

The Magister's Mask

Chapter One The Wind Knows

Laraquies Catteel of Nelnoor sat on his porch, enjoying the quiet of his garden. A sudden breeze made the treetops tremble. The birds, whose color and song he admired, stopped as if with one breath, and the soft mist that rose from his tea feathered away into nothing.

The leaves' whispered warning sped across Chalsett, City of Gardens. The silence reached the market, where the hubbub of merchants and hagglers faltered. On it sent, over the docks and through the harbor, rippling away across the Jewel Sea.

A tense moment more, and the first brave bird ventured a strand of bright notes into the stillness.

The old man raised a small bowl to his lips with a hand as brown as the tea inside it. That was no mere wind. Those were voices from just beyond mortal hearing. Laraquies was a magister, one of the highest ranking sorcerers in Chalsett-port, and it was his business to hear such things. His dark eyes searched the arched fronds of a fern tree above him, as if he might see some answer there.

Bare feet patted softly over the cottage floor and out onto the porch where he sat. They stopped behind him and a young woman asked, "Magister?"

"Oh, you're awake." Laraquies looked up into the face of his apprentice.

Shenza Waik of Tresmeer covered a long yawn with her hand. Like all people of the Jewel Sea, she was brown-skinned, with a compact built. She had thrown an apprentice's robe, striped purple and white, over the plain sheath she slept in. It half-fell from her shoulders as she pushed springy black curls away from her face. Shenza pulled it back up with a quick jerk.

Laraquies smiled at the self-conscious gesture. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Shenza answered, "until just now."

"Then you should eat," he said cheerfully. "Get back your strength. You worked hard, Shenza."

A frown crimped the young woman's brow. She was very serious, Shenza, as the young often were. It amused him to tease her, the more because she would not let herself see the humor.

Shenza ignored his instructions and sat down beside him, tucking her knees neatly together. This rebellion was a good sign. For many years, the girl had been too much in awe to argue with him.

"Magister, what is happening?" the young sorceress asked. Her dark eyes did not leave his face.

Laraquies was forced to confess, "I do not know. It seems the spirits are

troubled." He looked up again, past the green canopy of his garden. It had been a clear day, the air heavy with warmth and humidity. Now the faintest pall obscured the tropical sun. Or perhaps he merely imagined it.

"What touches them will affect us all," he said. "I expect we will be summoned soon."

Shenza stared at him with dismay. Laraquies did not blame her. The spirits who ruled the sea, sky and forest were the only creatures in the world more capricious and terrible than man.

"I woke up so suddenly, I didn't know what to think." Shenza rubbed at her eyes, then covered another yawn.

"That is why you should eat," Laraquies said. "You have been sleeping for two days."

A wry expression crossed her face. Laraquies raised a hand to stop her before she could speak. Shenza was always apologizing for some imagined lapse. She had worked hard in the last of her labors as his apprentice, but it seemed his teachings were soon to be tested. There was more bad news for Shenza this morning.

"You have completed your mask," he said. "Don't forget, this next investigation will be yours."

"Oh." From the stricken look in Shenza's eyes, she had forgotten. "This one?"

Her frightened tone pleaded with him to say no, not this one. She wanted him to face whatever made the wind blow, and give her the next inquiry that came in. Ah, but then it would be the next job, and the next after that. Laraquies tried to be a reasonable master, but some things must not be delayed.

"This one," he affirmed. "Now, child, I will prepare a meal, and you will eat it. You're going to need your strength, I fear."

* * *

Shenza watched Master Laraquies stroll into the house and thought, "He can't mean it." But she knew he did.

She stared across the lush garden, not really seeing the brook, with its artfully placed stones, or the small bath house on the other side. All was calm and cool here. Still, she could not forget the tingle of her skin that woke her, the cold burning like diving into deep sea waters. Then screams, which her confused mind soon translated into wind-tossed branches scraping against the roof tiles. Shenza nearly fell out of her hammock, came stumbling out to the magister seeking comfort. And what did he do? He told her it was not his problem.

She tried in vain to swallow her fears. Nature spirits were dangerous to begin with. It would not be a simple task to calm their fury. Now, in the face of some unknown disaster, Master Laraquies pattered around the kitchen, humming off-key as if nothing in the world was wrong.

The old man came back out of the thatched hut. He knelt and set a tray on the smooth boards of the deck, then eased himself down beside it.

