


A SLICE OF LIFE FANTASY NOVEL



THE  
HEALERS'  
ROAD

S.E. ROBERTSON

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For Jay, who always believed.

# Content Notes

This book contains:

- depictions of depression and PTSD; discussions of past substance abuse
- character rudeness and unpleasantness, at least for a while
- medical gore / descriptions of surgery (on an arm and on a case of stomach ulcers)
- one violent incident: a character is held at knifepoint with mild injuries; another sustains a shoulder injury
- references to fictional religions
- mild swearing
- off-page sexual content; on-page kissing
- discussion of a character's experience with homelessness

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



# Part 1: Agna: Arrival

Agna stood outside a stranger's door. She had brought along her old friend Rone's most recent letter, slipped safely into an inside pocket. Now, as the lamps flared to life in the houses up and down the street, Agna decided that she had been childish to carry the letter along. She had come halfway around the world to serve her time as a charitable agent; she couldn't indulge in silly things like carrying a letter like a talisman.

She was having quite a bit of trouble knocking.

The windows of this house were half-lit, as if by a lamp or two deeper inside the rooms. Rone must have been reading a novel or some philosophical text after dinner. Agna wished she were back in her dormitory room, reading after dinner. Even a quiet night back at the hotel would be an improvement over lingering on the street. Agna's skin felt as though it had absorbed salt all through her weeks at sea, and she hadn't been able to scrub it out.

She tapped her knuckles against the wood, then, noticing a brass knocker, gave it a couple of firm knocks. She remembered how to breathe. Rone had said he'd missed her, in his letters; he'd be as happy to see her as she was to see him.

The stranger's door opened, and a stranger looked out. An adult — his chin was scuffed with the beginnings of a beard. The authority of the Academy shored up her nervousness. Standing up this straight, her head would have reached the stranger's chin. "I am Agna Despana, healer of the Church of the Divine Balance," she declared in carefully studied Kaveran. "Is this the residence of Rone Sidduji?"

The stranger's mouth quirked. "Yeah. He's working at the moment. You're one of his little sisters?"

Agna felt her ears pink at the term. "Not literally, no. At the Academy, he was my mentor."

"Right, that's the one. Come on in if you like. Tea?"

Agna hesitated. She had received letters from this country for four years, but it still seemed as though Rone should live in the upperclassmen's dormitory at the Academy, or in the Islander neighborhood with his parents. It seemed wrong that he lived in this bearded man's house, where one could just invite a visitor in and make tea.

She thanked the stranger and followed him inside.

In the vestibule, she remembered to take off her shoes. The stranger had gone on ahead. She padded after him, her silk-clad feet slipping on the polished floorboards. The fireplace was unlit, leaving the room in the chill that seemed to pass for early spring in this country. The stranger — Rone's friend, somehow — clanked around in an adjoining room, pumping water, lighting the stove. Agna clasped her hands behind her back, tried not to nod in exhaustion, and waited.

He'd said that Rone was working. So he'd taken the evening shift at a shrine. That was, as usual, selfless of him. She wondered whether she should drop by the shrine tonight, or come back here in the morning.

Agna cast a look around, gathering what she could about the state in which her friend lived. It was a humble city house, no more than three bedrooms. It had a modern kitchen with an indoor water pump, by the sound of the Kaveran's preparations. There were bookshelves along most of the walls, and the floors were clean and polished. It wasn't so different from Rone's parents' house in Murio: small and vicariously embarrassing, but safe.

Eventually, the bearded man came back with a pot of tea and two cups. "No doubt you've guessed already, but I'm Tenken Grim." He set the pot on the table on one side of the room and waved at the chairs.

Agna took the seat that Tenken Grim did not claim for himself. "Yes. Rone mentioned you. Pleasure to meet you." She thanked him for the tea and waited for it to steep. The scent of the leaves rolled up from the hot water — Kaveran tea, that dark, acrid stuff, not Nessianian herbal tea. They'd served it in the hotel, too.

"Do you take it with honey like he does?"

Agna's throat constricted, remembering Rone's over-honeyed cups of tea, crowding in with their textbooks and notes. Honeyed verbena tea for Rone, cold mint tea for Esirel, hot chamomile for Agna, at the last table along the right-hand wall in the Direzzo Café. Once a week for four years, the three of them had met to study, until Rone had graduated. And now Agna and Esirel were off in the world, too. It might be a long time until they all met again.

Agna found her voice and held it steady. "No, thank you."

"Hm." Tenken's solid brown hands cradled the teacup, soaking up its heat. "Always wondered whether that might be a Nessianian thing, or just him."

