

BANTAM BOOKS

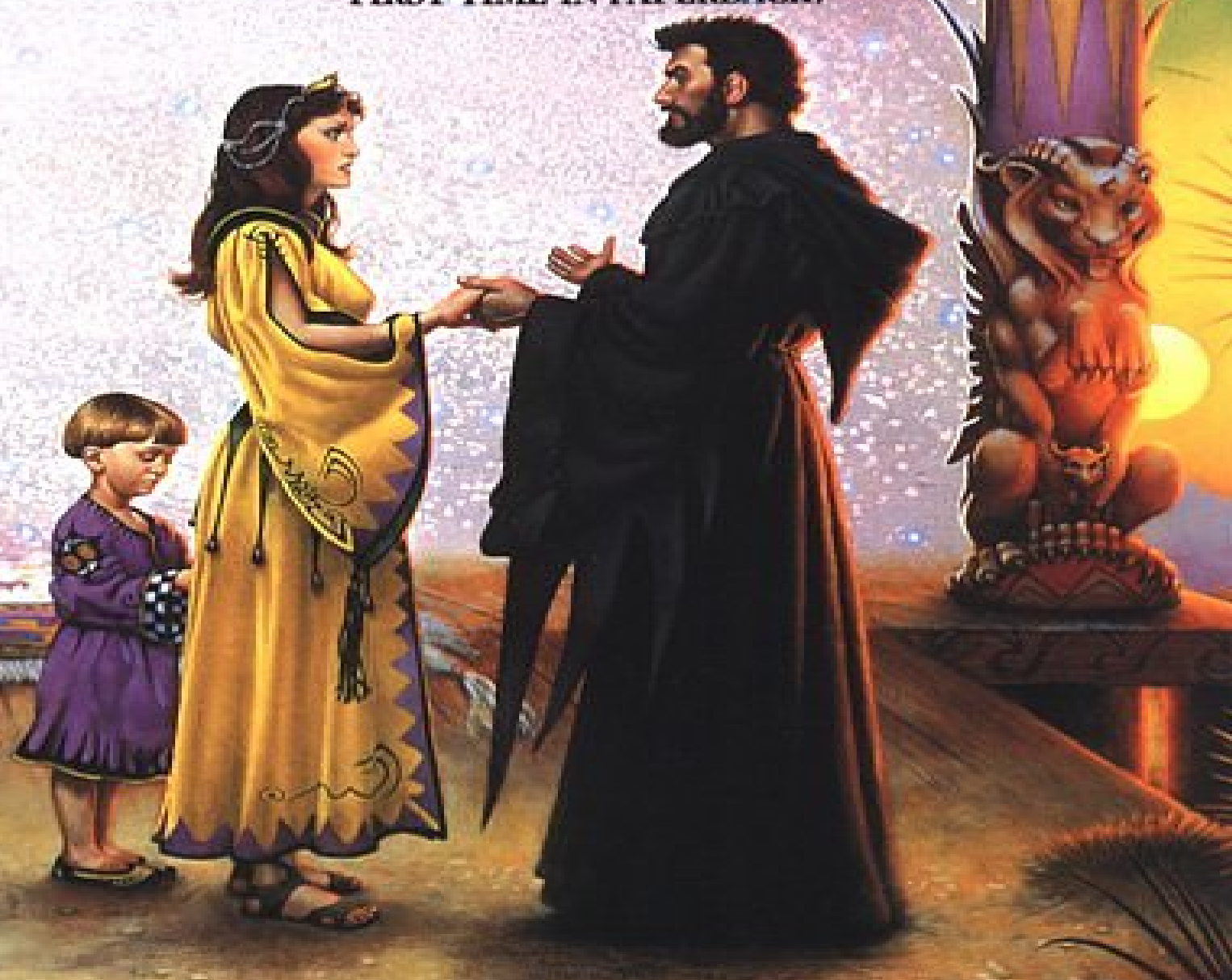
VOLUME II IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING *RIFTWAR* SAGA

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MAGICIANS MASTER

THE AUTHOR'S PREFERRED EDITION—
FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK!



Magician: Master

By

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Part Two of a Two Part Story

MAGICIAN: MASTER

ONE SLAVE

TWO ESTATE

THREE CHANGELING

FOUR TRAINING

FIVE VOYAGE

SIX KRONDOR

SEVEN ESCAPE

EIGHT GREAT ONE

NINE FUSION

TEN EMISSARY

ELEVEN DECISION

TWELVE UPHEAVAL

THIRTEEN DECEPTIONS

FOURTEEN BETRAYAL

FIFTEEN LEGACY

SIXTEEN RENAISSANCE

ONE SLAVE

THE DYING SLAVE LAY SCREAMING.