"Eat now," the old man urged.

"Yes, teacher," she sighed.

The tea kettle, freshly heated, sat beside a drinking cup decorated with colorful fishes. A matching bowl contained sea plums neatly pitted and cut into quarters. Shenza had to admit the tart fragrance was appealing. Laraquies' cup still sat on the deck, so she poured tea for both of them and took a slice of the juicy red fruit.

She eyed Laraquies as she ate. Despite his advancing years, he did not seem old to her. Waves of silver hair were caught in a rippling tail at the back of his bare skull. Dark eyes, set in his weathered face, reminded her of the sea: deep, and yet sparkling on the surface. A plain white kilt was wrapped around his skinny mid-section, and over one shoulder ran the purple robe that proclaimed him a sorcerer. The casual drape of cloth belied its high importance.

Laraquies seemed satisfied to see food pass her lips. He stood up again and went back into the house. A sip of tea rolled bitter and sweet across Shenza's tongue. Her mask was finished. So, too, her time as a sheltered apprentice. Yet Shenza felt at a loss. To leave Master Laraquies and work on her own... She didn't feel ready for that. Certainly not now!

The old man returned and placed something softly on the boards beside her. "This is yours. I had it made while you were asleep."

Shenza turned toward him and gasped. There, neatly folded, was the deep purple robe of a magister. Feeling her heart beat faster, she lifted the folded cloth. The color was so vivid, she knew it had never been worn.

"It's..." she began, and stopped. Shenza felt her chin tremble.

"It is a gift," Laraquies said quietly. "I know you will honor it."

Perhaps he meant to reassure her, but he misunderstood. Shenza had been poor all her life, a daughter of illiterate fishermen. She could hardly remember having any clothing that someone else had not worn first.

"It's beautiful," she managed. And yet, together with her mask, it seemed another reminder that her days as a student were coming to a close.

"Come, then," Laraquies said. "I want to see you wear it."

With some hesitation Shenza put aside her apprentice robe, so familiar and comfortable. She straightened, holding onto one corner so the new one was pulled open. The harsh scent of dye still clung to the fabric. A loop of thread hooked over the bone pin that fastened her sheath. The robe swung once around her body, under her right arm, across her back, and up over her left shoulder. The cloth felt slightly stiff and heavier than she was used to. Master Laraquies smiled as he watched her settle the hanging end.

Shenza was adjusting the drape of her new robe when she heard a resonant chime from the front of the house. She turned, her heart in her throat. A client was here, her very first client. She was still eating breakfast. Her hair had not been combed. And she was barefoot.

Master Laraquies gazed into the treetops, his hands clasped loosely before him. The moment of hesitation stretched on. Then the chime sounded again. Shenza stooped, grabbed her bowl of fruit, and ran to the door.

She crossed the workshop, which occupied the front half of the round cottage. Though it was the largest room, that was not saying much, for the house was small. In the early days, she had wondered why a sorcerer of Laraquies' exalted rank was satisfied with such a modest dwelling. Nor had she any answer now, except that he placed duty before fleshly comforts.

She paused just inside the door, swallowing to clear her mouth, and reached through the strands of hanging beads that obscured the entrance. Light fingers touched a certain spot on the rattan gate.

"Open," she murmured. The grille swung away, and she pushed through with a clatter of little shell beads.

Outside, jittering impatiently, was a tall young man who wore the deep yellow kilt of a peace officer. Shenza guessed he was within a few years of her own age. Black curls were cropped close to his skull, a cut she found unflattering combined with such a flat nose and wide mouth. A rounded club and short knife hung from his leather belt. The weapons were supposed to be ceremonial, though Borleek, the Chief Peacekeeper, was willing to look the other way if his men used force in the execution of their duties. A light sheen of sweat across the man's broad shoulders hinted that one of those occasions might have occurred quite recently.

The fellow stood near the bronze chime, which still hummed softly where it hung. Black eyes flashed eagerly when he caught sight of Shenza. He hung the leather mallet on its hook and jogged up the two steps to the porch.

"We need the magister!" he said, neglecting any other greeting.

Shenza bowed slightly, placing one hand on her chest and balancing her breakfast with the others. "We have been waiting."

He paused, impressed. "You were?"

