

Chapter 1

Z'Tan

The spindly urchin hurtled along the busy street, weaving violently through knots of pedestrians as though pursued by the hounds of hell. This was not so far from the truth, for a few paces behind and slightly above head-height, moving purposefully after the ragamuffin, was a darkish volatile cloud of buzzing angry bees! Small wonder it was that shoppers in the path of Z'Tan's headlong flight rapidly made way for the brown tornado and his malevolent pursuers.

Z'Tan swerved to the right, passing between two trinket stalls whose owners gave him the benefit of an extensive command of M'Rekh expletives, and into the narrow alley behind the stalls. Without slackening pace he followed the cobbled street hugging the rough stone wall to his left and turned suddenly into a recessed archway, flattening himself against the door behind him. The swarm whined angrily past, although having been only a scant three paces behind, they could hardly have missed such a transparent manoeuvre. A few paces further on they stopped, hovered, and the cloud shrank as though they drew closer together for a conference on strategy. But the cloud grew smaller still, and smaller, became point-sized - and vanished entirely.

Z'Tan drew the bright red *E'ranj* fruit from inside his tattered weskit, grinning from ear to ear, and took a toothy bite of it. *It never fails to work*, he thought, as the honey-tasting pulp dissolved in his mouth, leaving the tangy rind which he chewed with relish. His back slid down the door as he collapsed into a cross-legged squat, leaning forward over the fruit to which he proceeded to give his full attention. Eventually, and with a sigh of pure contentment, he rose directly from the cross-legged position, his back sliding up the door. Wiping sticky hands on the once-fashionable knee-length fitting trousers, now of indeterminate colour but with a hint of azure in the seams, he left the recess and ambled

forward in the same direction he had taken earlier at a much less leisurely pace.

Hands thrust into pockets, and still sucking on the last piece of *E' Ranjind*, he headed away from the town centre and the market-place, a skinny, brown, twelve-year-old, with close-cropped straight dark brown hair, brown-button eyes, a pair of slightly protruding front teeth, and, obviously, not a care in the world. He stayed in the shadow of the walls which bounded the large white houses with the blue tiled roofs, skipping across sunlit intersections to avoid the fierce blue and orange rays of the suns now well past the mid-day position. The alleys grew narrower, and the houses smaller and less imposing, as he wandered towards the outskirts of town. At last he arrived at the broad cobbled thoroughfare which circumnavigated the town, just inside the high red-stone walls, and he had to leave the shadows for the hot cobbles between him and the massive gate of ironwood. He ran then, on the balls of his feet, trying to make as little contact with the scorching surface as possible, till he gained the blissful cool of the gate-arch shadow. He called to the sentry three metres above in the gatehouse upon the walls. Nobody appeared, but the man-sized wicket gate set in the main gate slid upwards, about half its normal distance. He whipped through to the other side just as the sliding door crashed down again, grinning hugely, and calling up:

' Missed again! Gen, you're getting old! Even my old grandmother could pass through while you were fumbling for the gate release. Soon you'll be put out to tend the ceremonial *Ghoras* in their stables' .

Without waiting for a reply he dashed out of the gate-arch, hugging the wall to the right, just ahead of a slop pail's contents and the accompanying stream of invective from old Gen. Grinning even more, he rapidly crossed the dry denuded stretch of ground between the town walls and the beckoning shade trees, his shadows preceding him.

Z' Tan skipped under the nearest tree to its darker side, and sat hurriedly, nursing his scorched soles, and dusting off the hot dry powder he had collected on them during his rapid passage across the bare perimeter. In the cool dense shade of the *Alar* tree he gradually relaxed, sinking into the moss which skirted the trunk, and mused on the morning's events, his tongue licking the last sticky traces of *E'Ranj* from his lips.

A long trip for an E' Ran he thought, *but worth it.* Then, remembering the bees, his face split into a smile - *As if that fruit-seller could harm me with one of those cheap spells bought in the Temple forecourt.* They had got close, though, this time. It was bothersome to have to hide his immunity from magic, but necessary if he was to continue to taste of wares he could not afford to buy. Necessary, too, if he was to avoid interrogation by the Temple Mages - he was not immune to physical pain, which would certainly be inflicted when torture spells failed.

He remembered the time when he first discovered that spells failed to affect him - he was of six summers then, and had been taken to the Temple in the town by his adoptive parents, Z' Kal and S' Lin who went there in search of a fertility potion, and in his excitement and wonder at town life had accidentally backed into the legs of a Temple Mage causing him to stumble. The Mage, a fat and pompous man, had looked down on the child in amazement which rapidly gave way to fury - an unkempt urchin had dared to get in the way of a Mage of the Temple! And instead of falling to his knees and begging forgiveness, as was proper, the child simply stood there and gawked! This could not be permitted.

