

The Wayfarers Book Four

A Country without Unity

by

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Prologue – Taundon

Master Wayfarer Josiah Whitters entered the tavern and shook the snow off his long woolen cloak. Outside, the gale was bitterly cold and studded with sharp crystals of snow that bit into one's skin, but at least the air was uncharacteristically fresh for Taundon. Inside, the air was warm but filled with a thick haze of coal and wood smoke mixed with other smells. Whitters was not sure which was worse.

He had spent most of his fifty years in Taundon and at one time had sat on the Council of the Guild of Wayfarers, but that had changed several years ago. Since then, Josiah Whitters had kept his mouth shut, done little to call the attention of the new Guildmaster to himself, and waited. He might not be on the Guild Council any longer, but he still had a soft job that paid well. He could afford to wait.

Letting his eyes adjust to the darkness in the room, Whitters looked around and finally saw the man he intended to meet in one of the far ends. He made his way gruffly across the room until he stood beside the corner booth. "Miserable weather to have to go out in, Harton," Whitters told him gruffly by way of greeting.

"I don't control the weather, Whitters," Master Wayfarer Samuel Harton growled. "And this would be a picnic day in Kharasia this time of year."

"Oh that's right," Whitters nodded, taking his long coat off and hanging it on a convenient hook. "You've been assigned to Kharaskva, haven't you?"

"Kharaskva?" Harton laughed sourly. "I wish. No I was a thousand miles to the east of Kharaskva. Have you ever heard of Theronosgrad?"

"Can't say that I have," Whitters admitted. He sat down and tried unsuccessfully to signal the barmaid.

"I can't say for certain the next town over has ever heard of the place either," Harton grumbled. "It's a miserable little collection of scrapings and mud – little more than a glorified farmers' market if you need to know and over sixty miles from the nearest city, not that Petrasburgh is much of a city, but that's most of eastern Kharasia for you. They have a winter that lasts roughly thirty weeks long, followed by a long, cold and muddy spring. Then for two weeks it gets hot and the mosquitoes are a plague right out of Scripture. After that it starts to rain and then a month later it's winter again."

"Good Lord!" Whitters remarked. "Not much of a season, is it? Whatever do they grow?"

“Beets, mostly,” Harton replied. “Red beets, sugar beets, oh and don’t forget the turnips. They have a sort of grain that grows quickly out there as well, but most of that gets fed to the sheep. Anything else they need, they have to buy with the beets, but then they can’t imagine a meal that isn’t at least half beets.”

“Well, old boy, I hope you like beets,” Whitters laughed. He turned to the barmaid who had finally wondered over and told her, “A pint of the porter and what are you serving from the kitchen?”

“It’s turkey,” she told him, “from Varana. Roast turkey or turkey stew?”

Whitters scowled. It seemed all these dives had these days was turkey in one form or another. The colonists might be proud of their native bird, but Whitters would have preferred lamb for a change but had to admit the turkey was much cheaper. “Roast,” he muttered almost disgustedly and waved the woman off.

“I hate beets,” Harton told him. “Never much liked them before I got there – bloody well detest the things now. Feed them to the pigs, I say, except they don’t keep pigs in that part of Kharasia. Damned if I know why they don’t. Pigs would do better there than those sheep. Not like good Green Lands’ sheep either. The meat was tough and stringy. I would have killed for the turkey you so disdain.”

“Is that why you chose this place, Samuel?” Whitters asked.

“No, we could have eaten better at the Guild Hall, but we wouldn’t have had any privacy, now would we?” Harton replied. “Anyway, I’d have still been ice-bound in Kharasia if it hadn’t been for father’s health. Damned Cawlens had to let me return for that.”

“Ah yes, I was sorry to hear about that,” Whitters nodded. “Your father served the Guild well. Damned fine Guildmaster.”

“A damned lot finer than Cawlens, if you ask me,” Harton replied. “That’s why I asked you here today. We need to do something about him. He’s just ruining the Guild.”

“The Guild of Wayfarers is not what it was,” Whitters admitted. “I’ll give you that, but I don’t see what you expect to do about it. Raff Cawlens effectively owns the Guild. There’s not enough money in the world to buy it back from him, not even in the Guild itself.”

“No, that’s true,” Harton agreed reluctantly, “but he can still be voted out of the Guildmaster’s office. The fool actually put that in his new charter.” The maid returned with his meal and left it on the table unceremoniously.

“Well, technically that’s true,” Whitters admitted, “but I have to admit the man is dreadfully popular at the moment.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Harton agreed, “but we don’t need to attack Cawlens directly, you know. He has his weaknesses.”

“Such as?” Whitters asked.

“That adopted son of his, Bazani, or whatever his name is,” Harton replied.

"Kazani Basan," Whitters corrected him. "Yes, he is young for his masters' status, although I understand he's qualified enough. Everyone says so and Cawlens stayed out of the vetting process, you know. Basan earned his mastership."

"Oh I'm sure he has the abilities of a master wayfarer," Harton agreed, "but at twenty-two he cannot possibly have the experience. Tell me, though, what's been going on in the world?"

"In the world, old boy?" Whitters laughed. "I've been stuck in Taundon. I dare say you've seen more of the world than I have."

"Not any part of it that counts," Harton shook his head. "I've been essentially in exile for the last five years and every bit of news I've had has been filtered through dozens of wayfarers. It would be nice to hear it merely second hand."

"Well, alright, if you put it that way," Whitters agreed. "Varana's becoming increasingly at odds with the Green Lands. Up until the last couple of years the northern and southern colonies there have been in disagreement as to what to do about it, but ever since they began to reconvene their Colonial Congress, the protests against Parliament and Queen have become ever more united, although I still don't see them as any sort of nation if they actually secede. They'll be twelve or thirteen separate nations, if you ask me, and if Her Majesty is patient enough, her army will be able to gather them back in, one colony at a time."

"She won't be," Harton remarked, "or rather her Parliament won't let her be that patient. Queen Julia has too many other concerns to be able to treat her colonies as they must be treated. The younger Richard Winn was just elected prime minister, you know."

"Of course I know," Whitters nodded emphatically. "I voted for him myself."

"Did you?" Harton asked curiously. "Wayfarers don't normally have anything to do with government even in their homelands."

"There's neither law nor regulation against it," Whitters replied stiffly. "I may vote if I so decide."

"You may," Harton agreed. "It just surprised me, is all. Anyway, the elder Winn may have lost some of his political pull following the Lonport massacre trials..."

"Cawlens again," Whitters remarked.

"Yes, Cawlens again," Harton nodded. "He does seem to have his nose in everything upsetting, doesn't he? The thing is, that time he made Her Majesty more popular in Varana, but it was a temporary thing. Her Majesty may want to be the benign ruler of the empire..."

"Oh, are we an empire now?" Whitters cut in.

"Not officially, I suppose," Harton grumbled, peeved at the interruption, "but everyone calls it that, the Empire of the Green Lands."

"Maybe they do in Kharasia," Harton shook his head, "or even in Crace. Not here."

"They will," predicted Harton. "With the annexation of Salasia, one of Her Majesty's titles is Empress. It's only a matter of time, but we're going off the subject. With the spread of Green Landish power and prestige, Her Majesty is being increasingly forced to rely on Parliament to handle the minutiae

of governance in the colonies. If it were just Varana, there would be no problem in quelling the growing rebellion and even pleasing the colonists, but it's not just Varana. It's also Meldan and Neyka, Rhonesia, Sogarland, Rahia, Salasia, Sarlron, Nenoland, Wasee, and the Carter Islands in the Bright Ocean. The sun truly never sets on the Green Lands and that's more than any one person can rule over. Her Majesty reigns, but it is Parliament that rules, don't you see?"

"Your point is made," Whitters admitted. "So?"

"So I think it is inevitable Varana will attempt to secede from the Green Lands," Harton told him.

"They may try," Whitters agreed probationally, "but the Army and Navy of the Green Lands are the finest fighting forces in the World. They will be crushed and dragged right back again."

"Maybe not," Harton disagreed. "Varana is on the far side of the Dark Ocean. A war of rebellion will be expensive to the Green Lands and it is not likely Parliament will want to spend that money if the conflict is not quickly resolved."

"Perhaps," Whitters admitted, "but I still do not see what this has to do with Raff Cawlens or Kazani Basan. Aren't they the ones you really wanted to talk about?"

"I am talking about them," Harton insisted, "or I'm getting to that in any case. There are always some impossible situations, are there not? Some negotiations that are guaranteed to break down? Put a wayfarer you want to discredit in such a position and he cannot win no matter what happens."

"We tried that with Cawlens and the Lonport Massacre trials," Whitters reminded him. "Somehow he found the one solution that worked."

"Yes, but Cawlens can't go this time, can he?" Harton smiled maliciously. "He's shackled himself to Central Guild Hall."

"Well, by his own decree, he still gets out into the field every now and then," Whitters argued. "We all do whether we want to or not."

"And that is a monumentally bad waste of time of our top administrative wayfarers," Harton remarked. "Well I think we can change that. I understand there's a bit of a sticky negotiation going on in Varana right now and that they are calling for a master wayfarer to arbitrate."

"I tell you," Whitters insisted, "it didn't work last time. What makes you think it would now?"

"Kazani Basan is not Raff Cawlens," Harton smiled coldly. "He doesn't have the experience. Besides if it looks like he might succeed in spite of the difficulties, I have people in place to cause other problems. We have colleagues throughout the colonies. Not just Varana and Meldan, but the Cracian colonies as well."

The Way to New Ebor

One

“Master Basan?” a young apprentice wayfarer asked from the door to Kazani’s office in Central Guildhall. “This just came in for you.”

Kazani Basan looked up from a note he was drafting. It was a minor matter and one he would gladly put aside for something more interesting. Had he realized that being a wayfarer involved so much paperwork, he sometimes thought he would have rather stayed in his old village and trained to be a shaman. The thought flickered across his mind but, as always, it was rapidly followed by the memory of how his village had died at the hands of their blood enemies. Kaz could never have grown to become the shaman. He would either have been killed or dragged off into slavery.

The apprentice was dressed in the somewhat antiquated but quaint uniform of an apprentice wayfarer. It was a simple loose dark blue shirt with the badge of the Guild embroidered on its chest and worn over a pair of light gray slacks. Most days, Kazani still wore the same uniform himself. It was more comfortable and practical than the formal business clothing he was forced to wear in polite society, but today he had been obliged to attend an early meeting regarding recent Holran expansions along the border of Paknilan. While his adoptive father, Raff Cawlens, might get away with wearing an apprentice’s uniform in such a situation, a young master, just recently promoted, could not. Not if he expected to be taken seriously. Kaz regretted that because he felt his dark brown skin and black hair went so much better with the old apprentice uniform than that of his fairer colleagues.

“Thank you,” Kaz told the young man and accepted a large, heavy envelope that had been sealed with bright green wax. The apprentice nodded and hurried out of the office as Kaz noticed the royal seal of Queen Julia had been impressed into the wax. He had handled many such envelopes in his time while stationed in Central Guildhall, but none of them had ever been addressed to him. There was another note tied to the outside of the envelope and he read that first. Then he grabbed a knife eagerly and opened the envelope as carefully as he could while rushing to do so. He pulled out a document, the likes of which he had only seen once before. He read it through three times before getting out of his chair and racing unceremoniously with it through the guildhall corridors.

He practically stumbled up the steps to the top floor where the Guildmaster’s office was situated. As he passed, heads turned to watch the young man rush with increasing haste as he approached Raff Cawlen’s door until Kaz was running as fast as he could in his excitement.

“Raff!” he all but shouted, opening the guildmaster’s door, “did you do this?”

Inside Master Raff Cawlens was not at his desk, but in one of several comfortable chairs taking tea with his wife, Master Emblem L'Oranne Cawlens.

"Do what?" Raff asked curiously. Kaz thrust the parchment into Raff's hands.

"Kaz, calm down," Emblem advised the young man, "and join us, won't you? What is it, dear?" she asked Raff.

"It appears Kaz has been given an assignment that requires a royal warrant of office," Raff remarked. "No, Kaz, I didn't know anything about this. I'm sure your name just came up in the usual way."

"The usual way?" Em questioned the statement. "We do not normally give newly promoted masters that sort of assignment."

"Well, the world has been rather active as of late," Raff remarked. "Between Holrany annexing that former territory of Paknilan and the Cracian difficulties with Menino over their colonies on the Southern Continent, a lot of our masters have been sent out on negotiation duties. Why just last week I had to send Pauls out to arbitrate the talks between Voland and their colony, Gemland; something about taxes, I understand. What's this assignment?" he asked as he perused the document.

"It's just a matter of settling a dispute over fishing rights between Varana and Meldan," Kaz remarked off-handedly. "Shouldn't be all that exciting, right? I mean they're both colonies of the Green Lands, so it ought to be a matter of listening to both sides and then just drawing a line on the map. Not a big fuss at all, I should think."

"Oh, Kaz!" Em sighed. "It is never that simple and this dispute goes back to before the last war when Meldan was still a colony of Crace."

"Em's right, Kaz," Raff told him. "The issue of colonial fishing rights on the Great Banks was one of the major reasons for the last war between Crace and the Green Lands. This is no small matter, but, as you say, now they are both colonies of the Green Lands. It may be different."

"I think you will find the colonists of Varana and Meldan are both quite sensitive about the matter," Em told them. "Kaz, you really should co-opt the services of a partner on this assignment. The responsibility is ultimately yours, but you do get to choose who is on your team."

"And you will need a team," Raff advised.

"Well, the accompanying document said I could have my choice of apprentices," Kaz told them.

"Forget that," Raff told him instantly. "Pick a journeyman or, better yet, a fellow master. You don't need underlings who understand even less of the situation than you do. You're going to need someone with experience who you can trust to watch your back. If you turn out to need an apprentice, there are plenty available in Varana. No need to cart one across the ocean with you."

"And, Kaz," Em added, "be very careful. Whoever assigned you wasn't doing you any favors. I think I'm going to find out who it was, in fact. It could be that your name just came up on the duty rotation as Raff thinks, but I'm just a little suspicious. The trials in Lonport were bad enough, but this may turn out to be even more complicated and difficult to deal with and if you were assigned maliciously, I want to know who's behind it."

"If it's that bad, you and Raff can assign someone else," Kaz suggested hesitantly. That was not really his preference and it was obvious, but he trusted Raff's and Em's judgment implicitly.

"We do not know that it is, Kaz," Raff told him. "Just be careful and find a good partner."

"What about you two?" Kaz asked mischievously.

"You want to co-opt the Guildmaster as an assistant?" Em chuckled.

"Well, as a partner," Kaz remarked.

"I'd love to, but there's too much going on here at the moment," Raff shook his head.

"Like what?" Kaz asked.

"Well, you've heard about what's going on between Holrany and Paknilan, right?" Raff asked.

"It's been in all the papers," Kaz smirked.

"I suppose it has," Raff nodded. "Well, you're a wayfarer. Didn't you happen to wonder how Holrany and Paknilan came to share a common border?"

Kaz thought about that. In a sense there were no borders between nations in that all human population centers were islands of stability that floated around through a sort of slow chaos referred to as the Wild. No one really knew why humans, and to a lesser extent many domesticated animals, projected a field of stability. They also did not know why the more people and domesticated animals that gathered together, the larger the created region of stability became. But scientists had taken thousands of measurements in both stable regions and the Wild and they could point out the many differences.

Stabilities were just that – stable. If a normal human were to try to leave a stability on his own, he would soon find himself back where he started from. However if that person had the hard-to-define ability that allowed a wayfarer to travel between different regions of stability, he would not come back, but instead would have kept going in the direction of his choice. Wayfarers were the glue of civilization. Without them to travel from town to town, all humanity would be divided up into small floating island-like towns, completely isolated from each other.

It was a documented fact that there was a sort of energy, referred to as Wild energy that could be found throughout the Wild and it was this energy that ebbed and flowed everywhere that defined the Wild from the stabilities. One could even measure minute amounts of Wild energy within stabilities.

Wayfarers had not only the ability to navigate through the Wild but to create and follow pathways through the Wild and to escort non-wayfarers as well. Any wayfarer could follow a path, but only a master could create one and an accomplished master could actually bend the Wild to his will to create paths that connected stabilities together. And all this was done through a process of manipulating the Wild energy though the ability called wayfaring.

The simplest form of wayfaring was to follow a path. Even many untrained wayfarers could see and follow a wayfarer's path, which was neither more nor less than a thin line of stability impressed into the Wild. A normal human in the Wild would see no difference between the Wild and stability, but in the Wild a wayfarer is capable of seeing so much more. The wind in the trees became a visible group of sparkling strands, the clouds took on a plethora of colors and yet could also become transparent and the

sky became an ornate ever-changing collection of textures. However, a wayfarer could also choose not to see such Wild differences and most, after a while, naturally tuned them out, since they could also make the air an opaque and interwoven network of insubstantial fibers.

The ability to manipulate the Wild energy also gave the most accomplished wayfarers fantastic abilities. They could warp space and shorten the distance between two points. It was said they could make the mountains rise and fall and the seas drain and this was technically true, although there were limits and it was unlikely any one wayfarer could live the several lifetimes such a task would require. But they could throw boulders, balls of fire and bolts of lightning. They could also do things that were much more powerful and subtle and, with training, they also learned when not to do such things.

Conditions in the Wild seemed to humans to be constantly in flux. Mountains could melt away in a number of years and be replaced by seas. Oceans could become forests and forests could become deserts much faster than could happen within a stability. There were also places that never changed physically and in these places there lived another sort of people who called themselves the Kenlenta. The Kenlenta, or Ken for short, were believed to be closely related to humans biologically, but where a human would eventually sicken and die if exposed to Wild conditions for too long, a common Kenlien could only thrive in the Wild and would, in fact, suffer greatly were he to enter a human stability.

Among the Kenlenta, however, were elders, men and women who were trained in an art they called magic. Through magic they could enter, at need, a human stability, although that was among the least of what an accomplished elder might do. The elders ruled the Kenlenta and their magic also used the Wild energy, although the rules and usages were different.

Kaz was still thinking about the problem Raff had given him. Human nations had no true borders, that was true, but they did have areas of influence. Human towns had a tendency to move, but for reasons unknown, related towns usually stayed near each other. Some orbited each other in a path that took years or even decade to complete and others orbited larger population centers. For the most part nations, socio-political groupings bound by a common government, seemed to stay together in a sort of circle of influence.

Sometimes towns might wander from the region of one nation and into another, but such occurrences were rare and maybe happened only once or twice a year world-wide, but, they did happen, although almost always at the outer reaches of a nation's circle of influence. This was where most people thought the border of a nation was and perhaps in one sense it was, but in another sense, nothing that moved about so fluidly could really be considered a border. But Kaz understood it to mean there were Holran stabilities that were now much nearer to Paknilani stabilities as distances were measured through the Wild.

"I can't believe that many Holran towns could have moved several hundred miles," Kaz commented. "For one thing it's faster than Senopolis is moving and so far as I know that's the highest velocity any stability has ever achieved."

Senopolis was a city that had once been a part of the ancient Tasan Empire, but for some reason had started moving through the wild and had circled the entire world several times since it had started.

"Did someone forge a new, very short path?" Kaz asked after a bit more thought.

"It would take more than one path to make much of a difference," Raff pointed out, "and our Kenlenta friends wouldn't have appreciated our forging that many new paths through their territory."

“Well, no, and I suppose it would have been hard to keep the work of that many masters a secret,” Kaz agreed, “but doesn’t Yug usually act as a buffer state between Holrany and Paknilan?”

“Ah, now there you’re getting closer,” Raff told him.

“Holrany annexed Yug?” Kaz asked. “That sounds less likely than a hundred new paths.”

“They didn’t annex the whole country, but they did make a deal with the Yugians,” Raff told him. “They sort of rented part of the nation.”

“The part near Paknilan,” Kaz concluded. “Must be expensive renting a country.”

“Especially when it’s a ninety-nine year lease,” Raff nodded. “And as I said, it was only a part of the nation, one city and a set of associated towns, but it gives them a port on the Inner Sea.”

“That puts them close but there’s still water between them,” Kaz pointed out, “or has that changed too?”

“No, that part of the Inner Sea is as stable as anything is within the Wild,” Raff replied, “but they’ve used the port as a staging area of small colonies along the outer perimeter of Paknilan’s range. It seems they have this notion that if they put enough Holrans there, the area will gravitate to Holrany.”

“Will it?” Kaz asked.

“You got me,” Raff shrugged. “I doubt it, but I don’t claim to know everything. I think it is more likely that their little colonies will roam slowly around in Paknilan territory until they find some sort of equilibrium. Of course they are not very large colonies; none are more than two hundred men and women, mostly men. If you really want to know what I’m thinking is that this is some new form of military posturing and that after a while they will start to annex various Paknilani towns.

“Paknilan thinks that too,” Raff continued, “which is why they are making such a fuss. They are also making threats, but so far the Holrans are just peacefully creating new small colonies, so we wait to see what happens next.”

“Keeping the Guild neutral,” Kaz commented.

“Exactly,” Raff nodded, “but that’s hardly all that’s going on at the moment. Elder Leraxa is losing control of the Ken Nation again in spite of Guild support. There are no less than three factions all vying to put their own candidate for Chief Elder in her place. I imagine she’s really sorry she started this whole experiment in government.”

“She can’t say you didn’t warn her,” Kaz pointed out.

“Kaz,” Em told him, “there are some things we would rather be wrong about. Leraxa, in spite of everything, has turned out to be a good friend of the Guild. Not all of her opponents are well disposed toward us. And then there is the new Highpriest in Menino. He seems intent on reuniting the Church of Meni and from his sermons we suspect he has an old-fashioned crusade in mind. He may not have the power he would have a millennium ago, but Crace still jumps when he tells them to and even the priests of the Green Lands respect him. That’s a fair portion he might control should he decide to war against the “infidel,” and we are not sure which infidel he has in mind.”

“Well, at least Corisa seems to have finally ceased attacks on Nillon,” Kaz pointed out.

“Yes, I think your friend, Mu Feng, has finally decided the Nillonese have paid sufficiently for their attempt on his life,” Raff agreed. “Of course his war with Nillon did have the benefit of keeping Corisa from attempting to annex Eastern Kharasia again. Now that the Corisans have stopped harassing Nillon, we need to consider whether they will turn their attentions toward Khatasia or Salasia.”

“They could go south into Tyan and Hochimar,” Kaz suggested, “or they could just stay put for a while. War is expensive you know.”

“I know,” Raff nodded, “but Corisa has been at war more than it hasn’t in the last two millennia. It’s another wait and see situation. And those are just the big problems, Kaz. So much as I’d love to walk away from all this, I can’t.”

“You suckered yourself into this position, you know,” Kaz chuckled. “You didn’t have to be Guildmaster.”

“Yes, I did,” Raff argued lightly. “You were there. There really wasn’t another alternative. Still I’m not always shackled to Central Guildhall. We get out as much as any other upper level masters and we are due again. If I hadn’t been forced to send Pauls off, we might have been able to join you.”

“You need to find someone else you can trust to hold this place down other than Master Forrent,” Kaz told him, somewhat more seriously. “He’s not the only capable master who doesn’t want your job.”

“True,” Raff nodded, “but most of them prefer the life of a freelancer and I need to wait for them to come to Taundon or at least get close enough to call them here. Freelancers are allowed to refuse a summons, you know.”

“I know,” Kaz grinned. “I’m looking forward to my own freelancer status, but that’s at least a decade off.”

“Normally at your age that ought to be two decades,” Em reminded him. “But you have been very lucky and if that luck holds out, perhaps this job will halve the time of your remaining indenture to the Guild.”

Two

Kazani was not being given the bum’s rush out of Taundon, which he found refreshing for a change.

Normally when an important job was assigned, a wayfarer was told to pack his bags even as he was headed for the door. This time all the advice was to stay put and do his research into the matter first, to take a few days to assemble his team, but Kaz knew Raff and Em were right that he did not need to drag a handful of apprentices with him across the Dark Ocean. But finding a colleague interested in the job proved difficult.

Kaz spent the rest of that day talking to various master wayfarers and one by one they all wished him well, but seemed to have pressing assignments of their own. He was beginning to consider looking through the journeymen. If he couldn't have a colleague, a well-trained aide-de-camp might do, but as he made his way to the Office of Personnel to request a list of available candidates he spotted an old and dear friend just checking in to Central Guildhall.

"Chanya!" Kaz called out.

Master Chanya Sanai, like Kaz, had been born on the Southern Continent. Her tribe lived thousands of miles from where Kaz's had. Although she would have seemed tall among the Sanai of Northern Ronesia, she stood an inch shorter than the average Green Landswoman, a height differential she might easily have made up for had she let her curly black hair grow naturally, but she forcefully straightened it to conform with Green Landish fashion. She was garbed, in a heavy woolen dress, more fashionable in Varana than the Green Lands at the moment and cut similarly to clothing from Crace.

Cracian fashions were popular in Varana whereas they were usually disdained in the Green Lands proper, a symptom of the vestigial coolness between the two great Powers that remained following their war of almost a generation earlier. That Chanya chose to wear such a dress was not intended as a slap in the face for the Green Lands in general but as an unofficial reminder that she was a wayfarer and therefore not bound by convention.

"Kazani!" Chanya called back and raced over to give the younger man a warm hug and a quick kiss. They stepped back, not quite letting go of each other. "Are they keeping you busy here?"

"They were," Kaz laughed. "Now they're going to keep me busy in Varana for a while."

"Really?" Chanya asked, sounding slightly disappointed. "I'm just getting back from there. I was hoping we might have a few days together. You're leaving soon, then?"

Kaz quickly shelved the idea of recruiting Chanya. If she had just completed the long voyage from Varana, it wouldn't be fair to ask her to undertake another so soon. "As soon as I can find an assistant or a colleague," he replied. "None of my potential colleagues seem to be available, although I think one claimed he had to wash his cat."

"What?" Chanya asked in disbelief.

"Well, not quite," Kaz admitted, "but the excuses were getting pretty thin this afternoon and I hate to say it, but I suspect they wouldn't be the same if I asked again this evening. You would think I had drawn the short straw to oblivion rather than a plum assignment."

"What plum assignment have you drawn, Kaz?" Chanya asked interestedly.

"I'll tell you over dinner," Kaz suggested.

"If you're packing for a trip to Varana," Chanya countered, "you don't have time to waste over

dinner conversation.” She deftly steered him back toward his office

“Oh, I haven’t even started packing yet,” Kaz laughed as they walked down the long hallway. “It’s been suggested I spend some time boning up on the subject, although that hardly seems necessary. A stack of books and related reports were delivered to my office this afternoon. I figure I can browse through them during the voyage.”

“Take your time?” Chanya asked. “That doesn’t sound like the Wayfarers’ Guild to me. Normally the message is, ‘You were three days late a week ago before the problem came up. Get hopping!’”

“Nice for a change, isn’t it?” Kaz chuckled.

“Kaz?” Chanya asked sternly. “What have you gotten yourself into?”

“Oh, nothing really,” Kaz shrugged. “They just want me to moderate some negotiations over fishing rights between Varana and Meldan. Should be a piece of cake, right? What’s wrong?”

Chanya had stopped in her tracks and was staring at Kaz incredulously. “Are you out of your mind?” she demanded. “You have to be crazy taking a job like that!”

“Well, I’m not a freelancer,” Kaz shrugged. “It’s not as if I could refuse, but what’s so wrong? I mean fishing rights. It’s nothing!”

“Nothing but the casus belli of the last war between Crace and the Green Lands, you fool!” she told him heatedly. “Any treaty you broker is going to be of supreme interest to Royal Crace. You do know that Crace still claims the Great Banks every bit as much as she did before the war.”

“I do?” Kaz blurted, “I mean, they do? I mean...” he trailed off.

“Oh dear,” Chanya sighed, “It’s a good thing I haven’t unpacked yet.”

“Huh?” Kaz responded, suddenly feeling very stupid.

“I’m going with you,” Chanya told him.

“You are?” Kaz asked.

“Of course I am, idiot,” Chanya told him, although there was a note of exasperated warmth in her voice. “You’re going to need a lot of help and at least I’ve been to Varana recently. Oh, yes, you’re going to need all the help you can get. Let’s get to that office of yours and see what sorts of literature you’ve been given to read. Oh you were right about one thing, though.”

“Really?” Kaz asked. “What?”

“You’re going to be reading it during the voyage,” Chanya told him. “In fact I don’t think you’ll have time for the morning paper for the next month or two.”

Chanya spent an hour looking at the reading material Kaz had been supplied with and tossed half of it aside. “This is mostly redundant,” she told him. “There’s nothing in that pile you won’t find in what’s left. Are you still living with Raff and Em? I wish I had time to see them, but I’m just glad I caught you before you had a chance to blunder into this on your own.”

“Gee thanks,” Kaz told her sourly.

“Oh, Kaz, you know what I mean,” Chanya told him. “You’re one of the brightest men I know, but you forget sometimes that you aren’t the only genius in the Guild and I think this time some other bright troublemaker has it in for you. If I ever figure out who it is, I’m going to make sure he has enough trouble of his own but right now we don’t have that luxury. Anyway, you should go home and pack, then come back here. We’ll stay in the guildhall this evening, I did manage to snag a room even if my bag is still on the floor over there. We’ll leave with the first party going our way in the morning. I’ll make the arrangements.”

To Chanya’s delight she had the time to have her clothes cleaned and pressed overnight and as she expected there was a small party waiting to be escorted to Haristol at the Guild satellite office in Stonegate Burrow.

One of the niceties of Central Guildhall was that masters were not required to load their own wagons. While she and Kaz were eating a quick breakfast in one of the dining halls, apprentices were putting their luggage aboard a long black wagon, so as soon as she and Kaz were done, they were able to just walk out to the front gate, step on board the wagon and leave.

“Did we have to leave before sunrise?” Kaz grumbled.

Chanya laughed wickedly. She was pleased he was grumbling now because the previous day he had been entirely too cheerful and cocky about this assignment. Now that he was feeling sour, she knew he would be far more cautious about stepping into the trouble someone had set him up for.

Had this all been a setup? She wondered about that. It had all the markings of a trap, she had to admit, but while Kaz had been taken in, it was really not a very clever trap. Chanya was certain Kaz would have seen the pitfall before it was too late. But it did not seem like a random assignment either. The job was too complex for a newly promoted master wayfarer. Kaz had only been a master for a little over a year. This was the sort of job only the most experienced veterans should have been considered for. Someone was playing a nasty trick and he was not worrying about how many people got hurt either. Mishandling this negotiation could well leave half the world at war with one another.

“The sun is up, Kaz,” Chanya replied patiently. “Just not over the rooftops yet.”

“I don’t think it’s shining on the rooftops either,” Kaz argued, but when Chanya refused to take the bait, he dropped it and they rode on in silence until he spoke again. “So what sort of party are we escorting?” Kaz asked.

“We’ll be seeing some colonists to New Ebor,” Chanya replied. “Well, actually we only need to get them to Haristol. Once on board ship they become the responsibility of the shipboard wayfarer.”

“But we’re going to New Ebor as well,” Kaz pointed out.

“Right,” Chanya nodded, “so while our contract with them officially ends with their safe arrival at the Haristol guildhall, they will likely seek us out on board ship as well.”

“That doesn’t bother me,” Kaz replied. “Travelers almost never bother me. My fellow wayfarers, on the other hand, are a different matter.”

“Some travelers get to me,” Chanya admitted. “The ones who think they know more about wayfaring than I do really bother me sometimes. It isn’t that they might actually have learned something I don’t know. There’s a lot about wayfaring nobody knows yet. I’m talking about the ones who don’t listen to your warnings and go do what they like as though they own the world; they are the ones who act like they left their brains home in a jar.”

“That sort generally gets into trouble,” Kaz agreed, “but while I can’t say I love getting them out of the messes they get themselves into, I do enjoy the fun of telling them off after it is over. And you know? Some of them turn out to be the best tippers.”

“You accept gratuities?” Chanya asked, showing surprise.

“It’s allowed,” Kaz replied defensively.

“Well, sure it’s allowed, but most of the travelers we escort can’t really afford to tip us,” Chanya pointed out. “They’re spending everything they have just to get somewhere for a new chance in life.”

“Oh, I would never take their money,” Kaz shook his head emphatically. “I’m talking about the merchants we escort sometimes. They can certainly afford to give us something a little extra. Even then I don’t accept unless they’ve done something monumentally stupid while under my guidance.”

“Such as?” Chanya asked.

“Well, the most common error is getting impatient and hiring a local to escort them to their destination,” Kaz explained. “Very few local wayfarers are trained well enough to find more than the next town or two so generally all that happens is that a fool pays for a full trip only to get stranded in some small village. One such case, though, turned out to be something worse.” Kaz shuddered involuntarily at the memory.

“What happened?” Chanya asked hesitantly.

“This was just last year in Zagran, just the other side of Paknilan,” Kaz explained. “Evidently, three or four local wayfarers had found a more profitable means of making money than merely stealing it from their hapless clients, although they did that too. Turns out they had tricked over two dozen travelers in the area and sold them into slavery. I found them working at the bottom of a silver mine, the men anyway. There were quite a few women doing work of another sort. I let them have the slavers.”

Chanya nodded silently. She knew full well what sort of work the women had been put too, and how little of the slavers were likely to be left by the time the women were done with them, but that was nothing they did not deserve. “What about the local wayfarers?” she asked quietly.

Kaz was silent for a long time, but finally replied. “I taught them a lesson.”

“Huh?”

“Well, not successfully,” Kaz replied. “I tried teaching them how to fly.”

“Oh,” Chanya gulped. “You were too nice.”

“I figured they might have a chance to learn,” Kaz replied somberly.

“Not much of one,” Chanya shook her head.

“I was not feeling particularly charitable,” Kaz replied and then lapsed into silence until their arrival in Stonegate.

Three

“No merchants this time?” Kaz asked the dispatcher in the Stonegate guildhall.

“There haven’t been many merchants making the crossing in the last couple of years,” the dispatcher told him. “You have to be making a bundle to be able to afford the double taxation.”

“Double taxation?” Kaz asked and admitted, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple,” the man told him. “Her Majesty collects a tax on all goods exported from the Green Lands, right?”

“So I’ve heard,” Kaz admitted.

“Right,” the man nodded. “Well, the colonial legislature, or whatever they call themselves...”

“Colonial Congress,” Kaz supplied.

“Uh huh,” the dispatcher confirmed, “well they exact a tax on all items being imported into Varana, so everything gets taxed twice before it can be sold. There aren’t a lot willing to put up with that.”

“I understood that a lot of cargo was sold directly from the deck of the ships,” Kaz remarked, “and so not taxed until after the sale.”

“That’s great if you own the ship,” the dispatcher told him. “Anyone else needs to take their goods ashore before they can start selling.”

“Interesting way of bolstering the economy,” Kaz replied dryly. “So who are we escorting?”

“Prospective colonists,” came the reply. “Four married couples, one with two children.”

“I imagine we’ll need a second wagon,” Kaz replied. “Too bad. I was hoping to sit with Chanya the whole way.”

“Ah, the pretty one? Can’t say as I blame you. She’s stopped in here several times before and always causes heads to turn. Oh, I also have a cargo of mail for you. There are a couple of boys loading it up for you right now, but I have a special packet for you. Keep this locked up in your cabin when on board.”

“Money?” Kaz asked.

“Not likely,” the dispatcher laughed. “It’s Kenlienta mail. It’s going to some colony of theirs in Varana. Well, it’s not part of Varana, obviously, but I hear there are Varanan towns all around it.”

“Skethit?” Kaz asked.

The dispatcher looked at the label on the packet. “You’ve heard of the place then?”

“I’ve been there,” Kaz replied. “It’s a Kenlientan scientific colony. They built it near a coal mine, actually. You know those new steam engines? That’s where they were invented.”

“I’ve heard about them, but I’ve also heard they’re very expensive and not as powerful as most want them to be,” the dispatcher remarked.

“They’re getting better,” Kaz told him, “but they are very expensive, I’ll grant you that. There’s a mill north of here in Pollase that bought one and they seem to be very pleased with it. I imagine we’ll be seeing those engines more and more in the next decade or two.”

“Kaz,” Chanya called to him from the outer doorway. “We’re waiting for you. The day’s not getting any younger, you know.”

“Be right there,” Kaz promised. “Well, I’ll just take that packet and be on my way.”

“I’ll need your signature on a few pieces of paper first,” the dispatcher told him, holding the Kenlientan mail packet out of Kaz’s reach.

“Of course,” Kaz sighed. Somehow when he was younger and following Raff and Em across the world the paperwork eluded Kaz’s notice. Raff must have signed his name a hundred times or more, but Kaz did not remember a single instance. However, paper was the fuel of the Wayfarer’s Guild’s bureaucracy. Nothing of value changed hands and no travelers were included in a party without several signatures on as many forms. Kaz plucked a waiting quill from its holder, dipped it in the nearby inkwell and signed his name. Then he looked around for some blotting sand, but the dispatcher was holding out a thick, dull gray sheet of paper.

“The hall master prefers blotting paper,” he told Kaz.

“That works too,” Kaz admitted and accepted the sheet and used it to absorb the excess ink before going on to sign the other documents.

Finally, Kaz left the hall and found his and Chanya's charges were already on board the two wagons. Wagons they may have been, but they had been built with sturdy, almost flat canvas roofs and walls to provide the passengers with shade and shelter from rain and snow. At this time of year the chance of needed shelter from the snow was more likely than from the sun, but today the sun was bright and the air crisp. Chanya indicated he should drive the one in front, so Kaz climbed up, introduced himself to the people inside and finally sat down on the driver's bench.

"How long before we cross into the Wild, Master Basan?" one of the men asked a few minutes later. It was the most commonly asked question of a wayfarer, Kaz had found, and his answer was the most commonly given.

"We just did, Mister Williams," Kaz replied. "Only wayfarers can see the difference, though.

"I see it," one of the children, a boy, announced. "Taundon looks like it's in a big bubble!"

"That it does," Kaz laughed. "So maybe you'll be a wayfarer when you grow up."

"Really?" the boy asked.

"Maybe," Kaz repeated, "and only if you want to be. Why don't you sit up here with me for a while? What's your name?"

"Henry," the boy replied as he climbed forward and sat beside Kaz.

"Well, Henry," Kaz suggested. "Why don't you tell me what you see over there?" The boy described a tree that appeared to have a bright orange, almost flame-like aura and then a dozen other objects Kaz pointed to.

Kaz not only listened to the answers but examined the lad using a wayfarer's senses. "Your son has some talent as a wayfarer," he told the boy's parents that evening. "I can't say if it's enough that he might be a master wayfarer some day, masters are few and far between, but there are many journeymen who make a good living for themselves. Some of them earn a master's rank by showing an aptitude for organization and leadership. Many so-called hall-masters are actually journeymen."

"I'm not sure if I want Henry to be a wayfarer," his father replied.

"Well, just because he has the talent," Kaz replied, "he doesn't actually have to be a wayfarer, and I was not trying to recruit the lad, but he does have sufficient talent to get himself in big trouble."

"What do you mean?" Henry's mother asked worriedly.

"There's a game children sometimes play, especially teen-aged boys," Kaz told her. "They'll go to the edge of town and step out into the wild. They keep walking until they automatically come back. The one who stays out the longest wins. Henry wouldn't come back unless he turned around and did so intentionally. And he might, without realizing it, take the other boys with him. Without training he, and they, could get lost in the Wild.

"Until now I suppose you've always lived in Taundon, right?" Kaz went on. "I thought as much. So he probably hasn't been near the edge of the stability very often."

"Never," the man replied. "We lived in Mirlington Burrow."

“Near the center of the city,” Kaz nodded. “Taundon is the largest city in the world. Certainly none of the colonial cities are that large or even close. Henry is going to have more chance to come near the edge of whatever stability you move to. The guild offers some free training for such children. It’s not particularly extensive, but it does make them aware of the dangers and how to find their ways back home should they somehow wander over the town boundary. I can even start him off while we are travelling together if you like. It won’t make him a trained wayfarer, but it will mean he’ll be a bit safer.”

Henry’s father started to shake his head against the idea, but his mother quickly nodded and told Kaz, “Thank you. We would appreciate that.”

As Kaz promised, Henry’s training was not extensive and was mostly confined to talking about the Wild, describing wayfarer paths and how to use them to find his way home. Kaz was careful to stress the dangers of the Wild and the creatures that lived within it, but none of those creatures were obliging enough to appear during the next two days.

They were almost midway between Taundon and Haristol and approaching a small town when they spotted several Kenlienta waiting on one side of the path. “Please stay here in the wagon,” he instructed his charges, hearing Chanya do the same. Then he got down and together with Chanya went to greet the Ken. “Change is life,” he intoned formally.

“And Life is change,” was the equally formal response.

“My name is Kazani Basan and my friend is Chanya Sanai,” Kaz introduced them.

“The son of the great Raufanax?” the Ken spokesman asked, betraying some surprise. Kaz nodded in response to the question. The Kenlientan man did not have a living staff or any other sort of plant being kept alive by his own will, so Kaz decided he was not an Elder, at least not officially. “We are honored by your presence. This bodes well.”

“You’ve heard of me?” Kaz was surprised. Raff and Emblem Cawlens had some many years earlier saved millions of Ken from the ravages of a plague by rushing medicines around the world. Kaz had not even been born at the time.

“Through your father,” the Ken spokesman admitted.

“Of course,” Kaz murmured. “How may we be of assistance?” He knew the Ken would not have been waiting by the wayfarer’s road without good reason.

“I am Farulatix,” the man replied. Kenlienta did not always share their names with humans. That he did so early in the conversation, by Kaz’s estimation, exposed the man’s great need. “I was sent by my elder to find a master wayfarer.”

“You found two of us,” Kaz told him.

Farulatix nodded. “Elder Danela requests your aide in a matter of some grave urgency. Our town, Rehava is in great peril.”

“All right,” Kaz nodded. “Please allow us to escort our charges to the nearest human town and we will join you as soon as possible.”

Farulatix nodded and replied. "I will wait for you here."

The next town was, indeed, just two miles away and soon Kaz and Chanya were walking north with Farulatix and his fellows.

Four

Kaz privately thought Rehava looked like every other Ken town he had ever seen, in that it was totally unique and unlike any other Ken town. Rehava was a small town with no more than one hundred buildings, nearly all of which showed signs of ongoing redesign and construction. That was the Ken way of life. Every day they made some permanent change to their dwellings and other buildings. The change, Kaz and Chanya knew, could be small, and in bad weather might only consist of some carving or painting inside, although they arrived in Rehava in unseasonably warm weather. It had snowed a week earlier, but there were no signs of that here now.

What struck Kaz about Rehava most was that in spite of all the ongoing construction work, no one was actually working as they entered the town and that was unusual in the extreme. He had never seen a Ken town so motionless and quiet. Farulatix led them through the town and then almost back out until they were by a large pond on the north edge of Rehava.

The pond looked wrong. The water was green with algae in a season when algae did not normally grow. There were Ken townsfolk near the edge of the pond, but they were staying back from the green water itself. "Kaz, that pond has an aura of stability," Chanya remarked as they approached a woman holding a tall staff of wood out of which a small branch grew with fresh greenery that Kaz recognized as cedar.

"Yes, that is our problem," the woman replied. Like nearly all Kenlenta she was tall and thin. She kept her graying hair short which exposed her long pointed ears, the physical feature that most differentiated the Ken from their human cousins. "I am Danela. Thank you for coming."

"When the Ken call for help, it is our honor to respond," Kaz assured her and introduced himself and Chanya. "What happened here? Is this some sort of human pollution from upstream?"

"If only that were the case," Elder Danela replied. "It might not be any easier to deal with but at least this curse would not have been self-inflicted."

“What do you mean?” Chanya asked curiously.

“You know that Ken settlements are often specialized in nature?” Danela asked. Chanya nodded. Both she and Kaz had learned how the Ken often devoted whole towns to healing or scientific research. Others consisted almost entirely of farmers or herdsman. “Well, we have a large number of researchers into the natural sciences here.

“You were right to ask if this problem was of human origin, Kazani,” Danela continued. “There has been a problem in the last few years concerning leaks of human wastes into our ground water and random bits of stability have appeared, albeit rarely, in Kenlientan settlements. I understand our own waste products have been measurably weakening some stabilities as well. In a sense that is why we have this problem but your people are not the immediate cause. Ours are.”

“How?” Kaz asked.

“We have been trying to find a solution to the growing stability problem and it was thought that if we could create and control a small stability we might understand it better and thereby be able to deal with it,” Danela explained.

“So you created an alga with a stability aura?” Kaz asked. “That’s new.”

“And very dangerous too, it seems,” Danela replied. “This reservoir is our water supply and now it is not only unusable to us, but harmful as well. There are over two dozen children and adults suffering from stability sickness and we have only rain water to drink.”

“Well, we can cure the stability sickness, I should think,” Chanya replied.

“We can?” Kaz asked.

“I think so,” Chanya replied confidently. “I’ve had to do something like that once before. It’s not entirely unlike dealing out a force thrust when we are forced to fight, but it is done more gently and not quite so completely. Even Kenlienta need a little stability in them, after all.”

“You’ll have to show me how,” Kaz decided, remembering just how devastating a force thrust could be. Once, in Corisa, he had seen Emblem deal a force thrust to a man. In one moment he went from being alive and well to dead with all the life literally driven out of his body. “I’m more concerned as to how we might clean up this reservoir. If any of this algae gets out and into other water supplies this is going to be a very large problem all over the world.”

“It is, indeed,” Danela agreed somberly.

“Let’s see to your sick ones first,” Chanya decided. “Then we can see about the algae problem. But,” she pause as she thought of something, “don’t you have any *calsadrist*?”

“Calsadrist?” Kaz asked. “What that?”

“It’s a very rare medicine,” Danela explained. “We use it to cure stability sickness, but we only had enough to cure five people. Stability sickness is not very common, after all and the medicine is very expensive.”

“Then we’ll just have to do it the hard way,” Chanya replied practically.

It took the rest of the day and deep into the night to heal all the Kenlenta who had been over-exposed to stability. Curing them was something many Ken Elders should have been able to do, but healing magic was not one of Danela’s skills and it had not occurred to her to call on other Kenlenta simply because she was dealing with a stability. “Naturally the Guild of Wayfarers came to mind,” she explained.

“Naturally,” Kaz agreed tiredly after finishing with the last of the ill. He was fast asleep in a large chair a few seconds later.

The next morning brought Kaz and Chanya back to the reservoir where they tried a number of possible remedies. “If this were a normal small stability,” he remarked, “I would have no problem dispelling it. But this is being naturally generated by the algae. To dispel the stability aura you have to kill the algae and try though I might, it keeps getting ahead of me. Just how was this stuff produced?”

It turned out that the algae was not bred by natural means, but was, instead enhanced by Kenlentan magic. “It’s the only way we could get it to grow during the winter,” one of the Ken researchers explained.

“Maybe you should have restricted this to one of your laboratories or inside a greenhouse,” Kaz suggested. “It would have been easier to contain and a lot smaller as well. The problem here is the magical element in the algae causes it to grow back as fast as I try to kill it. I’m a fairly powerful wayfarer, but I cannot affect the entire pond at once. That’s the only way we’re going to clear all this stuff out – by killing it nearly all at once.”

“We could try finding an algacide to introduce into the reservoir,” the scientist suggested.

“It will have to be safe for Kenlenta,” Danela told him firmly.

“I think a team of a dozen good wayfarers or more should be able to handle it,” Kaz opined. “Chanya and I don’t have the time to wait for them, but we can send word back to Raff and Em in Taundon. In the meantime I think Chanya and I can produce a supply of fresh, safe water. We’ll need all the barrels you have and I think I can create a cistern as well. Yes, that should work.”

He walked back to the town square and focused on what he needed to do. Kaz had some training in Ken magic and he used that to dig a large round and deep pit. He could have done the same thing using wayfaring and that would have meant shoving all the dirt and rocks out of the way. Magic was different; he used it to encourage the dirt and rocks to move around each other until a sufficiently large pit was created. About halfway through the process Elder Danela understood what Kaz was doing and stepped in to help out.

