

# The Binding Returned



Volume 1 of 4 of DOOR,  
the first of The Five  
Books of Time

Jeffrey Morrow  
Miller



# The Binding Returned

Jeffrey Morrow Miller

The following is a work of fiction.  
All rights are reserved by the author.  
Cover art by the author.

First Edition : February 2011

Revised : June 2012

# DOOR

Being the First of the Five Books of Time

DOOR – KEY – NIGHTMARE

CLEANSING - BIRTH

## The Binding Returned

Volume one of the four of DOOR

The Binding Returned

The World Revealed

The Goddess Reborn

The Union Rejected

Jeffrey Morrow Miller

[www.jeffreymorrowmiller.com](http://www.jeffreymorrowmiller.com)

The five-fold Doors  
    may be gained  
through the Path of Water  
    by the man without form  
through the Path of Life  
    by the man of compassionate heart  
through the Path of Fire  
    by the man of courageous will  
through the Path of Earth  
    by the man who assumes the burden  
through the Path of Air  
    by the man who sees the vision  
or through the Binding of the World and Underworld  
    by the Man of All Paths

## **Riversea, 1016-1017**

A Prayer

Burn,  
Candle white,  
Flame red.

Light our lives,  
Past to present.

Give us our future.

## 1 A conversation overheard

"Have you ever wondered what lies beyond?"

Hamish knocked the creamy heads off of a line of Brown Ales. With an effort to appear friendly he replied to Navarra, "No, don't reckon I have. At least not since this time last year when you asked the same question." The Guide of the Covenant had arrived the night before with the news that the Islander Fleet had been sighted passing Haps.

"Perhaps you should have been thinking upon it since then."

"What with brewing all day, and serving all night, I'm a mite too busy for that sort of thing," Hamish replied. He then scooped up his load and hurried them to the table where Groggin, the Master of the Beggin Inn, was warmly welcoming Captain Grey of the Islander ship that had just arrived. Ducking an expansively waved arm, Hamish successfully set the drinks on the table and received a clout on the ear.

"Damn you! Boy, look where you're going!" Master Groggin shouted. "That's no way to serve our guest! And get food!"

Hamish gave a quick bow to the Captain, and then headed back to the counter for second part of his load, leaving the Captain about to say something.

"Damn that boy, he's no manners," Groggin said. "Drink up. Get the salt out o' your gobs."

At the counter Hamish saw the Guide turn and call out to one of the Islanders who was sitting by himself. "Hello there. My name's Navarra. You from around here?"

The young, blond-haired man looked a bit stunned. "No ..."

"Me neither," the Guide said as he shifted his bag and joined the Islander. "Boy! More drink for me and my friend."

The odors of three successful fishermen preceded them through the inner, summer doors of the inn. "And that, my blind friend, is the good Captain Grey of King Rane

d’Nor. You lose. Hamish! Boy, the wager was an evening. Don’t let the tide go out on us, hear?”

“Good evening Salter, Saltson,” Hamish said. Turning to the quiet one who had lost the wager he asked, “Netter, how was your catch today?”

“Fair.”

“Fair enough?”

“Don’t be shy, Netter,” Salter said. “I feel a great thirst coming on.”

“You’d best claim a bench, it’s going to fill tonight,” Hamish said. He then added to Netter, “If you could give me a bit of help I’ll open you a new barrel.”

In the tap room behind the counter Netter said, “The missus will be going to market in the morning ...”

“The last time she came around she made me promise - no more credit.”

“Damn that woman.”

“And she hit me,” Hamish added. “Many times.”

“Aye, she’s wont to...”

The two looked at each other while Hamish prepared to drive the tap home. Hamish then said with a smile, “I’ll make sure you bring a pot home for her this time, she’s a fine woman.”

“You’re a good lad, Hamish.”

“How did you mistake the ship?”

“She’s flying the standard of the High King of C’Holm.”

“Maybe Captain Grey has a new master. That would save you some Coppers.”

“Damn me. That’s it. We’ll see who’s the fool then. Give me those pots and don’t put us on the beach.”

Over the noise of Groggin telling of one of the new girls to be found next door, Hamish heard voices at the back entrance raised in anger and alarm. Taking the short staff from its place under the counter, he quietly slipped down the hall past the toilets, hoping Groggin wouldn’t notice the untended taps.

Two men watched while a third held a heap of rags against the wall with one hand. The third man was pulling at the belt around the middle of the rags. From the darkness Hamish launched a solid blow to the pickpocket’s shoulder, knocking him to the ground. Turning to the other two, he stood on the fallen man’s hand as it reached for a knife.

“Damn you, Hamish,” the man on the ground said. “I’ll kill you.”

Hamish ignored the threat and watched the other two follow the motion of his staff. “Go inside,” he said to the old woman inside the rags, and then stepped back, freeing the hand that still held the knife.

“You bastard!” the fallen man snarled as he rose to his feet, holding his knife out in front of his body.

“Watch his stick, Ruffie!” one of his retreating friends called.

“You’re a coward, boy,” the knife-waving Rufus said. “You’d be not so brave without a stick. I’ll take you man to man.”

Hamish stopped his stick, and pushed the tip into Rufus’ throat. “I don’t play with blades. Someone must die with blades. Are you as willing as I?”

Rufus hesitated, and Hamish pushed harder on his stick, “I’ve already died once, Rufus. Ready to join me?”

Rufus backed away muttering, “You’re a crazy bastard.”

Hamish prepared to follow, but the old woman put a hand on his arm. Hamish could only shout at the retreating trio, “Go back to Newton! Fisher doesn’t want you!”

Only when the three were out of sight did the old woman let free of Hamish’s arm. She then asked, “Has Falkyr, the son of the High King Ghent t’Fhar of C’Holm, arrived?”

It took a moment for the question to register, and then Hamish responded, “Is everything all right? Are you hurt?”

“No matter. It is Falkyr Fhar’s son I would seek.”

“Well, there is a new face among the crew of Captain Grey this year, but I have not been given an introduction. Come inside and sit by the fire. I’ll get you something.”

“Did your master send you out?”

“I am afraid that he is rather too busy right now to watch the back door.”

“It doesn’t make a profit perhaps?”

“He sometimes thinks only in the short-term,” Hamish said as he held open the door. “Please come in.”

“No beggars in my inn, boy.” Groggin shouted from across the room.

“I believe she has coins, good Master. I just found Rufus in the back alley.”

“I told you to keep that one away from here, boy,” Groggin continued to shout as Hamish went into the adjacent dining room to collect a proper chair. “I only took you

on to keep the trash away from my doors, so do your job! And see the color of her coins first. I won't be providing for no beggars. You hear me, boy?"

"Yes, Master," Hamish said. He then continued in a lower voice to the old woman, "Sit here next to the fire. My Master is too good for a rick of Globes. Of course he doesn't clean up the mess in the morning."

"I couldn't ..."

Hamish pointed to the extravagance of burning logs better suited to be used in the building of furniture, "It's the pride of the Inn. Someone might as well enjoy the money burning. Now what can I get for you? I've just tapped a rather good brown ale, but the mild is perhaps..."

"Your Master is right, I have no coins..."

"Not so loud," Hamish whispered. "Do you know of the Magic of the Water?"

"Do I what?" the old woman said sharply, staring hard at Hamish.

"A little service over here, boy!" several people shouted at the same time.

He turned to leave, but his hand was held tight in a cold grip. Hamish pointed to the tattoo of four blue waves on the back of her hand, "The Magic of the Water."

"You know of this?" she asked.

"Boy! I'm in a desert over here," someone shouted.

"Don't make me get up," Groggin added.

"I saw it in a book once," Hamish said.

The old lady laughed, "So, someone translated the lies of Santos a'Mann."

"If you could excuse my boy," Groggin interrupted. Taking a firm hold of that part of Hamish he could reach - the back of his pants, "I would have a word with him."

Before Groggin continued, Hamish produced a Copper. Being a head and shoulders taller than everyone else allowed Hamish to brace his head against a ceiling beam, preventing Groggin from dragging him back behind the counter.

"Well ..." Groggin said, "see that she doesn't block up the fire all night. She smells like a wet bog."

"A wet dog?"

"That's what I said. And see those?"

"Dark Forest People," Hamish said, "They have not come in several years."

"And Fisher is better for it."

"But you trade with them," Hamish said before he remembered some things were not to be mentioned. He didn't receive the expected blow because Groggin was too

busy trying to not see the Tribals. Hamish decided, “We should at least offer them a drink.”

“They need the door. Do you think you could get one of the girls to help with serving?”

“I’ll ask, but I doubt it.”

“I’ll pay for her time.”

“The whole evening?”

“Would they have it any other way? See that those Tribals don’t cause any trouble.”

“Trouble? More likely they’ll disappear before I can serve them. Let me have Captain Grey offer them something.”

“You better be fast about it, boy. There goes the captain to speak with them.”

But five of the High Mayor’s Guards entered and loudly hailed Hamish. Hamish didn’t need Groggin’s order to settle the Guards first. He gave their chosen table a few, unnecessary, flicks with the towel from his belt. “Good evening, gentlemen. The World is a safer place with your presence.”

“I know that,” the Watchleader snapped, protecting his face from Hamish’s towel. “Now bring us beer.”

“You know the rule, good sirs; no Coppers, no courage.”

“A Copper?” one sputtered. “In Newton me mate only charges a Second.”

“He’d be robbing you then,” Hamish said. “I’ll give you a pot full of piss for free.”

The Watchleader produced three Coppers. “You boys will owe me.”

Only a Guard would be too dumb to remember the price of beer was a Copper per pot. It always had been, and according to the Guild, it always would be. Although Groggin might give friends a matching pot on the house, everyone paid full price when they paid.

“Do you want to share your pots, or do you want to be served in half-pots?” Hamish asked. The whole room seemed to hear his question, and quieted to hear the answer. Only women ever asked for a half-pot.

“We don’t get paid until tomorrow,” the Watchleader snarled.

“Ah ... that means you’re on duty tonight,” Hamish decided. “You’d better stick to half-pots. I heard your Captain say he’d caught some of you drunk on duty. I

wouldn't want to compromise the security of Riversea." He saw that Groggin was scowling at him, so he left off and went to fetch the beer.

As he passed the loud Kingdome Guide and the quiet Islander, Hamish heard Navarra ask, "Prince Fhar'son, is it true there are no trees in C'Holm?"

"There are trees," the blond man said. His Common Tongue was thickly accented, and he took his time constructing his words.

"But not for burning?"

"No, we make ... use ... use the Globes for light and heat. Trees be for shipbuilding."

"That must make C'Holm very dependent on the success of its Captains," Navarra said.

Hamish paused to hear the reply, but it came from behind him, "Or the rest of the World very dependent upon us."

"Oh, excuse me Captain Grey," Hamish said, wiping up his spill.

"There seems to be a lack of beer here, boy," Captain Grey said. "So don't be spilling it."

"The Dark Forest People?" Hamish asked. He saw their table was occupied by a group of Fisherton lads.

"They've gone."

"Gone? I mean ... will they be back? Tonight?"

"Next year."

"How did they know you'd be here? You're a month early this year."

"We had a special cargo this year."

"We had no warning. The Houses haven't prepared your welcome, yet the Dark Forest People knew."

"Amazing, aren't they?"

"What did they want?"

"You've been in Fisher long enough, boy," Captain Grey said as a way of warning him off the subject.

"I wish I'd spoken to them," Hamish said. "There should still be something we could trade with them."

"It would seem you Highlanders always pay a better price," Captain Grey said. Hamish knew that since Captain Grey was kin, he was by blood as much of a

Highlander as he was. He also remembered that Captain Grey didn't much like him or his side of the family.

"I thank you for greeting them," Hamish said as he handed the Captain a drink for each hand. "I wish they had been able to stay longer."

"They wish they could have stayed. They were honored to know you care about the wood of your casks."

Hamish didn't reply for a moment. "May I ask a question, sir?"

"By all means," Captain Grey said after draining his first drink, "if I could ask a favor of you in turn."

"A favor?"

"Your question?"

"A friend of mine was curious about the flag on your ship."

"That of the High King?"

"Yes. I was under the impression you were the Captain for King Rane d'Nor."

"I am. But on this voyage I had two cargoes ..."

"And served two Kings?" Hamish interrupted. "My friend will enjoy this."

Hamish turned to fill a line of empty pots, and Captain Grey caught his arm. "Before you go, the favor?"

"Forgive me, Captain. How may I help you?"

"I would like to speak with your Ambassador while I'm here this season."

"My Ambassador ... ?" Hamish began.

"You know who I mean," Captain Grey snapped. "Would that be difficult? With Houses unprepared for our arrival, I will be in port longer than usual."

"I am sure the Ambassador would be honored to receive you," Hamish said. "Is there ... any special reason?"

"I will explain to the Ambassador."

"I am sure Ion will be interested in your words, Captain Grey," Hamish said. "I will visit him first thing tomorrow morning."

Hamish served the Guards without further incident, as well as the Fisherton lads who asked if he could introduce them to some of the Islanders. Then, with Groggin actually pulling the tap, he slipped down the passage to the adjoining building. At the foot of the stairs leading to the upper floors he was stopped by the two women he'd hoped to avoid.

"A bit early aren't we, lover?" the first asked.

“You think the Princess is going to be that busy, do you?” the second added.  
“Want to get in first do you?”

“Actually, I was going to ask if either of you wanted to...?” Hamish started.

“You won’t be pimping us!”

“We’re not like her Highness.”

“No, it’s not that,” Hamish said. “Groggin asked me to get some help serving.”

Hamish received a stinging slap. And then another, since they were both insulted.

“Tell him to show some respect.”

“If you want a servant, ask your Princess.”

“I will,” Hamish said and attempted to escape upstairs.

“Don’t be going where you’re not invited,” the first one called.

“Unless you got some business for her,” the second one added, and they both broke into laughter at such a witty remark. At the door of the best room on the second floor Hamish knocked.

“I’m dressing. You cannot come in.”

“Prudence?”

The door opened a crack. “I mean it, Hamish.”

“Groggin offered to pay for the evening if you would help serve.”

She burst out laughing, “He couldn’t afford me. And I wouldn’t be a servant for twice the money. With all the Islanders arriving, I doubt if even the Beasts would be so desperate.”

“They assured me they weren’t,” Hamish said rubbing his cheek.

“Are you going to Castleton tomorrow?”

“Early.”

“Could you deliver this for me?” But Hamish pushed open the door and entered quickly before she could hand out the bag of coins.

“Hamish! Get out of here!”

“They think I’m pimping you.”

Prudence slapped him.

“If they saw you handing me coins ...”

“I’ll kill them...”

“You’d be doing them a kindness,” Hamish said as he rubbed his cheek.

She stood in her underclothes, shaking with rage, as the room was far from cold.

“Your room is very nice,” Hamish said, taking a quick look around.

“Don’t touch me!”

“I’ll go to the moneylender for you.”

“And have the whole world think I give you my money?”

“He doesn’t ask questions of those lodging money with him, just of those borrowing.”

She threw the bag of coins at his chest, “I hate being a woman, and I hate you even more. Bring me the receipt. Now get out!”

“It’s about time you got back, boy.” Groggin said. “No one takes that long at a piss.”

“I went next door ...”

“Couldn’t wait until after work?” Salter asked.

“He’s a healthy one,” Saltson added.

“All of them took the offer of working here tonight as a personal insult. Even the two Beasts with the pox had a go at me.”

“You say ‘pox’?” Netter asked.

“That’s the word ...”

“All of them too proud to serve a drink?” Groggin asked.

“To put it mildly,” Hamish answered.

“Well, see that you don’t have such airs,” Groggin decided. “We’ve a room full of thirsty men here, and I need to put my feet up for a minute.”

“It was the Highlanders, under King Granit, who first sent out Ambassadors,” Navarra was saying to the room in general, while watching the quiet Islander. Like many Islanders, Hamish noticed the son of the High King had shoulder-length blond hair, striking blue eyes, and an arrestingly handsome face. Navarra, who continued to speak, was clearly from the Kingdoms with his dark skin. He probably tried to keep both his head and face shaved following the rules of his religion. “He sent out his son to the Empires to open the path to peace and trade.”

“Are you sure?” Captain Grey asked gently, and then snarled while looking directly at Hamish. “I always thought it was that bastard nephew of his, Gereham the King Breaker.”

