

THE COLOR of JUSTICE

GREEN JUSTICE

* 1 *

I tried. I really did. But with the loud, constant yammering from the woman in the cubical on the left and the overpowering stench of cologne the guy in the cubical on the right bathed in, I finally just gave up.

On the bright side, I was able to keep from smashing the face of the cubicle Nazi when I told him I was quitting. He had a short fuse, but that was not my problem. Seconds into my planned speech he started cursing and calling me names.

It was a close one, but then the memories of my time in the Middle East came back and I just smiled, turned on my heels, and walked out.

I ignored his curses as I practiced my calming ritual.

It was hard to forget the memories that still haunt my dreams, but I was one of those not afraid or ashamed to take advantage of the counseling the VA provided. I was also lucky enough to have a large VA hospital nearby and actually get appointments in a timely manner.

With therapy I had learned how to deal with the worst of the dreams and the out-of-control reactions that threatened to follow them when they woke me or I was startled.

Those reactions might serve well on the battlefield, but caused consternation in those around me in civilian life.

As a result of making use of the help that the VA provided, the nightmares didn't come near as often, and the ones that did haunt me weren't near as bad. I had also made considerable progress in learning how to repress wartime reactions to civilian situations and not attack those who startled me or pissed me off.

Well, most of the time anyway, so I was pretty proud of myself for not pummeling my former boss.

Back in my tiny apartment I scanned the want ads as I sipped my tea. With my recent civilian work record and an economy that hadn't rebounded enough to overcome the number of unemployed, I didn't expect many choices. I had already had three jobs since my discharge from the Army six months ago, and it was getting harder to find someone who favored vets over college grads.

It didn't help that I had to pay a portion of my wages to the temp agency that had found me each of the jobs in question.

Or that after my latest failure, the *agency* had all but labeled me as unemployable in the current financial atmosphere.

I got through all the help wanted ads and took another drink of my tea as my eyes went down the page to the lost and found section. Almost immediately I saw an ad that drew my attention.

I put my cup down and read more. Somebody needed another somebody to retrieve something they had lost, or misplaced, or something. The ad also mentioned that anyone responding needed experience in wilderness camping.

I wondered why anyone putting an ad in a city newspaper would need wilderness camping experience to find whatever it was the client lost, but that wasn't really important at the moment. What was important was that I was without a job, my funds were approaching zero and rent was less than a month away.

The ad specified a face-to-face interview, so after finishing my tea and calling a cab, I went to attempt to earn another month's rent money.

My cab pulled up in front of a brick home surrounded by a shoulder-high hedge. I paid the fare and walked through the iron gate. As I walked up to the front door of the modest, two-story home an elderly man opened the door just as my foot hit the bottom step leading up to the railed porch.

"May I help you?" The man said.

"Uh. I'm here about an ad in the paper."

The man's eyebrows creased as he peered at me with an intense gaze. After a moment he held out his hand and said, "My name is Thomas Justice. Please come in."

"Morgan Sullivan." I said as I shook hands. The old man had a firm grip and I could tell he was measuring me by my own grip.

He seemed satisfied as he turned. "Please come in."

I entered and was led to a windowless, back room that was bordered on three sides with shelves. Every shelf was lined with books and the smell of old leather was thick. It was obvious to me that the books were not the kind that would be found at the local bookstore. They had the smell of leather and the look of something hand crafted. Most were of a normal size for the style, slightly larger than the hardbound books of modern books, but there was one immense tome that rested on its own pedestal.

The only light to the room came through a row of six-inch high windows above the shelves that lay against the wall that faced the back of the house.

The old man watched me intently as I quickly scanned the room. When my gaze went back to him he smiled and walked to the chair behind the book-covered desk in the center of the room.

Sitting down, he reached out a hand, raised an eyebrow, and said. "Resume?"

"Uh, I don't have one with me." I stammered.

Justice sat back and crossed his arms. "Then I guess you'll just have to tell me about yourself."

“OK. My name is Morgan Sullivan. High school graduate with two tours as a Stryker crewman, one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan with an honorable discharge six months ago.”

When I hesitated, the old man said. “My ad specified experience in wilderness camping.”

I nodded and said. “Lots. With my dad and uncle from the age of ten till I graduated from high school.”

“Boy scouts?” The old man asked.

“No.” I replied, then shrugged a shoulder. “They wouldn’t have me. That whole religion thing.”

“You could have just taken the oath and not told them you were a non-believer.”

“Yea, I could have.” I shrugged again. “Didn’t.”

“You spent enough time in your military to have funding for higher education.” The old man said as he stroked his chin, then asked. “Is there a reason why you did not make use of the opportunity?”

“I took several courses while I was in the service.” I told him, adding. “Except for the basic courses everybody has to take, most of the stuff was things I already knew better than the instructor. I usually got drafted to *student teach*.”

I shrugged. “I just lost interest before I got to things I didn’t already know. Instead of paying for school and doing the instructor’s job for him or her, I found out what books were on the list for certain topics and checked those out myself on my own time.”

“I just lurked, but I also logged on to several of the on-line debates ...”

Realizing I was rambling, I shut up.

Justice gazed at me for a few moments then seemed to come to a decision. “You’ll do. How soon can you be ready?”

I was caught off guard and stood mute for a moment before recovering and asking about pay.

I was told that I would have to supply my own equipment and would not be paid till I recovered the man’s lost property. I had worked just long enough to pay my rent the week before, so I had under a month before my stuff was thrown out on the streets.

Taking my uncle up on his offer to join him as a wilderness guide seemed about the only option I had left if this job tanked.

Of course, that wasn’t really a bad thing. Maybe after this job I would take Uncle Bart up on his offer anyway. The money he charged for a week in the wilderness was considerably more than I would make in any job in New York that I could tolerate.

The amount the man offered seemed to be out of proportion to the job till he told me that he didn’t know where his lost item was exactly, but knew the general area where it could be found. I was then told that I would have to find the

object in question myself and that it wasn't so much lost as it was stolen.

"So," the old man said, "do you accept the job or do I mark your name off my list?"

* * *

A couple of hours later, as I spent most of the last of my money at the sporting goods store to replace some of my older camping gear, I wondered at the weirdness of the old man's last words. Where in the hell anywhere close to New York City would I need barter goods? Unless, of course, I would be going upstate somewhere where people didn't live close to even the smaller towns.

I took a cab back to my Harlem apartment and packed my new backpack with the experience I had learned from my many camping trips with my dad and his older brother.

The last time I had seen Uncle Bart was at dad's funeral just before I went to Iraq for my first Middle Eastern tour. From what Aunt Sue said, Uncle Bart was now somewhere in the northern Rockies, living in a cabin just outside some ski resort town in Montana.

Uncle Bart was currently making a comfortable living off rich folks who needed an experienced guide for the right to pretend to be mountain men for a week at a time.

Remembering the old man's question about whether I had ever encountered any bears or other dangerous animals on my camping trips, I packed my pistol in a separate bag. I also packed three extra clips, a thigh holster with a large knife and sheath on the opposing side, and two boxes of ammo. The weight made the bag heavy, but not so heavy that I couldn't add a full cleaning kit and the five rolls of silver coins that I had always kept for real financial emergencies.

The last thing I brought was my favorite walking stick. A gift from my father when I turned sixteen, it was a stout hickory limb, five feet long and slightly more than an inch thick with a stainless steel lag bolt screwed into the base and a huge oval turquoise stone affixed to the top.

The hickory had been sliced and trimmed then steamed to soften it enough to fit around the polished stone. It had then been secured above and below the stone with a single heavy strand of stainless steel wire wound in three loops and pulled so tight that when the steam-softened wood dried, the stone was tightly held.

The walking stick, besides being unique in appearance, made a handy emergency defensive weapon when confronted with unexpected surprises on a wilderness trail.

The cabby who came to take me to the old man's house was the quiet kind who didn't ask questions about the heavy pack that we loaded into the trunk. I was glad because I didn't really have any answers to the questions that rattled around in my own mind.

The fare and a generous tip took the last of my cash, and as I slung the pack on my back and picked up the shoulder bag and walking stick, I saw the old man standing on his porch waiting. I wondered at the big smile the old man displayed upon seeing my walking stick.

He led me into the house and back to the library where I set my pack and shoulder bag on the floor. I stood there for a moment waiting for him to speak, but was totally shocked when he moved to the rear bookshelf and pulled a section away from the wall like a door to expose a bare wall behind.

There was a latch in the middle of the exposed portion of wall. The old man twisted the latch at one side of the wall and pushed. The wall swung away and I could see into a dimly lit room that looked to be a duplicate of the library where we stood.

The odd thing was that the library room was at the rear edge of the home I had entered. It should have been the back wall. There didn't seem to be enough room for another room the size of the one I now saw through the hidden door in the shelving.

The old man motioned for me to pick up my gear and follow him. I did so and when I passed through the door I saw that the only light came from the door behind us. I was looking around waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dimmer light when the old man lit an old-style lamp sitting on the desk in the middle of the room.

My brows creased as I wondered how he had lit the lamp. I hadn't seen him produce a lighter and hadn't heard the click of a spark maker.

I quickly looked around. The room had stone walls instead of the wood in the first room. Shaped as if it had been cut from the inside, the walls that were faced with shelves on three sides were as smooth and even as a sheet-rock wall.

Without a word, the old man handed me the lamp, swung the opposing bookshelf-doors closed, and donned a leather vest hanging on the back of a chair behind the desk in the middle of the hidden library. He then retrieved the lamp from me and walked to the door in the stone of the other side of the room and opened it without a word.

I didn't have much of an option, so I followed him through the door and into the next room.

I found myself in another room that was both wider and longer than the duplicate library room behind me. The walls of half the room were of stone that turned into stacked logs on the other end.

There was no way the room I stood in could have fit behind the house that I'd entered.

As I set my pack and bag down by a heavy oak table, I saw that the only light other than the lamp Justice carried came from a row of six-inch high windows lining the top of the logs in front of me.

Walking to the door, the old man set the lamp on a table by the door and reached toward the board that rested in a cradle across the door. Hinged on one side, he lifted the board and lay it at an angle against a brace to the left of the door, opened the door, and walked outside.

Following him, I immediately saw that the wooded wilderness in front of me was much larger than the back yard of the two-story home I had entered only moments before. Turning to look back at the door I had just passed through, I was stunned to see a small log cabin nestled against and beneath an overhanging cliff face that rose fifty or sixty feet. Above the cliff I could see mountains marching off in the distance.

I stood staring for a moment before I also noticed the complete lack of the sounds of the city that had been a constant background noise when I had arrived at the old man's residential home. The gentle breeze that blew through the clearing held hints of the snow-covered mountains in the distance, but also felt similar to the early spring weather I had left behind on the streets of New York.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed, then looked to see the old man smiling.

Gesturing toward the dense woods in front of the cabin, he said. "The world we now stand on would be termed by the scientists of *your* world as a parallel world." I noticed the stress he put on the word, *your*.

"It is almost exactly the same as the world you know of as Earth. Many of the plants and animals are exactly the same or so close to the same as makes no matter."

"How is that possible?" I stammered.

Justice simply shrugged and replied. "It doesn't really matter how. It just is."

Regaining a little of my composure, I asked. "How many people know about this? Are there other," I hesitated, "doors like this one to this other world?"

"A few of both doorways and those who know about them." Justice answered. "Well, actually, quite a few, but most of those who know about them spend the majority of their time here on this world than back on your Earth."

"My Earth?"

"Yes." Justice said. "I was born on this world, not your Earth. In fact, most of those who know about the two worlds were born here on Altan."

He gestured toward the open cabin door and said. "Come inside and I will explain."

We went back into the cabin and Justice replaced the heavy plank in its cradle to secure the door. When I looked at the door and lifted an eyebrow, he said. "Like I said, this world is much more primitive than your Earth and has only a fraction of the population as your world. Because of this, the wildlife here is both more numerous and much less afraid of men than what you are used to."

He smiled as he gestured toward one of the chairs by the oak table. "I wouldn't want our conversation interrupted by a curious bear. One species that lives at the foot of these mountains has year-old cubs the size of your world's grizzly."

I sat and as the old man heated a pot of a drink he called guaff, listened to what would be a fantasy tale if I hadn't already seen the evidence with my own eyes.

"The doorways between our two worlds were discovered by one of my world's greatest wizards less than a hundred years ago. Since then, only a few dozen of the most powerful wizards have been able to duplicate the method for opening a doorway."

"Wizards. Is that what you call scientists here?" I interrupted.

Justice smiled and said. "No. The definition of scientist is the same on this world as your own. The definition of wizard is also the same. Many who claim to be one also claim to be the other as well."

At my confused look, he continued. "The laws of physics are different enough here that what you would call magic is possible on Altan. The science that you have known all your life is still true," he shrugged, "but *here* those laws of physics have just a little bit more to them. I guess you could say that the study of magic is just another form of science on Altan. The science of magic is like chemistry or physics and also based in a large part on mathematics and the manipulating and controlling of energy."

I snorted my disbelief and at the old man's look I said. "Magic is like God. I don't believe in it cause I've never seen any proof. Show me proof of either that I can independently verify and I'll change my mind."

"Ah, science and religion, opponents in the greatest war that never was."

"On Alton the laws of physics are just enough different to allow me to provide that evidence." Justice smiled and pulled a box from the floor beside his chair, opened it and withdrew a polished stone about the size of a baseball. It was of a solid black on one side and the purist white on the other. The division of the two colors resembled the rounded shape of the yin and yang symbol. Completing the symbolism, the white side of the sphere had a small black circle inside and the black side a corresponding white circle. "Except for the color, this is a replica of the item I want you to retrieve for me."

He then pulled another smaller stone from the box. With a deep green color, I identified it as most likely malachite. Almost as large around as a small hen's egg and about half an inch thick, a leather thong was tied through a hole in the smaller end.

As he held the necklace out for me to see, Justice said. "The stone I want you to retrieve is the same color as the amulet on this necklace. The one will help you find the other."

He placed the necklace on the table in front of me and continued. "The larger stone that was stolen is a Sphere of Justice and is considered the symbol of office of he or she who is responsible for green and growing things."

"It is also a source of power for the wizard who possesses it, as is the amulet in this necklace, but to a much greater degree."

"She who now possesses the forest and farm Sphere of Justice killed the former owner of the Sphere and has abused the power of the office she has taken."

Justice gazed into my eyes with an intensity that I had seen in few men and asked. "Do you still want to seek out and reclaim my property?"

I hesitated for only the barest of moments before replying. "You still haven't proven your claim of magic."

Justice smiled as he held the malachite necklace. "The presence of this parallel world doesn't convince you?"

"Scientists on my own world have theorized alternate universes for years. Other than the fact that you seem to have confirmed those theories, you haven't shown me anything that defies the laws of physics on the Earth I was born to."

With a nod of his head, Justice reached into a pocket inside his leather vest and pulled out a small metal dart. He lay it on his palm and looked at me.

I looked at the dart, about the length of the old man's index finger, and was surprised when it rose into the air about six inches above Justice's open palm. Then in an instant it shot forward and buried itself into the wood of the heavy door to the library.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as I jumped to my feet. "How did you do that!"

Justice just smiled and shrugged one shoulder. "Like I said. Magic. Do you still want to accept my offer of employment? Will you still agree to seek and reclaim my property knowing that she who has it will kill to keep it for herself?"

"Yes." I said without hesitation.

The old man then spent another hour telling me how to store energy in polished stones, gems, and crystals and finally spent another hour showing me how to perform several basic magic spells.

I was surprised when he instructed me to perform certain tasks *just so* ... and they worked. It was a shock to see that I could perform what, to all intents and purposes, appeared to be the actual manifestation of magic.

I had to concentrate in a way that reminded me of my calming routine with an added twist that reminded me of the concentration I felt in the middle of a firefight.

It was a weird combination, but it worked.

At one point I asked if there was any way I could perform those same *spells* on my own earth. I was informed that

the experiment had been made within the first few moments that the original Altanian stepped foot onto my world. Subsequent experiments had only confirmed the phenomenon.

“Remember,” he said at one point as he glanced meaningfully at the turquoise stone adorning my walking stick, “you can only expend as much energy as you have within yourself or have stored in polished stones, gems, or crystals you have on or very near your person. If you try to perform a spell without sufficient energy to draw on, the spell will simply fail or you will be rendered unconscious.”

Finally, Justice said. “That is all I can teach you for now.”

We returned to the cabin where Justice presented me with several items as gifts. One was the malachite necklace.

“The stone in this necklace is currently devoid of energy but is embedded with a seeker spell.” He explained. “It will be up to you to energize it and embed what other spells you see fit.”

The next item he gave me was a bracelet of leather strips woven through flattened beads of polished malachite that were also devoid of energy. “I showed you how to cast defensive spells. I would suggest that you energize this shield bracelet with nothing more than those spells.”

He smiled and added. “There is a saying on Altan that the best offense is a good defense. Those wizards who live the longest pay close attention to that saying.”

The next gift was a simple jade ring and a pair of small, thin books. “This ring is imbued with a spell of learning and is already energized.” Justice informed me. “The larger of the two books is a dictionary of words in your English language and the corresponding words in the three languages you will most likely be exposed to on your journey. The other contains a list of the most basic foundations for magic spells. Add those basics to what I’ve already shown you and you will be able to expand your use of magic as your imagination allows.”

The last gift he presented to me was a sheet of soft leather that resembled chamois. About two-foot square, one side contained an intricate map of a circular island that Justice said was about seven hundred miles in diameter. He pointed to a spot on the southeastern quadrant and said. “We are here.”

I looked closely and saw fine lines and words printed much too small to read. When I looked up, Justice handed me a half-inch thick, flat crystal about four inches in diameter and told me to look again.

I put the clear crystal to my eye and bent over the map and was surprised to see the details jump out in clear, clean lines. As I bent closer the details grew sharper until I imagined I could see individual trees. Moving across the map I came to a small group of buildings and realized I was seeing a farm as if from a high-powered satellite view.

Looking up, I exclaimed. “Wow! Is that an accurate representation?”

“Yes. The map represents the island nation of Saerol and the immediate area of surrounding islands. You will not need a larger map that includes the continents that encircle Saerol.” Justice answered, then rose from the table in the cabin and added. “Now it is time for you to go.”

We walked outside and Justice pointed toward the woods. “The path to the nearest road is that way.” He looked at the sky and continued. “It’s about a day and a half out, so you should make it by evening tomorrow.”

Then without a word he turned to re-enter the cabin.

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “What do I do when I get your stone sphere back?”

Justice shrugged a shoulder and said. “Return here with it, of course, and accept your reward.”

Justice turned and entered the cabin and I could hear the heavy board being dropped back into place to secure the door. I stood there for a few moments then shrugged my own shoulders and turned toward the line of trees and to my journey.

* 2 *

I had gone only a few feet along the path when I stopped and dropped my pack to the ground. I pulled my pistol and knife belt from my shoulder bag and put them on. Then I loaded all four clips, placed one in my pistol and secured it in the holster. The other three clips I put into pouches on the front of the holster belt.

After a quick inspection of my bowie knife I re-donned my pack and bag and pulled the spell book from my shirt pocket. Opening it I quickly saw that it was written in the runes that composed the writings of Altan.

Smiling, I replaced the spell manual and pulled out the dictionary, muttering to myself. “Should’ve known I would have to learn the one before I could learn the other.”

I engaged the learning spell like Justice had shown me and soon set a walking pace that allowed me to read the dictionary as I walked the well-defined path. The runes of each of the three languages as well as a phonetic pronunciation followed each English word and I spoke them aloud as I walked.

I was surprised an hour down the path when I had gone through all of the first three letters of English words that I could easily picture every single word of all three Altanian languages in my mind.

I became engrossed in my task, following the path by instinct and the occasional glance and when I finally noticed that it was growing dark I had reached the letter ‘T’ in the dictionary.

Looking around, I saw a jumble of large stones several feet off the path that looked to be a good place to set up camp. I cleared detritus from the area and collected enough wood to last the night and made camp as the last of daylight fled the forest.

By the light of my small fire I prepared my evening meal, ate, and cleaned my utensils before returning to my self-imposed language class. I quickly finished the dictionary, then pulled out the magic book and sought out a defensive spell.

Reading the basics of the spell, I set a simple alarm at a distance of several yards around my camp, feeling the drain of energy that washed over me as I engaged the spell. Exhausted by the simple act of creating the protection spell, I crawled into my sleeping bag as I fought to stay awake.

I slept the sleep of the truly exhausted and jumped when the defensive spell shocked me awake. Struggling out of my sleeping bag I saw a couple of deer leaping away as I tripped over my bag and fell in a heap.

