

THE GIFT

Mark smiled. “Speaking of appreciating whatever the aliens did to us, having no tooth decay is like an extra gift. My Earth teeth weren’t bad, but a root canal and extracting wisdom teeth were enough for me. When I was younger, I worried I might have inherited too many of my father’s genes—he had most of his teeth replaced by implants by the time he was fifty.”

“I don’t think it was just the nano elements,” said Yozef. “A combination of bacterial action, a diet high in carbohydrates, and not cleaning the teeth are the causes of cavities. Well . . . those and genetics—genes like maybe your father had. Nothing we can do about the genes. Teeth here are generally better than you’d expect because the local microorganisms aren’t as compatible with our biochemistry. At least, that’s my theory since infections aren’t as common.”

“That reminds me,” said Mark. “I was going to ask how come the sweetened foods here taste more like on Earth. In Frangel, the only way to sweeten food was with the sap from a parasitic vine growing on trees. It wasn’t all that common. I only remember a few occasions when someone found an infected tree. I even had a casual thought about seeing whether I could deliberately infect trees to produce more sap.” Mark grimaced. “Had other things on my mind, and, as you know, events . . .”

“Never heard of such a vine on Caedellium,” said Yozef. “Any sweetness came from fruit and fruit concentrates. You’ve seen a hell of a lot more of Anyar than I have. How about any of those places?”

“No. Not that I saw. Of course, I wasn’t exactly looking to sample the fanciest cuisines. Most of the time we bought foods that traveled well.”

“Even so,” Yozef said, “I suspect you’d have come across more sweetened foods. I guess the plants transplanted from Earth didn’t include sugarcane and sugar beets. Those were Earth’s main sources, along with processing of cornstarch to get high-fructose corn syrup.”

“Well, I haven’t seen corn anywhere I’ve traveled on Anyar. Wheat and barley, but don’t they have starch?”

“Yes, but their higher protein content makes it harder to process. As for where we get sweetener here, it’s from a swamp plant called ‘holowar.’ Most of the plant parts are fleshy. Something like seaweeds you’d see washed up on Earth beaches. We use all parts of the holowar—leaves, stems, and roots.”

Yozef laughed. “It’s something of a story how we got sugar out of a swamp plant. It actually began with trying to identify naturally occurring antibiotics for the infections that *do* occur.”

He stopped speaking, and his face tightened. After half a minute, he looked at Mark. “Sorry. Memories popped up. After the final battle with the Narthani, I was wounded and out of it for a while, but while I was still recovering I visited the wounded.” He shook his head. “There were thousands. Hell . . . maybe well into the tens of thousands. Mainly our people, of course, but there were a few wounded Narthani that our people didn’t kill in the aftermath.”

“Anyway, with so many casualties, there were some infections, though not as many as there would have been on Earth before antibiotics. However, what they lacked in numbers, they made up for in severity. Once the local microorganisms seem to take hold, they really ravage a body, and the fatality rate is high. That’s when I determined to try and develop antibiotics. I saw it as a long-term effort. I’m not a microbiologist, and knew nothing about Anyar microorganisms.”

“What I *did* know was the basics of growing microorganisms in labs and roughly how penicillin was discovered. For growth, on Earth it’s either in a liquid medium or on agar plates. The agar comes from seaweed and is composed of two different polymers. Both have the two stereoisomers of the monosaccharide galactose as a major constituent, either as unmodified galactose or with side groups such as sulfate.”

A hint of a smile followed Mark’s faint sigh. He recognized the change in Yozeff’s tone of voice and the sparkle in his eyes whenever he launched into an explanation involving chemistry. It was a quirk of the man, but considering what Yozeff had accomplished, Mark could easily tolerate it.

“What we get from the holowar plant is not ‘real’ agar, but that’s what I call it because it works acceptably as a solid growth medium for Anyar microorganisms. Then we do the classic Fleming experiment of growing a specific microorganism on an agar plate where we introduce other microorganisms onto that lawn of cells. If the new organism, often a type of mold or fungus, produces an antibiotic, the lawn of surrounding organisms will start to die. It’s more complicated than how I just described it, but those are the basics.”

Mark shook his head. “And that *actually* works? Sounds like it could take forever to find anything potentially useful.”

“Well . . . it was either that or not bother trying.” Yozeff smiled. “Of course, now that I know there are other survivors on Anyar I could have waited and hoped a microbiologist would turn up. Anyway, I opted to give it a shot. I don’t know the exact number of samples we’ve tested, but it’s way into the thousands. By luck or happenstance, we’ve got three candidates, one of which looks especially promising. It’s worked on the first animal experiments, but I’m loath to move to human trials yet.”

“I suspect the first uses will be on cases that seem too severe for the person to survive, and you’ll give them the test antibiotic as a last resort,” said Mark.

“That’s pretty much what I figure. I’ve talked to the senior medicant who’s liaising with the research, and he’s recommended waiting until that exact scenario. Of course, the problem is that if the antibiotic doesn’t work, we wouldn’t know if it was only because it was given too late.”

Yozeff shook his head. “But back to your original question about sweeteners. While we focused on getting the agar plates to work, we found that a large fraction of this agar is a polymer more like starch. Instead of galactose being the major monosaccharide component as with agar, the holowar polymer contains mainly glucose and a smaller fraction of galactose. The other polymer fraction of our agar seems to be more like pectin, a polymer of galacturonic acid, a sugar acid derived from galactose.”

Yozeff’s face was again animated.

It wasn’t a conscious decision, but Mark’s brain shunted knowledge associating galacturonic acid and pectin with the holowar plant into a seldom-accessed compartment of his mind.

“Such polymers can be broken down to monosaccharides, usually by adding appropriate enzymes, but we use the other main method, acid hydrolysis. Depending on the conditions used, you can get different mixtures of glucose, galactose, and fructose. The latter is the sweetest tasting and is the main reason so much sweetening on Earth uses high-fructose corn syrup.”

Yozeff stopped and looked a little chagrined. “Sorry, but I get a bit cranked up whenever I get a chance to say anything semi-chemical to someone who understands what I’m saying.”

“I got most of it,” said Mark, letting the incipient smile blossom. “So that’s where the sugar comes from in the foods here?”

“Well, when we say ‘sugar’ on Earth, we usually mean sucrose, which is a disaccharide of glucose bonded with fructose. But yes, the resulting syrupy stuff from holowar is cleaned up and used in foods.”

Yozef’s face brightened in a wide smile, and he chuckled. “The first major use was unanticipated. I’d . . . uh . . . drunk way too much of a favorite local wine one evening when I felt a little melancholy. It might have been brought on by the sudden availability of sweets like I hadn’t experienced since Earth.

