

In Book Two, four years after Alysa reunites two antagonistic tribes, another threat comes to the mountains. Who are the Parents, really? And what do they want? Alysa and the TrailFolk face a menace far more dangerous than the M'raudas!

The TrailFolk of Xunar-kun, Book Two in the Tellings of Xunar-kun Series

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at  
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/3780.html?s=pdf>

# **The TrailFolk of Xunar-kun**

**Book Two in the Tellings  
of Xunar-kun**

Book, Cover and Illustrations Copyright ©2008 Tina Field Howe

**ISBN 978-0-9768585-4-6 Paperback**

**ISBN 978-0-9768585-5-3 Hardcover**

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Printed in the USA

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Tina Field Howe  
PO Box 762  
Corning, NY 14830

607-936-1455  
[info@AlysaBooks.com](mailto:info@AlysaBooks.com)  
[www.AlysaBooks.com](http://www.AlysaBooks.com)

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2008

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008905423

# **The TrailFolk of Xunar-kun**

## **Book Two in the Tellings of Xunar-kun**

Tina Field Howe

## CHAPTERS

Prologue: The Telling.....	1
The Roaming Star .....	5
The Caretaker's Lament.....	19
Return To Falling Stream .....	27
High Point Reunion.....	39
A Mother's Clarity .....	49
Moonsfest Memories .....	59
A Change In Plans .....	69
A Friendlier Trek .....	81
Lowlands Learnings.....	95
Wintertide Wait .....	109
Snow Tunnels.....	123
Moon Matters.....	135
Eve Of Greening Moonsrite .....	149
Journeys Myriad .....	161
A Light In The Distance.....	173
Parental Welcome.....	187
The Reuniting.....	201
A Curious Absence.....	213
Orryn's Lantern .....	225
Revelation.....	237
Caught.....	249
The Soaring Ship.....	263
A Greater Secret.....	273
An Even Greater Joy.....	285
<hr/>	
Glossary Of Xunar-Kun .....	293
Author Bio & Contact .....	301

## THE ROAMING STAR

A stark tangle of mangled satellites and debris hovered high above the brown plains, brackish seas and scattered deep-green mountains of planet Xunar-kun. The dulled surfaces of the satellites that faced Tabir-sun harshly reflected its orange rays. Sporadic flaming bursts of energy—emissions long ago programmed into the satellites that circled Xunar-kun—allowed them to maintain altitude above the planet and keep them from plummeting to the surface.

Since the Cat'clysm, the satellites had continued their programmed operation, powered by some form of limitless energy, perhaps gained directly from the rays of Tabir-sun.

It was now A.C. 3027, more than three thousand cycles since the last operational command was received from Xunar-kun. But time did not matter to the satellites; they would continue to execute their instructions until some malfunction or celestial intervention caused them to fall from the sky.

A plume of white light drifted across the space behind the tangle of metal, casting the shapes into skeletal silhouettes. The broad light—a fork-tailed comet—washed through the dark sky.

On the world far below, the setting sun cast an orange glow over the sparse forest. Many suns south of the Field Folk homesteads and far from a view to Winding Mountains, a band of ten Trailmen and Field Folk trekked along the top of a rounded ridge. The ridge bordered a wide, rolling plain stretching to the south. Green and tan grasses waved in the sporadic breeze over the distance. Here and there, outcroppings of rock pushed up through the grass.

In total, there were five Trailmen and two Trailwomen, two young Folk men and one Folk woman. All were dressed in Trailmen's garb: sleeveless shirts, trousers and tall trail boots.

In the lead were rugged Trailman Rainur and his mate, Elder Marteen. Rainur halted and turned his creased, dark-golden face to Field Folk Alysa, the next traveler in line. Even Alysa had set aside her long skirt in favor of the more appropriate trail clothing. Now

twenty-three, Alysa's face and arms were tanned mellow-gold. She was lean from bearing a heavy packbasket on the long trek through the wilderness.

Alysa came up to the leaders and leaned on her tall, winding walking staff. She turned back to Szaren, her Trailman husband of four cycles. He followed close behind. Now twenty-five cycles old, Szaren was also taut, strong and golden as a result of their journey. Sweat dripped from his short, brown-streaked hair.

Following Szaren was Jesh, his long-time friend. Jesh was taller than Szaren, and lanky. His short, pale hair and mustache also dripped sweat. Using the back of his hand, he wiped his wet face. They halted when they reached their leaders.

Their peltee companions, Drongo and Vonni, walked below in a stream that ran along the ridge. They lapped water with their black tongues. From time to time their heads darted up, their long ears standing tall to listen to distant sounds.

The second half of the band lagged farther behind. Someone in that half, probably a Field Folk, began to hum a tune composed of a dramatic alternation of high and low tones. The tune floated through the air to Alysa's ears. She scrunched up her face, rolled her brown eyes at her husband and mumbled, "That tune. I wish they'd stop!"

Amused, Szaren laughed. His pale-blue eyes danced. "Alysa of High Point, you are too modest! You are their champion, after all. You achieved some things that had not been done before; it is a much-deserved song."

Alysa shrugged and shook her head. She pushed her long braid—worn by all Field Folk females and males—behind her shoulder.

Rainur turned to the darkening blue-purple sky. Prominent scars running down the painting on the back of his neck were a reminder of his long-ago battle with a greatclaw. He pointed at the ground, and those at the front of the band eased their packbaskets, walking staffs, rolled hides and hunting gear to the ground. Relieved of their burdens, they stretched their tired bodies and drank from water bladders.

Young Folk men Thom and Colb, breathing hard, caught up. Their long braids swayed before them. Their immature beards were damp with perspiration.

The final members of the band arrived—Trailmen Folie, Vyyn, and Nrandia. They also wore short hair, as was the Trailmen's way. Their moist necks displayed paintings that began at the tops of their ears, trailed down the backs of their necks, and ended somewhere under their clothing.

Peetah, a small white peltee bonded with Folie, searched for rodents among a stand of trees farther behind. She loped along the ridge to join them.

Someone pointed at the northern sky. They all turned and gasped as they witnessed the appearance of the comet just rising above the hills.

Bald-headed Rainur announced, "The Roaming Star! It has come as Nrandia foresaw. Very good counting, Nrandia!"

Trailwoman Nrandia nodded her young head in acceptance of the praise.

"Yes," Marteen added. The deep creases flanking her eyes betrayed a hint of disappointment. "Mid-summering is already upon us."

As they paused to watch the long, bright tail of the Roaming Star clear the horizon, Szaren stood behind Alysa and wrapped his arms around her.

She leaned her head against his chest and sighed. "It seems like we just started out, not like we left directly after Greening Moonsfest. How could time have gone by so quickly, my husband?"

Szaren shook his head. "I do not know, Yissa, although these lands have not given us much of a challenge. Perhaps the ease of this journey makes it seem like a shorter span of time."

Alysa retorted, "It hasn't been 'easy'; it's tiring! It's not easy searching for signs of the Parents, weaving back and forth over the land, and not keeping to a truly straight course. It seems like we aren't making any real distance for all the hiking we do. No, Szaren of Winding Mountains, I wouldn't call this trek 'easy'!"

