

## TWO MAGICIANS...AND A BOAT

### CHAPTER ONE

The dull *clunk* of steel on steel echoed in the passage, interspersed with the shuffle of feet and the effortful breathing of two people with no time to do more than breathe. They emerged into the large, airy room still locked in combat, heavy swords meeting again and again as blow after blow was parried, blocked or narrowly evaded.

The taller of the two, darkly handsome and well-muscled, moved with a dancer's grace and precision, but his moves were becoming blurred as fatigue took its toll, and the erratic, unschooled assault of his shorter, scruffier opponent did not slacken. Little by little the tall man was driven further into the room, across the bare stone floor, up the three shallow steps towards the window which gave on the courtyard far below. He hesitated, and the other's sword bit into the flesh of his upper arm, causing blood to well and soak the sleeve of his costly satin shirt. At this a spasm of annoyance crossed his face and he tried to redouble his defence, but the pain was sapping his strength.

The other fighter saw his weakening and smiled wolfishly, moving in for the kill, and in this made a fatal error. The opening was momentary and minute, but the tall man saw it and took advantage with almost inhuman speed. The sword plunged deep into the other's breast, splintering bone with the force of its velocity and emerging from the back deeply crimsoned. The shorter one swayed, staring mutely down at the blade embedded in the rough homespun tunic, at the dark stain growing on the undyed fabric, and then tottered and crashed to the floor.

The tall man, panting and sweating, stood over the motionless body, gazing down at it. His left arm hung uselessly at his side, and his posture had lost its dancerlike tension. He sagged, and his rich, accented voice when he spoke was strained and rough from fatigue.

"Let that," he said hoarsely, "be a lesson to you."

He gathered his resources and stepped round the body, making to leave the room.

"Best out o' three?"

The tall man sagged still more. He turned to the erstwhile corpse, who was sitting up looking at him with bright, mocking eyes.

“Willibald,” said Mordecai del Aguila, and could find no other words.

“Cause I kens what I did wrong,” Willibald Volebreath went on, “and I be pretty sure I could catch thee out proper next time.”

“Not today,” Mordecai said. “Not for at least a week.”

“Tha be frit,” Willibald remarked sagely.

“I be not frit—I mean, I am not scared of you,” Mordecai retorted. “I am the finest swordsman in all Tamland. You are an untutored booby. The only reason I did not kill you in the first five seconds is because the purpose of these sessions is to teach you something.”

“So tha says,” Willibald said. “All right, then, a week come yesdy. ‘Cause this’n were supposed to be yesdy only tha called un off.”

“Yes, yes, all right. Get my sword out of your body, you look ridiculous.”

“Thee put un there. Thee can take un out.” Willibald bounced to his feet, seemingly unhindered by three feet of cold steel amid his vitals, and stood waiting.

Mordecai set his teeth, seized the hilt and dragged the weapon free with unnecessary viciousness. As he did so, Willibald muttered a cantrip and the wound closed cleanly as if it had never been, leaving only the bloodstain on the tunic.

“What about that?” Mordecai said, gesturing at it.

“I reckoned I’d leave un there,” Willibald said. “Then when folk ask I ‘how do yon master of yourn treat thee?’ I can just show ‘em—“

Mordecai pointed his forefinger at Willibald’s chest and spoke a single oblong-sounding word. The area of the stain faded to a brilliant, blinding white. “Turn round,” he said, and Willibald turned, revealing a similar white patch on the back of the tunic. “Now what will you say?”

“I’ll say tha threw vitriol at I.” Willibald was unperturbed. “Put un back the way un was, or else clean the whole thing, Master. Bain’t like thee to do half a job.”

“Am I hearing correctly?” Mordecai pantomimed astonishment. “You are actually asking me to clean your clothes?”

“Be a wrench, I’ll tell thee that for nowt,” Willibald said, “but sithee, tha’s got rid on t’muck there now. Be less effort to get rid on t’reast.”

“I used to be a master of the highest magics,” Mordecai muttered, making a series

of gestures with his good hand. “A seeker of the secrets of the cosmos, a highly respected member of the community. Now I am a laundry maid to a—” He broke off and spoke some more of the angular language. Willibald's tunic at once became white all over, and the apprentice wriggled fretfully.

