

# MAGICIAN'S CHOICE

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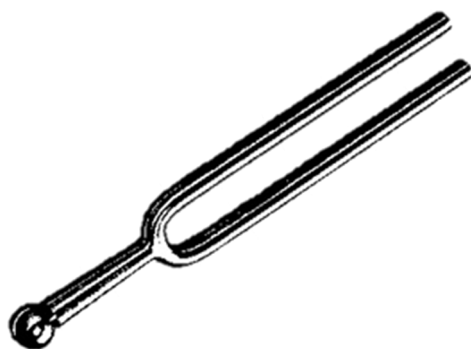
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# MAGICIAN'S CHOICE



*RISE OF MAGIC*  
*BOOK ONE*

STEFON MEARS

THOUSAND FACES PUBLISHING

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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“All I ask is a tall ship...” is quoted from “Sea-Fever” by John Masefield

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*The year is 2025*

*Six decades after the Rise of Magic*





## Chapter One

DONAL CUTHBERT FROWNED AT the tourism sign above the customs station and said to the agent, "In a few weeks Bran might be the first human to set foot on Ganymede, and I'm not even the five millionth man on Mars."

"Passport," replied the tired woman whose skin bore the red tint of a local. Official speculation had it that the spells adapting Mars to human life might also adapt human life to Mars. The agent tapped Donal's passport with her badge. It chimed legitimacy. "Who's Bran?"

"Bran Cuthbert. My brother."

"*The* Bran Cuthbert is *your* brother?" The agent paused, giving Donal's passport a second look. "You must be very proud. Without men like Bran we wouldn't be on Mars today." She touched Donal's distressed leather messenger bag with a baton enchanted to detect contraband, then twirled the baton in a circle over Donal's head. No sound of alarm came. "Anything to declare?"

"IIX courier package for delivery in New Leningrad."

She consulted a list. "Everything's in order. Any checked bags will be in baggage claim in thirty minutes. Welcome to Mars."

Donal looked over the spaceport foot traffic as he left the customs area: busy, but less so than San Francisco. Maybe a thousand travelers instead of tens of thousands. He took a deep breath and started into the

spaceport proper. He got two dozen steps past the waiting area when a half-meter-long dragon made of sinuous, wingless smoke whirled a wide circle around him and zipped away. Donal stopped. That had to have been someone's familiar. His contact?

Wait. Was that sulfur he smelled?

Fire roared. With a crack like a boulder shattering, a garbage can ahead and to Donal's right exploded into flame. The shock wave threw Donal at least two meters. He landed in a crumpled heap. Others in the crowd weren't so lucky. Donal spotted four charred bodies, then panic made the crowd a mob.

A silent mob. The explosion had consigned Donal to a world of dreamlike silence. Travelers milled and ran every direction. Donal clutched his messenger bag. Adrenaline froze him. Run away? Try to help? What should he do?

A hand grabbed his wrist. Donal was yanked to his feet by a beautiful Chinese woman with red skin and a light gray business suit. Her lips moved in rapid speech, but Donal shook his head and tapped his ear. She grimaced, craned her neck to look past him, then turned and dragged him sideways through the chaos in a broken-field run. She shoved him against a side wall. Donal's body lit up with dozens of aches that promised bruises from his fall. The woman glanced back, watching something over her shoulder. As far as Donal could tell, customs had locked down, sealing away the gates and docking bays. Travelers pushed every direction, a mass of confusion.

Travelers, but not everyone. A handful of men moved through the crowd, seeking something. Donal fished through his pockets. Where was his tuning fork?

The woman towed Donal along the wall and through a door marked, "Employees Only." Then they stood in a hallway that led straight back into the port or away on a curve. Along the opposite wall was a series of closed doors labeled in code.

Donal found his tuning fork, struck it, and waved it past his ears while chanting words he could not hear. Warmth flooded his ear canals, then heat, then sound popped back into his world. He could hear

muffled screams and panic just beyond the door they came through.

"Better?"

"Yes." He held the tuning fork between them. "Who are you?"

"Just shock then. Good. I'm Tai Shi Li Hua, your liaison on Mars."

