

The Firestone **by Stephen Morrill**

Sample chapters

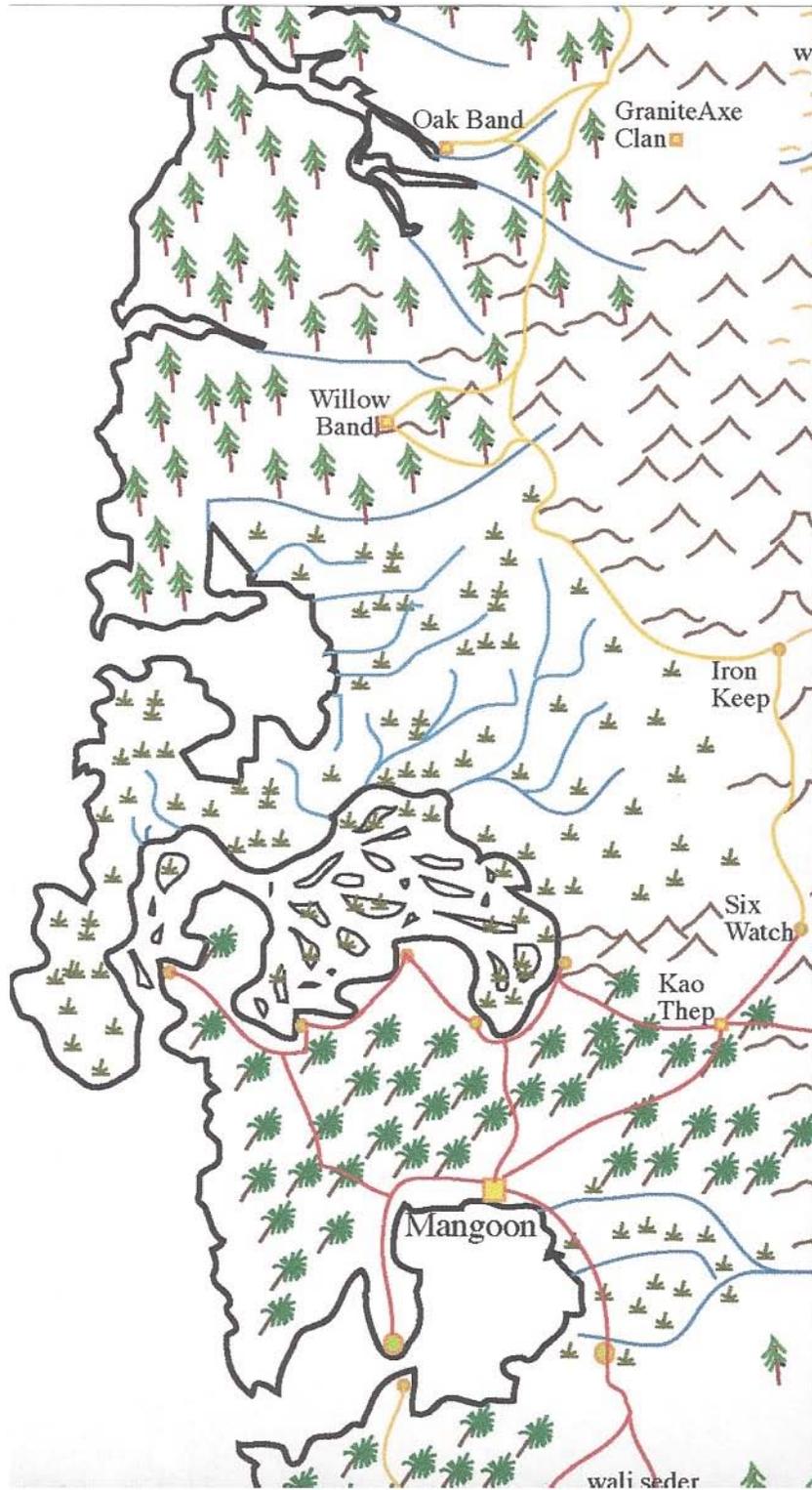
First book in the Sorcet Chronicles series

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Map



Chapter 1

Sorcet struggled to her feet, swinging her longsword one-handed at the last of the desert sylphen. But that big male leapt back, turned, and sprinted for the north horizon. Sorcet started after the sylph but a stabbing pain in her side drove her back to her knees. She summoned a fireball — there certainly was enough heat in this desert to use for that — but by the time she created it the sylph was out of range. Sorcet, still on her knees and partially leaning on the sword thrust into the sand, unleashed the thing anyway. The fireball dissipated just a few yards behind the fleeing guard, its distinctive rippling sound fading even as the terrified sylph glanced back.

The track, a road in name only, led south to the human kingdom of EastHolme and its port city of Freedmouth, and north to the desert sylphen village of Wadi Bilet. The party Sorcet and Greer had just ambushed had been traveling north to Wadi Bilet and Sorcet knew that the fleeing sylph could reach that village in two days.

Sitting on the sand, Sorcet felt her left ribcage with one gauntleted hand and grunted in pain. She knew the armor would be intact but one of the other sylphen, a big male, had hit her with a hammer weapon so heavy it could have cracked a rib, even one covered by leather tunic and then a xythos scale hauberk over that.

She glanced around at the carnage. The hard-packed sand showed the marks here and there of feet that had shuffled during brief fights. There were several arms and one leg no longer attached to any owner. There was blood everywhere, and splashed on her as well. Only her longsword, still quietly humming in her right hand, was clean. It was three feet of obsidian-like black glass and it was always clean. She looked at it a moment as if she had no idea where it had come from, feeling the faint vibration within it, then slid it back into its scabbard and, wincing at the pain in her ribs, slung the scabbard up onto her shoulder where it hung down her back.

There were two human 'chair-men' lying hacked in the road just in front of the palanquin they had been carrying. They had worn little more than thin unbleached loincloths topped by filmy cloth robes as protection against the sun. Sorcet looked at the still-smoldering remains of the other two chair-men who had been carrying the rear poles of the palanquin. The same fireball that had fried the palanquin had obliterated them, payment for the bad luck to be in the way. At least, for them, it was quick. Here there was no cloth to be seen, only blackened corpses curled into distorted shapes. The palanquin had been a lightweight one for travel, little more than a narrow bed with long poles affixed to either side and with an awning overhead for shade. It had been almost totally burned away, along with its one occupant. A charred arm extended up from the still-smoking remains lying on the sand. The hand had burned away or fallen off and the ends of the two forearm bones gleamed whitely.

