

The Emeraldstone

by Stephen Morrill

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

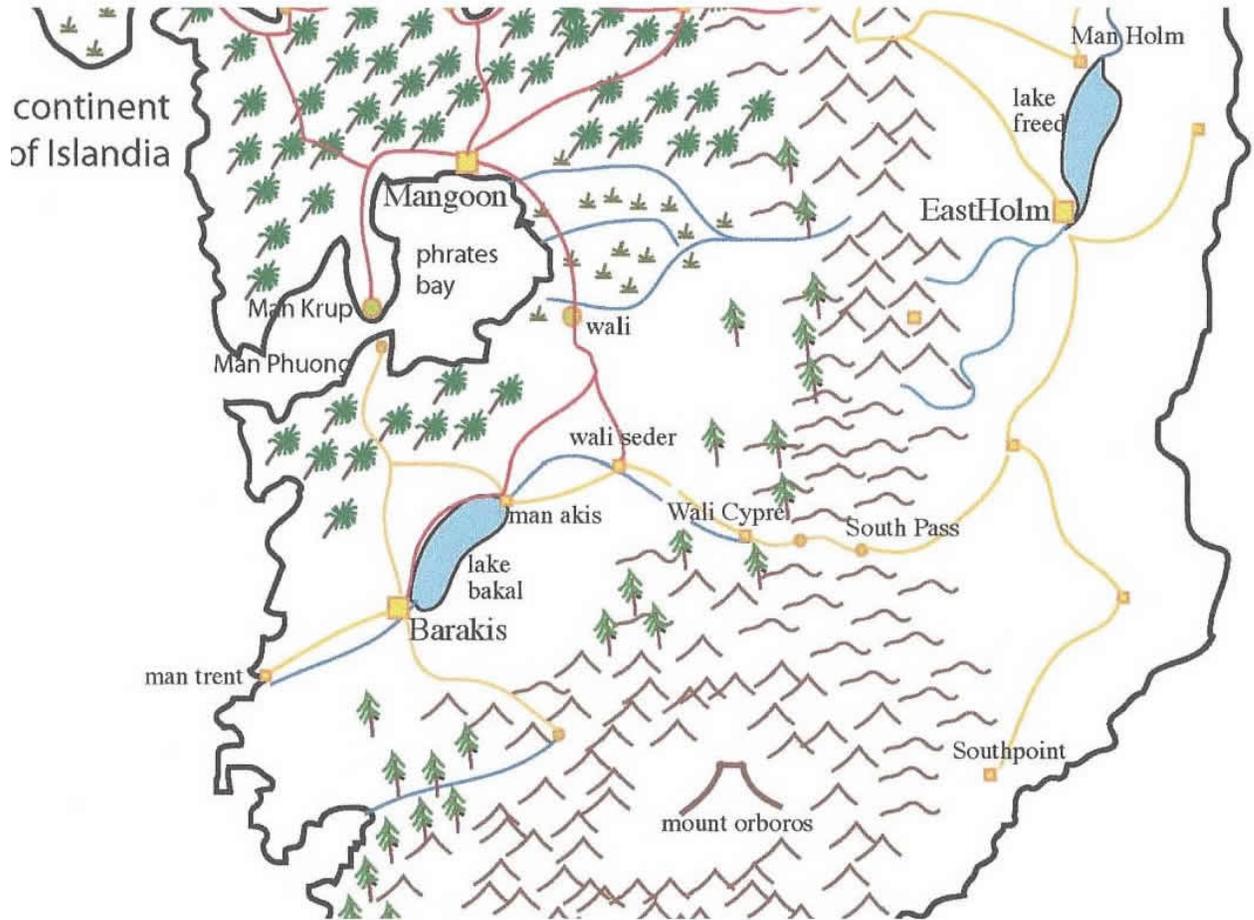
Second book in the Sorcet Chronicles series

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Map



Prelude

Caitlin, Tachi, Dag and Sorcet stood in the narrow cave passage looking at the portal. Dag was a young droich, native to the droichen caves they had just defended from a hive of stingers — human-size ant-like creatures — but the other three were not of this world. They had fought their way to this point, through a stinger hive and with an army at first, then one last battle by themselves far from the main fighting.

Sorcet — a Gray Guild deru or druid/magicker — sheathed her sword, that dreadful black obsidian-like artifact. She did not need to shake the yellow stinger goo off the sword because nothing ever clung to that death-cold blade.

Tachi and Caitlin — Sorcet's two taidar, guardians sworn to die for or at the command of their deru — recognized the spot at once, the small side-room, the piles of charred bones, some ancient, some more recent, of so many species, and the pervading sense of fear that they all had to fight against just to stand near the thing. The terror emanated from the three-foot circle of ... nothingness ... set into the far wall. Tachi shivered just to remember how cold that thing had felt to a first touch and how the fiery trip through it from Earth to Tessene had singed his hair and his skin.

"Look for the Stone, the key" Sorcet said tightly. Tachi raised an eyebrow at her tone. Caitlin, always the more intrepid of them, was already digging through the bone pile. Dag joined in and soon they all were digging. After only a few moments it was Tachi who found the key.

"Got it!" he exclaimed, holding it up. It was a bronze tube, green with age and patina, with a large ruby at one end and a prong extending two inches from the other end. It was cold when he picked it up but soon warmed and the crystal end began to glow. It vibrated uncomfortably in his hand and Tachi hastily handed it to Sorcet, who looked it over curiously, biting her lower lip.

"A firestone," Dag said, looking at the crystal on one end of the tube. "We, call those gems firestones."

"The Firestone Portal, Caitlin said. "It's a good name."

"Nothing of any technology I know," Sorcet said. Tachi wondered what technology she did know. Sorcet was notoriously tight-lipped about her own native world.

"So are we ready to close the portal?" Caitlin asked, her voice taut. She was fighting the fear too, Tachi thought. He knew that alone would make her angry.

"May I see the stone," Caitlin said. Sorcet handed the key across. "Oh, it almost burns, doesn't it?" Caitlin said. "I can feel the thing throbbing."

"Caitlin, be careful," Tachi said.

Caitlin turned to Tachi, "You know that I have always missed my family, my friends, back on Earth. This thing could take us home, Tachi."

Tachi felt his throat close in fear, not the dread generated by the portal, but another, worse, fear. It had come to this and he could permit it to go no farther. "Caitlin, don't even think that. Your home is here now. It is almost certain death to pass through that portal. You know that."

Caitlin eyed the black hole in the wall. "We passed through once and lived. Sorcet did that too. Maybe we're immune, somehow, to the deadly effects."

"You tell me," Sorcet said. "how smart do those bones look to you? How can you

tell? The reason I save my own portal for last is because I believe I will die passing through it. I am willing to do that to close it but not foolish enough to think I will ever see my own home or family again."

"You were afraid to do it?" Tachi said. "You aren't afraid of anything! I've never seen you afraid."

"Yes," Sorcet said. "You have."

"Caitlin, give me that thing," Tachi said. "You can't be serious. And remember, you're pregnant too, with our child. We have a future together here, on this planet, on Tessene."

"A future?" Caitlin laughed maniacally. "You call being taidar to a deru a future?" She turned to Sorcet. "Do you expect to live out a natural life here on this planet, Sorcet?"

"I expect to live as long as I can." The flat steel eyes offered no consolation to Caitlin or Tachi. "My taidar might help me to live longer; that is the point of them. But, ultimately, I serve something greater than my own life. I expect to pay that price some day, perhaps distant, perhaps soon."

"She's crazy," Caitlin shouted. Tachi jumped at the sound. Caitlin almost never raised her voice. "She has killed at least the taidar before us," Caitlin continued. "And will kill us too someday. She has as much as said so. How many of your taidar have you killed, Sorcet?"

Sorcet looked back to Caitlin, Her silver dime-like eyes did not blink. "They die in my service and are not forgotten."

"How many, Sorcet."

"At least ... several," Sorcet said. "And if need be, you will be next. I do hope the need does not arise, but such is the fate of a taidar."

"Yeah. Well, I'm not going to follow you around to my death, soon or late," Caitlin said. "I want to go home."

She eased her way carefully over to the portal, crunching bones underfoot. "Through that dark hole at least I have the chance to go back to my life, my real life. Tachi, you can come with me." She stretched out a hand to him. "We can have a life together on the other side, on Earth. You can go back to your friends and your old life too."

Tachi's hand went out automatically but he drew it back before Caitlin could grasp it. He shook his head. "I have no family back there as you do. You know that. And few friends. And I'm not going to commit suicide. Life here may be hard at times but it is life. For as long as it lasts."

Caitlin shrugged. "Then I go alone. Or the two of us, me and the baby, go alone."

"Caitlin," Tachi begged. "I love you, we can have a life here. You have no right to kill an unborn infant!" He turned to Sorcet, "Do something. Stop her!"

Sorcet's eyes were on Caitlin, that steady unblinking silver gaze. "She is free to do as she wishes," Sorcet said. "She will close the portal, which is all-important. If she lives, no one on Earth will ever be able to repeat the trip here, or back. They are not the makers of these portals and would not know how to use the stones. No one will believe her story. If she dies then the portal closes anyway and your Earth will never learn of the existence of Tessene."

"You want her to jump through that thing!" Tachi shouted. "She has been loyal to you and you toss her aside like an old apple-core! Just another taidar, plenty more where

that one came from."

Sorcet shook her head. "I do not want her to do it. But I know about family and loneliness too. If she wishes to try I won't stop her. But she does this on her own, not as my taidar."

"Well, I'll damn sure stop her," Tachi started toward Caitlin only to run against the point of her xythos dagger. He stopped. That lethal blade would go through his armor with ease.

"Tachi, I love you too," Caitlin said. "I always will. If I live the child shall bear your name if it's a boy, and I hope it is."

Tachi lunged forward, attempting to knock aside the xythos blade and grab Caitlin. But she turned, dove forward and ... vanished. A gout of flame surged from the portal, singing Tachi's eyebrows and hair, and all of Caitlin's clothing and equipment spewed out of the portal into the chamber, the cloth burning, the armor scorched, weapons hot to the touch. Tachi's head met the solid wall of the chamber with a dizzying crack and he fell into the pile of bones, stunned. When he looked up the portal was gone, the sense of overwhelming dread was gone too.

Tachi sat up among the bones and wept. He looked up at Dag and then at Sorcet. "I ... couldn't do it," he said. "I just could not do that."

"You are alive," Sorcet said. "Sometimes it takes more courage to stay alive than to give up and die."

Tachi nodded and wiped away a tear, leaving a mixture of yellow stinger-goo and bone-dust across his face. He stood and then bent back down to pick up Caitlin's xythos dagger, which was still hot.

"Mind if I keep that blade?" Sorcet asked. "It's better than the steel dagger I have now."

"No." Tachi said. "I'll give you mine. I want to have Caitlin's."

Sorcet shrugged. "They're identical. It makes no difference. Yours will be fine."

"They're not identical to me. This was hers. It's all I have left." He handed his dagger to Sorcet. He turned to Dag. "You can take the armor back to the storerooms in Clan Graniteaxe deephome."

Dag nodded. "It needs repair. Your own armor is not much better now. Before you leave us, Tachi, I'll see that we outfit you in some good droichen chainmail."

Tachi nodded. "I'd like that. Perhaps I can make my own if we have a few days. I know how, after all. Learned that working in your smithy."

"Are you still with me, Tachi?" Sorcet asked, those dead steel eyes set on him. "Do I still have one taidar? I'm getting tired of training them. And we have more portals to close."

"You know, Boss, sometimes you can be a cold-blooded bitch. And that's on your good days. But I'm with you," Tachi said, with a sigh. Now that the awful fear was lifted he could think more rationally, which made Caitlin's irrational action no less painful to him.

