

Beneath the Canyons

Daughter of the Wildings Book 1

by Kyra Halland

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Silas Vendine is a mage and a bounty hunter, on the hunt for renegade mages in the vast, sparsely-settled Wildings. Lainie Banfrey, a rancher's daughter, has been taught all her life that mages are unnatural creatures with no heart and no soul. If anyone finds out that she's a mage, she could end up on the wrong end of a hanging rope. Together, they must stop the renegade mage who is tearing Lainie's

hometown apart before the dark power he has unearthed destroys everyone who makes the Wildings their home.

Chapter 1

BITTERBUSH SPRINGS. FROM Silas's vantage point in the low, rocky hills, the town didn't look like much, just a dozen or so wooden crates laid out in rows. He lifted his hat and wiped sweat from his forehead, then reached out again with his mage senses towards the town and the valley beyond.

There it was, the magical power he had been following for several days. It was strong, for him to have sensed it from such a distance, dark and alien but with flashes of more familiar kinds of magic. A hell of a lot of magical activity for a place where no mage would dare show himself openly.

No doubt about it; something strange was going on in the Bitterbush Valley. And, with any luck, there would be a nice, fat bounty in it for him.

If there wasn't, he was going to have to start doing some serious belt-tightening. Five years of making a good living hunting renegade mages in the more settled eastern part of the Wildings, shot to all the hells when a flood of greenfoot mage hunters came through the Gap from Granadaia looking for quick, easy fame and fortune. Mostly what those amateurs had done was chase away the smartest and most dangerous rogue mages, the ones who were

worth the highest bounties, to more remote parts of the Wildings.

So, with his money running low, Silas had come west, hoping for better hunting. Rumors of a mining rush in the Bitterbush Valley had caught his ear, and soon after he set out to follow the rumors, he had sensed the bursts of magical power coming from the area. A mining rush was indeed just the sort of thing a rogue mage might try to horn in on, looking for quick riches to fund his life of rebellion against the Mage Council's authority.

Not that Silas himself gave a good gods-damn about the Mage Council's authority. But he had his own reasons for hunting renegades. And the money was good.

He surveyed the valley again. It looked like good cattle country, grassland bleached gold in the hot, dry weather, well-watered by seasonal washes and a handful of running streams. A number of ranch compounds and farms stood scattered the length of the valley from north to south, and herds of cattle and sheep roamed the rangeland. All signs of prosperity that might also draw a rogue mage to this place.

It was definitely worth his time and trouble to investigate what was happening here.

Silas made sure his revolver was loaded and that the shield inside him concealing his power was firmly in place and seamlessly camouflaged. It wouldn't do to let the rogue mage, if there was one, know that another mage had arrived in town. Not to mention the mage-hating Plain settlers; he had more

important things to do than deal with a bunch of Plains trying to hang him.

His Island-dark skin was another problem; it could give him away as a member of one of the elite Island mage families back in Granadaia. But it wasn't so dark that it couldn't be mistaken for a deep tan, and when necessary, he could pass himself off as a descendant of the servants and slaves the Island mages had brought with them to Granadaia.

With an earnest prayer to the Provider for good hunting and a good bounty, he nudged Abenar, his big gray speckled gelding, into a walk. Keeping to the trail marked with stakes hung with white feathers that indicated safe passage through the A'yimat-controlled hills, they headed down the pass. As the trail descended into the valley, it turned into a road that crossed the valley from east to west. Silas followed the road into town, where it intersected with a second road running north and south, then stopped to get his bearings.

On the north side of the crossroads, two saloons, the Bootjack and the Rusty Widow, faced each other across the street like two gunfighters squaring off. Laughter and a discordant jangling of competing hammerboxes spilled out of the saloons. The town's bank and the Rusty Widow boasted tall false fronts and fancy painted signs that looked brand new. In the empty lot on the southeast corner of the intersection, a large sign proclaimed, *Future Site of the Bitterbush Springs Grand Music Hall and Variety Theater*. Towards the north end of town stood a half-built building of imposing size.

It looked like a large amount of money had recently come to town.

Silas turned right and rode up the street in search of stabling and a place to stay. Next door to the Rusty Widow Saloon stood a two-story building, also sporting a new false front and painted flourishes. A big sign in the front window read, *Mundy's Boarding House. Rooms to let. 2g per nineday.*

Silas let out a low whistle. Two gildings a nineday was an enormous sum for a room in a boarding house in the Wildings, especially this far west. This was going to make a bigger dent in his funds than he'd planned on.

