

The Waterstone

(SAMPLE)

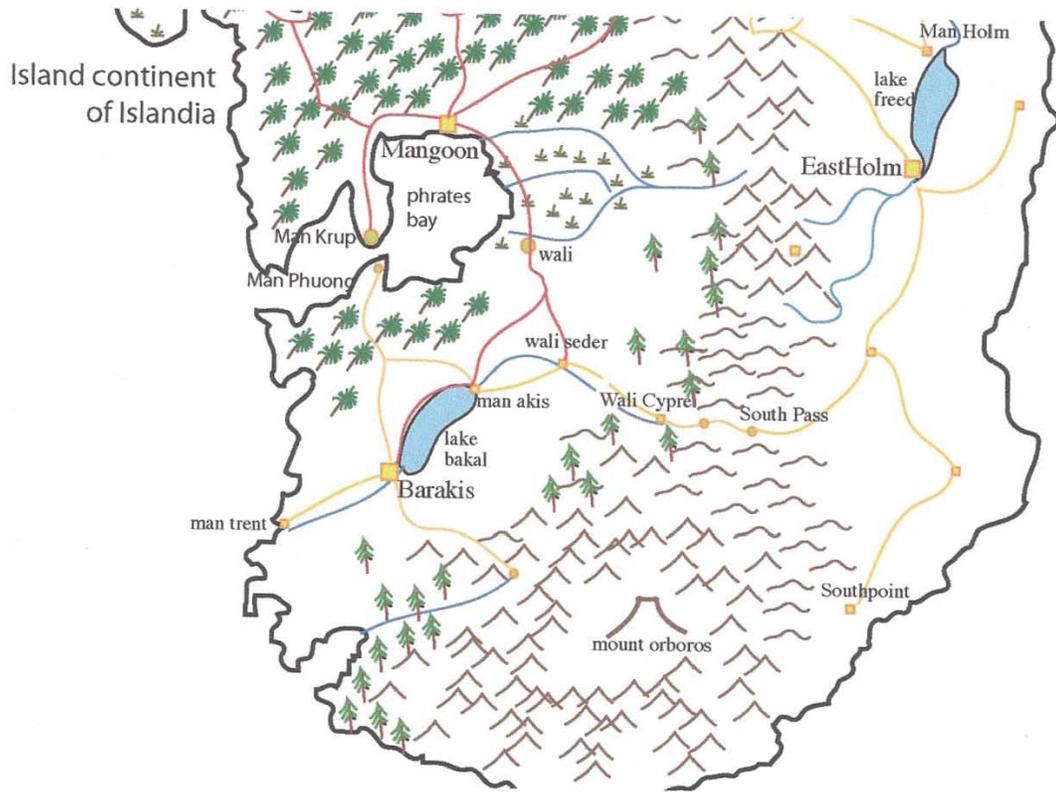
by Stephen Morrill
Fourth book in the Sorcet Chronicles series

Copyright 2018 by Stephen Morrill
Cover Copyright 2018 by Sorcet Press

The author is hereby established as the sole holder of the copyright. Either the publisher (Sorcet Press) or author may enforce copyrights to the fullest extent.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, dialogue and events in this book are wholly fictional, and any resemblance to companies and actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Map



Chapter 1

It was the Dawning period of the second day of the Time of Kalin — winter on Tessene — and Tachi was packing for the road once more. Yesterday, beyond the walls of the Gray Guild compound, Mangoon City had turned out to celebrate the ceremony of Mathris' Lights. The poorer residents had spent the day banging small drums and any metal pots they were fortunate enough to own, to frighten away the cold, while the wealthy — mostly two-names and three-names — paid for private and public bonfires meant to lure the warmth of Mathris' Torch closer. Tachi, born of another culture on another world, was pretty sure spring would come in due time, banging on pots or not.

The central square had been packed all day and the Temple of Mathris there did a booming business which required sacrificing an entire herd of bullocks. Today most of the townspeople slept in, having indulged in too much ale and more meat than they usually saw on their plates.

The world of Tessene had no tilt and so days and nights were always the same length, but it had an eccentric orbit and winter came when it was farthest from Mathris' Torch. Other than the obvious fact that it did, indeed, grow colder in winter, Tachi couldn't see much difference. In Mangoon City, in the equatorial latitudes, it didn't even snow.

In the several tendays since Tachi, Sorcet, Leafe and Dag had closed the Sandstone Portal in the desert sylphen lands far to the east, he had insisted that Sorcet, Leafe and himself rest and recover from many days of walking and fighting. His friend Dag was at rest forever, having been killed at the Sandstone Portal, and Tachi missed the rough cheerfulness of the young droich. Sorcet, for her part, had been drunk much of the time here in Mangoon City, making up for lost opportunity while in the alcohol-free desert sylphen lands and, perhaps, mourning Dag. Tachi had taken to sleeping back in his own small room just down the corridor from Sorcet. Drunks, he had found, did not sleep very well and he preferred not to watch.

