

## THE ONE RULE OF MAGIC - sample chapter

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My sense of liberation became tempered with a debilitating urgency impelling me to question again my motives, my mad dash to rebuild this collection. I thought of leaving the items in places around my parents' house where they would find them and feel that I was somehow on my way, that I was close.

The invisibility helped. I was able to follow them around the house and watch them impersonate a normal lifestyle. With every passing moment I wanted to appear and banish the pretence, but then they would discover what I had become, not what I should be. They still weren't ready, and neither was I.

Spinoza's information led me to Prague and the hat worn by Robert Redford in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. The buyer was a man called Tomas Druba who lived on Kampa Island next to the Vltava. I had arranged to call at his home and was eager to do a deal and leave. So was he. He didn't want the hat when he discovered it was a fake.

I don't think my father knew it was fake when he bought it. In a fog of euphoria and probably not thinking straight, he paid with money from what I later learned to be a scam. (He also bought a new Audi with some of the same money.) I asked my mother if she was happy with income earned this way, but she shrugged and told me, 'it's what everybody does these days. Principles are fine in an honest world, but we don't live in an honest world.' She was right and fate conspired to prove her point; my father the conman had been conned, leaving me, years later, to put things right by handing out compensation to unwitting victims of crime.

Thanks to Rob Wallet I was able to travel from here to there without the need for car keys, passports, overnight bags, travel documents, plane tickets, lip balm, toll road fees, the usual garbage necessary to leave the home. I arrived at a quiet spot on Kampa, a place where I wouldn't be seen materialising out of nowhere, tucked below the parapets of Charles Bridge. Climbing the steps reminded me of the old days when we - the covens - would do as we wish with all the supernatural arrogance we could engineer and not worry if anyone saw us. After all, who would believe them? When I levitated on the Alte Meinbruecke in Wurzburg and sent Yves Sunier slipping and skidding across a carpet of fish, eye witness reports appeared in the local papers for about forty-eight hours before they dissolved into local folklore, catalogued as unreliable gossip.

Druba's address turned out to be a smart apartment in a charming terrace of pastel coloured buildings around Na Kampe square. I buzzed his intercom and waited.

"Hello."

"Hello. It's Frieda Schoenhofer. I've come to collect the hat."

"You mean the fake hat."

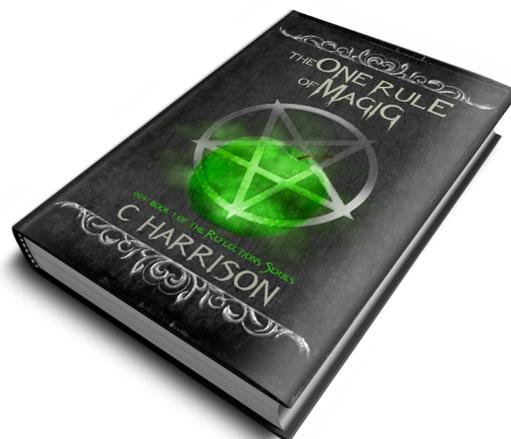
"The fake hat, yes. I'm sorry Mister Druba, but I didn't sell it to you."

"You can call me Tomas."

"I didn't sell you the hat, Tomas. I think I'm being generous buying it from you."

"You can claim the money back from the crook who sold it to me."

"I don't think Herr Spinoza knew it was a fake either."



"Didn't know? It's obvious. Well claim it back from the crook who sold it to Spinoza."

"How far back in time do you want to go? May I come in, Tomas, or are you going to throw the hat to me from an upstairs window? I know how much you Czechs enjoy throwing things from windows."

"That's not funny, Frieda." The door buzzed and clicked open.

Before entering, I took a moment to consider the incongruity of opening a door for someone who could walk straight through it, and then I remembered another conversation with Klaus Lenzl, the quantum physics student who first told me it was theoretically possible to walk through solid objects. It wasn't theoretically possible; it was reality.

