

CHAPTER ONE

The bite of spade on stone rang hollowly in the excavation site.

This was followed by an equally ringing silence—and then shouts of dismay. From what Major Valentine Strange, late of the Emperor of Alba's 21st Regiment of Benhali Lancers, discerned, a nest of baby cobras had been discovered in the bowels of the ancient temple. Just one of any number of unpleasant surprises that had been laid bare as the bones of the old building were picked clean.

The Great Temple was less than an hour's ride from the noise and bustle of the great capital city of Harappu to the eerie green silence of the jungle where the ruins of the ancient tombs had lain buried for centuries. Unsettling really, were Strange a fanciful man, to note how fast the jungle moved in to reclaim its own once life had departed.

Sometimes before life had departed.

In the great open pit below, Strange could see the excavated walls and courtyards where native laborers, the marl—worker caste—were running around like ants in a downpour. Typical. No discipline. No organization. The only surprise was that the Holy Orders could find anyone at all to work the site. A lot of unsavory legends about these ruins.

Untroubled, Strange continued on his way down the rickety wooden stairway. Sultry early autumn heat shimmered from the torn, wet earth. Behind the veil of humidity, the crooked towers and broken statuary gleamed with the eerie

pale blue light that proclaimed this a place of Power. Which, in Strange's opinion, was good enough reason to steer clear, but he had an appointment here today—and the promise of a job.

Strange needed a job. Rather urgently. His luck at the tables had not been the best lately, nor had he been able to recoup his losses on the polo fields. In any case, he was growing bored again. Bored with civilian life, bored with the rules and rituals of polite Harappun society. He was beginning to reminisce fondly of his good old days in the cavalry. That was always a bad sign.

Insects droned in the heavy air. Something skittered away through the golden ferns on the hillside. Strange glanced its way, but did not slow his brisk progress down the stairway built into the hillside by the excavators though he was glad of his tall riding boots. Many unhealthy things, both natural and magical, lurked in this place. The disinterring had halted during the Inborn Mutiny, but now the temple was the focus of much national interest as the Alban colonial rulers tried to legitimise their century-long reign by allying themselves with conquered Hidush's mystical past.

After nineteen years spent protecting the frontier border from the menace of outlaws and outcaste—not to mention suppressing manifestations of that same mystical past —Strange found this turn of events grimly amusing, but then he'd been told he had a black sense of humor. He'd killed the man who told him so in a duel, although that had happened a few years later. Nothing to do with the bloke's boorish sense of humor and everything to do with the honor of their regiment. Or so Strange had believed at the time. He had been much younger then.

He was thirty-six now. He felt a good deal older.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, he crossed the cracked and missing colored paving stones of an enormous courtyard. He could see that once the interlocking pieces had formed the austere face of the moon, but now one eye

and several pieces of mouth were missing, giving the image a half-blind and toothless look. Wild flowers and herbs grew in clumps between the bricks.

Strange spoke briefly to one of the Natal guards at the temple door, showing her the indigo-edged card he had received. Blunt features impassive, her green eyes studied the card closely before she handed it back with a nod.

Strange continued down a winding, steep stairway lit by primitive wall torches. The flames cast odd shadows against the irregular stone walls. Beyond the hiss of the torches he caught the whisper of voices from down below. Two voices in quiet argument augmented by the weird accustics of the ancient architecture.

“I tell you, it’s not a matter of being afraid. There is something here.”

“Of course there’s something here! This is a temple. Purya’s own temple. A place of great and awesome power.”

“You’re not listening to me. That chamber has nothing to do with Purya. It’s much older.”

The second voice hissed, “*Older than Purya?* Beware, Grimshaw. You risk heresy.”

“Oh for the sake of...why won’t you listen to me? I tell you, something ancient has awakened here. It’s watching us. Learning us.”

“Nonsense.”

At the bottom of the stairway, an arched doorway lead into a cavernous chamber. Daylight dappled the floor and leaves drifted gently through the great holes in the ceiling. In the center of the chamber was a huge green marble edged pool fed by an underground spring. In the center of the pool was a very large golden statue, the features of which were obscured by moss. Beside the pool stood two men. One was tall and thin and fair in the way of Alban true bloods. The other was the most beautiful man Strange had ever seen.

The beautiful man, who wore the rich blue-purple garb of a priest, beckoned to Strange. “Ah! Major Strange, is it not?” He smiled, and for a moment Strange forgot anyone else was in the room. “I’m Brahman Ehimay Warrick. I sent for you.”

“Holiness,” Strange said, shaking hands.

Warrick was shorter than himself. He had the creamy complexion and the wide, tawny gaze of the half-blood. His hair was dark as a raven’s wing. Taken individually, the parts of him were nothing distinctive, and yet the sum was extraordinary.

“I’m delighted you’ve come.”

“I was intrigued by your invitation,” Strange admitted. “It’s not often I find my services required by the Holy Orders.” Although if anyone could afford to pay for them, it was certainly the church.

As though reading his mind, the priest chuckled. His ears and hands were adorned by the sapphires and gold of his station, and though he was quite young—several years younger than Strange—he had the assurance of a church elder. He turned. “And this is Master Aleister Grimshaw.”