Agna's laugh hurt a little. "Just him."

Tenken seemed to lose himself in thought. Agna watched the drifting tea leaves. All she wanted was to ask about Rone, to make sure he was well, to grasp some sense of his life in this place. Yet asking might look desperate and immature. The thought of this stranger's disapproval — or, worse, amusement — made her jaw tighten. She shouldn't care. But she would rather ask her old friend personally. She knew she could trust him, and he was too noble to think ill of her.

She swallowed. "So... where is the shrine, if I might ask?"

"The shrine?" the Kaveran echoed. "Well, there's one up in Prisa. Three days' ride from here."

Agna squinted, parsing the answer. "Does he travel back and forth, then?"

"Rone? No — well, he went up once for a festival."

"I thought you said he was working."

"Yeah. He works a lot of places. Three jobs right now, I think."

"But..." She swallowed the rest of her protest. Rone was the greatest swordsman in his year, if not the greatest ever. He was dedicated to the service of his Church and its missions. That was why he'd come here originally, on his own assignment. Now that he was finished, why would he work all over the city, like a common ditch-digger? This foreigner didn't understand. But the point was that Rone wasn't here, and that she had come here for nothing. Here to this house, she reminded herself. Not here to this country. No need to jump to such conclusions yet.

She sipped her bitter tea. There was nothing she wanted from Tenken Grim but answers, and she hated her own sense of desperation. She was out on her own now; she was supposed to be an adult.

Agna turned her questions over and over in her mind until they seemed innocuous, smooth as river stones. "So... how long does Rone intend to stay here?"

Tenken shrugged. "Until he makes enough to move out on his own. Doesn't bother me. Nice to have some company."

*Until he can move out on his own*, Agna noted, not *until he can go back to Nessiany*. She intended to ask Rone about that in her next letter. Perhaps his new roommate was mistaken.



“You’re the healer, then?”

She looked up and squared her shoulders. “Yes, healer second order of the Academy of the Divine Balance.”

“And the other one was a swordmaster, like him.”

Agna chose not to take offense at *the other one*, as though she and Esirel were somehow interchangeable. “Yes. Esirel Relaska was his other — little sister, as you put it. She’s on assignment in Achusa.” She took a deep breath and sipped more of her tea. Her assignment was almost manageable compared to Esirel’s. Esirel was closer to home, true, but her term was four times as long. And Agna didn’t have a sweetheart to leave behind, of course. As much as it grated on her soul to be overlooked her whole life, Agna could at least take solace in having missed the traditional graduation separation.

“Going to work in one of the hospitals here?” Tenken asked.

Agna turned her cup around on the saucer. “It depends on the Benevolent Union. I’ll leave it up to them.” *Like he did*, she finished silently.

“Ah.”

Tenken was quiet as he drank. Agna struggled to the bottom of her teacup in silence.

At the end of it, there was nothing else to say. “Thank you for your hospitality,” she said, scraping her chair back. “Please tell Rone that I will be in town for four more days. I’m staying at the Bluethorne Hotel.”

“All right,” Tenken allowed. He saw her to the door. “Good to meet you, then. Safe travels.”

Agna fled into the strange city alone.

# Keifon: Exile

Keifon watched the sky turn gray and pink and blue from the window of his room in the Benevolent Union base. After a week in Vertal, he had learned the layout of the neighborhood, and the positions of the restaurants and bars and theaters. He did not trust himself outside. It had not been this hard in a long time.

He read his Kaveran phrasebook again, dusting off the words that he had learned in another life. He read his other two books when he tired of that one. The sacred texts and the medical terms slid through his brain in the same way.

One day, after he had managed to get some sleep, he ventured out to buy cooking equipment. Buoyed by this small victory, he practiced the nanbur that had lain neglected on a side table in his room. His fingers flexed around the notes of the scales. The strings were still sound in this southern climate. The nanbur was undamaged by its time on the ship, crammed in next to him on a narrow bunk alongside sacks of wheat and bolts of silk. That was something. He should have left it with Nachi, so that she might grow up to learn how to play it and remember him by it, but he had lost his nerve.

He sat at the table later that evening to write a letter to Nachi — or to her mother, as Nachi was still learning to read. He had to believe that Eri would read it to her. She had agreed to let him visit on his way out of the country, though her eyes had betrayed her worry. He had not broken down in front of Nachi. He had put on a brave front for the last time he would ever see his little girl.