The four desert sylphen guards had worn leather armor and had put up more of a fight than Sorcet had planned on. She and her taidar, Greer, had gotten ahead of the palanquin on the road, then buried themselves in the sand before dawn, when the morning wind would blow away all traces of their activity. They had lain with heads, shoulders and arms exposed but hidden behind some small sereplant bushes, one of the few plants that could survive the harsh conditions.

It had been nearly midday before they heard the men and sylphen approach, the four-man palanquin carrying Aube Teegs, leader of a breakaway faction that had only recently

tried to assassinate the EastHolme eparch. The two-name had failed in a political world dominated by three-names and where failure was ill-rewarded. Teegs was one of several disciples of a mysterious but charismatic human who had appeared in the desert sylphen lands, passed south through the human land of EastHolme, and vanished into the trackless wilderness around Mount Orboros to the far south.

But when Sorcet and Greer judged the traveling party to have just passed, fleeing from Freedmouth and heading north to Wadi Bilet, and rose up to attack, it took too long to struggle out of the sand and draw weapons. The guards had managed to close with her and Greer so quickly that she had no time to form a second fireball. Still, she and Greer had killed three of the guards and the two front chair-men as well.

Foolish of those two to try to fight her, Sorcet thought. But, then, what else for them? If they stayed, they died. There could be no surviving witnesses to this ambush and they well knew whom they carried and of what he was guilty. If they ran, where would they go in this hot and waterless desert? Going up against a deru and her protective taidar, and bare-handed at that, was a thousand-to-one chance but better than any other option they had. Sorcet sighed, looking around her. She disliked killing anyone and hated killing innocents. But she was a deru of the Gray Guild and that was the end of it.

Aside from herself, the distant running sylph, and the scattered bodies around the burned-out palanquin, there was not a thing to see north or south or in any other direction. It was all windswept sand, some large areas of gibber-pebbles, and occasional flat wind-exposed stone. There were a few plants but no small desert animals to be seen, at least in daytime. High above the western horizon Sorcet saw a slowly circling dot. She knew that would be a vultross and she knew that even at such a great distance the big flying lizard could clearly see her and the bodies around her. It would come to collect its due. Soon.

It was the tenth day of Allonel, the Spring Quarter, and already this desert was hot in daytime and only slightly cooler at night. To the east and beyond the horizon, Sorcet knew, lay the sea. Far to the west across trackless desert lay the Spine Mountains that blocked any rainfall here, and Iron Keep, the human fortress that guarded the pass there. Even this desert road was little more than tracks in the sand, weaving slightly here and there to take advantage of any firm soil. Shoulder-high stone cairns placed every few thousand paces provided a rough guide to travelers but the footprints would vanish with the day's wind. There were no wagon tracks because no wagons could traverse this wasteland of soft sand.

It would take longer for evidence of the fight here to vanish. The sun, wind, insects and animals would see to the bodies soon enough. In a week all flesh would be gone, a happy find for larger beaks and fangs, small teeth and, ultimately, tiny mandibles. The palanquin, weapons, armor and the like would stay until passers-by took whatever they might value and could carry. The next travelers to come by would wonder at the bones, some of which would be seen cut clean through, and would report the find to the guards at the next town they reached. The guards might or might not bother to send out a patrol to look at the scene. Sorcet assumed they would; Aube Teegs had been an important man within his faction in EastHolme and his followers would miss his arrival at Wadi Bilet. She had no intention of going north to Wadi Bilet or south to EastHolme territory. She would strike out cross-country, west to Iron Keep, once her business here was entirely finished.

Sorcet got to her feet again and limped, slowly and stiffly, across the track to where Greer lay on the other side of the smoldering palanquin. She knelt and felt for a pulse. He was dead, as she had guessed. A spear had thrust entirely through his leather armor, his lung, and probably his heart. His left hand still clutched the spear shaft, his right hand the axe he had favored. The sylphen guard who had killed Greer lay beside him, head cleft open.

"Sorry. So sorry, my dear, sweet Greer," Sorcet said softly. She tousled his brown hair helplessly. "And I shall have to strip thee of all Gray Guild markings and then bury thee some distance off and with no stone. Thy body, here, is ... inconvenient."

She sat back and began to remove her armor, a tedious process and the more so with only one good arm. Had there been a Gray Guild kaiphon present, that magicker could have healed her rib quickly. Kaiphonae specialized in healing and, if need be, harming, the body. The derudae, of which Sorcet was a senior, were users of natural energy in various forms, which was of no help at this moment. Still, Sorcet was a skilled healer in the more usual sense and she stripped to her bare torso, then cut up a cloth robe taken from one of the dead litter-carriers and bound that tightly around herself, hissing at the pain until it seemed as tight as she could get it. Slowly she put her tunic and armor back on. Exhausted, she sat back, drank some water from a skin at her side, and rested.

Chapter 2

Earlier ...

The flashlight woke the bat from its midday sleep and it watched from its upside-down grip on the pocked limestone cave ceiling as the two humans splashed past below.

Tachi Green Fujiwara and Caitlin Dierdre Beltane shivered in their cold, wet jeans. Their clothing and hands were caked with mud and Caitlin had a mud smear across her right cheek. Tachi's nose told him there were other things mixed in with the mud and he tried to put that thought out of his mind.

"Cate, it might be time to turn back," Tachi said as he sat on a muddy ledge and considered. "The flashlight batteries could die soon."

"You put in new ones just for this camping trip, right?" Caitlin said. "It's good for a while yet." She splashed past Tachi and continued on deeper into the chamber.

Tachi sighed, stood and followed. He was learning that Caitlin tended to push things to the very edge. He was the cautious one.

Tachi and Caitlin had taken to the road for spring break and had been camping at a small state park in West Virginia when, at dusk, they had seen the smoke-like cloud of bats and tracked down the hidden entrance to this cave. He and Caitlin had just started dating and he liked her but also found her a bit intimidating. Caitlin was a tall, thin redhead who played volleyball and could run the hundred-meter dash faster than Tachi. She pushed Tachi out of his comfort zone. He liked that in one way, dreaded it in another, put up with it for the most part.

Camping saved money and money was in short supply for a young man attending a state college, a young man whose parents had died in an auto accident. Working summers as a roofer, and an athletic scholarship barely covered the bills. At six feet — just two inches taller than Caitlin — and one hundred eighty pounds, Tachi was a good wrestler and decent defensive guard on the school football team.

Caitlin whistled aloud and waved the light around the chamber. Tachi stopped behind her to admire it. Looking like pointed teeth, wetly glistening in the flashlight beam, limestone dripped from above, each tooth striving to meet and join with its partner thrusting up from below.