"Why does she do that?" Leafe had asked Tachi. "She's useless. She comes out of her room at the Midday period, wanders around aimlessly for the rest of the day, then takes a pot of ale back to her room at Starview period. What are you and I supposed to do?"

"We're supposed to guard her," Tachi said. "That's what taidar do. And await better days. She gets this way sometimes. Mourns her family, perhaps. Her lost world before she came to Tessene. You don't know of that because you were born here." Leafe, a forest sylph from the Oak Band, had long since become Tachi's adopted 'older sister'. She was, in fact, about eighty years older, being a one-hundred-year-old teenager by sylphen standards.

"You came from another place," Leafe said. "You and Caitlin. You don't get drunk over it."

"Caitlin might have. She missed her old life. I do not." Caitlin Dierdre Beltane and Tachi Green Fujiwara had come to Tessene through the Firestone Portal but, just as they had finally closed that, Caitlin had leapt back into it, vanishing from Tachi's life along with their unborn child.

Tachi had no way to know if she or the child had survived the return trip. Her bloodwood tree in a sacred grove in the sylphen forests to the north yet lived. Bloodwood trees died instantly when their bond-mates died, but Tachi doubted that the tree actually knew of Caitlin's fate.

He glanced down at his left palm, at the green tendril inserted beneath the skin there by his own bond tree. He closed his eyes a moment and concentrated and slowly the direction and rough distance to his own tree came to him. The tree, too, always knew where he was and how far off.

But, a tenday ago, Sorcet had shown up at the door of her small office. Tachi had been seated at her desk, trying to cope with the few bureaucratic items that came to his attention as her senior taidar. In the year and some he had been on Tessene he had learned to speak the droich, sylph and human tongues and could read and write human fairly well. Caitlin had always been better at languages but Tachi could barely make out sylphen writing and had forced himself to learn enough droichen to let him get around their home tunnels without getting lost, reading the signs carved into tunnel intersections in the GraniteAxe droichen deephome.

Tachi looked up when the door opened and saw Sorcet standing there. She wore her black leather tunic and trousers with a Gray Guild cloak over, and clutched Frost, her sword in her left hand. Tachi knew she never let the sword out of her sight. He raised one eyebrow, something he had practiced until he was good at it. Sorcet, so far as he knew, never paid that attention.

"Good morning, Boss," he said. "You look beautiful today. And sober. And clean." Sorcet, in fact, turned heads anywhere she went. She was Tachi's height, six feet, slender and muscular where he was stocky. Sorcet had black hair and a deep tan from too much outdoor living. But any human male wanting to get closer, and few ever did, would have hastily backed off at the sight of her eyes. Sorcet saw, or sensed, Tachi wasn't sure which, out of eyes resembling ball bearings. Tachi had grown accustomed to it but even he was seldom certain what sort of mood she was in or even what she was looking at.

"I need for you and Leafe to get ready for the road," Sorcet said. "I shall be speaking to The Magnus today and we shall depart in a few days."

"I can do that, Boss. I'll get a travel purse from the guild bursar. Where are we off to?"

"South. To Barakis lands and then east into those mountains around Mount Orboros."

There's a portal inside that mountain," Tachi said. "Or so I've heard."

"There shall not be, once we are done there."

"Aha. Those mountains, so we are told, are full of wild, weird, dangerous beasts. And somewhere in there is that Earther who came here so long ago. Do we get a replacement for Dag? An entire 'hand' of four taidar would not be amiss."

"You and Leafe will do."

"Boss, you're a senior deru. The Gray Guild will give you anything you ask for."

"You and Leafe. Day after tomorrow, First of Kalin. Perhaps a few days longer if I need it."

"Why not tomorrow?"

"I am not yet ready for the travel."

"Boss, you're always ready to travel. You wear me down. You wear out Leafe."

"I need a few days."

Tachi always started each day with a hard physical workout, trying to maintain his greater Earth-strength in the slightly lower gravity of Tessene. For the next few days

Sorcet and Leafe joined him as they ran through the city, did some weight training, and some limbering exercises the Ranger Guild had taught Tachi.

They ran and exercised in full gear, armor and weapons. Sorcet was never without Frost. Four feet of glasslike black shadow, two inches wide, with twin razor-sharp edges, the thing reflected no light, seemed to absorb the very air around it. It was not of this world and froze anything it touched. Tachi had a droichen sword and also a long dagger, both of xythos, a dark gray metal harder than steel and so rare his sword alone was worth more than a lifetime of earnings for a Mangoon farmer. As Sorcet's taidar, Tachi and Leafe could hardly let her go out alone, so they all ran together. Sometimes Spots, the 100-pound catlike fert, loped alongside, helping to clear the way through startled shoppers and passers-by in the various "quarters" of the city.