For some people. . . .

Druba's apartment door was also open. This wouldn't take long; pay the man, take the hat back to Bamberg and prepare for the next trip. My arrival was ignored by Druba and met instead by a small audience hanging from the walls of his hallway. Row upon row of marionettes, a mesmerising population of soldiers and judges, dairy maids and dancers, freckle-faced children and red-cheeked clowns. They had big chins and long noses and large eyes; flamboyant hats (fake or otherwise), ornate collars, multicoloured coats, boots with turn-over tops, baggy breeches and long flowing skirts. Surrounded by a packed guard of honour I stepped between them and forgot I was entering someone's apartment; a human being's apartment.

"Who do you think she is?"

"Dunno."

"Is she collecting the rent? She doesn't look like the rent collector."

"A thief."

"Thief!"

"Thief!"

The voices soared into a cacophony until I was rescued by a young man I assumed to be Druba. He stood at the end of the hallway, skinny legs bent as if ready to spring towards me, and in the same voice as one of the marionettes said, "No, she's not a thief. I know who she is."

"Was that you?" I said. "Making those voices."

"Yes. Part of the act." He joined the wooden ranks, adjusting hemlines and repositioning the more pushy puppets back into line. "My wife makes them, I perform with them. It's a hobby of mine. I don't have the dexterity she has," he held up the tiny detailed hand of a grinning policeman, "but my wife can't throw her voice. So we take advantage of each other's skills. Like Jack Sprat and his wife."

"Jack Sprat?"

"Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean. And so between them both, you see, they licked the platter clean. It's an English nursery rhyme."

"I've never heard that." I didn't think I'd hear the word platter so soon after leaving Nice. "They're exquisite. Your wife is very talented."

"Yes. Her family are professional puppeteers. They manage the Vltava Microtheatre. It's very popular with tourists."

"I'm sure it is." I stroked the dress of a lady wearing an embroidered face mask.

"Oi, that's me wife yer gropin."

"Sorry." I apologised to a wooden general. . . .

"Anyway, Frieda, what are we to do with this hat and what is the recompense and compensation for the disgraceful deception I have been subjected to?"

I followed him through the busy apartment. Marionettes lurked in every corner as if Druba was hosting some kind of gathering. After moving a farmer with a deeply furrowed brow off a battered old armchair I sat down. Druba entered the room wearing the hat.

"It's the label that attracted my concern." He took the hat, knelt down and showed me the inner lining. "You see the stitching? It's European. The real hat would have American stitching. A heavier cotton."

"I'm astonished. What did you pay Herr Spinoza for this?"

"Four thousand five hundred euros, plus three hundred and twenty euros for insured expedited delivery."

"Four thousand eight hundred and twenty. If I offer you five thousand, will you be okay with that?"

"I don't know." He looked around the lounge for a second opinion provided by a jury of disparate figures, some hung on the walls between paintings, some on an old sideboard, sitting shoulder to shoulder for stability, and some occupying the empty chairs. . . .

"It's not enough," said one.

"Take it and move on," said another.

"Don't be greedy, get your money back."

"She looks loaded, if you ask me. Fleece her."

"That's a bit rich coming from you."

"What do you mean?"

"This is getting us nowhere."

"No."

"Get the money."

"Rob her."

"Steal her purse."

"Turn her upside down and shake her 'til she rattles."

"Mister Druba," my interruption stopped the growing chatter, "five thousand. Take it or leave it."

"Sure. Okay. That's fair enough."

"Can I pay you by bank transfer? I had a lot of trouble in Nice because the guy there only dealt with cash."

"Transfer is fine. As soon as the funds have cleared," he put the hat on again, "it's yours."

