

A SLICE OF LIFE FANTASY NOVEL



THE
HEALERS'
HOME

S.E. ROBERTSON

A SLICE OF LIFE FANTASY NOVEL

THE
HEALERS'
HOME

S.E. ROBERTSON

Copyright © 2016 by S.E. Robertson. 2nd edition, 2024.

Cover art © Miblar (<https://miblar.com>)

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

For Toby and Lily, and the synergy of cats and books. Thanks for all your “help,” fuzzies.

Content Notes

This book contains:

- depictions of depression and PTSD; discussions of past substance abuse
- references to fictional religions
- medical gore / descriptions of surgery (broken leg, described with some detail)
- mild swearing
- a couple of incidents of racialized insulting language
- depiction of homelessness
- mention of patient death in a medical context
- references to food scarcity/shortages
- one threat of violence: a character has a crossbow pointed at them

Please read at your own discretion. Additional details are available at the author's site:
<https://www.serobertsonfiction.com>.

Part One: Agna: The Transfer

“Name and affiliation, please?”

With a glance at her traveling companion, Agna stepped up to the desk. “Agna Despana, the healer. From the Academy of the Divine Balance, originally. I’m here to extend my contract. A letter from the Vertal base should have arrived by now.”

The clerk, unperturbed by any amount of hinting, scanned down the ledger on her desk. “Yes. Your last assignment was on the Golden Caravan?”

“That’s right.” It still seemed strange that the caravan had moved on without them. For two years, she and Keifon had traveled with the company of merchants and tradespeople, setting up their clinic at every village and crossroads they passed, treating everyone who came their way — Agna with her energy healing, Keifon with his field-medic’s training. And now someone else would have been hired to take their place, packing their belongings onto a wagon between stops, treating their patients, trading jokes with their friends, sitting around the bonfire in the evenings. She and Keifon had fallen into a rhythm together, and now it belonged to someone else. Now their lives would change again, in this chilly city’s mountain air.

“And...” The clerk looked up at the other arrival and dipped her pen.

Carefully unshouldering his lute case, Agna’s traveling companion stepped up: a man a few years older than Agna and not much taller, with skin the color of sunlit amber and dark, calm eyes. The Yanweian rhythms of his voice did not obscure his clear, though quiet, command of the Kaveran language. “Keifon the Medic, ma’am. Yanweian National Army.”

The clerk made some notes on the ledger and replaced her quill in its holder. “Welcome to Wildern, agents.”

“Thank you,” they chorused. Agna felt a tentative brush against her hand, and she wound her fingers through Keifon’s. They had arrived, after weeks on the road, after the years before that. It seemed too simple. She’d met with the Benevolent Union at the end of her two-year contract, and told them that she would stay on instead of going home to Nessiny. They’d thanked her for her service and said that she would be of use in Wildern as a healer. They hadn’t tried to talk her out of it.

Of course, she hadn’t gotten letters back from her family yet. They’d have plenty to say about this. But she had made the decision to take her life down this path — rather, she and Keifon had decided together to follow parallel paths. And here they were. That was all it took. She’d singlehandedly changed her life, just like that. And her dearest friend, who had begun this tour as a stranger, would be with her all along. She had every confidence that she would successfully open the first art gallery in Wildern, but it wouldn’t come immediately, and she was glad to have a friend beside her as she set out.

Agna shrugged at the straps of her backpack, which seemed heavier than ever. “You have rooms here, right? We were told...”

“A few, yes,” the clerk replied. “How long do you need to stay?”

“With any luck, just a night or two. I have a friend lining up some housing for us.” She ran through her mental checklist; she’d need to let Jaeti know that they’d arrived. She’d sent letters to the Wildernian historian frequently since her decision to try and open an art gallery in the city. Jaeti had turned her exacting attention toward finding a good location for their joint venture. She’d been on the lookout for years, and according to her letters, she had found a good location where Agna could live on site. She’d described it in her letters, and Agna was eager to see it in person.

The clerk blotted her page, distracting Agna from her dreams of the new gallery. “Will you need one room or two?”

Keifon’s hand dropped away, and Agna glanced at him to find him blushing and staring at the edge of the clerk’s desk. She rolled her eyes. The clerk meant nothing by it, not that it even mattered. “If there’s room to set up a cot, one is fine. I hate to take two rooms if you don’t have too many to start with. I mean, we stayed in a little tent for two years, we can take small quarters just fine. Kei, is that all right with you?”

He shifted his backpack straps. “Uh, yeah.”

The clerk plucked some keys from the rack attached to her desk. “If it isn’t sufficient, do come back and we’ll get you a second room.” She held out a pair of dull iron keys to Agna, who gave one to Keifon. “Up those stairs there on the left, down the hall, last door

on the right. The bathroom is across the hall. One of us will always be at this station if you need anything.”

“Thank you very much.” Agna steered Keifon toward their remaining luggage, piled near the door. Loading himself up seemed to distract Keifon from his embarrassment, and he gamely followed Agna up the sweeping wooden staircase to the balcony overlooking the atrium. Agna set off down the hall, noting the doors to meeting rooms and libraries across from the guest rooms. A muffled conversation seeped from under one of the guest room doors; Agna sifted out the Kaveran speech pattern, but nothing more.

She unlocked the last door and heaved her half of the luggage through. Inside, enough orange sunset light streamed in from the windows to illuminate a spacious but simple room: table, chest of drawers, couch, single bed. She set down the chest of cookware first, then the folded cot frame, and then shucked off the backpack full of clothes and books. Keifon piled his own luggage next to hers.

“There’s a couch,” he remarked, sounding unconvinced. “I’ll try that out first.”

“Plenty of time to work that out. I’d like to write a note to Jaeti, put in a request to meet with the officials here, get some dinner, and take a bath.” She swatted Keifon on the shoulder for mouthing the last part with her. “The last inn was a week ago. I’m not going to say that you smell, but I’d recommend it too.”

“I will, I will.” Keifon stretched his back, bending his neck from side to side. “Don’t know if I’m up for dinner, though.”

Agna heard the fatigue in his voice, even before he dropped onto the couch and tipped his head against the backrest. If he so much as left this room to take a bath before falling asleep, it would be a surprise. “Suit yourself. If you don’t want to go, I’ll bring you something. I’d hoped to meet with Jaeti regardless, if she’s available.”

“I’m sure she’ll be available for you. It sounds like this is as big a deal for her as it is for you.” He yawned, confirming Agna’s suspicions. “Hm. Mind if I use the bath first? I’ll try to be done by the time you’re done with your letter.”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” He knelt by his backpack to rifle through it. Agna fetched her stationery kit from her backpack and the tinderbox from the larder chest. The lamp flared to life, and Agna turned it down to a soft glow.

She took a seat at the table and unpacked her paper and ink and pens. Keifon squeezed her shoulder on his way out the door, carrying an armload of clothes. Agna found Jaeti’s

address in her notebook and addressed the envelope first, trying to rein in her mind before she started dancing around the room in glee.

Dear Jaeti,

I hope all is well with you. Keifon and I have arrived in Wildern at last! We are staying at the Benevolent Union base. I'd love to meet you for dinner if you have the time.