“Whoever gets the credit,” Navarra said, “you must admit it was a most politically astute move.” Turning to Hamish, who was trying to make his way to the kitchen,

Navarra asked, "From your coloring I would guess you are a Highlander. What do you know of the Ambassadors of King Granit?"

"You know what I know, Guide Navarra," Hamish said. "And I expect everyone here knows their history lessons as well."

"I would ask you to tell us of the history of the Ambassadors of the Highlands," Navarra said.

"The history of the Highlands is for Highlanders." Hamish said, looking at Captain Grey. "There are no Highlanders here tonight. Who did what to whom, and why they did it, was generations ago."

"Are you saying it wasn't exile?" Captain Grey asked, getting to his feet.

"I'm just saying the fate of those no longer in their lands is whatever they make of it," Hamish said. Captain Grey was nowhere near as tall as Hamish, but Hamish had a lot of filling in to do before he approached the Captain's build. Falkyr also rose to his feet and placed himself between Hamish and Captain Grey.

"That is exactly what I was saying," Navarra quickly said. "It is best to leave the past to the stories of history. Today is what is important, and what we can make of tomorrow. Sit, gentlemen, sit. You are blocking the fire. Let us just agree that the peaceful contact between all people is a benefit to all people. Talking is what is important. I was merely pointing out that the exchange of friendly Ambassadors between nations can only help with the flow of words and the easing of tensions. It is a role that could, perhaps, be developed between other countries than the Highlands and its neighbors."

There was no comment from either Captain Grey or Hamish.

"Of course the etiquette of these things is always most delicate," Navarra continued without noticing. "Exiled pretenders to thrones are normally threatening. But where the exile is voluntary ... a mutually beneficial and individually fulfilling role could be developed. The High Mayor's own son now serves in my land as ..."

"This ain't Riversea," Groggin said slapping the table hard. "That one is not to be mentioned here. Nor are the names of his bastards."

"I was only saying ..."

"You are talking of things you know nothing about," Captain Grey said. "And remember, friend, we have only been ashore a few hours. We have better things to do than fighting - like drinking, and eating."

“Well said, good Captain,” Groggin cheered. Turning to Hamish he added, “Didn’t I send you for some food?”

In the kitchen, Bottle, who made sure everyone knew she was not Groggin’s wife, was in a foul mood. “How could they be so rude? No one is prepared for them. And this year was to be so special. Riversea has not hosted the son of a High King ... since forever. Damn that Groggin! Doesn’t he ever clean this kitchen? Has he no flour?”

“I’ll get some from the cellar,” Hamish volunteered. It was safer than suggesting to Bottle that Groggin was in a hurry.

“Do that, Hamish, for you know I won’t go down there. And find that daughter of mine. She is supposed to be bringing me apples. If I find her anywhere near those sailors I will have your ears, Hamish.”

“Groggin would have her serving first.”

She held up a cleaver and said, “Don’t even think about it.”

“Say, boy,” one of the Islanders said, grabbing Hamish’s arm as he quickly served a drink before visiting the cellar. “Might there be a chance of a lonely lad far away from home finding a bit of company around here?”

“Yes, boy, tell us of that new trollop next door,” Salter burst in.

“A right connoisseur of femininity, our boy here.” Saltson added.

“The finest ladies in Fisher be found next door,” Netter said.

“Excepting your missus,” Salter said, and they all burst out laughing at Netter’s expense.

“That’s just because there ain’t not ladies in Fisher,” one of the group of Guards said, without much of a smile. “You be wanting to go into Newton,”

“Only if you want to take home the pox,” Salter responded.

“If you have the coin, I reckon next door is the go,” Hamish said, overruling the Guard’s retort.

“And how is that little blond of yours?” Salter asked again.

“Now she is one fine looker,” Saltson said .

“Too fine looking for my taste,” Netter said. “Won’t even give you a word on the street, that one.”

“She’s been giving our boy a bit more than that out in the dunes I hear,” Salter said. “Is there a luckier lad in the world, I ask you? Living next to heaven, he is.”

“Without a coin it’s more like living in hell,” Hamish muttered, and the whole group burst out laughing.

“Told you,” Salter said. “Turned redder than his hair he has.”

“So the boy is sweet on our pretty princess?” Netter asked.

“The boy ain’t sweet on nothing,” Groggin said on his way to pee. “Whores is whores, and they ain’t for marrying.”

The Guards broke into laughter, but others didn’t join them. Netter said, “He’s right, Hamish.”

“I never said...”

“You’d better stick to your own kind,” one of the Guards offered.

“You need a girl with resources, boy,” Salter said. “Someone that can set you up in a place. You marry a whore and the money stops coming in.”

“Hamish!” Groggin said from the door to the back.

“Yes?”

Hamish approached his master and had his head pulled down to Groggin’s level by the front of his shirt, “Don’t be serving those Guards no more,” Groggin whispered fiercely. “I won’t be having them smash the place again.”

“I don’t think...” and Hamish’s ear rang from Groggin’s fist.

“I think. You do.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey, more beer!” one of the Guards shouted. “And no more of your swill, Groggin. We want the boy’s beer.”

“You bastards...” Groggin began.

“... can’t have any more of my Master’s product.” Hamish finished, stepping in front of Groggin. “But I will be generous with my product if you can find your way to the door. Here, have a pot each for the road. Mind you return the pots in the morning.”

After the door closed on the sullen and bewildered Guards, Groggin turned on Hamish, “Are you stupid? You’ll be paying for that, and the pots. I won’t be given drink away for free.”

“It got them out of here without a fight.”

“There were only three of them.”

“The other two can’t be far away. There is only one of me. Anyway, they are our best customers, and now they’ll be back. Or maybe Fisherton will give them a room for the night.”

Groggin gave Hamish a hearty laugh, “Damn boy, you are sly. I need to pee.”

“What’s this?” Navarra asked.

“There’ll be no public drinking in Fisherton,” said Salter.

“Now that sounds unnatural,” Navarra said.

“A longtime back Fisher had a problem...” Hamish said.

“We’ve our own charter,” Netter said.

“Which used to mean every sin Riversea wouldn’t allow, they dumped on us,” Saltson expanded.

“But then came the slaving...” Netter said.

“... And we fought them,” finished Salter.

“And Fisherton got cleaned up, so womenfolk could live here,” Saltson said.

“Mite too clean,” Salter grumbled.

“Which is why the Beggin Inn is here outside the town wall,” concluded Hamish.

“Close enough for a lad to wet his whistle...”

“... And then get a lady to whistle his wet.”

“Which brings me back to my question,” said one of the Islanders. “If a lonely lad wasn’t well endowed with coin...”

“Then he’d be just as lonely here as back home,” said another Islander.

“Unless he had red hair...” said Salter.

“... And a bed of soft sand,” finished Saltson.

“We just talked!” Hamish shouted above the din.

“Spare us...”

Hamish set a beer down violently, “We just talked!”

“I believe the boy,” Netter said, since it was his beer now half on the table. “Our Hamish is not a clot like you’s two.”

“He’s a marvel, he is,” said Groggin on his way back in. “And he ain’t sweet on Miss Prudence any more than he was on Virginia, or Chastity, or that other one last year. The one with the short dark hair...”

“Meadow,” Hamish said, and again turned red as the room filled with laughter at his expense.

“So leave him be,” Groggin said, wiping his eyes from the belly laugh. “He’s got customers to serve.”

But before Hamish could be pushed back behind the counter he said to the Islander, “Try the market in Riverseaton tomorrow. The country girls coming to town - it always works for me.”

And the room again filled with laughter, and Groggin’s curses. “Damn that boy! It’s the girls next door you want.”

“But before you damn him, Innkeeper, have him bring a round for the house, on me,” Navarra said as he threw a bag of coins to Hamish. “I ask everyone to drink to all the lonely lads from far lands. May they find their future on the morrow!”

“Aye,” the room shouted in unison.

Hamish filled the mugs of Navarra and Falkyr first, and then caught snatches of their conversation as everyone suddenly found their mugs empty and formed a queue for a refill.

“Well Falkyr, if I may be so informal, shall we drink to a new era of dialog between our two countries?”

The blond Islander struggled to get his well-oiled tongue around the Common, and after starting his reply in Islander, managed to get out, “No, it be not right. I can not speak for C’Holm.”

“You could if you asked for the right to,” Hamish said quietly. “All that you cannot do is inherit your father’s title, or reside in C’Holm as a man. You are not forbidden from serving C’Holm. You could be a great asset to the land of your birth, as others in similar positions to you have been. Think about the possibility.”

“Yes, your Highness,” Captain Grey suddenly said. “Do not make the mistakes I’ve made. You’ve known all your young life this was going to happen. There is nothing to be bitter about, or hold against your father or the land I am sure you still love. As the boy said, all the Codes hold you to is leaving C’Holm. You can make anything you want of your life.”

“Yes, there is plenty of time.” Navarra continued. “Decisions don’t have to happen tonight. You could return to the Kingdoms with me before winter and see if you like the place, and then if both your High King and my Nightlord find you suitable, something formal could be arranged. It would take time, many years. The Nightlord moves very slowly on these things. It might not even happen in your lifetime.”

“It be ... making forward of me...” Falkyr struggled to say as the whole room quieted to hear him speak.

“It is an opportunity to create yourself,” Hamish said. “Not many people have that freedom. You are probably the only man in the World who bears the burden of complete freedom from his ancestors and their expectations. Your future is too frightening for most of us. You are exiled and separated from your home by an impassable ocean as well as your honor. You won’t have a family around you like the Ambassadors from the Highlands did. Even though they may not have liked each other, the Highlanders were never completely on their own and were always there for each other.”

“I guess you’d know more about that than me,” Captain Grey said.

“It can be hard living in a foreign land,” Hamish continued, “especially when things go badly for you. But you should know that even here you are not without friends.”

“In that the boy does speak the truth,” Captain Grey said to Falkyr. “You will never be without friends. And those who would pretend to be your friend.”

Navarra started to object, but Hamish cut him off. “With or without friends, what could be worse than holding a beer and saluting the fact that tomorrow is a new day? Whatever it brings, it is your choice. But drink up, Guide Navarra, you are holding up the room with your heavy words.”

“I say we drink to my boy Hamish, who knows how to solve all our problems,” Groggin shouted. “Bottoms up, gentlemen.”

And the room gave a cheer and Hamish got an elbow in the ribs. The conversations grew louder, and Hamish found he had more immediate concerns.

“Damn those bastards in Newton.” Netter said.

“All of them?” Hamish checked Netter’s pot for a leak. He’d been the first in line to receive Navarra’s largesse and now was the last in line.

“They won’t be lettin’ us into their market without paying aforehand.”

“But they always get a cut.”

“Aye, a Copper for a Bronze it was, but now they want a Bronze for the year, a’fore-hand, no matter what you sell.”

“But that’s just because no one ever paid,” Hamish said. “One Copper in one hundred is not so bad.”

“Me missus don’t even bring home a Half-Silver all year.”

“Course not, with them smelly little things you give her to sell,” Salter spoke up, rejoining the line to share in Navarra’s generosity.

Hamish tried to suggest that no one from Fisher should sell anywhere but in Fisherton, but Netter cut him off by shouting at Salter. “At least my catch is regular like. Didn’t see you coming home with much last week.”

“There’s risk and there’s reward.”

“There had better be reward. You’ll be paying before you’re drinking here,” Groggin said as he pulled Hamish aside. “You count the Kingdome’s coins before serving the house?”

“Yes, a Silver, 3 Bronzes, and 15 Coppers.”

“What? Let me see. Where would that Kingdome get that kind of money? He’s supposed to be a Guide ain’t he?”

“It’s real.”

“He must be drunker than he looks.”

“Or planning on being generous all year.”

“Keep count. I don’t want him saying we robbed him.”

“He’ll still be getting change from his first Bronze so far.”

Groggin looked around, trying to count.

“About 30. I started a new barrel.”

“Good thinking. What he doesn’t finish he can take with him,” Groggin said. “In fact, include those pots you gave the Guards. And the cost of the pots.”

“But they aren’t here.”

“An open barrel for the house is a generous act. Don’t insult the man.”

Netter and Salter both held up their empty pots, “You heard the Master, lad, don’t insult the man’s generosity.”

“You two have another problem on your hands,” Hamish said. “Captain Grey is serving under the flag of High King t’Fhar, as well as King Rane. The ship in the harbor both is, and is not, the ship of d’Nor, so I’d say you’re both winners, and both losers. If it wasn’t for the visitor from the Kingdoms, you would both be buyers. Now take another pot over to Saltson. His knees are too weak to stand in a rocking boat.”

“Life is good, lad,” Netter said.

“As long as I don’t have to talk to your missus.”

Hamish had one more person to serve, and that required a trip to the cellar.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” Hamish asked the old woman by the fire upon his return.

“What? No, boy, I was thinking.”

“Here, this will help,” Hamish said as he set a great glass of barleywine before her. The aroma from the thick creamy white head filled the room. The light from the fire in the hearth took on a magical color as it passed through the rich golden liquid. She looked at it slightly confused.

“I was to present this to the Guild Masters,” Hamish explained. “But I would ask your blessing of it first.”

“What are you doing, boy?” Groggin shouted, now standing right in front of the pair. “That is not for sale.”

But Hamish was faster, and pulled the glass out of Groggin’s reach. The whole room was quiet. “I know. I give it as a gift, for it is mine to give.”

“Boy...”

“Don’t grab at me, you’re going to spill it.”

“Damn you, boy, set it down. Then I’ll thrash you...” Hamish gently held the potion in front of Groggin who inhaled deeply and licked his lips.

“It’s the best we’ve ever made, Master.”

“I must taste this, boy.”

“First I would ask the blessing of the Water Witch.”

“Witch? Where? In my house?” Groggin asked. “You don’t mean to give that hag the God’s First Drop, do you, boy?”

“It is my right.”

“You still work for me, boy. Don’t let this go to your head.”

“We have discussed this before...”

“And no doubt you’ll be discussing it again,” Navarra interrupted. “Good inn master, have the boy bring us another round of drinks first. Then thrash him.”

“Have him bring us some of that which he is so free with,” Salter added with keen anticipation.

“Yes, do,” Captain Grey added. “Could this be the legendary liquid upon which the reputation of this establishment rests?”

Although Groggin clearly did not want to, he decided to agree with the clamor. “Boy, bring us your new brew. Let us see what you’ve made.”

Hamish opened his mouth to say no when the old woman added, "Yes, boy, this is too good for an old woman to drink alone. Show them the magic you have wrought from my water."

Navarra turned to Falkyr, "Talking of Magic, that is a powerful symbol on your arm. Are you a disciple of the Dragon?"

"There be no dragons," Falkyr answered.

"The Nightlord of the Kingdoms killed a Dragon," Navarra said after draining his pot in anticipation of Hamish's barleywine. "The Dragon's blood made him immortal."

"I've heard that story," Salter interrupted. "But I don't believe it. No man is immortal."

"The Nightlords have been around since the Beginning of Time," Navarra said.

"Living a long time doesn't make a person immortal," Saltson said.

"Time began over 1000 years ago," Navarra insisted.

"It seems to me that all it takes to live a long time is to not get killed," Salter said. "Can your king grow a new head if someone chopped it off?"

"More to the point," Saltson said, "if he did grow a new head, would his new head remember what was in his old head?"

"If the old head was drunk," Netter proposed, "would the new head also be drunk?"

"That has nothing to do with Dragons!" Navarra said hotly.

"Doesn't it?" Hamish asked, after setting a tray of half-pots of barleywine on the counter. "What good is immortality without the ability to remember it? Can any of you really say how long you have been alive - as you are alive right now? Can any of you remember the sensations of last night as they are alive for you this night?"

"Meaning what?" Navarra asked.

"Meaning you lot had better show some respect for this barleywine, because this is all that there is. You can just share these cups around and have a taste. You will never have another moment in your life as you are going to when you taste this. If you all drop dead after your taste, you will all die happy. Your Nightlord should be pitied for having forgotten to die. Moments like this mean nothing to him for he thinks he can always have another chance, while we mortals know the truth."

"He can't die!" Navarra said. "He is immortal."

“He may be animate, but is he truly alive? Does he know the value of every moment? Does he burn with the urgency of completely living right now because he knows tomorrow may never arrive, and yesterday may not have been what we think it was?”

“I’m urgently dying of thirst,” Salter interrupted.

“All these words have dried out my tongue,” Saltson added.

