

# UNDERCOVER MAGE

BOOK ONE OF THE MAGE AND THE BIRD CALLER

KAAREN SUTCLIFFE

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To every reader, thank you. Enjoy the story, and I hope you have as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

*Kaaren Sutcliffe, AE*

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### *Axis*

Everand	Mage, spy, member of the Mages' Guild
Mantiss	Mage, Head of the Mages' Guild
Agamid	Senior Mage, assistant to Mantiss
Beetal	Deceased, Mage and former mentor to Everand
Tiliqua	Mage, daughter of Mantiss
Pelamis	Mage, member of the Inner Council

### *Riverfall*

*Dragon boat team (glide\*, paddlers 1 to 10, drummer)*

Tengar, Melanite, Mookaite, Selenite, Kunzite, Zeol, Persaj, Zink, Acim, Ybur, Beram, Micate

Atage	Town leader
Ejad	Reserve paddler — cloth maker
Lyber	Town second-in-charge
Thulite	Atage's wife
Vogel	Old man, historian
Mizuchi	River dragon
Mizukaze	River dragon

### *Riverplain*

*Dragon boat team (glide, paddlers 1 to 10, drummer)*

Lamiya, Lazuli, Larimar, Laza, Lopa, Levog, Lattic, Lapsi, Lepid, Luvu, Ejad, Lulite

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\* In modern day paddling, the steersperson is usually called the 'sweep' or the 'steer'. I found a reference to a 'glide' somewhere, and felt it suited the fantasy terminology. The two lead paddlers are often called 'strokes' as well as 'pacers'.

***Riversea***

*Dragon boat team (glide, paddlers 1 to 10, drummer)*

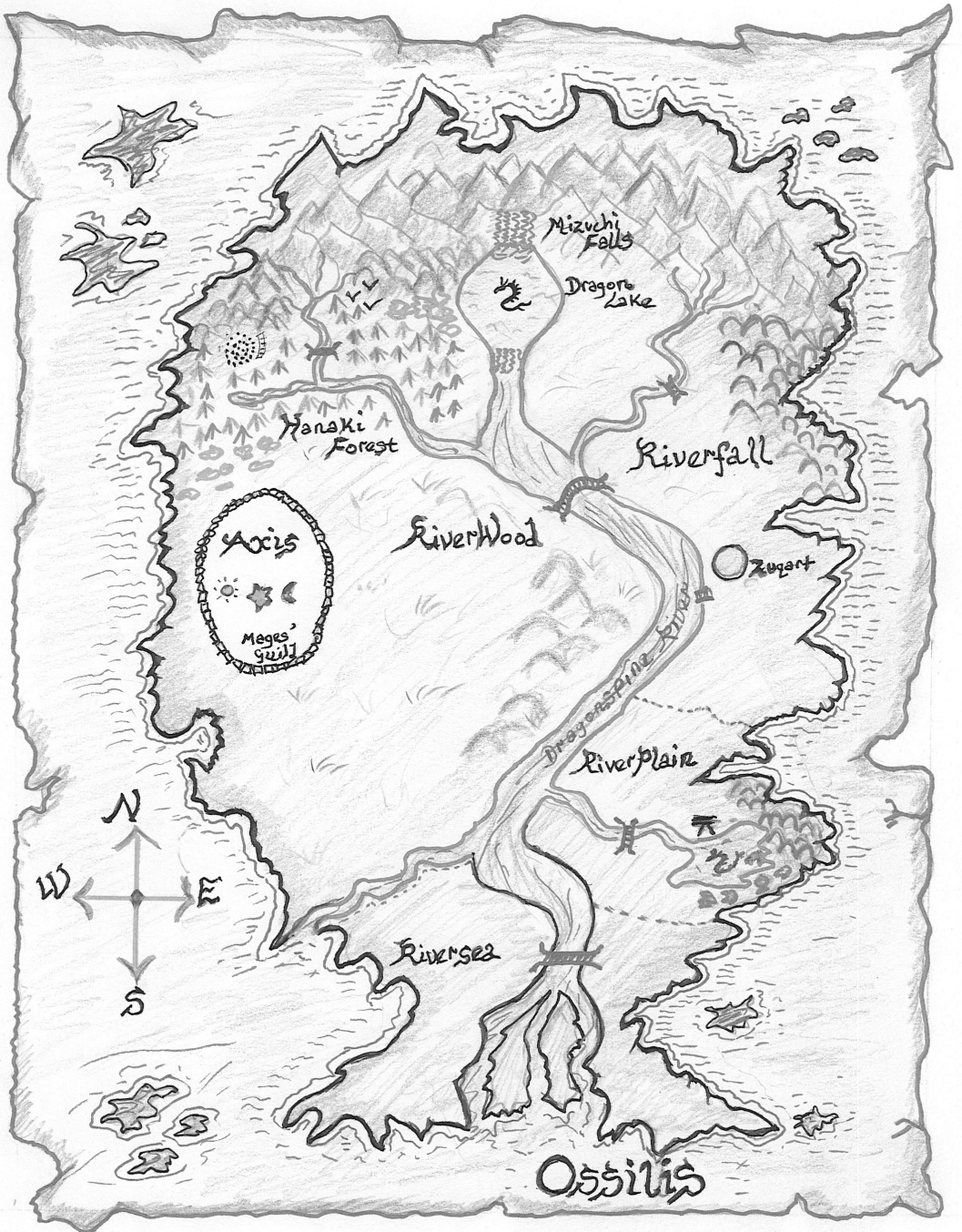
Cowie, Conch, Chiton, Limpel, Clommus, Summel, Pippel,  
Spirula, Charonia, Clama, Nawpra, Chella

