

CHAPTER THREE

“Yes,” Mordecai said, “yes, yes, yes, Highness, I know you remember packing them, you have said so at least twenty-nine times. We have searched all of the luggage six times. You have gone over the sequence of actions you performed last night eleven times. I think it is time we faced the fact that someone has rendered all this activity completely futile by stealing the papers from your bag.”

Varnak did not respond, which was a hopeful sign.

“As to when it could have happened,” Mordecai said, “possibly when the luggage was brought on board, or possibly when I was asleep.”

“You'd have woken up—” Varnak began. “No, possibly you wouldn't,” he amended. “I know how soundly you sleep. But I can't believe it, Mordecai, I just can't. I mean, who would want a load of dry-as-dust information on Chotan?”

Mordecai rolled his eyes. “Perhaps the question you should be asking is; who would want us to go into these negotiations unarmed with the information we need?”

“No, I'm sorry, I can't accept that.” Varnak set his jaw mulishly. “I mean, only three people in the whole kingdom knew about this mission—you, me and Dad.”

“And the messengers by whom the meeting was arranged, and the clerk who took notes when your father was discussing with the Councils—in carefully guarded terms, of course—the situation which has made the mission necessary, and the grooms who tended the horses, and the palace laundryman for all I know. For someone who claims to be in touch with the people, Varnak, you find some of them extraordinarily hard to see.”

“Well, all right, fair enough, but only the three of us knew how we were travelling and when. And anyway, the only people who've handled this luggage apart from you and me—well, me actually, now I think about it—are the palace servants and the crew of the boat. Their jobs depend on their honesty.”

Mordecai held up one finger. “Their jobs depend on their *reputation* for honesty. Not the same thing. Your Highness, this argument is academic. The papers were there and now they are gone, therefore someone has taken them. It must be someone acting in the pay of one of our enemies, Briom, Tsenesh, possibly Sinjara depending which party is in power this week, or even the Chotani themselves, trying to weaken our position and so boost their profits. I suggest, Highness, that you leave the political thinking to me and concentrate on looking like a merchant.”

“Well—“ Varnak broke off. “Wait a minute. I'm an idiot. Can't you use magic to find the papers?”

“I was afraid you were going to say that. The answer is; possibly. If you wish me to try, I will need two things from you. One is a piece of the same paper, or something else that may be in sympathy with the specific papers in the bundle.”

“Erm—“ Varnak brightened, delved in his pocket and produced a much-crumpled scrap of paper. “I used it to write down the hour of departure. I find doing that helps me wake up at the right time. What's the other thing?”

“Your assurance that when I have run out of magic and we are locked in some foreign prison, chained to the wall and blindfolded, with carnivorous beasts on all sides and the ceiling slowly descending towards us, I will not hear anything that sounds even a little bit like 'why can't you use magic to get us out of this?’”

“Do you think that's likely?”

“Anything is possible as long as it is deeply unpleasant. I have a finite amount of magic, Highness, and it will grow less and take longer to renew itself the further away from Tamland we go. This theft is a setback, certainly, but it is not for me to say whether it is sufficiently serious to justify the use of magic.”

“But we're still in Tamland at the moment. Mordecai, we haven't been on the river more than half a day.”

“And if the spell shows that the papers are being carried across the border into Briom on a fast horse? Will you be prepared to go and get them? The only thing we can be certain about is that they are not on this boat, and we do not have time to search the country for them. The odds that I could supply any practically useful information in exchange for the depletion of my resources are not good, Highness.”

“I suppose you're right as usual, Mordecai.” Varnak sighed gustily. “It's a bit of a blow, though, something like this happening before we've even got properly on the way.”

“Oh, trust me, your Highness,” Mordecai said gloomily, “this is only the beginning.”

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“Mmm.” Chaz replaced the documents in their case. “A fairly complete summary. Their spies are most efficient.” He regarded his captive coolly. “A pity I cannot say the same for ours.”

“I protest, my prince,” Zorn said. “Our information was most carefully checked.”

“And yet wrong, nonetheless,” Chaz said. “Well, girl, are you ready to talk yet?”

The woman opened one eye. “Tha kenned I were foxin' then?”

“Of course,” Chaz said. “You should be aware that if we have any more outbursts of the sort with which you favoured us earlier, my advisor here stands ready to send you back to the land of dreams...and that each time you visit it becomes harder to return, and to stay away. Eventually you would do anything, betray anyone, to get the drug.”

The woman considered. “Happen I'll bide quiet, then,” she said.

“A wise decision,” Chaz said. “Sadly the promise of a woman is worthless, so I can hardly send Zorn away...but we shall see. Now then, your name?”

