

## CHAPTER TWO

The Temple of None stood across the square from the palace. It boasted a fine, clear-voiced bell, which was rung at sunrise, noon and sunset. The architecture was the work of Frantyk, the finest designer of buildings Tamland had ever produced; it captured the eye with its soaring lines and sleek curves.

Prince Varnak crossed the square, kicking through the débris of the market, now being cleared away by the stallholders. The Tomes, the ancient volumes of law by which the government of Tamland was guided, were very clear on the subject of litter; it bred disease and promoted a slipshod attitude among the people. He mounted the steps and passed through the ever-open double doors into the cool, dim stillness of the Temple, sidestepping the pool in which all comers were invited not to bathe their feet.

On the altar, the golden image of No God stood in all its majesty. Briom had many gods, and they were worshipped with complex rituals and sacrifices, overseen by priests and acolytes and paid for by a tithe imposed on all the people. When Tam had gathered his small army of malcontents and set out on the journey that would eventually lead him to his own kingdom, it had been, at least in part, to escape from the compulsion to bow down to beings who, from their own stories, came across as little better than their worshippers, and he had set up this temple specifically to make sure that Tamland would never fall into a like error. People came to the temple for many reasons—it was a quiet place to think things through, or to read or study, or talk in the seclusion of one of the curtained booths down the side—but never to ask favours of the gods.

Varnak walked purposefully up the aisle till he faced the image, stood for a second, and then turned deliberately away. Most people, most of the time, contented themselves with simply not praying, but in extreme cases, a willed act of non-propitiation—of snubbing, without contempt, whatever gods there might be—was seen as a good idea. It said, to the universe in general, that whatever such gods might do (if they existed) the people of Tamland would rely on their own efforts and qualities to withstand it. Some thought that even this minimal

acknowledgment of the possible existence of such beings was a concession, but Varnak had always found that it helped to firm his own resolve. As he walked back down the aisle and out of the temple, he felt better in himself.

“Your Highness?” said a voice as he blinked in the evening sunlight. A man with a yellow beard and one eyebrow perpetually hitched up was approaching him in an agitated manner. Varnak hesitated, then walked towards him.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Rylome, isn't it? We had you up before us a while back for—“

“I was one of the Steel Wolf's men, Highness,” said the man Rylome, bowing nervously. “Fully reformed now, though, sir, and thank you for remembering.”

“I'm very glad to hear it,” said Varnak, reserving his judgment. “What can I do for you?”

“I have some information,” Rylome said. “For the right price.”

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Mordecai looked up as Gisel knocked on the open door.

“Any sign of Willibald?” he said.

“Not yet, Magus,” Gisel said. “He's probably found a tavern that'll let him in.”

“Amazingly short memories these landlords have,” Mordecai muttered.

“Perhaps the lavish compensation the palace sends them helps to dilute the more, um, poignant remembrances,” Gisel said. “Anyway, I'm going home now. Is there anything you need?”

“Uh, no thank you,” Mordecai said. “See you in the morning.”

“Bright and early as usual,” Gisel answered—it was an old ritual between them. She closed the door quietly, and he heard her footsteps pattering on the stairs. Mordecai rubbed his hands and turned towards his workroom, and then stopped as louder, heavier footsteps came back up the stairs and the door burst open.

“Your Highness,” he said. Varnak was breathless and pink in the face. “To what do I—?”

“Someone's kidnapped Willibald,” Varnak said.

“What!”

“I was approached by Rylome outside the temple—you remember, we caught him in the mopping up after the Steel Wolf affair.” Varnak caught sight of himself in Mordecai's mirror and made a few sketchy gestures at restoring his ruffled appearance. “I don't think he's involved, but he says he saw it happen.”

“Take me to him,” Mordecai said. “Tell me what he told you on the way.”

In the courtyard, Rylome was sagging in the grip of two of the palace guards, looking rather the worse for wear.

“He tried to get me to pay for the information,” Varnak said as he and Mordecai emerged from the tower door.

“Some people can never change,” Mordecai said. “Let me deal with him.” He nodded to the two guards, and they released Rylome and stepped aside.

“You,” he said, glaring at Mordecai. “Bedamned foreign—”

Mordecai made a gesture, and Rylome's head twisted abruptly upwards and to the right.

“Where were you when Willibald was taken?” Mordecai said softly.

“Standing next to him with a dagger in his ribs,” Rylome said, the words dragged out of him as if by physical force.

“Why?”

“Tseneshi witch hired me to scrobble him.”

“Why?”

