

# FUGITIVE MAGE

BOOK TWO OF THE MAGE AND THE BIRD CALLER

KAAREN SUTCLIFFE

Copyright © 2023 (Kaaren Sutcliffe)  
All rights reserved worldwide.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

Publisher: Inspiring Publishers,  
P.O. Box 159, Calwell, ACT Australia 2905  
Email: [publishaspg@gmail.com](mailto:publishaspg@gmail.com)  
<http://www.inspiringpublishers.com>



A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

National Library of Australia The Prepublication Data Service

Author: Kaaren Sutcliffe  
Title: Fugitive Mage  
Genre: Fiction

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-922792-60-0  
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-922792-61-7  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-922792-62-4

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who so kindly and professionally helped me, Everand and Lamiya on the journey. A huge thank you to my trusted readers who waded through early drafts, providing encouragement and constructive suggestions.

To AJ Collins, AE, and her gun assessor Liz, thank you for another insightful assessment that helped me to lift the story to another level. I remain eternally grateful to Gail Tagarro, AE, for another meticulous edit and for her further encouragement and support. I loved her comment about not wanting book two to end.

For the initiating inspiration, my thanks go to Nature Coast Dragon Boat Club, who took me training on the Moruya River and taught me to paddle. Nature Coast warrants a special cheer for hosting the wonderful launch of *Undercover Mage* with racing dragon boats and paddlers dressed in the Riverfall and Riverplain costumes! Thank you, paddlers from Narooma Blue Water Dragons and Sussex Inlet River Dragons for joining us to celebrate the launch. I encourage readers to take five minutes to watch the awesome video on my website, crafted by my talented brother-in-law and sister, Antonio and Phillipa Saraceno.

A huge hug for my husband Andrew for all his support, for cooking dinner, putting up with my spiritual absences and for sponsoring the matching bookmarks.

Once again, I thank the expert and tireless team at the Australian Self-Publishing Group for turning the story into another quality book that I am proud of.

Dear readers, I hope you enjoy the continuation of Mage Everand's twisted and not-so-simple mission, and the evolution of Lamiya into so much more than a caller of birds.

Finally, I hope the story does the sport of dragon boating justice and inspires some readers to give paddling a go.

*Kaaren Sutcliffe*, AE  
[www.kaarensutcliffe.com.au](http://www.kaarensutcliffe.com.au)

## 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
Simoselaps	Mage, member of the Inner Council
Saiphos	Mage, member of the Inner Council
Elemar	Warrior woman who Everand loved previously

### *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

---

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

### ***Riverplain***

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

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

### ***Riversea***

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

Cowrie, 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

## GUILD LAW — AS ESTABLISHED BY MAGE LAPEMIS

**Rule One** — The key purpose of the Guild is to enhance and refine the workings of magic, and to impart knowledge and training to younger mages as apprentices.

**Rule Two** — The Guild will be led by an elected Head of the Guild.

**Rule Three** — The Head of the Guild will be supported by an Inner Council and an Outer Council, member numbers to rise over time.

**Rule Four** — The Guild will work ‘to protect by sun and moon’ the mages of Axis and the humans who work with us.

**Rule Five** — The Head of the Guild has overall authority, and the code words to access the Staropal are to be known only by the incumbent Head of the Guild.

**Rule Six** — The Staropal will be concealed and only accessed in times of dire need, as decreed by the Head of the Guild and with agreement from the councils. The stone must be used for honest purpose and for the greater good.

**Rule Seven** — The humans who reside in Axis agree to work with and care for the physical needs of the mages, such as food, water, clothing and labour, in exchange for shelter and protection.

**Rule Eight** — Mages must only breed with other mages to keep the lines of magic pure. Accordingly, the humans of Axis must only breed with other humans.

**Rule Nine** — No mage or human shall pass outside the granite wall, unless ordered to do so by the Head of the Guild for special purpose.

**Rule Ten** — Others from outside Axis shall not be allowed inside the wall of granite, unless authorised by the Head of the Guild for special purpose.