*Remember me, he wanted to write. I know you'll be nine by the time I get back, and you'll forget you ever had a father, and maybe that's for the best. Maybe you'll have a new father by then. But don't forget me.*

He didn't waste the ink. *Have fun in school, he wrote. Listen to your mother and your grandparents. I love you. Always.*

Keifon couldn't cry afterward. He could feel for Nachi; he could love her and miss her. The rest was blank.

He tried to pray instead. He remembered the right words and the proper placements of his hands. The prayers echoed through his head. The gods didn't hear him. They couldn't. If the gods loved him, he would not be here. Kazi would not have sent him away.

*It doesn't mean I don't love you,* he had said.

*It's for our own good, both of us,* he had said.

*I know it's sooner than we expected, but this is a perfect opportunity for you,* he had said.

*Someday I'll make enemies, if I haven't already,* he had said. *I want you out of harm's way.*

Keifon did not feel out of harm's way. He felt very much under harm's boot. He counted hours and waited. Four years. He couldn't see the end.

# Agna: The Golden Caravan

The world headquarters of the Benevolent Union were unassuming from the outside. Agna had mistaken the building for an inn the first time she'd visited, following the address that she'd been given at the Academy. But she had noticed afterward that the Benevolent Union's sigil was carved into the sign over the door, and stitched into the jacket of the receptionist at the desk. She returned on the appointed day, feeling like an expert.

"Name and affiliation?"

"Agna Despana, healer second class, Church of the Divine Balance. I have an appointment," she added. "With Agent Harnal."

"Mmhm. Down this hall, third door on the right."

Agna inclined her head and hurried past him. She closed her hands in her skirt as if to lift it out of the way of her shoes, wicking the sweat from her palms.

The Benevolent Union was a well-established charitable organization. The Academy would not partner with it if it weren't competent. Its agents would find a fitting assignment for her abilities, something that would serve the people of Kavera and the missions of the Benevolent Union and the Church. She would join the long line of Academy graduates who had gone before her in serving, as Rone had.

Agna paused and steadied herself with a hand against a doorframe. She took some deep breaths and murmured a prayer, as Rone would have. "Let my hands and my mind serve the world's need." Agna had never been particularly observant, but it couldn't hurt.

The agent's office was a small room, and three walls were lined with bookshelves loaded with logbooks and bound papers. The only other furnishings were a massive wooden desk, with one chair behind it — where the intake agent studied some papers — and two chairs in front of it. Behind the desk loomed a noticeboard, as big as a banquet table, plastered with paper notes. As Agna peered at it, the chaos resolved into order: the notes were sectioned into columns, with subheadings under that. Over the largest divisions, she

made out some names — Vertal, Prisa, Laketon, and Wildern, all Kaveran cities. Most likely, the notes represented the Benevolent Union’s openings at each location. Agna stared at the board. There were hundreds of notes. All of this happened in a mostly modern country, in peacetime.

The agent, a middle-aged Kaveran man, looked up and motioned to the empty chairs. “Do have a seat.” He spoke her native Nessianian quite clearly, despite his accent.

Agna sank into one of the chairs, as the grandiose introduction she’d planned — citing her honors, insisting upon the best of assignments, expressing her displeasure with being made to wait for days — withered in her mind. A familiar voice replaced it. *That’s why the Academy exists. That’s why they send us out.* Rone had been so proud to go overseas, to do his duty as a graduate. He probably hadn’t thought about his own importance. He had probably looked at that board and said *Let me work wherever the need is greatest.* Agna felt selfish and small. For all her accomplishments, she was still inadequate.

The agent paged through the file on his desk for another minute as Agna regained her bearings.

“So, Healer. I’ve read the Academy’s report on you. We’re glad to have more of the Academy’s graduates working with us. And healers are always appreciated.” He consulted a nearby logbook and dipped a pen in his inkwell. “Now. Do you have any requests for your assignment?”

Agna swallowed. Part of her wanted to ask where Rone had been assigned. Part of her wanted to beg to go home. She revised her goals for the conversation: don’t cry in front of the intake agent. And remember what Rone would do.

“Wherever I can be of use, sir.”

The agent smiled. “Well then.” He turned to untack a note from the board behind him. “We have a need for medical workers on one of our more challenging assignments. The Benevolent Union runs a mobile clinic that travels with a merchants’ caravan.” He found another sheet of paper among the stacks on his desk and handed it to her. Agna stared at it: a map of Kavera with a path traced over it, crisscrossing the network of canals that fanned through the country like the veins of a leaf.

The agent went on. “Some of the areas that it visits don’t have resident doctors or healers of their own, so it’s important to our mission to supply these places with medical care.” He paused, and Agna nodded, looking up from the map. She was listening, whether or not she understood fully yet. “It’s not more dangerous than any of our other details — though it is difficult. But it’s needed, and greatly appreciated.”