Master. A witch then. Valentine Strange was not fond of witches. In fact, he probably disliked witches more than magicians, which was saying something. At least you knew where you were with the paid practitioners of magic. Not that witches didn’t have their uses, though they were mostly scholars and academics these days. The Church certainly put them to good use—native borns anyway. Not quite so much demand for the true bloods since the Inborn Mutiny when the witches of Alban descent had joined with the insurgents.

“Major Strange,” Grimshaw murmured, offering a perfunctory hand. His lashes veiled his eyes. His eyebrows were dark and delicately winged. He had a bony, intelligent face, neither attractive nor unattractive. His skin was honey-colored and his hair was ash blonde. He was probably about the age of

Brahman Warrick. A small gold earring pierced his left earlobe, indicating the witch strain was on the maternal side.

“Master Grimshaw,” Strange said, and the younger man flicked him a quick uncertain look at something he heard—or didn’t hear—in Strange’s tone. His eyes were gray, not the expected blue of the true blood.

“Have we met?” Grimshaw asked warily.

“Not to my knowledge.”

Braham Warrick said, “You’ll soon know each other very well indeed. That is—if you’ll hear me out?”

Strange suddenly realized something that had been secretly bothering him since he had entered the excavation pit. There were no monkeys. Despite the leafy bowers provided by the towering trees lining the excavation site, Strange had not heard the chatter of a single monkey since his arrival.

Odd. Very odd indeed.

“That’s why I’m here, Holiness,” Strange replied.

Grimshaw said nothing—although he looked as though he wished to.

“You won’t mind my speaking as we walk,” the priest said. “Much of the excavation of the temple is my responsibility. I’d like to show you something.” He rested a light hand on Strange’s sleeve, and then turned leading the way from the main chamber.

Grimshaw followed behind, and Strange found himself oddly aware of that tall, silent presence as Brahman Warrick paused to light a brass lantern.

“I’ve heard that you’re a man who gets things done, Major Strange. That you have experience and discretion as well as courage—and that you know the Benhali Mountains as much as any Alban can know them.” He didn’t wait for an answer. “You’ve heard of the Diadem of Purya?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Strange admitted. He thought, but was not sure that the witch gave a little snort from behind them.

Brahman Warrick was unphazed. “Long ago, when the world was threatened by fire and demons, Our Lady Purya went into battle and defeated the monsters and destroyers, and from the dying flames and the gouged-out eyes of demons, she forged a diadem to be worn by her successor the next time the world was in great peril.”

News to Strange, but he was not much interested in the Hidush dieties. In fact, he didn’t put much stock in any deity, although like most colonial soldiers he wore the likeness of Brigantia on a small silver medallion. After a century of occupation Purya had been largely amalgamated with the Alban goddess. Strange had heard rumors of a movement to bring back the old faith, but there were always such rumors in a land of religious fanatics.

He drawled, “One does like to face such things appropriately kitted out.”

Brahman Warrick laughed, but there was an edge in his voice as he said, “That was something else I’d heard about you. That you take few things seriously and lack reverence.”

As a matter of fact Strange took a number of things seriously. These included, but were not restricted to, the meticulous care of his weapons, the health and welfare of his polo ponies, and gambling debts. He also put high value on fine brandy and a cheroot after an evening meal shared with good friends—of which he had many. All of whom would have earnestly advised him against getting involved in anything to do with the church.

“I’m not much for old legends,” Strange stated. He could see where Warrick was headed. In these days of civil unrest, the church—or rather the emperor—needed some symbol of unity and Power, which was why they were revisiting the abandoned excavation at Gomar.

“But Major Strange, one man’s legend is another man’s crusade.” Warrick sounded unexpectedly cheerful. The witch made no comment.

They were halfway down a long winding stairway. The smell of damp and incense made Strange's nostrils twitch in distaste. Something dashed between his boots, and he nearly stumbled, reaching out to the slimy wall. He saw a white rat racing down the steps ahead. It vanished into the murky darkness below. The shadows from Warrick's lantern swung across the glistening walls, briefly illuminating the enigmatic moons and shooting stars carved into the stones.

"You seem to have made remarkable progress on the excavation of late. I remember when the only sign of this temple was the tip of the tallest tower poking through the earth that buried it."

"We've made progress," the priest agreed. "Not as much as we would wish, but then so much of our work was undone during the late uprising—"

Strange could feel the stark silence emanating from Grimshaw like a field of energy. *Grimshaw*...yes. He remembered that name now. One of the oldest true blood families. Reformers and do-gooders who had sided with the Inborn rebels—and faced the same fate. This would be the son and grandson—too young to have taken part in the Mutiny. His dam must have been well-connected indeed, since he was not only practicing The Craft, he was employed by the Holy Orders.

They had reached the bottom level now. Wet and mud lay on the floor, and the smell of burned out torches and forgotten sepulchers permeated the air. A dead snake lay a few feet from the staircase.

"This way," Brahman Warrick said, squalching ahead.

Strange glanced back at Grimshaw who held his gaze without expression.

