volunteered, “Chanya, you look tired, though.”

“I’m okay,” Chanya shook her head stubbornly.

“No, you’re not,” Em decided. “I think you’ve been working so hard you have forgotten you are in the Wild. Even wayfarers can be harmed by Wild energy if they don’t watch it. I think you pulled your aura in too much.”

“I didn’t want to hurt any Kenlienta,” Chanya replied.

“Reasonable, but you went too far for your own good,” Em told her. “Come along. You’re going to need a good rest and I can set up a small stability for you until you have regained your balance. You won’t be able to until you’ve rested though.”

“Oh dear, what happened?” Nearlina asked when she saw Chanya barely able to walk without Em’s help.

“Chanya was being a little too careful about her aura,” Em explained quickly. “Careful not to hurt one of your people with stability, she exposed herself unduly to Wild energy. We need a place I can establish a temporary bubble of stability for her to rest and rebalance herself. Is there some place we can do so without endangering a Kenlien?”

“There is a garden behind my house,” Nearlina replied. “I will keep others from going there, which isn’t likely during the current emergency anyway.”

“Thank you, Elder,” Em replied.

“I’m really no elder, Emblem Cawlens,” Nearlina reminded her.

“I think you underestimate yourself,” Em told her and continued on with her shoulder helping Chanya stay on her feet and with Nearlina helping from the other side. When they reached Nearlina’s backyard, Em caused a ten-foot diameter sphere of stability to form, half of which was below ground level. “We have a tent in one of the packs,” Em told her as she helped the young woman sit down in the comforting area of stable conditions. “I’ll go get it.”

“Why?” Chanya asked.

“Because you’re in no condition to do it and it looks like it might rain tonight,” Em replied.

“No,” Chanya shook her head, “I mean why do we have a tent with us at all?”

“Oh, well you never know when something is going to happen and you’re going to need shelter of some sort,” Em explained. “Of course what I don’t have is tent poles. That was a bit short sighted.”

“I can round up a few poles for you,” Nearlina offered from well outside the stable zone. “How many do you need and how long?”

“Just two and about five feet,” Em replied. “It’s a fairly simple tent so the lower it is the broader it will be. I generally just use available tree branches unless we have a carriage or wagon to carry prepared poles.”

Nearlina nodded and she raced off to find a pair of poles while Em retrieved the tent from the packs. It really was not a large tent, nor was it made of heavy canvas. For use in the summer, being waterproof was more important than sturdiness or the ability to hold in heat, especially since she could modify the zone of stability to keep it comfortably warm if need be.

By the time Em returned, Nearlina was already back and seated next to Chanya in the small stability. “And you say you’re not an elder?” Em asked pointedly. “Most Kenlienta would be feeling sick in there by now.”

“I doubt I could keep this up for very long,” Nearlina replied, “and I can only do so as long as I concentrate.”

“Not every elder can tolerate stability at all,” Em informed her. “Have it your way, but I think if you were to show up at a Council of Elders, you would not feel too out of place.”

“Do I really have to sleep out here tonight?” Chanya asked. “I’m feeling much better.”

“You’re still out of balance,” Em told her after a brief check. “You feel better because I created that stability for you. Step outside of it and you would collapse again. No! Don’t try it. Stay there until morning, but if you’re feeling that much better you can help me put up the tent.”

“I’ll go get something to sleep on and in,” Nearlina told them. “Then, I’m sorry, but I’ll have to go up to the mine. I’m supposed to be on shift.”

It was nearly thirty-five hours later, after Chanya had recovered and had been back to the mine twice and while the wayfarers were taking a four hour break before hurrying back to the rescue effort that Nearlina came rushing to find them. “We’ve broken through into an air pocket,” she reported.

“Survivors?” Raff asked, getting to his feet.

“A few, I think,” Nearlina replied, “but the area is so unstable I stopped work until I could find you. I’ve heard of the things you and Emblem can do, you see, and...”

“We’ll try,” Raff promised. A short time later he looked at the situation and informed her, “Magic isn’t going to do it for us. The tensions in the roof are all wrong. I can hold it up, or I can with help, but no matter how carefully we do it, there will be a mild stability formed. I don’t think it will be harmful, but it won’t be comfortable for your people to pass through, and the way you’ve cleared that hole out, you’re going to have to crawl over the rubble.”

“We’ll do what we have to,” Nearlina told him.

“All right,” Raff nodded. “Kaz, Chanya, get ready to help pull the survivors through.” A few pebbles fell out of the ceiling just then and Raff spoke a bit more softly. “You two are the only ones here who can stay in the area of stability we’re going to form. I promise that roof will not fall on you.”

“I trust you, Raff,” Kaz told him, “and you, Em.” Chanya took a deep breath and nodded her agreement.

“Very well.” Raff took a deep breath of his own and nodded to Em. They held hands and went to work in the sort of coordinated teamwork that only a pair of wayfarers who had plied their skills together for years could accomplish. They began to glow a deep red almost immediately and the glow soon turned orange and then yellow. Letting go of each other, they turned to the gallery’s walls as the twin yellow halos seemed to flow from them and into the walls and ceiling.

The glow quickly vanished from sight and Raff turned to the others and told them, “You may go through now. Quickly, but carefully, please.”

Nearlina led a team of seven Kenlienta through the passage and into the clear area and just behind them Kaz and Chanya readied themselves to help pull survivors through to still more Ken waiting to carry anyone rescued to safety.

Above them the stone grumbled and cracked, but Raff and Em continued to hold it in place as six people were brought back through the hole one at a time. Raff saw the last survivor to come through was human, but he did not have the opportunity to look at the man before he was carried carefully to end of the mine shaft where it opened up above the community of Skethit.

After the six survivors had come through, Nearlina called back that there were bodies she wanted to bring back for decent burial. “Bring them,” Raff grunted, keeping as much of his mind on holding up the tons of stone as he could. The longer they had to hold the tunnel open the longer it felt like he and Em were trying to hold the entire mountain on their backs, but they refused to give up and held on as twenty-one bodies were recovered.

Finally, after the last of the rescuers had returned, Kaz and Chanya crawled back out of the way and Raff and Em were finally able to let go of the roof they were supporting.

At first there were just a few cracking sounds and dust and pebbles trickled down. As Raff and Em stepped back and away the cracking sounds stopped for a few moments and everyone began to relax. A strange tension ran up Em’s spine and she shouted, “Run!” just before the entire section collapsed again.

Three

Dust and bad air roared all around them as they raced for the mouth of the mine. The lanterns, that had been providing illumination, were mostly blown out, but Kaz and Chanya held each other up as they moved along, trying not to breathe deeply. Raff and Em were supporting nearby Kenlienta, but they too continued to struggle their way toward the end of the tunnel. The outside was too far away, however, and soon they were all coughing, choking and struggling for breath in almost total darkness.

Kaz and Chanya fell to their knees, tripping up the people behind them. And then just as it seemed hopeless there was light and there were dozens of Kenlienta carrying them quickly outside. It turned out they had fallen only a few dozen yards from the entrance and the only reason it was so dark where they fell was that it was night time.

Everyone sat on the grassy hill for a long time coughing out the dust from their throats and trying to breathe normally again. Raff was still coughing occasionally when Nearlina found him and reported. "Peter Bridger is alive, but I fear not for much longer. He was badly hurt when the mine collapsed and is not really conscious."

"Take me to him," Raff requested. "I can, at the least, ease his pain."

Nearlina led Raff down the slope to an area where the six survivors were being cared for. Em, Kaz and Chanya followed along from nearby. Peter Bridger was, indeed, in bad shape. His legs had gotten caught and crushed under a support beam and tons of rock in the initial cave-in. Although some of the people trapped with him had managed to pull him free, he had been bleeding internally.

It was a relatively simple matter to block off the nerve impulses for the crushed legs and as Raff did that the relief on Bridger's face was immediate. Em stepped in then and told Raff, "Let me have a look. You know I'm better at this."

"Of course," Raff agreed. "I didn't realize you were there."

"None of us have been aware of much but our own breathing," Em commented even as she started her examination. Bridger was dying, she saw. Not only were his injuries fatal, but he was suffering from exposure to the Wild in the same way Chanya had during those first few hours after the disaster. She infused some needed stability into him, in essence calming the Wild energy within him, but she knew that like Raff's treatment, it would only make the man more comfortable, not save his life. "That's all I can do for him," she sighed.

"Thank you," Bridger whispered hoarsely and haltingly. He tried to move, but Em stopped him.

"Easy there," Em told him. "You'll hurt yourself." It was a silly thing to say and they both knew it.

"I'm dying," Bridger noted almost clinically. "My wife and son."

"Yes?" Em prompted gently, fearing he was about to confess.

"Sotz Marnas," Bridger told her between weak coughs. "Near Marnas Nokit."

"We know," Em nodded.

"Tell them," Bridger requested. "Tell them..." he trailed off coughing again.

"Tell them?" Em asked.

“Tell,” he tried once more, “what happened. Love them.” Bridger lapsed into silence.

“We’ll tell them,” Em lied. She had looked deep into Bridger and saw he was truly unaware of what had happened to Sarah and Peter Jr. “We’ll give them your love.”

Bridger smiled weakly, then even all Raff’s and Em’s efforts failed and his eyes widened slightly for a moment. In the next moment, Bridger’s last breath sighed out of his lungs.

“Dead,” Raff confirmed, “and I think we can take that as a deathbed statement. He didn’t kill his wife and son.”

“What?” Nearlina asked. “You thought he did?”

“I thought he did not,” Raff replied, “but I did have to find him one way or the other.” He explained what had brought the wayfarers to Skethit.

“I could have told you he could never have killed his own family,” Nearlina told them. “Do you know why he died? He was clear of the initial cave in, but when he saw the roof coming down over one of the other miners, Peter Bridger rushed in and pulled his companion away from danger only to be crushed by the falling beam himself. He loved everyone, but most especially his family. Anyone who knew him could have told you that.”

“Some who did know him in Sotz Marnas suspected he did,” Raff pointed out. “We encountered a fair amount of anti-human sentiment there.”

“Stupid provincials,” Nearlina almost spat. “Ignorant and superstitious.”

“How long have you been here on the Western Continent?” Raff asked her.

“About twelve years,” Nearlina admitted.

“There have been changes back home,” Raff remarked. “Change is life.”

“And Life is change,” Nearlina replied automatically. It was a religious response. “What sort of change?”

“Have you heard about the new permanent Council of Elders that meets in Yakrut?” Raff asked.

“I’ve heard that most elders send their representatives,” Nearlina replied. “My brother wrote to me about it. It does not sound all that different in our home town, though.”

“The change has not gotten down to that level yet, I think,” Raff told her, “but there is a lot of prejudice against humans. It is feared the wastes from our towns and cities is affecting the Wild, making it less Wild or more stable. It’s true that some wastes, especially in the air and water, are getting into the Wild and hurting Kenlienta.”

“No worse than the smoke from coal fires, I’ll bet,” Nearlina told him, unconsciously looking over her shoulder at the mine.

“Probably not,” Raff agreed, “but you don’t really want to breathe that either. Wastes from

Kenlientan activities are getting into the stabilities as well, making them a bit less stable, or so the scientists tell me. So far it takes a scientist to measure most of the changes that way, but the emotions of young Kenlienta are somewhat more volatile than those of their elders. There have been attacks on human settlements and wayfarer parties. The problem was worse before the Leraxa's new government was formed in Yakrut, but there are still incidents and I think they may be getting more frequent again. Most Kenlienta have never met humans, you know, and it is easy to blame someone you don't really know for your problems."

"That is true," Nearlina admitted, "but it is still wrong, but what can I do about that? I am here and they are there."

"I did not say there was anything you could do," Raff pointed out. "Prejudice of any sort is hard to stop. It is not an immediate concern in any case. In the morning, we're going to need to go through Bridger's effects."

"Why?" Nearlina asked.

"He may not have killed his wife and son, but he was our only suspect," Raff explained. "Now we're back to the beginning and need to find clues. Since Bridger did not kill them, I feel I owe it to him to find out who did. He kept a journal of his business expenses and experiences. I read an old volume of it. If he had a newer one with him, it might go a way toward pointing toward the real killer."

"Very well," Nearlina agreed, "but not until after the funerals. We bury our dead almost immediately so we will honor them in the morning."

Sleep was a long time coming to Raff that night, so leaving Em snoring softly on their bed; he went for a walk around Skethit. "Going somewhere?" Kaz asked softly from a nearby shadow.

"Couldn't you sleep either?" Raff asked.

"I did sleep," Kaz told him. "For a couple hours anyway. I've only been sitting out here for a few minutes. Where are you going?"

"For a walk," Raff replied. "Want to join me?"

"Sure," Kaz nodded and got up. "We're not going to Bridger's place, are we?"

"I don't even know where he was staying," Raff replied. "Besides, I promised Elder Nearlina I would wait until after the funerals."

"Just making sure," Kaz replied. "It wouldn't have seemed right. So where to?"

"Just around, Kaz," Raff told him. "We've been here a few days, you know, but we haven't had the time to actually see the town, have we?"

"No, I suppose not," Kaz agreed.

They walked wordlessly through the cobblestone paved streets of Skethit, their footsteps echoing off the nearby buildings, but the town was not completely silent. Even at this pre-dawn hour the sounds of profound sadness and mourning came from many homes, pouring out through the cracks along with pale lantern light. It seemed Raff and Kaz were not the only ones awake.

They reached the edge of the settlement then turned around and started walking back. On their way, they found a Kenlienta woman sitting quietly beside a fountain. When she looked up to see who was there, Raff and Kaz could see the tears running down her face in the dim light.

“I’m so sorry,” Raff told her gently, stopping to sit beside her.

“No, Raufanax,” she replied. “Thank you. My husband died, yes, but you saved five of our people.”

“That can’t be of much comfort at a time like this, however,” he replied.

“Do you think I would want my friends to suffer just because I have?” she asked him quietly. “It is terrible to lose family, but it happens to us all in time. You have prevented it from happening to five families, Raufanax. You could not save everyone during the plague either, but you did save all of us you could. All living Kenlienta owe their lives to you, so I say, ‘Thank you,’ for that and for the five lives you saved this night.”

“What is your name?” Raff asked. Strictly speaking, it was not a polite question between humans and Ken. A Kenlienta would give his or her name if he or she pleased, but wayfarers were trained not to ask, usually.

“I am Falaxa, Raufanax,” she replied, and added, “My husband was Garanx.”

“I will remember you, Falaxa,” he promised. “You’ve reminded me that while I should learn from my failures, it is just as important to learn from and rejoice in my successes. I forget that sometimes.”

“You should not, Raufanax,” Falaxa told him. She smiled a little then. “You look like you haven’t slept.”

Raff grinned back at her. “So do you,” he replied. “I think maybe I can sleep now, though.

“So can I,” Falaxa replied quietly.

Four

The funerals began two hours before noon the next morning. Nearlina conducted a mass service for all the victims in the center of Skethit. Raff was able to help her with some of the words when she faltered

and fumbled.

“You are allowed to use a book, you know,” he whispered to her at one point. “Memorization is not required.”

“I left my prayer book at home,” she admitted. “It is not an elder’s book anyway. Not all the prayers are in it. I’m doing this badly, I know.”

“You’re doing fine, Elder,” Raff told her, stressing the title. “Look at your people.”

Nearlina lifted her eyes to look at the people of Skethit for the first time since she had begun the service and saw reverence and love shining back at her. All the people of the small town were present, not just those related to the miners who had died. It was a time of healing for everyone. They had all lost a family member or a friend. It was a small community; everyone knew each other and they had all come to take what comfort they could from the woman they had tacitly chosen as their elder. The emotional shock of the realization was nearly too much, but Raff put his arm comfortingly around Nearlina’s shoulders and she drew strength from the gesture and went on to recite the next prayer.

The service had no eulogies, such memorials were performed at graveside, so after the prayers, the people lifted their dead in their caskets and began the long procession to the small cemetery just outside of Skethit. They were only halfway there when a child, maybe nine or ten years old, suddenly ran from the long line of people and into a nearby garden. He drew a short knife and cut off a length of a vine with two bright red and yellow flowers.

Seeing him cut the plant, Nearlina thought he was making an offering to bury with one of the bodies, so she was mystified when he suddenly ran up to her and held it out. “You’re supposed to have a living plant,” he told her with the serious faith of youth. All Kenlienta elders carried or in some cases wore plants they kept alive through magic. It was the mark of an elder’s rank, in fact. Many chose to use a staff cut from a favorite tree and kept alive with a few green leaves. On the tropical Southern Continent, Elder Nienta preferred to keep an orchid entwined about her arm.