“Don't know.”

“What happened?”

“Cast a spell on me, he did. And then this other lot got him.”

Under Mordecai's questioning, Rylome described the incident in detail. He was unable to identify any of the kidnappers, but the description of the bulb-shaped device seemed to excite Varnak. He also described the woman who had engaged his services. Finally, when he was wrung dry and beginning to have trouble breathing, Mordecai released the spell and Rylome folded at the knees and fell over, sobbing.

“That bulb thing,” Varnak said, when the prisoner had been led away, “I'd bet my crown it's made of this stuff we're supposed to be getting.”

“You think so?” Mordecai said. “That could mean one of two things. No, three

things.” He considered. “No, two. Either one of our neighbours, probably Briom, has already concluded a trade agreement with the Chotani, or they themselves have abducted Willibald for their own reasons.” He brightened. “Either way, this means the river journey is cancelled.”

“What? Oh no, Mordecai,” Varnak said firmly.

“Either the substance is already promised to Briom, in which case there is no point in our trying to get it, or we are at war with the Chotani, which makes negotiation for trade rather futile, wouldn't you say?”

“No. We don't know that Briom or anyone else has secured an agreement with them, and I'm sorry, Mordecai, but we aren't at war till Dad says so. I'll talk to him tonight, but I'm betting he'll stick to his word.”

“Well, I at least have more pressing concerns now than accompanying you,” Mordecai declared. “I have to find Willibald.”

“I can't spare you,” Varnak said. “Even less now. Don't make me command you, Mordecai.”

“By custom and tradition, I represent the King directly,” Mordecai said hopelessly. “You cannot command me.”

“No, but Dad can.” Varnak's face softened. “I'm truly sorry, Mordecai. I know what this is like for you, but I can't let you be distracted now. Dad will have the guard search the city from top to bottom, starting as soon as I let him know what's happened. Don't worry. We'll find him.”

“You had better,” Mordecai said. “Because although they may not know it, these kidnapers are now in a position to demand a price of Tamland that far outweighs the value of any magical tree sap. If they should find out who Willibald is—”

“I know that!” Varnak shouted. “I *know*,” he repeated in a calmer voice. “But we still can't afford to let this mission slide, Mordecai. Dad's walking a razor's edge right now. He needs every advantage we can get him, if Tamland's not to become just another province of Briom, or satellite state of Tsenesh.”

Mordecai rubbed his forehead. “All right,” he said at last. “You will have to send word to Gisel that magery will be closed for the duration of the journey. One of the court scribes is to keep us apprised of events at all times. And if Willibald is not found before we get to Freeport—or if the Chotani delegation even look as if they think they have an advantage over us—”

“If we can prove that they have him,” Varnak said, “I promise you we'll take whatever steps are necessary to get him back safely. After we've got the trade agreement.”

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Chaz, son of King Kaz of the J'tahni, paced the low-ceilinged room fretfully, casting angry glances at the slumped figure in the chair at each turn. Zorn, his father's chief adviser, stroked his moustache as he watched his prince gloomily from his own chair, a mug of wine in front of him.

"It may be that—" he ventured.

"Quiet!" Chaz snapped at him. "I was against this from the start," he went on. "Deal honestly with your enemies, that is the wisdom of our ancestors. Show always the same face. But you and the stranger would have it otherwise, and my father listened. And now your brilliant plan has completely miscarried, and I have no idea how we are to put things right!"

Zorn started to speak again, and thought better of it.

"Take the magician's apprentice prisoner, you said," Chaz went on, "and we will be in a position to demand even more for the *úllama*. So we make our plans, and we ask people, and the operation goes off perfectly—except that instead of his apprentice we have one of his bed companions!"

"As I was about to say," Zorn said before Chaz could speak again, "it may well be that in this barbarous land they allow females to study magic. In the land known as Zenej it is only females who can wield any power at all."

"You are trying to distract me from my painful brooding on the subject of your failure, dear Zorn," said Chaz with a sour smile, "and I thank you for your concern. However, I think it will be better for me to steel myself to contemplate the awesome and ever-expanding vistas of your incompetence a little longer, or at least long enough to devise a suitable punishment."

"I await the prince's pleasure," Zorn said humbly.

"You will be waiting a very long time," Chaz said. "But I see our captive is awake," he went on, switching from his own language to Tamlandish with scarcely a hesitation. "I hope you are none the worse for your ordeal, woman."

"Well," the prisoner said, "that'll be up to thee, cully. Leave I go and us'll say na more about un."