“Itches,” he said.

“I am sure it does,” said Mordecai. “Now, if you will oblige me with this arm—”

“Wouldn't tha liefer do it thissen?”

“Fair exchange,” Mordecai said. “I have just removed several tons of filth from your person. The least you can do is heal my torn muscles.”

As Willibald was obliging, there was a knock on the door and Gisel, Mordecai's self-appointed secretary, opened it and put her head around it.

“Magus,” she said, “if you two have quite finished your horseplay, the Crown Prince desires your immediate attendance. I've put him in your workroom. Don't worry, he knows not to touch anything.”

“Go on with thee,” Willibald said. “I'll take magery till tha come back.”

“All right.” Mordecai stretched the formerly wounded arm and waved it about a bit. Gisel pretended to duck, and Mordecai made a face at her as he stalked out.

“He be improvin’,” Willibald remarked. “Only killed I once this morn.”

“I don't understand how you put up with him,” Gisel remarked. “I mean, he's annoying enough for me, and I only look after the office for him.”

“Ah, there's nowt wrong with him at bottom,” Willibald said.

“I know that,” Gisel retorted. “It's all the rubbish you've got to go through before you get to his bottom—I mean—” She blushed deeply.

Willibald laughed merrily. “I know what tha means,” she said. “But he do need it still. Like this guising o' mine. Think thee he'd play at swords with a Tseneshi princess?”

“Well, there are other good reasons for that,” Gisel said. “If it became publicly known that Princess Amiya were not living in her seclusion in Tsenesh, guarded by the loyal warriors of the Witchring, we'd be in a pretty pickle. I still have nightmares about what they'll do if they need to send you on another diplomatic mission.”

“Ah, they'll have another wench to wear frock and hair-frame by now,” Willibald said airily. “Never fret, lass. I doubt not they ken fine where I be, but t'would be far too risky to seek to get I back.” She stretched, and pushed her fingers through her short, tousled hair. “I be quite safe here.”

“Down the river?”

Genuine alarm crossed Mordecai del Aguila's handsome face. After a moment it crossed back again, closely followed by despondency.

“It'll be an outing for you,” Crown Prince Varnak declared. “You spend too long shut up in here. You need to get out in the fresh air.”

They were sitting in Mordecai's workroom, a largish chamber dominated by three long workbenches cluttered with magical equipment and piles of paper. Varnak, dressed in his usual white military uniform, perched on the room's only seat, a three-legged stool apparently designed for a person half again his height.

Mordecai, wiser, leant on a scarred and ancient dresser.

“What is this obsession everyone has around here with making me breathe fresh air?” Mordecai demanded. “Air is air. I open the windows once a week for ten minutes whether I need to or not.”

“Yes, and half the pigeons on the palace roof promptly clutch their beaks and fall off,” the Prince retorted. “You just don't know what it smells like in here, Mordecai.” He wrinkled his already snub nose. “It's like...it's like the long-unopened tomb of an unsanitary Sinjaro bandit.”

Mordecai looked at him, and he coloured. “No offence to your people, of course. I'm sure Sinjara is a model of cleanliness and decency these days.”

“I wouldn't know,” Mordecai said. “I have never been there. Stop changing the subject. Since when did you need the Court Magus to hold your hand?” Suspicion replaced the other emotions on his face. “You're not—”

“No, I'm not.” Varnak sighed wearily. “You can relax. I'm still going through this thing about blonds, remember? You're not currently my type, even if I didn't know you aren't interested. This is a serious trade mission, not an excuse to go spooning on the river.”

“The King sends you on trade missions now?”

“The man I am to meet in Freeport is a king himself. He refuses to deal with anyone of lesser rank than a prince.” Varnak inspected his fingernails. “I suppose one can't blame him really.”

“And what does this easily impressed person have that we want so badly?”

Varnak pulled a face. “If I understood that I'd be a lot happier about the whole

thing. It's apparently some sort of sap that comes out of a tree..."

"Oh, I see. Very original."

"And when it hardens it's soft, or something. The Messenger brought a sample, which Father grabbed at once and won't show to anyone. The trees that produce it are only grown in this one country—the Chotani guard the plantations with their lives. The stuff seems to have any number of different uses depending what you do with it...and that's where you come in."