“Meila,” the woman said promptly. “Scullery maid to Lady Andemar. She's third cousin to King o' Tamland, tha knows. She'll not miss I though. Who be thee?”

“You serve this...Lady And'mar?” Chaz frowned. “It seems strange then that you spend so much time in the company of Mord'kye del Ag'la, the court wizard.”

The woman laughed merrily. “Not so strange at that, cully,” she said. “Mistress be sweet on yon magus, and she uses I as a go-between. She do sit in's office and play at being's clerk, and I do run up and down stairs bearing messages. Some on 'em be fair sick-making and all, I can tell thee.”

Understanding dawned on Chaz's face. “Then that may be how our agents came to the conclusion that you were the wizard's apprentice.”

That sent the girl into even more gales of laughter. “I be not the type,” she managed, between guffaws. “Yon great perfumed streak o' piss do prefer summat a bit larger. Wi' hairy arms and all,” and off she went again.

“Then why does he encourage your mistress?” Chaz said sharply.

“Think on, cully, so be tha hast a brain,” the girl—Meila—said sharply. “She's his surety of king's favour, and she do keep rest of kingdom from spyin' out his preferences.”

“Then it is not acceptable in Tamland for a man to favour male companionship?” Chaz said sharply. “Another fact that failed to find its way into your agents' reports, Zorn.”

“The place is undoubtedly even more barbaric than we realised, my prince,” Zorn said miserably.

“Ach, nay, lad,” Meila said. “'T is not so bad nor all that. 'Tis Magus hissen wants

to keep it secret what he does.”

“Then you are remarkably free with your employer's friend's secrets,” Chaz said.

“Aye, well, tha has me at a disadvantage, cully,” Meila said. “Lady Andemar do pay me well, but not well enough so I'll bide the torture. Ask and I'll tell thee. And maybe when tha tires of putting me to question tha'll think a mite kindly o' me and make un quick.”

“A word, my prince,” Zorn said urgently, and Chaz followed him out into the narrow corridor and closed the door.

“What?” Chaz said flatly.

“The woman seems remarkably self-possessed for a serving wench,” Zorn said.

“I find myself wondering if—“

“I find myself wondering if I can bear to leave your revolting head on your shoulders till we get home,” Chaz snarled. “I have long ago lost count of your mistakes, Zorn, and if you tell me of another one now it may well drive me to do something I would be put to the tiresome inconvenience of explaining to my noble father. Barbarian women are notoriously malapert, because they are not kept properly in check. Every schoolboy knows this. If she seems to face her death with an almost manly stoicism, it can only be because her brain cannot conceive of the reality of it.”

“Doubtless you are right, my prince,” Zorn murmured. “I beg forgiveness.”

“Hey!” came faintly through the door. Chaz grimaced and pulled it open.

“I warned you, girl,” he said. “Zorn—“

“Thee went away, not I.” The girl grinned at him; truly she seemed unable to grasp the peril in which she stood. “Art tha minded to feed thy prisoner, then, or dost tha plan to let I starve to death right here?”

Chaz clenched his fists. “Zorn,” he said quietly, “fetch food for the wench. And I suggest,” he said, “that you think twice before you make any more noise. Next time Zorn will use the spores on you without waiting for my command.”

“Then tha's best stay within earshot of I, cully,” Meila said, “'cause so be I wants thee, I'll call thee. Tha do need me hale and live, I'll hazard, and that means not thrall'd by thy spores. Else tha'd have killed me ere now.”

“For the moment,” Chaz said, “that is true. But it would be better for you if you do not try my patience. The spores are not the only weapon at my command.” He took a deep breath. “Now, let us talk at more length about this Mord'kye...”

Master Humpoletz and his clerk Alonso emerged from their quarters to join in the communal evening meal of sausage, bread and mixed greens, and to watch as the boat traversed the Great Lock that marked the border of Tamland's authority. From then on they would be in no man's land, between Briom to the marth and Tsenesh to the gilth, till they passed through the River Gate of the fiercely independent Freeport.

Mordecai watched his fellow passengers as they ate. The dining salon contained six round tables, with a seating capacity of about two dozen, and about half that number were present. Any one of them could be an enemy agent, in the pay of the Witchring, or of the elderly but still scheming King Valbogast of Briom, or some other potentate with designs on the fabulous commodity, or simply with designs on their lives. Bran, after all, had no other heir if Varnak met with a nasty accident, and with Willibald already gone, killing him, Mordecai, would leave Tamland ripe for the plucking.

Why do we send our most valued people into dangerous situations?