“Anyway . . . I guess the more I drank, the more I babbled on, and I told everyone present about Christmas. Of course, I didn’t call it Christmas. Didn’t seem appropriate, so I called it Saint Nikolas Day. You know . . . Old Saint Nick, Santa Claus. A couple of sixdays later I got thrown a surprise party, and they tried to recreate what I’d told them about Christmas. It was quite an experience. Carnigan dressed up as Saint Nikolas and rode up to the house driving a sleigh—it had snowed the past few days. The horses had faux antlers and noses dabbed red. The sleigh had bell chains. Turns out, the whole city got in on the surprise and liked the idea of a new celebration. They told me that when they’d asked about the meaning of Saint Nikolas Day, I went on about good cheer, celebrating life, treating other people kindly, delicious sweets, the special care of children and giving them presents, Christmas trees, colored lights, family gatherings, and blessings for the year. *Actually*, I don’t know if I got a *complete* playback of what I said, though I guess I didn’t say anything to later get me in trouble. You know . . . about Earth and how I got here.”

Mark scratched his beard. “I think I had a similar experience, though it wasn’t brought on by drinking too much, as yours was. It was a winter evening—it gets colder in central Frangel than it does here. We’d been at the yearly dinner and party thrown by the family of the ranch we both worked at. They were the Toodmans . . . Keeslyn and Leesta Toodman. It was a big deal at the ranch. Lots of people, lots of food, lots of beer, and everyone in a good mood.

“When we went back to the cottage we lived in, I must have been maudlin and talked about our family Christmases back home in Colorado. I don’t know if I rambled as much as you say you did, but it must have made an impression on Maghen. A year later, we were crossing Rustal on the Ganolar continent. All of us, humans and horses, were tired, and it had snowed enough to slow travel. Our guide, a Rustalian arms smuggler named Gulgit, suggested we take a day of rest, even though he wanted to get over a pass in a major mountain range before it got snowed shut.

“Both of us were worried about Alys. She’d always been a happy, outgoing toddler before we left, but after the months of travel she seemed more withdrawn. Maghen remembered my story of Christmas. Alys is pretty sharp for her age and understood more than I expected of what Maghen told her about Christmas trees and presents. She perked right up and wanted to have Christmas right where we were. I guess we could have sluffed it off, but we wanted to do something to help her, and on impulse I agreed. Of course, then we were stuck about the Christmas tree and presents. I cut down a shrub that wasn’t *too* different a shape from a small fir and decorated it with pieces of cloth. The Rustalians were initially perplexed at what I was doing, but they got in the mood when I explained to Gulgit that was for Alys. He was the only one I could talk to . . . we both knew Suvalu . . . but he translated for the others. They contributed small pieces of cloth from what they had, and we ended up with a tree not *all* that bad when illuminated by our campfire. Well . . . considering the circumstances, anyway.”

Mark paused, and his face softened. “While *I* was busy, Maghen hurriedly sewed little cloaks for Alys’s two stuffed animals . . . Milo and Abba. It might end up being one of my most

memorable Christmases. Anyway . . . Alys transformed back into the little girl we knew in Frangel, both that night and pretty much for the rest of the trip.”

He paused before continuing in a more contemplative tone. “I wonder if she remembers?”

Yozef grunted. “Well . . . if she doesn’t, the other children are bound to start talking about Saint Nikolas Day. It’s coming in a couple of sixdays.”

Yozef’s prediction was prescient. Two days later, after the Kaldwel family sat for evening meal, Maghen was cutting Alys’s meat into smaller pieces, and Mark had just transferred a larger bite into his mouth.

“Papa,” asked Alys, “is Krismas the same as Saint Nikolas Day?”

Maghen snickered. “Told you she remembered.”

Alys waited patiently for Mark to chew and swallow, innocent eyes fixated on his face.

“Uh . . .”

That’s as far as he got before stopping to think. How could he explain it in a way she would understand? He tried to remember what he had told Tiffany, his daughter with Jocelyn on Earth, when Tiffany was Alys’s age. Sadly, he couldn’t remember having many conversations with her. All he recalled was sitting through two of her favorite videos seemingly innumerable times while his mind was off somewhere else. By the time Tiffany was Alys’s age, he was disillusioned with the marriage and took every opportunity to be away from home . . . something he only *fully* realized in the last few years on Frangel.

Maghen finished cutting Alys’s meat and started on her own. She cleared her throat. Alys waited.

“They’re the same,” Mark said, hoping he wasn’t boxing himself in. “At least, in many ways, although it will be a little different here than Mama told you about.”

He inadvertently passed off some of the responsibility. Not that it went unnoticed by Maghen.

“Let’s go ahead and eat, baby,” said Maghen. “We’ll talk about Krismas tomorrow.”

Two days later, Yozef’s two Amerikan compatriots became more involved in Saint Nikolas Day. Heather remained living with Mark’s family. The offer of separate living quarters was made several times, she declined, and then it was left open by Yozef. Living alone was still not appealing, and the three Kaldwels accepted her presence as long as she needed company. This morning, she was about to leave the residence when Mark stopped her.

“We’re going to meet with Yozef. It shouldn’t take too long.”

“What’s up?” asked Heather. “I’ve somewhere to be early this morning.”

“As I said, it won’t take too long. It’s a minor thing, but I want to be at his office before he gets too caught up in other meetings or whatever. I would have caught him earlier before he started to work, but I was waiting for you to get up. Please . . . let’s hurry.”

“Okay, okay,” grumbled Heather, “but at least let me grab something to eat on the way.”

Twenty minutes later, they shook off a dusting of snow and stamped their feet inside the foyer entrance, then entered the island headquarters. No one gave them more than a casual glance as they climbed the stairs to the second floor and entered the large room where half of the clerical staff members were already at work. A woman with streaks of gray hair turned from speaking with a man.

“Mark, Heather. I didn’t see you today on the schedule to meet with Yozef.”

“Something just came up,” said Mark. “We need just a few minutes of the Paramount’s time.”

“Please wait, and I’ll see if he’s available,” said the woman named Kloona in a voice conveying no option but for them to wait.

Mark muttered under his breath as the woman walked away.

“Gee-zus. Have a little patience,” said Heather. “She’s only doing her job. And don’t glower at *me*. You’re the one who won’t tell me what this is all about.”

“*Caedelli*, Heather. Christ. How many times do we have to remind you not to use English when others can hear?”

She looked around, then stuck out her tongue at Mark. No one was within twenty feet, and they had whispered.

“Hear what? Even if they notice anything, they’ll just assume we’re speaking *Caedelli* too low for them to hear, or probably it’s our terrible accents.”

Mark was formulating a reply when Kloona reappeared.

“Go right in. He says he has about half an hour.”

They passed through a smaller room, this one where Kloona and several other aides of Yozef worked. The office door was open, and they walked in to find Yozef pushing several sheets of paper together. He rose to meet them. His face showed moderate concern.

“Wasn’t expecting you here this morning. Kloona said something came up?”

“Nothing dramatic,” said Mark. “I wanted to check something with you and thought maybe Heather should be here, too.”

“All right. Let’s sit and talk. Over there by the window.”

Mark launched in as soon as all three were in chairs at a round table beside a south-facing window.