***Riverwood***

*Dragon boat team (glide, paddlers 1 to 10, drummer)*

Malach, Torrap, Magle, Mahog, Kwah, Tiek, Perid, Melan,  
Meralb, Kerish, Folnak, Yosper

# THE ISLAND OF OSSILIS







## PROLOGUE

The shadow of an eagle darted across the lake, trailed by echoes of the bird's shrill cries.

The river dragon pushed off the lake bed, clouds of mud swirling around his legs and ripples eddying in his wake. A shoal of red and silver fish flashed past his nostrils.

Submerged, the dragon coasted with the current as the eagle's shadow skimmed to the western shore. He glided under the churning, cascading ribbons of the waterfall to observe the shore. The fading light stretched shadows from the line of trees behind the beach and silhouetted the man standing there, the eagle now perched upon his shoulder. What did this man want? He'd come several times to stand at the lake's edge and stare at the water. The man raised his arms, dislodging the eagle, and his feathered cloak slipped back over strong, muscled shoulders.

The dragon felt a beckoning nudge, a suggestion to approach, bump against his chest. Was that supposed to be a magical summons? His mother had warned him, over and over, not to trust people who held magical power. He ignored the nudge. After a pause, the man dropped his arms. Amused, the dragon blew bubbles through his nostrils.

The man produced a bag from behind his back and walked along the edge of the water, placing items at intervals. The eagle hopped behind, inspecting the fare. The dragon's ears pricked. An offering? For him? On this western shore? When he was a weanling dragon, people had come to the eastern shore to leave

piles of fresh fish and sweet things for his mother. She had liked those people who came with laughter and children, telling him they were good people who needed rain to grow their crops. She told him stories of the early days, of when these people without any hint of magical power had first arrived. They had raced boats across the lake to play with her, beating glorious drums. Those people, she said, could be trusted.

Age finally claimed her, and his mother's bones now lay in glistening white arches in the centre of the lake. Irritation coursed through the dragon. Not once had people brought offerings for him, on either shore. Feeling discarded and grumpy, the dragon thrashed his tail.

The eagle screeched and the man stopped what he was doing and stared directly at where the dragon lay submerged. Again, the man raised his arms and the whispering nudge skimmed across the water. Why did this man call him, without ceremony and with meagre offerings? Where were the boats and drums his mother had spoken of? This man had power, weak though it was. The dragon reversed under the gurgling waterfall.

The man stood staring for a long time in the fading light. The dragon stared back. Once, many seasons before, an older man clad in brown robes and reeking of magic had tried to coax him. The strength in *that* summons had been difficult to resist, but the dragon had avoided the powerful call by diving deep under the waterfall. Was this man the lanky boy who'd come with the robed man? Was this weak nudge the best he could do? The dragon snorted clouds of bubbles.

Darkness fell, the tree shadows reached for the water's edge and the man walked away, soon swallowed by the trees.

