

# WayFarer

*(chapter one excerpt)*

Janalyn Voigt

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**WayFarer**

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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# Part One: The Bridegroom

## 1

### *Return to Torindan*

An indrawn breath alerted Kai. Unsheathing his sword, he peered into the shadows beneath a weilo tree's curling tresses.

Nothing stirred.

"Show yourself!" His challenge rang through the vale.

No response.

He stepped closer.

*Kai.* His name sighed in a sudden wind that ruffled the waters of the weild. Morning mists eddied above the river, but the leafy canopy over his head remained still and silent.

Impossible! And yet he knew that voice. "Shae?" With his heart beating in his throat, he pressed forward.

Beneath the weilo a many-hued light shimmered, swirled, and took shape. Shae stood before him, her eyes closed as if in prayer. Her unbound hair cascaded in burnished curls to her waist. Beneath her scarlet cloak, she clutched something at the end of the fine chain encircling her neck. The glint of silverstone between her fingers told him

she wore his locket. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Kai.”

But he backed away. “Are you some dryad come to enchant me?”

“Please.” She held out her hands imploringly. “Stay.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“You have nothing to fear. It’s me—Shae.”

He shook his head. “I saw you vanish from this world. Do you return by another gateway than *Gilead Riann*?”

“Gilead Riann is the only Gate of Life, but there are soft places like this one where I can look into Elderland, if only for a time. When I saw you near, I called to you over and over.”

Even as a spark of hope flared, he hesitated. “I heard your voice once only, borne on the wind.”

She clasped her arms about herself and smiled, although tears glistened in her eyes. “And yet you answered my call.”

“I love you, Shae.”

“No. Release yourself.” Her voice broke on the whispered words.

The longing to take her into his arms left him weak. “You ask more than I can give.”

“I can’t bear to see you suffer.”

“Then you must not look.”

Shae’s image shimmered like a reflection in wind-stirred waters. “I release you.”

“Wait!” As he rushed toward her, she dissolved into glimmering light that melted into shadow...

Jerking heavy lids open, Kai blinked against the weak light tilting through swishing weilo leaves. His dream had seemed so real. A moan sprang to his lips but died behind gritted teeth. Short, swift breaths relieved the tightness in his chest. His mind, however, knew no ease.

He turned his head and met a pair of dark, rounded

Elder eyes. He let his lids close to shield himself from their penetrating gaze.

“Kai.”

Emmerich’s murmur called him back from the edge of thought. He rolled onto his side and pushed to a sitting position. His companions, their shapes little more than shadows in the gathering mists of morning, bent over their bedrolls. Behind them the canyon walls of Doreinn Ravein rose into obscurity.

At the expression of pity on Emmerich’s face, Kai balled his hands into fists and rode out a surge of heat. Shae might stand beside him now, but for Emmerich.

As soon as the unworthy thought came, he pushed it away and forced his hands to unclench. Shae had willingly traded places with Emmerich at Gilead Riann. She’d sung her own death song by choice. And he, to his joy and sorrow, had urged her on.

He glanced sideways at Emmerich. “Sometimes, when the wind blows, I think I hear her calling.”

Emmerich’s eyes gleamed. “Perhaps she does.”

Kai waited until he could trust himself to speak again. “She comes to me in the land of dreams.”

Emmerich tilted his head, and a lock of dark hair fell across his brow. “Does she speak to you?”

Without answering, Kai bent and rolled up his bedding.

Emmerich waited.

Kai sighed and looked away. “She tells me to wait for her no more.”

“I see. And will you heed her?”

He dusted off his hands, lingering over the task, and then glanced sideways at Emmerich. “At odd moments I expect to see her, to hear her voice. I can’t stop hoping for a sight of her—looking for her return.” The words wrenched from him in a rush. “I can’t release myself from loving her. I

don't know how."

"Patience does not spring from sorrow with ease."

All at once, Kai laughed. "You have both wisdom *and* youth—a fearsome combination."

"Those with ready ears often hear wisdom, even from a youth."

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"Steady, Fletch." Kai touched the neck of the winged horse beneath him and looked out over the frothing weild, which fell to rapids here. Sudden memory caught at him. He could almost see Shae combing her hair on the flat-topped rock at water's edge.

At a restive movement from the other wingabeasts, Fletch shuddered in sympathy. Kai turned away from the wraith of memory and gathered his wits before facing his companions. "Thank you for your faithful service. Each of you went beyond duty. Although we—" He heaved a breath. "Although we return without Shae, our quest succeeded. In that we can give thanks to Lof Yuel, the High One, who has kept us in His care."

He signaled Fletch, and wings rose to enfold him like a feathered curtain. As the great wings lowered and they lifted on invisible currents to the top of the canyon walls, draughts rippled across him. At this height the mists thinned but would still hide their movements from any stragglers from Frearer's forces retreating from the siege of Torindan.

How would Lof Shraen Elcon, Faeraven's new high king, react when Kai returned without Shae? He put the thought from him and focused, instead, on navigating the twists and turns of the canyons. They emerged into a flat land as the horizon blushed and the shadows lengthened to stain the eastern desert purple.

