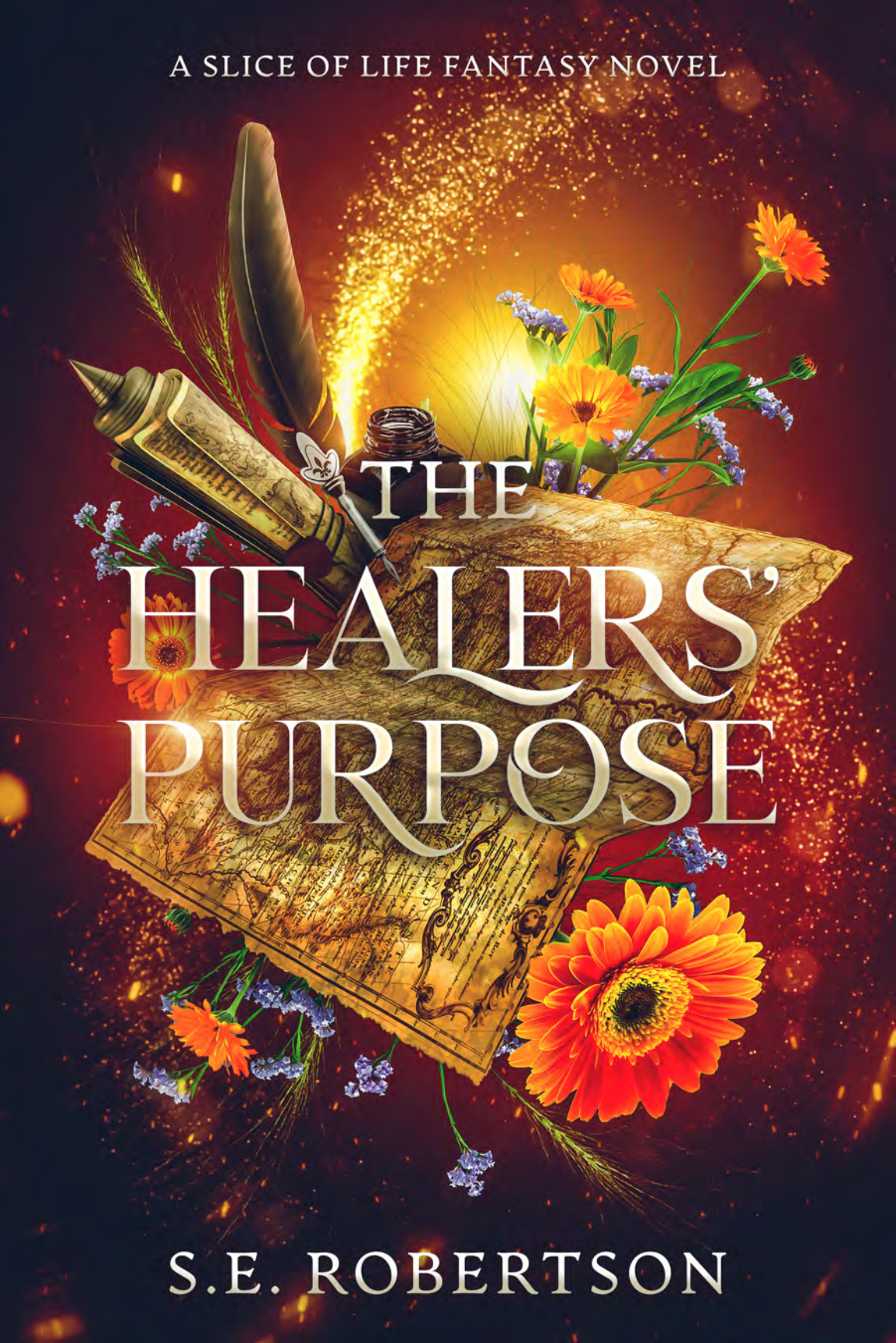


A SLICE OF LIFE FANTASY NOVEL

The cover art features a central composition of various items. At the top left is a large, dark quill pen. Below it is a fountain pen with a silver nib and a dark barrel. A scroll of parchment with a map and text is partially unrolled. To the right, there is a small glass inkwell. The entire scene is set against a background of a bright, glowing light source, possibly a fire or a magical light, which creates a shimmering, golden glow. Scattered around the central items are several flowers, including large orange daisies and smaller purple flowers. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, golden, and orange tones, with a dark, almost black background that makes the light and colors stand out.

THE
HEALERS'
PURPOSE

S.E. ROBERTSON

A SLICE OF LIFE FANTASY NOVEL

THE
HEALERS'
PURPOSE

S.E. ROBERTSON

Copyright © 2022 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.

Content Notes

This book contains:

- depictions of depression and PTSD; discussions of past substance abuse
- mild swearing
- two incidents of racist street harassment (hostile dialogue and shoving/grabbing)
- references to fictional religions
- medical gore / descriptions of surgery (magically regrowing limbs; intestinal cancer surgery; burns)
- mention of patient death in a medical context, specifically a young patient
- ongoing side plot about burnout
- mentions of various illnesses and injuries (broken bones, food poisoning, flu)
- one major violent incident: a series of intentionally set fires cause deaths (POV characters are in dangerous situations, but survive), injuries, and extensive property damage

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

Part One: Agna and Keifon: In the Element

Agna Despana let go of her patient's arm and came back to herself as the tingling paths of nerves and rushing courses of blood vessels swirled out of her mind. As her own face began to feel like a part of her again, she made sure to arrange a neutral expression.

"No change since last week, Mr. Suras," she said, reaching for the chart in its slot at the end of the bed. The pencil felt reassuringly solid between her fingers. "You should be ready to go home soon."

The next-to-last patient offered a tired nod and closed his eyes. Agna replaced the chart and turned to her last patient with half an hour to spare in her overnight shift.

"Can't the priest take care of me?" The patient nodded past Agna toward the door, and the healer turned. A man sat at the bedside of one of the patients Agna had already checked, looking dignified and well-rested in a cream-colored linen tunic and trousers. His back was turned, and so he could not see Agna's exasperated glare. Nor could their shared abilities detect disturbances in energy at a distance. She felt as though her roiling aura could be seen through a solid wall.

She ought to be more forgiving. The patients had the right to request their caretakers, and most of the priests of Tufar were locals whom the patients had known all their lives. None of it helped her feel less irritated after eight and a half hours on the floor.

Agna turned back to the patient. "Absolutely. I'll add that to your chart." After a second, she eased her grip on the pencil. In her head, she had a chalkboard and a podium and notes. *First of all, Balance healing operates on the same biological principles as the Tufarian priests', and second of all —*

"Have a good morning, Mrs. Teminar," she said as she stood. The pencil slid into its clip, the chart into its slot, the foreign healer out of the ward and into the hallway.

Done, then, with half an hour left. She ought to stay and help the apprentices distribute breakfast. Agna focused on the rain pelting the trees outside the windows as she strode down the hallway. Not the worst night shift, certainly. But it stung to be unneeded, to be unnecessary.

A familiar pair rounded the next corner, and a familiar fizzing ignited in Agna's middle. The first person, a stout Yanweian woman in her early sixties, leaned on a cane as she walked. The second, younger and male, pushed a cart of supplies and frowned in concentration as he spoke to his mentor. The drab green apprentice's uniform did nothing for his amber complexion, though he was still — himself, and everything that meant to Agna. Her housemate, to begin with. Former traveling partner. Her friend. So many neat, easy boxes.

He saw her before his mentor did, and broke out into a smile that took hours of fatigue off Agna's shoulders.

She kept her voice light and professional. "Good morning, Kei. Dr. Rushu."