"I.D."

"About time you asked for that." She handed him a business card that identified her by name as the Regional Director of Corporate Security for 4M. She fidgeted, impatient, while Donal tapped it with his tuning fork and checked the soft orange glow against what he saw when he waved the fork in front of her: a perfect match. Donal glanced to double-check, but she rolled her eyes and said, "We need to get moving."

"What's going on?"

She ignored the question. "Pinyin-Lung," she barked, and a spirit dragon puffed into being, the one Donal had seen near customs. Donal noticed an echo of resonance between them and concluded it was her familiar. Tai Shi Li Hua gave the dragon orders in Chinese, and turned back to Donal as it flew off. "I have just arranged for private transportation, but we cannot meet it here. My agents will collect your luggage. Do you have a familiar?"

"No." The comfortable subject helped Donal recover himself. He had a plan for binding the perfect familiar as part of his graduate studies. "I..."

"What is this, your first assignment? Stick close to me, then." They flattened against the wall as a crew in uniforms rushed past and out into the chaos. She flung a spell after them, a false trail deception if Donal read it right, then looked back at him. "Tell me the package is secure."

Donal gripped his messenger bag and the liaison smiled. She must have realized that his spells had made the bag too innocuous to notice. He smiled back. "The package is secure."



JOHN JACOBS, CAPTAIN OF the helioship *Horizon Cusp*, crouched with one knee on the Martian ground as though he bowed before a king. He

closed his eyes and picked up his customary handful of local dirt. He rubbed the rough soil through his fingers. He held it to his nose and smelled its tang. He opened his eyes at last and looked at the dirt. Dark. Red. Gritty. Mars. He stood.

Jacobs hoped to finish his day's business in time to refill his books with different novels, but he would not skip his personal gesture of gratitude for another safe voyage, another immaculate landing. He wiped his hands clean and sighed into the distance at the Barrier, where the blue sky above New Leningrad became the yellow sky of Mars. Was yellow the natural color or an effect of the Barrier? Jacobs could never decide if he wanted to know.

The spaceport's architecture was typical for Mars: a Mediterranean feel, all curves and arches, reds and tans and browns and open air buildings with plants that were sprayed, not watered. Jacobs did not dally for the art display: the story of humans on Mars told in curving, twisting red-brick statues carved by "local" artists who had been born on Earth, some fifty-six million kilometers away.

Jacobs left the tourist area of the spaceport for the smaller section dedicated to businesses run out of the port. Warehouses, shipping lines, and a handful of passenger lines like his own, Starchaser Spacelines.

Jacobs entered the office, but before he had time to greet the receptionist he heard his partner's voice. "John? That you?"

"It's me." Jacobs poked his head into Zoltan's office: spotless as a magazine ad for an executive suite, done in red oak as an homage to the planet. On Earth, Zoltan's office was brown, green and blue. On Earth's moon it was gray and blue. "What are you doing here, Zoltan? I thought you were heading back to San Francisco with Yoshi."

"Good thing I didn't. The *Beamrunner* didn't make it. Yoshi, his crew, and almost all of his two hundred eighty-seven passengers: dead."

"What happened?"

"We're still trying to find out. Zuglodon attack maybe."

Jacobs sank into one of the guest chairs across the desk from Zoltan. Yoshi was in his forties. Half Jacobs' age, and a decade younger than Zoltan. Too young. "Whiskey."

Zoltan broke out a bottle of bourbon, Butcher's Block. He poured them each a double. Jacobs raised his glass and said, "To Captain Yoshi Hirohito, taken home too soon by the stars. May his name live on, and may his spirit light our way whenever we sail the black depths."

The Butcher's Block burned on its way down, in Jacobs' mind a perfect choice for the occasion. Sixty-seven years he had sailed the seas, the skies and space, ever since he was a lad of eighteen, before even the fall of technology and the rise of magic. He had buried too many friends.

"How many dead men have you toasted?" asked Zoltan.

"I've lost count."

"You might be toasting our business next."

Jacobs noticed that his partner looked half-dead himself: bowed and crumpled like a poorly folded map. He waited for Zoltan to continue.