The ground folded and rose beneath them, and then crested a rise. In the distance, past the broken peak of Maeg Strehcan, swelled the hills that Kai's people, the Kindren, called Maegren Syld. The Elder nation knew them as the Hills of Mist. To the west, the kaba forest stretched to meet sandy shores where the tides of Maer Ibris ebbed and flowed.

Torindan, fortress of Rivenn, perched on an arm of rock thrusting into Weild Aenor, the wild river of legend. Kai caught his breath at the sight. How long ago it seemed since they had left.

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Raena Arillia stepped toward Elcon in the dance, jewels and eyes aglitter. Her figure had softened since he'd seen her last, and the luster of her golden hair echoed the glow of her skin. He captured her by the hand and waist and turned her toward him. When she smiled at him, he forgot everything but her beauty.

He clapped his hands in tempo, and Arillia swayed in a circle that brought her back to him. Dainty, light on her feet, and quick to smile, she reminded him of Shae.

*Shae.*

Elcon's hands stilled, and his smile died. He'd tried and failed to reach his sister with the shil shael, the hereditary soul touch they shared. He could only hope she still lived.

Arillia's smile faltered. "Are you well?"

Without replying, he offered his arm to her. She took it without hesitation, and he guided her out of the crush of dancers toward the leaping fire in the nearest of the great hall's three large hearths.

Arillia's parents smiled down upon them from the dais at the end of the long chamber. Shraen Ferran and Raelein

Annora had conspired with Elcon's mother to thrust Arillia and Elcon into one another's company all of their lives. No formal marriage pact existed, but he and Arillia knew they were expected to wed. As children, they'd laughed at the notion many times.

With a tug on his arm, Arillia brought him up short. "What ails you?" Such trusting eyes she turned on him, eyes of palest gray. She knew him well, but he thought she did not guess he used her company as a balm. In her presence, he found ease for the worries that tormented his rest.

Her gaze probed his, but he glanced away, out the tall window behind her to the fieldstone paths that cut through the lush sward to the inner garden.

Ah, the garden. They'd often whiled away entire afternoons gathering the roses that nodded beneath twisting strongwood branches. Side by side, they'd dropped bright petals into the silken waters of the pool and watched the water cascade in glinting ribbons from the tiered fountain.

Elcon pushed away his memories and looked down into Arillia's troubled face. "Naught but shadows."

Her expression registered her disbelief, but he offered nothing more. For Shae's safety, he couldn't claim her as his sister. And how could he explain to Arillia the feeling of doom that weighted him?

And yet, when he looked into the cool depths of her eyes, he could almost persuade himself she understood. The thought should draw him to her, but it only made him uneasy. Perhaps he and Arillia shouldn't spend so much time together.

"As you please, Elcon." Irritation edged her voice. "It's clear you mean to keep your thoughts private." Arillia stepped closer to the fire and gazed into its depths as silence stretched between them. "But I still wish—"

Elcon took her by the elbow. "Forgive me. I must return



you to your parents.”

Her eyes widened, but as he pushed her through the crowd toward the dais, she didn't resist. His perfunctory bow to her parents included Arillia. He caught the glint of tears trembling on her lashes and hesitated, but then hurried across the great hall. Arillia, and all the confusing emotions surrounding her, would have to wait.

By the time he reached the main archway, Weilton, the second guardian of Rivenn, had joined him. In Kai's absence, Weilton had assumed his duties as Elcon's personal guard. Elcon answered the question in Weilton's light gray eyes. "I saw from the window a company of wingabeasts approaching from the south. Kai and Shae return."

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Kai sent Flecht into a spiral and touched down beside his companions on the arched bridge outside Torindan's barbican. Although they could have flown into Torindan, protocol and good sense called for the guardians to land their wingabeasts outside all strongholds, even their own, and obtain entrance in the usual manner.

"Who goes there?" A guard called from the parapet above the barbican.

"Kai of Whellein and a company of weary travelers, all friends of Torindan."

With a rasp and screech of metal, the drawbridge lowered over the moat's dark waters and the barbican's timbered metal doors swung open.

As they passed beneath the iron fangs of the portcullis, Aerlic drew his silver wingabeast, Argalent, abreast of Kai. Just behind, Emmerich rode Ruescht while Guaron and Dorann brought up the rear. They had barely passed through when the doors thudded shut and the bar clanged back into

its rests. Chains clanked, and the portcullis dropped with a squeal and a thump, sealing them into the treacherous “walls of death.”

Fletch’s hooves clattered on the wooden floorboards and rang when they found trapdoors above pits. As Kai guided his wingabeast onward, bars of light penetrating through arrow slits in the outer walls fell over him. With much clanking and screeching, a second portcullis gave way, and they emerged before the inner gatehouse.

Kai, blinking in the sudden light, answered another round of salutations. A small drawbridge lowered across a second channel of the moat. More doors opened, and they passed beneath twin turrets into a short corridor.

