

The Sandstone

by Stephen Morrill

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Third book in the Sorcet Chronicles series

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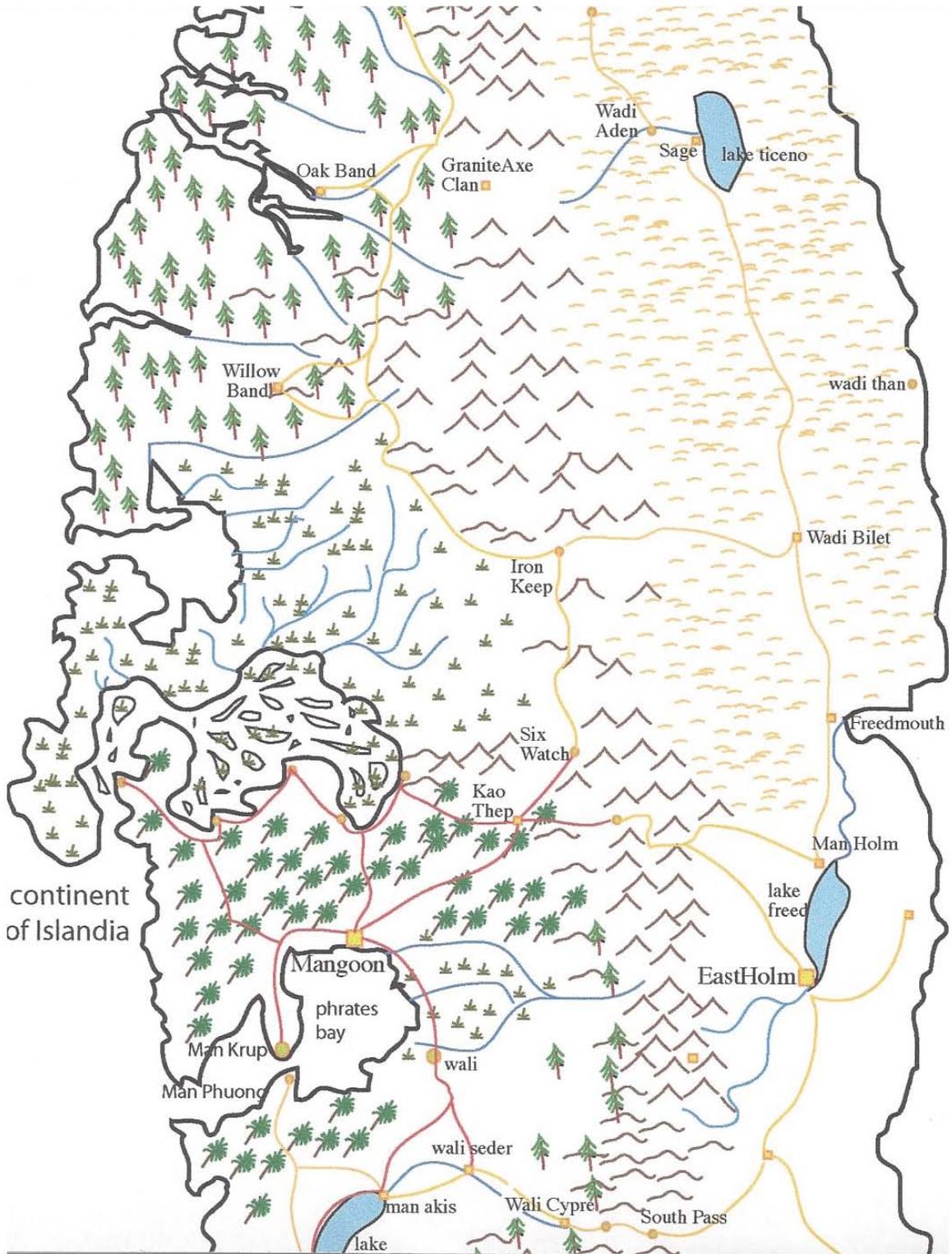
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Map



Chapter 1

If you live in Mangoon City on the world of Tessene and need a murder committed, go to Dendrich's Gems Shop in Mangoon's artisan quarter. Moussavi Dendrich will listen to your story and then tell you he knows nothing of the Shadow Guild and doesn't even think it exists. He has to say that or he would be dead by the next dawn, but he makes note of your request because he can read and write, as befits a two-name.

After you leave the shop he will go to the storeroom behind the gem-cutting room and close and lock that door. There is a hook on the storeroom wall with a lantern hanging from it. He will remove, light and hold the lantern and then, with his free hand, push up, hard, on that hook. The concealed hatch in the corner of the room will drop down. Dendrich will climb down a ladder into a dead-end tunnel and reset the hatch. He will follow that tunnel which, like all the Shadow Guild's "mousehole" entrance tunnels, leads to one common gateway. Soon he will enter a small room with arrow slits in one wall. A thin-faced human sitting cross-legged on a comfortable cushion on a raised dais and behind a low table has eyes that have seen more than Dendrich would ever want to know about.

The table holds an oil lamp, a black-painted dagger, some cheap pressed-linen paper, a writing quill and an inkpot, for this person, though a lowly one-name, can also read and write, which is why he's chosen for this clerical duty. There will be a second Shadow Guild male, more fleshy of face and belly and with a scar running from his half-missing left ear down to his throat, standing to one side, sucking on a tonnat berry he's secreted in his cheek and idly cleaning his dirty and ragged nails with a ten-inch dagger whose blade has also been painted black. He cannot read or write and doesn't need to know how, and what he's cleaning out from under his nails, Dendrich would not wish to know about either. This second male will flick his dagger slightly, a tiny gesture to indicate that Dendrich is a known friend. The man holding the crossbow in the adjacent room will relax and Dendrich will not die at this time.

Do not ask Tachi Green Fujiwara how he knows all this, for he cannot tell you and live to see the next dawn. But today Tachi, as he is known on this world where he is permitted only one name, is standing next to Dendrich in front of that table. He is holding a bundle of cloth, folded into a compact square. Dendrich is dismissed to return to his emeralds. This room is all he is ever to know of the Shadow Guild. But Tachi, who is a Gray Ranger and taidar to a Gray Guild deru, is also an adopted Shadow Guild member and he is passed on. Soon Tachi is in the guildmaster's office talking to his old mentor, Recluse.

"I'm almost afraid to be near you," Recluse growled, tossing a small throwing dagger into the air and catching it by the pommel as it came down. Recluse's cushion was elaborately embroidered because he was a little vain, and his low desk was of mirrwood and had a lot of drawers for papers. What was on those papers would have upset a lot of people, which is why Recluse always burned anything not current. "People keep trying to kill you. How many times is this now?"

"I've almost lost count, guildmaster." Tachi knelt on the tatami flooring before the low desk and bowed. "And that's not counting attacks on Caitlin too."

"Ah. Caitlin." Dagger up. "She was a promising Shadow member," dagger down, Recluse didn't even look at it as he caught it. "Though you have now been cross-trained

to replace her. Where is she now?" As always, Recluses' soft and raspy voice made Tachi want to clear his own throat.

"Back on our home planet. Called 'Earth', a land far from here. Along with our child." Tachi was wearing his good steel droichen-made chain armor under his plain brown shadowcloak but he knew that didn't protect him here. Recluse could, in a heartbeat, put that dagger through a person's eye at twenty paces.

"Ah. I do remember now. You two were married shortly before she went through the portal in that Stinger hive. So how is it that you are not back in this Earth place too and enjoying connubial bliss? What sort of husband lets his pregnant wife travel alone?"

"A coward, guildmaster. The journey is extremely dangerous and usually fatal. I was afraid to go. And now that portal is closed."

"You know that you are a coward?" The guildmaster's eyes narrowed.

"Yes sir."

"Well," Recluse took in some air and tossed the dagger. "That's more than most men know at least. And yet Sorcet keeps you on as her taidar. And taidar usually have shorter lifespans than Shadows, if that's possible. And that's even assuming they aren't on the receiving end of some determined assassins. Were I you, I wouldn't be buying green fruit."

Tachi had to smile. "Good point. But that's why I'm here. The last assassins, last evening, were Shadow Guild members."

Recluse caught the dagger and laid it on his desk. He sucked at a bleeding finger. "And how do you know this? And how is it that you are still alive? I don't train people to miss."

"They tried to stab me on a dark street. The usual two-on-one ambush, they had used tonnat extract to dilate their eyes to see better. And they wore shadowcloaks."

"Yes, of course. Routine, like painting blades black to avoid reflections. So then?"

"Well, I always use the downcast that you taught me. I saw the one in front at the last second as he gave a sign and then I knew there was someone behind me too. I did a backflip over the man behind just as he lunged. I think he actually pinked the one in front of me in the chest. By then I had out my own dagger and, as he turned around, I killed the one who had been behind me. Then I nipped around a corner and reversed my own shadowcloak to the light-bending side."

"You could have fought the one remaining human face-to-face."

"Well, he did look around the corner for me but by then I was squatted behind a garbage-box. And I did mention that I'm a coward."

"And had your deru, Sorcet, been present?"

"I would have had no choice but to fight. But she wasn't there."

"Umm. Is that the dagger?" Recluse pointed at the blade at Tachi's side. "Made from xythos, as I recall. A rare and impressive blade indeed."

"Yes sir. I know it's a little longer than regulation for you but I use it with a one-hand sword as well.

"Huh. And just how high can you jump? Over a man?"

"Almost. I actually brushed over his head. The gravity on Earth, on my home planet, is greater than here so I'm a lot stronger, relatively speaking."

"I'd like to visit this Earth sometime. Is it far? Is there not another way besides the portal you closed?"

"I know of no other way. And you wouldn't like it, guildmaster. There are too many laws. Too many policemen ... er ... city guards. They would hold a trial and a jury of your peers would sentence you to prison for murdering people."

"My peers? I would be judged by other Shadow Guild members? Nothing to fear, then."

"Not exactly. Your 'peers' would be mostly old retired people who are bored and willing to serve, and anyone without a decent job who could get excused from the duty."

"A stupid system." Recluse dismissed a millennium of English common law with an idle flick of his dagger. "As well, then, I shall not be visiting this land of Earth. But tell me about the second attacker?"

"He ran. I followed. The cloaks are not perfect, as you know, and staying right on his rear I could see a blur now and then. He did not seem to know I was able to keep up with him or that I might have a shadowcloak too. I followed the blur into that blind alley behind Jan's flower shop, where she stores her trash bins."

"Ah. One of our mouse-holes."

Tachi nodded. "I waited but he did not come out. I went to look and he was not in there. I assume he moved that last bin, the one Jan never fills, and came down here. I went back to the dead man and took his shadowcloak." Tachi leaned forward and laid his cloth bundle on Recluse' desk.

Recluse unfolded the bundle. There was a single slit in the front and a lot of blood soaked into it. Recluse rubbed at the bloodstain and found that the blood was still sticky. He wiped his finger on a dry part of the cloak and glanced up. "This is only a few hours old."

"Yes sir."

"Can you identify this man? Or the one who ran?"

"No. The one who escaped wore the shadowcloak, of course. Average height, weight, the usual garb." On the world of Tessene, humans were all about the same height. The tallest were no more than five feet ten inches and most, like Recluse, shorter. Tachi, at six feet and with Asian eyes no one on Tessene had, stood out in a crowd, which was not always a good thing.

"It is a violation of guild law to admit that we have a contract to kill you," Recluse said, leaning back on his cushion. "But I guess it's all right to tell you that we have no such contract. We have no such contract."

"Another city's guild perhaps?"

Recluse shook his head. "No. We do coordinate."

"That doesn't always seem to work," Tachi said. "The EastHolme guild once had a contract out on me."

Recluse shook his head again. "That was a clerical error. And you got that nullified anyway. But to last night: the male you followed knew our mouseholes, which a guild member from another city would not. This was an unauthorized act. Why would a guild member break his oath to do that? I have never heard of such a thing."

"He ... they ... may have been geased to do it."

"Geased? Mind control? I have heard of it."