Dr. Rushu gave her a nod. "Good morning, Healer."

Doctor, apprentice and healer came to a stop, leaving enough space between them for others to pass. Keifon faced Agna across the gap. "Almost done?"

"Yes, and not a minute too soon." All she wanted was to cross the hallway and lean her head on his shoulder — right there, where the neckline of his shirt dipped to his collarbone. There had been a time when such a gesture would have felt normal at home. Months ago, before she'd gone home to see her parents and managed to break everything. "I'll see you this evening."

Something flickered in his dark eyes at the words. He leaned across the hall and lowered his voice. "Maybe we could talk about... some things."

Agna felt herself flush. "M-maybe." She raised her hand to fuss with her hair, and remembered that she'd tied it up in a ponytail. "Good day to the both of you."

She turned before she could embarrass both of them further. The scheduling desk was right down the hall; she'd see if they had something for her to do —

A young page appeared in her path, stopping her short. "Healer Agna Despana?" The page pronounced her name with the vowels rounded off strangely, as Kaverans often did.

"Yes?" Her voice tilted into a question.

The page clasped her hands behind her back and squared her shoulders. "Agent Shora would like to see you in his office."

"Oh. Thank you. Message received."

Agna ransacked her memory as the page ran off. She'd been back on the floor for a month since her return, and apart from comments like the last patient's, everything seemed to have gone well. She rubbed her temples as she walked. Had the Tufarian priests complained about her? She'd been careful to be cordial. They could glare daggers at the Nessinian healers all they wanted; the Benevolent Union had hired them to ply their art, and that's what Agna intended to do. First, she'd find out what the leader of the base wanted.



Dr. Rushu nodded toward the end of the hall. "Let's tackle Infectious Disease, shall we? And do you have the cranial blood vessels ready yet?"

"Yes, ma'am." Keifon threw his weight behind the cart to get it rolling again and followed his mentor, reciting the terms and functions he'd memorized. With one another they spoke in their shared native language, and so he could shut a door between his work and the part of his mind that lingered on Agna. On her tired eyes, on the spark of joy in his chest when he saw her, on the way she'd blushed when he'd asked about tonight.

Though she might be nearly finished with her shift, he had eight and a half hours to go. Pushing the cart with him, he followed Dr. Rushu into the prep room. The smell of alcohol filled the small room, and Keifon hastened to tie on a cloth half-mask as Dr. Rushu attired herself in the same way. His mentor left her cane leaning against a counter, slowing her gait as she crossed from supply closet to the cart and back. Keifon's hands tightened on the handle of the cart as he fought the urge to fetch the supplies for her. She knew what she needed, and how much her knees could take. He wouldn't dare tell a bonded doctor — accredited doctor, they didn't have hereditary guilds here in Kavera — what to do. Dr. Rushu had always been kind to him, but as an apprentice, Keifon ought to know his place.

Once she had outfitted the cart to her satisfaction, they both scrubbed their hands to complete the routine. Then Keifon unlocked the brake on the cart and followed his mentor into the Infectious Disease ward. Each patient lay in a narrow bed in a cubicle separated by high walls, an inconvenient design that aimed to slow the flow of infectious energy between the patients. Distance helped. Cleaning before and after contact seemed to help. The priests spoke prayers of protection instead.

Dr. Rushu sat on the stool at the first patient's bedside. Keifon handed her the charts from the end of each bed and busied himself with the routine: collecting bedpans, refilling water pitchers and glasses, handing his mentor any tools or medicines she requested. The first patient dozed half-awake, the second tossed fitfully, the third slept off an overnight dose of sedative. All but one were native Kaverans, three elderly people and a six-year-old boy. The last was an older woman whose face and whose name on the chart marked her as a Yanweian immigrant, like himself and Dr. Rushu.

A step across the threshold drew his attention. A Kaveran man in an undyed linen tunic and trousers strode in, prayer beads swinging around his neck. Keifon bent his head and let Dr. Rushu address the priest first.

"Brother Gillen, good morning."

"Dr. Rushu," the priest answered. His gaze swung past Keifon. He bent over the first patient in the room to lay a hand on the patient's forehead. His free hand twisted up the beads in one fluid motion, and a low prayer chant filled the room.

The patients were in good hands, though even the priests couldn't banish contagious sickness. All the same, Keifon could feel his upper lip sweating under the mask. Dr. Rushu finished her notes on the young patient and made her way back to the prep room. There, Keifon emptied bedpans as the doctor scrubbed up and wiped down her cane with alcohol to banish any infectious energies that might have clung to it.

She told him about a fever outbreak she'd worked through in Nijin, the capital city in Yanwei, years ago. Tempted to sit and listen, Keifon kept his hands moving, collecting the supplies on the cart one by one. When he had emptied or scoured or discarded everything, he washed down the cart in cleaning solution that stung his eyes. Finally, he scrubbed his hands and stripped off the mask, leaving it in a bin in the corner.

"Ready," he said. He didn't have to play the part of a bright-eyed apprentice. Dr. Rushu knew he was ten years older than most of the others in his position. But some part of him, something he didn't want to pry open or even acknowledge, wished he could follow the more experienced doctor around and listen to her insight and answer her quizzes about terminology indefinitely. Some part of him couldn't bear the thought of a little apprentice looking to him for advice someday.

For now, he pushed the supply cart and followed and absorbed everything he could learn, and studied at home, and waited to become something more.

Agna: The Leader

“Good morning, Healer.” The leader of the Benevolent Union base set aside the paper he’d been reading as Agna entered his wood-paneled office. As always, Aines Shora dressed impeccably. Today’s outfit featured a violet silk waistcoat and a dark jacket; the sober combination accented the increasing threads of silver in his hair and beard. He could play any part he wished, and today he played Thoughtful Authority.

He waved her toward the leather-upholstered seats in front of his desk, and Agna chose one, smoothing her dark brown healer’s robes. “Good morning, sir.”

She’d been in this office a few times already. In fact, the painting of idyllic Nessinian hills on the right-hand wall had been a gift from her, purchased on her trip back to Nessiny. Still, being summoned this way sparked a buzz of nervousness in the pit of her stomach. She hadn’t dealt directly with Aines Shora since they’d both interpreted for the meeting between representatives of the Yanweian and Kaveran governments.

“We have some good news,” Shora said. “Your Academy and the Union’s central office have sent us three new healers this year. They reached Wildern last night.”

One more than usual, that was good news. But why was he telling her this in his office, and not in a meeting with the other healers? “I’m happy to hear it,” she said. “Evidently the Academy feels their skills will be well-used here.”

“Indeed.” A trace of a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. “Which brings me to the purpose of this meeting. I would like to establish more organization among the Balance healers. A team leader, as Brother Gillen is for the Tufarian priests.”

“I see.” Her heart began to race.

“Would you accept the position, Healer? We can offer you a twenty-percent increase in your pay.”

Agna quietly clenched her hands together in her lap. It would be nice to put some additional capital toward the mortgage, or toward acquiring more art for her gallery.

That was only the surface of the offer. Out of all of the Nessianian healers at the Wildern base, she had been selected, judged equal to the task. She'd rejected her place in her father's agency, her supposed birthright, to come back to Kavera and pursue her own goals. She had a chance now to prove it hadn't been a mistake.

"I'd be honored to accept," she said.

The base captain's eyes seemed warm. "We appreciate your dedication."



The new arrivals were only three years younger than Agna, but something about their posture or the glazed look in their eyes made them seem like lost children.