"Now and forever. The question is, do you want a taidar who is too afraid to take a risk, even for his wife and his child? Do you really want a bodyguard who is a coward?"

"I take what I can get," Sorcet said. "For now, let us get out of this hive as soon as possible. You are not the only coward here, and we have other portals to close."

Chapter 1

Tachi was relaxing at a tavern when the next attack came. The Spouting Serpent was a waterfront dive with a large drinking room, a fireplace cold and empty now but for ashes and half-burned logs, and the low tables and dirty cushions common to low-rent inns. There were a few "bedrooms" upstairs with tatami woven-straw flooring and grungy futons that could be rented by the night if you wished to sleep, or by the hour if you wished to enjoy one of the barmaids' favors. A storage room in the back also hid one of the 'mouse holes', secret entrances to the Mangoon City Shadow Guild's subterranean network, and Tachi had been pressed into training as a Shadow to replace Caitlin.

Of course he would never be a true Shadow member, but the Shadows owed the Gray Guild much and could teach him some of their tricks. The Gray Guild, collectors of wisdom and written knowledge, had need of many disciplines and it was not unheard-of to cross-train members by apprenticing them for a short time to other guilds. Sorcet's needs were extreme, even by Gray Guild standards. She needed a taidar who was as at home in the forest as he was skulking in a dark city alley, and one who could fight like a Warrior too. Tachi had already lived among the sylphen who had taught him much about the forest, and had trained with the Ranger Guild, men and women who patrolled the borders and carried the most urgent messages for the eparchs of the Three Kingdoms, the three human-inhabited areas within the island-continent of Islandia.

Now, Tachi, who could move like a zephyr through the woods, was learning stealth in the city, just so long as he did not offend Recluse, the Mangoon City Shadow guildmaster. Recluse, like the spider for which he was named, was innocuous-looking and ruthlessly deadly. The Shadows worked mostly at night and lived underground and, after most of a season of training, Tachi was glad of the rare chance to sit in the midday light and look out the window at the Mangoon City harbor and Phrates Bay beyond.

Windows in all but the most expensive homes were just wood frames with an oiled papyrus or linen cloth stretched over them. They were translucent but not glass and today the proprietor had his windows raised up on hinges, secured by ropes and hooks to the overhanging second floor that gave the ground floor some protection against rain. It was midsummer, the Time of Celat and the day was warm. The world of Tessene did not tilt on its axis but did have an eccentric orbit that gave it mild seasons.

The Spouting Serpent faced the wide paved lading yard between the docks and the street. Bullock-wagons, some with bullock teams still in harness, others not, were being loaded or unloaded by lines of dockmen. If there was anyone up to challenging him to a wrestling match, Tachi thought as he sipped his ale and watched the scene through the open window, it would be a dockman. Mighty of back and biceps, they humped hundred-pound bales and boxes all day, most days. Tachi, the ex-Earth college wrestler who was taller and stronger than the average human on Islandia, could have carried a bale in each hand.

The door was open to the fine weather and when a large shape blocked the light Tachi glanced that way to see a sailor, by his dress, come into the room. Doors on Tessene were either eight-sided in human cities — with longer vertical sides — or round in droichen caverns. The forest-dwelling sylphen didn't use doors at all, just leather flaps. The man looked around a moment, blinking in the dimmer light, and then sat crosslegged

to Tachi's right on a cushion at the same long table. He waved over a barmaid and ordered ale. People sat where they wished at common tables and that the new drinker was at Tachi's off-side, away from Tachi's long dagger, seemed of no importance.

"Where are you from, friend," The stranger asked after taking a long gulp of ale and letting out a relaxed sigh. "You don't look to be from around here." Tachi's height and Asian eyes, the gift of his dead Earth father, seemed to the inhabitants of Tessene to be more sylph-like than human, though Tachi had the four-and-one hand of a human. The sylphen lived in the northern forests and, across the central north-south mountain chain, in the northern desert. They had two thumbs and two fingers per hand, could see in near-total dark, had the 'slant' eyes that Tachi shared, and were taller and usually thinner than humans. With his height about that of a sylph, and his eyes, people often assumed he was a half-breed. That he was also physically stronger than most people on Tessene, stronger even than most of the squat droichen who lived in the mountains that they called The Womb, was not so obvious.

"I come from far off, friend," Tachi said. "But I call Mangoon home now. You must be new to the city too, not to have seen me before."

The man nodded. "In from the Islands," he said. "Serving on the Sea Pearl." Tachi knew of the Sea Pearl, a local ship that did make regular trips southwest to the Islands, a sylphen stronghold and transshipment point for ports farther west. Mangoon City was the chief port for all of Mangoon as well as for goods from across the mountains in EastHolme. At any time there might be a dozen small sailing ships in the commercial harbor. An adjacent naval harbor held about twenty 'caterpillars', the Mangoon navy's swift rowing galleys.

"I've seen many a sylph in the Islands," the man persisted after a swig of ale. "But I had no idea they could interbreed with humans. But you, you now look like a half-human. How is this possible? And, by the way, my name is Othar."

Tachi was not offended. He was accustomed to this. "Well, Othar, things are not always what they seem in this world, and we are what we are, what Mathris of the thousand eyes and ten thousand ears made us."

Othar laughed and half turned on the bench. "By his Light, you speak truth, the truth of the cups," he indicated the ale before himself and Tachi. "And what may I call you, my newfound philosophical friend? I have given my name."

"I am Tachi." He resisted the urge, as always, to use his full name of Tachi Green Fujiwara. In Mangoon, as in other human lands, most people had but one name, the burghers and merchants usually had two, only wealthy and privileged nobles had three and only the ruling eparch had four. It was a criminal offense to assume any extra names.

Othar frowned. "I have heard the name ... Tachi," he said. "But I know not whence. Are you famous for something? Are you somebody?"

Tachi smiled. 'Tachi', in his father's Japanese, was a type of sword, but also a not-uncommon boy's name. "No. I am but a humble servant to my mistress," he said. No one ever admitted to being a Shadow Guild member or even trainee. And the Gray Guild was looked upon with both fear and awe too. Tachi wore no Gray Guild cloak this day; he was dressed as every other peasant in Mangoon City, in common brown cloth pants and tunic.

"Humm." Othar drank down the last of his ale in a large swallow. "I'll be on my way. Duty and all that." He stood, commenting as if in afterthought, "I once heard of a Gray

Guild deru with a half-sylph taidar to protect her. Would you be that suicidal fool, friend?"

Tachi swiveled on the bench at the whisper of Othar's withdrawn dagger clearing its sheath. He knocked the blade aside with the back of his right hand, incurring a shallow gash in the process, and punched Othar in the abdomen with his left fist. Othar, who had been trying for a back-of-the-neck stab, was knocked several yards away but bounced up quickly, dagger in hand, and came back. But by now Tachi was on his feet, his xythos dagger in hand. The sight of that long, deadly dull-gray blade made Othar stop and lick his lips.

"You're him," Othar said.

Tachi made a swift sign with his left hand. Othar didn't react, which told Tachi he was not a Shadow Guild member from Mangoon or any other city. He might have worried if Othar had known the sign but Othar was not a Shadow assassin, only an amateur.

"You can put down the blade and come with me," Tachi said quietly. "Tell me who hired you to do this." Behind him he heard the other drinkers scrambling to their feet to get out of the way or to watch the show, as their inclinations led them. Dimly his ears registered a "Hey there, enough of that" from the innkeeper.

Othar, his eyes wide in fear, threw his dagger at Tachi's head, spun and ran through the door into the open dock area beyond. He had planned on a swift backstab, not a fight with a bigger man wielding a droichen-made xythos blade. Tachi ducked Othar's dagger — it actually struck a sailor standing a few yards behind him, fortunately by then having turned to hit pommel-first — and threw his own dagger. The eighteen inches of impossibly hard and sharp xythos caught Othar as he passed through the doorway, buried itself to the hilt between Othar's shoulder blades, severed his spine, passed through his heart and breastbone and six inches of it protruded from Othar's chest. The man was dead before he hit the pavement.

Tachi walked outside, stood with one foot on Othar's back, and yanked the blade out with his non-bloody hand. He carefully wiped his dagger clean on Othar's pant leg and sheathed the blade. When he straightened he realized that the lading yard was silent, everyone, including one man with a heavy sack over his shoulder, had stopped what they were doing and were staring at him. When he turned, the doorway of the Spouting Serpent was filled with curious patrons and more looked out from the windows.

An hour later Tachi was still explaining things to the city guard, several men-at-arms with short spears and a lieutenant with a katana. The lieutenant had already talked to witnesses and was inclined to let Tachi go as being the victim here of an intended mugging and not a common thug.

"Are you all right?" the lieutenant asked. "I mean in your head. You seem unhappy. I would be very happy indeed were I still alive and this trash," he nudged the body between them with the toe of his left boot, "would not see tomorrow's sunrise. I enjoy sunrises."

"I like sunrises too," Tachi said. "Especially ones I was not certain I would live to see. But this was a human, with a life story. He probably has friends someplace, a family perhaps. Killing him ... there was something about it that I didn't like."

"Well, certainly. One hates to take a life. When you kill a man you take away all he has been and all he ever will be. I understand."

"No," Tachi said. "That's all true but it wasn't that."

"Well then, the blood, the mess. The fear and the let-down after? I understand ... "

Tachi shook his head again. "No. Not that either."

"Well, then. What?"

"I ... enjoyed ... it."

The lieutenant gazed at Tachi a long moment. Then he nodded. "You, my friend, have crossed a threshold. This sometimes comes to those who live by the blade. You will never be able to go back. And you are that much less human now. I pity you."

"Why are you pitying this man?" a soft, accented voice asked. Tachi and the lieutenant both turned to see that Sorcet had arrived, her tall, slender yet muscular frame, silver eyes and jet black hair — humans in Islandia all had brown hair and brown eyes — attracting some attention as always. She wore a Gray Guild cloak over her xythos dark-gray scale mail armor. It was armor worth a man's lifetime wages, though no amount of money could buy it from the droichen blacksmiths. The lieutenant bowed respectfully at the sight of a Gray deru, and eyed the sheathed sword on her back nervously. No swordsmith on the world of Tessene, droichen or other, had made that sword.

"Mistress Sorcet," he said. "What concerns the Gray Guild here? A common fight and killing."

"This one," Sorcet indicated Tachi, "is taidar to me. Word of a ... dispute ... down at the docks reached my ears and I sought to rescue him from his own foolishness. With your leave, of course." She turned her flat ball-bearing eyes to the lieutenant, who did well not to have his knees buckle. When a Gray Guild deru asked a favor, only the suicidal refused.

"Oh. Certainly. Certainly. I think we know all there is to know here," the officer said. "Your man only defended himself. This offal," he nudged the body with his boot, "tried to kill him. I'm amazed Tachi still lives. He is taidar to you? No wonder he killed this trash so swiftly."

"He has quick reflexes," Sorcet said dryly. "Pity his many talents do not extend to merely wounding and capturing an assassin. Much information died with this man and you know, do you not, how the Gray Guild loves to collect information."

"I tried, actually," Tachi said. "Asked him to put down the dagger and talk to me. Instead he threw it at me and then tried to flee. That was a bad career move for him."

"He was then unarmed? You could have run him down easily. Then perhaps we could have learned more about these annoying assassination attempts and who is behind them."

"You're right. I got excited and didn't think things through. And, believe me, I'm as annoyed as you about people always trying to kill me. In fact, it is barely possibly that I'm more annoyed than you are."

