

# Talisman

by Jane M. H. Bigelow

Dark true green, heavy in my hand, the emerald called to me. I was too mesmerized by its beauty to hear the footsteps coming up the hall, too fascinated to escape over the rooftops.

The temple-woman gave a screech fit to break glass when she saw me standing there. That broke the spell, if spell it was, and I'd moved out the window and half-way across the tiles before she'd drawn breath to scream again.

I ran barefoot, and the cracks between the smooth green tiles gave footing sure enough for me. Across that roof, on to the next, a little drop to the one after that; it's like a dance. You must set your feet just so, with no hard thumps or uncontrolled slides.

A tree grew near one of their fine mosaic walls, just near enough--a good quick spring, a slither down its most obliging branches, and I touched ground. So far, contrary to what most people believe about Sarinsat's eye, the temple had not collapsed.

Behind me, the temple guards rushed towards the screams and lamentations of the devout. Need I mention that they were also rushing away from me?

My woman-clothes were as I'd left them, hidden behind a water jug under a bench by the well. It took only a moment to put on the plain, dark wool caftan and headscarf. In place of a gem thief there stood someone's plain sister, someone else's third or fourth wife. The poor creature filled her water jug and walked towards home in the dawn light.

Even so downtrodden a woman would look up when the temple gates were flung open, and well for me that it's so. The gallant temple guards nearly trampled me in their rush. I survived unharmed, but the water jug was less lucky.

There went a good part of my disguise! With it, I had an obvious reason for being out so early. Without it, I'd surely have to explain myself to someone.

"Best leave it, little sister. There's no mending that one." A woman's voice, low-pitched and half-laughing, startled me into a most unprofessional jump. She was indeed a good bit taller than I, and probably somewhat older, though the braided edging of her headscarf hid the color of her hair. Aside from that, she dressed plainly for this quarter; someone's housekeeper, perhaps. It's shameful how even the servants of the rich have time to stand around.

"No, even the handle's in several pieces." I agreed sadly. Oh, but it was hard to hide my laughter behind a worried frown! "I wonder what all that was about so early in the morning."

"Someone's robbed the temple, I think. I wonder who'd be so bold? And what was taken?" She looked at me strangely then, or so it seemed.

"I don't know, but I do know what's waiting for me if I don't get back soon, especially since I'll get there without water or pitcher. Wish me luck!" And I turned to go.

"I wish you the best of luck, little sister. I believe you'll need it." The voice was amused again. I do not like being laughed at, or being addressed familiarly by those who are no kin of mine, but I murmured my thanks and left.

The temple is new, and the streets around it are wide; I breathed more easily when I'd reached my own tangle of narrow ways. They were crowded already with provident folk who meant to get most of their work done before the day's heat began. My work was done for awhile now. I needed to wait a few days before trying to find a buyer for the emerald; the temple guards would have put the fear of the entire pantheon into all the jewelers.

I had a small room at the back of the house of two widowed sisters. They liked quiet tenants, and asked no questions so long as that one requirement was met. A woman alone is a

scandal, but they'd overlook that for a little extra rent.

I'd made myself comfortable there with fat cushions and stolen silks. (The cushions I bought, just like an honest woman. Try running while holding a cushion in your arms.) Someday, of course, I hoped for better. This night's work had brought someday a great deal closer. I'll say this much for my unlamented teacher: he taught thoroughly.

Yes, and one lesson he taught by example. No thief goes uncaught forever. Bad luck, enemies, or age itself if you live that long, will take you out unless you take yourself out. Someday, before my joints hurt after a night spent roof-running, I meant to find safer ways of thieving.

It proved no great sacrifice to stay quiet for the next several days. There were far too many temple guards around, too many priests asking too many questions. I waited, mending my clothes and studying the emerald.

May the gods bless my father for letting me watch him at his jeweler's work. Thanks to him, I can recognize most false jewels from several feet away, and know just how to present a flawed jewel to hide that flaw. In his memory, I've never yet robbed a jeweler.

This gem had no flaw. Emeralds that large are rare enough, even when flawed; unblemished, it was almost unbelievable.

It was also almost unsalable. I went to Old Parata to handle it; he has a number of foreign clients and a strict conscience about protecting his sources. I trust no one, but it's impossible to sell something without at least admitting that you know where it can be found. Of course, I didn't tell him I had it in a pouch tied snugly against my stomach. I needn't have been quite so cautious in what I told him--he wanted nothing to do with it.

"Surely some of your distinguished clients are more concerned with beauty than details of provenance?" I asked.