Agna realized that she had been out to dinner in Wildern exactly once. She redipped her pen.

— I trust you have some locations in mind, as I am not very familiar with the city yet. I'll be at the base if you can meet me here. They can send for me from the front desk.

I look forward to seeing you again soon, and then embarking on the next step of the project!

Enthusiastically,

Agna.

She sanded the page, sealed the note in the envelope, and pulled a fresh sheet of paper from her stationery kit.

To the Wildern base intake agent:

I would like to meet with you to negotiate the terms of my contract. I will be engaged in some business in town, but I hope to be available as soon as you are able to see me. I would also like to request a meeting for my friend, Keifon the Medic, who is renegotiating his own contract with the Yanweian National Army. Either of us can be contacted at 17 Sprucetree Street, Wildern. The property is currently vacant, but I plan to purchase it tomorrow.

Cordially,

Agna Despana

Gathering both letters, she left the door unlocked for Keifon as she went. Two things off her list. Next, a bath and dinner, and then some much-needed sleep. By then, her mind might stop buzzing with excitement. Maybe.

Keifon: The Expatriate

A gna's pale-olive skin no longer seemed anemic and strange to Keifon, and the rhythm of her voice echoed in his head as though he'd heard it all his life. Every other Easterner he encountered — as infrequently as that happened, even now — had changed their categorization, likewise. They were not strangers, not alien, but *like her*.

She could still irritate him in splendid fashion. She'd come out with some arrogant pronouncements without provocation. And yet. He'd watched her listen to the concerns of hundreds of patients along their travels. He'd played his nanbur in the evenings as he watched her draw beautiful illustrations of the herbs she'd collected. She'd studied his native language, even though it didn't come easily to her, even though she had no use for it except to talk with him. She made him laugh when he'd thought all was lost — especially then. He'd confessed his greatest failures to her, the divorce and his drinking and the rejection by his clan. She had listened. She had hugged him and told him she was sorry he'd suffered.

Now she had invited him to live in the same city where she would make her life. It was dangerous to ask too much of her, to get too attached. She'd oblige, of course. She'd come to visit him, or let him visit; she'd listen to his worries and his joys and share her own. And eventually she'd see how weak he was, how terrified he was of walking into this strange city alone.

Until he found a matchmaker who'd agree to set him up, his life would be a balance between the fear of being alone and the shame of harboring that fear. And above all that, he wanted to stay in touch with Agna. She'd always put up with camping grudgingly, doing what she had to do for the sake of their assignment. Keifon wanted to see how she'd bloom when she had space to put down roots. He wanted her to have a place to draw that was better appointed than a lap desk and an oil lamp. He wanted her to buy all of the books she wanted, no longer limited to what they could carry in their backpacks. He'd

known her only under restrictions, laden with inconveniences. He wanted to know her in her element.

Thud. “Aagh!”

Keifon woke with a start. The walls were in the wrong places, too far apart; space stretched and warped. He didn’t know these walls, or the ceiling, too far away to touch. But he knew the voice.

“Aghna?”

“Ow. It’s me. Did you sleep well?”

“Mmn — yeah.” He rubbed his eyes. Last night — today — swam into focus. They’d come into town in the afternoon, after the long trip north from Vertal. This was the room in Wildern. He’d come back after his bath and fallen asleep on the couch. He sat up, ruffling his hair and yawning. “How was your meeting?”

“Oh, wonderful. Mind if I light a lamp? Sorry.”

“Nn, go ahead.” He winced and shielded his eyes as she struck a light on the table.

“It was so exciting, you have no idea.” Aghna bounced around the room, straightening their shoes by the door, pulling clothes from her backpack. “Jaeti put a bid on the building and made her part of the down payment, so we just have to go over tomorrow, put down my part, and sign the paperwork. It’s happening. It’s really happening.” She landed on the couch next to him and gripped his hands. “We’re here, Kei. We made it.”

His smile turned into another yawn as he squeezed her hands. “I’m happy for you two.”

“For us! You and me. You just have to talk to the Benevolent Union, and you’ll be on your way, too.”

He slipped out of her grip to stretch his shoulders. “Hm, and find somewhere to stay. I bet there’s a lot of—”

“What? With me, obviously.”

Keifon blinked.

A year ago, he would have argued with her. Even six months ago, a part of him would have convinced the rest of him that it was too good to be true, that he didn’t deserve such a kind friend. That voice still muttered somewhere, walled up behind a hundred sweet memories.

It didn’t mean the same thing to her as it did to him, he reminded himself. Her country’s ways were different from his own, and both were different from the country in which they found themselves now. She’d mentioned that her mentor from the Academy had roomed with another friend in Vertal, as though that were a normal occurrence out-

side an apprenticeship or the Army. He'd gathered over time that such things happened in Nessiny, where she'd grown up, and even here in Kavera. Young people moved out from their parents' homes without getting married, and sometimes formed temporary households of their own. They might stay together for months or years, until they got married to other people or could afford their own space. It didn't mean that they were engaged, or even interested in one another. Certainly that wasn't the case here.

He still dropped his gaze and blushed a little. "Th-thank you. You're sure?"

She nudged him, shoulder to shoulder. "Always. Anywhere I am, you're welcome. Got it?"

You don't know that, the small, exiled voice warned. *I might disappoint you.*

Shut up.

He hugged her, hoping she wouldn't notice the wetness in his eyes, knowing she wouldn't think less of him if she did. "Thank you so much. You're always welcome with me, too."

She squeezed him back, then rumbled his hair. "I got you some food. Then you should get back to sleep. So should I, if I can." But she echoed his yawn this time. "Ergh. Stop that."

"Heh. Sorry." Keifon stood and stretched on his way to the table, where a paper-wrapped package waited. He unwrapped it, and his hunger revived at the first whiff. "Thank you, Agna."

"Sure." His friend shrugged. "I'm going to get changed. Be right back."

While she was gone, he devoured the sandwich of sliced pork marinated in a mild herbal oil. He poured a glass of water from the ewer at the side of the room and drank it, then collapsed onto the couch, folding his hands over his stomach.

With me, obviously. She had such a way of seeing the fantastic as prosaic. Keifon smiled to himself. So — he let himself think it, now that he was alone — he had a place to stay. And it was with his dearest friend in the world. Not a tent, moving from campsite to campsite — though in that temporary shelter, he had fumblingly forged his relationship with Agna. Not a bunk in a barracks, not a snow-drifted doorway; not his parents' house, every board thick with sorrow and disappointed expectations. A new place, a fresh place, a corner of his own, where he was welcome, where he could stay.

She didn't know how impossible it was, how important, how precious. He could try to make her see, but she would still shrug it off. She would understand that it meant something to him, even if she didn't quite see it herself. He would tell her how much it

meant to him, how much she'd given him. He would make it up to her if it took the rest of his life.

The door snicked open, and Agna slipped in, wearing her nightdress and dressing gown. She packed away her clothes and crossed her arms, looking between the couch and the bed. "Are you sure you're all right with the couch? We can still set up a cot."

"Mmn, it's fine. It's pretty comfortable." To illustrate his point, he stretched out, pulling his blanket up.

"All right, if you say so." She blew out the lamp; he heard her pad over to the window. The curtain rings hissed against the rod as she pulled the drapes closed.