Sorcet grinned. Normally Tachi loved to see her grin; it was even better than her smile, which was incandescent and extremely rare. But at the moment he was angry, angry at himself for being stupid, and angry at her for pointing it out.

"There is nothing quite so bad," he said, "as being wrong, except being wrong and having people comment on it."

"Well, nothing we can do now," Sorcet said. She turned to the lieutenant. "Did the man have anything in his purse?"

"Nothing useful, mistress. A few coins was all, not even many of those. If someone paid him to attack Tachi, he either spent it already or stored it someplace or with

someone."

"I see. Are you done with my taidar now?"

"Yes, mistress. I'll release Tachi to your care. If I learn anything, anything at all, about this worthless dung, I'll see that you are informed."

"He was not worthless dung," Tachi observed. "He was a human. His name was Othar. He was a sailor on the Sea Pearl."

"Probably not," said the lieutenant. "On either count."

Chapter 2

As the guard lieutenant had guessed, the assassin, Othar, if that was ever his true name, was no crewman from the Sea Pearl. Tachi visited the ship the next day and spoke to Haakon Wanderer, the master.

"Never heard of him before," Haakon said as he supervised some dockmen loading stores aboard his ship. The Sea Pearl was tied up at the farthest of the half-dozen docks, away from the central bustle of the lading yard and warehouses and at the end adjacent to the mole that encircled the naval harbor. She was a narrow, fast ship but not one that would carry a fat, full cargo. Haakon Wanderer traded beam for speed and specialized in high-priced and urgent goods. He also sometimes ventured into seas where slow and bloated merchantmen would be easy prey for pirates.

"I never saw him before," Haakon continued. "And I know most of the sailors around the docks in all the major cities, both in Islandia and across the Great Sea. I walked over to the Spouting Serpent yesterday afternoon, the watch lieutenant asked me to look at the body. The body had nothing on it to identify him."

Tachi nodded. On Tessene, nobody carried passports or drivers' licenses or identity cards. For most people, the poor, no one so much as recorded their births or parentage. Such information was pointless when you were born into poverty and doomed by an implacable class system to remain always in your station. You would never own anything to pass on as an estate that would be worth notice to anyone of higher rank. Only the rare one-name ever, literally, made a name for himself through mercantile or other efforts, to be promoted by the eparch to two-name status. Haakon Wanderer himself was one such. He had worked his way up from deckhand to ship master and, likely, had done favors for some three-names along the way to get their endorsements. Tachi wondered briefly if he would ever be allowed to use his last name again. He put aside the thought; anything he might do to earn it would probably kill him.

"You there," Haakon bellowed at a dockman. "More care with that crate. Drop it and you will owe me twenty years of your life and you'll feel forty years older when I feed what's left of you to the sharks." The dockman took a firmer grip and scurried below. Haakon was a big man, nearly Tachi's height but much wider, not an ounce of fat on him and shoulders and arms that could hoist a yardarm alone if need be. His bearded face and bare chest were tanned to the color of the deck he trod. Tachi, who had never before met a man who spent his life handling oars and ropes, had also never seen a man with such callused palms.

"You tell Sorcet that if I learn anything more I'll get the news to her. And she is welcome aboard Sea Pearl any time she wishes to voyage afar again."

"Well, it isn't her these assassins keep trying to kill," Tachi said. "They seem to have it in for me. I don't know why."

"Eh? So. Not content with serving as taidar to a Gray deru, you acquire sworn enemies of your own? You do crave excitement." Haakon slapped Tachi on the back, staggering him, and laughed. "Good boy! Your flame will burn bright and short! Hah!"

"But what if I don't want my life to be short," Tachi said.

"Nonsense. Only cowards want to live old and feeble. We eaters of life want to go out in glory, in style, in meaning. Only problem is," Haakon looked thoughtful for a

moment, "knowing when is the right time."

"Yeah," Tachi said. "Hate to die for only a little glory when a big one is just around the corner. What a waste."

"Exactly! I knew you understood."

"But getting knifed in the back by some unknown assassin does not seem to be all that useful or glorious."

"Um? No, I suppose not. If I were you, I'd pick a better exit. I'm sure you can arrange that, boyo, I have every confidence in you. Hah! Now you get back to Sorcet and give her my love."

Tachi stared. "Your love? Were you two lovers once? I didn't think she loved anything but that sword she carries."

"Oh yes," Haakon continued, "Sorcet and I, we go back. I took her off, away from her captivity, long ago." Haakon's booming laughter caused several dockmen to stop and stare, "Never been back to that particular island. I don't think they have forgotten me. I know they have not forgotten her. By Mathris' sky-flung Torch, they were after her! For certain."

"She once said something about being prisoner on some island."

"Eh? Is that so? Well, I speak out of turn. Not for me to be telling Sorcet's history. Let's leave it that there are people beneath this sky who wake up every day displeased that she yet lives. You aren't the only one with enemies. Why do you think she hired you anyway?"

"Hired? I'm not sure I was hired. I was sort of conned into it."

"You were sort of befuddled by her beauty, is what it was. Any man would be. I was myself. It damn certain isn't her personality. And have you lain with her? Seen her naked? Sweet Mathris' ten thousand eyes!"

"No, of course not," Tachi said. "Well not the lain part anyway. And I would prefer that you not talk about her that way."

Haakon's booming laughter stopped the line of dockmen momentarily. "A gentleman! We have a gentleman lubber among us!" he dropped his voice and clapped a hand on Tachi's shoulder. "Sorry lad, didn't mean to offend you. Or her."

CHAPTER 3

Back at the Gray Guild compound the gate guards had a message for Tachi to report to the guildmaster's office. This was so rare an invitation that Tachi scurried to his small sleeping cell and changed into his one best outfit and Gray Guild cloak. When he arrived he had to sit on a bench and wait; guildmasters didn't wait on lowly members, the lowly members waited the pleasure of the guildmasters. A starched and rigid male secretary kept the anteroom and opened the door to the inner office only when Sorcet herself appeared. Sorcet wore her usual xythos fine scale armor. Tachi stood and followed her, one step to the rear and one to her left as was his formal place.

Pons Valor Magnus, the Gray Guild guildmaster, sat crosslegged on a cushion on his raised dais and behind a low mirrwood desk. The desk was surprisingly clear of scrolls and tomes for one in charge of a library and hospital. He was a thin man, old but not so old as to be feeble, and his white hair was illumed like a halo by the noonday light streaming in through large glass windows behind him. He wore a mournful look and a large hooked nose, and his face was permanently creased by a frown. Tachi, in the few times he had crossed paths with 'The Magnus' had never seen him looking happy. There were several elaborate guest cushions before the dais and Sorcet sank onto one like a black snake coiling. Tachi knelt behind her.

"Sorcet," the guildmaster opened, "the Council has met and has a need that you may be able to satisfy. Have you caught up with your office work here? If not, I can assign someone else to the task to free you for travel."

"Exalted master, I am bored nearly to tears," Sorcet said. "If you need a ditch dug in some distant land, I shall have shovel in hand in a moment."

Magnus didn't smile. He seemed to carefully consider the offer. "Well, we certainly are good at digging. But what I had in mind was your stopping a war. Think you can put a shovel to that?"

Sorcet thought a long moment. Tachi thought the moment deserved it. "I am probably better at starting wars than ending them," Sorcet said. "Tell me more."

"Certainly. I will have you supplied with some scrolls for background, those will be in your office shortly. Read those, memorize what you must, but leave them with the library. But, briefly, Gron Gaius Greybeard Barakis, the eparch of Barakis, is thirsty and wishes to slake his bloodlust by conquering Mangoon and its territory. We suspect he is making a compact with EastHolme, across the mountains to our east. It's doubtful that the Mangoon army can stand against attacks from both south and east."

"Of what interest is that to the Gray Guild?" Sorcet asked. "We usually stay well out of politics, choosing to work in each city with whomever is in power."

"Ah, yes. True. But Greybeard Barakis is a madman. He would be a cruel and capricious ruler in any case but he has also fallen under the sway of some religious zealots, founded his own cult and imposed horrible and intolerant laws upon all who suffer beneath his hand. But what offends the Gray Guild the most is that he has started to interfere with our mission of collecting, copying and distributing knowledge. He presses upon our kaiphon healers in the small hospital they have there. He's trying to subordinate the Gray Guild in Barakis City."

"Well, we cannot allow that," Sorcet said. Tachi glanced at her, wondering if she was

being sarcastic.

"We cannot allow that," the guildmaster said with a nod. "But also, as you know, one of the 'portals' you seek to close is in Barakis City too, the one controlled by the Emeraldstone. We, and you, want all those portals closed, of course. But this one may be the most urgent because Greybeard Barakis is believed to be trying to use it for some mad religious scheme.

"So perhaps you can do double-duty there. Find a way to make Greybeard Barakis leave the Gray Guild alone. Find a way to prevent the coming war. Find out Greybeard Barakis' intentions vis-à-vis the Emeraldstone Portal. Close that portal for all time. If you can do all that, so much the better. But my first concern is stopping the war."

"Respectfully, guildmaster, the portal is by far the greater danger in the long term," Sorcet said. "For all the slaughter a war entails, when it is over things remain much the same. But, at any time, something could come through one of those portals that would change the world of Tessene as we know it now, perhaps even destroy us all. And as for the war, one would think that our own eparch is hard at work on the problem with an overreaching Greybeard Barakis."

"I'm afraid that Paulus Pliny Sertortius Mangoon is, himself, part of the problem," Magnus said. "The Mangoon eparch has been restricting trade caravans from EastHolme. Those come through the pass and fort at Seven Watch, into Mangoon lands and on to Mangoon City. Some are shipped onward by boat to the West. But now Sertortius is demanding high tariffs that remove the profit from the trade. EastHolme merchants still come because the goods they acquire from the human farmers to their south and from the desert sylphen to their north accumulate in EastHolme warehouses and because Mangoon goods brought back incur no tariff and sell well."

"So what is the problem there?" asked Sorcet. "Merchants always complain about taxes. And eparchs tax them because they deal in gold. Taxing farmers means waiting all year to get a wagon-load of wheat. What is all that to us? "

"The problem there is that merchants want profit both ways for a caravan. So-called 'dead-heading' one way only annoys them. And annoyed merchants soon get the attention of a city eparch.

"But that is not the immediate problem. The immediate problem is to find a way to put an end to the threat from Barakis. Initially, at least, we will keep a low profile, as always. I want you to travel to Barakis and assess the military situation for yourself. Look around. Find a chink in the armor. Locate the Emeraldstone Portal too; it's believed to be in the palace itself. I have heard that Greybeard Barakis has tried to harness its power or to steal the Emeraldstone from its place. I doubt that he can do either but my doubt is not my certainty. Go thence, report back." His sorrowful face turned to Tachi. "Perhaps your taidar, here — Tachi is it not? — can use his otherworldly experience to our advantage too, see something we do not."

Tachi had not realized that the guildmaster knew even that much about him. "I follow my deru, of course," he said. "But I am still a few weeks short of completing some ... er ... training I am currently assigned." Tachi would not mention the Shadow Guild even to the Gray Guild guildmaster, even though The Magnus had himself arranged the training. Any mention of the Shadows was a death offense.

"I am pleased that you are so devoted to our ... thing," a soft voice, like a fingernail drawn over sandpaper and behind Tachi, said. Tachi spun, his dagger out in an instant. At

first he saw nothing but the wall and several chairs. Then a hand waved, down low, and he made out Recluse, the Shadow guildmaster, virtually invisible in his shadowcloak, sitting cross-legged in a dark corner. "Hold, my fierce friend," Recluse said with a laugh. "It's bad luck to kill one such as me."

"By Mathris' eyes! I didn't see you there. Apologies." Tachi hastily resheathed the xythos dagger.