Jesh quipped, "Easy for a Trailman..."



Alysa laughed. "Jesh, please don't start that Trailmen and Folk dispute again this eve!"

They laughed, all knowing full well that as long as there were Trailmen and Folk, there would always be a reason to start a debate about something – about *anything* – just for fun.

Drawing their attention away from the Roaming Star, Rainur growled, "The Star will be there all night to gaze upon, for the next two nights. Even with the rising of Donol-kul it will be visible. Here. This is a fine place to make camp."

Young Colb and Thom, who had become adept at hunting hoptails, set out with Folie and the peltees to catch the evening meal. The others spread out along the ridge to set up the shelters.

As Szaren set up his and Alysa's hide hut, she gathered rocks to build a hearthring, followed by kindling and enough wood to last the night. This was her preferred duty, as over the last few cycles she had learned to make fire very well. With a few strikes from the yellow firestones Jesh had given her, the hearth would be blazing by the time the huts were up.

It was not long before five conical shelters were standing, each just large enough to hold two people. The nightchirpers began to send their song across the ridge. Their singing was comforting. The far-journeying Trailmen had discovered long ago that continuous song meant no predators were about.

Folie, Thom and Colb returned with several hoptails. While the game roasted and wild sweetroot and greens steamed in a clay pot, everyone spread mats and sat around the hearthring to talk about the events of that sun. The exhausted peltees lay beside their master-companions.

Alysa untied the soft laces of her hiking boots and removed them. She rubbed her tired feet and shins.

Nrandia, skinpainter-turned-Mapper, examined a hide map spread upon her lap. Drawn on the map were representations of hills, streams and other natural features. There were also names written on it.

Rainur asked, "Do you know where we are, young Nrandia?"

Nrandia's dark-blue eyes squinted at the words printed on the map. "It looks like we are in a land called 'the Tier of...,' and with difficulty, "...Vol-ko...Volkolik'."

Elder Marteen nodded and said, "Ah!" as if she had at first understood the name. Then she looked at Rainur and shrugged.

Rainur asked the Mapper, "Do you think there is danger of coming unto any sleeping lands?"

"I am not certain, but we must watch for places where nothing is able to grow," Nrandia replied. "It is unfortunate that Orryn has found only a few texts with maps of what the lands were called before Cat'clysm. The best he could do was to make maps with the names of the ancient places. Our additions will help us understand what these lands are like now."

Alysa added, "And the ancient places are so difficult to locate. Even artifacts haven't been easy to find this time out. So much has been buried by the cycles."

"Perhaps the closer we get to the City," said Rainur, "we will find that everything was lost in the Cat'clysm."

Jesh said, "There are not going to be enough objects in the artifacts basket to please Orryn this time. But I can imagine that he is still consumed back at Falling Stream by the study of the relics we found on our last journeys. And by the ancient machines and images discovered in Father Gord'n's cottage."

"It would be good to have my old friend Orryn on this journey," said Alysa, "were he able to be in two places at the same time. Then he could see these lands for himself."

"But then locating the ancient destroyed cities is not the main purpose of our journeys, is it?" Szaren asked.

"No," Marteen replied. "And it has not been the purpose for the past four cycles."

Alysa said, "If we could just find some evidence of the Parents of the Orphans, then we'd know we're going in the correct direction."

"Yes, the Parents," said Szaren. "It would be such a amazing thing to reunite the rightful parents with the twenty-four Orphans we saved from the M'raudas. Four cycles is a long time for them to be separated. A very long time, indeed!"

All bore wistful expressions as they gazed into the flames.

"But it is even more than that," Marteen added. Her dark-golden face brightened. "It is learning about other people, where they live, what they are like..."

"And what they might know," continued Rainur. "Marteen and I spend much time speculating about what they could tell us of the time Before Cat'clysm. Perhaps they know what happened."

Alysa said, "Orryn and I've talked quite a bit about that."

"What do you mean 'quite a bit?', my mate?" teased Szaren, feigning jealousy.

Alysa rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant, Szaren. Orryn and I spend time together only as *friends*. My betrothal to him ended ages ago!" Continuing, she dismissed Szaren's comment. "Orryn would like to know more than he's been able to learn about the history and the machines. Perhaps the Parents would have that knowledge."

"There are so many *good* reasons to find them," Marteen added.

Rubbing one of many small, old scars on his face, Folie mused, "I wonder if Jontif's Seekers have discovered anything worthwhile?"

"We will find out in two moons when both Seeker bands return to Falling Stream," replied Rainur.

Still studying the map, Nrandia shook her head and flipped her dark bangs out of her eyes. The bright paintings that flowed over her ears and down the back of her neck depicted several detailed mountain scenes. Her paintings—as all paintings borne by Trailmen—were proof that she had traveled many trails in her young life.

Nrandia said, "This name that Orryn wrote on the map, 'the Tier of Volkolik'...now what do you suppose that means?" She looked up, and everyone either shrugged or, with slight grins, said nothing. "I will rename this land..." Thinking, she looked around and proclaimed, "'The Vast Plain'."

She looked to Rainur and Marteen for confirmation, and they nodded. Nrandia picked up her quill and dipped it into a tiny pot of dark paint. She struck a neat line across the old name and wrote the new one beneath it. Concentrating, she stuck out the tip of her tongue, which she also did when she painted someone's skin.

Watching her, Jesh grinned, exposing his large front teeth. His mustache followed the curve of his lips. He bumped Szaren with his elbow. Szaren suppressed a smile, noting mischief in Jesh's wink. Joking, Jesh said, "Ah, look at the dutiful Nrandia! Careful, Nrandia, do not make an error!" She did not look up. "What if you are not supposed to rename the lands? Maybe you will get into trouble with the Elders..."

"Jesh, I am the *Mapper*. It is my duty to make changes as I see fitting. I cannot imagine sitting at a gathering, describing our journey and using a name such as 'Tier of Volkolik' when 'Vast Plain' so much better describes the land."

Jesh continued, "Does Mapper Pooktosh of Jontif's Seekers do that? Does he rename lands to fit his whim?"

Nrandia kept to her work. "This is my first cycle with the Seekers, but I am not naive. Pooktosh told me that he puts new names on the maps all the time."

Rainur rolled his eyes and growled, "Jesh, do you not have enough to keep your mind occupied? You know as well as the rest of us that the new names Nrandia adds to the map are proper to the lands we traverse."

Szaren added, "Rainur, Jesh's only trouble is the lack of a woman to occupy him."

Jesh laughed an incredulous laugh. "Ha! Not so!"

"Ah," Szaren continued. "That is correct; you visited upon Bromeedi the last we were in the Lowlands; correct?"

"No! Bromeedi and I...we are not together." Jesh looked up at the surprised faces reflecting firelight. "But I have not yet *told* her that I do not wish to pair with her. And if any of you should see her before I do...do not say anything!"