**Rule Eleven** — Breaches of Guild Law will be judged by the Inner Council, with the final say by the Head of the Guild. Extreme digressions will be punished by obliteration or removal of power.

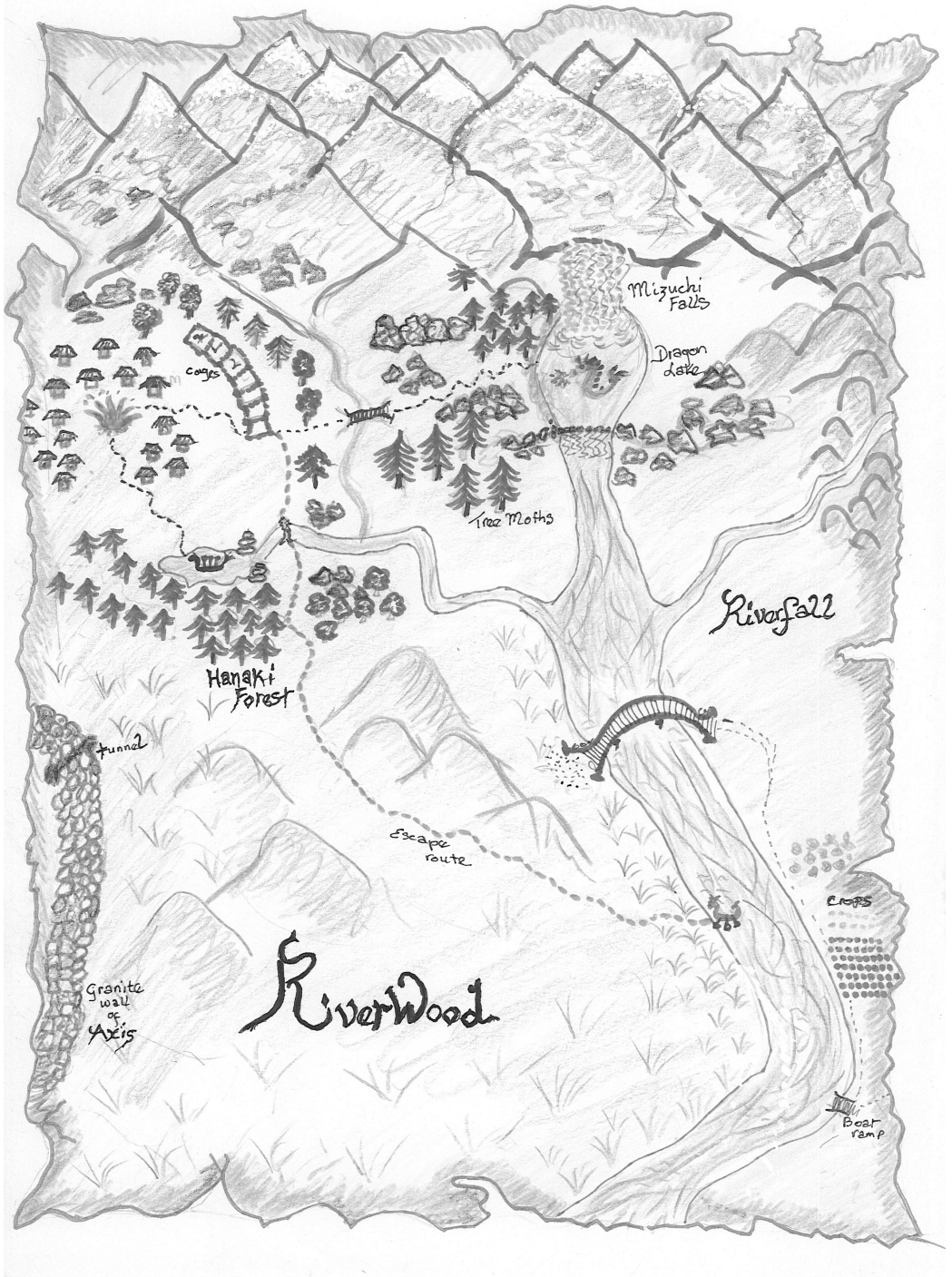
**Rule Twelve** — Mage power must only be used for sound purposes with honest intent. Use for personal ambition or evil intent constitutes a breach of the direst magnitude and will be punished in accordance with Rule Eleven.