“It’s this Saint Nikolas Day. You were right. Other children have been talking to Alys, and she asked me last night if Saint Nikolas Day and Krismas are the same.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I said we’d talk today. I left the house before she found me.”

Yozef grinned. “Typical avoidance strategy. I’m afraid I’ve used it a time or two myself.”

“Saint Nicolas Day? Christmas? Are you two talking about . . . you know . . . *our Christmas?*”

Yozef and Mark proceeded to recount their experiences of transferring the Earth holiday to Anyar, with Yozef’s account taking far longer. Heather listened intently, made comments, and asked questions until the two men transitioned into recounting memories of Christmas at home . . . on Earth. Yozef’s positive recollections spanned his entire life, while Mark’s noticeably ended about the time he married Jocelyn. However, it was Mark who first noticed Heather’s silence. He responded only when a tear trickled down her left cheek.

“What is it, Heather?”

Her mouth opened. Nothing came out. Her mouth closed, then opened again, this time with a choking gulp.

“It’s just . . . I . . . hadn’t thought about Christmas for so long. Maybe since I got here. I missed my family so much, and I was so lost that after a while I tried not to think about them or my previous life. It was just too hard otherwise.”

Both cheeks now had rivulets running down and dripping onto her dress.

“Now . . . hearing you talking . . . I keep seeing our house at Christmas. Father would go overboard on the outside lights. Enough so that one year a neighbor complained. He wasn’t very

nice about it, but Daddy didn't argue—just took down enough to placate the man. And Mama. She made cookies, shopped and wrapped gifts, and organized all us kids in decorating the inside of the house and helping with our own shopping and wrapping. It was all so predictable and so wonderful. I wish I wasn't remembering." She choked. "I miss them so much. I—"

Heather put her head in her hands and sobbed, her body jerking with the intensity.

Mark and Yozef looked at each other, partly wondering what to do and partly hoping the other would do it.

Mark moved first, but only a fractional second ahead of Yozef. They rose and knelt by her chair, enveloping in their arms. Neither spoke for several minutes until her shaking seemed to lessen.

"You're not alone anymore, Heather," said Mark.

"He's right," added Yozef. "We can't replace your family or your life on Earth, but there's a chance to have new good memories here on Caedellium. Not as replacements, but still good."

Heather raised her head and wiped her cheeks. Several deep breaths followed a loud hiccup.

"Sorry. It just suddenly hit me like it hadn't for maybe two years. It was the talk about Christmas. I'm all right now. *Really.*"

Her shrugs seemed to support her statement, and the men returned to their seats.

A minute passed. Two. Mark raised one eyebrow at Yozef. He shook his head once. They waited. Three minutes.

"Okay," Heather said in a stronger voice. "So, you guys have Christmas on Caedellium. Is it just you two and maybe your families?"

"From what Yozef is saying, it's gotten to be an island-wide thing," said Mark.

"Well...not quite *that* wide," said Yozef. "Orosz Province has jumped in with both feet. Hetman Orosz declared it a formal holiday, but other provinces vary. Maybe six or seven neighboring provinces have followed Orosz's lead. It's almost like it's spreading from Orosz outward. It's liable to be in all provinces eventually, although there are some conservative elements in a few provinces that are actively resisting, including the clans that most objected to unification even for fighting the Narthani."

"So . . . is it going to be Saint Nikolas Day or Krismas? I assume the spelling is phonetic."

"I think Krismas is outvoted," said Mark. "Now with the two of you, that makes five votes for Krismas versus a few hundred thousand for Saint Nikolas. I think I can easily concede."

"Well . . . you're obviously invited to the Kolsko manor Saint Nikolas party," said Yozef. "It's about three sixdays from now. This will be the second year for it. The one change from last year is no fireworks. Last year we were lucky no one was killed or the manor burned down."

"*Fireworks* for Chris . . . uh . . . Saint Nikolas Day?" asked Heather.

"Wasn't my idea. The whole thing was a surprise. The whole damn city was in on it. Mark can fill you in later, Heather. I gave him a full description."

"What about decorated trees?" asked Heather. "You know . . . Saint Nikolas trees? And wrapped presents under them?"

"Trees? Yes. Naturally without lights, though I admit it would be nice to get that far in my . . . er . . . our lifetimes. Have to get electricity by then. Presents, too, but so far restricted to one gift per person. Turns out, the Caedelli already had customs for giving presents on birthdays, weddings, and naming days. That last one is when a new baby is formally introduced at a Godsdays service and the name announced. But it's a single present from one person to another . . . depending on the occasion and the relationships. I think I've about figured out when it's appropriate, but I depend on Maera for the definitive answer."

“I’m glad you didn’t use your position to change that one,” said Mark. “I certainly heard older relatives complain often enough about how every generation of kids thinks they deserve more presents than the last one.”

“Harry Potter!” exclaimed Heather. “Oh, Lord, the image just came up about Harry Potter’s cousin in the first movie. An obnoxious brat who counted presents and expected more each year.”

“*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*,” groaned Mark. “That was one of Tiffany’s two favorite movies. By the time the second movie came out, she was no longer interested in Hogwarts. As for my family on Earth during Christmas . . . well . . . suffice to say, dealing with my wife and daughter were not among my favorite pastimes.”

“I don’t know,” said Heather. “It was one of *my* favorite family times. Everyone getting together to open presents, one at a time, even with the littlest kids. It made every present more special.”

“I guess I have similar memories,” said Yozef, “but remember, even poorer households in the U.S. had more possessions than almost any family here. When you’re living closer to the edge, for most families *any* present usually has to have a functional purpose. As for my family, we had a hybrid system. There was no limit for kids under thirteen years, and each family had their own rules. But for the extended family, everyone went into a pool. Names were randomly drawn, and everyone gave one person a single gift. It was supposed to be under a fixed amount, though that increased every so often to account for inflation. And it wasn’t actually enforced, although I heard my mother get after one of her sisters for being too extravagant.

“Anyway, neither of you should worry about what to do this Saint Nikolas Day. You’re invited to the manor. Mark . . . it’s up to you where you share any presents within your family. Alys might enjoy being part of the festivities with the other children. I’m hoping Carnigan reprises Saint Nikolas. That’s something you have to see to appreciate the absurdity.”

While there was a pause in talking, Yozef had an idea.

“Heather, I don’t know the exact plans for the evening, but I’d like to tell the planners that you could perform something. At least a few people already know about Rudolph and Frosty. I *sort of* did a translation of ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,’ but I wasn’t sure about Frosty, so I left that one alone.”

“*Really*, Jo . . . er . . . Yozef. *Those* were the best songs you could remember?”

“Well . . . the occasions for Saint Nikolas Day songs didn’t exactly come up all that often.” He smiled. “But I take your criticism as a desire to introduce something different. It’s settled then. I’ll pass word to Anarynd that Heather Chen is willing to perform at the party.”

Anarynd had volunteered to be lead hostess for the party. Two days later, Heather appeared at the Kolsko manor when she knew from observation that Yozef and Maera were elsewhere.