"Ah. Well, Sorcet sensed me, did you not?" Sorcet turned her flat silver eyes to gaze back at Recluse and nodded. She would have known he was there even with those eyes closed. "And I have been speaking to The Magnus here about the problem and even about you, Tachi. You are released from my service. We have taught you most of what you need to know and a lot more than we normally let anyone outside our ... circle ... know."

Recluse stood, removed his shadowcloak, and handed it across to Tachi. "Here. A parting gift. You are not so well-trained as was Caitlin. She was truly gifted in the Dark Ways. But you are welcome at any of our ... places ... any time you need us." Even Recluse, in this company, would not mention the name of his guild. "And I have sent word to Barakis — the city not the man — to the ... associates ... I have there, to aid you as needed."

Tachi stepped forward to take the shadowcloak. He turned it to look at a date, stamped in tiny numbers on the seam at the back of the neck, and saw that this one was new, the common brown side to be worn outward at most times, the inner side of ever-changing colors that would match any background, to be worn when one wished to pass unseen. It was a truly precious garment and one worn only by the Shadows. The background-matching threads would wear out on their own in about a year and render the cloak quite ordinary; Shadows exchanged them regularly for fresh ones and any cloak stolen from a dead Shadow — and that was the only way someone not in the guild could get one — would eventually become useless.

"I thank you, Recluse, for all that you have taught and for this gift," Tachi said formally. "I miss Caitlin and I wish she could go with us on this mission."

"She would not have been able to do so in any event," Sorcet said. "She was pregnant and by now would have been near her time."

"She is near her time," Tachi insisted. "Back on Earth now."

"As you say," Sorcet said tersely. "You will have to be both my ranger, for which you are long-trained, and my intelligence-gatherer too." She darted a glance at Recluse. "It will suffice. I will be acquiring another taidar too."

Tachi looked at her, astonished. Some senior derudae had a 'hand' of taidar, usually four plus the deru, for maximum personal protection. Sorcet was notorious for traveling with one only. "Mistress, how have I failed you," he cried.

Sorcet smiled. "You have not, Tachi. Have no fear as to your value to me." Her voice sharpened. "But let us speak of this later."

"If you two are quite done," The Magnus said. "Recluse and I have other matters to discuss which have no bearing on your mission. Sorcet, be ready to leave at dawn."

She stood, effortlessly, a black snake uncoiling. "As you order, guildmaster." Sorcet strode from the room with Tachi in pursuit, his new shadowcloak in his arms. He saluted Recluse as he passed and the Shadow guildmaster formally saluted back. "Go with Mathris, he of the ten thousand eyes and thousand ears, my friend," Recluse said in that sandpaper-whisper voice. "May you see the Torch rise many more days to come."

Recluse, Tachi thought as he hurried after the long-striding Sorcet, sounded more hopeful than certain.

CHAPTER 4

Back in Sorcet's small office, Tachi vented. "I stayed by you when my own wife, pregnant with our child, went through that Firestone Portal," he said. "I have never, not once, given you reason to doubt my loyalty. Now you want to replace me?"

Sorcet walked around her desk and removed her back-slung sword. She stood the sword against the wall and sat on a cushion. She gazed at Tachi. "I thought that thee preferred not to be a taidar, to live or die at my command," she said mildly, the lisp more pronounced, as it was when she spoke most softly.

Tachi waved that aside. "That never bothered you before. You know that I believe in you, Boss, and in the mission to close the portals. I have stayed by you, as I said."

"Actually, as I recall, you did not go with Caitlin through the Firestone Portal out of cowardice. You said that you preferred this life, bad as it was, to almost certain death."

"I was confused at the time. That scared the piss out of me. I was not thinking straight."

"Oh, I believe that you were. You tend to think straight even in times of stress. I have come to rely upon that. You are quite a remarkable man, I got my money's worth in taking you on as my taidar."

"Especially as you don't pay me. I get expenses and a salary from the guild."

Sorcet grinned. "Well, I see to it that you are taken care of. As you know, half your salary is banked against the day you no longer serve but yet still live, should such a day ever come. As for your being a coward, well, so am I. Our relationship works because I am, by a slight margin, more frightened than you are."

"This doesn't sound as though you are really firing me."

"Not at all. Indeed, I plan to promote you. I want for you to be closer still to me. We will be together, in intimate ways, much more than in the past. I need someone by my side instantly when danger looms, not a room or a run away."

"I have heard that about derudae and taidar," Tachi said. "And I think everyone already assumes that you and I sleep together. But I'm married."

"Well, you are married in theory at any rate. There's no evidence that Caitlin yet lives. And I do not care what rumors may say. But for now, you will be the primary taidar in my small group of two. I may someday add a third. But if I fall, you are to take command and continue the mission to close all the portals. I know that you will do that no matter how terrified you may be at some times."

"Humpf. So who is this other you are bringing on? Another Gray Ranger? I have not seen any around here not already assigned to other derudae or kaiphonae."

"I had intended to recruit Gryun, the Iron Keep watch commander. But the stingers killed him. I want the droich named Dag, of the GraniteAxe Clan. You know him well. But he is not yet ready for that. Your new assistant will be Leafe Willowsdotter."

Tachi stared a long moment. There was a single visitor's cushion on his side of the desk and he pulled it over and sat, something he almost never did in Sorcet's presence. "How did you manage that?"

"It was not hard. Leafe, as you know, as you are her adopted brother, has actually traveled through both human and droichen lands, and speaks both of those languages in addition to her native sylphen. She has always been adventurous and now that she has

seen what I do she wishes to be a part of it."

"Did you explain to Leafe, what being a taidar meant? Sylphen have long natural lives, so dying early might mean more to them. Leafe is about one hundred years old, though just a teenager by their standards."

"Well, that was for her to decide for herself. I did explain the ... requirements ... of the job."

"Aha. Sure. But why a sylph? We're going to look like a bloody circus walking around town. Especially if Leafe brings along her pet fert."

"We will not attract all that much notice in larger cities. There are other sylphen and even occasional droichen visiting or living in Mangoon, for example. Sylphen leaf-boats stop by the port sometimes. Not many, I concede. She did bring the fert and I do admit that her cat-thing might draw a few stares."

"She brought it? You mean she is here? In Mangoon?"

Sorcet nodded and twisted slightly to flick a bit of dust from a boot. "She has been here some months, at the Warrior Guild, receiving some cross-training. She is not quite finished but I've sent word to send her to me this night."

"And why didn't you tell me that one of the two best friends I have in this world was here within walking distance? I could have gone over to visit."

"Who is the other best friend?" Sorcet asked.

"Dag," Tachi said. "He pulled me out of captivity in that stinger hive and then he and Drenhor took care of me in the GraniteAxe Deeptime. I owe him my life."

"He is competent, I grant him that," Sorcet said. "Am I not one of your 'best friends' too?"

"No. You're my boss."

"Well, I take what I can get. But back to Leafe, truth to tell, I was not certain that she would work out. But reports have been good. It did not occur to me that you would want to visit her and I fail to see what would have been the point of that."

Tachi pointed at Sorcet. "Boss, you and I need to work on our communication skills."

Chapter 5

That evening Sorcet was still in her office, going over scrolls she needed to read before leaving. She wore white tunic and trousers with the Gray Guild stripe on the tunic. Tachi, although he was allowed "the white" too, wore the plain brown clothing worn by all one-name peasants. He had collected their armor and weapons and was carefully going over each piece, looking for any rust or dent or broken ring. He had worked with the GraniteAxe droichen in their smithy while living among them and had a few tools useful for at least some minor repairs. Any major damage to Sorcet's xythos scale mail would have to be sent back to a Drouchen smithy for work but it was hard to imagine anything damaging such armor. He had found nothing to complain about, but it was better than standing there watching Sorcet read.

The door opened and Leafe Willowsdottor stepped in carrying wrapped packages. Tachi had not seen Leafe in half a year, since the battle in the stinger hive next to the droichen GraniteAxe deephome.

He leapt up to hug her. Leafe, child of Willow Slerenesdottor and Oakleafe Elisson, had taught Tachi his sylphen woodcraft. Her parents had taken in Tachi and Caitlin and stood for them when they were adopted into the Oak Band through the bloodtree ceremony. Leafe was the closest thing to a sister Tachi had on Tessene, or any other world.

Sorcet glanced up. "You will knock another time," she said to Leafe. "And await the order to enter. I do not like people walking in on me."

"But you did expect her," Tachi protested.

Sorcet shifted her glare to him. "And you are my chief taidar now. It should be you disciplining my staff, not me." She stared at Leafe, who looked down at her feet and apologized, and at Tachi, who stared right back and said nothing. He was accustomed to those ball-bearing eyeballs by now.

Sorcet nodded to herself and went on reading, apparently as interested in Leafe's arrival as if some Gray Guild acolyte had dropped by with a supply of fresh candles. Tachi stood to give the one visitor cushion to Leafe and she knelt and laid her packages beside her and next to the two piles of armor Tachi had been working on. Tachi and Leafe chattered on, catching up on what each had seen and done since their last battle together. Leafe, typically sylphen, was six feet tall and rail-thin, even thinner than the slender but more muscular Sorcet. Leafe's brown hair was cut to shoulder-level for forest-travel, and her short pointed ears swiveled to catch the slightest sound. She wore the sylphen leather armor that was dyed brown and green but her own skin could change, chameleon-like, to those colors too, at will. Her vertically-slitted green eyes glittered slightly in the reflected light from the candles on Sorcet's desk. All sylphen had a reflective layer behind their retinas that permitted them to see better in the dark.

"Where is your fert?" Tachi asked Leafe. "What was his name?"

"Spots. He's waiting outside the office door. Part of his training is to wait in place for me to return or call him."

"Well, call him."

Leafe did so and a hundred-pound catlike fert trotted into the room. Yellow reflective eyes took in the room and settled on Leafe as the fert sat before her. Spots had

a light brown coat with black spots, four-toed feet with claws, and, jutting below the jawline, three-inch canine teeth. Tachi knew, from his days hunting in the sylphen forests, that ferts could climb trees and pounce from above.

Tachi backed up with an exclamation. "He's grown," he said when he was sure Spots was not going to eat his head at once. Leafe herself probably weighed about one hundred pounds and she was Tachi's and Sorcet's height. Spots, standing on his hind legs, was as tall and as heavy as his sylph mistress.

"Spots." Leafe pointed at Tachi. "Friend." The cat looked at Leafe's extended finger and then looked at where it was pointing, something Tachi had never seen a cat back home do. Spots came to Tachi and gingerly sniffed at a hand, the broad nose a millimeter from Tachi's skin. Some sensory hairs on the nose actually tickled a bit but Tachi was afraid to snatch his hand away. "Friend," Leafe said again, pointing at Sorcet. Sorcet didn't look up from the scroll she was reading when the fert went around her desk, but she reached out a hand and stroked his broad head which was on a level with hers. Spots seemed to nod after a moment and came back to sit beside Leafe.

When she finished the scroll Sorcet carefully rolled it up and tied the linen cord around it. Her ball-bearing eyeballs focused upon the two taidar before her, the old and the new.

"Welcome, Leafe. I have heard good things from the Warrior Guild about your training." Sorcet leaned forward and looked at the floor in front of her desk. "What are the packages?"

Leafe straightened on her own cushion. "Gifts from the GraniteAxe Clan. A courier brought these down from their mountains to the Oak Band gladehome and asked us to deliver them on to you. I've had them with me while in training, waiting for the chance to see you both together.