Nearlina looked first at Raff and then at the people of Skethit. Several nodded encouragingly and Emblem whispered, “Go ahead.” Hesitantly, as though she was doing something absolutely forbidden, Nearlina made a circlet of the vine and placed it lightly on her head. Then she closed her eyes for a moment and the circlet grew. It did not need to grow very much, but she encouraged it to put out short branches, which burst into flower, making it look like a full wreath of flowers that had been braided into her hair.

Polite applause greeted the act and Raff commented, “Not bad.”

“The trick,” Nearlina admitted as they started proceeding once again, “is to be able to keep it alive while I sleep.”

“Use a tray of water,” Raff advised. “That’s part of how it is done, you know.”

“It is?” Nearlina asked.

“Oh, yes. Even a living staff needs water,” Raff told her, “If you watch carefully, you’ll see elders intentionally dipping the feet of their staves in any random puddle they walk near. Of course, if you choose to keep using that wreath as your sign of office, you’ll either have to get your head wet occasionally or find a way to spray mist on it.”

“I’m going to get into so much trouble,” Nearlina fretted.

“I doubt that,” Em told her. “Elders are always chosen by their people. They are only ratified by the Council of Elders and actually you don’t have a regional council to report to, so there’s no one to reprimand you, even if that was appropriate, which it is not. These people have chosen you and you have finally accepted the responsibility.”

“I’ve had the responsibility for years now,” Nearlina replied.

“Yes,” Em agreed, “but now you have done so openly and in public.”

“Good timing too,” Raff told her. “It will be remembered as part of the town’s healing process. You have made a sad day one to remember with joy. Now that’s truly the magic of an elder.”

Nearlina behaved far more confidently at the sides of the graves where she recited still more prayers and spoke briefly about each of the lost. Then as she finished the services at one grave and moved on to the next, Ken closely related to the deceased would fill in the graves before rejoining the rest of the town in its mourning. One of the dead had died without any kin in the area and Nearlina filled the grave in using magic to cause the dirt that had been piled up beside the open hole to fall back in.

Finally, they reached the grave that had been prepared for Peter Bridger. “Peter Bridger,” Nearlina told the townsfolk, “was more than just a visitor among us. While he has only been here a few times in the last five years and stayed here briefly each time, he was always a part of our community. He worked with us, laughed with us, shared stories of his family with us.” Nearlina looked as though she was about to mention the deaths of Bridger’s wife and son, but then decided to leave that for another time. “He was one of us and he will be missed as though he had been here from the founding of Skethit. Raufanax, are there any special observances from Peter Bridger’s human religion we might honor him with?”

“There are some customary prayers,” Raff replied and he recited the burial service of the Church of the Green Lands with practiced ease. It was nearly identical to that of the Church of Meni and he had been obligated to perform both rites from time to time while in the Wild. Wayfarers were often called on to perform religious services and had to be well-versed in the religions of all those in their care. When he was done, the four wayfarers took the place of Bridger’s family and filled in his grave.

The sun was just setting as the townsfolk of Skethit left the cemetery and walked slowly back to their homes.

“Do you want to look at Peter Bridger’s belongings now, Raufanax?” Nearlina asked as they drew close to her home.

“It can wait until tomorrow morning, Elder,” Raff replied.

“I’m not used to that yet,” Nearlina admitted, opening the door, “but I asked, because I had his things brought here.”

“Oh,” Raff replied, “well if they are here anyway, I suppose we can have a look.”

“And Chanya and I will make something for dinner,” Emblem announced.

“Emblem Cawlens,” Nearlina objected, “you are guests in my home.”

“And an elder is supposed to have a grand celebration when they first accept the position,” Em replied. “The least I can do is see to it that you do not have to cook your own feast. Kaz, why don’t you help us?”

“But...” Kaz began, obviously more interested in reading Bridger’s journal. “Oh, all right,” he concluded reluctantly.

Bridger had not carried much with him to Skethit, just what he could hold on his back. Unlike the wayfarers, he had walked, not ridden, to Skethit from the nearest human town. “I wonder what he may have left in New Ebor,” Raff mused, and then a few minutes later decided, “not much. He left a wagon and horses in Hedley. I’ll have to see if there are any clues there, but I doubt it.”

Still later, Raff, after reading through both Bridger’s business journal and a personal diary, had gained a far better understanding of Bridger and his wife. “They started out as petty thieves,” he told the others. “They were probably only moderately talented wayfarers and Bridger was self trained. He evidently showed Sarah what he had learned and together they used their abilities to commit a series of thefts in the City of Ebor. According to the diary, after Sarah was nearly caught, they worried that the Guild might come after them. Probably not,” Raff added as an aside, “unless someone had come to us with a complaint, but from this, I don’t think they really understood the Guild and what it does.

“Anyway,” he continued, “they left Ebor with the intention of finding a Kenlienta town to hide out in. I don’t know why they chose a Ken town, rather than following a path to another city, though.”

“They thought the Guild was looking for them,” Kaz remarked, “and the Guild has offices everywhere.”

“Maybe that’s it,” Raff agreed. “So they eventually made their way north to Marnas Nokit and, on realizing they had a chance at a fresh beginning, chose to settle in Sotz Marnas. They stayed in Sotz Marnas for over a year, but when the money they had from selling various human goods to their fellow townsfolk started to run out, Bridger started taking Kenlienta goods out to human cities. He made a few quick trips to places like Ebor and Taundon, but soon realized there would be even more demand for them in Varana and he could buy uniquely crafted items here cheaper than in the Green Lands. So he established two regular trade routes in Varana and traveled once each year to one or the other, and some years went to both. So he set up a nice little business for himself and his wife and among the Ken they could afford to be model citizens.”

“What sorts of things did he trade in?” Em asked.

“He tried just about everything,” Raff replied, “and had his best luck with jewelry and silverware. The interesting thing is that he did try to sell human-made muskets and rifles, but it seems that of all the Ken he knew, only Oronoxis was interested in buying human weapons.”

“Who is Oronoxis?” Kaz asked.

“That’s what I want to know,” Raff replied, “and I think we’re going to have to go back to Marnas Nokit to find out.

Lonport

One

“What the bloody hell is this?” Raff demanded holding up a small pamphlet.

“A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Lonport,” Master William Craftor read the title aloud.

“I can read that for myself, Bill,” Raff grumbled. Their ship had a two day lay-over in Bonford and the wayfarers had taken the opportunity to revisit the Guildhall there. “How long has this been in circulation?”

“That copy arrived here just after you left,” Bill told him. “Sounds like someone may be trying to influence potential jurors.”

“No,” Raff disagreed, “it sounds like someone *is* influencing potential jurors.”

“There are laws against that, you know,” Bill commented dryly.

“No kidding,” Raff growled, “I don’t see anyone taking the credit for this fine bit of journalism, however, and I’ll give you any odds that no one is going to admit they know where it came from. Damn! This trial was already going to be hard enough to keep fair, now it’s going to be nigh-on impossible.”

“The Guild Council will be pleased, I’m sure,” Bill remarked.

“The Guild Council had damned well better hope I can pull this off,” Raff told him. “Those idiots think they threw me overboard, but if this blows up in our faces, they’ll be treading water right next to me. They’re just too short-sighted to notice.”

“They want to move the Central Guildhall to Carais anyway,” Bill replied. “I’m sure the Cracians will welcome them with open arms.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that either,” Raff disagreed. “Crace likes the Guild so long as we do our jobs and stay out of the local politics. I suspect King Charles would lose his royal fondness for us if the Guild Council started playing the same games they have with Parliament. But that’s neither here nor there. The vote to move did not pass, but this damnable piece of paper has probably spread all over Varana by now.”

"I would be very disappointed in the efficiency of our packet ships if it had not," Bill told him with a laugh.

"Thank you so much," Raff told him sourly.

"Raff, it could be a lot worse," Bill laughed again.

"Oh?" Raff asked. "Have the Comitati Vigilantes decided to move north? Any news on them, by the way?"

"Oh yes. The Royal Governors of Julia and Kensing have both declared them outlaw and have ordered them disbanded," Bill replied. "The militia and the Royal Army have been ordered to hunt them down and put a stop to their activities."

"I'll bet that won't be the end of it," Raff commented. "The back country of Julia is pretty rough land and they'll know it far better than the army."

"What about the militia?" Bill asked. "Most of them were recruited back there as well."

"And likely have brothers and cousins in the Comitati Vigilantes,"

Raff replied. "My guess is the colonial militias will march back and forth ostentatiously, but somehow never quite find them."

"I wouldn't take that bet then," Bill decided. "You're likely correct. So what are you going to do about the propaganda?"

"The pamphlet?" Raff asked. "I don't see that there's anything I can do. I was already planning to run a fair trial. I'll just have to go ahead and hope I can contain the damage."

"And if you find out who published that thing?" Bill asked.

"I'll lock him up and throw away the key," Raff replied.

The trip to Lonport was smooth and, with a strong following wind, the ship arrived in the port a day ahead of schedule, allowing the wayfarers a chance to relax, although Emblem had a shopping trip in mind.

"Our clothes have gotten badly worn, Raff," she told him.

"I don't need new clothing in court, Em," Raff insisted. "I'll be wearing a robe and a powdered wig."

"You didn't at the pre-trial hearing," she pointed out.

"That was an informal hearing," Raff replied. "Even so, I should have, but I was in too much of a hurry to get out of town if you recall. Now I'll take all the time I need to keep this case running to the satisfaction of everyone."

"Then you'll need to buy a robe and a wig," Em told him practically. "And you will buy fresh clothing. I will not have you wandering the streets looking like a beggar."

“My clothes aren’t all that bad,” Raff denied. “Anyway I can borrow a robe from the Guildhall and there are always wigs available in the courthouse.”

Em wrinkled her nose at the thought. “You don’t know whose heads those things have been on.”

“I think that’s why they’re powdered,” Raff remarked.

“The powder is to make them perfectly white,” Em told him, “and it’s made of starch. Really! A man in your position is expected to wear those things on all formal occasions.”

“When was the last time you saw me wearing a wig?” Raff asked pointedly.

“Most gentlemen wouldn’t be caught dead without proper evening dress,” Em told him.

“Wayfarers are the constant exception,” Raff replied. “You’ve known that for years. Besides we don’t normally spend much time at evening parties where such things are required.”

“I know, but you really should try to dress more appropriately to your station, especially when you are serving as Her Majesty’s high justice. You know I never ask you to do that for yourself or even for me,” Em insisted. “But you are representing Queen Julia, you know.”

“Well, yes,” Raff gave up. “Alright, we’ll spend the day shopping if it makes you happy.”

“Good, because I already sent Kaz and Chanya out for new clothing,” Em informed him.

“You’ve forgiven them, then?” Raff asked.

“I think they need a chance to prove they’ve learned from their mistakes,” Em replied. Raff nodded and they left the Guildhall.

Summer temperatures in Lonport could be brutal and this day was the hottest of the season so far. Raff dreaded the ordeal of trying on clothes until Em would express her approval. He already knew she found the conservatively simple styles that prevailed in Lonport to be boring and gauche. Part of that bias, he knew came from her upbringing in southeastern Crace, one of the leading fashion centers on the Northern Continent. Her childhood home had started innumerable fashion trends and she tried to keep up with them even now when she had to wear sturdy travel clothes most of the time.

She had long since given up on getting Raff to wear some of the more advanced men’s fashions. He hated lace, perfume and any sort of clothing that hampered his movement, preferring simple lines, regular bathing and outfits that only included jackets when the weather demanded it. “I’m a fourth generation wayfarer,” he’d tried to explain once years earlier. “It’s natural I should dress like a tradesman. I am a tradesman.”

This time, he had to admit privately that she was right. As a high justice, it would be inappropriate for him to wear a simple shirt and trousers, although on a day like this the thought of wearing nothing underneath the judges’ robe appealed to him greatly. He absolutely detested the powdered wigs, but they were actually required by the laws of the Green Lands. To intentionally not wear one as the judge, could well invalidate the trial.

Gritting his teeth, he picked out a clothing shop where the samples in the windows did not seem too

ornate and started to open the door. "Good choice, dear," Em told him. "I'll be next door when you're done."

Raff entered the small shop and noticed that while the air was still hot inside, there was a cross breeze blowing through that made the place bearable. "May I help you, sir?" the shopkeeper, a short, middle aged man wearing the simple style of dress shirt common in Lonport and the other northern cities, dark trousers that only reached a few inches below his knees and long stockings that covered the rest of his legs down to his black leather shoes.

"I'm looking for a nice formal suit, but a simple one," Raff explained. "One similar to the one in your window would be perfect, I think."

"Very good, sir," the tailor replied. "If you'd like to choose the cloth, I could make one for you within the week or I could alter one from the rack and have it ready later this afternoon."

"The latter, I think," Raff replied. "I'm going to need it tomorrow. But I suppose it might be a good idea to have a second and that can certainly wait a week."

The tailor nodded politely and together they chose a cloth and then found a jacket that mostly fit, save for the length of the sleeves. The little man made some marks on the sleeve and carefully pinned each one, then helped Raff out of it. "This will do. Now you'll need to try on the trousers, sir."

"Oh, I'll need two or three shirts too," Raff added. "I prefer mine a bit on the loose side."

The man nodded, cocked his head to one side thoughtfully, then removed a shirt from its hanger and handed it to Raff. "Why don't you use the dressing room, sir, and I'll finish the measurements when you return."

Raff changed quickly, noticing the shirt fit him well without modifications, but it had no cuffs. They would be added when the tailor was certain the arms were the right length. At first Raff thought that was a bother, most shirts he had bought like this were finished, but he decided that the tailor was obviously a perfectionist and wanted all his customers in properly fitting clothing.

He left the dressing room to discover another gentleman had entered the store as well. "Good morning, Mister Baker," Raff greeted the prosecutor. "Are you buying new clothes for the trial as well?"

"Your honor," Baker replied politely, and then sighed. "My wife thought it would be a good idea."

"There's a lot of that going around," Raff smiled.

"If you don't mind my saying it," Baker commented, "I would have expected to find you in one of the fancier shops."

"I'm a simple man, Mister Baker," Raff replied. "I am not comfortable in lace or the cuts of clothing the nobility prefer."

"We share that much in common then," Baker replied. "Still, how is it that a high justice appointed directly by the queen is not a nobleman?"

"I'm a wayfarer. I thought you knew that," Raff replied. "When you requested a new judge, Her Majesty went to the Guild."

"That is quite unexpected," Baker admitted suspiciously. "The Guild of Wayfarers is usually the court of final appeal. Was this some sort of ploy on Her Majesty's part?"

"I doubt it," Raff replied. "Her father probably would have thought along those lines, but the queen is young and idealistic and from what I could tell, she chose to come to the Guild because of our reputation for fairness and neutrality. Did the procedure for summoning jurors meet with your approval, by the way?"

"It was a new experience, sir," Baker replied. "I was surprised at how quickly that part of it went. Also it was the first time Mister Prescott and I have worked together without the usual wrangling between opposing attorneys. There was not anything to argue about, since we really did not know most of the names before us."

"I didn't think there would be," Raff replied. "All the arguments on those lines should come today during the selection process. So you and Mister Prescott have worked together before?"

"Together is not the right word for it, sir," Baker replied, "but we know each other. The legal community in Lonport is not a large one. We all know each other. Mister Prescott and myself have debated in court often enough in the past. Last time, I was prosecuting and he was defending."

"What about that pamphlet that's been circulating?" Raff asked. "Do you know anything about it?"

"I know it's going to make my job incredibly more difficult," Baker admitted, "but it was ultimately the fault of Lieutenant Mifflin. He never should have granted that interview."

"What interview is that?" Raff asked.

"Not too long after the indictments, a reporter for the Gazette in Taundon interviewed Mifflin because he was the commanding officer involved in the incident," Baker explained with a sigh. "He said some rather inflammatory things about the colonists of Varana. Doubtless he never thought his words would be published in Lonport, but the article was in our own local newspaper the day after your hearing and that sparked the author of that pamphlet."

"What ever possessed him to talk to a newspaper?" Raff wondered.

"Vanity, perhaps," Baker shrugged. "Arrogance, maybe. Fearlessness, definitely. He was not yet my client and by the time he came to me the damage had already been done. Until I explained the full situation to him, he honestly thought the whole matter would be quickly forgotten."

"This was the second such incident, was it not?" Raff asked.

"More than that if you count the ones in which blows were struck instead of shots," Baker remarked.

"I see," Raff nodded. "It was not that bad the last time I was here. There was no Brotherhood of Freedom at the time and no Freedom Poles to incite the troops."

"The troops arrived incited, sir," Baker replied. "The troubles began when Parliament passed the Paper Act five years ago. It was repealed a year later but on the same day they passed the Act of Declaration in which they arrogantly claimed to have the right to bind us to their laws."