"Hey." He reached out, not expecting to catch her in the dark. She stumbled into his arm. Her hand struck his shoulder, searching, and traced down his arm. Her fingers curled into his grip.

"What is it?" Her voice was hushed and sleepy. She'd hardly slept on the road, either, and it had caught up with her.

"I just — I wanted to say thank you. For letting me stay with you."

He couldn't see her face, but he knew she was smiling. "Of course. *Alaste la.*"

I love you like my own family. It was one of the first sentences she'd taught him in her own language. Another impossible thing. She couldn't see him smiling, either, but that didn't stop him. "*Alaste le.*" He could let go now. For now. Keifon tucked his hand under his pillow. "Good night."

Agna's hand found his head, stroked his hair, and went away. "Good night."

Agna: The Wildern Museum

A fevered commentary hummed under every sight and word and act as Agna followed the historian and the banker up the hill. All of the patrons would walk this way, and stop in for tea here, and then see the front display windows... The banker picked through a key ring feathered with paper tags and unlocked the door.

The windows lining two sides of the front room had been papered over, filtering the morning sunlight. The interior of the former dry-goods store — soon to be her gallery — glowed in the dusky light. Jaeti, the historian who was Agna's partner in this venture, sneezed three times and pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, groaning.

"We'll clean up," Keifon said.

"Yeah. This afternoon," Agna added.

"Don't mind me, I—" Jaeti sneezed again, and finally breathed through the handkerchief to screen out the dust.

Reading from a floor plan, the banker led them deeper into the room that would soon be their showcase gallery. "This front room was the main shop floor, of course; cold storage on the left here, down the stairs; dry storage on the right; office, kitchen, restroom and more dry storage in the back. It's been scanned by our earthbreakers. The structural components are sound, no termite damage or settling. There were a few mouse holes in the cellar, but those have been filled in."

Traveling exhibits! Competitions! Wine cellar for opening galas! And her own office. Hers and Jaeti's, anyway.

The banker unlocked a door with filmy glass panes and led them into a little courtyard knee-deep in weeds. A peeling fence as high as Agna's head hemmed it in on all sides. Turning, Agna saw a second door next to the first, which the banker unlocked. She rolled up the floor plan and slotted it into her shoulder bag. "This way, please."

Agna, Jaeti, and Keifon followed her up a narrow staircase, soon to be Agna's front stairs, lit by two narrow windows. In the room at the top of the stairs, a squat iron stove huddled by the wall next to a water pump and stone sink. Cupboards and counters lined the other walls. The upstairs windows were not papered over, and dust motes swirled in the sunbeams as the four of them walked across the wood floor.

The banker turned to wave around the room. "Kitchen, as you can see. Of course, you can convert it later if you like. The bath is through that door. Common room through here. Down the hallway, there are four more rooms — the shopkeeper's family lived up here, but you can convert that, too."

Agna and Keifon peeked into each of the rooms; each was dusty and empty. The right-side rooms were sunlit, facing the street. The left-side rooms were overshadowed by the building next door, but the windows let in enough light to see. When they expanded, they could transition into a second exhibit, or put the historical displays on the second floor. Someday they'd fill this place to the rafters. For now...

"So?" Jaeti asked, muffled by her handkerchief, when they returned to the kitchen.

Agna throttled her excitement down to a tiny bounce on her toes, but it burst through her voice. "Where do I sign?"

In the absence of furniture, the banker spread out a mountain of paperwork along the kitchen counter. Agna checked the bank slip in her pocket for the dozenth time and stepped up to read. Keifon opened a window for Jaeti, then ghosted through the rooms as Jaeti sipped the fresh air.

The banker answered each of Agna's questions, jotting notes in a leather-bound book as Agna studied the terms. Thirty years. Subtract the down payment, then divide the remainder over a span longer than her entire life so far. She would be Jaeti's age when the terms were over, if they didn't pay ahead of schedule, of course. The more they could raise from the community and their early backers, the faster they could open the gallery, and then the proceeds could pay into the mortgage as well as into new acquisitions and personnel. Meanwhile, Agna would keep her contract with the Benevolent Union and work as a healer to cover her own expenses and pay the mortgage. She would work hard, and tap all of her reserves of patience and expertise and determination. Jaeti would pull in her five and a half decades of contacts in Wildern. They would make this happen.

At the end of the document, there were blank lines and spaces, ready for signatures. Seeing her progress, the banker produced a stripped quill from her bag and slid the inkwell toward Agna. Jaeti sniffled her way away from the window.

We, the undersigned, agree to...

We, the undersigned, are going to open the first public art gallery in the city of Wildern.

We, the undersigned, are adults.

We, the undersigned, are terrified.

She remembered to call before dipping the pen. "Kei! It's time!"

His joy hit her like a wave as he rushed into the room, bearing her already light heart up. He waited beside Jaeti, reminding her with a soothing pat on the shoulder to keep breathing.

Agna signed the contract and stepped back. Keifon hugged her so tightly that she thought they might both explode, as Jaeti took her turn to sign.

"I knew it. I knew it. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you," Agna replied, with a sudden wobble in her voice. She was in a new world, her head swimming with legal terms in her second language, and she had signed off on her fate for the next thirty years. But her dearest friend was with her, and his quiet voice and his embrace tied her to her past. This was not a new life; it was the continuation of her current life. One grew into the other. And she would not step through the door alone.

"Congratulations," the banker announced, and Jaeti applauded, her handkerchief flapping like a flag. Agna and Keifon stepped apart, too excited to be embarrassed.

"So — payment," Agna said. She pulled the bank slip from her pocket, nervous that her shaking hands would tear it as she unfolded it. It had traveled all the way from Vertal with her, and she had touched its edges twenty times a day; it was a strange relief to finally let it go. She passed it to the banker, who nodded and studied the signatures. Keifon sidled up to set a small cloth bag next to the banker's elbow.

"What's that?" Agna poked it and heard a heavy, metallic clink.

"It — it isn't much. I'm sorry. But if you're going to let me stay here, I want to contribute."

Agna sighed. "If you really want to..."

"I do."

"Well then, I appreciate it. I'll be paying rent to the gallery while I live up here, so it will be easier with both of us together. Thank you." She slid the bag closer to the banker's pile of papers, and the banker opened it and spilled out the pile of coins to be counted. Agna turned to her friend. "I'll name a gallery after you."

"Actually..." Jaeti began.

“—Joking. Joking. I know what a sponsorship goes for! Don’t worry. A — hmm — a bench, then. Or a shelf. Welcome to the Reji Keifon Shelf of Honor.” Her flourish in the air made him smile.

Keifon bowed, a solemn hand over his heart. “I’ll visit it every day.”

“You’d better.” Agna scooped up the empty bag and crushed it, fidgeting. “Still... isn’t this going to set you back? I don’t want to get in the way of your plans, either.”

He shrugged, turning toward the open window, and leaned on his hands as he looked over the neighbors’ yards. “A little. Maybe. I’d rather do this now than keep it. I’m getting ahead of myself, after all. I don’t even have any prospects, let alone plans to get married. So I’ll save up for my house. And not be afraid of living in the meantime.” He rested his forehead against the window glass. Agna saw his smile. “We’re here now. I don’t want to forget about now.”