Because they are our best. Varnak has to go because only a prince can negotiate with a prince. I have to go because...because the universe hates me and wants to drive me insane. There are reasons for everything. Not good reasons, not sane reasons, but they exist.

Who could it be? Who is my enemy?

Next to Mordecai, Varnak ate stolidly, giving—unintentionally, Mordecai was sure—a very good impression of a man of business, weighted down with matters of grave import, or possibly export. Beyond him, at the next table on the left, sat three ladies of tender years, dressed in styles that might have been the height of fashion when their grandmothers were their age; two were engaged in animated conversation, while the third read a book through small rimless spectacles.

Interesting. Someone who is well off enough to travel, but who has not felt the urge to have her vision corrected by magic. It was a grey area; some people felt that using magic to heal defects in the body was against the way of nature, and

that natural or artificial non-magical remedies were more likely to succeed. Mordecai, who had been healed by magic of wounds that would otherwise have killed him, was not a subscriber to this view.

On the next table, the big man who had supported Mordecai as he embarked was sitting alone, picking at his food while leafing through a collection of documents. *Surely not—he could not be so brazen, could he?* Surreptitiously, Mordecai took out the piece of paper Varnak had given him and essayed a small spell.

Nothing. There was no connection, no sympathetic vibration. And now that Mordecai looked more closely, he could see that the big fellow's documents were written in a language of blocky pictograms that he could not recognise. *Bran might have his eccentricities, but even he would hardly press upon his son a file of essential information in an unknown language.* Mordecai's curiosity was piqued, though; he was quite good at languages, and to find one he could not read was a rare occurrence. The big man, feeling himself observed, glanced up, and Mordecai's gaze flicked on to the next table.

Four young men, students by the look of them, were laughing and talking loudly over cups of wine, their emptied plates between them. At the next table around, a tall spare fellow in the grey robes of a teacher was watching them disapprovingly through narrowed eyes. *Are they travelling with him, perhaps, or he with them?*

At the table immediately to Mordecai's right sat a woman, dressed in voluminous black and wearing heavy veils that entirely concealed her face. Before her sat a plate with some bread and cheese on it and a glass of water. Neither had been touched.

“You're thinking what I'm thinking,” Varnak said in a low voice.

“Do you mean you have finally come to terms with the idea that someone on this boat is our enemy?” Mordecai said in the same tone.

“I'm really not as stupid as you think I am, you know,” Varnak said without heat. “Who do you think it is?”

“I have no idea. Maybe we will get to know them better as the voyage goes on.”

“There are a few other passengers, I think. They had their dinner sent to their rooms.”

“It might have been more sensible if we had done the same.”

“Nonsense,” Varnak said briskly. “Hiding achieves nothing. It's time to take the fight to the enemy.”

Mordecai sighed. “But we do not know yet who the enemy is.”

“Well,” Varnak said reasonably, “we'll find out when we take the fight to them, won't we?”

A clear, mellow whistle sounded from somewhere, and most of the diners got up from their tables and left the salon.

“Come on, Alonso,” said Varnak. “If you've never seen this before, it's a treat.”

The river was blocked ahead by huge black gates, and on either side stone walls were topped with windlasses turned by teams of four oxen. As Mordecai watched, the windlasses turned, and the level of the water around them began to fall. The boat descended, little by little, into a clangorous box of stone whose walls were coated with weed.

“Ah, yes,” Mordecai said. “How thoughtful of you to remember my passionate interest in slime.”

“Wait,” Varnak said.

The descent slowed and stopped, and the great gates began to swing open. Several of the passengers gasped. Before them, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, lay a vision of endless landscape rolling away into hazy distance; hills on one side, some cloaked in trees, scrubby heathland on the other with outcrops of grey, jagged rock protruding through the dry, crumbly soil. At the limit of vision the keen of eye could barely make out, on the left bank, the lamps of a town just starting to twinkle.

The veiled woman emitted a sound, it might have been a sob, and turned away. The four students hugged each other and pointed out the town, while their teacher pursed his lips and shook his greying head.

“What place is that?” Mordecai wanted to know.

“Clesterbyne,” Varnak said. “Briom owns its allegiance. We'll be overnighting at the moorings there. I'll lock the doors and windows just in case, but I really don't think we have anything more to fear at this point.”

“You could be right,” Mordecai said. “For the moment at least. I will see what I can find out tonight—”

“Actually, I'd rather you didn't go on any astral junkets just yet,” Varnak said firmly. “Not while we're in a potentially hostile village, anyway. There'll be time later on when we're on the open river. Concentrate on husbanding your strength.”