All of the current Balance healers had shown up as well, and together the ten of them packed the break room on the second floor of the hospital. The new healers had taken three of the seats at the table in the middle of the room, and the rest of the group lined the edges of the room, on the couch and in front of the curtained changing cubicle. The tea kettle and coffee pot heated over the little oil burners that Fulvia had rigged up on the counter, and a few healers had taken the cookies Agna had left on the table. Through the overlapping chatter, Agna strained to listen for footsteps in the hall from her place near the door.

Finally she heard a quick, solid tread approaching, and pressed her palms against the fabric of her robes at her sides. A few of the others near the door turned. Conditioned by Academy habit, the younger healers' conversation ceased.

Two Kaverans appeared in the doorway: Aines Shora, the leader of the Benevolent Union base, and Ryta Tima, the director of the hospital, whose sensible sweater contrasted with Agent Shora's expensive suit. Shora's gaze swept the room, lighting on Agna. Her stomach dropped. Then the two of them passed her, and the crowd of healers pulled back to make room. Fulvia poured a cup of tea, unperturbed. As soon as the kettle hit the stand again, her friend Ettore nudged her in the ribs.

"Welcome, healers," Shora said. His voice carried through the room. "Thank you for coming."

Agna sneaked a glance at the newcomers, past the two administrators. Two whispered to one another, and the third listened intently.

She cleared her throat politely. "Sir, if I may?"

"Go ahead, Healer Despana."

“Did you all study Kaveran at the Academy, or should we interpret for you?”

The three newcomers exchanged glances. One of them, a petite young woman, spoke up for the group. “We all took it. We’re fine.” Her tone was almost bored.

Agna settled back with a nod. One less thing to worry about.

Shora went on. “Our facility here in Wildern continues to grow, and it has come to be a destination for those in need throughout northern Kavera. Your talents are greatly appreciated as we expand our operations.” He seemed to address each of the group in turn, as though they were in a private meeting in his office. “The Benevolent Union, like our city, is proud to be a place where all faiths and nations work toward the common good.” An exaggeration at best. Plenty of the Church of Tufar healers would be more than happy to see all the Balance healers loaded on a ship back to Nessiny. “And so I hope your experience here will be both satisfying and beneficial.

“With this increase in your numbers, Agent Tima and I have decided to appoint a team leader. We believe this will allow you to better coordinate amongst yourselves, and to communicate with hospital administration.”

A loaded pause passed before Shora extended a hand. “Healer Agna Despana has agreed to step up as our Balance team leader.”

Gaspere started a polite round of applause, and the older healers joined in before the new. Ettore left his arms crossed, standing at the back of the group. Agna tried not to see him.

“Thank you.” Time and space had become strange and slippery, and what she planned to say threatened to slither out of her head. The other healers seemed miles away, though Agna stood nearly shoulder to shoulder with Rubina. “I know that Academy healers are capable of great things. I hope to help everyone to achieve their highest potential. Thank you.” Lacking anywhere to sit down, she merely stepped back.

“Excuse me.” The voice rang out in Nessinian. Agna recognized it before she looked up. The tall, prematurely gray-haired healer raised two fingers in the air, the Academy convention for a dissenting point, which of course the administrators would not recognize. They didn’t even speak Nessinian. And Ettore’s grasp of Kaveran was shaky at best, even after being stationed here for the last few years.

Agna glanced between Ettore and Shora, feeling compelled to interpret now that she was supposedly the leader of the group. “Healer Ettore has a question,” she told them in Kaveran.

“Go ahead, Healer,” Shora said.

“She’s in our year.”

Feeling the administrators’ eyes on her, Agna translated, “My colleague says that I graduated from the Academy the same year he did.” She knew what he implied, but she left the statement as spoken. Let him spell it out.

“Would you please clarify your question for us, Healer?” the hospital head said. Agna repeated it in Nessianian, too furious to make eye contact with her former classmate. She’d stayed in this country, at this hospital, of her own free will after her original contract expired. Ettore spent all his time whining about going back to the Academy. She’d bought a house and started up a business, while he barely bothered to learn the language. She’d made ugly deals with her family and damaged her friendship with the person who meant the most to her in the world, all for the right to stay here and build her own life. She deserved this. Ettore Cruti was lucky she wasn’t carrying anything that could be launched at his head.

“What gives her the right to be in charge? Doesn’t anyone see this? You four have been here longer than she has.” He lashed a hand toward the older healers.

Agna’s jaw had locked, so Gaspare offered an interpretation. “Healer Ettore asked why Healer Agna was chosen, out of all of us. Including those of us who have seniority.” His voice was pleasantly neutral. Shora ought to have made him team leader, Agna thought bitterly.

Shora replied, “Rest assured we have made this decision based on many factors, and believe Healer Agna to be a worthy candidate.”

Agna gamely translated, keeping her voice flat.

Ettore grumbled something that Agna couldn’t catch, clearly not meant for the whole group to hear. Next to him, Fulvia sipped her tea.

“If we might move on?” No one else spoke up. The captain addressed the new healers, turning the full force of his charm on them. “We’ve scheduled time for all of you to meet with Agna and address your needs in settling in. Welcome to the team.”

They said thank you, showing off the Kaveran they’d learned at the Academy, and then the administrators left.

“What just happened?”

“This is the stupidest—”

“Cruti, shut up.”

“Look, everybody—”

“—teacher’s pet—”

“They’re our bosses, not our teachers, you dolt.”

“Everybody shut up!”

The younger healers froze at Agna’s raised voice. Agna sighed. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. “Ettore, if you have a problem, go file a complaint. Everybody else—” her arm sweep took in the older healers besides herself and Ettore — “thanks for your time. I’ve got to meet with the new kids.”

“Excuse me, we aren’t kids,” one of them retorted. “We’re graduates.”

“You are to us.” They couldn’t use Ettore’s excuse about seniority. Even so, he’d tarnished the authority she’d had for all of three minutes.

All but one of the older healers dispersed. Ettore left without a word. The others offered congratulations or wished her good luck. Fulvia remained with her cup of tea, idly twirling the end of her braid around her fingers. She was scheduled for this shift, so she had every right to use the break room. Agna hoped against hope she wouldn’t comment. Fulvia and Ettore were best friends, and Fulvia had never met a tactful boundary she couldn’t breeze past. It wouldn’t be personal, and she wouldn’t hold the argument against Agna — probably. It would only make Agna look bad in front of her new charges.

Remembering the first awkward meetings of some of her clubs at the Academy, Agna had the new recruits introduce themselves by name and hometown. Two of them, Alme and Oriana, had grown up together in Reguli; that explained the southern Nessinian accent Agna had heard in Oriana’s answer earlier. The third new healer, Calogero, was from Murio — Agna’s own hometown, and the home of the Academy. Agna noticed that Alme used the *li* form in Nessinian, instead of the masculine *le* or feminine *la*. The only other fact Agna could glean was that Oriana seemed to have some Furoni ancestry, like Rubina and Giada. Calogero and Alme were native Nessinians like Agna herself, pale-skinned and dark-haired.

“I’m going on shift,” Fulvia said. “This is boring.” She tossed back the last of her tea.

“A-all right, I’ll catch up with you later,” Agna stammered, and Fulvia left.

Attempting to break the ice, Agna asked the new healers about their specialties and hobbies. Gradually, they all relaxed a little, though Agna had to prompt Calogero to speak a few times; otherwise the two friends from Reguli tended to go off on their own tangents. She learned that Oriana had been first soprano in the Academy’s choral club, Alme enjoyed drawing in their spare time, and Calogero was fourth out of six siblings and had grown up not far from Agna in an estate at the northern edge of Murio. All three had taken a few semesters of Kaveran at the Academy, at the behest of their academic

advisors. Apparently it was seen as a useful language for assignment placements these days. Calogero had met the other two in those classes, though they weren't close. Oriana and Alme seemed to have kept to themselves during the long trip from Nessiny.