When they were finished, the pit was thirty feet across and over fifty feet deep. “Okay. Stand back,” Kaz instructed everyone in the vicinity. “I have one more thing to do.” He concentrated and used the Wild energy in the area to heat the sides of the pit until they became molten and fused together as thick glassy walls. The heat rose from the pit volcano-like and the glass inside could be heard to crackle and pop as it cooled rapidly. The sides would still leak he knew, so he concentrated in a different manner and used the energy to encourage the glass to refuse back together as it cooled. Finally, he had a deep pit that would hold water for as long as it took to evaporate naturally.

“We still cannot carry the water here,” Danela commented.

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Kaz chuckled back. “We’ll create a trench between here and the reservoir and let the water flow in on its own. Chanya and I can purify the stability out of the water as it flows and this should be a sufficient water supply until The Guild can get enough wayfarers here to clean out the reservoir or for your own researchers to find a safe way to kill the algae. Whichever comes first, I suppose, although I think we’ll want wayfarers to make sure there is no residual stability in your reservoir.”

“Then what do we need the barrels for?” Danela asked.

“Still more water,” Kaz shrugged, unwilling to admit he thought of the barrels before the cistern, which by itself would support the town for a long time to come. “Come to think of it, I probably should have built stairs into the sides of the cistern so you could walk down to the water level.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Danela smiled at him. “We can lower buckets into the pit if need be. And I think it is my turn to dig the trench between here and the reservoir.”

“Okay,” Kaz nodded, “and it might be a good idea to put a fence around this, just to keep people from falling in.”

It took all day and night to fill the cistern and the barrels and, even taking turns purifying the water, both Kaz and Chanya were exhausted by the time it was done and so stayed over in Rehava one more night before rushing back to join their party of travelers.

“My honor guard and I would be pleased to accompany you back to your path,” Danela offered as Kaz and Chanya prepared for their trek back to the south.

“Thank you, Elder,” Kaz replied politely. “It’s an honor, but I think we’ll be able to travel more swiftly on our own. I’ll get word back to Raff in Taundon as soon as I can and hopefully there should be someone to scope the situation out here within the week.”

“That was very strange,” Chanya remarked once they were on their way, walking briskly along a Kenlenta road headed more or less in the direction they needed to go. While wayfarer paths were normally packed dirt roads at best, mostly worn into the earth by constant usage, the Ken paved their roads with hard stone cobbles, in much the same way city streets were paved in human stabilities.

The sunny skies had given way to a flat gray sky that had Kaz worried it might start to snow again anytime now and he was anxious to find their path. “What was?” he asked, looking up at the clouds.

“Well, that whole thing with the algae,” she replied. “Something just didn’t seem right. Why would they create a plant that had a stability field and why put it in the reservoir?”

“That’s a good point,” Kaz admitted, wondering why he had not thought of it himself. “Why didn’t you ask Elder Danela about it?”

“It didn’t seem polite,” Chanya admitted. “She seemed very embarrassed about it and we had to ask several questions to get her to explain hardly anything about it at all.”

“So what do you think really happened?” Kaz asked. “If they thought humans had done this to them somehow, I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t have just said so.”

"I agree there," Chanya nodded, "but I can't help think there was something else going on."

"They may have just been embarrassed an experiment had gone so awry," Kaz told her. "They probably did create the algae in a greenhouse but somehow it got into the reservoir."

"Magic can create a small stability if that's all they needed," Chanya retorted. "and they wouldn't have had any trouble dispelling it afterward."

"Heh!" Kaz chuckled. "Ken scientists aren't any different from their human counterparts you know. Sometimes they do things just to see if something theoretical can be done in practice. If not, then the theory might be bad, so it's not as reckless as it might sound. Also I think creating an alga with a small stability field was a good idea. Sure, you can do the same thing with Ken magic, but not easily and it has to be constantly maintained. The algae kept the field going on its own, so less effort was needed to study the effect. I think what happened is that they did not expect it to get out of control."

"Well, that ought to go without saying," Chanya agreed, "unless..."

"Unless what?" Kaz asked.

"Well, no, it wouldn't be that," Chanya replied.

"Am I going to have to guess?" Kaz asked.

"Well, what if someone did it on purpose?" Chanya asked.

"A human?"

"No," Chanya shook her head, "One of the Ken researchers."

"Why?" Kaz asked.

"You know there are Ken who blame humans for the stability incursions that have been going on," she reminded him. "Like that one we saw a few years ago on the way to Marnas Nokit. It just seems to me that if one of the researchers wanted to foster anti-human sentiment, having an accident that caused stability damage to Kenlenta might make them think the humans were behind it after all."

"It doesn't make sense to me," Kaz decided. "Elder Danela was very quick to admit it was done by her own people."

"I'm not saying she was in on it or that it had worked," Chanya told him. "And maybe I'm just being suspicious. It just seems odd to me they would try something like that with their own water supply. It's obvious we didn't get the whole story, although it could be Danela doesn't know it either or she was just being polite and not blaming anyone without adequate proof."

"Hmm, now there you have a possibility," Kaz admitted. "I hadn't thought of that." They both knew from experience that the Ken considered the mention of anyone in connection with a crime was tantamount to an indictment. If Elder Danela was not ready to make a firm accusation it was all too likely she might not even present the poisoning of Rehava's water supply as a possible crime. And it was all too likely she would have just presented it as a situation to be dealt with, which was what she had done. Elder Coraxis had no problem referring to the deaths of the Bridgers as a crime."

“It was obviously murder, Kaz,” Chanya told him. “There was no way Sarah Bridger or her baby could have fired a gun through her window to kill herself and her child whether on purpose or by accident. And you may recall he denied that Peter Bridger could have done it either even though he was the only obvious suspect at the time.”

“You have a point there,” Kaz admitted.

“And Elder Coraxis is a regional elder and a member of the Ken Nation Council of Elders. Danela is just a local elder,” Chanya pointed out.

“Hmm, yeah,” Kaz nodded. “It’s hard to remember they all have the same title even though they have such a complex system of rank. Still they live with it and they all know where they stand with each other. It works for them. So are you going to put your suspicions in your report?”

“I’ll make a note of it,” Chanya told him. “Do you want to write up your own report or just co-author with me?”

“Raff will tell me I should write it up for myself and not rely on you to do it for me,” Kaz replied. “He’s right.”

“Since when have I ever let you take advantage of me like that?” Chanya countered. Kaz kept his mouth shut. He did remember one occasion on which she had lied on his behalf and he had allowed it. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll write the rough draft of the basic report and you polish it and then we’ll each write our own cover letters to go with it. That’s fair isn’t it?”

“Well, this once,” Kaz shrugged. “I have a feeling we’re going to have a lot of reports to write before we get back to Taundon.”

Five

Two more days of travel brought Kaz and Chanya’s party to the hill that overlooked Haristol and its deep but long and narrow harbor. The hill was steep so the path switched back and forth three times on its way, giving the travelers ample time to look down into the Haristol stability where the thriving seaport surged with a life of its own.

“Something seems wrong down there,” Chanya called ahead to Kaz from her wagon.

Kaz took a look for himself and saw dozens of small boats in the harbor all around the ships that were anchored away from the docks. “Looks a bit busier than normal,” he agreed. “I suppose we’ll find out what’s happening when we get there.”

They continued on into town where the activity on the streets also seemed odd to both Chanya and Kaz. Haristol was always a busy city, but there was something grimly quiet about the bustle of activity they observed on their way to the local guildhall.

Haristol’s guildhall was larger than most, but it was also a very busy hall with barely enough room for the wayfarers passing through, so travelers had to be boarded in various establishments around town at the expense of the Guild of Wayfarers. Kaz and Chanya checked their charges through the front desk of the guildhall and told them they would probably meet again on the ship to New Ebor before allowing them to be escorted off by a pair of apprentices.

As Wayfarers, Kaz and Chanya normally got their own rooms but as the desk clerk explained, “We’re really crowded here this week, I don’t have any more single rooms available. You’re going to have to double up.”

“The Guild doesn’t normally encourage unmarried wayfarers to sleep together,” Kaz remarked dryly.

“The Guild doesn’t forbid it either,” the clerk told him with a wink, carefully hidden from Chanya. “Look I can either room you two together or with members of your own sex. Your choice.”

“Do you have a suite available?” Chanya asked, raising her voice just enough to be heard by other nearby wayfarers.

“All our doubles are suites,” the clerk replied.

“We’ll take one then,” Chanya decided. “Now about a ship to New Ebor, are there any in port?”

“Several that plan to go that way,” the clerk replied, “but the harbormaster has closed the port pending an investigation of the fires last night.”

“What fires?” Kaz asked.

“You haven’t heard?” the clerk responded. “Well you did just get in, didn’t you?”

“Seems that way,” Kaz remarked. “So what happened?”

“Two ships burned down to their waterlines last night,” the clerk told him. “That’s all I know. Master Llewellyn might decide to tell you more when you see her. She should be back in half an hour. I’ll put you on her schedule for then.”

“Does she have time to see us?” Chanya asked. “Seems she might be too busy, what with the fires.”

“She always makes time for wayfarers as they pass through. Weren’t you here just last week?”

“I was,” Chanya agreed, but when she offered no other explanation, the clerk took the hint and allowed them to find their room.

“You were practically advertizing that we were sharing a room,” Kaz commented as the door to their suite closed behind them.

“Actually I was advertizing that we would each be sleeping in our own rooms,” Chanya laughed.

“Oh,” Kaz nodded, his face falling several levels emotionally.

“Well, it’s no one’s business how many beds we actually use,” Chanya laughed at his reaction.

Hallmaster Aeron Llewellyn had been assigned to the Haristol office three years earlier and in that time had gained a reputation for keeping an orderly guildhall. In a city as large and active as Haristol, the Green Land’s largest port town, that was no mean feat. Hundreds of wayfarers passed through the city every year and she had to be able to account for all of them, but while she had managed to keep her hall working efficiently the strain of the last day was clearly showing on her face as she greeted Kaz and Chanya.

“Nice to see you again, Master Sanai,” Aeron told her with automatic courtesy. “You seem to have become a regular this past year, and Master Basan, is it? Oh yes, the young man everyone says to watch out for.”

“Excuse me?” Kaz asked.

“You seem to have made a name for yourself as a young up and comer,” Aeron replied, having shaken his hand. She continued around her heavy wooden desk and finally sat down. “Wayfarers like to gossip and you are the son of the Guildmaster, aren’t you?”

“I am, but it’s never gotten me any special privileges within the Guild,” Kaz pointed out.

“Perhaps not, but this moderator’s assignment in Varana... You have to admit you are a bit younger than most who might get this job,” Aeron replied.

“Raff and Em were as surprised as I was,” Kaz protested. “So far as I know, my name got drawn from a hat.”

“Not very likely, Master Basan,” Aeron disagreed. “This sort of posting is never given to the next man on the roster. Somebody chose you specifically.” She paused before adding, “If Guildmaster Cawlens did not pull any strings to get you this job, I suggest you watch your back. There are only two sorts of people who might assign you to oversee negotiations like this one; friends and enemies. A friend would have told you about it in advance, therefore...”

“I never thought I had enemies,” Kaz laughed. It was an attitude he had picked up over the years from Raff. “There may be one or two people who don’t like me, but that’s about it.”

“Well, then someone doesn’t like you a lot,” Aeron replied. “Still that’s none of my business and you do have a reputation for handling jobs better than most young masters and it looks like you’re going to be in Haristol for a few days, at least, until the port is reopened. The local police have asked me to lend them a hand in this infernal investigation of theirs. What have you heard about the ship fires last night?”

“Only that they occurred,” Kaz shrugged.

“Good,” Aeron nodded. “Too many of the men and women in this hall have already formed opinions. The current rumor is that this is related to all those ships going missing in the last decade or so.”

“Have there been more lost at sea than usual?” Kaz asked.

“That depends on who you ask,” Aeron shrugged. “The rumor mill started grinding away five years ago when those three ships all disappeared in the Belis Chanel.”

“I remember that,” Kaz remarked. “It was the chief topic of conversation in Center Guildhall for weeks.”

“I’m not surprised,” Aeron nodded. “We never did learn what happened to those ships. It wasn’t likely to be piracy since no more ships have been missing in this part of the world, but ships still go missing elsewhere on the Dark Ocean.”

“Ships always go missing from time to time,” Kaz argued. “Two or three a year, it’s probably just storms at sea. It happens. It’s sad, of course, but going to sea has always been a risky business.”

“I see it that way as well,” Aeron agreed, “but then I’m not the one spreading fantastic rumors.”

“So what can you tell us about those ships that burned?” Kaz asked, but Aeron shook her head.

“No, I think you should save that question for the Chief of Police,” she decided.

Staunton Willsit was a large man, standing over six feet tall, who looked like he ate nails for breakfast every morning. However, like Master Llewellyn, there was a tired look to his face the next morning as Kaz and Chanya entered his small, spartan office.

“So, Master Llewellyn sent you?” he rumbled in his deep voice after the obligatory greetings.

“Yes, sir,” Kaz and Chanya chorused. “She said you had asked for Guild assistance?” Kaz continued.

“Funny people, you Guildsmen,” Willsit mused, “Using a man’s title for a woman. Oh, no offense intended, Master Sanai, but it has always seemed strange to me.”

“It’s an old Wayfarer’s Guild tradition,” Chanya explained, “with a thousand different explanations for how it came to be. Like most things, it just happened this way, I think, but it may come from the fact that early in Guild history, women were not allowed to serve as wayfarers. There seem to be fewer female wayfarers than men anyway, but when we were finally admitted to the Guild, it was decided that all titles would be the same, regardless of our gender.”

“I see,” Willsit commented. “Well, that is neither here nor there and has nothing to do with the matter at hand. You know about those ships?”

“Only that there’s not a whole lot left of them,” Kaz replied. “We just got in yesterday afternoon and Master Llewellyn wanted us to approach this without any preconceptions.”

“Master Basan,” Chief Willsit laughed. “You know two ships have been burned to their waterlines. You cannot possibly be without preconceptions.”

“Well then, as few preconceptions as humanly possible, if you would rather,” Kaz corrected himself. “What can you tell us about them?”

“They were the *Caradice* and *Windrider* two of the fastest ships in the world,” Willsit explained. “*Windrider* was not even fully rigged yet, she was that new, but they were both being prepared for the big race next month.”

“What big race?” Chanya asked.

“Why the Ocean Cup, of course,” Willsit replied. “The transoceanic crossing in this new class of ship. They were going to set a new record, or so said the owners.”

“What about these owners?” Kaz asked. “I imagine they had a lot of money invested in their ships. Ships are expensive propositions in the first place and a new design must be even more expensive than most.”

“I suppose it would be,” Willsit agreed, “The sail makers have been busy for months.”

“Quite,” Kaz nodded. “Now with that much money invested, might not one or even both of them been a bit tight for cash about now?”

“I hardly think so,” Willsit shook his head. “You’re talking about the two richest men in town. Their companies own several ships each and even the expense of building these two could not have put a strain on their finances.”

“But they are also competitors, are the not?” Kaz pushed. “If one were to go under, the other would likely pick up still more business. I’ve never known a rich man who didn’t want still more money.” He silently corrected himself. Raff Cawlens by owning the Guild of Wayfarers was technically the richest man in the world. You would never know it to look at him or the way he lived, but there you were. Oh, he and Em were obviously quite well-off, living in the nicest part of Taundon, but owing to a poorly worded Guild contract his enemies expected him to default on, Raff now owned more money than the Guild actually had and the Guild was richer than any three nations in the world. Raff Cawlens, however, was an exception to many rules. This was just one of them.

“They are also good friends, and godfather to each other’s children,” Willsit replied. “I’m not saying they could not possibly have turned on each other, but it also does not seem likely. Not over money.”

“Kaz, you’re forgetting something very fundamental,” Chanya chided him. “It may or may not have been the money involved, but both these ships were in a race. Chief Willsit, was there anyone betting on the race?”

Willsit’s laughing boom practically shook the room. “Better to ask if there was anyone not betting on the race,” he told her. “The gambling houses have been taking bets on it for months.”

“Well there you go then,” Chanya told him, “Perhaps someone was trying to fix the race.”

“By taking out two of the three contenders?” Willsit considered. “Yes, that’s possible. This has been a hotly debated topic.”

“Perhaps someone backing that third ship?” Kaz suggested.

“The *Paul Shims* ?” Willsit supplied the name. “The owner has been out of town the last two weeks.”

“A man may leave instructions to be followed in his absence,” Kaz replied, “or it need not have been done by the owner. But I doubt we’re going to figure this out by sitting here. I think it’s time Chanya and I started the real legwork, by your leave, of course, sir.”

“You have it,” Chief Willsit told him. “I do have my own men involved in this too. I would appreciate it if you can coordinate with them.”

Kaz assured him they would, but since the men assigned to the case were already out investigating, they left a note suggesting a meeting later in the day and then quickly rushed off to the scene of the fires.

Six

“Back off, folks,” a policeman told Kaz and Chanya as they approached the wharf to which the *Caradice* had been moored. “This wharf is not safe and there is an investigation going on.”

“Masters Kazani Basan,” Kaz replied, pulling a billfold from his long coat and extracting his Wayfarer’s Guild credentials, “and Chanya Sanai, Guild of Wayfarers. We’ve been asked to assist in the investigation.”

The constable looked at Kaz’s and Chanya’s identification and from the look on the cop’s face it was obvious he couldn’t tell if the documents were authentic or not. However, the man made a decision and let them pass with the advice, “Stick to the center of the wharf until you get to where the detective is, sir. The edges near the ship took a lot of damage and we’ve already had to fish two men out of the water when they tried to get a closer look. You want to talk to Detective Jenins.”

Police Detective Roger Jenins was a short man and the tall police man’s hat seemed far too large for his head, but he wore it with such confidence no one would be tempted to laugh at the disparity of proportion. “Wayfarers? Yeah, that was probably a good idea. I hear you guys can magically find a perpetrator no matter where he is hidden?”

“There are limits,” Kaz replied. “For one thing while I am capable of following a man or woman several hours after they have been somewhere, I have to know who I’m following and what their trace looks like. In this case it looks like there have been hundreds of people on this wharf in the last day or so.

Animals too. I suppose they must have been horses. Most of them are fading and they're all confused. There's no way to tell what any of them were doing either."

"Yeah?" Jenins asked, "Well, I never did believe in magic anyway. So what can you do for me?"

"At the very least, offer a pair of fresh perspectives," Chanya told him. "I'm also fairly accomplished at truth telling. It's not admissible in court under most circumstances, but knowing when an informant is lying can be very useful in solving a mystery, don't you think."

"You can read minds?" Jenins asked suspiciously.

"No one can read another's thoughts," Chanya shook her head, "and it takes a fair amount of concentration to get it right. What I actually detect are various signs in a personal stability field, what you might call an aura, that indicate when a person is suppressing a thought. That happens more frequently than most of us like to think. If you are courteous to a person you don't really like, it can sometimes look the same as if you just told me your hair was bright green, so the real trick is in asking the right questions and reading the responses. I'm fairly good at that, and Kaz here is even better at finding the right questions.

"In any case," she continued, "that's one way we can help and you weren't completely wrong about the tracking skills of a master wayfarer. If the trail is fresh enough, usually not more than a few hours old inside a stability, longer in the Wild, we can generally find someone or even some things."

"And at the worst we'll be unable to help you," Kaz added, "but we won't try to get in your way. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"I could wish the same for some of the men on the force," Jenins replied after carefully making sure there was no one else within earshot. "So this wreck," he pointed over one side of the wharf, "used to be the *Caradice*. What can you tell me about it?"

Kaz glanced over the side and grinned. "I don't think she'll be winning any races."

"Funny," Jenins replied flatly.

"Do a serious analysis, Kaz," Chanya told him.

Kaz looked more intently at the remains of the ship. "It burned..." he trailed off, considering what he was seeing.

"I know it burned," Jenins replied harshly.

"Shh!" Chanya hushed him. "Kaz is giving it serious consideration now. Anything he says for the next few minutes is just thinking out loud."

Kaz did not actually say anything else for the next few minutes, but he did walk up and down the damaged wharf and then carefully near the edge to peer down into the burnt out shell of a ship. Finally, without turning back toward Chanya and Detective Jenins, he began. "The fire started down in the hold about one third of the ship's length back from the bow. It spread rapidly forward and then up through the cabins and into the rigging. It moved more slowly toward the stern until right about here." He pointed at a spot about as far from the stern as the area he had initially indicated have been from the bow. "And then there was an explosion. Gunpowder. I take it this was the magazine?"

“This ship wasn’t armed,” Jenins informed him.

“Then why was it carrying gunpowder?” Kaz asked.

“Are you certain?” the detective asked. “we thought it was just a steam explosion when the hull was breached.”

“No doubt about it,” Kaz replied confidently. “Gunpowder leaves very distinctive traces of wild energy when it burns. And they generally last two days or more before completely dissipating.”

“Why would an unarmed ship be carrying gunpowder?” Jenins wondered.

“Cargo, perhaps?” Chanya suggested.

“There was only one keg of the stuff,” Kaz told them. “I think it is more likely that it was brought on board by whoever set the fire. Detective, this was a very well thought out case of arson and with no slight intended to you, only a wayfarer could have figured this out.

“The initial blaze,” Kaz continued, “was intended to burn upward very quickly, but they wanted it to look like an accident and the traces of the fuel – oil, I think – would have been detectable had the ship continued burning that way alone. The gunpowder was just enough to mix everything up, hide the initial ignition point and collapse what was left of the ship while doing only minimum damage to anything else in the area. Well the wharf took some damage, but, aside from some flying timbers hitting nearby buildings, this was as neat a piece of work as can be imagined.”

“You sound as though you admire the workmanship,” Jenins noted.

“Admire?” Kaz echoed. “Not particularly, but I do recognized the expertise. Sir, this was a professional job. An amateur is more likely to have either under-powered or over-powered the explosive charge. Too little power and it would have been obvious arson. Too much and you would have recognized the explosion for the sort it was. I seriously doubt anyone could have managed this by accident. Of course we’ll know for certain after I’ve seen the wreck of *Windrider* .”

“How so?” Jenins asked.

“If the results are the same, then the fires will have most likely been set by the same person,” Kaz replied.

They hurried to another wharf half a mile away at the far end of the harbor and Kaz looked at the remains of the *Windrider* . “No doubt whatsoever,” he declared. “Placement was a little different, mostly due to structural differences in this ship, but method of destruction was the same. Has anyone spoken to the owners of these ships?”

“I have,” Jenins replied. “They both deny having had anything to do with these fires.”

“So Chief Willsit assures me,” Kaz remarked. “Of course that wouldn’t rule out a mutual pact to destroy both ships, but proving such a possibility would be difficult at best. First we would need a motive and I understand the need to defraud their insurers is out of the question.”

“The matter has been discussed and rejected for the time being,” Jenins replied. “We have no desire

to probe into the private dealings of two such pillars of the community.”

“You do realize it could come to that?” Kaz asked pointedly.

“I would prefer to leave that for a last resort,” Jenins answered stiffly.

“Have it your way,” Kaz shrugged. “I’m just here to support your investigation, and I’ll admit you ought to know your community better than I do. To tell the truth, I’m more suspicious of the owner of the third ship, the *Paul Shims*.”

“Mister Milbury is not in Haristol at the moment,” Jenins informed him.

“We’ve heard,” Kaz nodded. “It doesn’t mean he is not guilty, but it does make it harder to investigate him. But we could talk to the captains of the ships. I have been given to understand the captains of ships in a race are not always above a bit of sabotage when it comes to the competition. And of the three ships, there does appear to be one left.”

“Had I known you wanted to see that one, we could have stopped along the way here,” Jenins remarked.

“No,” Kaz shook his head. “It was necessary to confirm my analysis before the traces faded out. If I had a trail to follow, I’d have dropped everything to see where it led since waiting can mean you lose it. Now that we have done that, it’s safe to move on to another aspect of the investigation.”

The *Paul Shims* had a long and proportionally slim hull so that while she was as wide in the beam as most ships Kaz was acquainted with, she looked slimmer due to the increased length. Her three masts held more area of sails than anything but a first-rater ship of the line, the fore and main masts were square rigged and the mizzen held fore-and-aft rigging. She looked fast just sitting at the dock.

The captain denied holding any animosity toward anyone on the other two ships and told them, “My younger brother was second mate on *Caradice* and he barely got off that ship with his life. He’s in the hospital now with some bad burns and a broken leg, though he’s supposed to be released today.”

He agreed with Kaz that sometimes captains did try to knock a competitor out of the running, but, “I had a year’s pay on my own ship to win, sir, and now all bets are off.”

“Such a bet might have set a man up for life,” Chanya mused.

“Naw,” the captain denied. “The odds were only three to one. It would have been a nice chunk of change but nothing I would want to spend the rest of my life on.”

“He was telling the truth,” Chanya told Kaz and Jenins as they rode away from the dock. “He had nothing to do with the fires even though he had money on his own ship winning.”

“Maybe we should have a word with the ships’ wayfarers,” Kaz wondered. “I’d hate to accuse my fellow Guildsmen, but we’re as fallible as anyone else.”

“The wayfarers had not yet been assigned to those ships,” Chanya told him.

“What?” Kaz asked. “How did you know that?”

“I asked around this morning while waiting for you to come down to breakfast,” Chanya chuckled. “You were still snoring away and I couldn’t sleep any more, so...”

“I don’t snore,” Kaz denied.

“Of course you do,” Chanya replied without heat.

“Well,” Kaz paused before continuing, “I’ve never heard it.”

“Of course not,” Chanya laughed. “You slept through it. Oh don’t worry, you don’t snore all that loudly, but you do snore.”

“Don’t worry, mate,” Jenins told him with the first note of camaraderie they had heard from him. “My wife says the same thing to me.”

“But...” Kaz trailed off, catching a sharp look from Chanya, and failed to correct Jenins’ impression of them. Kaz told himself he had been in Central Guildhall too long and forgot that wayfarers tended to be more liberally minded about relationships than their fellow humans. It came from the fact that wayfarers were almost never infertile and from their exposure to a wide variety of cultural values. However, in Kaz’s personal case, it was not unusual for young men and women to “try each other out” before committing to a life-long relationship. Such trials had been relatively short affairs and usually carried out discretely near the edges of the village, but it was rarely a secret, not in a village where everyone really did know one another all their lives.

“So where do we go next?” Chanya asked Jenins.

“I am not certain,” the detective admitted. “I’ve pretty much exhausted every line of investigation I had, at least until Mister Milbury returns to Haristol. I appreciate what you two have done today, but we’ll just have to wait. Maybe I’ll think of something new overnight. If not, I imagine the harbormaster will reopen the port in another day or two.”

Seven

Kaz and Chanya were walking back toward the Guildhall when they saw several familiar faces. Even before Kaz waved a greeting at some of the people they had guided to Haristol, they came rushing

across the street. “Master Basan, Master Sanai,” Mister Williams began. “We need your help.”

“Why?” Chanya asked.

What’s wrong?” Kaz asked simultaneously.

“It’s our accommodations,” Williams complained. “They’re far too expensive. We’re spending every farthing we can spare to get to Varana, but we never expected the prices we’re finding here in town. Can’t you do something about getting us a ship soon?”

“I don’t have the power to countermand the harbormaster,” Kaz replied, “but I also don’t see the problem. Don’t you realize the Guild is responsible for your room and board until you reach New Ebor?”

“But we don’t like the food at the inn we were put in,” Mrs. Williams complained. “It tastes funny.”

“It’s not what you’re used to, I imagine,” Chanya diagnosed. “It’s probable the food in Varana will taste even funnier to you, but never mind. We’ll talk to the Guildmaster about it and see if you can be placed elsewhere.”

Guildhall Master Llewellyn was sympathetic to the complaints, and explained to Kaz and Chanya, “When we have the room I put up all travelers here in the guildhall. Usually no one is here more than a few days, but recently the outbound traffic has gotten heavier and with the harbor closed we’re rapidly running out of rooms all over Haristol. Another day or two of this and I’ll have to start setting up tents in the commons and if your people are uncomfortable now, just wait until they wake up one morning to find a foot of snow just outside the tent flap. But, I’ll see what I can do. We already have some wayfarers doubling up. What about you two?”

“We’re in a two room suite,” Chanya told her, “but we could share a single if need be. It would make room for maybe four of our lot.”

“All right,” Aeron nodded, “and I can ask some others to do the same or maybe some transients would like to try that inn. We get complaints in here too, you know. Just let everyone know that once they’ve moved that’s it until it’s time to board ship.”

“Right,” Kaz nodded. “Otherwise, they’ll just be down here again tomorrow, demanding to be boarded at the mayor’s mansion.”

Once that was taken care of Kaz and Chanya decided to get out of the guildhall for the evening and eat at the same inn their charges had been complaining about. “The food tastes just fine to me,” Kaz remarked around a lambchop. “I do wish they wouldn’t serve mint jelly with the lamb though.”

“It’s as you said the last time we were in Haristol together,” Chanya laughed.

“Huh?” Kaz looked confused. “What did I say?”

“You said that lamb was part of the state religion in the Green Lands,” Chanya reminded him.

“Oh yeah,” Kaz nodded, “and as I recall you told me the Theology Department at University would have a field day with me. I did raise a few eyebrows, you do recall.”

“I was your freshman year student advisor,” Chanya chuckled. “You have no idea how many notes

about you came my way.”

“Just as well I graduated early then,” Kaz laughed in response. “I think the Theology teachers were dreadfully afraid I might leave the Guild in order to enter the Church, especially after I successfully defended the notion of evangelical agnosticism in a class debate.”

“When was that?” Chanya asked.

“The year after you graduated, I think” Kaz told her. “What does all that have to do with the militaristic use of mint jelly?”

“It goes with the lamb in this state religion of yours,” Chanya pointed out.

“You mean, ‘Thou shalt serve mint jelly with all lamb,’ or something like that?” Kaz laughed.

“Something like that,” she agreed. “If you don’t like it, just don’t eat it.”

“I don’t but I’d rather it wasn’t served at all. It’s a waste really,” Kaz replied.

“Most Green Landsmen prefer it that way,” Chanya replied.

“I don’t see you eating it either,” Kaz observed.

“I’m not a Green Landswoman,” Chanya shrugged, “and I actually prefer beef, but not the way they serve it here, but this is pretty good for lamb and the potatoes are excellent.”

“So you think the food tastes funny too?” Kaz asked impishly.

“Not really,” Chanya replied. “It’s different than in Ronesia and I do have my preferences, but I also like variety. Besides, I’ve gotten used to the fact that Green Landsmen can’t cook.”

“They can’t?” Kaz challenged.

“Not like the Cracians,” Chanya pointed out, “or even the Meninans. Green Lands cooking isn’t bad, though, just uninspired.”

They were finishing up their second cups of coffee when a general alarm sounded on the street outside. “What’s that?” Kaz asked their waitress.

“Alarm, sir,” she replied. “There’s another fire somewhere.”

Kaz reached into his pocket and dropped too many coins down on the table. Then he and Chanya raced out the door. “Keep the change,” he called back over his shoulder.

People were running in every direction out on the street, but soon more were carrying buckets than not and the human tide started to flow downhill, carrying Kaz and Chanya with them.

“I think it’s near the harbor,” Chanya opined as they raced in that direction.

A moment later, they got a clear view of the wharves as they turned a corner. “Another ship is burning,” Kaz identified the blaze. “Looks like it may be near the *Shims*.”

“Or maybe it is the *Shims*,” Chanya added. “That could be its dock.”

“No, fortunately not,” Kaz replied. “*Shims* was at a wooden pier, that one two piers upstream, I think. This ship is burning beside an earth-filled wharf similar to the ones *Windrider* and *Caradice* were at.”

“Oh, yes, I see what you mean,” Chanya agreed and they hurried on.

They were only a block away from the burning ship when a burst of light suddenly blinded them and Kaz instinctively knocked Chanya to the ground just as a blast wave of sound and debris swept over them. People were screaming all around them, but Kaz did not feel anything worse than the bruises he had picked up. “Are you okay?” he asked Chanya worriedly as debris rained down all around them.

“Well, a tall guy just knocked me to the ground and he won’t let me up,” she replied. “My vision’s a bit blurry and my ears are ringing, but other than that, I’m fine.”

“Good,” Kaz told her, rolling off. “I think we got lucky, but I can’t see much at the moment either. Let’s move out of the way before someone steps on us.”

“Good idea,” Chanya replied as they felt their way to the edge of the sidewalk against the front wall of a ship chandler’s shop. “I think my vision is getting better.”

“Mine too, but let’s give ourselves a few minutes to be sure,” he suggested. “I think I hear a fire engine coming. It’s something heavy and drawn by horses.”

“Looks like a pump of some sort,” Chanya told him. “Are you sure your eyes are clearing?”

“Yeah, they’re improving,” Kaz replied. “It’s night, right?”

“Kaz,” Chanya worried. It was, but if he had to ask, there might have been a worse problem.

“Just kidding,” he told her.

She hit him hard on the shoulder and told him harshly, “Don’t do that! It isn’t funny.”

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Seriously, I’m fine. I saw the pump just as you were describing it. I think we can try to get up now too. The ground is too cold anyway.”

They got up and looked around. Whoever had been screaming a few minutes earlier did not appear to be doing so now. With returning vision, Kaz did not see anyone on the ground so he assumed the screaming had been due to panic, not injuries. “We’re lucky no one got trampled,” he thought out loud.

“What was that?” Chanya asked.

“I just noticed that for all the panic, no one seems to have gotten hurt in the blast,” Kaz explained. “Not here anyway.”

“Hmm, yes,” Chanya agreed. “We got lucky, but there were people closer in than we were.”

They found an increasing number of injuries as they approached what was left of the ship but, with

others apparently attending them, Kaz and Chanya felt free to continue on to the wharf. The ship fire had been nearly extinguished as what was left of the hull sank into the soft bottom of the harbor, so that only those parts still above the water continued to smolder. The entire stern of the ship had been blown off in the blast and the midsection and bow had rolled over onto its starboard side.

The wharf itself had taken damage as had the ship on the other side, but from what Kaz could discern as concerned sailors worked in what was left of the rigging, it had not actually caught fire, although there was charred wood and rope everywhere and some of the canvas sails were smoking.

Kaz closed his eyes and concentrated as best he could to call to the traces of Wild energy all around them. He had once heard of how Raff Cawlens had created a water fountain in the City of Mannsburg, but Raff's command of a wayfarer's power was far and above any other man or woman. He could have teamed up with Chanya, but that would have involved stopping to explain what he wanted to do, so instead he used Wild energy to cause the sea water to flow up the side of the ship's hull and then up into the rigging until everything had a thick coat of saltwater. Then when the smoke no longer rose from the furled sails, he let go and the water fell to the deck, continuing to drip for several minutes afterward.

"Nice," Chanya complimented, ignoring all the people around them.

"Thanks, but it's a good thing the slip across the way is empty," Kaz remarked. "I'm not sure I could do that sort of thing twice in one night."

"Fortunately we won't have to try," Chanya told him. "Are you up to diagnosing the wreck? You're better at it than I am, but I can help."

"Thanks," Kaz agreed, "and yes, let's do it before Detective Jenins arrives."

"You're sure he'll be here tonight?" Chanya asked.

"He takes his job as seriously as we do ours," Kaz remarked. "I would be very surprised if he isn't."

As it happened, Jenins arrived while Kaz and Chanya were still surveying the wreck. "It was similar to the other two," Kaz reported when he was finished, "but the charge of gunpowder was much larger." He looked around and saw that the dozens of people who had been on the wharf had now been mostly herded off.

"So is this related to the first two fires?" Jenins asked. "Or is this the sort of amateur job we were discussing earlier today?"

"It's hard to say, really," Kaz confessed. "The setup was the same except for the size of the charge. It could be someone just trying to copy what happened the other night although they knew where to place the initial ignition point and the explosive charges, which argues, to me at least, that this was the same person doing it. It could be a clever ruse to make us think it was someone else, but then I may have been wrong about the first two jobs having been done by someone who was knowledgeable. It wouldn't be the first time someone got lucky in such a way that the experts mistook his luck for experience, but if I had to guess, I would say that it was the first possibility. Someone is trying to throw us off."

"Was this ship in the race too?" Chanya asked suddenly.

"No," Jenins replied. "Only *Caradice*, *Windrider*, and *Paul Shims*. Is there an arsonist's path you can follow this time?" A large black carriage pulled up at the end of the wharf.

Kaz looked around. "With all the people who have been here since the fire broke out? No. Not without an actual suspect. The trail we want is still here, but which one do I follow?"

"Let me through!" they heard a man demanding of the constables at the end of the wharf. "That was my ship!" A rotund man of medium height barge on past the men and toward Jenins and the wayfarers. He got about half way and then turned to see the wreckage of his ship. Even from thirty feet away they could hear him sob. Then he fell to his knees with his hands over his eyes.

"Oh dear," Jenins sighed. "I always hate this part." They walked closer the ship owner. "Sir?" Jenins asked softly. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I am not all right!" the man turned on him, still on his knees. "I'm ruined! Everything I had was invested in *Star Mary*. Now I have nothing!" He bent over moaning.

"No insurance, sir?" Jenins asked. It was rare for a ship to be uninsured, but some owners bet they could beat the odds and thereby save the high fees that cut so deeply into their profits.

"Insurance!" the man spat. "Insurance won't replace the years I have put in to this business and it won't be enough to replace the ship entirely either."

Then Jenins got down to the grim business of asking the important questions, from the investigative point of view. *Star Mary's* owner was Mister Warren Hesson. Many ships were not owned by a single person, but by a group of businessmen, but Hesson had chosen to invest everything he had in order to not have to split the profits and for two years, until the fire, it had gone fairly well. He had no idea who would want to burn his ship and seemed aghast at the notion that this was not just a galley accident that had spread. Finally, Jenins signaled to Hesson's driver to come and escort the man away from the docks.

"He was lying," Chanya reported when the man had gone.

"About what?" Jenins asked.

"Just about everything, really," Chanya replied.

"We're not supposed to pry without just cause," Kaz reminded her.

"I had cause," Chanya replied. "He wasn't holding himself correctly for someone who had just lost everything. He had to keep reminding himself to look sad, so I decided to take a closer look for myself. It was like watching a play. He was acting sad, but that's what it was, acting. Inwardly he was quite pleased, well, until we brought up the probability of arson. That worried him."

"Why was he so pleased?" Jenins asked.

"We've told you we can't read minds that way," Chanya reminded him. "And if I'd told you what I was doing it's likely he would have just quieted up and walked away. But, yes, the possibility of arson, definitely worried him."

"He might have simply been fearing for his life," Kaz conjectured. "If someone was burning his ship, they might go to his house next."

"That could be the case," Chanya shrugged.

“Well, you’re better at truth-telling than I will ever be,” Kaz admitted, “but I’m very good at following a trail inside a stability and now I have one.”

“What do you mean?” Jenins asked.

“Hesson’s trail is obvious from here to the end of the wharf, where he got into the carriage,” Kaz explained, “but I can also see a relatively fresh trail of his further out on the wharf where he did not go just now. He was here earlier today. This is going to take some leg work, but if I follow his trail back, I can figure out approximately when he was here and if it was just before the fire, we have a suspect.”

“You think he burned his own ship?” Jenins asked.

“Not exactly a unique occurrence in maritime history, is it?” Kaz retorted.

“I suppose not,” Jenins agreed reluctantly, “But that does bring up the question of his motive.”

“Ah, well, that part is probably going to be your job,” Kaz admitted. “Mine, just now, is to follow his trail and see if you have any reason to look into his financial records. From what I recall you can’t do that without a judge’s approval, can you?”

“Not those of a citizen of the Green Lands,” Jenins agreed. “So what do we do first?”

“We walk,” Kaz replied. “Unless you rode here?”

“Chief Willsit rides,” Jenins laughed. “The rest of us are on shanks mares.”

“That’s not unique anywhere either,” Kaz laughed. “Let’s go.”

They walked down the wharf and turned left. “Mister Hesson went the other way,” Jenins pointed out.

“True,” Kaz admitted, “but we are not as concerned with where he went as where he came from and he came from this direction.”

They followed the trail deep into the city, and uphill to a posh inn, where Kaz announced, “He was in here for an hour or so. Does it matter what he had for dinner?”

“You can tell that?” Jenins asked amazed.

“No, of course not,” Kaz laughed, “but I could show you where he sat and we could ask his waiter if you think it might be relevant. I kind of doubt it is, but it’s your investigation.”

“Let’s pass,” Jenins decided. “His choice of meal might be ironic, but I doubt a jury would very much care if he chose the sole over the mutton.”

From the inn, they continued on through a city park where Kaz reported the carriage stayed put for a while overlooking a decorative pond and then the trail led them back toward the harbor district and directly to the wharf.

“He was here roughly four hours ago,” Kaz told Jenins. “By my watch, that would be approximately

an hour and a half before the fire alarm was sounded.”

“That could be too long before the fire broke out,” Jenins remarked.

“Not if a candle was used as the fuse,” Kaz pointed out. “Depending on the candle it could take hours before the oil ignited and would provide a possible alibi for the arsonist. Of course, I can’t say that Mister Hesson did the actual arson, only that he was here at a time during which it might have been committed. There was another here with him at the time. Someone he met here, but obviously did not leave with. I think we need to follow that trail next.”

“Yes, find him and we may get the whole story,” Jenins agreed.

They set out once more as the midnight hour was sounded by several church bells. “Getting late,” Kaz remarked an hour later as they walked along. “I could use a cup of tea or coffee about now, but this isn’t the time to stop for a snack.”

“A bit late for street venders,” Chanya remarked. “Well, breakfast will be on me.”

“Or the Guild,” Kaz laughed and pointed to his right. “This way. Whoever this guy is, he doesn’t travel in as many straight lines as Hesson.”

“Hessen was in a carriage,” Jenins pointed out. “You said yourself this one is on foot.”

“True,” Kaz agreed, “but I’ve done this sort of thing before and the last time I had to follow a trail this convoluted was in training. We’ve been down two breezeways and an alley, climbed over a fence and now...” he trailed off and pointed at a building. “He went up that fire ladder and then doubled back down again. Stay here. I’ll climb up and see if anything of interest happened up there.”

“Such as?” Jenins asked.

“Hah!” Kaz laughed suddenly. “I don’t know, but I can only think of two reasons for him to go up this ladder. One is because he was meeting someone up there or had something to do, or else he expected a wayfarer to try to follow him. Most people don’t really know we can do this, though, so it’s more likely the first.”

“Be careful,” Chanya warned.

“Hey, you know me,” Kaz chuckled.

“I do,” she replied seriously. “Yes.”

Kaz made his way up a wrought iron ladder that had been attached to the side of an older, half-timbered building. Kaz thought the ladder seemed curiously wrong on the building, but in case of fire it was a good idea. As he climbed he wondered why more building owners hadn’t thought of that, but when he got to the top he had other things on his mind.

The roof was steeply peaked and the man he followed had obviously climbed up to the top. Kaz did likewise and found a flat section at the very top. It was only about six feet wide and he wondered what the point of it was until he noticed that in the moonlight, he could see the entire harbor from up here. There was a hatch set into one side of the flat section and he found it was unlocked, so he carefully lifted it up and found the building’s attic. It was too dark to see in the conventional way, but Kaz thought for a

moment and created what was commonly referred to as a wayfarer's lamp.

A wayfarer's lamp was a small concentration of Wild energy that almost any wayfarer could cause to provide light in the Wild. Some masters could do the same thing inside a stability, although that was considerably more difficult.

Kaz sent the spot of light into the attic but saw nothing of interest. His quarry had evidently lowered himself down to an open spot in the center of the floor and tried to sleep. After roughly an hour, he had gotten up again and left the hideaway. Kaz looked closely but there was no evidence the man had been anywhere but the center of the room. He closed the hatch back up and made his way carefully back down the roof top and then the ladder.

"Are ladders like that very common in Haristol?" Kaz asked after reporting what he had seen.

"Not really," Jenins replied. "Only a handful of buildings have them. They're expensive and most owners feel they detract from their buildings."

"Well, I've seen stranger and less useful things," Kaz replied. "Anyway, he left the way he came."

"Are you sure?" Jenins asked.

"You think I'm just making this up?" Kaz asked with a smile on his face.

"It's not that, but how can you tell which path is which?"

"The traces we leave have a direction," Kaz explained. "With a lot of practice a wayfarer can learn to tell which way someone went from the trace."

"And Kaz is one of the best at this," Chanya chimed in.

"I don't know if I'd say that," Kaz denied modestly. "I know I'm good, but there are plenty of masters who I would say were better if only because of their years of experience. Ability is one thing, but knowing what to do with it makes all the difference."

"Even if not for the directional indications, though," Kaz continued, "I could tell because one trail is visibly fresher than the other. If we had been simply looking for the man we're following, I could have skipped that whole detour, but I thought it might have been important. Except for the fact that he seems to have taken a nap, we learned nothing."

They followed the trail for another hour up hill and into a park-like district of the city filled with large mansions and rich estates. However, when the trail led to a house in which the front door was open and all the lights were on, Kaz started getting worried. The trail continued into the house where a woman was crying and being comforted by servants.

"Are you the police?" the butler asked as Jenins and the wayfarers entered. "We have been expecting you."

"Detective Roger Jenins," he introduced himself, "and Kazani Basan and Chanya Sanai of the Guild of Wayfarers. You expected us?"

"Yes, sir," the butler said. "About the master."

Kaz shot a glance at the grieving woman and asked quietly, "What happened here?"

It turned out that an hour earlier, a lone man, dressed in rough clothing, unshaven and thought to be in his late twenties had come to the door and rung the bell. As the door opened he had shoved his way into the house, drew a gun and started firing. The master of the house, Sir Terrence Direct had been shot and killed immediately and one of the servants, a scullery maid, had been wounded as the assailant attempted to leave the house through the kitchen. As it happened, Sir Thomas was one of the owners of *Caradice* and had been up, unable to sleep for more than an hour at a time since the fires.

"This is getting a bit complex," Kaz remarked quietly to Chanya.

"Getting?" Chanya shot back equally quietly. "This was never a simple investigation."

"The ships were relatively straight forward," Kaz replied. "It didn't start to confuse me until the third ship had no direct connection to the first two."

"Until now," Chanya remarked.

"Until now," Kaz agreed. "While Detective Jenins talks to Mrs. Direct, why don't we see what we can in the kitchen and beyond?"

"You're just looking for a cup of tea," Chanya accused him.

"Not really," Kaz shook his head, "although I wouldn't refuse one about now."

Chanya led the way back into the kitchen area and was greeted with a concerned, "Yes, miss?" as she entered. Several women were clustered around another one, who may have still been in her teens. As they all looked up to see who had entered the kitchen, Chanya saw the one they had been clustered around was as dark of skin as she and Kaz were. There was a cloth bandage around her arm and a spot of blood had started to seep through the dressings.

"Oh!" Chanya gasped. "We're sorry to have barged in." she turned to the wounded woman. "You were the woman who tried to stop the gunman?"

"Yes, miss," she replied, then caught sight of Kaz and added, "uh, ma'am?"

"It's miss and you may call me Chanya if you like," Chanya told her. "That hurts, I bet."

"Yes, miss," she nodded.

"I may be able to help a little," Chanya told her. She held her right hand out over the woman's arm for a moment and then requested to one of the others, "Please remove the bandage. Even if what I am doing doesn't work, she'll need a fresh one soon." One of the women hastened to comply. While waiting, Chanya asked, "What's your name?"

"Kasha, miss," she replied, "Kasha Alono."

Chanya heard Kaz gasp behind her and she could feel an involuntary gathering of Wild energy. "Kaz, no!" she replied in almost conversational tones. "She wasn't there. It had nothing to do with her. Kasha, how long have you been in the Green Lands?"

“All my life, miss,” Kasha replied. “My parents came here before I was born.”

“See, Kaz?” Chanya told him.

“Sorry,” Kaz replied. Then he explained to the woman, “When I was a boy, your tribesmen killed mine, and sold others into slavery.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Kasha replied timidly. “I do not have a tribe. I am a Green Landswoman.”