“Anarynd, Yozef spoke with me about performing at the Saint Nikolas party this year. I wanted to talk with you about it.”

“Yes, he told me, but please, Heather. Call me Ana. All my friends do.”

“Oh . . . okay . . . Ana. Though I wonder . . . Yozef calls you Anarynd?”

“Well, you *know* Yozef. Well . . . maybe you *don’t* him all that much. You may both be from Amerika, but you haven’t known him as long as many of us. He says he prefers to use a person’s full first name and not a shortened or alternative name. Something about men named ‘Bush’ and ‘Trump’ who did such things disrespectfully. I don’t mind. It’s a minor thing. He also tells me that Anarynd is a lovely name, and why change it?”

Heather shrugged. “All of us have *quirks* . . . uh . . . little things that make us different from anyone else. But I wanted to talk with you about songs I might sing at the party. I have ideas. I don’t know if anyone else is going to perform music, but I was thinking about two songs that everyone could join in on, and two songs I would sing alone. Do you think that’s too much?”

“Merciful God, no, Heather. I’ve heard some of your music at the cathedral, but I’ve never heard you sing. Mark says you’re very good. I’m sure everyone will enjoy hearing you.”

Heather smiled. “For the ones I’ll sing alone, I’ve picked one traditional Caedelli song, ‘Hold Close.’ It has a lovely melody and celebrates being with family. That seems like an appropriate song for Saint Nikolas Day. Also, I would sing an Amerikan song I’ve translated into Caedelli. It’s called ‘The Home Hearth’s Fire’ and has similar feelings and sentiments to ‘Hold Close.’ I thought it would be good to show similar music and feelings between Caedellium and Amerika.”

Heather had changed the words to “Oh Little Town of Bethlehem.” It was one of her favorites at Christmas, no matter where she heard it—at church, in malls, on television, and anywhere else. The beginning had even been on her phone. The original words wouldn’t work here; the theology was different. But she thought the melody’s new words echoed “Hold Close.”

“Then there’s the other two songs, the ones where I’d like other people to join in. One song you already have heard. ‘Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer.’ Yesterday I was walking to St. Wyan’s Cathedral when I heard children singing it. When I asked them to sing it all for me, they only knew part of the words. I think Yozef couldn’t remember all of it. I asked a number of people around the city, and it seems to be well-known, especially among the children.”

Heather laughed. “From what I hear, when Carnigan dresses as Saint Nikolas, he is known to join children in singing the song.”

“Heavens, yes!” exclaimed Anarynd. “He’s the one who got Yozef to tell him the words after he heard Yozef singing the song to himself last year. That’s how the children learned the story of Rudolf. If you know children, once they like a song, they will sing it over and over to more than one mother’s distraction. It would help if there were more words than just the ones Yozef’s says he knew. It’s a bit of a mystery that someone with his memory can’t recall more of the song.”

“That’s what I gathered. I can help with that because I know all the words. I can sing the entire song through once and then ask everyone to join in for those parts they know. I’ll see if I can make it so I ask who is the most famous reindeer and get the children to respond.”

“What’s the other song?” asked Anarynd.

“Well . . . that one I’ll have to do some explaining about. The title is ‘The Twelve Days of Krismas.’ The word *Krismas* refers to—”

“Oh, we know,” said Anarynd, interrupting. “Yozef calls the holiday after Saint Nikolas, but several times he slipped and used Krismas. Finally, he admitted that was the name in Amerika.”

“Uh . . . well, good. But then there are the words to the song. Some of them refer to things that don’t exist here on Caedellium, so I changed those words to something people will recognize. Well . . . except for one line of the song. It goes, ‘A partridge in a pear tree.’ The ‘partridge’ is a bird, and ‘pear’ is a fruit. I’ll leave the pear for the benefit of Yozef and Mark.”

“What’s the song about?”

Heather described the repetitive nature of the lyrics—to Anarynd’s confusion.

“Sorry, I assume it’s a popular song in Amerika, but I don’t see why.”

“Trust me. The words may seem nonsensical, but once you hear it, you get caught up in it.”

Anarynd shook her head. “Maybe I’d have to hear it. Sing it for me now.”

Heather glanced around. “Is anyone else around? I’d like it to be a secret until the party.”

“Let’s go to one of the rooms opposite from the kitchen where everyone has gathered. You can sing it softly, and no one will hear.”

Heather was on the seventh verse when Anarynd joined in for, “And five golden rings,” and continued to the pear tree.

“Let’s sing it again!” said Anarynd after the twelfth verse. “I think I already know most of the words.”

After the second time through, Anarynd clapped her hands. “I see what you mean! The words don’t make that much sense. I mean . . . after all . . . who gives drummers for a present? In previous years I’d worry about the lines with the hetmen and theophists, but things are different with Yozef. Well . . . at least here in Orosz Province and a few others. One suggestion. We can have the words printed and handed out so it’s easier to join in.”

Heather gave Anarynd a hug. “Oh, thank you, Ana. I’m looking forward to this more than I thought I would. At least in my mind, this will be a gift to all of you who helped me these last months.”

Adults were not alone in anticipating Saint Nikolas Day. Heather joined the Kolsko, Puvey, and Kaldwel families in attending Godsdays services at St. Wyan’s Cathedral. Abbot Parwyn had requested their joint attendance to support his homily on welcoming strangers. A secondary purpose was to help the acceptance of the Kaldwels and Heather into Orosz society. Heather had been a regular attendee, with the Kaldwels only starting to attend the previous month. The Kolskos, however, attended the cathedral service about half the time and the other half went to smaller venues around the city. Maera had originally suggested the idea, and Tomis Orosz, the province hetman, had taken to the idea, although he circulated less frequently than Yozef, who was absent from the city more often.

Following the service, Yozef and Maera mingled, exchanged greetings and short conversations, and introduced Mark, Maghen, and Heather to a seemingly endless sequence of men and women. Meanwhile, Anarynd and Gwyned took all the children outside to play in the plaza next to the cathedral. As large as the space was, it needed that much room for the number of children whose parents had the same plan. Both Anarynd and Gwyned were pregnant, but the saving grace was that only four of the children under their care were seriously mobile. The others toddled, crawled, or were immobile—all able to be contained within a reasonable distance. Still, it took all their attention, and they didn’t notice five-year-old Morwena giving a serious lesson to three-and-a-half-year-old Alys—who insisted she was *almost* four.

“Saint Nikolas Day is coming, Alys. It’s my favorite day of the year. Well . . . after my birthday. But Saint Nikolas Day is different. It’s the day you give presents to other people, instead of just them to you. At least, that’s what my mama says. I’m grown up now, so I’m making presents to give to Mama and Papa. It’s a secret what I’m giving them. Do you want to know what they are?”

Alys’s bobbing curls followed the motion of her head.