Chapter 2

The next day they were running through the "glitter" quarter, home to jewelers and other crafters' shops. Just exercising, they always ran. Out on the road they walked or sometimes alternately walked and jogged. There were no riding animals on the world of Tessene, something Tachi hated. But in the time he had spent here he had toughened up and no longer regarded walking hundreds of miles as anything unusual.

As they passed a shop filled with blown glass decanters, pitchers, bowls and mugs, the proprietor stepped out into the street and, with a long roundhouse swing, stabbed Tachi in the chest with a dagger. The blade slid sideways on the scale-mail armor Tachi wore beneath his Gray Guild cloak and snagged in the cloth. Tachi gave out an oof and stumbled and fell. He instinctively rolled to one side and leapt to his feet. The man was standing before him staring down at his wrist. His right hand, still holding a knife, was lying on the ground. Sorcet had her sword out and it was coated with a thin film of blood. The man now looked up at Tachi and Tachi saw what he knew that he would see — a glazed blank stare. The man, blood spurting from his right wrist, tried to club at Tachi with his left hand. Tachi ducked a clumsy punch and decked the man with a left hook to the chin.

The man lay stunned. Tachi grabbed his right wrist and squeezed, trying to stanch the blood. "Don't kill him," Tachi shouted. Leafe was there and she and Tachi managed to hold the man down while Leafe stripped off the man's belt and wrapped that around his wrist. She tied his two wrists together behind his back with a cord Tachi took from his belt pouch where he kept his Shadow Guild equipment. Only when they had the man trussed did Tachi look up. Above them, Sorcet stood, a thin black-clad deru holding a thin black sword. She switched the sword to her left hand and pulled the scabbard off her right shoulder. The red film on the sword had now turned a mixed pink and white as humidity in the air froze onto the blade. She nodded and rapped the sword against the scabbard to knock away frost and blood alike, and slid the sword home.

"Again?" she said. "Is thee injured?"

Tachi examined the rip in his cloak. "My pride, mostly. I need a tailor. And I need to pay better attention. That man could have gone for you."

"Well, I have an even tougher shell than you." Sorcet said. "And you are the one they always try to kill."

Tachi sighed. "I know. Haptor's dead and yet these geased innocents keep trying to kill me. I wonder how many of these living traps are still around. It's lucky we don't have Spots along today. The fert would have torn out this man's throat. Is there anything you can do to break the spell on this one?"

"What's all this, then," Tachi heard. A city guard had arrived on the run, his short spear was extended to one side to hold back some curious bystanders.

Tachi explained. That took some time and the wounded shopkeeper regained consciousness and now kept trying to squirm towards Tachi, probably hoping to bite him. An officer and two more guards showed up.

"I can try to find out how long this man has been spellbound," Sorcet said, "and if it's possible to break the geas." She knelt and put hands to either side of the man's head.

"You may not wish to watch," Tachi told the officer and the guards. "She is a deru. It won't be pretty."

"And you two are ... "

"Taidar to deru Sorcet of the Gray Guild," Tachi said.

The officer licked his lips. Behind him Tachi heard one of the guards mutter to the other, "Trained killers. Sworn to die for her."

Sorcet concentrated. The man started to twitch. His eyes rolled back in his head. Sorcet raised her head and adopted her thousand-yard stare at nothing. The man screamed and squirmed. Sorcet was almost as strong as Tachi and she held the man firmly as she probed his mind. The man started to bleed from eyes and ears and gave a final scream and fell silent. Behind him Tachi heard a noise and he turned to see one of the guards retching on the street. The officer and the other guard looked green as well. The bystanders had all stepped well back and now those to one side parted to let a woman and two young girls through.

The woman shrieked and threw herself onto the corpse as Sorcet stood. The girls stared down at the body, at their mother, and up at Sorcet, uncomprehending.

"By Mathris' eyes and ears," Tachi said. "He had a family. Did you learn anything useful, mistress?"

Sorcet nodded. "He had been geased about a year ago. He had orders to kill you upon sight. He had a good description of you."

"I've been by this place many times," Tachi said. "Though, come to think, I used to do my runs earlier, before the shops opened. Only been doing it at this time because you and Leafe are late risers."

"I don't need to rise," Leafe said. "Sylphen don't sleep as you humans do. But it is true that I never came on the runs until Sorcet did."

"I could do nothing for the geas," Sorcet said. "He simply would never have stopped trying to kill you. I decided it was more merciful to end his life."

"Wait ... are you saying you killed this man?" the officer said. "With your mind?" To his side the sick guard had straightened up and wiped his lips.

Sorcet stared at the officer, who stepped back at the sight of those steel-colored eyeballs. "I did say that," She said quietly. "Is that any problem?"

The officer eyed the colored guild-stripes on the Gray Guild cloaks of the three of them. "No, deru Sorcet. No problem at all."

"They killed my husband," the woman shouted from where she was holding the shopkeeper's bloody head. "Arrest them!"

The officer looked down and shook his head sorrowfully. "I am sorry, madam, but I cannot arrest a Gray Guild deru. And anyway, it was self-defense. Your husband attacked this man."