It took a few moments to untangle myself and rise to greet the morning. Using what I had learned from the basic magic manual I probed the protection spell and saw that it still contained more than half of its energy reserve.

I used some of the energy I had gained from a night's sleep to extend the perimeter of the spell so that it encompassed an area twice the size. Then I adjusted the spell so that it gave a less shocking identifier when the protection boundary was compromised.

As I stood with my eyes closed, I could sense all the life inside the field of my spell from insects on the ground to individual birds that flew through the area. I could tell when a curious rabbit approached from the cover of a bush at the edge of my defensive field a couple dozen yards away, then darted off at some disturbance outside my purview.

Breaking away from the lure of my newfound abilities, I re-started my nearly dead fire using the wood I hadn't used the night before. After eating and cleaning up my camp and re-packing, I put out my fire then settled down to read more of the magic manual.

I quickly learned how to recharge my magical storage capacity without draining myself as well as a couple of new spell ideas that I might be able to use in the future.

Studying the way spells were created, I noticed how much like computer programming they were. I went over the spells I knew in my mind several times before I saw the obvious link with my earthly training.

"Hmmm, I wonder." I thought to myself as I took the laser pointer from my pistol.

After a short time, with a satisfied smile I reattached the laser pointer, packed my gear and disengaged the protection spell around my camp. I made sure the fire pit was cold and stirred the ashes one last time before donning my pack.

As I set off down the trail with my walking stick in my left hand I continued modifying the protection spell. I moved it further away, then in closer while varying the sensitivity and power consumption. Eventually I created a less energy-guzzling

version that allowed me to *see* in a twenty-yard radius around me and not be weakened by the expenditure of energy.

To build a store of energy, I tapped the stone of the amulet at my neck with two fingers of my right hand. At the same time, while maintaining a constant movement of my walking stick tap tapping at the trail as I hiked, I charged the ring and the bracelet on my left hand and the turquoise stone on the top of my walking stick.

I used my newfound ability to divert the kinetic energy from those acts into the polished confines of the several stones and store that kinetic energy like a battery.

The concentration it took to maintain my sensor sweep and charge my magical batteries at the same time helped me practice my magic. I was surprised at how short a time before the actions were so ingrained that I began to be able to let my mind wander to other things.

I now knew why Justice had smiled upon seeing the stone in the walking stick my father had made for me so long ago. The golf ball sized polished turquoise stone was a potentially larger reservoir of magical energy than all the stone magic batteries the old man had given me put together.

The constant movement and the pounding into the ground as I walked charged all the stones I carried with considerable kinetic energy. Every once in a while I checked energy levels and I could sense the increase in power with every step.

At my lunch break I read the remainder of the magic manual and learned how to transfer energy from one stone to another. I also added another spell to my growing repertory and did some study of the two spells that old man Justice had put into the ring and pendant he'd given me.

After my lunch break and returning to the trail, I continued practicing holding my sensor spell, recharging my magic batteries, while at the same time *casting* one of the basic spells I'd learned.

Before long I was able to easily do all three as I hiked at a normal pace.

By the time the sky began to grow dark with the coming night I had completely recharged the learning ring and had enough power in the shield bracelet that I was able to maintain a sensor spell without using much of the energy reserve.

When the darkness of full night became imminent, I stopped and looked at the chamois map and found that I was several miles from the road.

"Must have walked at a slower pace than Justice thought I should." I muttered to myself.

The thought that I had failed to make the distance he predicted disturbed me somewhat till I remembered that the first afternoon I had walked while reading. The act had slowed my progress enough that it had cost me those few miles.

I made camp in the cover of three immense trees and slept the sleep of one who had spent an entire day hauling a heavy pack across an unpaved animal trail.

The next morning I prepared the last of my fresh food, checked the chamois map and the seeker spell from the necklace amulet for the location of the sphere I sought. Marking the direction in my mind, I set out on the trail with a smile on my face and a pack lightened by several pounds.

It was only a couple of hours later when I came to the road. It wasn't quite what I'd expected. As wide as any one-and-a-half-lane road on Earth, it was more of a glorified trail than a road. Unpaved, the hard-packed dirt looked like a strip of sandstone.

Then I remembered one of the paths of spell-making in the magic manual and realized that the road had been formed through magic. Upon closer look it was obvious that the road was a magical construct, using dirt and sand from beside the road and compacted to the consistency of sandstone.

Rising from my inspection of the road, I set out toward the northwest. There were three villages and what looked to be a large camp around a bridge over a large river between me and the port city the map indicated where the sphere I sought was located. The first village was at least a two-day walk from where I stood.

I adjusted my shoulder bag and backpack and set off to the left of where I came out of the forest.

I had been walking a couple of hours when an accumulation of clouds began to form in the sky above. I made my lunch break on my feet, eating jerky and a granola bar with one hand as I tapped my walking stick on the road.

Late in the afternoon I could sense the rain about to fall and began looking for a campsite. It was several hours before I wanted to stop for the night when I saw a large outcropping of rock with a large, cave-like indentation at its base.

I left the road and in moments saw that it wasn't a complete cave but was deep enough that I would be able to stay dry unless the rain was driven sideways by a strong wind. Since the wind was currently coming from the west and behind the outcropping, that was unlikely so I set up camp inside the protection afforded.

To save on my accumulation of energy, I retracted my sensor spell as I tucked my pack into a deep crevice before clearing detritus from inside the overhanging rock.

I quickly collected a considerable pile of firewood and stacked it inside the enclosure to keep it dry. I was getting ready to begin practicing my newfound magic when the storm let loose with a suddenness that surprised me.

Moving back into the protection of my dry cave, I tapped my shield bracelet as I watched the storm. I had always enjoyed storms, as long as I was not exposed to their ferocity,

and marveled as lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and the rain fell in sheets.

I was watching with enjoyment and was just about to light my fire and prepare an early supper when I saw a small group hurrying down the road from the direction of the village I was heading toward. They obviously knew of the cave for they left the road at a brisk pace just as they came to the twin pines directly across the road from where I watched.

They had come half the distance when the largest of the small group looked up through the driving rain and saw me. With a sharp word and a hand on the one beside him, the group stopped suddenly and stared for a moment. Then they dejectedly started to turn away.

“Wait!” I yelled in English, then again in the first of the languages in the dictionary as I motioned for them to come into my shelter. As they turned at my voice I could see that the group consisted of a man, a woman holding a baby, and another small figure that could only be another child.

As they hesitated I yelled again, this time in each of the three languages as I motioned for them to come forward. “Come! Come out of the rain!”

They still hesitated, but relented when the babe in the woman’s arms began to cry.

As they approached, I moved my gear as far to the side as I could to make room for them and smiled as I continued to motion for them to come into the cave.

When they were inside the cover of the overhanging stone and out of the rain, they threw back their hoods and I gaped in astonishment.

Both the man and woman had the thick brow ridges and rough faces that could only be described as making them look like artists rendering of Cro-Magnon man. The child had softer features than the two adults but all were of the same race.

The adult male knelt in front of me and in the second language of the dictionary Justice had provided, said. “Thank you sire for allowing us to share your shelter. I am your servant.”

I was shocked at first, then what the man was implying struck a nerve and I replied in the same language. “Nonsense! You are no one’s servant! It’s raining out there,” I gestured toward the increasing storm, “and it’s just getting worse. There’s enough room in here for all of us.”

The child with them let loose a violent shiver as the cold of his wet clothing struck and I said. “Come, I was just about to light a fire and make a meal. Will you join me?”

The question seemed to catch them as much by surprise as my invitation to share the cave’s shelter and they all stood mute and staring.

“You would share a meal with such as us?” The woman said in disbelief.

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “Why wouldn’t I?”

There was a moment of silence that was broken as a bolt of lightning struck nearby followed immediately by a bone-rattling peal of thunder. The child behind the woman yelled in surprise and the child in her arms screamed in fear.

As the rain poured down even harder, I hustled the woman and children to the back of the cave with myself and the man on the edge of the overhang. I then stooped to begin stacking the wood inside the ring of stones I had made earlier.

I moved to my pack to retrieve my butane lighter and when I turned around the man was hovering over the wood and I felt the energy surge as he lit the fire with magic.

The woman looked at me in shock and spoke a sharp word at what could only be her husband.

“If this one would share his shelter and fire with us he would surely not forbid me from using magic to light that fire.” The man said, then he looked at me with evident surprise that he would say such a thing aloud where I could hear.

Then he bent to a knee again and said. “Forgive me, Master, if I presume too much.”

I reached down to pull him to his feet. “I am no man’s master and there is nothing to forgive. The fire needed lit and you lit it. What more is needed to be said?”

At a sound from the older child I looked and saw that he was pointing toward my walking stick.

The man looked where his son pointed and then back at me and said. “Ah, you are of the sea. I had heard tales that some of the lands across the sea treated my people differently. It must be true.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but let it pass as I dug into my pack for my cooking pot and a couple of bags of freeze-dried stew. I also pulled out several granola bars and passed them out to my cave companions to their increased surprise.

We introduced ourselves and I learned that the man’s name was Morg, his wife Thule, their son Gram, and the baby daughter Thia. He named his people the Mo’ag and mine Yu’ob and mentioned another race of people he called sky walkers.

Morg and I tidied the cave while Thule took charge of the meal and, adding her own contributions, had the stew simmering in no time. While she prepared our meal her husband and son interrogated me on the lands across the sea.

It took me a while to convince them I wasn’t what they thought, then Gram exclaimed. “You are Erting!”

“Is it true?” Asked Morg in disbelief. “You are from Ert?”

I wondered what they were talking about for a second, then said. “You mean Earth?” I said the last word in English as there was no word for my world in the dictionary Justice had given me.

I could see them mouthing the word as they played it across their tongues. “We have heard stories of your people.

Many fantastic stories! Is it true that you build homes that scrape the sky?"

"And can your people really build metal birds that can carry dozens across the skies as easily as a sky walker can fly?" Gram exclaimed with disbelief.

I thought about it, wondering again what a sky walker was, but could do nothing more than agree. It was not long after that Thule pronounced the meal ready and we sat down to eat as the storm raged outside our dry refuge.

When the meal was consumed and the fire began to die down, Thule moved to the back of the cave and breast-fed her daughter. With her busy, Morg and Gram asked me for tales of Earth and my purpose here on Altan.

"It is indeed a worthy quest you have taken." Morg commented several minutes into my story. "It is because of the abuse of power that she who you seek has unleashed that I take my family to the safety of the southeastern forests."

We continued to feed small branches into the fire and talk while Thule took her daughter to bed in the safety of the shelter. As the storm continued to rage I tapped the stones in my bracelet and Morg finally relaxed enough to bring out his own magic stone and tap it to renew its store of energy.

Soon Gram fell prey to exhaustion and fell asleep leaning on his father's side. I talked with Morg for an hour or so more before we both sought our respective bed rolls and fell asleep to the sound of distant thunder and pounding rain.

When morning came we shared provisions again to make a meal for all. I found a use for some of the barter items I had brought when I saw Thule trying to repair a portion of her clothing. Torn by the wind of the storm before they had reached the cave, she was trying to tie two strips together when I dug a sewing kit from my pack.

"This is too great a treasure!" Thule exclaimed when she saw the assortment of needles and the several spools of thread. "Surely I couldn't accept!"

I closed her rough hands around the sewing kit and said softly. "I have another just like it so it would be no loss to my supplies."

I actually had three more just like it. "The pleasure of your family's company and the stories of this world your husband and son told me will help me greatly in my travels. The knowledge I have gained will more than make up for such a small gift."

The pleasure in her brown eyes was more than worth the gift and she hurried to the back of the cave to perform the repairs to her clothing while I went over to Morg and Gram as they packed their own travel gear in the rough packs they carried.

"Hey Gram." I called as he helped his father sort their gear. When he looked up I pulled out a folding knife I had tucked into my pocket when I retrieved the sewing kit. "I have a gift for you."

His brown eyes grew as big as saucers when he saw the folding knife and he looked to his father. “This is a knife from my world. It has two blades.” I opened and closed it to show him how it worked. “I would be honored if you would accept it as a gift from me.”

Gram looked as if he couldn’t believe he could own such a fine knife and looked to his father for permission to accept the gift.

Morg shook his head yes as his own smile nearly split his face. The smile grew even greater when I pulled another gift from another pocket. The folding knife I’d given Gram was small, but still a treasure in his eyes. The one I held out to Morg was twice the size and also held an awl and second blade more than half the length of the larger, seven-inch blade.

Morg accepted the gift, then a look of pain shadowed his face as he said. “We have nothing to give you that can compare to these gifts.

“Oh but you have already given me gifts that compare.” I said with a smile of my own. “You already know that I am new to your world. The foods you shared with me last night and the stories you told me will help me considerably.”

“I would never have known not to eat the white core of the orange fruit you shared or my dreams would drain the magic from any stones nearby as I slept. I also would not know of the danger of mistaking the blue berry for the purple ones you brought to our meal and spending a full day squatting over a hole in the ground as my stomach purged itself of all that I’ve eaten.”

“I also would not have known that those of the sea and rivers follow blue-stone magic while those of forest and farm are responsible to green-stone magic. And I definitely would have never known the social rules of your world enough to keep my identity hidden while I search for the stolen, green Sphere of Justice.” I continued.

“Without your help I would have simply asked for information without knowing that those who have also benefited from the sphere’s theft would have harmed me to gain favor with the thief.”

“Look at it this way.” I said. “Without your help I would have died before the moon was full and all I own would have been claimed by my murderers. Forgive me if I demean these gifts, but I think the knowledge that will extend my life is worth more than two knives and a sewing kit.”

“You are right!” Morg exclaimed as he thumped my back hard enough to stagger me. “I should be ashamed for doubting your generosity.”

We said our good-byes and I watched as the Mo’ag family went down the road the way I had come. I waved one last time then turned to travel the direction they had come from.

Due to the storm I had been delayed enough that I spent another night camping beside the road before reaching the first village. I spent the entire time charging the energy reservoirs of my magic stones and practicing my newfound magic.

It was on the road at the edge of the village that I got my first sight of the sky walkers that Morg had told me about when a wagon pulled by two horses passed me on the road. Alerted by two riders preceding the wagon, I just had time to get off the road before the group thundered by.

I felt sympathy for all four horses at the cruel way they were being driven. Then I saw the contents of the cage on the wagon and momentarily forgot the plight of the horses.

Shackled to iron rings fastened to the bottom of the cage was a creature with a dark back and a stomach and the underside of its wings the color of the sky. Looking almost like a frail child, the creature had bat like wings that drooped despondently as the wagon bounced along the road.

Morg had told me in our cave during the storm that another of the great wizards had discovered a second world other than Earth where the creatures had six limbs instead of the proper four that the beasts and men of Altar and Earth bore.

The wizard had died in a battle with others who had tried to gain the knowledge of the door to this third world. The doorway to the newest world was lost but not before thousands of the sky walkers had been captured or lured to Altar.

Morg told me that the sky walkers suffered at the hands of Yu'obs like myself even more than Morg's people. He said that the only free sky walkers were those who inhabited the tallest, most isolated mountains far from the towns and villages of men.

I walked into the village a couple of hours later and saw the wagon parked in front of what could only be a tavern. The two horses that had ridden ahead of the wagon were tied to a post in front of the tavern.

As I approached, I could see the condition of the sky walker confined within. Feeling anger at the way the being had been treated, I dug a water bottle from my pack and walked toward the wagon.

I knew from my conversations with Morg that the third language in the dictionary that Justice had given me was that of the sky walkers and as I approached I spoke aloud. "I have water for you to drink if you will tell me why you have been caged."

The sky walker raised its head and croaked. "Why would one such as you wonder why one like me is caged? Is that not the way of all your kind, to cage mine?"

"Not all." I replied. "As for me, I would cage no man unless he had done something to deserve such an act."

"Hah!" Came the weak reply. "Is not existing crime enough for those who can dance between the clouds? No Yu'ob, my crime was only that my curiosity brought me within reach of those who now transport me to some unknown place to provide

entertainment for more of your kind. How that entertainment is performed I can only hope does not include the mutilation that provides some of your kind with clothing made from my wings before I die.”

I recoiled at the thought of someone killing such a being for entertainment then using the dead being’s wings for clothing. I reached into the cage and held the water bottle out. “I am Morgan Sullivan and I do not hold with those who would cage *any* man for no other reason than sport or entertainment.”

“Hah!” Came the faint reply as the sky walker tried to hold the water bottle steady before tipping it to drink. “Your eyes must be fogged Yu’ob. I am no man.”

“You have language and talk with as much intelligence as any man, so I can call you a man unless to do so is an insult. In that case I would ask what you would prefer to be called so that I would not give insult.”

The sky walker drank his fill, as little as that was, and pushed the water bottle away. “I will accept your naming of me as a man then, Yu’ob, and not call insult. Now you had best leave before my captors return and arrest you for giving me water.”

Before I could answer a yell from the door of the tavern told me it was too late for that. Two others followed the man through the tavern door, and in seconds I faced the group that had ridden by me earlier in the day.

I quickly shed my pack and shoulder bag, grabbed the walking stick, tapped into the energy stored in the stone, and turned to face them as I condensed a shield around me.

I was just in time as two of the men reached into pockets and withdrew dart arrows the length of a finger. Each propelled their darts toward me without another word while the third lit a pair of fireballs and propelled them toward me.

I raised my hand with the shield bracelet and walking stick and caught all four projectiles inches away from my body. At the same time as I used the bracelet to catch the projectiles, I used the greater power of the walking stick’s stone to reverse them and propel them all four back toward their source.

I had only fractions of a second to react and, knowing I was too new to magic to stand against three experienced wizards for very long, dropped my walking stick and quickly drew my Glock as the three took mere seconds to defend against the return of their projectiles.

I had experienced war and knew that, unlike television or the movies I had seen, when one fought a life and death battle in close quarters, if you didn’t win in the first few seconds, you didn’t win.

Chambering a round as I brought the pistol up to a two-handed grasp, I sighted down the barrel pinning the targeting laser’s red dot on the first man’s chest over the heart.

As the three stopped the return of the darts and fireballs, I squeezed the trigger twice as I targeted the center wizard.

Having read my basic manual of magic, I knew he had performed the hardest and strongest spell by igniting and throwing two fireballs at the same time.

I took him out first.

They were all three close enough to chance head shots, but I chose the upper chest instead. I squeezed twice, shifted left with the laser pointer and squeezed two more times, then shifted further to the right and squeezed twice more.

Part of my therapy for dealing with my time in war had included regular visits to a target range and I knew from years of practice that my six-shot move would take about three seconds.

Keeping my crouched stance, I shifted my eyes quickly as the bodies fell. None of them moved and I quickly rushed to where all three lay and confirmed their condition with a magical probe as I approached.

The man on the far left was still alive but was only able to feebly gasp, "Who are ..." before he too died.

Relaxing only slightly I lowered my weapon and quickly looked around the street. All around me people were starting to come out from hiding.

Recognizing the elimination of general threat, I ejected the clip, cleared the chamber and caught the ejected round, then switched the used clip with a new one and holstered the pistol. I thumbed the extra round into the old used clip and tucked it into the pouch the full one had come from.

Turning back to the cage on the wagon I formed a spell in my mind as I approached the locked door. Picking up my walking stick on the way, I reached the back of the wagon and without hesitation, sent a charge of magical energy into the lock. It fell open just as I reached it and I pulled it free of the iron hasp and threw the cage door open.

I reached into the cage with the same spell and the lock on the chains bolting the sky walker to the floor of the cage sprang open. I stretched to my limit and hauled the chains away from the sky walker and helped him struggle out of the cage.

When he rose to his full height, the sky walker's eyes were not much higher than my belt when I stood straight. The sky walker almost faltered then rose to his full height and I could see that he would be much taller if his legs weren't so short.

Of course, his legs and feet were more adapted to gripping limbs of large trees than walking on the ground.

I reached into my pack where it lay and pulled out a chocolate granola bar and a water bottle. I extended the two to the sky walker as I said. "You are free to go where you will. Please accept this gift of food as my personal apology for the objectionable actions of my fellow Yu'obs."

"You named yourself earlier and I neglected to respond in kind." The sky walker said as he accepted the gifts. "My name is Briol Ley. In my language it means Cloud Dancer. The name of my people is Kroen Tol which means Sky Watchers."

“These people call you sky walkers. Is that a misnaming?” I asked as I gestured to the gathering crowd.