Agna stepped up beside him to squeeze his shoulder, and held out the empty money bag. “Now is good.”

The banker cleared her throat, and Agna and Keifon turned. “I have Jaeti’s down payment, your transfer, and this. Any other contributions?”

“No, ma’am.” Agna laced her fingers together, willing herself to at least appear calm.

The banker’s pen flew across the pages. Its plume stirred dust motes in the air. “All right, then. That’s eleven percent of the total. Over the agreed time of thirty years, with taxes and fees... here’s the plan by year, if you would both sign, please.”

Agna and Jaeti each scanned the columns of numbers. They signed the lines, and the banker blotted the pages. She swept the bank transfer and Keifon’s coins into her bag, and left the gallery’s copies of the documents on the counter. “And we’re finished.”

Agna’s whoop escaped at last. Jaeti chuckled between snuffles. Keifon applauded. As they subsided, the banker detached four labeled keys from her formidable keyring and lined them up on the counter. “Thank you for your business. If you need help or want to renegotiate, come and see me. Good day.” She whisked off in the wake of their thanks, leaving the two founders of the Wildern Museum and their first benefactor.

“Well.” Jaeti’s eyes were wet, which Agna suspected was not only from the dust. “I can’t tell you what an exciting day this is. How long we’ve waited for it.”

“It couldn’t have happened without you,” Agna said. “Truly. This is a dream for me, too. I hope it’ll be everything you were waiting for.”

“I’m sure it will.” Jaeti picked up one of the keys, nudging its mate closer to the other two. “This is to the second floor, I believe. If you’ll be living here for a while, I won’t need this yet.”

“Ah. Right. Thank you.” Agna collected the remaining keys and slipped two into her pocket, labeled *Front/Back* and *Upstairs*.

“I’ll be off, then. Time to spread the word. Mobilize the troops.”

“Yes. We’ll get this place cleaned up, don’t worry.”

Jaeti dabbed her nose. “I appreciate it. Good day, then.”

“Goodbye. Thank you.”

When the door at the bottom of the the stairs closed, Agna took a deep breath. Jaeti was an equal partner in the whole undertaking, of course, and someday they would have steering committees and a board of directors. For now, this space, this dusty room and all of the dusty rooms up here, were hers — and Keifon’s, as long as he needed to stay. Theirs and no one else’s. They were answerable to no one, for this little piece of the world. Keifon had inherited his parents’ ranch once, and although that time of his life had ended badly, perhaps he had felt this way then. Agna had never felt it before. It was like a gathering summer storm, like a fire on a winter night. She felt free and exposed, but she knew she was not alone.

She uncurled her hand and held out the last brass key. “Here. This is yours.”

Keifon took it, read the label — *Upstairs* — and saluted her, the key closed in his fist as he pressed it to his heart. “Thank you.”

Agna: The District

Agna and Keifon returned to the Benevolent Union base to pick up their luggage and check out. They would be back soon enough, if all went well and the intake agent answered Agna's note, but the departure still seemed important. They were no longer visitors, passing through town.

They piled their things in the apartment's kitchen, at the top of the stairs. Agna found her paper and pens as Keifon opened the windows.

"I think there's an attic, too," he called from one of the rooms. "I can't reach it, but there's a — what d'you call it — a hatch in the ceiling back here."

"Huh. We'll check it out as soon as we can get a ladder or something." She brushed the tip of her quill across her lips, then added "ladder" to "buckets, scrub brushes, mop." Closing her eyes, she pictured Tane's housekeeping closet at home. Soap. Wood polish. Vinegar.

Keifon returned to the kitchen; Agna dabbed at a spot on her cheek, and he wiped off the smudge on his own. "Hm. So, upstairs first, or down?"

"Well..." She looked over the list. "I'd thought downstairs first. Priorities. If it takes more than this afternoon..."

"I'm pretty sure it will."

"...then we're going to want a livable place to stay. We can rough it a little—" She grinned, and he returned it. "—but, you know, we'll want to cook and have a place to sleep and everything."

"Makes sense. So... we'll need food first of all."

"Cleaning supplies and food."

"Hm. I can work on getting the pumps primed if you want to go out. Or we can both go."

"I have a lot on the list," Agna said. And she didn't know what she was missing, anyway. She set down her pen. "And, well, if I'm overlooking anything, maybe you'll think of it."

Keifon didn't betray a flicker of doubt, or disappointment in her sheltered cluelessness. He rubbed his hands together and dug into his backpack for a money bag. "All right, ready when you are."

Agna snatched her list from the counter, folded it in quarters and stuffed it in her pocket on top of a handful of coins. They'd probably have to wander a while to find the nearest stores. They'd have to learn what was where in the neighborhood. She couldn't wait.

A few minutes later, they stood outside the shuttered gallery, looking in all directions. A tailor's shop and a cooper were across the street, a papermaker's was around the corner abutting their back courtyard, and on the other side was a stretch of houses. The city had solid construction, at least, compared to some of the villages Agna had seen during her travels. Almost all of them were made of wood, or wood and plaster with stone foundations; she couldn't see any solid stone buildings from where she stood. The local style seemed to favor steeply pitched roofs, to shed snow — the less she thought about snow, the better — and dark, solid timbers with whitewashed plaster between them. It was an odd effect, compared to the sprawling rooftop gardens and stone stairways of her home city, but she could get used to it.

"I remember Jaeti saying there was a good cluster of stores up the hill a ways," Agna said, realizing as she spoke that the whole of Sprucetree Street lay on a slant, and that the cross street did as well, angling toward the middle of town. "...Oh."

Keifon took a few steps up Sprucetree. "This way, maybe? We can always come back and try the other way. Eventually we'll have to learn it all."

"True."

They set off along Sprucetree Street, crossed the street that ran along the side of the gallery, and continued up the hill. Agna tried to note what shops were mixed in among the houses. Most of the businesses announced their names on carved wooden signs hung from beams above their doors.

First, she and Keifon needed cleaning supplies, and for that they needed a dry-goods store or a soapmaker's. Would a dry-goods store carry vinegar? It wasn't dry, but it kept through the year like flour or dried beans would, and back home in Nessiny, dry-goods stores always sold pickled vegetables and olives out of enormous barrels of vinegar. She'd rarely accompanied Tane when she went grocery shopping; she preferred shopping for

books and clothes, and her mother disapproved of her tagging along with the housekeeper.

Keifon touched her elbow and pointed across the street, drawing her out of her memories. Agna clapped. "A bookstore! So close! Ooh, that's dangerous."

He chuckled. "So they can just load up a wagon and roll it down the hill, then?"

"Yep." The thought of unpacking her small collection of books brought another realization. "After we get the place clean, we'll need some furniture. Bookshelves, tables. Beds."

"Yeah. We can set up the cots for now, but... yeah."

"Where to start." She noted a carpenter's sign ahead and pointed it out to Keifon. "Room by room, or what? I think we should get proper bedsteads first. And a table and chairs for the kitchen. We'll use those every day."

"Mmn. The table for sure. I kind of... hm. I wonder whether we should do the common rooms first. And your stuff. I don't know how long I'll be there, after all."