Well, Tachi thought, *killing the man after he was trussed up like a hog ready for slaughter was not exactly self-defense*. But he thought it wiser to let the officer's version of things stand.

"You murdered my husband," the woman now shouted at Sorcet.

Sorcet just stared at the woman who now shrank back from those eyeballs. "He was geased," Tachi tried to explain, "by a renegade kaiphon. He attacked me. He had no choice but neither did we. The person to blame is a kaiphon named Haptor."

The woman looked puzzled. "I don't understand. Why don't you kill this Haptor, and not my husband?"

"I did kill Haptor," Tachi said. "Some time ago. But that does not stop the geas. When I happened by, your husband was compelled to attack. That was a death sentence for him, no matter the outcome."

"Kaiphon are Gray Guild too," the woman said. "So one of you mind-cursed my husband ..."

"Well, he went renegade on us," Tachi said.

"... then another of you killed my husband, the father of these children?"

"Well, yes."

"I curse you," the woman shrieked. "I curse all of you. I curse the Gray Guild!" The woman looked at the two girls. "And now who takes care of me? Who looks after the children?"

Tachi looked to Sorcet. She merely shook her head. "The Gray Guild is not an orphanage," she said.

"You have some inventory yet in the shop," the officer said. "Sell that."

"But my husband is ... was the glassblower," the woman said. "When this is gone ... what for us?"

The officer swallowed and took a moment to answer. "I guess ... there is the copper collar."

"Sell herself into slavery?" Tachi said. "What about the kids?"

The officer looked even more sorrowful. "The Temple of Mathris, perhaps?"

"Mangoon seems rather short in the social services," Tachi muttered.

"What is a social service?" Leafé asked.

A few days later, after a particularly long run and workout, they were sitting at breakfast in the guild dining hall, gasping and drinking water and Sorcet nodded to herself and looked at Tachi.

"I am ready now. Tomorrow we leave."

"Tomorrow is the Feast of Mathris' Lights," Tachi said. "Nobody travels during a feast day."

"We do. I care not one whit for their celebrations. I am not superstitious."

"Well, neither of us came from here, Boss. But Leafé is sylphen, and sylphen celebrate The Sea of Light on that same day. It's important to them. We can wait a day for Leafé."

Sorcet turned her eyes on Tachi. He was not intimidated and stared back. "Obey me, taidar," she said.

"I am taidar to you," Tachi said. "I agree to live or die at your whim, to protect you at all times, and to die in your place if need be. And the four Time ceremonies are important to sylphen and to my sister Leafé. And we can leave here on the day after the ceremony."

"She's not really your sister. You aren't of the same species, not even of the same worlds."

"Closest thing I'll ever have to family. Back on Earth I was an orphan. With Caitlin gone, Leafé and Dag — and you — are what I have."

"Dag is dead."

"I still have him. In my mind. Some day I'll have to journey to the GraniteAxe deephome, talk to Drenhor and Mother Gael about Dag."

"I sent word of Dag's death to them," Sorcet said.

"I know you did. I paid the Ranger Guild runner who carried that sad message."

Sorcet took another sip of water. That alone impressed Tachi. When it was available Sorcet usually drank ale at every meal; only the quantity varied, and that from a lot to entirely too much. She put down the mug and looked down at her plate.

"Come to my bed tonight," she said softly.

Tachi raised an eyebrow. "You must be feeling better."

"I feel ... a need."

"How do you know I haven't taken up with some human girl from around town, here," Tachi said.

Sorcet grinned. Tachi's heart swelled. Her smile was incandescent but she rarely smiled. But her grin promised more and was usually a private thing. Sorcet, he thought, was pulling out of a deep dive into melancholy and he was glad to see it at last.

"Don't be absurd," she said. "You have me. Any time you please."

"I thought it was the other way around," Tachi said. "I believe it's even written into our contract."

"We have no contract. You do not even serve for the standard twenty years, but for only so long as you please. Now come to me tonight."

"Well," Tachi said. He drank some water and thought about it a long moment. "I guess it has been a long time."

Sorcet punched his arm. "Why do I put up with an insolent taidar?"

"Ow," Tachi said. "Is it because you love me?"

Sorcet's grin vanished. "You well know that's not the case. I can love no one. I cannot afford that luxury."

"Well, Boss. I love you."

"Stop saying that."

Chapter 3

Their first stop was the Mangoon City waterfront. The Sea Pearl was at her usual dock, out of the way and over beside the entrance to the naval base. Haakon Wanderer, the captain, liked his boat narrow and fast, the better to outrun pirates. He plied the more risky routes and often carried passengers for the Gray Guild. Today he would carry Sorcet and her two taidar from Mangoon City to Man Phuong, an easy overnight run.

"Sorcet, I see you have two old salts with you," Jain, Haakon's bosun, shouted as Sorcet, Tachi and Leafe walked across the large lading yard. Spots, Leafe's fert, a cheetah-like companion she had trained, trotted alongside Leafe.