Now, however, they were on the same team. With their help, the seven current healers would have more opportunities to introduce their healing art to the people of Wildern. Balance healers from the Academy were less well-known than Tufarian priests in this part of the world. There were so many wrongheaded ideas about what they could do, why they were here, what they believed. They had to keep showing up, day after day, until the Kaverans believed that they belonged there.

All of those concerns lay in the future. Right now, Agna faced three young graduates who had spent weeks on a ship and in carriages to get to this outpost, seemingly at the edge of nowhere. She had to do her best to lead them and to help them come to love her chosen home.

In the spirit of camaraderie, she offered to take them out to lunch. They had questions about the city, about where to find housing, about everything she had forgotten she'd learned. Agna led the trio out into the street. She almost envied them, knowing all they had ahead of them.

Agna: Healer's Fences

Agna knocked on the front door of Wei Cabinetry as Keifon tried the next door over, which had a diamond-shaped window set into it. There were no name plates on the side door, and no clues whether it belonged to the carpenters or to the tailor's shop next to it.

The diamond-paned door swung open, revealing Whalen the woodcarver. The slight Kaveran seemed unruffled. "Hey."

"Hi," Keifon said. "Are we early?"

"Not especially." He reached around to thump the shop door.

"I tried that one," Agna said.

"He's in there. Not listening, apparently." After three more thumps, a movement in the back of the shop resolved into a tall figure, hurrying past the sales desk toward the door. The shop door opened on Tai the cabinetmaker, dressed in a leather apron over a shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Agna told herself it was too dark on the doorstep to see her flush.

She and Keifon had bought some furniture from Tai and Whalen last year, when they'd first come to Wildern. She'd had a chance to talk to Tai for a little while, and she'd managed not to say anything completely asinine yet. The two of them were around Agna and Keifon's age, and their shop was just a short walk up the road. Once she'd come back from Nessiny, she and Keifon had received an invitation to come over and play cards. And so tonight, she stared up at a truly distracting Yanweian carpenter as her arm ached from carrying a picnic basket.

"Aw, hey." Tai rubbed the back of his head. "Were you waiting long?"

"Long enough for me to hear the knocking from upstairs," Whalen said.

"Sorry. I was sweeping up. Come on in."

Agna hung back, letting Keifon follow Tai into the shop. Whalen held the door, so Agna walked behind Keifon as the woodcarver brought up the rear.

The shop was dimly lit by the sunset through the front windows and a lamp at the back of the shop, turning the showroom into a maze of shadows and angular wooden forms. The cabinetmaker led the visitors between the bureaus and bookshelves and past a low, swinging gate into the workshop. Agna's shoes kicked up scuffs of sawdust as fine and fluffy as snow. Its sharp scent filled the shop.

Tai pulled off the apron as he walked and slung it over a workbench. Beyond the half-built shells of a set of cabinets, the shop opened up into a gathering area. A round kitchen table stood in the center of the room, and a pump and sink took up the far corner. True to Tai's word, the floorboards were swept clean here.

Agna headed for the counter next to the sink to unload her basket. As she did so, Whalen opened a door into the courtyard behind the shop and propped it open with a wedge of wood. Seeing Agna's line of sight, he waved an arm. "Helps with the air flow. It gets stuffy in here."

"I see." She folded back the towels covering the basket and laid out the food she and Keifon had packed at home: baked chicken, cut up in pieces; golden bread rolls, sprinkled with poppy seeds; a bowl full of lightly steamed vegetables, sweet pea pods and spring carrots; and oatcakes with honey.

Keifon set down the jug of cold tea next to the spread and leaned toward her, lowering his voice. "If you're uncomfortable, we don't have to stay."

She kept her gaze nailed to the basket, refolding the towel and straightening the already even corners. It would be easy to come up with lies. *I'm not nervous*. Instead she muttered, "Thanks."

He turned away to join the two carpenters. Reluctantly, Agna accepted that she had nothing left with which to fidget, and followed him.

"All right, then." Tai stood, beaming, between two of the chairs. "Everybody get some food and we'll decide on some games."

Agna lined up between Keifon and Whalen and chattered about the menu and stole a few bites of vegetables. The back of the workroom was cozy, with the sawdust scent in the air and the neat arrays of tools hanging on pegs on the walls. Agna had hoped to get out of the house more often, and Tai and Whalen had been kind enough to host. It might be all right, as long as she didn't say or do anything stupid.

"So." Tai held up a drumstick like a conductor's baton, once they'd all settled around the table. "Farmer's Fences? Sevens? Round the Cape?"

"We know sevens," Agna said. "We used to play it on the road."

"Takes a while," Tai said. "Which is fine."

"Works for me." Keifon took a sip of tea from one of Tai and Whalen's tin mugs.

As Tai bit into his first piece of chicken, Whalen shuffled the cards. "How have the two of you been, lately?"

"Well, Agna got a promotion at the hospital."

She glared at her roommate, who calmly took another drink. Now would be a good time for some air flow; she felt ready to catch fire. As Tai and Whalen congratulated her, Agna tore a roll in half, then in quarters. The rolls had looked delicious when Keifon had pulled them out of the oven, and now this one seemed as appetizing as a wad of cotton.

"We got some more healers from Nessiny," she said. "Hospital management wanted, you know, a team leader. To make schedules, help them get situated."

"Sounds like a big responsibility," Tai said. "Best of luck."

He hardly knew her. She ran back over his comments in her mind as she finally ate a bite of the roll. It was delicious, after all. And she couldn't find a hint of malice in anything Tai had said.

She'd begun to form an opinion about Tai, and it didn't bode well. Alarmingly nice to look at. Alarmingly nice to her. She knew where this ended. It ended in *I didn't want to say something and ruin our friendship*. It ended in embarrassing herself.

"I'll do my best, that's all." She noted with relief that Whalen had begun to deal the cards. Her appetite roared back in like a dam had burst. She'd destroyed this roll too thoroughly to butter it, so she ate it piece by piece as she inspected her hand. Sevens was a slow game, as Tai had noted; a player often had to build up her strategy over a dozen draws.

"So you are staying in town permanently, it sounds like?" Whalen laid down a card in the center of the table.

Agna glanced up. Right. "I hope to, if all goes well. At least for a long while. I've gotten attached to this city. And it lets Kei live closer to his daughter."

Whalen's eyebrows rose as the group's focus shifted off her and toward Keifon. Chastened, Agna set down her cards and took a bite of chicken. She'd forgotten how much they didn't know.

"She lives with my ex-wife in Ceien," Keifon said. "Compared to when we were traveling, it should be much easier to visit. She's—" He hesitated, and Agna looked up. He kept his eyes on his cards. "Not mine anymore. But I can visit."

“Is that one of those old-country things, like...” Tai gestured vaguely with his cards. “You’re not part of the family anymore, so on and so forth?”

Agna read the tension in her best friend’s shoulders, in the snap as he laid a card face-down. “Yes.”

“That’s too bad,” Tai said. “At least you don’t have to worry about those things here.”

Before Keifon could respond, Whalen finally asked for Keifon’s daughter’s name, and they digressed onto less controversial questions. Of course Whalen and Tai seemed charmed by Keifon’s obvious pride in his daughter. Agna wiped her hands and resumed studying her cards.

“And so you two are...?” Tai said it lightly, despite the trailing-off that had become Agna’s least favorite thing to hear.

They both said “No,” their voices overlapping. It was Agna’s turn, and so she focused on her hand, her fingers gripping the fan of cards. She let Keifon answer.