Nudging Rainur and chuckling, Marteen said, "Now who here do you think would wish to get in the middle of that?"

"How long have you known that you would not pair?" Szaren asked.

"Since the beginning. Three cycles. You all know that I have not fought to win her."

"Ah, but she has fought for you more than once," Rainur said. "And she has won!"

Jesh looked away, embarrassed.

Trying to look serious, and glancing at Marteen, Rainur said, "I would not wish to be the one to turn down Bromeedi. My wish for you, young Jesh, is a safe escape!"

Jesh quieted, almost sulking. Everyone else burst into laughter. Defensively, Jesh said bluntly, "We do not mesh very well." He looked wistfully at Szaren and Alysa.

Alysa nudged Szaren, and he reached up and roughed Jesh's hair. Jesh laughed and, shaking his head at himself, said, "It is best to not leave things undone."

Rainur said, "You are fortunate that Bromeedi did not choose to join us Seekers. That would have been very difficult for both of you."

"If she had, I would have gone over to Jontif's band and ventured west with them." Jesh shook his head and looked at Colb and Thom. "Now let this be a learning for you midlings!"

The Folk men nodded and grinned.

Rainur sighed and patted Marteen's shoulder. "I am glad that our Xugee has paired. I would not like to see him in the same quandary as Jesh!"

Marteen nodded and smiled. "That is correct; Xugee is but twenty cycles to your twenty-five, Jesh, and he has already been paired for two cycles."

Jesh winced, nothing further to add. He had heard just about every maligning comment people could make, so he had gotten used to it. He simply shrugged and busied himself with cooking.

When the game was roasted and the food in the pot was cooked, they ate. The peltees patiently waited at a distance, knowing that they would get the leftovers after their masters had supped.

Now filled, they reclined around the fire. They stared up at the Roaming Star which seemed to have barely moved. It would be visible until the morn after next, if the weather permitted. Donol-kul was rising into fullness, but even his light would not be able to eclipse the Roaming Star.

This was the first time Field Folk Thom and Colb had journeyed with the Seekers. Even though many Folk had tried to discourage them from leaving High Point, Alysa convinced the young men that the adventure outside the mountains would be good for them.

Some Folk openly criticized her for taking them away; she hoped her mother and sister were not bearing any hardship because of her. After all, Alysa was now a grown woman and only she was responsible for any blame that might arise. Yet she also realized that some would find it easier to convey any fault through her family.

But she and Szaren, with the wisdom and support of Chief Elder Islean, felt that Colb and Thom's presence on the journey could help change for the better the Folk's perception of Trailmen. At the same time, the Trailmen were learning more about the Folk.

One moon ago, Colb and Thom stopped complaining about the many discomforts along the way, thus gaining more respect from their Trailmen companions. They were growing stronger, learning much about the wilderness, decision making, and even more about the ways of the Trailmen. Although slow, change *was* taking place. Alysa believed that she could see this, anyway.

As the band relaxed beneath the deep sky sprinkled with stars, Rainur announced, "Since young Thom and Colb have joined us this season, we must share the legends about the Roaming Star." Rainur laid his head back in Marteen's lap. She caressed his bald head. Thom and Colb waited attentively.

These same legends were repeated when the Roaming Star appeared each mid-summering, as there were always new Folk or Trailmen around the hearthring who had not yet heard each other's tales.

Alysa pulled the hide string tied around her neck, freeing the blue star-filled pendant from beneath her blouse. She played her fingers over its smooth surface. Szaren moved behind her, and she leaned back into his arms. She smiled, anticipating the reactions of the uninitiated Folk men to the ancient tales.

Watching this had almost become a game to her, one she looked forward to when the Roaming Star appeared. She remembered the first time she heard the Trailmen's telling and the feeling it left her

with. At that time, and every time she had heard it since, the hair on her arms stood up.

As well as being an apprentice healer, Vvyn also told a good tale. Alysa thought he would have made an excellent Teller had he been born a Folk. Thom and Colb listened carefully as Vvyn told the Trailmen version of how the Roaming Star came to be.

Vvyn scratched his pale hair, focused his green eyes on the boys and said, "It is believed that the Roaming Star was not born of the sky."

The Folk midlings' mouths dropped open. Colb said, "No! How can that be?"

"It is said that far back in time, before there were any cities, or even the *thought* of cities—I would have to say in a time before time—there was no Roaming Star."

Thom said, "I can't imagine a time before time; a time before the homesteads!"

Vvyn rose and looked down upon them. From below, the orange firelight highlighted his sharp features and cast odd shadows over his face. Vvyn no longer looked like himself; he was transformed into an unexpected tale-teller. "There was no way for the people who came before the Trailmen to know when mid-summering was upon them; there was no way for them to know when to prepare for wintertide. So sometimes they were caught without adequate stores of food. Sometimes they starved or were caught in the high mountains, unable to escape the snows. Many of them perished.

"The Forever One was saddened by this. So he journeyed to the other side of Xunar-kun where no people dwelt. He stretched his arms wide and made the ground tremble. A crack opened, and as it widened, the dirt and rock of Xunar-kun fell over the edge. The crack grew into a great canyon with no bottom."

Alysa suppressed a grin. She looked up at Szaren. He, too, enjoyed watching as the story was absorbed by the first-time listeners. Young Thom and Colb were completely drawn into the tale, their eyes wide as they stared up at Vvyn.

"Soon a great fire began to blaze from the canyon. Some say a sun, a twin to Tabir-sun, dwelt inside Xunar-kun, and it began to lick the land."

Vyyn walked behind Colb and Thom, standing over them. He pointed at the flames in the hearthring. "The Forever One let spill the seas of Xunar-kun into the canyon. This partly subdued the fire, and when mixed with the soil and rock, the fire became a solid, burning ball. The Forever One reached in, lifted the fireball out of the canyon, and flung it into the sky!" He paused to make a throwing motion. "With its still-flaming tail, the Roaming Star will always circle Xunar-kun twice each cycle, to mark for us the middle of two seasons; mid-summering, to tell us when to prepare for wintertide, and mid-wintertide as a promise of greening's return."

Alysa rubbed the chill-bumps on her arms.

Colb and Thom sat motionless, stunned by so grand a concept. Finally, Colb asked, looking at his Trailmen companions, "The Forever One must be really big and strong!"

Thom asked, "Has anyone ever seen him?"

Marteen replied, "Ah, well, all of this happened long before the Trailmen trod upon Xunar-kun. Before *anyone* ever trod upon this world. So no one has ever *seen* the Forever One."

Thom asked, "And the canyon! Is it still there? I'd like to see that, too!"

"That is not known," Rainur said. "We may never know."

"But *knowing* is not the important thing," Folie added, who until then had been quietly replacing the hide string on his bow. He looked up. In the firelight, the scars on his face were more pronounced. "The important thing is *believing*."

"Yes, but still, wouldn't you like to *see* it?" Thom pressed.

Marteen laughed. "Now that would be a journey – all the way to the other side of the world – would it not?" All nodded.