“They are Her Majesty’s government,” Raff pointed out.

“But not ours, sir,” Baker asserted. “You are allowed to vote for a member of the Commons to represent you. We are not. If a tax is enacted that you feel is unfair you can tell your Member of Parliament why it is unfair and possibly have him work on your behalf. We have no such recourse, sir. We are subject to Her Majesty, sir, but not her Parliament. That is why we have colonial governors and legislatures, or we did until the current governor disbanded our legislature in Bournset Bay.

“Since the Act of Declaration, Parliament has enacted a series of taxes against Her Majesty’s colonies in Varana, one of the worst of which was the Revised Customs and Revenue Act,” Baker continued. “That, it was felt, unduly regulated trade within the colonies and was severely detested here in Lonport.”

“I heard about that,” Raff admitted. “And when a ship, the Freedom, I believe, landed within the next year with a cargo of rum, the inspecting customs official was held hostage while the cargo was unloaded without payment of the required duties. That ship was seized, was it not, sir?”

“It was,” Baker agreed, “and when the population of Lonport grew angry over that, two regiments of Green Lands troops were sent in to invade and subjugate Lonport. That last has been intolerable and was utterly without precedent.”

“So has the situation here, but you sound like a Brother of Freedom, sir,” Raff noticed.

“I am a Brother of Freedom, sir,” Baker replied.

“And yet you are defending those soldiers?” Raff asked.

“It is a matter of honor, sir,” Baker replied stiffly. “Everyone, even Her Majesty’s green-coated bullies, deserves a fair trial.”

Two

“And he was the only local lawyer who would agree to defend them,” Master Longe told Raff that evening when he repeated the conversation. “The soldiers are not well-liked in Lonport, not even by those conservatives who are fiercely loyal to the queen. I am surprised, however, that Baker told you some of the things he did, though. It was almost as if he was arguing the prosecutor’s case.”

“What he says to me on the street or in a shop may have little resemblance to what he says to a jury starting tomorrow,” Raff replied.

“I think you’re going to have to keep an eye on him,” Emblem commented. “It seems to me that as a self-declared Brother of Freedom, Baker might have taken this job to ensure the men are convicted.”

“No, I think he’s honestly doing this out of his own ideals and a desire for a fair trial for everyone,” Raff disagreed.

“And he was asked to argue for the prosecution,” Longe told them. “Baker is one of the leading lawyers in Lonport.”

“That’s good to know, and yes he might have been the prosecutor,” Raff agreed. He explained to Emblem, “This isn’t Crace and we have no public prosecutors. A prosecuting attorney is hired by someone wanting to press charges against an alleged wrong-doer. Alternatively, and this happens more often, the prosecutor is the wronged party himself, but in this case the families of the victims pooled their money and eventually hired Mister Prescott. It is considered potentially quite tyrannical to have prosecutors hired full-time by the state. And, of course, since it is the norm in Crace, Green Landsmen are even more opposed to the practice. Mister Baker, on the other hand, while generally one of the highest priced lawyers in town, has taken up the defense for whatever his subjects can afford; a pittance compared to his usual fees, I understand. However, I could be wrong and I will be keeping an eye on both lawyers as a matter of fact. I’ll expect you and the kids to help out too.”

“Of course,” Em nodded. “We’re to serve as your staff.”

“Where are those two, anyway?” Raff asked.

“Upstairs,” Em replied. “I set them to studying the colonial laws of Bournset Bay. I know you have not had the time to adequately acquaint yourself with them, so we will be your memory for that. What one of us does not know the others ought to remember.”

“I know you’ve been teaching Chanya how to truth-tell,” Raff noted. “Have you explained to her it is not admissible evidence in a court of law?”

“I have,” Em nodded, “I also warned her not to do so even out of curiosity lest she do or say something that could invalidate the trial.”

“Good,” Raff decided. “Well, in spite of what you think, I have been hitting the law books off and on since we arrived and I will spend the rest of the evening reviewing what I know too.”

The jury selection took the rest of the week. While Raff admired the forthright honesty of the colonists of Varana in general, he was not particularly amused by the large numbers of potential jurors who arrived for the expressed purpose of convicting “those horrible murderers.” Finally, eighteen sober men who both attorneys agreed seemed to be unprejudiced were chosen and the trial could truly begin.

“The Colony Province of Bournset Bay,” Prescott began his opening argument, “enjoyed a happy and beneficial union with the Green Lands as recently as five years ago. Then Parliament chose to inflict us with the burdensome tax law known as the Paper Act requiring all printed materials to use a specially commissioned and watermarked paper sold, of course, by Her Majesty’s Ministry of Inland Revenue. All seemed to be corrected a year later when the Paper Act was repealed, but then Parliament chose to enact a series of taxes far more onerous than the happily departed Paper Act.

“And when the brave men of Lonport dared to resist such illegal acts and stand up for their rights,”

Precott continued, “no less than two regiments of Her Majesty’s Army were sent in to supposedly ‘quell the rebellion.’ What rebellion, I ask you? A few quiet protests, some individuals resisting the taxation as is their right, I would have you know. It is the right and duty of all free men to resist unfair and improperly enacted laws, since such laws are invalid in any case.

“The result,” Prescott told them, “is that the ships of honest businessmen have been seized, homes have been invaded and our port has been closed on several occasions. In short our industry has been stifled, cargos have spoiled and yet we are still required to pay the duties and taxes. It is a situation no honest man can bear, and when citizens of Bournset Bay dare to protest this treatment, they are harassed and attacked by Her Majesty’s soldiers.

“Early last spring,” he went on, “a small group of citizens chose to meet publically in the Commons of Lonport and discuss the ways and means of legally protesting the aforementioned treatment by the Crown and were attacked without provocation by Her Majesty’s troops, some of which are on trial here today. This began several days of similar treatment of our law-abiding citizens by the soldiery all of which culminated on that terrible night when Lieutenant Mifflin ordered his men to open fire on a small group of men engaged in peaceful and legal protest.

“In the coming days,” Prescott began to sum up, “I will demonstrate to the gentlemen of the jury how Lieutenant Mifflin and his men ruthlessly and with premeditation attacked and murdered seven men, all bravely standing up for their rights to a life free of tyranny.”

“I would thank my esteemed colleague of the prosecution for his history lesson,” John Baker began his opening statement. “It certainly saves me a lot of time. I must take note, however, that this is the first time I have heard that a vicious attack by a mob, armed with rocks, ice and clubs, against a single guard standing sentry duty outside the Customs House could be described as a ‘peaceful and lawful protest.’ Quite a remarkable characterization, I must say.

“That some seventeen men were shot and wounded, that dreadful and tragic night and that seven of them died of those wounds is a sad fact that cannot be denied,” Baker continued. “However, I shall demonstrate to you all that not only were the actions of Lieutenant Mifflin and his men not premeditated nor borne out of malice for the men they faced, but were, in fact, acts of self defense.”

From there Prescott began to call his first witness and the long, slow process of presenting testimony began. Prescott first spent several days, as his opening statements implied he would, establishing the history of events starting with the infamous Paper Act. His goal was to paint the laws as improper and invalid and to show the actions taken against them in a favorable light. In cross-examination, however, Baker repeatedly showed that while unpopular, the laws in question were still the laws and that citizens were obliged to obey even if they also chose to protest those laws.

It was not until the third week of the trial that Prescott finally got down to the specifics of the night in question.

“Are these trials always so slow and involved?” Kaz asked one evening. “They always seem more interesting when you read about them.”

“Most trials only take a few days,” Raff replied, “but this one is particularly complex and involved. As you have heard, there is a bit of a history that led up to the night of the shootings. Also we’re still on the testimony presented by witnesses for the prosecution. You may recall how one man claimed at first to have heard the lieutenant screaming, ‘By the Blood, kill the bastards! Kill them all!’ but on cross-examination he admitted that those might not have been his exact words and eventually even

retracted his testimony that it was Mifflin who said them.

“That’s all part of the trial process, of course,” Raff went on. “When his turn comes, Mister Baker will attempt to show that his clients not only did not intentionally kill anyone, but will try to make it sound like they were trying to shoot over the heads of the crowd and that the victims deliberately jumped into the line of fire or some such. It will then be up to the jury to decide which version is most accurate.”

“It’s called a jury of twelve, but you actually have eighteen men selected,” Chanya noted. “Shouldn’t you call it a jury of eighteen?”

“Six of the men are alternates,” Raff explained. “Some of the jury members could become sick or for some other reason be unable to continue serving before the trial is over. The law states there must be twelve jurors and if there are only eleven the trial is automatically invalid and must be started all over again. So eighteen are chosen. After the closing arguments, there will be a lottery and twelve from the pool will be chosen to actually deliberate, the others will be dismissed. That’s part of why we don’t want the trial to run on for too long. Very long trials have a habit of losing too many jurors to go on. It’s frustrating and can take months or years to convict or acquit the accused that way. I don’t really want to settle down in Varana, especially if my only job is to preside over this trial.”

“You were really annoyed by Mister Baker that first day of the trial, weren’t you?” Kaz asked.

“A blinding glimpse of the obvious,” Raff laughed. “I’m surprised you haven’t brought that up sooner.”

“I wasn’t sure if it was safe to do so yet,” Kaz admitted, “but I did enjoy your response when Mister Baker tried to get the case dismissed because that propaganda pamphlet ‘would make a fair trial impossible’ for his clients. I didn’t realize you could move the venue to another country, though.”

“Well, I probably couldn’t, although there is precedence within Guild history of doing so. I guess the question would have been whether this was a Guild-run trial or a colonial one being presided over by a Guild member. Normally, I would consider it the latter, but I figured it would quiet him down a bit by threatening to move the case to Carais where at least the jurors would have probably not heard of the incident yet.”

“No, the best part was when Baker protested that would make them unduly prejudiced against any Green Landsman,” Kaz laughed, “and you told him, ‘Fine. Then I’ll move this whole show to Nillon. I doubt any juror there has even seen a Green Landsman before.’ I kept waiting for him to call your bluff.”

“What makes you think I was bluffing?” Raff asked.

“You’ve had me reading the regulations, remember?” Kaz replied. “I especially studied the parts regarding wayfarer-run trials, so I know that while you can move the location of the trial, assuming this really is the court of a wayfarer as you said, it may only be somewhere there is a Guildhall. The Guild does not do business in Nillon.”

“There are Dix and Pangamese trading colonies there, you know,” Raff pointed out.

“I knew you were going to say that,” Kaz laughed, “so I looked it up. Neither has a Guildhall.”

“Really?” Raff asked.

“Really,” Kaz told him. “Wayfarers guide ships there, and the Nillonese restrict how many may go there, but the traders are not allowed to leave the trading colony and there are never more than two wayfarers there at a time, sometimes not even that many. No need for a hall there.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have moved the trial out of Varana in any case,” Raff admitted, “I was just trying to give him something to think about. Actually, I’m more worried about Prescott. So far he’s just gone along with any of my decisions quietly. I think he’s just waiting for something.”

“Why should he object?” Kaz asked. “So far everything is going his way. All the witnesses are his and he’s having no trouble making it sound like the blood is still dripping from the soldiers’ fangs.”

“I don’t blame Mister Baker for objecting so much,” Chanya added. “He’s trying to defend those men and almost none of his attempts to face Mister Prescott’s charges have done much good.”

“That will change soon,” Raff told her. “Prescott is nearly out of witnesses and then Mister Baker will have his shot. There’s no surprise evidence, you know. Both lawyers are required to show each other what they’ve got. We know what they are going to present to the jury. The real question is who will be more believable.

“Also I think Baker has done a fair job of discrediting some of the worst of Prescott’s witnesses’ testimony,” Raff went on. “For one thing he has already cast some real doubts on whether Lieutenant Mifflin really gave the order to open fire.”

“Nearly all the witnesses heard the order,” Kaz recalled.

“True, but only two of them were willing to swear on the Holy Scriptures that it was the officer in charge who gave it,” Raff replied. “Any of the soldiers might have shouted it and frankly, one of the rioters might have as well, though I doubt that. My point is the Defense hasn’t really had a chance to present the story their way. Then just as that rosy picture is shining in the jury’s collective eyes, the Prosecution will begin their rebuttal. No, this trial is a long way from finished.”

Three

John Baker’s case changed the complexion of the trial drastically. While Prescott’s case lumped the soldiers together with their lieutenant, Baker started by defending Lieutenant Mifflin’s behavior and brought forth witnesses that testified they could clearly hear and see the officer but that he never ordered his troops to open fire. There was also testimony by his captain to the effect that no officer would have

given the order to fire from “charged bayonet,” with the soldiers’ musket held down around their hips and with the bayonets fixed. “And even if the order had been given, the men would have mostly fired together, not in scattered shots as has been described.”

By the time Baker had finished the lieutenant’s case, Raff doubted the jury would choose to convict him, even with the incendiary remarks he had made in the earlier interview. The case against the soldiers was not as clear cut, however.

Two of the soldiers involved had been in a scuffle with another mob of townsfolk just a few nights before the shooting incident, and several had told many of their comrades they were just looking for an excuse to shoot some of the “Troublemaking colonists.” However, the witnesses Baker brought forth emphasized the fact that the mob had been throwing rocks, ice and sticks at the soldiers and taunting them as though daring them to start shooting.

Gradually, the full story was pieced together. It seemed that on the night of the shooting a mob had started harassing a single guard outside the Customs House but as the taunts became more threatening, Lieutenant Mifflin had taken several soldiers out to the guard’s aid with the intention of quieting down the situation.

The mob was undoubtedly throwing rocks, ice and other objects at the soldiers so when one of the projectiles hit one of the soldiers on the head and caused him to fall to the ground one of his comrades fired his gun and shouted to the others to join him. In just a few minutes seven men were dead or dying and ten others seriously wounded.

Both lawyers delivered their closing summations at length and between the two of them filled an entire day so that Raff decided to wait until the next morning to deliver his instructions to the jury.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “it will be your job to determine the guilt or innocence of the ten men who have been on trial here these past weeks. You are instructed to consider the evidence against each man in turn. Keep in mind that the guilt of one does not determine the guilt of any of the others. Also while they are on trial here for premeditated murder it is possible you might find them guilty of manslaughter instead.

“Manslaughter differs from murder by our laws in that murder is the act of malicious and intentional homicide whether planned in advance or merely done on the spur of the moment. Manslaughter involves the unlawful death of a person, but one that in which premeditation or malicious intent cannot be proven.

“You might also find that the actions of one or more of the accused were justified and entirely lawful,” Raff told them. “That is the decision you were chosen to make. I will remind you all that the burden of proof is on the side of the Prosecution. Further, that proof must be beyond doubt. You must be absolutely certain the accused is guilty and if you find there is a reasonable doubt that one or more may not be guilty of the crimes of which they are accused you must find them not guilty,

“This is also why you must consider each man’s case apart from the others. Each man reacts differently in a given situation and on the night in question each of these men behaved as their own reactions dictated.

“Now, it is also important to remember that you must judge the evidence as it has been presented here in this court. Both sides have presented their cases and your job is to consider them both and decide which is the more accurate. You may have heard things, outside of this court that repudiate both versions. You must ignore that. You might feel you know what happened better than either and, that you must set

aside as well. You are only allowed to determine the results of this trial based on what was presented here.”

He went on to repeat what he had just said in detail and then described how he expected them to elect a foreman from among themselves, weigh the evidence as it had been presented and come to a decision. He stressed that any decision of guilt must be unanimous and explained why. He also explained the concept of a hung jury. Finally he concluded, “We are not going to rush you in this. Take as long as you need to be certain you have come to the correct answer.”

The jurors filed out of the room and Raff stepped back into the office he had been given. “Have some coffee,” Kaz offered. “You talked longer than either of the attorneys did.”

“I had water on the bench,” Raff remarked, “but you’re right that I didn’t really take much time to drink any of it.”

“Do you think they’ll reach a decision today?” Chanya asked.

“You never know,” Raff replied. “It’s a complex case and it ran for a very long time. Two or three days is actually normal, you know. But we had a lot to consider since the events were not isolated from everything else that was going on at the time and since. I’ll be very suspicious if they come to any conclusions in the next few minutes. Late this afternoon would be the earliest, but they could keep meeting for a week or two. Probably not, however. Most juries don’t take that long.”

“Most of these troubles came about because the troops were moved into Lonport, didn’t they?” Kaz asked.

“That seems to have been the spark that ignited this particular fire,” Raff admitted, “but the troops were sent here because there was already unrest in the city. Maybe there should have been less, or more. I can’t really say. Maybe Parliament should have responded more favorably to the concept of colonial representation or at least not been so eager to tax the colonists. That’s a matter of ‘What if?’ and we’ll never really know how things might have been different. I will say that the colonies of Varana, especially the ones we’ve visited, have developed their own unique personalities, much like independent states. I’ll be making recommendations of my own when we get back to Taundon.”