When silver moonlight danced in dainty steps across the lake, the dragon slid out from the waterfall and swam to the beach. As he surfaced, silver wraiths of glistening mist rose around him. He waded out of the water and crunched across the pebbles. Reaching the items strewn along the stones, he lifted

his head and, on detecting no lurking presence in the dark trees, clawed his way to the first item.

Lowering his head, he sniffed at a large, white-scaled fish, its glassy eye glinting back at the moon. He pushed it with his nose and a tingling sensation zinged into his whiskers and nostrils. He shook his head, but the tingles lingered. Riding the scents of the fish, an acrid taste crept along his tongue. Something was not right. The offering was a trick.

The dragon clawed over the pebbles to the next item, a decent sized bird, black eyes open and beak agape. A bitter aroma hovered over the bird's carcass. Not a spice — a potion. Poison? A stronger lure? His mother was right; these devious people with power were to be avoided. No matter what they wanted.

Disappointed, the dragon shifted his weight to his haunches. Having the little people with no magic come with laughter and offerings, respect and company would be welcome. He wanted to race a boat and hear the drum. Fury rising, he swished his tail, scattering pebbles with a clatter. Deep in his chest he growled at the cold disc of the moon. Mother had told him that after the little people raced their boats to ask for harvest rains, she'd melt the snow and conjure bulging clouds to drench the crops. As she had taught, he did this every season when the leaves budded. Without any company or races.

He roared. After this deceit the tricky man and all the little people could wait and wait for their rain.

Forever.

## CHAPTER ONE

Everand woke abruptly and lay blinking; his room was still shrouded in darkness except for the pale light fingering the windowsill. The communication horn on his desk chimed. Was that what woke him? The horn chimed again and he sat up. A summons in the dark? His warm blanket beckoned, but perhaps something had happened. Reluctantly, he rose and padded across the marble floor to his desk.

‘Everand?’ Mage Agamid’s voice came through the horn. ‘Come to the Great Hall. Mantiss and I are waiting. Hurry.’

Any questions died: something *must* have happened. ‘On my way.’ Hastily, he changed into his azure robe and laced on his favourite sandals. He took two steps towards the door and turned around. He should feed Mizu in case this impromptu meeting ran into the formal council one scheduled for just after breakfast. Weak primrose light from the arched window stole into the fish tank and his steps faltered. No bubbles, no flashes of white and red, no swish of a fan-shaped tail. His fish was floating on the surface on her side.

He leaned his hands on the sides of the tank, his breath forming patches of mist on the glass. *No, no, no.* Mizu was fine last dusk, gobbling her meal of ant eggs and warbling bubbles at him. Perhaps she was playing a new trick on him instead of hiding underneath the yellow lily pad. On tiptoe, he opened the lid of the tall tank.

Another chime reverberated, echoing off the marble walls. He frowned; Mage Mantiss was not usually so insistent. The echoes of a further chime mingled discordantly with the previous ones and his heart raced. What was going on? Shifting his grip on the lid, he spread his fingers above the immobile fish and murmured a spell of stasis. His heart skipped a beat when Mizu's fan-shaped tail twitched. The water in the tank turned to a clear gel, and Mizu's body straightened and stiffened. This would have to do for now.

Hurrying out the door, he created a small orb of light and jogged along the corridor of the circular building. His forehead twinged. What could have happened to make the Head of the Guild and the second most senior mage summon him in the dark? The corridors and stairwells were empty, and the slapping of his sandals on the tiles bounced eerie echoes off the walls. Had no-one else been summoned? Or was he late and they were already all there? He trotted down the final winding staircase to the lower level.

Halfway across the crushed pebble path that led to the administration building, he glanced up at the gold emblem displayed above the entrance. The sun and crescent moon with a star hung between them glinted in the pre-dawn light. The motif reflected the motto of the Mages' Guild to protect during the light and the dark, their power augmented from time to time by the magical star-shaped stone. He slowed to take more measured strides.

An urgent meeting hadn't been called for seven seasons, not since the full-scale battle to contain the ambitious Mage Beetal. The treacherous mage, his former mentor, had tried to wrest control from the Guild through an army of winged dragons that he had discovered on another world. Everand's pulse quickened. The battle was an epic moment in Guild history, and he'd played a large part in uncovering the mage's plans! Pride trickled through him. He squashed this warm

feeling before it triggered memories of Elemar. That was then, this was now.