Vyyn asked, "So what of the Fielder..." He caught himself using his tribe's somewhat derogatory name for a Field Folk. Alysa grinned. Vyyn continued, "I mean, what is the *Folk* account of the Roaming Star? What do the Folk make of it?"

"Yes," said Nrandia, "I am curious to hear the Folk belief."



Thom, the elder of the boys, looked at Alysa. She nodded and he began. "The Folk's view is...very different from the Trailmen's. We believe that the Roaming Star was once a part of Nanthan-kul. That's why Nanthan is so much smaller than Donol."

Nrandia laughed and asked, "Now how can that be?"

"It's believed that the moons collided, and Donol-kul, being so much larger, broke a piece off Nanthan. Then the piece burst into flames that have yet to be consumed. And now the Roaming Star's caught in a path around the world, as are the moons."

"So what was the purpose of that?" Nrandia asked.

Thom shrugged. "No purpose. It just is."

Nrandia laughed. "Things do not happen for no reason."

Sensing Thom's inability to pursue the questioning, Alysa added, "Orryn's been searching through the texts but hasn't yet found evidence to verify this telling. But that's what the Folk have believed these many generations."

Vyyn added, "That is an odd tale, as if it were meant to cause fear. It makes your mind question: if the moons collided...could they also collide with Xunar-kun? Or Tabir-sun?" He shuddered. "I prefer the Trailmen legend, not so much because it is what we are accustomed to, but because it is a tale of triumph."

Alysa felt uneasy at the thought of *anything* colliding with her world! She snuggled closer to Szaren and closed her eyes. Sensing her anxiety, he rocked her and softly twirled the end of her braid in his fingers.

She closed her eyes tighter, trying to shut out the thought of any harm coming to her husband and family, either by the moons colliding or by any other means. Then another fear rose up in her – the fear that she would never bear Szaren's younglings if anything bad did ever happen to him. It was all too much.

Trying to calm herself, Alysa thought, *Is it just a legend, or did the moons really collide?* She wished Orryn would happen upon knowledge that would resolve so many mysteries that left her feeling small and powerless.

She suddenly felt farther away from home than she had in a long time. Home was so far northward that even the three tallest peaks of

Winding Mountains were just a memory. She closed her eyes and recalled their radiance, longing to be back in their company.



## THE CARETAKER'S LAMENT

Two moons after the Roaming Star crossed the sky, the leaves of the forest bounding the terraces of Falling Stream homestead had turned color. Here and there they were being plucked by the wind and spiraled up into the unusually clear, deep blue-purple sky. The leaves sailed high above the stone cottages, orchards and the sparkling lake which lay on the very top of the broad hill. They swept across the background of forest to the north, toward the distant peaks of Winding Mountains which rose bright and sharp into the air.

In the center of the cottage terrace, the Great Hall loomed above the cottages. Many 'steaders went in and out of the hall, attending to the duties necessary to its supply and upkeep.

A few Trailmen – those who were the first and most eager to try a different way of life – worked alongside Folk in the fields, gathering in the last of the season's crops. They pulled carts overflowing with the cycle's bounty of grains and vegetables over stone paths to granaries and storehouses.

At the far edge of the terraces, beside the waterfalls, sat Father Gord'n's cottage. It was built into the side of the hill at a considerable distance from the nearest cottage. The only hint that there was any activity within was the curl of smoke that drifted from the chimney.

Orryn labored at what three thousand cycles before had been Father Gord'n's supper table. He bent over ancient texts, complex drawings covered with numbers and angled shapes, and metal parts that he referred to as 'gadgets'. Surrounding him on all sides were shelves loaded with old texts. The shelves also held many conglomerations of parts he had put together in an attempt to follow drawings of machines he had found.

He stroked his short, pale beard and wrinkled his brow as he leaned on the table scrutinizing a large metal box sitting before him. The box had switches and pushbuttons protruding from its surface and gauges filled with numbers, the purpose of which he did not understand.

Absently rubbing the long scar on his cheek—the scar he had earned in the vicious fighting at the Battle of M'rauda Ridge—Orryn shook his head in frustration and mumbled. Two furry, dark-eared saroos who had been dozing in his lap roused and chattered at him unhappily. He patted them and they snuggled back into slumber.

Talking to himself had become a regular pastime. Orryn talked to himself because there were few who could even begin to understand why he was studying the gadgets. Worse, there was a scarcity of those who even cared.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Nonnee, stumbling into the cottage, nearly lost the basket she was carrying. She caught herself just in time. Orryn startled and looked back to his work, shaking his head.

"Ah!" Nonnee exclaimed as she straightened and pushed her gray-streaked braid behind her. "I didn't expect the door to open so easily..."

The saroos, disgruntled at yet another disturbance, slid off Orryn's lap and slunk across the bare stone floor, sputtering as they went outside.

Nonnee shut the door and smoothed her clothing. She tiptoed toward the hearth. Orryn looked up and watched her cross behind him. She set the basket to one side.

She clicked her tongue when she saw that the fire in the hearth was nearly out. As she took a few pieces of kindling from the wood basket and placed them on the embers, she blurted, "I thought the door wasn't going to yield to me again. That's why I pushed it so hard. Why did you block it last sun so I couldn't get in? I'm the caretaker, after all!"

Orryn looked back to his work and shrugged. "I was busy."

"But you're always 'busy', Orryn. You didn't answer my pounding. I beat the door so hard—look!—the side of my hand is bruised."

Orryn rolled his eyes. "I'm truly sorry for your having struck the door so hard."

"I also climbed up the woodpile to try the shutters..." she stopped short, a little embarrassed, but continued, "and I got scrapes on my legs."

Not yielding to the guilt she tried to instill with her foolishness, Orryn kept to his work.

Nonnee stood in front of him. Her dark, aging face now wore a pleading look. "Orryn. You know that it's my duty to take care of this cottage and that it must be kept *just so*."

"Yes, I know, Nonnee; but I had some very difficult work that needed my full attention." He squirmed on his stool and did not look up. Would she never cease! "Thinking is quiet business. I need quiet time to do my work, with *nobody* around."

"But you are never quiet, never ceasing in your climbing up and down the shelves, shuffling metal parts, pushing this button or setting that gadget to humming. No, Orryn, your thinking is never quiet!" She pointed to the 'Room of Secrets' that everyone now knew was located behind the moving shelf. "When I was here the sun before, were you in there?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps."

She propped her hands on her hips. "I'm not certain that you were in the cottage at all. I listened at the door for some time and didn't hear a single sound!" She crossed her arms and stared at him, awaiting an explanation—which she did not receive. Orryn bent lower over his work to avoid looking into her eyes.

In frustration, Nonnee began to clean up around him. She collected the eating utensils piled beside him on the floor and tidied the cottage as best she could. And she did not do so quietly. "In all my years of care-taking—ever since I joined with Forstol's father and came here from Green Plateau—no one has soiled the premises with uneaten scraps of food..."

She sat down on a bench and sighed. "You've moved everything out of its proper place. I don't know where anything is supposed to be any more. Some of it belongs in this part of the cottage, some in the Room of Secrets..." Her voice began to break. "Orryn, you're not supposed to be *living* in Father Gord'n's cottage!"