"Great Mother Gael of the GraniteAxe deephome sent this to Tachi," she said, unwrapping the long package. "It is her thanks, the thanks of the GraniteAxe Clan, to him for helping rid them of those stingers. She took away the last wrapping and presented an astonished Tachi with a long droichen two-hand sword in an enameled black scabbard. Tachi, who had worked for a brief time with the GraniteAxe blacksmiths, knew that good droichen steel swords, like the Japanese katana on Earth, had a natural curve to them. This sword was straight and very thin.

Tachi drew the blade and sucked in his breath. It was a xythos blade, dark gray and similar to his dagger but three feet long and sharper than the sharpest razor on both sides. The sharp edges, Tachi saw, ended a foot before the crossguard, so that the user could grip the blade with one hand, the sword's grip with the other hand, and forcefully swing the blade horizontally if need be. Xythos was believed to be part of the inner core of the planet, more dense than iron and the reason that Tessene, though smaller than Earth, had only slightly weaker gravity. Sorcet thought it was also one reason why derudae like her and the equally deadly kaiphonae could manipulate physical matter. She had once explained it to him but he didn't know whether to believe her theory or not.

What he did know was that a full-length xythos sword, made of the metal found only in the deepest droichen ore-workings and in tiny veins within "pipes" of volcanic lava frozen in place from long-ago eruptions, was unimaginably rare. Xythos daggers like Sorcet and he had were not uncommon among the droichen, though the mountain-dwelling GraniteAxe Clan didn't hand those out to just anyone or sell them for any price.

But a sword took as much xythos to make as several daggers.

Tachi had seen several xythos swords, and several of the short-handled axes the droichen preferred in their caves, in the GraniteAxe deephome. He recalled seeing a sword on display in the smithy, and a xythos-bladed axe used by Doosat GraniteAxe, the clan's now-dead guard commander. Even that one was not strictly personal; it was handed down from comander to commander as a badge of office.

"Mathris' eyes!" Tachi said. He wielded it one-handed as he could do. The grip was wrapped in some black pebbly snakeskin hide, good for holding with a bloody hand. The sword was completely unadorned, the only marking a GraniteAxe Clan stamp on the blade at the guard and, next to that, the mark of the droichen blacksmith. He held it in both hands and hefted the sword and swung it over his head. It fitted his hands like it had been born there. He had long fingers and the droichen smith must have taken that into account, for the grip was thicker than the norm. "This must have cost a fortune. Is this a legacy blade or is it new?"

"Leafe grinned. "It's new. Dag told me so. Apparently, last you were in the Clan GraniteAxe deephome, the droichen blacksmiths were just starting to make a xythos sword for your city eparch, to thank him for sending troops to help exterminate the stingers. You told them he would be happier with more jewels in a more ceremonial sword. Well, he is happy now with a good steel blade loaded down with gems instead."

"You mean this one was originally intended for Paulus Pliny Sertortius Mangoon?"

"Is that his name? He has a lot of name. And, yes, you now have his original sword, or what was originally intended for him. The droichen smiths were already creating this one when they switched to make the ceremonial one for ... what were the names?"

"Paulus Pliny Sertortius Mangoon"

"Whatever. Since they had already started on the blade Great Mother Gael told them to keep working on it. Paulus-whatever will never know, and you will make better use of it. For my help, they gave me a xythos dagger." She drew an eighteen-inch blade almost identical to Tachi's to show him. Sorcet had one too. "And I also have this one-hand sword of good droichen steel. Because I also use the sylphen bow and so cannot have a shield, the Warrior guild taught me to fight with a sword and to dual-wield using the dagger too.

"Now," Leafe continued. "For Sorcet, Great Mother Gael was stumped. Sorcet already has better armor than almost anyone and a better sword than exists anywhere else on Islandia, maybe on the whole world. Droichen blacksmiths could not improve upon her equipment. So Great Mother Gael turned to her artisans." She took the round package from beside her foot, unwrapped it, and sat a one-foot-diameter bust on Sorcet's desk. It was a likeness of Sorcet herself, carved from some clear crystal.

"Oh my," Sorcet said, her steel eyes round as she smiled in delight. The crystal was very slightly pinkish. She turned the bust this way and that to see the candlelight reflect off of it and within it. "What is it made of?"

"I am told it is a form of quartz, deru. It is a hard enough material that sculpting it is a long process, mostly using small chipping — they have to be wary of the crystalline structure — and a lot of very fine sanding. I do not know exactly how they do it."

"I shall treasure it forever," Sorcet said. "I shall send a letter to Great Mother Gael thanking her. Tachi, I can add a note from you if you wish. I know you cannot write very well in the droichen tongue."

"And you can, Boss?" Sorcet never failed to surprise Tachi. He normally called her 'boss' only between the two of them, preferring the more formal "deru" or "mistress" or even "liege" in larger company. But Leafe was family too.

"I can. I work in a library, after all. My thanks to you, Leafe."

"You both are most welcome," Leafe said. "And Tachi, I have one more gift for you, one that was lighter to carry. And that is the news that Caitlin's bloodtree yet lives."

"It does? That's wonderful!" Each sylph was bonded at an early age to a semi-sentient tree in their sacred groves. So long as the sylph lived, so did the tree. When the sylph died, the tree died too, overnight. The sylphen band would then cut down the tree and, if possible, use it to cremate the dead sylph. It was almost the only time the sylphen, who never touched living wood, used either axe or fire. The Oak Band sylphen had taken both Tachi and Caitlin to one of the sacred groves and there bonded them to trees of their own. It was a form of adoption into the band.

"Has someone watered Caitlin's tree? My tree?" Tachi asked. He glanced down at his left hand to see there the green tendril dimly visible under the skin of his palm, inserted there by his own tree during the bonding ceremony. Leafe would have just such a mark too, as did Sorcet. Once per year, on the day the moons all lined up, the sylphen 'watered' their bond-trees with their own blood. If a sylph was absent for some reason a friend or relative would perform the duty instead.

"Yes," Leafe said. "I did so, all three." She glanced at Sorcet. "They're all together, side by side in that one sacred grove. Now that I am here with you, my father or mother will take over that duty."

"If her tree still lives, then Caitlin must also," Tachi said. He realized that he had begun to give up on the likelihood of her having survived the trip through the Firestone Portal.

Sorcet spoke, always impatient of idle chatter or, perhaps, Tachi suspected, impatient of talk about the departed Caitlin. "Now, to business. I have more hours of reading to do here. Tachi will show you our sleeping rooms, Leafe. You do not need a bed but humor us for a night by resting in Tachi's room. Tachi, as prime taidar now, will be sleeping in with me."

"On the floor. In front of the door," Tachi explained to Leafe. Leafe looked amused.

"In the morning I want you two ready for travel," Sorcet went on. "Tachi knows what is needed and will look to your equipment. And lay in a supply of dried meat for Spots, here. Emergency rations. Our kitchens will have a supply. I would not want him eating something important because he got hungry."

CHAPTER 6

By now Tachi was accustomed to hard travel, but at least the first part of this trip would be easy. The two taidar met Sorcet in her office at dawn the next day, their weapons sharp and clean, backpacks loaded for travel. Tachi had his sylphen bow and a quiver full of arrows. He had his new xythos longsword now, and his droichen xythos dagger was the one that Caitlin had once carried. It was his last physical memento of her and of the child he now thought might have survived the return trip to Earth.

Most swords made by humans and droichen alike were of beaten iron. The forest-dwelling sylphen made no iron or steel weapons but did trade for them, mostly for daggers and skinning knives. They almost never cut down living trees and so had little use for axes, and, in the rare occasions they had to fight, they relied upon their superior bows and the daggers they had obtained from human or droichen smithies.

Leafe's sword, a gift from the droichen, was made using two grades of steel, in the manner of a Japanese katana and, like those, had a slight curve imparted by the unequal cooling of the inner and outer metals. A droichen steel sword could cut an iron sword in half, with a lucky strike and a lot of force, while incurring some nicks that had to be ground out later. Leafe carried no shield as those were useless in the forests and she was among the most-skilled sylphen with a bow.

Sorcet was ready for the road in her dark gray xythos armor, scale on the torso and chain on arms and leggings, and with a matching conical helm. Scale was much more effective against arrows and thrusts from sharp daggers but also less flexible than chain. At her left hip she wore her xythos dagger, Tachi's old one, and slung on her right shoulder, beside her pack, her long, straight, black sword made of ... what, Tachi did not know. It looked like obsidian or black glass but was unbreakable and actually fairly heavy for being only two inches wide at the most. If there was a way to sharpen it, Tachi had never seen Sorcet doing that and it never seemed to dull or get nicked. It could cut through an iron sword as if the latter were a blade of grass and had little more trouble with steel.

It did take a strong arm to wield such a sword but, Tachi well knew, Sorcet was, for all her raven-haired slender beauty, tough as beef jerky. She was one of the few women Tachi had ever known with serious biceps, deltoids and six-pack abs. After Tachi, she may have been the second-strongest person in Mangoon City at that moment — if you didn't count the dockmen down at the harbor.

Sorcet was standing, re-reading some last notes. She rolled up the scroll and bound it with its attached ribbon, added it to some others on her desk and ordered an acolyte standing beside her to return the lot to the library across the compound. Sorcet shouldered her own backpack — she always insisted on carrying her own load — beside the backslung sword and led the way, not to one of the city gates, but to the docks.

There, Haakon Wanderer waited, impatiently it appeared, aboard the Sea Pearl. The ship was loaded and ready to sail and Haakon wanted the morning land breeze to get him out of Mangoon City harbor. The ship was already "singled up" with extra bow and stern lines and the two spring lines released and hauled aboard. Dockmen stood by bow and stern ready to cast off the last lines.

"Get aboard, lass, hurry. The wind, she blows!" Haakon bellowed across the lading

yard as they came into sight. Sorcet did not walk any faster but even her normal stride was already more than most anyone but Tachi and now Leafe could keep up with. Spots trotted along a few feet to Leafe's rear and left. Dockworkers eyed the fert cautiously.

No sooner were they aboard than crewmen snatched aboard the gangplank and tied it across the opening in the rail. Others ran to pull in the last dock lines and climbed to unfurl the sails as the offshore wind gently pushed Sea Pearl away from Mangoon City. Tachi, marveling that anyone could call Sorcet a 'lass' asked, "Is there some cabin for us to store our packs and to sleep?"

Haakon was watching the sails and the harbor but he turned to look at Tachi and laughed. "A cabin, is it? Do we look like some fat, wealthy yacht, boyo? Mind your course there," Haakon shouted at the helmsman at the ship's wheel. "If we prang old Grimsby's side there, he will want blood money from me." As the ship turned, the sails overhead filled with a thump and Sea Pearl put her shoulder into a choppy sea. Spray flew as the ship seemed to come to life, shaking off the land and plunging gleefully into the waves. Tachi, who had never been on a sailing ship, was taken by surprise as the ship heeled over.

"What keeps us from tipping over?" he asked, grabbing at the lee rail, which was not so far above the rushing water as he would have preferred.

Haakon laughed. "All lubbers ask that the first time," he said. "It's only my special magic that keeps us upright. Well, that and a few tons of rocks stowed down below the cargo."

"Rocks?" Tachi muttered. "We're headed out into the ocean in a ship full of rocks? That sounds suicidal."

"Jain," Haakon shouted at his bosun, who was supervising the helmsman. Jain was a beefy woman nearly the match for Haakon but sporting a livid scar from left ear to chin, "Once we're clear of the harbor, set us a course south by southwest."

"South by southwest, aye."

"I think we'll hold that for a time yet. When the sea breeze fills in we'll probably need to tack."

"Aye. Likely." Jain, Tachi was to learn, saved her words for stimulating the crew, which she did using curses and entire sexual concepts Tachi had never heard before and some of which sounded quite impossible unless one were double-jointed.