“Such as?” Emblem asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Raff admitted. “It seems to me that Varana needs to be made to feel it is part of the empire and not just a mine from which precious metals can be extracted to increase the treasury of the Green Lands. That might be part of the problem. Parliament has always treated Her Majesty’s colonies like possessions. In one sense perhaps they are, but the people who live there are Green Landsmen who do not have the same rights as other Green Landsmen. The issue of taxation is just the cause some have gathered around. It is relatively new, however. The Green Lands did not tax these colonies for the first century after they were established, but goods and money went back with the large mercantile companies whose funds helped to build these colonies and those companies paid taxes even if the colonists never felt the pinch. Now very few of those companies exist and a lot more money is staying on the Western Continent, which is why Parliament chooses to levy taxes. I feel there must be some middle ground, but I’m not sure where it is and to tell the truth, I doubt you’d get either side to agree to a settlement at the moment.”

“But wouldn’t that mean things will only get worse here?” Chanya asked.

“Not necessarily,” Raff told her. “There has to be some give and take from both the colonists and Parliament, though. Parliament is mired in its political squabbles and those who feel colonies are there to be exploited are the ones in charge. The colonists just want to be left alone, I think, but that is not likely to happen either.”

“But leaving the troops in Lonport is only going to upset the colonies more, isn’t it?” Kaz asked.

“It’s going to continue to upset Lonport more,” Raff replied. “And, of course anywhere the Freedom Poles have been raised, which is mostly in the northern half of Varana. I think your opinions might be different had we gone to Pacidelphia, for example. There are no troops stationed there, nor has the reaction to the taxes been as violent.”

“Why not?” Kaz asked.

“I don’t know,” Raff admitted. “Different people, for one thing. They came here for different reasons and goals and those goals may not have been as severely impacted. The difference might also be due to who has been the royal governor in each colony. The one here asked for the troops, the ones down there have not. Too many variables, Kaz, and I have only been here a few times. We’re wayfarers, you know, and we’re always just passing through. That’s our business. The business of the colonists is all right here though, and that makes the issues look different to them.”

Raff left word that he would be at lunch and then the Guildhall should the jury come out of deliberations. There was something he wanted to ask Master Longe. “So what’s the word on the street? Have I at least made the trials look fair?”

“The entire city is holding its breath,” Longe replied. “Did you know that Baker’s brother Henry was one of the leading Brothers of Freedom, by the way?”

“I didn’t even know he had a brother,” Raff replied. “I did know Baker was a Brother, though. He told me so himself. He’s an odd one, though. Idealistic to take on the defense of those soldiers to the best of his ability even though his loyalties lie elsewhere and in doing so he might well be ruining his own career.”

“Sounds more than a bit like you,” Longe commented.

“I wouldn’t mind being able to call him a friend,” Raff admitted. “The fact there are men here who can do what he has shows there’s hope we may yet bring peace back to Varana.”

“Well, Henry Baker is still screaming for the removal of all troops from Lonport,” Longe informed him, “but I don’t see that happening.”

“Not right away,” Raff agreed, “although I will recommend bringing life here back to normal and so long as there are two regiments occupying Lonport, nothing is going to be normal.”

“Actually it’s three regiments,” Longe corrected him. “After the initial invasion a third regiment has been brought in gradually and, of course there are more troops in the neighboring colonies as well. There was a standoff in a small town called Geselton in Cobbsland the other night. The army marched in and tried to tear down a large Freedom Pole and the colonists stood in their way.”

“I was there on our way south,” Raff told him. “Small town, but with a big pole. The colonists seemed quite proud of it. How many were hurt?”

“Just a few with bruises,” Longe replied. “They stood in a tight mass around their pole and the captain in charge chose the better part of valor and backed off first. It might easily have gone the other way, but nobody was throwing rocks at his men down there.”

“That would make a difference,” Raff nodded.

“So he sent a few men back the next night and they tore the pole down without all the fanfare,” Longe reported. “Now all of Cobbsland is infuriated.”

“So he avoided Mifflin’s mistake and made one of his own,” Raff sighed. “I guess there’s always room for a new error.”

“You’re lucky, Raff,” Longe told him. “You’ll be going home soon.”

“I still have to find out who killed Sarah Bridger and her son,” Raff reminded him. “So far all I know is that Peter Bridger did not. I’m dealing with too many deaths this summer. All I wanted was a few months off.”

“So take it this winter,” Longe suggested. “I hear the southern islands are very nice.”

“They are,” Raff agreed, “but I’ll settle for a snowy winter so long as I can have a bit of time away from anything even vaguely related to the Guild.”

“You won’t get it though,” Longe predicted. “You told me yourself that Leraxa is begging you to come to Yakrut.”

“That’s the way it sounded in the last packet,” Raff shrugged, “but even if I do, I still have to finish up in Marnas Nokit first.”

There was a knock on the door and Kaz stepped into the office, “Excuse me, Master Cawlens, but the jury is back.”

“Already?” Raff asked. “It’s only been three hours.”

“I’m just the messenger,” Kaz shrugged.

“A few years ago,” Raff told Longe, “I had to face off against one of the Ikkito masters from Nillon. He was very good and nearly killed me. Good times... good times.”

Longe laughed and waved him out of the office.

The courthouse was only one block away from the Guildhall so it was only a few minutes later before Raff, sitting behind the bench, once again, watched the jury march back out into the courtroom. “Has the Jury reached a verdict?” he asked ritualistically.

“We have, your honor,” the foreman replied, then went on to read off from a long list.

Four

“I don’t understand what this plea of clergy is,” Chanya admitted a few days later after the sentencing hearings were held.

“An ancient and outmoded and definitely badly abused law,” Raff admitted. “Okay there are three types of criminal offenses. There are minor offenses like petty larceny. The punishments for those are more meant to embarrass the offender than anything else. But then we have the two classifications of major offenses and they are divided between those that are clergyable and those that are not.

“The difference between those two is dependent on the individual,” Raff continued. “The ‘Benefit of Clergy’ originated when it was felt that clerics charged with capital offenses should be allowed to be tried before a court of the Church. The Church has never imposed the death penalty, so they knew that no matter what, they would not be killed for their crime. Since then, however, the definition of clergy has been changed to include anyone capable of reading and the Church’s courts no longer take such cases. For that matter, the ‘Benefit of Clergy’ is often extended to anyone regardless of whether or not they can read these days.

“Two centuries ago a defendant who pled his clergy might have been imprisoned for a year although even then that rarely happened. And defendants taking advantage of that plea but who were not clerics were supposedly supposed to be able to do so only once. That is why a person who had pled clergy is branded on the thumb. It shows he has already pled his clergy and cannot do so again. That too has gone by the wayside in recent decades and a man might plead his clergy two or three times, assuming he survives getting caught in the first place.

“Murder is not a clergyable offense but manslaughter – homicide without malicious intent – is,” Raff continued to lecture. “So the three soldiers who were found guilty had a choice. Plead ‘Benefit of Clergy,’ or face the hangman’s noose. Not much of a choice. Branding hurts, but death is forever.”

“You don’t approve of the plea of clergy though, do you?” Chanya asked.

“I don’t,” Raff admitted. “It had its place once, but not these days. Now that the trial is over I can admit that the three soldiers who were convicted were the worst sorts to have been in such a situation. Their comrades and Lieutenant Mifflin were men doing their jobs as best they could in a situation beyond their control, some of them may have panicked, it’s hard to say really.”

“I detected genuine remorse from them,” Emblem commented.

“I didn’t look,” Raff replied. “That would be wrong for a judge to even consider, but one does not have to be a wayfarer to see how people behave. Those three, however, were looking for an excuse to

kill people. They hated the colonists before they ever arrived here and should never have been allowed into the army. Perhaps they should have been allowed their courts martial. There would have been no plea of clergy for them there.”

“So that’s it?” Chanya asked. “Their thumbs are branded and they are allowed to go free?”

“Well, in practice they also face transportation,” Raff replied. “Had they been convicted in the Green Lands, they might have been exiled to Varana or Meldan, but given their opinion of the colonies and colonials, perhaps it’s best if they get themselves shipped home. I don’t wish them a comfortable voyage though and they will not get it. They’ll be kept in the ship’s brig for the entire journey and dishonorably discharged on their return home, so while they may have escaped hanging, I don’t think life is going to be a joy for a long time to come for them.

“Part of the problem is that the penalty for manslaughter is death,” Raff went on. “That doesn’t seem fair to me. An eye for an eye and a life for a life is simplistic. There are always extenuating circumstances. If the homicide is without malice, but maybe flogging or several years imprisonment is a fairer punishment, but the law is quite exacting about that. My only choice was to sentence them to hanging and Clergy was their only viable option.”

“I think the jury went easy on those three,” Kaz remarked. “It seems to me they found the soldiers guilty of manslaughter because the jurors did not want the guilt of their deaths on their own heads.”

“That happens and it’s called ‘pious perjury,’” Raff explained. “I’m certain at least one of those convicted had been looking for an excuse to kill since he arrived on these shores. The testimony proved it several times. I think we’d all call that a clear case of premeditated murder, but the jury chose to call it manslaughter because that is a clergyable offense whereas murder is not. They took pity on those soldiers, not something I might have expected considering how the colonists view the current occupation of Lonport. People will surprise you from time to time and in this case I’d rather they err on the side of mercy.”

The sentence of branding was carried out the next day by the court’s sergeant-at-arms under Raff’s supervision. It was not a duty Raff really had to be present for, but he attended feeling that if it was by his office the sentence was imposed, he should at least be around for the actual imposition. Raff felt sorely tempted to have a stiff drink afterward, but shoved that notion aside and left the courthouse with Kaz intent on merely a strong cup of tea or coffee.

“Master Cawls!” a man called from his left. Raff turned to see the portly John Baker rushing up to him. “I wanted to say, ‘Thank you,’ sir.”

“For what?” Raff asked.

“You ran a perfectly fair trial, sir,” Baker responded, “and under rather trying circumstances. No pun intended, I assure you.”

“Well, you’re welcome, I am sure, sir,” Raff responded a bit more stiffly than he felt.

“I know,” Baker continued a bit uncertainly, “that I have not exactly made your job easy for you.”

“You would not have been doing yours if you had,” Raff laughed for the first time in days. “Sir, you were the perfect defense attorney. If I should ever be so unfortunate as to need one, I can only hope to find someone half as good as you. Considering your political and philosophical leanings, your

accomplishment was even more impressive.”

“Not all my clients were acquitted,” Baker replied humbly.

“No, but you made the jury sympathetic enough to call it manslaughter,” Raff told him. “I’m not sure I would have in their place, but then I have my idealisms as well.”

“Would you be, perhaps, staying in Varana, sir?” Baker asked.

“No,” Raff shook his head, “I leave for Haristol on the morrow and have business to attend to in Hosinland.”

“That is a pity, sir,” Baker replied. “Varana needs men like you.”

Raff felt a warm rush of embarrassment at the compliment and replied, “As long as she has men like you, sir, I think she will do all right.” Then they shook hands and parted.

“Do the successful lawyers always thank the judges like that?” Kaz asked.

“Not hardly,” Raff replied, “and I especially did not expect it from Mister Baker.”

“Because he did give you such a hard time?” Kaz asked.

“No,” Raff shook his head. “It’s like I said, that was part of his job. But he’s a self-proclaimed Brother of Freedom and I am a Queen’s man or at least I was as Her Majesty’s High Justice. Actually I’m a wayfarer first and foremost, although as a born Green Landsman, I’ll probably always hold some loyalty to my country. But he and I are on opposite sides of an on-going conflict. It is hard to thank an enemy regardless of what he may have done.”

“You admire him, though?” Kaz asked.

“Yes, very much so,” Raff replied. “He hated those soldiers, Kaz, but his hate was nothing compared to his belief that all men have the right to a fair trial. To overcome his prejudices and still represent those soldiers as he did is remarkable indeed. And he is only in his mid-twenties, so I suspect he could have quite a career ahead of him. Oh, excuse me, sir!” Raff said suddenly having just bumped into a man going the other way, knocking him down. Deep in conversation, Raff had not been paying much attention to where he was going. The other man was dark-skinned and about Kaz’s height although much older and had been carrying a basket of groceries which he dropped and was now scrambling to pick back up again. His clothing was clean, but fairly well-worn and nearly ready to be used as rags. “Here, let me help you,” Raff offered offering his hand to help the man up.

“No, no, master . . . uh sir,” the dark man replied, quickly getting to his feet on his own. “It is all my fault.”

“Nonsense!” Raff told him as he and Kaz bent down and started picking up the various victuals. “My head was in the clouds and I wasn’t paying attention. The least I can do is help pick your things up. Oh, this bread won’t be any good,” he noted, lifting a loaf out of a puddle. I owe you for that at least.”

The man tried to protest as Raff reached into his pocket and drew out a silver shilling. It was almost as much as the whole basket had been worth, but Raff felt amends must be made and pressed the coin firmly into the man’s unwilling hands. Finally as though making a difficult decision, the man smiled and

said something in a language neither Raff nor Kaz had heard in years.

Kaz looked hard at the older man trying to figure out why he looked familiar. “What village are you from?” he asked in the same language, the Sarahní dialect of Teltoa.

The man’s eye widened and looked and returned the young man’s gaze with equal intensity. “I was Tranami Sahan of the village of Sarahn. You?”

“Kazani Basan!” Kaz announced himself. “I remember you! Your hut was on the far side of the village next to Shaman Borahni.”

“Kazani?” Tranami asked. “Little Kaz? I thought you were dead. I saw your family killed.”

“I nearly was, but I escaped into the Wild,” Kaz admitted. “This is Raff Cawlens. He adopted me and taught me how to be a wayfarer.”

“Wayfarer,” Tranami repeated in Grundish. “Like shaman, yes? We all knew you would be some day.”

“Did you?” Kaz asked. “I didn’t want to be.”

“It is not a matter of want or not want, Kazani,” Tranami told him. “It is a matter of what you are. You have always been shaman.”

“I suppose you are right,” Kaz admitted, nodding. “How did you get here?”

“Most of us were killed, you know,” Tranami replied.

“I know,” Kaz told him almost emotionlessly. “I saw the village die.”

Tranami nodded. “A few of us were captured and sold and sold again. We were put on ship and taken to Ralati, an island. There we were sold again in lots. That was last I saw of Gera, Molani, Calani and Frasa. I was taken to Kensing. Sold again.”

Kaz shot a meaningful glance at Raff. “I’ve heard rumors of that. It is not legal to import new slaves, but there is no real enforcement of the law in the southern islands and it is not illegal to bring slaves from there. We’ll report that. The Guild takes a very dim view of the slave trade in general and that is a part we specifically thought we had put a stop to. But there are no slaves in Bournset Bay. Did you come with your master?”

“No master,” Tralani replied, shaking his head. He looked around and told them in a whisper. “Ran.”

Raff nodded, but warned him. “Don’t tell that to anyone. You could be sent back.”

“Yes,” Tralani nodded. “I know. But I trust Kazani. Kazani trusts you. I trust you.”

“I won’t betray that trust,” Raff assured the Sarahní man, “but it was still a risk. There is always a bounty, a reward. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Tralani nodded. “I know bounty, but I have papers. No one knows.”

Raff looked around with all his senses, decided it was safe and asked. “Papers proving you are free? How?”

“There are people who help slaves escape,” Tralani told him. “They helped me.”

“Good to know,” Raff nodded. “I’ll ask no more.”

Kaz spoke to Tralani for another few minutes, and was assured that his old tribesman was well off, gainfully employed and as happy as one could be after going through everything he had. He was about to wish the man well, when he realized Raff had slipped away. A moment later, Raff returned with a loaf of crusty bread similar to the one that had been spoiled and pressed it on Tralani. “Fair’s fair,” Raff commented, slipping the bread into Tralani’s basket.

The Green Lands

One

“Master Cawlens, we thank you for your service, but we note your distaste for the Privilege of Clergy in your report,” Queen Julia told him when Raff, Em, Kaz and Chanya met with her in private. “We find it distressing that a man who served as our judicial representative in Varana should so disdain our laws.”

“I do not disdain the laws of the Green Lands in general, Your Majesty,” Raff explained, “but I am not happy about that one in specific. It had its place once when it was designed to give clerics the right to be tried directly by the Church, but the Church’s court no longer hears that sort of case. Also your Parliament redefined ‘Clergy’ first to mean anyone who could read and more recently anyone who thought to make a plea for the ‘Benefit of Clergy.’