' Beggar child. Since your parents have failed to teach you respect for your betters, it falls to me to educate you. You shall smart for seven days, as from a severe beating' . He had then uttered a spell and pointed at the child, who had stood there wide-eyed and fearful, staring up at the Mage. Seconds passed, and nothing happened. The Mage coloured, as by now the attention of those around had been attracted, and these had noticed the failure of the Mage' s spell. As the Mage drew himself up, and prepared to hurl another - and possibly more potent - spell, Z' Tan fled into the crowd, towards his parents. Z' Kal and S' Lin, who had stood stunned at the reaction of the Mage to a simple accident, came out of their stupor and had hauled Z' Tan away heading immediately for the town gate, fertility potion forgotten. It was only later that evening that they realised, when relating the incident to the village Elders, that, somehow, Z' Tan was unaffected by curses. From that day Z' Tan was conditioned to conceal his "gift", and the three of them had stayed well away from the town for the next couple of years.

A sudden loud creaking split the silence of the forest, jolting Z'Tan out of his memories, his head jerking in the direction of the gate from which he had recently emerged. What he saw catapulted him to his feet and galvanised him into a headlong flight to the nearest stand of bushes, propelling him headfirst through the thick foliage. He broke his fall with a curved arm, rolling head-over-heels onto his feet again, then turning round in the same motion to face the way he had come, hurling himself flat against the aromatic earth. He squirmed forward, snorting dried leaves and mulch out of his nostrils, till he could see through the dense leafy cover.

The gates continued opening inwards, drawn by the ropes that old R'Gen was winding onto the spindle as he laboured to turn the massive iron wheel. Framed in the gap was an enclosed sedan chair on the shoulders of four bearers, the burnished wood reflecting the dazzling sunshine, heavy curtains drawn against the heat, accompanied by a group of Temple Guards. As soon as the gates were wide enough for passage the caravan moved forward rapidly, the bearers just as anxious to escape the blazing suns as Z'Tan had been. The procession moved into the forest, bearing right onto the road to Stil, and Z'Tan, feeling the familiar tingling in his head then noticed the blue and orange discs embellishing the sides of the sedan chair.

A High Mage! he gasped beneath his breath. *What takes him to Stil? He could have no other destination as the range can be reached by a much easier route. Besides, Mages leave much earlier for the range so that they can return across the river before sunset.* He followed the caravan with his eyes as it disappeared around a bend in the forest path. He lay still for a few minutes more, his nose almost touching the cool mulch of the forest floor, until the trembling stopped. He turned onto his back then, immediate danger past, and tried to fathom the purpose of the High Mage's mission in the heat of the late afternoon sun.

Still puzzled, Z' Tan rose, his feet rested and cooled sufficiently for him to continue his journey, and headed deeper into the forest following the less frequently used tracks out of habit - just in case an irate vendor had sent a runner to follow him - and to avoid the Mage's route. It was a longer way but safer, and he also avoided the possibility of meeting other travellers to M'Rekh. His mind, however, dwelt still on his Talent. There had been other

incidents, from which it had been found that those in close proximity to Z' Tan had some protection too. Z' Tan had avoided Mages since, and even when engaged in devilment, as earlier today, had learnt to avoid the consequences of his actions in private where none could notice his immunity. His "gift" remained undetected and unknown to all but his village, for, apart from this peculiarity, he was outwardly a normal village boy, though a little precocious and eternally curious. One fact that he kept concealed, even from his parents, was that he could detect the presence of magic and determine its intent, for both good and evil. He could smell a Mage a kilometre away, and, when on one of his pilfering excursions to the town, could tell the potency of the spell being used to ward the wares. He avoided those where fleetness of foot was not enough to delay retribution - or, in his case, escape from it - until he was out of sight.

He had come to accept that he was different from everyone he knew, but had a consuming desire to understand why. Since none in the village were capable of performing even the simplest of magics, and he was forbidden to question the occasional itinerant spell-seller on his way through the village to the town, he remained in the dark. Almost. Though unable to ask questions which could possibly lead to the revelation of his secret, he was allowed to watch the spell-seller prepare his spells - love charms, healing spells, crop wards, talismans for journeys, and, very rarely, curses to repay real or imagined wrongs. So he learnt of gems and metals, colours and runes, and all the paraphernalia of minor magic. He stored this information in his mind, but was never tempted to even try to practice it. It was not just the fact that it was forbidden to those unlicensed by the Temple, but also that the practice of concealment was learned first. But even more so, he knew these magics to be trivia, in comparison with the powers he had seen demonstrated in the town during his surreptitious thieving expeditions. He knew the spell-sellers to be mere mechanics of magic, and not wielders of true power. And so, he mused away the long hours in the village smithy, tending the blacksmiths fire, passing him tools and metal, fetching water, while his mind kept asking why and how, knowing that one day he must seek his answers in the town.