"Yes sir. I saw it used at Iron Keep. An entire squad of soldiers, members of the Warrior Guild all, were compelled to attack us. How much has Sorcet told you of a man called Haptor? I know that you and she speak occasionally."

Recluse glared at Tachi. "Try to forget that you know that. And I'll try to forget Sorcet's violating our rules."

"Of course, sir. But I am her taidar. You well know what that means and what loyalty it requires."

Recluse nodded. "You guard her with your life. You live or die at her command. Willingly. I find that incomprehensible."

"Well, sir, that's between me and she. Now, about Haptor?"

"I know that he had gone renegade. A wild kaiphon is not a comfortable thing to contemplate. Did this Haptor perhaps influence two of my members?"

"We can find out if we can get that one male in front of me. He will be compelled to attack."

"Then why didn't he stay and finish the job last night?"

"I am not certain, sir. It may be that the confusion and the slight pain from his wound momentarily overrode the geas upon him. And by the time he recovered I had hidden from his sight."

"Good. I summon him to this office. After he kills you we can kill him. Problem solved. Neat. I like it."

"Sorry, guildmaster. He won't kill me."

"So you say. Let's see what we can do. Wait here." Recluse stood, picked up the bloody cloak, and walked out of the room. There was no other cushion but the one behind the desk. Tachi would no more have sat in the guildmaster's place than he would have dared pick up that throwing dagger off the desk. He took off his cloak, plain townsman-brown on one side, and reversed it to the shadow side and put it back over him, pulling the hood up over his head as well. He stood in a corner, waiting. Another thing he had learned in his time training with the Shadows was the art of waiting. The cloak did not make him invisible but it bent light around him and if he stood still it would be almost impossible to see him without looking directly at him. He squatted to both make himself seem smaller and to change the human shape.

Chapter 2

Down here in the Shadow Guild depths there was no sun to judge by but it was many moments, perhaps close to the Midday Period, by Tachi's estimate, before Recluse came back. On Tessene humans and sylphen sat on cushions or the bare tatami woven-straw floor coverings. The cave-dwelling droichen used tables and chairs usually carved directly from the rock. Tachi had learned the art of sitting cross-legged or on his knees and heels, much as his Asian ancestors must have done back on Earth. Even so, he had to shift several times before Recluse returned to the office.

With Recluse was a woman, thin and hard as a bamboo spear. This was Scorpion, Recluse's executive officer and heir apparent. Unlike most Shadows who relied upon cloaks and quickness, Scorpion always wore leather armor. So far as Tachi — who had once trained under her — knew, she slept in the stuff. Recluse glanced once in Tachi's direction — the cloaks didn't fool him — and smiled as he sat down behind his desk. Scorpion never looked at Tachi but did stand in a different corner.

"As you know, the Shadow cloaks wear out in about a year, becoming quite ordinary," Recluse said, looking at Tachi's corner.

"Yes sir. So if they fall into the wrong hands they will, in due course, cease to be a problem anyway."

"How old is your shadowcloak?"

"It still has a few seasons left on it," Tachi said.

"Scorpion, see to it that Tachi gets a fresh shadowcloak. His travels often take him far."

"Will do, sir."

"Thank you, guildmaster," Tachi said.

"It's routine," Recluse said mildly. "You're considered a Shadow and are entitled to exchange them. But you might try to earn a little gold for the Shadow Guild coffers, to pay for your upkeep."

"I'll draw some money from my account with the Gray Guild bursar and bring it by," Tachi said. He chuckled. "It would not do to simply hand him your bill."

"Hardly. Now, Tachi, you probably know that each cloak has a number on it and we track when that cloak was issued, and to whom."

"I've seen the numbers. On mine and on others."

"Sir," Scorpion said, her arms crossed and staring at the door to the room.

"Sir," Tachi said.

"You brought me the cloak issued to one Farythous, an experienced and long-trusted member."

"Farythous? what kind of name is that? Sir."

"The name of a man now floating out into Phrates Bay," Recluse said drily. "That's what we down here call a funeral. We're not given to ceremony."

"I can relate, sir. My predecessor as taidar to Sorcet lies in an unmarked grave in the eastern desert, stripped of all identification."

Recluse nodded. He stared at his desktop a moment, thinking. "Well I suppose once we're dead it doesn't much matter what they do with the leftovers."

"As you say, sir."

"All right. We're now looking into who went out with the dear departed last night."

The door opened and the man who entered looked about the same shape as Tachi's would-be assassin. He wore wool trousers and jerkin. It could be chilly in the Shadow tunnels. The clothes were the standard unbleached brown that one-names wore.

"You summoned me, guildmaster?" the man asked. He looked nervously at Scorpion.

"We have before us," Recluse said to no one in particular, "our guild member Towart. Now Towart, where did you and Farythous go last night when you left the Guild tunnels?"

"We ... we just went to eat at a tavern, guildmaster. Then we came straight back."

"And where is Farythous now?"

"Why. I would not know, guildmaster. He came home with me. Perhaps he went back out again."

"Farythous is dead. Perhaps you ran away so fast you didn't have time to check on that."

Sweat ran down Towart's cheeks. He glanced at Scorpion's unsmiling face and saw no help there. "I'm sorry, guildmaster. I don't understa ... "

"Take off your jerkin."

"My ... my jerkin?"

"Your jerkin. Remove it. I want to see your chest."

"And 'sir'. Call your guildmaster sir. Or guildmaster," Scorpion said. Tachi, who was still sitting in his corner, thought it an odd time to enforce guild protocol. But if Scorpion had said the sun would rise in the west tomorrow, he would have agreed.

Towart fumbled with the belt that cinched in the knee-length jerkin. He held belt and dagger scabbard in his left hand and then pulled the jerkin up over his head with his free hand. Trousers on Tessene were customarily worn with suspenders; the belts were for carrying belt purses and small weapons.

"There, sir. But I don't know why ... " his voice trailed off. Recluse and Scorpion were staring at the bandage Towart wore on his chest.

Recluse picked up his throwing dagger and tossed it into the air and caught it again. "Is that a dagger wound under there, Towart?" He asked in his soft rasp. Behind Towart, Tachi stood up silently.

"I ... I cut myself, guildmaster. Cleaning my dagger."

"Cleaning your ... " Recluse shook his head. "Here is my problem, Towart. Perhaps you can help me. I have to decide whether to kill you for being a clumsy and incompetent assassin, or kill you for running away and leaving your guildmate to die or, now, kill you for being so stupid as to stab yourself while cleaning your dagger. Which should it be? Oh, and Tachi, did you have a comment?"

Tachi tapped Towart on the left shoulder. "Hi there, little guy," he said conversationally. "We meet again."

Towart turned at the sound. He looked up in astonishment at Tachi's face above his own. His first thought might have been to wonder how Tachi came to be in the very center of the Shadow Guild's maze of tunnels.

Tachi actually saw a sort of glaze come over Towart's eyes, almost as if he were looking at something far beyond Tachi. The assassin's right hand flicked instantly to his belt. Tachi jumped back as Towart's dagger slashed toward him; the man was a trained killer and incredibly quick. Before Towart could complete the swing Recluse's small

dagger had sprouted from Towart's right ear and a longer dagger was deep in his back, the tip buried in Towart's heart. The dead assassin dropped to the office floor.

Recluse stood behind his desk to look. "I believe my dagger was first," he said.

"No, guildmaster," Scorpion said. "Mine claimed his life."

Recluse sighed. "Must be getting old. Well, now we know what we know. Scorpion, can you ... "

"I'll dispose of this, guildmaster."

"Leave the blades in until you have him in yon corridor. I try to maintain a neat office."

"Yes guildmaster."

"Tell no one of the geas. That is between you, me and Tachi here."

Scorpion nodded. "Let them all wonder," she said. "It will keep the members well disciplined." She bent to seize the body by the suspenders, dragged it out into the corridor, and closed the door. Tachi could faintly hear her giving instructions to the two guards who always stood outside.

"You made no move to defend yourself," Recluse said, sitting again upon his embroidered cushion. "You trusted that I, or Scorpion, would kill Towart before he got to you. Could you have killed Towart yourself?"

"Yes, guildmaster."

"Then why did you not defend yourself? Are you too cowardly to draw a weapon?"

"Killing him in your office would have been disrespectful. It was not my decision to make."

"Not at all cowardly then. I shall remember your respect for the office. Now, my own guild members geased," Recluse frowned. "I owe this Haptor a death. Two deaths, counting Farythous. Those were both good guild members. And I have a long memory."

"Yes sir."

"You are a Gray Ranger, Tachi, not under my command even though you are Shadow trained too. Can I order you to kill this renegade kaiphon?"

Tachi shook his head. "I obey only my own deru, Sorcet," he said. "But, guildmaster, we are leaving soon for the eastern lands, where Haptor was last seen, and I will kill him if I come upon him."

"That would be gratifying indeed. But I shall be putting out a contract on Haptor later today. This is personal now. He has cost me dearly."

"I imagine that Farythous and Towart aren't too happy about it either. Sir."

Recluse ignored that. "I'll send copies of the contract to all cities and all other Shadow Guilds."

"Suits me, guildmaster. Call it a contest. Your guild with its vast networks versus my one dagger. Loser buys the ale."

Recluse grinned. "I like that. Perhaps you will be quicker after all. I seem to be slowing down. Did Scorpion's dagger really strike first?"

"Yes, guildmaster."

"Damn."

Chapter 3

Tachi's next duty was to release his old friend Dag from training at the hands of the Warrior Guild. He found Dag in the practice yard there, sparring with a trainer Tachi did not know. Dag, a stocky droich from the GraniteAxe droichen clan that lived in the caves tunneled throughout The Spine mountains, seemed to be holding his own.

As Dag and the taller human circled and struck and dodged, small clouds of dust obscured their feet. Both wore heavy training armor and practiced with heavy but blunt weapons.

Tachi, watching from a doorway, doubted that he could match either in this form of heavy-weapon combat even though he was taller than the human and much taller than Dag. The human trainer was sweating and barely able to keep up with Dag, which did not surprise Tachi, who recalled seeing Dag grimly hacking away at an army of stingers, giant insects, during the raid on the Firestone Portal several seasons ago.

Dag had wanted to join Tachi, Leafe and Sorcet, and upon Dag's arrival in Mangoon City the deru had sent him off for cross-training, much to Dag's annoyance. He considered himself already trained as a warrior and Tachi, having seen Dag in action, covered in his blood and stinger gore and grimly swinging his short-handled axe, was inclined to agree.

Tachi turned away, climbed a flight of stairs to the Warrior guildmaster's office and delivered a note from the Gray Guild asking that Dag be released back to them.

That evening they all met in Sorcet's small office in an obscure part of the Gray Guild compound. The Grays were the lorekeepers and librarians and also operated a specialized hospital. They not only maintained libraries of scrolls and tomes in each major human city but also copied anything new for distribution to other libraries. Some wealthy customers paid for private copies as well and there was a fee for a non-guild member to access and read in the library's reading rooms.

Dag had cleaned up and wore the Gray Guild cloak with the guild stripe. He was the shortest person in the room. Tachi was six feet tall and weighed about one hundred eighty pounds, though the inhabitants of the world of Tessene used different measurements. Sorcet was the same height, but only about 150 pounds, and was, in her own way, as muscular. Leafe Willowsdottor, a young sylph from the Oak Band, was as tall as the others but much more slender and weighed little more than the cat-like Spots, her semi-intelligent pet fert. Among them, Dag, at about five and a half feet but one hundred eighty pounds of compact muscle, looked like a rock surrounded by willow reeds.

Tachi had just given Dag a tour of the Gray Guild compound, four high walls so wide as to be two-story buildings in their own right, surrounding a large central park. The Gray Guild was one of the larger guild compounds in Mangoon City and almost a village of its own. The Gray Guild did more than collect tomes and scrolls. It collected the rare magiker too. There seemed to be just two known varieties of these, the derudae, who could manipulate some physical laws, and the kaiphonae who could affect minds and bodies. These were so rare on Tessene that even the Gray Guild, which actively searched out any children showing the slightest potential, had collected only a few.