"I'm relieved to hear I come in somewhere."

"They use magic to shape the stuff into different forms. When we conclude the agreement we'll be given a suite of spells that make it do different things. Your job is to look them over and make sure they're all sound, since, as you know, I'm about as magical as a dead herring."

"Dead herring can be very magical," Mordecai pointed out solemnly. "Leave one behind your settee for a week and watch people disappear. Why can't I examine the spells after you bring them back?"

"Because, my dear idiot, magic from other places works differently here. I still remember when you tried out that levitation spell from Briom."

"It was only a small section of the roof," Mordecai protested. "The builders had it fixed within a day."

"Yes, well, we don't want another job like that. So you'll need to make whatever adjustments are necessary to the spells to make sure we can use them. And that, my lad, means that down the river you come, tomorrow, with me. There's no help for it. Father's being all autocratic again."

Mordecai sighed deeply. "Oh, well, if I'm going, I'm going. Willibald can take care of things."

Varnak looked embarrassed. "One more thing," he said after a lengthy pause.

"There's cause to believe that our dear neighbours have been trying to get a deal with the Chotani for this stuff, and so far have failed. Either or both of them might try to prevent us reaching Freeport, possibly fatally. We'll have to travel incognito."

"No problem," Mordecai said airily.

"No, I mean really incognito."

Mordecai paled. "You mean—"

"We must dress as ordinary travellers," Varnak went on, "and that means from the skin out. That business in the tavern on my last birthday was humiliating."

“I didn't know she was going to get that interested that quickly.”

“Homespun,” the Prince said firmly. “Skin out. I'm sure Willibald can give you some tips.”

Mordecai shuddered.

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It was market day in Tamshold, under a brilliant sun, and stalls thronged the square in front of the palace; some colourful with fabrics and trinkets, others alive with the less gaudy but more natural hues of fruit and vegetables. One particular stallholder of this latter sort, a fellow with a scrubby yellow beard and a sardonic quirk of one eyebrow caused by an old scar, cast his eyes about, scanning the faces of the passers-by, and casually moved to one end of the stall, leaving one of his sullen-faced daughters to serve the customers.

“Fine plums!” he called. “Fine Sinjaro plums!”

A middle-aged woman in black, her hair still a startlingly rich auburn, approached him.

“The Sinjaro plums are indeed fine to look at,” she said, glancing at the display of the fruits at the other end of the stall, “but for flavour I much prefer the Tseneshi.”

“Oh, yes,” the stallholder said. “You are obviously a woman of taste and discernment, madonna. A pity it is that the Tseneshi plums are so hard to find.”

“They are much sought after indeed,” the woman agreed. “Wise men keep them well hidden, and bring them out only at need.”

“Yet,” the stallholder mused, “for an appropriate consideration, it might be possible to track them down.”

“It would have to be handled with discretion,” the woman said. “My mother has a passion for Tseneshi plums. She utterly dotes on them, and I have set my heart on getting her some for her birthday, as a surprise.”

“I believe you can rely on me for that,” said the stallholder. “I pride myself on my abilities in that direction. How soon would you be requiring them?”

“As soon as possible,” said the woman. “If it takes too long, or if anyone should come to hear of it, then the order would have to be cancelled.”

“Put yourself at ease, madonna,” said the stallholder, glancing up at the palace

walls. "I happen to know where I shall be able to lay my hands on the merchandise today. I presume you would wish me to take the utmost care in handling it?"

The woman smiled. "As to that," she said, "my mother is an elderly woman now, and her teeth are not what they used to be. If the plums were too fresh, too immaculate, she might find the skin a little hard. A certain amount of bruising is to be expected, after all."

"But no serious damage?"

"Exactly. You will recall that Tseneshi plums, despite appearances, have no stones. Use your much-vaunted discretion, sir, and I am sure she will be happy with the result."

"Very well," said the trader, and a largish bag of money changed hands. The woman bowed and moved on, and the stallholder returned to his work, nudging his scowling daughter aside.

A little way off, a stocky, shaven-headed fellow with a short chin-beard who had been leaning against a wall, cleaning his fingernails with a pointed twig and intense concentration, straightened up, strolled casually down a narrow alley and ducked into a side door.