“And I’m a Green Landsman,” Kaz told her, and then flashed a quick smile. Chanya was sure it was forced, but given what Kaz had been through, that smile was enough. “Chanya, why don’t I go follow that trail to the edge of the property while you handle this?” Chanya nodded and heard Kaz walk away. A moment later she heard the outer door open and shut while she turned back toward Kasha.

When the wound was exposed, Chanya went to work in earnest. Kasha had been lucky. The wound was a deep gash in her upper arm, near her shoulder, but it was not fatal. It had also been cleaned properly. There were ways of healing using wayfaring and Kenlienta magic and they took many years to learn completely, but Chanya had learned a few of them and she used them to stop the bleeding and begin the healing process. After a few minutes, however, she saw Kasha visibly relax. “Better?” Chanya asked hopefully.

“Yes, miss,” Kasha replied, giving her a shy smile. “Much better.”

“Good,” Chanya replied. “You’ll still need to wear a bandage for a while, but it need not be as heavy. The wound will remain sensitive for a while as well, but at least it shouldn’t hurt you if you don’t touch it. Has a physician seen this yet?”

“No, miss,” one of the others replied. Chanya guess this was the head cook. “We take care of our own here.”

“Well a professional should take a look at it just to be sure, but I think this will heal without any chance of infection now so long as it is kept clean. If Mrs. Direct has her doctor see her, you should ask him to look at Kasha while he is here, just to be sure.” Chanya was certain the mistress of the house would call for her physician if only for the stress she was under. “I think Kasha should be on light duties for a few days just to give that wound a chance to completely close up.”

“Yes, miss,” the cook nodded. “Our Kasha was very brave, she was. Stood up to that awful man even when he raised that gun in her face.”

“In her face?” Chanya wondered out loud. “How then did she only get hit in the arm?”

“She ran at him, don’t you know,” the cook explained, while Kasha nodded quietly. “Tried to knock him over and he tried to get out of the way. Then the gun went off. Scared the wits out of me, I tell you, miss, and there was our poor Kasha on the floor bleeding. I was afraid for a moment we had lost her, but we got lucky, we did. Can I get you anything, miss? A cup of tea, perhaps?”

“Tea would be lovely,” Chanya agreed. “And one for my friend when he gets back if you do not mind?”

Eight

The head cook insisted Chanya and, by extension, Kaz have more than a mere cup of tea, and brought out fresh bread and bowls of a thick seafood stew she had been keeping herself busy with as the night grew late.

“The trail leaves the property through a gate on the east and then heads back toward the harbor,” Kaz reported after his first sip. “We can’t stay here too long, you know.”

“Of course not,” Chanya agreed, “but more policemen just arrived and Detective Jenins has to fill them in on what he’s learned here. It won’t be too much longer.”

Chanya was right and by the time they had finished eating, Jenins was already eager to continue onward. The man they were following next went to the same city park where Warren Hesson had spent some time earlier, where he sat on a bench very briefly with someone else and they headed directly back into the harbor district.

“There’s something different about this trail now,” Kaz remarked.

“What do you mean?” Jenins asked.

“It’s like someone or something is trying to obscure it,” Kaz replied, “it is fading out faster than normal.”

“We shall just have to hurry along then,” Jenins suggested.

“I think we’re coming full circle,” Kaz commented a short time later as they entered the same alley where the iron ladder had been attached to the wall of the old building. Then they all stopped abruptly when they saw a man on the ground at the foot of the ladder. Kaz and Chanya both created wayfarers lamps to illuminate the alleyway.

“Dead,” Kaz reported a moment later.

“What are those marks on his fingers?” Jenins asked as he bent closer for a better look. There was a dark blue stain on the fingers of his right hand that ran from his fingertips to his palm and then faded into his wrist.

“This seems familiar,” Chanya whispered. “Don’t touch him.”

“Why not?” Jenins asked.

“Let me check,” she replied. She waved her hands near the dead man’s, without actually touching him, but allowed tendrils of Wild energy to tell her what she needed to know. “Calsadrist,” she reported. “This man has been poisoned.”

“What is calsadrist?” Jenins asked.

“It’s a Kenlientan medicine,” Chanya replied and she continued to check the body remotely. “They use it to heal themselves from illnesses related to exposure to stability. It works by changing stability back into the Wild state. In a human it is a deadly poison, of course and even the Ken have to use it in small amounts. All life needs at least some stability and some Wild energy to exist, but the amount of stability a Ken needs is insufficient to keep a human alive.

“Calsadrist is a contact medicine, absorbed through the skin and leaves these blue stains for only a few minutes in a living Ken. In a human, they would have faded in another hour or two. Ah, in here.” She opened the man’s coat pocket and pulled out a small bag with coins in it.

“Careful,” Kaz warned.

“I’m on guard,” she assured him and explained to Jenins, “A wayfarer can stem off the affects of calsadrist when aware of the danger.” She opened the bag and sniffed gently. “It’s on the coins. Whoever gave him these wanted him dead. Had we not been so close behind him... well, who knows what might have happened had others handled these coins.”

“I don’t understand how that works,” Jenins confessed. “What does this stuff do?”

“It’s like I said,” Chanya explained. “All life needs some stability and some Wild energy to sustain it. Humans need more stability than Wild to keep us healthy and the Ken need more of the Wild. The Wild and the stabilities are actually two sides of the same coin when you come right down to it and they represent different states of energy. At least that’s the current theory. Calsadrist breaks down bits of stability in a creature, thereby increasing the ratio of Wild to stable in favor of the Wild.”

“And how does that kill a person?” Jenins asked.

“A human,” Chanya corrected him. “Properly administered in a Kenlien, it is a cure, not a poison. As a wayfarer I could kill a person instantly by performing what we call a force-thrust. What that means is we force Wild energy into another person and thereby drive out all the stability in an instant. Without that stability the body stops working. The ancients thought of it as separating the soul from a body.”

“So that wouldn’t hurt a Ken?” Jenins asked, still obviously trying to understand.

“Even the Ken need some small traces of stability, detective,” Chanya informed him. If I were to perform a force-thrust with sufficient thoroughness on a Ken, he too would die instantly.”

Jenins nodded and was quiet for a while before concluding, “So this man killed Sir Terrence and then got paid off with poisoned coins.”

“And is in some way related to the fire on board the *Star Mary* this evening,” Kaz replied. “I don’t think it takes a genius to figure the next part out.”

“He got paid off in the park,” Jenins concluded. Kaz nodded agreement. “Was it Mister Hesson?”

“We’ll have to go back and find out,” Kaz replied, “but I don’t think so.”

“Someone else then,” Jenins added. “Good.”

“Good?” Chanya asked. “I would have thought the added complication would only make things worse.”

“In one sense, perhaps,” Jenins replied. “But it is said that three people cannot keep a secret. The more who are involved here, the more likely we will get all the answers.”

It took still more time to summon the police to see to the body and for Chanya and Kaz to give them highly specific precautions on how to handle, or rather how to not handle the coins and the toxin that was in the pouch. “I will see to it that Master Llewellyn inspects this and certifies the presence of calsadrist before she decontaminates it,” Chanya promised.

Finally they were able to race back to the park and pick up the trail of the person who had probably given the dead man the tainted coinage. “Yeah,” Kaz remarked almost to himself when they found the new trail. “This is a certainty. This guy’s trail was fuzzed out before the meeting on that bench.”

“Fuzzed out?” Jenins asked.

“Just like our killer’s was after the meeting,” Kaz explained. “It must have been the presence of the calsadrist. Anyway, that’s not a problem any longer. Is it starting to snow?”

“It’s been snowing for the last half hour,” Chanya informed him.

“Really?” Kaz asked. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Well, it isn’t very heavy,” Chanya commented, “at least not yet and you have had other things on your mind. We seem to be heading back into the more fashionable side of town.”

“I have a few suspicions about that,” Kaz admitted. “This one was in a carriage, I can tell from the speed he was going.”

“Was he in a hurry?” Jenins asked.

“Not particularly,” Kaz admitted. “Horses generally pull a carriage faster than we can walk comfortably. That’s sort of the point, don’t you think?”

They continued onward until they arrived at another large mansion just a few blocks away from that of Sir Terrence. “He drove into the carriage house and then walked from there to the main house.”

“This is Mister Hesson’s home,” Jennins informed them. “I shall need you to identify the man whose trail we just followed, but as soon as we have some officers to assist, I think we can go knock on the door, no matter how beastly an hour it is.”

It was two hours past dawn before Kaz and Chanya were finally able to make their way back to the guildhall where they then had to spend another hour reporting to Aeron on what had happened overnight.

“So this Hesson was about to default on his loans, huh?” Aeron asked. “Sure couldn’t tell from the way he was living.”

“Not at all,” Kaz agreed. “He was actually trying to live even higher on the hog than he might normally so as to appear prosperous among his peers. But then he got a twisted notion. He decided that if his ship burned, the insurance would cover his debts and more. He was right of course, but it had to appear to be either an accident or obviously set by someone else.

“Making it appear to be an accident isn’t as easy as it sounds,” Kaz continued, “even when he hired a professional arsonist to do the job. Hesson decided to make his own ship fire seem to be part of a series of crimes, so first his men set fire to *Caradice* and *Windrider*. He might have gotten away with it, had it not been for the more massive explosion when *Star Mary* went up.”

“What happened there?” Aeron asked.

“He forgot to check the ship’s cargo manifest,” Kaz replied. “Earlier in the day fifty barrels of gunpowder were loaded into the hold for delivery to Her Majesty’s garrison in Lonport. When the more moderate charge ignited, it set off the cargo.”

“And what about the arsonist?” Aeron asked

“Hesson’s head servant was an accomplice in the attempted insurance fraud from the beginning,” Kaz replied. “It was always his plan to kill the arsonist and managed to procure a small amount of calsadrist to do the job. If we hadn’t been trailing the arsonist, we may never have found the characteristic stains calsadrist leaves so fleetingly, save that it’s likely to me, someone would have searched the body and stolen the coins. That person would have soon died too and perhaps several other petty crooks as well.”

“But why kill Sir Terrence?” Aeron asked.

“Sheer anger and stupidity,” Kaz replied. “Sir Terrence was attempting to buy a controlling share in *Star Mary*. Hesson had, as I said, been in debt, and one of his attempts to get out involved selling shares in his ship as though it was a limited liability corporation. He sold only a small number of shares to each owner, supposedly with the notion of buying them back later, but Sir Terrence caught wind of the deal and started buying up shares from Hesson’s investors at a handsome rate.

“Hesson got angry when he found out,” Kaz went on, “and paid his arsonist to kill Sir Terrence. From what I learned from Detective Jenins and his colleagues, the arsonist was wanted for a wide variety of crimes around town. Not exactly a specialist, I guess. It may have been the head servant who planned to kill him, though. Hesson claims he knew nothing about that, but with the number of injuries and deaths occurred in the harbor last night, it probably doesn’t matter.”

“Anything to add?” Aeron asked Chanya.

Chanya shrugged and replied, “What he said.”

“You two did very well,” she commended them. “Well, I would expect no less from the son of Raff and Emblem Cawlens nor from their one-time protégée.”

“How did you know I studied with Em for a while?” Chanya asked.

“It’s not exactly a secret,” Aeron laughed. “You know how wayfarers love to gossip. We gossip about the kings and queens of the world and about each other as well. Anyone who likes to keep up with what is going on in the Guild will at least have heard of you. I thought you knew that.”

“No one has ever mentioned that before,” Chanya remarked.

“Well, they wouldn’t have,” Aeron laughed. “First of all they would assume you knew they knew, but really, dear, one does not gossip about someone to their face. But don’t worry, I think most guild masters are quite impressed at how you make no attempt to trade on your relationship with the wife of the Guildmaster. Kaz here, is likely to have more trouble on that account than you will.”

“No matter what I do, I’m always going to be Raff’s adopted son,” Kaz nodded.

“Well, you have started to make a name for yourself,” Aeron told him, “and tonight will just add to that. I doubt you have to worry about being in GuildMaster Cawlen’s shadow.

“I’ll have to go down to the police station and the city prosecutor’s office and see how long they’ll need you to stay in town,” Aeron continued.

“But I have to get to New Ebor,” Kaz protested.

“Well, I doubt either of you will need to leave more than a notarized statement,” Aeron shrugged. “That’s standard protocol for wayfarers, of course. And if at all possible I intend to get you on the first ship to Varana.”

“Only if she’s headed for New Ebor,” Kaz cut in. “It’s a long way from Pacidelphia, you know.”

“Not from experience,” Aeron chuckled, “but I’ve heard. Look, you two are practically falling asleep in those chairs. Go get some sleep. I’ll have statements for you to sign here this afternoon. The trial isn’t likely to happen for a month and if they actually need either of you two, they will just have to wait for your return to the Green Lands. That’s not likely though. The sworn word of a wayfarer generally has the weight of a deathbed statement.

“Anyway,” Aeron continued, “you’d better get some rest. I suspect the harbormaster will reopen the port this morning and I may have to get you two shoveled on board a ship if you can’t make it on your own.”

Nine

Perhaps it was ironic that the next ship bound for New Ebor was the *Paul Shims* . Aeron had been right about the port reopening that day and Kaz and Chanya only had two hours of sleep before being wakened and brought down to the *Shims* in a Guild-owned carriage.

“You can sleep onboard,” Aeron told them as the carriage bumped on down the cobbles.

“What about our statements?” Chanya yawned.

“I have them here,” Aeron assured her. “You can sign then while your bags are put onboard for you.”

“I don’t need an apprentice to carry my bags,” Kaz protested.

“Normally, no,” Aeron agreed, “but they’re going to slip the *Shims* ’ hawsers about the time we can reach the dock. You may have to jump on board, so we’ll see to it your bags are there a moment ahead of you.”

“Well let me at least read it on the way,” Kaz requested.

Aeron handed them the documents. “You don’t get nauseus, trying to read in a moving vehicle?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” Kaz admitted. “I’ll just have to put up with that. Sounds like we haven’t a moment to spare.”

Aeron had to admit he was correct. A few minutes later they arrived on the wharf where two apprentices rushed Kaz’s and Chanya’s bags down to the departing *Paul Shims* . The two young master wayfarers, having read through their statements, quickly signed them.

“I’ll let you blot the ink,” Kaz told Aeron, leaving his statement on the seat of the carriage.

Chanya did likewise and together they sprinted down to the end of the dock as Aeron shouted after them, “Safe voyage!”

“Thanks!” they chorused in return.

The *Shims* , had officially cast off from the dock a few minutes before their arrival, but ships move slowly when only the tide can carry them toward their destination. As one the wayfarers reached the end of the dock and jumped over the gunwales and on to the deck of the ship. “Cutting it a little fine, aren’t you?” The first mate of the *Shims* asked pointedly.

“Half an hour ago we didn’t even know when we’d be leaving or on which ship,” Kaz laughed. “At least we didn’t have to swim after you.”

“Hah!” the mate laughed. “In another few minutes you might have had to. We have a strong current this afternoon and once we get into the main channel the winds should be favorable for a speedy departure.”

“Excellent,” Kaz replied, “but if you don’t mind, I think we’ll sleep through it. We were up late last night.”

“Tracking down the bastard who was burning those ships, I know,” the mate told him. “We’ve all heard. Well, let’s get you two heroes to your cabin and we’ll toast your health this evening, eh?”

“Sounds good to me,” Kaz chuckled. “So, where is our cabin?”

Kaz half expected the first mate to reply, “Down below,” But instead he signaled to a young hand who was about to climb up into the rigging and instructed him, “Dickie, escort our nearly late passengers to their cabin. They are the captain’s special guests.”

“Yes, sir!” the young man saluted.

“What was that?” the mate asked gruffly.

“Aye aye, sir!” he quickly corrected himself.

“You’ll have to excuse young Dickie,” the mate laughed. “Landlubber. Thinks he’s in the army or some such. Off with you now, kid. See to our guests and then get back to your tasks.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Dickie replied. “This way, folks.” He led the wayfarers down a ladder to the lower deck and then back toward the stern. “The captain held the best guest cabin for you. Are you both really wayfarers?”

“We are,” Kaz smiled. “Why is that so amazing? I imagine this ship has its own wayfarer, doesn’t it?”

“She does, sir,” Dickie replied, “but I’ve only met him once. Well, it’s my first voyage here, sir, so...” he trailed off.

“I was led to understand this is the *Shims* maiden voyage,” Kaz remarked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then it is everyone’s first voyage here,” Kaz replied.

“I suppose so, sir, but the mate was right, I am still a landlubber. I’ve never been to sea before,” Dickie confessed.

“Not a problem,” Kaz told him kindly. “Just remember that when you get seasick to throw up over the leeward side.”

“Why, sir?” the young man asked innocently.

“Trust me on that,” Kaz replied.

“Yes, sir,” Dickie replied, “Here’s your cabin, sir. Excuse me, I need to get topside to help unfurl the sails.”

“Wait, where is the other cabin?” Kaz asked on Chanya’s behalf.

“Sir?” Dickie responded, obviously confused by the question.

“Nevermind,” Chanya told him. “Best you get back to your job.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the hand replied and hurried off.

“Looks like we’re being pushed together again,” Kaz commented and he turned to open the cabin door.

“I didn’t hear you complaining about my company in Haristol,” Chanya pointed out.

“Never,” Kaz told her.

“That’s better,” Chanya replied. “Oh, what a fantastic view!”

The cabin was a large one for a shipboard accommodation in Kaz’s experience. In most cases he had slept in what was essentially a closet with a bunk in it. Crew quarters, he knew were usually larger, but they had to be shared between six or more men so in essence they had even less living room. Even the large cabin Em and Raff had shared on the voyage to Varana several years earlier had not been overly spacious. It did have a desk in it for Raff to work on, but as Kaz remembered, Raff had to sit on the bed in order to use that desk. This cabin was as wide as the ship’s stern and the sternward side was covered with mullioned windows, providing not only sufficient light, but as Chanya had gasped, a fantastic view of the harbor.

“We’re in for a fortnight of seeing nothing but ocean out there,” Kaz commented, “but for now, it would almost be worth staying up to see.”

“Almost,” Chanya replied. “Nice looking bed. Might even be comfortable.”

“It’s likely to be unused,” Kaz replied. “Time to end that, then.”

By the time they woke up that afternoon, a large island was visible off to the starboard stern. “It’s got to be Dabin,” Kaz identified it. “We’re making very good time.”

“That’s likely to be the last land we see for a while,” Chanya remarked wistfully.

“I certainly hope so!” Kaz told her.

“You hope so?”

“The Oceans are all Wild,” Kaz replied. “Anything might happen out here. I’ve heard that islands have been known to rise out of the sea only to be gone again the next time a ship goes looking for it. And ships go missing every year. Doesn’t take much to scrape your keel off on a reef that wasn’t there two weeks ago.”

“Does that happen often?” Chanya asked.

“Not along the marked wayfarer paths,” Kaz replied, “but oceanic storms toss us off those paths, you know.”

“It’s happened on three voyages I’ve been on,” Chanya agreed,” but they just use the sun and stars as a guide to keep going in the right direction until a path is found.”

“I know,” Kaz nodded. “There’s been some discussion of allowing the transoceanic pathways to dissolve at Central Guildhall. The proponents of the idea say that the pathways aren’t really needed since modern navigation techniques are more flexible and just as reliable. The ones arguing against it point out the problem with temporary islands and reefs.”

“Where does Raff stand on that issue?” Chanya asked.

“He’s willing to go either way,” Kaz shrugged. “Maintaining the paths across the Dark Ocean is expensive and time consuming, especially since a master might have to cross three or four times in the process of doing maintenance – those storms and all. On the other hand, the paths mark known routes that have never given us problems and it is easier to maintain a path than to create a new one. Raff will go whichever way the Guild Congress goes on this. Of course, he generally does anyway.”

“He has more important work to worry about, I imagine,” Chanya remarked.

“He does,” Kaz agreed, “but he does wish the Congress of Wayfarers would stop taking up so much time with the minutiae. Raff feels they have more important work to do too, but I keep telling him they’re still basically politicians. You have to expect them to argue out every point until it gets ridiculous.”

“You’ll likely be in that Congress one day too, you know,” Chanya reminded him.

“I really hope not,” Kaz shook his head. “It’s much more interesting out here in the field.”

“I thought Raff made the rule that every wayfarer must do field duty,” Chanya argued.

“It’s just amazing how many crises those guys can manufacture in order to get an exception from field duty,” Kaz told her. “Well, that’s a Guild politician for you. Raff really should have seen that coming. It’s not like he didn’t know who and what he was dealing with.”

“So after everything that happened, nothing really changed?” Chanya asked.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Kaz replied. “Our policies are very different now. We have gone back to true international neutrality rather than the farce the old council made of it and our ties with the Ken Nation are stronger than ever. We really are back to being the Guild of Wayfarers we always used to be before Harton and his cronies started their intrigues and international manipulation.”

“Oh that’s good then,” Chanya commented, relaxing. “I always looked up to the Guild members when I was young.”

“Well the worst of the lot were on the Council. Most of the field agents lived up to our ideals, at least as well as any poor mortal can,” Kaz told her. “So, any idea of where the galley is on this tub?”

Ten

Over the next two days, the wayfarers settled into the shipboard routine. They met and talked with their former charges while up on deck and Chanya spent some time with Henry Sames, the boy who had showed some native talent at wayfaring, giving him a few basic lessons in wayfaring.

Henry's father continued to express his reservations about Henry growing up to be a wayfarer, but Chanya assured him, "Knowing how to do these simple tricks will not make Henry a wayfarer, but it will make him a safer person. When a person with the talent goes untrained, the talent sometimes comes awake by itself and if it does people can get hurt. Our ancestors used to think such occurrences were witchcraft and the witch was inevitably killed.

"When the talent wakes up that way after having been suppressed, it is always in a time of stress and it tends to be chaotic. Henry could start everything around him on fire or cause lightning to come out of the earth or any number of things, all because he never learned how to control the ability. It is not a matter of knowing how to use the talent, but in knowing how not to use it," Chanya insisted.

In the end it was Henry's mother who convinced his father to allow the boy to learn the few basic lessons with Chanya. She actually did not have time to teach him very much, but the ability to see and follow a path and to create a Wayfarer's Lamp would come in handy all his life, although she was not sure he would be able to create a lamp inside a stability.

In the winter there are frequently storms on the Dark Ocean and this trip was no exception. For two days the ship was tossed around like a child's plaything and Kaz found himself taking care of Chanya. The woman never had troubles with motion sickness during fair weather, but when storms blew up she was forced to stay in bed for the duration. Kaz was not feeling much better, but was at least ambulatory and managed to get Chanya to drink some tea and eat some light ginger wafers every now and then using his abilities to keep her unconscious until the storm had passed.

The morning after the storm, everything above deck was covered in salt water ice and passengers were advised to stay in their cabins while the crew chipped the ice off the sails and key parts of the rigging, but when dangerous chunks of ice continued to fall over the rest of the morning, Kaz worked with the ship's wayfarer, a middle aged man with the rank of journeyman, to melt the rest of it off. "Thank you, sir," the wayfarer told Kaz. "I never knew how to do that before."

“Really, James?” Kaz asked. “It’s not a very advanced technique, just sort of like making a fire, without summoning up as much Wild energy.”

“It’s simple enough,” James admitted, “but no one ever showed me how. Heh! I imagine it will go a ways toward keeping my cabin warm too.”

Chanya was just starting to recover when Kaz returned to the cabin with more tea and a stack of toast. “Feeling better?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied. “You would think by now I might be used to that.”

“No one could get used to what you went through,” Kaz assured her. “Half the crew was sick too. Fortunately the helmsmen were capable of keeping our bow to the wind throughout the storm and we suffered no abnormally large waves. Although James was telling me about the time he saw one that must have been over twice the height of the masts. It came right up and...”

“No!” Chanya stopped him weakly. “Don’t tell me. I’m sure I don’t want to know. Sorry, I’m always like this just after a storm.”

“I remember,” Kaz smiled. “Well, you just relax and we’ll see how you are in the morning.” He turned and sat down at the small table he had been using as a desk.

“What are you doing?” Chanya asked.

“Trying to memorize everything in these law books you made me bring,” Kaz replied

“You’ll never get them memorized,” Chanya predicted, “and you really don’t have to. This isn’t a trial, it’s a negotiation and your job is to be the arbitrator, not a judge. Just remember what is covered in each section so you can look it up as you need to. Odds are the lawyers will know the law well enough already.”

“I agree,” Kaz told her, “but I really need to be able to understand what they’re saying. I have to be able to make a fair and unbiased decision when asked to. I still remember some of the trouble Raff got into because he didn’t read everything he had to before that trial in Lonport.”

“It turned out all right,” she reminded him.

“It did,” Kaz recalled, “but he had Em to help him and us. This time it’s just you and me and you’re the one who convinced me how important an agreement about fishing rights is.”

“Well, we’ll be able to co-opt a staff of apprentices in New Ebor,” Chanya predicted. “They can run errands like we did and I’ll be like Em was to Raff. Don’t worry so.”

“I’m not all that worried,” Kaz admitted, “but I do have to be prepared. It’s the first time I’ve been tapped as an arbitrator, you know.”

“I’m sure you’ll do very well,” Chanya told him sleepily.

“That’s not what you said in Taundon,” Kaz reminded her, but she had already fallen back to sleep.

Two days later, Chanya managed to convince Kaz he ought to go up on deck every once in a while,

“Just to stretch your legs,” she told him. “Pacing around the cabin in tight circles doesn’t count, you know.”

There was a commotion as they arrived topside. Both crewmen and passengers were crowded by the port rail and looking at a whale about two hundred yards away. The huge marine creature was staying near the surface and spouting off every so often, when suddenly, something attacked it from beneath, large fleshy coils could be seen wrapping around the whale and trying to drag it under the waves even as it fought back. The fight was brief and for a long five minutes it looked like the whale had lost, but then suddenly the whale breached the surface and could be seen hurrying off to the south.

“What could that have been attacking it?” one of the women wondered aloud.

“A kraken, ma’am,” the third mate opined, “It had to be. They’re great squid-like creatures that eat whales as easily as you or I might eat a kipper.”

“Looks like this one’s breakfast didn’t agree with him,” one of the deckhands laughed.

“Not this time,” the mate agreed, “and this one was a bit out of its usual waters. They’re more common in the Volland Sea.”

“At this range,” Kaz told Chanya, “I think it looked as much like a sea serpent as a kraken, and I think a serpent would have more trouble hanging on to a whale than a kraken might.”

“Shh,” Chanya tried to hush him.

“Oh why?” Kaz went on. “It would go a long way toward explaining some of the ship disappearances over the last few years.”

“I think I liked your theory about transitory islands and reefs,” Chanya told him. “Besides you know what happens to wayfarers who claim to have seen a sea serpent too much. Look what happened to Raff when he reported one.”

“True,” Kaz nodded, “but this time I’d be reporting it to Raff. Well, whatever it was, it didn’t get a meal today and I’ll be just as happy if it doesn’t try munching on us next.”

The rest of the trip turned out to be uneventful and less than a week later the *Paul Shims* made her way up a wide bay and docked in the bustling colonial city of New Ebor.

New Ebor

One

Kaz had been to New Ebor once before, years earlier with Raff, Em and Chanya, but it seemed to have doubled in size since then. Several landmark buildings had been replaced with newer structures so that only the carefully planned streets were still the same although even there some streets that had been paved with round-topped cobbles now sported smoother, flat pavers which made the ride to the guildhall much easier than Kaz was used to.

“About time you got here,” Master Lewis Dulass told them as they entered his office that afternoon. “The Meldanians walked out of the talks three days ago and I can’t get them to come back.”

“Sorry about that,” Kaz apologized to the hall master. “We came as quickly as we could, but there were hold-ups along the way.”

“There are always hold-ups along the way,” Lewis shook his head. “How are you, Kaz. Congratulations on your promotion, by the way. Nice to see you back, Chanya.”

“Thanks,” Kaz replied. “I’m just glad they finally let me out of Central Guildhall.”

“We all have to serve where we’re needed, Kaz,” Lewis told him seriously.

“Maybe, but I can’t wait to be able to finish paying off my training so I can go freelancer like Raff and Em,” Kaz admitted. Unlike in a lot of professions, a freelancer among wayfarers was not independent of the Guild. He or she did, however, have the freedom to turn down jobs and only work when they wanted to. Most freelancers, however, were too industrious to settle into a life of idle waste for long. A truly lazy wayfarer might never pay off his training debt to the Guild, so freelancers tended to be those people who worked the hardest even after they reached the point when they did not always have to. A wayfarer did not have to become a freelancer once his debt to the Guild was paid off and only a few did, but those few tended to be the most able and highly sought-after men and women in the Guild of Wayfarers.

“And look what being a freelancer got them,” Lewis pointed out. “As Guildmaster, Raff has more responsibilities and less freedom than the freshest apprentice.”

“It was his own choice,” Kaz pointed out. “I was there and someone had to take over and get Harton and his boys off the Guild Council.”

“And then he got rid of the whole Guild Council and replaced it with this Congress of Wayfarers of

his,” Lewis laughed. “I think he gave the colonials here the idea as well. They’re meeting here in New Ebor too. Looks like this is rapidly becoming the most important city in Varana.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Chanya asked.

“It makes my job more difficult,” the older wayfarer told her. “New Ebor was never an easy assignment, but now I think I could use a couple of satellite offices, especially if this is to become the administrative capital of these new United Colonies of Varana.”

“Then why not do just that?” Chanya asked.

“Hah!” Lewis laughed harshly. “I don’t have enough wayfarers to go around as it is. Opening extra offices will require more of us.”

“You don’t have to be a wayfarer to actually run a small office,” Kaz pointed out. “Lots of small town Guild offices are just run by a local hired to act as representative.”

“I know that,” Lewis admitted, “but I need at least two more hall masters or journeymen who can get others to take orders to do the job right. Well, I’ll put in a request with my next packet back to Taundon. Who knows, maybe the Guild Congress will be in a good mood to spend the money for a change.”

“The Congress is always in a good mood to spend money,” Kaz remarked sourly, “but mostly on themselves. Now about these Meldanians. Are they still in town?” Kaz asked.

“Of course they’re still in town,” Lewis laughed. “You didn’t think I would allow any wayfarer to guide them out while you were still on the way, did you?”

“Well, one never knows,” Kaz shrugged. “And it’s not like you knew when I would arrive or even it would be me. Although knowing it was me, you might have decided the job was beyond my abilities.”

“Not if you were chosen for it,” Lewis assured him. “Oh if they had been insistent enough I would have had to allow them passage back to Meldan. There are ways to stall, of course, but I don’t think they’re really ready to leave town just yet.”

“So the walk out is just a negotiating tactic?” Kaz asked.

“Everything these men do is a negotiating tactic,” Lewis laughed, “And so long as the Selomanians are still here along with the spokesmen from Gemland and the Southern Islands, Meldan would be crazy to really walk away.”

“Wait,” Kaz stopped him. “Hold up. My briefing only mentioned Varana and Meldan. The Southern Islands technically belong to Varana, so I can understand why they might be here, but what are Cracian and Volander colonists doing in these talks?”

“They all demand the right to fish on the Great Banks, of course,” Lewis pointed out. “The Great Banks represent the richest fishing grounds known in the world and the Selomanian and Gemlanders are contending the banks are international waters. Meldan and Varana disagree, of course, but their argument is over who owns it.”

“I thought this was just going to be a matter of drawing a line down the middle,” Kaz confessed.

“Oh it’s not going to be that simple,” Lewis predicted. “Negotiations between Meldan and Varana never are.”

Kaz found out the next day just how correct Lewis was.

“We are perfectly willing to sell fishing rights on the Banks,” Renaud Latour from Meldan declared to all assembled around the table. “I am even willing to set those prices as part of our agreement here.”

“That’s very generous of you, Mister Latour,” Patrick Aimes, the Varanan representative remarked dryly, “but I do believe that your right to sell those rights is what we are debating this morning. The Colonial Congress of the United Colonies of Varana would like me to remind you that Varana claims the Great Banks as our exclusive territory as per the surrender agreement signed at the end of the last war.”

“Said agreement, sir,” Latour replied smoothly, “granted ownership of the Great Banks to the Green Lands, not to Varana.”

“It granted those rights to the Green Lands and her colonies, sir,” Aimes replied, his voice dropped several degrees cooler.

“Of which, I would remind you, sir,” Latour match his tone, “that Meldan is one.”

“But it was not one of the Green Lands colonies until after the surrender was official, sir,” Aimes contended. “The Cracian colony of Meldan waived all rights to the Great Banks in the surrender.”

“But the Green Lands’ colony of Meldan, sir,” Latour argued, “has all the rights of any other possession of Her Majesty, Queen Julia.”

“Are you saying, sir,” Aimes asked wryly, “That fishing boats from Nenoland or Sarlron have the right of free access to the Banks? Do you mean to imply that the colonial governors of Wasee or the Rajah of Salasia also deserve to sell rights to fish on the Great Banks?”

“Well, no, but they are on the other side of the world,” Latour replied. “It is unreasonable to assume they could grant rights to something they themselves cannot reach.”

“But you do claim that all colonial possessions of the Green Lands have the same rights, sir,” Aimes replied, now sounding as slick as Latour had moments earlier, “and yet you would deny those colonies the right to fish in our waters?”

“If they could send their boats here, it would be a different case,” Latour told him.

“Either all colonies have the same granted rights, sir, or they do not,” Aimes went on. “And it is obvious they do not. Varana does not have the right to send her citizens fur hunting in Western Meldan, do they?”

“Permits can be purchased by non-residents,” the Meldanian retorted. “Besides that is demonstrably on territory that even you must admit is the sole possession of Meldan.”

“Oh yes,” Aimes agreed readily. “We all know what territory belongs to Meldan. Our Guild of Wayfarers keeps most careful records of the locations of all our stabilities, but we are not debating the possession of your settlements, sir. We are talking about the Great Banks, a region within the Wild that Varana contends belongs to us.”

“And since when is any Wild territory claimed by a nation?” Sven Guntharsson, the representative of Gemland chimed in. “By your own arguments, the Kenlienta have more claim to the Great Banks than any of us do, and yet I see not a single Kenlien among us.”

“Within a stability?” Aimes laughed. “That would be the day!”

“An accomplished elder might make the journey and be able to protect other Kenlienta while in human lands,” Kaz told them all. “However, the Ken also are not renowned for their sailing prowess, nor do they claim the Great Banks. I believe we can safely leave them out of these talks.”

“Well, then the region belongs to Varana by right of prior claim,” Aimes proclaimed.

“The Great Banks belongs to Meldan for the reason it is closer to our shores than yours,” Latour countered.

“Gemland has equal claim to the banks,” Guntharsson argued. “They lie equidistant between us.”

Kaz sighed and looked at the representative from the Southern Islands and asked, “And what is your claim on the Great Banks?”

“We have no claim on the Great Banks, sir,” Mateo Perez replied.

“No?” Kaz was astonished. “Then why are you here?”

“The indigene question,” Perez replied.

“What indigene question?” Kaz asked. “Are the Nasano claiming the Great Banks as well? If so, they could have a prior claim over all of you.”

“No,” Alain D’Orace, the negotiator from Selonmania, told him. D’Olace, had so far been fairly quiet, claiming to only be here as an observer. “We are suing on the behalf of the Nasano for restitution for their maltreatment by the Green Lands and her colonies.”

“Leaving aside the matter that such an issue is not in my brief,” Kaz told him, “with the exception of Gemland and Selomania, you are all representing colonies of the Green Lands. If your governments feel so strongly that the Nasano were ill-treated, why come to me for a remedy? You can just make restitution on your own.”

“You misapprehend the situation, sir,” Aimes told him.

“Obviously,” Kaz sighed. Chanya was sitting beside him and promptly kicked his foot. “Yeah, okay,” he whispered out of the side of his mouth.

“Play nice,” she whispered back, barely moving her lips.

“In what way, Mister Aimes?” Kaz asked.

“Meldan and the Southern Islands expect Varana to pay full restitution to the Nasano for their alleged maltreatment by Green Landsmen,” Aimes explained. “We do not think that is reasonable or justified.”

“Why not?” Kaz asked.

“First of all we contend that the Nasano have not been mistreated in anyway,” Aimes replied.

“Nonsense!” Latour scoffed. “You stole your colonial lands from them and forced them to move.”

“We bought the land for the original colonies at the fair asking prices,” Aimes shot back, “and have negotiated many treaties in good faith.”

“Good faith, sir?” Latour countered. “Rewriting those treaties whenever they become inconvenient can hardly be considered in good faith.”

“Oh?” Aimes fired back, “and has Meldan truly done any better? Oh I know where this is coming from. As a Cracian colony you pushed the Nasano around every bit as much as you are now accusing us of having done and claimed to have done it all by your divine given right. Not to mention that in the war you made sure they led the charge in every attack, taking all the highest losses to save Cracian lives even though it meant the deaths of three quarters of the Nasano warriors you so happily referred to as allies.”

“Those, sir,” Latour fired back, “were crimes committed in the name of the King of Crace. We are loyal to Queen Julia and as a colony of the Green Lands have never mistreated the indigenes who live among us.”

“And therefore you take no responsibility for their treatment even though many of you and your families were Cracian subjects before the surrender,” Aimes pointed out, “and the original Cracian colonists of the Southern Islands killed off most of the indigenes there through slavery, massacres and the spread of disease.”

“How dare you?” Perez demanded.

“Gentlemen,” Kaz tried to cut in and got nowhere while the so-called diplomats bickered back and forth. “Gentlemen!” He added an ominous rumble of thunder through a minor work of wayfaring. He had seen Raff do that and had hoped it would be fun. Afterward, he wondered if Raff had taken as little delight in the act as he had. “Gentlemen,” he tried for a third time in the now silent room. “This is getting us nowhere. Whether any of your arguments concerning the Nasano and their treatment are valid I don’t honestly know, but I am fairly certain I am not empowered to arbitrate on the matter.”

“Of course you are,” Aimes told him. The others made sounds of agreement.

“Yes?” Kaz asked, “and how do you figure that?”

“We requested an arbitrator with a royal warrant and you have such a warrant, do you not?” Aimes asked.

“I do, but anyone empowered to arbitrate between colonies would have such a warrant,” Kaz explained.

“Well, then there you are,” Aimes told him with satisfaction.

“Where am I?” Kaz asked.

“You are a duly appointed officer of the Queen’s court here to arbitrate our disputes,” Aimes replied.

“I am here to oversee negotiations concerning deep sea fishing rights,” Kaz told him. “A Nasano rights case is beyond my warrant.”

“I do not think so,” Aimes told him. “Your warrant is a general one. That is what we requested and that is what Master Dulass promised us.”

“Really?” Kaz asked. “I shall have to have a word with Master Dulass and also have a good look at my warrant. It is not that I do not want to help you, but I also do not care to betray the trust of the Queen as well. This should take me the rest of the day to do at least.”

“But what about the Great Banks?” Gunthersson asked.

“And the Nasano?” Latour asked at the same time.

“I suspect neither is going anywhere before tomorrow morning, gentlemen,” Kaz told them. “Of course if you four would care to discuss the matter like mature, civilized adults while I’m away and you can come up with a solution you all agree to, that would not only make my job simpler, but I’m sure you would all be happier with the results. No?” he added on realizing they were all staring at him. He sighed deeply. “Very well, we shall reconvene in the morning.”

Two

“What do you mean they’re right?” Kaz demanded of Lewis Dulass.

“Your warrant is a general one, Kaz,” Lewis explained. “Read it for yourself.”

“I have read it,” Kaz retorted. “What I haven’t read was anything in my orders that suggested I should consider redressing the wrongs done to the indigenous people of Varana.”

“It doesn’t have to be so specific,” Lewis assured him. “It is a general purpose warrant to deal with any problems this committee of delegates wants you to deal with. It’s what I requested.”

“It is?” Chanya asked. “Kaz, was there something in your order packet I didn’t see?”

"Only if it was written inside the envelope," Kaz replied. "Someone's been playing me dirty. I think. I'd like to know who and why, but somehow I doubt I'm going to know from this side of the ocean."

"Send a report back to Raff and Em," Chanya suggested.

"What?" Kaz asked. "And have them think I can't handle my own problems?"

"That isn't the point," Chanya insisted. "There is someone at Central Guildhall who may be maliciously withholding vital information from field wayfarers. Worse, he may even be passing on erroneous information. This time you were the target, but it could have been anyone. How many other missions could be compromised by a wayfarer in just the right position?"

"Well, you may be right," Kaz admitted.

"If you don't send that report, I will," Chanya warned him.

"We'll send a joint report," Kaz told her. "That's been our style so far."

Over the next few days, Kaz and Chanya got the full reasons for the inter-colonial conference. The fishing rights had actually only been part of the agenda. They were vitally important to Verana and Meldan, but with the exception of Gemland, who merely wanted to be able to fish one particular stretch of the Great Banks as they had for hundreds of years, the other colonies were not particularly interested.

The main reason for the gathering had always been the Nasano question. The Nasano were no specific group of indigenous people this side of the Dark Ocean, and in fact the word was a corruption of one used by a tribe from the Southern Islands that no longer existed.

From what Kaz could tell, the people of Crace, Dix and the Greenlands had all pretty much treated them badly from the moment they had arrived here. The earliest colonists had enslaved and taxed the Nasano. Cracian conquerors had demanded tributes of gold and had destroyed whole indigenous cities in their lust for the yellow metal.

Green Landsmen were not any better. Two early colonies were composed entirely of men. They had attempted to raid Nasano villages to steal mates away. Several colonies vanished in their first year before a different sort of colonist started to arrive. These second wave colonies included families, not too many at first, but enough. Colonists with family had no need to attempt to take the land by force. Instead they bought the land by trading manufactured goods from their homelands.

Such trades seemed reasonable to the Nasano tribesmen at first until their children had a chance to go to school in the Green Lands. Then they began to see just how little they had sold out for. Returning to their homes, they also discovered that many more colonists had arrived in their absence and the more recent arrivals were not so careful to pay for the land they used. Most, in fact, reverted to their predecessors' habit of taking what they wanted, so by the time the second generation of Nasano, after the coming of the first successful Green Lands colonists, realized they were being forced away from their own lands and it was already too late.

The son of the original chieftain who had welcomed colonists to the region of Bournsett Bay, had been one of the young Nasano who had the benefit of a Green Lands education. While in the Green Lands he had even taken a Green Landish name, so by the time he had inherited his father's position he was referred to as King Oliver.

King Oliver's War on Bournsett Bay and Newland, lasted several years and turned out to be the Nasano's last real chance to expel the invading Green Landsmen. In the end, King Oliver and over half his people were killed and the survivors were forced to live on carefully selected tracts of land. This turned out to be the model set in the rest of Varana for the next half century and, as the colonial population grew, most Nasano learned to stay out of their way. Many moved westward through the Wild to establish new homes themselves, but they always had the expanding colonists behind them and the other Nasano tribes in front.

Those who traveled to the north found a marginally better reception from the Meldanian colonists who used the Nasano grievances to forge a one-sided alliance in the Meldan version of the long-standing antipathy between Crace and the Green Lands.

Decades of tension finally erupted into all-out war a generation earlier between Cracian Meldan and Varana. The Cracian colonists had, as Kaz had pointed out, used the Nasano instead of their own troops where they could. In the end, however, Cracian interests had been stretched too thin world-wide, and they were unable to hold Meldan, the Southern Islands and what was now part of Southern Varana. And through it all the Nasano continued to be repressed.

Meldan was now a colony of the Green Lands and a fair number of Cracian colonists had been expelled, many migrating to Selomania to the west of Varana. However, Tens of thousands of Cracians were unwilling to leave their homes and were forced to accept the change of national interests, so many people, like Latour, had Cracian names and a fair sized population in Meldan continued to think of themselves as Cracian.

Kaz was not sure if these expatriate Cracians were seriously concerned about the treatment of the Nasano, especially since their fathers had not treated them any better than the Varanans had, or if it was just another form of attack. He decided it did not really matter. His job was merely to guide these talks to a fairly agreed-on conclusion if at all possible. If not, he was empowered to make a decision for all involved, but as the days passed, he realized that any decision he made was going to upset one or more of the negotiators.

He learned that while it was the official view of the Colonial Congress of Varana that they owed the Nasano no reparations, there had been an increasing incidence of raids on the towns of Varana's western frontier where there were never enough militia men nor members of the Colonial Army to keep the colonists safe. Those militias were yet another point of contention in these talks. Even in Varana, the colonial governors decried them as illegal gatherings of armed men. Some had briefly gained some official acceptance, such as the Comitati Vigilantes or Vigilance Companies of back country Julia and Kensing Colonies. But these newly legitimized militias turned out to be a worse problem than the ones they had solved.

Having protected the colonists from raiding Nasano in those two colonies, the vigilance companies had turned to fighting what they saw as an equal threat on their welfare by the representatives of the colonial government itself. The vigilance companies were now allied with Nasano tribesmen in that area.

The demand by the representatives to the negotiations that these comitati vigilantes be disbanded, put Mister Aimes in the unenviable position of having to defend them even while the Royal governors were trying to do just that. However, Aimes, Kaz came to realize, was not really representing any of the Queen's governors. He had been assigned to this post by the Colonial Congress, which, while tolerated by the governors officially as a means of uniting the colonies for defensive purposes, were beginning to follow the same path of the comitati vigilantes. The Congress had been established to iron out certain issues between the thirteen colonies of Varana, mostly dealing with inter-colonial trade and the United

Colonial Army had been established to protect that trade, but having allowed the United Colonies their own army, the governors had rapidly come to the conclusion that they had also authorized the creation of an enemy of the Crown.

To date, the Congress did not consider itself opposed to the Crown, not as a whole in any case. The Colony of Bournsett Bay was now leading a drive to declare independence from the Green Lands with some strong sympathy from Cobbsland and Newland, but the other colonies were quite content for the moment to be under Her Majesty's protective arm. Kaz did not really blame the northern part of Varana for their antipathy to the Crown and more specifically to Her Majesty's Royal Army, especially since that army had been occupying Lonport for the last six months in yet another attempt to put down rebellion. The attempt, from what Kaz could see, was a failure in almost every way and it had only served to rouse more citizens, most of whom had previously been content to quietly mind their own business.

Kaz expected violence to break out in northern Varana any day, but as he stayed in New Ebor, a city almost perfectly in the middle of Varana's coastline, those troubles seemed a world away and also they were not his.

"This is entirely unfair," Kaz complained to Chanya one evening in their room two weeks after they had arrived. "I am not a high justice. This is not the job I agreed to do."

"Feeling sorry for yourself?" Chanya asked. A gentle tone in her voice took most of the sting out of the words, but there was still a touch of sharpness there.

"Yes," Kaz admitted. "Yes, I am. And the worst part is you're the only one I can complain about this to. Anyone else would just think I was whining."

"Well, it does sound a little like whining," Chanya admitted.

"Only a little?" Kaz chuckled. "I must be doing better than I thought then."

"But you are right," she told him. "It isn't fair, but it is your job and you have been empowered to make the decisions they are forcing on you."

"The fishing rights thing is fairly simple," Kaz told her, "and I'm tempted to just make them continue to fish the Great Banks in the same manner they have for the last few decades. It's worked well enough so far and I see no reason to change it just because the Varanans see a chance to grab the whole thing."

"Then do that," Chanya suggested.

"I don't think I can," Kaz replied. "Well, I can, of course. I can walk in there and rule they must always wear a pink bonnet with a yellow ribbon on it whenever they fish those banks if I want, and they would have to take that as my decision. Getting the fishermen to do it would be a different matter, but that's beside the point."

"But you see if I rule on that matter first and then move on to consider the Nasano situation, which really is what they are all concerned about, they are going to expect the same decision there too," Kaz continued. "I don't see that as a particularly viable solution. The western Varanans have been taking land as it suits them, often to the detriment of the Nasano there. Oh there are treaties, but they get rewritten whenever inconvenient, the Meldans are right about that, not that they are all that much better. My other alternatives are equally filled with problems."

“The Meldans and Selomanians really want me to halt all Varanan expansion,” Kaz told her. “Varana has already taken a few small chunks from Meldan and the Meldanians want that stopped immediately.”

“I cannot say as I blame them,” Chanya remarked.