“Not in that sense,” he said, and Agna fought against the impulse to hide her face behind her cards. She laid down the weakest card in her hand and let both game and conversation slide to Keifon.

“We’ve decided to live together for the companionship, as it seems you have,” he said. “Which I think is more common here than in Yanwei, isn’t it?” He put down a card.

They moved on to comparing social norms between Yanwei and Kavera, and Keifon asked Tai how long he’d lived here, and they never passed that way again.

“So how about you, Agna?”

She nearly dropped her cards, and collapsed them into a stack before fanning them out again. She couldn’t look at the carpenter, sitting one seat over, paying her so much *attention*. “Yes?”

“Was anything in Kavera a shock to get used to?”

Shuffling her cards as though they might reveal an answer in their sequence, she cast about for something to say. “I come from a region of Nessiny that’s deeply entwined with the Church of the Divine Balance, so I’m not used to seeing so many Churches of the Four. Though that’s common even in other parts of Nessiny.”

Tai shuffled his cards in his hand and asked, “You’re a member of the Balance church?”

“Actually, no,” she said. As Whalen drew a card, Agna considered getting another roll. Would it look awkward?

Tai pushed his chair back. Standing, he seemed gigantic. “Can I get anyone anything? Agna?”

“Oh, uh...” She set her cards down and closed her fists. Tai waited for her answer. She sneaked a glance at Keifon. Entire paragraphs came through in his sidewise look and the bend of his arm as he took a drink.

“...Another roll, please.”

Tai brought the butter, too, so she wouldn't have to get up. He reached for a card as he sat down.

She thanked him. Maybe the air flow would be better if she crawled under the table.

Whalen asked her about the Church of the Balance, which she admitted she knew mostly secondhand. She'd read some of their central text out of curiosity and a bit of teenage pretension, not much more than she'd read about the Church of the Four in a class back at the Academy.

Tai picked up a card. “Where you studied to be a healer?”

“Yes, they had all sorts of classes. We had our healers' studies, and then we were supposed to round out the rest with whatever we wanted. I took a lot of Kaveran. Obviously.” The Kaveran she'd memorized in those classes seemed strange and stilted. *What time is it? Where is the market? How much for two of these?* Still, it had gotten her here. “And, you know, history and economics and-and things.” It felt as though she'd been talking for hours. She laid a card face-down and picked a replacement.

“You are clearly the smartest person here,” Tai said, with a kind laugh in his voice.

Agna felt her voice sharpening. “I was lucky enough to have the money for formal schooling. That's all.”

“Sorry,” Tai said. “Didn't mean any harm. So who else wants some of those cakes?”

“Hold on. Seven.” Whalen laid his hand across the table. Tai tossed his cards down to fold, Keifon bid for a closed reveal — risking that Agna would beat his hand — and Agna laid down her five-and-wild hand. So Whalen had this hand, and Keifon came in second.

They pushed all of their cards into the center, and Tai got up to fetch the cake. Agna gathered the cards to shuffle them, needing something to do with her hands. Keifon was, it seemed, happy enough to talk to Whalen for a while. The two of them discussed their strategy, on the surface. But she also saw the way Keifon focused on him, the playfulness around the edges of his questions. She saw how Whalen's arch personality started to thaw as he answered.

It had been a long time since she'd watched Keifon pour on the charm. She had no right to feel annoyed, she reminded herself as she bridged the cards.

Whalen didn't quite watch Keifon as he spoke. "Are you two going to the Resurrection festival?"

Agna felt her roommate's eyes on her, and could nearly taste the answer he wanted to give. They'd celebrated the summer festivals together every year since they'd become friends. She'd avoided talking about it till now, letting her work schedule speak for her. It was a coward's move. She shuffled the cards again. "If I can, around work."

Keifon drew a breath through his nose and did not address her comment. "How about you two?"

Whalen's smile was rather charming, when he chose to employ it. "Turns out we've got a booth. Friend of ours with a pottery studio had to pull out, and offered us her spot."

Keifon and Agna congratulated the carpenters as Tai passed around the oatcakes. They began another hand. She didn't notice Keifon looking her way again. Maybe it was her imagination, or her guilty conscience. Game strategy was simpler than...this. She'd direct her attention to that instead, and hope her luck didn't run out.

Keifon: Love Letters

“**A**nd what do you intend to do about it?”

Keifon’s counselor had watched him with his fingers laced over the front of his deep blue priest’s robes. There was no disapproval in his voice, and Keifon’s head knew that securing the priest’s approval wasn’t the point. No matter what his heart searched for.

After freezing for a second, Keifon had clenched his jaw and looked away and muttered, “I’ve made my feelings clear. It’s up to Agna to answer for hers.”

“True,” Father Tufari had said. “Still, your actions and reactions are always your own.”

Keifon thought about this now. There were choices he could make. He could ask her for answers. He could walk away and give her space to come to a decision. Instead, unable to focus on the medical textbook open in his lap, he rubbed the ears of the gray cat sleeping on the couch next to him. Shadow seemed immune to the tension in the room. Meanwhile, Keifon’s best friend stormed around her writing nook with a letter clenched in her hand and did not, as he’d hoped, talk about the unanswered questions hanging between them.

“What is it? Your family? Or—” He left the question open, not wanting to imagine what else it could be.

“Marco. Doing his — doing the thing he has to do. Ugh.” She shoved the page in his direction, close enough that Keifon could see the flowing black Nessianian script. She meant for him to take it.

Father Tufari would have said that he made it more complicated than it needed to be. Strip away the oddities of their meeting and their living arrangement, look past the private jokes and the heartfelt conversations, and the reality was simple. Agna was intelligent and ambitious and kind and, however technically, married to someone else. That fact meant different things to different people, in different cultures, in different times of their lives. He didn’t know what it meant to her. He wasn’t sure she knew.

“I can’t read that,” Keifon sputtered. “It’s private.”

“It’s full of lies anyway,” she said, and slapped the page onto the end table next to him. The water in his glass quivered, splintering the lamplight’s reflection into shards. “Suit yourself. He sent a painting, too. I haven’t even opened the thing. It’s downstairs. I don’t have time for this.”

She exited toward the bathroom. Keifon heard the door latch as he stared at the letter from her husband, his fingers tightening on his book. A queasy tendrill of curiosity unfolded in his stomach. He was desperate to know more about this mysterious family friend, no matter how bloodless and businesslike Agna said their arrangement had been. This Marco was four months deep into an honor he couldn’t possibly appreciate, and Keifon needed reasons not to resent him.

Besides, Agna wanted him to read it. It had been her idea, hadn’t it?

Keifon slowly closed his book over its bookmark and set it on the cushion next to Shadow. Despite the warm night breeze through the window, Keifon’s body was a tangle of heat and cold as he reached for the letter.

Dearest Agna,

It brings me such joy to know that, after so many exchanges of words, I may finally express what has grown, hidden in my heart, for so long. I never suspected my foolish epistolary infatuation would be spoken aloud, much less returned. But here we are, with no more secrets between us. Were it not for our necessary separation, for the sake of our respective careers, I would be inexpressibly happy. I yearn for your presence, my darling. Someday we shall be together again, and I dream of that day.

If I may turn now to more earthly matters, I have some good news about a business dealing which I mentioned in our last exchange of letters. The statuary sale to the Mssrs. T— has been completed, to great satisfaction on all sides...

This was “the thing Marco had to do”: ostentatiously pretending to love her, to miss her in her absence. On a visit home, Agna had been cornered by her father and this Marco, and to get them out of some difficulty involving her father’s business, she’d agreed to sign a marriage contract. She’d come back to Kavera, leaving her family and her new husband in her homeland, to attend to her own life.