Chaz turned to Zorn. "The wench has a pert tongue about her," he said, laughing. The laughter stopped, instantly. "Quell it."

Zorn took a bulb of *torashya* spores from his pouch and squeezed it into the woman's face, while the prince turned away. The woman fought to stay awake, but the potent spores seduced her mind despite her efforts, and her head lolled again.

"She will eventually learn to hold her breath," Zorn pointed out mildly.

"Then you will use the *mallush* thorn," Chaz said. "Whether she dreams or becomes a living statue is of no concern to me, as long as she is still and quiet. Understand this, Zorn," he went on. "There is no going back now. We are committed to this insane plan of yours, even though our hostage is a worthless drab of a woman and not the budding magician we hoped for. We can only hope that my father will be able to make some use of her."

"These Tamlanders do place a ridiculously high value on their women," Zorn said. "I have heard that a man is only allowed one bedslave."

Chaz laughed. "More likely their blood is so inferior that they can only manage one," he said. "They disgust me, these muddy-skinned parodies of men, with their magic and their toys. I shall be glad to return to J'tahn."

"I too, my prince," said Zorn fervently. "I too."

"But you think she might still be a useful bargaining token?" Chaz disdainfully surveyed the unkempt figure in the chair, blissfully smiling in the grip of sporedream. "Perhaps. But if so, this Mord'kye has less taste than his reputation gives him credit for."

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"Here she is," said Varnak, with as much pride as if he had built the thing himself. "The *Pride Of Tamland*."

The boat was long and broad, with a blunt point at one end and a smooth curve at the other. Each end had a raised section, accessible by short flights of steps at either side, with a very low door between the steps that presumably led down into the bowels of the thing. There was a sort of hut arrangement in the middle, with glazed windows all around it and doors at either end, stencilled with the words "DINING SALON." On the raised part at the back of the boat, a man stood behind a kind of wheel arrangement. Small round windows in the sides indicated accommodation on two levels below the deck.

Mordecai squinted at it. He had slept badly, worrying about Willibald, and his grounding and centring had been complete but perfunctory. He felt raw around the edges, and the docks in the early morning were not a congenial setting at the best of times. Boats of all shapes and sizes were constantly coming in and setting out, delivering raw materials from down the river and taking cargoes of manufactured goods back, and the constant shouting and noise jarred his nerves.

“Highness,” he said, looking around to make sure they were unobserved, “a barge is a barge. No splendid-sounding name can change that.”

“Ah, but you should see our rooms,” Varnak said. “I had a look around yesterday. Very comfortable.”

“I will take your word for it,” Mordecai said. “For myself, I shall not be comfortable till I know that Willibald is safe and well.”

“And how will your discomfort help him?” Varnak said, stressing the pronoun. “Come along, Mordecai, this concern over a fairly capable apprentice must look odd to those who do not know you and him as well as I do.”

“Any halfway competent magician must be concerned for the well-being of his apprentice,” Mordecai retorted, but in a lowered voice. “Besides, as you should well know, Highness, he is in possession of a goodly number of my magical secrets, as well as his own.”

“Then he should be able to take care of himself,” Varnak said conclusively. “Now, shall we get on board?”

“We are, I trust, the only passengers?”

“Ah, no,” Varnak confessed. “The haste with which this journey had to be arranged meant that there were no vessels to be chartered, and besides, we do not want to draw undue attention. This is a regular passenger boat. As befits two ordinary citizens such as ourselves. Which reminds me—have you thought of a name for yourself?”

“Alonso del Cazargua,” Mordecai said. “He was a great-uncle of mine. He never left Sinjara, and he died fifty years ago, so nobody should recognise the name.”

“And I am Humpoletz the merchant,” Varnak said. “A dealer in farm machinery, bound for Freeport to trace a discrepancy in our iron shipments.”

“I notice,” Mordecai said, “that your own attire is not as you showed me last night. In fact, it appears to be somewhat better than mine. Homespun, you said.”

“Well, I’m a *rich* merchant,” Varnak said. “You can be my clerk.”

“Put not your trust in princes,” Mordecai muttered, “for they will cheat you blind.”

“Come along, Alonso,” said Varnak breezily. “Time's a-wasting. Our luggage is already on board.”

They stepped on to the broad-hulled barge, and Mordecai staggered and nearly fell.

“Watch it there, fellow,” said a large man with a bulbous red nose, steadying him with a not unfriendly hand the size of a plate.