Briol finally succumbed to his hunger and tore the covering from the granola bar. He cautiously sniffed the contents, then said. “No. To call my people Braen Tol is to imply that we are so slow that we move at the pace of a ground beast in the air.”

“We *watch* the entire sky and everything below it at great speed. We do not *walk* slowly across the sky! Some of your kind knew full well that it was an insult when they mockingly named us after deciding that we were too few and too weak to stand against their contempt.”

Briol took a hesitant bite of the chocolate granola bar and his eyes lit up. As he rapidly chewed and swallowed, then took another, bigger bite, I said. “I will remember that and correct all who give insult to your people in my presence.”

Briol stopped chewing and glared at me. “Do not mock me, Yu’ob!” He spoke in the Altanian language instead of his native tongue.

Responding in kind, I said. “I’m not mocking you Briol Ley. Where I come from all races are treated the same and have the same rights. Many times in the past I have spoken up against racial insults and will always do so in the future.”

Briol tilted his head as he stared at me. He popped the last of the granola bar into his mouth then opened the water bottle and took a long drink. Then he waddle-hopped around the wagon and went to the center body of his former captives.

Pulling the man’s arm up, Briol removed a bracelet and put it around his neck. As he hop-waddled back I realized that was how the Kroen Tol walked on the ground on legs and feet evolved for tree limbs. As he came closer I saw that the wristband he had retrieved was actually a neckband that fit Briol’s neck perfectly.

Somewhat similar to my bracelet of polished stone beads, Briol’s necklace was a mixture of several colors of various-sized beads, some as small as the nail on my smallest finger. With three rows of at least ten or twelve each, the combined polished stones contained considerable energy.

“*At least, now I know where he got the power to throw two fireballs.*” I thought to myself.

Nodding toward the necklace, I asked. “Your property?”

“Yes.” Briol answered as I felt him drain energy from the necklace back into his body. “But only if you do not claim it as your due as the victor in personal battle.”

Thomas Justice and Morg had both informed me of the law that gave all property of a vanquished foe to the victor. “The necklace was stolen. It was not legally the property of the dead man. The rightful owner now has his property back.”

Briol looked at me with new respect and said. “I thank you for giving me my freedom and your generosity both before

and after you did so. May the wind flow evenly across your wings.”

I understood the meaning and repeated it back to Briol. The sky watcher, *Kroen Tol* fastened the half-empty water bottle to the harness that was his only clothing and hop-waddled away from the wagon to give himself more room.

He then made what could only be described as a running hop-waddle toward the gathering crowd, which had never come closer than a dozen yards. The crowd in the direction he was running ducked as Briol made a final hop just as he snapped his wings out and thrust them downward. His feet barely cleared the tallest member of the crowd.

I watched him fly in circles upward till he was just a speck in the sky that moved off to the south where my map showed the nearest mountains. Looking down I saw that the crowd had finally gained enough courage that several were close enough to smell.

They smelled of fear that had festered so long that it left a perpetual nervous state.

It was the smell of people who were living every day in an atmosphere of sudden violence.

After two tours in the Middle East, I was familiar with the smell.

The man who seemed to catch my eye the most directly finally spoke. “Welcome Master Wizard.” The man’s eyes went to the stone at the top of my walking stick. “I don’t recognize you as one of Saerol’s river men. Are you from across the great oceans surrounding our island nation?”

Smiling, I replied. “Much further than that.”

“I hope it does not anger you that I noticed you came from the southeastern road.” The man dipped his head in apology. “It is several days ride by horse to the nearest coastal port where you could have left your ship. I hope it does not anger you that I notice you are walking so you must be weary of traveling.”

Another man in the crowd stage-whispered. “Ask him.”

“Uh, sir.” The chosen spokesman said as he looked at the three bodies lying in the street. “Sir, could you please claim your property from your vanquished foes so that we may clear the street?”

I was startled for a moment as the social policy of this world sank in. I finally realized the truth that I now owned every piece of the three dead men’s property. That meant that for anyone to approach their bodies before I stripped them of their most valuable possessions would be the same as an open challenge to me.

With resigned distaste, I approached the bodies and sent a magical probe around them. I quickly found several sources of power and sought them out. In all I removed four rings, one bracelet, two necklaces and dagger with a polished stone set in

the handle. In the course of my search I found that each man also carried a leather pouch containing coins.

When exiting the tavern, two of the men had carried saddlebags that they had dropped at the beginning of the fight. I rightfully guessed that both carried items of value and threw both over a shoulder.

After making sure there was nothing of value left on the bodies I rose and said to the man who stood waiting. "You may now do with them as you see fit."

Walking to the horses, I inspected the beasts more closely. In the process I realized that the horses were slightly different from those of my Earth.

When they had ridden by me on the road and with only a cursory look when I came into town, I hadn't seen the differences. Upon closer look, I could see that their hooves were split into two in the front with a barbed rear toe.

Other than that one difference, the similarities to horses on my earth were enough that a cursory inspection showed me that all were somewhat rested after being driven so hard. With relatives who own horses, I had enough experience in the matter to see that the wagon team had not been cared for after their hard ride, still having the dried, salty foam of their sweat crusted in their hair.

I spoke softly to the two tired beasts, patting their muzzles as I radiated comfort, then went to the two saddle mounts and inspected them as well.

Satisfied that the horses didn't need immediate attention, I then inspected the wagon and found nothing of value.

Glad again for the dictionary and learning spell Justice had provided, I pointed to the two saddled horses and said in the tongue of Altan. "I will claim those two. Use the wagon and the two horses pulling it to settle any debts the dead men owe and divide the remainder with the townspeople."

I looked over at some of the Mo'ag nearby and added. "And I mean *all* the townspeople!"

My new shadow followed my eyes to look at the Mo'ag and gulped, his throat bobbing like a bouncing ball. "Yes sir! *All* the townspeople."

I opened one of the money pouches I had claimed and dug out a silver coin, then spoke loudly. "Who runs the stables?" Seeing a man in the crowd cringe, I focused on him and asked. "Can you take care of my horses, please?"

The man darted forward, but then gingerly accepted the silver coin and bowed. "Your horses will be scrubbed down, washed and fed the best of my grain and hay Master Wizard." He then cautiously moved around me like I would bite and tugged the horses' reins free from the post where they were tied and led them away.

I turned to my new shadow and his face held a more easy anticipation with considerably less fear. "Is there a place where I can get a room and a bath and a meal, in that order?"

“Oh yes sir!” The man exclaimed, smiling brightly as a bit of normality seeped back into his life. He sank back into his comfort zone as he continued. “The Inn is just beside the tavern and has its own kitchen and baths.”

Turning back to face me after pointing, he continued. “I am sure it would suit you perfectly.”

I thanked him then retrieved the six expended shell casings and tucked them in a pocket before grabbing my gear and heading for the Inn.

* 4 *

I paid for a room with two of the quarter-sized silver coins from the dead men’s money pouches. A copper coin the same size paid for a hot bath that allowed me to finally relax from the adrenaline high of my recent battle and the knowledge that I had killed three men.

And looted their bodies.

After my bath I sorted through the two saddlebags and transferred everything of value to my own shoulder bag.

Then I donned my pistol belt and various magical rings, bracelets, and necklaces, grabbed my walking stick and the shoulder bag and wove a protection spell on the room’s lone window facing the main street. Opening the door and stepping out into the hall, I closed it behind me and wove another protection spell, marveling that I was doing so much mere days after discovering that magic was even possible.

Walking down the steps to the tables in front of the Inn’s main desk, I paid two more coppers for a meal that was excellent despite most of it being unrecognizable.

A simple magical probe ensured it was edible and not poisoned and the meal was soon a memory.

Sitting back I complimented the Inn owner’s wife for the excellent meal as she collected my plates, then excused myself to seek out the stables and check on the horses. Satisfied that they were being well cared for, I made my way to the tavern next door to the Inn.

I chose a table that had a sturdy wall behind it and a clear view of the door as well as the rest of the room and propped my walking stick against the wall as I sat.

A single copper brought me a large mug of home brewed ale that was pretty good. I told the tavern owner truthfully that I had not had many mugs of ale as good and he was so pleased that he actually blushed through his beard.

He told me that business was brisk tonight as the funds distributed to the townspeople were already making their way to his tavern. He then whispered conspiratorially that he would not tap another barrel till the next day and that if I wanted more I would only need to tell him how many mugs-full to hold back from sale to others.

Being full from my meal and taking into consideration the ale's obvious kick, I told him I was sure I wouldn't have more than one more mug and he left with a smile. I noticed later that he was charging everyone else two coppers for the ale he served me for one.

I finished the first mug in short order and sat sipping the second when the first of my growing fan club approached. I smiled politely as the man nervously approached.

Over the next few minutes, men came up to me to introduce themselves and share some of their thoughts. It was not long before I learned that the three I had so quickly defeated were known as some of the worst of the wizards who had grown more brazen since the new Justice of Forest and Farm had come to power.

I listened politely, nodding or prodding a hesitant talker where appropriate. The villagers seemed to be full of grievances that they had no trouble sharing with me and I was able to get a considerable amount of information in a very short time.

The most prevailing complaint was that the normal tribute given to the Green Wizard's Guild for their regular maintenance of the basic infrastructure of the nation had grown even as the number of those collecting that tribute had also risen. The second part of the complaint was that along with the increased tribute, the quality of the work had dropped off drastically and sometimes was not done at all.

I quickly learned that road maintenance had fallen off so much that some of the more isolated roads were becoming less comfortable to navigate by wagon. There were also complaints dealing with everything from magical garbage rendering to medical wizardry.

"The wizard's tax is supposed to be distributed to the various wizards as they perform their duties." One man, who had obviously had more than one mug of ale muttered darkly. "The offices of Blue and Red Justice have no problems, but Green's share of funds are not being distributed."

"Because of this, whichever Green Wizard we can find to do a job has to charge a second time for his efforts and they're charging more than the job is worth."

"You are the first wizard in recent memory who has acted in accordance with the old laws, both in protecting those done wrong, to giving to those less fortunate than yourself." The man drained his mug and turned to head back to the bar.

As he left, another came to take his place. It didn't seem as if there was a line to my table, but as soon as one or a pair walked away, another appeared.

I noticed the attention my walking stick drew as I nursed my ale and listened to the villagers. One curious man finally asked if I was a Justice of Sky and water.

I assured him I was not.

Soon the crowd grew too large for my liking and I drained the last of my mug of ale, thanked the tavern owner, and

made my way back to the Inn next door. I disengaged the protection spell, entered my room and re-engaged the spell behind me, stumbling only a little as I realized how much the full meal and two mugs of ale had affected me.

It didn't take long to use magic to check the bed for bugs and satisfied that it was cleaner than the ground I had spent the past few days sleeping on, I quickly succumbed to the day's exertions.

My dreams included another magical battle where I could not lift my walking stick and no matter how hard I squeezed I could not pull the trigger on my pistol. In the worst dream, laughing wizards and a flying dragon that breathed fireballs in a rapid firing stream ravaged me.

When I woke with a start, I was drenched in sweat and breathing like I had run a sprint. I used the bowl of water on a mirrored table to wash, brush my teeth, and shave as well as possible, then used the chamber pot before dressing in clean clothes from my pack.

I re-packed my backpack and shoulder bag, collected the two saddlebags and my walking stick and disengaged the protection spell on the window and door. Making my way to the ground floor, I paid a single copper for a wonderful breakfast and thanked the owners for their hospitality.

Walking out into the street, I went to the stables and found the man I had given the silver coin to brushing one of my new horses. "A fine animal." He said by way of greeting. He patted the horse's side affectionately. "I'm sure he will live a lot longer under your care than that of the one you got him from."

"I won't need both saddles." I said by way of my own greeting as he continued brushing.

I noticed that he had already brushed the other horse as I continued. "Can I trade the other saddle for a harness to hold my pack and some extra grain and fresh fruit?"

The groomsman looked at me and asked. "Fruit for you or for the horses?"

"Both." I said with a smile as I stroked the face of the horse I had chosen as my mount. "I am all out of fruit for myself and these two fine beasts deserve to be pampered after what they endured at the hands of their former owners."

The groomsman peered at the pack on my back and said. "Yes. I can set you up with a pack of oiled canvas that will shed water even in a storm like the one we had a few days past. It will hold your back pack on one side and, if you wish, provisions for you and your beasts on the other side."

At my confirming nod, he continued. "It will be a couple of hours before I can put everything together. I still have to repair or replace some of the shoes and send a boy to get travel provisions. Should I check at the Inn when I have completed my tasks?"

"No." I said, curious about the shape and installation of shoes for a two-toed horse. "How much will that cost?"

The groomsmen rubbed his whiskered chin as he squinted in thought. "The saddle will offset the cost of the canvas pack and two baskets of grain. I think three silver coins will be enough to get you a hand of day's worth of travel provisions. Will jerky, cheese, nuts, and travel bread be acceptable in addition to a basket of fruit?"

I dug three silver coins out of the leather pouch I now wore on my belt and gave them to the groomsmen by way of answer, as I said. "I'll be in the tavern when you are finished."

I left my backpack with the groomsmen after letting him watch me put a protection spell on it and walked down the street to the tavern, tapping my walking stick onto the street surface as I walked.

On the way I noticed a villager accompanied by the Altanian version of the domestic dog. As large as a Great Dane, they were furred and resembled a large wolf. They were the little cousins of the wild wolves like the pack that I had encountered before.

Used as both guard dogs and pack animals, the one I saw carried a small saddle over its back as it walked beside the Mo'Ag woman.

When I got to the tavern, I paused a moment to let my eyes adjust to the lower light then made my way to the table I had occupied the night before.

The tavern owner rushed over and said. "I won't open the new barrel of my best ale till a couple of hours past high sun to ensure it is the best quality. All I have to offer at this time is a lesser brew that is acceptable to most of my patrons."

"It's a little too early in the day and too soon after breakfast to be drinking ale." I said. "Do you have anything else?"

"We have guaff." He replied. "It is the same guaff that is served in the Inn."

"Ah, yes. That will do fine." I said then pulled the map and its viewing crystal from my shoulder bag. I unrolled the map and peered through the crystal as the tavern owner left to get my guaff.

Quickly returning, he set the steaming mug down as far away from the edge of the map as he could along with a small plate of cheese and flat bread.

Looking up, I handed him a silver coin and said. "Do you have enough time to get yourself a mug of whatever suits you and join me for a few minutes to talk?"

The man nervously shook his head yes and was soon back with a steaming mug of his own. We talked about the circumstances of the day before and I was able to learn more about the land I found myself traveling through.

I learned that it would be a three-day journey by horse to the next town if I didn't ride hard. I was also warned that I would have to watch for more like those I had fought the day before the closer I came to that next village.

The two hours went by quickly and I rose to leave when a young boy rushed into the tavern to inform me my horses were packed and ready to travel. I thanked the tavern owner for his hospitality and was pleasantly surprised when he presented me with a small cask of guaff.

About equal to a gallon, he told me that it would not be harmed by the rocking of a pack horse and all I had to do was heat it and I would be guaranteed a more than passable drink.

I was on the road in only a few more minutes and was surprised to see the number of people on the street wishing me a safe journey. Smiling at those I passed on my way out of the village, I tapped the stones of my bracelet, rings, and necklaces in rotation as I rode.

To keep from getting saddle sore and to give my horse a break from carrying me, I dismounted every other hour and used the time to charge the stone in my walking stick. I also used the time to practice some more difficult spells as well as more than one at a time as I traveled.

On the second day I was walking beside the horse I had named Spot due to the large white spot in the center of his brown forehead when he shied sideways, followed by the packhorse behind us.

I sent a magical probe out past the edge of my sensor spell and detected several large animals pacing us in the woods beside the road. I calmed the horses and kept a magical eye on the animals that I soon identified as a pack of wolves.

Well, after catching sight of them on several occasions I named them wolves, even though they made Earth wolves look like Chihuahuas in comparison. Standing tall enough to look an adult Mo'Ag man in the eyes, the Altanian wolves were impressive beasts.

I made it a point to find an easily defended campsite that evening, stopping earlier than I normally would to ensure the better site long before dark.

I spent the extra time charging my magic batteries and used considerable power to ensure a strong protection spell when I finally crawled into my sleeping bag. Luckily my dreams were calm and I awoke refreshed and ready for the day.

Heating the last of my cask of guaff on the morning of the third day I was examining the map when I felt a more persistent probing of the wolf pack on the edges of my protection spell.

I downed the last of my hot mug of guaff, rolled the map and tied it before tucking it into my shoulder bag. I picked up my walking stick and walked over to where the horses were hobbled just as they began to worry about the closer proximity of the wolf pack.

I fed both horses the last of the Saerolan version of winter-dried apples and talked to them while projecting a feeling of calm. As I calmed the horses I probed the perimeter of the camp and located all seven of the wolf pack's members.

Using a calming spell on the horses to steady them, I knelt and picked up a number of golf ball-sized stones while drawing the edge of my protection spell inward.

Sensing the lessened resistance, the wolf pack grew closer as the edge of the spell shrank inward. When the first of the wolves came into view I smacked it on the snout with a magically thrown stone. I hit four more of the wolves at least once and that first one two more times before the pack lost interest in my horses and me and loped off into the woods.

The rest of the day went quickly and before long I began to pass an increasing number of small farms along the road. The traffic increased with the number of outlying buildings and the spring summer shone bright and warm as I rode into the next village.

I used all but two coppers of the last of the coin from my victory in the preceding village at the stables when I put the horses up for the night. The groomsmen were extremely polite and assured me that my horses would be well cared for. I nodded as I picked up my shoulder bag and backpack and turned to go.

When I walked the street toward the Inn the number of those who greeted me pleasantly as they passed by surprised me. I used a simple spell to expand my hearing range and was able to hear several comments that included the phrases 'Blue Justice' and 'finally going to change for the better'.

When I got to the Inn the Innkeeper's eyes grew as large as saucers when I showed him one of the silver dollars I had brought with me from Earth.

"You are Erting!" He gasped. "Is it true ..."

"Please," I said with a hand out to stop him, "I am tired from my journey. After a bath and a hot meal I would be glad to answer your questions."

"Of course, of course." The man was obviously embarrassed. "My apologies for my rudeness." He motioned to a young lad whose eyes were as big as the rest of his head as he gaped. "Roan, show the Master Wizard to the front corner room." When the boy continued to gape, the Innkeeper yelled. "Roan! Wake up!"

The boy shuddered and came out of his trance and squeaked. "Yes father! Please come with me sir!"

He practically ran up the stairs and turned left out of sight. When I reached the top and turned, Roan was standing in front of an open door waiting. I entered the room and was pleased to see its size and furnishings.

"This is our best room, sir, the best in all of the village. Only the most important guests get this room." He looked worried for a moment, then added. "I hope it pleases you."

I smiled as I lowered my pack to the floor and turned to the boy. "It is more than enough young man. Thank you." The boy's chest expanded and he seemed to grow another inch at the compliment. I dug one of my last two coppers from a pouch and

bent down to whisper in his ear as I held it out. "This is for you if I can get a hot mug of guaff before my bath."

Roan's eyes grew even larger as he gingerly accepted the copper, then almost collided with a pair of older boys who struggled to bring a large tub into my room.

The younger boy darted around them and was gone as the older of the two new boys stood and said. "Water is being heated for your bath sir." As the younger of the two left the room, the older one continued. "Father said to tell you that you can have a meal sent up to your room or you can eat in the dining room downstairs if you prefer and are hungry now."

"He also said to tell you that if you can wait a couple of hours you can share our family table if you wish." The boy gulped and added. "He didn't say so, but I'm sure he wants to hear stories of Ert." The boy gulped again and added. "We all would ... sir."

I smiled at the boy's nervousness as Roan dashed into the room holding a steaming mug that took both hands to control. "Ah, guaff!" I exclaimed and took a sip to test the heat, then a longer pull. "Ahhh, that's really good."

I looked up at the expectant faces and said. "Tell your father that a hot bath and a short rest will take just about exactly two hours and that I would be honored to share your family's table."

Turning to Roan, I added. "Roan, could you come to let me know when it is time to join your family?"

The young lad shook his head so violently that his hair flew in all directions. "Yes sir, Master Wizard!"

"Thank you Roan." Turning to the older boy, I said. "Now, just fill the tub quickly and I will heat the water myself."

"Yes sir!" The older boy said and the two dashed away.

The tub was quickly filled and after using magic to heat the water to suit myself, I spent a full half-hour soaking the travel weariness from my body.

