(*The Thief* by *Megan Whalen Turner*)

**CHAPTER TWO**

TWO GUARDS CAME FOR ME late the next morning, and I was surprised again. I had thought that the traveling the magus had mentioned would take some time to plan for. He had clearly gotten the king’s approval for the plan only the previous night. My hopes, which had been falling and rising, sank again as I realized that the magus hadn’t mentioned how far we would travel. It might be no more than a few miles. But I cheered up once I was free of my chains.

The guards removed the manacles this time as well as the waist and ankle cuffs. (...) We crossed through the guardroom to the door to the courtyard between the prison and the megaron. (...)

It was nearly noon, and the sunlight dropped directly into the courtyard. The pale yellow of the stones in the walls reflected it from all sides. I howled and swore as I covered my head with my arms and hunched over in pain. Burning at the stake couldn’t have been worse.

(...) “Gods damn, *gods* damn,” I was howling as the guards led me, completely blind, down the stairs. I still had my hands over my eyes, and they held me firmly by the elbows. My feet hardly touched the stone steps.

At the bottom the magus was waiting. He told me to pull myself together.

“Gods damn you, too,” I said through my hands. (...) I sniffed a little and wiped the tears away. As soon as I could manage, I pulled my hands farther from my face and tried to see what was happening around me in the courtyard.

(...) I was still looking at the world through tears and the narrowest of slits between my eyelids. I counted the hazy shapes in front of me. It didn’t seem like a large party, only five horses, but all of them had humped baggage behind their saddles. It was going to be a long trip. I grinned with satisfaction. Beside me the magus looked up at the sky and said to no one in particular, “I had planned to leave at daybreak. Pol,” he shouted, “get the boys mounted. I’ll load the thief.”

I didn’t appreciate the way he spoke of me as another parcel to be dumped into a saddlebag or, in my case, a saddle. He walked over to a horse, and I could see that he gestured to me to join him, but I didn’t move. I hate horses. (...)

I didn’t move, and the magus got tired of waiting. He stepped to my side, grabbed me by the back of the neck, and hauled me over to the horse.

(...)
Once the others were up, the magus directed his mount toward the archway at one side of the courtyard. My horse obediently followed, and the others came behind me as we passed under rooms of the palace and hallways that I had been in the night before. My eyes had a few moments of relief before we reached the outer gate. There was no fanfare, no shouting crowds to wish us luck on our journey—just as well. The only time I had been the focus of shouting crowds had been my trial, and I hadn’t enjoyed that at all.

(...)
As we rode onto the avenue, the sound of our horses’ hooves was muddled with the other noises of the city. It was just before midday, and we were in the middle of the last surge of activity before people withdrew into their homes to wait out the afternoon heat. There were a few other horses on the road, and many more donkeys. People traveled on foot and in sedan chairs carried by servants. Merchants brought their goods up the avenue in carts and then led loaded donkeys down the narrow alleys to the back doors of the great houses, hoping to sell their vegetables to the cook, their linen to the housekeeper, or their wine to the steward. There was jostling and shouting and noise, and I relished it after the perpetual smothered quiet of the prison.

(...)
We crossed the upper part of the Sacred Way, and then the lower part, which held all the nicest shops in the city. Looking up and down it from the intersection, I could see the sedan chairs and fancy carriages waiting by doorways while the gently bred owners made their purchases inside. One shop near the corner sold only earrings, and I watched wistfully as it went by. We were too far away and there was too much traffic to allow even a glimpse of the merchandise displayed in its window.

Once we got to the lower town, traffic thinned out as people retreated indoors. I looked in vain for a familiar face. I wanted to tell someone I knew that I was free, but I didn’t know very many people who would be out on the street in the middle of the day. When we reached the docks, we turned and rode along beside them toward the north gate out of the city. We passed the merchant ships and a pier full of private boats for fishing and pleasure and then the king’s warships lined up at their docks. I was counting the cannons bolted to their decks and almost didn’t see Philonikes passing by me.

“Philonikes!” I yelled, leaning out of the saddle. “Hey, Philonikes!” It was as much as I said before the magus grabbed my arm and dragged me away. He kicked his horse into a trot, and mine as well, as he hauled me down the street. I turned backward to wave to Philonikes disappearing around a corner, but I am not sure that he recognized me. The magus turned another corner before we slowed down, the other four riders hurrying to catch up.

“Damn it!” said the magus. “What do you think you are doing?”

I pointed backward and looked bewildered. “Philo’s a friend of mine. I was going to say hello.”

“Do you think I want everyone in the city to know that you are out working for the king?”

“Why not?”

“Do you announce that you’re going off to steal something before you start?” He thought for a second. “Yes, you do. Well, I don’t.”

“Why not?” I asked again.

“None of your business. Just keep your mouth shut, do you understand?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. (...) I ducked my head to hide my smile as my horse clopped along after the magus’s.