Agna found her voice. She sounded meek and distant to herself. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"Well. The caravan doesn't have top-notch accommodations. They have water and various other conveniences, and the trading company will supply guards and transportation. The Union supplies you with some camping equipment and the mobile clinic. When the caravan sets up shop, you and your partner will open the clinic and treat anyone who comes to it to the best of your ability. When the caravan comes back to Vertal, we will account for the fees you've collected, all applicable taxes, and the expenses that the Union owes to the trading company. You'll be paid out of the remainder."

Money was not interesting in the slightest. He was getting off track. Camping? The world-famous charitable organization resorted to *camping*? Agna throttled her initial reaction. "...I have some questions. Please."

"Go ahead."

"When the caravan comes back to Vertal, you said — how long is it on the road?"

"The circuit is a year long. If you want to be reassigned elsewhere for your — second year?"

"Yes."

"When the caravan comes back around this time next year, if you want to be reassigned, we can arrange for that."

"I see. And... my partner, you said? I don't have a partner. There were a couple of priests coming to the west from the Academy this year, but they're going on to Warma. And there were two other healers that were going to a new hospital in — Wildern, is it?"

"Yes, Wildern. But I'm afraid we have a greater need for healers on this assignment, if you're amenable."

Agna sighed. "Go on, then. Partners."

"Yes, well. The Benevolent Union's procedure is to work in pairs or teams. One doctor can't cover the whole caravan route alone. There are some areas where you'd have them queued out the door." He drew another logbook from the stack on his desk and opened it. "We've had an agent from the Yanweian National Army sign up already. You'll need to be ready to meet the caravan before they leave town. They arrived last night, so they should be moving on by this time next week."

"A Yanweian?" she blurted.

“Yes. The Yanweian National Army sends agents to work with the Benevolent Union, much as your Academy does. They’ve sent an agent who is fluent in Kaveran and has trained as a medic.”

“I see.” Agna racked her brain for everything she knew about Yanweians. Yanweian artists had been in and out of fashion in some of the galleries in Murio; she could recognize their style of brushed ink on vellum and their idiosyncratic color combinations. She had read Yanweian poetry in some of her classes, and had once heard it read in their strange, lilting language. There were a few Yanweian students in the Academy, but no one that Agna knew closely. The Yanweian immigrants in Murio didn’t mix with outsiders. Agna realized that she knew nothing else about them. They were... foreign.

“Do you have any problems with this arrangement, Healer? Do you accept?”

“I...” She tore her eyes from the map in her hands. She would have to spend a year riding around the country like an itinerant trader, on a horse? In a wagon? — and ply her healing in the Kaveran hinterland, accompanied by an incomprehensible stranger from a foreign military. This was not why she’d become a healer, to tread dirt in the back of beyond. And then the noticeboard caught her gaze again, and she remembered Rone’s voice, just before he went away. He hadn’t spoken a word of Kaveran. He had asked the Church and the Union to make the best use of his talents, to serve the greatest need. He had trusted his life to them.

And somewhere out there, he was still serving, humble and devout, lending his sword and his soul to the cause. Agna couldn’t hope to reach his level. The thought made her mouth go dry. Rone would tell her to go, to give her abilities to the people who needed them, no matter how hard it would be for her. That was what the Church and the Academy meant to him: defending the weak and saving the lost. To Agna it had been a refuge where knowledge was paramount, where she could prove herself through hard work and intelligence. They’d had so many long discussions in the coffee shops in Murio about the nature of the greater good and the best uses of Church resources. Agna cherished those memories of her peer mentor; they meant infinitely more to her than his advice about finding her way around the Academy.

She had come across the ocean in his footsteps, trying to follow his example. And in this assignment, Agna might be able to pursue both knowledge and selflessness. She had trained as a healer since she was twelve, and now she had an opportunity to find people who truly needed her expertise. Agna hoped that she could set aside her pride. She hoped that she wasn’t making a terrible mistake.

She took a deep breath. "I accept."

The agent nodded, smiling as he drew a form from a drawer in his desk. "For the Benevolent Union and for Kavera, thank you for your service, Agent Despana."

She bowed her head and hoped she wouldn't cry as he filled in some blanks on the form. This was a terrible mistake. "Thank you."