Morwena lowered her voice to show she was going to tell a secret. “Mama is teaching me to sew. She likes flowers, so I’m going to sew a flower on one of her cloths she uses to dry dishes.” Morwena frowned. “It’s hard. The first time I tried, Papa didn’t know it was a flower. I cried, but he said just do another one. I did, but I thought it looked the same. I was wrong because Papa saw it was a flower and said it was beautiful.” Her eyes lit up at the last words.

“What are you giving your papa?” asked Alys.

“His present is easier, and he doesn’t know what it is. I’m drawing him a picture of our family. I’m good at arms and legs, but the heads are still hard, especially hair. Papa’s head is easier,” stated Morwena, “because most of his head is red.”

Alys looked apprehensive. “I don’t have presents for my mama and papa.”

Morwena shook her head. “Well, you *need* to get some. That’s how you show them you *love* them.”

Confident in the wisdom she’d passed along, Morwena ran to join Aeneas and Dwyna in a game of tag. Alys stood, absorbing the newly acquired knowledge. She needed presents for Mama and Papa now that she was grown up like Morwena.

“Alys seemed quieter than usual at evening meal,” said Mark. “She’s not ill, is she?”

“She says no. I was sewing a tear in one of my dresses today, and she wanted to help. I thought she meant maybe help hold the cloth stiff, but she insisted she could sew. Of course, she couldn’t, so I told her I’d teach her when she was bigger. Well . . . *that* didn’t work, and she started getting upset, so I let her try on two pieces of scrap cloth with me directing what to do. I convinced her I wanted them sewn together. I winced when she stuck herself twice before giving up. I thought she was going to cry, but she didn’t. However, she’s been quiet the rest of the day.”

“What do you think, Maghen? Is it part of her wanting to no longer be a baby, as she reminds me at least once a day?”

“Oh . . . I got that, too. Including when she argued she was grown up enough to sew. I think it’s just a phase or mood for today. Odd though, because later she spent almost two hours drawing—something she’s only occasionally been interested in before. She showed me a ‘picture’ of Mama and Papa. I told her it was good, but honestly, I wouldn’t have known what it was if she hadn’t told me before. I got the impression I wasn’t convincing.”

When Mark came home the next evening, he queried his wife on Alys’s condition. It was late. He had just returned from a lightning, one-day trip to Cherona, the capital of Bultecki Province—all for a one-hour meeting.

Maghen shook her head. “I guess she’s fine. The day started off with her broody, but by afternoon she perked up and seemed normal. How was your trip? I still can’t quite grasp traveling so fast so far in one day. What was this? Eighty miles in just one day?”

Eighty-four miles, thought Mark. *Lord, how things have changed for me.*

He remembered flying from Los Angeles to Chicago and back in one day for another one-hour meeting, leaving LAX at 6:15 a.m. and getting back at 9:45 p.m. He had made the same trip several times, including the fated flight that ended near Denver. He thought today’s round trip to Cherona had been more productive than most bureaucratic ass-covering trips, such as the Chicago meetings.

“You know the mining problem Yozef and I argued about? Turns out, both of us were partly right and partly wrong. There’s nothing like seeing things for yourself. Once the people there showed me the problem and their ideas, we agreed on what to do next. We’ll hear in the next sixday or two if it works out.”

The next sixdays passed with the weather trending colder. Snow fell several times, mainly only dustings. On Saint Nikolas Day, intermittent flurries left no more than an inch on the ground, not enough for Saint Nikolas’s sleigh. However, Carnigan was prepared, and a wagon had been modified to simulate the “real” vehicle.

Colored lanterns, garlands from windows, and the excitement of thousands of children had increased day by day. When guests gathered at the Kolsko manor, the number was smaller than the previous year. Apologies were given to many of the attendees of the first Kolsko manor Saint Nikolas party the year before, with the excuse that Yozef wanted a smaller group for the two other Amerikans now resident in Orosz City. *Most* of the left-out people understood . . . or *so* they claimed.

Despite the *intent* for a smaller party, the numbers approached the previous year's for two reasons: several people newly associated with Yozef and Maera were invited . . . which included spouses and children, and the proliferation of pregnancies since the Narthani departure meant more babies and toddlers.

Final preparations were underway at the Kolsko manor on Saint Nikolas Day evening. Mark and Heather had made contributions but found themselves standing alone next to the decorated tree.

"What are you going to sing tonight?" asked Mark.

"One will be a traditional Caedelli song, but the other three will be from Amerika. 'O Holy Night' is my personal favorite Chris . . . uh . . . Saint Nikolas Day song, but Yozef already introduced the melody and incorporated it into glorifying himself in 'The Abbey's Deliverance.'"

"Hey! Come on. Give him a break. I believe him when he says he and . . . what's his name . . . Pernel put together music intending it to be for a memorial and thanksgiving service after the Buldorians attacked that abbey."

"Yeah . . . I guess you're right. Pernel *did* tell me the original wording was changed and some additional music added without Yozef's knowledge. Still . . ."

"No *still* about it. I expect that by the time he heard the revised version, it was too late to do anything about it. Whether he liked it or not, it had to have helped solidify his long-term position here to be portrayed as some mythical hero."

"Well, I guess it's *not* a bad 'sort-of' opera once you get used to the different words for famous Earth music," admitted Heather.

She was silent for a moment and tugged on locks hanging down her chest.

"You know . . . there's still something unreal about all this. You and I didn't fare too well, but he ends up running this whole place. And the stories they tell. Despite some variations, it's consistent that he's not some everyday 'Joe.' And to be honest, while you didn't end up running Frangel, everything you did to get here could be part of an epic. I'm certainly not in the same class as you two."

"Circumstance and luck have a lot to do with it," said Mark. "Switch the three of us around with the three sites, and it might have all come out different. Hard as it might seem for you, my advice is do the best with what we have and recognize it could be a lot worse. But enough philosophizing. You haven't said what songs you're singing."

"I'll let there be some surprises. You'll know two of them that I changed based on where we are. Then, besides a Caedelli song, there'll be one straight from *Amerika*."

As soon as the first guests arrived, three musicians provided soft background music, either individually or in combination. Each played a different instrument: the zurta resembled a large mandolin with four double strings; the tubelon may have looked like a small bagpipe, but the sound was like a bassoon; the susbar was the generic name for gourd-shaped wind instruments where each example had a different tone—reminiscent of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and French

horns, depending on the sizes and the shapes. Heather struggled to convince Caedelli musicians that standardization was needed for large ensemble music. In opposition, many Caedelli argued for the traditional variety and for the freedom for individual interpretation that was possible with unique susbars.

“Good grief!” she complained once to Yozef. “It’s like trying to play symphonic music with a gaggle of jazz musicians, each of whom wants to do a different interpretation every time they play the same piece.”

Fortunately, the background music for this year’s Saint Nikolas Day party did not require cooperation between musicians. When Heather was to sing, she would accompany herself with a zurta, which was not too different from the foralong she’d learned to play in Iskadon during her enslavement. At first, she had resisted the zurta because it triggered memories she struggled to suppress. Finally, she was convinced by Pernel Horton, the Abersford musician who had been the driving force behind the original and enhanced versions of “The Abbey’s Deliverance,” and who now resided in Orosz City as a lead collaborator in introducing new music and theory.