"Please come this way." Shenza pushed the gate back against the outside wall and held the hanging strands aside for the man to pass.

Entering the cottage, the peace officer spied Laraquies and strode right over to him. Shenza followed, eating as quickly as she could. Reminded of his manners, the officer pressed a hand to the curly black pelt on his chest and made a cursory bow.

"Magister," he said urgently, "we have captured a criminal. Chief Borleek wants you to come right away."

"Really?" Laraquies answered mildly. Then he turned to his student. "I believe Magister Shenza should handle this."

The young officer gaped at Laraquies, then at Shenza, who swallowed a hard lump of fruit. She had been expecting this, but still her breakfast sat sour in her stomach. Just as she opened her mouth to ask what his need was, he blurted out, "But the first lord has been murdered!"

His words shocked her into silence. *Murdered?* Was that what awakened her so suddenly? She turned to Master Laraquies, whose expression was now grave.

"Borleek wants *you* to come!" the officer was insisting.

"And I wish Shenza to conduct this investigation," the sorcerer responded. A placid smile erased all concern. "She is no longer an apprentice, but a fully qualified

magister."

"But, Magister..." he sputtered.

Shenza knelt, setting the empty bowl on the tray. She felt almost as frightened as she peace officer sounded.

"Magister," she managed faintly, "this is a very serious matter. Are you sure it is appropriate..?"

"Yes, it is." He nodded cheerfully at her dismay. "If the first lord has died, then his successor must be located and ordained. And there is the spirit world to be treated with. Those shall be my tasks. The investigation, therefore, falls to you."

She stared at him reproachfully. It wasn't fair. She was not ready to investigate a crime of this importance. Consecration of the new first lord could be done by any sorcerer. Even Shenza could do it. On the other hand, none of them were likely to challenge Laraquies once he made his claim. She supposed she should be glad he would at least deal with the spirits.

"As you say." Shenza bowed to her teacher. "I will need a moment to prepare, officer."

"Now just a second!" the peace officer protested as Shenza walked into the house.

Her room was a cramped wedge of space at the back of the cottage. It was mostly filled by the hammock she had abandoned just a short time ago. Shenza folded the thin sheet and rolled the mesh into a compact bundle. With shaking hands she drew a sandalwood comb through her hair, restoring order to the tangled curls. With leather sandals tied on she hurried back into the workroom.

"Light," Shenza commanded, softly but firmly. With a soft pop, oil lamps sprang to life. A pair of windows in the curved outer wall were screened with pierced wood to admit cooling breezes. Below them were a small cabinet and a low table decorated with carved vines and flowers. She knelt and touched the cabinet in two places. "Open." The doors parted silently.

The young sorceress withdrew a flat leather travel case and opened it onto the table. Arcane sigils covered the interior, weaving about between straps for holding talismans. She sat back on her heels and stared at the many containers within the cabinet. How many times had she done this very thing, preparing Master Laraquies' tools? Yet now her mind was blank. She had no idea what she would need.

Shenza tried to think calmly, logically. She pulled out each tray and stared at its contents. The drawers held ordinary things: flat gray rocks, short bamboo rods, a handful of small round shells. These were the magister's talismans, specially created objects of power.

All manner of spells could be stored in such commonplace items, to be released at need. They had to be made carefully, using just the right materials, gathered in the proper way and time, and prepared in exactly the correct manner. A good part of her training had been to learn their crafting. And now it seemed she was to depend on her own work, as she had never done before.

Strangely, that gave her little comfort. She had made these things. She knew them intimately. It shouldn't be so hard to trust them, but her hands would not stop

shaking. She clenched both fists in her lap. Shenza blew out a breath, forcing herself to relax.

She started with the basics, a scroll of cloth, ink and pens for writing. Verity stones for interviewing witnesses. A wand and powder for detecting spells. Another wand to dispel magic, though she did not know if she would need it. A knotted line for measuring. She slid these into straps and pouches shaped to hold them, and peered nervously into the cabinet's dark recesses. Had she forgotten anything? She was sure she had.

Behind her, voices echoed faintly as the peace officer continued arguing with Master Laraquies. His commander wasn't going to be pleased by the substitution, Shenza gathered, and the man thought it would be blamed on him.