Finished with my bath I dressed in the last of my clean clothes from my pack and lay down to rest. My nap was deep and dreamless and the hesitant knock at the door to my room came just a moment after the protection spell alerted me to the lad's approach.

The meal was as good as any other I had eaten and I spent the rest of the evening talking with the Innkeeper and his large family. With a wife that stood inches above his own five-foot ten, four sons, and three daughters, the family only needed the help of two other men to run the Inn and the connecting tavern.

The Innkeeper, Teal, told me that it might not be wise to use the silver dollars I had shown him and said that he could change some of my dollars to Altanian coin if I wished. I gave him three more of my silver dollars and got a large pouch full of smaller silver and copper coins in return.

Teal's wife, Beatra, also offered to launder all my clothes and I was more than happy to accept as I had planned on washing them myself at the river that my map showed me a day's ride west of the village.

"There is one other thing that some in our village have asked me to ask you." Teal said hesitantly. At my motion to continue, he said. "Ever since the two recent changes in ownership of the office of Justice of Forest and Farm, the number of unresolved disputes has grown. We are too far from the sea or a river or lake for regular Blue Justice and there is just too much for Red Justice to do alone."

He wrung his hands and continued. "I know you *say* you are not authorized by the office of Blue Justice," he glanced again at the large turquoise stone in my walking stick, "but could you hear just a few of the more serious disputes before the opposing parties resort to taking matters into their own hands?"

"What could it hurt?" I thought to myself. *"Mediate a couple of family quarrels, then head out of town before the dust settles."*

"OK, Teal." I said. "As a favor to you and your family for the wonderful meal and better company than I have had in a long while."

* 5 *

The next morning I was met at the top of the stairs outside my room's door by Teal who then escorted me across the street to a building that he explained was the village meeting hall. As I entered with my walking stick in hand everyone rose from their seats.

I looked around and realized that I might have taken on too much. There were at least a hundred fifty people crammed into the room with several standing at the edges of the room after seats ran out.

"Oh crap! What have I gotten myself into." I thought, hoping my face didn't reveal the turmoil that knotted my stomach.

Teal led me through the gap in the seats to a large walnut desk that seemed to be a little taller than a normal desk.

"Make's intimidation easier." I thought as I came closer.

A very short, very portly man in a very long-tailed coat, elaborately embroidered in the green of Forest and Farm standing by the desk greeted me. "Welcome Master Wizard. We are grateful that you have agreed to moderate for Justice." He motioned to the seat and I moved around behind the desk and sat down.

Discretely putting his back to the crowd, short-round bent to whisper to me. "Make sure the blue stone on your staff is visible to all during the proceedings." Then he turned to face the

crowd and announced. "The first dispute for Justice is between the Wizard Argant and the stable master Tyrel."

There was a little background noise as the two men and what appeared to be some sort of lawyer or advocate for each rose from seats in the front and sat at two tables facing the desk I sat behind.

Short-round introduced the wizard and stable master to the court, me, then introduced their advocates before giving me control of the proceedings.

I listened as the stable master stated his complaint that the Wizard Argant had rented a horse to ride to the next village and ran the animal to death. His dispute was that Argant not only refused to pay for the loss of the animal, but that he demanded Tyrel pay *him* for causing him to be late for an appointment in the next village.

After several exchanges in accusations and counter accusations, I asked Tyrel. "Was the horse in question sick in any way or lame or having substandard shoes or saddle?"

"No sir!" Tyrel insisted. "The wizard demanded only my best animal and approved all manner of preparations before he left."

I probed the stable master with a truth spell as he spoke and confirmed his words were as true as he believed. Turning to the wizard, I asked. "Do you dispute these words?"

"I was in a hurry. I told him that the horse was sufficient for my needs because I was already pressed for time and had no more to waste on his incompetence!" The man sneered as he added. "The animal was obviously not his best or it would not have collapsed after so short a time! And if it *was* his finest then he is a criminal for duping his customers into paying good coin for animals that would not even make a decent meal!"

The stable master held his tongue but just barely, his face so red that I feared his head would explode.

Looking at the wizard I said. "You say you left the stables at precisely high sun and that the animal died only half way to sun set. Is that true?"

I truth-probed the wizard as he sneered his answer. "Yes. Not three septs and the animal collapsed and died on the road. I was lucky that it did not crush me as it fell or I would probably have been eaten by wolves." He stood and pointed a finger at the stable master. "That poor excuse for a stable master tried to kill me! I demand that he pay me recompense and be punished for the attempt!"

The stable master lost his composure and screamed back. "I did no such thing! You rode my best horse too hard and are the guilty one!"

"Silence!" I yelled, boosting the volume of my voice with magic.

As the room quieted I turned to Argant and asked. "You said you were already late for an appointment and that you mentioned this to Tyrel when you rented the horse?" At his nod

to affirm the question I asked. "How did you get to this village in the first place?"

"My horse had gone lame outside of the village and had to be put down. I had to walk the rest of the way. That is why I was so late."

I nodded. "You said earlier that when you rented Tyrel's horse that you had walked a half-day, but you also said that you were a full day behind schedule. How again did you say that your first horse became lame?"

This time I pressed the truth spell with more power and saw a flicker of falsehood when Argant said. "It broke its leg in a rough spot in the road."

"You said earlier it stepped into a hole." I reminded him.

"It was a dip in the road that was the beginnings of a hole." Argant said with a negligent wave of his hand.

I turned to the portly man who still stood by the Desk of Justice and asked. "Am I correct in assuming that regular maintenance is performed on the main roads?"

"The regular maintenance has been disrupted, but several of the merchants who use the roads most have banded together to hire wizards to travel ahead of their caravans to make some repairs." Short-round answered.

I then asked. "When was the last time one of these contracted wizards smoothed the road in that direction?"

"It has been since deep winter sir. Nearly two months."

"So it is feasible that a rough spot could have formed in that time?"

"Yes sir. It is possible."

I pursed my lips and turned back toward Argant. "You say your first horse broke its leg in a hole on the second day out of the last village and you had to walk a half-day to this village?"

"I've already said that twice before! Is your memory failing, *Master Wizard*?"

"No," I smiled, "just making sure I have all the facts straight. I traveled that same road and it took me three days, yet you made nearly the entire trip in less than a day and a half. Are you sure your horse died of a broken leg?"

"Quite sure!" Argant insisted although there was still that twinge to the truth spell I aimed in his direction.

I nodded and changed tact again. "So you rented a horse from Tyrel and rode it for less than three septes and it died of heart-burst. Let me take pause for a moment."

I took the map from my shoulder bag and lay it out on the desk. Using the crystal to scan the roads in question in fine detail I saw that the only way that Argant could have rode the distances that he claimed, and those claims were the most truthful he spoke, was to ride his horses at almost a full run the whole way.

Looking up from the map, I asked Argant. "You must have rode hard to get to where your first horse broke its leg. Are you sure that your first horse did not also die of heart-burst?"

I felt the surge of Argant's mental shield as he insisted that his first horse died of a broken leg, but the half-lie was clear to me. His first horse may have broken its leg *as* it fell, but it had fallen due to heart-burst from being ridden so hard.

"I have checked the distances on this map," I gestured to the map on the desk in front of me, "and find it hard to believe that *anyone* would push a horse so far in such a short time as you claim."

Argant's face lost its arrogant sneer as he began to realize that Justice did not seem to be going his way.

"I will ask you only this one more time and I want you to lower all magical shielding so that I may confirm the truthiness," I smiled at the word I stole from a man from my home world, "of your words."

Argant's face grew red and I had only a fraction of a second to raise my shields as he struck. A small dagger flew from within each sleeve, propelled by a magical spell, as Argant raised both arms and pointed them toward me.

I read his emotions well and was prepared with my own weapons. On the road I had removed the laser pointer from my pistol and experimented with a new spell. I had readied the laser pointer at the beginning of the trial and had lain its black plastic, human technology on the desk in front of me at the beginning of the proceedings.

It was so alien to the people of this world that it looked completely harmless lying close at hand.

Instead of catching the two daggers, I used less power to deflect them into the ceiling with the wave of one hand as I pressed the button on my targeting laser with a finger of the other hand.

The unexpected power and speed of my return fire caught Argant off guard as the beam of magically intensified laser light struck him between the eyes. His eyes blew out of his head and blood shot from his ears, mouth, and nostrils as the overpressure of a portion of his brains turning to steam found the quickest way out.

The wizard Argant dropped like a stone and silence cloaked the courtroom. I stood slowly as the silence stretched on and said softly. "I rule in favor of Tyrel. The cost of the horse to the requested sum of 50 silver coins and another ten silver coins for Argant's refusal to admit his wrongdoing will be taken from Argant's possessions and presented to Tyrel.

I moved to the corpse and sought out all the magical items and his coin purse and other hidden weapons and items of value, wondering at how quickly I had adjusted to the practice of looting my victim's bodies.

Inside the purse I found more than enough gold and silver coins to equal the sixty silvers and handed them to Tyrel, who still stood mute along with the rest of the villagers. He accepted the coins with a shaky hand and I turned back to the Desk of Justice.

As I sat down, I calmly said. "If someone will please escort the wizard Argant from this court we will resume Justice."

There was a quick bustle as several villagers removed Argant's body while a few more cleaned the area of the most obvious signs of Argant's demise.

As I re-rolled my map and placed it back in my shoulder bag, short-round held a whispered conversation with two villagers.

I returned to my place behind the tall desk, then looked over at short-round as he hurried over to speak to me. "Master Wizard, sir, it seems that all but two of the remaining cases being brought forward for Justice have settled their differences and departed."

"Ah yes." I said as I continued to silently perform the mind-calming meditation that my PTSD therapist and I had discovered was my most effective method for dealing with things that reminded me of my two tours in the Middle East.

Observing me as I calmly returned to the task at hand seemed to help the villagers also relax.

The two remaining cases were fairly complex and it took some compromising but in a little over a sept both sets of disputants were satisfied with my ruling, especially, as I heard one of them say to the other as they left, that both of them were still alive.

I returned to the Inn and relaxed in my room till Roan came tapping at my door to inform me that lunch was ready. I thanked him and went down to the dining room where the noise diminished as I came into view.

I moved to the table that Roan stood by and thanked him as I sat. The meal was as good as any other I had eaten since arriving on this world. I was pleased when I was able to identify most of the contents by name as well as the way they were cooked.

I silently thanked Thomas Justice for the learning spell and ring then had a thought. Old man Justice seemed to be considerably more than I had originally thought. And the office of Justice seemed to imply his name was more than it seemed as well.

Remembering what Paetra had said about two names, I wondered if the old man's last name was an add-on for when he dealt with human Yu'ob, like me.

As I ate my meal and drank the guaff that was a much more satisfying drink than the coffee I had had back home, I wondered if I was getting comfortable with returning to the prospect of daily violence.

Would I rather be here on this world living in a wilderness not easily found even where Uncle Bart lived, or back on my own world babysitting rich city men with delusions of wilderness grandeur?

On my earth I'd be at the mercy of rent, utilities, and all the other costs of modern technology, unless I wanted to live like

a hermit in the mountains somewhere. But on this world I could roam around and explore while doing odd jobs of a magical nature for those whose paths I crossed.

On my world, my occasional war reactions caused discomfort in those around me, while on this world, the cost of just staying alive sometimes provided its own monetary benefits.

My mind continued racing as I finished my meal. I sat for a short time with a mug of guaff after my table was cleared, grateful for the small measure of solitude in the busy room. After finishing my guaff, I left the Inn to walk the streets and explore.

Everywhere I went villagers greeted me with a smile and a complement, which I returned with pleasure. In the hardware store I got into a conversation on the building of a wind-powered pump for a farmer's well and made some suggestions that seemed to set a spark in the farmer's eyes. I later learned he used my suggestion and made a new, side business building the same style pump for others.

While being shown around her general store, I made another suggestion to the store owner on how to preserve perishable goods using magic and cooling that she had not thought of before. She was excited at the prospect of increasing her profit without any extra cost by simply reducing her waste by nearly half.

I spent the next hour with her experimenting on the proper spells to reduce the temperature by removing heat instead of creating cold by more forceful means. When we finally hit on the proper spell she almost crushed me in her enormous bosom then blushed like a girl a fraction her age when she realized what she had done.

I gave her one of the smaller rings I had accumulated so she would have room to imprint the spell to be able to renew it on a regular basis, and was again crushed as she thanked me profusely.

On my stop at the stables to check on Spot and the packhorse, Tyrel came up to me and bowed deeply. "I must thank you for your Justice, Master Wizard. It has been many months since we in Saerol have seen proper Justice. You have brought hope back to our people that Justice has not deserted us.

"Thank you Tyrel." I said. "I just wish that it was not at such a cost."

"You did what you had to, sir! If you had not it would be you that was being lain within the ground or given up to fire at sunset."

I shook my head and replied. "Yes, I know. But it is still sad that a life had to be taken. Unavoidable under the circumstances, but still sad."

I stayed to help Tyrel with his duties till he insisted that I may be a great wizard, but I would never be a stable hand, and convinced me that my help might be needed elsewhere. I took the hint and went back onto the street to explore the village.

Eventually I returned to the Inn for supper with Teal and his family then after another hot bath, dressed in the freshly laundered clothes provided by Beatra. As the sun kissed the horizon I went down to the tavern that abutted the Inn where I was met by Teal's oldest son, Tank. Build like his earthly namesake, Tank had no trouble clearing a path as he led me to a side table that had a solid wall behind it and a clear view of the bar and both front and kitchen doors.

The family had laughed in disbelief the night before when I had told them what a tank was. Roan had earned a good-natured poke when he commented that his oldest brother had a hide like steel and fists that were like explosions to those who drank too much ale and became rowdy.

I was halfway through an excellent mug of ale when the tavern became silent as a pair of figures came through the door. Palming the laser pointer in my left hand and just below the table's edge, I sipped my ale as the two wizards spotted me and came toward my table.

Tank made a move to intercept them but at a shake of my head went back behind his bar.

"May we join you Master Wizard?" The male half of the pair asked as they came up to my table.

My probe of their emotions revealed an openness that spoke volumes and I relaxed. "By all means." I replied setting my mug on the table, then looked at Tank and held up two fingers.

I kept the targeting laser in my hand.

The room seemed to exhale in relief as the two wizards sat down with me and Tank brought over two mugs of ale. I gave him a couple of silver coins and said. "Could you bring us some bread and cheese too please?"

"Of course Blue Justice." Tank said as he turned to go.

"I know the holder of the office of Blue Justice and I do not recognize you." Said the woman accusingly.

I looked at her and saw a young woman in her mid twenties, approximately my own age. With a sun-darkened face despite being still early spring, her hands showed that she was not adverse to hard work, but did not make a living at it either.

I shrugged. "I keep telling them I'm not affiliated with that office, but they keep naming me as such anyway. I finally quit insisting they stop."

"What office *are* you affiliated with?" The male of the two asked as Tank set a plate of cheese and bread sticks in the center of the table.

I looked at him and realized that his features were so similar to the woman's that they could be brother and sister, possibly even twins. "None really. I'm simply looking for stolen property for another." I shrugged again. "If and when I recover that property, I will most likely return to where I came from."

"So," the man said, "you do not represent any of the three offices of Justice?"

“Not really.” I replied.

“And yet you have dispensed Justice in a wide swath across Saerol over the past few hands of days.” Commented the woman.

“I have had to defend myself a lot more than I would have had to in my home land, yes.” I replied. “But that seems to be more the norm than a rarity here.”

“I have been hired by a man who says an object of his has been stolen and he wishes for me to retrieve that item.” I continued. “Some have named me that which I am not because of a stone set in my walking stick. Because of that naming I have been asked to perform certain duties that I understand are usually performed by that office.”

“I saw no harm in the request and honored it only if those who asked it recognized that I was *not* who they thought me to be. They asked that I perform the duty anyway and I accepted.”

I held my hand out and said. “My name is Morgan Sullivan. I am what your people call an Erting. I have been hired by Thomas Justice to retrieve the Sphere of Forest and Farm from the one who he says stole it.”

“Another one!” The woman exclaimed in disgust. “Why does he insist on bringing outsiders to interfere with our affairs!”

The man smiled at the woman and reached out to shake the hand I still had extended. He gripped my wrist in the Saerolian custom. “My name is Paero and this is my sister Paetra.” He smiled and added. “Sometimes, even though our parents claim we shared the same womb at the same time, we are so different that it is hard to believe.”

As Paetra sat back and crossed her arms in disgust, Paero continued. “You did not have to admit that you are an Erting, just the fact that you gave two names told us as much.

“Just like an Erting, though!” Paetra spat. “One name is not enough, they need two!” She took a long pull of her ale and almost spoiled her look of anger with a mustache of foam across her upper lip.

It was all I could do not to laugh out loud, but her brother had no such restraint. He snorted and at her look brushed a finger across his upper lip. She touched her own and her face grew bright red as she quickly wiped the foam away, then sat back sullenly.

Paero turned to me and grew serious. “Word of your deeds has spread far and wide across Saerol. There are many who would see the current holder of the green sphere defeated, but there are just as many who are happier with things as they have become.”

“When you get to the western coast where she resides, there will be more than just one Master Wizard to face.”

“She?” I asked.

“Yes.” Paero answered. “The last person Justice sent to retrieve the green sphere was a woman. She won her prize in bed

with a dagger in the back of the man who had taken it in battle with the former owner.”

“The old Wizard should have retired years before but the comfort of his office was too much to give up willingly.” Paero continued. “He may have been powerful with the sphere of Green Justice as a source of magic but had grown complacent and the stone was mostly drained of energy before he was challenged.”

“Since Greta has taken the office, Justice had suffered even more than it did with Filian’s impulsiveness or Jalen’s aged indifference.” Paetra finally quit sulking and added to the conversation. “She is more interested in amassing new spells and building personal wealth.”

“It is her lead that is being copied by so many green wizards.” Paero said. “They have been seduced by their increased power and the lack of anyone of higher authority who will stand against them. A few have begun to amass great wealth while the majority of those who depend on Green Justice have watched as they’re own meager wealth dwindles.”

“Villages are reduced to letting outlying roads and bridges fall to ruin as they try in vain to get green wizards to perform routine maintenance for a legitimate price.” Paetra said. “Those same villagers are barely able to maintain their own buildings since they can no longer afford the wizardry of those with greater access to power.”

“What about blue and red wizards?” I asked.

“If you were one of us, you wouldn’t have to ask that.” Paetra muttered darkly.

Paero smiled tolerantly at his sister. “But you weren’t born to this world, so I will tell you. Most wizards find the source magic that best suits them and develop their skills in limited fashions.”

At my creased eyebrows he continued. “A red wizard works mainly with the fire and earth, a blue wizard with water and air, and the green wizard with all living and growing things.”

“After a while each becomes specialized in the practice of their chosen field. There are those who can and do practice wizardry outside their chosen field, but their efforts are less skilled than those who specialize in those fields.

“The division of magical labor has been established for so many generations that if you can think of a specific function of society you automatically know what color of justice rules over that function.”

“That is why green magic oversees the roads and village infrastructure, blue magic over everything concerning rivers, lakes and all port commerce, and red magic over all mining and forging and relevant businesses.”

“Red magic is used in all portions of the process of making all the metal parts that go into making a wagon. But once a wagon is made, if it is only used on roads and trails and in the fields, its use is presided over by Green Justice.”

“On the opposing side, the wood used in making a wagon starts as seedlings that are planted and tended as they grow, then harvested and cut into planks using green magic. But if the wagon is used only in the villages that support the mines and forges, then their use is under Red Justice.”

“The same basic materials and processes are used to make the barges and ships that ply the waters of the world, but once the river barge or sailing ship is finished and in use, Blue Justice has primary authority over every aspect of its use.” He continued.

“Port cities and villages are usually the responsibility of Blue Justice and villages that support mines and forging communities are the responsibility of Red Justice.”

He shrugged. “Landlocked villages and the roads that connect them are the responsibility of Green Magic.”

Although the Hall of Justice is in a port city, being the capital of our island nation, Justice for Saerol On The Coast is shared by the three holders of the Green Sphere of Justice.

Paero shrugged. “You have only traveled the inland forests and roads connecting isolated farming populations where Green Justice presides.”

“There are plenty of red and blue wizards who could perform the duties that green wizards are not doing or charging too much to do, but those red and blue wizards are busy with their own duties. They would not allow their own duties to suffer while performing the duties of another color of justice. It is the holder of the green Sphere of Justice who sets the tone for the entire Green Wizard’s Guild.”

I drained my mug of ale and caught Tank’s eye as Paero continued. “Altanians are an independent people who rarely concern themselves with politics. The vast majority rely on the holders of the three Color’s of Justice to set the tone of civility.”