Since then, Marco sent Agna love letters as proof for his own snooping, noble relatives that the union was not a mere business arrangement. Every time, it sent Agna into a spitting wrath.

Fighting the urge to feed the letter into the lamp's flame, Keifon set it back on the table. He couldn't even pretend to study now. Instead, he reached for his nanbur and settled it on his knee. He had picked out a few notes by the time Agna returned. There wasn't time to talk about this, anyway. She'd be off to work soon, and he'd attempt to get some sleep. When their shifts were out of phase, this brief time was his only chance to see her.

As Agna turned toward the writing table, she tucked a fine gold chain under the neckline of her healer's robes. The marriage rings that sealed her arrangement with Marco hung on it. She didn't wear them on her hands as other easterners did, and yet she never parted from them, either.

Keifon gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry this has been so aggravating for you."

The tension in her posture eased. "Thanks. I guess he's doing what he has to. He wouldn't do it to taunt me. It's just..." She shrugged, tilting her head in a gesture suggesting ambiguity. Her dark hair, grown long now, framed her pale face.

He nodded. Before the rings, before her flight back to her homeland, before his own badly timed realizations, he would have gotten up and reached for her hand, or even pulled her into a comforting embrace. He ran through scales on his instrument instead.

"We were starting to be friends," she said. "Colleagues, at least. Now it's spoiled." She sighed. "The letters are all mixed up with real news about the agency, and I don't want to miss that part."

"Mhm," he said. "It's complicated." He didn't have an answer. She wouldn't expect him to have one.

He wondered whether she wrote back falsely loving words to Marco. Father Tufari would tell him to name the feeling, to be honest about where it led, and to walk another path.

I'm jealous of someone who hears those words from her, even if they aren't true. Not much of a mystery, Father.

A cart rattled past outside, and his notes filled the air. Agna sat at the writing table and opened her box of stationery to begin a letter. The cat slept. It might have been a cozy scene.

"I know it's not a good time," Keifon said quietly. "I'm not sure there is a good time."

His friend didn't answer at first; from the corner of his eye, he watched her set her quill down and cork her inkwell. "I did promise you that."

The disappointment in her voice sent a ripple of queasiness through him. He wasn't pressuring her, was he? He'd asked in the hall, then she'd gotten the promotion, and he

hadn't brought it up again. He set his instrument aside and steepled his fingers between his knees. "I'm worried we'll never talk about it. Keep putting it off."

She didn't turn around to look at him yet. Her head bent over her table. "I'm sorry, Kei. I've always said you should find someone who—"

"And maybe I will, but I want—" He rubbed his face, frustrated with his own impatience.

Agna finally turned in her seat. "What do you want?"

"To know how you feel. Whatever that happens to be." He felt her watching him, and some part of him drank in her attention. It wasn't a version of himself he ought to listen to. "And if you're willing... I want to build a life together." "We have a life." She sounded disappointed. Confused.

Keifon ran a hand through his hair. He hadn't meant to be so evasive. "I don't mean to say this isn't enough. I love what we have here. It's meant more to me—" He swallowed to keep from losing control of his voice. Calm. Reasonable. "It's enough. And I've talked about this with Father Tufari so many times, that I'm happy with my life and still want more. Maybe it doesn't make sense."

"It does." She looked away when he tried to meet her eyes, and twisted her fingers together. "Not the same way you mean — probably — but I understand, you know, being happy with things as they are, and still hoping for something else. Maybe. Kind of."

He crossed his arms to quell the impulse to leap from his seat, and to contain the light, bubbling feeling in his middle. "Like what?"

Her grimace suggested that she'd hoped he wouldn't ask. "I want to stop ruining every chance I have at love. — *Amane*," she corrected hastily. Her language's word for romantic love. When she said she loved him in Nessianian, she said *alaste*. In Kaveran, it might mean the difference between passion and devotion. "I'd like to stop being the world's biggest idiot."

"Agna."

"*Fine*," she shot back, her voice tense as a bowstring. "I want... to do things differently, someday. To not make mistakes like I have so far."

He could argue with her all night about what constituted a mistake, and who had been to blame, and whether any wrong had even been done. It wouldn't help. She didn't have time. She probably wouldn't listen, if she did have time.

"I think you can do things differently," he said at last. "If you want to. I believe you can. ...And I don't see it as ruining things. But I don't want to argue."

She thought for a moment, lightly kicking her heel against the leg of her chair. "Anyway, I'm not sure I want *amane* in the first place. Wasting away and not sleeping, and all the torment."

Keifon felt the corner of his mouth lift despite himself. She'd talked about this idea of love as drama before, about poetry and grand gestures and loud public scenes. "I don't know. I've tried a little of that, and at this point in my life, I just want something quiet."

"Quiet?"

"Yeah." The words were difficult to form. Too much weight, too many hours with a dream just out of reach. "Just... building a safe and meaningful life, and having a partner beside me as I do it. That's all I want. Like I told you." That night he'd gone to bed worrying about a revolution and woken up into a nightmare: Agna running from him into the night. He'd run out after her, and the rest was a blur, except that she'd come home. He'd told her everything he could bear to tell. And the next morning, she'd been in the kitchen, home safe.

Agna crossed her arms across the chair back and leaned her head on them. "We were talking about us that night, though."

He cleared his throat. "...Yeah."

"But what about the rest? That can't be all you want out of a relationship."

"It isn't." She always changed the subject when it glanced past attraction or desire. It wasn't personal, was it? Would that be better or worse? He pushed another breath out. "If you aren't interested, then I can find someone for a night, when I need to."

"If *I'm* not interested?" She lifted her head, her voice rising.

"Yes. I told you." He rubbed his forehead. He remembered the relief of having her home, after the terror of almost losing her. He remembered holding her in the kitchen, drinking broth with her by the fire. He thought he'd told her everything. "If I could have that kind of partnership with you, that's what I'd choose. But if you aren't interested, I'll find someone who is interested for that part, and keep what we have together. If that's what we both want."

"Kei, I... I don't understand what you're suggesting."

The clop of hooves slowed to a stop alongside Agna's art gallery downstairs, followed by the peal of a bell: the night mail had arrived.

"I'll get it," Keifon said, rising before she could. The walk down to the ground level and back might burn off a little bit of restlessness. Maybe she'd understand by the time he got back.

He grabbed his keys at the kitchen door, headed down the stairs and pushed his feet into his boots. Should have brought a lantern. Too late now; he wasn't going back up. The door to the gallery stood next to their own in the courtyard behind the building. He unlocked it and let himself in through the back of the gallery.

In the darkened storeroom, Keifon picked his way through the piles of crates and canvas-wrapped picture frames. Beyond the storage room was the public area of the gallery. There, the streetlamps shone through the windows clearly enough to light his way. On the walls, the dark rectangles of the frames outlined the feathery blurs of Agna's artwork. It still made his chest feel warm to remember her drawing by lamplight in their tent, to remember his pride when she opened the exhibit.

The night mail lay in a heap below the slot in the side door. Keifon scooped it up and sorted through it as he retraced his steps. A few letters for Agna, surely less fraught than the one she'd gotten this afternoon. A reminder from the bank about the mortgage payment. A letter for him in the looping handwriting of his and Agna's friend Nelle, addressed to his new name: *Keifon Laimeng*, written in Kaveran order. He felt a little jolt upon seeing it. It didn't entirely feel like his own, even after filling out forms and signing letters with it. It belonged to his life here, though, to the person he wanted to be in this country. It would feel more comfortable in time.

One letter was addressed in stiff Kaveran script, copied by rote from his own handwriting. Nachi's next letter. That would brighten this frustrating evening, at least.