# THE ISLAND OF OSSILIS



# RIVERWOOD PROVINCE



## PROLOGUE

‘Ow!’ Malach tried to bat his mother’s hand away.

‘Stand still. You must look neat.’ Her grip tightened until her fingers pinched his shoulder and she resumed dragging the comb through his knotted hair.

‘Why?’

‘You’re going to meet someone important.’

Scowling, Malach endured the rough drags of the comb through his hair. Who could be more important than his father, Chief of Riverwood? And why was she wearing her new dress of soft bunya skins? She also smelled nice, of orange blossom mixed with musk. Strange, when his father was away hunting, but he knew better than to ask.

‘That’ll do.’ His mother squinted at him. ‘Rinse your mouth and wash your face. Hurry.’

As soon as he spat out the water, his mother grabbed his hand and tugged him out of the cabin. Outside, she let go but glared at him to follow and walked away, taking the longest steps her dress would allow. He trotted to keep up, his spirits lifting when they passed through the outermost ring of stone and wood cabins and she strode towards the forest. Maybe he could climb trees while she met this important person, or lure a hawk to train as his own now that his arm was strong enough to hold such a bird.

His legs tiring, he trailed after his mother while she followed a narrow, crooked path among the towering pines, seemingly

intent on passing right through Hanaki Forest. Was she going to the far edge, to the massive granite wall that Father had strictly forbidden them from going near? Rumours told that anyone who went close to the wall would be engulfed in fiery red energy and die instantly. The skin on the back of his neck prickled.

‘Malach! Hurry!’ Pausing, his mother pulled an object from her dress pocket.

Creeping closer, Malach rubbed his eyes and looked at the oval stone that was glowing a deep red. A warning or a summons? Was this the stone she kept hidden in the jar of cakes? She’d smacked him once when he took it out and held it up. The tips of his fingers tingled with the memory of the odd static he’d felt in the stone.

Shoving the stone back in her pocket, his mother took his hand. ‘You must bow. Don’t speak unless spoken to. Understand?’

When he nodded, her eyes softened.

‘I want him to like you.’ Bending over, she stared into his face, her nose almost touching his and her warm, mint-leaf-scented breath huffing over his cheeks. ‘You’re going to learn a big secret. Promise me you’ll guard this secret with your life?’

A secret? He gave a solemn nod.

‘My brave boy.’ She patted his shoulder. ‘Now you’re old enough to learn, he may be interested in you.’ Her dress rustling, she spun around and resumed walking.

By the time they reached the final row of trees, his mouth was dry and his feet sore. The dark pines cradled the air above, filtering the light into dapples of fidgeting shade; the ground was spongy with pine needles. Breathing in the scents of earth, pine and fungi, Malach peered out at the flat expanse of wild grasses stretching away from the trees and waving in the breeze. The grasses abruptly ended at the base of the ominous storm-grey wall. For an age, his mother stood staring at the

wall, and Malach shifted his weight from side to side to ease the throbbing in his feet.

Something moved! His attention snapped to the bottom of the wall where it looked as if one of the rocks was rolling out into the grass. Heart racing, he stared hard while his mother patted her face with her hands and smoothed her dress. By the wall, something rose up and travelled towards them above the ground, but it was not a bird. His heart galloping, he frowned at the way his mother's lips parted and her eyes grew wide. That was the expression she wore when Father hauled her into their sleeping space.

Squinting at the approaching object, he saw it was a large black-and-white beetle, with a person riding it. His heart thumped. The beetle was massive! With fierce, jagged and curved horns. Malach swallowed. It must be awesome to ride. The tall rider was clad in brown robes, the face obscured by a hood.

'Don't stare,' mumbled his mother. 'Hold your tongue unless spoken to.'