A portion of the guild compound was given over to a small hospital where the kaiphonae worked at their expensive craft. Being treated by a kaiphon was costly because

each use of his or her talent cost the kaiphon hours, days or weeks of lifespan and they liked to be rewarded accordingly. Only the very wealthy sought out the services of the kaiphonae and then only when a regular physicker could not help them. Other kaiphonae — and the renegade Haptor was counted among those — practiced the dark side of their art, and could control a victim's mind or kill a person outright with a thought. Such dreadful power came with consequences: a kaiphon who killed someone or saved someone's life lost a bit of his or her own lifespan in the process. It tended to make them cautious in their work.

But the Gray Guild also sent out agents to locate and bring in any new-found knowledge. Sometimes these agents also went on other missions, quiet but well-funded tasks on behalf of wealthy three-names or even city eparchs. Sorcet, who was a deru by training, was one such. A senior deru, she was always accompanied by taidar, bodyguards sworn to her defense. When Tachi had first met Sorcet, the deru's previous taidar, just one, had recently been killed. Now Sorcet had three. Leafe Willowsdotter, a sylph, had joined them earlier in the year and had already been on one mission with Tachi and Sorcet, when they had participated in a rebellion in the southern city of Barakis and then closed the Emeraldstone Portal. Dag was the new one, but he was not new to the others, for he had helped Tachi and Caitlin when those two first came to the Spine Mountains and to the droichen home caverns, then had fought beside them in the battle with the Stingers that ended with closing the Firestone Portal and Caitlin's departure.

Sorcet was sitting bolt upright on a cushion behind her desk. Her jet-black, shoulder-length hair matched her boots. Her tanned skin did not match the Gray Guild cloak. She was not wearing her dark gray xythos armor; that was displayed on a stand in an alcove behind her, along with that dreadful black blade she favored.

Her three taidar knelt before her on the tatami floor; there was one visitor cushion but they ignored it. Sorcet had spent most of the recent days reading scrolls and tomes that acolytes brought across the compound from the library on the opposite side.

There was a small pile of those to one side of the desk. Sorcet leaned in to lay the scroll she had been reading on the desk, then looked from one to the other of her little band of taidar.

"We are tasked to close the portal in the Eastern Desert," she said without preamble. "But there are complications."

"I should imagine so," Tachi said. "Even crossing that desert won't be easy. And the desert sylphen are tough to know, tougher to like, and impossible to fight. Or so I have heard."

Sorcet stared at him a long moment. Once upon a time this would have frightened him, she had eyes like ball-bearings and he sometimes wondered if she even saw in the same visual spectrum as the rest of them. "The desert is survivable," she said at last. "I have survived it. I have also had dealings with the desert sylphen."

"Did they survive meeting you?" Tachi asked.

"Some did. Others, no. But the problem is not the desert, or the people there. We shall learn more along the way, I am certain, but the portal itself appears to be too dangerous to even approach."

"How do you know that, Boss?" Tachi asked. He never used 'boss' in public but Dag and Leafe were family.

Sorcet gestured to the scrolls. "Reading. Reading is a wonderful invention," she said. "More people should try it. Apparently the portal there sickens or kills people who come near it."

"Then why do we care about it," Leafe said. She idly stroked Spots' head as he sat beside her, the big cat's eyes closed in bliss. "They're already almost suicidal to use."

"Mistress, I think Leafe is right," Dag said. "Is this even worse than the Firestone Portal? We lost good friends fighting through a stinger hive to close that one. And that was with an army. And, as I have heard, Tachi nearly died closing the Emeraldstone Portal."

"Actually, I did die," Tachi muttered. "A kaiphon gave much to bring me back. My eternal thanks to Sorcet for paying the poor man."

Sorcet nodded to Tachi and shifted that blank gaze to Dag. "We care about it because it is a portal. That alone makes it dangerous to the people of this world. We care about this one at this time because it happens to be one whose location we know of and can reach. We take them one at a time, as we can."

Tachi, who had known Sorcet the longest, was her senior taidar, and also, for the past few months, her occasional lover, recognized when Sorcet was getting annoyed. "What is your wish, Boss," he said.

Sorcet leaned forward. "Dawn. At the guild front gate. Weapons, armor, field gear. We will take a wagon to Seven Watch, thence on to EastHolme. Leafe, take these scrolls back over to the library. Tachi, there is some expense money ready for us with the bursar. See him and collect that. Take Dag along, he needs to learn his way around."

"And Dag, welcome to the team," Tachi said, looking straight at Sorcet.

"And Dag, welcome to the team," Sorcet said.

Chapter 4

Haptor sat in his room on the second floor of the only inn in South Pass and tried to stop shaking. South Pass was a small fort on the EastHolme side of the mountain pass that led west to Barakis lands. It was a small and unimportant and remote place, but had the advantage of being on the road between EastHolme City, Barakis City and Mangoon City and about equidistant from all three. The Other had ordered Haptor to stay there and await further orders. Haptor was waiting now.

The Communicator vibrated and gave off a soft chime. It was a headband with a box on each side over Haptor's ears. He slipped it on and tried to sound nonchalant.

"Yes, Master," he said aloud. "I'm here in South Pass. I hope all is well with you too." The Communicator actually transmitted thoughts but the thoughts, at least in Haptor's case, had to be uppermost in his mind and the easiest way to guarantee that was to talk aloud. He always made certain to be alone at these times. He had even killed his own taidar, Gorham, back at Iron Keep in Mangoon lands when that human had become curious about his master's strange behavior.

Haptor had then fled that granite fortress where he had been the assigned Gray Guild officer, and was now a homeless renegade. That had not been his original plan when he traded his soul to The Other in exchange for everlasting life and wealth that The Other had promised. This also made Haptor the only magicker he knew of without any armed protection, without any taidar. That didn't frighten him nearly as much as having to talk to The Other.

Is the young Earther dead yet? Haptor heard, or his mind sensed. The Other never wasted time on pleasantries. Haptor wished he hadn't been so glib. It was weakness.

You are weak, all people here are weak, The Other said. Haptor had forgotten that The Other could read his thoughts when Haptor wore the Communicator.

I can read your thoughts at any time. I don't need that silly headset. Is the young Earther dead yet?

"By now he is, Master. Certainly. I geased two Shadows to kill him. The Shadows never fail."

Would you wager your life on this? The Other's voice came to Haptor as a deep rumble, almost too low for human ears to hear. But, of course, Haptor thought, that was only the way his own brain interpreted it.

Haptor swallowed. "Well, Master, I wasn't there. But I'm sure they succeeded. I'm sure we'll get word of that eventually."

I will terminate you if you fail to kill the young Earther. His continued presence on this world is ... annoying ... to me.

"Master, no one on Tessene is a danger to you."

I did not say the Earther was a danger to me. I said he was annoying. He may have powers of which he is not yet aware and I don't want him — or myself — finding out. I have the older Earther and he is sufficient.

"Yes Master. I understand. But if the Shadows fail I have other assassins in readiness. I will not fail you."

I am not so certain as you. But remember our bargain: Kill the young Earther and I will release you from our bond and you retire with wealth and luxury. Fail me and you die. Perhaps you need to geas more people, more assassins, eh?

"Master, remember that each time I do that I shorten my life by many days."

Of what consequence is that to me? You can shorten your life by all that is left if you do not carry out my orders. Do what you must do to stay alive, even for a shorter time.

"I ... I understand Master. I can also bribe people, hire willing killers. But for that I need more money. I'm starting to run out of gold. Can you get me some added gold?"

I thought all kaiphonae were wealthy. You certainly charge your customers enough.

"Well, those are mostly the healing kaiphonae," Haptor said. "The combat ones, like myself, rely on payment from our sponsors: eparchs, guildmasters, or you.

The deep rumbling in his ears sounded to Haptor almost like low laughter. *I do not have much of this gold you humans find so precious. No use for it. And are you willing to come to Mount Orboros to get it?*

"Well, no, Master. That is, not if I don't have to. That place has a horrible reputation."

It is a well-deserved reputation. I keep most of my ... pets ... around here. I suppose you will have to get by on your own somehow.

"Well, Master, I'm sure that this Tachi is dead by now. If he is not then he soon will be."

Good. That would be good for my plans. And good for your plans too.

"Master, how is this young Earther a danger? Or even an annoyance? I only ask so that I may better assist you. And why is not the older Earther a danger too? I do not understand."

You shall assist me at my command; you need not know the why or how of it. The older Earther is valuable to me. He is here with me now.

"How is he valuable and the young one not?"

That is none of your affair. Just continue to do as I command and you will go on living. That is all you need to remember.

"Yes sir. Of course." Haptor swallowed once more. He realized he was drenched in sweat. It was always this way when The Other called. "But may I move on to Barakis City? This small fort and inn is not suitable for a kaiphon of my stature." Haptor tittered and instantly regretted that. "It's just not suitable."

You will remain there. It is convenient to me. In fact, Haptor knew, South Pass was one of the closest civilized points to Mount Orboros and The Other had a safe place somewhere near or perhaps even within that immense volcano.

The Communicator ceased to transmit. Haptor tore it off his head and flung it onto his futon in annoyance. He had agents out across the island continent called Islandia and he would just have to sit in this miserable little inn until one brought him word of Tachi's fate. "I don't know whom I hate the more," he said aloud to the empty room, "Tachi, or his deru Sorcet, or The Other." Then he looked guiltily at the Communicator. Could it hear him? He picked it up and pushed it into the small felt-lined bag where he stored it.

Chapter 5

Leafe eyed Tachi the next morning as he climbed up into the wagon Tachi had hired for the trip. Some light trips were made in two-wheel carts with a single bullock but this was a four-wheeler with two bullocks harnessed for a medium load. The drover, a teenage girl, worked for a family Tachi knew who hauled loads throughout Mangoon lands.

Tachi was sometimes still surprised at how young some workers were on Tessene. But when you had no effective school system for most of the population, they went to work almost as soon as they could walk and talk. Few people here could afford the luxury of education, something that meant a mouth to feed that produced no useful work for many years. He had even seen small children leading one-ton bullocks around the farms and nobody ever seemed to think that might be unsafe. Where he came from, Tachi thought, parents, child protective services, entire governments, would have had collective heart attacks to see such a thing.

The girl was inspecting the animal harnesses, yanking here and tightening there. She seemed to know what she was doing. The bullocks just stood there, which is what bullocks usually did unless someone persuaded them to slowly walk. They were not entirely stupid, Tachi knew; they could also drool while standing or walking. Dag was already there too, as was Spots. It was warm this morning. Because Tessene did not have a tilted orbit, all days were always the same length but the planet's orbit was eccentric enough to create seasons. They were in the fifth tenday, or halfway through the Time of Celat or summer. Tachi could not think of a worse time to head out for the eastern desert.

"You look exhausted," Leafe said brightly. "Did you and she sleep like two sylphen last night?" Sylphen didn't actually sleep at all. Leafe had likely spent the night in a semi-trance, fully alert but not moving.

"I had a ... hard time." Tachi admitted. Dag muttered something in the Droichen tongue and Tachi glared at him. "But at least I can sleep in the wagon. One reason I like wagons."

"Was it hard too often?" Dag said louder, in the droichen tongue. "And will she nap today too?"

"By the Great Womb's deepest ore, I hope so," Tachi said in the same language. All three, and Sorcet as well, spoke the three main languages, human, sylphen, droichen. He switched to human, "What is all this junk?" Tachi gestured at a pile of bags and boxes that took up half the space.

"Supplies for the fort, sent along by my friends at the Warrior Guild," Dag said. "Why waste a good wagon?"

"One reason might be that I don't like sleeping on lumpy bags," Tachi grumbled.

Sorcet appeared, stalking across the wide inner yard and out to the gate, a tall, slender figure in dark gray armor and short black hair peeping out from beneath a conical helm. Tachi always loved to watch her walking in armor. She was the only person who looked better in armor than in the usual cloth tunics and cloaks everyone normally wore. But, then, Sorcet could walk around in a gunnysack, Tachi thought to himself, and he would like to watch that too. A part of his mind thought back, as always, to Caitlin and their child that he had never seen. He knew he would never forget but he knew, too, that

he had to move on. Leafe, his adopted sister from the Oak Band, had worn him down on the subject over many discussions.