The saloons would likely have rooms to let on their upper floors as well, but those were probably even more expensive than the boarding house, and more distracting. Not that Silas was averse to enjoying the amenities to be found in such establishments, but for now he needed to concentrate on work. And since there didn't appear to be a hotel in town, the boarding house it would have to be.

On the next lot north of the boarding house he found a stable. A boy was tossing pebbles into a circle scratched in the dirt of the yard; Silas rode over and gave the boy a penny to watch Abenar and his belongings for a moment. He took note of the smithy behind the stable; Abenar was in need of new shoes. Silas hoped getting a horse shod in this town wasn't as expensive as renting a room in the boarding house.

He pulled on his long brown duster, which he had shed in the heat of the day and draped over the saddle behind him, then headed back to the boarding house to inquire about a room.

A crash from inside the saloon across the street caught his attention. He turned to see a big-bellied, bushy-bearded man come flying backwards through the swinging doors of the Bootjack. The man landed on his back in the street, then leaped to his feet with surprising speed for a fellow his size. A second, much thinner, man charged out of the saloon and plowed into him, knocking him down again. The two men tussled in a cloud of dust, rolling along the street until they came to a stop in front of the boarding house, the skinny man pinning the bearded man face down with a knee in the small of his back.

"I ever catch you digging on my land again, I'll draw an' quarter you an' chop you up for dog feed!" the skinny man yelled. "You hear me, Gobby?"

In a blur of motion, Gobby twisted out from under the other man and dropped him with a blow to the jaw that sounded like an axe thunking into wood. "You threatening me, Redlun? Cause if you're gonna threaten me, you better be ready to back it up!"

"Yeah, he's threatening you," said a man with an extravagant mustache who stood in front of the Bootjack. His right hand dropped to the holster at his hip and came up holding a six-shooter aimed straight at Gobby. "An' I'll back up his threats for him."

Bullets were about to fly. Silas suppressed an instinct to throw a protective shield around himself.

The bullets dropping harmlessly to the ground, slowed by their passage through the shield, would give him away to any other mages who might be around and to the Plain folk of the town. Instead, he stepped back into the shadows of the covered wooden sidewalk in front of the rooming house and edged out of the possible line of fire. Without knowing anything about the dispute, he would do better to not get involved. At least, not unless it spilled over onto innocent bystanders.

A handful of men burst out through the swinging door of the Rusty Widow, the saloon next to the boarding house, and stood clustered on the sidewalk, watching. Gobby got to his feet and turned to face the mustached man. He was now also holding a gun. “Well, Winnard?” he said. “You think you can beat me?”

“I can –”

A gunshot exploded from the group in front of the Rusty Widow. Winnard tumbled back against the wall of the Bootjack and collapsed, blood spreading across the right shoulder of his shirt. More men came pouring out from both saloons, and wild gunfire erupted from both sides of the street. A handful of stray bullets hit the wall of the boarding house next to Silas; he dove aside, holding onto his hat, and hit the sidewalk.

From up the street came a wild burst of magical power, panicked and uncontrolled, strong enough that Silas could feel it even through the shield on his own power. He recognized it from the flares of magic that had led him to Bitterbush Springs. He started to raise his head to try to spot the mage, then

a bullet split a board in the wall of the rooming house not one arm-length above him. He pressed himself even flatter against the boards of the sidewalk as the shootout went on, praying to the Defender that the gunfire would stay away from the stables and Abenar.

Then, for no reason Silas could discern, the shooting stopped. "What's all this, boys?" a deep, resonant voice called out into the sudden silence.

Silas raised his head. Three men lay sprawled in the street. One was writhing in pain, the other two were still. The shooters who were still standing had all lowered their guns and were looking at the Rusty Widow. Silas turned his head to follow their gaze.

A tall man with a hearty build, handsome, pale face, and luxuriant black mustache was standing in front of the saloon. He wore a finely-fashioned black suit and black flat-brimmed hat. Two house ladies bedecked in lace and ruffles appeared behind him, clinging to his arms and peering around him into the street.

"Redlun an' Winnard threatened me, Mr. Carden, sir," Gobby said. "Me an' the fellas was just defending ourselves."