Malach dropped his eyes, peeking through his eyelashes and listening to the hum of the beetle's wings as it landed on the grass. The brown-robed rider lifted a leg over the beetle's neck and slid down.

'Chinfe,' said a deep voice. 'Come.'

His mother stepped daintily towards the man and, after a heartbeat, Malach followed. He froze when the tall man stared at him, eyes glittering in a face in shadow.

'What is this?' the voice demanded.

Malach stopped, exposed amid the grasses, and glanced over his shoulder to judge how far it was back to the trees.

Approaching the imposing man, his mother slid her arms around his waist. 'This,' she said distinctly to the shrouded face, 'is your son. Now he's seven I thought you should meet him.'

The air whooshed out of Malach's chest. What was she talking about? Chief Magrin was his father. He would be the next leader of Riverwood when he grew up, and Father would train him. A roaring filled his ears. Then he understood the man was roaring.

'My son? What is this trickery?'

Mother's hand disappeared inside the cowl to caress the man's face. 'No trickery. He's yours.' Turning, she held her other hand out to him. 'Malach, come.'

Heart pounding, mouth dry, he hesitated. An invisible force buffeted him and in a single blink he stood in front of the man, looking up into a stern face glaring down at him. Squaring his shoulders, Malach stared back at the face with swarthy skin, coarse, jet-black hair and a black bristly beard. Sweat tickled the back of his neck at the static and power oozing from the man.

'Just this one, Chinfe, or do you have more surprises?'

Meekly, his mother said, 'No, my Lord Mage. Just Malach.'

'Does he show power? Never mind, I will read him.' The man pushed his mother aside.

Malach went numb when the man's gaze swept right *through* him. His head tingled and he squirmed at the sensation of gruff fingers prodding inside his mind. The fingers found the dark well in a corner, where he often found the willpower to do odd things, like call ravens to his outstretched hand, or move pebbles without touching them. The man's bushy eyebrows lifted and he grunted.

'So. The boy *is* mine.' The tingling eased and the man regarded him thoughtfully, then grabbed his jaw and yanked his face from side to side. 'He even looks like me. A shame the Guild Law on non-pure mages is clear. I must obliterate him.'

Stepping back, the man held up a hand with lines of red energy crackling and fizzling across the open palm. Knees quaking, Malach held his ground, hoping it would be quick: a

warrior and hunter's death. He gaped at the writhing power in the man's palm. *This* was his father?

'Wait, my Lord Mage! No-one will ever know! He's yours to train in secret!' His mother flung herself in front of him, arms spread wide, and stood steadfast, protecting him.

The mage's brows drew together, his hand and the fearful red energy held aloft. 'Stand aside!' he roared.

His mother didn't flinch. 'He's a good boy, he's brave and he'll be strong and smart. Train him, Lord Mage. He is *yours*.'

Abruptly, the man released a bark of laughter and the crackling energies receded into his palm. 'You are full of surprises, Chinfe. A secret apprentice ... the idea has merit. If he's good enough.'

'You won't regret this, Lord Mage.' His mother smiled.

'We'll see,' said the mage, directing his piercing eyes to Malach. 'Well, boy, would you like to be strong and powerful?'

'Like you?' Malach blurted. Oh no! He wasn't supposed to speak! Although the man had asked a question. Emboldened, he added, 'Can I ride on your beetle?'

His mother went to backhand him and her arm froze mid-air.

'Never discourage boldness!' snapped the mage. 'What did you say his name is?'

'Malach.' Mother rubbed at her arm.

The mage inspected him from head to toe, as if he were an interesting bug. 'Tend to my beetle while I spend time with Chinfe. After, I will take you for a ride.'

'Yes, Lord,' said Malach, bowing when he caught sight of his mother miming a bow with her hand.

Before he'd straightened up, the mage had grasped his mother's hand and was tugging her towards a tight knot of pines. Her giggles floated back and Malach turned away. Father would kill her if he found out. Wait, Magrin was *not* his father. *Promise me you'll guard this secret with your life?* Malach

swallowed: Magrin would kill *both* of them in a heartbeat if he knew. Oh, but his *real* father was more powerful — a *lot* more powerful.