“Where, I ask Your Majesty, is the sense of that?” Raff asked. “Anyone can commit a qualified offense, including manslaughter, plead ‘Clergy,’ and walk away free.”

“Should we then hang people for killing unintentionally, Master Cawlens?” the queen demanded.

“No, I think it is time we revised the penalties to make them fairer to all. Hanging is too extreme a penalty for manslaughter? I agree with that, but is disfiguring the culprit the proper penalty?”

“It would certainly make one unwilling to commit such a crime again,” Julia replied.

“Several years in gaol at hard labor might accomplish the same thing,” Raff countered, “and they might accomplish something of value to society at the same time. It might also cut down the number of times a jury resorts to pious perjury as well. Take, for example, a case in which a man is accused of stealing. If it is less than forty shillings the offense is clergyable. Forty or more is a killing offense. Why? It’s only money and hardly worth dying for.”

“Would you say that if you were destitute, sir?” Queen Julia inquired.

“Probably even more readily, Your Majesty,” Raff replied. “A man without money is also without food. When you get right down to it one equals the other. We only use money to buy luxuries when there’s enough left over after the necessities have been paid for. A hungry person steals food because he does not want to die. If he steals money it’s because he’s hungry and wants to buy that food. Without food he is dead so at that point he has nothing to lose. However, he doesn’t think it’s worth dying for. No, it’s worth living for.

“It is my opinion that it might just be time to abolish the Benefit of Clergy and revise your legal system,” Raff concluded.

“We shall consider the matter, Master Cawdens,” the queen promised him.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Raff replied. “Did you also happen to see my recommendation concerning the treatment of the Varanan colonies?”

“We did, sir,” Julia told him. “They too will be taken under advisement, especially your report on the illegal slave trade. Might we ask how you managed to discover slaves were still being transported from the Southern Continent? You were hardly in the port of entry you mention. Pacidelphia, was it?”

“It was, Your Majesty,” Raff agreed. “The discovery was quite accidental, I assure you and the gentleman I learned it from is hardly the issue, I should think. The fact is slaves are still being brought to the Southern Islands and from there into your colonies.”

“True enough,” she agreed. “We do not need to prove this beyond the shadow of a doubt, and we do claim those islands as part of our empire. A small, but well-planned expedition ought to be enough to disrupt that disgusting practice. It’s a shame we cannot bring an end to slavery in the colonies altogether.”

“Why can’t we, Your Majesty?” Kaz asked.

“Well, we could in theory, Apprentice Bassan,” the queen allowed, “but in practice it is a different matter altogether. We have tried to indicate our feelings on the subject to all our legislatures. Parliament, for example, was very quick to outlaw slavery here in the Green Lands as were our colonial legislatures in most of our colonies, but the southern Varanans have resisted our suggestions on that subject even while they protest their undying loyalty to us.

“We could take the extraordinary action of superceding those resisting legislators,” she continued, “but it would set an unpopular precedent that we are loath to establish. Our advisors assure me it would make rebellion in southern Varana even more certain than in the north and it is also probable that we

would face rebellion from Parliament as well. These are our governments and they govern our empire. We are obliged to allow them to do their jobs. If we were to step in and replace one without the direst cause it is likely we would find ourselves at odds with them all.”

“So you are as much subject to them as they are to you, Majesty?” Chanya asked.

“The duties and obligations, along with the privileges, go with the rank, Journeyman Sanai,” Queen Julia replied with a sigh. She was silent for a long moment, but then turned back to Raff, “Master Cawlens, We do not believe we have properly shown you our appreciation. You have done more for us than you may be aware of. Prime Minister Winn was hoping to use the incident in Lonport to increase his own standing and influence and thereby force certain concessions. He believed the Colony of Bournset Bay would go up in flames if this Lieutenant Mifflin and his men were found not guilty and that the loyal opposition party in Parliament would lose prestige if the soldiers were found guilty. He had plans to profit either way and get what he wanted from us, but your solution left him in a position where he had to applaud the results publically while privately cursing his bad luck. Bad luck for him, and good for us, we believe.”

“I doubt his machinations on that account were his only current plans, Your Majesty,” Raff replied.

“No, not at all,” Julia admitted. “There has been a game of push and pull between us since we ascended the throne. Sometimes we win, sometimes he does. This time we win in every way. Mister Winn gets no concessions from us and our colonies remain at peace. We shall consider how best to reward you all for your efforts, but for now, we fear, other business demands our attention.”

“Very well, Your Majesty,” Raff bowed and the others did likewise.

Kaz was the last to leave the room and at the door he turned back and asked with a touch of impudence, “I mean no offense, Your Majesty, but do you always speak so formally?”

She winked at him. “Not with my friends, Kaz.”

Two

Queen Julia was not the only one to whom Raff and the others had to report on their return to Taundon. Ignoring Guild regulations, they had gone almost directly to the palace, stopping at Raff’s and Emblem’s townhouse only long enough to change into appropriate clothing.

Changing back into less formal attire, although garb that was still finer and more delicate than anything they would have dared to wear while traveling, the wayfarers managed to arrive in Central Guildhall by mid afternoon to find a long list of people waiting for them.

“This looks like most of the Guild Council,” Raff remarked as his eyes slid past the small pile of notes he was given on checking in.

“Small, square and papery?” Em asked. “I haven’t noticed that before.”

“We could probably just save ourselves a lot of time and report to the whole Council at once. I wonder how long it would take to drag them into the meeting room,” Raff mused.

“They are in session right now, sir,” an intern of Chanya’s age, who had rushed up to offer help in the checking in process, volunteered. “But the session is closed. No one but Council members may enter. Not even to the observation seats in the balcony.”

“Hmm, sounds good to me,” Raff chuckled.

“Raff, you aren’t thinking of locking them in there, are you?” Em fretted.

“No,” Raff shook his head, “but I do like the way you think. I believe I’ve said that before.”

“Usually when I’ve thought up something particularly evil,” she noted. Kaz and Chanya snickered.

“Just so,” Raff joined the laughter. “No, all I had in mind was barging directly in. Several of these, including the one from the Guildmaster, instruct me to report immediately on receiving this summons. Harton of all people ought to know better than to give orders to a freelancer.”

“Sir,” the intern interrupted. “There are no freelancers anymore. The Guild Council removed that distinction almost a fortnight ago.”

“What?” Raff demanded. “No, I heard you. Explain it, though.”

“It was announced that within the Guild-serviced nations all wayfarers will be required to pay Guild licensing fees and subject to Guild orders. Anyone caught operating outside Guild auspices will be fined on the first two offenses and killed on the third,” he informed them.

“Someone’s just gotten a little too full of themselves,” Raff growled. “Any other new regulations over the last summer?”

“Quite a few,” the intern replied nervously at Raff’s sudden turn to anger. “Um, apprenticeships now last at least until graduation from an approved university, and a journeyman must serve at that rank for fifteen years before being considered for master rank.”

“Several of them wouldn’t qualify for master rank with that requirement,” Raff replied.

“Well, it was not made retroactive,” the intern admitted. “For masters, that is. I was a journeyman but am now an apprentice again.”

“Don’t count on it,” Raff told him, starting to walk toward the Council Chamber. “I’m going to have a little word with the Guild Council about it right now, among other things.”

“But the doors are sealed!” the intern reminded him, half-running to keep up with the others.

“A mere formality,” Em remarked as they continued to march purposefully.

None of them had been speaking softly and the word spread through the Central Guildhall quickly that something was up, so by the time Raff and the others reached the tall, dark wooden double doors, a large crowd of apprentices and journeymen were close behind, curious as to what this legendary wayfarer thought he could do.

There were two men clothed in what had been a wayfarer’s uniform two centuries previously. A Guildsman’s costume was an ornate affair with brightly striped leggings and equally bright yellow tunic over which a deep blue tabard was worn. The seal of the Guild of Wayfarers have been embroidered on the tabards in gold thread and the two men, who were the ceremonial guards of the Council Chamber, also held quarterstaves, which doubled as walking sticks and weapons in the Wild in the days before gunpowder had been invented, although a competent wayfarer needed neither.

“Stand aside, gentlemen,” Raff instructed them softly. “I’ve no quarrel with you.”

“Nay, Master Cawlens,” one of the guards replied. “We have been ordered to allow none to pass.”

“Nay?” Raff mused. “‘Allow none to pass?’ You sound like an old play. Perhaps this is, but you obviously have not read the script. I have been summoned to this hall and must present myself immediately to several of the men within. There was nothing in these summonses,” he held up the stack of notes, “about waiting until this session was over.”

Kaz privately doubted the memoranda could be considered official summonses, but decided it was as good a fiction to be going on with especially since both Em and Raff had gotten angry in concert. That didn’t happen often and they usually calmed each other down, but the sudden news of the Council’s changes to the regulations, he realized, was too much for either of them to tolerate. With that thought, he wondered how many wayfarers in the field would tolerate it as well. The field operatives were a different breed from those who rarely left the Central Guildhall.

“This is an extraordinary circumstance, sir,” the guard replied. He lowered his voice and added, “I understand our allies from the Ken Nation are within the Chamber.”

“Allies?” Raff asked. “We call the Ken our friends and enjoy a warm relationship with them, but to call them allies is to imply a common enemy. Who is this enemy we share with the Ken?”

“I, uh, do not know, sir,” the guard admitted, staring as Raff began to glow with the color of a hot blue flame. Beside him, Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens was glowing bright red. “Oh, and please get someone to clean up this mess.”

“What mess, sir?” the guard asked, puzzled.

Raff did not reply. Instead he merely pointed at the locked and sealed doors and willed them to disintegrate. Immediately, the substance that had been nearly three-inch thick slabs of oak fell to the floor as a pile of dust. Still glowing, Raff stepped through and into the Council Chamber with Em and their students directly behind them.

“I wonder if we should be glowing as well,” Kaz whispered to Chanya.

“What?” someone was asking indignantly from the far end of the chamber. “Who dares?”

“I don’t even know how,” Chanya admitted. As they entered there was an astonished buzz of voices all around them but as they proceeded forward the Guild Council grew gradually silent.

“Nothing to it really,” Kaz told her, still whispering. “Just draw in a lot of Wild energy and the more you have the brighter you glow.”

“How dare you interrupt these proceedings?” the man at the end of hall demanded.

“And the color?” Chanya asked.

“I’m here at your...” Raff began and paused. Then he dropped his voice several degrees and finished coldly, “orders.”

“The more intense, the further up the spectrum,” Kaz told her. “I think Raff’s the only one who can get it to blue. I can barely reach green myself. Red is most common, though you’ll notice Em’s is more orangey than most. Oh, and it is infernally hard to do within a stability.”

“Master Cawlens,” Guildmaster Harton greeted him coldly. “Master L’Oranne Cawlens, we usually rely on you to keep this one under control.”

“He is under control, Guildmaster,” Emblem replied calmly, “and I would advise you stop trying to use the royal ‘we.’”

Kaz and Chanya finally had a chance to look around the Chamber. It was not the first time they had seen the Guild Council in session. High above the deep, half bowl-shaped meeting room was a steeply sloped balcony where apprentices and journeymen were welcome to observe their masters at work during normal sessions and such attendance was mandatory at one time or other for all students. It was, however, the first time either of them had seen the chamber from the Council level.

The room was brightly lit by sunlight streaming in through the glass roof far above and by hundreds of oil lamps at each councilman’s desk. Those desks were perched on tiers in the semi-circular bowl which were set so that everyone would have a clear view of the presiding Guildmaster at the bottom.

Guildmaster Giles Harton had gotten to his feet in indignation as Raff and Em invaded the chamber, but sitting to one side of him were three master wayfarers, Raff knew well, including his former student, Michael Roarke. Roarke, had been an indifferent student at best, Raff had said on several occasions and his rise to and within the Guild Council was a matter of politics rather than ability.

On Harton’s other side sat three Kenlienta Elders. Even had they not carried batons of living wood as their mark of office, their status as elders would have been obvious, for only an accomplished elder had the ability to enter and survive within a human stability. They had no honor guards with them, however, leaving Raff to conclude they had left them at the edge of Taundon and were incapable of shielding others as Coraxis had done.

Remembering his promise to Coraxis, Raff recalled he did not really have time to waste here. “You wanted us to report? We’re here and we have other obligations that are more pressing so I think we should get on with it. It also seems that most of the masters in this room wanted a word with me. Gentlemen, I do not have the time to spend hours with each of you. What do you want to know?”

“Master Cawlens, you are hereby commanded to leave the Council Chamber,” Harton shouted at him. “Furthermore, you are all on indefinite leave of absence from the Guild and not allowed to leave this stability until you are called to answer for this interruption of our proceedings.”

“No.” Raff told him quietly.

“You will do as I say, sir!” Harton demanded.

“No,” Raff repeated. “You demanded a report and I am damned well going to shove it down your throat, sir, collect my fee from this Guild Council for my duties in Varana and then go on to complete the commission this Council approved of last spring when we were visited by Elder Coraxis.”

“You will retire to your home and await my summons, sir,” Harton told him, his voice chilling down. He was also starting to glow, a sickly greenish yellow.

“Or?” Raff asked.

“What?” Harton failed to follow Raff’s question.

“What do you propose to do if I disobey, sir?” Raff asked. “The fact is I am going to make my report. Right here and right now.”

Harton lost his temper completely at that point and attempted a “force-thrust” at Raff. The force-thrust was a technique by which a wayfarer, usually a master, could literally push Wild energy into an opponent, disrupting that person’s stability. Depending on the intensity of the thrust, the effect is most often fatal, although with finesse a master could merely incapacitate an opponent. Guildmaster Harton’s force-thrust was highly powered and not at all under humane control, but Raff did not physically react as he parried the thrust and added its energy to the glowing aura around him. The only visible effect was that the aura had deepened into the violet range.

“Sit down,” Raff growled, “and shut up, sir. I assure you that your next attempt at assassination will result in more humiliation than you ever thought possible.” With a gesture, he used a trace of Kenlentan magic to shove the Guildmaster back into his seat. “Does anyone else care to argue the matter?”

“Only members of this Council and its guests are allowed here at this time, Cawlens,” Master Roarke told him, showing more courage than sense.

“Point of order!” Master Pauls Forrent shouted from near the back of the hall. “I have documented proof that Master Raff Cawlens was never formally removed from this Council and therefore it is every bit his right to stand here today.”

“Oh hell, Pauls,” Raff sighed into the arguing wind of voices that arose at that news. “You know I didn’t want to wager that particular coin.” But he said it too softly for anyone but Em and their students to hear. “It does not matter, Mister Roarke. These demands superceded your closed session from the moment I received them.”

“Raufanax,” one of the Kenlenta elders stopped him. “You are interrupting an important deliberation. Perhaps you could give us another hour or two?”

It sounded like a reasonable request, but Raff was suspicious. “Who are you, Elder? And what

faction do you represent?"

"We are members of the Grand Council of Elders, Raufanax," the Elder replied, "and we are here in an attempt to restore order to the Ken Nation."

"That doesn't answer my questions," Raff noted, "but I will assume you are the same three who visited this Council last spring. Is that so?"

"That is so, Raufanax."

"Well, I'll discuss that matter with you when we are done here," Raff told him.

"You will?" Harton demanded.

"We'll get to that as well," Raff replied and proceeded to give a long verbal report describing the long trial in Lonport as well as an update on the case of the death of Sarah Bridger and her son. He told them about the continued slave trade route that passed through the southern islands and everything else he and the others had encountered while in Varana, including the rise of the Brotherhood of Freedom and the attempts by the Army of the Green Lands to suppress them.

While he was talking, Emblem reached into her pack and produced a written report that detailed even further everything that Raff was describing and Kaz and Chanya arranged for food and drink to be delivered to the Council Chamber when it became apparent they would be there deep into the night.

Throughout the process the Council members started making comments out loud as they usually did, mostly to cheer support to some items or shout "Shame" or "Boo" at others. Raff did not really care what their reactions were. The fact they were no longer silent meant they were starting to relax which would make what he had to do all the easier. At one point Raff looked upward and noticed that the balcony was now filled with spectators. It seemed as though the entire Guild in Taundon had turned out to see what was happening.

Finally, Raff summed up, "And that concludes my current contract with the Guild. Now we come to the matter of my fee."

"A bankdraught will be drawn up to whatever amount you desire," Harton told him coldly. "Now get out of here."

"I did not do this for money, Harton," Raff told him sternly. "I never said my fee would be in crowns."

"Then what do you want?"

"What I want is not what I'm going to get, I assure you," Raff retorted. "What I'm taking, sir, is your job."

"Outragious!" Harton exclaimed over the shouts for and against the notion from the rest of the Council.

"Impossible," Roarke laughed. "You have not been elected by this council."