The suns were low towards the west when Z' Tan' s reverie disintegrated into consciousness

of the approaching dark, as usually happened. He reluctantly dispersed his daydreams, and turned his attention to more pressing matters. His first priority was to get back to the village before sunset - before Z' Kal returned from the fields and discovered his absence, and therefore quickened his pace, trotting and walking alternately. In theory, he was free to do as he pleased on his tenth-day, but in practice Z' Kal had set limits on his freedom. He was not permitted to go near the town unaccompanied, for instance, under any circumstances. No specific penalty or punishment had been stated, but the tone of Z' Kal' s voice alone hinted at a fate worse than anything a Mage could do. The hills to the east of the village were similarly forbidden territory because of the reputation they had for being the haunt of the I' Rez - beings neither mortal nor spiritual, but somewhere in-between, sometimes one, sometimes the other - according to legend. None in the village had ever seen the I' Rez, but even Temple Mages did not enter the I' Rez range alone, no matter how pressing the reason. It was assumed that such terrors were enough to deter him from adventuring in that direction. The north was boring, consisting of forest followed by flatlands which stretched beyond the horizon, unrelieved by even a river or lake until they reached the Eye, a vast circular lake rarely visited, many ten-days march beyond. To the west was the Tarl forest which stretched indefinitely till it reached the coast, impassable beyond ten kilometres. This left the south, and the cluster of villages between Zant and M' Rekh within day-return distance. The nearest was S' Lin' s home village, Stil, directly on the route to the other villages. He could not claim that he had visited Stil, as S' Lin' s friends and relatives were all-too-frequent visitors to his home Zant. He had been found out in that lie before, and had found it necessary to admit to a trip to the foothills on the fringes of the I' Rez range and taken his punishment rather than admit to visiting the town! Which left only the lake to the south-east, and an unsuccessful fishing trip. That story was wearing a bit thin, and he would soon have to find an alternative, but it should be good for a few more tenth-days. The lake had the advantage of having an abundance of fishing spots which were totally invisible from other parts of the shore, because of the tall reeds along the edge, and the short but shady trees which all but surrounded the lake. He had, in fact been within thirty paces of another villager on one occasion, and neither had been aware of the

other until they had decided to return home at about the same time. Even so, his lack of success at the lake was beginning to raise a few eyebrows. Perhaps he would steal a fish in the town the next time - that would allow the deception to continue a while longer!

His ruminations continued as his feet found their own familiar way through the Tarl forest, and he broke through the tree line just as the last sun was about to dip below the tree-tops. The village lay ahead and slightly to the right, a collection of thatched wooden houses, bathed in the orange glow of the remaining sun, surrounding a circular open space in the middle of which rose an obelisk of stone, about five metres in height. His own house was two houses to the left of the gap into which his path led, and he could see that Z' Kal had arrived home before sunset and was waiting for him at the gap. He quickened his pace, mentally rehearsing his story of the one that got away, and planning a tale of how he had explored a side path from the lake as an alibi for not having met any other villager who had chosen the same pursuit that day.

"Z' Tan! Z' Tan! Make haste!" he heard Z' Kal' s words clearly from nearly forty metres distant. Z' Kal, tall, lean and wearing a rough pale blue home-spun shirt over trousers similar to Z' Tan's , began to walk towards him rapidly, and as the distance shortened he saw that his father' s brown weathered features were set, not so much in anger as in concern. What could be wrong? He had been late before, and had been admonished for it, but had never seen Z' Kal look so worried. As he drew nearer to his father, he felt a coldness sweep over his skin. He had felt this sensation before when certain Mages had passed close to him, and particularly during the public punishment of wrong-doers. But this was his father! *The High Mage!* He spasmed at the thought, his heart accelerating instantly to twice its former rhythm.