Silas stood up, making sure his hat was still in place, and brushed dust from his long brown coat. He kept close to the wall, in the shadow of the overhang, curious about this man who had the power to stop a gunfight just by appearing.

The black-suited man turned and put his arms around the house ladies. "Go back inside, my dears. No need to worry yourselves." The ladies retreated into the saloon, and Carden stepped down from the

wooden walkway into the street. He stopped in front of Gobby, shaking his head. “Don’t tell me you went into the Bootjack again, Gobby,” he said in a genial tone. “You know damn well that’s rancher territory. You’re stupid enough to keep going in there, you deserve whatever you get.” The crispness of an educated Granadaian accent underlay his informal Wildings speech.

“When are you gonna start paying us for the ore that was taken off our land, Carden?” shouted Winnard, the wounded man in front of the Bootjack. The right side of his shirt was soaked with blood, but judging by the anger in his voice, he was a long way from dead.

“If you have a difference with me, Winnard, I’d be happy to discuss it peacefully,” Carden replied, with just the hint of an edge to his friendly voice and polite words. “There’s no need for anyone to be shooting anyone else.”

Two men helped Winnard up, then they and several other men from the Bootjack walked over to Carden and started arguing with him. Gobby and some of the men from the Rusty Widow joined in. A whip-thin, bandy-legged man with a silver sword-shaped badge pinned to his shirt came over as well, but he stood back and remained silent.

Silas couldn’t make out what the men were saying, but their argument wasn’t what interested him the most at the moment. Taking care to avoid attracting any attention, he walked up the street towards where the burst of magic had come from.

Chapter 2

ON THE OTHER side of the street, in front of a shop that advertised tack and leather goods, Silas spotted a youth hunkered down behind a barrel, head buried against his knees. Silas let down the shield on his power just a bit and extended his mage senses. The feel of magic hung thick around the boy, though it was quickly dissipating. It felt like the power of someone who had been born in Granadaia but with a distinctly different flavor to it. This power didn't account for all the Granadaian-style magic Silas had followed here, but it was a significant portion of it. He reached a little further, into the boy, and found living power inside him.

So, here was his mage, or one of them. Not a renegade mage from Granadaia, but Wildings-born of Granadaian ancestry, and clearly untrained. Which presented its own set of problems. The kid probably had no control over his power at all. He was lucky he hadn't hurt himself or anyone else with that explosion of magic. Lucky no one had seen what he had done, or the shootout would have been quickly followed by a hanging party, the Plain settlers' preferred way of dealing with mages. Especially untrained ones who couldn't protect themselves.

Silas crossed the street and walked up to the barrel. The boy stayed hunched over, shaking badly. "I think they're done for the day," Silas said.

With a startled movement, he – no, *she* raised her head and looked up at him out of wide hazel eyes set in a delicate face with a dusting of freckles.

What Silas had taken for a young teenage boy was actually a small, slender young woman, nineteen or twenty years old, wearing men's clothing – brown canvas pants, a green plaid shirt, boots, and a straw hat with a curved brim like those favored by cowhands. A long braid of light reddish-brown hair trailed down her back from under the hat.

After all these years in the Wildings, the sight of women wearing men's clothes still caught Silas off guard. But it wasn't an unpleasant surprise. Far from it. "You okay?" he asked.

Slowly, she took a deep, shaky breath and let it out. "Yeah," she said. "I'm okay. I just hate it when they start shooting like that."

"Does this happen often?"

"About once a nineday or more, lately. My brother got caught in it a few months ago. Shot dead, right through the heart. He was just minding his own business when the damned fools come out an' start shooting." Her voice caught and she wiped her eyes with hands that had started trembling again. "I'm sorry. Listen to me chattering on."

"I'm sorry about your brother," Silas said. The Wildings was dangerous country; sudden, senseless death was no stranger to this land. But in a reasonably well-established town, it was unusual to have full-blown shootouts erupting every nineday. "What about the sheriff?" He jerked his head in the direction of the man with the silver badge, who was still standing silently by the arguing men.

"Huh. He just says 'Yes, Mr. Carden' and 'No, Mr. Carden' and 'Whatever you say, Mr. Carden.' It's Carden running this town and his no-good

miners causing all the trouble. Damned sheriff's no use at all."