"I have a document promising me anything," Raff replied. "It was signed by Master Harton and a

number of other masters, yourself included. That, sir, is my price. You sent me on a nearly impossible mission. You thought, in fact, that it was impossible and that I would return in disgrace. Well, not only did I return in good graces, sir, I have been commended for my actions by Her Majesty, proof positive that I did, indeed, succeed in my commission. The regulations clearly state that an extraordinary mission is deserving of extraordinary pay. By your own words, this mission was considered extraordinary and so the usual pay scale is out the window.”

“The rank of Guildmaster is not a coin to be handed over for the completion of any contract,” Roarke insisted.

“Very well, I will withdraw my demand conditionally,” Raff replied, smiling broadly. “Harton, you say I may collect any monetary amount I choose from the Guild?”

“We will pay whatever you ask, sir,” Harton growled. “And then all four of you will leave this Guild forever. Furthermore you are prohibited from using any wayfaring talents on pain of death nor will any wayfarer agree to transport you outside of this stability.”

“Done,” Raff agreed. “Everyone here is witness to that. Care to put it to a vote?” Harton agreed and the vote was overwhelmingly in favor.

“You damned fools,” Raff chortled. “You forgot to ask my price.”

“Too late now!” Pauls called from the back of the room.

“My price, gentlemen,” Raff replied, “is the sum total of the Guild’s current assets, plus every farthing of income for the next decade.”

“Payable within the next century,” Roarke added.

“Payable immediately, sir,” Raff told him. “All fees are to be paid immediately on completion of a contract. That is the regulation. You have no choice.”

“But that will bankrupt the Guild, sir,” Harton insisted.

“Yep and the moment you are unable to pay for so much as a slice of bread, the Guild will be defunct. And since you are incapable of paying me the entire fee, that time is now. But don’t worry, the Guild now effectively belongs to me and I have no intention of letting the organization die completely. The charters are one of those assets, I believe. At least we have always maintained they were, so they belong to me as well. About the only thing that passes by the wayside is the Book of Regulations... oh, and the Guild Council, of course. Gentlemen, do any of you want a job?”

Three

Reorganizing the Guild of Wayfarers was a monumental task. Raff knew it could not be accomplished overnight although by dawn he had made a number of decisions that would keep the Guild in operation until he had the time to enact still more substantial changes.

He had quickly announced that, for the time being, he would restore all regulations to the state they were in as of the time he had last left Taundon. "I have some major reservations about a lot of those," he told the former Council, "but we shall undertake to make improvements in a manner that will not disrupt our Guildsmen." He also decided that he would establish a new council and promptly named it, "The Congress of Wayfarers," "I want this Congress to include representation from the journeymen as well as the masters," he told them. "Pauls, choose a committee and start drafting a plan along those lines. We'll go over what you come up with on my return from Marnas Nokit, but one thing I want established from the start. No one is to be allowed to sit in Congress who does not spend at least four months out of every year guiding parties through the Wild. Most members of the Guild Council never left Taundon and gradually lost touch with the vast majority of the Guildsmen in the field. I don't want that to happen again."

"Would being stationed as master in another Guildhall count as work in the field?" Pauls asked.

"For now, I think so," Raff decided. "I'll consider it at least. Only a few masters here had remote postings. We'll also have to work out a rotating vote system so that members who are in the field during key votes get to make their voices heard before decisions are set in stone. Well, knock something together and we'll hash through it."

"And you'll force it on us when you're through?" Roarke demanded.

"Are you still here?" Raff asked whimsically. "Mister Roarke, keep in mind that the former Guild Council is currently working pro tempore. Who among you will be in the new Congress has yet to be determined, but the establishment of that Congress will be by our vote."

"Mister Roarke," Pauls added, "If I were you, I wouldn't be so quick to anger the new Guildmaster considering you are here by appointment, not election."

"Really?" Raff asked.

Pauls nodded, "At least a quarter of the Council members are shills appointed by Master Harton."

"Hmm, make a list of those names for me and their records of service both here and in the field," Raff told him. "If they were appointed they can be removed just as easily, but I have no intention of tossing anyone out who's been doing a good job just because he was appointed by my predecessor. For now, everyone stays in who wants to at least until the new Congress is ready for its inauguration."

"Not I, sir," Harton told him. "I will not be a party to the destruction of the Guild. You will have to dismantle it without my help."

“Dismantling is not what is happening here,” Raff told him. “But we have never been friends, sir and I shall not regret your departure. I offered you a chance to stay on. That, sir, is as far as my honor will go. Good day and good luck.”

“That’s not likely to be the last you hear of him,” Pauls told Raff as Harton left the hall.

“I’d be very surprised if it was,” Raff agreed.

“He’ll be causing you trouble for years,” Em opined.

“Yes, but he would have done so even if he had not left the Council,” Raff replied watching another dozen members leave just behind Harton. “Them too. Should I take that as their resignations?”

“Not my place to decide that,” Em replied. “I’m not on the Guild Council.”

“You are now,” Raff told her, grinning. “I can appoint members to the Council Pro Tem; in fact I suppose everyone who’s still here is an appointee, since I’ve abolished the old Council.”

“I don’t want to be a Councilwoman,” Em protested.

“And I don’t want to be Guildmaster,” Raff replied. “But you know I’m going to be coming to you for advice for as long as I’m stuck in this position. We may as well make it official. This doesn’t make you a part of the Congress when it meets in any case. Everyone in that body will be elected. Now, Elders,” he turned toward the Kenlienta, “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. How may the Guild be of service?”

“By honoring the agreement Guildmaster Harton was about to sign when you so abruptly changed the very nature of your Guild,” the Elder who had spoken for them all earlier replied.

“Hmm? Life is change,” Raff replied.

“And Change is life,” all three elders responded.

Raff picked up an indicated piece of parchment. “Real parchment? My my, he was trying to make it look official. Okay, let’s see what we have here. Uh, no, I’m afraid I cannot sign this. The Guild is and always has been neutral in the politics of all governments, human and Ken. Master Harton may have been prepared to break that long-established tradition, but I am not.”

“But our reforms are needed to keep the Ken Nation from flying apart,” the Elder protested.

“By supplanting the currently elected Grand Council of Elders with a triumvirate composed of the three of you?” Raff asked skeptically. “Life may be change, but I think that’s just a bit too radical a change to force on the Life of the Ken Nation. In human parlance we call it a revolution. You mean to replace a lawfully elected government with yourselves.”

“Elder Leraxa’s vision for the Grand Council is flawed,” the elder, who still had not given his name, replied. Raff wanted to know what it was, but the Ken was obviously not going to tell him. He decided it didn’t matter for now; there were other ways to find out. “It threatens to destroy us and only our intervention can prevent that.”

“So you say, but the Guild does not play favorites. You should know that.”

“But the concessions we propose...” the elder tried.

“Are nothing but bribes,” Raff finished for him. “We will not stop you from overturning Leraxa’s government, but will certainly not assist you.”

“You will find us to be formidable enemies, Raufanax,” the elder warned.

“I’m not looking for enemies, Elder,” Raff replied. “But if it’s a matter of ease or honor, I will choose honor every time. If this is all you came here for today, I am sorry this disappoints you, but that is how it is going to be.”

“Why do you support Elder Leraxa so?” the elder asked. “She refused to treat you with honor during the first permanent Grand Council meeting.”

“How I was treated is not at issue, Elder,” Raff replied. “I may not have liked it, but there was a certain logic and justification on Leraxa’s part. But regardless, she has apologized since then and, even more important, her government was agreed on by the Grand Council of Elders. You just want to conduct what the Cracians call a coup d’état – the illegal overthrow of a legitimate government.”

“You will regret this decision, Raufanax,” the elder predicted. As one, the three elders left the Council Chamber without another word.

“I’ve regretted a number of decisions,” Raff remarked in their wake. “I may regret this one too, but I think I can live with this choice. We’d better get a message to Leraxa about those three as fast as possible.”

“I’ll see to that,” Em replied. “I’ll have it delivered to the nearest regional elder...”

“That should be Genaxtis,” Raff told her. “He lives in Haramas Nethik. It’s due south of here about halfway to the Belis Channel.”

“I’ll see it on its way within the hour,” she promised and quickly turned to Chanya. They stepped aside for a few minutes as Emblem composed a hasty note. Then Chanya rushed out of the chamber with that note in hand.

Raff watched her leave before turning his eyes back to the Council Chamber. “This room has always depressed me. It’s either dark and gloomy or else too brightly lit and hard on the eyes. Pauls, can we afford to redecorate in here?”

“I don’t see why not,” Pauls remarked. “The council set money aside for just that purpose last month. We haven’t approved a design yet. Did you have anything in mind?”

“There’s an artist whose work I admire in Tamag Methin,” Raff replied. “I think we should invite her to redesign this room, especially since we aren’t likely to call it the Council Chamber anymore.”

“The Chamber of Congress?” Pauls asked.

“I hope not,” Raff replied.

“Wayfarers’ Hall,” Em suggested.

“Better,” Raff replied. “Anyway her name is Naratha.”

“I’ll send her an invitation,” Em offered. “I owe her a letter anyway.”

“I don’t believe there has ever been an example of Kenlienta architectural design in a human city,” Pauls mused.

“Then we’re overdue, I’d say,” Raff replied.

“It might be interesting to see what Naratha comes up with when designing a room that won’t be changed,” Em noted. “Most of her work is based on the Kenlienta philosophy that Life is change.”

“Will she continue that theme here, do you think, or design something that suggests permanence?” Pauls wondered.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Raff told him. “What are you up to?” he asked Kaz, who had suddenly sprouted a wicked grin on his face.

“Just thought of something,” Kaz replied. “Did you realize you are now the richest man in the world? Your fee for the Lonport trials was the Guild itself and the Guild owns more than any three nations in the world.”

“It’s not really my money, Kaz,” Raff told him.

“Actually it is,” Pauls reminded him. “You presented your bill and we paid as much as we could and, in fact, will continue to pay off for the next ten years.”

“I’m not actually planning to own the Guild, Pauls,” Raff replied. “I don’t want it. I didn’t even expect Harton or the rest of his cronies to fall for the ploy.”

“Then why did you try it?” Pauls asked.

“I figured they would offer to settle; concede some of my points and rescind my banishment from the Guild,” Raff admitted.

“Well, you must have shocked them so much their brains stopped working,” Kaz commented.

“Ha!” Pauls laughed. “Their brains stopped working years ago. No doubt they’ll wake up in the morning and realize where they went wrong. Too late now, though.”

“It is,” Raff agreed. “I just hope I don’t end up regretting this even more than I think I will. Well, let’s officially convene this new temporary council, give everyone something to do and then go get some sleep. We’ll meet again tomorrow afternoon, uh, no, make that this afternoon. I think the sun will be up in another hour and a half. We’ll make sure we’ve got everything accounted for and then I need to travel to Marnas Nokit.”

“You’re leaving right after turning the Guild on its head?” Pauls asked.

“I have to find out who killed Peter Bridger’s family, Pauls. That’s a precedence I want to set here.

When you have a job, it must be finished no matter what comes up in the meantime. There's a lot to do here, I agree, but the Bridger case came up before any of this broke. I'll clean that up and then come back here and see about cleaning this up too. Besides, I expect all of us to do fieldwork, remember?"

Four

"It's so different!" Chanya marveled as the wayfarers approached Marnas Nokit for their second time. While they had planned to leave Taundon the next day, it had actually taken nearly a week before Raff could be spared from the duties he had thrust on himself in his take-over of the Wayfarers' Guild. It had all seemed so simple at the time, but functionaries at all levels kept bothering him at every hour for decisions they ought to have been able to make for themselves. Eventually, however, he managed to convince the administrators that they were not going to be thrust out from their desks and into the Wild anytime in the immediate future and the questions slowed down enough to allow him to slip out of the city.

"No Ken city ever looks exactly the same twice," Emblem told her. "The big tower is still atop the peak, but even it has been painted a new color."

"Colors is more like it," Chanya noted. "It's been painted in stripes of almost every color, hasn't it?"

"Looks like it from here in any case," Em agreed.

"And the houses and other buildings all look so tall and thin," Chanya observed. "Why are they all dark red, though?"

"I don't know, but my guess is that the Ken would be only too glad to tell you," Em told her.

"They love to talk about the changes they've made," Kaz added.

"It's a big part of their life," Raff put in. "We won't be going to Marnas Nokit immediately, though. Our first stop will be in Sotz Marnas."

"Shouldn't we bring Coraxis with us?" Kaz asked.

"Coraxis is the regional elder, Kaz," Raff told him. "He stayed with us last time, but he was due back in Yakrut and is probably still there. If it turns out he's here, though, I'll send him a note to let him know we're here. We can stay in an inn while we revisit the evidence."

“Oh good,” Kaz sighed. “I’ve forgotten a lot of what we learned here last time.”

“You need to learn to take notes, then,” Raff told him. “You’re likely to be asked to conduct investigations more or less like this one from time to time. If you don’t take notes, you’ll forget something crucial.”

“Where do we start?” Kaz asked interestedly.

“By finding a place to stay,” Raff laughed.

It was already late in the day when they found an inn in Sotz Marnas, but Theraxin, the teenager who had been assigned to help them on their last visit, saw them approaching and happily ran up to greet them. When Raff asked him if Coraxis was at home, Theraxin instantly volunteered to run to Marnas Nokit to find out.

Neither Theraxin nor Coraxis were anywhere to be found the next morning, so Raff and the others made their way back to the Bridger home. Raff had half-expected the building might not actually be there any longer. It would have been typical of the Ken to have reused the materials and the land itself for a completely different purpose, but it had been left unused, possibly in tribute to the humans who had once lived there. But then he remembered the people of Sotz Marnas did not yet know of Peter Bridger’s death in Skethit. They had left his home untouched because it was not theirs to change.

“You’re back?” a voice asked from behind them as they contemplated the house. They turned to see the Bridgers’ neighbor, one who had eulogized Sarah and her son so passionately on their first visit.

“We need to be sure we’ve found the killer,” Raff replied.

“It was Peter Bridger,” the man told them.

“I doubt that,” Raff replied. “I am sure the killer is still here in Sotz Marnas

“Who else could it be?”

“Oh, I have an idea,” Raff told him, “but I need evidence before I make any accusations. Now if you don’t mind, I need to take another look at the murder weapon.” So saying, Raff opened the door to the Bridgers’ house and the wayfarers went inside.

“It smells stale in here,” Chanya wrinkled her nose.

“No one has been airing out the house,” Em decided, voicing only one reason she considered likely for the odd smell in the building.

“You may open some windows if you want,” Raff told them. “We’ve gotten as much from the house as it was as we’re likely to get from our first time here.”

Chanya and Kaz quickly lifted window panes and pushed open the shutters of the room they were in. Wind rushed in, gently adding the sweet smell of late summer flowers to the air.

“Now, I hope that rifle is in the kitchen where I left it,” Raff remarked. He poked his head through that door and saw that someone had removed the gun, although the spent bullets were still on the

kitchen's work counter.

"Can you track it down again from the bullets?" Kaz asked.

"It's been much too long," Raff told him. "Traces of stability evaporate in the Wild fairly rapidly, you know. We were lucky it worked last time, in fact."

"We have a name, you know," Kaz pointed out. "That Oronoxis, Mister Bridger's journal mentioned."

"The Ken are sensitive to names sometimes," Em told him. "For Kenlienta to give someone their name is to say, 'You are a friend.' To speak one's name in connection to a crime investigation like this is to accuse him. We have to be careful who we ask until we are certain."

"We could ask Coraxis, couldn't we?" Chanya asked.

"If he were here, I suppose we could," Raff told her, "but even then I would prefer to have the gun first. Let's look around the house a bit more. It may be someone thought to tidy up. The kitchen is no place for a rifle anyway, and if they were expecting Bridger to return, it would have been a mercy to take the weapon that murdered his family away."

They searched the house from top to bottom, but failed to find the rifle in question. "Now what do we do?" Kaz asked by the time they had finished.

"We'll have lunch," Raff decided. "I'm hungry and it's time to eat. I know we expected this to be the easy part, but it won't be. We'll have to start asking questions. Maybe someone knows where the gun went."

A favorite midday meal of the Kenlienta was a rolled-up sandwich of sorts. They started with thin, round and flexible pieces of bread and covered them with any of a variety of meats, vegetables and seasonings. It was then rolled up and held in one hand, leaving the other free to grasp a beverage, eating from one hand and drinking from the other. Raff particularly liked it because it allowed him to walk while eating and the walking helped him think.

In the larger Ken cities one might find dozens of venders on the street selling these mobile lunches, but in Sotz Marnas the wayfarers only found one. The meat he offered was lamb with a rich, nutty sauce, chopped onions, lettuce and cheese people could put on according to tastes.