"I'll try not to throw up on your deck this time, Jain," Leafe shouted back.

"If you do, you know where the bucket is," Jain said. "Is that fert going to pee on my ship? Sharpen its claws on my mast?"

"I guess we'll find out," Leafe said. Jain's grin was misshapen from a long scar from left ear to chin. She ruled her crew with an iron hand and a vocabulary of curses Tachi found astounding.

They reached the gangway and came aboard. Haakon Wanderer came out of his cabin. "Welcome, lass!" he shouted to Sorcet. "Could not stay away from me, I see. I hear that from women far and wide."

"Probably more from wide women who stay far away," Sorcet said.

Haakon sighed theatrically. "Some are wide. Some narrow. In the dark they're all the same."

"I thank thee for that authentic sailor wisdom," Sorcet said.

"You were an exception," Haakon said. "I still dream of those nights. Are you back for more?"

Sorcet shook her head and grinned. "Yon Tachi does the honors now. He's better at it than you ever were."

Haakon clutched at his chest. "Lass, you strike me to my very core." Across the deck a sailor with a mop grinned and Jain cursed him back into action.

Haakon looked at Tachi. "And you, my young friend, I truly pity. She must wear you out."

"Not at all," Tachi said. "But, then, I'm much younger than you."

Haakon shook his head and walked away. "I need to charge the Gray Guild more for these transports," he muttered. "Make up for the damage to my self-esteem."

They stored their backpacks in Haakon's spare cabin while Jain and the small crew, with brisk efficiency, got Sea Pearl away from the dock, turned for the harbor entrance, and underway. The ship heeled as it passed the mole protecting the harbor and entered Phrates Bay. Tachi, who had been almost as queasy as Leafe the first time he had sailed, found he was able to stand and walk around without difficulty.

"See," he said to Jain, who was standing behind the helmsman watching the compass. "Old salt, indeed, now."

Jain glanced up at the mainsail above her. The Sea Pearl was a fore-and-aft rigged schooner. She looked at Tachi. "Wait for the Afterday period," she said. "We're in the lee of the land now, with the offshore morning wind. Favorable wind, flat sea. Later, we'll be tacking into a good-sized swell and against the sea breeze. Keep your bucket handy."

"I'll do so. Is the food as good now as I remember?"

Jain nodded. "Haakon Wanderer keeps a good table," she said. "So long as the fresh vegetables and meat last. But sail out beyond Phrates Bay and into the Great Sea, and we get by with iron rations. Hardtack and jerky."

"Well, I live on that half the time anyway," Tachi said. "Whatever we need we have to carry on our backs."

Jain nodded. "Why I like the sailing life. Our home travels with us."

After lunch Tachi, Sorcet and Leafé lay up against the low-side rail, dozed in the sunshine, and watched Jain, Haakon and the crew sail the ship. Spots, the fert, lay beside Leafé and slept. In his year-plus on Tessene Tachi had learned to enjoy and cherish these rare down times. That night they slept, Tachi and Sorcet, in the two narrow bunks, one above the other, in the spare cabin. Spots lay down blocking the doorway and Leafé, as always, sat with her back to the cabin wall and waited patiently for morning. Sylphen did not sleep but, rather, sat and rested their eyes and ears slightly but remaining all the while sufficiently alert to anything happening around them.

When Mathris' Torch rose the next morning the Sea Pearl had crossed Phrates Bay and now picked its way carefully into the small harbor at Man Phuong. Some dockmen caught bow, stern and spring lines and tied her fast. Haakon's crew shoved the gangway over the side and onto the pier. No sooner had they done that than dockmen came aboard and started unloading some cargo Haakon had brought too.

Phrates Bay was pinched sharply at its western end where it opened into the Great Sea. The town of Man Krup sat on the northern side of the strait and Man Phuong sat a few miles away at the southern side. The "man" only meant the town was a port; even Mangoon City had once been Man Gon. Man Phuong had been Mangoon territory until the recent war, when Barakis took it over.

Sorcet paid the local mayor a visit. "We're widening the road south to Barakis City, Otto Norkeep Kirrallis told her. "Eventually we'll pave it and make it usable by bullock-cart."

"Better for trade with Mangoon," Sorcet said. "Trade is good. People who trade do not fight so much."

"I suppose," Kirrallis said. He was a thin and strong-looking thirty-year-old who liked to get out on the ball field and play sports with one and all, of any social class. As a three-name, he would be working his way up the ladder of responsibilities and his mayoral posting would be for only a few years. Still, he seemed to be taking it seriously. Tachi recalled the previous mayor, when the town was in Mangoon hands, as a fat and selfish oaf only too happy to be run out of town by invading Barakis troops.

"Oh, and our eparch, Merank will need to see you in Barakis City," Kirrallis said.

Sorcet nodded. "Asja Gaius Merank Barakis is an old friend," she said. "But why would he need to see me?"