Interesting. Money and influence – this mining business sounded like the sort of trouble a rogue mage might be dealing in. Though Silas generally didn't expect to find renegades doing honest work. They were more likely to be cheating banks, selling fake medicines, seducing respectable widows out of their inheritances and their virtue, or stealing some honest man's business out from under him, all with the unfair advantage of their magic.

Silas let down the shield on his power again and did a quick, discreet scan with his mage senses. He found no signs of any power in the area except for the girl's. Then he did a more careful survey, looking for the subtle signs of shielded power, the nearly invisible seams and slight flaws in the camouflage, and still found nothing. If there was a rogue mage anywhere around, he was well-hidden. There were plenty of non-magical troublemakers in the Wildings too, but, unfortunately, the Mage Council didn't pay bounties on them. "You need any help?" he asked the girl.

"No, thanks." She got to her feet, brushing dust off her pants. She wore a gunbelt with a holstered revolver that was small enough to fit her hand. Silas had no doubt she knew how to use it. "I better get on with my errands before they start shooting again," she said. "Hey, Gobby!" she shouted at the group of arguing men in the street. "The same thing from my Pa! He ever catches you on his land again, he'll shoot you so full of holes you can piss from ten places at once!"

The bearded man's face broke into a leering smile. "Miss Lainie, you tell your Pa for me that this land ain't owned by no one an' I'll drill wherever, whenever, an' –" he leered more broadly "– whoever I want."

Miss Lainie responded with a rude gesture. Gobby went red above his beard, and the men from the Bootjack laughed. One corner of Silas's mouth quirked up. He liked a woman with spirit.

He offered her his arm. "I'd be happy to escort you while you do your business, in case there's any more trouble."

She eyed him head to toe, her gaze lingering on the large revolver holstered at his left hip. Though firearms were considered anti-magical and were therefore forbidden in Granadaia, no mage hunter would last a nineday in the Wildings without one. Silas had specially modified this piece himself; mundane bullets alone couldn't be depended on to take down a strong and highly skilled mage.

"My Pa don't like me going around with strange men," Miss Lainie said.

"Well, then, I'm Silas Vendine." He added the usual name-slip charm as he spoke his name, to make it harder to remember, though it didn't always work very well with other mages. Then he grinned at her. "I may be strange, but at least now you know my name."

That got a smile from her, a shy half-smile as she glanced away. Silas wondered how he had ever mistaken her for a boy. With her trim, pert figure, winsome manner, and pretty face, she was undeniably all girl. "All right, then, Mr. Vendine,"

she said. "I'm Lainie Banfrey. If you'll keep Gobby away from me while I do my business at Minton's, I'd be grateful. My Pa's foreman should be over at the cattlemen's co-op; he'll see me home."

She took his arm, and he accompanied her next door into Minton's General Mercantile. He stood just inside the door, keeping an eye open for trouble, while she made her purchases and talked with the storekeeper about the weather and this year's cattle drive herd, which was currently on its way to the annual market at the Gap.

Two other young women walked up to the counter from the back of the store and greeted Miss Banfrey with hugs and clasped hands. "We heard shooting," one young woman said. "Was anyone killed?"

"Couple of miners, that's all," Miss Banfrey replied.

"I'm just so afraid now, every time it happens," the other girl said. "Ever since —" Her voice broke.

Miss Banfrey hugged her. "I know, Mari. I miss him, too," she said, tears in her voice.

"Maybe those no-good miners will all kill each other, or the mining business will go bust and they'll all go back to wherever they came from," the first girl said.

A young man came in the door, holding what looked like a brand-new bridle. The first young woman ran to him and grabbed his shoulders. She and the young man both wore wedding rings.

"You're okay?" she demanded.

The young man kissed his wife. "I'm fine, honey. I stayed inside next door the whole time. You ready to go?"

"Almost," the young woman said. "I just need a few more things."

Miss Banfrey finished her own business, paying for the sack of nails and other items she had bought. With another squeeze of her friends' hands, she said goodbye, then came over to Silas. "Let's go."

The young couple, the other girl, and Mr. Minton all stared at Silas. He imagined he had just made Miss Banfrey the subject of the Bitterbush Valley's latest gossip.

They left the store. "Mari was walking out with Blake, my brother, when he died," Miss Banfrey said. "They were going to be married this fall."