Haakon turned back to Tachi, "I do have a spare cabin for wealthy paying passengers. You know, persons of quality, genteel three-names who know and expect the finest accommodations. In short, not like anyone now on this ship. The Gray Guild paid me for three transports, not for mussing up the futons in my spare cabin. Transports sleep on deck. And they said nothing about a damn fert which will likely piss on my boot! No, boyo, store your equipment in my cabin. I'll be generous only because I need you out from underfoot and you may sleep in the fo'c'sl with the men. This one," He hooked a thumb at Leafe, "being a sylph, doesn't need sleep at all. She can stand in a corner someplace. Sorcet can sleep with me. Or not, as she pleases."

Sorcet looked amused. "She pleases not. Have you even bathed, Haakon, since last I saw you? I give no favors to just any unwashed heathen waterman I run upon in my travels. Tachi and I will take the spare cabin and Leafe and the fert will join us. We will be well out of your way there. I shall give you a chit for the difference in silver. The Gray Guild will gladly pay to protect my virtue from a common vulgar such as thee."

"A vulgvirtue ... HAH!" Haakon roared. He turned back to his crew, "Arr, you there, you cleft-hoof wonder, tighten that halyard, you know the work! Don't shame me in front of these quality people!"

Haakon strode over to the helm and watched the compass in the binnacle for a moment, checked the wind once more and looked to Jain. "She holds. Good." Jain merely nodded. Haakon walked back to Sorcet, Leafe and Tachi. Like Haakon, Jain and the crew, Sorcet stood on the rolling deck, her legs automatically adjusting to the ship's heel. Tachi was still at the hanging-on-to-everything stage. He was also not so sure about his stomach and beginning to regret having eaten a large breakfast. Leafe, he noticed, was, if anything, worse off. It was hard to tell, but her skin seemed more green than usual.

"Lass, I washed just last week," Haakon said to Sorcet. "This morning I combed my beard especially well, in anticipation of being slapped by you."

"Not to worry, my old friend," Sorcet said. "I would never slap you at the beginning of a voyage, only at the end, when you can get medical attention ashore for a broken jaw."

Haakon turned back to Tachi and grinned. "She hasn't changed a bit, your mistress," he said.

Chapter 7

Tachi and Leafé found a corner of the deck where sailors didn't step on them while running to carry out Jain's orders, sat down so they didn't have to hold onto something all the time, and tried to enjoy the ride. When Haakon saw Tachi turning green and Leafé turning greener the big man had advice.

"Look at yon horizon, boyo, and you too, lass," Haakon said. "Stay on deck in the wind, don't go below. Jain, fetch these young people here two buckets of water and holystones. Put them to work. A lubber with work to do feels less seasick."

It did seem to help a little. A holystone, Tachi learned, was a flat, heavy, smooth brick one pushed back and forth on the deck to clean it. Tachi and Leafé spent an hour or so on their knees — why they were called holystones — alternately shoving the stones around and dipping rags into the buckets for more water to splash on the deck ahead of the stones. At one point her stomach got the better of her and Leafé suddenly realized the second reason Jain had given her a bucket.

"Take that to the lee side, you scurvy phergo penis," Jain said, passing by and seeing Leafé vomit into the bucket. Spots, who had been sitting beside Leafé, sniffed at the bucket and his nose wrinkled in disapproval as he looked up at Jain.

"Don't be getting that on my ship's deck or side," Jain said, rubbing Spots' ears and frowning down at Leafé. "Here's a line." She bent to swiftly tie some complicated knot around the bucket handle. "After you dump the bucket, lower it down with the line. Hang on good, it will try to leave the ship when it hits the water, bring up a fresh load of water and get your bony arse back into it! And if you take it into your head to chum for sharks any more, use the bucket or get your arse over the rail, the lee rail, before I have to use my knout on you." She waved a short length of rope, made into a complicated knot with a significant lump on one end and a wrist-loop at the other.

"What's a lee rail?" Tachi asked, looking up from his holystone.

"Mathris of the ten thousand eyes, take note," Jain cried to the sky above, "that I am not taking my knout to this lubber's ridiculously tiny penis. Haakon Wanderer will punish me, doubtless, for my kindness and generosity."

"Are you this ... colorful ... with all the crew?" Tachi asked, sitting cross-legged on the deck with his own bucket between his thighs. "Or are you just making a special effort for the genteel paying guests?"

Jain walked away, not answering, slapping her knout against her thigh, but Tachi thought he saw her smile for just an instant. And, between the horizon, the work to keep his mind occupied, and just the passage of time and getting accustomed to the ship's rolling, he felt better after a few hours and so did Leafé, who was helped by not having much more to throw up.

"Do you really think the fact that Caitlin's blood-tree still lives means she is still alive?" Tachi asked Leafé as they rested again in a corner out of the crew's way. Spots had gone to the ship's stern and into the cabin with Sorcet. "How would that work with a non-sylph, and through a portal too?"

"I do not know. I'm sorry. How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know how I feel. It has been a shock. I had almost forgotten the blood trees."

"You should not forget. Your tree certainly does not forget you. You should visit

once a year. It's expected of you."

"I know. I have been busy. It's good to have you here with me, Leafé. There are things I do not talk to her about. I never had a sister, no siblings at all. I enjoy your company."

Leafé smiled. "Well, when I'm not throwing up into a bucket, perhaps. But, Tachi, you can talk to me at any time. You are my brother. Not just brother-in-arms, but adopted into the Oak Band and into my parent's home too. And I'm not like ... her." Leafé didn't say but Tachi knew whom she meant. "I will listen. And I can feel."

They sat and looked out at the water. After some time Tachi put his thoughts into words. "I am confused. Part of me insists to myself that Caitlin had to have survived that return trip, even though the odds were very high against that. I guess I just want to believe. And I loved her, love her, so much that I can't imagine her dead, and our child within her, dead as well. She has to have made it back to Earth, to her family. She wanted that so badly, so intensely, that if sheer willpower could effect her survival, it would have done so."

"But there is another part?" Leafé asked.

Tachi shot her a glance, then stared once more at the horizon. Large seas, he was beginning to appreciate, offered much in the way of distant horizons, useful when thinking too much for too long. "I am still here. I was afraid to make the leap into the portal. I told Sorcet it was that I was a coward."

"You are certainly not a ... "

"Yes. I am. I know that. But that was not the chief reason I'm still here. If that portal passage were as easy as walking across this deck to the other rail I still would not have gone."

"But your home back there ... "

"You don't understand. Caitlin never understood either. I have no home back there. I had no one who cared if I lived or died. I had no reason to even exist. This is my home now."

"Sorcet does not care if you live or die, Tachi. But I do."

"She cares," Tachi said, shaking his head. "It's just that she cares more about her mission. I understand Sorcet and her mission and I agree wholeheartedly with it. I live now to serve her."

"That I can understand. I feel the same. But there's one difference between you and I, Tachi. I don't love Sorcet. You do."

"How on ... do you know that?" Tachi said turning to look at Leafé.

"It's obvious," Leafé said with a smile. "To your sister. You walk like a couple, talk like a couple. You two even argue like a couple. One can always tell when people are linked in that way, even among a crowd."

"Well, we are deru and taidar, after all. That is a link to be sure. I have to stay near her."

"Perhaps that is what I sense. Someone in the Warrior Guild compound once told me that taidar are supposed to sleep with their derudae, that it's part of the job. You say you don't do that."

"No. I'm married."

"So ... not yet anyway. But I think there is more to it. I said that you are in love with her. I do not know if she is in love with you. She is hard to read. But I can tell you this,

she does intend to sleep with you, sooner or later."

"You can't know that."

"Of course I know that. She's a female. A strange one to be sure, but a female. I'm a female. I know. And she tends to get what she wants, and she wants you."

"But I love Caitlin."

"Love is not a jar that holds only so much and no more, Tachi. It is perfectly possible to love more than one person, even with the passion of the vows and sexual pleasure. And Caitlin is far, far distant, never to return. You have no way to go to her, and she may even be dead, blood-tree or not."

Tachi smiled. "We have a song on earth that goes, 'If you can't be with the one you love, then love the one you're with.' "

"That is a wise troubadour, that sings such," Leaf said. "Can you not accept into your heart another love?"

"I ... don't know. I don't think so. At least not now."

"Well, someday you will. You really have not much choice. Meanwhile, I am here. For you. And for Sorcet too. Always and forever." She switched to the droichen language to use one of that species' favorite sayings, "So this is?"

Tachi stared at the distant horizon a long moment. "So this is," he sighed.

CHAPTER 8

Phrates Bay was the southernmost of three great bays on the west coast of the island continent that the humans called Islandia, though it was hardly the only land on the world of Tessene. The northern bay had no name that Tachi knew and was mostly bordered by the marsh, home of the annoying marsh sylphen and their renegade human allies. Next south was The Glades, a shallow bay filled with marshy islands with narrow channels between those, bordered on the north by the marsh and on the south by farmland belonging to Mangoon. A paved military road along the south shore connected One, Two, Three, Four and Five Watch, the forts established to keep the farmers of the Mangoon lands separate from the marauding marsh peoples.

Phrates Bay was almost an inland sea pinched in the center by the towns of Man Krup to the north and Man Phuong to the south, within sight of one another across a narrow strait. The trip from Mangoon to the small port of Man Phuong would take the day and night if they sailed all night. From Man Phuong south to Barakis was a further six-day walk, at the human-standard two-marches-per-day pace, on a narrow track through a forest. To go from Mangoon City to Barakis City by land the entire way would have taken much longer.

When nightfall came the crew ate a quite delicious supper; Haakon could be relied upon to have a good ship's cook. They had fresh greens — sailors always stocked up and ate those so long as they lasted, not long enough on voyages across the Great Sea. A sailor had brought up two fishing poles once they were clear of the Mangoon City harbor and locked those into sockets at the stern. Several times during the day, Tachi had heard cries of "fish on!" followed soon by the thump of a belaying pin on a fish skull. They had not caught enough fish to feed the entire crew but the cook had some fresh steak too, so Tachi had the best 'surf and turf' he had ever eaten.

Tachi suspected that Leafe was starving, having lost her breakfast and skipped lunch, and Jain saw to it that Leafe got served first. They pressed on through the dark, though most merchantmen would have hove-to, 'jogging in place' by backwinding reefed sails against rudder to hold position all night. Haakon's theory was that it was better to sail on in pitch darkness than to sit waiting to be boarded by pirates because you were afraid to risk the dangers of night sailing. He also saw to it that his charts were the best and most recently updated, and that his hard-bitten crew were all well-armed.

Any issue of who got the bed and who the floor in the spare cabin was easily resolved. The two narrow bunks were one above the other, each a bare wood platform with a futon. The door had no lock but rather a simple bar through some iron rings that seemed safe to trust. Tachi wanted to sleep on the floor, his feet against the door but the space was so small that Sorcet ordered him into the lower bunk. Leafe simply sat in a corner leaning against the wall and Spots lay down by the door.

Although they had on occasion stripped entirely before one another in inns, Tachi and Sorcet had in the past usually tried to alternate in a rented room, each taking a turn standing guard outside the door while the other pulled off the chafing armor, took a fast sponge-bath if there was water, and donned casual clothes or a night-shift for sleeping. Since outside in this case was the ship's main deck, Sorcet calmly stripped in front of Tachi and Leafe and washed herself with a cloth dipped in a water bowl. She donned her

second trousers and surcoat — on the road she carried no excess weight in her pack and had no night shift — washed and hung the first set to dry from the end of the upper bunk, and scrambled easily into the top bunk. Leafe followed suit though she did not bother with night clothes. Sylphen regarded clothing as protection from branches and nothing to do with modesty and often went about naked in their home forests.