"Seventy-five cancellations in the last twenty-four hours. At this rate we'll be lucky to book a fifth of the *Horizon Cusp's* berths for your next flight. Then there are the lawsuits, insurance problems, Mars and Earth are both investigating—"

"They can't blame us for—"

"They do, John."

Jacobs held out his glass for a refill, then slammed down the bourbon. He savored the burn against the unfairness of it all. In sixty-seven years he had never lost a ship, and now his business might be ruined over something he could not have helped. "I was going to retire next year."

"You've been saying that since I met you."

"I had a place picked out in Mazatlan."

"Your attention please," said a voice over the loudspeaker in the corner. "There has been an incident in the public area. Please proceed to your assigned safe zone in a calm, orderly fashion. There is no cause for alarm."

*No cause for alarm?* Jacobs gritted his teeth. His business and his future were spiraling out of control. He faced the real possibility of dying broke and homeless, starving in a gutter somewhere.

DONAL RACED AFTER TAI Shi Li Hua as they ran to the rendezvous point. His breath came in gulps. Sweat stuck his collar to his throat. His bag rubbed against his hip. Side doors flew past. Still the hallway curved.

Donal's legs grew heavy. He pushed to keep pace. Sweat spread into his shirt. His muscles burned from the effort. His bruises throbbed in time to his heartbeat. Still the hallway curved.

*And she does this in a suit?*

"How ... much ..."

"Not far," the liaison said in a regular, conversational voice, "We're almost to the west employee exit."

Finally she stopped. Donal leaned forward, hands on his knees, and tried to steady his breath while his messenger bag dangled. He wiped sweat out of his eyes. The liaison looked crisp, as though she were ready for an interview. No, that was not quite true. Her nostrils flared at a steady rate, and her chest rose and fell in deep breaths.

*Don't stare!*

The door in front of Donal did not look different from any of the other doors they passed. He reached for the knob, but she stayed his hand.

"Wait." Tai Shi Li Hua closed her eyes and chanted briefly in Chinese while moving one hand back and forth: a seeking spell. "We lost the ones near baggage claim, but I can't be sure the streets are clear. Pinyin-Lung will tell me when it's safe to move."

"What happened . . . back there?"

"Corporate espionage." The liaison shrugged. "Clumsy corporate espionage. Aetheric Dynamics must be hiring cheap labor." She looked him up and down. "We have a moment. Rest if you like."

"Look Ms..."

"Someone just tried to kill us, Donal," she said with one eyebrow raised. "Call me Li Hua."

Donal fell back against the wall and stared at Li Hua.

"Wait, that explosion was supposed to kill us?"

"No, I don't think even Aetheric Dynamics is that clumsy." She glanced back down the way they came. "I think the explosion was sup-

posed to create confusion while their agents came at us from both sides and killed us before order was restored."

Donal rubbed his temples. Someone had tried to kill him. This was supposed to be the safer way for Donal to earn quick money, safer than the illegal option....

"Sloppy execution though," Li Hua continued. "They should have tightened their perimeter before triggering the bomb. Of course, it's not that easy. You have to keep out of the target's line of sight, and ... are you all right?"

"No one's ever tried to kill me before."

"Really?" Li Hua put a hand on Donal's shoulder. "Well, don't worry. I'll get you out of this alive. Besides, that attempt just activated the combat clause in your contract." She smiled, and it made her eyes radiant. "Look at it this way: you just got a pay raise."

"If I live to spend it." Donal tried to worry, to focus on the fact that his life was under threat, but her relaxed smile had infected him. Li Hua pulled out a compact and straightened hairs that Donal would not have known were out of place. She seemed to treat the whole encounter like a trip to the corner store; perhaps they were not in any real danger. Still, the combat clause was so named for a reason. "How can you be so calm?"

Li Hua laughed.

"Let's just say it's not the first time someone's tried to kill me." She glanced toward the door. "Come, Pinyin-Lung tells me our ride is here."