"He has problems to his southeast. Perhaps the Gray Guild can help."

Chapter 4

The last time they had walked south out of Man Phuong towards Barakis City they had been loaded down with backpacks full of gold coins to use to buy off the Barakis army and help Asja Gaius Merank in the overthrow of the mad tyrant who ruled there. And, worse, they had to do much of the trip through the forest to one side of the road, to dodge patrols.

Things were easier now. They walked two marches each day, an easy trip for toughened travelers, and camped overnight at the large campsites everyone used. These were well-organized now, Tachi noted. Yamas, the small pack-animals that, until the road was widened and paved, were the only cargo transport, were kept in fenced enclosures. There were stone-lined fire pits so people would not just build campfires everywhere. There were screened-off latrines for males and females. And there was one larger, permanent, tent for some guards who kept things orderly and clean. In the evenings weary travelers, merchants for the most part, sat around and chatted and shared their food. A far cry, Tachi thought, from the madness of the previous administration.

In four days they came to Barakis City. There were three gates in the city walls and, before, those had all closed at sunset. Now they stayed open all night, though watchful guards were posted at each. The first time Tachi had seen the north gate, it had been decorated with hanging corpses. The citizens of the city had been cowed by ferocious religious fanatics of the Cult of Mathris' Sword who beat anyone, on no provocation, and then killed anyone who objected.

"At least you two don't have to wear those bag-like khaburs now," Tachi said as they walked down a city street. "They seem to know how to treat women decently now."

"The townspeople knew how before," Sorcet said. "But they allowed a small number of fanatics to rule them. I will never understand that."

"Well, the Redcoats had the spears and the canes and the willingness to use them," Tachi said. "You forget, Boss, that most people aren't accustomed to fighting or killing."

Sorcet stopped and turned at that and fixed Tachi with her ball-bearing eyes. "Are you saying that I like killing?"

"I did not. But you are accustomed to it. As am I. As is Leafe, here."

"I am not 'accustomed' to that," Leafe said. "I hate it."

"You seem quite efficient at it when required," Tachi said.

Leafe shook her head. "I don't know how you can kill people and not hate it too."

"Depends upon whom I'm killing," Tachi said.

"Yes. Well, I'm not like you, brother," Leafe said.

"You had better be, come the next fight. Or you will be dead. Take your cue from Spots, there," Tachi pointed to the fert who customarily walked behind Leafe and to her left side. "He doesn't think too much. Told to attack, he goes for the throat. End of discussion."

"End of this discussion too," Sorcet said. She turned and walked away, her two taidar dutifully following, the fert following them.

The sun had set and the streets were dark. A few townspeople went about carrying torches or candle-lanterns. Tachi had one small lantern in his backpack but Leafe could

see well enough even in the dark. They made their way directly to the palace where a guard captain knew them and welcomed them.

Asja Gaius Merank Barakis — he had added the city name to his, as was the custom for eparchs, the only four-names permitted — was still busy in his office on an upper floor of the palace. As was the custom, his low desk was on a raised dais at one end of the room and he sat crosslegged on a cushion behind it. The room was carpeted in woven-straw tatami and there were several guest-cushions stacked up to one side.

Merank glanced up as they entered, waved away a secretary with some papers, and leapt to his feet to come around his desk and hug Sorcet, Leafe and Tachi.

"Welcome, welcome all," he said. He glanced at Spots, put out a tentative hand to pet the fert's head, then thought better of it. "Sit, tell me what you've been up to since I last saw you. Tachi, I see you are well. You died here, below the palace in our caverns. I did not know one could revive someone so poisoned as you."

Tachi nodded. "The poison on that dagger paralyzes the lungs. Sorcet kept me breathing and Leafe ran to the Gray Guild compound here and brought back a kaiphon. He saved me, at considerable cost to his own future."

"That's right," Merank said. "Each use of their powers, as I understand, shortens their lifespan. What became of that renegade kaiphon who was bedeviling you with geased attackers?"

"I shortened his lifespan," Sorcet said.

"Really? By how much?"

"All that he had left."

"Oh. Well, good for you. So Tachi is safe from him now."

"More or less, sir," Tachi said. "He left a few geased victims around to attack me if they ever see me."

"Does the geas not vanish when the magicker dies?"

"Apparently not, sir."

"That must keep you on your toes."

"It does, sir."

"I was planning to see you anyway," Sorcet said to Merank. She was always impatient with small-talk. "But I was also told by the mayor in Man Phuong that you needed me for something."

Merank nodded. He sat at his desk and Sorcet took a cushion too. Tachi and Leafe knelt on the tatami behind her as was their custom.

"You know of Mount Orboros, to our southeast," Merank said. "Our farmers have always had problems with animals coming out of those mountains to kill the occasional cow."

"And always a special, breeding cow," Tachi said. "So that the farmer expected the government to reimburse him for generations of future breeding stock coming from that one dead, skinny cow."