He shied away from the thought that his real father might also kill him, and he wouldn't even see his death coming.

Ignoring the noises coming from the copse, Malach approached the large beetle, which lifted its head and pushed its jagged horns at him. The reins were dragging loosely in the grass and, edging sideways, he grabbed these and took a hasty step backwards when the beetle waved its front pair of legs alarmingly close to his head.

Reaching inside himself, he drew on what he called his pool of luring potion and sent out calming thoughts. The creature stretched its head forward until the wispy antennae brushed the ends of his fingers. Standing on tiptoe, he stroked its face, marvelling at the tough carapace and the colourful glints in the glossy black surface.

He pulled the reins; the beetle balked. He willed it to follow, and it did. Thrilled, he walked in circles, delighted at the creature's chirruping. Seeing a small green pine cone in the grass, he picked it up and offered it to the beetle. Its antennae brushed over the cone, then it reached up with its front legs and prickly feet took the cone from his fingers.

A breeze swirled around him and two strong hands plopped onto his shoulders.

'With some training you will do nicely, boy.'



## CHAPTER ONE

Everand sat up as soon as muted light crept under the door curtain. Every muscle and bone in his body ached after the intense activity of the boat races and his wild ride on the river dragon. He scrubbed a hand over his face, sure he hadn't slept a wink, his mind and heart churning with emotions all through the darkness. Had he really chosen to stay in Riverfall and *not* return to the Mages' Guild in Axis?

His forehead pounded and he groaned. Why had he allowed the others to ply him with so much feeja wine at the feast?

The back of his head also throbbed mercilessly where Malach's eagles had torn out chunks of his hair. Unease pooled in his stomach. What would Malach do with the hair? His best guess was that the rogue half-mage would concoct a potion to subdue his powers. Malach would want revenge after having his plans to take control of the river dragon so soundly thwarted. Everand sighed. No time for such gloomy thoughts. As the scribe for the first-ever trade discussions between the four river provinces — correction, three provinces — he must stay focused.

*Lamiya.* A shiver of joy ran down his body. Dancing by firelight with her entwined in his arms had been amazing. His groin tingled and anticipation flooded him. Gorgeous, beautiful, brave and intelligent — and she wanted him to stay and be with her. His throat grew painfully tight. This was supposed to be a simple mission, not one where he lost his heart and decided to

change his entire life! After just this sun of trade negotiations, he would go to Riverplain with Lamiya.

His stomach quivered with nerves. After only seven suns in the province there was so much he didn't know about her, or her people. He didn't even know how old she was. Younger than his twenty-six season-cycles? Probably, but not by much.

'Stop air-dreaming and get up.' Beram's voice came from behind him. The paddler was already rolling up his mattress.

'Air-dreaming?' Everand lumbered to his feet and began to roll up his mattress.

'Cloud-drifting, star-gazing, air-dreaming ... you were obviously thinking of Lamiya!' said Beram, wagging a finger at him. 'Atage and Lyber are relying on you to concentrate.'

Everand raised his hands in defeat.

'We're so happy you decided to stay. We like having you around, and not just because your magic is useful.' Propping his mattress against the wall, Beram grinned. 'I mean, instant warm water is nice, but we can heat it ourselves!'

Humbled, Everand nodded, still amazed that these people apparently liked him for himself. The eddy of nerves returned. The Mages' Guild would not release him lightly. Guilt flushed into him — by failing to return, he was betraying Mantiss, the Head of the Guild, who regarded him like a son and relied on him as a spy.

His mattress stored away, he hastily changed into fresh clothes, considering what was likely to happen next. The Guild wouldn't wonder where he was for another sun or two, until after the trade discussions. It wasn't his fault Mages Mantiss and Agamid had sent him to Riverfall without a communication sphere and no instructions on how he was to get back in to Axis through the wardspell. How was he supposed to tell the Guild that instead of finding squabbling people from different provinces, he'd uncovered an untrained half-mage and called a live dragon from the river?