“When Justice is compromised, the effects sometimes do not spread to those below the authority at the top. Usually there is enough resistance to acting badly that Justice is quickly reset to its proper balance.”

“If Justice continues to be compromised at successively lower levels it may take a while for resentment to build to the point of action. Like many times in our past, that point has been reached and that is why we sought you out.”

“Greta was completely unknown till she openly claimed the green sphere. No one knew what kind of Justice she would bring until she *already* held the office. She set the tone of her Office, then challenged any who not only *did* openly oppose her Justice, but even those who she thought *might* oppose her *in the future*.”

“Before very long those few who might stand against her were already complicit in her new justice through delaying too long. She set a tone of ruthlessness that has trickled down to those at all levels of the Green Guild.”

“You, on the other hand,” he continued, “have shown by your actions and words from the moment you arrived exactly what kind of Justice you support. At the first moment you see Justice abused, you stand up for those supposed to be under the protection of Green Justice, not its prey.”

His eyes locked with mine. “By your actions you have precipitated a more universal civil reaction to failed Justice. Simple word of mouth describing your acts of Justice has triggered additional acts by those less capable than you in regards to wizardry.”

Paero smiled. “If you would have us, my sister and I would join you on your journey to Saerol On The Coast to reset the balance of Green Justice.”

* 6 *

The next morning, as Paero, Paetra and I readied our horses at the stable, Roan brought me a fresh loaf of bread and two sealed casks of guaff, one in the empty I provided and another in a cask with Teal’s brands burned into the wood.

I thanked him and bent down to his level. “You have been my most faithful friend since I arrived,” I said, “and I have a gift for you.” I had already given each of the rest of the family gifts, including two power rings, my last large folding knife and two sewing kits among other things, but had saved his for last.

I held out one of the smallest power rings I had accumulated and the two booklets Thomas Justice had given me. “The smaller book contains the basics for learning to be a wizard and the ring is charmed to increase your ability to learn.” I showed him mine. “This one has the same spell. The other book will help you learn the language of my people as well as that of the Kroen and Mo’ag.”

His eyes grew larger with each word I spoke and his mouth opened in surprise. “But I ask you two favors. First, never insult the Kroen Tol by naming them sky *walkers*. They are the Kroen Tol, the sky *watchers*, so remember that when you see wings above you. It may be one of their kind *watching* how you treat the world.”

Roan looked nervously at the sky as I continued. “And secondly, also treat the Mo’ag with the same respect that you treat me or anyone else you would have think well of you. Can you do those two things for me?”

At his rapid head-shake and hearty, “Yes sir Master Wizard!” I released my hold on the two booklets and the ring. “If you hold to your promise you have the opportunity to become as great a wizard as you could wish.”

I stood up and ruffled his hair. “Now go back to the Inn and thank your father and mother for these parting gifts and tell all in your family that I have had great pleasure in their company.”

I watched as Roan turned and ran back toward the Inn as fast as his legs could carry him. After a few dozen yards, he turned and waved, then resumed his run home when I waved back.

When I turned back to stow the extra provisions behind Spot's saddle I caught Paetra gazing at me with a strange look.

"What?"

Her face cleared of emotion and took on the scowl that I was more familiar with as she busied herself with her own horse.

"I don't mean to be nosy, but is that all the supplies the two of you need?" I asked when she pulled the drawstrings to close the oversized saddlebags she and her brother both carried behind their saddles.

She just smiled and turned to lead her horse out of the stable into the bright morning sunshine where Paero waited for us. I made a final tug on the last strap on the packhorse's load, tied the lead to my own mount, then walked Spot out of the barn.

Tyrel ran up from deep inside the barn as I turned to mount. As he handed me a small leather bag, he said, "Everything you asked for is in this bag sir, although I can't imagine what you would need most of it for."

"I'll figure something out Tyrel." I said as I accepted the bag. "Thank you my friend."

The stable master beamed at the words and said, "Have a safe journey," he hesitated, "my friend. May your Vision of Justice be true."

I didn't know how to respond so simply smiled and pulled myself up into the saddle. Paero and his sister turned toward the road to the west and we departed the village for the city of Saerol On The Coast. We passed a Roman chariot-looking cart drawn by a team of two of the domesticated wolves coming into the village as we were leaving.

We rode in silence for a while before Paero pulled his horse next to mine. "Did you understand what the stable master meant with his last words?"

"No." I replied. "The dictionary Justice gave me only had individual words. I'm still learning how to put them together in the context they are meant."

"It is an old phrase that has fallen into disuse the past few years." Paero said. "In it's purist form it is meant to wish that the recipient will have the vision to dispense justice in its truest form to all within the world from the highest cloud in the sky to the lowest stone at the bottom of the deepest ocean and all between."

"It is, in fact, a way for the speaker to acknowledge that we are all responsible for the entire world and all within, upon, or above it." He smiled. "Only a Justice or his or her eyes, the Visions of Justice, do not respond in kind as their Visions of Justice are law."

"A Justice may appoint up to six Visions, who are divided into two teams of three. Visions are the ones who do the

legal research and deliver edicts from the Office of Justice. They are directly below the holder of the Sphere of Justice.”

As we rode along the road, Paero continued. “The two teams of three routinely travel to deliver decisions on law with one team traveling around the nation in three directions and the other team dealing with the bureaucracy of the office of justice for its turn at home duty.”

“Oh,” he added with a devilish smile, “and all Visions are identified by a large magic stone. Not near as large as the Sphere of Justice, closer to the size of the one atop your staff.”

“Oh crap!” I muttered as Paero laughed and trotted his horse ahead to ride next to his sister.

After all my efforts to deny being affiliated with the office of Justice or being one of his or her designated Visions, I had just given Tyrel no reason to doubt that I actually *was* a Vision. By not responding to Tyrel’s last words I had given the impression that I really *was* one of these wandering Visions of Justice.

“It’s a *walking stick*,” I yelled up to Paero, “not a staff.”

Then I sulked.

It was only a short time later that we came upon a pair of Mo’ag on horses trailing leads to heavily laden mules. As we approached, Paero rode up to me and said. “Morgan, this is Keebo and his wife Wila. They ride with us.”

I nodded as each was named and said in their own language. “I am pleased to meet you both. I wondered how Paero and his sister,” I heard her mutter her name under her breath, “traveled so light. I thought they might sleep in trees and eat rocks for all the supplies they carried. I am glad to find that they are normal as you and I.”

Keebo laughed aloud and replied in the same tongue. “Hah! Well met Vision!” Then glancing at the way Paetra scowled at me, the Mo’ag man added. “I can see that our journey will be entertaining for all.”

Keebo and Wila steered their horses onto the road, leading the mules by leather straps that only rested on the flanks of their mounts.

As we rode I talked with each of my companions in turn, well, except for Paetra. She seemed to be still holding some sort of grudge against me for being an *Erting*. I tried not to let it bother me, but it still did.

We rode all day, taking lunch in the saddle to make better time. By the time we stopped to make camp for the night I was glad that I had built somewhat of a tolerance for horseback.

All five of us found something to do as we set up camp within sight *of* the road but out of direct view *from* the road.

Keebo and Wila set a picket line to hold the horses and mules and raised two large tents while Paero and Paetra collected stones for a fire ring. Then while Paetra formed the ring with the stones, her brother ranged outward from camp to inspect the area and collect firewood.

In moments I saw that they were used to working together and would have most of the camp quickly set up.

I had not had much need for my tent on the first leg of my journey so far because I was afraid to sleep enclosed and only once on the second leg when it rained and I had grown confident enough in my protection spell to ensure my safety.

I pulled the tent from my saddle pack and flicked it open. Seconds later I had my tent positioned and staked and was helping Paero collect firewood. More than once I saw signs of other use of the spot where we made camp and mentioned it to my new traveling companion.

“Yes. I have noticed the same thing.” He told me. “But that is not surprising. I am sure over the past seasons there have been many traveling this road. This spot would always be about a day’s ride from the village coming away. Coming from the other direction, any regular traveler would know how much longer they have to travel if they stop here on the last day of their journey.”

He smiled at me as he found a good log for building longer lasting coals and added it to his stock of smaller pieces. “That is why we have to walk so far from camp to find decent wood for a proper fire.”

We took another load back to camp to find the fire ring finished and the two Mo’ag placing wood in a recognizable pattern inside the ring. As they worked from the pile we had amassed, Paetra assembled a grating over one side of the ring.

I made a motion for Paero to wait before we went for a last load, then went to my saddle pack between my tent and Spot at the end of the picket line. I pulled out my own grill top and asked if it would help.

Paetra looked up with barely hid impatience then took a closer look at the grating. My dad had made it after one camping trip that I had been too young to join, when he and my uncle Bart had thought that item was on *the other’s* list.

I had made sure to claim it when dad had died. To me it was a treasured heirloom of camping that could not be replaced.

The iron legs were each as long as the grate and with a little maneuvering could either lock in two places or be completely removed.

It was heavy and could sometimes be a bitch to pack, but it more than made up for that in the times it came in handiest.

Paetra squeezed out a small smile and said. “Thank you Morgan. This *will* help.” Then she went back to her task.

Upon seeing the grate, Wila became excited and helped Paetra figure out how to unfold it. Then the two experimented a little and quickly arranged their larger grate in tandem with mine to make a cooking cover over half the fire ring.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Paero watching me and said. “What?” Then I brushed past him heading in the only direction we hadn’t gone yet. “Lets get another load of wood while you show me that cloaking spell again.”

We found a good winter fall that provided more than enough for its size and carried it back to camp as one piece to break apart later. Then after Wila started the fire with a spell and while it was burning down to cooking coals, Paero called everyone over to a spot where no grass grew.

He cleared the dirt of debris and when everyone was collected around him, Paero took a stick and drew a line in the dirt. "This is the road to Saerol On The Coast. It's five days ride to the only village between here and there," his eyes swept those around him and stopped at me, "and seven more to the outlying farms. Then we have two more days before we reach the city proper."

"If we do not stay in the village for any longer than to obtain provisions we will reach the bridge at Torynd River two days later. Bridge Camp will be the last time we can be assured of anonymity for the remainder of the journey." He looked at me again. "Do you have this," he gestured to the dirt map, "firm in your mind?"

"Oh yeah." I said. "I've seen a pretty good map of the entire island of Saerol. I know all the villages that lie on roads and all those that lie on rivers, and I know which have both roads and rivers leading to them. Saerol On The Coast has both rivers and roads leading into it and just about the best harbor in the island. There's also a large island just outside the bay that protects the harbor in time of heavy storm and any ship close will try to get to Shelter Bay at the very least."

"How do you know all this?" Paetra demanded.

I held up a finger and walked to my shoulder bag propped against the saddle pack by my tent. Reaching under the flap I pulled out the rolled tube of my chamois map. Pulling the crystal from a shirt pocket as I re-joined the group, I untied the map and opened it on the ground for them to see.

"A Taryn map!" Keebo exclaimed.

"Where did you get this?" Paero said excitedly.

"Uh, I told you. I was hired by some guy named Justice. This was one of the things he gave me to help me with my quest."

"Another was the books that I gave to the boy, Roan, before we left the village." I held up my learning ring "The books came with this. It's got a learning spell on it."

"You have a learning spell?" Wila gasped

"Yeah." I replied. "I copied it and put it in the ring I gave to Roan with the books."

"You *copied* a learning spell?" Paetra exploded. "I don't believe it!"

"It took me a couple of days to figure it out but it works. I tried it. In fact," I insisted as I dug into my shirt pocket, "I made two of them to test them against each other and the original."

"Let me see!" Paetra exclaimed as she held out her hand.

I shrugged and handed one of the rings to her without hesitation. I didn't see anything big about it and since I had collected several more rings on which I could upload the spell. I could make another any time.

When I had first begun testing my magical skills I recognized how similar to computer programming spells actually were. I had gotten a lot of hands-on experience with the computers in the Stryker vehicles I worked with and I was able to come at spell-casting in a completely different way from the native wizard population.

Some of the things that native Altanians took for granted could never be done I seemed to be able to find exceptions for because I never knew they were impossible to do.

One of those myths was that it was impossible to copy a spell above a certain skill level.

Everyone knew that there was no way to copy a spell that had been embedded into a stone or gem.

It just couldn't be done because no one had ever done it.

Paetra took the rings with their copied spell and showed them to Paero. The planning session dissolved when Paetra and her brother became engaged in inspecting my efforts. While they tested the copied embedding Keebo and Wila drifted away to tend the growing pile of coals and begin the evening meal.

I went to my saddle packs to get some spices and the remainder of my fresh food and asked the two Mo'ag if there was anything there they could use.

"Of course." Wila said as she relieved me of the entire pile. "Some of it tonight and more tomorrow. It should last until we get to the next village." Then she returned her attention to her task.

I looked at the sun and realized that the time I thought we'd gained by riding through lunch had been consumed by our early evening stop.

We had our meal just before the sun touched the road ahead where it cut through the dense forest between villages. After cleaning our cooking and eating gear, we spent some time exchanging spells and showing each other what we were capable of doing.

Paero said that it was so they could plan how we could work as a team, then practice doing so. I agreed with the concept, saying. "It's pretty much what I did for four years including two tours in the Middle East."

Later, after the sun was a memory and we sat around the fire, I explained the Middle East wars as best I could. It was when I got to the part where I tried to explain what a Stryker vehicle was that I lost them.

"How many are in your army?" Keebo asked after a lull in conversation.

"There was around three hundred thousand there when I first got there." I explained. "About half were regular troops like me and half were mercenaries."

“So you have been in battle before.” Paero said it more as a statement than a question.

“Yeah.” I said softly. “More times than I care to remember. There is a lot I would prefer to forget.”

Then I looked up with a half smile. “But it sure did prepare me for this place. The weapons are different, but the basic method is the same. Kill them before they kill you, and be quick about it.”

They were all quiet for a while as what I’d told them of my experience in war soaked in, then Paetra said. “I inspected the ring you gave me and I can find no flaw in the spell or any way to duplicate it.”

“It’s easy once you know how.” I said, then. “Here, let me show you.”

I had to go through it two times before they all figured out how I did it. In the mean time I got better at it myself, remembering as I did how my Stryker Lieutenant had routinely proven how one never learned anything more thoroughly than when they taught it to another.

“Can you copy other spells so easily?” Wila asked.

I was taken aback for a moment, then said. “I don’t know. I just did it with the learning spell cause it was only one of three I had access to and I never knew that you couldn’t do it.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t try it with the other two spells I had because I didn’t have time.

I dug another of the rings I’d collected from my shirt pocket and said. “Let’s try it.” Then I said more to myself than loud enough for all to hear. “I think I wiped this one.”

I hadn’t liked the fact that all the magical grade stones I collected had offensive weaponry spells embedded into their stone or crystal matrixes. So I went about solving the problem by clearing some redundancy in my magical energy reservoir.

But apparently, wiping a fixed, embedded spell from any stone or gem pure enough to hold magic was another of those things that I didn’t know the Altanian mind insisted was not possible.

“You did what?” Paero asked.

“This one had another fire spell embedded in it.” I said as I held it up. “I already had a good fire spell so I mixed the one in here with the other one I had and wiped this one.”

“You can not only copy an embedded spell, but you can wipe an embedded spell?” Paetra asked in disbelief.

“Don’t forget mix two different spells without compromising either, Paetra.” Paero said with a smile, then turned to me. “They don’t wash each other out when you mix them, do they?”

“No.” I said, then wove my fingers together. “You just sort of put them together where they’re the same and put in patches to the phrasing. When you find that spot you delete the parts of the spell that are the same and use the patches to mesh the different parts together till they feel right.”

I shrugged. "It's kind of like trouble shooting the computer programs on my Styker's operating systems. I helped the nerds do it whenever I got the chance cause I figured knowing how to do geek stuff would come in handy when I got out."

"Can you show us how to do this also?" Paero asked.

"Sure!" I said. "Where do you want to start?"

We ended up staying up most of the night, with Keebo and Wila bowing out first as they were usually the first up to prepare the camp for the next day. The twins and I stayed up till fatigue began making the lessons futile, even with all three of us using learning spells. We went to sleep after Paero woke Keebo for the next watch.

* 7 *

The next morning I awoke to the smell of breakfast cooking and was barely able to perform my morning toilet before Wila called us to eat. The meal was quickly eaten and camp cleanup quickly followed.

We worked together to take down all the tents rather efficiently till Keebo got caught up inspecting my earth-made tent. Its carbon fiber frame and nylon fabric enthralled Keebo to the point where Paero jokingly told him to let me pack it so we could go.

When we were back on the road, Keebo came up to me and asked me to look at the pendent he had wiped of a redundant spell and imprinted with the learning spell. I looked it over and probed its components to the best of my ability but could find nothing wrong with it and told him so.

No sooner had he rode back to rejoin his wife and tell her of his success, then Paero rode up next to me and asked me to inspect his blending of his and his sister's individually crafted fire spells to see if it was done correctly.

I found his effort very well done and told him so, then made a suggestion where he could add another portion that would decrease the power needed to engage the spell. I had learned the method when I probed the fire spell I had collected from my first battle with another wizard.

I remembered most of the spell in the stone disk after handing it back to him and as Paero rode away I focused on one of the two new bracelets I wore on my right wrist and added a section to the more intricate fire spell I was constructing.

After I inspected the new spell for structural integrity, I went back to charging my accumulated arsenal of magic stones as we rode.

Not for the first time I wondered at my rapid acceptance of the mystery of magic or the even more rapid skill level I'd attained.

I couldn't explain it and didn't really need to. Everything else was as it should be but I had the added ability of performing acts that could be called nothing else but magic.

It went against everything I had ever thought possible, but here it was. I had the ability to use the energy of my body to direct other energies. I could *visualize* the energies ... but I couldn't *see* them.

I visualized the energy and what I wanted it to do and vocalized the appropriate focusing chants...

And the energies obeyed my wishes.

That's all it took.

And the result was ... magic.

We rode while we ate at high sun again and shortly after the rest of my companions openly stared when I began running beside Spot every so often. I explained that besides being easier on the horses, it helped keep me in shape and increased my stamina. By the third time I dismounted, all four of my companions were joining me.

For some reason, Paetra got mad at me again when I was always the last one to remount, especially once when she tried to outlast me and tripped from exhaustion.

"What did I do?" I whined to Paero after she got on her horse and rode ahead in a huff.

He just laughed at both of us and rode back to talk with Keebo and Wila for a few miles.

We stopped early again for the evening and after the fire was lit and burning down to cooking coals, we practiced with our magic. Each of us took a turn performing spells for the others to identify weaknesses and familiarize ourselves with each other's styles.

After a while we stopped to make our evening meal and talk about what we had learned from each other.

After eating and cleaning our utensils, we began combining spells to better learn how to do so and comparing each other's attempts when we were finished. By the time the sun disappeared behind the forest to the west of our camp we each had a series of intricate spells that we shared with all the others.

Like the others, I had developed the nightly habit of inspecting my magic stones for the precursors to stress cracks.

Magical stones were made from only the most flawless of semi-precious and precious stones and the more valuable but less numerous flawless gems. But no matter how flawless the original stone, the stress of magic will eventually wear it down. When that happened, the stone or gem would shatter, sometimes so explosively that its demise could endanger its owner with the force of flying shrapnel.

The effect was called stone burst.

It was such a powerful description of the energies released by overstressed magic and the chaos that follows a stone

burst, that it also was a name for chaos in general and a standard curse.

I took my turn at watch when Paero awakened me, then passed my turn to Wila before catching another couple hours of sleep.

The next day after cleaning up from our morning meal, I was oiling my pistol when Wila asked me its function.

After I showed them how it worked by firing a couple of rounds into a tree, they all surrounded me and inspected the pistol. I was surprised when more scrutiny was spent on the ammo than the pistol.

Later that evening Keebo asked if I could spare a round for him to try something and I agreed. I had only used eight rounds so far, six in my wizard battle and two to show them how it worked and still had 92 rounds from the hundred I'd brought.

We gathered around as he and Wila set up their experiment. After he almost hit one of the horses with a ricochet I helped them set up another experiment. We only used three more rounds before we found a way for the nine-millimeter rounds to be used to further add to our team arsenal.

Realizing I hadn't shown them my beefed-up laser pointer yet I called them over and showed it to them just as the sun went down and the effects were more obvious. I ran my hand in front of the laser beam without the added spell and then they watched as I aimed at a piece of firewood the thickness of the meaty part of my forearm. They all flinched at the loud snap-crack of the miniature thunderclap from the air rushing back into the path the laser cut through the air

They inspected the burned hole in the dry wood and asked me dozens of questions. After a brief tutorial on lasers we all tried to figure a way to duplicate the effects just using the spells we all knew or could imagine.