“Thank you,” Mordecai said, as Varnak strolled casually down the dangerously unstable floor of the boat towards the low door in the side of the raised section at the back. Mordecai followed, hands out at either side in a desperate attempt to maintain his balance. Someone whistled from the dockside, and a raucous voice shouted “Ooh, get her!” Mordecai set his teeth and ignored it.

“Mind your head,” Varnak said, just a second too late, as Mordecai found the lintel and saw stars for a moment. They went down two flights of steps, at the bottom of which a narrow passage led down the length of the boat, with doors on either side. Varnak opened the door on the left, and gestured Mordecai inside.

“Not bad,” he said a moment later. “A little cramped for my taste, but respectable at least. Where will you be sleeping?”

Varnak was grinning broadly. “I think you misunderstand, Alonso,” he said. “This is my room. As a wealthy merchant, I am entitled to the best accommodation the boat can offer. You, however, as my humble clerk—” He opened another door, revealing a room about a quarter of the size of the one they were in. There was no window, but a skylight let in some daylight; presumably it was led through the upper level by means of mirrors or some such arrangement. The room contained a bed and a chair.

“Out of the question,” Mordecai said at once. “I am leaving now.”

“Mordecai,” Varnak said, “would you disobey a royal command?”

“I cannot be expected to sleep in a box-room,” Mordecai said firmly. “This is a bad joke, and I want no part of it.”

“Mordecai,” Varnak said again, and all the good humour was gone from his voice, “believe me when I tell you that no part of this is a joke. It is important that we remain incognito as ordinary people till we get to Freeport—”

“Then you can be the clerk and I will be the merchant!” Mordecai snapped. “I will not sleep in that hovel!”

“Then you can damned well stay awake all bedamned night if you want!” Varnak shouted. “Do you think I *like* this?”

“Yes,” Mordecai breathed. “Yes, I think you do, Highness. I think to you it is a game, a bit of fun, a diversion from the boredom of your luxurious life. You were born to luxury and power, and so you have the luxury of despising it. I had to achieve it. It has taken me a lot of effort, and I am not going to give it up, not for one day, not for one *second!*”

There was a frozen moment of stalemate. Then all the fight went out of Varnak, and he deflated a little. “Well, if it really means that much to you, Mordecai,” he said, “you can have this room and I'll sleep in the clerk's room.”

“Thank you, Highness,” Mordecai said, with an excessively formal bow.

“It would cause too many questions if we actually swapped roles at this stage,” Varnak went on, “so if you wouldn't mind pretending that I have some kind of authority over you when we're in public—”

“I can play the part, Highness,” Mordecai said. “I shall not let you down.”

“Thank you,” Varnak said wearily. “That's very nice to know. And now, if you don't mind, I'd like to lie down for a couple of hours.”

He went into the smaller room and closed the door, and Mordecai stood staring at it for several seconds. *He actually backed down*, he thought. *This must really be important.*

He looked around the room again. The walls were marquetry panels, intricate and multi-coloured, and there was a tastefully woven rug on the floor. The furniture was basic, but of good quality, and the bed looked very, very comfortable right now.

*Well, what's sauce for the merchant...*

Mordecai slipped off his sandals and outer robe, shifted the luggage off the bed, lay down and was asleep almost before his head touched the pillow.

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The walls were closing in.

His father had told him to wait, that he and Mother would tell him when it was safe

to come out. He just had to be brave for a little longer. He had tried counting his heartbeats, but had lost count somewhere after three hundred and fifty-two. He might have fallen asleep, but he could not be sure.

But he was sure the tiny, dark box was getting smaller. He could feel it, pressing in on him from all sides. He imagined the soldiers outside, standing in the puddled blood of his parents, grinning as they worked some mechanism that pushed the walls together, discussing among themselves how long it would take him to scream himself to death as his bones bent and cracked and split and his own blood gushed out of his burst body and his eyes—

He had lost count of the number of times he had lived through the nightmare long before daylight flooded his tiny prison and his father's voice told him that their coach had made it back over the Sinjari border and they were safely in Tseneshi territory, at the home of a friend. He could barely understand the words. He had not the strength to lift himself on his elbows, to climb out of the box, and he was horribly, shamingly aware that he had soiled himself, more than once. His mother told him how brave he was, but he had seen the look that had briefly crossed his father's face when the box had been opened and the smell had hit him; he knew the truth. He was a coward, a worthless, stinking coward who dishonoured the name he bore. He had not been brave. Could not be.