Shadow encasing him, he hurried up the broad, lacquered steps to the Great Hall and passed through the ornate wooden doors. His footsteps muted while he crossed the large silk rug. He glanced down at the woven images of the Last Great Battle of two generations earlier, admiring the bold mages who fought from astride their gigantic, armoured battle insects. Would Mage Mantiss commission a new rug to show the more recent battle with Mage Beetal?

Two generations of peace had passed between those two battles, and yet he was being summoned to an urgent meeting already, only a handful of seasons since the second one. Energy seeped into the soles of his feet as he mounted the steps to the wooden dais — and stopped dead.

Forcing his eyes away from the strangely clad figure sitting at the table, Everand bowed to Mage Mantiss, Head of the Mages' Guild, seated at the head of the table.

'Good of you to come so promptly.' Mage Mantiss stood with a rustle of his green silk robe and reached out to grasp Everand's hands.

Agamid, clad in his signature purple robe, stood and nodded a greeting.

Everand bowed again and then looked at the vacant seats around the large oval table. The dark mahogany gleamed softly, the matching wooden-backed chairs all tucked in neatly. So, this was an emergency meeting of three, and not one of the Inner Council of Ten. Agamid waved a hand and the enormous doors creaked closed, the locks sliding into place with ominous clicks. He swallowed: a clandestine meeting.

Everand sat in his customary chair, which placed him directly opposite the stranger. Was this man one of the non-mage humans who lived in Axis who'd committed a crime? Or — unease trickled into him — was the man from elsewhere and

there'd been another breach in the wardspell? The last breach was when Elemar and her flying horse fell through it, alerting the Guild that a rift had been created. His previous mission had been to find out by whom and why. He looked to Mantiss for elaboration. Both senior mages appeared unsettled, their foreheads creased and shoulders tensed.

Agamid spoke, his hazel eyes troubled. 'Now you're here, we will question this man, who I found at the edge of the granite wall. We'd value your views, given you've had more interaction with outsiders.'

Everand assumed Agamid was referring to the time he'd spent with Elemar and her warrior friends. Reporting covertly to Mantiss, he had first unravelled how they got into Axis, and then pieced together a timeline of Mage Beetal's traitorous actions. It had taken much effort and considerable patience because Elemar's primitive lifestyle, values and concepts were so different, and she didn't speak Ossilian.

He eyed the man seated opposite him now: he sensed no power, so he was not mage-born, and the clothes were different to those worn by the humans who worked for the Guild. The man was covered in grime and dried sweat, suggesting he had travelled.

'Perhaps you could start at the beginning,' he said. 'How did you know he was there?'

Mantiss waved a robed arm at Agamid, who spoke steadily. 'The alarm to the wardspell sounded several times just as the moon was waning. Mantiss sent me to investigate the sounds, which came from a little way south of the Guild, on the eastern side of the granite wall.'

Everand looked across the table. The man was swallowing repeatedly and clenching his fingers, but listening as if he could follow their discussion. 'Can you understand us?'

The man gulped, briefly met his eyes, and nodded.

So, the man was from nearby and not from another world, like Elemar had been. ‘Do you mind if I ask him a few questions?’ Both senior mages waved assent, looking relieved. Trying to keep his face relaxed and not too stern, Everand asked the man, ‘Where have you come from? Do you have a name?’

‘Riverfall. Beram.’ The man spoke with a lilting accent.

Everand frowned. Was one a place and the other a name? ‘You came from Riverfall and your name is Beram?’ When the man nodded sharply, he asked, ‘Why?’

‘We need help.’ Beram fidgeted, struggling to find words.

Mage Mantiss leaned forward, his green eyes stern and wispy silver beard projecting sharply. ‘While the Mages’ Guild is aware of the riverland provinces to our east, we do not interact, having no need to trade or mingle.’ Mantiss drew a breath. ‘In this light, your request will need to be most compelling.’

Agamid leaned on the table with a rustle of his purple sleeves, and said, ‘We must consider carefully. The Guild does not meddle in the affairs of others.’

‘Agreed, this could ...’ Mantiss scouted for the right word, ‘this could establish future expectations.’