Sorcet spoke briefly to the bullock-wagon drover, who looked terrified at being addressed by an armor-clad deru. Sorcet then leapt agilely up into the wagon, the girl flicked her long willow-rod at the two bullocks' rumps and they started off with a jerk. Spots growled at the motion and Leafe stroked his head. Spots might have startled the bullocks pulling the cart but for the fact that nothing ever seemed to startle them. They lived out their lives staring at the ground before them and walking at the same stately pace.

A person could outwalk a bullock-wagon but the wagons were the trucks on Tessene and could carry heavy loads, or lots of people, or both. The heavy wagons did require good roads. Beyond the fort at Seven Watch there would be no hard surface road and travelers walked alone or took along yamas, pony-sized beasts that could carry small burdens. There were no riding animals on Tessene, a source of major disappointment to Tachi.

They would ride the wagon on the stone road to Seven Watch, traveling one "march" per day, about ten Earth miles or an easy walk, for fifteen days, then leave that fort and the wheeled transport and walk over a pass and into EastHolme country and on to EastHolme City. Once east of Seven Watch and in EastHolme territory they would actually travel faster, walking, than they did riding the wagon.

The wagon rattled slowly though the city streets, past the sprawling Temple of Mathris near the city center, past the eparch's palace, though the tanning quarter with its drying racks, chemical baths and stench, and on out the northeast gate in the city wall. All that day they rode though pleasant farmlands and occasional groves of fruit trees. Tachi dozed, Sorcet did not. Dag and Leafe and sometimes the drover chatted and sometimes got down to walk beside the wagon just for the exercise. Tachi woke when they stopped for lunch: some cheese, fruit and dried meat for them and some oats for the bullocks. Spots fended for himself, ranging out to either side as they rode, and caught a slow-witted rabbit, thus improving the Leporidae genetic stock thereabouts. He knew not to bother the sheep and cattle.

That afternoon they stopped at an inn. There was an inn every "march" along the major roads. Tachi realized that he could no longer smell Magoon City. On the rural world of Tessene, and depending upon which way the wind was blowing, one could smell a city a half-day or a day before arriving. Living in the city, one's nose got accustomed to it so that it was especially noticeable to Tachi when he left again.

Tachi negotiated with the innkeeper for two private rooms and a stable space. The girl would sleep in her wagon and the bullocks would spend the night in a locked stall. Sorcet and her taidar would take the best rooms — the Gray Guild always did that both for better security and to avoid most of the fleas that inhabited the common sleeping halls everyone else used. Dag and Leafe could take one room and Sorcet and Tachi the other. The food was usually good and often excellent at these inns. They were, after all, in the midst of farms and groves and everything was fresh. They had local beer and wine. As always Sorcet, who Tachi thought must have hollow legs, drank a lot of the wine.

They reached Kao Thep in nine days of easy travel. This eastern Magoon town had been briefly occupied by EastHolme troops during a recent war between Magoon and Barakis. The EastHolme eparch and merchant class had, indeed, legitimate grievances

with Mangoon but had only come west over the pass at Seven Watch in order to lure Barakis into attacking Mangoon on the mistaken assumption that EastHolme was taking Barakis' side in the war.

After their staged attack, the EastHolme troops had gone home, the pass was open to merchants once more, and business was booming in Kao Thep. The town was a cacophony of lowing cattle, snorting — and sometimes spitting — strings of yama pack animals, and shouting bullock-wagon drovers. Large corrals outside of town hosted herds of cattle being driven to markets in Mangoon. EastHolme shipped a lot of livestock and raw linen, and much else, not just to Mangoon but to Mangoon City's wharves, for shipment west across the Great Sea.

Unlike Mangoon City, with its organized "quarters" — a misnomer since there were more than four — for manufacture and commerce. Kao Thep was one huge flea market from end to end. Criers outside taverns shouted out that they had better wine than the tavern next door. Blacksmiths and cartwrights repaired bullock carts for the road once more. Physickers dealt with ills, boils and cuts, the wear and tear of the road, on both man and beast. Shopkeepers hawked fine goods for the men to take back to EastHolme for their wives. Their wives being so far away, whores enticed the men to slake other thirsts. Dag perked up as their cart rolled past a building with half-clad women at the windows and a fat and surly-looking guard standing in front of the door.

"Don't even think it," Tachi said to Dag. "We aren't here on a pleasure trip. You're a taidar now."

"You sleep with her." Dag nodded towards Sorcet, who was sitting up front with the drover girl.

"Yes. And with that sword too. She usually keeps it within reach even in sleep."

"Oh." Dag thought a moment. "That sword can break any other sword. If you know what I mean. Are you saying that you and she ... "

"I'm only saying that we don't always."

"Well, those women could be a threat," Dag pointed back to the house, now behind them. "I should probably get over there, inspect them closely for weapons."

"It's quite obvious that they're not wearing any weapons," Leafe offered, stroking Spots' head. He was staying in the cart while they rolled through town. The 100-pound fert tended to frighten people when he ran loose.

Dag looked over at Leafe. "What about you, lass. Don't you feel the need to ... relax a bit ... now and then?"

She shook her head. "We sylphen only have sex when we want to create a new sylph. And that is a rare event. We get no great pleasure from it as you droichen and the humans seem to. Sometimes we make a ceremony of it, with friends and relatives all watching. A child always results; there is no randomness, as I have observed here among humans."

"But you and I ... there would be no result. We could have sex without worrying about any outcome."

"I don't wish to. And if we did you might get hurt."

"Hurt?"

"We sylphen don't have or use futons. We do it standing up. You droichen are much too short. I might drop you."

"Lass," Dag shook his head, "you are a cruel female."

Sorcet never so much as looked their way but Tachi saw a corner of her mouth turn up, for her an outright giggle-fit.

Dag stopped by Tachi's room later that evening. "Want to go out, little brother?" he asked. "I have some money and I'm buying."

"What would you buy here, Dag? We're traveling. We don't need more things to carry."

"I thought I'd spend some on wine, loose women, and cards."

"And the rest I'd spend foolishly," Tachi and Dag said together. They both laughed. "No," Tachi said. "I'll stay here. Someone has to keep Sorcet from drinking too much."

"Humph" You don't seem too good at that task," Dag said.

Next morning they started before dawn. Seven Watch was a six-day journey eastward from Kao Thep and with a pass to climb at the end. The pass beyond was not so steep as the one Tachi had seen at Iron Keep, farther north, and the fort at the crest was much smaller.

Tachi had been here before and knew the place. They arrived tired and hungry just in time for the midday meal.

Because this was also a border post, the Gray Guild did have a small office here, staffed by one scriptor who checked wagons and yama loads for scrolls and tomes. There were no Gray Guild magikers here. Most travelers slept in a common visitors barracks but Tachi negotiated with the fort commander for officers' quarters for Sorcet and her taidar.

Tachi also paid off the young girl who had driven the wagon. The fort had a booking agent who could arrange a load for her return to Mangoon City and she would likely be off in the morning. Tachi turned over the supplies they had brought along for the fort. Because they had brought some tomes and scrolls, copies made for the Gray Guild library at EastHolme, they would need a few yamas, and Tachi paid for several, to be picked up on the morning as they left.

The fort's soldiers, like everyone else in the small but professional Mangoon army, were Warrior Guild members and they were clean, polished, disciplined, and courteous to the passing civilians. Tachi remembered his dealings with the mob that passed for an army in Barakis City. They were gone now, and a new eparch had replaced the madman that Sorcet had beheaded during a revolt she had helped to instigate.

Tachi sometimes wondered what had become of the one surviving acolyte of the Cult of Mathris' Sword, deep under the Barakis City palace, whom Sorcet had so casually hurled into the Emeraldstone Portal to close it forever. The man was probably dead; almost no one ever survived the journey to a portal's far side. Tachi only held out hope for Caitlin and their child because her bloodtree, in a special grove in the Oak Band forests, still lived.

Tachi and Caitlin had undergone the bonding ceremony and each had a tree that knew them and which would live for so long as they, too, lived. Caitlin's tree yet lived, but no one knew what that meant, since the bonding was not thought to extend beyond the world of Tessene. She could be dead and her tree simply not know. But Tachi had convinced himself that she and their child still lived, back on the Earth to which she had so desperately wanted to return.

"Thinking of Caitlin?" Leafé asked as Tachi sat on a cushion at the long, low table in the fort's mess hall, looking around quietly, ignoring the conversations to either side. She stood behind Tachi and had tapped his back with her foot.

"You're a good sister," Tachi said, looking up. "She once sat here. In this very hall. I think of her often when I revisit places we were together."

"She is at peace," Leafé said. "In another place. Her tree yet lives. Be content."

Tachi nodded. He swallowed to try to get his throat under control. At least he wasn't in tears; sometimes he was when he got morose. "That's one reason I don't like to go back to places I've already been. Keep moving forward, is what I like. The past is past."

Then the tears came. "I don't know if I have a son or a daughter." He wiped his eyes, "May Mathris' own eyes not see my weakness."

A scarred older Warrior Guild captain sitting across the table looked up at Tachi. "Old memories? Bad ones?" he asked. He took a swig of ale from a pewter mug.

"Good ones," Tachi said. "Good memories. Never to be repeated."

The man nodded. "Those are the best." He looked down at his plate a moment. "And the worst."

"But don't you despise my weakness for weeping so?" Tachi said.

The captain stared at Tachi a long moment, then at Leafé. He looked back at Tachi and hoisted his mug. "Ale. I recommend ale. A lot of it. That works for me. Who among us is not weak in some way?"

"Apparently the past is not fully behind you," Leafé said. "About the child, male or female, does that matter to you?"

"Not really. I would love either. I suppose I do love the child even though I've never seen it. But it would be nice to know."

Leafé pulled over a cushion and sat crosslegged beside Tachi.

"Sometimes life is unfair, little brother. But it is life, none the less."

"I suppose so," Tachi said. "For as long as it lasts."

Chapter 6

That evening Tachi joined Sorcet, Leafe and Dag in the large common mess hall. They had meat, a rarity in Mangoon City but plentiful here on the trail between the EastHolme herds and the Mangoon City livestock buyers. Spots was almost asleep on the floor behind Leafe. Tachi took a cushion across from Leafe and next to Sorcet.

Even in a crowded public dining hall there was always plenty of room around Sorcet, and usually a lot of silence too. Sorcet didn't see it or, if she did, never commented upon it, but Tachi, walking a step behind as her taidar, often noticed the looks of awe and sometimes fear that even battle-scared warriors showed when they thought her safely past and not looking their way.

Sorcet had two mugs of ale in front of her — Sorcet always had attentive ale-servers — and was halfway through a large steak. "Did you make all arrangements?" she asked.

Tachi nodded. "Done. All set for tomorrow. Paid off the drover-girl too. Gave her a small bonus. She was a nice person and very adult for her years."

"I did not notice. I trust that you did not overpay her too much. That is bad for Gray Guild business. Another time she will expect that bonus."

"By Mathris' eyes! What do you care? The guild pays you, and me, almost nothing. They just give us expense money. May as well spread the joy."

"Well, not true," Sorcet said. "You three, and I, are paid and paid well. It is just that they bank it for us, for our eventual retirement."

"Is that true?" Dag exclaimed. "We get paid? A lot? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Leafe answered. "Would it have made any difference to whether or not you joined us?"

"No. Of course not."

"Exactly. Sorcet doesn't want people guarding her back who are only doing it for the money. Isn't that right, Sorcet?"

Sorcet stared at Leafe over the lip of her mug. She drained the mug, sat it down, and reached for the second. She said nothing.

"What Sorcet means to say is that the Gray Guild bursar doesn't think it matters how much we are paid," Tachi said. "He figures we will never live to retire and collect it."

Sorcet cut into her steak, using a smaller dagger they all carried for such mundane tasks. On Tessene, in the country especially, everyone carried their own utensils and a bowl to use for food. Only the finest inns in larger cities supplied tableware and utensils. "Well, my mother taught me to work hard for my pay," Sorcet said. She swallowed some ale. "And harder still for any extra pay."