“Do you think the powers of the Underworld are so small, boy?” Navarra shouted. “The Dragons are just the guardians of the Doors to the Underworld.”

“And so your Nightlord also stole the powers of the Underworld after taking the life of the Guardian of the Underworld?” the old woman by the fire asked.

“I’m going to find a Dragon!” Navarra shouted and then threw back the full contents of the half-pot of barleywine in front of him. “Damn, now that is good. I’ll drink a toast to your future as a brewmaster.” And then he fell off the back of his stool.

“You can always tell a Kingdomer by how well he holds his drink,” Groggin said. “But we should all drink to his toast. Boy, add your cask of barleywine to his bill.”

And to the loud cheers to the health of all dragons, Hamish made several trips into the cellar. And then there was a toast to the generosity of Groggin, and finally a much more somber one by Captain Grey to the generosity of the Goddess of Water, who once again had allowed his crew and ship to cross safely over her domain.

“To the Goddess of Water,” Hamish quietly echoed, finally having a chance to sit and taste his special brew himself. “May the protector of Riversea and C’Holm, guardian of sailors, and inspiration to brewers be kind to us all. May her sisters, Life, Fire, Earth and Air, join her in the Promise of the Binding and reunite the World and the Underworld.”

He sat, with his eyes closed and let the velvet of the drink work its way around his tongue, and then as he swallowed, fill his body with great warmth. He knew it would have been good enough to gain him entrance into the Brewers Guild, if that option had actually ever been his. He also knew that if he drank even another mouthful he’d soon have a splitting headache.

“A strange prayer,” the old woman said from behind him. “Another bit of wisdom from your book by Santos a’Mann?”

“Perhaps,” Hamish said. It really was too good not to risk another taste. “I don’t really remember.”

“Is this prayer your voice, or a recitation of a lesson?”

“I remember,” Hamish said as he pushed the glass away. Tomorrow was not enough hours away and he had too much to do. “It comes from a book on the High King of the Nightlords. It is the prayer he said when he faced the Dragon.”

“I doubt that very much,” the old woman said, and she sat back by the fire.

“Then the tales of the Kingdomer be true?” Falkyr asked Hamish.

“They are tales written in books by scribes who heard them in places like this, and read by young boys with more imagination than experience,” the old woman said.

“In C’Holm we have no such books,” Falkyr said.

“My father had an interest in books,” Hamish said, “and he used to collect them.”

“To read these books, as you have, would a wondrous experience be.”

“They are still in the library of the Ambassador. I know he would be honored to show you his library. Come with me tomorrow, if you are free.”

Captain Grey came over to them and said, “If there is one thing you are, Prince Falkyr Fhar’son, it is free. I wonder if there has ever been a man given the training of a High King, who was then set completely free upon the World to decide his own future. You may now regret the inability to follow the path of your father, but some day you will realize you escaped the curse most men face. You do not have to merely live out a predestined fate. I feel honored to have been able to deliver you safely to freedom and your future. And you, Hamish, are not so free. This season you go home.”

“I mean to ...” Hamish began.

“This season I will not sail until I see your ass out of Riversea,” Captain Grey swore. “You should have gone home for your Testing three years ago with my son.”

“I ...”

“Since your father is no longer here I must step in and insist.” Captain Grey waved a finger at Hamish. “This year I will see you on your way. But I must now get my crew back aboard my ship so we can face the morning. Otherwise people will think I’m drunk.”

After giving Falkyr a hug and kisses on both cheeks Captain Grey ordered his men to form up and return to the ship. But he wasn’t worried when only two were capable of providing him shoulders to lean on.

Soon, those that hadn’t gone home or paid for a room were asleep at their benches in uncomfortable angles. Hamish dumped the tub of rinse water out back, and stacked

the pots on the shelves, remembering that Netter had taken one full of barleywine home to his wife, and that he needed to replace the three of the Guards.

After covering the Globes to give the sleepers some darkness, Hamish noticed there was a candle burning on the table in front of the old woman, and he sat down to watch it. In the now still air of the room the flame burned tall, and the smoke rose in a column into the darkness of the rafters. The snoring and the scratching didn't disturb the white wax or red flame. It burned on, the flame and wax seeming to not to notice one another. Both were just parts of a whole. The old woman slept with her eyes open, watching Hamish. And still the candle refused to melt as the endless sun of midsummer slowly began to brighten the room through the shuttered windows.

The ages of man

A babe has no fear  
an innocent self.  
Unknowing and uncaring  
of the world around him.

A child learns  
through falls and by guidance,  
and drinks deeply  
of the world around him.

A youth is a turmoil  
of testing bounds and bonds.  
Finding a place  
in the world around him.

A man in his prime  
creates and returns  
that which he can  
to the world around him.

A senior watches the babe  
and teaches the child.  
He foils the youth  
and receives of the man  
and becomes the World.

## 2 On the road to Castleton

As the overloaded wagon creaked away from the gate in the wall separating Fisher from Riversea, the three young men leading the team of straining horses followed their long shadows cast by the early morning sun. It was uncharacteristically bright. The air was still, and the smoke from the chimneys of the estates of the Five Houses and the County Mayors rose in great gray columns from among the trees before them. Looking back at the empty gatehouse, Falkyr asked, “Be it always as last night?”

“No, the locals are usually pretty quiet,” Hamish answered. “They don’t have the coin for much else,”

“And the Guards?” Navarra asked.

“When they’re not together, they’re no problem. But a bunch of them after failing inspection, like two weeks ago, they really went at it with a crew from Undercliff. Completely smashed the place.”

“And what did you do?” Navarra asked.

“I just let them have at it,” Hamish said. “The town constable only enforces the peace within the walls of Fisherton.”

“And your master?” Navarra asked.

“Had to lock him in the cellar after he took a good one on the head. He’s prone to attempt heroics.”

“And you?” Falkyr asked.

Hamish rubbed the scar on his forehead running from between his eyes into his hair. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

Navarra asked, “Do you always defy your master?”

“Never,” Hamish answered. “Are you here with the permission of the Primus of your Hall this year?”

“But you would serve your barleywine against his wishes,” Navarra said.

“That was a matter between the Master and myself.”

“You be many years be?” Falkyr asked.

“16.”

“You still be apprentice?” Falkyr asked.

“I had a late start.”

“And your barelywine might have been something you were going to present to the Guild?” Navarra asked.

“Yes. It is mine.”

“You to be common room master?” Falkyr asked.

“No. I will be returning to the Highlands. But I would like to know I’ve become worthy of the guild. I think that barelywine will impress the Masters.” Hamish pulled hard on the bridle of the lead horse. Going straight was something it did not understand. “Actually, I probably would not get into the guild, since its members are all from Riversea. Master Groggin was Riversea trained and Spoken For before he moved. The still hold it against him. Now he is his own guild in Fisher. I think he’ll like the barelywine.”

“It is still?” Navarra asked.

“There are more casks in another part of the cellar.”

“Why you give a thing important to old woman?” Falkyr asked.

“Yes, especially after your master had told you to see her money first. Is it the red hair that makes you crazy?” Navarra asked. “That seems to be an act of defiance to me.”

“No, I...”

“It best you more careful be,” Falkyr interrupted. “If this one see the truth, others be also. Best a master be not insulted, even if he be abusing you.”

“But you have it wrong, he has been most fair to me,” Hamish protested. “He only hits me because he knows I am leaving. He wants me to buy him out of the Beggin Inn so he can enjoy his seniority. He figures I owe him that for his teaching me a trade.”

“And he has taught you well,” Navarra said, “for I usually suffer mightily after a night like last night. But this morning my head is clear and light, and looking forward to the challenge of the Game you play here in Riversea over my breakfast. And you, Falkyr, how is your head this morning? Did you sleep well your on your first night ashore?”

“Well enough.”

“No visions of your future?”

“I dreamt of the old woman,” Hamish said as if he had been the one addressed.

“Oh?” Navarra prompted.

“But I was awake and talking to her.”

“And she said?” Navarra asked lightly, cautioning Falkyr to keep quiet.

“She said, ‘Be not afraid.’ And I replied, ‘I am not afraid, only curious.’ And I remember she looked at me most peculiarly, and then touched me in my head, right here,” Hamish said, pointing between his eyes.

“Does that injury still bother you?” Navarra asked.

“She touch inside head?” Falkyr asked.

“Did she ever thank you for the drink?” Navarra asked.

“I don’t remember.”

“I suspect not. It was a bit busy,” Navarra said. “That was just her thanking you.”

“What?” Hamish asked.

“You said she was a water witch, yes? She could have been thanking you with the mind voice,” Navarra said. “Then again, you did say you were dreaming.”

“The what?” Hamish asked.

“You be touched by witch?” Falkyr asked with some worry.

“Although the Covenant frowns upon them,” Navarra said, “I was taught that they are harmless, and they provide some comfort to the superstitious. Falkyr, is there a palace in C’Holm as grand as that one over on the hill there? I’ve heard that it even rivals the palace of my Prince in the Kingdoms on the inside. Have you been inside, Brewmaster?”

“Yes. My father was the tutor of the sons of the High Mayor.”

“Ah, yes. It is hard to remember who you are,” Navarra said. “You are not at all like what I was expecting, other than the red hair, of course. Exactly how tall are you?”

“If you think you know something about me,” Hamish said, “then perhaps you know something of Captain Grey as well. Some of your words last night may have been better left unsaid.”

“There can be no harm in words ...” Navarra began.

But Falkyr cut him off sharply, “Prince Altan be right ...”

“I am no more that, than you are Prince t’Fhar.”

Falkyr abruptly stopped, and then bowed his head. “I must be apologize. If you be excuse me, it be best I return to ship. I wish not to be as loose with my words as some.”

“My skin is not that thin,” Hamish said. “I’ll give you an insult, and then we’ll be even. How is it that your Common is so bad? I mean, you knew you were leaving C’Holm.”

“Now that is a low blow,” Navarra said. “I find the language an abomination. It seems to be Kingdomer turned inside out and made to resemble the tongue of the Empires. And the way it’s spoken here in Riversea is nothing like it is supposed to be spoken.”

“I did not wish to learn the language,” Falkyr said stiffly.

“I understand,” Hamish said. “Come on, we need to catch up with the horses.”

But seeing that no one moved, Hamish continued, “Now listen, Falkyr, and you too, Guide Navarra of the Covenant, Voice of the Nightlords, we all have probably heard plenty of stories about one another, most of which are probably not true. Let us put them all aside, and start as what we are.”

Seeing no disagreement, Hamish continued, “Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Hamish, apprentice of Groggin, the occasional mayor of Fisherton and brewmaster of the Beggin Inn. Until I return to the Highlands and pass the Test upon the Holy Mountain I am not heir to my father nor able to claim his title. I am not yet the Prince of Sarzana. As the Highlands have no kings, the title of Prince does not refer to the son of a king, but simply refers to the largest of the independent noble holdings. In the Highlands, sons waiting to inherit have no special titles or positions. The Gods may choose another path for any one of us besides our inheritance. Only when I assume my inheritance will I take the name my father gave me. Now I prefer the name my mother used, Hamish rather than Altan.”

Hamish stuck out his hand to the other two.

“We do not all call ourselves the Voice of the Nightlords,” Navarra said. “And I prefer to be simply known by the name my father gave me, Navarra. Since I am not on official business it might be best to ignore the Guide bit.”

“I accept that, simply Navarra,” Hamish said. “Although others may not so easily ignore the fact that one of your faith is here in Riversea without a writ from the High Mayor and your Primus.” And after shaking one another’s hand they both turned to Falkyr.

Falkyr stood tensely for a moment, and then suddenly smiled, and said, "I be Falkyr Fhar'son, nothing more."

Once they caught up with the horses, Hamish said to Navarra, "Now that we know who we are, you should know that Captain Grey is the son of one of those Ambassadors of the Highlands you spoke so loosely of. And unlike the other Ambassadors, the father of Captain Grey, the High Councilor Gretz, did not choose his position, but was forced to accept it after the Council replaced him as High Councilor with Gereham."

"I thought Gereham was the King before Graz, who was King before Gretz, and that they all were the sons of Granit," Navarra said.

Hamish laughed, and then struggled to prevent the horses from making a detour into a field of clover. "I realize it's much easier where you come from, but some places, where men are not immortal, High Councilors, Kings, and even High Mayors, come and go. But if our good High Mayor Barnabas asks, I will deny my words. According to a book on the history of the Highlands I once read, the High Councilor Aldric, Prince of Aerie, was followed by his adopted son Alloric who was removed by his true son Granit. Upon the death of Granit, his sons, Graz and Gretz were both not of age, so his nephew Gereham, Prince of Sarzana, was elected High Councilor. Gereham's mother, Gert was the sister of Granit and had tied the Principality of Aerie, the holding of the lineage of Alloric, to the Principality of Sarzana through her marriage. Then, when Graz had matured, Gereham was the first to accept exile and came here to Riversea as Ambassador. However, Graz proved to be a bit profligate in his habits, and the Council had to replace him with his younger brother Gretz, at the urging of Gereham. Graz accepted exile as Ambassador to the Empires, clearing the way for Gretz. A few years later it was decided that Gretz was not exactly the right man for the job either, and Gereham agreed to serve a second time as High Councilor until Hurl, the son of Graz could be properly educated. Gretz was made Ambassador to C'Holm, and his son, now Captain Grey, went with him. Once Hurl was of age, Gereham again accepted exile and resumed his post here in Riversea as Ambassador. If there is a shame in losing the position of High Councilor, as Captain Grey sometimes seems to believe, then he should remember that Gereham accepted the shame twice. Gereham is sometimes called the 'King Maker' for his roles in elevating Graz, Gretz, and Hurl. But then history comes in many flavors, and Falkyr probably knows another, equally true version, from the mouth of Gretz."

“You must be knowing he died when I be a baby,” Falkyr said. “Since then the Highlands have not honored us with Ambassador. I think now maybe Captain Grey be retiring from the sea to be Ambassador when his son returns.”

Hamish thought for a moment. “It is not good that C’Holm has felt slighted by the lack of an Ambassador. The son of Captain Grey, Greyling, might be returning from his Testing in the Highlands as Ambassador, but I don’t think it would be possible for Grey to become Ambassador. He was never Tested, you know. He is not a Highlander.”

“He be Presented Before the Gods, is it not the same?” Falkyr asked.

“If being Presented is necessary for you to call yourself an Islander, then it is the same,” Hamish answered. “His being Presented and accepted as an Islander, would not allow him to claim to be able to represent the Highlands as a Highlander.”

“I cannot call myself a man of C’Holm,” Falkyr said. “I be not allowed to Present myself. It be the same. I not be able to be Ambassador either.”

“Every nation is different,” Hamish began, only to be interrupted by the sound of a group of horses approaching with some urgency. He brought the wagon to a halt, and urged his team to the side of the road so they would not be spooked.

“Falkyr, hold the lead pair, and stay out of sight,” Hamish said. “Navarra, hide in those bushes. If there is trouble, it doesn’t concern you. I’ll explain later. Do it.”

A group of five riders pulled up in front of Hamish. The leader, a thin young man who was missing his right arm below the elbow, exclaimed to his companions, “Gentlemen, we are saved. Here is the elixir we have been riding for.”

“Good morning,” Hamish replied. “You are returning home and to bed, I see.”

“On the contrary, boy, we are merely between engagements. Will you not share a drink with us?”

“No,” Hamish answered. “It is not mine to share.”

“Oh yes, I forgot. The boy is but a servant to his master now. Who has a coin to buy the master’s ale? Mind you, boy, we expect a fair price. None of your tricks now.”

“It is not for sale.”

“He’s trying to drive up the price,” the companion wearing bright red snickered.

“Is your brain that addled?” the one-handed man asked. “Of course it is for sale.”

“I am delivering it,” Hamish said. “It has already been sold.”

“Yes, you are delivering these barrels to us. Then you will go back to your master and get another load.” To his friends he pointed to his forehead with his stump and added, “You have to make it simple for the idiot, someone scooped out most of his brain.”

“I have nothing for you,” Hamish said.

“Are you trying to be insulting?”

“If it is required.”

“Boy, you speak boldly for one who is outnumbered.”

“He be not alone,” Falkyr said, stepping into view with his right hand obviously upon his long knife, and his left hand holding the scabbard of his broadsword. From the forest there were sounds of snapping branches and a curse, and Falkyr added, “And there be others in the forest.”