"Well, in any case, you can move it to your new house someday, so it's not going to be wasted." They weren't even moved in, and he was already halfway out the door. She'd have no idea where to start without him, which was aggravating. He wanted to leave; that was the whole reason he had come to Wildern, to get married and settle down on his own. She was being selfish, wanting to keep him. Needing his help.

"Anyway," she said, "we agree on the table, at least. Do we need anything else for the kitchen?"

He seemed to ponder this as they walked. "It would be nice to get a few more cooking utensils, now that we don't have to carry them everywhere. A good frying pan, and a proper bread pan. A couple of pitchers and bowls for drinking water. So if we can find a tinsmith or a blacksmith or a potter, we can get some things like that."

"Right." She hadn't even considered blacksmiths. They didn't have a horse and they didn't need weapons, and she'd forgotten that blacksmiths would make iron implements of other kinds, cooking utensils and fire tongs and such. This was why she couldn't be trusted to do this on her own.

"Thank you," she said. "For helping with this. Knowing what to do, and everything. You remember how I was when we first went out on the road." Insufferable. They had both been insufferable. Beyond that, she'd been about as much use in camping as a newborn colt. "Not knowing how to take care of myself, I mean. Well... I'm a little better at housekeeping than camping, I guess. Not by much."

Keifon squeezed her shoulder. His arm felt nice across her back. "I'm just doing my best, too. I learned about camping in the Army, but I'm out of my depth here, too. To be honest, I'm nervous. That I'm going to botch this, that I won't know what we need."

She dodged a low branch of a tree that grew between the street and the wooden walkway. "Yeah, but you've done all of this before. — Oh, here's the street, I think." They had come to an intersection with another street that ran flat along the side of the hill. From this vantage point, she could spot signs for a butcher's shop and the dry-goods store that had once occupied her new home. A greengrocer's shop displayed its piles of spring greens and fresh beans in bins. "How about we take a walk along here and see what's around?"

"Mmn. Yeah, sounds good." They rounded the corner past the greengrocer's. Keifon walked with his hands in his pockets. "The thing is... when I got married and moved back into my parents' house, everything was ready for us. My cousins had taken over when my parents died, and when I came of age, I just stepped in. I never had to figure things out or plan, just try to follow their lead. Of course, I was useless at that, too."

Agna let the self-directed insult pass. She didn't like to let him get away with it, but she had to focus on the problem at hand. "I didn't realize. I'm sorry for assuming it was your responsibility to figure things out."

He was hard to hear over the rumble of cart wheels on the street. "I'm sorry I don't have answers for you. I wish I could be of use to you."

"You can." She caught his elbow, and they swung to a stop between a pair of houses. "Just — look. I'm only pretending to be a grownup here. So just help me figure it out. Talk it through with me. If we're patient and we work together, we can make this work. I don't really need you to have all the answers." She watched his shirt front, unable to keep contact with his eyes. "I just need you to be here. So we can work together, and be frustrated and confused. But not alone."

Before she could register what was happening, he stepped forward and hugged her, in the middle of the street, in front of the entire city of Wildern. Agna refused to peek over his shoulder and see who had noticed. It mattered — if nothing else, he was looking for a new spouse, and it wouldn't do to give people the wrong impression — but she chose not to think about anything other than hugging him back.

"Thank you so much." His quiet voice by her ear rose goosebumps along her arms. "I know I can't stay forever, I know this is just for now, but it means a lot to me. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Always." She rubbed his back and felt her own nerves calming. There were so many details to remember, to puzzle out. They'd figure it out together.

She gently pulled away, and he ran a hand through his hair as they parted. Agna gave him a soft collegial punch on the arm. “I just thought of another thing. Lamps.”
“Lamps! Yeah. One lamp isn’t going to cut it anymore.”

They continued along the street. Ahead, Agna heard the clang of a blacksmith at work. Another supplier located. “Not with two bedrooms, nope.”

“Mmn.” He watched the traffic pass as they walked, carriages and delivery wagons loading and unloading goods and people in front of stores. “You know, I’ve... I’ve never had a private room before. I’m not sure I want to take up one of your rooms now. I might just stay in the living room, or something.”

“What? Really?” His family hadn’t been particularly well-off, had they? She tended to forget that most families’ houses didn’t have as much space as her family’s estate.

“Mhm. Shared a room with my brother. Bunked with the other apprentices. Got married, lived with Eri. Then the barracks.”

Between the last two he’d skipped a world of upheaval — his clan stripping him of his status, divorcing Eri, living on the street. It was oddly encouraging that he could skim past those parts of his life, as though they weren’t relevant.

“Oh,” he said, “then the tent, with you. Of course.”

“Of course, how could I forget such palatial accommodations. And now our second-floor city hideaway.”

He was quiet for a few steps. “Yeah.”

“Well, if you ever need company, I’m right down the hall. And I’m sure it will seem less strange over time. It’s lovely to have privacy every now and then.”

“Yeah... yeah, I’ll get used to it.”

She let out the sour mouthful that had begun to ball up in her throat, wanting it to sound light and offhanded. “And before long I’m sure you’ll be married again. Unless you want to get a place of your own first, and see how that feels.”

“If you need me to,” he said.

“No — no, that’s not what I meant. Forget I said that. We’re here now, and we’ll build our new home here. That’s all that matters right now.”

“...Yeah.”

They passed a beggar sitting against the wall of the blacksmith’s shop, and Keifon stooped to add a few coins to his cup. Agna hovered a step away, unsure whether to say anything or to do the same. Before she could come to a decision, they moved on.

Beyond the blacksmith's shop and its blast of hot air, the street opened into a market square. Canvas booths and wooden kiosks ringed a statue of a man with an axe over his shoulder. The carriage traffic routed around the perimeter, leaving the center free for foot traffic. Agna felt conspicuous, as was typical when she found herself in a Kaveran crowd. She was paler than anyone in this city, probably; people could see her coming and mark her as a foreigner a mile away. And no one could confuse Keifon for a native, either. The two of them stuck out everywhere they went. Well, if she meant to stay in Kavera, she'd have to get used to it.

To distract herself, she scanned the square. The nearest stall held stacks of newspapers, and a crier outside read the headlines between transactions.

"Ooh, newspapers. I'd love to get a subscription once we get settled." Her father had received two daily papers — one international edition, which Agna had pored over as soon as she'd learned to read, and the *Criterion*, from Murio. There had also been a sheet of classified advertisements and art industry news that had arrived weekly. For a while, she'd gotten her own subscription in her mailbox in the student union. She'd enjoyed the thought of being connected and being a real art-industry adult more than she'd enjoyed the tightly-packed, jargon-filled reality of reading it.

She stepped up to buy a paper from the crier for a few copper coins. It was a simple broadsheet, front and back, with local news and advertisements jammed in among opinion columns and announcements. She folded it in quarters and slipped it into her pocket for later, next to the shopping list.

They threaded between the clusters of shoppers to take in a full round of the market, debating what to cook for lunch or dinner, given their small collection of cooking implements. Midway through the circuit, the scent wafting from a food cart put an end to the lunch half of that discussion. Agna bought them each a pork-stuffed pastry, and they shooed enough pigeons away to take a seat on a bench at the heels of the lumberman's statue.