Everand raised an eyebrow when Mantiss clamped his mouth shut and steepled his fingers, and Agamid leaned back in his chair. He considered Beram’s clothing of a rough cotton tunic and comfortable-looking trousers. The man looked harmless enough, but why bring him to the Guild if they had no intention of helping him? Motes of dust hovered above the table in the early light, as if they, too, awaited direction.

His thoughts clustered like butterflies. Why summon just him and not convene the Inner Council of Ten, or the full Outer Council of Twenty? Last time an outsider arrived, it had heralded a plot that nearly unravelled them all. There was an odd undercurrent to this meeting. Last time, he’d reported only to Mage Mantiss, but now it seemed Mage Agamid was fully



involved. What did this signify? And what did the senior mages expect him to do?

‘Perhaps Beram could outline the problem?’ he proposed, given that the oddly reticent senior mages seemed at least prepared to hear what the man had to say.

Mantiss waved a hand at Beram, inviting him to speak.

‘I come from Riverfall, the province to the north-east. Our town sits on the banks of Dragonspine River.’

Everand cast a sideways glance at Mage Mantiss when his master suddenly sat straighter. Was that information important?

Beram rubbed a hand over his chin, which was covered in bristly stubble smeared with dust and grime. ‘We’re a farming and water people. We rely on the river.’

Concentrating to make sure he understood properly given the man’s lilting accent, Everand nodded to show he was following so far. This all seemed tranquil, the nature of the issue difficult to predict.

‘The river traverses four provinces and all of us use it.’

Everand held up a hand. ‘Where does the river start, and finish?’

‘The origins are in the mountain range above our province. In cold-season the mountains are ice-bound, and the growing-season melt helps renew the flow. Good rainfall helps.’ Beram’s jaw tightened.

‘And the far end?’ prompted Everand.

‘The far end reaches the sea, in Riversea. In between, the river meanders, covering much land, and its tributaries mark the province boundaries.’

Everand flexed his fingers and glanced at Mantiss. No guidance there; Mantiss’ face was unreadable. ‘I don’t understand the problem, though.’

Beram’s face flushed and he twisted his hands together. ‘The last five seasons have been dry, with not a single drop of rain. The river runs lower in its banks and the tributaries

are becoming shallow. With no rain in sight, we try to use less water.’

Everand slid his glance to Mantiss, who remained impassive. He cast his mind back over the past few seasons. Perhaps there had been an unusual amount of blue sky and sunshine, but that hadn’t affected the mages, who relied on an eternal underground spring for their water.

Beram’s face grew a deeper red and he plucked at the hem of his tunic. ‘If it doesn’t rain before the harvest, tensions may develop. Just as we’re trying to forge closer relations and begin trade among the four provinces.’

Agamid raised an eyebrow and murmured, ‘There are now four provinces?’ He exchanged a look with Mantiss.

Everand frowned. How did this involve the Mages’ Guild? Did the province people want the Guild to make it rain or to magically increase the water in the river? He sat back. *Could* the mages even achieve this? No, because mages are not allowed outside the granite wall. Ah. *This* was why Mantiss hadn’t summoned a full council! To help Beram and his people in any way would require a breach of Guild Laws. And if interaction *was* commenced, the notion of exercising power over the provinces would be too tempting for some.

Already, some of the younger mages were expressing frustration with the limitations of their duties. Over the last few meetings, Pelamis and Simoselaps in particular had pushed Mantiss, arguing for a broadening of their research and access to more power.

Everand drummed his fingers on the table, thinking hard. That kind of argument was precisely how Mage Beetal had shown his early ambitions — and the same pattern was recorded in the annals about Mage Thrip, the ambitious mage from two generations earlier. Twice, history had shown the Guild the danger of the allure of power. Twice, mages who had travelled outside the granite wall and breached the wardspell had

wreaked havoc. Guild assistance to the river provinces could generate ... yes, expectations was a good word. *Expectations. Responsibility. Change.*

Everand leaned back heavily, feeling the support of the wooden chair across his shoulderblades. That still didn't explain why they had collected Beram in the first place. What could *he* do? His specialty was sleuthing information. He frowned. He was also the only mage who had already breached Guild Rule Nine. In order to collect evidence against Mage Beetal he had, with Mantiss' sanction, travelled through the rift to Elemar's world with his treacherous mentor. Was this what Mantiss wanted? Information and an eye into what was happening beyond the granite wall?