Another nearby vender was selling cold fruit juice. Raff would have preferred a beer, but decided to forego that pleasure while he was still bothered about the missing gun.

They walked through the square looking for familiar faces to ask about the gun and eventually found the town elder, a woman named Birnari. Birnari was a quiet old lady who on their previous visit had stayed very much in Coraxis' shadow. On talking to her, she did not seem shy, but had evidently felt it best to defer to her regional elder while he was present.

"No, I have no idea of where the rifle went after you left," she told Raff as they sat together in the town square in the warmth of the afternoon. "We held the funerals, of course, and I sent several people in to clean up the house so at least it would be orderly for Peter Bridger's return."

"So you don't think he killed them?" Raff asked.

"I don't think I would believe that if Peter Bridger confessed it to me himself," Birnari replied. "Will he be returning?"

"I'm sorry, Elder," Raff replied. "No." He went on to tell of what had happened in Skethit. Birnari cried silently when she heard of how Bridger had died in the mine disaster and nodded on hearing his last words.

"See, he was a hero and a good man right to the end," Elder Birnari pointed out. "It is a shame he could not be buried beside his wife and son, however."

"There was no way to preserve him long enough," Raff explained.

"No, I understand," Birnari replied. "Perhaps it is enough that they are all together in the Ken Nation to come."

"You mean Heaven?" Kaz asked.

"You call it that," Birnari replied serenely. "We believe that all people, Ken and human alike live together in the next life where there is neither Wild nor stability. Where all live as they wish and in harmony."

"Sounds like Heaven to me," Raff nodded. "I could use a bit of that harmony back in Taundon."

"Any disharmony there, you brought on yourself, dear," Em reminded him.

"True enough," Raff agreed. "Should I have just kept my mouth shut, do you think?"

"I'm glad you didn't," Em replied. "Our lives might have been quieter and more comfortable, but we might not have learned about those three dreadful elders and their *coup d'état*."

"Their what?" Birnari asked. Raff explained. "Ah, yes. Elder Coraxis mentioned to us, the local elders of the region, that there was a faction of the new government that wished to take Elder Leraxa's place. I did not realize they meant to do so outside the laws of the Ken Nation. It is good that you stopped them."

"I don't know that we stopped them," Raff corrected her, "but they won't have the help from the Guild they wanted. That ought to at least slow them down, force them to try in some other way. I have the impression that Leraxa's government is under siege from more than one quarter."

"We in the Marnas region did not support the change when Elder Leraxa proposed it," Birnari replied, "but we accepted it when it was proved that more Kenlienta wanted it than those who did not. We would be far more opposed to a change brought about by force. Such a thing would divide the Ken Nation where before we have always been one. I should inform Coraxis of this. He could then let Leraxa know."

"I've already sent a message to Leraxa by way of Elder Genaxtis," Em informed her. "With luck, it may have been flown directly to Yakrut and be there by now."

"Good," Birnari told them. "So long as she has been warned. Is there anything I can do to help you in your search here?"

“Maybe later,” Raff told her. “We have a possible name and some suspicions, but I appreciate that the naming of a name is an accusation among the Ken, so I’ll wait until there is no alternative. Who, by chance, did you asked to neaten up the Bridger home?”

“Their three nearest neighbors, of course,” Birnari told them. “We always help our close neighbors when such aid is required.”

“I’ll ask them then,” Raff decided.

None of the neighbors admitted to knowing what had happened to the rifle. “We left it in the kitchen,” one Ken woman told Raff. “I did think we should put it somewhere else, but you had left it there and Elders Birnari and Coraxis told us not to move anything in case you still needed it as evidence. It was still there when I closed the house up.”

“Someone went back in afterward,” Raff remarked. “Any idea who it might have been?”

“Why would anyone do that?” she countered. Raff just shrugged.

The single man who lived closest to the Bridgers seemed annoyed to see the wayfarers when they called on him. “What are you doing here?” he snapped irritably.

“We have a few more questions for you, if you don’t mind,” Raff replied.

“I mind a lot,” he told him. “I’m a busy man. If you want to talk, you’ll have to do so while I work.”

“Of course,” Raff agreed easily. The wayfarers followed the man back through his house to his workshop where he was carving a stature of a gryphon out of a tree trunk. The creature stood on its hind legs with its eagle-like talons reaching for the sky and its wings partially unfurled as if about to spring into flight. It looked mostly finished, but then the carver pressed a hidden release and the wings unfurled and he started carving in details there as well. “Very nice,” Raff told him appreciatively.

“I need to deliver it today,” the man replied “and I still have a few changes to finish.”

“Changes?” Chanya asked.

“Even a statue has to be able to change from day to day,” he explained, carving feathery details into the opened wings. “I have worked out five different positions for the arms, legs, head and wings so my customer can change the piece as it suits him each day. Eventually, in a month or so, he will probably sell it to someone else. Change is life.”

“And Life is change,” the wayfarers responded politely.

“Would you know what happened to the gun that was left in the Bridgers’ house?” Raff asked him a short time later.

The man looked up from his carving and scowled. “It was there last I saw it,” he told them.

“So you wouldn’t know who took it or why?” Raff tried again.

“If I didn’t know it was gone, then how could I know who took it?” he asked in return.

“Any idea who might have been inside the house?” Raff pressed.

The man shrugged. “Anyone might have been inside,” he replied. “I haven’t exactly had the time to watch all the comings and goings over there.”

“So there have been comings and goings?” Raff inquired.

“I just meant I haven’t paid much attention,” the carver told him. “I have commissions to fill. I helped clean the place up because the elder asked me to and then I got back to work. It’s a sad thing Sarah Bridger and her son were killed, so I helped clean up since it wouldn’t be nice when the husband came home if their blood was still all over the bedroom. It’s what neighbors do around here. But we don’t pry into each other’s business or spy on them.”

“All right,” Raff replied calmly. “We’ll let ourselves out. Thank you for your time.”

“He seemed a lot nicer last time,” Kaz remarked as they headed back to the Bridger home.

“He’s busy,” Em reminded her adopted son. “He’s probably running behind on that statue. It is beautiful isn’t it?”

“It’s nice if you like gryphons,” Kaz admitted grudgingly.

“Em?” Chanya asked. “Could you tell if he was lying?”

“The technique doesn’t work on Ken,” Em replied. “It has to do with reading the mental perturbations of one’s personal field of stability, remember?”

“Well, yes,” Chanya agreed, “and Ken really have no stability aura. I forgot. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” Em told her. “We all forget sometimes. It’s because the Ken are not all that different from us as people. Their differences are physiological and to a lesser extent sociological, but we do all tend to think alike in a broad and general way.”

“Why are we coming back here?” Kaz asked as they re-entered the Bridger home.

“Because I’m honestly not sure what to do next,” Raff admitted, “and I’m hoping that something will occur to me here. In the meantime let’s all look over the place one more time.” Kaz and Chanya both groaned, but obediently went to work, climbing a thin ladder up to the cramped attic.

“It’s dark up here,” Kaz grumbled. A moment later a bright light appeared at the peak of the roof, illuminating the dark space.

“And now it isn’t,” Chanya told him. “Did you forget about that? A Wayfarer’s Lantern” It’s what Em and I used last time we looked up here.”

“I would have remembered in another moment,” Kaz maintained. “Did you look inside that trunk?” he asked, pointing into the far corner.

“We did,” Chanya replied. “It was full of winter clothes and lined with cedar planks. We should look through it again, though, because there’s not much else up here.”

“What about under these floor boards?” Kaz asked. “They’re fairly loose. It wouldn’t take much to lift one and hide something between it and the top of the ceiling below.”

“We didn’t think of that,” Chanya admitted. “Let’s look.”

They turned up the loose boards and after a few minutes found several canvas bags filled with gold and silver coins. “Mister Bridger did pretty well for himself and family,” Kaz noted.

“Unless this money came from his days as a thief,” Chanya replied. “My real question, however, is why were they hiding this up here? Don’t the Ken have banks?”

“The Ken don’t have a monetary system like ours,” Kaz told her. “They understand how we value money, but they think we’re crazy to place so much value on gold and silver. Instead, they have a rather complex barter economy. It’s hard to follow because some things and services have set values and others are negotiable. The Ken live with the system and understand it, but if I had to make a deal I’d have to rely on the basic honesty of the person I was dealing with.”

“But Raff bought our lunch with some coins,” Chanya recalled.

“Like I said, the Ken understand our money,” Kaz replied, “and they know they can use it to buy human merchandise. There is a bit of contact, mostly through wayfarers and some towns have places just outside their stabilities where they can trade with neighboring Kenlenta, should the Ken want to trade for something. Raff’s coins will be traded for something the venders want and so forth and eventually they’ll make their way into the hands of a human merchant.”

“What do we do with this money, then?” Chanya asked. “Did the Bridgers have surviving human family?”

“I don’t think so,” Kaz told her. “That was part of why they felt so comfortable here, according to Bridger’s diary. To them the Ken felt like family.”

“Then I think this money should go to benefit the people of Sotz Marnas,” Chanya decided.

“That sounds right to me,” Kaz agreed. “Let’s see what Raff and Em say. Did you hear that?”

Chanya nodded. “The door opened and someone came in.”

While Kaz and Chanya were in the attic, Raff and Em went through the kitchen and bedroom once more. “Find anything?” Raff asked after finishing up in the kitchen.

“Nothing I haven’t seen at least twice before,” Em replied. “There’s someone outside.”

“I’ll take a look,” Raff told her.

“Keep your guard up,” Em warned.

Raff sidled up to one of the windows just as there was a knock on the door. He peeked out the window and smiled. “Elders! Come in please.”

He opened the door wide to allow Elders Coraxis and Birnari to enter. Theraxin entered just behind

them. "I have just returned from Yakrut," Coraxis reported, "and found this lad waiting for me." He pointed to Theraxin. "He said you had something important to tell me."

"Well, something important to discuss," Raff corrected. "Close, but not quite the same thing."

"Did you find Peter Bridger, Raufanax?" Coraxis asked.

"I did," Raff replied. He asked Birnari, "You didn't tell him?"

"I have not had the time, Honored Raufanax," she replied. Raff nodded and reported once more how Bridger had died.

"Grave tidings," Coraxis sighed, "but perhaps it was a mercy for him as he never had to learn what happened to his family, at least not in this life."

"That's one way of looking at it," Raff agreed, "but there is still a murderer at large. Kaz?" he asked seeing the apprentice's head watching from the attic. "Did you find anything up there?"

"Probably not a clue," Kaz replied. He and Chanya climbed back down with the bags of coins. After they both greeted the elders Chanya spilled the contents of one of the bags out on a nearby table.

"They're all like that?" Raff asked.

"Pretty much," Kaz remarked. "They were under the floorboards in the attic. Why didn't we think to look there last time?"

"I can't say," Raff replied, staring at the coins. "I checked for loose boards down here. Well, I suspect you're right about those not being a clue. The Ken rarely use human coinage."

"I know, but they might be of use for when the people of Sotz Marnas need to buy things of human manufacture," Kaz replied.

"True," Raff agreed, "Elder Birnari, please accept these on behalf of your people. Even if you do not want to buy anything with them, they can always be melted down to use in jewelry and other ornamentation."

Birnari nodded her head in acceptance. Raff stepped away from the table and gestured to her to take the coins.

"This is a fine gift," Coraxis commented, "considering you might have claimed it as your fee, Raufanax."

"This has gone beyond considerations of money," Raff replied, looking over his shoulder at the back window and then back again. "Besides, as Kaz recently pointed out I am technically the richest man in the world. If there's anything I need, it is not money. We were hoping to re-examine the murder weapon, but it appears to have been removed. Consequently the only clue I have is a name from Bridger's personal journal. I realize that this might be construed as an accusation without adequate proof, but..."

"Look out!" Kaz shouted suddenly and jumped toward Raff, knocking him on the floor just as a rifle shot rang out.

Raff rolled away from Kaz as they hit the floor and jumped back to his feet, prepared to counter-attack the rifle wielder. Coraxis, however, had been the first to react and had cast a spell that bound the attacker motionless. "Someone should disarm him," Coraxis told them.

Raff stepped over to the open windows and recognized their assailant as the wood-carving neighbor. He pulled the rifle out of the Kenlienta's unresisting hands, and then pulled the man himself into the house through the window.

Five

"This is Oronoxis?" Raff asked Birnari.

"How did you know?" Birnari asked.

"An educated guess," Raff told him. "Peter Bridger mentioned him as the only Ken in the town who was at all interested in human weapons. Also, that was the name I was about to ask about. Unless I miss my next guess, that rifle is the same gun that killed Sarah Bridger and her son. The only thing I don't know, is why he did it."

"Why did you do it, my son," Elder Coraxis asked Oronoxis. His voice was soft, but with his wayfarer's senses, Raff could tell the elder was using a compulsion to back up the question. Nothing could force Oronoxis to tell the truth, but Coraxis' spell could compel him to speak.

"I had to save us from their corruption," Oronoxis told them. "Their very presence was befouling our town, desecrating everything we hold dear."

Once started, the Ken kept talking and as he talked a sad story came to light. Raff had often said the Ken were no better or worse than humans as people, but on this occasion he would have rather been proven wrong. Oronoxis had hated the Bridgers simply because they were different. He detested the fact they never actually changed the look of their home, for example. No civilized person would go so long before repainting the front door or reshaping the roof at least. No, the Bridgers had kept their home precisely as they had originally built it, like animals.

Oronoxis had spent years pretending to be as friendly as the rest of the townsfolk, learning more about them and secretly waiting for the perfect opportunity to rid Sotz Marnas of their presence. Over the years he had secretly tried harassing them in little ways, but they never seemed to notice so he knew he would have to take more drastic action. When Bridger showed him the human hunting rifles, he

feigned an interest and quietly bought one, putting it away for over two years while waiting for the right time to use it.

He got to know Bridger's working habits and was able to plan to kill Sarah and her son soon after Peter left on his annual business trip. He used the human weapon to be certain the blame would be pointed at Bridger and then threw it away into the Bridgers' Well, where Raff and the wayfarers found it soon after they started looking. Oronoxis' deepest wish was that the incident would grow and become a war between the species.

"The poor man is sick," Coraxis told the wayfarers later that evening in his home. With a sigh, he continued, "and not competent to stand trial. I have sent him to a hospital town on the Southern Continent."

"A hospital town, Elder?" Kaz asked.

"You might call it a colony, perhaps," Coraxis replied. "It is a settlement entirely committed to the healing arts. We have several of them in the Ken Nation. The healers in the one I have sent Oronoxis to specialize in diseases of the mind. I hope they can help him. At least they will help him find a way to contribute positively to Ken society."

"He seems to be a fine carver," Raff commented. "I think if he stays away from humans, he'll be able to remain well-balanced."

"That may be the best we can do," Coraxis nodded, "But I will continue to hope he can be cured."

They stayed that night in Coraxis's home in Marnas Nokit, intending to leave after breakfast the next morning, but to their surprise, another Kenlienta elder arrived just as they were sitting down to eat. Coraxis got up from the table and went to greet his visitor, but he soon returned with Elder Leraxa, the Chief Elder of the Ken Nation.

"Hello, Guildmaster," Leraxa greeted Raff lightly. "I understand you have been busy."

"You heard about that, did you?" Raff noted.

"I went to Taundon to express my thanks to you and Emblem Cawlens for your timely warning," Leraxa told him. "Your Guild appears to be in as frenetic a state of change as my own Yakrut."

"That happens to everything given enough time," Raff chuckled. "Change is life."

"And Life is change, Raufanax," Leraxa replied. "I also owe you my thanks for your letter a few months ago. While I would have preferred to see you in person, it was a much needed support, without which I might already have been voted out of office."

"It was not out of love for you in specific, Elder," Raff admitted. "While Life is change, not all Change is good. You are the point of stability, or normalcy, for the entire Ken Nation at this time. I don't think you should have set yourself up in that position, but you did it with the approval of your people. What three other elders intended was illegal by anyone's standards."

"Much like what you did with the Guild of Wayfarers?" Leraxa asked archly.

"Except there is nothing in our charter or regulations that say a single person cannot own the Guild,"

Raff told her. "It is not a nation. It is a commercial corporation, one which became mine in a business deal, so to speak. I don't intend to remain Guildmaster any longer than necessary."

"Don't you?" Leraxa laughed lightly. "I think you will find that while you would want to shed yourself of the office, the office will have a death grip on you. We are much the same, you and I, Raufanax. Neither of us truly wants to be in absolute control because we realize that it means we are absolute servants to that which we control. We both came to that realization too late and we are both too responsible for our own actions to try to avoid the consequences. We should probably call each other, 'Friend.' Raufanax, do you still think badly of me for what I felt forced to do during the Grand Council?"