"I don't believe it," Tachi exclaimed. Leafe and Dag looked up at him and then at Sorcet.

"What?" She said. "You do not believe my mother told me that?"

"I don't believe you had a mother."

Sorcet stared at Tachi a moment, then burst out laughing. A dozen Warrior Guild soldiers sitting nearby stared, never having seen a Gray Guild deru laughing.

That night Tachi stopped by the mess hall and came away with a small bucket of ale and two pewter mugs. Sorcet raised an eyebrow at the sight when he entered their sleeping room. "Planning a party? You never drink to excess. That is my job."

"Something a guard captain suggested today at midday meal."

"A guard captain told you to get drunk?"

"Said it would help with old memories. Of Caitlin. I miss her."

"Ah." Sorcet picked up one of the mugs and poured herself a drink. "I am no replacement for Caitlin. Thee knows that, really. Does thee not?" She reverted to her most formal lisping accent only when being very personal.

"I suppose." He poured his own mug of ale. "Tonight I want to get drunk. Very drunk. And make love to you."

"To me?" Sorcet said. "Or to Caitlin?"

"Does that matter to you, mistress deru Boss lady? You're here; she's not."

Sorcet grinned. "And you certainly get drunk quickly. Feeling a little hostile, are we?"

"Not used to it, I suppose. Usually drink water." Tachi poured another mug. "And no. Not hostile to you. Never. I love you."

"Stop saying that."

"Well, it's true.

Sorcet sighed. Sorcet did not lay her sword between their two futons, but stood it upright against the wall nearby. She stripped off her armor, then the leather jerkin and trousers beneath that. It took a few minutes. Tachi sat and stared and drank.

"Did I ever tell you how beautiful you are?" he said.

"No. I do not believe you have. But I already know that."

"Egotistical too."

"Now you are starting to sound like the Tachi I know. Come to bed now. And stop drinking. You will only have a big head in the morning."

"You should know, Boss."

"I do know. I, too, have memories. Tonight we shall make new ones. And call me Sorcet."

Sorcet grinned. Tachi loved to see her grin. Her smile was even better, but she was usually stone-faced. He nearly threw her on a futon right then. "Not sure I want to bed a mere one-name," he said. "That's more Dag's speed."

"You are obnoxious at times; you know that," she said. She lay down on one of the futons and pulled the second close.

"By Mathris' ears," Tachi said. "I'm obnoxious most of the time. You just normally don't pay much attention."

"I always pay attention," Sorcet said. "I do not always respond. Now come to bed, Tachi. Come to me."

Next morning they dressed for the first time in their full armor. Sorcet always wore hers when on the road but until now the others had carried it in the wagon. But the most sensible way to carry armor when you were walking was to wear it.

Tachi and Dag had good droichen chainmail that they wore over leather tunics, and conical helms. Dag, formerly a guard commander for the GraniteAxe Clan, had a good steel war-axe, short-handled and with a half-moon blade on one side and a spike on the back. There was a protective leather cover over the razor-sharp blade and Dag usually let the thing hang by a built-in eye from a hook on his chest harness. He carried a large round shield, thin steel over a wood-and-leather backing. Leafé wore leather armor that was spotted in green and brown. Her own sylphen skin could take on those colors too,

chameleon-like. Though forest sylphen normally carried only a bow and dagger, Leafe had trained to also use both a one-hand longsword and the dagger.

Tachi's weapons were very rare, gifts from his droichen and sylphen friends, he had a bow that a sylphen bowyer had made for him after Tachi snapped a standard version in half. At his side he carried an ancient droichen xythos dagger as long as his forearm, and a new xythos longsword that was worth a king's fortune hung at his back next to his bow and quiver. Xythos was an element harder than steel, yet lighter. It was probably harder than anything on Tessene other than Sorcet's black blade. It made up part of the planetary core and oozed up in rare volcanic vents in the bowels of the Spine mountains. Only the droichen had access to the metal and only they could work with it. Such weapons were extremely scarce. Tachi's sword had originally been intended for the Mangoon City eparch, a thank-you for sending a small army to help clean out a stinger hive that was a threat to Dag's clan. But Paulus Pliny Sertortius Mangoon was happier with a good steel "show" sword encrusted with gems instead.

Sorcet's gear was the most rare of all. She wore dark gray xythos scale armor on her torso and xythos chain for the leggings and arms. She had Tachi's old xythos dagger for he now carried the one that the droichen had given to Caitlin and which was the only thing he had to remember her by.

Sorcet's sword, about which she said little, looked like black glass, long and thin and two-edged. Most swords on Tessene were katanas, curved slightly by the unequal cooling of the steel that gave them both strength and flexibility. Her black glass sword was long and straight. It looked light and fragile and was neither. It had no temperature; it was as cold as the depths of outer space. When pulled from its sheath it thrummed with power, the vibration actually helping it to cut through anything in its way. The original owner was dead. Few people who had angered Sorcet in the past were not dead. No one knew where that black thing had come from or who had generated the magic to create it. It couldn't even be destroyed. Tachi imagined that, some day, eons hence, the Tessene sun would expand and consume the planet, and that sword would still be floating around inside the star.

Once dressed, they broke their fast in the dining hall, Sorcet attracting the usual slack-jawed stares at both her equipment and her tall lithe figure all in black and dark gray. Tachi had no appetite and a large hangover.

"I don't know how you do it, Boss," he muttered. "I feel queasy."

"Apparently the guard captain's advice is not to your liking."

"Well, it was good advice last night." Tachi's eyes widened. "Oh Mathris' eyes! Did we make love or not? I cannot recall."

Sorcet shook her head. "That is no great endorsement for a woman. You cannot recall? Last night it was, 'I love you Sorcet' and 'you're beautiful, Sorcet'. And now it's 'I cannot recall'?"

"Well, I'm sorry. I was drunk. Wish I still was."

"You'll get used to it, Tachi," Dag offered. He was digging into a large plate of phergo bacon and eggs and Tachi almost turned green just to watch. "Myself, I feel sorry for people who don't drink to excess. When they get up in the morning that's as good as they're going to feel all day."

Tachi pushed aside his plate. "Thank you for that droichen wisdom. I think I'll go look to our yamas. And maybe throw up out in the corral."

Near the fort's east gate they picked up their three yamas, and loaded these with the tomes and scrolls for the EastHolme City Gray Guild library. The animals could only carry about eighty pounds of load and that had to be precisely balanced in left and right-side bags. The cargo from the Mangoon City Gray Guild was only one yama-load but Tachi had purchased two more animals to carry their four backpacks. Alone and in a hurry, Sorcet and her taidar would travel faster than the yamas but, since they needed the one anyway, there was no reason not to buy three.

Soon they joined a stream of people and yamas heading east from the Seven Watch fort. The route wound through a zigzag pass for two marches, or a full day walking with the yamas, which were twice as fast as the bullock wagon. By noon the next day they were descending into the broad EastHolme plains and that night they stayed at an inn located at the intersection of roads from Seven Watch, EastHolme City to the southeast, and Man Holme town to the east. Next morning they resumed the march, now across flat plains dotted with ranches and cattle herds.

They walked, leading one yama apiece by a long leash. The animals were docile enough though sometimes they enjoyed spitting on their masters. Leafe didn't lead a yama. She liked to range out ahead of them and to the sides, loping along in a ground-covering run with Spots circling her. Tachi, watching her, was always reminded of some ballet dancer; Leafe almost pranced and bounded about. Her endless energy sometimes made Tachi feel old.

Even covering two marches a day across the broad plains following a narrow, dusty track, it was a six day walk from Seven Watch to EastHolme City. Tachi recalled once asking Araket Leonine Voiten EastHolme, the eparch of EastHolme, why he never built paved roads anywhere in EastHolme. The eparch had reminded Tachi that, while EastHolme's small army was accustomed to traveling with nothing but their backpacks, both Mangoon's and Barakis' armies needed bullock wagons to haul along their gear. The wagons couldn't use the narrow dirt tracks nearly so well, especially as those were churned to deep dust by herds of cattle being driven to market. In the EastHolme countryside, bad roads were a defensive measure.

Chapter 7

On the twenty-first day out of Mangoon City they passed through the northwest gate of the EastHolme city wall. Though back on Earth he had been an athlete in college and worked summers on roofing jobs, Tachi thought back, as he often did, to the first times he had done these long marches, and at how much more fit he was now than back then. He still wished he had a horse. He had no idea how to ride a horse, had never done so. But if one were available he would try.

Tachi had enjoyed his previous visit to EastHolme City, but for one assassination attempt. He made a mental note to check in with the Shadow Guild to make sure there were no contracts out on him again.

EastHolme City was physically larger than Mangoon City but with perhaps one-third the population. There were broad paved streets, parks and squares were plentiful, and the homes were set off in quiet neighborhoods surrounded by landscaping. Even the merchant sections were clean and neat. In Mangoon City, one tended to step in squishy things on the public streets. The herds of cattle — EastHolme's major product along with the grain that fed both them and the humans — that had been brought in to market were fenced off outside the city walls on the southeast side. There they were usually downwind of the city and had access to the Freed River downstream from the city's water wells. The city sat at the southern end of Lake Freed, and a steady boat traffic ran between here and Man Holme at the lake's northern end. The Freed River then ran onward from Man Holme northeast to Freedmouth, EastHolme's small and only port.

Sorcet wanted to meet with the eparch but first they needed to report to the Gray Guild compound. Tachi delivered their load of tomes and scrolls to the scribes at the library. Sorcet, Dag and Leafe moved into some rooms reserved for visitors to the compound, while Tachi strung together the three yamas and led them out the southeast gate and across a bridge to a stockyard where he sold them.

Sorcet had waited for his return before visiting the eparch. Tachi was only slowly getting accustomed to being her 'senior' taidar. She seemed to rely more and more upon his advice. Sometimes that worried him.

The eparch, Araket Leonine Voiten EastHolme, remembered Sorcet, as well he might.

"The last time we spoke, you talked me into attacking Mangoon lands," Voiten said.

"As I remember, you needed little persuading," Sorcet said mildly. She sat on a visitor cushion before the eparch's desk in the EastHolme palace. It was a light and airy room with double doors open now to a wide balcony outside. The three taidar knelt behind Sorcet, Leafe as usual keeping one hand on Spots' head.

"Heh. This is true. Scared the wits out of Paulus Pliny Sertortius Mangoon. I enjoyed that. That was a complex plot but it did seem to work out." Voiten waved a hand at a pile of documents awaiting his attention. "Mangoon now permits free trade without taxes and restrictions, which makes my merchants happy. And Barakis is no longer a threat to my southwestern flank, which makes my generals happy."

Sorcet nodded. "Your feint against Seven Watch and Kao Thep convinced Gron Gaius Greybeard Barakis ... "

"... the conquering lion of whatever and all that blathering title. A legend in his own mind," Voiten said. "But go on."

"Yes. We tricked him into launching an attack against Mangoon, thinking that you were supporting him."

"And how did that mob of thieves and drunkards fare against Mangoon's army?"

"The only reason they were not all slaughtered was that most surrendered quickly. A uniform and sword does not a warrior make. But pulling the army out of Barakis City and sending it to attack Mangoon lands gave Asja Gaius Merank and his followers the chance to stage a coup and kill Greybeard. Merank is now the eparch, and a four-name. Asja Gaius Merank Barakis."

"So I have heard. And long may he rule. Just so long as he leaves my lands and people alone. I heard that it was, in fact, you who relieved Greybeard of his head."

"He wasn't using it anyway," Tachi said. Voiten grinned at Tachi.

"I take no pleasure in killing an eparch," Sorcet said. "You should know that."

"Oh, come, come now. Not even a little pleasure?"

"Perhaps some. He was, after all, a horrible tyrant. Merank is a sensible man who didn't even want the throne, which makes him all the more suited to it, in my opinion."

"Ah, you speak the truth there," Voitan sighed. He stared out the open doors at the balcony for a long moment, perhaps seeing, in his mind, his family pastures, several days walk to the south. "I'd rather be raising cattle, myself."