STARCHASER SPACELINES' "ASSIGNED SAFE ZONE" was a dome-shaped warehouse some sixty meters in diameter. Two officers at the entrance greeted everyone and passed word that the investigators would soon conduct interviews. Camp chairs had been set up before Jacobs and Zoltan arrived. Scattered crates served as tables. Jacobs wondered what use the warehouse filled under normal circumstances, that it could be converted so readily. Perhaps it stood empty. It did smell of must. Still,

the arrangement far exceeded Jacobs' expectations. He estimated about fifty people stuck with him in a space that would not have felt cramped with twice that number. Much better than Kennedy Spaceport on Earth's moon, Luna, where Jacobs had once wasted six hours in an eight meter square interview room with some two hundred strangers while port security searched for a murderer. Perhaps a larger "safe zone" was a benefit of Mars' small population: New Leningrad had plenty of space and spent it freely.

Jacobs spotted the Starchaser Spacelines logo and he and his partner led their office staff toward the chairs below it, per official New Leningrad Spaceport emergency procedures. Jacobs sighed. Before he could figure out how to save their business, he had hours of paperwork to finish after that last voyage from Earth. Passenger lists, cargo manifests, crew passports and licenses, customs reports, star chart anomalies logged in transit, upcoming schedule, maintenance requirements, even the contents of the ship's lost and found: Martian bureaucracy made up for its small size with vast quantities of regulations and forms.

And now he had to waste time waiting for some official idiot to realize Jacobs did too much business in this spaceport to blow it up. At least, he used to.

The various companies present all seemed to gravitate toward their logos, and either engaged in small talk, speculated about the reason for the alert, or tried to continue their business. A few people flitted among the groups, either seeking or fomenting rumors.

Jacobs took a seat at the center crate-table of his designated waiting area. Zoltan joined him, but the sales and administrative staffs gathered at the other two crates and fell into easy conversation. Over the silence at Jacobs' crate he heard one of them mention that security would even provide coffee and a snack if the wait stretched past the half-hour mark.

*Of course, good coffee would be too much to ask.*

"At least port security is organized," offered Jacobs. "There's even talk of coffee."

Zoltan did not respond. His attention was fixed on a gathering two tables away, under the Taurus Insurance sign. Jacobs followed his



gaze and saw a crowd of ten people watching a show of some sort.

"Let's see what's going on over there," said Zoltan.

They joined the crowd. A man near Jacobs' own age, dressed in a soft gray suit, stood behind a collapsible table on which he had lined up three small cups, face down. The showman had sharp features and eyes, a charming smile and short hair slicked back on his head.

"Now the question is simple," said the showman. "Which cup hides the ball?"

Something about the scene echoed in Jacobs' mind. Something he almost remembered from his youth.

A young Martian boy, perhaps too shy to speak, pointed at the cup by the showman's right hand.

"Are you certain?" The showman smiled. The boy nodded. "Are you quite certain?" The boy squirmed, less confident, but nodded again. The crowd seemed to hold its breath. "It's not too late to change your mind. No? Very well then." With a flourish, the showman lifted the cup. Nothing. "It was a good guess, my boy. Between the two of us, I thought it was there too. I bet it moved when we weren't looking." He lifted the middle cup, then the left cup, but the ball was gone. "Where did it go?"

The crowd murmured at the showman's apparent confusion, and the boy bent to look under the table. The showman leaned forward, looked at the boy, and said, "You clever lad! You had it all the time!" He plucked the ball from behind the boy's ear. The crowd applauded, no one louder than the child's parents, and the young Martian gaped in amazement.

Jacobs remembered now. He had once been that boy, dazzled by men in tuxedos who sawed women in half and made volunteers disappear. Smooth men who lost their jobs when "real" magic returned.

The showman appeared to draw a deck of cards out of the air, and offered them to a woman in the crowd for inspection. Zoltan, however, must have tired of the show. Jacobs followed him back to their table. Near the door he saw a team from port security arrive and begin to interview people.

"Didn't like the magic show?" asked Jacobs.

"I was hoping for an opportunity," said Zoltan. "That wasn't even magic, just sleight of hand. Anyone could do it."

"They used to call it stage magic, and if you think it's that easy, you try it."