Heather was standing alone, sipping on fruit juice and mentally reviewing the coming performance, when Anarynd touched her back.

“I think it’s time. Carnigan needs to get ready to arrive as Saint Nikolas, but he wants to hear you sing. I’ll get everyone in place and hand out the song word sheets when it’s time.”

Heather smiled. She had been apprehensive the last sixday, for reasons she hadn’t identified, but now calmness enveloped her. Maybe going over the words in her head and memories of home didn’t dampen her mood as they had earlier. She gave herself a small shake.

“Okay, Anarynd. I’ll get in place and finish tuning the zurta.”

Heather walked to the end of the room to where a two-foot-tall, four-foot-square wooden platform sat next to the Saint Nikolas tree. The platform was covered in cloth of a brilliant red color only recently available because of one of Yozef’s new dyes. A few wrapped presents lay under the tree, almost all intended for the Kolsko, Puvey, and Kaldwel family members and Heather.

She was about to step to the platform when she noticed Alys Kaldwel sitting on the floor on the opposite side of the tree. The child held two bundles crudely wrapped in plain paper. Untied twine held the paper together only because it encircled the bundles so many times and the ends tucked under.

Alys rocked slowly back forward and back as if cradling a baby. Heather wasn’t sure, but were there tears in the child’s eyes?

“Is there anything wrong, Alys? Are you all right?”

Alys nodded vigorously. “I love Mama and Papa.”

Heather was momentarily taken aback at the declaration.

“Well . . . that’s good, Alys, and you know they love you, too.”

“I know. Maybe love is sad sometimes.”

“Uh . . . well . . . it shouldn’t be. Why are you sitting here alone and not playing with the other children?”

“I can play later. I have to say goodbye.”

Before Heather could think of anything to say, Anarynd’s voice boomed over the party guests, calling for attention and directing people to gather for songs. When Heather looked back down, Alys was missing. The two bundles lay under the tree.

Odd, thought Heather. I wonder what that was about?

Her further wondering was cut short with the movement of people and furniture. Heather stepped onto the platform, looped the strap holding the zurta over her shoulder, and began tuning the strings. She'd prepared the instrument earlier, but checking again was a last-minute ritual and provided a distraction while she mentally put herself into her performing mind-set.

The babies and the children too young to understand silence had been sequestered on the other side of the manor and were attended to by Elian Faughn, an elderly retainer of Yozef's from his time in Abersford, along with several teenage girls from the city. The remaining younger children were held by parents or sat on the floor.

It took only three or four minutes for the audience to settle into place, with conversations providing a throb of noise. As she had in Iskadon, Heather began strumming the zurta, connecting a few chords, and repeating until the audience buzz subsided, and she increased the tempo, then ended in a crescendo. She spoke before the talking restarted.

"There will be four songs. The first song you all should know. It's 'Hold Close,' which I am told is a favorite throughout Caedellium and which celebrates the family. After that will be a tune from Amerika. The words in Amerikan would not mean anything here, so I've changed them into Caedelli—I hope to convey some of the same feelings as 'Hold Close.' The new title is 'The Home Hearth's Fire,' but Mark and Yozef should recognize the music to the Amerikan song called 'Oh Little Town of Bethlehem.'"

She spoke the last words in English. Heather saw Mark smile. Yozef had been whispering something to Maera but jerked his head around at Heather's last words.

Heather's fingers plucked, strummed, and pressed strings, leading into 'Hold Close.' Total silence during performances was not the custom on Caedellium, at least not yet, according to Heather. A hum rose from the audience with the first dozen bars of music. The humming rose but not enough to interfere with people's hearing Heather's voice.

She's even better in a smaller room than at the Song of Irlan, thought Mark, remembering the hybrid pub/performance hall where her Iskadon owner had her perform. *That space was too large for us to fully appreciate the emotion she can put into a song.*

Heather let her voice and the zurta fade away at the end of the song's last verse. Murmurings of approval started but were cut short as she moved into 'The Home Hearth's Fire.' Maera concentrated, listening for clues to the feelings and beliefs of Americans. She had done the same with music Yozef introduced, but this was an opportunity to compare his choices with music not only of a second Amerikan, but one who was an apparent music scholastic.

Heather was ending the first verse when Maera noticed Yozef softly singing. She glanced at him seated next to her and moved her head toward him as little as possible to prevent him noticing. His lips moved in sync with Heather's, but his words were different than hers. Maera recognized English from the rare times Yozef used his native language—something he obviously studiously avoided.

"The hopes and fears . . . years are met . . . thee tonight."

She couldn't pick up all the words. When Heather went into a second verse, Maera strained to hear more. By the end of the third verse, she recognized that Yozef was repeating his words.

Maybe he only remembers one verse of the song, thought Maera, *or maybe there's one verse that's his favorite.*

She turned her head away from Yozef to look at Mark sitting with Maghen and Alys. His lips also moved. She smiled, caught Maghen's eye, and nodded toward Mark. Maghen nodded and smiled back.

Heather let the last notes die away, then let the zurta hang free from her neck. She smiled and nodded to acknowledge claps and foot stamps of approval.

“Lovely,” said Eina Saisannin from across the room. She sat next to her husband, with two of their children on the floor in front of them. It was the second Saint Nikolas Day on Caedellium for the Fuomi ambassador. “Both songs remind me of one from where I grew up on Fuomon. Just shows how similar feelings are from peoples throughout Anyar.”

Similar sentiments came from Rhaedri Brison and several others in the audience—directed either to Heather or to other listeners. Heather gave a half bow and looked to Anarynd, who returned from where she had been listening. Anarynd raised both hands and called for attention.

“We all thank Heather. But she isn’t finished. She has two more songs. I’ll hand out the words. Sorry we didn’t have enough for everyone. We wrote them by hand at the last minute, so please share with those around you. I’ll let Heather explain the rest.”

Anarynd stood aside again, as Heather began lightly strumming chords to draw attention.

“You’ve all heard about the reindeer that pull Saint Nikolas’s sleigh or wagon and the one reindeer with the red nose.”

Laughs rose from some in the audience, groans from others.

“I venture to guess that some of you have children who sing Rudolph’s song over and over.”

“Lord, don’t I know it?” Gwyned Puvvey called out. “Morwena will start singing it and the other children will sing along. I’ve heard that song more times than I care to guess.”

“It’s my favorite song, Mama!” protested Gwyned’s five-year-old daughter.

“I know, dear, and I’m anxious for the day when you have a *new* favorite song.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Gwyned, but the next song is Rudolf’s. Morwena . . . do you know how many reindeer Saint Nikolas has?”

“Four!” shouted Dwyna Kolsko-Puvvey, the adopted daughter of the two households. Her mother had been killed in the Narthani attempt to assassinate Maera’s father.

“It’s five!” complained Morwena “And Heather asked me, not you!”