Tachi, as always in such situations, waited until the two females were done before removing his own armor and sleeping in his day-clothes. He could bathe tomorrow, he decided, when he could have the cabin to himself a moment.

"Thee need not be so modest," Sorcet said, looking down at him from above. "It does not offend me."

"I'm content, Boss. For now."

Sorcet laughed. "I have seen naked men before, even you. You just hate for me to see your erect barge-pole."

Leafe laughed. "Only the males are modest here," Leafe said. "Tachi and Spots keep their hides on." Spots' ears twitched at the sound of his name but he did not look up from his curled-comma position at the door. Tachi reached out a hand and snuffed out the candle in its gimbaled holder bolted to the cabin wall.

Near dawn Tachi awakened to a change in the ship's motion and went on deck. Leafe trailed behind as soon as she had dressed and Spots came out for the fresh air too. Haakon was on the aft deck above the stern cabins looking tired and even more scruffy than before. "Did you have a restful night?" Haakon asked, "Your sword against hers?"

"Don't talk that way, Haakon. It's disrespectful. She puts up with it. I won't. I also know she spent no time in your cabin."

Haakon glanced his way and laughed. "She could have had my cabin to herself in any event. I spent the night here, playing with my chip log and compass and chart. Your mistress may be a great piece of ass ... " he held up one hand to forestall objection ... "I only speak the truth here, don't be offended, but she's not worth a ship's hull. No, the Sea Pearl is my wife, always. And she is demanding and unforgiving, like all the best women. But if I offend you, I mean no harm. You're young. And a lubber."

"And stop calling me a lubber."

"Well, a sailor keeps his food down underway and doesn't turn green." He looked at Leafe. "No offense, lass. You people all look seasick all the time to me, with that green and brown skin."

"Well, I was seasick yesterday," Leafe said. "I feel better now."

"That's my girl. Jain will make a topman of you yet. But I'll compromise. For your second voyage, you two will no longer be lubbers? Will that do?"

"I suppose it will have to," Tachi said. "Why have we stopped?"

Haakon was hove too now, waiting a few minutes for more light. The Sea Pearl had made better time than usual through the night and he wanted to enter Man Phuong harbor by daylight. The calm of the predawn hour soon ended when Mathris' Torch came up in the east, and the Sea Pearl, in a light and dying wind, picked her way gingerly into the small harbor. The entrance to the inner Phrates Bay, a narrow strait, was only a few miles wide at this point. Tachi could see a slice of the outer part of Phrates Bay beyond and he knew the Great Sea lay beyond that. In the distance, across the strait to the north, the rising sun reflected off the whitewashed buildings of the slightly larger port town of Man Krup. The "man" simply meant a town that was a port, even Mangoon City had once

been named Man Gon before the name evolved.

Haakon had cargo for Man Phuong, aside from his passengers, and the ship's crew set about cleaning the ship, a daily task never overlooked, while dockmen unloaded the items for this stop. Ship's crew rarely did dockman work and once the ship was readied once more they all took off for a few hours drinking ashore. Haakon allowed no ale aboard his ship. "Only a fool drinks ale on a short pier or a narrow deck," he said.

Sorcet joined the crew at a tavern across the lading yard from the Sea Pearl's dock, and Tachi and Leafe sat beside her as they ate a breakfast. Spots lay on the floor beside Leafe's cushion. Leafe had some dried beef for him and the tavernkeeper brought a bowl of water. Tachi, too, usually settled for water until nightfall, but Sorcet drank ale with almost any meal, and usually too much of it. "Did Haakon really accept a chit for our use of his spare cabin?" Leafe asked.

Sorcet laughed. "Haakon puts on a show," she said, swigging some ale. "I think he must have spent the night on deck. I could hear him thumping about up there, just an arm's length above my bunk. But, no, he seemed content with what he had already been paid."

"He is a rude fellow," Tachi said.

"Not rude. Blunt and bluff. He speaks his mind. But you could not have a stouter friend in need. I know. I was once in need."

"He's no gentleman. I didn't like the way he talked about you."

Sorcet glanced at Tachi over the bottom of her mug, then signaled an attentive servant for another. One thing Sorcet always had close to hand was attentive ale-servers. "Tachi, Haakon and I have slept together and a good deal more. He takes sex as a natural function, much like pissing and crapping. I doubt that he demeans me in intent, even if his speech is a trifle raw."

"He said you were a 'great piece of ass.' I would call that demeaning."

Sorcet snorted. "I would call it accurate. But I am biased. Haakon once saved my life. He can be crude but, in his rude way, he remains a gentleman in the truest sense."

"Well, I don't like it."

"I like that you defend my good name," Sorcet said. "If a Gray Guild deru can be said to have a good name. You are a gentleman too. I got more than I paid for when I hired you."

"You don't pay me," Tachi said. It was an old joke between them. "All I get is some expense money from the Guild. And a salary they mostly keep anyway. Even the half they give me now I mostly bank with them."

"Well, by local standards you are well-paid even if the Gray Guild gives you only half up front. What would you wish to buy?"

"I don't know. I never needed things. Back home on Earth, people seemed to always want to buy more and more things. It became an obsession with most. If a neighbor or friend had the newest thing, then they had to buy that thing too. People spent their lives working hard to earn money they would then spend on things that nobody really needed.

"It seems simpler here and I like that. Of course, a lowly taidar, slave to a deru," Tachi continued. Sorcet grinned at that, "has to travel fast and light and so my entire collection of things now fits into my backpack."

Sorcet nodded. "I have been here longer, yet my backpack is no larger than yours."

"I used to think I would buy a better sword," Tachi said after a pause. "A droichen

steel sword. But now that my wish has come true and even better than I had hoped, I don't know what else I need. I certainly could never afford this." He reached a hand up to tap the bronze pommel of his back-slung xythos sword.

Sorcet nodded. "Such a sword would take a bullock-wagon full of coin. You could buy the Sea Pearl, yonder, cheaper. Good thing Great Mother Gael holds you in high honor and has already given you one."

"I don't think I want to own a ship," Leafé said. "But I would like such a sword someday. I get a salary too, now. That's a strange thing to a sylph. We don't have money in the forest. How long will it take me to earn enough to buy a better sword?"

"Be content," Sorcet said. "You have good droichen steel. Should you kill anyone along the way who has better, you can improve your lot."

"There you have it," Tachi looked across the table at Leafé. "A goal to look forward to. A hope for the future. You might kill someone better-equipped. It's good to plan ahead this way."

"Humm." Leafé said. She looked at the fert beside her. "Spots, why do I put up with these two jesters?" Spots stood, head-bumped Leafé, then carefully picked up a steak off her plate and swallowed it whole.

Chapter 9

The Sea Pearl would remain in port until the next dawn, when a land breeze would carry her clear of the outer Phrates Bay and into the Great Sea. Haakon had business in the Islands west of Islandia and would be gone for the rest of the Time of Celat and even into the Time of Forinor, the fall here on Tessene. Sorcet, Leafe and Tachi moved into a room above the tavern and spent the day in town, talking to the mayor, the merchants, and to the captain in charge of the guard.

The mayor, one Ormsby Brethe Arundt, was a Mangoon noble serving here at the eparch's order. Young and fat, with a prematurely bald spot he combed over, he wore the purple cloak of nobility, reeked of perfume and had a ring for every finger of his hand. His desk was piled with papers and he frequently used a handkerchief dusted with scented talc to blot the sweat on his brow. Heth Longsword, the city captain of the guard, stood to one side. His face and arms were so weatherbeaten that it was hard to tell where Longsword left off and his leather armor began. Tachi also realized that Longsword was missing his left ear.

Ormsby Brethe Arundt was, clearly, none too happy with his lot. But he was philosophical when asked. "This is what one does when a noble, you serve in a variety of positions to work one's way up to anything decent."

"I would imagine that your worst job was better than a peasant could ever hope to aspire to," Tachi said. Back on Earth he had been a liberal. Sometimes it bubbled up.

Arundt raised an eyebrow. "Your man here is rather blunt for a one-name," he told Sorcet. He fluttered the handkerchief in Tachi's direction releasing a small cloud of talc. "You might tame him better."

"He is, in point of fact, downright rude, but such is his way and I live with it," Sorcet said. "In his own land he held higher station and now he serves me."

"A virtual death sentence, that." Arundt's hard look softened a bit. "No offense meant, my good man."

"No problemo," Tachi said. "In another time and land I too was a three-name nobleman. But I am content now with my one name and my station."

"Humph. Content. To follow her. Well, it takes all kinds."

Tachi looked at the guard captain. "You're a two-name and your last name is Longsword? Is that some sort of title or did your mother have a sense of humor?"

Heth Longsword smiled and Tachi saw that he was missing a few teeth. "I was born a one-name. Took the second when I was promoted by the eparch, may Mathris' thousand eyes look out for him."

"It was already his nickname," Arundt said with a chuckle. "But it's not for his sword. He cut a swath thorough the town's single women and, it is rumored, some of the married ones as well. It's said he would screw anything that would stand still for it."

Longsword smiled again. "But the rumors about the phergos are ... exaggerated." He stared hard at Sorcet and gave her a deliberate up-and-down look. She stared back, deadpan, with her ball-bearing eyes. The smile slipped from the captain's face.

Arundt, for all his pomposity, was an efficient local governor and well aware of developing events to the south. He showed them a map of the road south to Barakis and Barakis City, and the vast forest through which it cut, with marked locations of the border

and the Mangoon and Barakis guard posts on the road. Tachi had his own map, a copy brought along from the Gray Guild library, but he noted some fresh details onto that. Captain Longsword complained that he had only about half his allotted strength and half of those were out on the south road, "Keeping Barakis honest" as he put it. There were occasional skirmishes between his men and those from the Barakis outposts.

They strolled about town talking to merchants and members of the various guilds and found another problem. Man Phuong had originally been a Barakis town, lost a century earlier to Mangoon in a previous dispute. Mangoon, the dominant sea power in Islandia, had wanted to control, from both the north and south sides, the entrance strait between outer and inner Phrates Bay. But Man Phuong had no direct road connection back to Mangoon. Everything came in or went out either by sea or down the south road to Barakis City. And the south road was not a paved highway. The large bullock-wagons could use it only in the time of Kalin, the coldest and driest time of year when the ground hardened. When they did so the drovers often found that when they met there was little room to pass. Even the pack-caravans, using the pony-sized yamas strung together, traveled rarely now, the merchants fearing the impending conflict that would probably erupt along that very road.

"But you could build a road to the east, around the shore of Phrates Bay and over to Wali town," Sorcet said to a merchant as she and several merchants took supper in the town's best tavern. She had Tachi's map spread open on the table before her.

Tachi, standing behind her and gnawing on some bread, glanced over at Leafé who sat across from Sorcet so that she could watch both Sorcet's and Tachi's backs. Leafé was slipping bits of food to Spots. Tachi wondered just how you were supposed to be inconspicuous in a land of five-foot, seven-inch men when your party consisted of two six-foot women, one of them a green-and-brown sylph and the other with eyeballs like ball-bearings, a six-foot human male with sylph-like eyes, and a 100-pound cat with deadly-looking fangs. He shrugged to himself. At least the bread was good.

"In theory, true," said the man, peering at the map. "The entire south shore of Phrates Bay is, on paper at least, Mangoon territory. To the east of the bay, Wali is the southern Mangoon limit on the main Mangoon-Barakis highway. The Barakis soldiers have a small post at the intersection of the highway and the smaller road off to their town of Wali Seder. But without some way to guard a coast road from here to Wali, we would be at the mercy of bandits coming up through the woods from Barakis, or even Barakis soldiers themselves."