“Good morning, Islander,” the leader said as he settled his shying horse and touched his forehead with his stump.

“And to you, sir,” Falkyr said as he returned the salute with his left hand.

“Now, if you would excuse us, we were speaking with the boy.”

“And making fear in his horses,” Falkyr said, standing his ground.

“That is no concern of yours.”

“But it be, for we be traveling with him and would ride upon those horses if they be calm enough.”

“What sort of man cannot sit on a harnessed draft horse?” The one in red asked.

“A sailor,” the third overdressed man answered.

“Gentlemen,” Hamish said. “I would like to introduce Falkyr Fhar’son, son of High King t’Fhar of C’Holm. He is to be a guest of his cousin and patron, Madam Eloise, the Holder of the House of the Silver River, before being presented to the High Mayor. Falkyr, this is...”

“Silence, boy,” the one-armed leader of the group said. “We will be introduced when it is appropriate. A word of advice, Prince, choose your companions more carefully in the future. Until we meet again, sir.”

As Navarra climbed out of the bushes he said to the backs of the departing riders, “A rather rude gentleman.”

“He has been hiding in the forests for the last few years,” Hamish said as he urged his horses back onto the road.

“And that will knock the veneer off some gentleman you say?” Navarra asked.

“He never had any to start with,” Hamish mumbled.

“I be to agree,” Falkyr said. “Those gentlemen be not the most polite, but perhaps they be not given the best opportunity.”

Hamish didn’t respond, so Falkyr continued, “be you willing to share the gentleman’s name? Should we meet again I would not to be disadvantaged.”

After the team was settled, and Hamish had checked the overloaded wagon, he answered, “The two in the grey cloaks who did not speak are known as Daner and Julon. They style themselves as swordsmen for hire to those who believe they need protection, although neither be more than Masters of Iron. The two quieter gentlemen were Sander and Elkon. Sander was the one in red. They are both men in search of positions, as neither will inherit much from their fathers. Both have older brothers. The other one was Belthor, second son of our High Mayor Barnabas.”

“The gentleman with missing arm?” Falkyr asked.

“Actually, it is just his hand,” Hamish corrected. “And I am sure you both know that it was Belthor and his brother Basson who killed my father, Prince Hamblin of Sarzana, son of High Councilor Prince Gereham, and the Ambassador of the Highlands to Riversea. So let’s talk about something else.”

“... And he lives in the forest now?” Navarra asked.

“I have heard he has plans to open some land in the New Ground and create an independent county outside of Riversea,” Hamish said. “We need to turn in here. If one of you would hold the gate, I will see if these animals can manage the lane without eating too many of the flowers.” They passed the front of an older mansion and then pulled up at the back entrance. A young woman in an elegant evening dress stood by the door, as if waiting for them.

“Madam Eloise, I am sorry if I have come at an inconvenient time,” Hamish said as he bowed before the lady. “I didn’t realize you were entertaining.”

“Actually, Hamish, I’ve just returned from a dreadful party at the High Mayor’s. I couldn’t sleep without warning you that Lord Belthor is back for the summer.”

“I believe we already...” Navarra started to say, but then Hamish cut him off and said, “Madam Eloise, I have the honor of almost following your instructions and almost immediately bringing your guest to you. If I may be presumptuous I would like to introduce Falkyr Fhar’son, son of High King Ghent t’Fhar of C’Holm.”

Madam Eloise gave Hamish the sternest look she could. “I will deal with you later, Hamish.”

“I offer my apologies for detaining your cousin in Fisherton last night,” Hamish said. “Falkyr, may I introduce Madam Eloise, Holder of the House of the Silver River. But now I have embarrassed both of you by forgetting my manners. I must apologize for contriving this introduction without the proper invitation. We are standing at your back door, Madam.”

Madam Eloise turned slightly red, and stamped her foot, “Hamish! You go out of your way don’t you ...”

“Madam Eloise,” Falkyr interrupted, “I who must apologize for arriving without announcement. To be honest, I be unsure of my ... circumstances, no, position, and I ...”

“... Must have had a dreadful voyage getting here.” Madam Eloise gracefully finished. “And I am sure you had an even worse night last night in that Beggin Inn. That place caters to the worst sort, or so I have been told. Welcome to our home, cousin. You are family here. We need not stand on formality. I was just about to take my breakfast. Please join me so that we can discuss your introduction to Riversea. I am sure Hamish can bring in your things after he gets about his work. And if we have time, Guide Navarra, you must also tell me about your Covenant. How is it that you claim to know the will of the Gods?”

And then Madam Eloise had one last word for Hamish. “You had best visit the Ambassador this morning.”

“I would show Falkyr my fathers library if you could spare him for an hour.”

“The Lady Eloise speaks most highly of you,” Navarra said to Hamish as they continued on their way in the late morning.

“The Holders of the Five Houses are addressed as ‘Madam,’” Hamish corrected. “The landed gentry are addressed as ‘Lord’ or ‘Lady’. I should have known Madam Eloise would be awake. I am sorry to embarrass you Falkyr. I meant to introduce you after visiting the Ambassador.”

“I think she be planning your punishment,” Falkyr said.

“I will have to go around and present my apologies,” Hamish said.

“I do not think she would require you to invent an excuse for visiting her,” Navarra said.

Hamish gave Navarra a fierce look, “Do not assume the Madam’s intent.”

“I was rather suggesting an action on your part. A good marriage has lifted many a man out of his current circumstances.”

Hamish opened his mouth, and then closed it, and then opened it again. And then he realized that Navarra must have no idea of the importance of the Five Houses. Finally, he said with a smile, “it is hard to think of marriage when I am not yet a man. I do not wish to embarrass you, Falkyr, but have you given any thought to the problem yourself?”

“I ...,” Falkyr stopped. “No.”

“From what I have read of being Presented to the Gods in C’Holm,” Hamish said, “or undergoing the Selection of the Gods as you do in the Kingdoms, Navarra, being Spoken For here in the Riversea has less of a ... religious requirement. You would not have to change any of your beliefs. It is more a matter of finding a position of employment. If you were to join a guild to practice a trade ...”

“I have not the training,” Falkyr said.

“Or if you married a landed daughter,” Hamish continued, “she would Speak For you as her fiancé. Nothing more would be required of you. You would jump the hurdle of adulthood and find yourself a future at the same time.”

“I do not ... have not given thought to ... how I be Presented to the Gods.”

“I am sure Madam Eloise will figure something out for you,” Hamish said. He then turned to Navarra and said, “There are several places in Castleton where it is possible to find players of the Game. None would be interested in a stranger unless he had some money to lose.”

“Do you play the Game?” Navarra asked eagerly.

“Just a little. Some customers ask for a Game on quiet nights, and I can take a while in losing if they have had enough to drink.”

Navarra laughed. “Then tell me some tricks, for I am one for attack, and have yet to learn a proper defense.”

Under the intense questioning of Navarra, Hamish reluctantly revealed several stalling ploys that had stood him in good stead. But Hamish quickly realized that the subtleties of the Game were beyond the understanding of Navarra. He couldn’t get Navarra to understand that it wasn’t the actual sequence of moves that had been successful, but that rather the feeling of the board that the moves generated that led to their success. He gave up trying to explain how it could be that the context of every

action was more important than the content of the action, and said, “You can’t win by just remembering a sequence of moves. It is something you have to have a talent for.”

“But what if I prove to have some talent?”

“Then you will probably offend some thin-skinned individual and end up being challenged to fight with the local weapon of choice. Would you prefer a venue where it would come to fists, sticks, knives, or swords?”

“I would have thought a venue which would respect quick wits and a nimble tongue could be found.”

“I could point out such a venue, but I am afraid my tongue would not suffice to make the introduction.”

“I would consider introducing myself as my first challenge,” Navarra said with a laugh. “Which reminds me ... the ‘Madam’ - see I listen and learn - Eloise was most reticent to discuss the, I believe it is, ‘Lord’ Belthor?”

They rode in silence for a while, until it became extremely uncomfortable.

“Have I said something ... ?”

“Belthor is the second son of our High Mayor,” Hamish said. “He has no estate and has no right to a title until his brother dies, he marries a lady of position, or he builds something worthy of such recognition on his own.”

“I be ready to cross swords with him,” Falkyr said, a bit disturbed.

“It would not have come to that,” Hamish said. “He was right-handed and never had any skill with his left.”

“I had asked the Madam Eloise how it was that you were still free, Hamish,” Navarra continued. “Are the laws here in Riversea so different from those in most parts of the World?”

“Be not rude!” Falkyr said angrily.

“I believe it was felt that the events were not my fault,” Hamish said.

“In my experience,” Navarra continued, “that rarely matters when nobility are involved.”

“That question be not appropriate,” Falkyr said forcefully.

“Isn't it t’Fhar’s son?” Navarra asked. “Or do you compromise yourself, not only by riding in the wagon of one who is now a mere servant, but also has such a dubious history?”

“There be no need for insult...”

“He gives no insult, Falkyr, it is the way of those of the Kingdoms to speak bluntly,” Hamish said. “And he is quite right in advising you to consider your circumstances. Traveling with me does have its consequences. Just as does traveling with an agent of the Kingdoms who has chosen not to present himself to the High Mayor and ask for permission to overnight in Riversea. I know you’ll claim Fisher is not Riversea, Guide Navarra, but you have not asked permission of our mayor either. Falkyr, you may find the intentions of some people here are not what they seem to be.”

“Now it is you who offer the insult, young man,” Navarra said.

“I wasn’t referring to you, Navarra,” Hamish said, “I was referring to the element that has arisen here in Riversea since the arrival of the Highlanders. Before Granit began the direct trade between the Highlands and Riversea the things you bring us from C’Holm were the exclusive province of the Five Houses of Riversea. The trade of the eleventh Captain was reserved for Fisher, but except for what was given to the Dark Forest People, everything was then transported out of Riversea across the Silver Lake by the Lady of the Silverlake. Unfortunately, the Highlanders arrived with great wealth, and a trade bypassing the Lady of the Silverlake and the Houses has developed. There are people who would bribe your Captains and their crews to divert some of their cargoes. They will probably approach you at some point hoping to make use of your contacts in the Islands ...”

“I heard of this,” Falkyr said. “I will not interfere. Do you know of who? To warn me of?”

Hamish laughed. “Actually, Falkyr, if Madam Eloise hasn’t already warned you, most of this ‘unofficial’ trade takes place at the Beggin Inn.”

“But ...”

“Before you hear it from someone else,” Hamish said, “I must confess that I was offered money to keep you at the Beggin Inn last night. By people who wished to speak with you.”

“Did you take their money?” Navarra asked.

“Yes,” Hamish said, “because I wish to remain in their confidences. Unfortunately, they were not as patient as you, Navarra, and the early arrival of the fleet caught them at home. I only promised one night.”

“It is a dangerous game you play at,” Navarra said.

“It’s the same game you play, Kingdomeer,” Hamish said, “but unlike you, I know my way around Riversea.”

Hamish then turned to address Falkyr. “In case we get separated I should tell you about the geography of Riversea. As you know we came from Fisherton through the wall separating us from the rest of Riversea. Fishergate is always open, but if you try to go through late at night the Guards can be difficult. Don’t ask me why the Riversea Guards are more interested in what you take from Riversea into Fisher, than what you bring from Fisher to Riversea, but it’s convenient. All anyone brings into Fisher are coins. Where we took to the left at Fishergate, the road to the right would have brought you past Newton and to Riverseaton. I would recommend sticking to the road and going past Newton to the Maingate of Riverseaton at all times. If someone tries to take you through Newton and the hole in the Wall, just remember that I warned you that it is rarely actually a short cut. We’re headed to Castleton, but the road has a few switchbacks to get over the ridge. The more direct route, if you’re on foot, goes through the New Castle and down the Grand Stairs. If you go straight here, where we’re turning, you will continue along the banks of the Town River and soon reach the Boundary Road at the edge of the Estates where you can then see Riverseaton across the fields. From most places in Riversea, except here in the forests of the Estates, you can see either the New Castle or the old Castle and orientate yourself.”

“Do you expect a man who has sailed across an ocean to get lost in the little town like this?” Navarra asked.

“I be not the Way Finder,” Falkyr said, “I be passenger. Thank you for the directions. Be all of these great houses as nice as it of Madam Eloise?”

“I would say hers is one of the more honest homes,” Hamish said. “It is not the largest, nor the fanciest, but yet it is probably the most beautiful.”

“I be impressed.”

“If you stay in Riversea long enough, I’m sure that you will have opportunity to visit all of them,” Hamish said. “And yes, Navarra, many of them are owned by single women. Perhaps it is you who should consider representing your country as an Ambassador here in Riversea, and then making a marriage with prospects.”

Navarra’s mood changed and he gave a quick laugh. “Alas, but my faith prohibits me from marriage.”

“No of your faith marry?” Falkyr asked.

“Oh, no. Just those of us who Guide.”

“Why?” Hamish asked.

“I have asked that many times myself. The only answer I have received is that women are too much of a distraction. We are supposed to serve the needs of all of our people. If we had temporal families we would not be completely available to serve our spiritual family.”

“That sounds like a hard rule to live by,” Hamish said.

“Avoiding a wife is not so hard. It’s the viewing of women, and life’s other pleasures, as evil temptations that I question,” Navarra said.

“You are allowed to question?” Hamish asked.

“My Mentor was of those who taught that to question was the highest calling, for only through learning would we come to truly understand the Covenant between the Gods and Man, and what we must do to live up to it,” Navarra said. And then after a pause he added, “Of course, they did cut off his head for his teachings.”



Know your goals

Know your means

Know your assets

Know your limits

Know your friends

Know your foes

Know your life.

### 3 The Game ...

As they left the woodlands that sheltered the great houses from prying eyes, they realized they were almost at the base of the walls of the massive New Castle. The road turned away from the castle as it slowly gained elevation, and then, after they negotiated a tricky corner, it directly approached the dry-moated gate in the great wall. At the junction where one road led into the castle and the other descended into the valley sheltering Castleton, a man stood waiting at the gatehouse. Hamish pulled the wagon to a halt and let the animals rest for a moment as he walked over to the man and kissed him on both cheeks.

“I have been meaning to visit,” Hamish said, “but I just never get the time. We were hoping to visit your library this morning.”

The immaculately dressed man continued to hold Hamish’s arm as he bowed stiffly to Falkyr. “You will have to forgive my cousin. Only someone so well schooled in etiquette could so completely disregard the simple courtesies. Hamish, are you not going to introduce your friends?”

Hamish stepped back, and quickly saluted his cousin. “Gentlemen, may I present, Ion, grandson of the late Ambassador, Prince Gereham of Sarzana, and acting Ambassador of the Highlands to the Council of Barnabas, the High Mayor of Riversea. Acting Ambassador, please allow me to introduce Falkyr Fhar’son, son of High King Ghent t’Fhar of C’Holm.”

“On behalf of the High Mayor, and all of the people of Riversea, it is an honor to welcome you to our shores and city,” Ambassador Ion said. “We have been expecting the arrival of the son of High King Ghent t’Fhar this season, but your early arrival has caught us slightly unprepared.”

Before Falkyr could attempt to apologize, Hamish continued, “And I would like to introduce Guide Navarra of the Covenant of the Kingdoms and currently resident at the Hall of the Covenant in Haps. Both gentlemen would be seeking an introduction to the Council at the convenience of the High Mayor.”

“Your presence in Riversea has also not gone unnoticed, Guide Navarra,” the Ambassador said, “I believe your Primus wrote to the High Mayor asking that he watch out for you. Since your Primus failed to specify exactly what you wished to achieve during your visit to Riversea I know the High Mayor is most interested to meet you. Perhaps you could speak of it tonight, for the High Mayor has asked that I invite you both to a dinner in your honor, Falkyr Fhar’son.”

“I am greatly honored by the High Mayor’s interest,” Navarra said, “but I am here in a strictly private capacity and represent neither the Kingdoms nor the Covenant.”

“I be honored, but I be not able to accept,” Falkyr said.

“Oh ...?” the Ambassador began.

“Actually,” Hamish interrupted, “before you reach such a decision, Falkyr, you should walk with the Acting Ambassador down the Grand Stairs and discuss his library. In it I believe there are several books concerning the Codes of C’Holm. One, I believe by High King t’Weis, specifically deals with the courtesies appropriate to the exiled sons.”