"I'm not living..." Orryn looked around, for the first time realizing that he had, after all, created a considerable mess.

Nonnee's eyes glistened with tears. She continued quietly, "My son Forstol has kept to his tradition as a stoneworker. Forstol does

everything he's supposed to do in carrying out this most important task, for most of Falling Stream is made of stone. Forstol is so very clever with stone and mortar. His trimmings are magnificent, his tapers, perfect! I'm so proud of my son and his decision to remain in a *traditional* role!"

Orryn finally looked up and ceased his work. "I'm proud of Forstol, too. We grew up together. He's one of my closest companions. The reason I gave up my Teller duty was not because I thought it was unimportant; I did it so that I could pursue Father Gord'n's secrets. I'm happy for my choice. I believe it was the correct one!"

Nonnee had obviously forgotten that Forstol had shed his traditional role for a time when he became a warrior and fought ferociously at the Battle of M'rauda Ridge. That was hardly a traditional Field Folk duty! But Orryn thought bringing that up would only make matters worse for himself.

"How do Bavat and Tach feel about your choice, Orryn?"

He sighed. "My parents are well with it, Nonnee."

"Is that so?" She noisily began to tidy the room again. She clicked her tongue. "When you and Forstol were boys just learning your crafts, I never imagined this would come to be. All you talked about back then was becoming a Teller! Then you achieved it, and when you brought younglings here for tellings, you didn't create any mess at *all*."

She stabbed a finger at him. "You were so respectful, so careful. You did what your duty required and only touched those things that were allowed!" She carefully placed a few texts on a shelf. "When you handled an object, you always put it back *exactly* where Father Gord'n had set it three thousand cycles ago. Now when people come to visit...What's so important about learning what all these...gadgets are for, anyway?" She threw up her hands, placed her palms on either side of her face and shook her head.

Orryn, growing concerned over Nonnee's rising anxiety, set his work down. He looked at her. "Nonnee. The only way I can learn about the gadgets, what's in the texts, what the drawings and images mean, is to study them. And to study them, I must bring them out, scrutinize them, and yes, make a mess of things. I can't explain why

just yet, but I know in my *core* that learning as much as I can about them *is* important. I apologize for my mess; but I believe that Father Gord'n would understand."

Tears spilled down her dark, creased cheeks. "Would he?"

Rapping on the door startled them. It flew open, and suddenly the cottage was filled with younglings. Following them were Major Teller Bakar and Lesser Teller Thikil, who had advanced into Orryn's position when he gave up the duty.

"Ho, Gadgetcrafter Orryn!" blurted Teller Thikil.

"Ho, Orryn," said Teller Bakar with a hearty laugh.

Overjoyed at seeing the friendly faces, Orryn rose and said, "Ho, Teller Bakar. Teller Thikil!" He bowed in respect. He turned to their charges. "Ho, Younglings! How've you been? So 'Gadgetcrafter' is my title now, is it?" He chuckled and sat down.

Bakar said, "Well, we must have some way to refer to you and the duties you're currently undertaking, mustn't we?"

Orryn said, "Agreed. I guess that title will do!"

Nonnee wiped her eyes and retired to the rear of the cottage. She continued to do the best tidying she could with so many people around. Orryn feared she might suffer additional dismay at the number of younglings swarming the room, but he must now turn his attention to them.

The younglings crowded around the table. The youngest was a little over four cycles old, the oldest perhaps seven. They set to asking questions, all seeming to talk at once as they looked around the cottage at the many wondrous things.

Orryn looked into their excited faces. "Younglings, what *one* thing would you like to ask me? Keep it simple, now, as I'm still learning myself!"

One boy said, "Tell us about the room—the Room of Secrets!"

That request was the most popular one. It seemed that everyone wanted to know what miracles were hidden in that room. With entry denied to all but Orryn and the Tellers, he waited until the younglings quieted, as was the way when any stories were about to be told.

Looking into their eager eyes, he understood that many would become homestead leaders in the time to come. He wanted them to



be interested in non-traditional ideas and, yes, the gadgets. For this reason, he welcomed their interest in his stories.

He began in much the same style as he did when he had been a Teller. "There are secrets in there that you can't begin to imagine!" The younglings' eyes opened wide, and they whispered in astonishment. "There are images of the moons as they still, to this sun, spin around Xunar-kun. There are larger gadgets than the one that sits here on the table. I'm still trying to learn their purpose. Sometimes when I push this..." Orryn pressed a large blue button on the front of the console, "this happens."

A soft whirring emitted from the machine and soon filled the air with a beating vibration. In just a few heartbeats, it grew so loud that everyone, including Orryn, had to clap their hands over their ears. The younglings squealed and laughed in delight. They had never heard anything like it! The noise frightened Nonnee. She covered her ears and ran out the door. Orryn pushed the button again, and the noise slowly whirled to a stop.

The children jumped up and down. When Orryn pretended that he was going to press the button again, they ran outside, laughing and screeching, not wishing a repeat.

But one youngling remained: Umbri. One of the older Orphans rescued from the M'raudas, she was not quite six cycles old. The chubby girl, dressed in a light-colored smock, continued to examine the machine. She said, "Gadgetcrafter Orryn?"

"Why, brave Umbri, the sound didn't scare you off, did it?"

"No, Gadgetcrafter Orryn."

"You may call me just 'Orryn'."

The other children poured back inside when they saw that Orryn's hand was not near the machine. They crowded around him again.

Umbri sighed, considering the machine. "Does it do anything other than make that awful noise? Why does it do that? What's the hole for?" She leaned over and peeked into a small square opening on the console.

Bakar said, "Umbri, you're always too full of questions!"

Orryn held up a hand. "I've learned that Umbri has uncanny curiosity, Teller Bakar. I'm thrilled that she would ask." He returned his eyes to the girl. "If it does have a purpose, Umbri, I haven't discovered it yet."

"I truly would like to know what it's for. I truly would!"

"Well, Umbri, how would you like to come here every sun to help me?"

A boy said, "She can't! She's a girl!"

Orryn said, "Ah, but of course she can, Tody. Alysa of High Point's a girl, and look what she has achieved!" Orryn began to hum a tune, and the children joined in.

A wide grin spread across Umbri's face, as she knew the story behind her rescue from the M'raudas and Alysa's part in it.

Orryn said, "Would you ask your mother and father if you can come to help me, Umbri?"

Umbri beamed and nearly yelled, "Yes, Yes! I'll ask as soon as I get home!"

"Good. I hope they say you can."

Bakar and Thikil guided the younglings outside. They continued to hum the tune as they trod down the path.

Orryn was alone again. He thought back to Umbri's rescue. She and the other younglings had been so hungry, cold, and ill kept when they found them stacked in cages at the M'rauda camp. What would have become of Umbri if they had not found her in time? What if Alysa had not gone against tradition by going on her long, lonely journey to find the Trailmen? His eyes misted as he thought of the consequences.