He accepted the loaf and mug from Beram and chewed slowly, the unease threading through his stomach making the bread less palatable. The half-mage was cunning, unpredictable and a risk to the provinces. By failing to return to Axis as expected, he was consciously withholding this information from the Guild. The bread sat heavily in his gut. How culpable would he feel after whatever Malach did next?

‘You look very serious for someone who saved our boat races from disaster,’ commented Beram.

‘Sorry. I was thinking about what Malach might do next.’

‘You don’t think he’ll take his boat and team and just leave, as Atage asked?’ Beram raised both eyebrows.

‘It seems too easy, based on how clever and subtle Malach has been so far. Already, he’s gained a concession by asking for time to repair their boat.’

‘But Mizukaze rammed it!’ Beram shuddered. ‘He can’t take a boat cracked by a dragon all the way back up the river.’

‘Maybe so,’ said Everand, ‘and if he hadn’t tried to shoot the dragon with his crossbow the boat would be intact.’ Rolling his empty mug around and around in his hands, he said slowly, ‘I agree, Atage had to grant them time to repair the boat, but I’ll feel happier when they’ve actually left.’

‘What else could Malach do, though?’ Beram’s brow creased with concern.

‘Destroy the bridge. I thought that *was* his plan, to cause chaos at the end of the long race so that Atage would call off the trade discussions.’ Everand shrugged. ‘Malach has confirmed Riverwood will not trade, meaning they have no need for the bridge.’

Beram reached over to prise the empty mug from his fingers. ‘Although we don’t use it often, it is the only bridge across the Dragonspine River. It would certainly indicate a major divide between the provinces if it were destroyed.’

Watching Beram tidy up, Everand felt his forehead tighten and his head start to pound again. Malach could still destroy the

bridge on his way home north — and he *must* have somehow acquired the potion that made creatures do his bidding and fight until victory or death. The rogue half-mage even looked and sounded *exactly* like Mage Beetal, his own former mentor and a reviled traitor to the Guild, who had originally developed the potion. Yet Guild Law prescribed that mages must only breed with mages ... how could he confirm Malach's lineage?

With a shiver, he recalled Malach's final comment: *I know exactly who you are. You and I are not done yet.*

'Are you ready to go?' Beram hovered, twisting his hands together. 'You look worried.'

With a shrug, Everand said slowly, 'It seemed a good plan to ban Malach from the discussions, but now I'm thinking that if he were with us in Atage's meeting room we'd at least know what he was doing.'

'I could ask Acim and Zink to keep an eye on him and tell us if he does anything untoward,' said Beram, still twisting his hands together.

'Good idea. Tell them to interrupt the discussions to confirm when the Riverwood boat has left. Then we can focus properly.' Everand felt the tension leave his forehead.

'You go to Atage's dome ready to scribe and I'll find Acim and Zink and then join you.' Beram flapped his hands. 'Go!'

Stepping outside, Everand looked up at the heavy, grey sky and shook his head. When he'd first arrived, he thought the people's fervent belief that good races would bring a dragon to deliver rain for their crops to be nothing more than a fanciful myth. But the dragon came, and after five seasons of unending blue sky, the building clouds suggested rain. The mages had no idea about this kind of magic outside of the Guild.

He strode towards Atage's dome, the movement easing his stiff muscles, and observed that the town was already waking, with several traders carrying tables outside ready to display their wares. When he neared the domes assigned to the boat teams, his

heart beat faster. Was Lamiya awake? He probed with his mind, and his lips quirked when he sensed her making her way to her dome door. She *always* knew when he was thinking of her.

Lamiya emerged and headed straight to the path to intercept him, a smile adorning her beautiful face. His spirits soared and when his lips met hers, a joy more powerful than any magic throbbed through him. Pausing for air, he crushed her against his chest and buried his face in her wavy, mahogany hair, absorbing the flowery scents. How was it possible she had chosen him? ‘Lamiya, Lamiya,’ he murmured.

‘Everand, Everand.’ She giggled.