“Both four and five are good answers,” said Heather, cutting off a budding argument.

“Sometimes Saint Nikolas uses four reindeer and sometimes five, depending on if Rudolf helps. Anyone who knows all the names of the reindeer, raise your hand.”

A dozen small hands shot into the air, as did one somewhat larger one belonging to a large man standing in back. Half of the children started reciting names.

“Wait, wait. Let’s let one of you try to give them all.”

Heather pointed to a blonde girl sitting in her father’s lap, agitatedly waving a hand.

Heather gestured toward her. “How about you, dear? Can you name them?”

The girl bounced on her father’s lap. “Dancer and Disher, Komet and Kopid!”

Protests exploded until Heather called for quiet and recognized Morwena.

“It’s Dasher and *Dancer*, Komet and *Kupid*!”

“You forgot Rudolf,” called out Aeneas, sitting on the floor between Yozef’s feet.

“I was getting to him,” rejoined Morwena.

“All very good, children, but it turns out there are four *more* reindeer. Their names are Prancer and Vixen, Donner and Blitzen.”

Morwena looked accusingly at Yozef. “Why didn’t you tell us *all* the names?”

Several other children frowned at Yozef, including Aeneas. Sitting on the floor, he had to swivel his head to look up at his father.

“Uh . . . they were a secret until this year. Heather got permission from Saint Nikolas to tell you the names tonight as a special surprise.”

Multiple heads nodded in acceptance, the mystery solved.

“But you know what?” said Heather. “Sometimes the sleigh or wagon is *so* heavy that Saint Nikolas needs more reindeer to pull. That’s why he has eight reindeer at his home in addition to Rudolf. We’ll sing the Rudolf song with some new words. Everyone can read the new words on the paper or listen carefully. I’ll sing the complete song once, then everyone join in to sing a second time.”

Heather strummed. “Here we go. Remember, I’ll sing it first, and then we all will.”

She started slowly, then sped up by the third word.

“You . . . know . . . Dasher and—”

Despite the instructions, a third of the children joined in as soon as they heard familiar words. Some acceded to adult entreaties to hush, but others ignored these and matched Heather’s with words they knew, more or less. Heather’s intention to stop after the second iteration was ignored by the children, and she continued through a fourth time before raising both arms. By then, half of the adults had joined the chorus—including Yozef and Mark, the latter after sharply being nudged by Maghen.

“And now for the last song,” said Heather, raising her voice over the hubbub of enthused children. “This one is also from Amerika, with a few words changed. Anarynd will hand out another page of words, but you will all need to wait for me to sing alone until you understand how the song is to go. Once you do, join in.”

She nodded to Anarynd, who quickly passed out the second sheet and grinned broadly as she handed one to Maera and Yozef. He groaned when he first glanced at the page, then chuckled and finally laughed when he reached the end.

“You’ll have to tell us the original words, Yozef,” said Maera.

Fat chance, he thought. He tried to be scrupulous about avoiding utterances in English, though occasional failures worried him. Maera was *too* bright, and Eina Saisannin was a prodigy linguist. He wanted neither his wife nor the Fuomi ambassador to hear *too* much English and risk them getting clues to the secret of Amerika. He worried about times when he didn’t know what he might have said. After being wounded at the final battle with the Narthani, it was a day or more before being fully aware of his surroundings. As far as he knew, he hadn’t revealed anything sensitive, but he could have given clues Maera would remember. However, despite his entreaties to Heather and Mark about avoiding English, there were times when speaking without others understanding could be advantageous.

Heather again began strumming her zurta. “You also need to know that a pear tree is a fruit common to Amerika. It has a shape a little like a cathedral bell and is the last fruit to ripen every year, sometimes much later than any other. In that sense, it’s also a gift reminding people of the end of summer and the coming of winter. I don’t know for sure, but I expect the Paramount was known to climb into the branches of his family’s pear tree.

“Also, some of our people anticipated St. Nikolas Day so much that they count the days before.”

She ran through the melody of the first three lines before repeating it, accompanied this time by words.

*“On the first day of Saint Nikolas,
My true love sent to me,
A Paramount in a pear tree.”*

Heather paused her singing while repeating the melody with the zurta. Onlookers exchanged puzzled looks as they checked her first words with those on paper.

*“On the second day of Saint Nikolas,
My true love sent to me,
Two zurtas strumming
And Paramount in a pear tree.”*

The first, second, and last lines were sung slower and with more emphasis than the rushed third line. Maera and a few others laughed as they recognized the pattern. Yozef heard Eina say something to her husband and children.

Cluing them in, thought Yozef, as he read the lyrics to see what was coming.

On the twelfth day of Saint Nikolas,
My true love sent to me,
Twelve drummers drumming
Eleven pipers piping
Ten ladies dancing

Nine hetmen snoring

Eight horses prancing
Seven ducks a laying
Six theophists praying

Five golden rings

Four murvors flying
Three calling birds
Two zurtas strumming
and a Paramount in a pear tree.

When Heather came to the fifth round, she slowed the tempo to give the reason for the larger lettering for days five and nine.

“Five . . . gol . . . den . . . rings.”

The children enthusiastically, and some adults hesitantly, joined for the first time when Heather again reached the golden rings on the sixth round.

“**Five . . . gol . . . den . . . rings!**”

From there on, everyone joined. To Yozef’s and Mark’s hearing, the new words’ cadences didn’t always match those of the original, but they were close enough, and the enthusiasm of the audience made the difference moot. One of the loudest voices was that of Hetman Tomis Orosz, who had arrived late from meetings. On the last three rounds, Hetman Orosz stood to proclaim what hetmen did on the ninth day of Saint Nikolas.

Heather ended with a flourish, relaxed the zurta, raised her arm before bowing, and waited for the cheering and the stomping to die away. She shook her head at entreaties from several directions, originating from both large and small bodies.

She laughed. “I think one time through ‘The Twelve Days of Saint Nikolas’ is enough for one evening.”

“How about the original, Heather?” said Eina. “How about singing for us just the twelfth day?”

Yozef was slow in recognizing the question. Xena and Odysius had been well-behaved enough not to be exiled with the other small children and babies. However, they chose just the wrong moment to decide to switch parents’ laps from like gender to the opposite. Thus, Xena had just completed her transition to Yozef’s lap when Heather started singing again.

“On the twelfth day of Christmas
My true love sent to me
Twelve drummers drumming”

Yozef jerked, almost ejecting Xena.

Oh, shit! Not in English! And not with Eina and Maera listening!

He didn’t doubt it had been deliberate by the Fuomi ambassador. The woman was too devious by a mile. Friendly. Kind. And sneaky as hell.

He reflexively started to object, but he was too late. Ladies were already dancing. He glanced at Mark, who shrugged back. Too late. Heather paused after the theophists prayed. Children called out, “Five . . . gol . . . den . . . rings!”