He left the room to collect his bank account details and I found myself alone with his puppet population. The silence felt awkward, as if, in Druba's absence, they expected me to start a conversation. The older puppets with the lines of wisdom around their eyes, the mouths fashioned into accusatory scowls and ironic grins, looked ready for an argument. The ladies peered down or gazed up, amazed to find one of their own standing so tall and able to move by herself. I contained the urge to wobble a hat or pinch a toe inside its buckled shoe until I came across a figure so adorable, so utterly beautiful in the form of androgynous perfection I wanted to lift him off the wall and dance around the room cheek to cheek, chin to chin, nose to nose.

His eager bright eyes shone like those of a new born foal's, and the blushing bulge of his face tapered to a gentle point framing a wide dazzling smile offered to me with profound happiness and glorious generosity. His spiky black hair may have hinted at some impish turn of character, but how could such angelic features be anything other than a blessing, an affirmation of life carved and teased from a block of wood with all the love of a benevolent creator?

"Should take twelve hours," he said and then I realised Druba had returned carrying his laptop. He joined me opposite the angel-faced puppet. "Ah, you've met the wondrous one. Everyone seems to make a beeline for this one."

I wanted to tell Druba how much I loved this little puppet, but my feelings were embarrassingly close to something beyond admiration for the skill of his wife. Separating the puppet from the artistry proved to be a struggle and when Druba elbowed me out of my hypnotic fixation I decided to calm down and concentrate on why I was here.

But the Wondrous One was as fascinated by me as I was by him. He watched me take out my phone and connect to the bank. I set up a payment transfer, conscious of him peering over my shoulder from his vantage point on the wall next to the window. When I checked Druba's laptop for the bank account numbers, the Wondrous One looked too. He was either protecting Druba's interests or protecting mine. Mine hopefully. I wanted the Wondrous One to be on my side.

With the transaction complete Druba snapped shut the lid on his laptop and I asked him, "What does he sound like?"

"Who?"

"The Wondrous One." I stood in front of him waiting for his sumptuous mouth to speak.

Druba pushed past me and stroked the puppet's face with such tenderness, as if stroking the face of his wife. "If you come with me I'll show you," he said and stalked away with his laptop.

I took a cautious step closer to the Wondrous One. "What's your name?" I whispered. "I'm Frieda." I shook his fine little hand. "Don't say much do you?"

Druba reappeared and stared at me as if I were mad. He had his coat on and was holding a parcel. "I take my wife something to eat if she's working late. Saves her buying out and paying overinflated prices at takeaways."

"Okay."

"Don't get too close to this lot. Some of them bite." He headed down the hallway.

"What a coincidence," I said to the back of his head. "So do I."

Druba didn't find it funny and tried the lock on his apartment door twice before heading off downstairs.

Through the streets of Prague we wandered, across Charles Bridge where Druba had a word with nearly everyone selling or hawking or trading along the bridge walls. Across the river we dived right into a confusion of narrow streets barely wide enough for a bicycle and emerged into courtyards that seemed to be self-enclosed not just from the city but from the world itself. Bathed in bluish-green light the rooftops carried the complex shadow of an unseen tower hidden by the high walled garrets and tenements of a lost neighbourhood.

Druba passed through the heavy wooden gate of a short alleyway connected to a silent street lined with cars where an unmarked doorway led us to the workshop of the Vltava Microtheatre. "We're nowhere near the river," I said. "Vltava Microtheatre?"

He beckoned me over to a wall between two buildings. Behind an iron grille the stonework plunged ten metres to the churning waters edge. "The river is everywhere, Frieda, if you know where to look."

Inside the workshop - a vast space concealed by such a small door - an army of people toiled on scenery, backdrops, curtains and stage props. Two carpenters hauled a castle turret into position, delicately avoiding damage to the castellation of the outer walls. A group of technicians stared in wonder as a curtain was drawn back and forth, back and forth, and each time the curtain unfolded to its full width a different decoration and design appeared. I shared their amazement and my father's admonishment came back to me when I figured out the secret of his magic trick. I wanted to know how they made the curtain change form with every tug and pull, but concluded this was a truly magical workshop and that there were some secrets best left unknown.