Merank laughed. "That is usually the way of it. Only the most valuable stock die; it's been a rule of farming for centuries. I should know; my family is in land, not like the other three-names in commerce. And I never heard of a cow being killed that was just an old, tired, worthless animal.

"But the problem is worse now" he continued. "Far worse. There are beasts coming out of those mountains the like of which no one has ever seen before. And they don't kill

the occasional cow. They kill herds of cattle. They kill any humans foolish enough to wander around after dark. And recently they attacked some farms and killed the people in their houses."

"And you did ... what?" Sorcet said.

"I have reinforced the garrison at Wali Tera. That's a small fort at the end of the road out there, in the shadow of those mountains."

"So what is the problem now?" Sorcet said.

"The problem is that I want those mountains cleared out, once and for all. I've sent in patrols to reconnoiter. I've asked Araket Leonine Voiten EastHolme to join with me. His EastHolme army can penetrate those mountains from the northeast while I go in by the northwest. But so far he has delayed.

"What did the patrols you sent report?" Sorcet asked.

"Nothing," Merank said. "They never returned. That's why I thought of you."

"I am flattered. What can I do that an armed patrol cannot?"

"You were able — you and your taidar — to sneak into and out of Barakis City when Gron Gaius Greybeard Barakis and his Redcoats ruled here. I never knew how you did that. But now perhaps you can work your magic and sneak into that mountain fastness and bring back some useful information for me."

Sorcet turned to look over his shoulder. "Tachi?" she said. "May we tell him?"

"No, my liege. We may not." In fact Tachi had cross-trained with the Shadow Guild and it was they who smuggled him and Sorcet and Leafe out of Barakis City while the Redcoats were frantically searching the streets above for them, and then got them back into the city when they were ready to help Merank seize power. The Shadow Guild lived beneath the human cities and profited by thievery, murder, stealth and silence. Any mention aloud of the Shadow Guild's existence was a death sentence for any member.

"I can say this," Tachi told Merank. "The resources we had available to us inside this city will not be of use out there, in those mountains."

Merank considered this a moment. "And here I had thought that you, Tachi, was almost a Gray Guild magicker yourself. Now you tell me you're only human."

"Sir, none of us, Sorcet, Leafe, or me, are human."

"Well, you are. Leafe there is a forest sylph. Sorcet is ... something. I know not what. But you're human."

"I am not of Tessene, any more than Sorcet is," Tachi said.

"Even so, you people must be of some use to me in this. I would pay the Gray Guild well for any service you are able to render."

"Let me think on that and confer with the local Gray Guild guildmaster," Sorcet said. Tachi glanced down at the back of Sorcet's head but said nothing.

They took their leave of Merank and walked to a nearby inn. Tachi, as senior taidar, negotiated for several rooms and they took cushions at a table in the dining hall and ate a late supper. The well-trained fert, Spots, lay quietly behind Leafe and ate some meat from a large bowl.

"You didn't tell Merank that we had come here with the intent of going on to Mount Orboros," Tachi said to Sorcet.

"I did not. I had not realized that I could, possibly, gain some allies here. This could be useful to me. I wanted time to think and so prevaricated with Merank."

"Were you planning to discuss with the local Gray Guild?"

"No. It was simply the first good excuse that came to mind. I knew that would make sense to Merank. He lives in a world of orderliness, of rankings."

"Clever. Quick thinking, Boss."

"So what do you think, Tachi?"

"I think you're the deru and I'm the taidar. Boss."

"Come, come. You are never hesitant to toss out an opinion. I have come to rely upon your judgment."

"All right. I think we should try the same trick we used on the Firestone Portal. Go in behind an entire army. Let them do all the dirty work and then we do our thing off to one side."

"We did much the same thing here," Leafe said. "Helped Merank overthrow the previous eparch and while he was cleaning up the mess in the palace, we went into the cavern beneath and closed the Emeraldstone Portal."

"Which I don't actually recall," Tachi said.

"You were dying on the floor," Leafe said.

"There is one major flaw in your logic, Tachi," Sorcet said. "We knew where the Firestone Portal was. We had a willing army with maps of the stinger hive. And there was no magicker helping the stingers with their defense."

"There was one at Wadi Than," Leafe said. "Haptor, the renegade kaiphon. And we killed him."

"Barely," Tachi said. "Spots got to him first because Haptor's mind-spells didn't work on a fert. Then I helped. Sorcet gave him his death. It took three of us."

"But he's gone. There won't be any kaiphon at Mount Orboros," Leafe said.

"No. There will be something else," Tachi said. "I don't know who or what. But even Haptor worked for someone else. Some thing else. Am I right, Boss?"

Sorcet nodded. "There is some ... power behind all this. There is no obvious reason for Haptor to have needed to kill Tachi. He was probably following orders."

"Too bad you didn't hold him down and read his mind, boss," Tachi said, "Instead of sticking Frost into his chest."

"No time for that. He had to die swiftly, while he was confused and overwhelmed. Given a moment to cast a final spell he would have killed us all, probably killed everyone in that cavern."