Leaning forward, Everand asked Beram, 'How long did it take you to get here?' Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mage Mantiss' subtle smile.

Beram grimaced. 'On foot it took me two full suns, with no rest.'

'Why come to Axis? Who knows you are here?' asked Everand.

'Two others know of my journey, made at their request.'

Everand arched an eyebrow. For someone who supposedly needed help, the man was not very forthcoming. 'Because?'

'Because?' Beram tensed in his chair.

'Because,' repeated Everand, 'only two others know because?'

An interesting shade of mottled crimson spread up Beram's neck and seeped into his face. While waiting for an answer, Everand guessed that Beram was about his own age of twenty-six. He looked fit, muscled, strong, even for a farmer.

'We don't know who we can trust,' blurted Beram.

Everand glanced at Mantiss, who gave approval to continue the line of questions. Resting his hands lightly on the table, Everand asked, 'What do you fear will happen?'

‘Someone is attacking us. We don’t know what to do.’ Beram’s hands trembled and he clasped them together in front of him. ‘We find irrigation trenches blocked. Crops crushed by rocks.’ A sweat formed on his brow and his eyes turned a deeper shade of grey. ‘The sun before my journey, large moths attacked the town and there was an explosion in the marketplace. A trading table was destroyed and three people were injured, including a child.’ Beram stopped with a gulp.

Realising the background sound was coming from his fingers drumming on the table, Everand made them still. ‘And you’ve no idea who is responsible?’

Beram looked directly into his eyes. ‘In eight suns we’ll hold the festival of the Full Harvest Sun. We’ve invited the other three provinces to join us. There’ll be trade markets and boat races. Negotiators from each province will discuss the possibility of regular trade. We must find out who’s doing this and stop them. In case ...’ Beram’s eyes pleaded. ‘I was asked to come to the Guild. We had nowhere else to turn.’

Agamid held up a finger. ‘You risked death by approaching the granite wall. Did you not know this?’

Beram squared his shoulders. ‘Yes. But so much is at risk, I volunteered.’

Everand warmed to the man. He was brave, like Elemar and her people. ‘How did you survive the wall?’

Beram shrugged. ‘I threw rocks at it and saw the red crackles as they exploded. I figured someone would notice.’ He frowned. ‘I was more scared when the mage arrived with his enormous beetle.’

Impressed by the simple ingenuity, Everand repressed his smile, noting the annoyed thinning of both Mantiss’ and Agamid’s lips. Many thoughts rushed at him, but one stood out. ‘You need to know why,’ he said. When the others stared at him, he cleared his throat. ‘You need to know why, otherwise you can’t reason with them even if you do find out who it is.’

Mantiss placed his arms on the table, his green eyes intent. ‘What do you propose?’

Everand closed his eyes. Mantiss was hoping he would spy for him again. With a deadline of seven suns and in an unfamiliar environment. Now they’d brought Beram to the Guild they could hardly just send the man away again, or kill him. A subtle warning wriggled in his gut; there had to be more to this. But Mantiss was relying on him! His heartrate lifted. The meetings of the Inner Council of Ten were not *that* interesting. The boat races sounded intriguing and he’d never seen a boat, not in inland Axis. A new mission held appeal.

Everand looked at Mantiss. ‘I will go. If you wish it.’

A look of relief crossed Mantiss’ face and he glanced at Agamid, who dipped his head almost imperceptibly.

They had wanted him to offer! The warning in his gut squirmed again. Did they know something else or want more than was being stated?

Beram’s mouth dropped open and he addressed Mantiss. ‘How will that help?’

Mantiss made a chopping motion with a hand. ‘We need more information and Everand is a master at this.’ When Beram opened his mouth again, Mantiss held up a firm hand. ‘Out of instinct you kept your mission here secret. Let’s keep it that way and aim for less violence, not more.’

Everand stood up when Mantiss rose and came around the corner of the table to grasp both of his hands.

‘Everand, my son, your loyalty is beyond bounds.’ Mantiss raised an eyebrow in query. ‘You can disguise yourself? There must be *no* hint of the Guild’s involvement, *none* whatsoever. Find out who and why, and prevent more attacks if you can.’

Agamid stood too. Then he reached down beside his chair and retrieved a rolled-up parchment, which he placed on the table and rolled out.