Druba passed a huge wardrobe full of miniature costumes waiting to be claimed. A red demonic outfit of feathers and spikes; a courtly ensemble of 17th century origin complete with his and hers

crowns made of beaten copper and plugged with costume jewels; two butler's frock coats hung next to the ragged bits and pieces of a pauper; and at the end, a dress as long as I was tall, the base coloured blue transforming to orange where it concluded with a gossamer-light collar attached to a translucent hood.

I could smell roasted sawdust and linseed oil, a sweet aroma of water-based paint and washing powder. The roof echoed to the constant tap tap of tiny hammers on delicate wooden components, and like a large interfering insect, the sudden buzz of a small drill puncturing holes and smoothing edges, inanimate bits of wood evolving into arms and legs of kings and queens, beggars and tax collectors, judges and villains. Everyone in the workshop greeted Druba, everyone except an old man sat in an old chair next to a short flight of steps. He could sleep through the knocks and scrapes and bangs and general chatter of activity, but then I crept towards him and noticed his costume and motionless features and realised he was another puppet, almost life size, dozing untouched by the repairs and alterations going on around him.

Another technician too preoccupied to catch Druba's arrival, hunched over a wooden figure lying prone on a workbench. Several pieces of its left leg were connected together by astonishingly intricate joints. I watched intently as the figure stood on its newly constructed legs and faced its maker. Druba approached and attracted her attention. "Natasha, food. . . ."

Natasha turned to me and smiled. "Hi," she said.

Struck dumb by her face I needed a moment to answer. Natasha was the full size embodiment of the Wondrous One, a human facsimile with the same glowing eyes, so large and beautiful; the same life affirming joy in a smile stretched across her round face, rouged cheek to rouged cheek, extruding her chin until she looked like an upturned raindrop. And the same spiky black hair framing her angelic features with lively puppet mischief.

All I could say was, "Hi," and endure a furious heat blush my skin from forehead to collarbones. "Amazing." The word was the most appropriate I could think of.

"Thank you." Natasha used the tip of her finger to check the free movements of the puppet's legs.

"What will that one be?" I said.

"She's the daughter of a wizard. He'll try to teach her his magic and she uses it to enchant a man she's loved since she was a young girl and he was a young boy."

"Will it have a happy ending?"

"No." Natasha was satisfied with the legs. She smiled at me again and I waited to hear more of her gentle voluptuous voice. "They never have happy endings. You don't learn anything in life if everything concluded with a happy ending."

Druba placed his parcel on Natasha's workbench. "I made meatballs in sweet and sour sauce."

Natasha's eyes, as if they weren't big enough already, swelled until they were ready to burst. "And noodles?"

"And noodles." She explored the meal, dipped her finger in the hot sauce and winced.

Her spiky black hair invited its own exploration, but more than that I noticed the invitation of her neck where flawless skin as smooth as the varnished puppet wood flowed down across her golden shoulders and back. My heartbeat increased and a terrible thirst overcame me. Natasha pulled the puppet out of the way and devoured her meal as if she hadn't eaten for a week.

Druba distracted me by demonstrating a vintage car built out of fibreboard and embellished with metal lamps and a big black bulbous horn. The use of the car and who the driver would be went in one ear and out the other. Behind him at the workbench, his wife, his living marionette, tucked into her meal unaware of my increasing bloodlust.

"When the money goes through, you'll tell me," I said short of breath.

"Sure. . . ."

Leaving him next to his miniature car, I dashed for the door. Natasha looked up, mouth full, unable to speak, and waved goodbye with her fork. I smiled and left the workshop, relieved to feel the merciful calm of cold air. Below the iron grille the Vltava flowed along its forbidding black channel like a warning, a warning to me to consider Natasha's dark observation on happy endings and what we might learn from them.