He tickled her ribs and she squirmed. When she tilted her face up to speak, he sealed his lips over hers again, warmth flowing through his entire being. Painfully, he drew back. If only the trade discussions were over already.

‘I know,’ she said pertly, the blue tints in her grey eyes sparkling. ‘*After* the discussions.’ She gave him a stern look. ‘No more *after* anything else, busy mage.’

‘Not if I can help it.’ As soon as the words passed his lips, he knew further impediments were not only likely but imminent. Trying not to spoil the moment, he asked, ‘No boat training?’

She leaned back, allowing his arms to support her weight. ‘What, you think we haven’t earned a rest?’ Her dimples deepened. ‘After being declared the best team at the races?’

Suppressing a smile, he replied seriously, ‘You paddlers *live* for your boats. I can’t imagine what else you’d do!’ As affront crossed her face, he looked skyward. ‘Will it rain?’

‘I expect so.’ Lamiya eased her weight off his arms. ‘And I will be enjoying myself at the trading tables while you are locked inside a meeting scribing the records.’

‘Speaking of which ...’ He kissed the top of her head. ‘I’ll look for you as soon as we’re finished.’

‘Enjoy.’ Lamiya gave a mock yawn and then touched his elbow. ‘Take good records. These discussions are important.’

No pressure. He could hear Mage Mantiss already: *This, dear boy, is precisely why we do not mingle with people or meddle in their affairs. Too easy to be assigned responsibility.* He sighed; he'd already stepped far beyond the bounds of the supposedly simple mission. But if he didn't intend to return to the Guild, did it matter? Now Mantiss was scowling in his mind's eye and growling: *It matters a lot. And you will be called to account.*

He swatted at the annoying pattering on his cheek before he realised it was Lamiya's hand.

'I see you're focused already. See you later, busy mage.' She tried to pout, but it became a smile.

Resuming his trajectory towards Atage's dome, he wondered what writing implements the people of Riverfall used. Probably feather pens and ink. Using magic to inscribe the records would be faster. Except he wasn't supposed to use his magic here; that would be meddling.

Atage's wife appeared in the dome doorway. 'Come in,' she said, flapping her hands. 'The others are waiting.'

Passing through to the meeting room, he assumed his seat was the place set at the table with sheets of finely sliced wood and two feather pens in a neat line. He glanced at the wall, enjoying the view of the ancient tapestry depicting a dragon boat racing a real blue-and-gold dragon across the lake at the river's source. The crafters had cleverly captured as a backdrop the silver threads of the waterfall cascading into the lake. He'd enjoyed listening to the history of the arrival of the first dwellers four generations before, recounted by old man Vogel, the oldest resident of Riverfall.

Arriving initially at Dragon Lake, the early people had named the dragon Mizuchi, meaning river dragon in their old tongue. Once the population grew, they'd moved south to the flatter and more arable lands alongside the river. A splinter group had gone further south, forming the next province of Riverplain. Old man Vogel had said the current trade discussions were

especially important because many welcomed the opportunity to renew the bonds with their related people.

Atage's vision was clever — the trade discussions and the boat races were an ingenious way to bring the provinces together. The races had also enabled him and Lamiya to summon the river dragon, which transpired to be Mizukaze, *son* of the extinct Mizuchi. It seemed Mizukaze had remained elusive all this time, having no idea how to interact with the people of Riverfall.

Frowning, Everand thought of Mizukaze's reluctance to deal with him as a mage, the dragon growling that 'tricksy two-leg people with power' were not to be trusted. This implied the dragons had interacted with the mages before, but there was not a single reference to any connection with the dragons in the Guild texts. He recalled no mention of the creatures in any of his apprentice history lessons. What did this mean?

Folding down, he sat cross-legged on the plump cushion and nodded to each negotiator. The three from Riversea were clad in the team colours of gleaming white tunics and turquoise trousers. Their blond-green hair was bound in tight topknots, and Cowrie wore his chieftain's headdress of flowing white feathers from a sea eagle, the tips tinged grey.