"A Mage from the town passed through earlier, asking of an urchin of your description. He was seen stealing an *E' Ranfruit* today, and was recognised as the same lad who took a string of fish-hooks a tenth-day ago. R' Gen at the gatehouse has recognised him as a regular visitor to the town, at ten-day intervals. We have denied that you are of the village, but the Mage has spelled a rash on the lad *and* his keepers. He will return tomorrow to inspect us all, and both S' Lin and I are afflicted" Z' Kal spoke without pausing, and then drew a deep breath, and

continued "The Mage suspects you have an undeclared Talent. You know that it is the Law that we report any Talents we find in our children, and take the child to the Temple for inspection. And children who go to the Temple never return. Do you not remember young Z' Pan last year?" Z' Kal finished speaking, leaving the question hanging rhetorically in the air, for none in the village could forget Z' Pan's sudden departure from their midst.

"Z' Kal-sha! I did not think that the Mages would follow a mere *Ranfruit*, or a string of fish-hooks" Z' Tan blurted, alibi abandoned, in the panic created by the thought that his parents would be punished for his misdemeanours. The punishment for concealing a Talent was fearsome - a public flaying, by magical means, in the Temple forecourt. He had seen it himself - the slow peeling of the skin, strip at a time, until the miscreants entire body was raw, and the subsequent immersion of the subject in a trough of salt water, with only the head exposed so that all present could hear the soul-searing screams which, mercifully, ceased quickly and abruptly.

' Come!S' Lin is in pain. Let us see if the protection afforded by your Talent can alleviate the pain enough for us to leave the village. We must flee before first light, and hope that distance and time will be the cure. But we will never be able to return, for the Mage took census before he left for the next village' Z' Kal spoke quickly and tersely, but still without anger. It was not uncommon for people to flee the Mages for having infringed this law or that, or simply being unable to provide a Mage with some commodity. Ignorance of the Law and poverty were not acceptable excuses - the punishment spells were still visited on the hapless victims. Z' Kal turned on his heel, and walked rapidly in the direction of the village, with Z' Tan half-running to keep pace.Z' Tan, his face a picture of guilt, was made no happier by the red weals rising on the back of his father's arms and legs.

They passed a knot of villagers just inside the gap, without word or greeting, and, turning left, they arrived at the house with the corn-dollies over the blue-stained door. The door was wide open, to allow S' Lin some comfort from the cool air as she lay face down on the straw pallet below the window on the left, her long black hair to one side hanging over the edge of the bed. The dying sunshine reflected off the wall outside the window, and the diffused orange

glow filled the small room. S' Lin' s slim back was bare, the loose shift she customarily wore having been drawn down to the waist, and the skirt drawn up to the same level. From the neck down to her ankles her skin was a corrugated stretch of red blisters, and it was apparent from her slightly hunched position that she was trying to avoid frontal contact with the bed. Z' Tan gasped and half-choked in his astonishment, and tears flowed from his eyes unbidden. He ran to S' Lin, a few paces away, and just barely stopped himself from embracing her. S' Lin turned her head away from the wall, towards Z' Tan, and looked at Z' Tan with eyes full of pain but without blame.

'A high price for an *E' Rahj* she smiled ' but not too high for twelve summers of joy, even if the Mage claims his due' .

'S' Lin-shu, forgive me, I did not mean to bring this on either of you. I did not believe that I could be caught. None saw me escape the spells, I swear it' . The words tumbled out through Z' Tan' s tears.

' Old R' Gen. The market traders complained to the Temple tithe-takers that a young lad was stealing from them each tenth day, and appearing unmarked by their spells ten days hence. R' Gen identified you, and denied any evidence of bee-stings on your face or arms when you left through the gate. He saw you approach the gate, unharmed. The Temple Mages now suspect that there exists a Talent that laughs at their spells, and they are not amused. Our time here is drawing to an end. We must go to another village by another town' .S' Lin paused for thought. ' Is there anything that you can do, to ease my pain? Through your Talent?'

'S' Lin-shu, even I do not know how my Talent works - I have no control over it. Perhaps the spell-sellers healing spells I have learnt may relieve the affliction. I do not know' Z' Tan' s voice carried the desperation that he felt. He searched his memory for healing spells, but found nothing appropriate to violent rashes. He reached out and lay his hand gently upon his mother' s shoulder, between patches of afflicted skin, and continued ' There is nothing. We will move you tonight, to the lodge by the lake. None will find us there, and when you are well enough to travel we shall go far from here. But first, you must rest. It is not a short journey, and will be even longer because of your pain.' Turning to his father, he asked ' "How severe is

your affliction, Z' Kal-sha?'

' Bearable Z' Kal answered shortly. ' You stay here with your mother, while I make preparations for our journey. There is much to be done.' So saying Z' Kal turned and left the now darkened room.