But Umbri, the other Orphans, and those younglings stolen from the homesteads—including Seda and Aryz's Sureena—*had* been saved; the Orphans were welcomed into the homesteads and Trailmen camps. Even though he had been initially disappointed that he and Alysa had not ended up joining, Orryn was happy that everything unfolded as it did.

Now that the Orphans had become a part of them, he considered, *Would finding their true mothers and fathers be the best thing, after all?*

The Seekers would be home any sun now, and with them, news of whether or not the Parents were found.

He stared back at the texts and drawings covering the table, musing if he would ever solve the purpose of the gadgets he had found. But he would not allow himself to become discouraged. He sighed, sat back, closed his eyes and said to the air, "I need *help!*"

The basket that Nonnee brought rested on the hearth. He rose and opened it, finding a small pot of stew, fresh bread and drink. He shook his head, trying to understand how Nonnee could be so disgusted with him, yet at the same time so caring.

Returning to the metal box on the table, he scribbled a note and stuck it on a switch beside the blue button. An arrow on the note pointed to the button. The note read *DO NOT PUSH!*

## RETURN TO FALLING STREAM

The early leaffall morn was crisp and cool. The trees in the forest and orchards were bare. Along the edge of the forest, people cut and stacked wood. Crafters carried baskets of raw materials from the storehouses into the Great Hall. Food and finished goods were being loaded into the Pantry which sat near the hall.

The wind was brisk and repeatedly stirred up shocks of spent grain stalks that the Falling Stream 'steaders had stacked for removal to compost heaps. The midlings and adults were challenged by the need to continually gather the debris and toss it into carts before it was whisked off over the fields. Sometimes the women's shawls were snatched from their shoulders so that they had to chase after those, too!

One figure, however, stood alone, solid, watching from the highest terrace. As the wind whirled leaves around Trailman Jontif's feet, he gazed beyond the fields, down through the bare trees southwest of M'rauda Ridge. Since their return two suns before, he and the other Trailmen from his Seeker band had kept a constant watch on the forest. His band had returned without finding the Parents or any evidence of them. Jontif hoped that Rainur's band had at least found some sign.

Suddenly, his gaze brightened as he detected faraway movement through the forest. He shaded his eyes from the sun and squinted to be certain; yes, it was Rainur's Seekers, returning at last!

Jontif lifted a leaprock horn to his mouth and blew several loud, high blasts. The sound echoed over the homestead, and everyone stopped; they lifted their faces from their work or ran out of buildings. The Trailmen emerged from their huts along the waterfalls and looked at Jontif. He aimed his horn at the forest.

Most turned back to what they were doing, but some ran down the stairway to the lowest terrace, yelling with excitement. They halted at the entrance to the forest. The new path leading from the south of Falling Stream—now called Ridge Path Lower—was only

used by the Seekers when they left Falling Stream on their journeys to locate the Parents and upon their return.

Soon Marteen and Rainur emerged from the trees, followed by Alysa, Szaren and the others. When they saw the waiting 'steaders, the Seekers let out a hearty *whoop!* in greeting.

The Seekers were met with embraces and welcome-home claps on their shoulders. Leading the other Trailmen, Jontif arrived out of breath and just in time to shout the order, "Relieve the weary travelers of their burdens. Come now, everyone!"

Elder Poolan, accompanied by Vadonna, his wife, looked beyond the Seekers and saw that no strange faces accompanied them – which meant that the Parents had not been found. Poolan sighed and nodded his gray head. "Yes, let's all lend a hand." Vadonna grimaced and turned up the stairway.

Soon the members of Rainur's band were relieved of their travel gear but, out of habit, they held onto their weapons.

Seda and Aryz pushed through the throng. Seda threw her arms around Alysa, holding her best friend as if she would never let go.

Aryz – carrying Rugal, his and Seda's second-born – firmly gripped Szaren's forearm. Szaren returned the masculine greeting.

Szaren looked at Rugal, who growled and crooked his arm. Szaren felt the boy's bicep and said, "Moons, look how you have grown, Rugal!" And to Aryz, "He is strong for a boy barely three cycles old."

Aryz looked into Rugal's large green eyes and proudly smiled. "Yes, he is. Working in the fields has made him strong. Before you know it, Szaren, you'll be holding your own youngling in your arms!"

Szaren said wistfully, "Ah, but only if we could be certain of that." Szaren roughed Rugal's curly red hair. Rugal giggled and buried his face in his father's shoulder.

Someone tugged on Alysa's trouser leg. She looked down and beheld Sureena, now five cycles old, staring up at her. Alysa knelt down and looked into the smiling little redhead's blue eyes. "Ho, Sureena. How tall you've grown!"

"I know!" Sureena blurted. Alysa hugged her tight. Seda, Aryz and Szaren laughed at the innocent antics of their beloved younglings.

The crowd parted, and Orryn stood before them, panting. "Ho, Seekers!" He stopped to catch his breath.

"Don't tell me," Alysa said, rising. "Let me guess. Hmm. What could it be that Orryn seeks besides the knowledge that we are back home safely? Hmm. Could it be...this?" She raised a packbasket, which Orryn eagerly seized.

Laughing, he set it down and said, "Of course I'm glad that you're back safely, Lys! But then I had no doubt that you would be. And with a nice, full basket of..." He peeked into the packbasket. His smile faded.

"Yes," Jesh added as he joined his friends, "we did not come upon many good artifacts. Almost everything we did find was broken into bits that would be of no value to anyone, even you, Orryn."

Orryn slung the basket over his shoulder. "Ah, well. There'll be more journeys, correct? I mean, since there are obviously no strangers among you..."

Suddenly, Alysa and Szaren looked tired. It had been, after all, a long journey that had given them little in return. Szaren said, "We did find some of the places on your map, Orryn. But very few."

"Ah, well," Orryn said again. "We can add the place names to the Great Map that both Seeker bands found. At least we'll be that much closer to understanding what's south of here."

"Yes," Alysa added, "we should be glad that we gained something from this journey."

All of them nodded, unwilling to accept failure, preferring to look at any good that comes when things do not turn out as planned.

Aryz said to Alysa and Szaren, "You'll stay with us, as always?"

"Of course," said Szaren, "as always."

Poolan raised his voice and said, "The sun's moving on, whether we like it or not! Let's get back to our labor. We can gather in the morn to discuss the findings of both Seeker bands. I'm certain we'll learn much from their adventure and from that information, determine what any further journeys might involve."



The following morn, Orryn and the two Mappers—Nrandia from Rainur's band and Pooktosh from Jontif's—bent over a table in the Great Hall. They examined the maps they had used on their last journey. On the wall just behind the table hung a large hide called "the Great Map". Drawn on the top half of the Great Map were features of known Folk and Trailmen territories. Most of the lower half was blank.

The Great Map was not as large as the carved Planting Calendar that hung on the rear wall, but it intrigued many, as new features were added each time the Seekers returned. Yet, other more traditional Folk and Trailmen did not care for the constant reminder that there was a possibility of other—probably different—people somewhere out there.