"Hard to tell the difference between bandits and Barakis troops," offered another man. "They're all thieves."

"Troops are supposed to be paid and trained well enough not to bother the citizenry," Sorcet said. "Mangoon troops are recruited by contract with the Warrior Guild."

"Hah! Tell that to General Warded Ert Leerob, the Barakis army commander. He hires any scum wanting a legal way to bully good merchants like us. They're not soldiers, certainly not Warrior Guild either. They're anything that cretin of an eparch down there can find for his low pay."

"That's the problem," another said. "Build a road to the east and we have to constantly patrol it to keep the bandits away. And we're already short of manpower for the guard here."

"Are the Barakis troops at this road intersection that you mentioned, south of Wali,

building a fort?" Sorcet asked. "Anything more substantial than a customs post?"

"Not that I know of. Why would they?"

Sorcet motioned to Tachi, who stepped forward to kneel beside the low table. He used a finger on the map. "If they thought there would be a war soon, they should be building a fort there. The paved highway from Mangoon to Wali Seder gives Mangoon faster access to that Barakis town than does the unpaved road from here — " Tachi indicated Man Akis on the northeast shore of Lake Bakal — "over to Wali Seder. Not reinforcing this vital junction means either that they expect no war, or that they intend to be attacking swiftly up that highway anyway, so deep into Mangoon lands that a fort to their rear would be pointless."

The merchant studied the map, brows furrowed. "I suppose. Hadn't thought of that."

"That's why they pay me the big bucks," Tachi said. "To be the strategist for Mangoon City."

"What's a 'buck'?" the merchant asked.

CHAPTER 10

Next morning, when the town gates opened, Sorcet and her taidar set off south. Despite the merchants' pessimism, two yama pack-caravans left the safety of the walls, heading south as well, willing to risk the road in hopes of profit. The yamas were strung together and totally docile but for a tendency to spit on anyone who annoyed them and came within range. As far as Tachi knew they had the intelligence of houseplants. No one bothered to name them because they would not respond anyway. Travelers often had their own yamas, one per person, to carry most of the gear. You could buy one for the purpose in any town and sell it at the next town. It was not uncommon to see a man walking alone, a long leash over his shoulder to a yama trailing behind. With feet terminating in large flexible toes instead of hard hooves, the sure-footed beasts could often walk where a human feared to tread. Tachi recalled once wading across a shallow stream while his string of yamas calmly walked across a fallen log too slippery for human feet.

As he always did at such times, Tachi yearned for a horse. But Islandia and, so far as he knew, all of the planet Tessene, lacked any trained riding animals. The yamas could carry only about eighty pounds apiece and, while they could certainly wander into the forest as well as any animal, they could not be expected to carry a pack load through dense foliage. On the wider dirt roads or stone-paved highways travelers walked or rode on a bullock-wagon. Walking was faster.

Tachi, Leafe and Sorcet soon outdistanced the pack-caravans, Sorcet's long stride eating up the miles, and her taidar keeping up. A party of humans and yamas could cover two marches per day. Bullocks and wagons only did half that. Ranger Guild, and Sorcet and her taidar, on any road, did three marches per day or about thirty miles. Only long experience now enabled Tachi to keep up, wearing armor and equipment and backpack that totaled almost eighty pounds. Back on Earth, with its slightly stronger gravity, Tachi suspected, he could never keep such a pace. Leafe's armor was lighter, being leather and not chain, and she typically spent half her time in her native woods anyway, so she had no trouble.

By noon the road had plunged into the forest and they were walking in shade. The road was only a dirt trail, barely passable by bullock-wagon in good times but today scattered mud bogs would have stopped wheeled wagons. This forest was low-limbed oak. Not having acidic pine needles on the ground meant there was more underbrush. Tachi had spent quite some time training in Mangoon City with the Ranger Guild and was at home in these woods now. They gave the bogs a wide circle and Tachi or Leafe stayed well in front, alert to any threat from animal or human. Sorcet adopted her thousand-yard stare that meant she walked with part of her mind and sensed out to the sides with another part.

That night they slept by turns in a grassy dell to one side of the road that would have been occupied, in more peaceful times, by at least several parties of weary travelers. But they slept alone. Sorcet had the pre-dawn watch but awoke when the dim forest began to show light filtering down through the tree canopy and when she smelled tea and phergo-bacon.

"Thee should have waked me," she said in her soft lisp, still too sleepy to be formal, as she watched Tachi wrap a cloth around his hand and pour out some tea into her metal

cup.

Tachi said nothing. This was a game they both played. For all her diamond-like hardness, Sorcet sometimes showed small thoughtful gestures. Tachi did likewise, for all his smart remarks that Sorcet put up with. This morning he was one-up on her, a small pleasure.

Leafe had spent the early morning in her usual 'sleep' pose, sitting with her back against a tree, legs spread apart, eyes open and ears swiveling at sounds, but resting in a semi-conscious state. Spots had prowled about half the night, as he liked to do, and had caught, by the sound of the scream, a rabbit to eat, but had also slept through the dawn at Leafe's feet.

"I watched the two of you last night," Leafe commented over her cup of tea. "Neither of you really needs to stay awake. Even resting, I'm alert enough to track any danger approaching us. And we have Spots, here, too."

"I suppose it's a habit," Tachi said.

"I spent many a night walking the halls of the Warrior Guild compound, and out on the streets of Mangoon," Leafe said. "It's strange to me, this 'sleep' thing that you humans do. And a little sad, too. You are totally unconscious, totally vulnerable. Your brains are turned off."

"Not really," Tachi said. "We dream, usually several times each night."

"I've been told of these ... dreams. We sylphen don't do that. What is dreaming?"

"None of us are really sure. We see scenes, we do imaginary things. It's in flashes and disconnected. Sometimes we incorporate parts of things we had done the day before or plan to do the next day." Tachi smiled. "Some people think it's a way for our brains to unwind, to relax after much concentration. But we're not sure."

"How does using your brain even more relax it? And why does it need relaxing? Ours must not because we neither sleep nor dream."

Tachi smiled at that. "We humans would go insane if we did not sleep, probably so if we did not dream. But we're not alone. Animals sleep. Some clearly even dream; you have seen how Spots will twitch from time to time as he's sleeping. He's dreaming when he does that."

"I did not realize that. About Spots. But about you humans, sleep separates you. I find it sad. Even when you sleep together you are, at that moment, utterly separate, all alone. And you waste a third of your brief lives that way."

By midafternoon they approached the intersection with the road that led east to Man Akis. They left the road and picked their way through the forest, circling well to the west of the road, avoiding contact with either the Mangoon or Barakis border outposts. It had started to rain, a steady drizzle that soaked them through. It was slow going but Leafe was able to pick out the animal trails when those happened to go the right way, and Tachi found one creek that flowed from the south and they could walk up the gravel stream bed. As the sun fell, Leafe led them out into a small clearing. "We should bed down here for the night," she said. "No telling if we will find anything as good before dark."

Sorcet wearily nodded. "We'll have another day of this to circle back to the road. No fire tonight, though. You've been in the lead all day, I'll take the first watch."

No fire was good sense, though it meant a miserable night. It wasn't for the flame, which could be seen only a short distance in this thick wood, but the smoke. Even if they could get one going — and Tachi could almost always find dry kindling — a fire would

smoke even worse than usual and the smoke could lie low and drift for miles to inquisitive noses. But no fire also meant no way to dry clothing or wet boots, even if the rain stopped during the night. It also meant extra caution that night against animals. They had the fert, though, to watch for those. Tachi tended to his weapons and armor first, as best he could in the rain, looked over Sorcet's and Leafé's too, then lay down. Back on Earth he rarely camped in the rain and, when he did so, had a tent. On Tessene, travelers on bullock-wagons could have tents and sleeping mats and oilcloths that shed rain. Tachi, Leafé and Sorcet, who traveled everywhere light, simply got wet and lived with it. Tachi went to sleep hardly noticing his soaked clothes and boots and by the time he awoke, He hoped, they would be mostly dry.

When he woke at Leafé's touch on his shoulder it was dawn. Tachi scrambled up, annoyed and embarrassed. Leafé smiled. She was learning the game too. Sorcet sat on a nearby log, her sword across her knees, a tin cup in one hand and a water gourd in the other. Tachi was still wet and it was still raining. Leafé had solved the wet-clothing problem by taking hers off and stowing them away in her backpack.

He fished out some crackers and jerky from his backpack and joined her.

"Leafé, you are no use to us if you go the entire night without rest," he admonished her. "And those clothes will mildew if you leave them in the pack too long."

"I split the night with Sorcet," Leafé said. "And I will dry the clothing when the sun comes out, as it will later today. You are the one to break brush in front today. You needed the rest. I have told you both before that I can do the night watch myself without any problem."

"Perhaps we should take her up on it," Tachi muttered as he held out his own cup. Sorcet merely nodded as she poured.

The three of them sat on the log passing one water gourd back and forth. The crackers and jerky were filling but dry and the jerky was salty. Spots, awakened by the talking, came over and head-butted Leafé, his way of trying to extort some more food out of her.

"You had another rabbit last night," she said to him. "Stop pretending that you are starving." Spots stared at her a moment and then head-butted her again. Sometimes it worked and he didn't have anything better to do.

In a few moments Tachi rose and readied his kit. They all made a habit of keeping things together, ready always for a sudden flight, and Sorcet and Leafé were already packed for the road.

"Boss, you should have a name for your sword," Tachi said as he watched Sorcet swing her sword up onto her shoulder and into its back harness, the black blade hidden now within a scabbard of hard ebon wood.

"I should name it?"

"Yes. Important blades need to have their own names. Special names, like Soulstealer, or Well of Darkness or some such. Back on Earth the most famous was Excalibur. One story I liked to read had a sword in it named Changeling."

"That sounds ridiculous. Why would anyone name a sword? Next, you will want to name my left boot."

"Maybe so. The ancient Romans had an emperor — what we call an eparch here — named Caligula — or 'Bootsie' — which was a nickname the army soldiers gave him as a child because he liked to walk around in oversized soldier's boots."

"Shut up," Leafé suggested. Tachi chuckled.

"Mnnn." Sorcet ignored Leafé. "Was he a good eparch?"

"He was one of the most cruel and vindictive monsters ever to sit a throne," Tachi said. "From what I have heard, our Greybeard Barakis is out to match Caligula, blood for blood."

This day they picked their way carefully in a wide circle around the Barakis outpost on the road, alert for any patrols. They saw no one, the undergrowth was so thick in most places that it would have been difficult to move any large force through at all, at least in any reasonable time. Tachi kept them moving, often using his sword or dagger to clear a way. His weapons trainer back in the Ranger Guild, Tachi thought, would have been horrified at this abuse of such fine blades. Sorcet came behind and Leafé brought up the rear, sending Spots out to patrol to the sides from time to time.

Sorcet fretted at the cut branches. "People might see these and know we had passed this way."

"Any trained ranger," Tachi said, "Would know that anyway. We're not exactly leaving no trace, even without the cuttings."

"I suppose that is because of me," Sorcet said. "I have spent years doing this and even now I am not the best at it."

"It's because of all of us, Boss," Tachi said. "No one can pass this way, at our speed, without leaving a scuff, a turned leaf, an overturned stone. By traveling much slower and with much more care, I could do it alone, pass by invisible to any human, even to most forest animals. Leafé could likely track me anyway. Don't worry about it. No one will see and if they do, by then no one will care."

They indeed reached the road near to sunset but backed off and spent another uncomfortable night deeper in the woods. Although they were now well south of the Barakis border post, to camp along the road at an odd location could attract the curiosity of a passing patrol. The usual camping fields, used by most travelers, were one march apart and they had come out onto the road between two of those.

— end sample —

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