"No," Raff admitted, "I've gotten over that. But you could have just sent a letter. Why did you really come to see me?"

"You don't think I might have been lonely?" Leraxa asked almost flirtatiously.

"You may have been," Raff laughed, "but I doubt that's the answer either."

"Truth," Leraxa replied, growing more serious. "I find I have deeply desired your advice on a number of subjects since our last meeting. Hardly a day has passed in which I did not wonder what Raufanax might decide in my place."

"Uh," Raff was uncertain how to respond, so he changed the subject, "So what happened to those three elders?"

"Their plans were poorly conceived," Leraxa reported, "and entirely based on the support of your Guild. We Ken do not have an army, you know. We have had no external enemies for over two millennia, so without the Guild to back them up, they had only their own supporters to back them up and most of those melted away when I arrested the three. They were put on trial and stripped of the rank of elder and then sent home. I suppose I'll have to keep an eye on their replacements, though, but they were not the greatest threat to my government, you know."

"They weren't?" Kaz asked, just ahead of Raff and Em.

"No, indeed," Leraxa shook her head. "They were just the hasty ones, there are two other factions that work toward replacing me and they are doing so in a legal manner. I cannot arrest them for attempting to convince their fellow elders that I should be replaced. Since the founding of the Ken Nation, there has never been such disunity among the elders."

"You manufactured that disunity yourself, you know," Raff told her. "Before your permanent government, the elders met to discuss and solve problems shared by the entire nation, but could go home to run their own cities and towns in whatever manner they saw fit. There was no High Elder's office they might aspire to. Now you've given them a prize they might win."

"I had not foreseen that consequence," Leraxa admitted.

They spoke about that and other subjects at length until Leraxa brought up a subject they had discussed on their first meeting. "Have you been able to do anything about organizing a scientific conference between our peoples, Raufanax?"

"I tried, and there are a number of scientists who will jump at the chance should we be able to arrange it, but the Guild leadership opposed me as you may recall I predicted it might," Raff explained.

“And now you are the Guild leadership,” Leraxa pointed out.

“So I am,” Raff nodded. “I will put that as close to the top of my agenda as I can. Maybe you should speak to the Guild Council yourself while you are in the area.”

“Guild Council Pro Tem,” Em corrected him.

“There is that,” Raff admitted. “We’re changing our own form of governance, but the Pro Tem Council can make commitments the Congress will have to honor later.”

“I’ll be glad to speak before them,” Leraxa told him, “so long as I may do so soon. I cannot stay away from Yakrut for long. Our own Council is between sessions or I would not have been able to get away at all.”

“We’ll leave at first light tomorrow,” Raff promised, “Unless you would like to leave immediately.”

“We have talked away most of the day,” Leraxa noted. “Tomorrow will be better.”

“Oh,” Em interrupted, “I meant to mention a matter in my letter, but was too rushed to bring it up. Are you aware of the Ken settlement of Skethit?”

“The scientific colony on the Western Continent,” Leraxa identified it. “Yes, the Grand Council gets annual dispatches from their team leader Nearlaxa, is it?”

“Nearlina,” Em corrected her. “Her people recently convinced her to take on the title of elder and she worries that she may be in trouble with your Council for doing so without their leave.”

“Tell me more about it, please,” Leraxa requested politely and listened while Emblem told her all about what had happened in Skethit. “It is not how we usually do such things these days,” Leraxa smiled when Em was finished, “but Nearlina has done nothing wrong. Her choice of a living wreath is an interesting one. It leaves her hands free to work; quite appropriate for a scientist. In normal circumstances she would have first been approved by her regional elder and his or her council, but Skethis is not part of any administrative region, and council approval is only meant as a formality in the recognition of what is already a fact. I will write to Elder Nearlina and congratulate her. I’ll admit to being a little jealous. Her ascension was far more beautiful and meaningful than mine, which was really quite mundane in comparison. That it came to her as a revelation must have made it a powerful moment, indeed.”

They continued to speak for the rest of the day and then spoke throughout the entire trip back into Taundon. On their return, Chanya realized they only had two days before classes began at Dunbridge and promptly rushed to pack her own bags and help Kaz with his.

“We still need to get registered,” she told Kaz. “Class registration was yesterday, I hope the professors consider what we’ve been doing to be an adequate explanation for being late.”

“What if they don’t?” Kaz asked.

“They’ll likely demand extra work from us,” Chanya explained. “Papers, usually, but wayfarer interns often have to join their classmates after the semester has started. They should be used to it.”

“And if they need proof,” Em told her, “the Guildmaster will write you a note. ‘Please excuse these two for their tardiness. They’ve been out saving the world,’ ought to at least get their attention.”

“We didn’t save the world,” Kaz denied.

“No, perhaps not,” Em allowed, “but you were a positive influence... most of the time.”

Raff returned to the Central Guildhall to discover Prime Minister Richard Winn Senior had been practically camping out there since Raff and the others had left town. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting for you, man?” Winn demanded once they were alone together in Raff’s new office.

“You could have left a note, you know,” Raff told him. “I would have let you know when I had returned.”

“I didn’t exactly take up residence here,” Winn replied in a surly tone.

“No, but I understand you did spend an hour or two here each day while I was out,” Raff replied. “I take it you did not trust me to return your calls?”

“The thought had crossed my mind that you might try to avoid honoring the agreements of your predecessor,” Winn told him.

“That depends on what sort of agreements Harton made,” Raff replied. “I managed to stop him from abetting the illegal take over of the Ken Nation. What government did you want him to topple?”

“I am not a criminal, sir,” Winn replied indignantly.

“But you have been at odds with your queen, I hear,” Raff told him.

“She is your queen as well, sir” Winn replied.

“Not when I am acting as Guildmaster, sir,” Raff retorted in the same stuffy tones. “The Guild is politically neutral. I realize my predecessor stretched that point beyond any limits I might have, but I, sir, shall not.”

“Do you realize that Parliament has the power to rescind your charter?” Winn threatened.

“I’ve heard that,” Raff laughed, “but you won’t.”

“I won’t?” Winn echoed. “Don’t be too sure of that. We’ll rescind the charter and then there will be no Guild of Wayfarers.”

“Yes, and then how will you move your ships and armies. How, sir, will you visit your country estate?” Raff shot back. “Even try to suggest that again and the Guild will go on strike. Furthermore, sir, you only grant our charter in the Green Lands and, at that, in the name of Her Majesty. I suspect you would run afoul of her as well, but her wrath would be a breeze compared to the hurricane we would give you. Since we would be on strike in the Green Lands, but nowhere else, I’d say your nation would be at a distinct disadvantage world-wide.”

“Other nations survive without your Guild,” Winn told him.

“True, but they have organized wayfarers there too. You would be starting from scratch and none of the previously trained men and women would be available to you. Don’t make stupid threats, Prime Minister, and don’t think you can blackmail me like you did Harton.”

“How...” Winn began.

“...did I know?” Raff finished the sentence. “The entire Guild knew, it was a matter of tea-time gossip. I would be sorely disappointed if everything we say here isn’t known throughout the Guildhall by dinner time. Keep this in mind, sir, I will not tolerate anyone trying that sort of thing with any Guildsman. That is your only warning. So which of your agreements are you concerned about, sir?”

“The matter of official transport,” Winn replied.

“You mean of Her Majesty and her retinue?” Raff asked. “We have always provided heads of state free transport and will continue to do so. I believe we have extended the courtesy to prime ministers in the last decades, providing the trip is primarily business-related in nature. Is that what you meant?”

“I mean the recent agreement to extend that courtesy to the movement of all governmental agencies,” Winn told him.

“What?” Raff laughed. “All agencies? Sir, I must apologize, but I was under the misapprehension that you did not have a sense of humor. Are you talking including the Army and Navy, or just a few of your trained politicians?”

“All agencies,” Winn repeated sternly.

“No,” Raff replied flatly.

“So Guildmaster Raff Cawlens is a man without honor, I perceive,” Winn noted as he got to his feet. “I had hoped this would go easier, but if this is the way you want it...”

“Don’t even bother trying to complete that sentence, sir,” Raff snarled suddenly. He reached out with Wild energy and slammed the Prime Minister back into his seat. “Threaten me personally, sir, or insult me as you just have once more, and I shall be more than pleased to meet you on the field of honor. Threaten the Guild and I will personally inform Her Majesty that she is in need of a new Prime Minister.”

“Are you threatening me, sir?” Winn asked disbelievingly.

“Can’t you tell?” Raff retorted, “Or has it been so long since anyone did this that you don’t recognize a friendly warning when you hear one? My hand is around your heart, sir. If I were as honorless as you have insinuated, you would already be dead. Now get out of my office, sir. Insult me again and I will send my seconds. Threaten the Guild and you will be destroyed. And understand what I am telling you. Death is not the worst thing that can happen. I won’t kill you. I won’t even harm you physically. But I will see you stripped of your standing in the community and your power in the government, sir.

“You know the Guild has that ability since you’ve been exploiting it for the last few years, roughly since Her Majesty’s father died. Well, that ends here and now, sir. You should have been wise enough not to try pushing me around before even knowing what sort of man I am. That was foolish. And you should never have attempted to control the Guild. That was potentially suicidal.”

Raff released his hold on the politician and allowed him to walk silently to the door. Winn turned then

as though about to make a parting shot, then changed his mind and left without another word.

“How much of that did you mean, dear?” Em asked from the backdoor of Raff’s office.

“You’ve been dropping at my eave, have you?” Raff asked amused.

“We have no secrets from each other, dear,” Em told him lightly, “and it kept most of the rest of the Guild from listening in.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Raff asked unable to keep a straight face.

“You know it might have been a good idea to at least be polite with the prime minister,” Em suggested.

“I doubt it would have made a difference in the outcome,” Raff told her. “I wasn’t about to let him control the Guild and he wasn’t about to take my refusals with good grace. Besides, the man was blackmailing Harton. I’ve no love for Giles Harton, but I won’t put up with anyone thinking they can strong-arm a Guildsman, no matter who it is.”

“Yes, I really did hear you,” Em replied, smiling. “However, we’d better hurry. The Guild Council is waiting for you to introduce Elder Leraxa. It’s a first, you know.”

Raff got up from his chair and hurried to the door, with Emblem. “Other Kenlienta have addressed the Council,” he reminded her.

“But she is the first Chief Elder to do so,” Em replied.

“She’s the only Chief Elder there has ever been,” Raff retorted. “And all she’s really going to do is say, ‘Hello.’”

“But she’ll do it with style, I’m sure,” Em laughed.

“You mean she’ll charm some of those old goats,” Raff laughed back.

“She’s certainly pretty enough,” Em admitted. “Do you know what you’re going to say when you introduce her?”

“Haven’t even thought about it,” Raff admitted.

“Well, try saying something about the human pollution problem in the Wild,” she suggested. “You did promise to work on that.”

“Good point,” Raff agreed. “Oh, have we heard from Naratha yet?”

“There’s hardly been enough time for her to get your invitation,” Em reminded him. “We made sure word was flown to Leraxa, but I sent the note to Naratha by the usual Guild messengers. She’s been very busy designing interiors on the Southern Continent, you know, so it might be a year or more before she can start here, assuming she’ll accept the job.”

“You think she might not?” Raff asked.

“I’m sure the invitation will thrill her,” Em replied, “but she can’t just drop everything and that’s just as well, because we’ll have to work out how to keep her safe and comfortable within the stability. She’s not an elder, you know.”

“I can create a Wild area for her,” Raff told her.

“And get it to follow her around where necessary, I’m sure,” Em replied. “But we’ll need a team of masters to maintain it, I think.”

“Perhaps,” Raff shrugged, “but we’ll figure it out. I know the spell elders use when in a stability. Maybe Naratha can learn it for herself, or she can give us a design and only come in to supervise from time to time. We have enough options. Compared to getting the Guild totally reorganized and keeping our promises to the Ken, that will be easy.”

“Yes,” Em sighed, “I’m afraid it will be. We’ve taken on quite a lot, haven’t we?”

“I like the fact you’re still saying, ‘we,’ Em,” Raff told her as they reached the door to the Council Chamber, “Especially since I made this mess all on my own.”

“We’re a team, Raff Cawlens,” she told him lovingly. “And you know you would help me out of the resulting mess if I’d done something this stupid.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I would, but you’re wrong, because you wouldn’t make a mistake like that.”

“Well, I like leaving such things to the professionals,” she laughed.

Epilogue – Varana

“It should have been the spark that ignited the fires of freedom, John,” a thin man with long brown hair declared. He was one of several seated in the smoke-filled private back room of the “Horn and Fox” a pub in the Garring Hill area of Lonport.

“I did the right thing, Henry,” John Baker replied to his brother. The two men were a study in contrasts. Where John was a fastidious dresser and kept his hair neatly trimmed, Henry’s clothes were worn and speckled with the ink he used on his printing presses and his hair looked as though it had not felt the edge of a barber’s sheers in over a year.

“Nobody’s saying you didn’t, John.” Henry told him, “even if you did defend those damned greencoats.”

“Everyone deserved to be treated fairly and equally before the law,” John maintained.

“And we’ve all heard you say that before too,” Henry snapped at him.

“You know,” another man, one with his hair turned silver at the temples and kept as neatly trimmed as John Baker’s, added, “it’s possible our cause might have been better served, John, if you had been even more successful. Had you gotten all those soldiers off, the entire colony would have been up in arms over the obvious miscarriage of justice. But, no. Only three were convicted proving the Queen’s justice is fair and rational. Could we blame the judge for being too biased on their behalf, do you think?”

“Raff Cawlens is a good man, Will,” John told him. “He may be the fairest judge I have ever had to argue a case in front of. He never played favorites either with Mister Prescott or me, and yet while he never allowed us any slack, he gave us every opportunity to prove our cases. You can’t say better than that.”

“Well, that may be, but it doesn’t help our cause, now does it?” Will replied.

“We need to do something spectacular,” Henry told them. “Maybe burn the governor’s warehouse?”

“Petty violence will not further our cause,” John Baker told them.

“And what do you want to do?” Henry Baker demanded. “Petition the Queen?”

“Perhaps,” John replied with quiet dignity.

“And while we’re at it, perhaps we should invite her over for tea,” Henry jeered. “Oh wait! We don’t have tea because Her Majesty’s Parliament raised the taxes on it yet again.”

“All right,” John told him coldly. “You’ve made your point. But even you have to admit we’re proposing something that has never been done before.”

“That’s a good point, John,” Will chuckled. “Seceding from our mother country is unique and certainly untried.”

“There have been revolutions before,” Henry argued.

“Not successful ones,” Will noted.

“It would be best to try to accomplish our ends without revolution,” John told them.

“That would be preferable,” Will told him almost jovially, “but not very likely. Henry, your idea isn’t really going to work well either. There is no way we’re going to annoy the Greencoats enough to persuade them to leave Varana. No, we’re going to have to declare Varana to be a free and sovereign nation. If possible we should bring Meldan along with us.”

“That’s fine and good, Will,” John told him, “but if we do that, the Greencoats will just march in and arrest us. We need an organization. A new government for our new nation. We need to raise an army

and a navy, find a way to pay for them and... and whatever else one does in starting up a nation.”

“We convened the Intercolonial Congress a few years ago in response to the Paper Acts,” one of the others commented.

“And only two-thirds of Varana was represented,” Henry replied sourly

“This time all of Varana must have a say,” John told them. “Meldan too. This involves us all.”

“I doubt Meldan will join us,” Henry commented. “They haven’t got the will.”

“We’ll invite them anyway,” John replied.

“And why are we convening a congress this time?” Henry asked.

“Oh, we’ll think of a reason,” Will laughed. “Last time we established that only the colonial assemblies could tax the colonies and yet Parliament turned around and passed their own act that said they could.”

“We also agreed at the time,” John added, “that without granting us the right to vote, Parliament could not represent the colonies of Varana.”

“And Parliament doesn’t seem to care much about that either,” Will replied. “You do realized, that it's going to take a good long time to convene a congress, don’t you?”

“I imagine it will take us a year or two just to get everyone to agree to meet and to find a place to do it,” John told him.

“Why not have it right here in Lonport?” Henry suggested.

“With the Greencoats patrolling the streets, man?” one of the other asked. “Have you gone mad?”

“That is a point,” John admitted. “With Lonport under the thumb of the Queen’s Army and Navy, this would be a spectacularly bad place to convene. It should be someplace not occupied by the Greencoats. Someplace close to the middle of Varana so no one will be unduly inconvenienced by the distance they must travel. New Ebor, perhaps?”

“Or New Farrington,” Will commented. “We can work that out as we go along. There’s a lot of work to do, men.”

“Then we had better get started!” John agreed.

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