Orryn, as the Great Map scribe, leaned against the wall to one side of it. He waited while Nrandia and Pooktosh—both proud of their duty as Mappers—argued about the name each had given to a stream they had passed on the last journey.

Nrandia blew a puff of air into her dark bangs to move them out of her eyes. She grimaced. "Pooktosh, 'Rockhopper's Tail' is a very good name for the way that stream moves over the land."

Pooktosh was younger than Nrandia, but he was tall and strong and not afraid to stand up to her. He focused his green eyes on her and pounded his fist on the table. "Ah! So once again you insist on using one of *your* names. What is wrong with 'Rolling Stream'? I think that name is very suitable. Orryn?"

Orryn, not particular about what they ended up calling the new features, shrugged, leaving it up to the young Trailmen to sort out. They took great pride in their duty, and realizing this, he let them do their best.

Nrandia crossed her arms, not intimidated by Pooktosh. She said, "I think that many of your names are fine. But this name—'Rolling Stream'—tells me that the stream moves up and down, which it does

not. It is very curvy and, well, takes the shape of a rockhopper's tail. I stand firm on the name I have chosen." She pounded on the table, the discussion over as far as she was concerned.

Pooktosh ran his hand over his short black hair and shook his head. He shrugged, conceding. Nrandia grinned.

"Good!" said Orryn. He picked up his quill and scribbled the words 'Rockhopper's Tail' along a river he had drawn on the Great Map. He stood back and compared it to Nrandia and Pooktosh's maps. "It looks like we've transferred the last of your findings. Is there anything more to add before the others see it?"

The Trailmen looked at their maps, shook their heads and rolled them up. Orryn took them and set them to the side, that duty completed.

Soon men and women began to enter the Great Hall: the Folk and Trailmen Seeker bands, Elder Poolan and Vadonna, the other Elders, Tellers Bakar and Thikil, Aryz and Seda, and several others who were interested in learning about the discoveries.

Orryn stood beside the Great Map as all settled upon benches or leaned against the opposite wall. Some of them strained to see the Great Map. Others folded their arms across their chests and looked around to see who was present. Still others engaged in conversation while they waited.

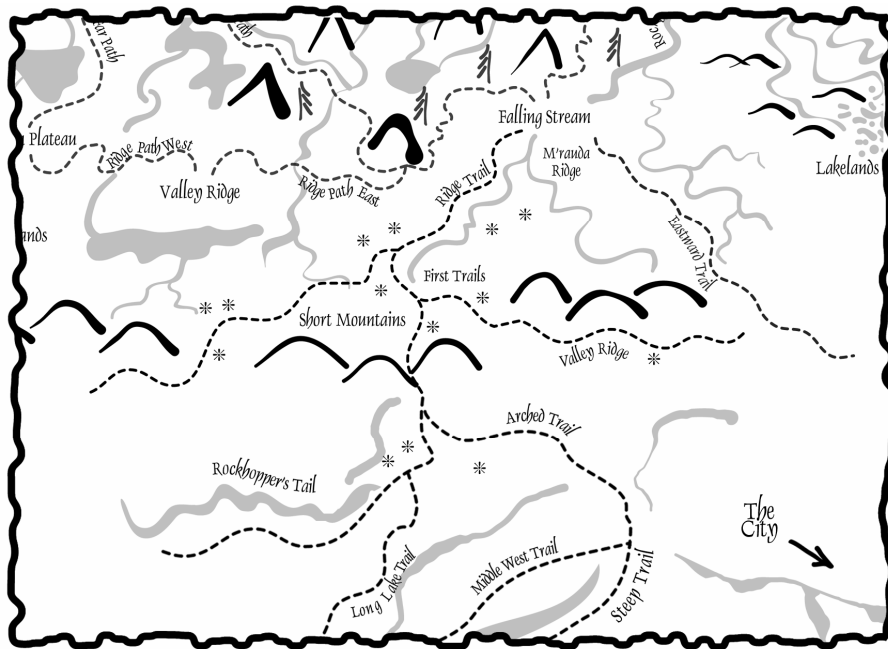
Nrandia and Pooktosh sat near Orryn. Elder Poolan stood beside him and cleared his voice. Everyone quieted. He announced, "Orryn and the Mappers—Pooktosh and Nrandia, thank you for your hard work—have renewed the Great Map with information from the last journey. Orryn will explain what the Seekers found. Orryn?" Poolan sat nearby.

Orryn gathered his thoughts. He stood before the Great Map and began, drawing the attention of his audience much as he had as a Teller. "Ho! Welcome, everyone. This sun you'll learn about what the brave Seekers discovered on their last journey. We're truly grateful to them for having risked their lives to locate the Parents. It was unfortunate that they didn't find them, but we appreciate them just the same." He gestured to the Seekers seated in the center of the gather-



ing. They looked around at the others and nodded, modest in response to Orryn's compliment.

"Now to tell of their findings." Orryn turned to the Great Map, maintaining as much eye contact with people as he could. His hand swept over its surface as he spoke. "You will recall that during the previous three journeys, the Seekers covered a combined area as far west as the edge of the Rolling Lands and well south of Valley Ridge, here...and far south of the Lowlands and to the northwestern edge of the City."



Orryn surveyed the gathering to be certain that he still had everyone's attention. "Upon looking at the Great Map, it might not seem like this is much territory to have traversed. But remember that the way in which they search—not straight in one direction, but instead weaving back and forth across the lands in search of signs of recent habitation or ancient artifacts—takes much time."

People nodded, the Seekers much more energetically, as Orryn explained in detail the method they used. Turning to the Great Map, he traced the drawings with his finger. "This time out, the Seekers traversed farther south to the Vast Plain, here; and to the edge of the Clay Rim, here. So you can see that they made good distance."

Teller Bakar said, "I'd most like to hear, did they find any sign of the Parents?"

Orryn sighed. "No, they didn't." Then optimistically, "But they did find some artifacts unlike any I've seen before." He gestured to a small table that stood beside the Great Map, on which lay a few large crystals, a piece of polished metal, and an unbroken red vial.

Several Folk grumbled. One said, "We don't care about any of that ancient refuse, Orryn!"

"Yes," Paraso added, standing. Angry, the middle-aged man thrust out his large jaw.

"Some of us don't believe that any good will *ever* come of these journeys. It seems that the Parents of the Orphans should be making some effort of their own, instead of us putting ourselves at risk. The Folk would do better to apply themselves to the fields!"

The Seekers were astonished by these harsh words of criticism; this was the first they had heard for themselves any rumblings about their journeys.

Flustered, Elder Poolan replied, "That would be your outlook as a respected Field Leader, Paraso; I appreciate knowing your thinking. We've thought of this, of course. Perhaps the Parents *are* searching for their younglings. The Seekers have found neither a recent hearthring nor a flame from the highest vantage points of their journeys. This indicates that the Parents might dwell much farther south than was thought. And, quite possibly, they have struck out on a southerly or westerly course to seek their younglings, which would take them in the wrong direction. It could take many cycles to meet up with them."