"I know it's an indulgence," she said, as he morosely eyed the wrapper of his pastry. "Let me indulge. It's our first real day in town."

"All right... well, I saw a secondhand shop a ways back, on the way in. We can start there for lamps and cookware and things."

Apart from books, Agna had never bought a secondhand object in her life — though, come to think of it, she didn't know the provenance of the camping supplies she'd bought along their travels. Perhaps she was assuming facts not in evidence.

“Good idea,” she said, took another bite, and left it at that.

Her life was already bound to be different from her parents’, in so many ways that she’d get dizzy listing them all. There was no need to hew to some notion of respectability over such a small thing as secondhand cookware. In fact, if Keifon had better ideas about living within their means as they got established, she’d do well to learn from him. But she’d fight for the occasional street-cart lunch. You had to take the easy way out at least some of the time.

As they ate, a young couple, each carrying an infant in a sling, stopped in front of them. One glanced their way, turned, and addressed them. “Oh, hello, are you new in town? Here to work in the hospital? Or the mountain road?” Her Kaveran was over-enunciated and a little too loud, sending a hot flush into Agna’s face. She’d studied the language for six years, thank you, no need to speak to her like a toddler.

Keifon answered before she could scrape together a civil answer. “Hello. We’re here to work at the hospital, yes. I’m Keifon, and this is my friend Agna. She’s a Balance healer. How old are they?” He waved at the nearer baby, who stared raptly at them.

“Imara is nine months, and Oli is seven and a half months.” She laid a hand on the other child’s head as it nursed. The other mother cast a dark look toward the interlopers — as Agna suspected they were — but her mistrust was cracking under Keifon’s interest in the children. He got so gushy that it had won over just about every parent who had set foot in their traveling clinic. Agna would let him work his magic. She had no clue about kids anyway.

“They’re adorable,” he said.

“Thank you! Do you have any of your own?” She’d eased off the too-crisp speaking-to-children voice, though her glance flicked between Keifon and Agna in a way that Agna could only read as nervous.

Keifon sailed on, undaunted. “A seven-year-old back in Yanwei, with her mother. I miss having little ones. Someday.”

“Are you staying in town long-term? Moving your family down, all of that?”

“Oh — well — her mother and I are divorced, but Agna and I hope to stay, yes.” He gave Agna a “take over the story” nudge.

“I’m working to open a museum and art gallery, with a local historian. We’ve just arrived, though. This is our first trip around the neighborhood.”

The friendlier woman hiked her baby up in the sling, beaming. "Well, welcome then! The District is lovely, and you're here at the right time. It'll really be something in a few more years."

"Mm-mm," her wife said, tucking a shawl around her baby. "Remains to be seen. Everything's in flux, and with all these... new people coming in, the balance could tip either way. You'd see it if you were born here, hon. It's complicated."

"Foreigners or not, it's still nice to see new people coming in, as long as they're hard-working and not some gang of transients. There's more to do here than there was when I got here, and that was just a few years ago. I'm a teacher in the Benevolents' school," she added. "So I suppose we're fellow agents, as well as neighbors. Tira is a weaver, her shop is over on Ashlawn."

"Ah. We'll have to check it out," Agna said. "Is that shawl your work? It's beautiful. Is it — oh, the name in Kaveran escapes me. The mountain goat wool."

"Cashmere," the weaver said. "It is. Thank you."

Keifon slipped back into the conversation. "If I may, actually — since you're familiar with the area. We still have to furnish Agna's new house. What's the best place to get some affordable furniture?"

The couple traded a look. "Hmm," said the teacher. "Mari's?"

"High-end, if you want it," the weaver said. "For everyday, you'll want Exceptional Furnishings. That street, this way." She pointed along the direction of the statue's gaze, toward the hills. "A block and a half, toward Oldtown."

Agna fixed the directions in her memory. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome. See you around."

"See you," Keifon said. "Thanks again."

The couple continued their walk, bouncing the older child as it began to fuss. Agna watched Keifon as he watched them go, and took a smug bite of her pastry. "That's your dream scenario, isn't it. Two babies at once. Starting off with a big family right away."

Keifon turned his attention to his lunch. His voice was low. "I'd need two surrogates. It would be expensive. Difficult. Or a wife and a surrogate at once."

At the mention of surrogates, an unsettled feeling washed through Agna's middle. She'd blundered right into it, of course, and now regretted it. Children were everywhere, and naturally they came from somewhere, but to tread near the business of their gestation felt like getting caught snooping in her parents' room.

Besides, it wasn't as though having kids was a normal topic of conversation between peers. Children belonged to parents, not, well, regular people. Keifon already had a daughter, a fact she had enough trouble getting her head around, but he still didn't seem like a parent. He didn't have life figured out yet. He insisted he wasn't sure what they needed to get started in life. He'd had plenty of training and experience in medicine, and he would soon return to being an apprentice. He was still learning and growing — like her. That was why they could muddle through this together. To jump ahead to a future where he was already remarried and picking out surrogates was to leave herself alone, left behind.

“Well,” she said. “Either way, make sure you choose well. Or you'll have to answer to me.”

He looked down at his half-finished lunch. “Mmn. I'll have to find a Lundran church. They would have matchmaking services. If they could find anyone willing.”

Hearing the doubt creep into his voice, Agna nudged him in the side. “Highest bidder, more like. Wildern's mysterious new doctor. You'll be a hot commodity.”

“Apprentice. Hopefully.”

“One step at a time. Get some furniture, chat up some married ladies, reputation spreads... I don't know how this works.” She finished her pastry and crumpled the newspaper wrapping.

He chuckled thinly. “Not quite like that.”

Agna leaned back on the bench, crossing one knee over the other, and fluffed out her skirts. As Keifon finished his lunch, she watched the crowds. The Wildernian population seemed to be predominantly Kaveran, though she thought she spotted a Yanweian once or twice. It was late morning on a fine spring day, and the farm stalls were doing brisk business in early greens and onion sprouts. She'd never been this far north at this time of year, but she had the impression that Kavera's short growing season was even more pronounced here. She'd have to find out what people ate all winter.

“Hey. Have you ever preserved anything?”

Keifon swallowed. “...What?”

Agna blinked, realizing that the context was solely in her head. “...Oh. Um, for the winter. Jarring up preserves and vegetables and things. Because you can't grow all year round here.”

“Ah. I haven't, personally. I've seen it done.”

“We'll have to learn,” she said. “I'll check the library.”

“Mmn. Sounds interesting. It’s another thing we can do with a real kitchen.”

“Yep.” Thinking about it chased away her strange, sick feeling. She could find some cookbooks at the library, or at a book shop. And if she wanted to make some jam when strawberries were in season, it wasn’t an unreasonable indulgence, too heavy to carry on the road. They didn’t have to carry everything with them, rethinking every purchase based on weight and space. Sure, she’d have to devote most of her salary from the Benevolent Union contract toward her payments on the building and toward purchasing art, but she could have things for herself, too.