“His words be not much remembered in these days. Do you truly have a book of his Codes?” Falkyr asked of Ion.

“I must confess that Hamish is more familiar with the library than myself,” Ion said.

“In the leisure of my youth,” Hamish said to Falkyr, “it was the one place my tormenters would never dare venture, for fear some intelligence would infect them. Sorry, Acting Ambassador, that was impolite, but you can ask anyone - the sons of Barnabas never read a book they didn’t have to. Sir, Guide Navarra has asked for some further introductions, but if you could, perhaps, offer Falkyr some advice concerning his current position, I will then be able to meet up with you both within the hour. Falkyr, you will find the Codes of t’Weis bound in green in the shelves under the Window of the Snow Rose. Unless someone has moved it, try three shelves down. It should be the only green book on the shelf.”

“You are cleverer than you need be, Hamish” the Ambassador said, to Hamish’s embarrassment. “Of course, now that you are finished with the brewing business and are returning to the Highlands as Prince Altan, it is good to see you using your mind again.”

“Yes ... well ...” Hamish said.

“Although I am sure it was the former, disreputable ‘Hamish character’ that ignored Madam Eloise’s instructions to immediately deliver her cousin to her care,” the Ambassador said with a wicked smile, “It is the later, charming Prince whom she has asked escort her to the reception tonight.”

“But ...”

“She thought it a suitable punishment.”

“It would be a punishment,” Hamish agreed, “but would it be wise? For her sake I mean.”

“She is a Holder of a House, Hamish,” the Ambassador said. “She decides who will be High Mayor, not the other way around.”

“I know. I taught you that.” Hamish hesitated. “Will Bethor be there? We met him once today already.”

“The presence of that one here in town is known,” the Ambassador said. “The High Mayor is not pleased his second son chose to be Spoken For outside of Riversea in Haps this season. It may be that the father soon decides that if the son chooses to reject Riversea, then Riversea will reject the son.”

Hamish thought for a moment, and then turned to Falkyr and said, “if I remember correctly, the High King t’Weis decreed that sons accepting exile should be held in the highest regard, for they ensure the peace of C’Holm. He proposed that as long as the sons remained outside of C’Holm, they should be regarded as what they are - sons of a King and Princes of C’Holm. Sons that stay and abuse their fathers with their position are clearly another category. I recommended you walk with the Ambassador and see if you agree with t’Weis.”

And, after Falkyr and Ion both decided they would be honored to walk with the other, Hamish kissed his cousin on the cheeks again and pulled his animals back onto the road. They turned away from the Castle and began the descent to the New Harbor, which was, as usual, empty of ships due to the swell breaking on its rocky shores.

Navarra was quiet for a while, and then said, “Why is it that you masquerade as a brewmaster when you are better suited to be a prince?”

“Is that meant to be a compliment or an insult?” Hamish asked with a smile.

“Calming disputes between drunks would seem to be a waste of your gift for intrigue.”

“Intrigue?”

“I mean ...”

“Last year, late in the evening, you mentioned you’d turned down a life of scholarship and contemplation for exile.”

“I did?” Navarra clearly didn’t remember.

“It was late in the evening,” Hamish reminded him. “But the point being - you renounced your calling because you thought it was a punishment in a prison. Instead you decided to teach a message you confess to have doubts about to people who are not interested in listening.”

“I never said that,” Navarra stated. “Did I?”

“I’m not your Primus,” Hamish said. “And to doubt that things must be how we are told they must be seems a reasonable thing to me anyway.”

“I see your point now,” Navarra said. “You doubt you must be a prince.”

“I wondered if that was all I could be.” Hamish stopped. “I wondered if I could only be what I was born to be. But I’ve learned a trade. Though you may sneer at it, and I agree it may be less reputable than others, I know I can brew and manage a Public House, and make a living on my own talents.”

“You should have been born in the Kingdoms,” Navarra said. “In my land no one is born with anything. There are no titles for sons nor unearned inheritances. Everyone starts their lives as equals and has to earn everything in their lives for themselves.”

“If I remember you correctly,” Hamish said, “you said that in the Kingdoms it is less important to do your job well than it is to convince others that you have done your job well.”

“Did I say that?”

“You were most articulate, considering how much you had put away.”

“Way too articulate for my own good I fear.”

Since they were getting close to the gate in the wall around Castleton Hamish had to change the subject and asked, “Where did you learn to play the Game?”

“The game? Oh, that Game.”

“The true game.”

“We had a board at the Temple where I was an Aspirant. Some of us played when we were to have been studying.”

“A single board or a pair of boards?”

“A single board.”

“Five sided, five players, eleven pieces each?”

“We only played with two people. Each of us started with two sides with eleven pieces per side, and tried to capture the fifth side.”

“That is the easiest way to play when you should be studying. Five people discussing a Game is hard to disguise, and a pair of boards can stop the business of a public house if you let it get too intense.”

“How do five people play?”

“In teams and then by betrayal. The real challenge is keeping the emotions confined to the board. Mid-winter we have a championship that is meant to get the players out of the inns where real blood feuds have developed. I think the championship just raises the stakes. And it’s bad for business.”

“And how are two boards played?”

“You’ll get as many answers as there are players. I favor cooperation and patience.”

Navarra was silent then as they passed alongside the small stream and fields of Castleton. The wagon was slow enough that several people turned around and walked back into town, rather than towards their jobs in the fields, while attempting to talk Hamish into donating a sample towards their labors. Just before the town gates Hamish had Navarra step down and walk through on his own, as the negotiations with the Guards and the tax inspectors sometimes needed a delicacy that the presence of an obvious foreigner would make difficult.

“This place is not like Fisher,” Navarra said when they were reunited.

“No,” Hamish agreed, “this is not Fisher. People here are a bit ... proud.”

“Why is that?” Navarra asked.

“It may be because the city is so new, and they have no history to rely on as the people in Riverseaton do,” Hamish speculated. “But Newton is old as Riverseaton, and no one there has any pride in anything.”

“Do you have an answer for everything?”

“I wish,” Hamish laughed. “I’ve spent so much time explaining Riversea to Ion - the Ambassador I mean, that I’ve become as boring as all those books I’ve read about other places.”

“Knowledge is precious ...”

“A lot of knowledge might be,” Hamish corrected. “But a little knowledge is only dangerous. I think you are going to learn this lesson when you attempt the Game this morning.”

“Perhaps it would be better if I found a Game in Fisher.”

“Fisher might be a little friendlier, but you’ll do fine. You may even walk away with some of your money. My only advice is - let the locals win the last game. If you’re winning at any point, try to discreetly pocket some of it. They won’t try to take all your money, just most of it.”

“An innocent to the slaughter.”

“That’s your best approach. Let them lead, play defensively, and after a few games you should see their style and be able to act accordingly. Just don’t make them feel you’ve conned them. It’s a long way back to Fisher. I’m delivering at the Castleton Inn,” Hamish said as he pointed to the front door of the establishment. “I’m going around back. I’ll ask the publican who has been playing recently. He’ll find you a Game. You just go on in the front door and order a large meal. It will let people know you have money.”

As deliveries went, this one was always easy. They wanted the remainder of the wagon-load, and the Master had his own lads to do the shifting. It left more time for the negotiations over payment. Hamish listened, and commiserated, but in the end could only agree that the good Master Groggin was a right bastard when it came to money. He declined an early morning drink with a touch to his forehead, saying, “I still can’t drink.”

“A terrible thing, lad, no being able to taste a bit” the publican said. “But then too many in this business are too fond of their own product. Your Master Groggin, for example.”

“Don’t start me on it. I have some business in town. May I leave my wagon with you for a moment?”

“The way my lads work? You’d best put your animals out to pasture and think about your old age. With luck they will have your empties loaded by lunch.”

Just before exiting back door Hamish stopped. “One other thing. I brought a Kingdomer with me...”

“You did what? Here, to my place?”

“He’s someone special.”

“I don’t care, I don’t want him here.”

“He’ll be introduced to the High Mayor tonight, and I would expect him to mention the friendliness of the people he has met.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Far from it. I’m pointing out the benefits of entertaining him for the day. He wants to gain some experience in playing the Game. He seems to be relatively well endowed with coins and it might be a good idea to clip his wings. I was thinking someone like Curtis could trim him gently so that his ability to get up to mischief would be reduced.”

“I don’t like this.”

“I’d really appreciate your laying on the hospitality.”

“Are you sure he has money?”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll cover his debts.”

“What’s in this for you?”

“I think the High Mayor would like to know our visitor was safely occupied and not up to whatever he has come here to Riversea to get up to. I’m just trying to do a bit of good. I need all the help I can get with the High Mayor.”

“Aye, that you do. I’ll see who is around. But if there is any trouble, he’s your man.”

On leaving the courtyard Hamish noted that the urgency of unloading his wagon seemed to be understood. Someone had unhitched his animals, but left the barrels untouched. After the initial display of action the lads were now, presumably, rearranging things in the cellar, as they were nowhere to be seen.

Castleton revealed its age by the scaffolding surrounding the numerous unfinished buildings. Trees that stood no taller than two men divided the wide High Mayor’s Parade that ran up through the center of town. Unlike Fisherton, with its covered roadways offering protection in the winter and stifling heat in the summer, Castleton had galleries in front of the second stories of the buildings. At the back of the buildings there was a network of alleyways for deliveries, which gave Hamish access to the kitchens of a residence of subtle grandeur. The cook was busy, but the two kitchen maids, who were dressed in their finest, were almost asleep at the servant’s table.

“Hello Hamish,” the cook smiled. “Are you delivering today?”

“No, I’ve come to see the Master.”

“Most people use the front door to visit the Master Banker.”

“But then they miss the chance to talk with you, dear Cook,” Hamish said as he kissed the large lady’s cheeks and sampled what she was preparing. “And this early hour is rather impolite for the front door. Is the Master still asleep?”

“I do not think he has yet retired. They were all at the High Mayor’s welcoming of the Islanders last night.”

“It was awful,” one of the sleepy maids said. “Nothing was prepared. The Master volunteered us to help serve, but there was nothing to serve.”

“The Master should have sent me instead,” the cook grumbled into the bread dough.

“And no one’s gowns were ready,” the maid said. “The Ladies refused to dance in last year’s clothes. Only Madam Eloise would dance. But she is so tall she looks silly when she is not dancing with you, Hamish.”

“That was three years ago,” Hamish gently corrected. “I doubt if Madam Eloise ever looks silly now. But you will if you don’t see if your Master could spare me a few minutes.”

“Yes, girl, be useful,” the cook added. Turning again to Hamish she asked, “Why did the Islanders have to come early this year? Why did the Prince not come last year like we were told he would? We were prepared last year. This year everything is so rushed. The celebrations were to have been so special. Everyone is so looking forward to seeing the exiled Islander Prince. Why wasn’t he at the welcoming last night?”

“I believe the Islanders had to come early this year in order to leave C’Holm before Falkyr’s birthday,” Hamish said. “It is forbidden for him to come of age in the Islands.”

“What were they going to do to the poor boy?” the cook asked. “Kill him?”

“He only avoided that option by a few days I believe,” a deep voice said from the hall. “Hamish, I thought I heard your voice.”

“Good morning, Master Banker.”

“I’d like a word with you, if you have a moment. Come through to my study. Have you eaten? Bring something for the boy and something light for myself,” the Master said to one of the blushing kitchen maids, and then added to Hamish, “A most dreadful meal at the High Mayor’s last night. Everyone drank too much instead. Unfortunately, the Prince also wasn’t able to attend, so we’ll have to do it all again tonight. I do hope he manages to make an appearance this time.”

“Maybe the kitchens will be ready tonight,” Hamish said.

“We can only hope,” the Master Banker said as he settled into a chair. “Are you delivering here? Did I have an order with you?”

“I have ...” Hamish hesitated as a maid entered. The meal she delivered required a complete rearrangement of the Master Banker's desk, so Hamish had to continue in her presence, “I would like to lodge some money with you.”

“Some coins again.”

“It is not much.”

“Sit, and eat while we talk,” Hamish was ordered. The Master Banker then turned to the hovering maid and said, “Get some sleep, girl. We have another dinner with the High Mayor tonight.”

As Hamish tore yesterday's bread into the cold stew, his host continued, “These coins of yours are a bit of a worry, Hamish. They are not your wages are they?”

“No.”

“Rather more considerable than your wages I would think.”

“Yes.”

“Now Hamish, when you were a youth at the New Castle, I always felt you had great promise. But now ... I can't be participating in anything...”

“There is nothing to hide.”

“I am not saying there is... but I am not unaware that you Highlanders have an unhealthy interest in our trade with the Islanders.”

“We have discussed it,” Hamish quickly agreed, “and I agree with you that it is a problem, and I will see what can be done about it when I return to the Highlands.”

“If you were not so clever,” the Master Banker said slowly, trying to sum up their previous conversations, “I might believe you. But when you say this smuggling is to the benefit of the Highlanders, and that most of it occurs through Fisher, and even the Beggin Inn, I have to wonder if you are not trying to hide by being obvious.”

Hamish finished chewing and wiped his lips. He then pushed his chair back from the table and stood. “If you don't want my business, you should just say so. I have always respected your judgment. Perhaps I should excuse myself from your company and call again at your convenience to collect all that I have lodged with you.”

“All of it?” the Master Banker said, shaken.

“It is not even 20 Bronzes.”

“Those coins...”

“You were speaking of ... ?”

“Hamish, please sit down again and accept my apologies. I could say I am tired, but that would not be an excuse for my poor behavior.”

“No, it is I who should apologize,” Hamish said. “I quite understand that you are not a pawnbroker and do not trade in small bags of coins. I also understand that you are concerned with the welfare of Riversea. It is now 70 years since Granit first arrived. Things have changed, and are still changing. Castleton and the New Castle were both build on the wealth of the increased trade between our two lands.”

“The follies of our High Mayors were supposed to have been built with the taxes on the legitimate trade between our lands,” the Master Banker corrected. “But I fear they have been built more upon borrowing against the possibility of this trade rather than its actuality.”

Hamish sat back down. “I can understand your worry about any diversion of goods directly to the Highlanders. It might directly affect you. But all I can see that has happened is that what used to be given to the Dark Forest People to then trade to the Highlands is now directly going to the Highlands. Fisher has always had a right to the eleventh ship.”

“But what about the activities in Newton and the ships that trade with the Five Houses?”

Hamish was caught. “I don’t know ... I have not been into Newton in years. I should have thought of that. I mean ... all along I’ve been watching Fisher. But the eleventh boat was never for the Houses and it was never taxed by Riversea ... I’ve been so clever, and yet completely missed the problem. I am sorry, sir, for having argued a case I know nothing about.”

“You can not be everywhere.”

“How bad is the problem?” Hamish asked. And then he quickly added, “I mean ... I don’t mean, rather, to inquire into your business, but are the Houses complaining?”

“Come now, lad,” the Master Banker said as he pushed his finished meal away. “What did I teach you about the money business?”

“No one ever mentions they are having problems until it is too late?” Hamish said, hoping it was the correct lesson.

“Precisely,” the Master Banker said. “And my survival depends on knowing things people don’t even know about themselves.”

“At least you treat people’s secrets with the same discretion as you do their finances,” Hamish said, preparing to depart. “You probably hear more impossible stories than I do serving drunks.”

“That I do ...” and then the Master Banker sat up straighter. “That reminds me ... I would like your advice on a matter you may not wish to discuss.”

“I would be honored to help you in any way that I can. You should know that.”

“It is about Lord Belthor.”

“I am not the best one to discuss his circumstances. We don’t see much of each other these days, you know.”

“But you grew up with him. You know his character.”

“And I can’t say much good about it.”

“I understand, and agree that there is much about him that is less than desirable. But I do not inquire about his morals, but rather his determination. In your opinion, would he finish something he started?”

“Such as his development in the New Ground?”

“You are as quick as ever. He has approached me for a line of credit to cover the expenses of his people until their crops come in.”

“And how long does he think it will be before he actually has a crop?” Hamish asked.

“He thinks his people would be able to bring in a full crop in their third year on the land. He is willing to support them for up to five years.”

“His generosity surprises me,” Hamish said, “as does the length of his proposal. I would have thought he would have planned for a year, or maybe two at the longest. The last time I was in the New Ground it was completely forested. It’s going to take a lot of sweat to turn it into ploughed farmland free of rocks.”

“He says he’s found open land that just needs to be ploughed.”