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"No," said Mordecai.

"At this rate tha'll still be pickin' and choosin' when boat leaves on t' morrow," Willibald pointed out easily.

"You cannot expect me to wear these things," Mordecai protested.

"A mort o' folk do."

"They are not—" Mordecai tried again. "I have sensitive skin," he said. "I have been used to wearing fine materials, silk, velvet. How inconspicuous will I be if I am leaping up and down and scratching myself the whole time?"

"Tha could guise thissen as Prince's pet ape," Willibald offered with a cheeky grin.

Mordecai glared at him.

"Could tha not use magic to—" Willibald broke off. "Nay, 't would be clear signal who tha be and all." He frowned. "Tha be serious? Tha can't do it?"

"Well—" Mordecai considered.

“Cause if tha wilt, I could go in thy stead,” Willibald said. “Never seen Freeport, me. Or anyplace much.”

“That would not be wise,” Mordecai said. “You would not be safe out there. Besides, the King specifically commanded me. No, I shall have to do it.” He surveyed the assembled outfits again, and pointed. “That one is the least disgusting. Let me try it on.” He looked pointedly at Willibald.

The hedge-wizard crowed with laughter. “Tha's got nowt I've not gowked before,” he said between chuckles.

“Nevertheless,” Mordecai said, “now that I know...who you are...I would prefer you to turn your back.”

Still chortling, Willibald obediently faced the other way, and Mordecai stripped off his rich garb and began to struggle into the homespun breeches and shirt.

“All right,” he said at last, and Willibald faced about again.

“Oh aye,” he said. “Muted earth tones be definitely thee.”

“Shut up,” Mordecai said through his teeth.

“How be thy skin?”

“I can live with it.”

“Good. And now for thy hair.”

Mordecai clutched his neat, lustrous pony tail in alarm.

“What about my hair?”

“See many common folk with such well-tended locks, dost tha?” Willibald said, drawing a short but serviceable knife from his belt. “Nay, lad, it's the shearin' for thee. Never fret, 't will grow back.”

“Keep away from me with that thing!” Mordecai backed away. “The Court Hairdresser—”

“Court hairdresser'll make thee look *nice*,” Willibald said, advancing with the knife at the ready. “Like a high-born lady—I mean, gentleman. What he does. Tha needs to look like a carl who's no time for such fripperies. Off it comes.”

Mordecai found himself wedged in a corner of the room. “My hair,” he whimpered.

“Ah, be not such a babe,” Willibald said. “'T will hardly hurt at all.”

Downstairs, in the office, Gisel looked up briefly at the high, thin, eerie wail of utter desolation that issued from the upper floors. Outside, in the stable block, Roldan

and Farneem also heard it and paused about their earthy tasks.

“Magus be conjuring spirits from the vasty deep again,” Farneem said.

“Never seems to get a cheerful one, though, does he?” Roldan said.

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“Oh, very nice,” Prince Varnak said, surveying Mordecai. “I think you've definitely caught something there. Yes. The air of mute, pent-up suffering that's the heritage of the downtrodden common man—the effluvium of grinding poverty and oppression—the sullen resentment just waiting to boil up into outright revolution—”

“He've been reading they books again,” Willibald remarked.

“Thank you, your Highness,” Mordecai said. “And may I compliment you on your own outfit. It is—almost—perfect. Just a minor touch or two—” He stepped forward, took hold of the left sleeve of Varnak's shirt and tore it almost up to the elbow.

“You think so?” Varnak examined the damage. “Well, then, perhaps I should suggest a slight cosmetic amendment or two to your own disguise—purely in the interests of verisimilitude, you understand—” So saying, he ripped Mordecai's shirt open to the waist. Buttons flew everywhere.

“I bow to your Highness's aesthetic judgment,” Mordecai snarled, “and would merely venture to suggest—”

“Hold hard there!” Willibald interposed himself between Mordecai and Varnak as the former made a lunge for the latter's breeches. “Y'are meant to be travellers, not war veterans. This lot'll take mendin' now.”

“He started it,” Varnak said.