"The ones from the ceiling are stalactites," Tachi said. "'C' is for Ceiling.' The ones growing up from the floor are stalagmites. 'G' is for Ground."

"Shut up."

"Good point."

Caitlin started forward but after just a few yards stopped suddenly and even backed up a step. Tachi, struck by a sudden feeling of dread, stopped too. Caitlin swung the light around the walls as Tachi wondered why he was suddenly so afraid. "Looks like the end of the cave," she said.

"Can't be. The water comes from someplace."

Caitlin nodded. "It does. From up there." She swung the light to show a thin fissure in the rock near the ceiling. A steady trickle of water ran as a sheet from the fissure, across the ceiling, and thence down the stalactites and to the beginning of the stream. The fissure was nowhere wider than a finger-width. "And what is *that*?" she said.

There was a three-foot black circular shape in the chamber wall down low on the side opposite them. Scattered around the floor beneath the black circle were bones, including a number of skulls. Caitlin waded the stream to investigate. She reached in, among a rattle of displaced bones, and pulled out a short bronze tube with a red crystal on one end and a thin rod sticking out the other. "Is that a ruby?" she asked.

"I don't know. Bring it over here." Tachi found himself too afraid to go nearer to that black circle. Caitlin came to him and handed over the tube. "Never saw a ruby," Tachi said, "and this is uncut too. Might be worth something. It's certainly big." He laid the tube down and then leapt to one side as it slowly slid back across the floor to stop among the bones once more. "What the hell?" Almost forgetting his fear in his sudden curiosity, he went to look. The closer he came to the black circle the more terrified he became. He could see now that it was a hole in the wall. He backed away. "Do you feel that?" he asked. "A sense of fear."

"I sure do. And I think it comes from that hole." The circular area simply absorbed the beam from Caitlin's flashlight.

Overcoming his fear, Tachi felt with his left hand and snatched it back with a surprised grunt.

"What is it?" Caitlin asked.

"Cold. It's some kind of opening and it's really cold."

"Well, it's all cold in here," Caitlin said. She came closer and thrust the flashlight into the circular opening. The light vanished into the cold, leaving Tachi and Caitlin in the womb-like darkness for an instant before she pulled back the light.

"Wow! Caitlin said aloud. "That is cold. And scary."

"This is not possible," Taichi said. "Nothing in nature is perfectly round. Well, almost nothing; raindrops' cross-sections and other things where surface tension applies can be round. And, of course, the entire Earth is, if not round, at least an oblate spheroid, which was close enough for Columbus."

"Thank you Mr. Scholar. But this hole is round. And it's big enough for us to squeeze through."

"You're joking, right?"

Caitlin laughed. "You afraid? Remember, what does not kill you makes you stronger. And this looks passable."

"A girlfriend who quotes Friedrich Nietzsche. What could go wrong there? Damn right I'm afraid. And clever sayings aren't a comfort when you're looking at something that terrifies you for no good reason at all."

"Let me try," Caitlin said. Tachi stood aside, sweating in fear even in the cold air, as she tried her head and her flashlight hand. She pulled back after a moment. "That about froze my ears off," she said, blinking rapidly. "The fear inside is even worse. Nothing. Can't see a thing, even with the light."

"Strange that the light goes out totally when you put it in there. You would think at least some would reflect back out here."

Tachi knew that, as far as Caitlin was concerned, there was but one thing left to do. She hated being afraid and tended to overreact to the feeling, throwing caution and, sometimes, good sense, to the winds.

"Don't even think about it," he said.

"Why not? This is probably important. How long do you suppose this thing has been in here and nobody knew about it? We need to find out more and then find someone who knows about caves."

"No," Tachi said. "Look at all those bones. It's no coincidence that they are clustered around that hole. What we need to do is go away and come back later with long ropes and big insurance policies. And we can take that ruby-thing with us and get someone to look at it and tell us what it's worth, if it's worth anything."

Caitlin ignored him. "Here goes nothing," she muttered. She took a deep breath and wiggled headfirst into the icy darkness. Tachi heard her whimper in fear, yet still she squirmed onward.

When the flashlight entered the darkness the light in the cave vanished. Tachi felt for and grabbed Caitlin's ankle with both his hands as she wriggled swiftly deeper. When her sneakers passed into the hole Tachi felt himself suddenly pulled headfirst after Caitlin, his fierce grip on her ankle their only connection. Suddenly he was in the hole too and falling, falling through a death-cold darkness and a paralyzing terror, his grip on Caitlin's ankle never easing. The intense cold gave way for an instant to an equally intense heat that seared his skin and still he refused to let go of Caitlin. He barely had time to wonder if this was going to kill him or make him stronger.

A blue-white gout of flame erupted from the round hole and sneakers and flashlight and clothing were spat back into the cave, the light shorted out and dead, the flames flickering as burning cloth arced through the air and landed in the wet mud. The bat took flight. When it returned later, it nervously pinged the area a few times with its echolocation and was satisfied that whatever had disturbed its sleep was gone. The odd area in the back of the cave that never returned a ping, and which the bat had always instinctively feared, was still there though. The bat clutched the ceiling, folded leathery wings, and dozed again, its tiny brain unaware that it was the last creature on Earth to see Tachi Green Fujiwara and Caitlin Dierdre Beltane.

Chapter 3

The stinger leader had been on her way to a distant storage area, leading a party of five workers, one of which carried her. The stinger-dug tunnels were round, smooth and straight but they did occasionally intersect natural fissures and caves deep in the mountain.

As they approached one such intersection a slight vibration in the air told the leader that some disturbance had occurred back in the depths of that fissure. The leader decided to investigate, detouring from the smooth dug-out tunnel and into a winding natural cave. The hive tunnels were unlighted but all stingers had a glow-organ that lit up their abdomens and cast a bluish light in all directions. The workers' small cutting jaws snapped excitedly at this deviation from their normal mindless routine but the leader kept them firmly under control.

They found the two intruders far back in a low-ceilinged cul-de-sac, sitting among a pile of bones. The alcove exuded a sense of dread but nothing that the leader paid much attention to. Stingers had no concept of fear or personal existence; they were part of the hive and that was all that mattered to them.

The leader ordered two of the workers to seize the intruders. To a stinger, everything that was not a stone or a plant, and not a living hive member, was just food. She considered cutting up this food on the spot but she had no soldiers with her and the workers would take much too long to do the job.

The creatures, she saw, were totally hairless and sunburned all over, a considerable feat, she thought, as they were then several hours' walk from the hive entrance and the outside sun. Their mouths opened and closed in odd patterns and if she was close enough she could detect small vibrations in the air from that. She had no idea what that signified but it was something she had seen other non-stinger prisoners do too.