"All right, all right." Zoltan raised his hands in surrender. "My point is that anyone can learn to do it. Directed attention, the magician's choice...."

"The what?"

"Give the audience a choice between A and B, but arrange it so that whichever they choose, the result is the one you want: C."

"Why do you know so much about this?"

"Business school. It's good for marketing..." Zoltan started stabbing at the crowd with one finger. "Our answer is in that crowd, John, I just can't see it yet." He settled back in thought, and Jacobs envied his comfort. Zoltan looked so relaxed that his camp chair look might as well have been in front of a fireplace. When he turned back to Jacobs, Jacobs half-expected him to offer cigars and brandy. Zoltan said, "You're here more than I am. Does New Leningrad have this sort of problem often?"

Jacobs should not have thought of cigars. Now he wanted one. He would have to have one after dinner that night when he sat down to read. Not brandy with it though. Whiskey would be better, something Irish.

"While I wouldn't call New Leningrad a quiet town, I wouldn't call it a war zone either. This is a standard evacuation procedure, and the tower didn't issue a terrorist warning when we docked, so I doubt that port security expected trouble."

Jacobs could see the security team more clearly now, only two tables away. A squad of five men and women who wore gray uniforms trimmed with dark brown and emblazoned with the insignia of the Martian Federation: twin moons over a stylized horizon. The security agents had the reddish tinge of natives and bore short, smooth clubs at their waists.

"Safety," said Zoltan. "Security. That's what we offer above and

beyond our top accommodations. Starchaser Spacelines has never had an incident aboard ship!"

"And the *Beamrunner's* accident?"

"Not a problem aboard ship." Zoltan began shaking one finger in the air as though he tapped an invisible table to keep time with fast music. "That was a hazard of space travel. Could have happened to anyone."

"Yoshi and his entire crew are dead. Hell, most of the passengers too. And you want to sell our safety?"

"Work with me, John. We need to focus on our clean record *aboard* our ships or we're...."

Zoltan let his words dangle as the port security team arrived. The agent in charge was a fit young woman with close-shorn hair. Her team fanned out behind her as she consulted a memoboard, held out an expectant hand, and said, "Identification please."

Jacobs handed her his captain's license while Zoltan presented his passport. She inspected each then verified their authenticity with a tap from her silver pinky ring. Jacobs did not see or hear any response to the check, but the officer seemed satisfied and returned their I.D.

"Where were you at the time of the attack?"

She sounded bored with the routine, which Jacobs assumed was either a deception or an indication that the real problem lay elsewhere, that this part of the investigation was a mere formality.

"I don't know when the 'attack' took place," said Jacobs, "but when the security alert came we were in our office." He waved a hand at their employees. "Everyone here will verify that."

The officer made a note on her memoboard. "And before that?"

"I just captained the *Horizon Cusp* here from Earth."

"I've been in the office all morning."

"That agrees with what I see here," she said. "You are both free to go. Public transit should be restored within the hour. All space traffic has been grounded until tomorrow, while we investigate." Jacobs thought he saw the first hint of real attention from her when she looked up again. "Have either of you spoken today with representatives

of any of the following companies: Red Sun, Sandstorm Transit, Allied Enchantments or 4M?”

Jacobs stood to leave. He had no interest in local politics. He raised his eyebrows at Zoltan, who remained seated and asked, “Does it matter?”

The agent in charge studied Jacobs’ partner.

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t relevant.”

“I met with a representative of Allied Enchantments this morning.”

Jacobs shook his head and left quietly. One of the passengers from Earth had worked in the upper management of Red Sun. He had brought along six crates that customs had certified contained wine. That was more cargo weight than Jacobs liked to allow a single passenger, but the sales office had handled the details. The executive also brought two underlings, plus a personal secretary and a half-dozen bodyguards.

Jacobs had reported only the pertinent details on the cargo manifest and passenger list. If the locals had questions, they knew where to find him.

On his way out, Jacobs passed the showman, who entertained his audience by making a handkerchief dance. Jacobs wondered how he concealed the wire.