It was Paetra who suggested that my spell was similar to Paero's camouflage spell in that it controlled light waves instead of burning something. We then inspected Paero's camouflage spell with intense scrutiny but were unable to come up with a stand-alone laser as powerful.

Paero was able to use a portion of my laser spell to increase the effectiveness of his camouflage spell so we added it to our growing team arsenal.

Seeing this improvement, I got the idea that we could use what we'd learned to create another spell that used light bending to create holograms.

It took till almost time for those of us not on watch to go to bed to explain what a hologram was.

The next morning we compared our team arsenal again and each made adjustments to our individual spells till all five versions matched.

As we rode till the evening of our third day on the road we each practiced individually and in pairs. Paetra was finally

warming up to me enough that she no longer openly wore *that face* when she was near me.

There was a little backsliding when Paero commented how well she and I worked well together when we sparred in rotating teams of two-on-two. We had set a pattern of sparring in pairs with the odd man out acting as referee, observer, and judge before rotating back in the training pattern.

The fourth day had us refining our spells on the road and again during sparring matches in the evening. By the morning of the fifth day our routine had become so familiar that we could identify individual patterns with each other that we could adjust to almost automatically when working together.

We hoped our opponents wouldn't have time to make use of the weaknesses that we didn't have time to work on, much less identify.

It was during this time that Paero and Paetra each shattered an overstressed stone with magical energy.

Neither asked me why I asked for the pieces.

We had marked our time on my map to the point that we rode into town on the morning of the sixth day early enough that we were able to purchase provisions and still miss most of the mid-day traffic. We were several miles west of town by evening and stopped at a farm a couple of miles off the main road.

I soon found that the farm was owned by an extended family of Mo'ag, some of them related to Wila.

While the others updated our hosts on the situation, I regaled the small herd of ankle-biters and their older siblings with tales of Ert.

Later that evening our small band was able to get the time to practice in the privacy of the farm's barn and again the next morning before we rode out with full provisions.

I purchased my own provisions with American silver dollars and traded a few more with the Mo'ag farmers for native coins so that I would have sufficient funds to help me maintain at least *some* measure of anonymity.

As we traveled the road to the bridge across Torynd River we were not able to practice our magic as much in private because of the increased traffic. To keep from growing bored I studied those who shared the road with our group.

There were a lot more of the domestic wolves, with a considerable portion of them pulling small wagons. Most of those were piled with produce, but there were also a number of the wolf chariots that seemed to be the favorite mode of transportation of the younger crowd.

It seemed those younger chariot drivers were as prone to race as any teenager driving his dad's car. They took every opportunity to race when their road ahead cleared for any distance. Their wolf-dogs seemed to enjoy the speed as much as the chariot riders.

But wealth seemed to be a factor in the owning of the wolf-dogs as many Yu'ob and Mo'ag pulled their own wagons

without the aid of wolf-dog or horse, those that had wagons. Many of those in the growing traffic were on foot carrying packs of various sizes. Others carried huge crates with pole handles at the ends in teams of two or more.

We rode till high sun and after our meal Wila showed me how to properly age my own guaff using the casks I had emptied to get a better brew than fresh made. I helped her search the woods near our camp for the roots that it was made from and how to replant the top knot so the root would re-grow.

As we prepared the root by cutting it into strips, she explained that the richer taste was due to the aging process and could only be gotten with a properly sealed cask of hardwood. She also revealed that the more times a cask was used and the fresher the roots, the better the resulting brew.

Paero gave us just enough time to boil the brew and fill all the casks we had with us before he pushed us back on the road.

We reached the edges of Torynd Camp late in the afternoon, walking our horses through the gathering on the eastern side of the river when the road widened. As our group walked our mounts across the bridge, I marveled at the traffic that filled the two-lane span. Built on two pylons on sandbars just a little ways out from each bank, the bridge was at least sixty to sixty-five meters wide.

As we rode across the bridge I saw the sleek riverboats that carried cargo and people where the roads did not go.

In my studies of the map that the old man had given me I learned that there were dozens of villages that could only be reached by river. Most of these were guild villages that were utilizing the rivers to transport their goods to the nearest guild market, which was most likely, also located on the river.

Floating with the current was one of the standard size riverboats coming downstream toward us as we crossed the bridge. About twelve feet wide and three times as long, I could see a rudderman at the aft end while a spotter sat at the bow watching the river ahead with focused intensity. The deck was covered with a cabin whose walls gave barely enough room around the perimeter of the chest high roof for the deckhands to move about.

As our group reached the middle of the bridge, another boat came from beneath us heading upstream and passed the first boat. As the boat traveling upstream came out from under the bridge, I could see the rudderman accompanied by a wizard who provided the propulsion against the current.

The platforms at fore and aft bracketed an open hull piled high with canvas bags as long as a man.

“Probably grain going upstream and passengers going the other way.” Paero commented when he saw me looking at the riverboats.

Within sight in both directions several other riverboats could be seen heading in each direction. Nearly all were in the

twelve by thirty-six foot canoe design, but there was also a considerable number of smaller canoes. These shuttled back and forth between the riverboats and the shoreline, ferrying people and goods back and forth.

The spot would have been a great place for a village, but politics had gotten in the way. Neither the green nor blue guilds would give in to the other on who would preside over the proposed village's Justice.

The river couldn't change course and the road had to cross the river somewhere. Neither blue nor green would give up authority *to* the other, and neither would share authority *with* the other.

Obstinate to the end, the blue guild would not allow shops and businesses to be built near the bridge and the green guild would not allow docks and warehouses to be built. But the bridge went up and stayed maintained by those who used it.

The political stalemate had resulted in a daily marketplace where part-time merchants and travelers set up camps on either side of the bridge. The entire area was occupied nearly year round, but the occupants varied every day. Farmers from all around would bring seasonal produce and livestock to the bridge to trade with each other, while fishermen from both up and down stream would trade fish and for produce and meat.

Surprisingly, even with steady occupation, the entire area around the bridge was clean and well maintained.

Keebo informed me that that was due to the camp's slogan, 'Be Spoor Free'. When in Torynd Camp it was expected that you take everything you bring back out with you.

It was not that hard to have a minimum amount of waste when wilderness camping, and traveling on the planet Altan definitely fit the description, wilderness camping.

But there were types of waste it was impossible to not generate. Paero had prepared me two nights earlier with the spells and follow-up process for dealing with that waste. He had also told me that there were those who roamed Torynd Camp performing the process for those who had no magic.

After crossing the busy bridge we rode on for several hundred yards before finding a spot large enough for our needs. We made camp off the main road, behind two larger camps to make use of their size to help shield us from view. After assembling our tents and picketing our horses, we explored in pairs while one of our group stayed with our belongings.

Paero volunteered for the first camp watch while Keebo and Wila went in search of fresh provisions in the nearest farmer's market.

That left Paetra and me together.

I was surprised when she didn't complain.

The leisurely hike back toward the bridge was the most entertaining time I'd yet spent on Altan. We watched a couple of acrobats and listened to a troubadour as we ate pastries purchased from a kitchen tent. We were eating cheese and bread

with a mug of ale at another tent overlooking the river when Paetra grabbed my arm and pointed her chin to a commotion on the bridge.

Downing our drinks and going to investigate, we saw a pair of wizards on horses trying to get around a cart that they were complaining was moving too slow. The traffic on the oncoming lane was too thick for them to pass without causing others to have to stop, but the two were loudly persistent.

Then one of the men's horses had too much and reared, kicking out to clear space around itself. The horse kicked the side of the cart and got a leg twisted in the spokes of a wheel.

The sound of the horse's leg breaking was like a gunshot and both horse and rider went down. Paetra grabbed at me as I ran to help, hissing. "Wait!" But it was too late.

I ran up just as the man jumped free of his horse as it rolled to its side screaming, then tried in vain to rise again, screaming all the time.

The man angrily threw his hand back to throw a spell. Thinking he was going to put the horse out of its misery without seeing the extent of the damage I quickly cast a blocking spell.

The man wasn't aiming his spell at the horse, but at the driver of the wagon, an elderly man who was still trying to calm the team of buffalo that pulled his cart full of produce.

As the wizard cursed the old man before throwing the spell, I threw my own spell in front of the old man and caught the sonic blast. By the feel I could tell the spell would have shattered the old man's body.

It was a killing blow.

I immediately felt Paetra beside me as she focused her attention on the other rider who had turned toward me when my spell released its energy. The second wizard had only begun to raise his arm to cast his return fire when I felt the energy of Paetra's spell and he fell from his saddle.

By this time the first wizard had recovered and was in the process of forming another spell when I hit him with a finely focused sonic blast of my own.

Mine was not a killing blow and the focused head shot only stunned the man into unconsciousness.

We rushed up to the fallen men and the still screaming horse and Paetra calmed the animal while I checked out the two fallen wizards.

We had practiced the sonic weapon in several scenarios and had devised a spell with sound focused like a sound laser. Paetra and I had gauged our blasts well, leaving both men moaning in pain but still alive. There was a little blood seeping from the ears and nostrils of the wizard Paetra had downed but a quick check showed me that he would recover.

I felt the surge of energy as Paetra used the healing spell I had helped Wila and her devise on the horse's broken leg. I could tell when she finally accepted that the injury was too great

to heal under the circumstances and put the animal out of its misery.

I gave a man driving a team of draft horses a silver coin to drag the horse's body to the east side of the bridge as Paetra took the reins of the other man's horse and followed. A pair of drunken revelers dragged the two fallen men to their feet and dumped them at the end of the bridge so they could recover out of the way of traffic.

"Let's get out of here!" Paetra said in a fierce whisper as she tied the living horse's reins to the belt of its former rider.

We made our way back across the bridge and quickly returned to camp where we found Keebo and Wila sorting through the provisions they had purchased. We told Paero what had happened and we quickly decided to break camp.

We did so as quickly as possible without making it look like we were in a hurry. In only a few minutes we were packed and blending in with the farmers who were returning home on the westbound road after a day at the Torynd Camp markets.

As we rode Paetra came up beside me and said. "You shouldn't have gotten involved. We must remain as ..."

"I couldn't let him kill that old man." I defended my actions. "It was their own fault for being too impatient on a crowded bridge. If they had just moved with the flow of traffic at its own pace they would have lost no more than a few septilon's time at the most."

I had compared the difference between Altanian and Earth time-keeping and the nearest I could figure, each septilon was a few seconds shy of a minute long.

"Well, OK." She finally agreed. "Did you at least claim your battle winnings?"

I held up a stone necklace and beaded bracelet. "The magical items. I left him his money pouch."

"I wasn't so generous." She told me as she held up a leather money pouch and a pair of rings, then shrugged. "But I doubt your generosity was shared by anyone passing by them before they regained full consciousness. Both horses are probably gone as well and the man you paid to haul the dead animal probably took it to a vendor and got paid a second time for the meat."

"If we would have stayed long enough to give those two the Justice they deserved, they would both have lost much more than they did." She added, then smiled. "I hear the conscripted road gangs are no picnic even for wizards and this close to the more populated areas is harder for miscreants to get away with what those two tried."

"What if they try to find out who we are and come looking for us or claim the right of Justice?" I asked.

"Too many people saw what happened and most of them looked to be local farmers. They would be most sympathetic to the old man who was the center of the commotion." Paetra guessed. "I doubt anyone will give any information willingly and

if the two press their case the evidence against them will be exaggerated and anything in their favor will be downplayed.”

“You hope.” I said.

“No. I am sure.” She told me. “You must remember, wizards such as those two have abused their powers too much of late. The non-magical population is growing tired of those abuses. Our quick actions and the results will cause stories to be told but not around those who might be forced to investigate.”

She smiled warmly for the first time since I had met her. “Besides, we got to practice our teamwork under extreme conditions and we performed flawlessly. I would say other than not getting a proper night’s sleep, it was a good exercise.”

* 8 *

We left the road before the sun broke the horizon and followed a livestock trail for a mile into the forest before making camp. Keebo ran back down the trail to clear our tracks and hide where he could see the road clearly but not be seen himself.

We set up a partial camp, unloading the horses and mules and hobbling them before letting them graze while we prepared an uncooked meal. After our meal we set a single watch while the rest caught up on sleep.

When Paetra shook me awake I saw that the sun was up and all our gear, including my own, had been repacked and loaded on our pack animals. As I looked around I saw Keebo leading the mules into position behind his and Wila’s horses and tying the mules’ leads to the back of the horses’ saddles.

I quickly ran behind a bush for a moment, then grabbed up my shoulder bag and pistol belt from where I had lain them. Throwing a leg over Spot’s saddle, I caught up with the others as they rode down the trail.

I came up behind Paetra leading her brother’s horse and surmised that he had taken Keebo’s place in watching the road. With my packhorse tugging at the lead loosely tied to Spot’s saddle I pulled my toothbrush and a water bottle out of my shoulder bag and did some quick, personal hygiene as we rode.

When we got to the road, Paero told us he had seen nothing out of the ordinary so we waited till there were no other travelers in sight before coming out to the main road and resuming our trek westward. We pushed at a quicker pace than our other day’s travel, again eating lunch in the saddle.

By late evening when we finally made camp there were enough other travelers on the road that we were never out of sight of someone. We found a spot that did not make an ideal campsite but was isolated enough to afford a clear view of the road and still discourage other travelers from joining us.

Exhaustion made conversation brief and we were soon wrapped in our bedrolls while the coals from small fire we had built burned down to white ash. I didn’t feel like I had gotten any

sleep at all when I was wakened for my watch and had to stay on my feet to stay awake.

The next morning started out cold, cloudy and windy and turned to rain about the same time Keebo brought me a hot mug of guaff from my first attempt at cask-brewing. After taking the first drink it was obvious that I needed more practice.

Breaking camp quickly, the weather gave me the perfect opportunity to test the heavy oiled leather poncho and wide-brimmed hat I had purchased during my exploration of the last village. Looking like some tricked out, old west cowboy did make the ride a little more comfortable until the cold rain eventually worked its way under my new coat.

It actually got better when the early spring rain turned to snow at midday.

We were still cold, wet, and miserable all that day but had a chance to sleep out of the weather when Wila led us to yet another off-the-road farm where she had relatives. The smaller barn we were given in the five-barn cluster was a welcome change from the misery of the weather and I slept the sleep of the dead on a soft mound of fresh hay.

With a pack of over two dozen wolf-dogs as guards, we didn't need to set a watch. With extra blankets to replace the fire we couldn't light, all of us had a chance to catch up on much needed rest.

By morning all our gear was mostly dry, taking a minimal amount of energy to rid it of the last moisture before we cleaned what our horses and mules had left in their stalls. Then we re-packed our gear and loaded the mules then saddled the horses.

We left the barn into a sunny day that still had a bite of cold, but promised to warm quickly. Everything around us had at least a couple of inches of new snow cover.

As I looked around I could see where the extended family's children and a pack of wolf-dogs played in the white carpet between the cluster of barns and the tree line a hundred yards away.

We thanked our hosts and led our horses and mules through the undisturbed snow between the barns and the ring of houses around them and back to the main road where we joined the growing number of travelers.

As we traveled, the number of farmhouses in sight grew and soon there was always one in view either in front of or behind us. At high sun we stopped for a rest and while we were making a quick fire to warm ourselves and heat guaff, a trio of travelers approached.

Paero and Paetra met them at a distance from our camp and talked for several minutes. Then, to my surprise, the three led their horses as they followed the twins the rest of the way to our camp.

Looking up from his task, Keebo reached down to throw more of our small collection of wood onto the small fire and said. "Looks like company."

I could feel Keebo calling his magic to ready as I copied his actions. Keeping a calm demeanor, I stood as Paero approached.

Paero introduced the three riders as Birl, Tam, and Varna. All were wizards who had followed us from Torynd Camp after Varna had seen what Paetra and I had done to the two green wizards.

By the end of the introduction we had all relaxed our hold on our magic.

"I was too far away to do anything myself," Varna said, her green eyes flashing through the bangs of her red hair, "but was glad to see someone else who would not just stand by and watch Justice be trampled upon."

"When my wife told me what she had witnessed," interjected Tam, "I knew that we were not alone in our disgust with how Justice has been abused of late. Birl and I had been talking about just such misdeeds as what occurred on the bridge and wondered if the tales we had been hearing were true."

"Tell me," said the one named Birl looking at Paero, "are you the ones who stories credit with bringing Justice back to outlying villages?"

Paero looked around to the rest of us before looking at me and saying. "Truthfully, until the incident at the bridge only one of our number was responsible for most of what you've heard about."

Birl focused on me and extended his hand. "I would be honored to travel with one who would stand for Justice when most look the other way or hide their faces."

I grasped his wrist in the Saerolian custom and said. "I did what I felt was right."

Tam extended his own arm and said as I repeated the greeting. "Your acts have sent a ripple all across Saerol. Many are repeating those acts all across our land and those who have failed Justice are becoming agitated in their discomfort."

"Some are realizing their faults and atoning for them." He continued. "But many more are becoming more violent, trying to reduce resistance to the ways they have become comfortable using."

"I have heard that Saerol On The Coast is being flooded with wizards from all over our land." Added Varna. "Many of them are demanding that Justice return to its proper state, but many others are siding with the holder of the Green Sphere of Justice."

"What of Red Justice?" Paetra asked.

"He is old, older than Green Justice when he lost that office." Birl said. "He says that he is not concerned with Green Justice as long as that office doesn't interfere with his mines and forges. Those few merchants who share both green and red

affiliation are not harassed as much by those who follow green alone, so red is staying out of the conflict.”

“What of Blue Justice?” Wila asked.

Varna looked at my walking stick and looking me in the eyes replied to Wila’s question. “Are you not traveling with Blue Justice?”

“Uh, that’s a little complicated.” I stammered as all eyes trapped me in their web.

Paero interrupted saying. “Come, let us share bread and quaff and talk in more comfort by a warm fire.

While our three new traveling companions tied their horses to our picket line, Keebo and I retrieved more wood from the bundles at the end of our line of animals.

Luckily, we had been prepared for the increased number of travelers and had collected several day’s worth of wood when it was still plentiful. Everyone in our group carried a bundle of firewood behind the saddles on our horses.

We added the load to the firewood we’d earlier unpacked and after the wood burned down to coals, Paero and Paetra put together a quick meal. Wila shuffled back and forth between the packs near the horses and the fire ring making sure that everything used was immediately cleaned and repacked so that we could move at a moment’s notice.

Her husband tended the animals, relieving them of their loads and providing food and water before wiping them all down with a sturdy brush. I joined him when he began and was soon brushing one of the mules while Keebo moved supplies in the pack to shift the remaining weight.

We worked our way through both mules then to my pack horse before looking to our mounts.

I put Spot’s saddle on the ground and began brushing his coat. Starting with his head, I worked my way down his neck and to his shoulders. As I worked, Keebo and I talked while he worked on his mount.

Despite only having two animals to scrub to his six, I was still behind Keebo in the line at the cooking pots when Wila called us to eat.

With our deep-dish plates full of stew and mugs of hot quaff by our feet, we traded stories for an hour of relaxation. Cleanup took only a couple of septilon, then we broke camp and resumed our journey west.

The next few days saw us collect two more wizard companions, a rare Yu’ob and Mo’ag marriage with magic but no stone energy storage, and a family of four who were traveling to the city by wagon to make a formal complaint.

Their story was that a group of wizards claiming to represent Green Justice had attempted to confiscate two cattle for a banquet supposedly for Green Justice’s spring celebration. When they had objected, the riders had torched their home and barn and left with all their surviving livestock except for the two old donkeys that pulled the small cart.

All that the desolate family had managed to save of their worldly possessions now rode in that cart. Their two children, both less than ten years old, rode atop that small pile of possessions. Dressed in utilitarian clothes and covered in soot and travel dirt, it was hard to tell the sex of either.

I let both ride Spot to give their donkeys at least a little relief from their load while I trained the father in basic green magic. When I was satisfied that he could handle the magic, I gave him a ring with a tiny one carat stone for energy storage.

A half-day's travel outside the city we made a final camp where we discussed our plans. Gathered around our camp, several other camps consisting of groups of Yu'ob and Mo'ag intermixed. Many of the camps blended together as the travelers shared provisions.