“He’s probably claiming the Summer Ground,” Hamish said. “That won’t sit well with the grazers and the haymakers.”

“No, his New Ground is beyond the Summer Ground.”

“That’s hard country out there.”

“He says he plans to commit his life to this project,” the Master Banker said.

Hamish thought for a moment and then asked, “And you want to know if I think he would actually stick to his commitment so that you stand a chance of getting your money back?”

The Master Banker leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Yes, that is my question to you. You have known him for much of his life, and yet you are not a friend nor eager to become his friend.”

“He will do exactly what he publicly commits himself to do,” Hamish said without hesitation. “In fact I would expect him to do more than he said he would, and he will do it sooner than he said he would. He is extremely driven to best his brother. Creating a new County would be better than working on, but not finishing, the castle their grandfather started.”

“So you would be willing to put your money in his hands, even though you do not like him?”

“No,” Hamish said. “I would not back him. I would back his project in such a way that it would not depend upon him.”

“Why?” The Master asked.

“Because he may drive his people so hard that they leave him,” Hamish said. “In that case you would have to be able to replace him with someone else equally inspired, but with a gentler style of leadership.”

“I think he understands that his greatest problem will be attracting skilled people to leave their current farms for his new lands. That is why he needs the money.”

“If this was something he could do without having to be nice to people, I would think about backing him,” Hamish said. “But his personality is his greatest liability. And then there is the problem of insuring his life.”

“What?” The Master Bank asked, suddenly completely alert.

“I, for one, would very much like to kill him before I depart for the Highlands,” Hamish said.

The Master Banker sighed and fell back in his chair. “I was afraid that might come up.”

“I can think of several people in Newton who also feel as I do,” Hamish said. “But I think dishonored daughters have lower priority than murdered fathers.”

“Hamish ... you know ... It was an awkward moment.” Hamish didn’t respond. So the Master Banker continued, “I don’t think either of them intended harm to either your father or you. Hamish, the two of you just got caught between the sons of the High Mayor. You should have let them kill each other.”

“Everyone tells me that,” Hamish said.

“I think everyone believes it, which is why no charges were ever pressed,” the Master Banker said. “They both also barely survived the injuries you gave them.”

“As I barely survived my own injuries,” Hamish said. “I’ve been told I was actually dead for a while.”

The Master Banker didn't reply.

"I met Belthor this morning," Hamish said. "We almost came to blows. In terms of your investment it's not his past you need to worry about, but his present. You should sit him down and tell him that if he starts his County he's going to receive a fair measure of abuse. From now on he's going to have to realize he's too important to respond to petty insults. People are going to insult him, and he's just going to have to take it. And he's also going to have to start living his own life as one of his position should."

"If I do this, you will not seek your revenge?" the Master Banker asked.

"If I were simply seeking revenge I would have had it by now," Hamish said.

"That is a great relief to know," the Master Banker said.

"But before you relax you should remember the true animosity was between the half-brothers. When Basson becomes High Mayor he may not take kindly to his younger brother sitting in the Council and able to veto his actions."

From the look on his face it was clear the Master Banker hadn't planned that far into the future. "But that won't happen. We already have our 25 Counties. There is no space on the Council for another Mayor."

"He could take the seat that Haps occupies," Hamish said, "since they don't belong there anyway. They are supposed to be part of Fisher."

The Master Banker laughed. "I always thought Fisher was supposed to be part of Haps."

Hamish smiled too. Everyone knew that was why the two had never joined. "Either way, the point is Haps is not part of Riversea. By sitting in the Council they get all the benefits ..."

"... without paying any of the taxes," the Master Banker finished.

"Exactly," Hamish said. "If Belthor creates a 25th County for Riversea then Haps will have to stand on its own like it should. I know Fisher would welcome a new trade partner without the restrictions Riversea imposes."

"To get from Fisher to Haps you still have to cross Riversea and use our roads," the Master Banker reminded Hamish.

"We're watermen," Hamish corrected. "We could go by sea."

"You've already thought this through then have you?" The Master Banker asked.

“Everyone in Fisher speaks of reclaiming what was once theirs after they’ve had a few,” Hamish said. “Maybe with the two half-brothers in the Council there will be a civil war and Fisher’s dreams can come true.”

“Hamish! That’s not even funny!”

“Actually ...” then Hamish changed his mind as he remembered, “Belthor can’t be a Mayor of Riversea since he was Spoken For in Haps. I wonder if he’s even thinking of being part of Riversea at all? Maybe he’s planning on being a second County of Haps. Then he could become his brother’s equal - both High Mayors.”

The Master Banker considered this new problem, and then said, “This project could cause more problems than a simple financial risk.”

“There is always that possibility when you attempt to start something new,” Hamish agreed. “If you turned Belthor away nothing would have to change.”

“Yes ...” the Master Banker seemed to agree. But then a look of sadness crossed his face. “But I fear it may be to late to stop this project. Based on the sum Belthor was asking of me, and his other hints, I believe he has other backers. I got the feeling that although he wants my participation, he’s not dependent upon it.”

“That sounds like his arrogance and slippery tongue to me,” Hamish said.

“Perhaps,” the Master Banker said. He then looked directly at Hamish and asked, “Tell me, how much do you think this project would cost?”

“Well ...” Hamish said, “you said he wanted to start a full County and support the 500 families for up to 5 years. If we assume the average wage of 3,000 Coppers a year ... that comes to ... something like ... 7½ million Coppers - 7½ Golds, right? I’m assuming the other 125 families of the County would be immediately self-supporting with their trades and businesses. He’d only need to support the farmers.”

The Master Banker smiled. “You know Hamish, after your injury, Ion approached me to take you on as my apprentice. I think I will always regret my cowardice.”

“Thank you,” Hamish said. “But you were wise to have turned me away. You avoided declaring yourself against Barnabas, and you avoided having wasted your wisdom. I really am leaving Riversea this year. Groggin is not too happy about losing his heir. Now he’ll have to find someone else to support him in his Seniority.”

“I’ll believe you’re leaving when you no longer come calling for these breakfast chats,” the Master Banker said with a fond smile. “What do you think would be the least amount of money he would need?”

Hamish thought for a moment. “Well ... he’s not going to get 500 families to up and move all at once. In fact he’d be smart to start slow. If things work then people will come without the offer of money, or only need the support for a year or two.”

“Remember,” the Master Banker cautioned, “we’re bankers here, not dreamers.”

“Right,” Hamish accepted. “If he only supports people for his projected 3 years, and settles a Clan a year for the next 25 years - no, 20 years, since the tradesmen once again can be assumed to be self-supporting, at most he’ll be funding 3 Clans, or 75 families, right? So that would be ... about 225,000 Coppers maximum.”

“That’s the way I figured it,” the Master Banker agreed. Then he chided, “But you’re forgetting that for the first three years he’ll have no income at all. And you seem to have completely ignored how he’s going to repay the loan - since he’s said he’ll not be asking anything more than the normal taxes from his people - and only that once their crops come in. That should have been your first calculation.”

“The numbers are too big. And the only calculations I do these days are to try and remember how many days have gone by since the customers last paid for their drinks. Lets see ... 1 clan in the first year, then two clans, and then 3 clans ... 6 clan/years before he has an income. That would be 45 Silvers needed in the first 3 years. After that he’ll need 22½ Silvers every year. And as for your repayments ... you taught that farms are supposed to produce 120 Measures every year, with 1 part in 6 going to taxes. County Mayors get 1/5 of the taxes to pay for what ever useful things it is that they do. That comes to 4 Measures - worth 160 Coppers per family farm, returning to Belthor every year. If he’s supported them for 3 years that’s 9000 Coppers invested returning 160. That’s about a 5% rate of return isn’t it? I would have thought you expected more.”

“I would expect 2 to 3 times that much. And I would expect my money to have a chance of returning to me.”

“Right,” Hamish said. “The numbers don’t work do they?”

“As a loan,” the Master Banker said, “I can do more rewarding things with my resources. As an investment towards a better Riversea, however ... say if the choice were between building a New Castle with my money or a new County ...?”

“The County feeds people, provides employment and generates taxes,” Hamish said, “while the New Castle employs people now, at some point it should be finished, and it always consumes taxes, generating nothing.”

“It is a thing of beauty, inspiring the people, and offering security ...”

“... against an enemy who has never existed,” Hamish said. “There hasn’t been a war in 1000 years.”

“That doesn’t mean there won’t be one in the future.”

“True, but if a war comes will a stone castle be useful? Would it save us from a Dragon?”

“So you think a new County would be a better ... use of my money, even if it may not make me much money?”

Hamish looked around the room they were sitting in. “Do you really need any more money?”

“Making money with money is what I do,” the Master Banker said. “Building a better society is supposed to be the job of our gentry.”

“Are you sure?” Hamish asked. “I thought they were meant to be colorful imbeciles whose decadent lives provided entertainment and diversion for the working people.”

The Master Banker burst out laughing.

“I guess I’ve been living in Fisher too long,” Hamish said, “and listening to Robeart too much.”

“Sometimes it is hard to remember that the Highlands has a true aristocracy,” the Master Banker said. “Your position comes to you simply because of the circumstances of your birth, while we elect the sons of our Mayors to the positions of their father.”

“Even more amazing,” Hamish said with a smile, “is that my power is absolute. Not even the High Council can interfere within Sarzana.”

The Master Banker leaned back and looked at Hamish. “Is that why you are afraid to return home?”

Hamish also leaned back. “You know, it’s not having the power that worries me, but rather what I’m allowed to do with it.”

The Master Banker also smiled, and nodded his head. “Tradition is a wonderful thing, isn’t it?”

“When I get back home,” Hamish said slowly, “Sarzana and I will become one. Every moment of my life will become a scripted act of the state. I will never again have a single moment of freedom.”

“You are not thinking of hiding from your duties for another year are you?” the Master Banker asked sternly.

“Is the size of the loan Belthor asks for ... er, beyond, shall I say, your means?” Hamish asked.

“Hamish, do you know the dealings between your grandfather and my father?”

“No. Should I?”

“At some point, yes,” the Master Banker said. “As you proposed, Lord Belthor seeks to settle a Clan each year. Even that is probably ambitious with our labor shortage. He has asked for a line of credit not to exceed 10 Silvers. As you pointed out, it would seem he’ll need more like 45 Silvers in his first three years, and then an additional 22½ Silvers a year for the next 20 years. And as for returning my money with a reasonable profit ...”

“Actually,” Hamish interrupted, “if Belthor were to remain independent from Riversea, then he could apply his brother’s share of the taxes from his farmers to repaying your loan. And we haven’t considered the taxes he’ll receive from his tradesmen he’ll be needing in his new town. Don’t forget, he’s going to have to be completely self-supporting out there. I believe you once told me the County Mayors received 10 times the taxes of their farmers in taxes on their tradesmen. Although his farmers may not be able to pay their way - they won’t be able to return your money to you with a profit, the taxes on the tradesmen they attract will probably make the creation of a new County a viable investment.”

The Master Banker leaned back in his chair and shook his head with disbelief. “You know, Hamish, I think you are probably the only person I have ever known who could reach that conclusion.”

“What do you mean?” Hamish asked. “Belthor must have arrived at the same conclusion. He’s not one to take risks or attempt things he doesn’t know he’ll succeed at.”

“That may be,” the Master Banker agreed, “but he never had your ability to think with numbers as if they were simple words.”

“It’s just a little adding and subtracting ...”

“No, it’s much more than that,” the Master Banker said. “It’s something even I struggle with after spending my whole life at it. It’s not just the thinking with numbers that you are so good at, it’s the ability to think without hesitation that you have ... it’s completely unique.”

“I think you are overstating things,” Hamish said.

“I wish I were, Hamish, I truly wish I were. I wish I could do what you can do, but I can’t. Whenever I think I have thought through a problem I find I either cannot re-trace my thoughts, or when I do they do not arrive at the same conclusion. And before you say it - it’s not just age catching up with me. It’s something I’ve always known.”

The Master Banker held up his hand to forestall Hamish’s interruption. “And it’s not just a fault in my own faculties. If you ever stopped solving everyone’s problems around you, and listened to their attempts, you would realize most people simply cannot think. I don’t mean that they are stupid. I mean it’s as if something in their minds is actively preventing them from logically analyzing a problem and deriving a valid conclusion leading to an efficient plan of action. If you look around you’ll find most people simply do a very limited range of activities that they have memorized - wake up, eat, work, eat some more, visit the pub and talk in circles, and then go to sleep.”

“Maybe it’s because I reverse that sequence,” Hamish said. “I start my day in the pub ...”

“I’m being serious, Hamish. I’ve had a long life, and this is about the only bit of truth I’ve managed to discover; we men are not meant to think. We are meant to live out the lives of our fathers, in an endlessly repeating cycle, nothing more.”

“Now you are getting into religion,” Hamish said.

“And I shouldn’t be,” the Master Banker said. “I should be speaking from a shared knowledge, rather than merely shared belief.”

“Speaking of knowledge,” Hamish said, “I think we both agree that Belthor was never well endowed with the substance. Since he’s asking for not nearly enough money to start, or sustain his project, I would wonder if he has any idea of what he’s attempting - I mean numbers-wise.”

“But didn’t you just say he wasn’t the kind to take risks - especially at something as large as his whole future?”

“You think it’s someone else’s plan, don’t you,” Hamish said.

“Just like that,” the Master Banker snapped his fingers, “you figured it out.”

“No,” Hamish said. “I just remembered you told me you thought he has other backers. Before you had me figure out the math to prove your point.”

“My point?” the Master Banker asked. “And that point was ... ?”

Hamish counted the steps on his fingers, “First, that Belthor hasn’t asked for enough money. He can’t support his people on what he’s asked for. That’s rather simple. He could figure that out himself. Second, his levies will not be large enough to pay the interest on his loans, let alone return the principal. That might have been hard for him to figure out. I doubt if he would have realized he could lose money on the farms and make it back on the taxes on the tradesmen who will be attracted to supply the needs of his farmers. Third, based on the fact we know he would not take a risk with his future, there must be someone else who has explained the project to him, is supplying the rest of the funds he’ll need, and whom he actually trusts that they know what they are talking about and are able to deliver upon their words.”

“I hadn’t thought about that ‘trust’ part,” the Master Banker said.

“I don’t think he’s ever actually trusted anyone,” Hamish said. “All of us were always on guard when we played. His own brother, half-brother I mean, tried to kill him don’t forget.”

“After being insulted.”

“Insulted?”

“You must have heard the stories of that evening, even if you can’t remember what happened to you,” the Master Banker said.

“Oh,” Hamish touched the scar on his forehead. “Actually there were many other times ... when our ‘games’ got a little too ‘real’. If you want to find his other backers, I would look for someone whom he’d trust with his life. He’s betting his future here, right? It’s a chance to best his brother - become the High Mayor of his own country, not just a Mayor of a County in Riversea.”

“So who do you think it is?”

“I have no idea,” Hamish said. “The only time I’ve set eyes upon him in the last three years was this morning. And even when we were children he never confided his plans to me. Especially since I was usually on the receiving end of them.”

“Could I ask you to think about it?” the Master Banker said.

“Of course,” Hamish said as he stood. He’d already taken up more of the Master Banker’s morning than he should have with his deposit of Prudence’s earnings. But before he turned to leave he asked, “But do you really need to know who his other backers are? You’re just a banker, right? You just need to know if he’ll return your money, and give you a decent bit of interest don’t you?”

“Yes, but as you pointed out, I should plan on backing the project and not just the man. I feel as if I’m being asked to commit myself to something I do not completely understand. And the proposal is to create something new. That’s very different for most of my dealings, which are to replace or repair things. New things can be very unsettling. Have you thought about what we should do with the Riverseaton Castle now that we have the New Castle? We can’t just leave it empty - it could be occupied by our enemies, and yet if we knock it down we leave Riverseaton, and especially the harbor, defenseless.”

“We have our 25 Counties,” Hamish agreed. “Why would we want another if it just means displacing Haps? And what would people really think of someone setting up a new country on their doorstep? Fisher already seems to insult most of the people of Riversea. Empowering Belthor so that he is a threat, or at least a thorn in his half-brother’s side, would not be to anyone’s benefit.”

“Now you’re beginning to actually worry me,” the Master Banker said. “I thought someone else was backing him, but I never thought it might be against the best interests of Riversea, let alone myself as his banker. Could you spare a few more minutes of your time while we discuss this?”