He waited as she read the contract, explaining the terms. She was to work for the Benevolent Union, by the good graces of the Church and Academy of the Divine Balance. Her pay would be minimal, her living conditions the best that could be managed under the circumstances — at least that was encouraging — and after this term and that condition were met, her contract would be fulfilled. Agna let the dry, formal words cool her mind back down. She signed and dated it and turned it over to the agent, who signed it again. And so it was done. She was an agent of the Benevolent Union for two whole years.

"Now. Get some rest, see the city if you like. Meet the other medic back here five days from now, at eight in the morning."

"Yes, sir." She sat dazed, then shook it off. The task lay before her. She would do whatever she could.



The morning of her departure, Agna woke up too early. She got dressed, descended to the lobby, and asked one more time whether any mail had arrived for her. One more time, the desk clerk said no. Sighing, Agna called for a carriage and her trunk, and settled her bill. The porters loaded her trunk onto the carriage, and Agna gave the driver the address of the Benevolent Union base for the third time.

She was alone in the small carriage they'd sent, and so Agna rested her head against the window frame. The doors and windows and signs and pedestrians flowed by outside. On the first day Agna had sent all of her clothes out to be laundered, which had been a great relief. She had stopped by a library to copy out a map of Kavera onto some of her drawing paper, and learn what she could about the trade routes. She had spent one full day in an art museum, wandering delightedly from one room to the next. On that day, she had managed not to worry about Rone until she checked for mail.

Rone had never come. Every day Agna set out to see the city and to try to prepare for her trip, and every day she resolutely set her feet away from the neighborhood where Tenken



Grim lived. Rone must have his reasons. Was he disappointed that she'd come, that she'd followed him? She waited for his next letter like a child awaiting a festival.

At the Benevolent Union base, Agna had the footman carry her trunk into the lobby, and gave the receptionist a few coins to watch it until her meeting with the Yanweian agent. She would have to pull it along herself soon enough. She could move it, just barely, thanks to the wheels bolted to the bottom, but it was tiring and undignified work.

There was enough change in her purse to pay for breakfast, and there was plenty more where that came from, anyway. Agna shrugged to herself and headed across the street to a café. The morning was cool and clear, so she decided to claim one of the outdoor tables. Since they did not offer Furoni coffee on the menu like a proper café in Murio would, she ordered tea and toast and a newspaper. Were it not for the dark, bitter tea, the Kaveran chatter of the occasional passerby, the news about Vertal in the paper, and the block-long edifice of the Benevolent Union headquarters dominating the landscape, she might almost be home in Murio.

Agna had had so few opportunities to travel, being busy with her Academy training. That was the only thing she'd looked forward to, among all of the duties she'd have to undertake in her father's agency. Currying favor with patrons was dull, buying new art was intriguing, but her interest was truly captured by the thought of traveling to museums and galleries and studios to collect new acquisitions. Agna had read countless books about the sorts of places that she would be able to see in person once she was an art dealer.

She suspected that museums, galleries, and studios would be in short supply on this trip, once she left the capital. But travel was good for one's horizons. Even if the people she met in the countryside were not the best-educated or most refined people in the world, she could make do. There would always be something to learn.

Agna paid for breakfast, leaving a handful of coins on top of the discarded newspaper for their trouble. She had read in her cultural briefings that such things weren't customary here, but it felt wrong not to do it.

The clock in the lounge area of the headquarters read five minutes to eight. An agent appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Agna addressed him. "You. Will you help me with something? I'll pay you. I'm in a hurry."

The newcomer frowned vaguely and rubbed his temples with one hand. "I'm running late, too. I'm sorry." Between his soft voice and his lilting accent, the words were hard to make out.

“It won’t take a minute. I just need to have my trunk loaded onto a carriage outside. I’ll pull it out there,” she offered.

The agent sighed. “All right.” He shrugged the strap of a long, angular case higher on one shoulder. Agna grabbed the handle of her trunk and bore against it, leaning hard to get it rolling. The other agent darted around her to hold the door open, and Agna hauled the trunk through the door, feeling clumsy and ridiculous, trudging through the door bottom-first.

“Now. When the Yanweian agent gets here...” She looked at him again as he closed the door. Just a bit taller than herself. About her own age or a bit older, on the young side of adulthood. Clearly in a physical trade, though not as graceful as the Academy’s swordmasters. He wore a light cloak of gray material with a sigil pin — a quartered shield — holding it together at the shoulder. On the opposite hip from his money bag, he wore a sheathed knife half as long as her arm. The valise in his hand was marked with the international symbol for medical aid. On his back, along with the long case, he carried a large hiking backpack. The stranger had dark hair cut short, and dark, guarded eyes. Dark eyes, amber skin, and... a Yanweian accent.

“...Oh.”

“You’re the Nessianian healer, aren’t you.”