"Well, I should prefer not to be a deru. But I am and there is no help for it. I make the best of it. Like yourself, eparch."

"Well, let's make the best of a situation I have encountered. Why I sent to Mangoon City for some magiker help from the Gray Guild there. You may recall that some eighty years ago a man came to us out of a portal. The portal may have led to the same world that Tachi comes from."

"Almost certainly," Sorcet said. "I have studied the tomes. The man had to learn the human tongue before anyone could understand him but he was interviewed eventually at the Gray Guild here in EastHolme. His descriptions of his home roughly matched Tachi's here, and those of Tachi's companion, Caitlin. Caitlin has gone back, but Tachi chose to stay."

Voitan looked at Tachi. "You choose to be a taidar?"

"We all do, sir," Tachi indicated Dag and Leafe. "We serve Sorcet, who serves a larger goal."

"Madness. Suicide. But I suppose it is good that you protect her. She will need it up north."

"Are we, then, bound for the eastern desert?" Sorcet asked.

"Aye. The man of whom we speak wandered south and vanished from our gaze, deep into that rocky wilderness around Mount Orboros. I'm certain that he's dead by now. As for Mount Orboros, nobody goes there, it's infested with strange creatures and wild men. Half my army has to patrol the fringe country between the towns of South Point and South Pass. Even so, we lose some cattle and, occasionally, a careless farmer."

"According to the reports from that time," Sorcet said, "The man was almost a kaiphon, able to sway everyone he met to his control. He may have become one by now, even without proper training with the Gray Guild. The transit through the portals sometimes empowers people thus. It did me. I was not a deru on my home world."

"Humm. I see. Did your trip here empower you in some manner, Tachi?"

"No sir. I was already perfect. Now I am just more so." Tachi didn't mention that he had once thought he had at least some small added powers. But it never developed. He was, of course, taller and stronger than humans on Tessene, but his greater strength was due partly to his being athletic anyway, and to the planet's lower gravity.

Voitan smiled. "Well, you four make for an interesting group. Perhaps you can carry out a difficult task. The portal through which the man came long ago still exists. It is not, as we had sometimes thought, near Mount Orboros. It's at Wadi Than, in the eastern desert — desert sylphen country — and about as far from any civilization as one could dream of going. Normally, humans only go as far north as Freedmouth, our seaport and in EastHolme territory. The desert sylphen come south to Freedmouth to trade but they dislike outsiders coming into their lands. And if the desert sylphen don't want you around, you had best not be around."

Voiten looked at Leafe. "No offense to your sylphen birth, of course. But you are a forest sylph, I can tell from your skin. Your people are civilized and ... gentle. Your desert cousins are civilized, in their own way, but hard, tough. Unforgiving. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you understand them."

"So," Tachi said, a little annoyed at how long-winded the eparch was, "short of the four of us, and the fert, hacking our way north through a living wall of sylphen flesh, did you have a plan to get us in there?"

"Ah." Voiten nodded. "I do. The tribal chieftain at Wadi Bilet has a son. The son is of an age where he should assume command of the chieftain's bodyguard and household. He would eventually succeed his father, becoming chieftain in his own right. But there is a test. Their long tradition is that the son must spend time with the EastHolme eparch, and with the EastHolme army. He must learn our civilized ways and also our ways of fighting. I can assign him to any trainer I choose. That person observes and judges the fitness of the son to assume his new command and someday to become chieftain in his own right.

"So, we can accompany this teacher you assign," Sorcet said, "and go about our business in desert sylphen lands while the son learns your ways?"

"No. I intend to assign the boy to you. He is here, in EastHolme City now. He's been here a year, learning our ways. It is time for his 'field trip,' so to speak. You will take him with you and close that portal, He will learn much from the four of you."

"I ... hardly think that is appropriate," Sorcet said. "We cannot be walking around with a novice, a stranger. He could get killed. Mine is not a safe profession," she wagged a finger at Dag, Tachi and Leafe, "and those about me know the risks."

Voiten shook his head. "You need to understand more. Whether the lad lives or dies is not only up to Mathris' eyes and ears and the laws of chance. It's also entirely up to me and, through me, you. The boy must be capable of assuming the leadership. If he is not, the chieftain needs to know this now."

"What if he isn't?" Leafe asked.

Voiten stared at her a long moment. "He is probably executed and a second son or someone else is put to the test next. I did tell you that your desert cousins are a hard people."

"Does that ever happen?" Leafe said.

"It has happened. Not recently and not often. The boys are extremely well-trained, after all, before we ever see them."

"You speak in generalities, sir," Tachi said. "Not about this boy in particular. What's his name and if he has been under your wing a year, what is your impression of him?"

Voiten looked at the floor, then out at the balcony for a long moment. "I begin to understand why you keep Tachi by your side," he said, turning back to Sorcet, "and why you seek his advice. He seems much more than a simple brute sell-sword bodyguard."

"Given what they pay me, being a sell-sword would be a step up," Tachi said. Voiten smiled at that.

"I value his advice and his fighting ability," Sorcet said. She was not smiling. "I see, as you probably realize, more than humans do. Tachi can see some things better than I."

"Well, there're different sorts of 'seeing', Voiten said. "But I, too, treasure a sensible advisor. They are hard to come by."

"So, too, is your answer to Tachi's question," Sorcet said sharply. Tachi glanced at her. She rarely lost her temper but he sensed she was on the verge here. Tachi looked around the room but Voiten was alone, making him the only eparch Tachi had ever seen without a gaggle of guards handy. *If she goes for the sword, I'll grab her hand*, he thought. *I can't let her kill him just because she is annoyed.*

"His name is Merc Flaecatson, of the Wadi Bilet tribe of the desert Sylphen. He has been ... a disappointment ... here," Voiten said. "He's bright enough and quick enough to learn. But his behavior is ... he's foolish at times, arrogant at others. He drinks to excess almost every night and day. He dices away his father's money. I have had to send back to his father for more cash once and now I simply pay the boy's debts myself, and not from the public treasury, but out-of-pocket. The boy has slept with every whore in EastHolme City, half the unmarried women and no few of the married ones. Someone is going to kill him if he stays here much longer."

"He and Dag, here, should get along famously," Tachi said. Dag grinned through his thick beard.

"Normally, at this stage, I would send him out for some service with the army," Voiten continued, not smiling at all. "But, while I trust and admire my soldiers, the army is probably not the best place for a lad addicted to wine, women, and cards. So he can go with you instead."

"Perhaps," Sorcet said. "If I agree to it at all."

"Voiten nodded. "If you agree. I understand. But if you do not agree, how are you going to close that portal at Wadi Than? You need Merc, the boy, to get you up there through all his relatives."

"I could manage something, I suppose," Sorcet said. "I usually do." She twisted around on her cushion to face Tachi, kneeling to her left rear. "What say you, Tachi?"

"I say we do as Voiten asks. First off, he's the eparch here and his word is law. But, second, we do need to travel long distances through desert sylphen lands and having the designated heir along with us will be useful. And, anyway, compared to me, how annoying can he be?"

Sorcet turned to her other side and looked at Leafe. "Well?"

"I agree with Tachi. We will need some help with my desert cousins. Just having me along won't help, but having this Merc Flaecatson along will."

"Dag?"

Dag grinned again and patted the axe hanging from his harness. "We can always kill the kid later."

"I don't think this is anything to joke about," Voiten said.

"Oh, I agree," Sorcet nodded. "But you just gave us the authority to do that if need be, did you not?" Sorcet's ball-bearing stare did not seem to Tachi at all quizzical, merely threatening. Voiten, like everyone, was a little intimidated by that metallic gaze.

"Just see to it that the brat gets home to his father in one piece. Promise me that."

"I make no vows over which I have little control," Sorcet said. "I shall do my best."

"And teach him some manners."

Sorcet's lip curled slightly. "Well, we are not the most well-mannered lot ourselves. You lean on a weak reed there. We shall show him discipline, if nothing else. When do we meet this son, heir and paragon of excess?"

"I'll send him to you this evening. In the meantime there is one slightly worrisome detail about the portal at Wadi Than."

"It's a portal, lethal to most who use it," Tachi said "It's in the middle of a nearly-impassible desert. It's surrounded by a people who kill strangers on sight. Of course it's 'worrisome'."

"Not that. Two more things," Voiten said. "First, it's in the hands of a small bandit force. I think those are loyal to the memory of this strange human who came here through that portal so long ago. They won't let anyone near the place."

"But you said he would be dead by now," Leafé asked. "You humans have such short lifespans." Leafé, at one hundred years old herself, was a young teenager by sylphen standards.

"I assume that. He would have to be a hundred years old or more. But I still hear rumors about him. From time to time."

Tachi remembered something that Sorcet had once told him, that she had not aged a day since coming through a portal and onto the world of Tessene herself. He wondered if he was getting older. He hadn't been here long enough to know. He put that thought aside; Sorcet was speaking.

"Could not Flaecat Sotherson and his Wadi Bilet tribe clean out some bandits?"

"They're afraid to go near the place. They say it is cursed."

"Well, surely ... "

"No, it's not some superstition," Voiten said. "The information I get is that even before the bandits moved in, the few people to visit the place came back diseased, covered in boils and sores, dying within days of arriving in Wadi Bilet."

"Perhaps the bandits are all dead by now too," Sorcet said.

"I don't think they are. They may be immune. Perhaps you can find out. Travel to Wadi Bilet and ask their chieftan Flaecat Sotherson. And take the son with you. Out of my sight, my lands, my responsibility, and my wallet."

They left the palace, walking through the EastHolme streets in what was now a standard formation: Leafé with Spots a half-block out in front, Sorcet, with Tachi a step to her left and rear, and Dag a half-block behind. "We shall need another room at our inn," Sorcet said without looking at Tachi.

"I'll see to it. Merc and Dag can bunk in together. But I also need to talk to Dart, the Shadow guildmaster. See if we're attracting any unwanted attention."

"Umm. Do that. Though it is you who seems to attract the attention. No one wants to assassinate me. And is not putting Dag in with Merc just asking for trouble? Dag likes the same excesses Merc seems to. They will just go out drinking and whoring together."

"Probably. But if they do at least Dag will bring them both home again."

"Ah," Sorcet said. "Strategy takes many forms."

Chapter 8

Dart, the EastHolme City Shadow guildmaster, was reading a small scroll when Tachi walked into his office deep beneath the EastHolme City tanneries.

Dart opened a drawer and put the scroll into it. He picked up a Shadow medallion, a small coin-like object typically left along with a note at the bedside of someone about to have a bad day or on top of the body of someone who would see no more days, and put that into the drawer too. He looked up at Tachi.

"Oh crap," he said. "You again." Dart sat crosslegged behind a large desk. There was no other cushion in the office, so Tachi knelt on the bare tatami. He didn't ask about the scroll; he was better off not knowing.

"Oh? Crap? What sort of greeting is that?"

"If you're here, there's trouble. And it will be a hairball."

"Do you know," Tachi said almost to himself, "I almost never meet anyone who is glad to see me."

"I let you in and let you come down here because I figured that knowing was better than not knowing," Dart said. "I know you have privileges, trained with the Mangoon City Shadows. But last time you were here you killed Aboul, one of our best people."

"No choice, as you know, sir. You ordered him to kill me."

"I did so. That was before I learned that you were Shadow Guild yourself, or at least an honorary member. That made the contract void. Pity Aboul died before I could cancel it. Theoretically, even now, I should kill you, for having killed one of my men."

Tachi shook his head. "Were you going to do that I would have been dead long ago."

"I know. Sometimes I like to fantasize."

"You promised me you would find out who was behind all that."

"Actually, I told you I would look into it. I made no promise about finding anything out. We aren't miracle workers, you know."

Tachi nodded. "So what have you found out?"

Dart stared hard at Tachi a long moment. His hands were folded on his desk and the darts for which he was named were visible in a pocket on the front of his tunic. Each dart was, in effect, a hypodermic. The four-inch-long spike tip could kill by itself with a lucky strike to the heart or head. The point was hollow and led back to a bladder in the feathered body of the dart, filled with a poison.