“No, of course not,” Kaz agreed. “The Varanans would like to make Meldan a part of their United Colonies, but the Meldans would not really fit in. Many are still Cracian at heart and the others are much more closely connected to their motherland and fear an alliance with Varana will change that. It probably would, but it’s not something they want, especially since the occupying troops of the Royal Army are finally starting to be redeployed out of Meldan.”

“Where are they going?” Chanya asked.

“Varana, of course,” Kaz remarked. “Where do you think those soldiers in Lonport came from? And with the independence movement being at least talked about in the Congress, I imagine they may have been quietly slipped into the other Varanan colonies as well. Another option would be to establish an equitable means of expansion, one that would please all parties. I’m not sure if that is actually possible. It probably is not, in fact since I think Selomania is really here to further Cracian interests on this continent as well as their own. Varanan towns are already started to get near some Selomanian ones especially down in the south, although only in a few places so far, but naturally Selomania would like to see Varana get no closer even if the stifling of the United Colonies did not benefit the entire Cracian part of the world.”

“Okay and the Gemlanders just want their fishing rights,” Chanya recalled. “Why are the Southern Islanders here?”

“Oh that part is simple,” Kaz shrugged. “They want to establish themselves as distinct from Varana, Selomania and Palendo, all of whom feel they have some claim on those islands. Well, Selomania doesn’t have much of a claim since the last war when they lost Torida to Varana, but of course that loss just makes them all the more compelled to stop any expansion of Varana. The Southern Islands are mid-way between Varana and Palendo, however. I think they actually feel more connection to Palendo since most of the original colonists of the islands were Cracian, but for the last century most of their economy has been built on trade with Varana.”

“Sure,” Chanya agreed, “the slave trade.”

“Not entirely,” Kaz corrected her. “Oh it’s still going on and I’d like to find an excuse to stop it. I told you about my fellow tribesman that I found in Lonport last time we were here?”

“You did,” Chanya nodded. “That’s what I was thinking of.”

“But that’s not all that is being traded,” Kaz told her. “In fact, from what I’ve been able to tell, it’s almost insignificant when compared to the rest of their economy. The biggest chunk is sugar and sugar-based products. They grow sugar cane down there, and they are the largest source of sugar for Varana. All other sources are heavily taxed by Parliament, so naturally the Varanans want to keep the Southern islands as a possession.”

“They only claim those islands in name, though,” Chanya insisted, “not fact.”

“The name is enough for the reduced taxes,” Kaz insisted. “And beyond sugar there is rum. The Varanan ships buy the rum at ridiculously low prices and then sell it at a premium in the Green Lands and

the best part is they only pay the tax on the import of the rum to Varana, not to the Green Lands. Their buyers have to pick up that cost so if they ship the rum directly to the Green Lands, they do very well indeed. But the Southern Islanders just want to be left alone. They don't really care what happens during these negotiations, just so long as they establish themselves as a separate but equal political entity."

"Sounds like they've done that already," Chanya remarked.

"So long as they do not walk out, they probably have," Kaz agreed. "It will be a fiction and everyone will know it, but in politics, fiction is often as solid as stone."

Three

The next day, Kaz came close to blowing up at the negotiators and by the middle of the morning had adjourned the session with a few scathing comments about compromise mixed with maturity that had Chanya all but crushing his foot beneath hers. The delegates were all taken aback and, in the shocked silence, Kaz had calmly strolled out of the room. Chanya had been just as surprised and had failed to come after him and in the back of his mind, Kaz knew he would be in for another lecture when she finally caught up to him.

At the moment, however, no one seemed to be catching up to him and he wandered down the sidewalks of New Ebor wondering how he had gotten himself in such a mess. He was paying no attention to anyone around him and neither was the man he collided with a few moments later.

"Oh, excuse me, sir," Kaz apologized instantly and he started to get back to his feet.

"No no, sir," the other man replied. "The fault was entirely mine, I assure you."

"Can't have been," Kaz started to say, but then he took a look at the other man and recognized him. "Mister Baker?" John Baker had been the defending attorney some years earlier during the controversial trials following the now infamous Lonport Massacre.

"Hmm?" John Baker responded. "Have we met, young man?"

"Kazani Basan," Kaz introduced himself. "Raff Cawlens is my adoptive father."

"Oh yes," Baker nodded. "You were the intelligent young man who ran messages for him as I recall. What are you doing in New Ebor?"

"Not being quite so intelligent, I fear, sir," Kaz confessed. "I have never been one to dabble in politics, but it seems that this time the politics have seen fit to dabble with me."

"I know the feeling all too well," Baker laughed, "although I have been a political animal all my life. But what sort of politics are you involved with?"

"Have you heard about the negotiations concerning deep sea fishing rights and the Nasano question?" Kaz asked.

"I should say so," Baker nodded, "As a member of the Colonial Congress I authorized Mister Aimes to speak for Varanan interests. Oh. You did not get tapped as the arbitrator from Guild of Wayfarer's, did you?"

"I'm afraid I did, sir," Kaz nodded.

"No offense intended, Mister Basan," Baker asked hesitantly, "but aren't you a bit young to have been chosen to guide such sensitive negotiations?"

"You mean, aren't I incredibly inexperienced and likely to fail?" Kaz translated. "I'm beginning to believe that was the whole point of my appointment. I was only told about the matter of fishing rights. That did not seem too complex or controversial at the time."

"Hmm, well don't underestimate the importance of the right to fish on the Great Banks," Baker warned him, "but it is negligible when compared to the main business of that committee."

"So I've come to see," Kaz nodded. "And you are here as a part of the Congress?" It was not really a question, since Baker had said as much.

"I am, although I too am starting to wonder why," Baker laughed ruefully. "Perhaps I am being punished, but I am certain I haven't been so evil as to deserve this particular form of Hell. Hmm, it sounds as though we have similar problems and have a similar need to talk them out. Tell, me, Mister Basan would you do me the honor of joining me for a meal?"

"Why thank you, Mister Baker," Kaz nodded. "I'd be delighted."

"Call me John," Baker told him in a friendly manner.

"Kaz," was the instant reply. They shook hands and John Baker led Kaz off to a small inn two blocks away with the sign of a fox and grapes on it. "I like this place," Kaz remarked as they entered. There were fires going in three different fireplaces and the smells of wood smoke and fresh food married in the air. "It's not too different from one I used to visit in Taundon when I could get away from Central Guildhall. I don't know if Raff and Em knew about it though. Em would never have approved."

John Baker flashed him a tight smile. "Some of my Congressional colleagues might agree with her. It is not the nature of the inn that keeps them away, however, but the riff-raff who hang out here."

"Doesn't look so bad to me," Kaz remarked.

"In this room sit some of the more notorious scoundrels and trouble makers," Baker told him, his voice mixing tones of sourness with humor.

"One of them is still standing, John" a man in a corner booth commented wryly. "Have a seat."

"Poston! When did you sneak out?" Baker asked, then turned to make the introduction. "David Poston, senior delegate from the colony of New Ebor, I have the honor of introducing, Master Kazani Basan of the Guild of Wayfarers."

David Poston was a thin elderly man who, in spite of being from New Ebor, dressed in the more somber styles of Lonport. He was of medium height and had long white hair.

"Ah, our new Royal Arbitrator," Poston identified Kaz. "Tell me, Master Basan, did John here warn you about the people who patronize this establishment before or after you walked through the door?" He turned to a serving maid and signaled for food and drink.

"Definitely after," Kaz replied with a grin, "Although had I known he was bringing me here to meet you, Doctor Poston, I might have insisted we hurry."

"Oh, I think I am one of the lesser attractions in the Fox and Grapes," Poston replied modestly.

"Oh I think that depends on whether one has read *The Collected Wisdom of Simple Simon*," Kaz replied, "I only wish I had not left my copy in Taundon. I might have asked you to sign it."

Poston looked flattered, but what he said was, "I fear there are more people reading Mister Wooley's *What We All Know*, these days."

"Really?" Kaz asked. "I suppose I should get a copy of that too then."

"Better hurry, young man," Poston chortled. "I predict it will be banned by next week."

"Banned?" Kaz asked. "So this is Brothers of Freedom propaganda?"

"Oh this goes well beyond the Brothers of Freedom," Poston told him. "Oh they got this started, but what Gareth Wooley has written speaks even to the loyalists."

"Is there something wrong with being loyal to Queen Julia?" Kaz asked.

"Not at all," Poston was quick to reply. "This is not entirely about rebellion. I think most of us would be quite pleased to put aside the growing tensions here in the colonies, if only Her Majesty and her Parliament could grant us at least a small voice in our own governance."

"Some say this tension is just an unwillingness to pay taxes," Kaz pointed out as a steaming plate of roast turkey and a large mug of lager were placed in front of him. "Thank you," he told the server automatically.

"Ha!" Franklin laughed as though Kaz had just told a joke. "No one in his right mind actually wants to pay taxes, not matter how loyal to the Queen. No, what we would like are representatives in Parliament. Good men selected by us to represent our needs and viewpoints. Then, at least, those taxes would be tolerable. Don't you think that is reasonable?"

“Now, now, Poston,” Baker laughed. “It’s not fair putting seditious thoughts into this young man’s head so early in the day.”

“I don’t recall it has ever stopped you, John,” Poston chuckled.

“Well, perhaps I am just in a merciful mood today,” Baker replied. “Besides he has worse problems than we do. We’re just trying to get the Colonial Congress to convene.”

“I thought you had already done that,” Kaz remarked.

“Only five of the thirteen colonies have agreed to even meet, so far,” Baker replied tiredly. Two others have sent observers to see what we are doing, I suppose, and then report on whether or not it is safe to be a part of this.

“Strange,” Kaz noted. “The way Mister Aimes goes on, it sounds like the Colonial Congress has already drafted a charter, a book of laws and established a department of foreign policy.”

“Patrick Aimes?” Poston asked. “He’s an observer from Pacidelphia down in Julia. We gave him the job of negotiating with Meldan and the others in the hope he might recommend that Julia send a full delegation.”

“Well, it sounds like you have him convinced, at least,” Kaz remarked. “By himself though he is not my problem. Well maybe he is, but only if he is doing his job and I can’t fault him for that.”

“Well, if it is any comfort, Our incipient Congress did approve of the petition asking for a Guild representative to moderate the fishing negotiation, but we had not planned to pass off those other problems on you,” Baker told him. “Have they brought up the slavery issue yet?”

“Good heavens, no!” Kaz exclaimed. Then he calmed down a bit and continued, “Are they likely to?”

“Mister Aimes is from a colony in which slavery is still legal,” Baker explained. “They consider it a natural institution and cherish it as one of the legs of their economy. I do not know how Mister Aimes feels about it personally, but as a representative of his colony, I would expect him to side with them.

“Of the other colonies, Meldan and Gemland find the practice repugnant as do I and Doctor Poston here,” Baker continued. “The Selomanians couldn’t care less what we do along those lines, and the Southern Islands are in favor since they’ve been the only legal source of slaves in the last two decades.”

“I know,” Kaz replied darkly. “Some of my people were brought into Varana through those islands. I met one in Lonport.”

“If he was in Lonport, he was not a slave,” Poston remarked.

“As a runaway he might have been caught and returned, though,” Kaz pointed out.

“This is true, although slavery is not supported in Bournsett Bay Colony,” Baker told him. “I believe very few citizens would turn him in if he were found out.”

“It only takes one,” Kaz pointed out.

"I can't argue with that," Baker nodded. "Anyway, while Aimes is not likely to bring it up, one of the other men might."

"Well, Good Lord!" Kaz swore. "What sort of talks are these that any subject at all might come up?"

"Quite reasonable when you realize why they are being conducted in the first place," Baker replied. When Kaz shot him a "Tell me" look he continued, "To build an alliance, of course. I'm relying on your discretion as a wayfarer, Kaz. But it seems obvious to me that Varana will not be able to remain a part of the Green Lands for very much longer. We are being alternatively ignored and taxed by parliament and while I believe Queen Julia cares for her subjects, she is a busy woman and we are just a small part of her empire. We're chafing under an unfair set of laws and no one seems to be doing anything positive about it."

"My own Bournsett Bay has been declared in rebellion," Baker continued.

"When did that happen?" Kaz asked.

"About three weeks ago, I would imagine," Baker replied, "but the news just arrived today. Even as we speak more troops are landing to occupy Lonport. I'm only glad that my wife and family have been staying on our farm in Sutton during my absence. It was that news that sent me from the hall this morning."

"Cheer up, John," Poston recommended. "This invasion may well forge our alliance for us. After you left, Mister Fanchon, our so-called simple cobbler from Cobbsland, gave a magnificent speech that fired up our colleagues from New Rossey and Kensing, and where they go, Julia is bound to follow."

"They're in favor of independence?" Baker asked interestedly.

"Not so much in favor as no longer unwilling to discuss it," Poston replied. "I'm sure they will want to make a peace gesture, John, but just being willing to convene this congress is a step in the right direction, and frankly should Her Majesty suddenly realize that our demands are as reasonable as we believe them to be, I'm not really in favor of war."

"Well, neither am I when you get right down to it," Baker admitted. "People die in wars. Good people on both sides. It's a waste. But Kaz we were discussing your problems. What sent you out your own door and into this den of inequity?"

Kaz took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay. I was brought here to mediate or possibly make a ruling about fishing rights. Usually when a wayfarer is called into such a situation the negotiators quickly find a middle ground before he can arrive, but I wasn't really counting on that. I certainly did not expect to be asked to rule on these other matters you say or imply should be up to this incipient Congress of yours. Indigene rights, relations with Meldan, possession of the Southern Islands and your undeclared war with the Cracian colonies to the south and west. Oh, and now I suppose I should expect to rule on the slavery issue. I think it is fairly clear where I would stand on that one even if the Wayfarers' Guild did not already have an official policy against it."

"But why do you think all these other matters are in your jurisdiction, Kaz?" Baker asked softly.

"Because while your Congress-to-be may have requested that I arbitrate on the matter of fishing rights," Kaz replied, "the other parties in these talks are demanding a Guild decision on every other matter they can imagine. My warrant of office was made all too broad and general so I am assured it is

their right to ask it of me, but any decision I make will be for one side and against the others, even should I refuse to decide.”

“That is the job of being a judge,” Poston pointed out.

“I wasn’t supposed to be a judge,” Kaz argued.

“Judge, arbitrator,” Poston weighed the two words as though in a balance. “Not much difference when you get right down to it.”

“You do have a bit of a quandary,” Baker admitted to Kaz, “and I think it is obvious my own preferences would be that you rule in Varana’s favor.”

“Ah, but which Varana?” Kaz asked. “North or South? It seems to me that the northern colonies are not all that united with the southern ones. You’ve said as much yourself. But what makes this all the harder is that almost any decision I make threatens to result in an all-out war.”

“I’m sure you’re exaggerating,” Baker shook his head. “Or rather if a war occurs any ruling you make is not likely to be the spark that brings it about.”

“There are enough fires burning already,” Poston chuckled, “to worry about your little spark. And despite what my incendiary friend here believes, this Congress we are building may be enough to make peace, not war.”

“But Kaz,” Baker continued as though Poston had not spoken, “perhaps you just need more time in which to make your decisions. You should not, cannot really, put such things off indefinitely, but they can be postponed while you consider the matters. The negotiators will press you for your decisions, but there is no reason you have to allow them to force you into haste.”

“Haste, Master Basan, is never a good ingredient,” Poston added sententiously, “no matter what the recipe.”

“And while you certainly do have to make a decision on the right to fish on the Great Banks,” Baker added. “those diplomats were perfectly willing to come to terms on the other issues before they heard you were coming.”

“Thank you, both of you,” Kaz told him and discovered while they had been talking, his turkey had gotten cold. He smiled at that. He was used to eating his meals cold when he and Raff got into interesting discussions. In a way the cold food was a taste of home.

The Way to Mannburgh

One

“So I divided up the Great Banks in pretty much the same way they’ve all been using it so far,” Kaz told Lewis that evening, “and they all started howling like wounded beasts.”

“You didn’t reverse your decision, did you?” Lewis asked.

“Hah!” Kaz laughed sharply.

“Not even a little,” Chanya chimed in proudly. “He simply told them that was his decision and that they had already agreed to abide by it. And he did it so calmly and politely none of them dared to argue about that again.”

“They did try bringing up the various other issues again,” Kaz remarked, “but I told them I was not yet ready to rule on them, unless they really wanted me to rush into it. So in the silence I told them I had other business in Varana to see to and that I would be gone at least five weeks. On my return, I promised to render any decision they liked, although it was fine by me if they managed to come up with their own solutions first.”

“What other business do you have?” Lewis asked.

“Well, I know that packet bound for Skethit hasn’t left yet,” Kaz told him. “I can deliver that.”

“That should not take you more than a week,” Lewis remarked.

“Probably not,” Kaz agreed, “but that’s where you come in. I figure there must be something going on, even if it means transporting travelers you can assign me to.”

“In your current capacity, I don’t believe I can actually assign you to anything,” Lewis commented uncertainly.

“Maybe,” Kaz remarked, “and maybe not. However, I am a fairly certain I can accept an assignment while on hiatus from the arbitration. And if I am wrong, well then I’ll just have to apologize later.”

“It’s really not all that different from what Raff did during the Lonport Trials,” Chanya commented.

“We tend to expect that in a trial,” Lewis pointed out. “It gives the lawyers a chance to prepare their cases.”

“The lawyers in question have already had ample time to prepare their cases,” Kaz laughed, “but as it happens the advice I’m following came from one of those lawyers. Look, do you have anything to the west of here either on the way to Skethit or with Skethit on the way?”

“Hmm,” Lewis thought a moment, “Well, now that you mention it, there’s a town on Varana’s western frontier, Mannburgh, where a group of farmers are having some trouble with the local Nasano tribesmen. I suppose you might consider it a bit of research, but...”

“But?” Kaz asked.

“It’s a touchy situation,” Lewis warned him.

“I’m rather well aware of that by now,” Kaz laughed. “That’s been chorused at me by everyone in those negotiations, but I have never actually met the Nasano and heard their side of the story and the more I think about it, the better the idea sounds.”

“Very well,” Lewis nodded, “I believe we have some people waiting for a west-bound wayfarer to guide them and since at least one couple is on their way to Mannburgh anyway, I guess that will work out well enough.”

They left early the next day with the two couples in a single wagon of a sort that seemed popular to those traveling to the frontier. It was fair-sized, but light enough to be drawn by a single horse, although this one had a team of two. It also sported several light metal hoops over which an unbleached sheet of canvas had been stretched as a cover. Large enough to sleep four even with all the travelers’ possessions stacked up in back, it might provide some shelter if they got caught one evening away from a town.

“I sent a note to Emblem last night,” Chanya confessed as they started out once their charges were comfortably situated in the back. “I just thought she and Raff ought to know how we were doing.”

“That’s not a problem,” Kaz remarked. “I sent a note to her and Raff last night too, asking for their advice. I just hope that advice doesn’t include, “Don’t go off into the frontier to avoid making a decision. It might, you know”

“It might,” she agreed, “but I think you’re doing the right thing. Part of what you are supposed to be doing for those talks is to guide them and encouraging the negotiators to come up with their own solutions sounds like reasonable guidance to me.”

“I think they would be less likely to be unhappy with the results if they do,” Kaz nodded, “even if the solutions they devise are the same as I would enforce. How are we doing back there?”

“Just fine, Master Basan,” one of the women replied.

“Okay,” Kaz told her. “We’re about to cross over into the Wild.”

“How long until we get to Mannburgh?” her husband asked.

“I’m not completely sure,” Kaz admitted. “About two weeks is my guess. I have a detour to a settlement called Skethit along the way and I don’t know how long I may be obligated to stay there. A

few days is possible, so we plan to leave you in a town called Hedley and then come back for you when we're done in Skethit."

"Why not just take us to Skethit?"

"Skethit is a Kenlientan settlement, Mister Keen," Chanya answered. "The Ken are a friendly and hospitable people, but humans can inadvertently harm them with our innate stability. They can no more tolerate being inside a stability than you can the Wild without proper protection."

"I don't recall having any particular protection from the Wild when I have traveled," Keen replied.

"The wayfarers you traveled with were your protection," Chanya replied. "We keep you in a nice safe bubble of stability as we travel through the Wild. That is a part of our talent. The other basic part is that we can navigate through the Wild so we do not automatically come back to where we started. Without wayfarers there would be no civilization."

"Oh, there might be a civilization," Kaz remarked, "but it would be very different from what we know. Clumps of humans would be isolated from each other and would rarely be able to contact each other. The stabilities would be much larger, I should think, since we would rarely leave them if ever and each one would be like a different tribe or nation. Of course it's likely very few would even be aware that other stabilities existed and they might even consider it heresy to suggest there were other people in the world."

"An interesting notion," Chanya remarked.

"It came up in conversation one night at University," Kaz admitted. "It turned into a mental exercise we played with for a few weeks. One of my notions was that word of other stabilities might come through contact with the Ken. Just because we had no wayfarers in that fictional world, it did not mean the Ken had no elders and an elder can protect his people inside a stability and to an extent provide a pocket of stability for a human, although I have noticed they tend to forget that need in us."

"That's understandable," Mrs. Keen commented, "since they do not need it themselves."

"Yes, that is probably why," Kaz agreed. "They have as little contact with us as we have with them and of the few humans they do meet, nearly all of us are wayfarers and that's the point we were getting at. With training, wayfarers are able to repress their basic stability auras so we can get near and even touch a Kenlien without fear of harming him or her."

"What do the Ken look like?" Mrs. Keen asked.

"Pretty much like us," Kaz replied. "They tend to be taller and thinner on the average and they have pointed ears, but their range of skin and hair color is the same as ours and if you saw one wearing a hat you might not notice the other differences. When I spend time among them I barely notice the differences myself. They're people, like we are. Their religion is different, of course and some of their social conventions as well, but not so different as you might think and their version of the Karnabash or Book of Mysteries is the same as ours although very few humans are allowed to study it, but all Ken are encouraged to, especially if they plan to be an elder some day.

"It's their towns and cities that are really different," Kaz told them. "The basic tenet of the Ken religion is 'Change is life and Life is change.' They use that as a greeting sometimes and a benediction frequently and a philosophical acceptance of any situation nearly every day. And they practice change as

a way of life. Every day they make some change to their homes and businesses. Sometimes it is a small change, like repainting a piece of furniture and sometimes they add on or take away parts of their homes. I've never seen a Kenlentan town look the same twice. Whole buildings can appear and disappear between visits. Even street plans can change.

"I have even heard," he went on, "that the governmental palace in Tamag Methin, which is the largest Ken city on the Southern Continent and means 'Flower of the Deep' has three sets of chambers or wings and that each day the wing they use changes and gets used only for one day. Then they have two days in which to completely rebuild it before it gets used again. The designers compete for the honor of having their designs used. Some of them are professionals trying to make a name for themselves, others are just retired Ken looking for an interesting new hobby, but even children are chosen for the honor sometimes. It is evidently a major chore to choose and arrange the new designs so that each one can be completed in the time allowed and then dismantled for the next one.

"One of those Ken designers was hired to design the new meeting hall for the Congress of Wayfarers in Taundon," Chanya remarked. "I think she was somewhat shocked that we intended to keep it just the way it was, so she designed in some very special changes that indicate both change and changelessness. I've never seen anything like it although I have seen some of her other work in my travels."

"You two like these Ken, don't you?" Mister Keen asked.

"Very much so," Chanya responded.

"I do," Kaz replied at the same time. "Like I said, they are friendly and hospitable people. They live in a different world than we do and we rarely intrude on it except during times of emergency or invitation. But they are also no better or worse than we are. They are concerned right now with the effects of human pollution on the Wild and make no mistake about it, we are having an effect, but similarly their own technological advances are having their effect on the stabilities. I've heard from scientists that if we are not careful, one day there will be no Wild to speak of and while a lot of humans hear that and think, 'More room for us,' I've also seen proof that it would be disastrous for human life as well. We need the Wild and the Ken need our stabilities. They are two sides of the same coin and they must be in balance."

"Enough lectures today I think," Chanya laughed. She knew Kaz was passionate on the subject and agreed wholeheartedly with him, but she also knew the lecture would be wasted on anyone who had never met the Ken or studied the Wild. "Now we left in a hurry so I haven't gotten to know you all yet. What brings you folks to travel though the Wild?"

That was always a good conversation point at the start of a journey and it kept the two couples talking for hours. The Keens were from the Green Lands but were headed out to Mannburgh to homestead a farm, Larson Keen already had family out there who were holding a large lot for him and would help him and his new wife, Doroty, get settled.

The other couple, Teos Wakfield and Abigail McCormac, was traveling to Taddfield, a small town about halfway to Mannburgh where they planned to get married. "We met at New Ebor College," Teos told them, "and now we're going to join Abby's family. It seems best that way. My only living family is my sister and she went back to Taundon a year ago. She didn't like it here, I guess."

"Well, Varana is not the culturally refined country the Green Lands is, but there is a certain cultural vigor here," Kaz told them. "The Green Lands is established in size and strength. This land is still growing and who knows how much it may yet grow?"

"I just hope I fit in," Dorothy commented worriedly.

"Of course you will, dear," Larson assured her. "My family is going to love you as much as I do. Just wait and see."

"But what if they don't?" Dorothy asked nervously. "I have no family there. My folks are all back in Easlanton. I'll probably never see them again."

"Ah no, darling," Larson comforted her. "If this doesn't work out, we can also go back, but it will work out, you'll see."

"Promise?" Dorothy asked hopefully. Neither Kaz nor Chanya were certain where Dorothy's hopes were.

"I promise," Larson replied.

Two

Varana was still very much a rough and tumble land where some few people with a trace of wayfaring talent would occasionally resort to robbery. The ability to steal in one town and then quickly make your own way to the next was frequently resorted to by amateur wayfarers. And some of those would resort to a more risky but also more lucrative trade, that of a highway man. Kaz's and Chanya's charges this time were newly arrived colonists who had spent their last money to get here. As often as not prosperous merchants could be found in a wayfarer's party as could other well-to-do people who traveled because they could afford to be tourists.

They were two days out of New Ebor when a man on a horse suddenly rode out of the surrounding forest, aimed a loaded flintlock pistol at Kaz and proclaimed, "Stand and deliver, sir!" He was garbed all in black, which Kaz thought had to have come from a bad penny novel, and wore a scarf up over his face to hide all features but his eyes from the party.

"A polite one," Kaz whispered amusedly to Chanya. He looked at the scruffy man, dressed all in ragged brown clothing and asked, "Stand and deliver what?" It was part of an old joke among wayfarers, but Kaz had been waiting for years to be able to use it. He never believed anyone would actually say that when trying to hold a wagon up. In a similar situation an apprentice and even most

journeymen would have been at the mercy of the gunman. Hardly any masters would have been in danger, of course, but there were not many masters in the Guild when compared to the number of apprentices and journeymen, and so few of them worked in the field on a regular basis that the chance of running into one was fairly slim.

“Your money or you life, sir!” the robber demanded.

“Oh,” Kaz chuckled. “I’d like to see you try.”

The man pulled the trigger and the flint snapped down to throw sparks into the flash pan but, aside from those sparks, nothing happened. Kaz snapped a quick glance at Chanya and started laughing.

“Did you do that?” he asked, still laughing. “I wanted to catch the ball and toss it back to him.”

“You have entirely too much fun,” Chanya told him seriously. “Stop him, he’s getting away.”

Kaz looked up and saw the flustered robber riding away at full speed. He tried to summon the Wild energy to immobilize the erstwhile gunman, but laughing too hard, he just did not have the concentration necessary to manage it. “Sorry about that,” he apologized. “I guess I really was having a bit too much fun, but I never thought I’d get to do any of that. ‘Stand and deliver?’ Who actually says that? It’s comes from cheap fiction.”

“So we have a literate bandit,” Chanya shrugged.

“Just barely,” Kaz replied, “but he was polite. All those sirs. I can’t help think he’s some well educated guy down on his luck. Well, after this little fiasco he’s probably already rethinking his career options.”

“I just hope he isn’t going to be waiting for us a few miles down the path,” Chanya pointed out. “Next time he would be more willing to shoot first and ask for the money after. And what do you mean you wanted to catch the ball and throw it back at him? All I did was blow the powder out of his primer pan.”

“Oh, that,” Kaz shrugged, “Raff told me about a time he stopped a musket ball. It sounded like fun.”

“Fun?” Chanya asked with danger in her voice. “Fun? Do you have any idea how difficult that sort of thing is? If you misjudged even just a little you’d be dead.”

“Oh, it’s not that hard,” Kaz scoffed. “I already had a hold on the ball, it was just a matter of...”

“You idiot!” she told him. “You aren’t taking this seriously. You couldn’t even stop him from getting away, but you think you could stop the projectile from his gun?”

Kaz had an answer to that too, but when he realized Chanya was not laughing with him for a change, he decided it might be best not to argue this particular point. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“Kaz,” she continued in a more reasonable tone, “this isn’t a game. And it is not like the training exercises they used to put us through. We don’t have the luxury of playing with dangerous people out here. Sure, you probably can get away with it, and if you were only risking your own life... well, it would still be stupid, but it’s your life. What would have happened if I wasn’t here and that man managed to shoot you? You’d be dead and four people would be trapped in the Wild is what.”

"I guess I hadn't thought of that," Kaz admitted. He was still certain he had the situation in hand, but privately admitted Chanya was right. Anyone could make a mistake and this was not the sort of situation where mistakes were forgivable.

He continued to listen to and weather her lecture for the next hour as they continued on toward Hedley. The incident, however, was nearly forgotten by the time they stopped to eat that night and Kaz decided not to remind her of it in the future.

They were just approaching the edge of the Hedley stability when Chanya spotted a pair of Kenlienta waiting patiently by the south side of the path. As always, they drew to a halt.

"What's happening?" Doroty Keen asked. "Are we in Hedley?"

"Almost," Chanya explained even as she and Kaz began to climb down from the wagon. "We have some friends who want to parlay first. Stay in here please."

"Hello!" Kaz greeted the two Kenlienta. "How may we help you?"

"We know you," one of the Ken noted. "You were there when the mine collapsed and helped us."

"We both were, yes," Kaz replied. "I am Kazani Basan, the son of Raff and Emblem Cawlens and this is Chanya Sanai."

"Yes, we know," the Kenlien replied, "and it is fortunate that you are here at this time. We have a problem in Skethit and Elder Nearlina requests the help of wayfarers. Will you come?"

"Of course," Kaz agreed instantly. "We were on our way already. There's a mail packet from, well, I'm not really sure where it is from, but I suppose it must be from Yakrut. Please allow us to escort our charges into the next stability and then we will hasten to Skethit immediately."

"Thank you, Kazani Basan," the spokesman replied. "I will let the elder know you are on your way."

"What was that about?" Larson Keen asked.

"One of those times we mentioned the other day," Kaz replied, "when Kenlienta come looking for a wayfarer to talk to. I did not expect it in Varana, considering there are very few of the Ken here, but they are having some sort of problem to the south." He gave the reins a shake and the horses started moving again. "As it happens that is where Chanya and I were headed next anyway, but if there is a problem, we may be delayed. Still, you can stay in Hedley at Guild expense until either we return or the next wayfarer party comes through. That is standard procedure and it shouldn't be more than a few days regardless."

The travelers were not completely reassured, but after checking them in with the local Guild office, a small affair with the local postmaster handling arrangements, Kaz and Chanya slung packs over their backs and started heading for Skethit.

"Maybe we should have brought horses," Kaz remarked as they walked swiftly along. Their route was not a normal wayfarer's path – there was no thin line of stability, but there was a well-traveled route headed south that after the first two miles widened out into a packed-earth road. The Ken, Kaz knew, built better roads on the other side of the ocean, but this was sufficient for the needs of a remote outpost like Skethit.

“Horses would have had to be stabled carefully in Skethit,” Chanya replied. “You know that, and it’s only three hours by foot anyway.”

“True enough, but I think I may have been getting soft lately,” Kaz laughed. “I’m too used to sitting in the Central Guildhall.”

“You need to get out more,” Chanya told him.

“I do,” Kaz agreed. “Raff believes we all should, but believing that and actually doing it are two different things. Once you’re stuck at a desk job it seems there’s no end of work that keeps you at the desk.”

“Apply for a transfer,” Chanya told him.

“You don’t think I have?” Kaz returned. “I no more want to be stuck in Taundon than Raff and Em do, but they only get out of the city once or twice a year these days too, you know, and never for more than a week or two. My requests are always turned down.”

“Raff turns down those requests?” Chanya asked disbelievingly.

“I don’t ask Raff,” Kaz explained. “I have to go through channels just like anyone else. I have an immediate superior who has a boss who has a boss and so forth. If I go directly to Raff with something like that, it will do nothing for my credibility as a wayfarer and I’m fairly certain Raff wouldn’t approve of me whining about it to him either.”

“But if you aren’t allowed to get into the field as he wants all of us to,” Chanya argued, “don’t you think he should know?”

“You don’t think he does?” Kaz laughed. “I still live with Raff and Em. That house of theirs is so big the three of us rattle around in it so there’s no need for a separate apartment.”

“It’s not all that big,” Chanya recalled, “but there is room for more than three I suppose.”

“At least twice that without worrying about bumping elbows, yes,” Kaz laughed. “I did think about getting my own place but it seemed like a waste of money, especially since I thought I’d be out in the field more. As it happens I end up sleeping in the office once or twice a week, just to keep up with the paper.”

“A master of your abilities should not be stuck behind a desk, Kaz,” Chanya told him. “There are dozens of experienced journeymen to push paper. Heck! We can hire non-wayfarers to keep our bureaucracy moving.”

“Well, I thought so too, until I saw the financial records,” Kaz admitted, “but we’re already paying our journeymen. Hiring still more people to do the paperwork would strain the budget.”

“Okay,” Chanya agreed tentatively, “but that doesn’t excuse the waste of a master wayfarer on a job a journeyman can do. There are never enough masters out here to do what we have to.”

“That’s just one of the reasons they’re talking about letting the Ocean paths go,” Kaz pointed out.

“And how many masters are stuck behind desks like you are?” Chanya asked. “Most of the Congress of Wayfarers stays in Taundon and they’re mostly masters.”

“They’re masters in rank,” Kaz replied. “Only about one third of them are masters by dint of their talents. Of course that’s not snobbery coming out,” he hastened to add, “I’m glad they’re there. For every master of rank who is actually a journeyman by talent, another master by talent is clear to be out here where we’re needed the most. Of course not all of us want to be in the field, you know. You have to remember the outcry when Raff announced that all would have to go out from time to time.”

“Heh,” Chanya chuckled, “You’d have thought some of those backsides had been grafted to their chairs.”

“Exactly,” Kaz nodded. “It’s not as bad now, but I still don’t get out as much as I want.”

“Until this assignment, when was the last time you left Taundon?” Chanya asked pointedly.

“Counting University?”

“Dunbridge doesn’t count,” Chanya told him. “It’s a satellite town of Taundon, I’m surprised it hasn’t been absorbed by the main stability.”

“Stabilities don’t do that,” Kaz corrected her. “They never actually touch, even when attracted to one another. It’s been proven mathematically.”

“I know that,” she retorted. “I might not understand the mathematical proof as well as you do, but I was just being facetious. My point is, Dunbridge is so close to Taundon you don’t really need a wayfarer to make the crossing, and that is not an exaggeration. Most non-wayfarers can do it if they try.”

“We don’t usually tell them that,” Kaz pointed out.

“No, of course not,” Chanya laughed scornfully. “It’s bad for business.”

“Not really,” Kaz disagreed. “We don’t schedule a lot of trips between Taundon and her satellites for just the reasons you pointed out. Nearly anyone can do it on their own, but not everyone, and non-wayfarers can’t see the bubble of the next stability so if they leave in the wrong direction, and that does change gradually from day to day, they could get lost in between.”

“But in between is the Wild,” Chanya pointed out, so they should just return to where they started, right?”

“The Wild between large cities and their satellites is evidently not as Wild as all that,” Kaz replied. “There’s this sort of energy flux that makes the region sort of half Wild and half stable. Doctor Harkermor tried to explain it to me last year when he was visiting Raff, but I’ll need to go back to school if I want to get to that level. If I get stuck in Taundon for another few years, I might just do that. Both Dunbridge and Camgate have advanced classes in the city and it would give me a break in the routine.”

“Do you have the time for classes?” Chanya asked. “It sounds like you’re too busy if you cannot leave the office some nights as it is.”

“I could find the time to work on a doctorate,” Kaz replied. “Raff did, after all. It would extend my time of indenture to the Guild but only for a couple of years. Maybe less, as with a PhD under my belt,

they would have to pay me more.”

“There is that,” Chanya agreed, “although I have no complaints with what the Guild pays.”

“No, the Guild pays well,” Kaz agreed. “Of course they charge us as much as they pay and you know some wayfarers never get out of indenture.”

“That’s because they take all their money out and spend it on themselves. If you put a bit back toward paying off your debt, it’s just a matter of time, you know,” Chanya remarked.

“True enough and that’s the other reason I stay with Raff and Em. They don’t charge rent and since I don’t get out of Central Guildhall except for once a year, I can’t rack up those field bonuses like you can.”

“Ha!” she laughed humorlessly. “The only bonus I ever earned was the one from that trip I made with you, Raff and Emblem. You don’t get bonuses for traveler milk runs and postal work, you know.”

“You do for path maintenance,” Kaz pointed out. “Haven’t you logged your hours doing that?”

“I’ve never been sent anywhere I needed to,” Chanya replied. “Most paths keep themselves, you know. It’s only the ones we don’t use often enough that start to fall apart.”

“There is that,” Kaz agreed. “What’s that odd sound?”

“What odd...” Chanya began, then stopped herself. “Oh. I don’t know, but it seems to be coming from ahead of us.”

“And judging from the smell of coal smoke in the air,” Kaz added, “whatever is causing it must be in Skethit.”

It seemed odd to Kaz to smell coal burning out here in what seemed like isolated Wild country, but he knew from experience that Skethit had been established near a coal mine in order to exploit that fuel for research into steam engines. On his last trip here, the steam engine was only an experimental device, but in the intervening years the Ken of Skethit had refined the engine into something that was efficient enough to run a mill and were hoping to optimize it still more so that it could be used for propulsion.

The odd sound oscillated and moaned as they drew closer leaving both wayfarers feeling ill at ease. They crested the last hill and looked down into Skethit. As they had last seen it, the scientific colony continued to be nestled against the side of the next mountain. From this distance Kaz could not see many changes, although the black slate roofs of the buildings seemed to mostly have been painted a bright orange and there was a bright silvery blue light glowing with varied intensity from near the middle of the town.

“I wonder if that odd light is making all this noise?” Chanya remarked.

“It is probably related,” Kaz replied. “Oh heck and now it’s starting to snow as well. Odd noises, coal smoke to breathe, and now snow. Can this day get any worse?”

“Probably will,” Chanya told him. “Let’s get into town, though. If this flurry turns into a storm, we’ll be glad of the shelter no matter how noisy it is.”

They continued down into the valley and then back up toward the long mountain against which Skethit had been build. The noise did not seem to get very much louder as they approached, but there was a subsonic vibration they had not previously been aware of that left their nerves jangled as they entered the Ken scientific colony.

There was no one to see them enter however and in spite of the mind-filling noise, the place seemed deserted. “Do we go looking for Nearlina or find out what all that racket is?” Kaz shouted to Chanya.

“Both, I think,” Chanya replied. “I suspect there’s no one to greet us because they’re all trying to deal with the noise maker.”

Kaz nodded and walked on, deeper into the settlement. Finally, they found Nearlina along with two dozen other Kenlienta standing around a large area, nearly two hundred yards across in the center of which was a twisted glowing mass that seemed to be creating all the noise and light.

“Thank the gods you’re here!” Nearlina greeted them. She was looking tired, Kaz thought, nearly exhausted, in fact. All elders of the Kenlienta carried with them plants of some sort, kept alive by their magic. Most carried living staves – short poles with a few leaves at one end, but Nearlina had chosen to wear a wreath of a local flowering vine around her head. It was fitting for an engineer such as she was to do so as it left both hands free, and Kaz felt it accented her eyes beautifully. The wreath was looking somewhat neglected, however, and Kaz had to suppose it was because she had been up working on whatever this monstrosity was.

“What is this?” Kaz asked over the loud pulsating noise.

“It was a new steam engine,” Nearlina explained, “I don’t think any language has the right words to fully describe it now.”

“What happened?” Chanya asked. “It looks like it’s spitting fire.”

“I think that’s what is left of the fountain that was in the central square,” Nearlina confessed. “See those two blobs circling each other in mid-air? That was the engine, but whatever happened to it has been warping the area all around it. As you can see, all the buildings within its range have been destroyed and water seems to turn into fire when it gets too close.”

“That can’t be,” Kaz remarked, “at least not according to the latest elemental theories. Fire isn’t a form a matter. It’s an expression of energy and water cannot burn in normal circumstances because it is already a nearly ultimate product of combustion.”

“Kazani, I don’t know what laws of nature apply in there,” Nearlina told him. “For all I know everything is reversed and the water is unburning somehow. We can’t get any closer than this because there is a strong element of stability in the region that thing effects. It’s why I sent for wayfarers. Magic doesn’t seem to help, I can’t get close enough. I was just hoping you could.”

“It might help if I knew how this happened,” Kaz admitted.

“We’ve been working on a mobile model of the steam engine, you know,” Nearlina began.

“I’ve been hearing about it,” Kaz admitted. “It would be a boon to Ken and humans alike.”

“Well, one of my smiths tried a bit of magic while working on the parts of that new engine,” Nearlina

explained.

“What was he trying to do?” Kaz asked.

“He was just taking a few shortcuts in the manufacturing process,” Nearlina replied. “From what we discussed, it was nothing that should have caused this, but I suppose it’s possible he may have done something we did not discuss beforehand.”

“Such as?” Kaz asked.

Nearlina merely shrugged helplessly. “When we started up the engine it went crazy. I think he must have done something dreadfully wrong because as the engine spun up it started warping everything around us. Many of us were badly injured and only got out of there just in time.”

“Good Lord!” Kaz swore. “Was anyone killed?”

“Just the smith who did this,” Nearlina replied sadly. “So now I fear we’ll never know how this happened. I just want to bring it to an end. It should have stopped an hour after it was started at the most. There wasn’t very much fuel in the engine.”

“Enough,” Kaz replied, taking another look at the disaster scene.

“Do you think this might be similar to some of those odd occurrences I’ve been hearing about overseas? Random pools of stability floating through the Wild and areas of super-Wild energy?” Nearlina asked.

“It’s a possibility, I suppose,” Kaz remarked. “There’s a lot we don’t know yet although as far as I know none of those things have been intentionally duplicated. Then again, neither has this.”

“I don’t want to duplicate it, Kazani,” Nearlina told him. “Just bring it to an end.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Kaz promised. “Chanya, what do you think?”

“I’m not sure,” Chanya replied. “This reminds me in a small way of that weird silver pool we saw in Gamat on our way to Marnas Nokit years ago, when we couldn’t tell if it was produced by Wild energy or a stability.”

“I’m sure that one was not any form of stability,” Kaz reminded her. “You remember how both Raff and I tried to make one like it. It might have been a hybrid, I think I said something like that at the time, but none of us has been so reckless as to try to make another since.”

“Yes, but this seems strange in much the same way,” Chanya pointed out. “It’s much larger, but see how the top is flattened out, not like a stability dome.”

“I hadn’t noticed that,” Kaz admitted. “It could be a related phenomenon. This has some definite, gravitational effects whereas I don’t recall that other one doing that.”

“Is it gravity or a warping of everything in it?” Chanya asked. “Remember that poor cat that got caught in the small one.”

“I do,” Kaz nodded, “But I don’t know if that was gravity that warped it’s leg or something else.”

“What is gravity anyway?” Chanya asked pointedly.

“The mutual attraction between two objects,” Kaz answered by rote.

“Right,” Chanya nodded, “so how does it work?”

“Uh,” Kaz stopped. “Well there are all sorts of theories.”

“Which is the right one?” Chanya challenged him.

“Well I don’t know,” Kaz admitted. “I don’t think anyone knows for certain.”

“And they’re just as likely to all be wrong,” Chanya smirked. “Kaz, I’ve had the same education you have and the fact of the matter is, there’s more that we do not know and understand than we do know.”

“Fine, but that’s not going to help us now,” Kaz decided. “I wonder if it’s safe for one of us to go in there.”

“I seriously doubt it,” Chanya shook her head and immediately grabbed the back of Kaz’s woolen coat to pull him back when he started to step forward. “Idiot,” she hissed just loud enough for him to hear it over the noise.

“Maybe you’re right,” he decided. He looked around and found a roofing slate on the ground nearby. He lifted it up and hefted the stone. Then he handed it to Nearlina who accepted it with a puzzled look on her face. He removed his long woolen coat and handed that to Chanya and then retrieved the slate. Then with a mighty side arm throw, he flung the slate tile as hard as he could toward the former steam engine.

The slate rotated as it flew and arced in a wide circle toward the center of the destruction. At first Kaz thought it looked smaller merely because it was getting farther away from him, but then he realized it had gotten too visibly small for the distance. It was leaving a trail of powdered stone behind it and after it had flown maybe one third of the way, it disappeared entirely with just a trail of powdered stone drifting downward.

“Okay,” he told Chanya, “that’s a bad place to be.”

“No, really?” she shot back. “I think we’re going to have to try the same thing Coraxis did to that pool in Gamat.”

“Coraxis is a highly accomplished Elder,” Kaz pointed out “and he used magic of a sort I’ve never been taught to dispel that pool. Nearlina, would you have an idea how it could be done?”

“If I did, I would already have dispelled it,” the elder told him hopelessly.

“Very well, Chanya, I have a few ideas, but it is going to take both of us, and maybe Nearlina as well,” Kaz told them. “Since this started because of magic I want to try some basic dispelling methods. Watch what I do and try to do what you can in response.”

Kaz started in on the nearest area of the engine’s effect. He tried a combination of magic and wayfaring. Magic and wayfaring were both ways of converting stability to Wild energy and vice versa.

He drew the energy to himself and examined it. Once it was under his control there was nothing special about it, but there was far more energy concentrated by whatever was at the center of that area than any one or two wayfarers could handle. Frustrated, he performed a force-thrust at the area in general and something strange happened.

A force-thrust was meant to push stable energy out of an enemy, killing him. In this case, however, Kaz had merely pushed Wild energy away from himself as hard as he could. As it moved away from him the noise changed from the deep oscillating wail to something closer to bell-like. He thrust again and the bell-like peal became clearer and more pronounced so he did it again and again. Seeing what he was doing, Chanya joined in and as she did, Kaz signaled for her to stay there while he walked part way around the perimeter of the area, still continuing to perform force-thrusts as though attempting to kill a giant through the most destructive form of wayfaring.

Nearlina , watched Kaz and Chanya closely and then tried some magical techniques of her own and on hearing the same Bell-like tones the wayfarers were achieving, kept that going as well. Then she realized what they were doing. It was a stability. Together the three of them were creating a small stability in the heart of Skethit.

At first Nearlina rebelled at the notion of causing a stability in her town. Such a condition could harm her people, but she soon realized that as dangerous as this was, it was the best hope for putting an end to the horror that had been created here.

It was two hours later that Kaz finally felt confident enough to start walking into the tenuous stability and work his way carefully closer to the one-time steam engine. As he drew closer to the center he found he was surrounded by a rapidly shrinking bubble of stability and realized he would only have one chance, if only he could figure out what it was.

The protective shield of stability around him continued to shrink and Kaz thought briefly of running back to the edge of the affected area and then realized he had walked too close. He did not have the time to retreat. Another look at the bright glowing engine showed him it was nothing more now than a pair of glowing blobs of molten metal. They were circling each other only one foot above the ground and each time they did he could actually feel himself being pushed and then pulled as though it was magnetic and he were made of iron filings.

Kaz reached out with his wayfaring ability and sent a surge of Wild energy deep into the ground beneath the glowing blobs and caused it to erupt upward and into the two orbiting masses. Kaz saw a flash of light and then something invisible slammed into him and everything went dark.

Three

“He’s waking up,” Nearlina said from nearby.

It was dark. Then Kaz realized he couldn’t see. Another panicked moment later he figured out there was a bandage over his eyes. “Am I blind?” he asked.