“...Um.”

“Do you know the way to the caravan?”

“Uh.”

“Follow me, then.” He turned and set off along the street.

Agna froze. “*Walking?*”

He turned. “It isn’t far.”

Agna scrambled to follow. It was a long walk to the caravan’s campsite, beyond the open-air market and the warehouses behind it, and through a gate in the city wall. Agna gritted her teeth and hauled the trunk. The wheels made a terrible clatter on the cobblestones. At long last, the street emerged into a field full of wagons and tents, people and horses, flags and banners. She caught a glimpse of a herd of goats. People were dismantling tents, hitching horses to wagons, fitting them with saddles and bridles for riders. The Yanweian scanned the crowd and gave a small wave to a stranger at the edge of the field. The stranger jogged over to meet them. The Benevolent Union seal was embroidered on his jacket — another agent.

“Good, good.” The agent opened a satchel slung over his shoulder and extracted two cardboard-bound books with the Benevolent Union seal embossed on their covers. He passed one to each of them. “These are for your records. You’ll need to keep logs of your patients, their conditions, any treatments that you perform, and what you’ve charged for them. The Benevolent Union will need this information when you return.” He reached into the satchel for another book, if it could be called that; it was not much more than a packet of bound paper. “This is a summary from the last team of spring healers.” The Yanweian reached for it first, and slung his backpack to one side to slide it inside.

The agent turned toward the campground. “Follow me, please. I’ll introduce you to the caravan master and the passenger wagon’s driver.” He led them to one of the larger wagons, a proper enclosed traveling coach with a rectangular sigil painted on the side in gold. A guard in a short brown cloak waited in the driver’s seat, yawning; another loaded boxes into a storage compartment over the wagon’s rear wheels. The agent waved to both and knocked on the wagon’s door. “Agent Chesler, Captain. I have the new healers.”

The door swung open, and the caravan master dismounted. Once on solid ground, she was barely taller than Agna, a fact which hardly dampened her commanding presence. The Benevolent Union agent bowed his head. The caravan master nodded her acknowledgement and scanned Agna and the Yanweian. Agna felt her nerve withering, as though she’d blundered into the wrong practice room and was about to be mocked in front of a class full of swordmasters. It might have been the caravan master’s close-cropped silver hair, leather riding clothes and compact build that gave her that impression. More likely, it was the unspoken, yet non-negotiable, air that the caravan master was very much in control of the situation.

“Another Nessianian — another Balance healer, are you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Agna replied, faintly irritated by the shortcut through the Academy’s name, but not at all inclined to raise her voice in protest.

“And a Yanweian?” the Captain went on.

“Yes, ma’am. Keifon the Medic, from the Yanweian National Army.”

“Interesting. Talina Tego,” she added. “I run the spring caravan. Welcome aboard.”

Agna bowed in proper Kaveran fashion, and from the corner of her eye she saw the Yanweian make some kind of salute.

“Agna Despana, second-order healer, Academy of the Divine Balance,” Agna added belatedly.

“Thank you, Captain,” Agent Chesler concluded, and craned his neck to peer through the mob. The caravan master rounded the wagon to speak with one of her guards. Chesler pointed ahead, and their sad little Benevolent Union contingent soldiered on.

“Captain?” the Yanweian asked the agent, once they’d left the caravan master’s wagon behind. “Is the caravan associated with the military?”

“It’s an honorary title. A nickname, if you will. Because of the comparison to running a ship along the trade routes.”

“I see.”

“And here we are.” Chesler turned to face them beside a long, open-sided wagon with a canvas roof. Some workers loaded rucksacks and trunks through the open gate in the back of the wagon. Agna aligned her trunk with the waiting luggage as Chesler hailed the driver.

“If you will, please.” Chesler waved Agna and the Yanweian closer. The Yanweian stroked the nose of a nearby draft horse as the driver looked them over. “The Benevolent Union will pay for your passage. The rest of your equipment is already loaded. It’s labeled with the Benevolent Union seal, so just look for that. There should be two tents as well as some tables and chairs for the clinic. Anything else you might need can be bought in the caravan. The mail riders stop by the caravan whenever their paths cross, so send word back to headquarters any time you like. Good luck. The Benevolent Union thanks you.”

He shook hands with each of them, as Kaverans did, and left.

The Yanweian heaved his backpack into the wagon and jumped up with his valise and the case across his back. Agna turned. Her trunk sat behind the wagon, neglected. “What — you forgot mine. Excuse me?” A few faces turned inside the wagon and stared. The Yanweian turned to look back at her.