The day was unmercifully hot. The other slaves went about their work, ignoring the sound as much as possible. Life in the work camp was cheap, and it did no good to dwell on the fate that awaited so many. The dying man had been bitten by a relli, a snakelike swamp creature. Its venom was slow-acting and painful; short of magic, there was no cure.

Suddenly there was silence. Pug looked over to see a Tsurani guard wipe off his sword. A hand fell on Pug's shoulder. Laurie's voice whispered in his ear, "Looks like our venerable overseer was disturbed by the sound of Toffston's dying."

Pug tied a coil of rope securely around his waist. "At least it ended quickly." He turned to the tall, blond singer from the Kingdom city of Tyr-Sog and said, "Keep a sharp eye out. This one's old and may be rotten." Without another word. Pug scampered up the bole of the ngaggi tree, a firiike swamp tree the Tsurani harvested for wood and resins. With few metals, the Tsurani had become clever in finding many substitutes. The wood of this tree could be worked Uke paper, then dried to an incredible hardness, useful in fashioning a hundred things. The resins were used to laminate woods and cure hides. Properly cured hides could produce a suit of leather armor as tough as Midkemian chain mail, and laminated wooden weapons were nearly the match of Midkemian steel.

Four years in the swamp camp had hardened Pug's body. His sinewy muscles strained as he climbed the tree. His skin had been tanned deeply by the harsh sun of the Tsurani homeworld. His face was covered by a slave's beard.

Pug reached the first large branches and looked down at his friend. Laurie stood knee-deep in the murky water, absently swatting at the insects that plagued them while they worked. Pug liked Laurie. The troubadour had no business being here, but then he had had no business tagging along with a patrol in the hope of seeing Tsurani soldiers, either. He said he had wanted material for ballads that would make him famous throughout the Kingdom. He had seen more than he had hoped for. The patrol had ridden into a major

Tsurani offensive and Laurie had been captured. He had come to this camp over four months ago, and he and Pug had quickly become friends.

Pug continued his climb, keeping one eye always searching for the dangerous tree dwellers of Kelewan. Reaching the most likely place for a topping. Pug froze as he caught a glimpse of movement. He relaxed when he saw it was only a needier, a creature whose protection was its resemblance to a clump of ngaggi needles. It scurried away from the presence of the human and made the short jump to the branch of a neighboring tree. Pug made another survey and started tying his ropes. His job was to cut away the tops of the huge trees, making the fall less dangerous to those below.

Pug took several cuts at the bark, then felt the edge of his wooden ax bite into the softer pulp beneath. A faint pungent odor greeted his careful sniffing. Swearing, he called down to Laurie, "This one's rotten. Tell the overseer."

He waited, looking out over the tops of trees. All around, strange insects and birdlike creatures flew. In the four years he had been a slave on this world, he had not grown used to the appearance of these life forms. They were not all that different from those on Midkemia, but it was the similarities as much as the differences that kept reminding him this was not his home. Bees should be yellow-and-black-striped, not bright red. Eagles shouldn't have yellow bands on their wings, nor hawks purple. These creatures were not bees, eagles, or hawks, but the resemblance was striking. Pug found it easier to accept the stranger creatures of Kelewan than these. The six-legged needra, the domesticated beast of burden that looked like some sort of bovine with two extra stumpy legs, or the cho-ja, the insectoid creature who served the Tsurani and could speak their language: these he had come to find familiar. But each time he glimpsed a creature from the corner of his eye and turned, expecting it to be Midkemian only to find it was not, then the despair would strike.

Laurie's voice brought him from his reverie. "The overseer comes."

Pug swore. If the overseer had to get himself dirty by wading in the water, then he would be in a foul mood—which could mean beatings, or a reduction in the chronically meager food. He would already be angered by the delay in the cutting. A family of burrowers, beaverlike six-legged creatures, had made themselves at home in the roots of the great trees. They

would gnaw the tender roots and the trees would sicken and die. The soft, pulpy wood would turn sour, then watery, and after a while the tree would collapse from within. Several burrower tunnels had been poisoned, but the damage had already been done to the trees.

A rough voice, swearing mightily while its owner splashed through the swamp, announced the arrival of the overseer, Nogamu. He himself was a slave, but he had attained the highest rank a slave could rise to, and while he could never hope to be free, he had many privileges and could order soldiers or freemen placed under his command. A young soldier came walking behind, a look of mild amusement on his face. He was clean-shaven in the manner of a Tsurani freeman, and as he looked up at Pug, the slave could get a good look at him. He had the high cheekbones and nearly black eyes that so many Tsurani possessed. His dark eyes caught sight of Pug, and he seemed to nod slightly. His blue armor was of a type unknown to Pug, but with the strange Tsurani military organization, that was not surprising. Every family, demesne, area, town, city, and province appeared to have its own army. How they all related one to another within the Empire was beyond Pug's understanding.