“So he did, but it do take two to make a brawl,” Willibald retorted. “Give 'em to I. And you, Magus, get into thy fripperies again for afternoon magery. I'll take they to Randra the seamstress and she'll have 'em done by sundown.”

“I am sorry,” Mordecai said.

“Aye, that tha be,” Willibald said, grinning, “but tha'll do.”

“Me too,” said Varnak. “I'm sure someone in the palace could—”

“Like I said to Magus,” Willibald said, “palace workers do palace work. Tha wants a commoner's touch on these, they were too nice anyroad. And 't is nowt trouble, I do go out every day at this hour, and Randra could use the work.” He took the

bundled clothes and stuffed them into a canvas bag. “She'll bring 'em to wicket gate when they be done.”

“When will you be back?” Mordecai asked.

“When Web do bid me return,” Willibald said airily. “Try not to scratch each t'other's eyes out the while I be gone.”

“What does he—she—do out there?” Varnak said, when the door had closed.

“Wanders around looking at the people,” Mordecai said. “I confess I have never seen the attraction myself.”

“I'd be happier if she took some guards,” Varnak complained.

“She says that would slightly detract from the effectiveness of her disguise.”

Varnak grinned. “Suppose it would at that. So when will she be back?”

“Whenever she feels like it,” Mordecai said glumly. “There is no point trying to regulate her habits. Sometimes she stays out till nearly dawn.”

“No more—”

“—burglaries, no, I think we have managed to discourage her from that.”

“Good.” Varnak shook his head. “It's embarrassing, having to apologise to people for the nefarious activities of your apprentice. And even worse, suppose someone caught her and found out—”

“Exactly what worries me.” Mordecai finished dressing in his royal blue robe with the azure trim, and muttered a glamour that restored his shorn hair, at least in appearance, to its usual glossy length. “When does this benighted boat leave?”

“An hour after sun-up. I'm going to the Temple of None tonight to not pray for a safe journey. Will you come?”

“I do not think so,” Mordecai said. He had tried to fathom the Tamlandish religion, or whatever it was, and had given up. “Now, if you will excuse me, Highness, my clients await.”

“Oh, and think up a convincing name for yourself, won't you?” Varnak called as Mordecai descended the stairs.

“I could think of several for you,” Mordecai muttered, and then composed his features into his best smile as he emerged into the waiting room to greet the afternoon's customers.

The erstwhile stallholder with the quirked eyebrow mooched along through the market, idly eyeing and occasionally fingering the goods on display, but every so often turning his head to mark the progress of a small figure in a disgusting purple hat. He had tracked his quarry all the way to a tiny shop by the bridge, and waited outside till it emerged again, without the canvas bag it had been carrying. Now he was starting to get impatient. At this rate the apprentice would be back inside the palace before he could make his move.

Not that he wouldn't welcome the money—Tseneshi gold was good anywhere—but why couldn't the bedamned witches arrange their own abductions? Easy enough to answer; they knew that any open sign of direct involvement on their part would precipitate an alliance between Tamland and Briom, and they could hardly take on an enemy on that scale. Let it be seen as the work of Tamlandish criminals, and the Witchring could hold up their hands in all innocence.

The boy stopped to speak to a woman selling gaudy jewellery, her stall pitched opposite an alley that led down to the river. This was his chance. He moved swiftly through the crowd, till he stood at his side.

“Move and you're dead,” he said quietly, allowing the point of his dagger to press lightly through Willibald's remarkably clean homespun shirt.

“Same to thee, cully,” Willibald said in the same tone, and the man found himself suddenly surrounded by a flickering wall of almost invisible blue force. At the same time the dagger became unbearably hot, and he let it fall from his hand with a curse. Willibald gave him a sweet smile and stepped easily away from him, almost into the arms of a thin, very pale-skinned man with a moustache, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and cloak.

The moustached one took a strange bulb-shaped object out of his pocket and squeezed it in the boy's face, and a sort of cloud of something squirted out and engulfed his head. He sagged, his eyes rolling up under his lids, and two more pale-skinned men emerged from the alley, grabbed him and faded back into the shadows so swiftly and smoothly the man could scarcely credit that they had been there at all.

*Organisation*, thought the man as the flickering wall around him faded away.

*That's the trick every time. Nothing's gone right since they caught the Steel Wolf.*