“Do you have some issue with carrying your luggage?” he asked, a cold tone underlying his polite words.

Agna crossed her arms. “The porters forgot mine. It’s very unprofessional of them.”

“Porters?” He folded his hands together, breathing deliberately. When he spoke again, he had reined in his voice to the point of monotone. “Agent. Everyone here is a passenger. There are no porters.”

Hot tears spiked behind her eyes. How was she supposed to *do* this? Why had she agreed to any of this? Why did it have to be so scrabbling and awful? She set her jaw and, propping the trunk against her foot, tipped it on its end. Nothing inside was that fragile,

she reminded herself. Things might get shuffled out of place, but that was worth proving to this arrogant stranger that she didn't need anyone's help.

The Yanweian bent over the edge of the wagon to grab the trunk's handle, and Agna bit back her impulse to snap at him. Her humiliation may as well reach its peak. Why hadn't any of the swordmasters been sent to Kavera this year? Curse everyone in this backward country.

The Yanweian pulled as Agna hauled upward with every muscle in her body. Her arms ached, but the trunk tipped up until the wheels made contact with the deck. The Yanweian stepped back along the narrow aisle between the benches.

"I'll get it from here." Her voice wavered, and Agna's cheeks burned. She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and scrambled up the ladder on wobbly legs to the deck of the wagon. She felt the wagon shift under her weight, and felt thick and clumsy as well as weak and conspicuous. She pushed the trunk in front of her through the rows of benches.

"You're welcome," a soft, sarcastic voice said as she passed. Agna grabbed a few coins from the pouch on her belt — she didn't see what they were, and it didn't matter — and shoved them at him. She ignored the disgusted sound he made and straightened her posture.

The passengers of the wagon sat in the ranks of wooden benches with their luggage piled around them. The Yanweian settled into a seat in the back, propping his feet up on his backpack and cradling the angular case on the bench next to him. Agna pushed her trunk four rows past him and sat on the opposite side, where a pile of luggage branded with the Benevolent Union seal was stacked near an empty bench. She slapped her blank logbook on the bench and took her seat.

The activity in the campsite intensified. Good-natured shouting mixed with laughter, creaking leather, banging wood and a thousand other things that Agna was too drained to care about. She tried to reason through the situation. The Benevolent Union had supplied her with some equipment. She'd read adventure stories before. They could make anything out of sticks and cunning in that sort of story.

She had agreed to this, in the most foolish decision of her entire life, and now she had to rise above it. She had come here to this stupid country to do the right thing. And Rone's stupid friend must not have even told him that she'd visited. She would have to prove that she had made the right decision. She would have to prove that these backward, small-minded people could not best her. She was a graduate of the Academy. She was capable of more than they could ever imagine.

# Keifon: Traveler

Keifon watched the last preparations through the open side of the wagon, between the supports that anchored the canvas roof. The tents were being packed up, the horses were being hitched to wagons, and men and women in matching reinforced leather and short brown cloaks roved through the grounds. Most of them were armed with short blades, though a few of the mounted guards carried muskets on their backs — modern, expensive pieces, the kind that the Yanweian National Army would only hand out to officers. Keifon wondered whether the caravan guard carried them mostly for show.

A bell rang somewhere in the middle of the camp, echoed by more bells around the edges. The passenger wagon driver barked a command at her horses, and the wagon lurched into motion. A cheer went up from the other passengers. Around them the other wagons began to roll as the mounted merchants and guards rode at an easy walk.

Keifon watched the receding city wall until a turn in the road put it squarely behind the wagon. Around him, the other passengers talked amongst themselves about their destinations and their homes — going back to the country from Vertal, or to the patrol garrison just up the road. A few were going as far as Laketon, which he remembered as a ranching hub in northern Kavera, just over the border from southern Yanwei.

His letter to Nachi would take several more days to reach her; he thought about the mail riders running north, cutting through the land he'd bypassed by sea, heading toward the home that wasn't home anymore. Ceien had never really been home, after all. It was Eri's family's home, and Nachi's now. The base had been home, and now he could not return for a long time.

Keifon had stopped listening to the other passengers. To distract himself, he turned his attention to the wagons and riders around them. He had visited the camp once with Chesler, briefly, introducing himself to the retiring Nessianian healers and helping them pack up their clinic tent. They had been gracious in showing him the quirks of the equipment that he had since inherited. They were middle-aged, looking forward to

settling down — one in a private office in Vertal, the other in a hospital. Keifon had politely listened to their reminiscing and their good wishes. They had spoken to one another in half-sentences in their syncopated Nessinian accents, hardly needing to finish their thoughts before they were understood. They had clearly worked together for a very long time. At the time, Keifon had fought the rising dread that he would be forced to work with a partner. He wanted to work alone; he wanted to live alone. If he could not be with Kazi or with his daughter, he did not want anyone else near him.