It felt ungrateful to feel so elated over leaving the caravan. She’d left behind a dear friend in Nelle, the caravan herbalist, and she’d given up the opportunity to see the country and help scores of people. If the Union needed her here — and she saw no reason why they wouldn’t need a second-order Academy-trained healer — then she could help people and still sleep in a real bed, the same one, every night. It was an attractive proposition after a year of sleeping in a folding cot, and before that, a year of sleeping on the ground.

As Keifon finished his pastry, Agna jumped up. “Want to check out this Exceptional Furnishings place?”

“Sure. It’s a lead, at least.”

They rounded the statue toward one of the streets that intersected with the square. “Oh, right,” Agna said. “After that, we’ll need sheets and mattresses and things. Ugh. Let’s just keep camping.”

“That’s clearly the answer,” Keifon said dryly.

The street lying along the statue’s line of sight was lined with barrels planted with the stubby sprouts of ornamental plants. A teahouse faced a clothier, a few houses with tall windows followed, and then a shop with lathe-turned woodwork around the windows and doors. Agna pushed open the door, triggering a bell.

“Be right with you!” The proprietor called, as he showed a set of chairs to a middle-aged couple.

“No hurry!”

They meandered through a forest of tables and chairs, coat racks and headboards. The carpenter’s work seemed solidly built, with just a little ornamentation on the finials and feet, polished to a dark shine. Agna stroked the long line of a couch back. “We should look for a couch soon, too. Somewhere to sit by the fire.”

“Mmmn. Priorities, though.”

“Yes, yes, all right. Well. Bed frames and kitchen table and chairs. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

She ducked past a thicket of coat racks. “I think a wardrobe is next for me. I can live without bookcases for a while longer. Seeing as I only have a few books yet. An empty bookcase just begs to be filled.”

Keifon smiled to himself. “Someday, though.”

“Yeah, someday I’ll get my books back from home, too. Till then I won’t tempt myself.” She eyed a disembodied headboard and footboard, leaning against the wall. “I wonder if they allow paying for things over time. That’s done, isn’t it?”

Keifon shrugged. “It’s something they do in Yanwei, anyway. You try not to get yourself in debt, but if the shopkeeper knows your family, they’ll trust you to pay. I don’t know how they establish trust here.”

“Hey, the bank gave me a whole building, and I’m a shiftless foreigner. So that’s a good sign.” As the sentence left her mouth, she became aware of the proprietor hovering behind her. She whirled around. “Good morning!”

“Good morning. New in town, are you? A new healer for the Benevolents?”

“Got it in one. We’re looking to buy a kitchen table and chairs, solid, not too showy, and two double bed frames.”

“Uh — one,” Keifon said.

“What? You need one, too. Honestly, two doubles, sir.” She took Keifon’s elbow and turned him aside. “A double is just a two-person bed, all right, if that’s what you’re upset about. It’s so much more comfortable.”

“I’m fine with a cot,” he said.

“You absolutely are not. — Excuse us, please.”

The furniture seller began to bustle away. “I’ll... just pick out some table samples, then, and show you when you’re ready. All right?”

“Thank you. — So no,” she said to Keifon, “absolutely no. Look. You buy it now, when you move, you take it with you. The end. One less thing to buy for your house someday. Don’t make this complicated. We can afford this much. A little at a time. Prioritizing. That’s all.”

He rested his hand on the polished ball on the end of a bedpost. “I just... hm. All — all right.”

“Cut corners somewhere else. I am sleeping comfortably, blast it.”

He let out a voiceless laugh. “You know it might take them some time to build and deliver it.”

“That’s fine. As soon as possible, though, I want down comforters and bolsters and oh, now I just want a nap.” Before he could slip out of this momentary lightness, she waved to the shopkeeper. He weaved through the maze to meet her.

“See anything you like?”

“Yes, those two there, either one for me. Kei?”

“Um, they look fine. How much are they?”

She managed to keep him from fleeing the store as she discussed prices with the shopkeeper. In the end, they got a deal on a table, four chairs, and two bed frames, with delivery and assembly. They promised to come back for more, and scored a recommendation for a cabinetmaker for the wardrobe and bookshelves.

“So it is camping tonight,” Agna said, as the bell jingled behind them. “It sounds kind of fun, to be honest. Though we don’t have any firewood. Hm. Another thing for the list.”

“I suspect firewood is affordable around here, at least,” Keifon said. “With so much forest. I think I saw a stand in the market that sold firewood.”

“Yeah, me too. We’ll stop on the way back.” They rounded the corner, looping the long way away from the furniture store to see what they could of the city. This neighborhood held a lot of closely packed houses with shared walls and timbers across their facades. Many of their windows were outfitted with windowboxes, still barely green at this time of year.

“I feel like I should at least try some windowboxes,” she remarked. “I’ll ask Nelle what would grow up here.” Her herbalist friend from the caravan had traveled around the country all her life, and knew the geography and climate of every corner of Kavera.

“Mmn,” Keifon said. “Good idea. There are three sides of the house with sunny windows; that seems like a lot of potential.”

“It would look more homey... well, to me, anyway. Murio is full of rooftop gardens and trees in pots and all sorts. Not as many trees planted along the streets, so we green it up however we can. Besides, there isn’t an end to the growing season like you have here.”

“Must be some place to have a garden.” Keifon tilted his face into the afternoon sun as they passed by a gap between two buildings.

“Yep. My sister would lose her mind in a climate like this, where everything dies off every year. Or she’d just do experiments all winter, and make things from dried herbs

like Nelle does.” She shrugged. “Won’t have to, though. She and Esi are settling down in Murio when Esi gets back from her assignment. So she’ll always have Nessiny’s climate.”

“Hm.” He seemed about to speak, but kept his peace. Knowing him, it would have been something like *life is unpredictable, you never thought you’d be shopping for furniture in a foreign country with your cranky Yanweian best friend, and here you are*. And that was true, for the most part. But Lina and Esirel were the pole around which everyone else in their peer group navigated. They’d been childhood sweethearts, for goodness’ sake. They’d already been together for ten years, nearly half their lives. Life was not unpredictable for them. Something had to be stable in this world.

These days, Agna knew where she’d be in a few years — though if someone had asked her on her graduation day where she’d be now, the answer would have been very different. She’d have said she’d be back in Nessiny, having just returned from her assignment overseas, and starting as a junior agent in her father’s art agency.

“Are you all right?” Keifon touched her elbow.

She shivered and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Just... thinking about how it could have been if I’d gone home after all.” Her life now felt strange and fragile, held aloft by her own will, something that could shatter in an instant. The urge to ask him to stop walking fought with the need to not look like a whining child.

“Hey.” He stopped for her, after all, and brought her around to face him. “It’s not too late, if you think this was a mistake.”

“No — no, that’s not it. It’s just — it would have been so easy to end up in that life, and it would have been a good life, too. I’d miss you, and I don’t think I’d be happy in my father’s shadow for long, but it would be safe, and easy. And all it took to come here instead was just... saying I wanted to. That’s it. And my whole life is a different shape.”

He ran his hand up and down her arm. “That is all it takes. Standing up. Making a choice. Deciding what you have to do. I’m still amazed at what you’re doing here. I can’t wait to see where it goes.”