The overseer stood at the base of the tree, his short robe held above the water. He growled like the bear he resembled and shouted up at Pug, "What's this about another rotten tree?"

Pug spoke the Tsurani language better than any Midkemian in the camp, for he had been there longer than all but a few old Tsurani slaves. He shouted down, "It smells of rot. We should re-rig another and leave this one alone. Slave Master."

The overseer shook his fist. "You are all lazy. There is nothing wrong with this tree. It is fine. You only want to keep from working. Now cut it!"

Pug sighed. There was no arguing with the Bear, as all the Midkemian slaves called Nogamu. He was obviously upset about something, and the slaves would pay the price. Pug started hacking through the upper section, and it soon fell to the ground. The smell of rot was thick, and Pug removed the ropes quickly. Just as the last length was coiled around his waist, a splitting sound came from directly in front of him. "It falls!" he shouted down to the slaves standing in the water below. Without hesitation they all ran. The cry of "falls" was never ignored.

The bole of the tree was splitting down the middle now that the top had been cut away. While this was not common, if a tree was far enough gone for the pulp to have lost its strength, any flaw in the bark could cause it to split under its own weight. The tree's branches would pull the halves away from each other. Had Pug been tied to the bole, the ropes would have cut him in half before they snapped.

Pug gauged the direction of the fall, then as the half he stood upon started to move, he launched himself away from it. He hit the water flat, back first, trying to let the two feet of water break his fall as much as possible. The blow from the water was immediately followed by the harder impact with the ground. The bottom was mostly mud, so there was little damage done. The air in his lungs exploded from his mouth when he struck, and his senses reeled for a moment. He retained enough presence of mind to sit up and gasped a deep lungful of air.

Suddenly a heavy weight hit him across the stomach, knocking the wind from him and pushing his head back underwater. He struggled to move and found a large branch across his stomach. He could barely get his face out of the water to get air. His lungs burned and he breathed without control. Water came pouring down his windpipe, and he started to choke. Coughing and sputtering, he tried to keep calm but felt panic rise within him. He frantically pushed at the weight across him but couldn't move it.

Abruptly he found his head above water; Laurie said, "Spit, Pug! Get the muck out of your lungs, or you'll get lung fever."

Pug coughed and spit. With Laurie holding his head, he could catch his breath.

Laurie shouted, "Grab this branch. I'll pull him out from under."

Several slaves splashed over, sweat beading their bodies. They reached underwater and seized the branch. Heaving, they managed to move it slightly, but Laurie couldn't drag Pug out.

"Bring axes; we'll have to cut the branch from the tree."

Other slaves were starting to bring axes over when Nogamu shouted, "No. Leave him. We have no time for this. There are trees to cut."

Laurie nearly screamed at him, "We can't leave him! He'll drown!"

The overseer crossed over and struck Laurie across the face with a lash. It cut deep into the singer's cheek, but he didn't let go of his friend's head. "Back to work, slave. You'll be beaten tonight for speaking to me that way.

There are others who can top. Now, let him go!" He struck Laurie again. Laurie winced, but held Pug's head above water.

Nogamu raised his lash for a third blow, but was halted by a voice from behind. "Cut the slave from under the branch." Laurie saw the speaker was the young soldier who had accompanied the slave master. The overseer whirled about, unaccustomed to having his orders questioned. When he saw who had spoken, he bit back the words that were on his lips. Bowing his head, he said, "My lord's will."

He signaled for the slaves with the axes to cut Pug loose, and in short order Pug was out from under the branch. Laurie carried him over to where the young soldier stood. Pug coughed the last water from out of his lungs and gasped, "I thank the master for my life."

The man said nothing, but when the overseer approached, directed his remarks to him. "The slave was right, and you were not. The tree was rotten. It is not proper for you to punish him for your bad judgment and ill-temper. I should have you beaten, but will not spare the time for it. The work goes slowly, and my father is displeased."

Nogamu bowed his head. "I lose much face in my lord's sight. May I have his permission to kill myself?" "No. It is too much honor. Return to work." The overseer's face grew red in silent shame and rage.

Raising his lash, he pointed at Laurie and Pug. "You two, bac to work."

Laurie stood, and Pug tried. His knees were wobbly from his near-drowning, but he managed to stand after a few attempts.