He had his solitude for now, at least. The order of the procession slowly shifted as one wagon or rider passed another, moving as a loose body to the northwest. He spotted a textile merchant, a livestock driver with a herd of goats, the bookseller that he had noticed on his first visit, and several merchants who dealt in whatever they could fit on their carts, tarpaulined over to keep the piles of scavenged odds and ends from spilling out.

In the early afternoon, a rider picked his way around the wagons, tailed by a young apprentice. The pair called out like street vendors. As they pulled alongside the passenger wagon, the apprentice handed up paper-wrapped packages and glass bottles. A wine vendor? Keifon's hand tightened on the bench back until he caught a rising savory smell from the rider's saddlebags. A food vendor, food and drink. Keifon caught his breath and considered what he could afford and what he could digest. He noticed a passenger two rows ahead buying bread and two hard-boiled eggs, so when the rider passed his way, he bought the same, with a flask of water. He downed half of the bottle of water first to muffle his stomach's complaints, then slowly finished the food. It settled his hunger without too much pain. He leaned against the roof support and watched the road as his body finished its ritual war with itself.

Along the road a series of inns, horse traders and general stores gradually thinned out. Keifon remembered the notes that the Benevolent Union had copied; the Nessinian healers had mentioned that they'd drawn maps. This ride would seem less interminable if he knew how long it would take.

He extracted the notes from his backpack and flipped through. They were written in Kaveran — translated, perhaps — and many of the treatments referred to Nessinian energy healing. A faint sick feeling swam through Keifon's gut. The Nessinians had seemed kind and even welcoming, but they were still unbelievers in the end. They called on Tufar's holy energy without proper training or attribution, an affront to the bronze god that could not be overlooked. Still, Keifon could learn something from their experience, however ill-gotten it might be.

The map folded out from the back of the logbook, with three dense pages of notes following it. The roughly rectangular trade route was heavily annotated, numbers and symbols peppering the countryside, each referring to the following text.

The caravan now pulled out of Vertal, the port in the south; Keifon located that. The route ran northwest to a city called Prisa, not far away, where the notes mentioned Benevolent Union clinics and a Church of the Divine Balance shrine — something the Nessinians would care about, but of no use to Keifon. From Prisa, the route turned east to the mountains, north to run near the border with Yanwei, then south again to return to Prisa and Vertal. Line after line, note after note, sprawled across the country. *Mining villages all over this area, will come to the Feast of Darano market. Ask for the doctor here, will appreciate help. Risk of bandits in this wood. Refused treatment at first, came to trust us. Caravan might look into rerouting here; hard going. New BU road? Recommend permanent doctor in this town, lots of business. Water sickness common here. Tried to educate.*

Ten years of experience had been distilled down to this. Keifon carefully closed the book. He couldn't imagine traveling with the young, pampered Nessinian girl for ten years. He couldn't imagine her sticking it out for ten years; she was throwing enough fits after one day. He fingered the outline of the coins in his belt pouch and wondered whether she realized how much she'd given him — enough to buy food for a week. His cheeks warmed with the memory. Had she meant to humiliate him? Or was she getting revenge for having been embarrassed? He had been harsh with her about calling the passengers porters. It seemed unbelievable that someone could be so thoughtless, and he was offended on the other passengers' behalf. It was all part of the gods' punishment, that he should be matched up with such a spoiled patrician.

The conversation on the wagon quieted as the afternoon wore on, a few murmurs blending with the wheels' rattle and the hoofbeats of the horses. The members of the caravan kept more or less the same pace with one another, and the mounted guards in their leathers and brown cloaks weaved back and forth between them. The passenger wagon now rolled alongside an open-topped wagon stacked with furniture, cooking implements, barrels, crates, small plaster statues of gods and demigods, farming implements, and canvas-wrapped packages of unclear purpose.

When the sun slanted in from the left front corner of the wagon, the food vendor came around again. The other passengers bought more food, and this time, Keifon noticed several bottles of wine being passed up as well. He could afford to splurge with what the Nessinian had given him, so he bought one of the vendor's Kaveran crepes — full of cheese



and mushrooms and herbs — and more water. The passengers behind him uncorked a bottle and passed it back and forth, laughing as they opened their picnic baskets. Keifon could smell it from here, and his throat clenched. His feet were moving before he finished forming the thought.