Everand held down the corner nearest him, immediately seeing it was a map of the large island of Ossilis. It depicted the Guild in Axis surrounded by the protective granite wall. The coast was close-by to the west, grasslands stretched east and south, and to the north were dense forests and then mountains. His neck prickled: how did Agamid know they'd need the map? Exactly *when* had Beram been found? Questions clustered in his throat, but before he could ask any the council summons chimed rang out loud and clear, reverberating across the Great Hall.

Agamid scowled and said briskly to Beram, 'Where is your town?'

Beram gaped at Agamid, confused by the rapid onset of action.

Mantiss leaned on the table for support, and looked sharply at Everand. 'I need your eyes on this. In accordance with Guild Law, no other mage has been outside the wall for three hundred cycles, except for Mage Thrip and Mage Beetal, and they are dead. You are the only mage alive who has been out, and sanctioned to do so. If the provinces around us are growing and now interacting we need to know more. Solve this issue and find out all you can about them in the seven suns.'

Everand hesitated, towering over his master. Mantiss looked disturbed and a tad subdued. Who had sounded the council summons? Mantiss called him 'son' and had covertly coached him in stealth and advanced magic since he was twelve, but what exactly was the *this* his master alluded to? Perhaps Mantiss intended to provide additional information in secret later. Swallowing, he pushed his concerns aside. 'Yes, master, of course I'll go, and I will be discreet.'

Agamid interrupted. 'We're taking far too long! We must send Everand right now, otherwise we'll have to consult with the council.'

Pulse racing, Everand stared at Agamid, who did not usually tell Mantiss what to do.

Mantiss turned to Beram. ‘Mage Agamid will take you back to our border unseen and let you through the wardspell. From there you must make your way home on foot so others don’t know of your contact with us.’ Mantiss then regarded Everand, the green hues in his eyes reflecting myriad emotions. ‘Everand will go by magic now. Who are the two people he can trust?’

Everand’s mind churned. He felt like a small stone in the strategy board game they had played when he was younger. Did he really mean *now*? Wait, what about Mizu?

Agamid jerked his head at the unfurled map, holding it open with wide-spread hands. ‘Quick man, point to a good location.’

Everand frowned, watching Beram lean forward, scan the map, trace a finger along a blue line that represented the river, which did indeed twist and turn, traversing the length of the map. It looked almost like a large lizard with tributaries for legs and arms.

Beram looked at Agamid, his brow furrowed. ‘This is an old map? The provinces are not marked?’

‘Hurry, man!’ snapped Agamid. ‘You must know where you live in relation to the river!’

Beram gulped, looked down and then stabbed his finger about halfway down the map on a grassy area next to a point where the river meandered in a curve to the right.

‘Everand,’ Mantiss swung his gaze to him. ‘I regret the haste ...’

*Wait!* Mantiss and Agamid were preparing the spell of translocation! Were there no more instructions? How would he communicate what he found out? What about Mizu? How would he get back?

Footsteps echoed on the steps and the locked door handle rattled. Alarmed, Everand watched Mantiss stretch one hand towards the river on the map and direct his other hand, palm

up, at him. Agamid directed both hands, palms up, at him. Their mouths moved in harmony as they intoned the spell and the Great Hall began to shimmer around him. ‘The two names?’ he gasped.

Through a tunnel of swirling grey and white, tinged with auras of green and purple of Mantiss’ and Agamid’s signature colours, Everand heard Beram gasp what sounded like, ‘Grrr’ or maybe ‘Brrr’.

The Great Hall vanished in a shimmering grey light, dissipating into a perception that he was weightless and surrounded by pale-blue sky. Cold air ruffled past him. Abruptly, he hung suspended but on opening his eyes saw only pale sky. He was cold and his arm wouldn’t move to reach out in front of him. His robe flapped and the air around the hem sparked and crackled with red warning energy; he’d reached the wardspell. He drew in a breath as lines of purple energy spread in front of him, tracing a doorway — Agamid, parting the wardspell. An invisible force butted his back, shoving him through.

Excitement trickled into him. Breaking Guild Rule Nine without the authority of the Head of the Guild was punishable by obliteration. And here he was with a new mission and the sanctioned opportunity to explore! Pale-blue air glimmered all around, and more cold air buffeted him. Everand flexed his fingers, gathering power and energy for whatever would happen next.

A ribbon of blue-green hue rushed towards him.