"I'm amazed you yet live," Dart said to Tachi. "The Gray Guild kaiphon, Haptor, was the one who purchased the contract to have you killed. When I ordered that contract voided he took other steps, or so I have heard. He has geased people all across EastHolme lands, and probably elsewhere, scattering them about like poisoned traps for you to step into."

"I don't think Haptor is still considered a Gray Guild magiker any longer," Tachi said. "He's gone renegade."

"Whatever. A renegade kaiphon. Just what the world needs. And he intends to kill you. I wonder why?"

"What I wonder," Tachi said. "Is why he expends his life-force on this. As you know, a kaiphon shortens his life a little, a day, a week, sometimes a month, each time he uses

his power. Haptor is burning up his days on Tessene just on the off chance that I will encounter his traps, his geased victims. Why would he do that?"

"You would die for your deru, Sorcet, is it not? Isn't that what taidar do?"

"Well, as a last resort, yes."

"Perhaps Haptor is taidar, or something like it, to a still more powerful person, someone for whom he is willing to die, even if it is by increments."

"Do you know of such a person?"

"I have heard rumors. There is a story of a human who came out of the eastern desert, many years ago. That he was not killed by the desert sylphen or the desert itself was odd enough. But he passed through EastHolme and on to the south and, so I heard, into the mountains beyond EastHolme borders."

"I've heard all this, sir. The Gray Guild here in EastHolme City interviewed him and made notes, though he did not stay long and he had only a very poor human speech. Is there more?"

"As I understand, he has learned the language now. The man can talk you into anything, I'm told. He may be a kaiphon himself. I'm told he calls himself Dolfe, but he stays out of sight in those mountains around Mount Orboros. That he's not dead — and we have not heard of that — means he talked the monstrosities that infest that terrible place into not eating him. The question, to me, is why does he hate you so much? He came here long ago and has never met you."

"I believe he came from my home world," Tachi said. "The portal at Wadi Than must be a second one to my home. Haptor would have told him about me. Indeed, the first try on my life was before Haptor and I even met. But Haptor had received a detailed report from the GraniteAxe droichen clan, who had taken me in. He passed that along to the Mangoon City Gray Guild but he would have made a copy. He set some swamp sylphen and humans on me and upon my friend Caitlin. I doubt that he had geased those; I think he just bribed them."

"An old technique, but still a good one."

"Yes sir. He's tried several more times since."

"This Caitlin. Is he dead?"

"She. Came with me from my home world. I married her but she has returned to her home."

"And you stayed here? Why? To die for Sorcet? What sort of life is that?"

"The one I chose. Caitlin was always more brave than I. And I was too frightened of the portal to use it a second time. The trip is usually fatal, you know."

Dart nodded. "So I have heard. So your wife is now dead? That must please Sorcet. I have heard the rumors about deru and their male taidar."

"Caitlin still lives. She is bonded to a sylphen blood tree. And it still lives."

"I'm not familiar ... "

"A blood tree bonds, in a ceremony, to a sylph. Sometimes to others. I'm bonded to one," Tachi held out his left hand and showed Dart the green tendril beneath the skin of his palm. "My tree knows where I am and how far distant, approximately, at all times. I know where the tree is the same way. It's that way," Tachi pointed at one corner. "And I came down here through twisting, winding tunnels. I don't know where the exit is now but I can point to my tree."

"And this tree, Caitlin's tree, knows where she is and how far?"

"Actually, it knows where the Firestone Portal was, though that's no longer there. Caitlin, by passing through it with the key from this side, closed it."

"How does it know she yet lives?"

"If the sylph, or in this case, human, dies, the tree dies too. Overnight. Completely. The bond remains unbroken even in death. And Caitlin's tree is alive and well.

"But it doesn't really know where she is," Dart said. "It knows where she was last on this planet, on Tessene. Perhaps it simply knows that, when last on this world, she was alive. She could be dead and the tree not know."

"I refuse to accept that. She lives. And we had a child. She was pregnant. By now that child is born. And that child lives too."

"By Mathris' ten thousand ears and thousand eyes! You let a woman with child go alone? What sort of human are you?"

"A coward," Tachi said. "I know that."

And Sorcet keeps you on as a taidar? Is she so desperate for help as that?"

"I wonder about that myself, sometimes."

Chapter 9

Like teenagers the worlds over, Merc Flaecatson showed up in time for supper. Though considered too young yet to be an adult, he was, in fact, almost eighty years old, a youngster yet by sylphen standards. Even Leafe was considered a teenager yet at one hundred.

If it were possible for a sylph to look soft, Merc managed. Tachi had never seen a sylph in the western forests who looked fat and most looked like beef jerky with personalities. The few desert sylphen he had seen around EastHolme City were much the same, though with dark brown skin instead of the mottled brown-and-green of the forest people. Merc pouted and pointed a lot, pouting when things were not exactly what he wanted, and pointing to indicate what someone else should do to make him more comfortable. He also, Tachi came to realize when talking to him, never looked anyone in the eye but, rather, stared at their chins.

Actually, Merc and six men showed up, the men carrying three large chests of clothing and collected souvenirs. Each chest was hung from two carrying poles. Merc was wearing the latest in foppish fashion and looked more like a male peacock than a male sylph. He was trailed, when he walked, by a faint cloud of perfumed talc, something popular among the higher orders of society. He was even walking around town in thin dancing shoes. Tachi, who was sitting at table with Sorcet, Leafe and Dag, almost burst out laughing at the sight.

"I am Merc Flaecatson, eldest son of Flaecat Sotherson and designated heir-apparent to the chieftain tent of the Wadi Bilet," he said as he walked up.

"I am Sorcet. Join us, if you will, for supper."

Merc looked down at Sorcet's chin. "You are to stand in my presence and display respect, not lounge around on some soft cushion."

"Look me in the eye, Merc."

Merc raised his eyes to stare at Sorcet's featureless ball-bearing-steel eyeballs. That tended to unman even the toughest Warrior Guild member and Merc hastily looked away. When he looked back he settled for staring at Sorcet's breasts.

"My eyes are up here," Sorcet said. Tachi thought she was amused. "This is Tachi, chief among my taidar, and Dag and Leafe. The fert is Spots."

"You are to be my servants for my trip back to Wadi Bilet? I think the eparch could have done better."

"We come cheap," Tachi said. "But I do have to wonder if you truly comprehend that Sorcet is a Gray Guild deru. She could kill you at a distance. I am taidar to her and I could kill you up close. But I usually only cut away the manhood of idiots who order my mistress to 'stand up and display respect'."

"I will permit you to remain seated then, my generosity in the face of differing customs," Merc said. "This is an ignorant land and I have often had to accept crudity in place of good manners."

"Thanks. We have, each, our special difficulties. But tell me, how were you planning to haul all that stuff home?" Tachi asked. He pointed to a place to one side and the six men gratefully laid down their burdens and stood flexing their shoulders.

"As you see," Merc said, pointing. "These men can carry it. They carried my belongings across town from my own quarters to yours. They can carry things up to Wadi Bilet." He glanced around at what was the dining hall of one of EastHolme's finest inns. "I must say, my own quarters were certainly preferable to this slum."

"I'm sure they were," Tachi said. "Probably less ... public ... too, an advantage when smuggling in the occasional whore."

Merc glanced around the table. He did a double take at his first real sight of Spots, the one-hundred-pound catlike fert. Spots was uttering a continuous low growl and Leafe had her hand casually on his head, telling him to stay down. Sorcet gave him a last look and then turned to cutting up a steak.

"I don't go to whore houses," Merc said. "But the higher-class courtesans of the city seem to like me."

"They like money," Dag said. Tachi grinned at him. "They just like more of it than a one-toss farm girl."

"You should know," Tachi said. "Pity the Gray Guild pays you so little."

Dag shrugged and mopped his pewter plate with a piece of bread. The inn provided actual tableware and the usual spoon and table knife. Poorer inns expected diners to supply their own bowl, knife and spoon. The fork had not yet been invented on Tessene. How Dag managed to eat so sloppily and yet get so little food in his beard always puzzled Tachi. "All women are the same in the dark," Dag said as he chewed.

"By Mathris' light!" Tachi looked over to Sorcet. "You hired him."

She nodded, chewing, then swallowed and reached for a mug of ale. "He is a good axe-man." She took a drink.

"Yes. Swell. Now, Merc, about the chests. Lugging those across town is easy. We will be taking a boat up to Man Holme and then down the river to Freedmouth. No problem there. But from there we will be heading north at two marches per day, four days to Wadi Bilet. These men cannot carry such loads so fast. Nor can we leave them to walk alone in that desert."

"My good man," Merc waved a diffident wrist inside a frilly sleeve and Tachi caught a whiff of powdered talc. "I don't walk at two marches per day either. We shall proceed at my pace. And my goods come with me everywhere I go."

"Who pays for these men?"

"Ah, the eparch, Araket, handles my finances here in EastHolme City. I suppose he does."

Tachi looked up at Sorcet, across the table from him. She appeared calm but Tachi knew she was probably dreaming of pleasant ways of eviscerating Merc on the spot. "Do you have traveling clothes?" Tachi asked. "A backpack? Any weapons?"

Merc waved a limp-wristed hand casually and a whiff of scented talcum floated to Tachi's nose. "I no longer require those things. Of course I have a dagger. In fact," he giggled and looked at Dag, "I have two daggers. If you get my meaning."

"Let's see the one made of iron."

Merc handed the dagger over. Tachi, who had spent some time working with the droichen blacksmiths, and whose own dagger was of dark gray xythos and as long as his forearm, whistled. Merc's dagger was short, made of cheap iron, but encrusted with gems.

Dag, droichen blacksmith trained himself, looked at it and snorted. "When you die," he said to Merc. "Can I give that to my daughter?"

The grip was wrapped in what looked like gold wire and would be slippery in a sweaty hand. Tachi tested the edge with his thumb. The dagger really had no edge; Tachi doubted he could cut a loaf of bread with it.

"Were you planning to just dazzle an attacker?" he asked. "Or maybe give him this thing as a bribe to go away?"

Merc took back his blade. "It's certainly far more valuable than yours, my good man."

Tachi didn't answer but Dag piped up. "Is your other dagger as gem-incrusted? No wonder the ladies like you."

Merc gave a high-pitched giggle. Tachi vowed on the spot never to giggle again, himself. "No, but it's longer," Merc said. "Not that a droich would know."

"Enough!" Tachi said. "Merc, sit on that cushion across from me and eat. You men, sit at yon table and eat. Tell the serving girl I'll pay. Two mugs of ale on me and after that you're on your own. You, there ... " Tachi pointed at the oldest of the six. "What's your name?"

"Thogg, my lord."

"Thogg, I presume you and these men have some home to go to tonight?"

"Yes, my lord. This one is my son. The others are relatives too. We live here in EastHolme City."

"When you're done eating, carry these chests up to our rooms. Dag, here, will show you. Then go home. Be back here at Afternoon Period tomorrow, you will carry these crates down to the harbor for us. You will not be sailing up the lake with us."

"Of course, my lord. We'll be here." Thogg and the group sat at a table to one side and waved a serving girl over.

"We usually leave at the Dawning Period," Sorcet said. "Or even the Hope Period before the sun."

"We aren't even leaving at Morning," Tachi said. "I need to buy Merc a proper wardrobe and backpack. Maybe a decent weapon too."

Merc glanced down at his purple linen shirt. Among humans here, one-names wore only unbleached brown, two-names were permitted the white, and only three-names wore colored clothing. But, Tachi supposed, Merc being a desert sylph, it was likely that no one in EastHolme City had bothered explain any of that.

"I suppose this is rather gaudy for desert travel. But there's nothing wrong with my knife. We desert sylphen are known for our fierceness and weapons."

Tachi, in a motion almost too quick to follow, whipped out his dagger and plunged it into the table in front of Merc. The long xythos blade punched half its length through the wooden table. Half the diners in the hall glanced his way at the noise, only to hurriedly look away again. Whatever went on at a table where a deru and her taidar were seated was none of their business.