She made a decision, remounted her worker, and headed back toward the main hive and to a nearby gallery where, she recalled, some further excavation was underway using slaves. Her workers dragged the two captives along behind.

Tachi and Caitlin soon found themselves delivered to a large cavern with several humanoid-looking species of captives, a dozen all-told. Some were tall and thin, some short and stocky. None looked like Caitlin or Tachi. The captives wore an assortment of filthy rags and only one of the short ones had boots but, even so, they were better dressed than the naked Caitlin and Tachi.

What they all had in common was that they were made to dig at one or another of several rock faces, digging out additional tunnels by using pointed stone battering rams so large that it took four of them to handle one.

It was Tachi who first noticed and whispered to Caitlin one rest period. "Cate, we are a lot stronger than these people, whatever they are. Probably a lot stronger than the bugs."

Caitlin nodded. "Best to keep that little secret to ourselves. Don't work too hard. The day may come when we will need a little surprise on our side."

Tachi and Caitlin had, from the beginning, looked for ways to escape. But there was only the one exit from the chamber and which opened into that long tunnel that led back toward the main hive. They could probably take down a worker or two but Tachi doubted he could kill a soldier quickly enough to avoid the snapping jaws, large claw "hands" or

the dread stinger. And there was always a leader, at least one soldier, and several workers present, the latter mostly to provide light for the captives.

Tachi and Caitlin began to acquire smatterings of several languages. The stocky creatures with very pale skin, pale blue eyes and brown hair, they learned, were droichen and they were cave dwellers too. The tall ones were sylphen, and these had been captured on the fringes of the forests they inhabited.

The sylphen had almond-shaped eyes and pointed ears that seemed able to swivel like a cat's to pick up sound from any direction. They were a head taller than the droichen, and Tachi's height. But the sylphen were thinner than Tachi and mahogany-skinned. Where the droichen had hands of three equal-length fingers and one thick thumb and no fingernails, the sylphen hands had two equal-length fingers and another thumb on the other side of the hand. Fingers and thumbs were very long and the feet almost matched and the sylphen had short black claws in place of fingernails. Sylphen eyes were yellow or green-tinted with a vertical slit in place of the round iris.

The stinger workers and soldiers were virtually mindless. The leaders, who usually had workers carry them around, were smaller and almost helpless, but they were never alone. They guided the actions of worker and soldier alike with telepathic commands. While being dragged to the cavern on the day he arrived, Tachi had noticed that the hive tunnels were long and straight, with distinct corners. At each corner a leader and a worker had stood. Now Tachi realized these leaders were message-relayers, as the telepathic messages could not pass through solid rock.

Tachi's and Caitlin's skins healed quickly. Caitlin would carry a scar on her right palm from the flashlight she had been holding when they passed through the portal. All their hair had been burned off and over time it grew back as stubble. Tachi was annoyed at this but for Caitlin it was most distressing as she had always been proud of her flowing red hair, which she had liked to wear in a single long braid. She had no time to weep over the loss, though. The stingers were always there, kicking their captives awake to resume the exhausting work.

"So, am I your girlfriend now?" Caitlin asked one day as they pounded a wall with a ram.

"What?" Tachi's hands had blisters from the first few days of digging. Later both his and Caitlin's palms would become almost solid callus from friction with the ram sides. The rams had no convenient handles.

"You said, back in the bat cave before we came here, that I was your girlfriend."

"I did? I don't remember that."

"You did. I remember."

Tachi stared at Caitlin. "Well. Look around you. Do you see any competition?"

Caitlin smiled. "All right then. I'm your girlfriend. You're my guy."

For some reason that made Tachi's day. Then again, he thought. It didn't take much to make his day here.

The stinger soldiers were the height of a droich, about five feet, and probably weighed one hundred twenty pounds or more. Their glossy jet-black exoskeletons were thick and they looked like armored tanks. Most of the hive was made up of workers who were the same height but weighed less, and their dark gray exoskeletons were thinner. The leaders were much smaller, only some two feet tall and maybe forty pounds in weight and they were more than half head, with almost vestigial glossy-red abdomens

and thorax. Stingers all had black multifaceted eyes and the uppermost two limbs were adapted to end in two thin claws that served as fingers.

All the stingers were capable of standing upright on the rear four legs. Every time one or more of them moved, their feet made a dry rustling sound on the hard stone floor. Tachi grew to fear that sound. Silence meant nothing was happening to threaten him. The dry rustling sound meant some stinger was up to something and the something was rarely good.

While they were called stingers by the captives, in fact only the soldiers had huge slicing mandibles and also stings at the tips of their abdomens. Just how effective those were as weapons, Tachi and Caitlin soon learned. During one of the long work periods a droich fell from exhaustion. He tried to crawl away to hide behind a pillar but a leader noticed and dispatched a soldier, which skittered over, its spike-like feet making faint scrabbling sounds on the smooth stone floor. The soldier snatched the droich up with the large claws on her front legs, and whipped her stinger between her rear legs and into the droich's stomach. The droich collapsed at once and started screaming and kept on screaming for more than an hour, writhing on the floor. The stingers ignored him while the captives fell to work with renewed desperation. Tachi and Caitlin learned later that a sting injected a toxin that broke down the tissue inside the victim. The victim dissolved from the inside out, still alive until some vital organ or blood vessel disintegrated, giving blessed relief in death. When the droich finally lay still the soldier lopped off arms, legs and head, and the workers carried limbs and the pre-digested torso away to be eaten by stinger brood-spawn.

Stinger work parties ranging outside the hive for meat brought in the occasional droichen or sylphen captives or, rarely, a passing human. These were first used as slaves, valued by the stingers because the captives had more fingers and could perform tasks the stingers had trouble doing. In death, the slaves fed the stinger young.

Life for Tachi and Caitlin continued its numbing cycle of work, more work, even more work, and very little rest. They managed to acquire, from several of the executed captives, some rags to wear. Meantime, they worked when told to and ate and slept when told to. And awaited their turn to die.

Chapter 4

The Other nodded in satisfaction at his dinner plate. *This is satisfactory, he thought to the trembling attendant. Meat fed?*

"Yes, sire. Sheep. All her life. Sheep and beer for added flavor. Or so the cook tells me." The two were alone in the dining room of the Other's redoubt in the fortress overlooking Sark, a sylphen village on an island in the great sea. While the Other used telepathy, the attendant — and most of the staff — wore the Communicator headsets that both translated their words into thoughts, and punished them if the Other so chose.