"I'm sorry," Silas said again, and not just to be polite. If there was a rogue mage behind the trouble that was tearing this town apart, catching him would be a job well done. Silas hadn't gotten his license as a mage hunter and come out here to the Wildings just for the money and the adventure and the freedom. The non-magical settlers of the Wildings, who had fled from mage-ruled Granadaia in search of freedom, were endangered in their new home by the ruthless, ambitious renegade mages who came out here seeking wealth and dominance away from the Mage Council's control. And Silas had made it his life's work to protect Plain folk from mages both lawless and law-abiding.

Miss Banfrey was no renegade mage, Silas thought as they walked down the street towards the crossroads. But there was still no doubt that she had

a significant amount of magical power. Under the Mage Council's law, he was required to either send her back to Granadaia to be trained, or, if she refused to go, Strip her of her power. Silas didn't think Miss Banfrey would appreciate being told she had to leave her home and family to travel to Granadaia and become something she had probably been taught all her life to hate.

On the other hand, Stripping destroyed the mind and personality of the person being Stripped and left them a helpless shell. Silas had done it twice, each time to men who had requested it over the alternatives. Each time, he hoped never to have to do it again.

It wasn't a pretty choice to offer to a pretty young woman. But, much as he wished he could ignore the problem, he couldn't just do nothing. She could hurt or kill herself or someone else with her untamed power, or sooner or later another mage would find her, who might not offer her a choice. And if it was somehow discovered that he had found her first and done nothing, they would both be in deep trouble.

Not to mention the very real danger that the Plain folk of the town would discover that she had power and she would end up on the wrong end of a hanging rope.

Well, he was planning to stay in town until he unraveled the mystery of the other powers he had sensed, the familiar Granadaian-style power and that darker magic, and caught his renegade, if there was one to catch. That would give him time to think of a way to approach the subject that wouldn't upset

her too much. Or earn him an unwelcome meeting with her Pa's shotgun.

They reached the office of the Bitterbush Valley Cattlemen's Cooperative Association, at the southwest corner of the crossroads. A medium-size brown mare and a larger buckskin stood hitched outside. "I'm ready to go, Mr. Dorson!" Miss Banfrey called through the open door of the office.

A tall, weathered cowhand with a salt-and-pepper mustache, wearing a stiff, curve-brimmed straw hat, came out of the co-op office. "You okay, Miss Lainie?" he asked. "We heard shooting out in front of the saloons. When I came out to look for you, I saw you outside Minton's with this fellow." He nodded towards Silas.

"This is Mr. Vendine," Miss Banfrey said. "He offered to escort me in case there was any more trouble. Mr. Vendine, this is Mr. Dorson, my Pa's foreman."

Silas shook Dorson's hand as the foreman said, "Much obliged to you for looking after Miss Lainie, Vendine."

Silas winced inside at Dorson's use of his name. So much for that name-slip charm. But fake names were too much trouble to keep track of. With any luck, Dorson wouldn't remember his name anyway, and if he did, he had no reason to spread it around any further or wish Silas ill. "My pleasure," Silas said.

He watched Miss Banfrey swing up into the brown mare's saddle in a practiced, graceful movement. It had been a pleasure, he thought, even if his next conversation with Miss Banfrey was

likely to be less pleasant, and even though he was no closer to solving his mystery and catching his bounty.

Chapter 3

WITH MISS BANFREY safely on the way home in the company of her father's foreman, Silas walked back up the street to the stable. To his relief, Abenar had come through all the excitement unhurt. It looked like the unwritten law of the Wildings, that it was a worse crime to kill a horse than a man, had kept the gunfire away from the stable. Silas paid the stable boy for a handful of dried apple slices and fed them to his horse to make up for all the trouble.

On Silas's inquiry, the boy told him that board, grooming, and feed for the horse would cost forty drinas per nineday. A little steep, but not as bad as Silas had feared. Shoeing Abenar wouldn't be as expensive as he had expected, either. At least this time, he wasn't going to have to choose between shoes for his horse and a roof over his head. There was no question which choice would win out, and he was tired of sleeping on the ground. He looked down at his own boots. With luck, they had a good few months left in them before they would have to be repaired or replaced.

With Abenar settled, Silas went to the boarding house. The landlady said most of the rooms were full, with miners come into town to work for Mr. Carden, and offered him a choice of bunking with a

few other men for only one gilding per nineday or having a room to himself. Briefly, Silas considered sharing a room. It would be cheaper, but he didn't much care for the thought of bunking up with fellows like Gobby and his associates. And there were things he would need to do in the course of his investigations that he would rather not do in view of Plain folk.