Tachi put one extended fingertip on the pommel of the dagger and tapped it gently. "Would you wish to go up against this with your pretty toy?"

Merc licked his lips, staring at the blade embedded in the table. "Is that ... "

"Yes. That blade is worth more than your little toothpick. It's worth more than you will ever see in your entire life. We aren't peasants here. But that's not the point."

Merc looked Tachi in the chin. "Perhaps I could use a ... less formal ... blade. For the road."

"Good thinking," Tachi said. He yanked his own dagger clear and re-sheathed it. He would probably hear about the damage to the table later, from the inn's owner. Merc was already proving an expensive companion.

Sorcet leaned across the table and looked at Merc from just a few inches distance. "I am a Gray Guild deru," she said quietly. "These others are my taidar. Tachi has already mentioned this but I need to know. Do you understand what that means?"

Merc tried to meet her gaze defiantly. But grizzled Warrior Guild fighters had backed down before those eyes and Merc was hardly in their league. He dropped his eyes and wiggled his spoon around on his plate. "I have heard the rumors. I never thought they were true."

"Whatever you heard was true. Whatever you heard was but a tithe of the truth. I could kill you this instant and I need no blade. I'm tempted to. But I respect Araket Leonine Voiten EastHolme and he has asked me to take you on, as part of your test of leadership. Do you understand?"

Merc nodded. He seemed, at least for the moment, cowed.

"My friends here, my taidar, are sworn to kill for me and to die for me, as I please. You have never met their like. No one in Wadi Bilet has ever met their like. Tachi is in charge and in charge of you. You will do as he says or he will probably kill you. And I don't care. You live or die, from this moment, at Tachi's whim. Whatever he does I will support, and Araket Leonine Voiten EastHolme will support, and your own father will support. That is the rule and the tradition of the Wadi Bilet tribe."

"Well, it's a tradition. But it's just an honorary thing." Merc was recovering his pride quickly. "I will be the next chieftain. You should remember that."

"If Tachi or I do not kill you, if the desert does not kill you, if the enemies we encounter do not kill you, and if your own arrogance and stupidity do not kill you then, yes, you will be qualified to be the next Wadi Bilet chieftain. And I shall so report to your father. And I shall be proud to know you. But that time is distant yet. Go with Tachi in the morning and do as he asks."

Morning was slow in coming and Tachi heard Dag and Merc come back to their room just before dawn. At first light he pounded on their door until Dag opened it. Dag was ready for the road, dressed and with his weapons. Tachi leaned in past him and crooked a finger at Merc. "You. Come. We have shopping to do."

"I am resting. Come back later."

"This is all you're going to get." Tachi was a little surprised. Sylphen did not sleep like humans and droichen. They simply rested, usually sitting with their back to a tree or something, eyes open and ears twitching. He had never heard a sylph complain of not getting enough rest. "Next time, plan your evening better and face next day's road with better spirits."

Merc rose. He didn't need to dress because he had sat resting in his finery, now very wrinkled and stained. "You're no better than I. You just sleep with her and don't have to walk across town. Must be convenient to have your personal whore."

Tachi took a long step into the room. He gathered up Merc's shirtfront in one fist and jerked the sylph off the floor. Merc's feet shuffled on air but to no avail. Tachi held Merc up and slammed him back against the wall, once, twice. Merc was tall, all sylphen were six feet, but so was Tachi, and Tachi was much stronger.

"No one thinks or speaks worse of me than I do myself," Tachi said. "You cannot insult me. I am beyond insult. I am taidar to a Gray Guild deru and thus have no right to pride. But speak of her in such a manner again and that breath will be your last." Tachi put his dagger tip against Merc's forehead, still holding him off the floor with one arm. "Do you understand? Do. You. Understand?"

Merc nodded, wide-eyed. Dag still stood by the door, quietly. Tachi smelled urine. He dropped Merc to the floor and sheathed his dagger. "Clean yourself. Then come downstairs to break bread with us. Then we will get you some clothing fit for a desert sylph destined to be a chieftain, and not some pompous troubadour."

Chapter 10

As it happened they did not leave the next afternoon. Tachi and Merc went shopping and by the time Merc was properly attired and equipped it was almost noon. It was an all-day sail from EastHolme City north to Man Holme and no boatman wanted to leave mid-day and have to dock after dark at the other end. Sorcet was predictably furious at the delay and Tachi was a little annoyed at having to pay Thogg extra for the delay in using his services.

But next morning at the Dawning Period they were underway aboard the Water Strider, with her owner, Powys, and two crew. These lake boats were not the larger ships Tachi had ridden out of Mangoon City and they simply shuttled goods and people from one end of Lake Freed to the other or, as in this case, on down the Freed River to the port of Freedmouth.

The Water Strider was simply a large shallow-draft open catboat whose long boom could also be used to hoist aboard cargo. There was a small deckhouse at the stern, large enough for the crew to squeeze into to sleep, and a small galley and storage for extra line and boat gear, but no accommodations for passengers and no below-decks hold.

"You have a true 'hand' of taidar now, boss," Tachi said as they sat on Merc's crates and watched the shoreline pass by. "Me, Leafe, Dag and now Merc. You're coming up in the world."

Sorcet nodded. "I never needed but one before. But I am sometimes glad of the company." She gestured to Merc's crates they were sitting on. "What are you planning to do with these? We cannot expect any porters we hire to keep up with us on the trail." Tachi had paid off Thogg and his relatives once the crates were on board the boat.

"There are regular caravans from Freedmouth north to Wadi Bilet. Thogg explained it all to me. I'll hire more transport once we get to Freedmouth. We won't need to accompany them, they know the way better than we do."

Sorcet's silver eyes remained fixed on the horizon. Tachi wondered if she was sensing out across the water. "And who pays for all this?"

"I spoke yesterday morning with Voiten EastHolme. He gave me a small purse. Said it was money well-spent if it got Merc out of his hair."

"Merc seems more friendly," Sorcet said. "More obedient, this day. He has been polite, even. I had not seen that side of him before."

"Mnnn," Tachi glanced at Merc, who was sitting a few yards away chatting with Leafe. Merc had a hand on Leafe's shoulder and she reached up and removed it. Merc grimaced momentarily and rose to cross to the shaded side. Tachi wondered if Leafe had bent one of his fingers. He smiled and gazed once more at the lake and the distant shoreline and glanced up at the sail just overhead and pulling hard in a westerly wind. They were the only transport boat in sight heading north but he could see a few smaller fishing sloops in the distance near the shoreline, some sailing, some anchored to fish, others pulling trawl nets. It was a peaceful panorama and Tachi had come to appreciate anything that was peaceful. Some days, even here, life was good. As always, at such quiet times, he wished that Caitlin could be here to share the moment.

"Why would you suppose Merc suddenly learned some manners?" Sorcet said.

"Oh, I don't know. I may have mentioned something to him. In passing, you know."

"Were Merc and Dag out again all last night? Dag seemed a little tired today."

"Boys will be boys. Last night in town and all that."

"You do not do that."

"I have you."

Sorcet turned to look directly at him and Tachi could see his reflection, tiny, in each silver eye. There was no white sclera, just the ball-bearing-like orbs. It always puzzled him that the reflected image was not reversed vertically. He knew that meant the reflections were bouncing back from the front of Sorcet's eyes and not from the retina behind. He had no idea how she actually saw or what she saw or in what wavelengths.

"Yes," she said after a long moment. "You do."

"For as long as I live anyway."

"For so long as you and I live, or until one of us changes his or her mind. Has it not occurred to you that you could return to your home, that this portal we are working to close leads to your home world?"

"I had thought about it. But I think not. This is my home now."

She stared at him again. "What about Caitlin? What about your child? You do not know if it was a boy or a girl. Would you not wish to rejoin her? Them?"

"Yes, I would. But I was too terrified to follow Caitlin into the Firestone Portal. I'm not any less frightened now. I've warned you before that I am a coward."

"A coward who insisted on taking on, single-handed, a male stinger bigger than yourself. And that was after you killed Mathris only knows how many of the other stingers."

"Well, he was slowly killing me with those dreams. I still do not know how he connected to me at a great distance. But it made me angry. And he would have succeeded had you not stepped in and saved me, at considerable risk to yourself, which you are not supposed to do."

"The Gray Guild had spent a lot of money training you. I was merely protecting the investment."

"Of course you were. Worked out well for me, though. But as for the portal, yes, I'd like to see Caitlin again. And the child."

"But you will not risk the journey?"

"It's more than that. This is my home now. Here I feel useful. Back on Earth I was a meaningless little man destined to live out a meaningless little life. Here I am part of something important. I actually like the Gray Guild, the scriptors and their scrolls and tomes, the kaiphonae fixing people up in the guild's hospital, and the derudae coming and going on important and sometimes dangerous errands. It's a lot more exciting than my life used to be. And then ... " Tachi paused and looked out across the lake.

"And?"

He looked down at the deck. "And I love you," he said softly.

"Nonsense," Sorcet said. "That is merely hormones talking."

Tachi looked up at her. "Maybe. But it's the same way I felt about Caitlin. And I married her."

"Well, I cannot speak to this or your feelings for Caitlin," Sorcet paused and Tachi thought that Sorcet seemed confused, uncertain, very unusual for her. "Assuming that you love me, which I do not concede for a moment, how can you be in love with two females at the same time?"

"Well, Boss. You're here and she's not. And ask Merc, yonder. He's loved half the females in EastHolme City."

"Do not be farcical. That is not love. That is lust. That is hydraulics. Answer the question."

"All right. There's no limit. Love is not a bowl that is filled up and that's all you can add. Leafé taught me that. She said there was no reason I could not love Caitlin even as I love you."

"You do not love me. You lust after me. Most human males do, though they are usually too terrified to approach. Interesting to hear that my taidar conspire behind my back regarding my most intimate needs."

"Well, boss. Someone has to take care of you or you would explode. It's a tough job but someone has to do it."

She grinned. He loved those rare grins. "Thee seems to enjoy the work. And thee seems good at it. Youth and all, I suppose." Her lisp deepened at times like this.

"Ah. And just how old are you, boss?"

"Older."

"You look, maybe, 25. Older than me by a few years."

Sorcet shook her head. "Much, much older. You know that I came unto this world more than twenty years ago. I was old before that."

"You don't look it."

"I have told you before. I do not age here. It is possible that you will not age either."

"I feel pretty much the same as when I came through the Firestone Portal," Tachi said. "Except that I can walk a lot farther than I ever did back home."

"It is too soon to tell if the effect is the same upon you."

"Well, I hope I live long enough to see," Tachi said.

Sorcet was staring at Merc. The desert sylph was sitting on the deck with his back propped up against the rail. Tachi followed her glance and decided that Merc was probably resting. "Why do you suppose he sleeps around so much?" Sorcet said, "if I may even use the term 'sleep' for what he does."

"Well, Dag is pretty randy too. I think he likes being out from under the thumb of Mother Gael back at the GraniteAxe deephome."

"Someday Dag will want to leave all this, leave us, and go home."

Tachi shook his head. "I think not. He is serious about his commitment to you. And we have a saying back home about 'How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, once they've seen gay Paree.'"

"Paree being a human city?"

"Paris. Yes."

"Have you seen this Paris?"

"I never saw much of anything back home. I was too young and too poor."

"And you still are. Both. But about Merc, I never met a sylph who cared much about sex one way or the other. They use sex only to produce children."

"They'd be perfect Catholics back on my world," Tachi said. "But with Merc, I don't think it's about sex at all."

"What then?"

"Power. Control. His life is pre-set, ordered by other people. His father, the chieftain of the Wadi Bilet tribe. Voiten, the EastHolme eparch. Now you, a powerful Gray Guild

deru. He has no control over anything. But with some wit and charm and, mostly, a lot of money, he can make human females spread their legs for him. That most are merely using him to earn a living doesn't really occur to him."

Sorcet nodded. "I have missed the wit and charm thus far. But he does seem to have his way among the wealthier females too. It is not merely the size of his purse."

"Probably the size of his penis. But yes, there's just no accounting for taste."

— end sample —

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