Keifon pinned the mail to his side with his elbow as he locked the gallery. He was almost too impatient to take off his boots before he climbed the stairs to the apartment. In the kitchen, he slit the envelope with his pocketknife and left it on the table with the other mail. The large, neat brushwork on the letter inside marched down the page with enthusiastic self-importance as it told of the arrival of summer, new classes, a trip to the museum. A child's view of the world, slowly widening. He marveled that he got to witness it, even from afar.

After his daughter's account of her life and questions about his own, the handwriting shrank into Keifon's ex-wife's denser script. Eri usually added a short postscript with context or news. This time —

He must have gasped aloud, because Agna stood in the doorway. "What is it?"

Keifon waved her in, reading and rereading the end of the letter. As she approached, he set the letter on top of the other mail and braced his hands on either side of it.

"She can visit," he said, and swallowed. "Eri says — Eri says Nachi can visit in the autumn."

Agna gasped. "Oh, Kei, that's wonderful."

"Yeah," he said, half dreaming. "Um, her grandfather is coming with her. Eri's father. He's mostly retired now, and I guess he's going to fully retire soon." He rubbed his mouth, staring down at the letter. Agna reached out to touch his arm; he focused on her and smiled. "It's kind of a shock."

"I'm happy for you." She left her hand in place. He didn't turn and hug her, as he once would have. Agna gave his arm a squeeze and dropped her hand. "It'll be so much fun to show them around the city. And they can see how well you've done for yourself here."

"Mmn." Keifon shuffled the pages back into order and folded them. "It does show trust on their part. And..." He tilted his head, searching for the right words. "A kind of legitimacy. It's complicated."

"It's always complicated with you." It was an old, weak joke. Maybe she would never fully understand the social strictures of his home country, but in their day to day lives, it didn't matter. Agna took a step back. "Keep me posted."

"Of course."

The complications didn't stay away for long. Eri's family might accept that he had been granted a doctor's apprenticeship, that in this country his lack of medical family background didn't matter. They might accept that he'd made something good of his life here, that he had built something he could take pride in. He was less sure they'd understand why he lived with a foreigner to whom he wasn't married.

At least they had months to work it out. The mountains had only recently leafed out into their full summer green. Autumn was impossibly far away. Agna stooped to pick up her shoulder bag and told him goodbye. He'd figure it out in time.

Keifon: The Resurrection

She knew this holiday was important to him. They'd talked about it the first time they'd spent it together. She might be avoiding him on purpose. Or maybe she couldn't manage to change her schedule. Or maybe she needed time to think. It wasn't fair to hold it against her.

She'd left while he slept and wrote a note on the slate in the kitchen. *Have a good time.* He had to take it at face value.

A year had passed since Keifon first came to services at the Daranite church in Wildern, and yet he'd returned only a few times since. The parishioners who streamed into the church at the edge of the woods were all strangers.

He fell in line and filed between the statues of the god armed with sword and shield. It didn't make him a bad follower. He led his life according to Darano's principles as well as he could, and prayed to the Great Protector every day. He'd wanted a place in the community, though. He'd wanted to recognize people he passed on the street, to help with picnics and festivals, to be a part of something bigger than himself.

The scent of incense filled the air as Keifon approached the altar and laid down his offering in its wrapping of crimson and white cloth. He made the god's sign, silently said a brief prayer, and stepped away to let the other worshippers take their turn.

He'd found a place, in a way. Just not here. Keifon nodded to the acolytes in their red robes and found a seat on a bench. Between his work at the hospital and helping Keiva's camp by the canal, he'd begun to build... something. He wasn't sure what it would be in the end, but the foundation felt right. Others had shown him kindness, accepted his help, invited him in. No doubt the Daranites here would have done the same, though Keifon was no longer sure he needed them to do so.

The armored priests raised their hands and began the prayers of triumph. Some of the parishioners chanted along; some did not, praying silently or watching the priests or trying to corral their fidgeting children.

Justice and order and peace, the rule of law and the defense of the defenseless — Keifon had once pledged what was left of his life to uphold Darano's ideals. When the Daranite priests had pulled him out of the snow, he'd had nothing but the breath in his body and a musical instrument he'd guarded beyond all reason. Now he had so much more, materially and spiritually. People he cared about. Things he wanted to do. Since then, the scraps and fragments of a life had been patched together into something he could call his own. He owed all of it to those priests.

And yet, the inspiration behind this new patchwork life was no longer Darano's sword or even a shield. He studied to become a doctor, which would traditionally make him one of Tufar's countless students, and yet that didn't feel quite right.

As the priests and parishioners sang the praises of the Great Protector, Keifon formed a prayer of his own. *With Your mercy, please let me find and cherish and protect the people I love.*

The answer had been there all along, and under the banners and steel he finally felt a sense of acceptance. The Four each had their own domain, and together They watched over humanity. Darano may have pulled him out of the dark, but now the dreams and needs that called him aligned more with another: to care and connect, to bring people together and love them, whatever that meant under the circumstances, with all his heart.

Thank You for everything I have been given while I tried to serve Your justice. I will praise Your holy name all my days. And now I think I will walk Lundra's path.

It might not be the answer. He didn't have answers, only hunches. It felt right, and it was enough. He let the sound of the voices around him fill his head, and knew he was alive.



Halfway down the hill, Keifon paused under a shade tree. From here, he could see the corner of the fairground. A rumble of voices and distant music reached up the hill. It seemed wrong to go without Agna, to experience something he'd loved to do with her. And yet he was his own person, too. He could enjoy it alone. Next year, they'd go to the festival together. What would their lives be a year from now? Would there be anything left —

No. He lifted a hand to the smooth bark of the tree as an anchoring point. It would do no good to assume the worst. Perhaps their friendship would deteriorate, and they would

be strangers by next year's festival. Perhaps things would shift, she'd take her time to think and come back with the answer he longed for; they could go to next year's festival hand in hand. Either way, they would both go on. This in-between, this suspended state would not last indefinitely. The two of them would keep growing and changing.

The thought settled him enough to continue down the hill. Perhaps he'd listen to the concerts for a while. He'd walk around the festival and find something for lunch, then sit and listen to the musicians.

A steady stream of people and carts flowed with him down the hill. More carts and wagons packed the road alongside the fairground and the pasture on its other side. A string of fabric pennants decorated the fairground's fence, their tips fluttering in the breeze. Keifon quickened his pace into the fairgrounds.

Near the entrance, workers forked out straw from the back of a horse-drawn cart to cover the muddy path. The wet spring hadn't dampened the festival's spirits. As he passed, Keifon watched a group of children daring one another to jump from the fence over a boggy patch. Their shouts cut through the murmur of adult voices and the drums and flutes in the distance.

The first row of stalls belonged to local artisans and shops, selling a profusion of goods: pottery, summer clothes, fruits and vegetables. Keifon stopped to greet the merchants he knew.

"Hey!"

He looked up from the iron pans he had been browsing. Tai waved from the next stall. Keifon took in the rest of the stall: Whalen's nod, the other two workers lounging behind them, and the wooden sign, painted in Kaveran and Yanweian, hanging from the front post. *Now Hiring: Woodworkers, Delivery, Counter.*

Keifon put down the pan with a quick apology to the blacksmith's apprentice and crossed to Wei Cabinetry's booth. "Hey. Your booth looks nice."

"Thanks," Tai said. "Best we could do on short notice." He spread his arms, showing off the display. The four workers were surrounded by cabinets; in front, a small table held an array of bowls, ladles, carved boxes, and other wooden goods.

"How are sales going?"

"Pretty good," Tai said. "We moved a chest of drawers and a bunch of kitchen stuff."

"And got a few leads on staff." Whalen lifted a sheaf of papers pinned to a writing board.