Good. I like the flavor. Better than the usual grain-fed prisoners. Raise some more for me. Meat fed.

"There aren't but three more like her," the attendant said. "It might take some time to get some babies past the infant stage and into meat eating."

Tell the cook to make that time short. Or he will be next on the kitchen spit. And I think the females taste better too. See to it.

"Ye ... yes sire."

The Other raised a forkful of Sylphen thigh to his mouth but paused at a slight tremble in his head. He put the fork back down. *Did you hear something just now?* He asked the attendant.

"No sire." The attendant tapped the side of his Communicator. "Just you, of course."

The Other sat back and stared at the high ceiling a moment to think. *Someone has used one of my portals, he thought at last. A sentient being, not some stray animal. Not an authorized visit from the Council, me thinks.*

"I ... I do not know of what you speak, sire. What is a portal?"

The Other looked down at the attendant. These pathetic vermin are weak resources, he thought to himself. Sylphen, humans. I wonder if the droichen are any less stupid. I should find out.

The Council had posted the young Other to this remote world to maintain the portals here. He hated it but it was a stepping stone to greater responsibilities and a political career among the Others.

I shall attend to the matter of portals and trespass, he thought to the attendant. You attend to getting me more meat-fed sylphen flesh.

Chapter 5

Mother Gael sat on her stone stool at the large stone table and regarded her military leader with a worried expression unusual for the GraniteAxe Clan's Great Mother. "Is there really no choice? No choice at all?"

Doosat, the general in charge of their small defense force, shook his head. "We lost two workers yesterday. Candar and Firton. A four-person party had gone out a back entrance, from our workings to a natural water-made cave, to gather some samples of rock. We may wish to expand in that direction. The two who ran back and reported said that stingers had grabbed their companions. By now they're slaves and will soon be brood-food."

"But that's not the worst part," Dag, a young droich fighter-leader, said.

Doosat looked across at Dag. "Let me do the talking here, Dag."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"There's a worse part?" Mother Gael said. "Worse than losing Candar and Firton?"

Doosat nodded. "The stingers are expanding too. We share a common mountain. And we're too close together. We have controlled things thus far with a few iron doors between us and some natural caves that connect to the stinger hive diggings. The stingers can't open locked doors. But sooner or later, and my guess is sooner, one or the other of us is going to break through a wall and into the other's space. At that point we will have stingers up to our eyeballs, running all around inside the GraniteAxe Clan deephome. At that point we will have to fight and we'll be fighting with our old and young and infirm in the front lines too."

"Better to take the fight to them," Dag said.

Doosat glared at Dag. He looked back at Mother Gael. "As my young and too-forward friend says, better to fight the stingers on a timetable of our choosing and on their ground, not ours."

"An all-out war, is what you're asking for," Mother Gael said, sadly. "Exterminate them before they exterminate us."

"I'm saying there will soon be, just as you fear, an all-out war. Better if we choose when and where."

"When was the last time any droichen clan fought stingers?" Mother Gael asked. She looked to her side at a scribe who was making notes. The scribe only shook her head.

"No idea," Doosat said. "One thing we can do right now is to test things. Test our tactics, our weapons, and theirs too. I propose, immediately, a raid into the stinger hive to rescue our missing people and any others the stingers may have. Then we can make a better judgment as to our capabilities. Better plan our strategy."

Mother Gael gave it a long thought. She was not normally quick to action. But she sighed and nodded. "Let us do that. Try to keep our casualties as low as possible, please, dear Doosat. Every droich is a long lifetime of experience and knowledge. I cannot spare even one."

Chapter 6

Tachi, Caitlin and two sylphen were ramming a wall when the two stinger leaders present became excited. One gathered up most of the workers and one soldier, and ran from the cavern. The other leader stayed to supervise a few workers and the one remaining soldier. The stinger workers herded all the captives back into the main room and stood waiting for further orders.

And Tachi heard something echoing down the main tunnel that led to their room. Voices, shouts, a clanging of metal. *Odd*, he thought. *The stingers don't talk*. Then one of the droichen present shouted that it was a droichen raid.

"Well, what are we standing here for?" Tachi said. "We can take that one leader."

The others stared at him. Finally one sylphen male ran to one side away from them and started shouting and jumping. They may have had no spoken language but the stingers all turned to stare at the sylph. The soldier started forward, fearsome mandibles clicking.

"Now!" Tachi said to Caitlin. They picked up the ram that they had dropped when the commotion broke out and, using their full strength for the first time, ran at the leader's back. All the stingers had hard exoskeletons but the ram knocked the leader down. Before it could get up or even transmit a message, Tachi and Caitlin raised the ram over their heads and brought it down with a crunching sound. Their telepathic connection to the leader broken, the workers reacted instantly, either standing still awaiting orders or wandering almost aimlessly, trying to carry out whatever order was last given.

Not so the soldier. Soldiers, apparently had a hardwired standing order they reverted to in the absence of any other. And that was to attack anything not a hive member. The soldier ran to the waving sylph and grabbed him. The sylph managed to twist away from the stinger but lost an arm in the process, lopped cleanly off by the soldier's mandibles. Moaning, the sylph stumbled away but was cut down an instant later by the sting. The soldier then turned and ran straight at the nearest captive, a sylph female, only to be blindsided and knocked off its four feet by Tachi and Caitlin and their battering ram. In the few seconds it took the soldier to flip over and regain its feet, the ram came down on its head once, twice, finally a third time that got the satisfying crunch Tachi wanted to hear.

He looked around, still wary of the workers and their jaws, but the latter were mostly standing still. What is more, they were being swiftly cut down by axes wielded by a band of short, heavily-armored droichen who had burst into the cavern from the tunnel. In seconds all the stingers were dead. Their glow-organs continued to glow for a time but the invading droichen had their own yellow-green lights too.

"Well done," the droich leader said, looking down at the oozing soldier at their feet. "But let us not stand here. We cannot hold off the entire hive. Come. To freedom come." He then walked over to the dying sylph and with one blow of an axe, took off its head, made some sign in the air and murmured, "Gift of Death," and turned back to give orders to his troops.

The droichen war band split into two, some to run ahead, some to bring up the rear, the gaggle of freed captives running as best they could in the middle. More captives joined them, rescued from other parts of the hive. Tachi and Caitlin carried the body of

the dead sylph. The sylph female who had almost been caught by the stinger soldier ran behind carrying the head and arm and crying out in distress. They rounded corners with dead stinger leaders and workers and the occasional dead stinger soldier, clambered over a heap of dead stinger workers at a major intersection, and ran for a long time down tunnels and then into a natural water-carved cave.