So, despite the rapidly shrinking state of his finances, he paid in advance for a private room for a nineday. Meals were served in the downstairs parlor, Mrs. Mundy told him, though most of the boarders took their supper next door at the Rusty Widow. "I don't charge none if you take a house lady from the Widow up to your room," she said, "but it's ten drinas a night for any other birdie."

Silas left his belongings in the small but clean room he was given and returned to the stable to check on Abenar once more. That done, he strolled back down the street to the Rusty Widow Saloon.

Two men were sitting on the edge of the wooden walkway in front of the saloon. One man's leg was wrapped with white bandages, the other had his arm similarly wrapped. Two bodies still lay in the street. The face of one was covered with a white kerchief. A white-haired man in shirtsleeves, with a large black physician's bag on the ground next to him, squatted beside the other body, feeling the neck for a pulse. Carden stood nearby, watching, his hands in his trouser pockets.

The doctor shook his head, then took a second square of white cloth from his bag and draped it over the face of the man he had been examining.

Carden spat off to the side, shrugged, and walked away. Like most towns in the Wildings, Bitterbush Springs probably didn't have a proper shrine to the Gatherer or even a priest. Most likely, the dead men's friends would cobble together a pair of coffins or just wrap them in grave-windings and give them a quick burial outside of town.

Silas walked past the wounded men and pushed through the swinging doors of the Rusty Widow. The plinking, jangling noise of a hammerbox being inexpertly played carried over the sounds of conversation and laughter, and a miasma of tobacco smoke drifted over from a couple of the card tables.

He looked around to gauge what kind of welcome he would receive. He had assisted a rancher's daughter, which would likely put him firmly on the ranchers' side of the feud and make the Rusty Widow, where the miners seemed to congregate, hostile territory. A few men looked up at him with varying degrees of curiosity, but most of the two dozen or so customers at the Rusty Widow were too occupied with playing cards, drinking, discussing the shootout, and flirting with the house ladies to pay him any mind. If there was trouble, as a newcomer he could always plead ignorance of local politics.

Silas lowered his shield a bit and reached out with his mage senses, checking for the presence of power or signs of power-blocking shields. Aside from an occasional dim, useless flicker of magic, the legacy of a long-ago mage ancestor in an otherwise Plain heritage, too small to be noticed by the person who carried it, he found nothing. With

no other mages around to sense him, he let his own shield go. Maintaining it all the time was draining, and he didn't want to be distracted by magical hunger or find himself short on power should the need to use it arise.

He walked up to the bar and perched on one of the tall stools. Minding his manners, he took off his hat and put it on the stool next to him. The bartender, only slightly less grimy and gritty-looking than his customers, raised his eyebrows at Silas in question.

“Beer,” Silas said.

The barkeep filled a metal tankard from a keg and handed it across the stained, smudged bar. “Two drinas and six.”

Expensive for a place like this, but Silas refrained from commenting. He laid two silver drina pieces and six copper pennies on the bar, and drank, trying not to examine the cleanliness of the tankard too closely. The beer was strong stuff, and rough, but still felt good going down after the long, hot ride to get here and the events since his arrival.

“Some excitement here today,” he said. The barkeep shrugged and turned away, wiping down a row of tankards behind the bar with a none-too-clean towel.

So the bartender was not inclined to be talkative. But the man next to Silas, a sun-shriveled, balding man with five empty shotglasses in front of him, said, “Damn ranchers bring it on themselves. They want a payout, they can get out there an' bust their asses digging like the rest of us.”

“What're you digging for?” Silas asked.

“Ore.” The man shrugged. “Dunno what it’s called. Carden buys it from us, pays a handsome gilding for it too. Says there’s si – sine – scientists –” It required a noticeable effort for him to slur the word out correctly. “Scientists, that’s it, in a country over the sea who discovered things to do with it. Things that would put the gods-damned wizards to shame.” With no visible sign from the man, the barkeep set two more full shotglasses on the bar, and he downed them both in one breath.

Interesting. Science was forbidden in Granadaia because it was considered the antithesis of magic, but it was practiced in other lands, across the sea from the vast continent where Granadaia and the Wildings were located. And now miners in the Wildings were being used to obtain materials for some sort of scientific work.