Yozef sighed and waited for the partridge to land in the pear tree. When it did, and the appreciation died away, Anarynd announced that there would be a break in activity while Saint Nikolas prepared. The mentioned persona had stayed for Heather’s last song and now rushed out of the room. Fortunately, the selected exit was wide enough that no one was trampled.

Yozef thought he needed to thank Heather for the songs and the melodies he knew. Different words or not, they brought up fond memories he could now recall with warmth, not regret. He would thank her for that gift.

The guests and the hosts resumed mingling, with most of the ambulatory children alternating between parents and roving packs who participated in games real or imagined.

“Do you want me to speak with Heather about the English lapse?” Mark said *sotto voce* when they bumped elbows as each wound toward the temporary bar. There, various libations were being dispensed by Gwyned and Eina.

“I guess, though it’s too late for this evening.”

“She’s been pretty good,” said Mark. “I think she just got too much in the mood and forgot herself.”

“I know. Maybe I’m paranoid about it.”

Further lamentations were forestalled by the appearance of Maera holding out a glass of wine for Yozef. Maghen gave Mark a much smaller glass containing a distilled concoction he referred to as rocket fuel, though he had come to favor it over wine or beer if there were options.

“Are these two griping about Heather actually using English?” said Maghen.

“I see I’m not the only one who noticed,” replied Maera. “Yozef should give up. I’ll eventually figure it out on my own, especially with Eina’s help.”

Mark laughed. Yozef wanted to glower and gnash his teeth. However, since he couldn’t form an appropriate and safe rejoinder, he switched subjects.

“Shouldn’t take long for Carnigan to make his grand appearance. I’m surprised the children contained themselves as well as they did. I know ours have talked about not much else than Saint Nikolas and his reindeer arriving to hand out sweets and presents.”

“I think the dry cakes soaked in sweet syrup will be the tradition,” said Anarynd. She had appeared with a glass of fruit juice to abide by medicants’ disapproval of women carrying a child consuming alcohol. It was one of the many changes Yozef had brought, although Maghen said the same warning was spreading in central Frangel, due to Mark.

“Last year the cakes were sweet but had no flavor. This year, the bakers have added two different fruit flavors. I suggested only one flavor each year to avoid children arguing over which flavor they got, but the bakers are planning to make the cakes all year round and wanted to use different fruits.”

“I’m glad Caedellium doesn’t have a custom of giving too many presents on any occasion and that Saint Nikolas gives children only one small present,” said Maghen.

She stopped. “Oh . . . speaking of children, Mark and I have something to do with Alys. Come dear.” She put an arm through his and pulled him away from the group. He shrugged at the others and let himself be led toward the tree in the far corner of the room.

“Alys wants to see us over by the tree.”

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” Maghen said. “She seemed anxious. I don’t think she’s ill.”

They wove their way around individuals and groupings, stopping several times voluntarily to greet and converse and twice involuntarily when it couldn’t be avoided. Even then, the individuals they might normally have found offensive or abrasive somehow seemed more tolerable.

When they reached the tree, Alys sat holding two paper bundles to her body and talking . . . they couldn’t hear or see to whom.

“Hey, bab . . . er . . . Alys. Is everything all right? Why aren’t you playing with Aeneas, Dwynna, and Morwena?”

Alys half sobbed, “I had to say goodbye.”

Both Mark and Maghen knelt by their daughter, Maghen putting an arm around a small back.

Mark frowned. “Goodbye? To who?”

“Here?” said Alys, holding out the two bundles, one to each parent. “Happy Saint Nikolas Day. I love you, Mama. I love you, Papa.”

“We love you, too, baby,” said Maghen, momentarily forgetting that Alys was now a “big girl.”

“What’s this?” said Mark, taking the bundle she held out to him.

“They’re Saint Nikolas presents to show I love you.”

Maghen and Mark exchanged looks, then both started unwrapping the bundles or, in this case, unfolding the mangled paper and twine. Mark finished first, revealing Milo. Maghen was only seconds behind to find Abba. The two endlessly repaired stuffed animals had been with Alys starting from when she was only two months and then five months old. They were facsimiles of small Frangel animals, supplemented soon after the family’s arrival on Caedellium by Farry, a local beaver-like animal.

“But they’re your friends,” protested Maghen. “You can’t sleep without them.”

“I still have Farry. Maybe I can visit Milo and Abba sometimes.” The last words held both a supplication and a longing.

“Thank you, Alys, they’re very nice presents, but won’t you miss them?”

A tear ran down one small, smooth cheek. “Oh, yes, but I have to show you I love you, so you’ll love me.”

Maghen choked. “Baby! Why do you think you have to give us your friends for us to love you? We’ll always love you!”

Alys jumped over to Maghen and buried her face in her mother’s neck. The girl’s little body shook while Maghen rubbed her head and whispered comfort.

At first perplexed, Mark had a suspicion and put a hand on Alys’s back.

“Did somebody tell you that presents show love?”

Alys murmured something muted.

“Can you tell Papa, Alys?”

This time, Alys pulled away from her mother and looked at her father, her face red and wet.

“Morwena said giving the best presents makes people love you.”

Mark cursed under his breath, inhaled and exhaled deeply twice, then said, “Is that really what Morwena told you?”

“She said it’s how you know I love you. I want to be sure you love me.”

“I’m sure Morwena didn’t mean it exactly like that. Like Mama says, we will always love you. That means you don’t have to give us Milo and Abba. Here . . . you can take Milo back.”

Maghen rolled her eyes.

“No!” exclaimed Alys. “He belongs to you now. You told me you can’t take presents back once you’ve given them!”

“Uh . . . right. Well . . . I’m not giving Milo back to you. It was a wonderful present. But you know Papa works very hard and might not have enough time to take proper care of Milo. Could you take care of Milo for me?”

Alys’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not giving him back?”

“No, of course not. You would be helping Papa by looking after Milo.”

“And it’s the same with Abba,” said Maghen. “You know how busy I am at home, and when the new baby comes, someone needs to teach the baby about friends like Milo, Abba, and Farry. That will be your job, so you’ll need to show them to your new brother or sister.”

Alys pulled away from her mother and sat on the floor, looking back and forth between the two “presents.” Her face was serious as she evaluated the situation.

“They will be yours, but I’ll take care of them?”

“Yes,” said Mark, “and you’ll be helping Mama and Papa.”

“All right,” Alys said, then reached out quickly and snatched the two stuffed animals. She jumped to her feet, hugged her charges to herself, and ran off to inform Morwena of the new arrangement.

Maghen was teary, and Mark wasn’t sure his own eyes were dry.

“Oh, Mark, was this one of those moments we’ll always treasure?”

“If it’s not, I’m not sure what *would* qualify.”

They sat close together next to the tree until shouts and the ringing of innumerable small bells announced the pending arrival of Saint Nikolas. This initiated everyone’s rush out to the front veranda. The festooned wagon was drawn by five faux reindeer this year—Rudolf having been added to lead (the only horse whose nose tip was painted red). Arguments ensued almost immediately among the small guests as to which of the eight other reindeer were pulling the wagon.