She could certainly sympathize with his feelings. Murder was the worst kind of investigation, and rare. She had only seen Master Laraquies conduct one such inquiry, so long ago that she couldn't remember half of what he did. The only death they had investigated since was a drowning that had clearly been accidental. And with this wealth of experience, she was to determine guilt in the death of a first lord?

Choking back her emotions, she closed her travel case and ordered, "Seal." Then she withdrew a plain wooden box from the cabinet. A slight push, a twist, and the concealed lid slid open. Within, cushioned on silk of a midnight hue, the gleaming face of her mask gazed up at her. She laid the box on the table and stared back.

The first layer had been new white cloth, pure feather-flower silk. At the public trough, on a rare moonless night, she washed and pounded the cloth, chanting rhymes to strengthen the fibers for the magic they would contain. Then, through more long nights, she rose when only the purple moon's rays shone under the eaves to set the careful stitches that joined in magic sigils of lightness, comfort. Then a layer of leather, boiled with rare herbs gathered from the shore of a tiny coral isle near Chalsett's white shore. The soft leather was molded to fit her own features before spells stiffened it to steely firmness. Over the following days, she used a moon-shaped dagger, itself spell-set, to carve more runes to repel danger. The eye pieces were pared from fragile mica, set with charms to make them reveal what endangered her, what was hidden. Next a layer of fine clay to join cloth, leather and stone. This was kept damp through weeks of labor as she sculpted a human likeness and added yet more runes into the pale, soft clay. These spells were intended to protect the mask itself from damage. Last of all, the kiln. For a day and a night she fed the flames, chanting the rhyme of transmutation. Finally, at dawn, she quenched the eldritch in a mixture of rice wine and her own red blood. Afterward, she slept for days to recover from the exhausting campaign.

All that effort, and she just wanted to smash it over her knee! But the spells were set, and physical violence could not touch it. And so, with firm words and purple cloth, her master shoved her out into the world.

With trembling hands, Shenza lifted the mask which would be both weapon and shield. The surface was a flawless pale gold. It glinted, though not as metal did. Despite the solid appearance it was feather-light, just as the spells decreed.

When she lifted it toward her face, Shenza felt the mask bond to her skin, easily,

eagerly, even without the word of command. She tensed momentarily at the weird sensation. Then she realized she was holding her breath. She released it deliberately. Warm air escaped her nose and cool air flooded her mouth on the indrawn breath, as if there was no obstruction. Blinking, she realized she could see perfectly. Cautiously, almost guiltily, she moved her hands over the exterior. The texture was slippery and firm under her fingertips, but she felt no sensation on her face. On the other side of the workshop, the peace officer was still pleading with Master Laraquies. Though they spoke in hushed voices, it sounded as though they were standing right beside her.

She knew what to expect, and yet still it confounded her. The spells worked!

Despite herself, Shenza felt a surge of confidence. If she had done this, then surely she could carry out her other duties. Then she would not be a disappointment to Master Laraquies or her family.

Shenza picked up the travel case and walked toward the two men. The peace officer, with his back to her, insisted, "But you know what he means. You can't play these games with Chief Borleek!"

Master Laraquies patiently answered, "Did I spend so many years training my apprentice, so that no one would turn to her in times of need?"

"I know she's your apprentice," the peace officer said plaintively, "but this is a murder. And the first lord! And she..."

Master Laraquies saw Shenza, and for a moment he went still. His face, regarding her, had an expression she had never seen before. Then, as if nothing was happening, he said, "My student knows all that I know. I have complete faith in her. If you cannot believe in her, then trust in me."

The man faltered beneath this logic. "I do, Magister. Of course. But my orders..."

"It's no good trying to reason with him," Shenza said softly. The mask did not seem to move, yet the words were quite clear; another unaccustomed sensation. The peace officer's startled expression on seeing her wear the golden mask somewhat soothed her bruised feelings. "Shall we go, officer?"

"Chief Borleek won't like this," he warned.

"He is welcome to discuss it with Master Laraquies," she answered, and was irritated by the old man's appreciative chuckle. Shenza knew Laraquies didn't think much of the Chief Peacekeeper. The two of them had crossed words before, usually to Borleek's sorrow.

The officer must have known it, too, for he flushed beneath his dark skin tone. Then he spread his hands and shook his head in surrender. Shenza paused, wanting to say something to her teacher, or for him to speak some farewell. No words seemed appropriate. She turned and hurried after the peace officer.