“The bandage is just a precaution, Kazani,” Nearlina told him. “You had a bad cut just above your right eye and there was no way to apply it without covering your eyes. We were about to remove it to check the wound anyway.”

“Check the wound?” Kaz asked. “How long have I been out?”

“Three days,” Chanya told him. “And if only you had really been out. You kept waking up and tried doing random force-thrusts.”

“That’s true,” Nearlina confirmed. “You might have gotten some rest, but poor Chanya has had hardly any.” Kaz understood that she must have stayed by his side the whole time and dispelled his force thrusts every time he tried one.

“Oh. Sorry, Chanya,” Kaz apologized. “I wasn’t myself.”

“You were definitely yourself,” Chanya told him with a mixture of anger and humor. “Whatever were you thinking, making that whole thing explode like that?”

“I was just trying to make it stop,” Kaz replied. He didn’t add that had he failed he would have been dead a few seconds later anyway. “Did I?”

“Can you still hear the noise?” Chanya asked.

Kaz listened and heard only the normal sounds of people talking and the wind blowing outside. “Are we in a storm?”

“It is still winter, you know,” Chanya told him. Kaz realized that her voice sounded odd, like she was slurring her words.

“Maybe you should get some sleep now,” he suggested. Just then someone started to remove the bandage gently.

“Not until I know you’re okay,” Chanya told him stubbornly.

He was about to argue in return. Aside from a nagging headache, he didn’t feel too bad, all things considered. But just then the bandage was removed and light flooded into his eyes. “Bright!” he complained.

“Not really,” a man replied. “But let your eyes adjust. You were looking directly at a lantern.”

Kaz turned and blinked a few times. Everything was out of focus, but he could make out a Ken man

seated beside the bed with the bandage in his hand. "Kazani, this is Veraxis, our healer," Nearlina introduced the older Kenlien.

"Nice to meet you again, young Kazani," Veraxis told him.

"Likewise," Kaz replied politely. He wasn't sure if he did remember the man, but they must have met on his previous visit to Skethit. "Everything is a bit fuzzy."

"That is not surprising," Veraxis assured him. "You should be able to focus your eyes shortly. Hmm, the wound is looking better too. I don't think we shall need to cover your eyes again this time."

Veraxis dabbed at the wound with a clean cloth and then started a soft chant in the ancient version of his native language. As Veraxis sung, Kaz could feel the skin over his eye tighten and became a little less irritated.

"There, the wound is closed at last," Veraxis told him. "Just a light dressing for the next two days. I'm fairly certain this should heal without a scar."

"I didn't realize Ken medicine was so efficient," Kaz commented, realizing his headache was much less now too.

"A few small tricks, is all," Veraxis told him. Had this wound been deeper or larger, magic would not have helped so much. Had you become infected, it might not have helped at all. You were very lucky. From what I was told, you should have died instantly from the molten metal that exploded."

"I was burned?" Kaz asked.

"No," Nearlina explained, "that was a minor miracle in itself. The earth you raised up into the ruined engine shielded you from the worst of it and Chanya and I were able to shield most of the people who were with us. Fortunately, I sent most of Skethit into the mine for shelter from the noise. The earth and stone blocked most of it and allowed them to sleep at least. Several buildings caught on fire, though, so it was a hectic time between rescuing you and putting out the blazes."

"Is there anything left of the engine?" Kaz asked. "I'd like to see it."

"Slag and droplets of steel is all," Nearlina told him.

"Too bad," Kaz sighed. He heard a gentle snore to one side and realized Chanya had fallen asleep next to him. "I was hoping to figure out what made it work. I think you had the basis of a true perpetual motion machine going there."

"It was too dangerous," Nearlina told him. "We will not be pursuing it."

"But the value..." Kaz began.

"Is not worth the potential loss of life," Nearlina told him. "I think we shall forget this little incident ever happened."

"No, better not," Kaz shook his head. He immediately regretted the gesture. He was better off if he did not try to move quickly. A young Kenlienta woman entered the room just then and offered him a drink through a straw. Kaz immediately realized he was thirstier than he had ever been in his life. The

drink was a mildly flavored fruit juice and he sipped the cup dry before thanking her, then he turned back to Nearlina. "Keep as careful account of what happened as you can. This might have been a freak accident, a once in a million sort of thing, but maybe not and if someone else tries what your late engineer did, it will happen all over again. Next time it might kill more than just the hapless engineer. It's a shame about him, by the way. Did I know him?" The young woman left the room with the empty cup without saying a word.

"You probably met," Nearlina replied, "but he was a second engineer's assistant five years ago, you won't have likely remembered him."

"Ah, there you have me," Kaz sighed. "I remember a lot of your people, but not all by name."

"I'm not surprised," Nearlina smiled. "You were a very busy young man."

"There was a woman who had lost her husband in the cave-in," Kaz recalled. "Raff and I found her crying that night by the central fountain. I remember she thanked us for saving the few we did manage to rescue though. Do you know who she might be?"

"Sorry, I think we were all crying that night," Nearlina told him.

It would be nice to see her again and know if she's better now," Kaz remarked. "Some faces stay with you for life, you know, and I see her any time I get sad."

"She may have been one of the ones who left Skethit after the cave-in," Nearlina told him. "Some went back to be with family and some others left to join the new cities on the west coast of this continent. Others have joined us since then."

"You have colonies here?" Kaz asked.

"Not here exactly," Nearlina told him. "They're almost three thousand miles away. And I would not call them colonies. All Ken settlements are a part of the Ken Nation. You know that."

"I do," Kaz confirmed. The young woman returned with the cup full and offered it to Kaz. "No thank you," he told her. "Maybe in a little while." She nodded and put the cup down on a small table beside the bed.

"My protégée," Nearlina explained. "Master Kazani Basan of the Guild of Wayfarers, I proudly present Taolin of Skethit."

"Pleased to meet you Taolin," Kaz replied. Taolin did not answer in words, but smiled shyly and made a few hand gestures instead.

"Taolin says that she is honored to meet such a famous hero," Nearlina explained.

"Famous? Me?" Kaz tried to laugh, but Taolin's intense brown eyes stopped him somehow. "I think she must have me confused with Raff."

"No one would confuse you with Raufanax," Nearlina assured him, "but you have become known to the people of Skethit at least. Sometime you must return when we are not having an emergency so we can honor you properly, Kazani." Then she paused before returning to an earlier subject. "You are right. I shall report on the incident as thoroughly as I can and send it off to the Grand Council. If they wish to

investigate the matter, that will be their choice, but we shall not do so in Skethit.”

“It would be best to know how it happened so we can avoid that same mistake in the future,” Kaz told her.

“I only fear some fool will try to do intentionally what we did by accident,” Nearlina told him. “I must word my warnings in the strongest possible language.”

“No amount of warnings will be enough to dissuade a true fool,” Kaz commented, “but maybe understanding the phenomenon will make it safer to dispel when that fool tries it.”

“That is why I’m so tempted not to send a detailed report,” Nearlina explained.

“I understand that,” Kaz replied, “but it could actually be an easily duplicated error. It is possible magic left some traces in the parts that were affected and that was what caused this.”

“I know,” Nearlina nodded.

“Oh, I have some mail for you in my pack,” Kaz remembered. “Is it anywhere nearby?”

“Chanya already delivered it,” the elder told him. “It was mostly a collection of personal letters from the families of those who live here. There was one official missive from Yakrut though. They would like me to send a representative to the Grand Council. I’ll have to think about that.”

“Well, technically you are a regional elder, you know,” Kaz replied.

“Only in that we are thousands of miles from any other Kenlienta,” Nearlina scoffed. “This is a scientific colony, not a normal city and I don’t think we have anyone to spare to go watch the politics of Yakrut.”

“How about Taolin?” Kaz asked, noticing the quiet young woman had left the room again. Her hand gestures implied that she was mute, but Kaz privately felt that might make what she had to say all the more worth listening to.

“Maybe in a year or two,” Nearlina replied. “She’s still just a student in magic, although the most promising I have encountered. I think she will be a superb elder one day, but not the sort of politician I would send to the wolves in Yakrut. She’s a little shy just yet.”

“She might grow out of that,” Kaz remarked, realizing as he said it, that Taolin was not really much younger than he was. “You have to watch out for the quiet ones, you know.”

“I know,” Nearlina smiled, “and she does have a wicked sense of humor when it suits her. “Well, I’ll ask around and see if there is anyone who would be willing to take a year off to represent us. I suppose we can take turns. Too bad we’re so isolated from the rest of the Ken Nation. It’s going to take months to get to Yakrut.”

“You probably should buy a hippogryph,” Kaz recommended.

“The nearest one is on the west coast,” Nearlina replied.

“Wait a moment,” Kaz had a sudden thought. “How did you all ever get here?”

“By ship and by walking or riding,” Nearlina replied. “The Ken have very few ships because very few of us are suitable sailors, but there are those who love the sea. I suppose our representative will have to go to the west coast, since we never know when a ship is going to arrive from across the Dark Ocean. I’ll authorize whoever it is to buy a hippogryph or a gryphon for hastier returns. We’ll still have an ocean to cross, but...” she trailed off. “So what else has been going on in the world?”

Kaz closed his eye to help remember. “Is it okay if I try sitting up?” he asked. “I’d feel better in a chair. At least I think I would.”

Nearlina looked enquiringly at Veraxis and the healer nodded in response. “You may try, but sit up slowly at first and if you start to feel dizzy you’ll want to lie right back down again,” he advised Kaz.

“I agree,” Kaz smiled. “If I feel dizzy I will want to lie down again.” As he started to sit up, Chanya’s arm moved over as if to stop him, but he took her hand, gave it a soft kiss and placed it back down. In her sleep, Chanya smiled slightly and then pulled her arm back in next to her.

“So far so good,” Kaz remarked after he had been sitting on the side of the bed for a minute. “Let’s see if I can stand.”

“I’d better help you,” Nearlina told him, coming to his side. She put her arm around him and under his shoulder and helped him to his feet. His knees gave way under his weight the first two attempts to stand up, but finally, Kaz found himself in a vertical position and with the elder to support him, made his way several feet to a comfortable chair.

“Your wreath is looking better,” he remarked to Nearlina once he was in the seat.

“I’ve had the time to tend to it. It’s vanity, really. There really is no practical reason an elder has to carry his badge of office everywhere, especially in this town,” Nearlina replied.

“I think your people like seeing you wear it,” Kaz pointed out. “That’s one of those things I remember. Everyone felt better once you admitted at last that you were the elder here.”

“Perhaps,” Nearlina smiled. In spite of it having been such a horrible day, all those funerals, there had been in that one moment something that could always make her feel good and smile. “But I think the novelty has worn off by now.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Kaz chuckled, “but I have never seen an elder that did not keep their badge of office near to hand. They might not need it, but I think maybe the people who look to them do. Putting your wreath aside might look like you didn’t take the responsibility seriously enough.”

Nearlina looked at the young man as though seeing him for the first time. “When did you learn so much more about the Ken than I seem to know?” she asked curiously.

“Sometimes an outside observer can see things one who has grown up with a system cannot,” Kaz grinned. “Do you remember ever seeing your own elder when you were growing up, put his staff aside.”

“Elder Rentax wore a collar of ivy,” Nearlina told him, “but now that you come to mention it, no I don’t remember ever seeing him without it. And you’re right, I think it would have been unsettling to see him without it. Even when he retired, he continued to wear it.”

“Once an elder, always an elder, I suspect,” Kaz remarked, “at least that’s the way it is for the respected ones. I know there are some who fail in the office, that’s just the way people are. We aren’t all cut out to be leaders. I’m not sure I am, but those who do lead successfully will always be looked to even by their successors.”

“Of course,” Nearlina nodded. “I still have so much to learn about all this.”

“Don’t we all?” Kaz laughed. “Anyway, you asked about the outside world. It looks like trouble is brewing here in Varana. When I left New Ebor word had arrived that the human colony of Bournsett Bay had been declared to be officially in rebellion against the Crown of the Green Lands and Grundish troops were landing to squash any resistance. They’re going to have to work fast, because the people of the Colony of Kensing aren’t going to be very pleased with their governor for disbanding the colonial legislature. There will be angry protests at the least there, I think. And the other colonials are likely to sympathize. I hear the other northern colonies have already protested the invasion of Bournsett Bay, so I suspect it will only be a matter of time before the army feels they must put down the revolt in those places as well.

“I don’t know if that will affect you, though,” Kaz continued. “There have frequently been human wars conducted all around Ken settlements throughout history, without the Ken ever being involved.”

“Your wayfarers know where we are,” Nearlina commented. “They have done well to keep their word about not bothering us with these disturbances.”

“It’s not hard,” Kaz shrugged. “The paths we follow do not come into Ken towns and cities, so the chance of that happening is small. It could happen, but only if a group of soldiers got lost in the Wild and wandered in. That has happened from time to time, but they don’t last long if they try making trouble.”

“Do you think we may be forced to so act here?” Nearlina asked.

“I wouldn’t want to say it is impossible, but it is unlikely,” Kaz told her. “You’re way off the beaten track here. An army not only would have to get lost, but climb a mountain to get here. They aren’t going to climb mountains if lost. Some bright commander might try to talk his wayfarer into leaving the path so his men can ambush their enemy, but as I said, our wayfarers know where you are, and besides, they would not have to come this far in order to set up an ambush. Besides, who’s to say there’s going to be a war?

“I have met some of the men who will be in the Colonial Congress they are setting up,” Kaz continued. “They’re reasonable and intelligent men. I am fairly sure they will attempt to resolve their problems peacefully.”

“And if they cannot?” Nearlina asked.

Kaz shrugged. “The rest of the world is asking that same question, of course. Holrany is playing border games against Paknilan. It’s anyone’s guess how that will turn out, but the rest of that part of the world is at peace. It’s sort of unusual, but I suppose there are times the entire world seems to stop to take a breath.”

“Except for Varana,” Nearlina observed.

“All eyes seem to be looking in this direction,” Kaz admitted. “Well, maybe not all eyes. Nillon doesn’t pay much attention to what happens here. Actually at the moment the Nillonese emperor is

probably wondering why the Corisans aren't still attacking. I understand my friend, the High King, finally decided his honor has been satisfied concerning the attempt on his life by a Nillonese assassin. Well, it has been a few years.

"And there's a new High Priest in Meni," Kaz added, "although I suppose none of that really interests you all that deeply. Well, the bad news, I fear is that Chief Elder Leraxa is losing control of her government again. Even with the support of the Guild and of Raufanax himself, it was just a matter of time before some of the more power-hungry elders managed to gain enough control to push her out."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," Nearlina remarked. "She wrote me such a nice letter when I first became an elder."

"Well, she's not out quite yet or wasn't when last I heard," Kaz remarked, "but it wasn't looking good. The only reason she was hanging on was that the elders who had originally opposed her permanent government were even more opposed to someone else taking it over. I think the Elders Saltaxis, Genaxis and Nienta are the strongest voices in her favor. But really even they're only holding sway because there are five different factions vying for the power and none of them were willing to share with any of the others. Leraxa and her friends are balancing one against the others, but it's a juggling act with too many balls. If they have to keep it up long enough, eventually one of those balls will drop."

"Well, Change is life," Nearlina replied philosophically.

"And Life is change," Kaz agreed.

Four

They stayed in Skethit another three days. To Kaz's relief the storm he had woken up to was more wind than snow and it appeared the way back to Hedley would be passable even if it meant walking through two or three inches of snow.

While Kaz's legs had been a bit shakey when he first got out of bed, he was able to get up unassisted the next day and would have left had Chanya not put her foot down. "You nearly killed yourself," she told him, "and while you might feel well enough to walk around Nearlina's house, going up and down a mountain is another matter."

"It's not all that much of a mountain," Kaz pointed out, "and the road goes over a saddleback."

"Never you mind that," Chanya told him heatedly. "We're going to stay here until Veraxis says you are fit for travel."

“Veraxis is a healer,” Kaz complained. “I don’t think he believes anyone is truly fit for travel.”

“You’re still weak from not having eaten for two days,” Chanya told him, trying a different tack.

“Yeah, I think it did me some good,” Kaz remarked lightly. “I was starting to put on a few pounds.” But as they walked around town that afternoon, Kaz had to admit to himself, even if he wouldn’t to anyone else, that he was still building up his stamina.

The area of destruction was complete, he saw. A wide circle of land, completely cleared with small bits of debris scattered evenly. The remains of the old fountain were half melted as well, but Nearlina announced they would rebuild the area as a park after new homes for the recently dispossessed had been built. From what Kaz and Chanya could see, merely getting to move back out of the mine was a cause for celebration among the Ken of Skethit.

Finally, however, Kaz was pronounced fit for travel and on a relatively warm day with the snow already mostly melted, he and Chanya made their trek back to Hedley. The way was muddy in places and they did not make good time, not only because of the mud but because Kaz really was still weak and needed to rest more frequently than he usually did. “I’ll be fine,” he insisted to Chanya on their second break. “Once we reach Hedley I can sit and drive the wagon.”

In Hedley, however it turned out that while Theos Wakfield and Abigail McCormac had waited patiently for their return, the Keens had become impatient to reach Mannburgh and chosen to move on with a local, non-guild wayfarer.

“I told them not to trust that one,” the Guild agent told the wayfarers. “We’ve had trouble with him. He’s fine with guiding other locals, but he uses all the tricks in the book with transients, but that big guy, Keen, just said he could handle himself.”

“Well, from here there aren’t too many places they could have gone,” Kaz remarked. “How long ago did they leave?”

“Four days,” the agent told him.

“We may still be able to follow their trail in the Wild then, unless this local knows how to erase a trail,” Kaz told him.

“I wouldn’t know,” the agent shook his head, “but the path only goes east and west from here and they were seen headed west.”

“That’s good,” Chanya nodded, “since we have to at least find them.”

They loaded up the wagon and left at first light the next morning. “I hope the recent thaw doesn’t make the path unpassable,” Kaz worried as they left the cobbled streets of Hedley. “I’ve never been on this stretch so I’m not sure how well packed the earth is, nor where we might get mired.”

“The ground here is still pretty hard, I think,” Chanya remarked. “What made you two stay in Hedley when the Keens decided to move on?” she asked the other couple.

“Oh we couldn’t,” Abigail replied. “There are such horrid stories about what happens to people who try to travel without real wayfarers to guide them.”

“Had another party come through,” Thos added, “we would have joined them as you suggested just before you left, but very few travel in the dead of winter. The agent told us we were the first party to come through in a fortnight and that it could be even longer before another came. Abi and I were willing to wait. Hedley is not a bad little town and we even made a few friends there while waiting, but the Keens insisted they had to keep moving so when that Fellowes bloke offered to guide them to Mannburgh, they accepted.”

“Fellowes?” Kaz asked.

“Liam Fellowes,” Thos replied. “Do you know him?”

“Never heard the name before,” Kaz admitted. “It may not even be his if he was being free with it, but you never know. We’ll report him to the Guild office in New Ebor in case there have been other complaints. We don’t mind the locals making a living by guiding parties from one town to the next. Most can only find one or two neighboring towns in any case. There’s a knack you have to learn to be able to follow a path you don’t know. Very few untrained wayfarers have the talent for it and if you only intend to travel one or two towns away, the locals are probably cheaper and more convenient than waiting for a Guild wayfarer.

“And among their neighbors most of those locals are fair and honest,” Kaz went on. “They have to be or else risk being shot or hanged, but when a transient or two happens by, they often throw the honesty out the window. It’s amazing how often people like the Keens figure they will be okay, though.”

“But are they in any danger?” Abigail asked.

“Maybe,” Chanya replied. “There haven’t been many cases of it here in Varana, “but in some parts of the world local wayfarers will kill and rob a party of travelling merchants who choose unwisely to use a non-Guildsman.”

“So we should really never trust any wayfarer other than one from the Guild,” Thos concluded.

“That depends,” Kaz shook his head. “It’s like I said, when you get to Taddsburg, you may find a handful of local men or women who can take you to a neighboring town should you have business there. Your family will know who is trustworthy. In some parts of the world, for that matter, the Guild is not allowed to operate. In those places you either have to rely on locals with the talent or use whoever is authorized to guide travelers by the government. In Corisa, for example, all wayfarers are inducted into the priesthood and the government is entirely made up of those wayfarer-priests. Until I was there, it was illegal to even be a wayfarer in that country unless you were a priest. My parents were forced to stand trial by combat simply because we had entered the country.” Kaz laughed then. “The priests never stood a chance, I think. I don’t know how the wayfarers are organized in Nillon. Some are members of the Ikketo Clan, but from what I have learned they rarely mix with other people, so I imagine they are not all wayfarers and there are others with the talent who guide people through their country.”

“The Guild is available in most parts of the world, right?” Thos asked.

“About three quarters of the world, yes,” Kaz nodded. “Hmm, I’m picking up traces of the Keens’ trails. This Fellowes person seems to have an inkling of how to erase a trail behind him, but either he’s not very good at it, or is a bit haphazard. Well at least we know for certain we’re going in the right direction.”

They entered the small stability of a village called Tinnerpool two hours later. "We may as well stop for lunch in the local inn," Chanya suggested spotting a sign with three geese on it. "Travel rations are all well and good when we must eat them but a hot meal on a cold day will do us all well."

The others agreed and Kaz pulled the wagon up to the side of the street, where Chanya expertly hitched the horses to a convenient post. The inn was small and the main room filled with smoke from a fireplace whose chimney, Kaz suspected was in dire need of a cleaning. He reminded himself that winter was nearly over and that a lot of chimneys were likely in as bad or worse shape by now.

"Oh, thank God you've found us!" they heard a woman say as they made their way toward a large table. Looking over they saw Doroty Keen, carrying a large tray of food intended for one of the other tables. She delivered it and promptly came over to join them. "We've been here for days," she told them. "That dreadful man brought us to the edge of this town and took everything we owned, stranding us here. I think he was the same man who tried to rob us on the other side of Hedley."

"I'm glad to see you're healthy, at least," Kaz told her. "Where is your husband?"

"Working somewhere," Doroty explained. "Without any money or even a Guild agent to appeal to in this town we had to hire ourselves out just to pay for food and a place to sleep in the loft over the livery." She wrinkled her nose and added, "it smells in there and there are living things in the straw."

"I can imagine," Chanya nodded. "Well, if Mister Keen is somewhere around town we may not be able to leave today. I'll make arrangements for proper rooms for everyone here in the inn. I suppose you can quit your job now."

"Oh, I don't mind waiting on the customers," Doroty told her, "and Jake, the owner, was nice enough to give me a job while his daughter's been sick, so I should at least finish the day or he'll have trouble."

"So long as you want to," Chanya shrugged.

"It's not really hard work," Doroty assured her and so much more pleasant than what Larsen's been forced to do. he had to clean out a privy yesterday. Not sure what he is doing today."

"In the middle of the winter?" Kaz asked, slightly surprised.

"Poor planning on someone's part, I imagine," Chanya commented, "or else somebody got greedy and figured this would be cheaper than hiring someone local in the spring. Well, Doroty, what's on the menu?"

"The chicken stew is very good," she informed them. "Jake lets me have some free and the black bread is wonderful, although that might be hunger talking. I never used to like black bread."

"I imagine now you'll learn to bake it all the time," Abigail remarked in her quiet voice.

"Could be," Doroty nodded. "Willa, Jake's wife, has offered me the recipe. So, the chicken stew for everyone? It's much fresher than the mutton," she added softly and Kaz suspected she had been expected to push the mutton.

They ordered and Doroty rushed back into the kitchen while Chanya made arrangements with Jake for three rooms. "Three is all we have," Jake remarked, "but there's no one else in town right now

anyway. Been a while since we were full.”

“It was nice of you to give Doroty a job and some meals,” Chanya told him.

“It’s not so much,” Jake shrugged. “I needed the help and, well, I once got robbed by a local guide so I know what she and her husband are going through. I offered them a room with just enough to pay for board, but her husband, he’s a proud one and didn’t want any hand-outs. Well, I respect that, but my Willa thinks Doroty might be with child. He should take it easier on her.”

“If she is, it’s very early on,” Chanya remarked. “It’s also possible Doroty hasn’t figured it out yet either. It would be her first.”

“Ah, yes,” Jake nodded. “That might be. Well, Doroty’s done me a favor and I feel I owe her. Just pay me for two rooms and don’t let her know hers is free. All right?”

“Of course,” Chanya smiled at the man.

Five

Doroty did not want to know just what had made her husband smell as bad as he did when he joined them that evening, but she did rush him immediately into the first bath he had in far too long. “I will not have you smelling like that and ruining Jake’s sheets,” she told him sternly.

They left the next morning and another two days brought them to Taddfield, where Thos and Abigail bid them farewell, but the local agent had bad news for the wayfarers and the Keens. “The path is out about thirty miles ahead on the other side of Follensborough between there and Mudd.”

“What happened?” Kaz asked. “Avalanche? A quake?”

“Nothing so dire,” the agent replied. “It just dissolved when the two towns drifted too far apart. We just haven’t had a master come through here in months who could reforge that section.”

“Well you have now,” Kaz replied. “Two of us, in fact. Have there been many travelers held up by this?”

“A fair few,” the agent nodded. “Most of them came back and found other ways around. There’s a path from here that goes north but it’s several hundred miles out of the way, so there are probably a couple dozen holed up in Follensborough waiting for someone to lead the way through the Wild.”

“Well, no need to make them wait any longer than need be,” Kaz replied. “We should be there tomorrow and be able to start re forging the path the day after that.”

Follensborough was another of the small back-country colonial towns in western New Ebor Colony. Like many of the others it was built around a town square in the center of which a tall pole had been erected. The pole had been lightly festooned with medals from which long colorful ribbons were draped. It was called Freedom Pole and Kaz had noticed an increasing number of them as they traveled further inland and into the mountains of New Ebor. On the coast, where there were garrisons of the Green Lands Royal Army, such poles were frequently pulled down and the people who erected them were arrested when caught, but the people more than two day’s journey inland had rarely been bothered by anyone but the royal tax collectors and some of them had gone missing over the years. Out here the independent spirit flourished and the freedom poles were permanent fixtures.

There were three other wayfarer parties waiting in Follenborough when Kaz and Chanya arrived. Like about half such towns, Follensborough had a Guild of Wayfarers’ office but it doubled as the post office. “Afraid you folks are at the end of the line,” the agent, another non-wayfarer local, told Kaz and Chanya.

“Not really,” Kaz replied and showed the man his credentials as a master wayfarer. “Among other things, we’re here to reforge the path to Mudd.”

“It’s about time you got here,” the agent told him. “That path has been out for months.”

“I just heard about it yesterday,” Kaz replied reasonably. “Someone seems to have left the New Ebor office out of the loop, which is fairly strange since that’s where most of the masters in this colony work. We’re only here by chance.”

“Well, you’re here now. Can you get started on it tomorrow?” the agent asked.

“Of course,” Kaz nodded. “Do you have the coordinates of Mudd? Without those it is going to be kind of hit and miss.”

“I have the coordinates of where it was two months ago,” the agent told him, “and the expected direction of drift.”

“Hopefully that will do,” Kaz nodded. “Where can I find the other wayfarers?”

“They’re all staying upstairs where we have a few rooms since the two inns are full of our clients,” the agent told him. “The rooms at the inn are better, but we have two left.”

“We’ll take them,” Chanya told him quickly. “One for us and the other for our clients.”

“Are you sure?” the man asked. “They’re not really furnished aside from beds. We only use them when we’re really short of space.”

“You said the inns are full,” Chanya reminded him. He nodded, allowing that was the case. “So where can we find the three wayfarers?”

It turned out that the three journeymen had been making a habit of hanging out in the Blue Bonnet Inn which was just around the corner from the Guild Office. Kaz didn't like the fact they were spending their days in the tavern, but it did at least make them easily findable should their charges come looking for them.

Kaz and Chanya stepped in and looked around the barroom. In the pre-dinner hour only half the tables were full. Clothing styles were more conservative in the back country, so when Chanya spotted three men who would have been fashionably dressed in New Ebor, she pointed them out to Kaz.

"Excuse me," Kaz began, "Are you the wayfarers enroute to Mannburgh."

"Not at the moment," one laughed.

"And our parties are full even if the path weren't out," another replied off-handedly. "You'll have to wait for another party."

"What?" the third laughed, hoisting a mug of the local beer. "This isn't party enough? Easiest job I've had in years."

"Well, it's time to get back to work," Kaz told him, a chill in his voice. "We'll be leaving in the morning."

"What was that, sonny?" One of the men got out of his chair. He stood several inches taller than Kaz and was obviously more strongly muscled and was at least ten years older than either Kaz or Chanya. "And who do you think you are to tell us that?"

"Master Kazani Basan," Kaz introduced himself, "from the Central Guildhall." He used a trace of Wild energy to lower the man gently back into his seat. He was not looking for an enemy, but he also wasn't about to let the larger and older man push him around. "My colleague, Master Chanya Sanai. We're here to reforge the path to Mudd. I just thought you'd want to know we're leaving right after breakfast. You may want to let your charges know between now and then."

"Oh," the man Kaz had pushed back into his seat muttered, not sounding at all pleased. "Right, sir. Right away, sir." He made the honorific sound like a curse.

"Oh, cheer up, Willy," one of his companions laughed as Kaz and Chanya started walking away. "You knew this wasn't going to last forever."

"Right," the third companion added. "Besides, he let you off easy. As a master he could have turned you inside out." He might have said more, but Kaz and Chanya were already out of ear shot.

"I think I could have handled that better," Kaz worried as he and Chanya sat down in the next room for their dinner.

"Not really," Chanya told him. "I don't know that Willy, but I've run into the sort. Some of these older journeymen forget themselves once they're out in the field. Oh they're nice guys in the big cities but occasionally need a few reminders where their masters don't see them. I think you handled him just right. You didn't really embarrass him, you were actually fairly subtle, especially since I'd have slammed him back down hard enough that he'd want to walk next to his wagon tomorrow. Oh, there are the Keens." She waved the couple over to their table "Did you get your chits at the Guild Office?" she asked them.

“We did,” Larsen nodded. “So this is the right place?”

“Well, there’s another a few streets away, I’m told,” Chanya replied, “but this is the closer one and since we’ll be leaving early, it’s probably best to make it an early night.”

“Of course you two can sleep in the wagon tomorrow if you want,” Kaz added.

“No, I can’t,” Doroty laughed ruefully. “I’ve tried to, but the movement keeps me awake.”

“Well, it’s not like we ride deep into the night,” Kaz chuckled.

They ordered their meals but before they arrived, Willy, the journeyman appeared at the table. “Sir,” he began, “I think maybe we got off to a bad start.”

“Forget about it,” Kaz told him. “I have.” It wasn’t true, but it cost him nothing to say it.

“Well, could I buy you a bottle of wine to make up for it, sir?” Willy asked.

“Thank you,” Kaz told him, “but I’d better not. It’s best if I don’t the night before I forge a path. Tell you what though, the first round is on me when we get to Mudd.” Willy thanked him and moved on. “That was a turn around.”

“I think his buddies warned him what might happen if you get a master angry,” Chanya smiled.

“I wasn’t angry,” Kaz replied.

“He didn’t know that,” Chanya told him.

The forging of a new path is work only a master Wayfarer could accomplish. A path, being a thin line of imposed stability in the Wild had a tendency, if not used or maintained to eventually dissipate. Unused, a path had a natural lifetime that if left alone would in time cause it to disappear without a trace. Trained wayfarers not only followed a path, but helped to keep it intact, but if there was insufficient traffic on a path the energy that had been woven together to form it would eventually begin to unravel.

There were some journeymen who were capable of doing light maintenance on a path that had started to come apart, but generally that was a job for a master. Master wayfarers habitually checked the paths they traveled for signs of degradation and if they found one that had become “frayed” they would take the time to “reweave” the energies tightly again. They could do this at nearly the same speed they might normally travel at, but when there was no path at all, the job was a slower and more painstaking task.

It could be speeded up by two master wayfarers working in concert, but even then they needed to be very careful and know precisely what the other was doing.

“We probably should have practiced this before just trying it out,” Kaz commented as they rode toward the edge of town.

“It would help if either of us had ever been here before too, rather than relying on two month-old coordinates,” Chanya told him, “but we don’t have that either. Just go slow at first as if doing this by yourself and I’ll assist as I get to know your style. That’s the safest way to do it.”

Kaz nodded. Neither he nor Chanya had ever actually created a new path before for the Guild except in lessons so they were both understandably nervous and Kaz kept talking even as he worked. “Well it’s not like we have to worry about the Ken out here. That’s the main concern when creating a path, you know, keeping it toned down enough so a Kenlien can cross it with only momentary discomfort. The first time I created a path it was rather wild and over-powered.”

“I remember that,” Chanya recalled. “The people across the Southern Continent called it the Path of Fire. Of course I didn’t know you had caused it, but it is how I first met Raff and Emblem.”

“Yes,” Kaz nodded. “I think you’ve told me that, but then I’ve told you about the first path of mine. It was a nuisance.”

“It was a danger to everyone and thing in the vicinity,” Chanya laughed.

“I didn’t know that,” Kaz replied defensively. “No one had ever shown me how to do it right. I didn’t even know I didn’t actually need a path to travel though the Wild.”

“No, of course not,” Chanya agreed, quietly glad they were repeating an old conversation. It meant she did not really have to think much about what they were saying and she could concentrate on the job at hand, but she did need to bring Kaz back on subject after a few minutes. “You’re doing this very well, Kaz, but you aren’t leaving me anything to do. Try leaving the energy a bit looser and I’ll tighten it up as you move on, I’ll bet we can start moving at a normal pace then.”

“All right,” Kaz agreed. “I think that’s how Raff and Em work as a team now that you mention it.” He did that and noticed he was right, though he could go much faster that way. It was still a little slower than normal but with Chanya doing the finish work, he was able to reach out and start the process further ahead. “Yeah, this is much better,” he told her a while later, “and I can cast ahead to feel out the terrain in front of us for maybe a mile.”

“That far?” Chanya asked, “I didn’t know anyone could do that.”

“I’m sure Raff could,” Kaz told her. “Probably much further, but this way I can see if there have been any terrain changes since the old path dissolved. So far I’m just following the old trace. Even without a wayfarer’s path you can see where it used to be merely from where the tracks are and because this happened in winter, it hasn’t become overgrown yet.”

“We’re lucky that way,” Chanya agreed. “I do wonder about the three journeymen, though. One of them was only two days ahead of us, but that Willy had been sitting around for nearly a month waiting for someone like us to come along. The detour would have been a long one, but would have only added a week or less to the trip.”

“It’s like you said last night,” Kaz remarked. “Some of these journeymen forget themselves once they’re in the field and beyond direct supervision, and to tell the truth, I would have expected Lewis to send someone out here or handle it himself sooner anyway.”

“If he knew about it,” Chanya added.

“What do you mean?” Kaz asked.

“He knew we were coming this way,” Chanya explained, “And this path has been out long enough

for the report to have reached him twice. He should have at least mentioned it.”

“Are you saying he kept it from us deliberately?” Kaz asked.

“No,” Chanya shook her head, “I think it is more likely someone in between hasn’t been doing his job and passing the report on.”

“Either that or it went to the wrong office,” Kaz replied. “From here it might just as easily gone to Bonford or New Farrington, although New Ebor is the place it should have gone, of course. In the wrong, city the report probably would have been filed and forgotten.”

“It should have been passed along to New Ebor just in case, don’t you think?” Chanya pressed.

“Of course,” Kaz agreed easily, “but obviously it wasn’t. We can make suggestions when we get back to New Ebor, though. Redundancy isn’t a bad thing if it keeps something like this from happening again.”

“I’m wondering if these local agents really have the training they ought to,” Chanya remarked sometime later.

“How much training do they need to take reservations from clients and send the money gathered back to the regional office?” Kaz countered.

“They need to be able to report a path outage like this and see to it that it keeps getting reported until something gets done about it,” Chanya insisted. “For all we know, that local agent in Tinnerpool never actually passed the report back up the line, but he knew the path was out, so we can’t fault the man in Follensborough.”

“Or it could have happened in any of the other dozen towns we’ve been in since New Ebor,” Kaz pointed out. “Ah ha!”

“What?” Chanya asked.

“I detect a stability ahead in just about the right place to be Mudd,” Kaz told her.

“Unless some Nasano village wandered into the area since the path was broken,” Chanya added.

“I don’t think so,” Kaz shook his head. “This is too large for a Nasano village, at least according to what I’ve been reading in the briefing. The Nasano live in settlements of up to one hundred persons. This is a collection of almost one thousand, or at least that’s how it feels to me.”

“Well, you’re pretty good about judging that,” Chanya admitted. “So how much further ahead is it?”

“About an hour,” Kaz replied. “If it weren’t for the reports we’ll have to file on completion of the path, we could move on to the next town and be there before dark. I just hope there’s room enough for us in Mudd.”

“Why shouldn’t there be?” Chanya asked.

“They don’t know we’re coming,” Kaz told her. “I imagine if there were three parties holed up in Follensborough, there could well be the same number in Mudd and Mudd is a smaller town.”

It turned out, however, that there was only one party of eight waiting in the town of Mudd and that they had just arrived the day before. Other travelers had chosen to turn back at another town up the line and seek out alternative routes. “But I had a delivery here, a young journeyman told Kaz that evening, “so we had to come this way regardless. I would have already back-tracked, but the men in my party are mostly travelling merchants and wanted an extra day to sell to the locals, so all that worked out well enough. So I’m going to be the first to follow the new path in the other direction? That ought to be fun. Never been the first before.”

“I doubt it will be all that different than your previous trips,” Kaz remarked. The route may have changed a little, but I doubt that. There was very little land deformation since the old path disappeared so most of the time I was just following the trace from all the wagons that have come this way.”

“It’s still a new path though,” the young man replied hopefully.

“I suppose it is,” Kaz nodded.

Mannburgh

One

“I never realized forging a path would take so much out of me,” Kaz yawned the next morning as they left the Mudd stability.

“You tried to do too much by yourself,” Chanya chided him, “and you worked too quickly.”

“You didn’t seem all that tired yesterday evening,” Doroty noted.

“No,” Kaz admitted, “but it seems to have hit me overnight.”

“Wayfaring can be like that when handling large amounts of energy like Kaz did yesterday,” Chanya explained. “You’re still fully charged when you finish, but once you stop to rest, the exertion catches up to you. It’s not uncommon for a master wayfarer to rest several days after forging a path like that.”

“We could have stayed in Mudd another day or two if you needed it, Kaz,” Larsen offered.

“That’s not necessary,” Kaz replied. “It’s like Chanya says, ‘I tried to do it all myself and at a pace that is really much faster than the Guild recommends. To tell the truth I think I was trying to show off a bit. It’s a bit immature, but maybe I’ll grow out of it in time.’”

“Who were you showing off for, Kaz?” Doroty asked. “Not us, I hope. How would we even have known?”

“No, not you,” Kaz chuckled tiredly, “and not for Chanya either. She knows me well enough by now that a little muscle-flexing is not going to impress her. It was those three journeymen, if anyone. They made a lousy first impression and I just wanted them to know how lucky they were that I was the one they mouthed off to, not some of the other masters.”

“Only one of them was actually rude,” Chanya reminded him, “and he did apologise.”

“Well, I said it was immature of me,” Kaz repeated. A cold wind swept lengthwise through the wagon and they all shivered. “When will this winter be over?”

“It was over yesterday,” Chanya informed him with a chuckle, “officially in any case. It was the vernal equinox according to the almanac. If I remember correctly next week will be the time to plant peas.”

“Not here surely,” Kaz remarked. “You would need a pick and a chisel to get them into the ground.”

“The spring thaw comes suddenly in these parts, I hear,” Chanya remarked, “but I don’t think I’ll be trying to plant a kitchen garden in any case.”

“The thaw can’t come soon enough to suit me,” Doroty told them. “I don’t ever remember being this cold this long.”

“We have been traveling a long time,” Larsen admitted, “and doing it in the winter might not have been the best time.”

“You’re from the Taundon area?” Kaz asked.

“Rimmergate,” Larsen replied. It was a small town to the south of Taundon, Kaz recalled, about midway from the great city and Denmouth.

“Well, it’s warmer in those parts in the winter,” Kaz told him, “so traveling in the winter is not as severe as it is in places like Hosinland, or here apparently. However, once you have a nice warm home of your own, I’m sure it will not seem so bad, and you are arriving in plenty of time to settle in before you have to start breaking ground.”

“Oh, I won’t be a farmer here,” Larsen told him. “I’m a blacksmith. My cousins tell me there’s not enough of that work to go around in Mannburgh.”

“It’s a small but growing city,” Chanya commented. “I think you’ll do quite well there, although I’m surprised you haven’t been carrying your own anvil with you. Aren’t they rather expensive?”

“I could not afford my own shop in Rimmergate,” Larsen admitted. “I do have my tools with me, not a full set but enough to make the other tools I will need and my family has already purchased an anvil and built a building for me to work in. We’ll build the forge itself as soon as possible. We can do that even if winter lasts another month.”

“And it might,” Kaz remarked. “Early spring blizzards can be the worst, although as the season gets later they melt away fast enough. We’ve actually been lucky this trip; no major storms to slow us down.”

“There you go,” Chanya laughed. “You had to jinx us, didn’t you.”

“Talking about bad weather doesn’t make it happen,” Kaz grumbled. “If it did, there would never be any good weather.”

They rode on though what had been a very long valley between two mountains, but then the trail turned southward toward the high saddle back of one of those mountains. The trail had to switch back and forth several times, to keep it at an incline that would not overtax the horses, adding at least five miles or more to the distance in Kaz’s estimation, but finally they reached the crest and were able to look down and into the next valley.

“Big river down there,” Kaz remarked, “and a small stability. There’s probably a river boat going downstream. If we didn’t have this wagon and everything in it we could travel that way, but Mannburgh should only be another day’s worth of travel. It wouldn’t make a lot of difference.

The south side of the mountain was even steeper than the north and they spent the next two hours on the switchbacks, gradually descending into the next valley. Although they had a clear view from the top of the mountain, the south side was heavily forested, so they only occasionally caught a glance at the valley they were heading into, until they had finally arrived.

“What are those strange animals?” Doroty asked, looking ahead once they had finally come out of the forest into an area covered in grass and low brush. There were nearly thirty grazers in the grass to the east of the path that looked to be part goat and part elk. Their fur ranged in color from a mottled light tan and gold, depending on their habitat and season. They had two long straight horns that projected forward from their foreheads, which, Kaz had always thought, was their strangest feature.

“They’re called bicorns,” Chanya told them. “They are closely related to unicorns, in fact. The Ken say it’s a matter of evolution. In unicorns the two horns grew together and became the familiar spiral horn most of us know from artwork. In the case of bicorns the horns are close together but are obviously two individual structures. Another difference is that unicorns invariably have white body fur with the only color variations being in their manes and beards which range from white to golden yellow. These are a light tan and gold as you can see, although in the summer their fur becomes dark brown with green mottling.”

“And, according to the Ken, they are quite tasty as well,” Kaz added. “They keep bicorns for meat on their farms. They also hunt them, but mostly for the sport, not necessity.”

“Doesn’t look like much of a sport,” Larsen observed. “They’re just standing there, grazing.”

“No one hunts bicornes around here,” Kaz explained, “except for some mountain cats, so this herd isn’t likely to be worried about the likes of us. In some parts of the world these creatures are as skittish as their one-horned cousins.”

“No one hunts them?” Larsen asked, taking another look as they passed the herd. “Not even the Nasano?”

“I don’t believe so,” Kaz replied. “Not around here in any case. According to my briefing packet, the local Nasano are primarily farmers and herdsman. The closest they come to hunting is fishing with nets. Of course my briefing might be in error. It’s been known to happen, but generally I can trust my briefings. In this case the information I’ve been given is essential to my mission here. There’s been some tension lately between the indigenes and the colonists. My job is to relieve that tension.”

Tension turned out to be an understatement.

Nearly all the men and a fair number of women were carrying muskets and rifles on them as the wayfarers and the Keens entered Mannburgh. Kaz was used to attracting attention as he entered an isolated town. Children loved to run after arriving wayfarers, loving to hear the tales of far off lands or just to get bits of sweets some of them carried with them for just that reason. Men and women would stare at and point at wayfarers as they arrived, some would wave.

In Mannburgh, however, the reception was a cold and distrustful one. People stared at them, but it wasn’t the sort of stare one would normally favor a wayfarer with. It was the sort given when expecting trouble from strangers. Children hid behind their parents and those parents were closely examining Kaz, Chanya and the Keens. It was clear they had passed some sort of test, but evidently not with flying colors. No one was in any mood to welcome strangers.

“Friendly town you have here,” Kaz commented to the local hallmaster, Franklin Sorst, as he and Chanya met with him after checking in and seeing the Keens off. Franklin was actually a journeyman wayfarer, but his talent at organization had earned him a local master’s rank.

“Oh it’s not usually so bad,” Franklin denied. “It’s generally a rather friendly city, but the recent problems with the indigenes has everyone on edge.”

“Well that’s why we’re here,” Kaz remarked. “What can you tell us about the Nasano?”

“Well first of all, they won’t know who you’re talking about if you call them Nasano,” Franklin warned them. “That name was coined by the first Cracian colonists and is a corruption of a tribal name in the Southern Islands. Each tribe has its own name although most of those names mean ‘The People.’”

“Most people’s names for themselves do,” Kaz replied. “The people who live in the Green Lands, the people who live in Crace, the southern people the northern people and so forth.”

“Right,” Franklin agreed. “The tribesmen around here call themselves the Alagondo. They live in villages of fifty to one hundred people and most of the time they are farmers.”

“Most of the time?” Chanya prompted him.

“There have been raids lately,” Franklin told them. “The latest just occurred a few days ago in Trasdale to the south of here. The settlers there report that the raid was entirely without provocation. No

one was killed this time, but several were wounded, farm animals were stolen and several houses and barns were destroyed.”

“They attacked without being provoked?” Kaz asked. “I don’t know the Alagondo, but it doesn’t sound too likely. What do they have to say for themselves?”

“I don’t know,” Franklin admitted. “They have their own wayfarers and their villages don’t lie on our pathways. If they did, I could have gone and investigated this myself. It’s why I called for a master to handle it. I needed someone who could navigate without a path to follow.”

“I see,” Kaz nodded. “I guess the first step then should be to visit the leader of the Nasa... uh, the Alagondo and get his side of the story.”

Two

There were special ways to approach an Alagondo village under the equivalent of a flag of truce. Kaz and Chanya found a long staff and tied a handful of eagle feathers to one end, then wearing headbands of nearly white leather they set forth toward the last known location of the nearest Alagondo village.

They followed a wayfarer path for several miles before reaching a landmark from which they struck off overland for another mile until they found a different path. “It doesn’t quite feel like our paths, does it?” Chanya noted.

“That’s true,” Kaz agreed as they started to follow the new path, “but I did not expect it to. So far you’ve only travelled on Guild-made paths, but every group of wayfarers does it a bit differently. I found that out fairly early on. Sarahnie paths were different from Alono ones and those in Salasia were even more different as were the ones in Corisa. It’s a difference of style and training, I guess.”

“That makes a certain amount of sense,” Chanya remarked. “I imagine different Nasano tribal paths will be different as well?”

“I imagine so,” Kaz nodded, “but just as some tribes are related, I think we might seem some similarity between their paths. But we have to be careful not to call them Nasano. It makes them sound like all one people and they take offense to that.”

“Sorry, I forgot,” Chanya apologized. “You would have thought that would be in our original briefing.”

“It should have been,” Kaz told her. “We could have gotten into real trouble had Franklin not corrected us. Each tribe is very different and proud of those differences. The Alagondo are a proud people and until recently have always been friendly with the Varanan settlers.”

Finally Kaz and Chanya reached the edge of the Alagondo stability where they stood just inside and waited to be recognized. It would be a dreadful insult to be ignored, but one Kaz was willing to overlook considering recent troubles. As it was, it was nearly dark before several men and women came to greet them.

“You come under truce?” one man asked them. He was wearing an ornate vest that had been decorated with dyed porcupine quills. Kaz knew it marked him as the headman of this village, but not the chief of the entire tribe.