Hamish sat back down and said, “I don’t know who he’d trust with his future. In fact I would go so far as saying I don’t think there is anyone in Riversea he’d trust. So we need to think about who has the means, and then think about understanding their motives.”

“I’m listening. Please go on.”

“Well, there are not that many sources of financial backing in Riversea are there? I mean this is stuff you taught me. The only wealth that there is in Riversea is in the hands of the mayors of the 25 counties, and especially in the hands of the High Mayor.”

“I think you can count the gentry out. Not even the High Mayor has the resources we’re discussing.”

“Really? I’m surprised.”

“Come now, Hamish, what did I teach you about the value of money?”

“That it has no value, unless it is invested and working for you?”

“Precisely, and what else?”

Hamish thought for a moment. “And that a wise man believes in himself and invests in himself rather than a stranger?”

“You really were a joy to have as a pupil. Although it’s taken several hundred years I think our Mayors have also finally learned that lesson. It’s not logical that any one of them, or group of them, would invest in a future competitor when their own holdings always are in need of money. They’ve only recently stopped fighting each other over those sorts of issues.”

“Surely you do not think one of the Five Houses is backing him?”

“Neither the gentry nor the guilds would tolerate it. Nor would the other Houses, and all five will never agree on anything. It was planned that way.”

“Then who ... ?”

“I would like you to figure out whom I suspect. You know more about Riversea than anyone I know, and would have been a valuable advisor to our future High Mayor Basson.”

“... If not for almost killing him ... I know. We’ve ruled out the High Mayor, who has more debts with building the New Castle than he will ever have income to cover. We’ve ruled out any one of the Five Houses, knowing the reactions of the remaining Houses. One of the guilds wouldn’t be backing him, would it?”

“None of them has enough money to even meet the needs of their members. And the Farmers themselves are not organized, even if they are the fifth power block of the land.”

Hamish remembered his lesson with his five fingers. “It’s not the High Mayor. It’s not the County Mayors. It’s not the Five Houses. It’s not the guilds. And it’s not the farmers themselves. That rules out everyone in Riversea doesn’t it?”

“It would seem so,” the Master Banker agreed, “which is why I am rather worried. But we have agreed that there must be someone. Try again.”

“Foreigners? The Highlanders? That wouldn’t make much sense. Belthor’s New Ground is on the other side of Riversea from the Highlands. It would make more sense for the Islanders to want to develop the Great Bay, but it wouldn’t help them much because their goods would still have to cross Riversea to get to the rest of the World. And when I was there the Great Bay wasn’t all that great. The weather was awful. Our harbors, except for the Mayor’s New Harbor, are much more protected.” Hamish thought for a minute. “Damn! It’s the Kingdoms isn’t it. They are trying to set up a colony right on the borders of Riversea, aren’t they? The New Ground is even near to Haps where they already have a Hall of the Covenant. The Kingdoms want to trade directly with the Islanders, don’t they?”

“That was my conclusion ...”

“Did you warn the High Mayor?”

“I felt it was my duty.”

Then there was a pause in the conversation. Finally Hamish had to ask, “Is the High Mayor going to do anything about the treason of his son?”

“‘Treason’ is a rather strong word for his display of initiative, do you not think?”

“The Houses won’t allow it,” Hamish said with passion. “Neither will The Lady of The Silver Lake.”

“The Lady ...” The Master Banker noted the chime of the clock on the wall, and then continued. “I do so enjoy speaking with you, Hamish. It is always a pleasure to test your mind. It is always good to see if you arrive at the same conclusions as I do.”

“Thank you,” Hamish said. He looked at the clock. It was supposed to be the only one in Riversea. He wished he knew how it worked. But he really didn’t want one for himself. It was only useful to remind people to leave.

“But I am going to have to cut this story short,” the Master Banker said.

“Yes, please,” Hamish agreed. “Just get to the part where Belthor is going to be punished.”

The Master Banker laughed. “Come now, Hamish, that’s no way to treat your old playmate now is it?”

“He’s not going to be punished is he?”

“Of course not. He is the High Mayor’s son after all.” The Master Banker was enjoying himself. “Since you are departing, it was suggested that Basson should be brought back from the Kingdoms and prove himself worthy to follow after his father. That would leave a vacancy in the Kingdoms for Belthor to fill.”

Hamish clapped his hands. “I like it. A reward for his good effort in the New Ground. This had to have been your idea - so simple, so elegant, so hard to refuse.”

“Unfortunately, Lord Belthor did refuse,” the Master Banker said, “on the grounds that he could not betray the commission - his exact word - that his patron had given him.”

“Then he must have had to reveal who’s backing him, didn’t he?” Hamish asked. And then he waited for an answer. It didn’t come.

“I am sorry,” Hamish said. “You can’t tell me. I understand.”

“No, I cannot tell you,” the Master Banker agreed. “But I think you will figure it out.”

“The Lady of The Silver Lake is behind Belthor’s plan to open up the New Ground as a County,” Hamish blurted out.

“Why do you say that?” the Master Banker asked with surprise.

“She is the only one with the resources who has not been ruled out.”

“But does she have the resources?” The Master Banker asked.

“Of course she does ...” and then Hamish reconsidered his immediate answer. “I mean ... she must ... doesn’t she?”

The Master Banker didn’t say anything.

“You think Belthor is lying, don’t you?” Hamish realized. “He named The Lady of The Silver Lake as his backer knowing it would be impossible to check, and thinking that you would be so impressed you would lend him money which won’t complete the project. You are afraid that you will have to keep giving him more and more in order to protect your investment aren’t you?”

“You should have trained with me,” the Master Banker said. “Your insight has been wasted on Master Groggin.”

“I wish it might have been possible,” Hamish said.

“But you have missed the most obvious question of Lord Bethor’s claims,” the Master Banker said. “The one you used to always ask first. Why?”

“Why?” Hamish asked. He thought for a moment. “You mean ‘why’ would The Lady of The Silver Lake wish to open the New Ground? Why she would back someone as unsuitable as Belthor?”

“I was thinking of why would Lord Bethor risk this claim.”

“Belthor probably believes you are as incapable of approaching The Lady as he is. But you are not, are you?”

“The Secretary of The Lady of The Silver Lake has always been available to me,” the Master Banker said. “Have you ever met her?”

“No,” Hamish said. “I do not believe so.”

“You would remember if you had,” the Master Banker said. “She is quite lovely to the eye, and has a mind as sharp as yours, maybe sharper even. She is less prone to distraction.”

“I never consider time spent with you as a distraction, although I should be going soon,” Hamish quickly replied. “It’s more of an education.”

“Are you really going to be leaving us for the Highlands this year?” the Master Banker asked. “You’ve been saying you were leaving every summer since you recovered.”

“And every summer something seemed to hold me back,” Hamish said. “But this summer Ion has made it clear. I will be leaving.”

“Before you actually depart I would like to meet with you and your cousin, the Ambassador,” the Master Bank said as he rose to escort Hamish to the door. “We need to discuss the administration of the assets of your family here in Riversea that you will inherit.”

Hamish sighed. “I suppose we do.”

“You are going to be responsible for much more than just yourself very soon.”

“That reminds me,” Hamish said, as he made ready to depart. “After I am gone, a young lady may approach you about the monies I have lodged with you. The name her mother gave her was Jessica, which she would rather not be known, for she calls herself Prudence now. All that I have given to you to hold for me I want you to make available to her.”

“All that you have lodged with me?” the Master Banker asked. “Are you sure of this, Hamish?”

“Yes, that is the arraignment she and I have between us.”

“Is this wise?”

“I hope it won’t cause you any problems,” Hamish said. “I just wanted to help her out as best I could.”

For some reason the maids of the Master Banker, who had also come to the door and overheard Hamish’s instructions, found his words very funny. The Master Banker then had to stifle their giggles, as well as return Hamish’s formal departing bow.



It is said  
that everything that happens -  
happens for a reason.

But is this reason  
predestination,  
or the whim of the Gods?

And we men attempt  
to assign causality  
to explain events.

But does that  
actually bring us any closer  
to discovering the true author?

## 4 ... and the Attack

From the front door of the moneylender, Hamish continued up the High Mayor's Parade to an area where the trees were taller and the buildings even more somber. The front door of residence of the Ambassador of the Highlands opened just as he reached it. He was greeted by Robeart, who had arrived with Ion from the Highlands four years ago bearing the news of the death of Hamish's mother.

"Ion said you would be arriving soon." Robeart said in his usual, breathlessly fussy fast pace. "I've been perched here waiting for you ever since. I must say, dear boy, that you look positively dreadful. Must you go about dressed like that? Are you ever going to stop growing? Ion took the prince off to that dreary library of yours. Let's just leave them to it, shall we? Come, you must eat something before you go in to talk with him. Doesn't that Groggin allow you to eat? Bend down, you are too tall for me to kiss."

"I'm sorry that it has been so long, Robeart. Have you been keeping out of trouble?"

"That's not funny, and you know it, young man."

"I'm being serious, are you still having problems?"

Robeart glanced around, and then whispered to Hamish, "It's all these damn girls they've saddled us with, Hamish. Now that you're gone, and we're here, every country lump thinks to place their daughters with us so they can gain a safe introduction to the city life. We're overrun. And the things they get up to ... don't get me started on it."

"And the other problems?"

"That was just your nasty friends. After what you did to them, I think most people think Ion and I are the normal Highlanders. Anyway, I've began studying the Blade again."

"You did tell me that you were once interested in becoming a Blademaster."

“At the time I think it was just vanity. I was too young then. My life was too complicated. Now, since I’ve settled, old age you know, I find the discipline very soothing. You might find it would help you as well.”

“You’re only 25 years old,” Hamish reminded Robeart. “You’re not old. You’re only halfway through your first Prime years.”

“A man has but one year to decide to live, two years as a babe, four years of childhood, eight years of youth, twice 16 years as a Prime, and then 16 years of Seniority,” Ion recited. “You are the one that told me only 5 of 10 births survive to their adulthood, and only 2 of the remaining survive to their Seniority. I am closer to the end of my life than the beginning.”

“I know you are better with your maths than to conclude that,” Hamish laughed.

“I can count your 16 years as one year too many to be a youth,” Robeart acknowledged.

“I think the Blade and I have parted company,” Hamish said, remembering the subject of the conversation. “I only just made it to Master of Iron, you know, before the accident. I would need another two years before I could even become a Master of the Blade. There is also that little problem that I have yet to be Spoken For. I couldn’t become an Initiate without being Spoken For first.”

“You are a Highlander. Your Prime will be achieved through the Testing. You can not be Spoken For here in Riversea. This is not your place.”

“Maybe both ... ?”

“No.”

Two maids, almost hiding behind the kitchen door, caught Hamish’s eye, but Robeart shoed them back to work. “They are incorrigible, I tell you.”

“I think I’ll have to visit more often.”

“Don’t you dare, young man.” And then Robeart sighed. “Actually, you’d be our savior. Once the word got out, we’d have worried mothers rescuing their daughters, and then blissful peace.”

“Some day you’ll have to introduce me to the person you have heard all these stories about.”

“Don’t play so coy with me, Hamish. I have the confidence of many of the better class tradeswomen these days, you know. They all have their eye on you over at the Riverseaton Market.”

Hamish laughed, “Now there is a trustworthy bunch of gossips.”

“Gossips they may be, Hamish, but I’ve heard things from them before I’ve heard them from the High Mayor. Anyway, it helps Ion if someone is listening to the word on the streets. He’s not very practical, but most men aren’t. We’ve heard about your Miss Prudence.”

“It’s Prudence, and she is not mine.”

“I would say not. You don’t drink too much there do you? That Inn is not a good place for a young man.”

“I wish I was able to drink,” Hamish said. “It’s hard to be a brewer without tasting every so often.”

“Some good comes out of all bad things. You’re looking much better,” Robeart said. “It’s only a small scar.”

“I know the joke ... it just shows where my brain used to be. Hello, Acting Ambassador,” Hamish said to Ion, who had just joined them. “We’re on our way to breakfast, sir. How is Falkyr?”

“The son of t’Fhar is reading the Codes of King t’Weis as you suggested. He says it is written in an archaic dialect of Islander. Is the Guide with you?”

“No sir, I left him at the Castleton Inn.”

“Was that wise?”

“I’ll check when I leave here, sir. I asked the master to see if Curtis would be available to teach him the Game.”

“Curtis only plays for money.”

“Sir, money is something the Kingdomer has too much of, sir.”

“It’s nice to hear you showing some respect, but don’t overdo it. How are you getting on with Master Groggin?”

“Just last night we tasted something that will get me into the guild.”

“That’s wonderful news, Hamish,” Robeart enthused. “Its always good to have a skill.”

“Yes, Hamish, we both have understood your desire to honor your contract with the brewmaster. Although you may be worthy of the guild, you will not be applying. This year you go back to the Highlands.” Hamish turned to Robeart for appeal, but Ion said, “No, Hamish, there will be no arguments. You will be Tested in the Highlands, not Spoken For here in Riversea. You are a Highlander.”

“The orders don’t just come from Ion, Hamish,” Robeart said, “it’s - no don’t shush me, Ion - the boy has a right to know. Hamish, Ion received a letter last year

ordering you back to the Highlands. He conveniently forgot to open it until after the last convoy. He gave you an extra year to work off your debt to Master Groggin, but your time is up. You're going home. You have already missed the convoy of the Silverwater. Since you don't want to overwinter in Freeville you're going to have to travel on your own, and fast. You have to take the Test. You are a Highlander. You have responsibilities. The Principality of Sarzana is waiting for you. And don't think it doesn't need you. Your family has been absent from the Council for too many generations now."

"Is my sister ordering me back?"

Robeart looked at Ion, who finally spoke. "No, Hamish, it's the High Councilor himself. Hurl wants you back. He feels he owes it to you. Your family has paid a high enough price for its king-making. He was a great friend of your father, you know. It hurt him to send your father away. It was he who told me to bring your father the news about your mother. He wanted your father to hear it from family first."

"I've always thought the job of Ambassador was an honor."

"It is, Hamish, it's become the recognition for men too powerful to be allowed to remain in the Highlands."

"My, but we do have airs," Robeart said. "You know as well as I do, Hamish, the job is for people who are thought to be threats to the orderly running of the Highlands. That is why Ion is sure to get the job. The Duke of Fano doesn't like to be reminded that the wife of his little brother is another man."

"You are being crude, Robeart," Ion said sharply.

"I can't believe the High Councilor is that concerned about me," Hamish said.

"You're probably correct Hamish," Ion snapped. "He probably doesn't give a damn about you. What he does care about is Sarzana. Either you get back there and claim it as a Tested Highlander, or you lose it. Your sister is only there as your regent. You have a duty to the other members of your family, the people of your birthright, and to all of the Highlands, and you don't have much more time to hide from it. We need you as our Prince, Hamish. We need you to protect us. If you let Sarzana slip away, then we all slip away as well."

"That reminds me," Hamish said. "Captain Grey would like to speak with you."

"I don't like to say this, Hamish," Ion said, "but that man is exactly what I will not let you become, even if I have to place you in chains. The children of Gretz - that

Greta and her daughters, and Grey - and however many spawn he's had besides that Greyling, are a shame to the Highlands. There is no honor in destroying a man's children."

"Don't get him started on Greta," Robeart warned.

"Greyling returned for the Testing," Hamish protested.

"It's going to be very hard for him, since he is only half Highlander," Ion said. "But at least he did not leave it until it was too late."

"I'm too old for the Testing, aren't I?" Hamish asked.

"Being a Prince is going to be the hardest thing you'll ever do, and it will never end until you die. If you can't survive the Testing, you'll never survive as Prince. Yes, you're already too old to start the training."

"I don't have a chance then, do I?"

Ion and Robeart looked at each other, and then Robeart said, "You don't have a virgin's hope over a long winter, if you listen to anyone's advice. The Testing is not about what you are, but who you are inside. Ion and I both passed, so don't think you know what the Gods will ask of you."

"You know," Hamish said, as a huge plate of delicacies was set in front of him. "I don't feel so hungry anymore."

Robeart simply said, "Eat."

"But I just ate with the Master Banker on my way here," Hamish protested.

"Is that why you kept me waiting at the door, you naughty boy," Robeart said, relaxing back to his usual persona now that the topic of discussion was no longer Hamish's future.

"How is the Master Banker," Ion asked.