With a stoicism which some might have said was characteristic of his people, he owned the bitter self-knowledge, made it a part of him, and hid it deep within himself. Over time he learned to control his fears, and it was a shock, the last time he had talked to his father, to realise that that incident which had shaped the very nature of Mordecai's being had completely slipped his father's mind, that he could not recall being disgusted by his son's cowardice, and rejected the suggestion indignantly.

By then, of course, it didn't matter. Mordecai knew what he was, on so deep a level that mere reason could never shake it. And while he could hold himself together long enough to move fairly swiftly through a confined space, the idea of staying in one for any length of time, of lying down in one, of *sleeping* in one—

It was simply intolerable.

And he could never let anyone know that.

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He woke with a start. The barge was moving: he could sense the emanations of the device that powered it, one of his own magic-to-motion converters. For now it would work perfectly, but as the boat drew further away from Tamshold, the power would grow less, and by the end of the journey they would be relying on horse power, wind power, or the unaided current of the river. Mordecai too would be forced to husband his resources. Too far away from the Panergodyne, the magical power source that made Tamland what it was, he would be reduced to the sorcerous capacity of a single human being. While that capacity was a good deal greater than it had once been, thanks to a salutary lesson he had received the previous year when the Panergodyne had gone missing, he would still have to be careful. Wounds, even slight ones, would not be so easy to heal, and if he were killed—

Or if Willibald were killed—

Put it this way. There would be no need to resort to best out of three.

He fought down the panicky thoughts, briefly grounded and centred himself, and went to find Varnak.

“Feeling better, Master Alonso?” said the purported merchant jovially. He was leaning on the rail and watching as the landscape slid slowly by, fields and farm buildings passing like a funeral procession. Tamshold was already nowhere to be seen, and Mordecai had another vertiginous moment of panic as he realised that he was further away from his home than he had been in years. There were half a dozen other passengers out here as well, so Mordecai adopted what he felt was an appropriate clerkly demeanour as he approached.

“We're about forty miles from the Great Lock,” Varnak remarked. “By sunset we'll be out of Tamland. How do you feel about that?”

“Why, Master Humpoletz,” Mordecai said, “even as a squirrel that stores his nuts in a tree and hears the blow of the axe.”

Varnak stared at him. “Quite likely,” he said after a moment, in a slightly strangled

tone. "Have you done something to your back, Mor—Alonso?"

"My back, Master Humpoletz?" Mordecai said blankly. "What is my back to you, that you should inquire after it? It is merely bent in your service, like the bow of my skill that sends the arrow of your thought flying to the bull of its objective. And you will acknowledge, my master, that with my help you have seen more bulls hit than ever before you engaged me." *All right, maybe that one would have been better written down, but who cares, Mister Can I Play The Part?*

"I'm sure you're right," Varnak said, obviously lost.

"Now, my master, if I may respectfully recall the falcon of your attention from the empyrean heights of contemplation to the gauntlet of mundane business, there are some accounts requiring your urgent attention," Mordecai said.

Varnak baulked. "But that's the sort of thing I pay you to deal with, M—Alonso," he said.

"My master," Mordecai began, "when the humble flea—"

"All right, all right, don't start that again," Varnak said testily. "I'm coming.

"What in Tam's name is it, Mordecai?" he continued, when they were back in the room. "And where in the kingdom did you get the idea that that's how clerks talk?"

"I have no idea how common clerks talk, Highness, since I do not listen," Mordecai said. "But I, or rather Alonso, am an *uncommon* clerk."

"There's no answer to that," Varnak muttered. "All right, what do you want?"

"I want to know more about these people we are going to be negotiating with," Mordecai said. "Chotan is one of the northern kingdoms, beyond the Lost Islands. That much I know."

"Then you know as much as I do," Varnak said. "Now if you'll excuse me—"

"What?" Mordecai said faintly. "You mean King Bran sent you on this highly sensitive mission without the slightest hint of information concerning the country, its people, its rulers, the correct protocols to use, or even what we have that they might want?"

"Oh, no, of course not," Varnak said. "He gave me a great wodge of papers—you know how he is about that kind of thing. Just because he enjoys reading he thinks everyone else does too."

"Did you," Mordecai chose his words carefully, "did you—by any chance—on a royal whim, perhaps—happen to bring them with you?"

"Of course I did, Mordecai, I'm not a complete fool," Varnak said warmly. "I thought you could perhaps mug up on them a little as we go and advise me.

They're in this bag he—”

He flung open the bag in question.

“I know I packed them,” he said blankly. “I remember putting them in there. I did it myself.”

Mordecai sat down on the bed.

“The foot of optimism has just encountered the cowpat of reality,” he said.