Paraso said, "So what are we supposed to do? Chase them until our final farewell?" Murmurs rose from the gathering; some supportive of Paraso, others not. It seemed that Vadonna, Poolan's wife, would jump from her seat in agreement were she not restrained by a

Folk tradition dictating that Elders' wives show support for their husbands.

Paraso continued, "Four times the Seekers have gone out. Four cycles' worth of greenings and summerings have been wasted. And for what? To bring back broken artifacts? To find 'new lands'? What are we going to do with new lands anyway? Abandon Winding Mountains and cultivate them?" He snorted and sat down.

Poolan looked around, witnessing a mix of emotions. He looked at the Seekers, who bore expressions of surprise and disappointment, thinking of the sacrifice they had made. "I'm curious if the Trailmen think the same? Elder Marteen, what's the Trailmen's perspective?"

Marteen stood. She looked around and firmly addressed the gathering. "The majority of Trailmen see value in continuing the search. The Seekers are not daunted by the task, even if it *should* take the rest of our lives." Rainur, Szaren and the other Trailmen threw their fists into the air and cheered in agreement.

"Then I think," Poolan said, "that there is but one solution." He looked at Alysa, Thom and Colb. "The Folk Seekers can stay in the homesteads—or choose to continue the journeys. It's up to them. But we have no right to suggest that the Trailmen cease the journeys." Alysa and the others, elated by Poolan's support, nodded at him. "And if any other Folk should wish to join them, I, for one, encourage this."

Vadonna grimaced and crossed her arms.

Poolan continued, "There's never been any strong dispute among the Elders of the homesteads about Folk going on the journeys; there are plenty to carry out the homestead duties. So let's have no further dispute."

The decision made, Paraso respectfully nodded, agreeing to put the argument behind him. He had his say and seemed satisfied with that.

Poolan continued, "Now any who wish to discuss the next journey should stay. All others may return to their duties."

The crowd dispersed, most leaving the Great Hall. Some wandered up to look more closely at the Great Map and artifacts. One of the artifacts was a shiny piece of metal not much larger than the palm

of a hand. They had never seen their reflection in anything other than pots of water or pools and were startled to see themselves clearly in the shiny metal. They passed the wondrous object to each other, having a great laugh. Maybe they were learning that even though the Parents had not been discovered, there could be many things to learn about the lands to the south.

"There'll always be some," Poolan confided in the Seekers, "who'll find reasons not to learn. I myself am still learning to be open to new things. If only the whole clan would endeavor to do so!" Poolan deferred to Rainur.

Rainur nodded and said, "It would be best to discuss the next journey now, before we lose the desire." The Seekers laughed; none of them intended to allow their desire to wane, even after just returning and being met by a few unappreciative Folk.

Rainur continued, looking at the Great Map, "We have covered a lot of territory in four journeys. Now it seems we must push farther south."

Orryn added, "Perhaps even below the City itself, keeping well away from the Sleeping Lands that surround it, of course."

"We must also keep in mind," Marteen said, "to watch for sleeping lands not yet known to us; we would not want to wander into any unknown places that have been poisoned by the Veiled Slayer."

"Yes," Rainur agreed. "We must always remain aware that the Veiled Slayer might have visited upon some of those lands and left them tainted." He considered the Map. "Now, if we must reach farther south, then we must begin the next journey from a point well below Falling Stream. We must begin from the Lowlands."

Orryn said, "That's a very good idea. You wouldn't have to repeatedly traverse as much land if you began in the Lowlands."

Alysa asked, taken aback, "Doesn't that mean that we'd have to go to the Lowlands before wintertide?"

Marteen nodded. "That is the only way to get a start from a more southern point first thing next greening."

Szaren brightened. "For us Trailmen who have been on all four journeys and have spent wintertide at either Falling Stream or High Point, it would be good to winter at home for a change!"

Alysa grew quiet. If she and Szaren spent wintertide in the Lowlands, it would be her first time away from home during that season. Szaren beamed at her. She smiled back, but it was difficult for her to feel truly joyful. Her body grew tense, and her stomach tightened.



It was late. Nanthan-kul's light passed through the open door and flooded the hallway. Sureena and Rugal slept peacefully in their nook. Seda adjusted the quilt that covered them and pulled the curtains closed. She shut the front and hallway doors against the cool air and returned to the table, where she sat with her husband, Alysa and Szaren. Crumbs of roundbread and smears of udommo cream and fruit preserves littered otherwise empty plates. A clay mug rested before each of them.

As they did every eve before going to bed, the friends discussed the sun's events. Aryz took a sip from his mug and said, "As tied as I am to the fields, being a Field Leader and all, I was surprised by Paraso's criticism of the Seekers. How can he give up so easily? Younglings need their mothers and fathers!"

Alysa said, "There'll always be criticism of some sort, Aryz. And if not from the Folk, then from the Trailmen."

Seda said to Aryz, "I wouldn't be critical of you if you wanted to join the Seekers, my beloved."

Aryz shook his head. "I'm not at all interested in making the journey—or in leaving you and our younglings, *my* beloved—but I don't have any trouble understanding that our friends do. And I'm glad that they choose to, because how else can we learn?"

Seda chuckled, "There'll always be some who won't change how they think; I'm certain that many people couldn't even imagine changing."

"All that matters," Alysa said, "is that we're aware when change needs to happen. We must trust that we'll always be aware, and willing."

Szaren said, "Yes! Trust is the most important thing; trust that we will always be led in the correct direction." He winked at Alysa. She looked into his sleepy, pale-blue eyes and smiled.

Seda asked, "When are you going back to High Point?"

"Since Leafall Moonsfest is in less than a moon," Alysa replied, "we've decided to leave in ten suns. That'll give us half a moon back at High Point before Moonsfest."

"You will be participating in Trade, correct?" asked Aryz.

"Yes," Alysa replied, "although..."

"What?" Seda asked.

Szaren said, "This might be her last Trade."

"Why?" Seda asked, surprised.

"Because I don't think it's fair that I'm not around to help Boshe and Panli prepare. As much as I love Trade, it doesn't seem right."

"Ah..." Seda said. "It'll be strange not to think of you as a Trader any more."

Alysa said, "It's my most favorite duty. But Szaren and I want to continue to be Seekers." She looked at Szaren and he nodded. "Preparation for Trade is too large a burden for just Boshe and Panli to do by themselves. They really need a third."

"So they're going to have to find someone else?" Aryz asked.

Alysa nodded.

Szaren added, "They should have less trouble finding someone now that the Trailmen are no longer strangers to the Folk." He watched Alysa closely as he continued. "And the best part is that we will be going to the Lowlands for wintertide!"

"Yes," Alysa agreed, averting her eyes, "and that's a good thing..."

In Book Two, four years after Alysa reunites two antagonistic tribes, another threat comes to the mountains. Who are the Parents, really? And what do they want? Alysa and the TrailFolk face a menace far more dangerous than the M'raudas!

The TrailFolk of Xunar-kun, Book Two in the Tellings of Xunar-kun Series

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at  
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/3780.html?s=pdf>