The products of foreign science that Silas was familiar with – eyeglasses, canned food, clocks with numbered hours, and, most notably, guns – were undeniably useful things. He could see why a renegade mage might have an interest in gaining scientific secrets for himself, once he got over the natural distaste for and distrust of science that most mages had. If a rogue mage could add such secrets to his magical skills, that would make him a force to be reckoned with. The bounty on a mage who was using science was sure to be high. And even if there was no rogue mage involved, the Mage Council might be interested in hearing about foreign scientists extending their reach into the Wildings – maybe even a couple hundred gildings’ worth of interested.

A house lady in black-and-silver striped satin came to the bar and gave Silas a lingering, appreciative look, which he returned with a slight nod. Enough to be polite, but not enough to encourage her; he didn't have the funds, and he needed to keep his mind on business. She shrugged, then took a tray of filled tankards from the bar back to the table she was hostessing.

From that table, a man shouted, "That's the stranger what was with Miss Lainie!" Silas recognized that voice; he looked over that way to see Gobby standing up, leaning drunkenly against the table and pointing one thick finger towards Silas. "I know it was you, mister, and don't say it weren't!"

"The young lady was frightened by the gunfire. I helped her," Silas said. "Is there a problem with that?"

"You stay away from Lainie. I set my eye on her, an' I'll have her for myself!"

"You an' half the fellas in this town, Gobby," someone else at the table said. A round of chuckles followed his words. "Anyway, Banfrey won't let no miner knock his little girl. He'll kill any who tries."

"We'll see about that," Gobby grumbled beneath his thick beard. "When I'm rich enough, ain't no birdie an' her Pa will say no to me." He sat down heavily and picked up his hand of cards.

Gobby seemed troublesome enough to be a renegade. Silas checked him for power or signs of a shield, probing more deeply than he had in his initial scan of the saloon. Again, he came up empty in his search. Which was no surprise; if the miner

was a rogue Granadaian mage, he was doing an awfully good job of pretending to be a Wildings ne'er-do-well.

"Supper?" the barkeep said to Silas, distracting him from his thoughts.

"Sounds good," Silas said.

A moment later, the barkeep put a large bowl of ham and bean soup and a fresh, warm bread roll in front of him. "Six drinas and two," he said.

Like the beer and the room, it was expensive, but it looked and smelled surprisingly good and Silas was hungry, so he paid. "So, Carden pays good money for this ore that the scientists want," he said to the wizened man next to him as he ate. "What's that to the ranchers?"

"They claim ownership of damn near all the land around here, right up to the blueskin markers. Ain't hardly nowhere to dig that ain't on land some rancher says is his. They's threatening to shoot anyone they find digging on their land, an' saying they want to get paid for the ore that's dug up."

Silas thought that sounded fair, but this didn't seem like the place to say so. "Hmm," he said non-committally.

"It's hard work, an' dangerous. Carden pays us good, an' we earn it. Don't need no ranchers what can't even prove they own the land taking what we earned with our hard work an' sweat."

"Well, I can certainly see your point," Silas said. "But is it worth killing people over?"

"It's worth it," the man said. "It's that much money. Right now, with what's in my pocket, I could buy all seven of the Widow's house ladies for

a nineday, just for me. Only reason I don't is because the other fellas would beat me good for keeping 'em all to myself. That's how much money we're talking about. An' that's just from what I dug out nineday before last."

"I see." Silas worked up a quick estimate in his head. Exclusive rights to just one house lady for even a single night didn't come cheap. The total he arrived at for seven of them for a nineday was impressive. What were the scientists doing with this ore that made it worth so much?

Whatever it was, the result was a tense, sometimes deadly, situation here in Bitterbush Springs. Putting an end to the trouble seemed more and more like a worthwhile endeavor. And not just for the money; he found he didn't like the thought of Miss Banfrey being caught in the middle of such trouble – or of someone like Gobby setting his eye on her.

He finished his supper, pushed the bowl back across the bar, and drained the last of his beer. "Thanks for filling me in," he said to his partner in conversation. "Man rides into town in the middle of a gunfight, he kind of wonders what's going on."

"Glad to help," the man said. "But if you want my advice, mister, if you ain't here to sign on with Carden, I'd just stay out of it, that's what I'd do."

"Thanks," Silas said. "I'll keep that in mind." He took up his hat from where he had set it on the seat next to him, and left the saloon.

End of Sample