They overtook other droichen parties and then passed one acting as rear guard and backing slowly while keeping alert to a stinger counterattack. One party carried a dead droichen fighter. The droichen left no comrade behind to become pupae-food. Eventually they came to a cave wall with a small round iron door set into it. There was no handle on the side of the door facing the stinger hive. The door was open and more droichen guarded it. They passed through, stooping to clear the low opening, and ran on down a tunnel into a new life.

Chapter 7

After their rescue from the stinger hive, Tachi and Caitlin lived with the GraniteAxe clan for almost six months Earth time before they once more saw the light of day. The droichen fed and healed the captives they had recovered from the raid on the stinger hive and then sent them on their way to their respective homes. But they were at a loss as to what to do with Tachi and Caitlin, seemingly a sylph and a human with no apparent home to go back to. Instead, Great Mother Gael welcomed the two into the GraniteAxe clan, set out to teach them more of the language, and put them to work.

Their chief mentor was Drenhor, a clan sub-leader in charge of distributing and storing supplies. Drenhor was an amiable droich and a widower who, it seemed, took in these strays to ease his loneliness. Like most droichen, Drenhor was about five feet tall but weighed nearly one hundred and fifty pounds, stocky and strong, with pale skin and pale blue eyes. His normal brown hair and beard had turned gray, for Drenhor, at three hundred seventy-five years old, was nearing the end of his lifespan.

Dag, the young droich who had taken Caitlin's hand and led them to safety during the raid on the stinger hive, was another stray who lived with Drenhor. A mere one hundred and fifty years old, Dag weighed only around one hundred and twenty pounds. Dag had a special hatred of the stingers. Dag's parents, Tachi learned, had died when the stingers had caught them outside of one of the clan's hidden back doors. Dag had been trained as a guard and was one of the few droichen to carry arms at all times, in his case a round shield with spiked boss and the fearsome droichen war-axe, a short-handled axe with a spike on the opposite side, that could punch through armor or cut off an arm and which could be swung by a short person in a low-ceilinged tunnel. On duty, he wore a leather tunic and trousers with a chain hauberk over that, metal greaves and a conical helmet.

Caitlin was to spend most of her time with the priestesses and scribes who handled the planning and paperwork for the clan. During rest periods — and the droichen didn't work very hard — she returned to live with Tachi, Dag and Drenhor in small rooms of their own.

The droichen cultivated a lichen that emitted a blue glow and that lined the most-used tunnels. Other lichens grew longer and were harvested and woven into the soft, almost felt-like, material the droichen used for clothing.

Away from the main tunnels with lichen-covered walls Tachi and Caitlin needed glowworms — what Tachi had seen some droichen carrying during his rescue — much of the time. The worms were almost a foot long and the center sections glowed a bright yellow-green when the worms were stroked.

Tachi tried to learn more of the language. Dag and Drenhor were infinitely patient with Tachi, but Caitlin was a much better student.

Caitlin had, of course, accomplished the goal she had set herself on that almost forgotten ride with Tachi into the West Virginia mountains before they fell through the cave-hole. She and Tachi were now lovers, with the fierce passion of the young. Once, Dag walked into their small private cell and backed out with an astonished look. He explained later that it had not occurred to him that a human and sylph could have sex together. Tachi, just as patiently, explained yet again that despite his eyes he, too, was a human, not a sylph.

Drenhor put Tachi to work at the smithies, a large complex of caves, chimneys, piles of ore and leather bellows worked by droichen with enormous muscles. Pools of a flammable oil collected in several places and redistributed in jars provided all the heat the droichen could need. The droichen worked in iron and brass, tin, bronze and even, to Tachi's astonishment, steel.

A small section of the smithy complex made weapons and armor. The droichen made exquisite chainmail and scale mail in iron or bronze. In one corner several droichen made swords. These, Tachi learned, were special order items and usually for humans in the cities to the west of the Womb mountains.

Rarely, the smiths made a weapon from an extremely scarce metal they called xythos which was harder than steel but lighter, a dull dark gray color, and impervious to rust. This ore was found only in rare "pipes" of lava that had extruded upward from deep in the planet. It was unworkable by ordinary fire and hammer and Tachi watched, fascinated, as a droichen 'searcher' sat next to a forge and, while other workers pumped the bellows and hammered on some xythos ore, focused his mind on the process, heating the ore from red-hot to well beyond white-hot, all without using his hands. Only at this extreme temperature could the ore be worked into a metal and then into a weapon, in this case a dagger.

No one used xythos for anything but weapons or armor and even those were rare. And no species but the droichen could mine the ore or forge it into anything useful.

Chapter 8

One morning Drenhor interrupted Caitlin, Dag and Tachi as they ate breakfast. "Today we to the outrooms go," he said gruffly.

"Why?" Tachi said. "Are we leaving the deephome?" And when Drenhor confirmed this, Tachi felt both elated at the chance to see the sky and sad to be leaving these wonderful people who had taken him in and treated him with respect.

Caitlin collected her writing materials — she had her own inkpot and some of the felt paper the droichen scribes used — and came along rather eagerly. Both of them by now had small felt-cloth backpacks for daily use and their meager belongings fit easily into those on a moment's notice. Dag hastily slipped on his mail armor, grabbed his axe and shield, and came too, looking sorry to lose his newfound friends.

Drenhor led them to the deephome entrance. They walked for a long time before Tachi began to see a different glow from ahead. Not blue wall-moss, not glowworms. Not a flame. It took a moment for Tachi to realize that he was seeing, reflected off cave walls, the yellow light of a sunlit day.

They rounded a corner and came to a large room with a perfectly round seven-foot door and opening leading to a short tunnel. There was another door at the outer end of the short passage.

"Those doors could stop a nuclear weapon, let alone any iron-age attackers," Tachi said.

Caitlin nodded. "Notice the size too. No grand castle entrance here. There is no reason for the doors to be any larger than the diameter of the interior tunnels, which makes defense all the easier."

Outside, there was a narrow ramp leading down a hundred yards to a large stone-surfaced plaza and a stunning view. Tachi was looking west, he was told, and from partway up the slope of an immense mountain. To his left and right he could see the high mountain chain the droichen called The Womb, jagged peaks extending out of sight to the north and south. Tachi craned his neck to look up to where, just above the high peaks behind him, a sun was shining brightly. The sight of that finished any thought that they were still on Earth, for the sun was larger and more orange than the one that warmed Earth.