Sitting with a hot mug of guaff gripped in my hands to keep them warm, I could see several fires as I looked around. The spring weather had changed again and was warm and sunny during the day but the clear skies didn't retain heat and the nights were still cold. All traces of the earlier snow had disappeared but the ground hadn't shed all the moisture yet and it froze with the setting of the sun.

As I sat before the fire with a hot mug of guaff in my hands listening to the conversations around me I saw the life of this world in microcosm. All social levels and occupations were represented in the multitude of camps around our own.

Near our own isolated camp in the mix was both a Mo'ag extended family on one side and the elaborate tent carried by a single wagon on the other. The traveling Yu'ob businessman was accompanied by two other wagons carrying eight smaller tents for the working crew, numbering at least twenty. It could have been more, I wasn't sure because they ran around so much and were all dressed the same.

They tended the herds that the wizard businessman handled. I had watched with interest when he walked the herd off the road, down which he had mentally encouraged them to walk in a tight double file. I had noticed them far behind us on the road this past day and wondered at the discipline of the herd.

Later I had asked Paetra how one went about controlling the actions of the native bovines. She told me that there were spells that could *connect* with the mind but that no wizard had ever been able to actually *control* another mind, even that of one of the lower species.

She told me that the best that could be done was to give what I interpreted to mean subliminal suggestions. A person not paying attention might act on the suggestion without realizing it, but a herd of Yofen just follow the mental suggestion. She said the wizard herder simply kept the beasts in a tight pattern and at a specific speed because that was the most efficient way to get them to market.

"The herd beasts become trained quickly and by only a few moons of age it takes minimal effort to move them about.

They do seem to be content with their lives.” Paetra said, then added. “It is the same spell that is used to train wolf-dogs.”

I thought about that for a while then went to Paero and asked him about spells that worked on the mind and we came up with an addition to the hologram spell. By adding a mental suggestion that the hologram was more substantive than it actually was we made it all the more effective. When Keebo suggested adding a mental smell as well, we had access to a diversionary spell that could give us precious seconds for victory.

I was relaxing with my back to the saddle pack by the end of the picket where Spot rested when one of the men from the wizard herder’s camp came up to me wringing his hands.

As I looked up he asked. “Sir, uh , Master Wizard sir, is it true that there is to be a great Mage War in the city?”

“Who told you that?” I asked.

“It has been the talk of Saerol for the past half-moon.” He said. “It is said that someone has come to reclaim the Green Sphere of Justice for the people.” He looked at the turquoise stone at the top of my walking stick. “My camp has been wondering if you are here as a witness for Blue Justice.”

“And you were given as sacrifice to speak for those who would cower in hiding to see if their messenger survived to bring them word?” I asked.

The frightened man flinched and wrung his hands all the more.

“Would the changing of the office of Green Justice be a good thing or a bad thing?” I asked after making him squirm for a few moments.

At his hesitation I asked again a little louder.

“It would be a good thing for my Master.” He answered diplomatically. “There have been too many of those wizards who claim to represent the office who have collected unfair taxes as the winter ended and the herd my master brings to market is much smaller each year because of their ever-growing greed.”

“So it *would* be a good thing?” I pressed.

The man wrung his hands and finally said. “Yes sir, Master Wizard. It would be a good thing.”

“I have heard the same thing from many people.” I took a drink from my mug of guaff and continued softly. “The only people I have met who have said the opposite always try to kill me.”

I gazed steadily at the man and he got that deer in the headlights look. “I am one who does not allow people to succeed in that act.” I said. “As for a war, I am wondering if anyone who had experienced war would ever want one.”

“But I am also wondering what it takes to get those affected most by war to do what they must to survive. Do they flee at the first signs of conflict? Or do they cower in fear until the dust settles? Or, my particular favorite, do they stand up to

what they know is wrong and openly support those who give their voice for justice?”

“*Oh crap!*” I thought. “*I used the word, voice. I hope he didn’t notice.*”

“Tell your friends,” I said, “that it does seem that some sort of increase in violence is imminent. As to how far that violence spreads or how many feel the need to support their particular viewpoint, I can’t say.”

I focused on my mug of guaff and the man took the hint and turned on his heels. He returned to his camp with as much haste and dignity as his shaking bones allowed.

As the sun set on the horizon I pulled out the bag that held my special project. I worked at it for another hour then put it away when it was time for my turn on watch.

The camps were packed together to the point that everyone I could see could also see me, but camp etiquette kept them in their own camps after the majority went to their bedrolls. Each of us watched our own patch of ground beside the road and woke our relief when it was time for us to take a turn at sleeping.

When I woke the next morning it was to a clear blue sky and a breeze just gentle enough to be barely felt. That didn’t mean the weather wouldn’t change, but it sure did make breaking camp more pleasant than it could be.

We took our place on the road as quickly as possible and I was glad that we did so before the Wizard Herder got his charges moving. I would hate to have to avoid the increased hazards the road behind the herd would exhibit.

It was not long before I noticed that the road was beginning to widen. Several miles later I smiled as I noticed that the road had widened enough to contain two lanes in each direction. Each lane still had considerable traffic.

Looking at the crowded road going into the capital city, I thought. “*Looks like rush hour on the interstate.*”

* 9 *

It was a couple of hours before sunset by the time we reached the border of the city and passed through the open arch that marked the city proper. The walls of the city on either side of the arch were nothing more than widely spaced obelisks standing no more than half again as tall as a man.

Paero informed me that the nine-foot obelisks were powered with spells to keep out the larger wildlife of Saerol. Similar to the protection spell used on the corners of private homes, maintaining the city’s protection spell was one of the duties of Green Justice.

Immediately inside the arch, rows and rows of residential homes replaced the farms that had previously lined the road. Each occupied at least a two-acre patch of land and most had a small garden taking up most of their back yards.

I could see outhouses near each home and many had a small stable attached to the side of the houses like some low-tech garage. Various wagon designs adorned the driveways of the homes with the largest yards. All the homes in sight had the unmistakable look of regular magical maintenance.

Wood and stone fences or simple hedges separated the property of each home. At only a couple of feet, none were so high as to impede easy crossing.

“Doesn’t seem like the kind of place where people have much fear of authority or the excesses of a rowdy populace.” I thought.

Almost as if he had read my mind, Paero said as he moved his mount next to mine. “The turmoil of failing Justice doesn’t seem to have reached this more affluent area of the city.”

He nodded off to the southwest and continued as I followed his gaze. “The slums south of the dock will not be so quiet or passive. The shacks there are packed more tightly together and have more occupants in smaller buildings than you see here.”

He nodded ahead where I could see the buildings that changed from residential homes with wide yards to the closer-packed, two and three story buildings that made up edge of the more densely packed areas of the city proper. As the number of multi-story buildings grew till there were only alleys between them, the buildings changed from all residential to merchant shops on the ground floor.

When he saw me notice the fields behind the some of the buildings in the distance, Keebo explained. “All cities on Saerol have farmland inside the city walls. It just makes good sense.”

In most of the buildings we passed it looked to me like the owners and possibly another family lived in the upper stories of each building. Paero confirmed my guess when he told me that any respectable merchant would at least have trusted family in charge and living on the premises.

The streets were wide and had posts in front of each building for tying horses. Each also had enough space between it and the next building to get a pair of wagons through. There were also public wells scattered about with one and a surrounding park between every third and fourth side street.

I couldn’t help but be impressed with the way the city had been designed to relieve population pressure and include green space to offset the number of buildings..

At least on this side of town.

By Paero’s word, the south side of the city couldn’t make that boast.

We eventually bypassed the first of those outlying buildings and past outdoor markets that sold everything one could imagine. We traveled another few cross-streets before we came to hotels and taverns with room at their sides for parked wagons and a minimum of stable space at the rear.

Most of the stable lots were full with young men or older children manning the watch and care of the individual horses and wagons. Those of the nearer ages congregated in groups as they waited for their elders to conclude their current tasks, whether it was buying or selling, or partaking of the various entertainments that grew in number with each block closer we came to the center of town.

I had noticed it earlier and was not surprised when the last of our companions drifted off to side streets, heading toward the center of town from different directions. We had determined the best place to meet later that evening and were each going to seek out our accommodations at different times and coming from different directions in case of watchful eyes.

Paero, Paetra, and I dismounted and walked our horses as Keebo and Wila rode ahead. When we came to the stables three buildings away from the sign that showed the hotel/tavern we planned to stay in, I saw Keebo bowing to the stable master and backing away as Wila cowered behind him.

If I didn't know it was an act I would have spoken up at the way the stable master talked to them.

"Bah!" The man complained as he came up to my two companions and me. "Damn stupid Mo'ag! Should be happy that I agreed to let him and his bitch sleep with their animals! There's not much difference between them and their horses anyway!"

Then smiling as he came closer, he said as he looked at the blue stone on the end of my walking stick. "Ah! Now this is more like it!"

"I can see that you are more worthy of my fine stables than those animals." He spread his hands as his face fell theatrically. "But if I am to survive the competition that besets me I am forced to deal with the lower forms that infest our great city."

He made pacifying motions as he added. "But have no fear. I will have my best stable hands attend to your animals with the utmost care. They will be pampered as much or more than if they were my own beasts."

Paero went off with the stable master as Paetra and I led the horses to the barn where a pair of scruffy-looking boys took them.

I snatched up my saddlebags and backpack before allowing the boys to take Spot and my packhorse, then threw the pack over my shoulder to follow Paetra carrying the bags she had retrieved from her own mount as she headed for the hotel.

We intercepted Paero as he finished his negotiations with the stable master and he said as he looked at my walking stick. "The stable master was full of questions about you as we suspected he would be. I'm sure that word will spread and we'll start getting the challenges that we expect."

We had talked quite extensively about how to go about retrieving the Green Sphere of Justice and agreed that the best way was to let the Sphere come to us.

Our open presence would draw some of the more curious and should result in more than one attempt to relieve us of our magical items.

Of course, the challengers would have to defeat us first and since we were being so open, they would have to come at us in the open.

The fact that there were three of us should limit our challenges to those who were far enough up the food chain to ensure that we wouldn't have to defeat too many of them before Greta came to deal with the challenge herself.

She might send a few of her most disposable flunkies first to test her opposition, but eventually she'd have to come herself or she would lose the confidence of her followers.

If that happened she would face the strongest of *them* as well as, or instead of, me.

We got two rooms in the same Inn with doors across the hall from each other. The rooms were at the far end of the hall from the stairs down to the kitchens and tavern below.

After stowing my gear and putting a protection spell on my room, I went down to the tavern to join Paero and Paetra.

The weather had cooled enough that it was not unusual for me to wear my leather duster and I had easy access to my pistol's laser pointer in the right pocket of the knee-length coat as I came down the stairs with my walking stick in my left hand.

As I came down the stairs there was a definite lull in the tavern's boisterous cacophony.

I tried not to show any reaction as I walked down the stairs, my eyes beginning to scan the crowd to find the twins. It didn't take long.

They were in the best table in the house to see all entrances and exits and with the best defensive position in case the stone burst.

Of course, as the last to arrive, I got the least desirable seat at the table but the only sacrifice was having the stairway above and behind me. The rest of the room was in full view.

Paero had a perfect view of the stairway from his seat and I was satisfied with his frequent scanning of what he *could* see down the second floor hallway above me.

I had put a motion spell on the whole hallway from the window at the end of the building and by both our rooms all the way to the landing above the tavern and stairway. Any motion from anything larger than a mouse would trigger my spell and let me know.

The rooms themselves were heavily protected and anyone attempting to enter them would suffer serious injury. The hidden motion spell didn't give any alarms or cause any injury, so the path became more of a controlled funnel for any intruders.

Paero signaled the waitress as I settled in my chair and another mug of ale was quickly brought over. As she walked away the owner made his way around the bar and approached.

“Would the Master Wizards care for any food?” The nervous barkeep asked as he constantly wiped at his hands with the rag he carried.

It was obvious he expected trouble because of the rumors that had flown in front of us as we traveled.

“We have an excellent yofen stew, he continued nervously, “or you could get a yofen steak with boiled tubers.”

“We’ll have the stew.” Paero said.

After the barkeep left to speak with the cook, I mumbled. “I kinda’ wanted a big juicy steak.”

Paero chuckled and said with a huge smile. “You may put your concentration into cutting up your food while you eat while my sister and I protect you by keeping most of *our* attention on the possible dangers of our position.”

I frowned at the logic that kept me from relaxing for some selfish pleasure and settled for the stew that could be eaten one-handed with a spoon while I helped watch the crowd for imminent challenges.

That, after all, was why we were here.

When the stew arrived with warm loaves of bread, we scanned it for safety then dug in. I was surprised to see how good it was and how hungry I was. The chunks of meat mixed in with the vegetables and tubers were numerous and so tender that they melted in my mouth while the bread was hot enough to be fresh from the oven.

Despite eating the house stew we all had a hard time keeping our attention on the tavern floor instead of our bowls.

When the waitress came to collect our bowls, I gave her an extra copper and told her to give it to the cook and tell him the stew was superb.

Afterwards, the cook nodded his gratification when I caught his eye and the barkeep seemed to relax as the crowd grew with the deepening of night.

I watched without apparent interest as Birl, Tam, and Varna entered in a rowdy group with arms across each other’s shoulders and a song on their lips. They were rowdy in their entrance and rowdy in their choice of a table just inside the door. They were just as rowdy as they were waited on and delivered what would obviously be watered down drinks if the barkeep was any kind of owner.

Birl proclaimed the weak ale the best he had drunk all night and the tavern relaxed as the table of rowdy revelers was deemed relatively harmless.

None saw the hand signs that flashed between the fake drunks and the serious wizards at the back corner table.

The waitress had delivered our second mugs of ale and I was taking the first sip when they came through the front door.

There were three of them in the first group and they all moved to the wall nearest our table. Then two more came in and headed for the opposite side of the room.

As the two groups hovered, buying drinks and not drinking them, I felt a tug at the motion spell in the hallway above. From the sensations that came from my motion spell I was able to determine that there were two people sneaking through the window and quietly making their way down the hall to the landing just above and behind me.

I caught Paero's eyes and gave him the hand signal for two more opponents above. He acknowledged me and flashed another hand signal to his sister, who gave her reply.

The process took all of two seconds and made me doubly glad I had taught my friends American Hand Sign using the memory spells to make the learning quicker.

We divided the room into its three groups and as Paero and Paetra focused on their targets, I fingered the laser pointer in my pocket and prepared my defense as I watched my three targets out of the corner of my eye.

Birl, Tam, and Varna waited to close off the doors to entry by reinforcements when the stone dropped.

We didn't have long to wait as the two from above leapt out of hiding to attack.

The other five had been waiting for the three of us to look up in surprise and immediately attacked from two sides.

It might have worked if the attack from above had actually *been* a surprise, and if we hadn't been expecting an attack in the first place.

Paetra had no trouble catching the two attackers from above off guard and downed them both with tightly focused blasts of sonic energy. Acting with physical force the concentrated sound threw them off the landing and to the floor below.

Her brother and I didn't see this because we were each occupied with our own groups.

Our days of practicing together paid off as we meshed our efforts flawlessly.

Paero threw a magical shield over our table first because his opposition group was furthest away. Slanting his shield just so, the fireballs from above bounced into the crowd in the same direction as the two he would face.

As those two tried in vain to get to their target, us, in the ensuing panic, I acted on the three who had positioned themselves better.

I didn't hesitate to use the laser to blast a hole in the chest of one of the men, but the other two were able to diffuse the beam as I targeted each of them in turn. I had expected some sort of defense to my Light Magic and quickly focused a sonic spear at the stomach of the man on the left.

When he collapsed in screaming agony I washed a combination of sonic spear and laser at the remaining man.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the two men from above land in the crowd below and heard a scream as Paero took down the first of his two targets.

My combined assault quickly overpowered the remaining man in my group and he fell in a lifeless heap.

I turned just in time to see Paetra join efforts with her brother and take down the last of our attackers, a man with a scepter with a green stone as large as the stone on my walking stick.

The whole process had taken about four or five seconds to complete.

After the sounds of fierce and explosive battle, the silence that followed was deafening.

People continued to scatter and soon the three of us stood in a nearly empty room with magic ready as the seven who had attacked us lay scattered across the tavern floor.

Two of them rattled their dying breaths as we moved to check on them and the only two that continued to move moaned or screamed in agony.

Paetra collected the scepter as it was her magic that had finally broken through the Voice's defenses.

I made my own collection after finally putting one of my targets to sleep to silence his moans. One of the items I pulled from a sheath in one man's sleeve was a dagger with nine colored stones in the handle, three each of blue, red, and green. Embedded in the handle with silver bordering each shaped stone, I was surprised at the craftsmanship.

"Ah, it's a good thing he didn't get close with that blade." Paero said. "The knife spell is hard to defend against without another like blade."

I wondered what other magic I had never heard of or hadn't yet imagined was out there to surprise me. Tucking the dagger into my belt, I decided to relieve the body of the sheath as well.

I was reaching to remove the sheath from my former opponent's arm when Paero slapped my hand away.

"Watch out for an ambush spell." He said. "Anyone with a spelled blade of that quality will also have a trap set for anyone lucky enough to win a duel."

He used the handle of a stew spoon grabbed from a nearby table to pry at the fastener on the wrist sheath and there was a flash of foul looking greenish smoke that appeared around the dead wrist.

Paero stood back for a few moments then cast a spell to blow the disintegrating puff of smoke on its way. He poked at the sheath some more to be sure, then poured the remains of a pitcher of ale from another nearby table over the dead man's arm.

"Are you through yet?" I asked with my arms folded across my chest.

"Yea." He answered. "It looks safe. But don't blame me if your arm turns into a sea beast's flipper."

I looked at the sheath skeptically, deciding to leave it on the wrist where it lay as the barkeep and waitress poked their

heads above the edge of the bar. As the silence stretched while we collected our victor's bounty, patrons began to come out of hiding.

Paero had a quick conversation with the barkeep and passed him a pouch of coins before turning and saying to me as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "He's going to take care of the bodies and injured."

"That was a little more than I expected for a first attempt at us." Paetra said as she watched the tavern door with her new green Scepter of Vision held in one hand and magic held ready.

I turned to her as the barkeep began shouting orders to his staff and they came out of hiding to clear the room of the worst damage.

"You think there'll be more tonight?" I asked.

She shrugged as jittery patrons began to return and said. "I would if I were Greta. Another group as big as the first would give her a better idea of what she faces."

Her brother chuckled. "Yea. Either that the overkill had succeeded and she had nothing to worry about, or that she should pack her wagons and hightail it out of town."

He smiled evilly. "But I don't think they'll attack anytime soon. Probably just before sunrise while they think we're asleep."

I snorted. "Then I guess it's a good thing we planned ahead and Keebo and Wila will be our night watch later tonight."

* 10 *

After cleaning up as much as possible and re-charging my primary magical devices, despite the fear of a possible night attack when I finally collapsed in bed I slept the sleep of the exhausted.

I was awakened by my protection spell just before there was a knock at my door

Going to the door, I *felt* Paero as he projected the ID spell we had devised to identify each of us to the other as well as our status.

He projected a calm and unconcerned demeanor, basically the 'all clear' in our ID code.

I opened the door without hesitation and he said. "We'll be ready in a few minutes if you want to go down and get something to eat."

"Give me a septil." I said, then dashed back into the room to use the chamber pot, then grab the bags that I had not unpacked.

I shut the door behind me and absorbed the energy of the protection spell as I followed Paero across the hall to his room. I stood outside as he stuck his head in and in seconds Paetra joined us.

Keebo and Wila would have felt the withdrawal of the protection spell and moved to watch the street till we appeared. I

trailed the motion spell along behind us as we neared the railed landing and the stairs down to the tavern below. Before going down the stairs, I left a series of *squeak* spells in several floorboards near the end of the hall.

They were far enough apart, yet close enough together to trigger in close sequence with someone moving at a normal walk, or show that someone had hesitated in caution while sneaking slowly.

With Paero in the lead and me covering the rear, we made our way into the tavern to find it embroiled in a hectic breakfast mode.

I quickly noticed the different dress of the waitresses, who were now in less revealing clothes and a complete absence of makeup. It matched the more elaborately dressed clientele that we saw mixed among those seated at the best tables as we came down the stairs.

At the table next to the door, I saw Birl, Tam, and Varna apparently nursing steaming mugs of guaff. Seeing them, I was mildly shocked that Paero and his sister and their two Mo'ag companions had put together such a cohesive group to help me retrieve the Green Sphere of Justice.

Seeing the support for my quest displayed in the room in front of me, it finally sank in that I was the focus of all that effort.