Z' Tan left his mother momentarily to light the small oil lamps at each corner of the room, each giving off a yellow glow which replaced the orange of the earlier sunshine. Outside it was dusk, a few russet clouds low over the horizon, the sky deepening away from them from blue to violet. Overhead, stars shone brightly, and just rising in the East was the burgeoning moon. Sunset and moonrise, together, a good omen.

Z' Tan returned to his mother' s side, sitting on the edge of the cot with his hand on her right shoulder. S' Lin sighed contentedly, Your touch soothes' .

The window was a violet rectangle when Z' Kal returned and stood silently beside the cot looking down on both of them, worry lines creasing his forehead, and tension showing in the muscles of his wiry arms and shoulders. ' We cannot leave' he said S' Lin opened her eyes and squinted at him from her prone position. ' The Elders have been threatened' he continued ' The Mage has promised a blight on our crops if any should be absent tomorrow. Particularly you' he paused, looking with concern at Z' Tan. ' Bring a lamp S' Neda' - the village healer of minor ailments - ' has given me a salve. No magic salve, but one which works well with nettle stings.'

Z' Tan left the cot quickly and fetched a lamp from the ledge above the cooking hearth, lighting it on his way from a corner lamp. He returned to stand beside Z' Kal, holding the flickering yellow flame above his mother' s back. Z' Kal fumbled with the pot of salve, greasy on the outside, trying to remove the cover which was sealed into place with dried salve. He succeeded at last, the lid coming loose with an audible pop, and a fragrance of balsam pervaded the small room.

' Lower the lamp, and take care not to spill the oil on your mother Z' Kal commanded ' Closer still. I see nothing yet.' His hand descended toward S' Lin' s back, fingers liberally covered in the fragrant salve, Z' Tan' s lamp trailing close behind. The lamp moved forward, then to one

side, then the next, following Z' Kal' s hovering hand. Then down her back, over her thighs, and back to her waist.

S' Lin turned her head rightwards as far as it could go in her present position, finally raising herself up slightly on her elbows, ' Why do you wait?' she asked, looking askance at the amber-lit faces of her husband and son, both stooping over her back wearing expressions of disbelief. ' What is wrong' she asked anxiously. ' Has the affliction become worse? I feel no different.'

' No different. Are you sure?' queried Kal in a strange tone.

' I feel nothing' said Lin, an edge of concern to her voice, which changed to a sharp exclamation of surprise '*Nothing!* No pain, no irritation. *Nothing!* What do you see?' the concern returned.

' Nothing! No rash! No weals, no rawness. I see what you feel. *Nothing!*' Z' Kal' s voice reflected his feelings of utter disbelief and wonder.

There was little trace of red, no ugly weals, nothing but soft, brown, skin. As they watched they saw the redness recede - slowly, but visibly - away from Z' Tan' s hand, where he had placed it on his mother' s nearer leg. Her legs were clearing visibly, the redness rolling away towards her toes, as oil runs away from water, clear brown skin became visible on her calves and upper thighs and also progressing towards her feet. While father and son watched agape, S' Lin' s body returned normal. She rolled over onto her back, then swung her legs off the low pallet and sat up. The front of her body was just as clear of the affliction, unmarked by even the slightest trace of red. She raised her shift from her waist, slipping her arms into the sleeveless bodice, then stood up, unmarked.

Z' Kal, in his amazement had leaned forward, placing his hand on Z' Tan' s shoulder for support. As S' Lin stood, he too straightened, but kept contact with Z' Tan. S' Lin smiled, and her gaze wandered down Z' Kal' s body. As though coming out of a trance, Kal suddenly realised that he felt no pain or irritation, and raised his arms in front of him, examining them. He turned his gaze downwards towards his legs, then looked at S' Lin in astonishment, arms still outstretched. They both turned, then, to look at Z' Tan who stood there wide-eyed.

' I did nothing! I know no spells for this!' Z' Tan blurted in his confusion. ' I have not kept such knowledge from you, I swear' .

' Not knowledge. This is but another aspect of your Talent' said Lin, ' Long have we known that being beside you gives a measure of protection from spells, but it seems that contact with you can reverse a spell too. We have never so much as suspected this possibility.' S' Lin' s smile faded, and her features set in a solemn expression. ' And we must now decide what is to be done about you. News of this nature cannot be kept hidden for long. Your safety is now in jeopardy. The threat you now represent to the authority of the Temple can have but one consequence - your death at the hands of the Mages. Ours too, for concealing your Talent. Perhaps the death of this village. We must speak to the Elders, and urgently.'

Her large brown eyes regarded Z' Tan steadily for a few moments, then turned toward Z' Kal. Z' Kal returned her gaze with one that was equally steady, then nodding slightly, he turned and headed for the door.

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