Next to them were the negotiators from Riverplain. Luvu, the gruff older paddler, was flanked by Lepid and Lulite. They wore their team colours of vivid orange tunics and bright green trousers. Each had their hair tied back in a simple ponytail, adorned with a single red feather. Luvu grunted in greeting. Everand winced at the cool glance Lepid gave him, although he probably should have expected that. As Lazuli's older brother, Lepid was of course unhappy Lamiya had chosen him over Lazuli. Lulite, a good friend to Lamiya, gave him a shy smile and he smiled back; he would like to win her approval.

Present for Riverfall were the town leader Atage, his offsider Lyber and Tengar the team captain. The empty cushions

at the fourth side of the table, where Malach and Torrap from Riverwood should have sat, felt ominous, a sign that Atage's vision was going awry.

With a rush of footsteps, Beram hurried in and took his place next to Everand. 'It is done,' he murmured. 'Acim and Zink have gone to the boat ramp.'

Wishing that his hovering unease would dissipate, Everand focused when Atage began to speak.

'Welcome, everyone. I hope this will be the first of many amicable discussions between our provinces, and the forging of strong friendships. My fervent wish is for us all to benefit from an exchange between us.' Pausing, Atage glanced Everand's way.

The records! Hastily picking up the longer feather pen, he selected the top square of thin-shaved wood. Concentrating, he wrote in flowing script: *Trade Negotiations Between the Four River Provinces*. He stopped. Should he scratch out four and write three, or record that four were invited?

'Ah,' said Atage. 'We should note that Riverwood was invited but declined.' To the rest of the table he explained, 'Apparently, they have no wish to trade with any of us.'

'Good riddance,' muttered Luvu. The others nodded.

Everand wrote that Riverwood had declined and felt a flush creeping up his neck when everyone watched while he added the names of the provinces and negotiators present, the feather making a scritch-scratch sound. If they were going to watch him scribe, it would take far too long. Subtly forming a spell of writing, he trickled it down his arm so the words flowed faster.

'Thank you for preparing detailed lists of what goods you can trade.' Atage held out a hand and Beram passed him three plaques. 'We need to decide matters such as how often we'll trade, where the trade will be held and how we set prices for the goods. We need a process for resolving any disputes, and a means of communication between us.'



Everand listed these under the heading of *Matters for Agreement*.

It was quickly agreed that the beginning of each new season would be a good time to hold inter-province trading. Tengar and Lepid interrupted each other in their enthusiasm to make sure boat races were added to the trading.

While the pair argued about how many races, and over what distances, Everand reviewed the conversation he'd had with Malach after the races. *You, of all people, should know the dragon can do much more than make it rain.* There had been a smug glint in Malach's almost-black eyes, and a subtle challenge. He rolled the feather pen between his fingers, thinking. The dragons had gone back to their lake at the river's source, near Mizuchi Falls, where the closest people were in Riverwood. Not ideal, but Mizukaze didn't trust Malach and would avoid him ... However, that could change over time.

'Did you get that?' asked Tengar. 'The races are to be devised by the host province, and the details provided in advance.'

Everand wrote this down under his smaller heading of *Boat Races*.

'Well,' said Atage, 'this brings us to the order of host. There are four seasons and if the three of us rotate in the same order, each province will end up hosting in a different season. Is this acceptable?' Looking at Luvu, he added, 'That means Riverplain will be next. Does this suit you?'

The lines around Luvu's eyes creased in a smile and Lepid and Lulite shared excited grins. 'That'll suit us just fine, and north to south is an easy order to remember.'

That drew smiles around the table.

'Well, that's the first two items agreed.' Atage rubbed his hands together and turned to Beram. 'Can you ask Thulite to bring in brew and cakes?'

Sitting back, Everand thought things were going well. Without Riverwood, the discussion would progress faster and

he could be with Lamiya sooner. She'd be enjoying herself at the markets, no doubt using the opportunity to chat to the artists from Riversea. He wanted to close his eyes and dream about the post-races feast and dancing by firelight with her in his arms.

How long would it take Malach's team to repair the boat? He swallowed, wishing Acim or Zink would arrive to report that Riverwood had left.