A short hallway lead to a small room with an alcove at the far end. Once the walls had been painted, but only ghostly streaks remained beneath the mold and damp. There were shelves for

books and scrolls, but the shelves were empty. In the alcove stood a battered statue. The youth depicted in marble must have been beautiful, but at some point he'd fallen on his chisled face and smashed his nose and pouty mouth. He still looked amazingly confident for all that. In one hand he held a sword, in the other, a small red glass globe. His breastplate was emblazoned with a cobra.

"Behold the goddess Purya," Brahman Warrick said. "She's not merely an old legend, you see."

Goddess?

Strange approached the statue slowly. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship that could make cold marble look warm and lithe and supple. Impressive. Not that the existence of the statue of a minor diety and proof the diety had been worshipped indicated the diety had actually *lived*; priests had trouble with those kinds of distinctions. This individual had likely been a young sorcerer of some kind—with excellent press.

"Look at her face," the priest ordered.

Her face? Mildly, Strange said, "Rather a...robust little thing, isn't she?" Leave it to a priest to get it wrong, but this happened to be one of Strange's fields of expertise—if he did say so himself.

"Indeed." Warrick's tone was quelling, understanding perfectly.

Well, if it made him happy to believe this lissome youth was his goddess, it was nothing to Strange, was it? As though reading his thoughts, the priest said with unexpected archness, "I suppose people often see what they wish to in the beauty of others."

Vaguely entertained though he was by the implication that "people" were something Warrick had only viewed at a safe distance, Strange was less amused—and he did not think he imagined it—by the suggestion that he would wish a goddess into a god. Not that the love of men carried the same stigma for

colonials that it did for native born, but it had been many a year since he'd given into the temptation of "soldier's affection."

He said neutrally, "I've not stayed alive this long by seeing only what I wished to see."

"Perhaps not. Turn your gaze then to this and tell me what you see."

Strange followed the graceful gesture, and his gaze narrowed.

There was a smooth, slightly indented band around the statue's curly marble crown—just about the width of a diadem? He threw a look at Brahman Warrick who was watching him with a suggestion of smug knowingness.

"So you see," Warrick said. "What we wish you to retrieve is Purya's own diadem. And we will pay you two hundred thousand rupees to do it."

Two hundred thousand...!

After the first astonished flash of understanding, he felt a dizzy rush of shocked jubilation. Two...hundred... thousand...

Had he misheard? But no. Warrick was standing there, smiling, looking pleased with himself, looking intent and...eager.

Half his problems solved in one instant. Just like that...his difficulties halved as though by the fall of an axe.

He was very careful not to give himself away.

"And you'll pay me that whether I succeed or not?"

The witch made sound. Not a laugh exactly. Not a cough. Something in between. Surprisingly cynical for such a small sound.

The priest's face changed. The pretty mouth turned down. Strange regretted having to disappoint such a beautiful young man. "We'll advance you half, certainly, if you agree to go. But it's a great deal of money and we're paying for results. That's why we're hiring you. You're a man who gets results."

Oh yes. He was a man who got results. That was one thing that had not changed.

Still, he had to try his hand. He needed the money too badly not to make the attempt. For all he knew, his...creditors might not let him leave this city without more on account.

And the truth was, as much as he needed the money—and he needed it desperately—the sheer mad adventure of it appealed. Appealed strongly. Reminded him of the old days. The good old days.

Cooly, Strange tipped his head to the side, studying the statue. “I don’t deny the idea intrigues me. But if I’m to spend how many months of my life searching for this trinket—”

“Oh! But that’s just it.” Warrick brightened at this promising sign that they might reach a compromise. “We know exactly where the diadem is. It’s in a monastery somewhere in the Benhali Mountains. For years we’ve heard rumors of it. Now we know that the stories must be true.”

“Why must they be true?”

Warrick blinked. “Er...it’s difficult to explain. However, in case it *is* a trick, Master Grimshaw will go with you. He’s an expert in such antiquities.”

“I’ll *what?*” Master Grimshaw said, coming suddenly to life.

“You’ll travel with Major Strange into the Benhali Mountains,” Warrick said. The gazes of the two younger men locked and held. It was the witch who looked away first. His profile was stonier than the statue’s as he stared at nothing.

Warrick threw Grimshaw an exasperated look, and then turned the full battery of his smile onto Strange. “We have it on good authority that the priests there are willing to sell the diadem. What we mostly need here is someone to negotiate for us and bring the relic safely back through the mountains. From everything we’ve discovered there is no man in Harappu better equipped for such a challenge than you, Major Strange. Will you take on this quest for us?”

“If you pay me the two hundred thousand rupees up front, yes.” As the priest opened his mouth, Strange continued dispassionately, “I know the White Mountains well. Too well to discount the difficulty of the task you ask. There are no guarantees, and if I don’t come back I should still like to know my debts have been honorably discharged.”

Warrick’s gold-brown eyes met his own. He seemed to be weighing unpleasant alternatives. His gaze shifted to the tense, mute figure of the witch.

“Very well,” he said reluctantly at last. “You shall have the money upfront. And if you fail—well, you must *not* fail, Major Strange.”

It was all Strange could do to preserve an appropriately grave expression. He asked blandly, “When do I leave?”