"He's rather worried about this plan of Belthor's to develop the New Ground."

"Did he say why?" Ion asked.

"Belthor has asked for a loan, but not enough for his plans. The Master was wondering who else was backing the project."

"And he suspects?"

"He sees Highlander conspiracies everywhere."

Ion watched for a minute while Hamish gamely attempted to eat under the watchful eye of Robeart. Ion finally asked, "What did you say to give him that idea?"

"I told him the obvious - the New Ground is closer to Haps and the Kingdom's Hall of the Covenant than it is to the Highlands. If Bethor were receiving support

from outside of Riversea, then the High Mayor should look to Kingdom interference, rather than to the Highlands.”

“Quick thinking,” Robeart said. “It’s completely illogical, of course. The Kingdoms already have a full Temple of their Covenant just outside of Riversea at Dark Forest Clearing. Strategically, they already block the door from Riversea to the World. Since they don’t have a navy they can’t come between the Islands and Riversea. They don’t need Belthor’s New Ground.”

“I completely forgot about that,” Hamish said. “How could I have been so stupid?”

“Riversea tends to ignore the fact the Kingdoms has an army camped on its only entrance,” Robeart said.

“But it’s only there to escort the Silverwater,” Hamish said.

“Right,” Robeart said. “But since that is a two-year round trip there is always at least a Wing in Dark Forest Clearing over winter and two in the summer. That’s the same size as the entire Riversea army I believe.”

“Actually, the Riversea army has 5 Wings,” Hamish said, “but only one is deployed at the Garrison at the Top of the Stairs.”

“So if the Kingdoms wanted,” Robeart said, “they could easily invade Riversea, but probably not permanently occupy it if the locals put up any resistance - simply by using the nearby troops.”

“I guess ...” Hamish said, seriously shaken by his miscalculation.

“But it would make dabbling with Belthor’s project unnecessary wouldn’t it?” Robeart said. “I hope no one heard you stirring up trouble between Riversea and the Kingdoms.”

“Actually, the Master Banker figured it out long before me and had already hauled Belthor before the High Mayor,” Hamish said. “But Belthor wouldn’t reveal his backers until the High Mayor ordered him off to the Kingdoms as Ambassador. He then named the Lady of the Silver Lake.”

“Impossible,” Robeart said. “We were just speaking with the Secretary of the Lady yesterday. She had been hoping to meet Prince Falkyr at the reception last night. We spoke of you, and the High Mayor’s sons. The Lady does not hold them in high regard.”

“Hamish,” Ion said with some embarrassment, “although I have been here for four years now, there are still some things I don’t understand about Riversea. And the Lady

of the Silver Lake is one of them. There is nothing in your library about her, you know.”

“There must be something,” Hamish said. “What did the Secretary say about her mistress?”

“A lot of nothing,” Robeart said. “It’s a good thing you are leaving, Hamish, for you and the Secretary would have a lovely time together. The two of you could plot for days about the future of Riversea, while completely ignoring the insignificance of this place in the World.”

Hamish had to laugh, “Yes, I know Robeart. This is not the Highlands. It’s only Riversea. But remember - you are stuck here. I am leaving.”

“You are a wicked, cruel boy,” Robeart pouted, appealing to Ion for support.

“The Lady of the Silver Lake is not even listed among the Gentry of Riversea,” Ion said. “She doesn’t seem to be a Mayor, and is not a Holder of a House, and yet everyone only speaks her name in a whisper.”

“That’s because she’s more powerful than all of them put together,” Hamish responded.

“How can that be?” Robeart asked.

“She was here first. All this was hers. When those fleeing the Breaking of Time arrived, she allowed them to settle. She gave them everything except Fisher, and the crossing of the Silver Lake.” And then Hamish remembered, “And Haps, but Haps wasn’t hers as Fisher is. Before the Breaking there was the Lady of the Silver Lake, her people who lived in Fisher, and some farmers in Haps.”

“The Breaking was a thousand years ago, Hamish,” Ion said, and Robeart added, “It’s not even history, it’s just legend.”

“Fisher takes its history very seriously,” Hamish replied. “It’s the only way they continue to exist. Their rights come directly from the Lady. Trust me, Master Groggin is still talking of taking Barnabas before the Lady because of the damage done to his apprentice – me, that is. You did the right thing when you took me there, Ion. Fisher is a separate country. It is the host country of Riversea. The Lady of the Silver Lake is their queen.”

“If she is what you say she is,” Ion began, “why would she be interested in someone like Belthor? Why would she be opening land out on Antine Island? No one even lives there.”

“What’s even ‘new’ about the New Ground?” Robeart asked. “I thought people had always been using the summer pastures on Antine Island?”

“Belthor’s New Ground is out beyond the Summer Ground,” Hamish explained to Robeart. Turning to Ion he continued, “I’ve heard that the lands beyond Roadsend are growing old. Yields are declining. The rains in the spring have been strange. Silvery. Crops seem to come in late for no reason, and if a winter was early ... it could be bad. But the truth of the matter is that she’s not backing Belthor. He named her because he felt no one would have the nerve to approach the Lady to confirm his story.”

“But then who is behind Belthor?” Ion sked.

“He’s been at it for several summers now,” Robert continued. “Ever since he tried to cut your head off.”

“He’s supporting his people somehow,” Ion concluded.

Hamish turned to the figure waiting at the door, “Ah, Falkyr, come in and join us. Have you learned anything from the Codes of High King t’Weis? One bit of advice, Ambassador, if I may. As one interested in knowing the state of affairs in Riversea, it would pay for you to spent time in Fisher. You should spend a winter serving beer to people with nothing more to do than talk to anyone who will listen. You’ll learn everything you’ll ever need to know.”

“Then you do know ...” Ion began.

“No, I don’t know what he’s up to,” Hamish said. “But if I wanted to learn, that is how I’d go about it.”

Falkyr looked like he was ill at ease for having interrupted, but Robeart found him a plate of food as large as Hamish’s.

“You read this book, Hamish?” Falkyr finally asked. “The writing of the High King t’Weis be very difficult. The language be not like he write it now. I must to think about his words long before I be understanding them. Please, I cannot eat all this, I apologize for not telling I eat before at the house of Madam Eloise.

“No one told me it wasn’t written in real Islander,” Hamish apologized. “No one here speaks Islander, so I thought I was reading Islander. Unfortunately, I can’t speak a word of the language.”

“Hamish, you didn’t tell us you called upon Madam Eloise,” Robeart said clapping his hands together, “and at such an early hour.”

“I had a delivery there.”

“She was so lovely last night at the welcoming,” Robeart said.

“I have heard there was a bit of a fashion crisis last night.” Hamish said as he stirred his food around to make it look like he was eating.

“Dreadful,” Robeart answered.

“I found it rather humorous,” Ion added.

“It was nothing of the sort,” Robeart corrected. “The ladies had nothing to wear.”

“You both will be attending the High Mayor tonight,” Ion reminded Hamish. “I hope you have something appropriate to wear. I will not have you embarrass the Madam Eloise on your departure.”

“I ... uh,” Hamish stopped. “I don’t have anything that fits.”

“I not have proper clothes also,” Falkyr squeezed in.

“Hamish, you must take t’Fhar’s son into Riverseaton and find both of you something appropriate for the dinner tonight,” Ion instructed.

“Go to Whillem’s,” Robeart added.

“I should...”

“This is much more important,” Ion concluded.

“Then perhaps we’ll have to finish this breakfast another day. Come, Falkyr, let’s see if my wagon is ready and then we can complete your introduction to the sights of Riversea. Thank you for the breakfast, Robeart, and for your words of concern about my future, Ambassador,” Hamish said, kissing both farewell.

“Hamish,” Ion said on the way to the front door, “there are still some things we need to discuss, - your holdings here in Riversea - this house, the matter of my position. Can I make an appointment to meet with you and the Master Banker? There is some urgency. You promised you would depart as soon as you welcomed the son of t’Fhar to his new life.”

Hamish sighed. “The Master Banker said the same. Whenever the two of you wish, I am always at your service.”

At the Castleton Inn Navarra had made great progress with the locals, while the lads had made no progress with unloading the wagon.

“Hamish!” one of the lads of the inn who was watching the Game shouted, “you should watch this. Your friend is sticking it to ol’ Curtis. I’ve switched my money to the Kingdome.”

Hamish noticed that Curtis had a desperate look on his face, but then gave the slightest wink.

“I’d hate to interrupt your game, Navarra, but Falkyr has decided some new clothes might be in order for tonight’s reception...”

“Good for him,” Navarra said moving his hand from one piece on the board to another, and then back to moving the first.

“Would you care to join us?”

“I’m winning here, boy. I can’t be bothered with clothes.”

“You’ll be here all day then?” But Hamish received no response as Curtis removed the poorly positioned piece of Navarra. Turning to the inn master Hamish asked, “Any progress on my wagon?”

“I’m afraid not, lad. Why don’t you go about your business and I’ll have one of my lads return the wagon to you tomorrow.”

“I’ll catch hell from Groggin for leaving the wagon.”

“Tell your master to beat my lad when he returns the wagon, instead of you. It’ll save me the chore. Are we going to be seeing you in the Tournaments of the Blademasters this year?”

“No,” Hamish said flatly. “Let’s be off then, Falkyr.”

“You be a student of the Blade?” Falkyr asked.

“No.”

“That scar on your forehead would say otherwise,” Navarra remarked after an astute move.

“He didn’t know what he was doing,” Hamish said.

“A pass at vertical angle be making your enemy completely open,” Falkyr said. “Did you return?”

“No.”

“You must have shown great restraint,” said Navarra as Curtis took his time in moving.

“No,” Hamish said. “If I had, it never would have happened. We’d best be going since I would rather not return through Newton.”

“Do you have something against Newton?” Navarra asked.

“It is more that Newton has something against me.”

“Make sure our lad gets home safely then, Falkyr,” Navarra said, dismissing the two of them. “And don’t keep the High Mayor waiting just for a set of fancy clothes. Damn, now that was a move.”

The walk to Riverseaton took them back up the High Mayor's Parade and then out of Castleton at the high end of town. The road passed the main gate of the New Castle, and from the top of the pass they could see the disorganized sprawl of Newton and the walls surrounding Riverseaton. Behind the harbor of Riverseaton, the almost abandoned Old Castle loomed darkly over the city.

"That man playing Navarra be very good," Falkyr said.

"Do you play the Game as well?"

"I be little patience for games of chance."

"But you noticed that Curtis is very good."

"He be fooling Navarra."

"I just hope Navarra doesn't get too offended when he comes to realize it. He's going to learn that there is much more to the Game than chance. It is easy to believe that the dice determine the fate of the markers, but a player like Curtis can get the markers and their placement to determine the fate of the dice. If they start playing on two boards then Navarra will really learn what the Game is all about. Something special happens when two boards are played that leaves little to pure chance. The actions of one board affect the actions of the other. The Game draws energy from everything around it. The players, and the audience, all become part of the event. It's an intensity beyond all others."

"It be like a Pass of the Blade in the Tournament?"

"Much more intense. Real players of the Game can't live without playing. They're worse than drunks. Navarra could become one of those, if he had the money."

"He be to lose?"

"Curtis is a professional. He plays to live, not the other way around."

The shop of the clothier Whillem was in a panic, led by Whillem himself. He just couldn't take on any more work until Hamish convinced him that perhaps his work would be best noticed upon the guest of honor. That only deepened the crisis as all the staff descended upon Falkyr with pins and measuring tape. Hamish found the process so much fun that he was finally ordered out of the room as Whillem dreamed up an outfit that would never go unnoticed. But before he departed, Whillem quickly measured Hamish and confirmed that the clothes Madam Eloise had ordered and already taken delivery of were going to fit him perfectly. It was then Falkyr's turn to laugh when Whillem remarked that it was surprising that the Madam Eloise knew so well how much Hamish's size had changed since the last time Whillem had dressed

Hamish. After even Whillem had a laugh at his expense, and Whillem usually never questioned his customers' actions, just their fashion sense, Hamish then told Falkyr how to find his way to the Riverseaton market where they could arrange some lunch.

It was actually late afternoon before Falkyr arrived, but Hamish didn't mind as he had bought lunch for a delightful young girl named Annalise, who, with Hamish's help, had managed to sell all of her chickens quickly. They had then walked the market looking for things to buy for her friends back home in Whitestone. Unfortunately, she completely lost her voice when she was introduced to Falkyr.

"You must not need to quit the young lady just for me," Falkyr said as they headed for the hole in the wall separating Riverseaton from Newton.

"She'll be back next week, and thanks to you, she'll remember me. That package is huge."

"I be to look a fool."

"Trust me. Tomorrow everyone will be trying to wear what you're carrying. Whillem is the best."

"He be expensive I think. He be not take payment."

"He knows the value of an investment. Will you look at this place," Hamish said as they entered Newton. "These people are pigs. I wouldn't take you this way, but we are rather pressed for time. And at this time of the day I have found the Guards at Maingate always seem to be overly interested in everything passing under their noses."

"I be not offended," Falkyr said.

"Riverseaton made a mistake when it allowed this place to develop outside its walls. The rot here destroys everything. I don't know how many times that hole we just came through has been fixed." And then Hamish laughed. "When I was younger, a group of us tried to bring order to this place. I never manage to visit without coming across someone who still resents our efforts. And I don't even have a stick with me today."

"I think maybe you better should use a sword," Falkyr said, touching his weapon.

"That would be a invitation for people to have a go at me. A good stick lets people walk away alive."

Since Newton had grown without a plan, each street terminated as if it was the last street, requiring detours and alleyways and even passing through a couple of shops. The timber buildings all leaned at contrasting angles as they slowly sank into

what had been a swamp. Random canals provided the earth to raise the ground above most of the high tides, and convenient places for every sort of refuse. The further they got from Riverseaton the shabbier the buildings became. Hamish made more and more detours trying to find areas where there were other people, but they finally came to an area where the alleys had been enclosed and the buildings built on pilings over the stinking mud. In the darkness it was a challenge to find the narrow planks of the walkway.

“Be this your usual path?” Falkyr asked.

“Like I said, I try and not come here at all. Newton changes every day. Last time I was here, none of this was here. Too many country people think the High Mayor is made of gold and come searching for easy jobs. We must be near the edge. All we have to do is keep going straight. If you could just carry on the way we’re going, I’m going to make a detour for a pee.”

“Straight ahead?”

“Straight ahead,” Hamish said and then ducked into the darkness. Since leaving the shop of Whillem their path had been far from direct. But all through the quieter parts there had been echos to their footsteps that had been too perfectly paced. Hamish was hearing them again as he lost sight of Falkyr. But the single set of footsteps had developed into the syncopation of several.

Three men passed with drawn knives. In the confined space swords would be a liability. A voice called out in a language Hamish didn’t understand and then he silently followed the men down the narrow planks. A hole in the roof pinned Falkyr in a beam of light. The column of men between Hamish and Falkyr had stopped, but beyond Falkyr Hamish could see more men approaching from the opposite direction.

Hamish shouted as loudly as he could and launched himself at the arm of the last man in the line, and drove the knife in the man's hand into the back of the next man in front. There was a scream and both men fell from the plank, leaving Hamish holding the dripping knife. The next man turned and Hamish slashed at his body, but caught him across the neck. Hot blood fountained into Hamish’s face as he slipped off the plankway, pulling Falkyr with him. By more swimming than crawling, Hamish pushed Falkyr in front of him under the building and toward the next alleyway.

“Where is your package?” Hamish whispered.

“I drop.”

“Stay here!”

“Leave it. Hamish, do not a fool!”

“Stay here!”

The voices and moans made it easy for Hamish to figure out where he'd crawled from. The attackers hadn't started searching under the buildings yet. Hamish stood and could just reach the planks. He pulled himself back up onto the walkway and grabbed the hair of the closest attacker. He placed his knife at the man's throat and pulled so hard he was left holding a head. He screamed out in Islander, “Kill them all!”

Below him he saw Falkyer's package in the mud. The remaining attackers were running. He jumped down into the mud and, trying to keep the package clean, crawled back under the flooring. Someone was coming at him, but with the package in the way he discarded the knife and attacked with a fist.

“Hamish!”

“Falkyr?”

“It be me.”

“Go, go. There still are more.” When they found another walkway Hamish pulled himself out of the mud and then helped Falkyr up after him. They then made no attempt to disguise their passage as they ran the rest of the way out of Newton.