“We do,” Kaz replied, grateful the man understood the Grundish language. Even so he might have insisted on speaking his own language and Kaz’s briefing had only covered a few words in that tongue. “We represent the Guild of Wayfarers and would like to negotiate peace between your people and the settlers of Mannburgh.”

“We too would prefer to live in peace,” the headman replied. “Not all your people agree, but for now you are welcome among us.” He reached out and took the feathered staff from Kaz and nodded at it approvingly. The eagle feathers, highly prized by the men of the Alagondo, were meant as a gift. The acceptance meant Kaz and Chanya were being offered the full hospitality of the village.

Kaz smiled tightly, but inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. So far, at least, this was going well. The headman led them into the village. There were a few fires over which food was being cooked, but they were not intended for warmth. There were a collection of earthen structures, in the village, each large enough for maybe ten people. However in the center was one large enough for the entire village to gather in and this was the one to which Kaz and Chanya were ushered.

As they entered this lodge it was apparent no one needed to wear their heavy winter clothing in here, so when the men and women who had come to greet them removed their furs and, in some cases, woolen coat – evidence of trading with the settlers - Kaz and Chanya followed suit.

The lodge was not brightly lit, but as his eye became accustomed to the light, Kaz could see the building had been constructed over a framework of wood and skins which held up the sod that made for an excellent insulation against the harsh winter weather. He had expected the smells of rancid oil and unwashed bodies, but while there was a hint of that, the air was amazingly sweet, with floral scents that covered the less pleasant odors. Chanya later learned that the lodge was aired out as frequently as the weather allowed and that these people valued cleanliness as much as she did.

Kaz and Chanya were seated by a fire and women presented them with bowls of a thick stew. They both knew that a meal must be shared before any serious talking could commence, but it did not stifle all conversation.

“It has been a wet winter, has it not?” the headman, Ashaghata, asked Kaz.

Kaz smiled. These people were not so different after all if weather was a universally safe topic. “It has been like that everywhere. Have you had much snow?”

“Two big storms,” Ashaghata replied off-handedly. “We were confined to our lodges, but that is no real hardship. Our crops and animals did well last year so food is plentiful and the chance to do nothing is rare.”

Kaz smiled. “It was like that with the people I was born to, although I never saw snow until I became a wayfarer.”

“So you are not of Varana?” the headman asked.

“No, indeed,” and not for the first time, Kaz found himself describing life in a Sarahnje village. The cultures were different as were their customs, food and nearly everything else, but the similarities were what both men latched on to.

“Then how did it come to be that you left your village?” Ashaghata asked curiously.

Pain flickered briefly across Kaz’s face as it often did when he was reminded of that awful night his life changed. “My people were at war,” he answered at last. “Our enemies, the Alono, attacked us one night. It was not a simple raid, but a murderous and wasteful assault on my village. In the end nearly all my people were killed or dragged off into slavery. I escaped because I can travel through the Wild, I am a wayfarer although I was untrained. When my village was destroyed I ran into the bush. I was nearly killed there several times, but eventually a man and woman followed and found me. They adopted me and gave me a second chance.”

“It is a rare and fortunate man who can live twice in a single life,” Ashaghata told him after a pause. Kaz nodded and they continued to talk about everything but the actual reason Kaz and Chanya had come here.

Finally the meal was over and Chanya was herded away from the men to the far end of the lodge where the women were gathered while Kaz spoke to the men. “We have lived peacefully with the men of Mannburgh,” Ashaghata told Kaz. “We have traded well to the benefit of both our peoples and until recently there has been no trouble between us.”

“So what happened?” Kaz asked.

“You were not told?” Ashaghata asked, betraying surprise.

“I was told only that your people had started raiding the Varanan settlements,” Kaz replied.

“We have not been quiet about our reasons,” the headman told him. “When the other men first came here they asked to purchase ample land for them and their families. The concept of buying land was new to us, but it made its own sort of sense so agreements were made and we sold them what they wanted. Everyone did well. Then more recently men began to take black rock out of the ground in territory that was ours by agreement. We would have been happy to sell or lease the land to them. We might even have just allowed it, had they asked first, but instead they pushed their way onto our territory and forced three of our villages to move away. They shot at us. One man was killed and several others were injured.

“We protested to the mayor of Mannburgh,” Ashaghata continued, “and when he took no action we sent word to the governor of New Ebor but we have been ignored. Finally it was too much to bear and we started to fight back.”

"It sounds like you had good reason to," Kaz admitted.

"We would rather we did not have to," Ashaghata told him sadly. "They hurt us so we hurt them, then they hurt us in return. It is hard to end that."

"Hmm, yes," Kaz agreed. "You should have come to the Wayfarers' Guild though. That's part of what we are here for. We do not side with any nation or group of people in such disputes and try to rule fairly for all."

"Could you have kept them honest?" Ashaghata asked with a note of skepticism in his voice.

"We can't make them honest men," Kaz laughed, "but we can and do enforce treaties. They need the Guild in the same way you need your shaman. Without wayfarers we're all stuck inside our stabilities, aren't we?"

While Kaz was talking to the men, Chnaya had a similar conversation with the women. She was surprised to learn that the leader of the women, the "Mother of the Tribe" if the title had been translated correctly, was not married to the headman nor any more closely related to him than any others in his immediate family were, although all the people in the village were part of a large extended family.

"Men are quick to take insult and fight," the old woman called simply "Mother" by everyone in the village told Chnaya. "It is up to the women to counsel them to reason."

"Sounds familiar," Chnaya grinned.

"I am not surprised," Mother told her. "It is the men, however who make the actual political decisions for the tribe although we women rule the families. If we take issue with their decisions we do have the ability to pressure them to change, but it is never wise to over-use that power."

"No, I suppose if you do that too often, the men would find other ways around you, or simply refuse to be persuaded," Chnaya remarked.

"Yes," Mother nodded, "or even more likely they would act without asking first. We are their conscience, but while we might make life uncomfortable for them, we guide the men through persuasion, not force."

Chnaya asked other questions and learned still more of how the Alagondo and their neighboring tribes lived. They had a complex lifestyle in which everyone had a say in what happened in practice, even though in theory the headman made all the decisions. As she thought about it, it was not really all that unlike life anywhere else. A leader led because he was allowed to. An unpopular leader soon found there was no one following him.

She also suspected that Mother controlled far more of the lives of her people than she let on, or perhaps she just did not see it as a matter of controlling them. It was hard for an outsider to really tell and Chnaya realized that she would have to live among these people for a long time before she truly came to understand them beyond the surface level. She was still asking and answering questions when another woman came excitedly to Mother. They spoke at length in their native language at the end of which Mother gave her several obvious commands.

"The headman's mate is giving birth," Mother explained to Chnaya. "It has been difficult for her and it is a little early. I fear the worst. Do you have experience with this sort of thing?"

"I have assisted in childbirth a few times," Chanya told her. "I am not an expert, but it is part of my training."

"That is good," Mother told her. "We may need your help. Perhaps that is why you are here."

Chanya did not reply to that, but followed the other women out of the large lodge without bothering to get her winter coat and into one of the smaller ones. The headman's mate seemed curiously small in her furs where she was alternately shivering and sweating. Then Chanya realized that while none of the Alagondo was tall, this woman seems small because of the size of her bed. She was also in great pain and the other women were trying to get her to her feet.

The scene evoked childhood memories in Chanya. The women of the Green Lands gave birth lying down, but among her own people, the Sanai, it had once been customary to do so in a squatting position. As the Green Landsmen and women brought their own customs to Rhonesia, the Sanai adopted most of them, but she did recall a few very traditional women who insisted on giving birth that way. It was apparent the Alagondo were the same.

"I don't think she's going to be able to get to her feet," Chanya told Mother.

"I was afraid that might be," Mother admitted. "It is not a good sign."

"She will just have to remain on her back then," Chanya replied practically. "It works for the women of the Green Lands and it will do her no good to be forced to her feet if she cannot stay there on her own."

"Sadly, that is true, but will the child be strong enough this way?" Mother asked. Chanya realized this was a superstition, but one which Mother fully believed in.

"It has been my experience," Chanya replied carefully, "that the method of birth has little effect on the strength of the child so long as it is healthy. But should this women collapse before the child is born that could be disastrous." Mother nodded and relayed instructions to the other women.

Then Chanya was free to use her wayfarer's senses to examine the woman. She saw the problem instantly. There was a concentration of Wild energy within the unfortunate woman's womb. "She is giving birth to a wayfarer," Chanya told Mother. "I mean a shaman." She took another look and smiled, "Two of them actually."

"That is not always lucky," Mother told her seriously. "Witch children can kill their mother in their birth."

"If I can, I will not let them," Chanya promised. "It is very rare for a wayfarer, a shaman to have power before they are even born, but it has been known to happen. Your own shaman should be here to assist."

"Men are not allowed at the birth," Mother told her, "not even our shaman."

"Then it's a good thing I am here," Chanya retorted. "Otherwise the mother and both children would die. I have never actually done this. But I have been told about it. They have a chance."

"Thank the spirits," Mother breathed reverently. "You can do that?"

Chanya nodded, "I think so."

"What must we do?"

"Well, first we make our patient comfortable, or as comfortable as possible," Chanya replied. "I'm sure you've delivered more babies than I have. Just do what you know is right and I'll keep those two young shamans from killing themselves."

Three

Back in the large lodge, Kaz and the headman continued to talk all night. Ashaghata was willing to negotiate a peace although he could only speak for the people of his village. "The chieftain must be involved in anything that involves all the Alagondo," he told Kaz.

"That makes sense and as it happens I'm not actually empowered to speak for the people of Mannburgh," Kaz replied. "I imagine that must be between your chieftain and their mayor, but you and I can sketch out an equitable deal and see how it is accepted."

"I suppose they will want to keep the lands with the black rock on it?" the headman asked.

"Everything is negotiable," Kaz replied. "They call the black rock coal and it is a powerful fuel. If they want it, I imagine they ought to be willing to grant you quite a bit for it."

"You negotiate strangely, Kazani," Ashaghata replied. "In my experience a counter offer is less than the asking price."

"I don't recall hearing an asking price," Kaz replied, "but I'm not negotiating in the usual sense. My job is to make peace here. Part of that is to advise you as to how valuable the land you have is in the eyes of the Varanans. The Guild of Wayfarers is neutral. We don't take sides. If I bargain on behalf of the people of Mannburgh, I would be trying to get them the best possible deal, but the thing is they value that land more highly than you do. If I let you sell too cheaply it will make things peaceful here for a while, but eventually, you and your people will find out how much more you could have had. If that happens you would feel cheated and this could start all over again. So the best way to prevent that is for both sides to reach a point that is fair to both."

“For a young man, you speak with much wisdom,” Ashaghata commended him. “What do you think would be fair for my people?”

“Well, is there anything special about the land they want?” Kaz asked. “Is it sacred?”

“Our people are buried on it,” the headman replied, “but so long as they are not disturbed there is no problem.”

“So we’ll want to know where they are so those locations can be recorded and marked,” Kaz decided, “to be left in peace in perpetuity. Hmm, I should be taking notes. Where’s my pack?” Ashaghata nodded to a young man who had been sitting nearby and he ran off to a corner of the lodge to return a few moments later with Kaz’s backpack. Kaz reached in and pulled out a notebook, a quill pen and a small pot of ink and started taking notes. He chuckled after a moment. “This is a lot easier when sitting at a desk or a table. Still it can’t be helped. So the settlers displaced three villages was it? That’s going to cost them especially since they were breaking a previous treaty with you. I think they ought to pay you for the land. Now you can sell it or lease it.”

“Which would be the better deal?” Ashaghata asked interestedly.

“That depends on how you see it,” Kaz shrugged. “If you sell the land you’ll get more money for it, but if you lease it the land still belongs to you when the lease is up. You can also demand a percentage of the value of the coal and any other thing of value they take from the ground. But it is not just the money. It’s also the protections we can get to keep them from doing this sort of thing again. I think your people should get your choice of land and have it to hold in the form of an official deed, not just a treaty.”

“More than a treaty?” Ashaghata asked.

“They already broke one treaty and ignored your protests,” Kaz told him. “They’ll try it again if the chance comes up. Having a legal document issued by the City of Mannburgh will help. Coming to the Guild next time to redress any wrongs will help too.”

They worked another hour putting details together. “Well, I think the Guild will back me on this,” Kaz told the headman. “It’s fair and balanced for both sides. Of course your chieftain and the Mayor will have to agree, but it’s a start.”

A woman came in from the outside just then and walked directly to the headman. “Ashghata, you have a son and a daughter.”

Kaz and Chanya stayed with the Alagondo another two days and helped to celebrate the birth of the twins. Chanya spent a fair amount of time with the elderly shaman of the village. “The twins are going to need special attention,” Chanya explained. “It is rare to be born with the ability, but it generally only comes out in times of stress. Also while they may do some unusual things for the first few weeks like create glowing lights so they aren’t in a dark room, all that will calm down for the most part after a month. It is likely that by the time they can walk they will have forgotten how to use the talent.”

“That could be for the best,” the shaman told her. “The boy will be headman one day and a female shaman is almost unheard of.”

“Women with the wayfaring talent are less common than men, that’s true,” Chanya agreed, “but ignoring the talent will not make it go away. It will come back and the longer it is suppressed, the more

dangerous it will be. There are witches among your people?”

“There are,” the shaman agreed. “They have the power of a shaman but without the wisdom or restraint. Ah, I see. They must be trained to control themselves.”

“Exactly,” Chanya nodded. “Start teaching them in five or six years. That should be about right. Then as they grow up they will have the talent completely under control. If they choose not to use it, that’s fine. At least it won’t come bursting out of them at the worst possible times. The other thing, of course, is to make sure they don’t go wandering out into the Wild. That’s the other reason to start their training early. If they go out there, they won’t just come right back, anymore than you do. They have to understand that as soon as they are old enough to understand. Other than that, however, I imagine they will be normal children.”

Chanya and Kaz spent even more time explaining that to the headman and his mate, but finally they had done as much as they could and it was time to leave. “We owe you much,” Ashaghata told the couple. “Kazani you have pointed us toward a peaceful and, I hope, prosperous path. And you, Chanya,” he paused. “I owe you a blood debt. A blood debt is one that can never be repaid, so instead I offer you this.” He handed her a small quill-work pouch. The design on it was similar to his ceremonial vest. “This amulet marks you as kin to me and all in my village. You will always have a home with us if you want it.”

Chanya, nearly moved beyond words, stumbled through her thanks, tears of joy flowing down her face, and then without warning suddenly hugged the powerful headman and kissed him on the cheek. Kaz shook hands with the Ashaghata in the manner of two Green Landsmen and finally the wayfarers left the village.

On learning that Franklin was meeting with the mayor of Mannburgh, Kaz and Chanya rushed to the city offices to report on their success. “They are willing to sell or lease the land your people tried to steal, mayor,” Kaz told him.

“No land was stolen,” the mayor insisted.

“Oh no?” Kaz asked. “Well, you try telling that to the people of three Alagondo villages those coal miners forced out of their homes at gun point. You’re lucky the natives have only been raiding the towns around here. In their place, I’d likely have been doing far worse. However, they are willing to negotiate to allow your people the use of that land. The Guild will oversee those negotiations.”

“Very well, I suppose we could buy the land, just as we paid for the area Mannburgh is on,” the mayor agreed.

“It will mean a new treaty, mayor,” Kaz told him firmly, “and if this one gets broken you can count on the Wayfarer’s Guild interdicting this entire western region of New Ebor Colony.”

“What does that mean?” the mayor stiffened.

“It means we will pull all our personnel out of the region,” Kaz explained. “No one here will be able to move from one town to another, and that includes the transport of colonial troops to defend your city. You’ll be isolated and defenseless. And that is an official Guild ruling. If you would like to appeal, you may send your protests to the Central Guildhall in Taundon.”

The Way to New Farrington

One

“We should probably stay around for a week or two to at least make sure the treaty talks get started properly,” Kaz told Franklin as they made their way back to the Guildhall with Chanya.

“I wish you could, Kaz,” Franklin replied, “but a packet came in for you today. Haven’t opened it, of course, but I’ve never seen one of those arrive without marching orders inside.”

“But I’m supposed to go back to New Ebor to finish my work arbitrating those inter-colonial negotiations,” Kaz protested.

“Evidently, someone has other ideas,” Franklin shrugged. “I do know there’s been a big row in the Colonial Congress and the delegations from Southern Varana walked out. Weren’t they involved in your talks?”

“A few were,” Kaz admitted. “Mister Aimes did all the talking for them, but he was the head delegate for Varana. None of the subordinates said much as I recall.”

“Sounds normal enough,” Franklin nodded. “I’m sure the various delegations wrangled their heads off in private, but wanted to present a united face at the talks themselves.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Kaz admitted, “but then I wasn’t really worried about that aspect of the talks.”

Once back in the Guildhall, Kaz and Chanya joined Franklin in his office where they opened the packet from New Ebor. “Oh this is worse than I feared,” Kaz remarked, looking at the cover sheet.

“What’s wrong?” Chanya asked.

“It reads like a bad joke,” Kaz told her. “On the one hand the treaty I was arbitrating is as complete as it is likely to be. They came to an agreement on fishing rights in any case and signed a treaty without me. I can live with that.”

“It’s what you told them to do,” Chanya reminded him.

“That’s doesn’t mean I expected them to remember what I said the moment we left town,” Kaz countered. “Still it’s nice to know I got them to do something. Nothing else was accomplished, however. The delegates from the other colonies have left town without further discussions.”

“I thought the so-called Nasano Question was important to them,” Chanya commented. “Was that just a political ruse?”

“Maybe not,” Kaz shrugged, “but they probably did not feel it worthwhile debating the matter until they knew who they would be debating it with. It appears Mister Baker’s United Colonial Congress is not quite as united as he dreamed it might be and that the entire delegation from Southern Varana has left New Ebor. They are going to meet in New Farrington instead to discuss formal secession from Varana.”

“From Varana?” Chanya wondered. “What would be the point of that? There is no one single colonial governor of all Varana unless you count Queen Julia.”

“True enough, from what I can tell, Varana is actually a convenient label through which Parliament can pass blanket laws over all thirteen colonies at once,” Kaz agreed. “Such a move would accomplish nothing.”

“It would separate them from those ‘villainous rebels’ in the north,” Chanya pointed out.

“But the Colony of Farrington is as upset with Parliament as Bournset Bay,” Kaz argued. “As far as I know they are the one southern colony who does want to secede from the Green Lands. Well, nothing in this packet explains that, so we’re just going to have to go to New Farrington to find out.”

“But what do they expect us to do?” Chanya asked.

“According to this, attempt to reunite the United Colonial Congress,” Kaz replied.

“Who signed those orders?” Chanya asked sharply. “The Guild does not normally take political sides like this. It ought not to be a concern of the guild if Varana is in two pieces or one.”

“Or thirteen,” Kaz added, “as it is now. But we are often asked to negotiate on behalf of a client who cannot for some reason do it himself. We have been hired by Mister John Baker, it seems. I’m not sure what I did to get him angry, but this does seem to be my punishment.”

“Funny,” Chanya told him flatly. “It sounds more to me like you impressed him favorably. So much, in fact, that he trusts you to represent his interests and the future of Varana itself.”

“Perhaps,” Kaz admitted, “but have you noticed the color of my skin lately?”

“About the same as mine,” Chanya replied. “Maybe a little lighter, in fact.”

“Right,” Kaz nodded, “and how would it compare to that of the average Green Landsman?”

“We’re from the Southern Continent, Kaz,” Chanya replied seriously. “So our skins are darker than most. That’s never mattered within the Guild.”

“And it still doesn’t,” Kaz maintained, “but I’m not talking about the Guild now, or maybe I am. They keep slaves in Southern Varana, Chanya. Black slaves. Slaves from the Southern Continent. Have you even been south of New Ebor?”

“Yes, I have,” Chanya replied. “They ask to see my papers in almost every town, even where they know me. Well, neither of us has papers, but we do have our Guild identifications. That always gets me past the check points. If it didn’t, they would soon find themselves under interdiction.”

“I wasn’t worried about being stopped at various check points,” Kaz told her, then hedged, “Well, maybe a little, but I was more concerned on how well anyone in this Southern Varana Congress or whatever they choose to call it will bother to pay attention to anything I say. Think about it. First of all, I look like one of their slaves. Mister Aimes kept his emotions well-contained, but we both know he was shocked to see us when we first arrived in New Ebor.”

“Patrick Aimes was never less than courteous,” Chanya told him.

“Oh yes,” Kaz agreed too readily. “Politeness and courtesy is a mask he hides behind, but you could tell he was insulted the Guild would send someone who looks like one of his slaves.”

“Does Aimes keep slaves?” Chanya asked. “From what I recall, he is a lawyer, not a plantation owner.”

“He owns land,” Kaz replied. “Everyone in that Congress owned land. It is one of the requirements in order to have a vote. Do you really think a delegate to the Congress would not be held at least to that standard? And if he owns land in South Varana, he would be a very rare man indeed who did not also own some slaves to maintain it. Even if all he owns is a townhouse, he’ll have some servants.”

“They might not be slaves,” Chanya pointed out.

“As I said, he would be a very unusual man if they were not, especially, from what I hear, in the Colony of Julia,” Kaz replied.

“Oh, he is Julian, isn’t he?” Chanya nodded. “I was only in Pacidelphia the one time. It is the only place I was asked to show my papers inside a city. I eventually started that trick with the visible aura of Wild energy around me.”

“That must have kept the obnoxious ones at a distance,” Kaz laughed.

“Oh yes, even the most bigoted person knows enough not to mess with a girl who glows bright yellow,” Chanya replied.

“Yellow?” Kaz asked. “I’m impressed. That’s not easy in a stability.”

“I can get it up the scale to true green,” she told him proudly. “I’ve been practicing, but I can’t maintain that intensity for more than a few minutes. Besides I look horrible in green.”

“One’s positive appearance is hardly ever a consideration when summoning the Wild that way,” Kaz laughed.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Franklin told them.

“There is a trick,” Kaz explained, “of drawing the wild energy around oneself and making it appear as a visible aura. It could be faked, I suppose, with a modified wayfarer’s lamp, but any master could see through that. Anyway, it’s one of those things that for the most part only a master can do inside a stability and the amount of power and its intensity is indicated by the color of the aura. Most masters can create one that is red. Orange is a bit harder, but maybe half the masters I’ve met can manage that. Harder still is yellow and green. With effort I can achieve the blue state although not for very long, but so far as I know, only Raff Cawlens can make his glow violet. Anyway, it doesn’t really have much purpose save as a warning to others. If a wayfarer is glowing like that, you probably do not want to upset him. Or her,” he added with a tilt of his head toward Chanya.

Chanya was reading through the packet. “Looks like this has been given top emergency status,” she observed. “We are to escort no travelers from here to New Farrington and can demand relays of fresh horses whenever we need to.”

“That should make this a relatively fast trip,” Kaz remarked. “Are we allowed to sleep along the way?”

“Of course,” Chanya glared at him. “Half an hour each night whether we need it or not. Too late to start out this evening, however.”

“We could ride a few hours,” Kaz suggested. “I’ve done that at night before.”

“In Taundon, maybe,” Chanya commented.

“No, in the Wild,” Kaz corrected her petulantly. “Oh wait, it’s nearly a new moon, isn’t it. It would be very dark.”

“And treacherous, even with a wayfarer’s lamp to light the way,” Chanya replied. “We’ll wake up at dawn, have a good meal and be gone before they finish extinguishing the street lamps.”

Two

Changing horses as frequently as possible they pressed on for two days until a storm blew up in the mountains. "This isn't looking good," Kaz told Chanya. "It's not too heavy just yet, but the wind is bad and I think we're looking at a late season blizzard."

"It's cold enough for one," Chanya agreed. "How far ahead is the next town?"

"An hour at least," Kaz replied. "Settlements are sparse along this route. We didn't bring a tent with us, did we?"

"We decided to travel light," Chanya reminded him.

"I wouldn't have wanted to camp out in a blizzard anyway," Kaz remarked.

"Better than getting caught outside without a shelter in a blizzard," Chanya pointed out. "Well, we're not in trouble yet. Let's keep moving."

Twenty minutes later, however, the snow had begun in earnest. "The wind is blowing the snow right into our faces," Chanya observed when they stopped to consider the situation. "It stings."

"The horses don't seem to enjoy it either," Kaz replied. "I think they would rather find the inside of a barn."

"Smart beasts," Chanya shot back. "I'd settle for a barn right about now too. Hey, what's that over there?"

Kaz turned toward where she was pointing. "Do you mean about half way up that hill?"

"You call that a hill?" Chanya asked.

"Compared to the mountains on either side of us," Kaz countered, "yes, but I see it. It's a stability, isn't it?"

"I thought there weren't any towns around here," Chanya remarked.

"Maybe it isn't a town," Kaz replied.

"What then?" Chanya asked.

"A small army, perhaps," Kaz suggested, "or a mining camp. Either way there are people over there and looks like they have a fire going. Maybe we can donate something to the pot."

"I'll settle for a space near the fire," Chanya told him seriously, "but where's the path?"

"I haven't the foggiest," Kaz told her. "It could be behind us. I haven't been paying much attention, but we don't need a path."

"True," Chanya shrugged, "but maybe we should leave one back here."

“Why?” Kaz asked.

“In case we get lost,” Chanya replied. “That happens in a blizzard. We might not find that stability, but we’ll be able to find our way back to the path.”

“Let’s go then,” Kaz replied.

Once again, forging a path slowed them down a little, but as Chanya had pointed out, it was also a lifeline back to the main path. The area was partially forested with the trees forming large clumps they threaded their way between.

“We’re not exactly building a nice straight path,” Kaz remarked.

Chanya looked over her shoulder and replied, “I’ve seen worse and we’re following the lay of the land. Now where’s that town?”

“You don’t know it’s a town,” Kaz reminded her, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

“We don’t know it isn’t,” Chanya shouted back. “There it is! We’re a bit off course, but not badly.”

“And here’s a path,” Kaz remarked a moment later and he joined the one they had forged to it. “Not a Guild path, though. Whose is it?”

“Alagondo, maybe?” Chanya suggested.

“Maybe, but I think we’re out of their territory,” Kaz replied. “We’ve come a long way from Mannburgh and I thought they ranged west and north of there. But this does look like one of their paths. Must be another group of Nasano.”

“Let’s find out,” Chanya suggested.

No longer needing to forge a path they were able to urge their horses to a faster pace as the strange path ran into a clump of trees and slightly up hill. The stability’s border was inside the edge of the small forest and the wayfarer path was replaced by a more common packed dirt foot path. And then they came out of the forest into a large clearing. The Alagondo village had been composed of several family-sized lodges with a single community lodge. This settlement had two long lodges that together were large enough to have held Ashaghata’s people with a fair amount of room to spare.

The wind was howling through the tree tops and Kaz had to shout at the top of his lungs “Ahoy! Anyone home?”

A flap opened just a bit on one of the lodges and a woman poked her head out. Even through the wind-driven snow, Kaz could see her eyes widen with surprise. She said something the wayfarers did not understand and made a simple gesture that spoke volumes. Chanya translated it as, “What sort of idiots are out in weather like this? Get in here before you catch your deaths!”

Two men came out of the lodge as Kaz and Chanya dismounted. They helped lead the horses to a sheltered area where there were various other animals were weathering the storm.

Finally inside the lodge, Chanya sat down by the fire and started to shiver, “I didn’t even realize how cold I was until I got in here.”

“Here take off your coat, you’ll warm up faster,” a woman told her in halting Cracian.

“Thank you,” Chanya responded in the same language.

“You don’t speak Grundish?” Kaz asked one of the men as he removed his snow-covered coat.

“Some,” the nearest man replied in Grundish. “A few of us. We all speak Cracian, however,” he concluded in Cracian.

“That’s fine,” Kaz concluded. “So long as we have a common language.” He immediately knew what these people were doing so here, so isolated from everyone else, however. They had been allies of Crace in the war a generation earlier. When they lost, many of the indigenes had melted back into the Wild, moving their settlements to new locations for fear of reprisals from the Varanan colonists. Kaz noticed that several older people within sight had relaxed when he switched languages. That was fine with him. The war was long over and so long as these people were not still fighting it, they were free to live in peace so far as he was concerned. “Thank you for inviting us in.”

“No one should be out in a storm like that,” the other man told him. “Please sit by the fire. Would you like something to eat?”

“We haven’t stopped to eat all day,” Kaz admitted. “We’d like to add something to the pot.”

The man waved him off. “That will not be necessary. Until now it has been a good winter for us. We had a good hunt recently and were able to store more than enough food to get us through.”

“Well, then, thank you for your welcome,” Kaz told him. “I don’t imagine you get many visitors out here.”

“A few, mostly fellow tribesmen or members of neighboring tribes,” the man told him. So they were not quite as isolated as Kaz had assumed. “May I ask how you found us?”

“We were traveling from Mannburgh, two days to the west, to New Farrington,” Kaz replied, “but were between known settlements when the storm caught up to us. We spotted the top of your stability dome from across the valley.”

The man frowned, but another stepped up and smiled, “Ah, wayfarers. At least one of you would have to be of course. I have a little training myself. That was when I was a lad in Meldan. I never finished my training, but I learned enough to help move our people here.”

Kaz nodded. If this man had even a little training from a Guildsman, he would have been able to guide people along a path and no tribe could travel reliably without at least one wayfarer. There were small bands of hunter/gatherers, Kaz knew, that had tricks for moving through the wild, but they lived a nomadic life and brought their stabilities with them as a group. Also, it had been noticed that so-called primitive peoples seemed to have a higher incidence of those born with the wayfaring talent than in civilized lands. Kaz thought about that and decided that maybe that was not quite true. It was more likely that with a more pronounced need for wayfarers to survive on a daily basis, that those with even a trace of talent became valuable assets to their people. In more civilized lands, those with only slight ability were less useful and more often went into other trades.

“You are not Alagondo, are you?” Kaz asked as a plate of meat and vegetables was placed in his

hands.

“Please sit,” the indigene wayfarer invited him, then continued. “No, the Alagondo are distant relatives. We are the Panominy. You know the Alagondo?”

“We recently brokered a peace treaty between them and the settlers of Mannburgh,” Kaz replied. “We stayed in an Alagondo village for a few days. They were very hospitable, like you.”

“Hospitality honors the host as much as the guest,” the man replied. “I am Falcon, or at least that is what my name means in your language.”

“Nice to meet you, Falcon,” Kaz replied and introduced himself and Chanya.

The sound of the storm outside changed then. “I was afraid of that,” Falcon commented. “It is changing to rain.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Kaz asked. “At least it doesn’t pile up.”

“Oh, but it does,” Falcon corrected him. “The river might rise as the snow melts and flood the village.”

“What river?” Kaz asked.

“The one you must have crossed to get here,” Falcon replied. “Although it has been frozen for the last month. If this rain keeps up though, it will be flowing again very soon.”

“But not tonight,” a woman chided him. “We cannot control when the river rises, but we do not have to worry about it until tomorrow.”

They woke up the next morning to see that Falcon had been correct. When the storm turned to rain the snow in the area and, more importantly, upstream had begun to melt. By daybreak the river Kaz and Chanya had crossed without even noticing was a torrent threatening to overflow its banks.

“You built a good fourteen feet above the river banks,” Kaz noted, “and the valley is broader on the other side. This river will have to rise quite a bit before the village is threatened.”

“We shall see,” Falcon replied tensely. “I had a vision about this, however.”

Kaz did not believe in visions or any other form of prophecy, but he held his tongue. Falcon and his people had welcomed him and Chanya into their home. He was not about to start a religious debate with them now. “It doesn’t look like the river is going to be crossable anytime soon,” he commented instead.

“Not for days at least,” Falcon agreed, “but there is a path that follows this side of the valley. It goes through two other Panominy villages and then through a gap in the mountain and eventually joins one of your paths into a town of, uh, white men.” He concluded uncertainly.

“My people called them that too sometimes,” Kaz replied with an ivory-toothed grin. “The ones around here call themselves Varanans or maybe New Eborians depending on whether they’re referring to the colony or the union of colonies. It’s still raining too hard to want to ride off yet no matter how urgent our mission is.”

"I think the rain will stop later today," Falcon told him, "although you may wish to stay one more day to give the ground a chance to dry."

"And to see if you'll need our help against the river," Kaz added.

The river crested its banks an hour later and continued to rise rapidly. "We're going to have to move the village," Falcon explained to Kaz and Chanya. "If we don't we'll be flooded by nightfall."

"What about building a levee?" Kaz suggested. "Put a wall of earth between you and the river."

"I don't believe we have the time," Falcon told him. From the look on his face, it was apparent he thought Kaz was hopelessly optimistic.

"Not really," Kaz replied. "There is a Kenlentan trick to moving things with what they call magic. Chanya and I can put the earth and stones roughly into place while your people pack them down and fill the holes. It will be exhausting work, but no more so than moving away and sleeping in tents tonight."

"You are certain you can do this thing?" Falcon asked. His face betrayed his disbelief, but that he was unwilling to show discourtesy to a guest by saying so directly. In response Kaz gestured at the ground to one side and as Falcon watched, a small area seemed to move on its own and pile itself up, leave a small hollow in the ground behind it.

"It's not hard on a small scale like that," Kaz pointed out, "but I think Chanya and I can erect a three or four foot tall earthwork between the river and the village. If I'm reading the lay of the land correctly, that should be higher than the river has flooded before. Hmm, maybe we should make it five feet tall just in case. Your people will be smoothing it out and packing the dirt down, so it will get shorter as you work. We may have some trouble on the side with the trees, but I suppose that will give you some firewood for next winter if any of them don't survive having their roots disturbed."

"We do chop down a number of trees each year," Falcon informed him. "That will just make the selection easier."

Kaz nodded and after a brief consultation he and Chanya went to work. "We should start here in the middle," he told her. "and then I'll go that way into the trees and you go the other."

"Make a big semicircle, right?" Chanya asked. "And trail off as we go uphill?"

"That's what I was thinking," Kaz confirmed. "The water's almost up to here. We'd better get started."

Without another word Kaz went to work. Unlike wayfaring which used Wild magic like a blunt weapon, forcing it into the shape of one's choice, Magic was more persuasive in nature. Every particle of matter has some potential energy that would cause it, if released, to move in a certain direction, even upward. The key to this operation was to allow the potential to form an earthwork to be invoked. To Kaz it had always felt like a pile, or in this case a not-yet pile of dirt and rocks composed of particles that were trying to move against each other, thereby cancelling out each other's potential. Magic was used to get those pieces out of each other's way.

He pushed the earth from a twenty-five foot wide area and encouraged it to form a five-foot tall and ten-foot wide mound between himself and the rising river. He watched as Chanya did the same, adding it to the side of his mound. Then he nodded and they started walking slowly away from each other, causing

the wall to grow longer as they went. The Panominies moved in and the two wayfarers worked and smoothed and shaped the wall of dirt and rock, packing it firmly down and filling in the gaps between stones where they appeared.

When Kaz reached the forest sometime later, his first thought was to try to go between the trees, but there was no workable way to do that, so instead he climbed up on top of the still-soft mound and willed the earth to mound up from thirty feet to either side. He hoped that would disturb fewer trees especially since the ground was two feet higher here and still rising on his projected path, so he did not need as much to complete the structure. Finally, after three hours, Kaz was done and he hurried over to see how Chanya was doing.

"I finished a few minutes ago," she reported when he found her near the place they had started. By now the river water was lapping against the side of the earthwork, but the levee appeared to be holding it back. "I don't think I have ever felt this tired though," she yawned.

"Me too," he agreed.

"This was truly a wonder," Falcon told him. "What may we do to show you our thanks?"

"A place to sleep for a few hours?" Chanya suggested. "I didn't realize how much this would take out of me. The Ken elders always make this look so easy."

"They've had a lot of practice," Kaz replied. "I also think they do that to seem impressive to their people. Raff shows off like that all the time too."

"So do you," Chanya chuckled tiredly.

"Well, I come by it honestly," Kaz admitted.

They were both fast asleep the moment they sank into the bed they had been offered the night before.

Three

"This was the worst flooding we have experienced since the village was built," Falcon told Kaz and

Chanya the next morning as they prepared to leave, “but your mound protected us as though there had been no flood at all.”

It was a slight exaggeration in Kaz’s opinion. During the night, while Kaz and Chanya continued to sleep, the earthwork had leaked in a few places and the Panominies had to pack in more earth and stones to hold back the water. There was also a fair amount of water in the ditch that had resulted from the construction of the mound. However, none of it had actually reached either of the lodges, so perhaps Falcon was correct, Kaz told himself.

“It was the least we could do to repay you for your hospitality,” Kaz told him. He was not sure the Panominy practiced the custom of disparaging a gift. Many cultures did, he knew, and it was never good manners to boast about how much you had done for another.

“Nothing we would not have done for anyone caught in the storm,” Falcon replied seriously, and Kaz realized that once more that he had said the right thing.

An hour later he was still thinking about that as he chewed on a piece of dried meat, Falcon’s mate had given to him and Chanya as a parting gift. “Chanya, did your tribe customarily belittle gifts to each other?”

“Not ritualistically,” Chanya replied, “but then my tribe was already rather acculturated by our association with Grundish colonials. We didn’t rub a recipient’s nose in it either though and generally gifts were rare and only between those with kinship bonds. Why?”

“Oh nothing,” Kaz shook his head. “Just something I was thinking about. I was a bit young to really understand the complexity of gift giving among the Sarahnie, but I seem to remember there were a lot of understood rules to it; what sort of gift you could give to whom and whether you could expect anything in return and that sort of thing. I don’t know if there’s even anyone left to ask about that now.”

“What about the Sarahnie gentleman you met in Lonport?” Chanya asked.

“Who’s to say he’s still alive or that I could find him again?” Kaz countered. “I don’t even know if there are any Sarahnie left on the Southern Continent. My village was not the only one, but it was our, uh capital I guess you could call it. It was the ceremonial center of the tribe. It was called the ‘Heart of Sarahnie.’ When it was destroyed by the Alono the entire tribe would have been demoralized. I haven’t been able to find out anything about them, but I suspect the Alono, either killed or enslaved the rest of them one village at a time, or maybe they joined other nearby tribes for protection. With the death of the Heart they would have lost much of what it means to be Sarahnie.”

“Why not build a new Heart?” Chanya asked. “That sounds simple enough to do.”

“You would have to ask the old shaman and he’s dead,” Kaz told her, “but I imagine there were countless rituals that would have been needed to be performed. You can’t just declare a new village is the Heart, or at least I don’t think you can. I mean, sure you can say it, but it’s a religious thing and the people have to believe it. I think all the ritual would help to foster than belief. Except to convince the people, of course the rituals mean very little.”

“Sounds like a rather cynical viewpoint,” Chanya observed.

“Blame it on my Grundish upbringing,” Kaz told her seriously. “The Sarahnie religion was a form of Malahnism from what I remember of it. That’s kind of an offshoot from the Church of Meni, but while

many of the sacred texts are held in common, the interpretations are very different. Of course I was a child and more concerned with hunting and farming than I was in religion. I didn't even want to know about being a shaman, which I would have been in time."

"Not necessarily," Chanya disagreed. They had discussed this several times before, but she let him go on. Kaz, she observed, was in an introspective mood and it was best to let him work his own way out of it.

"No, it was obvious, even to me at the time, I just wasn't ready to accept it. I was always a wayfarer from as far back as I can remember," Kaz replied. "The shaman knew and was just waiting for me to come forward as he knew I would have to eventually. Maybe I was born with my power awake like those Alagondo twins. That would explain a lot."

"It would explain how your shaman knew you were destined to be a wayfarer of one sort or another," Chanya agreed. "It also explains why you're so powerful. Most of those born to it are potential masters. It was different for me."

"Really?" Kaz asked. "When did you discover you were a wayfarer?"

"When I was a teenager," Chanya told him. "Not very long before you created the path of fire. I was just starting to learn, in fact, when Raff and Emblem came to my village while following you. Em took me into the Wild and gave me my first real lesson. After that I got an invitation from the Guild to study in the Green Lands. I've only been back there a few times since.

"I always thought I would go back there after my indenture," she continued. "but the last time I was there, about two years ago, it turned out Garo had decided to retire."

"Who's Garo?" Kaz asked.

"Garo Sanai," Chanya answered. "By Green Lands reckoning, a cousin of mine. Of course everyone in the village is related, so that's not saying much. He's a journeyman, although for a journeyman he's very good. Anyway, I always thought he was going to stay in the Guild and it would be up to me to be the new shaman."

"A woman shaman?" Kaz asked.

"Until I left my village I did not realize how unusual that was," Chanya told him, "but it is not unusual among the Sanai. There are as many women among us with the wayfaring talent as men. That is still only about one in one hundred, but there you are. Anyway, Garo fell in love with Falanaga. That's a large mountain near our village. It is said that Falanaga is an eternal mountain because it bends the Wild around it."

"Is that true?" Kaz asked.

"That's what Garo is trying to find out. He is studying Falanaga," Chanya explained. "And while doing that he is also learning from the old shaman. Of course, given the nature of our tribe, the shaman is really not much more than the local wayfarer and ours really is starting to get too old to lead people through the Wild. Anyway, Garo's about ten years older than me, so the village won't be likely to need me for a good long time, if ever, and I think I serve my people more by being out in the world, for now at least."

“That could be,” Kaz agreed, quietly thankful.

They waved at the people in the next two Panominy villages and then shortly thereafter reached the Guild path Falcon had told them about. They found the next town late that afternoon.

“We may as well stay the night,” Chanya told Kaz. “The Panominy were excellent hosts but the thought of sleeping on a real bed is just too tempting.”

“We’ve already been held up a few days. Another few hours probably won’t make a lot of difference,” Kaz replied.

“Welcome to Tranquility,” the painted wooden sign greeted the wayfarers as they entered the town’s stability, “a nice place to live.”

“Who are they trying to convince?” Kaz wondered softly.

“It looks like a nice town,” Chanya told him.

“It’s a town,” Kaz noted flatly, “and it’s a mile away yet. Hard to tell how nice it really is.” They rode on. “Sounds like there’s a celebration going on,” he added as they got closer to the center.

“I’d rather have arrived on a quiet night,” Chanya replied.

“Heh,” Kaz chuckled. “Nobody asked us.”

They turned around a corner and saw a large number of people rallying around a tall freedom pole. This was one of the larger ones Kaz had seen, second only to one he had seen years earlier in Cobbland Colony. They had seen many freedom poles since coming to Varana. Nearly every town and city had one or more. Many were just ten to fifteen feet tall, but this one stood much taller and Kaz guessed it must have been a pine tree that had been prepared especially for this use. Like many of the smaller poles this one was festooned with the familiar medals and ribbons, but there was also a curious-looking flag flying from the top of the pole.

The flag had thirteen vertical blue and white stripes and when Kaz pointed it out, Chanya informed him. “It’s called the ‘Stripes of Rebellion’ and it’s the banner of the Brothers of Freedom. I saw it a lot up north last trip, but down here it is mostly only flown during a rally like this one. The Brothers of Freedom are now the leading voice for independence from the Green Lands.”

“And with the invasion of Lonport,” Kaz added, “they have a lot more cause to want independence. But I thought the middle colonies were more moderate.”

“In the cities on the coast, yes,” Chanya replied, “Out here in the back country it’s as much as a tax collector’s skin is worth to show his face. Maybe we should just find the local Guild office.”

“All right,” Kaz agreed and he dismounted, he took off his hat and rested it on the horn of his saddle. Then he handed her his mount’s reins. “I’m fairly certain there ought to be one. Hold the horses and I’ll ask for directions.” Chanya nodded and started dismounting as well. Kaz walked up to the nearest clump of men and asked, “Excuse me, sirs. I just got into town and am looking for the Wayfarer’s Guild office.”

“Wayfarers?” one of them echoed. He looked at his buddies for a moment and then went on, “Yeah, sure we can show you where the wayfarers are. Just you and your girlfriend there?”

“Yeah,” Kaz replied, “no clients to escort this time.”

“I guess you can move faster that way,” the man commented conversationally gesturing toward Chanya to join them. “Come on, we can go through the square. Hey! Out of the way,” he called ahead. “We have wayfarers coming through!”

The crowd turned to see what was happening and instantly surged toward them. The next few minutes were confusing, but Kaz and Chanya were knocked over the heads from behind and found themselves being dragged without their horses and packs to the base of the freedom pole. “So you dare come to Tranquility?” a short man in a powdered wig demanded of them when they got there. The crowd had become unnaturally quiet. “And what business do you have here?”

“None at all,” Kaz shrugged groggily. “We’re just going from one place to another.” Normally he might have actually named his destination. It was rare a wayfarer had to be secretive about that. This time however, Kaz was in no mood to discuss his business, in spite of his groggy state and inability to think clearly.

“And you just happened to come here tonight,” the man commented.

“Something special about tonight?” Kaz asked. “I’ve seen dozens of rallies like this before.”

“I’ll just bet you have, Queen’s Man,” the other man retorted. “More spies,” he announced to the crowd. “Take them and put them with the others.”

The crowd roared happy cheer and a dozen men lifted Kaz and Chanya roughly off their feet and carried them to the edge of the square and into the local court house. Evidently they had already had their trial and they were pushed down into the basement, bumping Kaz’s head against the stairwell several times. There were several barred rooms down there and Kaz felt himself being thrown into one of them with Chanya. The two wayfarers fell to the floor unconscious.

“Welcome back,” a man’s voice told them an unknowable length of time later.

Kaz sat up on the cement floor with some effort. He had a headache and the events that led him here were still unclear. “Not exactly the best inn in town,” he complained. He looked around and saw Chanya, sleeping or unconscious on a bare bunk with neither sheets nor blankets.

“I fear the hospitality of Tranquility doesn’t extend to the likes of us these days,” the man told him wryly.

“Where are we?” Kaz asked. “No, wait. I think It’s coming back to me. This is some sort of jail. Let me see to my friend.”

“Of course,” came the reply.

Kaz started to get to his feet, but with Chanya only three feet away he decided getting to his knees was sufficient. He was aware of a dozen bruises and a terrible headache, but his thoughts were starting to clear although his last really clear memory was getting hit from behind. He remembered talking to a judge, but now thought it might merely have been a man dressed in a powdered wig who acted like a judge. He did not recall whether Chanya had even been as awake as he had been at the time. “Chanya?” he asked softly.

Chanya groaned and opened her eyes, and then she groaned again. “Kaz, what happened?”

“We got suckered,” Kaz told her and outlined what little he remembered. “How are you feeling?”

“Stiff,” she replied. “Sore and cold. Is it safe to sit up?”

“I managed it,” Kaz remarked. He looked around and saw an empty bunk. “Although when they threw us in here, I apparently missed the bed.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized needlessly.

“Oh?” he asked, a trace of his usual humor coming through. “Was that your fault?” He turned back to the man who had spoken to him and noticed there was another man in his cell and two more in the one behind. “Any idea what’s going on here?” Kaz asked.

“It appears wayfarers have become as welcome in Tranquility as witches were a century ago,” the man replied.

“Was this town here a century ago?” Kaz wondered. He doubted it. Also the Varana witch trials had not taken place in New Ebor, but he let that pass.

“Probably not,” the other man replied. “Hector Gomes, at your service, sir.”

“Kazani Basan, at yours,” Kaz replied and a round of introductions ensued. “So what have they got against us?”

“We are accused of spying for Queen Julia,” Hector replied.

“That’s ridiculous!” Kaz exclaimed.

“True,” Hector agreed. “The Guild is ever neutral. And even if I were disposed toward spying, it would have been in the name of the Cracian Crown, not that of the Green Lands.”

“The Brothers of Freedom have no gripe with Crace,” one of the others commented. “In fact I’ve heard a rumor that there has been Cracian support of their proposed revolution.”

“That’s conceivable,” Kaz nodded. “Anything that weakens the Green Lands would be to the benefit of Cracian interests. It’s possible Crace even intends to steal Varana in the same way the Green Lands took Meldan. But then why wouldn’t this bunch allow you to go?”

“They suspect anyone of the Guild regardless of their origins,” Hector explained.

“Given my skin color, I might have been accused of being an escaped slave,” Kaz remarked. “At least they aren’t biased on that account.”