“By then we will be further away,” Mordecai muttered, as the boat surged forward and through the gates of the Great Lock.

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“Come in,” said the voice from behind the door. Gisel took a moment to compose herself, opened the door and entered the study.

“Your majesty,” she said.

“Still no news?” King Bran was sitting at his desk, which was covered with books and papers as always. The window was open, and the night breeze stirred the corners of the unanchored sheets.

“The captain of the guard says if she's in the city, she's either dead or invisible,” Gisel said, still a little breathless. “I think he's probably right. I've told them to renew the search tomorrow, but I don't think they'll find anything.”

“So she has been abducted,” Bran said heavily. “And timing this bad can't be a coincidence. It has to be to do with the Chotani negotiations.”

“You've ruled out the Witchring? Despite what the man Rylome said?”

“I think so. The Witch Queen knows what would happen if she authorised any action against Amiya.” Bran sighed. “Though I'd really rather not be forced to it.”

Gisel nodded. In order to save face—a vital consideration in Tseneshi culture—the Witchring had decreed that the incidents of the previous year, when the Witch Queen's daughter-elect and heir had escaped her guardians and run away to Tamland posing as a boy, had simply not happened. They had quietly found another candidate and pretended that there had been no change; not difficult, since the daughter-elect was kept in strict seclusion from the moment of her selection till she was crowned. Amiya, sworn to silence, had agreed to lifelong banishment, and had chosen to return to Tamland to continue as Mordecai's apprentice, but there was nothing Tsenesh could do to prevent anyone else in Tamland from speaking the truth if they so chose.

“They're an amazing people, you know,” Bran said, speaking as if to himself.

“They came to that ghastly patch of desert and rock seven thousand years ago—shipwrecked, only a few hundred of them, no magic to speak of—built themselves a town with their own hands and now look at them. You go to their cities some

time, talk to the menfolk. They've a lot less to complain of than many women in Briom, or here come to that. I sometimes think..." He shook his head.

"If only they were a bit easier to get on with?" Gisel suggested, a smile playing about her lips.

Bran laughed. "Don't put words into my mouth, cousin. There are reasons, good reasons, why the women of Tsenesh are so proud and prickly, and no man has any right to question them. Even when he sees that pride leading them—maybe—to disaster."

"They may surprise us all," Gisel said.

"I just wish I hadn't sent Mordecai away." Bran returned to the subject chiefly on his mind. "It's not just the day to day magery, though that's going to become a problem soon enough. I—I feel sort of naked without a magician around."

"That's because we are," Gisel said. "And we must at all costs keep our enemies from realising that fact. That's why I was coming to see you. We need to find someone who can act the part of Court Magus to the world."

"That's what the Council said," Bran said gloomily. "But who?"

"I think I know someone who might be up to the role," Gisel said. "If your Majesty will allow me to approach him personally..."

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Clesterbyne, at close range a somewhat sorry-looking huddle of thatched brick cottages in the Briom style, apparently boasted a hostelry of some kind, and most of the passengers had gone ashore to sample its delights. Varnak and Mordecai took their evening meal in their quarters, with the doors and windows firmly bolted, and shortly thereafter Varnak declared his intention of retiring and disappeared into the tiny adjoining room.

Mordecai, chafing at the enforced inactivity, toyed with a book for a while, but his heart was not in it.

I should be looking for you. I should be back in Tamshold, co-ordinating the search, consulting the oracular sources, scrying for you on the astral plane, preparing my most hideous curses for the fools who dared to abduct you. Not

sitting here in a bedamned boat with a meat-headed princeling, bound on a mission that is completely doomed to failure already. This is criminal waste of resources, and when I get back to Tamland, if by some bizarre chance I should make it back safely, I shall tell His Majesty the King that personally.

Please be alive. Please don't let them hurt you. Don't let them make me that angry.

Heavy, stumbling footsteps and raucous voices raised in song heralded the return of, Mordecai suspected, the students, having fulfilled whatever adolescent ambitions they had cherished. At first they seemed disposed to set up a kind of glee club on the deck, but little by little the noise died down and the footsteps made their way down the stairs. Mordecai sighed, undressed, prepared himself for bed and was just about to slide beneath the covers when he stopped, his ears pricking. Someone was standing in the corridor just outside their door, listening.

Mordecai debated whether to open the door and catch them by surprise, or try to divine their identity with a spell. The first course he dismissed as unsubtle, the second as a possible waste of magic. He contented himself with producing a fairly creditable snore, and after a few of those the unknown person moved on about his, or her, business.

Mordecai got into bed, began to compose himself for slumber and was asleep before he had quite finished. His last coherent thought was *Must be the country air.*

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