LI HUA THREW OPEN the exit door, and Donal saw about five meters of dirt between himself and the hard-packed clay of the New Leningrad streets. The ride waiting for Donal and Li Hua was a runner with tinted windows and six powerful legs. It looked like someone had hollowed out the body of a huge komodo dragon - two meters high and five long - strapped two more legs on the center section, and lopped off the head and tail. The runner waited at the curb with its rear passenger door open.

Donal bounced on his toes to convince his legs they could handle one more burst of speed, then he and Li Hua sprinted across the bare

dirt while a gust of wind covered them in red dust. The driver, a scarred man dressed in black, snapped the reins as Donal and Li Hua scrambled into the rear bucket seats, and the runner took off at a swift, smooth clip before they had time to close the door. The runner's gentle side-to-side sway and the rhythmic ticking of its feet might have felt soporific under other circumstances, but just then even the soft leather of the seats pressed uncomfortably against Donal's aches.

Donal coughed dust and dug a tissue out of his bag so he could blow his nose and spit. He tucked the used tissue into a pocket by reflex - a magician did not leave ready-made magical links lying around. Donal's now-clear nose filled with the scent of the leather interior.

"Sitrep," snapped Li Hua.

"We're being followed," said the driver in a rasping growl that suited his cragged face. Traffic on the road was light: four-legged and two-legged runners alongside the occasional twelve- or eighteen-legged behemoth and even a riding horse or two. Horses had been out of fashion for over a decade, but finances did not always allow for fashion. Donal could certainly not have afforded a runner.

He spotted their stalker three vehicles back. It slipped between lanes like a saurian panther. Donal's stomach started to fold in on itself. People really were trying to kill him over the papers he carried. Maybe he should have taken that gig summoning malignant spirits to fix sporting events after all. It certainly sounded safer.

Panic would not help. First rule of magic: fear devours. He would have to fake confidence until he found it.

"More corporate espionage?"

"One in front too," said the driver. "They must have been ready for us."

"I'll take the one in front," said Li Hua. "Donal, get rid of our tail."

"But...." He could barely finish the word before she grabbed his shoulder and looked him in the eye. Her eyes were a soft brown.

"No one hires a Heiropphant for pursuit," she said. "You're a Journeyman. You can handle this. Go."

Donal took a deep breath. True, he held a Bachelor of Arts in

Thaumaturgy, and true he had taken a few self-defense courses, but this? He could see that Li Hua was already casting, calling a spell out of her earring and channeling forces to direct and contain it. Her gestures conveyed pure elegant efficiency.

*Calm. Clear your thoughts. Take one smooth breath. Good. Now look - really look - again.*

He counted two Martians in a runner teeming with spells.

*Slow down. Compare.*

Another deep breath and Donal realized that the pursuer's runner did not carry many more enchantments than any of the others around it. That meant that most of the spells he saw handled animation. Donal could handle that, given time. But the man in the passenger seat dug at something in his pocket. Whatever he wanted, it could not be good. Donal had to act now.

*No good link, but at least I can see them. Wait, I can see them. That's it!*

Donal brushed the local red dust from his shirt, pants, hair, and skin and cupped it between his hands. He mumbled a few words over the dust, then shook it gently, like a devout gambler praying over his dice. He chanted a few more words before he took a deep, deep breath and filled his lungs with as much Martian air as possible. He tossed the dust into the air between him and the rear window, his gaze locked on the following runner, and launched the spell with as much force as his lungs could manage.

A dust devil swept across the road and down on the pursuers, cutting off their vision. Donal heard great legs skid and clamber, the sounds of drivers fighting to maintain control and avoid collisions. Something crunched and crumpled, but his dust devil obscured the result.

"Not bad," said Li Hua with an approving nod.

Donal whirled around to find out what had become of her target, but saw only normal traffic: no sign of an accident or disabled vehicle, nothing.

"What happened to yours?"

"Oh, they won't be bothering us again," said Li Hua with an enigmatic smile.

As they passed a side street, Donal saw a runner on its back with its belly shredded, as though it had torn itself apart with its own claws. Donal looked a question at Li Hua, but she only smiled.