Agna talked to distract herself from the uneasy flush on her neck. “Who am I to decide that this was the right thing to do? I think it was, yeah, but nobody had to approve it. Nobody stopped me, and nobody said yep, you’re doing the right thing. I just... did it.” She narrowed her eyes at the smile he was trying to hide. “What?”

“And you say I’m too dependent on authority.” He didn’t mean it seriously; his voice acknowledged the irony. “No one stamped your plans with the seal of approval, no. You

decided to do what you wanted whether your parents were on board or not. But that means no one can stop you, either. That's... freedom, isn't it."

She took in the houses, the budding trees along the street, this city she had chosen as her own. She could walk in any direction. And he would come with her. "I guess it is." She took a deep breath and looked up past the tips of the trees, pinkish against the sky. "It's kind of scary."

"Mhm." He squeezed her arms. "Glad you're with me."

She crossed her arms to cover his hands in hers, no longer caring, for this minute, whether anyone saw. "Me, too. Thanks."

If she'd gone back to Nessiny, she would have dimmed that smile of his, too. She didn't want to admit that, didn't want to claim that power, even though she knew it was true. He would have recovered. He'd survived worse fates. But she knew his life had changed along with hers. "That's why I'm here," he said.

"Tch." She turned to walk down the slanting block. "You're here to tend to broken bones and break hearts and cook amazing food. In some order. I'm here to heal people and sell art. Probably in that order."

"Good plan. Let's do that."



They set up cots in their living room that night, having had enough time to clean only the living room and the kitchen. The room was twice the size of their tent, which hadn't had a fireplace, nor a window that let in the moonlight. The larder was only stocked with a few jars and boxes, and the load of firewood in the courtyard would hardly last a week. The room smelled like fire and soap. Tomorrow they'd do more. Tomorrow they'd keep building on what they'd done today. Then the next day, and the next, and the path that led to her safe place in her father's shadow would fade into the distance behind her.

"It's so quiet. — I'm sorry, were you asleep?"

"Not yet." Agna listened to the muffled city outside the window. A wagon passed, with the clop of horses' hooves and the rattle of wooden wheels on the cobblestones. A dog barked. "I guess it's normal."

Keifon settled onto his pillow. "Is it? There was more noise in the camp. Voices, coughing, the patrol going around."

“Well, yeah. Four hundred people in the same campground. I guess there are that many on this street, but not all out in the open.” Something creaked, and she gasped.

“It’s just the house settling.” His tone was kind and calm, an antidote to her mental image of burglars in every empty corner of the house.

Agna swallowed and pressed a hand against her racing heart. “Yeah. All right.”

“You’ll get used to it. I bet you don’t even notice the sounds your family’s house makes.”

“Our house is stone, stone behaves itself. You Westerners and your wood.” She wanted to laugh, to drive out the idea of hearing these creaks like footsteps in an empty house — as she would, someday, when he was gone. She wanted to sleep, after the mindless fear coursing through her system had a chance to thin out. Besides, part of her didn’t want their first day in their new city to ever end. That was childish. It would end just like so many days on the road had ended: a new place, a safe place, and a familiar voice.

“Today,” she said. “At the furniture store. I’m sorry I cut you off. Is there something else wrong? It isn’t more than you can afford, is it? Because we could still cancel the order.”

“No, that isn’t it. Well...” He sighed. “Now that I’m out of the caravan, I wanted to send some money to Nachi. Try to. When I visited last fall, Eri gave most of it back anyway. So I have more money than I’m comfortable with, right now. Money wasn’t the problem.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that idea, or whether to tread anywhere near the topic of his daughter and his ex-wife. And she had the idea that suggesting practical solutions like opening a bank account would be wide of the mark, right now. She listened until he was done, as her heartbeat settled into its resting rhythm. That seemed to be what he needed.

“In the furniture store, that was... It’s also that I don’t want to impose. To act as though I have a right to be here. To take advantage of your generosity. It seems wrong to be storing furniture in your house.”

“Hm.” She hadn’t thought of it as *her* house, from the outset. It was a joint project with Jaeti, and she was borrowing the living space until the museum and gallery needed to expand. It wasn’t as though she had inherited the family estate. Someday she’d face moving somewhere else, as their exhibit space grew. Until then, she’d thought of Keifon and herself as equal partners in this arrangement.

It was strange to think of herself as some beneficent landlord to her former traveling companion. It was a role she’d never intended to take. It weighed on her chest to think that he thought he was imposing on her, that he was reluctant to take up space. It didn’t

seem like a comfortable way to live. She remembered how Esirel had always seemed a little sad and wary when she stayed over school breaks at Agna's house — even though Agna's parents had greeted her warmly and never asked for anything in return, even though Esirel was nearly their daughter-in-law by the time they graduated. It had never made sense to Agna, and she wasn't keen to repeat the experience with another friend.

"Well," she said, "I want you to be comfortable while you're here. I want you to feel like you don't have to camp anymore. It bothers me to think that I'd be sleeping in a real bed and unpacking my stuff, when you've just got a cot and a backpack. That's what seems wrong to me." The layout particulars fell into place in her mind, the empty spaces turning into livable space as their purchases arrived. "I mean — once we decide who gets what room, I think it'll start to feel more natural. I figured we'd pick tomorrow, before the furniture gets here. We'll talk about it then."

"Wherever you want to stay," he said. "I'll take whatever you don't need."

She huffed out a breath. "Don't be that way. You're a full member of this household, as far as I'm concerned."

"It's — it's not the same. But-but thank you."

Agna snuggled into her beaten-up pillow. "We're in this together. I'm not taking you on as charity, you're not imposing on me, none of that. There's a lot to do right now, and I just want to get it done and plan for what's next. That's all."

Keifon absorbed her lecture for a moment. "Mmn. I understand what you want to do." His blankets rustled as he stretched out. "I think it's a good approach. I can try. Dealing with what's in front of me, for now."

"Yep. Like they say in Kavera, don't borrow trouble."

"Heh. I guess so. It's hard to break the habit."

Agna laughed toward their new ceiling. "If there were a position for a professional trouble-borrower, we'd have the house paid off tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm not that bad, am I?" He was chuckling with her, though. They had made it to this new place, this new venture, with their partnership intact. The Benevolent Union had thrown them together two years ago, but they would not fall apart when they weren't forced by circumstance to stay together. Agna had known for a long time that they had built something, grown something, bigger than the Union's assignment — she told herself it had been that way ever since they'd sat by the lake in Laketon together, but it had been true longer than that.

Agna crossed her arms behind her head as they wound down toward quiet. She heard Keifon getting comfortable on his cot.

“Thanks,” he said. “For everything, today. For the walk, and letting me stay. Everything. Being you.”

His compliments still made her ears feel warm, and she was still glad that he couldn’t see. She had grown used to his opinions of her. She had learned to stop arguing with them. It was something to live up to, after all. “Thanks for being here, too. And for being you.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.” She almost added *Welcome home*. She wanted to say it; the words lay in a warm ball on her stomach like a sleeping animal. She was certain she could say it almost properly in his language, too. But he’d argue, and they’d break this peace, and they’d end the day badly. She left the words there, unspoken. Someday she’d say them, and he wouldn’t argue about his right to be here or the temporary nature of their arrangement.

It was one more goal to add to her list.