Footsteps, light and fleet, approached from the outer bailey. With his eyes adjusting again to dimness, Kai halted Fletch and his companions gathered around him. Two figures entered by the archway from the outer bailey. “Kai. You return.”

Kai’s vision cleared, but he’d already recognized Elcon’s voice.

One of the guardroom doors along the corridor flung open and Craelin, First Guardian of Rivenn, stepped out, the lines around his eyes crinkling from the force of his smile. Beside him strode Eathnor, dressed in the green and gold of the high guard.

Kai dismounted and bowed before Elcon. “I’ve returned, but without Shae.”

“Rise.”

Kai obeyed.

Elcon looked him over. “You’re too thin, and I’ll warrant, weary. You look like a strong wind would knock you over. Still, I’m glad to see you. Has Shae stayed behind with her sister in Graelinn?”

Kai swallowed his surprise at Elcon’s response.

“Forgive me, but I should explain in private.”

“Tell me where she is.”

Kai flinched. “She remains within the gateway of Gilead Riann.”

Elcon’s eyes narrowed. “What madness is this?”

“Only the truth, I promise. Shae went through the gateway of her own will.”

“Why would she do such a thing?”

“So that Shraen Brael could enter Elderland.”

“The DawnKing of prophecy has entered Elderland? But *where* is Shae?”

Craelin stepped forward. “If I may suggest, whatever news Kai brings might better be given in private, Lof Shraen.”

Elcon opened his mouth as if to speak but closed it again. “Yes. Yes, of course.” His glance slid past Kai and landed on Emmerich, just dismounting. “Tell me, Kai, why you ride with this Elder. Has he strayed from his path so far it brings him among the Kindren?”

Emmerich lifted his head. “I know well my path, Elcon, Shraen of Rivenn, Lof Shraen of Faeraven. I follow it to you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That is the simple truth.”

Elcon paced before Emmerich, his gaze a challenge. “Who are you?”

Emmerich stood without flinching. “Are you certain you wish to know?”

Elcon stared at him, but then looked to Kai. “Bring him to my meeting chamber, and we’ll discuss these matters at length.” At the archway to the outer bailey, Elcon shot a final piercing glance at Emmerich. “I look forward to that conversation.”

Elcon went through the archway with Weilton behind

him. In the small silence that followed his departure, Kai drew his hands into fists at his side. After all they had suffered and sacrificed, would Elcon now reject Emmerich?

“Are you all well?” Craelin said near Kai’s ear.

Kai considered the question. “Well enough. We sustained injuries besides the ones you knew, but most have healed. Some take longer than others.” *And some never heal.* “How did you and Eathnor fare on your return to Torindan?”

A smile lit Craelin’s face. “Well enough, also. We reached Torindan in advance of Freær’s charge and just managed to take away a small group of messengers. We rode like the wind to summon the loyal Shraens of Faeraven but had to dodge welke riders to save our own lives.”

“Ah.” An image of dark riders pursuing through the mists of morning came to Kai. “We had a bit of trouble with them ourselves.”

“If not for Eathnor’s skill as a tracker we would not have survived to spread the alert.”

Kai nodded to Eathnor. “Well done. And so you have joined the ranks of the guardians. I commend Craelin’s choice in you.”

Eathnor clasped Kai’s hand. “Thank you. I hope to prove myself worthy of the company I keep.”

Dorann dismounted in one leap, and the two brothers gazed upon one another with eyes that shone. At last, Eathnor dipped his head. “You’ve healed.”

Dorann put a hand to his once-blackened eye as a slow smile spread across his face. “In truth, I’d forgotten it.” He took in the garb his brother now wore as part of the lof stapp. “Green suits you.”

Eathnor laughed. “That it does.”

With Eathnor beside him, Dorann led his dark gray wingabeast, Sharten, through the archway into the outer bailey, where the stables lay.

“Welcome back.”

At Craelin’s greeting, Kai smiled for the first time since entering Torindan. But he also felt like weeping. “Thank you. I’m glad to see you.”

The bright blue eyes nested more deeply in Craelin’s face. “And I, you.”

Kai cleared his throat. “We should hurry, although I dread facing Elcon again.” With slumped shoulders, he led Fletch after the others into the outer bailey, where smoke hung heavy and the stench of charred meat fouled the air. Dogs snarled and yipped, fighting over a bit of offal thrown to them. A scarred wooden door hung open in a doorway, through which emitted the clash and clang of cooking.

With Craelin keeping pace beside him, Kai took the side path to the stables, which squatted across the sward from the kitchens. Waiting for a groomsman at the stable door, he breathed in the heavy scent of hay. Thudding hooves, soft whickerings, and calming voices drifted to him. A lump formed in his throat. He’d forgotten what it meant to come home.

Craelin touched his arm. “Give it time, Kai. None but a fool would think you gave less than your all for Elcon or Shae.”

Kai wanted to shout that his all hadn’t been enough. He’d failed Shae, and he had failed Elcon.