"That's great. Good luck on both fronts."

“Hey, you want to walk around a while?” Tai smacked Whalen’s elbow with the back of his hand. “Res and Bori can cover for us. What do you say?”

The staff of Wei Cabinetry conferred for a minute; Tai’s other staff sent them on their way eagerly, complaining about the cramped quarters. Tai promised to buy them lunch.

It felt good not to be alone. All of a sudden, Keifon longed to hug Tai and Whalen. No doubt that would be confusing. So he only basked in their company as the three of them walked along the row of booths. It seemed Tai and Whalen hadn’t looked around the fair much yet, and so they took their time too.

Eventually the path turned a corner, and the shop stalls gave way to food stalls. The smells piled up on one another, making Keifon’s stomach grumble. True to his word, Tai found a stall from a favorite pub and ordered lunch and beer for his workers. Keifon and Whalen wandered around the other stalls as Tai headed back to deliver it.

Whalen squinted up at the sun. “So how have you been since I saw you last?”

“Mmn. All right. Went to the Resurrection services this morning. I’ve got a few more hours before I start work. That’s about all.”

“Services,” Whalen said, leaning halfway into a question.

“Yeah, I’m a Daranite. Or...” Keifon reconsidered his reflexive answer. “Have been, for a long time. I think it’s shifting. Still have to think about it for a while.” This wasn’t the conversation he’d wanted to have. Not today, not yet. “How have you been?”

The woodcarver waved a bare arm back toward the stall. “Getting ready for this thing. Seems to be worth the effort, at least.”

“I hope it will be.” Keifon saw Tai returning, half a head over many of the other festival patrons. “Have you had a booth here before?”

“No, this is the first time. Sales are up, though. We’re starting to get orders from merchants who made the trip from Ceien. Seems like a good time to seize the opportunity, as long as we can find more help. Elsewise it’ll be a long, backlogged summer.”

Keifon watched Whalen look out across the crowded fairground, and found himself wondering if it might be worth making an approach someday. No way to know if Whalen returned his growing interest; not with Whalen’s guarded demeanor. He’d just have to ask when the moment was right.

Something about Whalen was too familiar, chiming a chord in him that had rung wrong, not long ago. And yet behind his dryness and his sometimes cutting humor, Whalen didn’t seem to hold the same well of bitter anger as Keifon’s last partner. There

were walls between them, to be sure, but Keifon wondered if the gates might open if he asked.

Too much time had passed to comment on the state of the shop, and Keifon hoped Whalen wouldn't notice. He cleared his throat. "What are you thinking, for lunch? I had the noodles from that place over there last year."

They batted around inconsequential talk until Tai returned, then fanned out to wait in separate lines for their food. Keifon bought some mountain trout baked in a pastry wrapper. The booth was operated by a restaurant on the east side of town that he hadn't visited yet. He'd have to see whether Agna would be interested. If she had time.

The three of them ambled along the row of stalls. Tai had bought two chicken skewers and a mug of ale, and gestured with one or the other as he talked. Whalen had opted for the noodle stand, and deftly put away noodles and vegetables while walking. He insisted they didn't have to stop for him, though Keifon asked them to wait when they reached the corner so he could finish eating. He wanted to look at the next stretch of stalls more closely.

Along the next side of the fairground, booths had been set up by local theaters and clubs and churches, seeking participation instead of coin. A singer from a theater stood on a crate to serenade the crowd, drowning out the more distant music from the official festival stage. The weavers' guild curtained their stall in samples of their work; the bright colors and muted shades waved slowly in the breeze. The Tufarian priests handed out leaflets in the straw-covered pathway, inviting passersby to their newly built church.

As the trio drifted along, Whalen nodded to a few of the people at the tables. People stopped Tai to greet him every few steps, whether in the booths or along the path. Keifon saw no one he knew, because most of the other apprentices at the hospital would be working or at home asleep, and Keiva's people would avoid the fair to keep from being hounded by the police. And Agna was working. That was all he had, after a year.

Between one stall and the next, he tried to shake off the thought. Yes, he'd poured his time and effort into getting settled, into his friendship with Agna. Those were the choices he'd made in his first year in Wildern. This was not a permanent state of affairs. He could make more connections, like this new friendship with Tai and Whalen. He could build upon what he'd begun.

At the next booth, Father Tufari raised a hand. Keifon dipped his head and glanced around; three more Lundran priests in blue robes sat in a half-circle behind a small table. On the table they'd set out a collection box and a sign: *Rebuild the Church of the Mother of*

All. Keifon made Lundra's sign and then reached for his money bag. He felt Tai looming over his shoulder, and the carpenter's coins clinked into the box with his own.

"I'd love to join your church when it's built," Keifon said, trying to include the other priests in his comment. "I've been a Daranite for a long time, but..." He trailed off, unsure how to explain without unloading everything in his heart.

"The gods call us at different times in our lives," said one of the younger priests, a Kaveran woman about Keifon's age. "Perhaps the Lady calls you now."

"Yes. Thank you. I'm humbled to feel called," he said. "Is there anything I can do to help?" A third priest passed him a sign-up board. He added his name and address with the pencil tied to it with twine.

"The Lady welcomes you," his counselor said.

As he and his friends walked away, Keifon wondered where the Lundrans might build their church. What it might look like. If he stayed in this city, he'd experience some important days there. Funerals. Confirmations. ...Weddings. Had he grown up at all since he was a lovesick teenager?

"I was just remembering my confirmation in the old Lundran church," Tai remarked as they walked. "My grandparents made them do it all in Yanweian for them. And they'd already done it in Kaveran. The whole ceremony! It was torture for a seven-year-old. But now I'm twice a man, I guess."

"That would explain a lot," Whalen said dryly.

"I think it was a compromise," Tai went on, paying no attention to Whalen's jest. "Between my parents and grandparents. They'd do the ceremony in Yanweian if they let me do it at seven, when all my Kaveran friends were having theirs, and not wait till ten. And if they didn't start looking for partners for me, like they do back in the old country."

Keifon made a noncommittal noise. Their Yanweian-Kaveran friend had assimilated to that extent, then. Tai's unattached status did not escape him, either.

"I didn't want a ceremony," Whalen said. "Hated being the center of attention. They changed my name in the village records and that was it, till I got older."

"Oh, so I had my second ceremony on your behalf, then," Tai said lightly. "It all evens out."

The three of them finished the third leg of the fairground. A line of game stalls filled the side of the fairground facing the city, backed with the tiers of roofs cascading up the hills and the more distant wooded mountains. Tai cheerfully invited the other two to a challenge.

They wasted another fifteen minutes good-naturedly arguing about whether their preexisting skills gave each of them an unfair advantage at this game or the other, and whether this should be rectified with elaborate individual scoring.

It turned out Whalen had a keen eye for darts. And he did not let the other two win. Tai attempted to explain how a dart was too similar to a carving tool, reviving the argument for a second round.

Ultimately they put down their copper and played a few rounds of throwing wooden balls at stacks of pins. Tai had a good arm for that, as well as wielding hammers.

After the games, Tai and Whalen headed back toward their booth. Before they returned to their posts, Keifon indulged his impulse and hugged each of them for a second. Tai hugged him back surprisingly hard. Whalen laughed.

Keifon carried the glow back down the row of booths, looking for a souvenir for Agna. He didn't have to; she wouldn't expect anything.

At one of the booths he bought all the potted flowers he could carry, enough to fill the window box in her room. He'd plant them for her this afternoon, so she wouldn't have to take time out for it. Then he headed toward the festival stage with the heavy crate in his arms. He'd listen to the musicians and wonder about the rest of the summer, the rest of the year.