“I doubt this lot cares one way or the other on the slavery issue,” Hector told him, “but they have been making some nasty hints as to how they intend to execute us.”

“Execute?” Chanya asked.

“Spies are generally hanged in these parts, I understand,” Hector replied.

“Delightful,” Chanya replied flatly. “Kaz, sit down. That pacing is starting to bother me.”

“Hmm?” Kaz asked. The cell was barely long enough to take three full paces across its length, but after assuring himself that Chanya was well he had started pacing the length regardless. “Oh, sorry. Wasn’t aware I was doing that. Why do they think we’re spying on them?”

“Because we were,” Hector replied.

“What?” Kaz asked sharply.

“Not us, of course,” Hector explained. “But evidently the local Guild agent was. He’s not a wayfarer himself, just one of those local postmasters we use in towns like this one. He had royalist leanings.”

“Where is he now?” Kaz asked.

“Well, that’s just it,” Hector shrugged. “As far as we can tell, he got out of town with the last wayfarer party allowed to leave.”

“I see,” Kaz nodded. “So our agent got caught meddling where he ought not and we’re paying the price. Is that about the size of it? Well we don’t generally hold the local agents to the same standard as ourselves. It’s just that they are usually in agreement with their neighbors, more or less.”

“Much less this time,” Chanya remarked. “So how long have we been in here?”

“About two hours is my guess,” Hector informed her. “You were brought here just after dark and the Moon has not yet set. Time doesn’t really have much meaning in here and I got the impression they intend to do something with us in the morning, so rushing the night away is not high among my priorities.”

“They plan to hang us?” Chanya asked.

“Probably,” Hector agreed.

“You will pardon me, gentlemen,” Kaz replied, “if I suggest we do not stay here long enough to find out?”

“If we could have escaped, we already would have, sir,” Hector told Kaz. “We are inside a stability after all.”

Kaz turned toward the iron bars and started to concentrate, then changed his mind. “Chanya, why don’t you pick the locks? If I do it, I’m like to just tear the doors off their hinges.”

“Feeling a bit testy tonight, are we?” Chanya asked lightly.

“Headaches do that to me,” Kaz retorted.

“You’re masters?” Hector asked.

“Afraid so,” Kaz replied, hearing the lock of the cell door click. He opened the door and then helped Chanya to her feet. “Get the others, I’ll scout ahead.”

Kaz made his way up the stairs, freezing every time the wooden stairs creaked under his weight. He need not have been so cautious as the townsfolk had not bothered to post guards. The building was otherwise empty, but, "That damned rally is still going on out front," he told the others after they joined him. "You would think that after a few hours they would get tired of chanting 'Freedom!' but evidently that's high entertainment in this town. Anyone know if this place has a back way out?"

No one knew for certain, but it turned out there was a door on the side of the building that opened up into an alleyway. Kaz poked his head out and to his right saw the rally to the right, but to the left the way was clear to the next street. "We're going to have to take a chance," he reported, "but it doesn't look like anyone is watching the building. Let's go two at a time through the door, turn left and walk quietly away from the square. Chanya, you go first with Hector, just in case. I'll go last. We'll meet up on the next street."

Kaz pushed the door open in the hope that it would mask their movement from a casual viewer from the square, but with the hinges on the door's left, they still had to risk exposure as they stepped out and then around the back of it. The precaution may not have been necessary because they managed to leave the courthouse unobserved. Kaz decided the open door might be spotted as well, so he sent a light force thrust at it, which caused it to close. He felt his heart skip a beat when he realized he had "pushed" it too hard to close silently, but if anyone heard it over the noise of the rally, he had no indication of it.

"We're going to need our horses and packs," Chanya told him once they were several blocks away and able to stop moving for a few moments.

"They are probably being kept in the town stable," Hector informed them. "That's back in the square, of course. It might be best to just steal some other horses."

"I would rather not," Kaz admitted. "I doubt anything we do will lower the opinion the locals have of us, but if we can even just get our packs back I'll be happy. Chanya and I are headed for New Farrington and we'll need our Guild identification at the least or risk being arrested as runaway slaves in every town we try to enter."

"When is the Guild going to crack down on that?" one of the other journeymen asked.

"We all know Guild policy has been against slavery for over two centuries now," Kaz replied, "and so far we've managed to eradicate it from over three quarters of the countries we operate in. The Varanans, especially the southern ones, are particularly stubborn on that subject. I know the Congress of Wayfarers has been discussing the subject lately but they have not yet come to a decision on how to proceed next. Even if they had, it doesn't change the fact that Chanya and I have a suspicious skin color in the eyes of the Southern Varanans and I would rather not have to fight my way down into New Farrington. That rally is going to have to break up some time. Let's head back that way and see if the stable has a back door."

The stable only had the front door, but that did not stop Kaz from dissolving a large hole in the back wall of the building. Inside they found all the wayfarers horses, but only Kaz's and Chanya's packs were in sight, having been left on their horses.

"What about your packs?" Kaz asked Hector and the others.

"Forget them," Hector decided. "You need your papers, but no one is likely to challenge us. And we can get replacements for everything at the next Guild office. Let's just get going."

“You can’t make that hole large enough to let the horses out,” a journeyman remarked, looking at the back wall, “not without causing half the building to come down on us.”

“I got lucky as it is,” Kaz agreed. “It sounds like the rally is starting to break up, though. About time! Let’s wait.”

They waited another half an hour, but, when Kaz went to check, two guards had been left outside the stable door. He quickly knocked them out with a bit of Wild energy and he and Hector moved them out of the way while the others led the horses out on to the street.

“Okay, let’s try to just ride quietly out of town,” Chanya suggested to the others as they mounted up. “We may be able to get to the edge of the stability without raising an alarm.”

As they started to ride, however, a musket boomed from behind them and Kaz heard the ball whiz by his left ear. “So much for a quiet retreat,” he muttered as they all urged their horses to a gallop. Kaz’s and Hector’s horses panicked at the sound of musket fire, but they got them under control and were soon following the others.

There were shouts behind them and two more shots rang out, one of which Kaz identified as the sharp crack of rifle fire. And then the church bell began to ring. “Sounds like they were expecting something.”

“The locals are worried about raids from the Nasano,” Hector shouted back. “I’m sure they already had a watch system established.”

“I don’t think the Panominy have been raiding since the last war,” Kaz replied, but Hector offered no other explanation. Kaz was certain he could stop a bullet inside a stability, but felt no urge to stick around and try. As they reached the edge of the town, however, Kaz remembered there was still a fair distance before the edge of the stability.

With the rally in town over, the Brothers of Freedom had established mounted patrols and between gunshots and shouts, Kaz realized that two or three such patrols were bearing down on them. He summoned the Wild energy to him and managed to confuse the patrol directly in front of them. But in their confusion half a dozen muskets and rifles were fired randomly.

“That isn’t good,” Chanya grumbled and used her own power to knock the men and horses out. She didn’t like the thought that some of them might have been injured in the resulting falls, but she did not have the time to carefully pick her targets and could only do a lightly powered force-thrust in their general direction.

The action, however, slowed the wayfarers down and two more patrols were bearing down on them at full speed. As they approached the edge of the stability, however, Kaz and Chanya gained easier control of the Wild energy around them. Kaz held off one patrol with a series of illusory explosions and Chanya put another patrol to sleep. But just before they reached the edge of the stability of Tranquility a quartet of riflemen stepped from inside a copse of trees and fired at them.

Kaz, seeing the men lift their long guns to their shoulders in the dark, barely had time to react and threw up a wall of Wild energy to intercept the bullets. Four projectiles hit the wall and, to his surprise, kept going, although at a slower speed. He was certain all four shots missed only because of that change in velocity and as they finally reached the Wild another volley rang out, but this time his protective shield

was much stronger and the bullets froze on impact.

Four

They kept riding at full speed another few minutes until they were certain they were far enough into the Wild their pursuers could not follow and then finally slowed to a halt. “Well, that was not fun,” Kaz remarked to no one in particular.

“We can go back and try again,” Chanya suggested.

“Okay,” Kaz replied, turning his horse around just to get her reaction.

Chanya turned her horse as well and echoed, “Okay. Let’s go.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Kaz asked.

“Am I bluffing?” She asked him without betraying her inner thoughts.

“I think I would rather not find out,” Kaz admitted after a moment. “Besides we have better places to be.”

“You masters are crazy,” Hector told them sincerely.

“The power can go to your head,” Kaz admitted easily, “but every so often you have an experience like this last one that shows you that the power does not make you invulnerable. I’m still stiff and sore, I think someone must have worked me over fairly well before dumping me in that cell and while I was certain I could stop a bullet inside a stability, it turns out the best I can do is slow one down a bit. You don’t really want to know how close we came to getting killed back there.”

“I have a fair idea of how close it was,” Hector replied, “unless that hole in your hat was there before we started.”

Kaz removed his hat and examined it. It had still been on the horn of his horse’s saddle when they got to the stable and he had donned it without thinking. It was a standard tricorn hat of a sort that was currently fashionable in the entire western world. It was not as fancy as some of those in Crace, nor as plain as those in the northern colonies, but it was a good serviceable piece of headgear. Sure enough, in the middle of the front corner, there was a large hole where something had gone through the felt.

"I'm surprised it didn't just knock my hat off," Kaz replied, staring at the hole and trying to figure out what odd angle his head had been at when it happened. Then he decided it didn't really matter so long as it was the hat that had a hole in it and not his head. He caught Hector staring at him. "What?" Kaz asked.

"Nothing, sir," Hector replied. "I suppose we'll ride all night?"

"We don't have a lot of choice," Kaz admitted. "Unless... how far down the path is the next town?"

"About twelve miles," Hector replied, "but the Guild is under suspicion in all the towns around here. These back country folk think we're all spying for the queen. Tranquility is just the town that tried arresting us first, but if we show up in the middle of the night..." he let the thought hang.

"If it were in the middle of the storm it would be one thing," Kaz agreed, "so how far to the next real Guildhall?"

"About twelve hours," Hector informed him. "Julianna, in Farring."

"All night it is then," Kaz decided. "We'll probably have to go around the towns between here and there. That will slow us down too. Can't be helped though. Tranquility probably has a local or two who can find the next village without us."

"All the towns around here do," Hector replied.

"Not just here," Kaz replied. "There are always a few apprentice-class local wayfarers. Normally, I wouldn't care, but word is going to spread about what happened one or two towns at a time. The Guild will interdict Tranquility for what happened and probably any other town that attempts to arrest or harm Guild members. We take that sort of thing rather seriously, but it isn't going to endear us to the people of those towns."

"I don't see that they love us all that much now," Hector pointed out.

"We normally get along just fine with the locals, though," Kaz pointed out. "Aside from the former agent in Tranquility, has any Guild member given them cause to believe we have taken sides with the Grundish crown?"

"I still feel some loyalty to Crace," Hector admitted. "I do not think it is completely impossible to lose that. Most of the wayfarers in Varana are Green Landsmen. Even if they attempt to put the Guild first as I do, I'm sure some still love their queen."

"And that agent was just an employee," Kaz noted. "His primary duties were bookkeeping and dispatching. I doubt he was ever trained in or even had any talent at wayfaring. No doubt he is a royalist and would have been in trouble with his neighbors in any case. It just happens he brought us down with him. I imagine we'll find him eventually too. As an employee we don't expect him to be politically neutral, but we do expect him not to abandon his post and by extension, traveling wayfarers."

Chanya changed one basic plan, however. "There is no reason to avoid going through this town," she insisted as they stood outside the next stability. "For one thing it is over three hours until dawn, I doubt anyone is awake. This is not Tranquility and we do not know they are looking to arrest wayfarers. Even if they are, no one would be expecting us to enter town now."

Kaz had to admit she was right and they passed through that town and the next without incident. Businesses were just starting to open as they entered the third town where the townsfolk behaved in the manner Kaz had come to expect and after smiling and waving at the children he decided they might as well stop for breakfast. After the meal they stopped in the local Guild office and warned the agent about what had happened in Tranquility.

“No such problems here,” the agent assured Kaz. “Oh, we have freedom poles all long the main streets. You must have seen them. But no one is accusing the Guild of spying for the queen. I could use a couple wayfarers to escort waiting travelers. Not to Tranquility, of course, but we’re at the junction of four paths. Lots of traffic and never enough men to keep it moving.”

“Chanya and I cannot,” Kaz replied. “We’re under orders to proceed with all due haste to New Farrington.” But Hector and his companions were willing to work, so Kaz and Chanya bid them farewell, picked a fresh pair of horses and continued on toward Julianna.

Their reception in Julianna left Kaz uneasy. None of the children ran up to see him and Chanya and the adults affected not to see them at all, although it was obvious every eye in town was watching them as they rode down the street. “We’re in Southern Varana now,” Chanya reminded Kaz. “I told you about this. Don’t be surprised if we are asked for our travel papers.”

“Our what?” Kaz asked.

“When a slave is sent out on an errand off the land of his master he or she has to carry a document stating who the owner is, where he or she lives, the name of the slave and so forth,” Chanya explained.

“We’re not slaves,” Kaz pointed out.

“No kidding,” Chanya retorted flatly, “but to these people we look like slaves. There has even been talk in New Farrington of expelling anyone with dark skin who is not a slave. The Guild will interdict the entire colony for that, of course, but the colonial legislature has tried to pass that bill twice.”

“The legislature of Farring was disbanded by the royal governor,” Kaz reminded her. “I think that bill has been tabled for the time being.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Chanya told him. “You need to know this is going to happen. It’s a good thing Julianna has a real Guildhall. I doubt the local inn would allow us to patronize it.”

“That’s barbaric,” Kaz complained.

“That’s Southern Varana,” Chanya shrugged. “There are fewer freedom poles here as well.”

“After Tranquility,” Kaz remarked, “I find I can live without freedom poles.”

“There are fewer here who desire to secede from the Green Lands,” Chanya explained. “You know that already. It was in the packet.” They had been debating the meaning of their assignment off and on since leaving Mannburgh.

“That’s not the way I read it,” Kaz told her. “Southern Varana is as angered with Parliament and its taxes as the northern colonies are. They have different notions as to how to deal with that, is all. Anyway, what’s in that packet has nothing to do with how loyal the south of Varana is or is not. They are debating secession from the rest of Varana. It is the rest of the Colonial Congress who wants us to bring them

back to New Ebor.”

“But if they secede from Northern Varana,” Chanya pointed out, “I doubt they’ll also secede from the Green Lands.”

“If they split off from the north, neither side will secede from the Green Lands,” Kaz opined. “Neither is strong enough to try it on their own”

“Then we would be doing Queen Julia a favor to allow them to separate,” Chanya concluded.

“We don’t take sides, remember?” Kaz remarked.

“True, except this time we are taking the side of the north,” Chanya retorted.

“We have been hired to present the northern colonies’ viewpoint,” Kaz explained. “It is our job to present it as effectively as we can on behalf of our clients.”

“You’re right,” Chanya nodded, “but doesn’t it seem odd?”

“Doesn’t what seem odd?” Kaz asked.

“We’ve been specifically chosen to come to New Farrington to speak for the colonies of northern Varana,” Chanya pointed out. “Why us? Who would send two dark-skinned wayfarers here to negotiate with a group of light-skinned slave owners?”

“Last time we discussed it, that was my question,” Kaz replied. He noticed that he and Chanya had a habit of revisiting old conversations, each time taking the opposite side of the question. He decided he liked that. It meant they were both listening to each other. “John Baker specifically asked for us.”

“Why would he ask for me?” Chanya wondered. “We’ve never even spoken.”

“Well, he asked for me,” Kaz corrected himself, “I was too flattered, I guess to wonder why. If what you say is right, sending us is a deliberate slap in the face of the southern delegates. What does Baker accomplish with that? If he wanted the southern colonies to secede from Varana, he already had that. Well, we’ll just have to continue on down to New Farrington and play this out. We’re obviously missing something here.”

“Well, here’s the local Guildhall,” Chanya told him. “Let’s find out what’s been happening in the world.”

“I’m more interested in finding out what a real bed feels like,” Kaz told her. “But the local master needs to know what’s going on behind us too.”

“What happened in Tranquility is most disturbing,” Master Morris Wense told them a short time later. “You’re absolutely right, we’re going to have to interdict them for the time being, but that’s not my call. I’ll pass it on to the hall in New Farrington and they can relay it to New Ebor. Masters will have to be sent to investigate and if the situation cannot be calmed down we may even be forced to reforge the paths to go around Tranquility, effectively isolating them.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Kaz remarked. “The threat of interdiction is best kept as a threat rather than an actuality. Also we don’t know all the circumstances involved yet. It looks like our agent

there may really have been spying on the local Brothers of Freedom and passing information back to the Royal Governor. If that's the case, he's the one we need to deal with harshly. I'd recommend at least trying to restore our reputation in Tranquility before resorting to an interdiction."

"You've thought this out I see," Wense observed.

"I've had time overnight to sort it out," Kaz admitted. "At first I was all for lashing out at those people. I can't say they treated me well, but they had their reasons. They deserve an apology for the agent who misbehaved. After that, well, it depends on them."

"All right," I'll put that in the report as well," Wense replied. "Are you going to be in Julianna long?"

"Just long enough to get some sleep and a meal," Kaz replied. "We'll be gone in the morning."

"I'll have my report done by then," Wense decided, "and add it to your packet, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Kaz told him. "I'm going to need to report on that as well."

"We can make it a joint report," Wense suggested. "I'll write what you just told me and you can read it before putting your name to it."

"All right," Kaz agreed. "I think I'm already going to be busy enough once we reach New Farrington."

"No offense intended," Wense cut in with an embarrassed cough, "but are you sure you're the right wayfarer to be talking to the delegates there?"

"Because I'm so young?" Kaz asked, deliberately misinterpreting. Before Wense could explain though, he went on. "I know what you mean. Save for the fact that we are dressed much better, Chanya and I look like the local slaves, don't we?"

"The fact that you are riding horses marks you as very different as well," Wense remarked.

"And my clothing is also quite unlikely," Chanya added. "Only a female wayfarer would wear a bifurcated skirt." Chanya's travel clothing was, indeed unique. When standing she looked like she was wearing a normal long skirt, but it was divided into two sections, one for each leg, to allow her to ride a horse athwart as a man would. She only had the one with her on this trip and had only worn it during the ride from Mannburgh. While on the wagon she had worn more conventional clothing, which was easier to come by should she be forced to replace something that had worn out. When she sat, legs crossed, it was readily apparent, her skirt was of wayfarer style.

"That too," Wense agreed, "But since slaves are not allowed to ride a horse, merely being mounted will get unwelcome attention in some of the towns. Be prepared to show your Guild identification."

"I'll show them the backs of their own heads if they get obnoxious about it," Kaz growled.

"Kaz, that will only make trouble," Chanya warned him.

"We're not stopping between here and New Farrington," Kaz replied, "except to change horses. We've already been delayed too many times on this trip."

“Showing our identification does not really take all that long,” Chanya insisted.

“And there have been attempts by slaves to impersonate wayfarers,” Wense informed them.

“Really?” Kaz asked.

“Well, think about it,” Wense told him. “Approximately one in every hundred people has at least some of the talent. There are roughly half a million slaves in Varana, most of them in the southern colonies. By the law of averages, that means that there are five thousand slaves with at least some smidgen of wayfaring talent. It doesn’t take much to follow a path to the next town, does it and there are a few well-talented ones who help others escape.”

“There are?”

“With a bit of help from the Guild,” Wense confirmed. “We have to be very quiet about it, but you know the Guild policy on slavery.”

“Right,” Kaz nodded. “So what else has been going on since we left New Ebor?”

“War has broken out in Bournset Bay Colony,” Wense informed them. “Her Majesty’s army, colloquially called the Greencoats, after locking down the city of Lonport, sent a contingent inland in an attempt to arrest some of the more notorious Brothers of Freedom, thought to be hiding in the town of Covenant. Whether the men the Greencoats were looking for were there is unclear, but according to a dispatch that arrived this morning, they found themselves in a stand-off with the local militia. No one knows who fired first and there were dozens of deaths on both sides, but eventually the Greencoats were forced to retreat and the rebels of Bournset harried them all the way back to Lonport.”

“Interesting,” Kaz murmured. “But is one battle a war?”

“It is according to the General holding Lonport,” Wense replied. “He is promising reprisals and swears to bring the rebellious colony back under control of the Crown. A renewed call to all the colonies to send representatives to New Ebor for the Colonial Congress has been issued, and that, I think, is where you will come in.”

“We’re already charged with trying to convince the southern delegates to return to their Congress,” Kaz agreed. “I think we can assume my orders have been intensified.”

New Farrington

One

Kaz and Chanya entered New Farrington to find an almost festive mood sweeping the city on that warm spring afternoon. Farring Colony enjoyed a considerably warmer climate than New Ebor and it was unlikely to snow here now or until the following winter. Dozens of hastily erected freedom poles lined the road in from the edge of the stability, a few of which were topped by the new Stripes of Rebellion flag.

“That’s a change, isn’t it?” Kaz asked Chanya.

“It is since I was here last,” she admitted, “although that was over a year ago when I escorted colonists here. I guess the dissolution of the legislature made a lot of changes.”

“Or it was dissolved because of these changes,” Kaz commented. “There’s a lot of bunting up on the buildings as well.”

“Also in the Stripes of Rebellion, I see,” Chanya added.

“Hold up there, you two,” a constable called to them. “I want to see your papers.”

“I’m sure you do,” Kaz told him calmly. “Guildsmen do not carry the sort of paper you want to see. We’re wayfarers on Guild business.”

“You can prove that?” the constable challenged him.

“Try moving,” Kaz shot back. The man tried, but Kaz had already wrapped a sheath of Wild energy around him and was holding him still. “If you ever encounter a slave who can do that, challenging him is likely to be the last thing you’ll ever do.” Kaz held the man in place until the horses had moved on. When he finally released the constable, Kaz said to Chanya, “See? That was fast and easy and no harm was done.”

Released, the constable pulled out a whistle from inside his coat and blew a shrill blast on it. “Not all that easy,” Chanya sighed as a handful of other constables came running at the sound of the whistle, “and I think you wounded his pride.”

“He’ll get over it,” Kaz remarked. He summoned the Wild to him again, only this time he erected an invisible circular protection around himself, including Chanya and the horses. He dismounted and walked toward the policemen as they attempted to push their way through the invisible wall. “Is there a problem, gentlemen?” he asked. “I warn you, sir. You are obstructing Guild business.” This time he did pull a

document out of his coat's inner pocket and held it up for them to see.

A document with the official Guild of Wayfarers seal on it was something to be seen. The relic of an heraldic past, the seal was a fully realized emblazon of the badge of the Wayfarers Guild as it had been registered in those nations where a College of Heraldry existed. However, it was no mere example of an illuminator's art. The Guild's seal was impressed with a tiny bit of Wild energy that caused it to glow of its own light. Even in a completely dark room, that seal would be clearly visible.

"How do we know you have that legitimately?" the original constable demanded.

Kaz stared at him disbelievingly. "Are you really that dense?" he asked, forgetting his normally polite demeanor. "The document could be stolen, that is true, but only a fully trained master wayfarer can do what I have inside a stability."

"For that matter," Chanya added, still sitting on her horse, "if you're prepared to doubt the legitimacy of a document, why were you demanding to see it in the first place? Now stand aside and allow us to proceed to the Guildhall. If you still have any doubts as to our identities you may deal with the local hall master."

"I thought you didn't want to make trouble," Kaz asked Chanya softly a minute later when they were allowed to continue on. Two of the policemen followed close behind.

"You already made trouble," Chanya told him. "I would have just shown the man my identification document and moved on."

"I've never had to do that anywhere else in the world," Kaz replied.

"This is not anywhere else in the world, dear," Chanya reminded him.

"Evidently not," Kaz grumbled.

Master Charles Keith, the New Farrington Guildhall master was in the lobby of his Guildhall when Kaz and Chanya entered with the two constables in tow. "It's about time you two got here," he told them sternly.

"Do you know these two, sir?" a constable asked Keith.

"I know this one," Keith replied sharply. "Master Chanya Sanai has been here several times in the past. I can only imagine the gentleman is Master Kazani Basan, the new young diplomatic genius from Taundon." He did not say that last as though it were a compliment.

"But they are wayfarers, sir?" the constable persisted.

"Yes, they are wayfarers," Keith told him irritably. "Very highly-placed wayfarers, for that matter. Is there a problem, sir?"

"Apparently not, sir," the constable admitted. Kaz looked at him as though expecting an apology, but was not disappointed when the two men, simply turned on their heels and left the Guildhall without another word.

"Been playing, have we?" Keith asked acidly.

“They wanted to see my papers,” Kaz remarked off-handedly.

“Why didn’t you just flash your Guild documents?” Keith demanded.

“I did,” Kaz replied, intentionally editing out the initial encounter. “I suppose they thought I had stolen them.”

“That could have happened,” Keith admitted. Then he underwent an abrupt turn about. “Look. We’ve all be under considerable pressure here this past week and I really did expect you here days ago.”

“We expected to be here then too, but several things came up,” Kaz explained. “You know how that can go.”

“It couldn’t have done so at a worse time,” Keith told him, “but you two have been traveling hard and fast and it is too late in the day to do anything about your mission today. Go get settled, I’ll order baths drawn for you. You’ll want to be cleaned and perfumed for your meetings tomorrow.”

“Perfumed?” Kaz complained. “Where are we? Crace?”

“There is a lot of Cracian sympathy in Farring,” Keith replied. “The aristocrats prefer to adopt the Cracian fashions over those from the Green Lands.”

“I’ll bathe,” Kaz told him. “I want to bathe. I suspect my horse smells better than I do at the moment, but I am not wearing perfume in some vain attempt to fit in with polite society.”

“You’ll dress the part,” Chanya told him firmly, “and that will include wearing a powered wig in any formal setting.”

“Raff never did,” Kaz pointed out stubbornly.

“You are not Raff Cawlens,” Chanya argued. “Close, I’ll admit, but I think even he would have down here.”

“It is unclear whether you will be invited to any formal occasions in any case,” Keith remarked, “but it would be best to be prepared. Go relax, I’ll order dinner for us in, say, two hours and we’ll make an evening of it. I have some apprentices and journeymen who will serve as your staff here and you can meet them then.”

“I’m not sure how much of a staff we’ll be needing,” Kaz remarked. “I never used the ones assigned to me in New Ebor.”

“This isn’t New Ebor, Kazani,” Keith explained patiently. “Here you’ll be expected to be surrounded by an entourage. Anything less and you will not be taken seriously.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Kaz decided. “I don’t want so many people around me I trip over them.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll choose your assistants personally,” Keith promised. “Uh, you really do need those baths, however.”

"I said as much myself," Kaz reminded him with a grin.

To Kaz's surprise the bathroom in that Guildhall was a communal affair, with just a few removable screens between each tub. "How very continental," he remarked as he and Chanya stepped into the room.

"Another Crace-inspired fashion," Chanya explained. "Considering how Raff and Emblem share their baths, I did not think you would be shocked."

"Considering how in my village we all bathed in the same river without worrying about who was looking," Kaz shot back, "it would take more than this to shock me. But I still would not have expected it in the Guildhall."

"There are only a handful of women who come here each year," Chanya pointed out and she placed a set of clean clothes on a bench near one of the filled and steaming tubs. "And I think it was exquisitely courteous of the apprentices to give us some privacy."

"I thought they merely rushed off to another part of the hall on whatever their duties are," Kaz remarked.

"No, sir," a woman's voice spoke from the next room. "We are here if you need anything."

"I doubt that will be necessary," Kaz replied.

"Madeline, is that you?" Chanya called.

"Yes, Master Sanai," Madeline replied. "I have been assigned to you again."

"Madeline," Chanya spoke sternly. "What have I told you about calling me Master Sanai?"

"Not to," Madeline laughed and added, "of course. Toby and I will be in here if you need us."

"Enjoy yourselves," Chanya laughed adding in a whisper to Kaz. "They've been seeing each other for a long time now. I think we should allow them this moment of leisure, hmm?"

"Why not?" Kaz shrugged as he finally put his own change of clothing down.

"Hmm, one change, I think" Chanya commented. Then she pulled the screen between their tubs a few inches to one side. "There. I like seeing the person I'm talking to, don't you?"

"We've seen more of each other than that," Kaz laughed. There was a giggle from the next room.

"Hush," Chanya laughed back. "Not in front of the apprentices." From his side of the privacy screen Kaz heard her enter the bath and wondered how she had managed to get undressed so quickly. He shucked off his own clothes and slipped into the relaxing hot water as well.

Over dinner they met the rest of their staff. Not as bad as Kaz had feared, aside from the apprentices Madeline and Toby, there was only one journeyman there to help as well. Kaz was still not certain why he needed so many assistants, however.

"Only four," Master Keith told him, "and they don't have to follow you around everywhere."

“Four assistants?” Kaz asked, counting only three.

“This is your assignment, Kaz,” Chanya told him. “Those men are not likely to see me as an equal under any situation. So I’m just assisting.”

“The hell you are!” Kaz told her. “We’re partners.”

“That’s sweet, Kaz,” she smiled at him, “but someone has to be in charge of a mission like this.”

“Fine,” Kaz shrugged. “You do it. You’re senior to me.”

“Yes, and in the Guild we can be equals,” Chanya nodded. “I might even be a hall master someday.”

“Or the Guildmaster,” Kaz added.

“It’s possible, but not very likely,” Chanya laughed. “I’m not even sure I would want the job. Gender makes no difference in the Guild, probably because there aren’t many women in it, but in the rest of the world it’s very obvious men are in charge and most of them have very clear notions of a woman’s place. Whether you like it or not, the person who talks to them has to be a man and he has to be a master.”

“What about you, Charles,” Kaz asked. “You’re older than me. I’m sure these gentlemen will see me as barely more than a child.”

“They know me far too well, unfortunately,” Master Keith told him. “I’m the one they all come to when they need a wayfarer. I have to see things their way. For someone to walk in and change their minds it’s going to have to be a stranger. Besides, in less than a week, I have to be on a ship bound for Pacidelphia. I’ve been asked to help the new hall master there for a couple of weeks. We cannot be certain to conclude the mission before I have to leave and it would be best not to change the head negotiator midway. But don’t worry, you know some of them already. They were the Varanan delegates to the fishing rights talks you mediated in New Ebor.”

“Mister Aimes did all of the talking,” Kaz recalled, “and I’m not sure you can call what I did mediating. I left before the talks were concluded.”

“I spoke to Aimes a few days ago,” Keith told him. “He told me you were very clever to leave when you did. It forced them to work out their problems for themselves.”

“And yet they could have done that in the month or more they waited for me to arrive in the first place,” Kaz commented.

“Maybe,” Keith nodded, “but they felt you had pointed them in the right direction and then left them to find the solutions by themselves.”

“I did?” Kaz laughed. “Funny. The way I remember it is that I was at my wits’ end and needed some time to cool down. It was John Baker who actually suggested I take a bit of time off.”

“And it was that same John Baker who asked for you here,” Keith told him. “Don’t sell yourself short, Kaz. You’ve done a fine job so far and, since Aimes is already well-disposed toward you, it

should be a simple matter.”

“A simple matter?” Kaz laughed harshly. “To do what? Bring Varana back together so all the colonies can join Bournset Bay in rebellion or keep them apart. Either way I can’t see this ending well. For one thing, I already know I can count on them to bring up the matter of slavery again.”

“That was the main reason they walked out of the Congress in New Ebor,” Keith informed him.

“Not what I wanted to hear,” Kaz shook his head. “Even if I were not from a tribe that was sold into slavery, the Guild policy is firmly against the concept. Oh well. As long as I’m not expected to tell them I think keeping slaves is a great idea. I assume I can meet with them on the morrow?”

“Oh no,” Keith shook his head. “Not until after the holiday.”

“What holiday?” Kaz and Chanya asked as one.

“Founders Day,” Keith explained. “It’s a three-day festival in all of Farring. You saw the bunting on the way in, didn’t you?”

“We noticed it was all in the Stripes of Rebellion colors,” Chanya recalled.

“That’s new this year,” Keith remarked. “Farring was the first successful colony of the Green Lands on the Western Continent and the people of Farring take it very seriously.”

“So no chance of getting our members of the Congress together for a chat tomorrow?” Kaz asked.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Keith warned him. “I told you they take this holiday seriously.”

“Not all of them are from Farring,” Kaz pointed out.

“They will all respect the customs of their hosts. I imagine they would not appreciate being pulled away from the parties,” Keith replied. “I’m going to have to attend two of those as well.”

“Why can’t Masters Basan and Sanai attend those same parties?” the journeyman, a Meninan man named Tomasi d’Angelo, asked.

“You’re new here, Tomasi,” Keith replied. “I can’t expect you to understand how offended the Farringians would be.”

“That is true,” Tomasi admitted. “I do not understand.”

“It has to do with the color of our skins,” Chanya told him. “As far as the majority of Southern Varanans are concerned, if your skin is dark you ought to be a slave. They have so-called scientists who have purported to have proved that a light skin is the universal indicator of intelligence and so, since the founding of these colonies they have bought, stolen or captured other people and forced them to work for nothing more than room and board.

“Most of the slaves here are the descendants of those taken from the Southern Continent,” Chanya continued, “Although I understand there are also a fair number of indigenes, those called Nasano, who are slaves as well, and there are a few who themselves were born on the Southern Continent in spite of the fact that there are laws prohibiting the import of new slaves.”

“There are also a few freedmen who keep slaves,” Madeline offered.

“Very few,” Chanya replied, “and that does not make the practice any more excusable.”

“The Northern Varanans agree with you,” Keith commented.

“Some of them,” Chanya countered. “From Charlesia on northward, slavery has been deemed illegal, although I think indentured servitude is still allowed in Cobbland.”

“Allowed, but no longer practiced,” Keith told her.

Chanya shrugged at that and continued, “But there are slaves in New Ebor, New Rossey and Gontare. Not many I’ll admit, but slavery is still legal there. All this in spite of continued pressure from the Green Lands Parliament to ban the practice altogether.”

“What Chanya is trying to say,” Kaz cut in, “is that we look too much like the slaves these Farringtonians keep to be accepted in polite society. It is also why I don’t think it’s all that great an idea that I be the person assigned with presenting Mister Baker’s proposal.”

“Whether or not that is true,” Keith told him with finality, “it is the job that has been assigned to you. You are not a freelancer to be able to pick and choose what jobs you will accept. The Guild assigns us and we must all obey.”

Two

With a three-day holiday in front of them, Kaz and Chanya decided they had time to get to know their team. Chanya already knew the two apprentices. Madeline had been assigned to assist her on her previous visit to New Farrington. She was a bright young lady; short with dark brown hair, eyes of emerald and an easy smile. Chanya knew she would be at least a journeyman one day and possibly a master, but promotions in the colonial offices came more slowly than in Taundon and Madeline preferred to stay in Varana.

Madeline’s boyfriend, Toby, was tall and fair-haired. Chanya knew him mostly from confidences Madeline had shared, but he seemed eager to assist Kaz in anyway Kaz might desire. Kaz found the

attention bothersome even when Chanya laughed and pointed out, "It's no different than the way you behaved with Raff."

"I don't recall being constantly under foot," Kaz replied.

"You wouldn't," Chanya chuckled. "Just let him help you from time to time."

Tomasi was the most experienced of the lot. He was five years older than Chanya and had served in six offices since joining the Guild. While he might never be a master by talent, he had an organized mind and might well be promoted to master of a hall somewhere. It was he who had assembled dossiers on each of the Congressional delegates for Kaz. Kaz and Chanya spent the next two days with Tomasi learning as much about the men Kaz would have to deal with as possible.

"I wish I had a briefing like this before the talks in New Ebor," Kaz remarked. "This work you did is much better than what I got from Central Guildhall. Maybe you ought to be working there."

"I actually like working in halls like this one," Tomasi admitted. "Taundon is a large city, like Meni, and I am a farmer's son. I do not like the big cities so much. Here I can easily walk to the edge of the stability and see the Wild. Ah, the Wild," he sighed. "It was my playground growing up. I did all those things we tell young wayfarers not to do

"I walked out into the Wild and stayed there for hours," Tomasi reminisced. "Sometimes I would walk a few miles away and then come back. Sometimes I would just sit and look at the bubble of my town's stability."

"I did that as a child too," Kaz recalled.

Tomasi nodded and went on, "There was a Wild stream not too far outside my town, a few miles is all. I went fishing there sometimes with a Kenlientan lad my age."

"You knew a Kenlien?" Kaz asked.

"Oh yes," Tomasi replied. "He was as fascinated with stability as I was with the Wild. We were good friends; still are really. We write to each other from time to time. He is in training to become an elder now."

"Nice," Kaz nodded. I didn't meet the Kenlienta until after Raff and Emblem adopted me. But there is a young elder in training in a town called Therin Kal with whom I still correspond, although we only met the one time. I keep hoping to be able to stop in and say, 'Hello,' but I have been mostly assigned to the Central Guildhall, in spite of my desire for more fieldwork. Well, after this mission, I may be happy to stay in Taundon for a while."

Tomasi laughed and they went back to work. The three days were not all work, however. Chanya managed to entice Kaz away the second afternoon to the city green where they enjoyed a concert and a picnic lunch. And then on the third evening, there was a public feast followed by a fireworks display.

"I love fireworks," Madeline told them as they sat on the grass and stared upward into the darkening sky. "I could watch them every night."

"I get just as much satisfaction from looking at the stars and fireflies," Toby remarked.

"Those are nice too," Madeline nodded. "But this is so much more exciting."

"The old Duke used to sponsor a display like this every summer when I was a child," Tomasi recalled. "It was amazing to see from outside the stability."

"Really?" Kaz asked. "How so?"

"Many of the high-flying rockets actually burst above the dome of stability," Tomasi explained. Stabilities were always spherical, although the subterranean portions were not usually visible so from outside, a stability looked like a large dome. "From inside here the bursts look normal, but from out there the explosions are just amazing. The colors change rapidly and they get even larger. I guess some of the released energy just goes Wild, and you can see the difference between the high rockets and the lower ones. Of course I often missed ground-based displays like fire fountains and pinwheels, but I had a show that no one else could see."

"I never saw fireworks until I went to Taundon," Chanya told them. "That was not something my people did for celebrations, not even with the colonists we traded with all the time." She looked at Kaz.

"Same here," he agreed. "Well, actually I saw my first fireworks displays in Corisa. That was before Raff and Em took me to Taundon. The Corisans say they invented them and that may very well be true. At least I've never been told to the contrary. Well, folks, thanks for dragging me out of the hall for the evening" he added as the fireworks came to an end. "I needed this, especially with everything else I have on my mind. I'll see you all back there later, but right now I think I'll just walk around town for a bit."

"I'll come with you," Chanya told him. Kaz nodded. They did not get more than a few steps, however, before Kaz heard a familiar voice.

"Master Basan," Patrick Aimes called. "A pleasure to see you here this evening." The Julian aristocrat was headed toward them with a lady on his arm.

"Thank you, Mister Aimes," Kaz replied, shaking the man's offered hand. "I believe you have met my partner, Master Sanai."

"Of course," Aimes bowed slightly toward Chanya. "Delighted as always. May I present my wife, Martha?"

"An honor," Kaz replied using the customary courtesies that had been drummed into him over the last decade.

"Master Basan is the young man who handled us all so well in New Ebor, Martha," Aimes told his wife.

"Pleased to meet you, Master Basan," Martha Aimes told him. "Patrick has mentioned you frequently."

"And so now you are here to bring us back into the fold, eh?" Aimes continued to Kaz. "Well you might just do that. I must admit that I am inclined to return to New Ebor, even if my colleagues do not all agree. There is nothing to be gained from this disunity with our sister colonies."

"Then why did you leave?" Chanya asked before Kaz could.

“When a delegation is recalled, Master Sanai,” Aimes replied, still with warmth in his voice, “it is necessary for all members of the delegation to return regardless of their feelings. Roughly half of us were opposed to the withdrawal. The southern colonies are not united on this issue. Not yet. Ah, but I’m discussing business on a holiday.”

Kaz chuckled, “I’ll forgive you, sir.”

Aimes laughed amiably as well and then sighed, “but it is really most uncivilized behavior. I’m beginning to sound like Mister Baker. That man. When he embraces a cause, there is no letting go. Did you know he came to my apartment after midnight one evening to discuss the fishing talks?”

“I didn’t know that,” Kaz admitted.

Aimes laughed. “No reason you should know. It was the day after you left New Ebor. I understand I was not the only one he visited that night. I was tempted to throw him out the window.”

“I’m sure I would have, dear,” Martha told him.

“Well,” Aimes sighed again. “My flat was only on the second floor. He probably would have only broken a leg and I seriously doubt that would have stopped him. A most infuriating man, but a valuable ally when your causes agree. Well, we shall meet again in the morning. Good evening, Master Basan, Master Sanai.”

“Good evening, sir,” Kaz and Chanya chorused.

“He sounded downright chummy,” Kaz commented a few minutes later as he and Chanya strolled through the city streets.

“Well, Charles did say you impressed him favorably,” Chanya reminded Kaz.

“I suppose, but you might have thought we were old friends,” Kaz replied. “And he really does seem to think I was responsible for the success of the New Ebor talks.”

“If he thinks so, you must have been,” Chanya laughed. “That’s the report that will get back to Taundon.”

“I know,” Kaz sighed, “but I still don’t understand it. However, if Aimes and some of his colleagues are inclined to go back to New Ebor, maybe tomorrow won’t be as bad as I fear.”

“There,” Chanya laughed. “See? You worried needlessly.”

“But where is all this bigotry about our skin color?” Kaz asked. “The only time I’ve seen it was when we first entered town. You would have thought there was nothing different about us when talking to Aimes and his wife.”

“Well, to Aimes anyway,” Chanya replied. “His wife was holding something back. I’m fairly sure she was somewhat scandalized by her husband’s behavior toward us.”

“You’re not supposed to pry, you know,” Kaz reminded her, not for the first time.

“I couldn’t help it,” Chanya told him. “She was holding herself all wrong.” There was always an

excuse. Kaz decided to drop the subject. Chanya was hardly the only truth-teller who did so on the sly and he knew she only told him what she saw out of complete trust.

“It’s a lovely night,” Kaz changed the subject. “Hard to believe that a week ago we were caught in a snow storm.”

“It’s always warmer in Farring, especially on the coast,” Chanya told him, “than it is further north and inland.”

“Feels almost like we managed to miss spring time, though,” Kaz went on.

“It isn’t quite that warm tonight,” Chanya laughed, “and I imagine there will still be some cold and rainy days before the heat of summer presses in.”

“You’re probably right,” Kaz agreed.

They continued walking, just strolling around the green before finally deciding to head back toward the Guildhall. By now the streets were mostly empty aside from an occasional constable on patrol.

One such cop approached them from the direction in which they were headed and tipped his hat politely to them. He looked familiar to Kaz, but before he could place the face, something hard hit him from behind. He saw a flash of bright light in his eyes and then nothing at all for a long time.

Three

Chanya opened her eyes and saw nothing. She was lying on the ground. No, it was a hard stone floor and she was in a room without so much as a hint of light. She looked in every direction, occasionally imagining she could make out a detail or two only to discover her mind had been playing tricks on her. She chalked that up to the headache.

Thoughts of the headache reminded her of what must have happened. The constable they passed – she had not paid him any attention at the time, but when Kaz had slumped to the ground she had only an instant to realize he was the same man who had demanded their papers a few days before. Before she could react, something hard cracked into the back of her skull, probably the constable’s truncheon and she staggered to the ground as well. Not quite unconscious, she tried to get back up, but another blow

had knocked her out.

She was sore in a number of places she couldn't account for and decided the man had decided to hit her a few more times out of spite. Wayfaring was capable of some amazing feats of healing, however, and she knew she could at least erase the pain. When she tried, however, nothing happened.

A groan from somewhere nearby caught her attention and she immediately forgot about her own wounds. "Kaz?" she called. "Where are you?"

"Uhh!" Kaz groaned again. Chanya heard him move and she crawled over to him. "That depends," he replied groggily.

"On what?" Chanya asked worriedly.

"Where are we?" he countered. He groaned once more and then continued, "Feels like I've been a door mat. Was that constable...?"

"The same one, yes," Chanya confirmed. "At least I think so."

"Who else?" Kaz asked, becoming more alert. "This many bruises can't have been the work of one man. Seriously though, where are we? Why is it so dark and why does the air smell funny?"

"It's a bit stuffy in here," Chanya replied, answering the last question only. She attempted to create a wayfarer's lamp and nothing happened. "It's dark because I can't make a lamp," she reported.

"Really?" Kaz wondered. "That's strange. Let me try. Odd; nothing. Too bad I don't smoke. A tinder box would give us a bit of light."

"That would be bad," Chanya told him suddenly. "I just realize why the air is bad in here. There's not much to breathe. I think we're using it up."

"I really need a lamp, though," Kaz told her and concentrated extra hard. A soft light filled the room for a few seconds and then quickly faded out. "That was different," Kaz remarked. He tried again and got the same result.

The room was small, only five feet wide by, maybe, seven feet long. The ceiling was low and the walls appeared to be concrete and without a door. Several more brief lights later and they discovered the walls had been painted a dull gray, including one which did turn out to have a broad featureless door which had also been painted the same color.

"It must be airtight," Chanya decided. "That's why we're starting to have trouble breathing. But why are we having trouble wayfaring? Does a wayfarer lose his abilities when wounded?"

"Not the way I think you mean it," Kaz told her. "Of course when you're in pain, it is harder to concentrate on wayfaring, so it might seem like your wounds have affected you, but I think there's a different explanation."

"Well, save it for later unless you think it worth the use of air," Chanya suggested.

"It might, or not," Kaz replied anyway. "I think someone has intentionally built a prison to hold a master wayfarer."

“What?” Chanya asked and abruptly changed that to, “Why?”

“This can’t be natural,” Kaz told her. “We’re in an area of intensified stability. No naturally formed stability is any stronger than another. At least that’s what Raff’s colleague, Doctor Harkemor, told me. There’s always a little Wild in any stability. You know that.”

“Of course,” Chanya agreed, “then you mean someone did this intentionally?”

“I think I said that, yes,” Kaz nodded in the dark. “It would take a master, of course. And had Raff done this, I doubt I could raise even the little light I can. Now who would want to hold a master wayfarer prisoner?”

“I think the question is, “Who would want to hold us prisoner?” Chanya corrected him.

“Feeling like the world is against you?” Kaz asked.

“Not the world,” Chanya told him, “but if a master wayfarer had to have created this area of intensified stability, he must have done so with us in mind. You know as well as I do that a construct like this cannot last forever.”

“No, just a few days,” Kaz agreed, “Maybe a week. Just long enough to upset the southern delegates and give them reason to remain divided from the north.”

“That’s possible,” Chanya considered, “but who would want that?”

“I don’t really know yet,” Kaz admitted. “Let’s get out of here and find out.”

“How?” Chanya pressed.

“I don’t know that either, yet,” Kaz replied. “But there must be a way. Let’s take a good look at that door.” Together they were able to get a dim light to stay on as long as they continued to concentrate on it. “Nice door,” Kaz remarked at last. “Strong.”

“No handle, keyhole or anything,” Chanya observed. “It opens outward. Do you think we could kick or shove it open?”

Kaz got to his feet and did his best to kick his way through the door. “Oh good,” he commented after the dull clack of the bottom of his shoe against the heavy door.

“Now that foot is as bruised as the rest of me. That door didn’t even shake when I hit it. You would think it had been bricked in.”

“We have to find a way out,” Chanya told him.

“Yeah,” Kaz nodded in the dark-again room. “I still have my knife.”

“Do you think you can cut a hole in the door?” Chanya asked somewhat sarcastically.

“Not hardly,” Kaz told her. “I’m not out of air yet to be that silly. It’s possible I could drill a sort of air hole though.” He tried scraping the point of the knife between the wall and the edge of the door, but

had very little luck. "I could swear the door is tougher than the concrete of this wall," he told her.

"Might be," she agreed,

"That does give me an idea," Kaz decided. "Help me do a force-thrust at the wall."

"What for?" Chanya asked.

"Concrete cast inside a stability will crumble if later infused with Wild Energy and vice versa," Kaz informed her.

