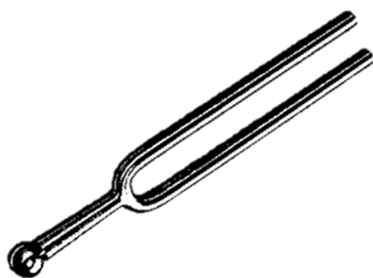


⊕ LUNAR
ALCHEMY



RISE OF MAGIC
BOOK THREE

STEFON MEARS

Thousand Faces Publishing

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For Melissa, as always

Many thanks to Bill, Lori, Rob and Wendy,
for catching what needed to be caught.

And even more thanks to my readers, for reading.

The year is 2026
Six decades after the Rise of Magic

Chapter One

“NORTH IS A DEAD MAN.”

Edik Barshai clenched his fist and watched *The Sparrow* close its feathered hatch for lift off, with a full load of tourists that should have been his. Eight wide-eyed Terrans, all ready to sail up into the air above Kennedy Spaceport and hear all about the settling of Earth’s moon and view the sites of interest around the spaceport city from a comfortable distance.

Anger tightened slowly up Edik’s arm until his shoulder was shaking. He should have been smelling their money right now. Not the ginseng-mint herbal odor of that alchemical solution North called fuel. Edik should have been selling them drinks and settling them in for his spiel about safety and fun.

And Edik included two sites in his tour that North overlooked. The Pillar and The Failed Site. The tourists weren’t even getting as good a deal. But North, it seemed, had learned one of Edik’s father’s lessons better than Edik had: better service may *keep* clients, but the better salesman *gets* clients.

No. This wasn't salesmanship. Edik had already *made* the sale. North must have met the tour group on their way to his bay. Told them lies, or threw in some kind of discount. Anything to get that group onto his ship.

Still, Edik couldn't help imagining his father, shaking his head at yet another of his son's failures. Bitterness twisted through his guts as North's airship – a recent design following the unimaginative fashion of ships that looked like actual, living birds – chirped a loud imitation of a real sparrow and stood.

Edik had heard real sparrows back in San Francisco. He found the ship's performance pale and weak.

Nevertheless, Edik's black jacket and short, blond hair were blown back by *The Sparrow's* single flap of preparation. The cold air swept past the buttons of his light blue shirt and shivered along his chest. Then the airship soared off of the blue-gray stone of Bay Two-Sixty-Two Cee, through the open hole in the ceiling above, and into the pale green sky.

Gone. They were gone. Along with money Edik had been counting on.

Edik tugged on his Van Dyke beard. He spat.

North probably saw Edik from the cockpit. Probably smiled and waved, the fare-stealing bastard.

But Edik would wipe the cocky grin off that pasty face all right. And maybe do a good deal more.

Fare stealing. Was there anything lower?

Beside Edik, the meter-tall translucent gray cat sighed and twitched his thick tail. This was Edik's familiar, Dola, and Dola's short fur didn't appear to be disturbed by the sudden breeze.

"Terrans are usually good tippers, too," said Dola. He spoke with a Russian accent, the way Edik remembered his father's voice from childhood, before time and practice had worn it down.

Dola's accent had been the first thing Edik noticed when he finally – on his third attempt – successfully summoned a familiar during the final exam of Conjunction 101, back at City College of San Francisco,

the first community college in the Bay Area to have an Associate's level curriculum in Thaumaturgy.

The gray cat had faded into being with a ripple of fur, and spoken his initial greeting in English that turned *th* sounds into *z*, and made *di* and *ti* sounds as though a *y* had been inserted. Just like Edik's father.

The resemblance ended there, though. Ivan Barshai's voice had been deep and rolling. Dola's was high and, well, feline.

Edik looked about for something, anything, to vent his anger on. But the bay was empty now, a wasteland of a blue-gray cylinder thirty meters across and ten tall, with the bay number 262C in huge, pale green block letters.

Not so much as a crate or a rag left behind, and any Port Authority checkers long gone.

North's office – Northbound Tours – had to be nearby, though, and *somebody* had to be minding the shop. Edik checked the saber hanging from his belt scabbard.

"You aren't *actually* going to kill anyone," said Dola, and Edik was pleased to hear doubt in his familiar's tone.