Snow and ice covered the middle and upper slopes of the mountains and there were several waterfalls that Tachi could see. Ahead, and thousands of feet below, was an endless sea of trees extending to the horizon. It was the Time of Forinor, Drenhor explained, the autumn here. Tachi had not thought about seasons; inside the deephome seasons didn't matter and the droichen never mentioned them. There was snow on the plaza surface and for some distance down the mountainside, and this high on the mountainside the temperature was below freezing, a shock when coming out of the warm deephome.

In the center of the outside plaza was a small pile of carrying poles and a crowd of sylphen, their long brown hair braided in complex patterns interwoven with bits of colored cloth. They wore soft leather clothing, mostly in mottled-patterned greens and browns, and had cloth wrapped and tied around their feet.

The sylphen had animal skins and processed leather, fruits and vegetables, some specialty items for clothing and, oddly it seemed to Tachi, wood. The droichen mostly used metal and stone for furniture and other uses where, on Earth, wood might be used.

A female sylph spoke fluent droichen and she and a GreatAxe clan subleader held a discussion that included pointing at Tachi and Caitlin and a scrutiny by a thin brown and green deadpan face with green, vertically-slitted eyes. The sylph came over and introduced herself as Leafe Willowsdottor. There was more discussion with a sylph leader who shrugged and nodded. The droichen taskmaster called Drenhor, Caitlin and Tachi over. "You are going with these sylphen now," he told Caitlin and Tachi.

Tachi was not sure what the sylphen would do with him. He would miss Dag's cheerful face and Drenhor's amused willingness to let him try any task. But he was happy to be in sunlight once more. Caitlin seemed pleased too, though more quiet about it. Caitlin turned to Drenhor. "I'm sorry to leave the deephome and you," she said, and hugged Drenhor and Dag.

Drenhor nodded, "I hope that you will someday find your true people and path," he said. "And you both will always be welcome with us. Come back here any time you need. You will always be welcome. You have family here, Tachi. I know you are lonely. And who knows, we may yet make a good smith of you." Drenhor grinned. "And the Great Mother says that, given more time, she can make a real scribe of Caitlin.

"And I also have gifts for you, my adopted children." He gestured to Dag, who came forward with two identical long daggers in boiled-leather scabbards. Dag handed these to Drenhor who turned to give one to Tachi and one to Caitlin.

Tachi drew out his blade and whistled in appreciation. It was one of the xythos weapons, the blade alone as long as his forearm and that deadly dark gray. This was one of the rare weapons the droichen made for their own use, Tachi knew. The width and thickness carried almost to the tip and the leading one-third of the top edge was sharp also. Forward-angled guards of softer brass would trap and perhaps break an attacking blade. The handle and pommel were of bronze and the handle was wrapped in some very pebbly hide for good gripping. This was no fancy blade for a noble. It was the best medium blade a droichen warrior could own. It would last a thousand years. Indeed, it occurred to Tachi, looking at the date on the blade, it might *be* a thousand years old. Perhaps Caitlin could tell him later.

His eyes were tearing up and he was blinking now as his eyes accustomed themselves to the sunlight.

"We came to you as helpless grubs," Caitlin said, wiping away some tears of her own. "Dag and his men saved our lives and we are not even droichen. And you and Dag and Mother Gael took us into the Womb and into your hearts. And now you so freely give us these protections. Friend Drenhor, I will never forget you. And Dag, my strong, kind brother, I will someday return."

Drenhor had problems with his eyes too and dabbed at one and then the other. "Damn this bright sun," he said gruffly. To Tachi, "I now see that you are not truly sylphen." He gestured at the sylphen working at the other side of the ledge. "But you two they will protect. Your species, Caitlin, I do not know. But in here," he tapped the side of his head, "all species are the same. So this is?"

"So this is," Caitlin repeated. From across the plaza came a shout and Tachi turned to look. The sylphen were departing, picking up the carrying poles, two sylphen to a pole,

laden now with silver and some gems for further trading, tools and iron bars to be used to make more tools, and even some of the droichen mushrooms to be taken home and eaten later as a delicacy. The leader called for Tachi and Caitlin to come along. Tachi followed Caitlin, sighing. "Looks like I need to start all over with another language," he muttered.

At the last turn on the downward track they looked back. Drenhor and Dag stood high above them, watching. Tachi and Caitlin waved and Drenhor waved back one last time while Dag held up his axe and shield in a farewell salute. Then Tachi and Caitlin turned to face their futures and descended into a green wilderness.

Chapter 9

It was now well into the Time of Allonel, spring on this world, and Tachi had managed in the past few seasons to learn the sylphen tongue and a good bit of their woodcraft. The Oak Band territory covered a large portion of the western side of Islandia, with the Oak Band gladehome on the innermost shore of a long fjord, one of several fjords on the northwest coast of Islandia.

Tachi had seen a map, hand-drawn on vellum. It was not especially detailed, but good enough to show Islandia as a large oval island-continent with The Spine mountains running entirely from north to south. The Northwest, Tachi was told, was the land of the forest sylphen, the Oak Band among them. East of the mountains was a long desert inhabited by desert sylphen. Between the two the droichen lived in caves in The Spine — what they called The Womb — mountains, with some open-air droichen settlements in the mountainous north. The southern half of Islandia was home to humans and was divided into three kingdoms, two west of the mountains and one east, and those rulers occasionally squabbled over their boundaries, a concept alien to sylphen and droichen alike.

Dominating the gladehome was an immense bao tree whose central trunk was more than thirty feet in diameter. The trees in this forest were much larger in every way than Tachi was used to seeing on Earth but even among these, a bao tree was a giant. Horizontal limbs spread out from the massive trunk, supported in their turn by secondary trunks themselves bigger in diameter than most trees Tachi had seen on Earth. The central trunk and some of the larger secondary trunks had been hollowed out for a meeting house and some storage. The single tree dominated half the gladehome and kept it in permanent shade. Tachi enjoyed walking beneath the tree, like walking through a high-roofed cathedral randomly supported by columns, he thought.

There were always some sylphen at the gladehome. Others wandered the forest, often for weeks on end and often naked. Sylphen skin could change color, chameleon-like, between brown and green, and they could fade into the leafy background.

Oakleafe Elisson, an elder of the Oak Band Council, had assigned his own daughter, Leafé Willowsdottor, to help Tachi and Caitlin with the language. Leafé, besides being among their best hunters, was the resident translator and spoke droichen and human in addition to her native tongue.