Chapter 5

They stayed two days to rest in Barakis City. Sorcet, Tachi reflected, had, in the time he had known her, grown more considerate of her feet and those of her taidar. Where she once insisted on a three-march day — about thirty miles of walking — without the slightest apparent regard for herself or for them, now she usually did only two marches and she was even willing to stay a day in some town to rest at an inn. Or, Tachi thought, she was just getting lazy and wanted to drink more ale.

On the eleventh day of the Time of Kalin they left the southeast gate of Barakis City and took a stone-paved road through farmlands that, in two days, gave way to groves and then to forests. By the third day the paved road had become a narrow track suited only to sure-footed yamas and they were climbing hills. On the late afternoon of the fourth day they were in mountains and ahead, at the top of a pass, they could see the fort at Wali Tera.

Tachi had spent time at Iron Keep, the fortress separating Mangoon and EastHolme lands and was expecting much the same here. But Wali Tera was small, with a small garrison, built on an outcropping that looked west towards civilization, humans, and Barakis lands, and east to more mountains, thick forests with unknown dangerous things roaming therein, and fear. There was no path leading east, Tachi learned; there wasn't even an east gate to the fort because no one ever dared to go out that way.

Passon Gaer started shaking his head before Sorcet finished telling him why she was there. Commander Gaer was a grizzled veteran soldier who had stayed on in the Barakis army when it had been rebuilt after the recent coup and now he commanded this small stone fort. He was on the tall side for human males here, nearly five feet, eight inches — though humans on Tessene didn't use those measurements — gray-haired with a gray beard to match, and a scar across his face from side to side and over his nose to add interest.

"Nobody goes out there," he said. He was standing on the wall looking at the forest and mountains to the East. Sorcet, Tachi, Leafe and Spots stood beside him. Below them, the forest was cleared back a bowshot-distance and the ground cover was only low shrubs.

"They mostly stay away from us, from our walls. But sometimes, late at night, we can hear the howling. The screaming is even worse."

"They?" Tachi said. "Who or what is 'they'?"

"I usually don't know. There seem to be some things that walk on six legs. Look like calcors — those big reptiles you get in the swamps and marshes."

Tachi nodded. "I have met a few calcors."

"Once only I saw something like a giant spider. Had a lot of legs anyway. My height. Body big as a man but more shaped like a ball. With the legs."

"And you thought it might be dangerous?" Tachi said. "Do you have any proof that these things really are that bad?"

Gaer turned from the view and looked at Tachi a long moment. "We have, in the past — this was before my time here, so I only have the reports — they sent out patrols into that horror."

"We heard about that," Sorcet said. "None came back, we were told."

"Well, some came back. Sometimes. But losses were heavy. The survivors reported being attacked by the six-legged things, the spiders, and more. And worse. Sometimes, indeed, nobody came back at all.

"I had thought, from some readings I did," Tachi said, "that there were also people out there. Humans, bandits, renegades."

Gaer smiled. "There used to be. They're all gone now."

"They were killed by the beasts?"

Gaer nodded. He pointed. "Out there, humans are just food. Back then we had a sally port, a small door, in this wall." Gaer thumped his fist on the top of the crenel beside him. "Eventually we gave up on sending out patrols and walled in the door.

"We sent a few patrols out recently, because the eparch so ordered. Foolishness. We had to rope them down to the ground from here. They never came back. You want to go out there, you had best know how to fly."

Leafe peered over the edge of the crenel. "Maybe a ladder?" she said.

"Gaer shook his head. "That's forty feet, lass. I suppose you can use our rope. That's how we put over workmen to clear out any new-growth trees too close to the walls. But it would be suicide to go out there."

"Suicide is my middle name," Tachi said.

Gaer smiled. "You have no middle name. You're a one-name commoner. Worse, you're a taidar, a slave to be sacrificed at her whim. Is that not right?"

"More or less.

"Might as well wear the copper collar," Gaer said. "It would be less lethal."

"My liege, what is your pleasure," Tachi said to Sorcet.

"We go. Tomorrow night."

Gaer shook his head. "Not at night, surely. You would be adding blindness to the danger."

"Leafe, here is not blind at night," Sorcet said. "She is sylphen. And I can sense things equally well, day or night. Tachi knows the downcast from when he apprenticed at a guild-not-to-be-named."

Gaer looked sharply at Tachi. "You were in the ...

"Don't say it," Tachi said. "I don't want to have to kill you."

"By Mathris' eyes," Gaer said. "That guild kills at night. But, then, so do the ... things ... down there in those trees. Up on those mountains."

Sorcet nodded. "So will we. And if we leave here at night we have at least a chance of not being observed coming down the rope and crossing yon field to get to the trees."

"Well, it's your funeral," Gaer said. "Assuming we have any bodies left to bury."

"You know Commander," Tachi said, "you're a rather cheerful fellow, once we get to know you."

— end sample —