I wondered yet again if I was up to what I had promised to do. I also wondered if I would be alive in an hour or two.

As we came to the stairs and started down, I noticed the table we had occupied the night before sitting empty with three chairs instead of the four that had been there the night before.

The room was fairly crowded and I found it interesting that one of the best tables sat empty.

Paero didn't hesitate as he sent a probing spell toward the table and chairs, then took the chair he had occupied before. I waited for Paetra to sit at her former chair before taking the same chair I had also sat in the night before.

The barkeep was quick to bring plates of food.

After the man and the elderly woman who helped him bring the meal left, Paero said. "I made my request last night."

He nodded toward his sister. "She talked to the waitress that looked the most like the barkeep and suggested her father screen his patrons a little more stringently till we have departed."

He rolled his eyes. "She actually hinted that we might not be so careful to limit the damage the next time, or contribute a share of what we recover from the bodies to help defray the cost of cleanup."

"Disgraceful!" I agreed smiling mischievously as I shook my head in false comdenation.

Paetra had the grace to simply smile instead of taking us seriously. Gesturing at the table, she smugly commented. "Seems to have worked to our benefit."

Paero gathered his energy and held his hands over the plates of food. "We'll see."

Then the magic flew.

In seconds we had all tested the food, plates, mugs, pitchers and tableware for poisons and or magical traps and satisfied, began to replenish our energy reserves.

It was several minutes before there was a single intelligible word spoken and the barkeep returned with another round of guaff before we finally began to slow our intake and look up from our plates.

One indisputable fact that I had found along with my new knowledge of magic, was that it needed constant fueling.

Especially when large quantities of energy were expended in a short period of time.

Or in preparation for such an expenditure.

We had all eaten heartily just before our battle the night before and I had snacked from my bags as I had recharged my magic before going to bed, but there was nothing like a huge, hot meal after a night of uninterrupted sleep to wake a wizard up.

When we finally came up for air I was embarrassed to feel the light touch of both the twin's light shields overlapping my back.

Paetra smiled evilly as she said. "Back with us are we Erting?"

I recovered quickly and said with faux indignation. "I'll have you know that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Besides, I faced three opponents last night. I have a lot of energy to replace."

"I also faced three." Paetra said. "Yet I have the presence of mind to keep my focus on threats to my ability to *keep* eating."

"Are you saying that since I only shielded the team for a brief moment and vanquished only one that I am not worthy of eating while I protect another?" Paero commented softly.

Paetra was inhaling a breath to defend against this unexpected verbal assault from Paero when she saw the half-grin that her brother failed to hide.

She huffed and threw a biscuit at him.

It didn't take long after for the regularly replenished plates to lay untouched. We joked and talked about nothing for a while, then our situation began to intrude its presence into our lives again and our conversation drifted back to the inevitable.

"So what do we do next?" Paetra asked.

"I checked the map last night with the seeker spell," I touched the pendant at my neck, "and the Green Justice Sphere is still at the buildings we marked on the way here." I said. "I can pull the map out and check it now, if you want."

I was reaching into my shoulder bag when Paero stopped me.

"No." He said. "Leave it. It is best that no one see what you have who does not already know of its existence."

I nodded and inquired. "So we just stick to our original plan?"

The twins nodded their assent and we rose, gave the barkeep enough silver coins to more than pay for his hospitality, and gathered our belongings.

Paetra flashed hand signs as we passed our three cohorts and we walked out into the daylight. Not long into the early morning, the sky was bright and clear.

A perfect day for someone to die.

I just hoped it wasn't me. Or my new friends.

Those were futile wishes.

I knew from my tours in the Middle East that there *would be* some empty spots around a future campfire. Considering the culture of this world, there might not even *be* a future campfire for any of those new friends, or me.

As we made our way toward the stables, I wondered at the train of events that had brought me here.

A year in Iraq, then another year in Afghanistan after too short a time away from war. Then a string of failed jobs till this wilderness trek on a world I could only have imagined before.

Not for the first time I wondered if I was actually lying in some field hospital tranked up on drugs as field doctors tried to save my life.

I wondered if I was just another casualty of war whose brain hadn't quite gotten the message that the body was dying.

I seemed to remember an old movie with a similar plot.

If the sun on my face didn't feel so good and the smells of the town weren't so biting *real* I would have been forgiven the fantasy that this was all a dream.

As we walked I saw a pair of men whose attention was a little too close, then saw Varna come into view and have a word with the two.

They smiled and moved off down a back street as I turned my head to see Birl and Tam approach a single man on the other side of the street. That man nodded and hurried to join two others down another side street, and the three disappeared in a hurry.

I caught sight of the two opposing groups flanking us at each of the next cross streets and hurrying ahead when we came to the stables. Birl, Tam, and Varna trailed us at a respectable distance, stopping occasionally to let us get almost out of sight before following again.

We retrieved our mounts and I was pleased when I saw Keebo and Wila heading off toward the Hall of Justice as we settled our costs with the stable master.

As we continued our journey toward the Hall of Justice I could see that our escort was growing by groups and individuals. There was no way to tell which side the many individuals supported.

Some, of course, were unhappy with the direction Justice had taken since Filian had taken Green Justice from the elderly

Jalen, and even more disappointed with Green Justice under Greta.

Others were more than happy with the new form of Justice as they had increased both their wealth and their personal power.

The clash of those two opposing views was what my presence had seemed to be precipitating.

As we grew closer to the Hall of Justice those individuals flowing along with us began to congregate in larger and larger groups. We witnessed several arguments and just as many impromptu battles that ended as quickly as they started.

Most of the battles were not of the size to leave bodies in our wake, but they did leave victors and defeated. There was an almost constant exchange of friction, and a resulting redistribution of magical talismans.

By the time the Hall of Justice came into view ahead, the two opposing views of Justice had divided along the street behind us. With our obvious supporters in a bunch behind us and on the left side of the street, our obvious detractors filled the sidewalks and spilled into the edge of the street on our right.

If numbers were any indication, I had the winning team at my back. But those numbers didn't indicate the energy level available to each of those supporters. Many of them may not have any wizardry at all. They may simply be those who have suffered the most from predatory nature of those who followed Greta's lead in Justice.

I looked up at the clear blue sky and thought that I could see several dots high up that seemed to be circling.

"Kroen Tol." I thought. *"The sky watchers doing what they do best."*

I wondered what they thought of this possible change in the way Yu'ob and Mo'ag interacted. Then I wondered why the two didn't interact with the Kroen Tol in a more civil manner.

I heard a louder commotion behind me, but did not turn to see what was happening. I felt the shield of the twins who rode just behind me and knew that if we were attacked from the rear, I was protected from the initial blow.

We had planned this ahead of time and knew that there would be a need to protect ourselves from attacks from behind as we moved to make our public challenge to Green Justice.

I could feel the increase of people at my back and made a quick look despite my need for the appearance of confidence in my magic.

What I saw was daunting.

An arc of protection spread behind me, stretching from the left side of the street, including the pedestrian walkway that fronted the buildings, all the way to the edge of the pedestrian walks on the right.

Most of the clashes came from the border of those supporters and the detractors that still paced the twins and me on the pedestrian walkway to our right.

Birl, Tam and Varna had moved up directly behind us and to our right and formed the strongest support nearest the group that showed the angriest faces.

In my brief glance I was able to see Tam take down a wizard that had prepared to throw a fireball at our mounts. The crowd swallowed up the man when he stumbled and fell as a result of Tam's effort.

I looked back to the front and within minutes we had achieved our goal. At the next corner and on the right stood the three-story structure that housed the judicial bureaucracy for the island nation of Saerol.

I could see the Flag of Justice as it flew from the topmost tower of the Hall. Its three-colored banner waved in the breeze that came from the sea a mere block further away. The salt smell and the odors of the docks to the south were thick with the wind that blew in our faces.

The red, green, and blue stripes of the flag marched upwards in sequence with the red below symbolizing the interior of the world. Above the red, the green stripe symbolized the green and growing things upon the world, with the blue symbolizing the sky and the waters that fell from the sky to fill the rivers and oceans.

As our entourage grew closer, I could see a massive gathering on the steps of the Hall of Justice. The group stood around a woman who appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties, not much older than me, or the twins who rode beside me.

She was dressed more casually than her reputation or position would indicate and in her right hand she held a sturdy scepter that held the sphere Thomas Justice had sent me to recover.

As we grew closer and slowed our horses the group on our right hurried to join those on the steps of the Hall of Justice.

The numbers now shifted to the other side.

I pulled my horse up on the left side of the street and dismounted, then tied my reins to the post at the edge of the walk. Grabbing my staff, I turned and walked across the street to confront Green Justice, the twins flanking me from behind with Keebo and Wila flanking them on the left and Birl, Tam, and Varna on the right.

My back was covered.

I stopped a dozen yards from the bottom step of the Hall and held my walking stick in my left hand as I palmed the laser pointer in my right.

Moving to stand at the foot of the stairway, I looked up at Green Justice standing at the top of the stairway. Her feet were above the level of my head.

She smiled down at me and said in a clear voice. "So Thomas has sent someone to take back what he sent me to claim. I take it he is not happy with my change of heart in not returning the Green Sphere of Justice to him to award as he saw fit."

“Apparently.” Was my only reply.

Greta waited to see if I would say more and when it was apparent that I wouldn't, she said. “I have had several months now to familiarize myself with the magic that this,” she held the scepter up to eye level and glanced at the green stone mounted on its top, “makes possible. I find that I quite like the sense of respect that has come my way since I legally acquired it.”

“From what I hear,” I replied softly, “the method may have been legal, but it was far from honorable, especially since you didn't return the Sphere.”

Greta's face grew ugly with anger as she snapped. “I did what was needed to retrieve the Sphere as I was hired to do. The method had nothing to do with the outcome.”

“But again, you still didn't return the Sphere as you were hired to do.” I commented.

Greta smiled again as she replied. “No, I found that I not only enjoyed the new level of respect, but there were other benefits. I simply decided that I was as qualified as anyone Thomas would decide to give the sphere to.”

She shrugged. “So I kept it.”

She held the scepter up and admired it. “The sphere was plain and didn't really show the power that it represented, so I had it mounted on this scepter.”

Looking back down at me, she added. “Don't you think it looks better this way?”

I looked at the scepter. From where I stood it looked like it was made of silver with gold thread wove in and around the many red, green, and blue stones that encrusted the surface. It looked heavy.

“Looks kind of gaudy.” I snorted. “Does it help you pick up guys?”

Greta's face grew red with anger and I felt the energies she gathered as she prepared to strike with her enhanced magic.

My companions and I had prepared for this moment and had practiced our response over the days of our journey.

I felt the magical shield come up around us as I gathered my own magical energies. Behind me, though I didn't look, my closest companions turned to form a five-point ring with me facing Greta.

In a split second the air around us was filled with the sounds of battle as wizards from both sides unleashed their powers.

I felt the first of Greta's attacks as she directed a sonic blast directly at my head. The force of the blast pushed me back a couple of inches, but the shield assembled by the twins held and I recovered quickly.

But not so quickly that I wasn't staggered by Greta's follow-up attack.

With the assorted stones and the Green Sphere to store her magic, Greta could wear me down so I had to respond soon or it would be a short, one-sided battle.

I recovered my footing as Greta prepared to throw another spell and raised my walking stick to cover the movement of my right hand and the laser pointer.

With as much energy as I could spare, I reinforced the light from the laser pointer and blasted the holder of the scepter.

The flash of light was greater than any other time I had used the magically enhanced laser and the thunderclap that followed it rivaled any nature could produce. Several of those closest to Greta were thrown from their feet as the laser struck Greta's shield.

I didn't hesitate and poured all the energy I could into another laser blast and struck again.

Stone chips struck me on the left side as the turquoise stone atop my walking stick burst.

I staggered, then fell to one knee as the drain of energy caused me to almost faint.

Looking up, I saw that Greta was also down on one knee, but the look of glee on her face showed that she was not as drained as I was. With the fully intact Green Sphere atop her scepter drawing power from those around her, she rose to her feet to finish me.

With only one option left to me I dropped the laser pointer and my walking stick and drew my pistol. Chambering a round as Greta raised her scepter, I began firing with a two-handed grip on the Glock.

Greta had grown overconfident when she had repulsed the worst of my attack and had lowered the strength of her shield as she prepared to blast me with her magic.

The shock on her face when the first bullet struck her shield was followed by her loss of concentration.

The second round hit her shield, but the third penetrated and struck her in the stomach.

She dropped the scepter as her hands were going to her stomach, but I had not stopped firing and the next two rounds threw her backwards.

Racing up the stairs, I held the pistol steady as I stood over her bleeding body.

She looked up at me in horror at the pain and started to say something, but blood poured from her mouth and she coughed once ... and died.

The silence that spread around the street was as deafening as the sounds of the battle that had started and ended in mere seconds.

There was no sound at all until I stooped to pick up the scepter that the former Green Justice had held. I could feel the immense power that still resided in the scepter and tapped it to replenish my own energy reserves and raise a shield around myself.

Turning toward the crowd, I held the scepter up and the crowd went wild.

The cheering continued as I returned my pistol to the holster partially hidden by my riding coat and bent to close Greta's eyes.

As I rose again to face the crowd I noticed dozens of those who had stood with Greta making rapid retreats in all directions.

Those who cheered let them go as they pleased. There would be plenty of time later to seek out the worst of them for delayed Justice for their actions during the reign of the former holder of Green Justice.

* 11 *

Paero and Paetra rushed up the stairs and hustled me inside the Hall of Justice while Keebo carried Greta's body and Wila followed with knives in hand and facing their rear. Birl, Tam, and Varna came behind her and stood at the door.

I didn't try to resist. Despite my infusion from the scepter, I barely had enough energy to stand. In moments we were passing through an immense room with tiered seating in front of a large desk on a raised platform. To either side of the desk stood twin flags with the three colors of Justice.

Behind the platform were three doors, each with a colored banner hanging the length of the door.

The twins assisted me to the middle door with the green banner and Paetra opened the door and stood aside.

I looked at her for just a moment before I entered the door.

As the twins followed me into the room beyond, I saw that all three doors led into the same room, an immense library with rows of floor-to-ceiling racks holding books of all kinds. In front of each door, and facing each door, sat another desk with a corresponding colored banner hanging in front.

At a loud thump, I looked down one of the rows and saw a man with a long-tailed uniform-like tunic that held the three colors of Justice. At his feet lay the book he had just dropped.

Then he rushed forward and began to kneel at my feet.

"No, no! Don't do that!" I said as I put a hand out to help him rise.

"But Greta insisted ..." He started.

"Greta is in no condition to insist on anything more." I said softly as he stood and gaped in obvious fear, then gasped as he saw the body over Keebo's shoulder.

I interrupted his fish imitation. "Uh, who's in charge here?"

The man looked at the scepter I held and replied as he gestured toward it. "You are sir!"

"Uh, then, could you tell me where I could get a drink. Preferably water."

"At once Sir!" The man exclaimed then rushed off to disappear through a side door.

I was just sitting down at the chair when the man came back followed by two younger men in shorter uniform jackets. The two men carried trays of food and drink that they set down on the desk.

I just looked at the feast for a moment wondering what to say when the man, nervously wringing his hands, said. "I am sorry if the choices do not please you sir. It is what Green Jus ... uh ... the former holder of the office of Green Justice ordered for her celebration meal after her upcoming battle. If it does not please you I will have the kitchen prepare something else."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "This will do just fine. There is no need to put your people through more hardship to cater to my whims."

The man seemed to be growing less and less agitated and the two younger men behind him openly smiled.

I could almost feel the tension flow out of the room as the three of them realized that I did not appear to be the taskmaster that Greta seemed to have been.

Paero and Paetra excused themselves while I consumed *way* too much food in too short a time.

Wila and Keebo had arranged Greta's body after I had finally collected the magical items she carried. Surprisingly, there were only a pair of items other than the stone-encrusted scepter that now held the green Sphere of Justice.

One was a single ring that held an opal that I could tell was from my own Earth. I should say *our own* for Greta had been an Erting like me. I was surprised at how much magic the small earth opal contained.

Then I realized why. Most opals sold in the jewelry stores of Earth were synthetic. As such, they were purer than many stones of the same size and that purity equated to a higher capacity energy storage.

The other was a dagger in a bra sheath. Paero had suggested I not bother checking for sheath traps unless I was going to start wearing a bra.

I solved the problem by giving the dagger to Paetra, forcing Paero to check for traps to keep his sister safe.

The man we'd first encountered came and went several times before I realized they were preparing me for another bout of Justice, with me as the Judge.

"Birl, Tam, and Varna are helping seat those who wish for immediate Justice." Paero said as the frantic Head Librarian fitted me with a Coat of Office.

At my deer-in-the-headlights look, he added. "It will be at least a couple of days before we will be able to return the Sphere of Justice to Thomas Justice."

He was wrong of course.

It was four days before I had satisfied enough of those seeking immediate Justice that I could leave.

And the journey back to where I started was twice as long as the journey to the capital because I had to stop for Justice at every village and cluster of farms we passed.

Many times along the way I looked up to see several shapes high in the sky, circling us as we traveled.

By the time we reached the spot where the trail led to Thomas Justice's cabin, I was thoroughly fed up with the pettiness of the Office of Green Justice.

"How the hell can *anyone* put up with this for months, let alone years?" I griped as we walked our horses through the woods. "Can you imagine anyone fighting over the names of their *children*? And willing to have a magical duel to the death because a neighbor took a certain name for his child two days before your own child was born?"

"Just *stone-bursting stupid!*" I said, unaware that I had used the Altan curse-words instead of the Earth-English that Keebo had learned from me.

My four companions simply smiled and let me rant.

We finally reached the cabin to find the old man who had hired me to retrieve the Green Sphere of Justice sitting on an old rocking chair.

Perched on the rail beside the old man, Briol Ley tilted his head to look at me with one eye. The water bottle I had given him so long ago still dangled from his belt.

"Cloud Dancer!" I exclaimed in his native language. I'm sure I mangled it horribly so I continued in the Altanian language spoken by the Yu'ob. "It is good to see you!"

"Well met." Came the reply as Briol bowed his head toward me, then jerked his beak toward Thomas Justice. "I see you have succeeded in the quest you accepted from this deceiver."

Before I could answer, the old man stood and said. "He has not succeeded yet."

Then to me he said as he extended his hand. "Do you have the Green Sphere?"

"Well, actually no." I stammered. "I got tired of carrying it and gave it to Paero."

Justice raised an eyebrow and inquired as Briol made a peculiar clacking sound. "You gave the Sphere to another?"

"Yea." I replied. "Greta mounted it on this big gaudy scepter with a bunch of other stones. Lots of gold and silver and rocks. It was a little heavy. He didn't want it at first, but I insisted he take a turn carrying it."

Justice looked at Paero and asked. "Did you accept the Sphere of your own free will?"

Briol continued to make the strange clacking sound with his beak.

When Paero agreed that he had, Justice returned to his rocking chair and said. "Well, then it is settled. Green Justice has been willingly relinquished and willingly accepted by another."

He looked at me and added. "Your task has been completed to my satisfaction and a new Holder of the Office of Green Justice has been witnessed by members of all three races."

"What?" I stammered. "What just happened?"

"You passed the test, Erting!" Briol exclaimed, then began clacking his beak again.

I realized he was laughing at me.

"You mean?" I stammered. "What *do* you mean?"

"I sent Greta to retrieve the Sphere and she kept it. I sent you and you retrieved it, then relinquished it. End of story. You passed, so I don't have to hire another to take it from you."

"But I was supposed to give it to you!" I said, confused.

"The test was the giving, not who you were giving it to. If you would have given it to me, I would have accepted it, then offered it back to you. If you had then accepted it in return, you would have been the legal Holder of the Sphere."

I looked around in shock for a moment till I saw the look on Paero's face.

Pointing at him, I laughed and said. "*You're* stuck with it now, my friend. *You're* the one who has to mediate between knuckleheads who've been friends all their lives and want to duel to the death over children's names! Hah! Serves you right for helping me!"

Then I started laughing with Briol. Soon Paetra and the others joined us as Paero realized what he had gotten himself into.

After a few moments we settled down and Justice said. "So, are you ready to return to your own world?"

I snapped my mouth shut on my first impulse and thought about it.

No electricity, no running water or indoor toilets, and no cubicle Nazis lording it over those unlucky enough to be stuck in tiny prisons of their own making to make a living.

It wasn't hard to decide.

"Do I still get paid if I stay here?" I asked.

At his answer that I would, I asked. "Then can I take a few days to get my things in order back on Earth before I come back?"