Tachi and Leafé spent happy days in the forest which, for Leafé, was more home than even the Willow Band gladehome. Caitlin came along sometimes but mostly stayed in the gladehome learning the flowing sylphen script. Leafé taught Tachi where to look for special herbs and plants but also to beg their forgiveness for pulling up some and only to pull up a little from each plant so the plant could go on growing. Tachi felt a little silly about all this but he saw that plants would actually bend toward Leafé's hand and offer themselves. Even trees would sometimes slowly bend down a low branch to caress Leafé's head or shoulder as she walked beneath them. Her hand was always, it seemed, stroking a tree trunk or caressing a bush as she walked. When she had to run through the underbrush chasing after some game, the bushes would bend out of her way. Tachi asked her how this was possible.

Leafe smiled. "I'm a treebinder, a sylph with unusual empathy for living plants. I can sense their moods, sometimes even talk to the larger trees in a crude fashion. Perhaps not talk, speech, as we understand it, but a sensing of what they have seen and felt and need."

"Are you some sort of wizard then? A druid perhaps?"

"Not really. Most sylphen can relate to the forest plants and trees. And we're all bonded to our bonding-trees, a special type called bloodwood. It's one reason we don't cut down trees like you humans do; we can hear the screams from dying trees. Very unpleasant. But we do always have a few people who can take this deeper and communicate better. It just requires a lot of training and practice. My mother, Willow Slerenesdottor, is one such and I'm learning from her. Someday in the future I will replace her. But that won't be for hundreds of years yet, I hope.

"Hundreds of years? Isn't that a little optimistic?"

"No, we sylphen do live a long time by human standards. My mother is still only middle-aged, about 500 years old. And I'm still a growing girl."

"Really? How old are you?"

"About one hundred.

"You don't look it."

Leafe laughed. "A teenager by human lifespans."

Like all sylphen, Leafe was tall, thin — Tachi had never seen a fat sylph — with brown hair and dark brown and green mottled skin. She had green vertically-slitted eyes; sylphen men had yellow eyes, while women had green. Leafe's face was almost always set in a smile and she was often first to leap to her feet to dash off to do someone a favor or to fetch something someone else needed — usually by sprinting lightly away and then back in a run that was almost a dance, reminding Tachi of the flight of a butterfly. Tachi learned over time that Leafe really was as naturally cheerful and happy as she seemed. It struck Tachi as abnormal.

Tachi was not sure how long the days were here but he guessed them to be about the same as on Earth. The day/night cycle was not at all the same, the days and nights being of equal length. Tachi deduced that the planet was not tilted on its axis, as was Earth.

There were seasons, though. Allonel was the planting time, Celat the hot time, Forinor, the harvest time and Kalin, the cold quarter. Each quarter or "time" was 100 days and there was a calendar-adjustment holiday, usually 14 days, between Kalin and Allonel. The slight seasonal temperature variation probably came from an eccentric orbit around the amber-colored sun.

Tessene also had three moons. There was one moon about the size of the one Tachi was accustomed to on Earth, plus two closer, smaller, moons that appeared as small orbs hurrying across the sky while reflecting only a little light. Sometimes one of the smaller moons would pass in front of the larger and the one day per year they all happened to line up, larger and smaller all visible and superimposed upon one another, was also the start of the Time of Allonel and the new year. There were a lot of stars at all times, more than he had ever seen on Earth, and the sylphen had eyes that could see well enough by starlight alone.

When not doing minor chores for the village, Tachi practiced with his bow. He had never used one before and, in fact, could not recall ever having seen a real one in his time on Earth. Leafe Willowsdottor gave him a spare and insisted that he try it. When he first tried to shoot at some targets, large leaves affixed to tight-twisted bales of grass, as the

sylyphen refused to injure a tree just for target practice, he usually missed the entire bale. But daily practice had made him quite accurate and Leafe was proud of her student. But one afternoon he pulled the bow tight and the wood snapped in two.

Oakleafe Elisson laughed when told this and asked the village bowman to make a special bow for Tachi, one longer and heavier than the usual, capable of standing up to Tachi's much greater strength.

Chapter 10

The kaiphon sat in his office and regarded the note he had received. Two creatures had arrived on the world of Tessene. They had come through a portal he didn't know of, but he didn't know of them all. What was interesting was the description of the two. Not only were they intelligent but they may be Earthers, he thought. And he had standing orders to report any Earthers who came to Tessene.

He looked around for his taidar — his bodyguard — but his office was empty at the moment. He got up and closed the door and then took out a cloth bag from a box on a shelf, got out the Communicator, and put it on his head. The Communicator was a headband with two boxes, one above each ear. He pressed a button on the side of one of the boxes. He waited, trembling a little.

Yes, he heard the Other's voice say. The voice was so slow, deep and rumbling that he always had to listen carefully to understand.

"Master, there is a development," he said. "Two Earthers have come to Tessene by way of a portal. The portal is located in a stinger hive to the northwest."

There was a long silence. The Communicator hummed faintly. "Are you there Master?" he asked.

I know of that portal. Some time back I detected a ... vibration ... that told me that a sentient being had passed through it. But how do you know of this?

"The droichen clan near the stinger hive rescued these two and sent a message to the Gray Guild about them. The message also said that the two would be sent to the Oak Band of forest sylphen."

The Other spoke only after a long pause. *I had not investigated because I assumed the stingers would kill anything coming through that portal. I was, it seems, wrong. So they would be with the forest sylphen now?*

"Presumably, Master. But the Gray Guild will want to examine them. I imagine they will be brought to the nearest Gray Guild compound. But Master, I thought the only Earth portal was in the eastern desert."

I tell you what you need to know to serve me. I do not tell you all.

"Of course, Master. Of course not, that is," The kaiphon cursed himself for sounding stupid. The Other had this effect on him.

You will intercept these Earthers. And you will kill them. Is that understood.

"Kill them? Why? Why, Master? You have the one older Earther already. Don't you want two more to serve you?"

Sometimes you are tiresome. I do not let tiresome people live for long. But today I shall be gentle. I still have use for you. Go to a private place so that I may punish you.

"Master, I only ask out of concern for you. I'm trying to help."

I decide what help I need. I am forced on this planet to use weak vessels like yourself, but you do not tell me what to do.

"Of course not, Master. My apologies."

I do not need your apology. I need for you to kill those two Earthers. They have the potential to disrupt my plans. Find them. Kill them. Report the success to me.

"Ver ... very well, Master. I will see what I can do."

You will not see what you can do. You will do as I command.

"Must I still be punished? I am contrite."

Are you alone now?

"Yes, Master, all alo ... " and the kaiphon screamed at the pain in his skull and went on screaming until he fell unconscious.

— end sample —

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