"Really?" Chanya asked. "I didn't know that."

"Not many do," Kaz replied. "It's not like it comes up all that often. We could be out of here in minutes."

"I'll help summon the Wild," Chanya offered. "You direct it."

They held hands and together sent all the Wild energy they could muster into the concrete wall just beside the door. "Nothing happened," Chanya observed.

"Well, even under normal circumstances the wall would not have just fallen in," Kaz told her. "But we should be able to push through it now." He tried but only a small patch, roughly one quarter of an inch deep flaked off. "This is going to take longer than I thought."

They worked like that for the next hour and only managed to make a wide spot on the wall that was an inch and a half deep. "This is tough going," Kaz admitted as he scraped yet more concrete dust from the wall.

"It's starting to get hard to breathe too," Chanya observed. "Could we break a small hole or two through for ventilation?"

"Good idea," Kaz told her. "Let's try for one, say, an inch wide." It took five more tries, but finally, Kaz poked his knife through the deepening hole and a final plug of concrete popped out the other side followed by a shrill whistle of cool air coming into the room. The whistle only lasted a minute or so, but the Wayfarers crouched near the hole to breathe in the fresher air. "That's not really enough," Kaz told Chanya after they had caught their breath a little, "but we'll start making a series of small holes all around the area we want to cut out. It should go faster and maybe the air in here will improve."

The air did not noticeably improve as they worked, but it did not seem to get any worse either. The work of punching a series of consecutive holes in a wall of concrete did not get any easier when they ran into an iron bar, but Kaz judged they would be able to squeeze past the rod and they kept working.

It was much later when Chanya finally asked, "How long do you think it has been?"

"I don't know," Kaz replied. It bothered him that he had been saying that too frequently lately. "I'm tired, hungry and thirsty. More than a day, I should think, and less than three."

"You should get some rest then," Chanya told him.

"I can't," he protested. "What if someone comes to check on us?"

“I don’t think that’s anyone’s intention,” Chanya replied. “If they were planning to feed us, they would have several times by now. It seems obvious they left us to die. If we hadn’t done as much as we had, we probably would have died by asphyxiation.”

“Now it might be by thirst,” Kaz pointed out, “but, yes, we have to get some rest.” A moment later he was on the floor and snoring, but Chanya was only awake long enough to hear him snore once.

She awoke to hear Kaz working on the hole again. He was not using wayfaring on it, however. Instead he was on his back and kicking it out. Chanya could hear the sounds of falling debris, mostly small pieces until finally a large piece thumped on the floor outside the room. “I’ll go open the door,” Kaz told her. “Wait here.”

“Where would I go?” Chanya laughed weakly.

“Um, yeah,” Kaz agreed. He shrugged off his coat and wormed his way through the tight hole he had formed in the wall. First his right arm, then his head and then finally, after nearly getting stuck, he managed to slip his left arm through the hole. Once his shoulders were free he was able to slip out of the room easily. Tired, bruised and exhausted he stepped away from the hole and found he could create a wayfarer’s lamp with ease and he looked back at the wall. Beside it, where there should have been a wooden door, all he saw were bricks and mortar. “No wonder there was no air,” he muttered.

“What was that?” Chanya asked as she tossed his coat and her own out through the hole and then started crawling through.

“I told you to wait,” Kaz remarked.

“I didn’t,” she replied, slipping through the rough hole quickly. He helped her to her feet and she saw the bricked in door. “Oh,” she said with only a little surprise. “Yes, that explains a lot. We still don’t know where we are, though.”

“In a dark corridor with several other doors,” Kaz supplied. She favored him with a mild glare and walked past him to look in through some of those doors.

“Empty,” she commented. “Whatever this is, I don’t think it is very old. Too bad we don’t know this city well enough to realize where there has been relatively new construction.”

It feels like we’re underground,” Kaz told her. “No light or windows. There are brackets in the walls for lamps, but no lamps have been installed.”

“The only air vents are out here in the hallway too,” Chanya noted. “Let’s find a way out.”

“The iron-clad door at the end of the hall should do it,” Kaz remarked, and he put his coat back on and brushed off some of the accumulated dirt and dust.

It was locked, but now that they were beyond the area of intensified stability, opening it was simple. Kaz accomplished it with barely a thought, but there was light beyond that door and a hastily barked order from someone, followed by the sounds of men picking up their muskets and aiming.

Chanya used a light force thrust and the four men on the other side were already falling to the ground unconscious as the door completely opened. One of the muskets went off as its owner hit the floor and

the roar was deafening. The acrid smell of burnt powder filled the room and a bit of the ceiling fell in.

“So much for stealth!” Chanya shouted.

“Can’t be helped,” Kaz replied loudly. “Are these policemen?”

“Looks like,” Chanya told him. “I think I hear more coming.”

Kaz grunted, but did not say what he was thinking. Defending himself from every constable in New Farrington was less than appealing. Doing it after having been locked up without food or water for two days was worse. He looked around the room for the moment he had and saw another door beside the one he and Chanya had come through, and a wooden stairway going up on the far side. He could already see several pairs of feet racing down the stairs.

Kaz summoned the Wild once more and froze the men gradually into immobility so that they slowed in their progress rather than suddenly halted and fell down the stairway. Once they were stopped he carefully knocked them out and let them down gently. It was far more work than what Chanya had done, but he did not care to have any deaths on his head, especially since he still did not know what was going on.

“Nicely done,” Chanya commented. “You’re feeling more charitable than I am.”

“Killing everyone in sight would have been easier,” Kaz admitted, “but getting answers afterward would have been impossible. Besides we don’t even know how many of these men knew we were here or why.”

“Wherever here is,” Chanya added. “I don’t hear anyone else moving up there.”

“I’ll go first,” Kaz told her. “No wait.” He spotted a pitcher of water their guards had been drinking from and filled two cups, handing one to Chanya. “We need this.”

“At least,” she agreed, helping herself to a second cup.

Once they had drunk their fill, Kaz went slowly up the stairs. He gathered a thick aura of Wild energy around him, ready to deflect a musket ball or knock out still more of their captors. Idly, he noticed he was glowing a dull yellow and decided this was not the time to show off. He consciously damped down the visible side effects and continued on.

There was another well-lit room at the top of the stairs with a large table and enough chairs for over a dozen men. Kaz looked back and counted only eight and wondered if everyone had come running down into the basement or if some had gone for reinforcements. How many constables would a city the size of New Farrington have? Kaz was not sure, but felt the number was greater than those he and Chanya had knocked out.

He signaled to Chanya and while waiting for her to join him, noticed this room had a window, but that it was dark outside and wondered just how long they had been captive. Long enough to have missed my appointment, he thought ruefully.

Opening the next door, they discovered a corridor beyond which they could hear the familiar voice of Master Charles Keith. “No one has seen them for over two days now,” Keith was telling someone in off-handed tones. “The congressional delegates are most annoyed, thinking they chose to leave the

stability rather than meet with them.”

“We’re right here,” Kaz announced, stepping into view. Master Keith was standing next to another gentleman and turned to stare at Kaz and Chanya. At first Kaz thought Keith was just startled to see them in such a disheveled condition, but only the protective aura of Wild energy Kaz was still maintaining managed to shield them from Keith’s sudden force-thrust. “What the hell are you doing?” Kaz demanded.

“Killing you,” Keith snarled. “Damn, but you’re hard to kill. Should have been dead a day ago.”

“You should have tried it while we were unconscious,” Kaz pointed out, parrying another force-thrust and returning one of his own. He had never been in a serious battle of this sort and the training he had received in Taundon had not prepared him adequately for fending off another wayfarer. Kaz did remember the fighting wayfarer-priests of Corisa however and recalled how they fought physically as well as with Wild energy. He jumped toward Keith, but the local hall master destroyed the floor beneath him.

Kaz reacted quickly and caught the edge of the hole before falling down into the basement again and noticed Chanya was covering him while he climbed back out. Keith’s main attention, however, was on Kaz and he was not fully back to his feet when the next attack came, but Kaz projected a wedge of the Wild at Keith’s force-thrust, causing the burst to go around him. There were twin explosions behind Kaz, but he refused to turn around and see what had happened.

They fought on in that manner for another few minutes with Keith throwing force-thrust after force-thrust at Kaz, when Kaz suddenly realized that was the only offensive move Keith was using. Everything the other master did, even the destruction of the floor, was done by projecting bursts of Wild energy to drive the stability out of either a person or a thing. Was it possible that was the only way Keith knew how to fight?

Once more Keith force-thrusted at Kaz and Kaz deflected the attack with a wedge of Wild energy. This time, however, Kaz pushed his wedge directly at Keith, who had to deflect that attack only to realize it was a feint as Kaz’s hand came slamming into his face.

Kaz suddenly realized that while hitting an opponent in the face might look flashy and effective on stage, it was also painful when done wrong. He winced as pain shot up his arm and was taken by surprise when Keith turned around and drove his fist into Kaz’s gut. Before Keith could deliver a final force-thrust, however, he fell abruptly to the floor and stayed there.

“Forgot I was here,” Chanya commented dispassionately.

“Em did that same thing in Corisa,” Kaz told her.

“I know,” Chanya replied. “That’s why I thought of it. But we still need to know why he was trying to kill us. Maybe his buddy here will prove to be a forthright and honest gentleman.”

Kaz saw Chanya was holding the other man immobile. “Who the hell are you anyway?” Kaz demanded of him.

“I am the chief of the constabulary, sir,” the man growled at him. “I demand you let me go at once.”

“That depends on the answers to a few questions,” Kaz replied. “Watch him closely, Chanya.”

“Of course,” Chanya chuckled, “but make it fast. I get cranky on an empty stomach.”

That last Kaz knew was a lie. Chanya was holding her temper far better than he was at the moment. Still, it had been two days since they had eaten, or so he estimated. It had been a very long time since he had been forced to go without food.

“Why were you holding us?” Kaz demanded.

“Until tonight I never heard of you,” the chief replied.

“That’s true enough,” Chanya confirmed.

“So you knew nothing of the special cell downstairs?” Kaz asked.

“What special cell?” the chief countered.

“The one specially treated to hold a master wayfarer?” Kaz continued. “The one with the door that was bricked over to make sure we ran out of air?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the chief insisted.

“He’s telling you the truth, Kaz,” Chanya confirmed again.

“Then why the hell was Keith trying to kill me?” Kaz wondered out loud.

“How should I know?” the chief asked angrily. “He was just here reporting your disappearance.”

“He didn’t seem very happy to find us though,” Kaz remarked thoughtfully.

“Yes, that was a surprise to me too,” the chief admitted. “What’s so special about this special cell you claim to have been in?”

“Someone, probably Master Keith, intensified the stability within,” Kaz replied. “That made it impossible for ordinary wayfarers to escape.”

“Then how did you get out?” the chief asked.

“We’re not ordinary wayfarers,” Kaz snapped back. “Bricking in the door so we would run out of air was nearly the clincher though. Sorry about the hole in the wall, I imagine you can get it fixed. But if you didn’t know about it, someone else had to. Who?”

“Whoever it is will have to answer to me, sir,” the chief told him. “I promise you that.”

“Likely it’s one or more of the men we left unconscious downstairs,” Kaz commented.

“What about Master Keith?” the chief asked.

“He’s dead,” Kaz replied. “I’d need a medium to ask him anything now and I don’t much believe séances work anyway. Superstitious nonsense. Well, come on, we’ll go downstairs and see if we can sort this out.”

Four

It turned out that Keith had duped the men who had originally attempted to arrest Kaz and Chanya. The chief of police, however, was not pleased to learn that several of his men had accepted money from Keith to keep Kaz and Chanya imprisoned without food, water or air, nor that they had done so secretly in his own station.

To Kaz's surprise, Chanya was able to verify, however, that the man who had beaten them unconscious had honestly thought they were escaped criminals and, unlike most of his companions, had accepted no money to conduct the arrest. He did know about the special cell although all the men denied knowing about the bricks. All four who had been guarding the cell, however, turned out to be lying about that. Their orders had been to wait a week before reopening the cell.

"And who gave those orders?" the chief demanded. He received silence to that question. "I see."

"I was told he was a murdering slave from Pacidelphia, sir," the man finally added.

"And this was enough to justify walling him up in a room like that?" the chief demanded. "And the lady too? What is she? A witch from Lonport here to eat your souls?"

"I don't know about this one, chief," Kaz told him, "but the constable in the corner is the one who knocked Chanya and me out."

"Liar," that constable replied coolly.

"Really?" Kaz asked, stepping closer. This time he allowed the raw energy around him to glow a bright green. The color of the energy reflected the intensity. He didn't expect this man to know that, but the fact he was glowing had the desired effect.

"You stay back," the man told him with just a touch of nervousness, but Kaz took a half of a step closer and watch the nervousness turn to terror. "All right!" he nearly screamed, "I'll talk, but you stay away from me. I'll talk!"

"You may ask your questions now, Chief," Kaz told him.

“What did you do?” the chief asked suspiciously.

“To him?” Kaz countered. “Nothing. But I think he’ll talk freely now.”

The constable did talk freely and as he did, the story became clear. After Kaz and Chanya’s initial encounter with the constable, Master Keith had called the man back to his office. Everything that had happened had been planned by Master Keith. During the fireworks display, Keith had come to the constabulary station and prepared the special cell. Rogue wayfarers, he had said, needed special handling.

“Rogue wayfarers?” Kaz interrupted the flow of narration.

“Well, that’s what the Guildmaster said,” the constable replied defensively.

“He was a Guildhall master,” Kaz corrected him. “My father is the Guildmaster.”

“Well, uh, the hall master said you were very dangerous and he needed my help to stop you,” the constable maintained.

“And you were all too willing to believe it,” Kaz replied. “Yeah, well, our first meeting didn’t exactly endear you to me either. And the idea of death by suffocation?”

“He said that was the only way to execute a rogue wayfarer,” came the reply.

“I hate to give you ideas,” Kaz remarked, “but didn’t it occur to you that you could have easily killed us while we were unconscious?”

“That would have been murder,” the constable replied softly.

“So was locking someone up in an airtight room,” the chief told him sternly.

“Master Keith said they were convicted criminals,” the constable replied defensively.

“This is going to take some sorting out,” the chief told them all. “I can see there’s no holding you two, but Master Keith is dead at your hands and until I’m convinced you acted rightly I want your word you’ll remain in New Farrington.”

“I’m,” Kaz began, then corrected himself, “Chanya is the ranking master in this city for the time being.”

“Me?” Chanya asked.

“You’ve been a master longer than I have,” Kaz told her. “I’ll help, but I imagine you’ll be busy putting the Guildhall here in order for several days to come. Chief, we’ll be there if you need us. Well, after I’ve had something to eat,” he added. “No one thought to feed us in there either.”

Arriving back at the Guildhall, Kaz and Chanya found it amazingly active for a hall near midnight. Kaz spotted Tomasi, stopped him as he ran across the front room and asked, “What’s going on?”

“You’re alive!” Tomasi exclaimed.

“I noticed,” Kaz replied dryly.

“I mean the Guildmaster is turning over every rock in New Farrington to find you two,” Tomasi explained.

“Raff is here?” Kaz asked. “Why?”

“Let’s go ask him,” Chanya suggested. “Where is he?”

“In Master Keith’s office,” Tomasi replied. “He just got in this afternoon and, on hearing you two were missing, started giving orders. I don’t think Master Keith was very happy about that.”

“Master Keith is currently trying to plea bargain with the Devil,” Kaz retorted even as they rushed toward the hall master’s office.

“He’s dead?” Tomasi asked.

“I certainly hope so,” Chanya told him. “Otherwise we’ll just have to kill him again.”

“I don’t understand,” Tomasi admitted.

Then you’ll have to join us in the office,” Kaz told him. “I don’t want to tell this story more than once.”

“Kaz! Chanya!” Emblem L’Oranne Cawlens shouted as they walked into the hall master’s office. She got up from the chair she had been seated in and rushed to embrace both the younger wayfarers at once. Then, with a temper than matched her fiery red hair, she demanded, “Where have you two been?”

“Stuck in a jail cell and left to die,” Kaz replied with a touch of whimsy in his voice. “Oof! Em, you’re crushing us.” Em did not let go, so Kaz could only turn his head to face his adoptive father. “Raff, I’m glad to see you, but what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Raff chuckled.

“Right now, sure,” Kaz agreed, “but why are you in New Farrington? Why are you even in Varana?”

“You sounded like you needed help,” Raff replied.

“I never asked for help,” Kaz replied.

“Since when does family have to ask?” Raff chuckled. “We went to New Ebor first, of course, because your interim report really did sound like the situation was pretty dire. Of course, by the time we got there, everyone had shaken hands and gone home happy.”

“About the fishing rights, maybe,” Kaz replied, “But they never came to any concordance on the other issues.”

“I doubt any of them expected to,” Raff remarked getting up from behind the desk and walking toward them.

“That’s not the way it sounded from where I was sitting,” Kaz pointed out.

“Maybe you were too close to the problem,” Raff suggested. He thrust his hand out and grasped Kaz’s warmly. “Dear,” he suggested to Em, “Perhaps you should let them go for a few moments.”

“Oh,” Emblem nodded and released them. “Of course. I was so worried though.”

“Us too,” Chanya laughed. “But Raff hasn’t finished explaining why you’re here.”

“Well, like I said, we got concerned when Kaz’s report arrived and along with some of the other recent events I decided it was time I got out of Central Guildhall again too.”

“What other recent events?” Kaz asked, taking one of the seats around the desk. The others sat down as well.

“You know about the invasion of Lonport, right?” Raff asked.

“Everyone is talking about it,” Kaz nodded.

“Well, it’s not going as well as planned, for Her Majesty’s Army, that is,” Raff told him. “They have most of the city under their thumb, but the surrounding towns are managing to resist. More troops are being mustered in the Green Lands and will be sent here soon and I hear they’re not all going to Lonport. Judging from the way this city is decorated, I think we can expect an armed presence in most of the colonies in Varana. When that happens worrying about who gets to throw a line in on the Great Banks is not going to be one of the more pressing issues.

“No, but the Nasano Question and the matter of slavery will be around for a very long time,” Kaz told him.

“But those issues were not why you were sent here,” Raff replied. “You did the right thing by walking off and making them actually talk to one another.”

“They could have done that for the first two months before I got here,” Kaz argued.

“Could have, yes,” Raff agreed, “but they didn’t. Look, Kaz, too many people depend on the Guild of Wayfarers to solve their problems for them. Even intelligent, educated men who are the leaders of their people sometimes lapse into that special laziness of wanting someone else to make their decisions for them. So where once we were only hired to mediate nearly irreconcilable differences, now we are often invited in where a few hours of honest wrangling would solve the problem. When you walked out of those talks, it was like giving each of those delegates a slap across the face and telling them to grow up. That doesn’t always go well, of course, so don’t try it too often, but in this case it worked.”

“Maybe if it hadn’t, the southern colonies would not have walked out of the Colonial Congress,” Kaz remarked.

“I doubt that,” Raff shook his head. “The orders for that came from the colonial legislatures and their own representatives meeting in Pacidelphia.”

“If they were talking about secession in Pacidelphia,” Kaz asked, “why are they all in New Farrington now?”

“Meeting the men who were in New Ebor halfway, is my guess,” Raff told him. “But also Farring was not inclined to leave Varana. Meeting here is a sop to the Farringtons. In any case, from my vantage point in Taundon, it seems like your negotiations were about to get a lot more involved, so Em and I came as fast as we could to help out if you needed the help.

“Well, you didn’t,” Raff went on. “We got to New Ebor to discover the negotiations were over and that you had gone off on a mission to Mannburgh but had already been sent orders bringing you here.”

“So we rushed down the coast on the next packet ship,” Em told them. “We weren’t really worried about whether you could handle the Southern Varanans, of course, but we had come this way and it didn’t make sense to leave without seeing you.”

“Then we arrived here and Master Keith told us you had just walked off a couple days ago and hadn’t been heard from since,” Raff explained. “After Em got done with him, he ran off to the local constabulary to have them keep an eye out for you.”

“That’s just what he told you,” Kaz remarked, and went on to describe everything that had happened since arriving in New Farrington.

“So he’s dead now?” Raff asked. Kaz and Chanya nodded as one. “Too bad. I would have liked a piece of him first.”

“Why?” Kaz asked.

“There are two reasons I can imagine why he wanted you dead,” Raff explained. “First of all, it’s no secret that there is still a large faction of master wayfarers who oppose me in the Guild. That doesn’t bother me, really. Anytime you put two thinking people together you get at least three different opinions. Well, most of my detractors are not in the Congress of Wayfarers, although most were in the old Council. I’m fairly unassailable against direct attack these days, but you are not. I tracked down those orders you got that assigned you to the fishing rights talks and they came down from Master Josiah Whitters a known friend and associate of Sam Harton, the son of my predecessor, Giles Harton.

“I tried to get both men into my office,” Raff continued, “but directly after issuing those orders, both men chose to leave town. Whitters reassigned himself to Farnsdam and Harton decided on a pilgrimage to Meni. Neither of them arrived at their announced destinations and now it seems possible Keith might have been one of their associates as well. I would have wanted answers out of him.”

“The other reason is that his name is not Keith,” Em cut in. “Or rather I mean to say it was not originally Charles Keith. After he went out this evening we discovered his real name is Carlos Castellano and he’s originally from Palendo, although his family moved back to Lower Crace when he was still a child.”

“Are you saying he was a Cracian agent?” Kaz asked.

“It is a possibility,” Em replied.

“But Crace has been quietly encouraging Varana to secede from the Green Lands,” Chanya protested. “What would they gain from making such a secession impossible?”

“Crace is not of a single mind, Chanya,” Em explained. “The nobility of Upper Crace have been sending money and other support to the Brothers of Freedom. Lower Crace has other notions and

dividing Varana would make the southern colonies ripe for annexation by Salomania or Palendo. The Southern Islands, while technically claimed by Varana are more inclined to side with the Cracian colonies anyway.”

“So I’ve come to know, yes,” Kaz nodded.

“And with the trouble in the north, the Queen’s Army would not be in a position to both put down a rebellion in Bournset while defending Southern Varana from Crace, especially since there is such a strong Cracian influence here already. Truly, I think New Farrington tries to be more like Carais than Carais itself.”

“So that’s why Mister Baker wants the colonies reunited,” Kaz noted.

“One of the reasons,” Raff told him. “He understands the rebellion that has started will fail if Varana does not stand together. The south will fall to Crace and his own Bournset Bay will be in the same subjugated position Meldan has been since the last war with Crace.”

“But where does the Guild stand on this?” Chanya asked. “Where are our best interests?”

“The Guild is neutral as always,” Raff replied.

“Always?” Chanya challenged him. “I don’t recall the Guild being neutral on the issue of slavery and I imagine we have a viewpoint on the Nasano Question as well.”

“Those are issues of human rights,” Raff replied. “We do have official policies about that sort of thing, but even then we only use persuasion in our attempts to steer nations to our way of thinking. Didn’t it occur to you we could abolish slavery merely by placing any country in which slavery is legal under interdiction?”

“I’ve come to the conclusion that interdiction is best used as a threat,” Chanya replied, echoing Kaz’s earlier statement. “The less frequently we actually use it, the more effective it is.”

“Good,” Raff nodded. “We’ll have your seat in the Congress of Wayfarers warmed and ready for you.”

“What?” Chanya asked suspiciously.

“He’s pulling your leg, dear,” Em explained. “I suppose we could load the Congress with those who think like us, but that would not be in the best interests for the Guild. Free and open debate makes us stronger. We would have more dissenting voices if the owners of those voices did not refuse to serve.”

“But how is it different?” Chanya pressed. “Either we are neutral on all subjects or we are not.”

“In truth we’re no more neutral than anyone else,” Raff laughed. “But we do maintain an official political neutrality when it comes to international affairs. For all the international nature of the slave trade, the legality or illegality of it is an internal affair. The Guild finds the practice repugnant and has used various means of leverage to make the nations of the world see it our way. Mostly that means raising our rates in lands that do not agree with us, and lowering them where they do, but we do not interdict a country that tolerates slavery. It wouldn’t work anyway.

“You have seen for yourselves that we all have our personal loyalties,” Raff kept talking. “The Guild

first, yes, but I'll always have a warm feeling for the Green Lands and Em feels similarly for Crace."

"So long as I do not have to think too long about Orseilles," Em added, "or Bur."

"Chanya," Raff turned to her, "you still love the Sanai Tribe and think of Rhonesia as home, do you not?"

"I suppose," Chanaya nodded, "but the Guild is my home as well."

"And that's pretty much what I've been saying," Raff nodded. "We could enforce our beliefs on others for a while, but we are not the only wayfarers in the world. We are not even permitted to enter some lands, although there are fewer of those than there once were. If we were to start taking sides between nations those nations, would start developing their own armies of wayfarers."

"It took us a long time to reach the point at which we could act as arbitrators and judges and be respected as such," Raff went on, "and so we tread a fine line between our policies against institutions like slavery and our official neutrality. We must be doing something right as it's working."

"But now we have some wayfarers apparently trying to destroy that," Kaz noted.

"Not as such, or no more than usual," Raff disagreed. "You will remember who Giles Harton and his cronies were conspiring with. Those three Kenlienta Elders against Leraxa? I've since found they were playing games like that in a number of countries; blackmail, extortion and so on. Had Harton not been in such poor health those last few years before his death, I would have had him up on charges in a dozen different countries. The hell of it is I can't clean out the guild of everyone who was involved, most were couriers who probably did not even know what messages they were carrying and the victims rarely admitted there had been anything going on. I never had enough proof, but I did keep that sort out of the new Congress."

"And speaking of Congress," Kaz cut in, "what can I possibly tell the southern delegates that will make them go back to New Ebor. I was supposed to meet with them yesterday. My failure to show up will be seen as a major insult."

"Your Mister Aimes was most worried about your disappearance," Raff told him. "I spoke to him before I even had a chance to unpack here. I'm sure he will forgive you, considering the situation."

Five

“I hope you gentlemen will forgive my unavoidable absence,” Kaz began late the next morning in Prospect Hall where the congressional delegates of Southern Varana had been allowed to meet. “I pray you will believe me when I say I’d far rather have been here arguing with all of you.”

That last raised a chorus of chuckles. By now every man in the room had heard at least one version of what had happened. Kaz later learned that Aimes and several others had gone to the constabulary station to inspect the cell where he and Chanya had been held captive and came away shaken, not only from the conditions they had been forced to suffer, but from the fact they had managed to break a hole in the concrete wall using only the powers of their minds. Kaz would have corrected their notion that it was his mind doing the real work – non-wayfarers rarely understood what was involved – but by the time he found out, it was already too late. It did, however, give him a better insight as to why even the most sophisticated gentlemen held the Guild and its members in what could only be called awe. Kaz supposed that had he thought someone had broken a thick concrete wall merely by thinking at it, he might have been intimidated as well.

“I am sure, sir, that we all agree,” Aimes told him in return. Aimes had been chose to preside over this Southern Caucus, as it was being called, and Kaz found himself seated at a table with Chanya looking across the room at Aimes and four colleagues, each from one of the southern colonies and with the rest of the Caucus seated behind him at their own desks. The procedure had the feeling of a trial. “Well, perhaps we can get down to business finally. You are here representing the interests of one John Baker, the leading Congressional delegate from Bournset is that correct?”

“It is, sir,” Kaz replied with a curt nod. “Mister Baker feels most strongly that all Varana is harmed by the absence of the south in New Ebor.”

“Obviously, some of my colleagues disagree,” Aimes remarked. Had Kaz not already known that Aimes was inclined to reunite the colonies, he would have thought otherwise now. “Tell us, Master Basan, why should any of us even consider returning to New Ebor and Mister Baker’s Congress?”

“Is it Mister Baker’s Congress?” Kaz countered. “I would have thought it belonged to all Varana, even if John Baker was one of the loudest voices to be heard there.”

“Loudest perhaps,” Aimes chuckled. “The shrillest, most definitely. But Mister Baker’s Colony of Bournset Bay has been declared in rebellion and even now is being occupied by Her Majesty’s Army. We should bring that same fate down on ourselves should we join him.”

“With only one colony in rebellion,” Kaz replied, “the army is free to concentrate its might in suppression there. If all Varana stands together, the army’s might becomes diffused and less able to bear down on any one colony.”

“You are, of course, talking about the most powerful army in the world,” James Gainer, the leading delegate from the Colony of Julia, observed coldly. “Do you really think we could raise an army capable of driving them from our shores?”

“A ragtag militia in Bournset gave them more trouble than they cared to endure in the Battle of Covenant,” Kaz replied. “Just imagine what a trained and organized army might do. Besides, who said I was advocating rebellion? I know the Colony of Farring is nearly as upset with Parliament as Bournset Bay and didn’t your Royal Governor disband your legislature?”

"It is being reformed," Aimes replied, "but then what would be the purpose in returning to New Ebor if not to revolt against the Crown?"

"That is strictly up to you," Kaz replied. "I don't imagine you will secede if the Colonial Congress votes not to. Of course if everyone who is loyal to the Queen boycotts the Congress, I do not think we need to wonder which way such a vote would go."

"It seems to me," Gainer noted dryly, "that Master Basan here does present a good point. We all know that Mister Baker and his Bournset Bay cronies advocate rebellion. It could be that even they recognize the need for cooler, more considerate heads in New Ebor."

"But we still have irreconcilable differences with the majority of our northern colleagues," Kennet Hill, the lead delegate from the Colony from Kensing pointed out. His eyes shifted from side to side as if trying to deliver an encoded message, but Kaz saw immediately what he meant.

"You mean slavery, sir," Kaz replied.

"I do, sir," Hill replied. "It does not take a genius to see where you stand on the subject and perhaps that is the true reason you desire us to return to Baker's Congress."

"I'm not sure I follow you sir," Kaz told him honestly.

"Are you not aware that one of the main proposals for this new union Baker is urging on us includes the abolishment of slavery?" Hill asked "I would have thought that was obvious, and it is also obvious that the men of Cobbsland and Charlesia would revel in such a state, not for the freedom of all men but because of the ruination of our economy. We enjoy great and peaceful prosperity in the South, sir, a prosperity that would come crashing down should our slaves be free to do what they may."

Kaz's first reaction was to tell the pompous ass he could try working his land on his own, see what it was like to labor hour after hour without pay or the freedom to look for a better job or see what his life would have been like without being permitted to learn how to read, do as he wished or bear with any of the thousands of other differences, not the least of which was to realize that he is just another piece of property, no more highly regarded than the plow horse he was forced to use. He was tempted to spit in the man's face as well, but instead Kaz took a deep breath and coolly replied. "My personal opinions have no bearing on these discussions or on what happens in your Congress, sir. However, keep in mind that even if my skin were not dark I would be morally opposed to slavery nonetheless. And even if, like you, I found it an institution to be cherished, I would be against it, because the Guild of Wayfarers is sworn to bring it to an end. Furthermore, it is also the policy of the Wayfarer's Guild to allow nations and their colonies to decide such matters on their own.

"However," Kaz continued, "that does not mean we will not apply what pressure we can to cause you to see it our way and keep in mind that even the Parliament has officially ruled against slavery."

"We know," Aimes replied, "and that may, in the end, be why we decide to rejoin the Colonial Congress."

"Well," Kaz replied, "my personal feelings have no place here. The choice is not mine to make and if you remain divided from the north, I daresay it won't be yours for long either."

"What do you mean?" Aimes asked.

“Have you gentlemen thought about what happens if you separated from the rest of Varana during this time of unrest?” Kaz asked. “I’ll tell you. The Queen’s Army is busy in the north. Currently they are trying to suppress the rebellion in Bournset Bay, but the Brothers of Freedom have the population aroused in other colonies too. I noticed their bunting and banners flying around here during Founders Day.

“So the army is in the north,” Kaz went on. “The south, well you have the richest farmland in Varana, don’t you. It’s a very rich land and a beautiful one, isn’t it? And you have Salomania on your western border and Palendo to the south, two strong Cracian colonies. Crace is not currently at war, so her army is available and with the Green Lands army concentrating on the north, who is there to protect you when Crace turns her eye this way?”

“That won’t happen,” Gainer denied. “We have friends in Crace who have already offered us money and the finest muskets.”

“And a few soldiers to help train you in their use, perhaps?” Kaz asked pointedly. The delegates looked uncertain. “Look, what you do in your Congress is not my concern. Many of you consider yourselves loyal to Her Majesty and seriously oppose the separatist movement. I suggest to you that you can best further your cause by returning to New Ebor and voting that way.”

“Master Basan,” Aimes told him toward the end of the day, “You have given us a lot to think about. We shall confer and let you know what we decide.”

Six

Raff and Emblem spent the next week going through the New Farrington Guildhall’s records. It was slow going because Keith, or Castellano as they began to think of him, had not kept a well-ordered office. “I can’t figure out why we haven’t audited this hall in a decade,” Em complained. “His reports are spotty at best. Someone should have noticed and looked into it. And what passes for organization is a travesty. Everything is just piled up in boxes with the newest stuff on top.”

“I’ll contact Pauls Forrent,” Raff promised, “and have him look into that and our entire reporting system. If Castellano was getting by this way, others must be too. What was he hiding, though? Was it just his Cracian affiliates?”

“From a bookkeeping standpoint, that’s the least of it,” Em told him. “It was a horrible violation of Guild regulations, but not the sort of thing that would have been mentioned by his reports, but he must have skimmed off over a million crowns in the last eight years and has evidently deposited them in the Bank of Crace by Guild courier. That bothers me more than the rest of this. His reports show no such courier activity, although the records in the boxes do. But the reports from the halls in Lexuaca and Madrena should have shown the couriers coming in with those packets. Why didn’t the discrepancy show up?”

“Something else to investigate then,” Raff nodded.

“Do you have a candidate to replace Castellano, dear?” Em asked to change the subject.

“I’m thinking this Tomasi d’Angelo is well-suited,” Raff told her. “He’ll never be a master by talent, but we both know that’s not necessary to run a hall. It’s a waste to keep our best wayfarers bogged down with paperwork when we need them in the field. And it could relate to why no one noticed the discrepancies in Castellano’s reports. It’s time more of our bureaucrats were chosen for their ability to organize and not because they can juggle balls of Wild energy.

“Tomasi impresses me as being a bright young man,” Raff went on. “Well, not so young, I guess he is about thirty, but he understands what it means to be a team player. Chanya tells me Tomasi was an excellent assistant to Kaz without showing any signs of resentment for being forced to work for a younger man. I think we’ll give him a shot at running this hall.”

“Shouldn’t he have experience in a smaller hall first?” Em asked concernedly. “This is the main Guildhall for Farring Colony, after all.”

“Most of the so-called halls in Farring are just local offices run by non-Guild personnel,” Raff replied. “Tomasi would be as wasted in one of them as Kaz would be if stationed here. There are a few that are real Guildhalls, but they’re all run by journeymen, most of whom have never been outside of Farring or if they have been it was to one of the neighboring colonies. They’re all local boys, really.”

“Snobbery, Raff?” Em asked archly.

“Not at all,” Raff shook his head, “but Tomasi has served in a variety of locations in Varana, Crace, Palendo and Meni. He has the experience we need in a larger guildhall.”

“Are you sure he was not a confederate of Castellano?” Em asked. “Having worked in Crace and her colonies...” she let the thought hang in the air.

“And you were born in Crace,” Raff countered. “Should I suspect you too? No. Tomasi’s record is good, or rather it was good until Castellano started giving him evaluations that were lukewarm at best. I think Tomasi would already be heading up a hall somewhere had it not been for that. Well, I’m not inclined to accept Castellano’s word for anything, least of all that.” There was a polite knock on the door and Raff looked up. “Ah, Tomasi. Are your ears burning? We were just talking about you.” Raff went on to explain the situation.

“Are you sure I’m ready to be a hall master, sir?” Tomasi asked when Raff had finished.

“I wouldn’t have made the offer otherwise,” Raff pointed out. “From what I can see from Castellano’s sloppy records, he’s been holding you back.”

“He held the entire hall back, sir,” Tomasi replied. “Most of our apprentices have graduated the local university and should have had proper Guild training in wayfaring. Toby and Madeline, the two who have been assisting Kaz and Chanya, really ought to be journeymen by now, but in spite of requests, Master Keith refused to requisition a Guild trainer.”

“Then you can do so now,” Raff replied. “I’ll countersign the request. That should pretty much guarantee approval from Taundon. In the meantime is there anyone in this hall with a head for organization?”

“Madeline is very good at that sort of thing,” Tomasi replied. “Of course from what you described, my own ability to keep files must be better than what Master Keith was doing. But Madeline is assigned to Master Sanai.”

“Chanya’s a big girl and can take of herself,” Em replied. “And she’s assisting Kaz right now, so she does not really need an adjutant. Toby can help them both for the duration. It won’t be all that long anyway.”

“Are you leaving soon?” Tomasi asked.

“Yes,” Em replied. “As soon as we can bring you up to speed and shake Kaz and Chanya loose from the Southern Caucus.”

“Em’s right,” Raff added. “As we’ve started to organize here, patterns of abuse are materializing and several names keep cropping up that do not seem to appear on any official reports. Also I’m expecting a packet from Pacidelphia.”

“Keith was planning to leave in a day or two for Pacidelphia,” Tomasi commented. “Do you think that might be related?”

“It’s a possibility,” Raff admitted. “We’ll have to be careful when we get there, but you shouldn’t have to worry about that. However, you’ll be sending your reports by way of that office too. Pacidephia is the Guild’s main office in Southern Varana. Anyway I want to see Castellano’s full record in the Guild. He doesn’t seem to have kept a copy here, but in the meantime I think we’ll put you and Madeline to work on straightening out the files.”

“We also need to keep wayfarer parties moving throughout the colony,” Tomasi pointed out. “Master Keith, uh Castellano, had a habit of making parties wait until they were almost too large for our journeymen to guide comfortably. I suppose that’s for the best now since everyone is used to working at their limits and we may have stretched them more than we might otherwise have, but since Keith died we’ve been sending out smaller parties and we don’t have many journeymen in the hall at any given time.”

“Good, actually,” Raff nodded. “We don’t want to keep travelers waiting, but there is no need to hoard the talent that moves them either. A hall full of journeymen does no one good if they aren’t working. You need to appoint a dispatcher. I don’t know why Castellano didn’t do that himself.”

“All the better to keep control of the hall, if you ask me,” Em replied. “Delegating the authority to dispatch parties would have meant someone else had to be able to see what passed for the hall records. Well, Kaz and Chanya should be back soon. I notice that Southern Caucus doesn’t miss too many meals. Why don’t I arrange for something to be brought in? We can discuss the changes over dinner and

be ready to work another hour or two on all this afterward.”

The expected packet arrived the next evening along with a party of merchants headed inland. Raff spent the next two hours reading it with Em before calling Kaz, Chanya and Tomasi in to discuss the matter. “Well this is starting to make sense,” Raff told them. “Castellano changed his name at the same time he was posted to New Farrington. That did not seem suspicious at the time since it is not uncommon for wayfarers to take local sounding names when permanently assigned to an office. His original surname is Salusian or Lower Cracian and would have obviously marked him as a foreigner. That never bothered me, but...

“His past,” Raff continued, “suggests a different explanation. Castellano’s first administrative assignment was as assistant hall master in Maceno, but it appears he had a bit of a gambling problem and got himself badly in debt. His hall master, one Gaston Omez, evidently covered for him and arranged for a long term loan from the Guild. He also reassigned Castellano to a hall in Palendo. Castellano didn’t learn his lesson, however, and was once more transferred. This time here to New Farrington.

“He seems to have kept himself away from gambling here, but he was already working as an agent for Crace,” Raff told them. “He was in contact with three others, all of whom I need to know more about – that’s for later – but one is Omez and the other two are Juan Vasco, for whom Castellano worked in Palendo and Pierre D’Ace in Salomania.”

“I’ve seen those names in the accounts,” Tomasi reported. “Each of them received fairly large transfers of Guild funds since Master Keith took over here.”

“Why?” Kaz asked.

“The books don’t say,” Tomasi admitted. “The lines just say ‘Services.’”

“I have also found letters from those men,” Em reported. “Castellano was most careless and while they wrote in circuitous terms, it seems obvious, given what we have learned, that he was being blackmailed by these men and receiving certain instructions from them.”

“Or perhaps he was merely sending money to fellow members of a conspiracy rather than being blackmailed,” Tomasi suggested. “You already said that he had apparently skimmed off a fair amount for himself.”

“That was before we knew about Omez, Vasco and D’Ace,” Em replied.

“The numbers don’t entirely add up, Emblem,” Chanya told her. “He was certainly paying those men for some reason and they do appear to have been telling him to do his best to exploit the differences between Northern and Southern Varana, but the amounts he paid them don’t add up to the amounts he was taking from the Guild.”

“So he was paying himself as well,” Kaz replied. “When we look into it, I’m sure we’ll find the packets that went to the Bank of Crace in Madrena were for him and the ones to Luaxaca were for these other three. But what were they up to?”

“Stealing such large sums of money from the Guild was motive enough, don’t you think?” Em asked.

“Normally,” Kaz replied, “yes, but we also see that they were acting on behalf of Crace. If they were getting paid through this office, that doesn’t make sense to me. I think they had something else going on.”

“I agree,” Raff told them, “and we’re going to have to track them down to find out. Our next stop will be Pacidelphia, I think. Waiting for more files to be copied and sent is too slow. We’ll see what they have on file there. After that, I think I want to have a few personal chats with Masters Omez, Vasco and D’Ace.”

“I’m not sure if chat is quite the word I would use,” Emblem commented dryly.

“Well, it’s likely to be mostly nonverbal communication,” Raff admitted. “But I will not stand for this sort of political meddling by Guildsmen. These three can’t be all there is to it. There almost has to be someone telling them what to do or paying them to do it. Maybe not, but we do need to find out. And if it turns out to be Royal Crace, His Majesty and I are going to have another long chat.”

“I’ll bet the word interdiction will figure heavily in it,” Em remarked.

“Does that bother you, Em?” Raff asked concernedly.

“Only on behalf of the innocents it would harm,” Em replied. “You know my only first loyalty is to the Guild.”

“I know,” Raff agreed. “Kaz, we need to finish up with the Southern Caucus as soon as possible, tomorrow, if we can. I’ll go with you to Prospect Hall and help you –present what we have learned about the threat to Varana.”

“I think I have them mostly convinced already,” Kaz told him, “but this is fairly damning. It should turn the rest of them our way. I’ll see to having those copied. I’m still under investigation by the constabulary, you know.”

“I’ll take care of that too,” Raff assured him. “Better pack your bags, we’ll be leaving on the next ship bound for Pacidelphia.”

Epilogue

The City of Haristol was all decked out for the one man who was arguably the world’s greatest celebrity. There was green and gold bunting hanging from the buildings all along the main street down to

the harbor as Captain James Carter and his valiant crew paraded down to the wharf, followed closely by a brass and woodwind band all tooting, piping and honking out a variety of inspiring anthems.

The sailors smiled and waved to the crowds, but the man of the hour, the great Captain Carter proceeded down the street with dignity, pausing every now and then to nod to a man, tip his gold-trimmed tricorn hat to a lady, or to allow his face to smile, just a bit, at a child.

Captain James Carter; explorer, navigator and cartographer. The townsfolk of Harristol had seen thousands of sailors come and go. None of them had been worthy of more than a passing nod if that, but all business came to a halt the day James Carter came to town. It was said he was a master wayfarer in his own right, but had chosen a career in the Navy instead. In truth he was a wayfarer of potential journeyman abilities but had never been trained.

Even the great James Carter was required to ship out with a Guild wayfarer on board. He did not really need one, however. Most accomplished sailors did not. The Wild changed many things, but the sun, moon and stars were eternal. At sea in the Wild, those were more reliable than a wayfarer path and there were very few paths across the Bright Ocean.

There was a young man walking beside Captain Carter. He had long shiny black hair and dark skin, but he was dressed every inch a gentleman. His name was Ponui. He was a native of the Friendship Islands and he had come to the Green Lands with Captain Carter some years earlier. Ponui had served as Carter's guide in the Bright Ocean and since his arrival in the Green Lands had become nearly as famous as Carter himself.

The crowds cheered and flowers were thrown in their path, and children raced to keep up with the procession until it finally arrived in the harbor district. Once there, the band took up its place at the end of the long stone wharf, not only to continue to play in honor of the departing heroes but to hold back the admiring throng.

Lord Admiral Horace Barker waited with his staff at the gangplank as Carter approached. "My lord," Carter greeted him formally as his crew boarded the HMS Aspiration.

"Captain," the Admiral nodded. Then he added in a more chummy manner, "Quite a send-off, I must say."

"Not too bad for the son of a farmhand from Ebshire," Carter commented wryly. "You have met Ponui, haven't you?"

"Of course," the Lord Admiral nodded. As the head of the Queen's Navy he would have been invited to all the fashionable parties. "A pleasure to see you again, Ponui. May you have a pleasant voyage home."

"Thank you, my lord," Ponui replied in what was an upper class accent in Taundon. Three years earlier Ponui's grasp of Grundish had been tenuous at best and now he spoke as well as the Queen.

"And this, Captain Carter," the Admiral introduced a gentleman to his right, "is Master Josiah Whitters of the Ancient and Honorable Guild of Wayfarers."

"Pleased to meet you, Captain," Whitters told him, offering his hand.

"An honor, sir," Carter replied clasping hands briefly. "Always happy to have a Guildsman on

board.”

“I suppose you won’t really need me,” Whitters commented. “This is your fourth trip to the Bright Ocean, isn’t it?”

“No, my third,” Carter admitted easily. My first voyage involved mapping New Voland to the northeast of Meldan. It was on that trip we first sighted the Northwest passage, through which we plan to return from the Bright Ocean from the west on this trip. Of course, the crowd out there thinks the main purpose of the trip is to bring Ponui here home. No reason to mention the Northwest Passage since we don’t know for certain it goes across the north of the Western Continent. It wouldn’t do if we failed to find it, you know.”

“We’ll be sending another ship through the other way,” the Lord Admiral added. “We hope to have them meet somewhere in the middle.”

“So Master Whitter,” Carter asked the wayfarer as they boarded the ship. “Have you ever been to the Bright Ocean?”

“Can’t say that I have, Captain,” Whitter replied, “but I have the logs we shall need to follow. That is all we should need.”

“Well, I won’t hide the fact I would prefer to have a wayfarer who had sailed those waters before,” Carter admitted, “but there aren’t all that many of us and no one has ever traveled our planned course, so a master is essential.” All around the crew was already casting off and the ship was slowly starting to move away from the dock.

“Well, that I am, Captain,” Whitter replied. “Until a few years ago, I was even on the Guild Council.”

“Really, sir?” Carter asked. “What made you leave?”

Whitter shrugged. He had rehearsed his answer. “I felt the need to get back out in the world, of course.”

“Good man!” Carter told him, clapping him on the shoulder. “Well, why don’t we both go up to the bridge and supervise, hmm?”

On the Wharf, the band played one last jaunty march as the HMS Aspiration slipped out to sea on what would become a most historic voyage.

Author’s Afterword

To be continued...

This is really not where I planned to end this story. In fact I thought this would be maybe the first third of *A Continent without Form*. I never meant to have an entire novel centered on Kaz and Chanya. I like them as characters, but I meant for Raff and Em to have a bigger part to play. I just didn't get there yet.

Here's how it was. I wanted to establish Kaz and Chanya, especially Kaz, as adult wayfarers; two fully accredited masters capable of handling anything Raff and Em could, because they were going to have to later on anyway and it seemed a good way to start the story rather than have Raff just shrug off his responsibilities and go gallivanting across the world. This way, Raff had a good reason to leave Taundon.

The thing is, as I wrote this part it just kept expanding. I'd realize that some incident would be needed to make a section interesting or that something that seemed small when plotting needed to be expanded and explained. And, to be honest, I think I underestimated how many words it would take to tell this part of the story. So the book grew longer and longer and what was supposed to be a brief return to Varana, became an extended one.

Finally when I realized what was happening I knew I would have to find a good break-off point. It meant revealing a few facts earlier than I had intended and writing a bridge with which to begin the next book in the series, but in all, I think this one turned out well. Hopefully you did too.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
Westport, Mass
June 30, 2009

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