"Within my rights." His voice was tight as he watched *The Sparrow* bank to starboard and vanish from sight. "Stealing passengers has to count as a moral crime, doesn't it? I had an agreement with those people."

"That's a— look at me, Edik, please." Dola waited until Edik met those cerulean eyes with his own hazel ones. "That's a question for a lawyer. Please tell me you won't do anything rash."

That wasn't worth a response. Edik spun on the heels of his shiny black, knee-high boots and strode toward the broad archway that led back into the port. Dola trotted to keep up with the determined click-click of Edik's heels.

"Edik, please," said Dola, trotting ahead and trying to catch his eye again. "Didn't you always ask me not to let you do anything stupid?"

"Going broke isn't smart."

"You aren't broke yet."

"I'm pretty damned close."

Edik passed through the arch and into the halls of the local traffic section of the spaceport. None of those big passenger liners here, much less the huge commercial transport ships. Nothing that advertised during sporting events or shadow plays. In this part of the spaceport were the long-term arrangements for private transportation. Airships mostly, like North's, but a few helioships like Edik's own *Third Son*, which were capable of getting from planet to planet.

Technically Edik's ship was a runabout-class helioship, which meant it was one of the smallest things flying that could brave the dark of space. And it was still bigger, flew smoother, and had more comfortable seats than that sky rat that North flew.

Unfortunately, helioships were also more expensive to maintain. Cut his margins and made him vulnerable to bastards like North.

Edik felt his jaw clench, his teeth grit tighter.

Typical crowd for this area. A half-dozen local pilots he recognized in black or blue mock-uniforms that impressed the planet-bound. They must have seen the look in his eye, though, because not a man nor woman of them raised a hand in greeting. Each got suddenly very interested in re-checking the memoboards they carried, or must have forgotten something back in the landing bay, the way they turned and hurried off.

A pack of cargo haulers in those beige jumpsuits smirked at Edik, like they would have followed him to watch the show if they hadn't been on the clock. No fear though. These were big men and women, with short hair and muscles hardened by getting crates from point A to point B, over and over. He could smell the sweat of their morning work as he passed.

Edik let them stare. Let them have their fun. He knew they'd be out of work all too soon, when those thaumaturgic lifters used in San Francisco made their way up here. Couldn't be more than another year or two. Edik had already seen them in a couple of of the richer private bays.

"Edik," said Dola, shifting sides so Edik had to look away from the haulers to see him, "this is folly. What's done is done. If we head to

the city center we could still round up another group for after lunch.”

“I’ve got that charter flight to the Romanov place after lunch,” growled Edik. Not much of a fare. Most likely one-way, because the Romanovs didn’t like third-party pilots hanging around their estates when they could fly businessmen back to the port and expense it themselves.

But Edik charged an honest fare and didn’t hide his rates. His father would have told him to charge more for one-way than just half the round-trip rate, but damn it, Edik was not his father.

A pair of customs agents, easily spotted by the sniffer wands they carried and their blue jumpsuits with white sliver moon symbols on the shoulders and over the heart. Recent high school grads by the look of them, skinny and wide eyed, and completely absorbed in each other. The boy looked like he put effort into bronzing his skin, but the girl had a hereditary edge on him in that department.

“Hey,” said Edik, pointing his steps at them. “Northbound Travel. You know it?”

“Sure,” said the girl, voice still so open and unconcerned she couldn’t have been on the job more than two weeks. “They fly out of Two-Sixty-Two—”

“I know where their bay is. Where’s their office?”

“Back in the port?” said the guy with a shrug that might have been impressive if he’d been old enough to have shoulders.

Edik gave them a tight smile. “I know you kids are new here. But you must have spotted that this place is pretty big.”

“Sure is, I’m from Jackieville, and—”

“Their office?”

The young, probable lovers looked at each other and shrugged. It was the girl who spoke. “They don’t send *us* to the private offices. We’re just—”

“Fine,” said Edik, past them and already forgetting them like a dream he didn’t care about. The office would be listed. He’d find the listing, and then...

“Come on, Edik,” cajoled Dola. “At least wait until North is back.

He's the one you're mad at.

“They need to know,” he said, rising bile tightening his voice. “They need to know they’re working for a fare-stealing bastard. Unless they already know. Wouldn’t be the first shady thing that man’s been accused of. Just the worst.”

Edik punched his palm.

“And if they know, then they’re just as guilty.”