"These two shall be excused work the rest of the day," the young lord said. "This one"—he pointed to Pug—"is of little use. The other must dress those cuts you gave him, or festering will start." He turned to a guard. "Take them back to camp and see to their needs."

Pug was grateful, not so much for himself as for Laurie. With a little rest. Pug could have returned to work, but an open wound in the swamp was a death warrant as ;1 often as not. Infections came quickly in this hot, dirty | place, and there were few ways of dealing with them. •

They followed the guard. As they left. Pug could see the slave master watching them with naked hatred in his eyes.

There was a creaking of floorboards and Pug came instantly awake. His slave-bred wariness told him that the sound didn't belong in the hut during the dead of night.

Through the gloom, footfalls could be heard coming closer, then they stopped at the foot of his pallet. From the next pallet, he could hear Laurie's sharp intake of breath, and he knew the minstrel was awake also. Probably half the slaves had been awakened by the intruder. The stranger hesitated over something, and Pug waited, tense with uncertainty. There was a grunt, and without hesitation. Pug rolled off his mat. A weight came crashing down, and Pug could hear a dull thud as a dagger struck where his chest had been only moments before. Suddenly the room exploded with activity. Slaves were shouting, and could be heard running for the door.

Pug felt hands reach for him in the dark, and a sharp pain exploded across his chest. He reached blindly for his assailant and grappled with him for the blade. Another slash, and his right hand was cut across the palm. Abruptly the attacker stopped moving, and Pug became aware that a third body was atop the would-be assassin.

Soldiers rushed into the hut, carrying lanterns, and Pug could see Laurie lying across the still body of Nogamu. The Bear was still breathing, but from the way the dagger protruded from his ribs, not for long.

The young soldier who had saved Pug's and Laurie's lives entered and the others made way for him. He stood over the three combatants and simply asked, "Is he dead?"

The overseer's eyes opened and in a faint whisper he said, "I live, lord. But I die by the blade." A weak but defiant smile showed on his sweat-drenched face.

The young soldier's expression betrayed no emotion, but his eyes looked as if ablaze. "I think not," he said softly. He turned to two of the soldiers in the room. "Take him outside at once and hang him. There will be no honors for his clan to sing. Leave the body there for the insects. It shall be a warning that I am not to be disobeyed. Go."

The dying man's face paled, and his lips quivered. "No, master. I pray, leave me to die by the blade. A few minutes longer." Bloody foam appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Two husky soldiers reached down for Nogamu and, with little thought for his pain, dragged him outside. He could be heard wailing the entire way. The amount of strength left in his voice was amazing, as if his fear of the rope had awakened some deep reserve.

They stood in frozen tableau until the sound was cut off in a strangled cry. The young officer then turned to Pug and Laurie. Pug sat, blood running from the long, shallow gash across his chest. He held his injured hand in the other. It was deeply cut, and his fingers wouldn't move.

"Bring your wounded friend," the young soldier commanded Laurie.

Laurie helped Pug to his feet and they followed the officer out of the slave hut. He led them across the compound to his own quarters and ordered them to enter. Once inside, he instructed a guard to send for the camp physician. He had them stand in silence until the physician arrived. He was an old Tsurani, dressed in the robes of one of their gods, which one the Midkemians couldn't tell. He inspected Pug's wounds and judged the chest wound superficial. The hand, he said, would be another matter.

"The cut is deep, and the muscles and tendons have been cut. It will heal, but there will be a loss of movement and little strength for gripping. He most likely will be fit for only light duty."

The soldier nodded, a peculiar expression on his face: a mixture of disgust and impatience. "Very well. Dress the wounds, and leave us."

The physician set about cleaning the wounds. He took a score of stitches in the hand, bandaged it, admonished Pug to keep it clean, and left. Pug ignored the pain, easing his mind with an old mental exercise.

After the physician was gone, the soldier studied the two slaves before him. "By law, I should have you hung for killing the slave master."

They said nothing. They would remain silent until commanded to speak.

"But as I hung the slave master, I am free to keep you alive, should it suit my purpose. I can simply have you punished for wounding him." He paused. "Consider yourselves punished."

With a wave of his hand he said, "Leave me, but return here at daybreak. I have to decide what to do with you."

They left, feeling fortunate, for under most circumstances they would now be hanging next to the former slave master. As they crossed the compound, Laurie said, "I wonder what that was about?"

Pug responded, "I hurt too much to wonder why. I'm just thankful that we will see tomorrow."

Laurie said nothing until they reached the slave hut. "I think the young lord has something up his sleeve."