"Some are, indeed," he agreed. Before I could continue my argument, he continued his. "But that beauty's unmistakable, and word of its loss has been sent as far as Issrandar. It'll be a year before I'd dare even hint that I might have it. Not to mention the fact that not everyone is as refreshingly free from superstition as you are. In a year, if we've no famine or flood and if the priests quiet down, I might be able to try. Maybe. Sarinsat's priests are after vengeance as much as the emerald, you know. This whole thing has Kossinli's faithful stirred up again, claiming that Sarinsat's eye wanted to be back where it properly belonged. They say that the thief was only a tool of Kossinli."

I snorted. The things some people will believe! I know what inspired me to rob Sarinsat's new house, and it had nothing to do with deities. Still, the religious quarrel might help keep Parata from deciding that the emerald would be safer with him than with me. He'd always dealt fairly, but this was more temptation than I'd offered before.

He expressed his regrets, and his hopes that I'd bring other business to him, "Especially if you manage to acquire rubies, or even garnets. I think the young must be showing how brave they are; I've had several inquiries lately." I expressed my thanks, and assured him that I would come to him if I had such good fortune. Since many in Charransar still consider them unchancy, rubies are rare here. Then I left to consider the problem of dinner. I'd dug up some of my savings for last night's lentils, and I hated to make a habit of that.

Back in my room after taking a long and indirect route to get there, I fished the emerald out of its hiding place. "So, you want to be somewhere else, do you?" I asked it. "Fine with me. Just give me a way to do it that'll give me some payment for my efforts. And while you're at it, you might do something about the dinner I can't afford to buy." I slipped it back into its pouch, drank a little water from my new pitcher, and settled in to sleep through the day's heat.

When I woke, I was hungrier than ever. The moon was up, which at least spared me the expense of a lamp. I went to get another drink of water and kicked something that rang against the uneven floor. Something that proved, when I picked it up, to be a coin.

This warranted lighting the lamp. A silver piece, unclipped, gleamed in its smoky light. When one has as few coins as I have, it's no great burden to keep track of them, and I knew that coin had not been there before.

"Thank you." I whispered. As I sat wondering what to do next, my stomach rumbled. I could think at least as well over dinner as I could sitting here.

I had meat with my dinner for the first time in a week that night, and couldn't truly enjoy the guilty pleasure. Nothing is free, nothing. What would the price for that silver coin be? At the same time, I couldn't quite help wondering what else I could have for the asking.

Two men watched me from the corners of their eyes as I sat alone in the tavern. Had they seen me pay with silver in spite of all my care? I'd best decide later, and elsewhere, how to test the powers of the stone. I could live off what I had for a day or two.

I could have, but I didn't. Curiosity as much as greed led me to use the emerald again. It, or the being to whom it truly belonged, had an odd way of doing things.

One morning when I'd dreamed of journeying far away, to a land of cool gardens and adoring men, I woke to find a donkey in my room. Unfortunately, he also woke the two sisters. Such cries of consternation and threats of eviction! My arguing that it must be a joke gained me grudging permission to stay after all, and comments on the sort of company I must be keeping.

Fortunately, I did manage to sell the donkey. My other possessions certainly wouldn't bring much: I owned two threadbare cushions, some crumpled silks, a small hoard of smaller coins, a little chipped pottery, and a magic gem with a perverse sense of humor. I began to lose sleep, wondering which offhand wish of mine the emerald would decide to answer, and how it would decide to do it.

At least my landladies couldn't blame me for the Joy-of-Princes tree that appeared in their tidy scrap of garden, or rather, they didn't know they could have. Really, I would have been satisfied with a few--all right, several--of the delicate pale-green fruits that I'd seen being delivered to the grain broker's house. There was no need to send a whole tree.

Once, I caught myself almost wishing to be back with my husband and our kin in Nahouendar. He never meant to be cruel. Even his other wives were kind enough so long as I made no trouble. Perhaps there were worse things than boredom and hurt pride. I'd at least had someone to talk to when things puzzled me, even if they laughed.

"I don't mean that!" I said aloud. I fished the stone out of its pouch. "I don't mean it at all. I was only tired and worried. I don't mean it!"

That night I hardly slept at all lest I wake to find myself back in Nahouendar. Clearly, I needed to get rid of this gem. Kossinli's faithful might not pay well for it--fanatics tend to offer blessings in lieu of money--but they would take it off my hands, and I didn't know who else would.

The big problem would be coming safely away from the encounter. The first problem would be making contact at all.

Trying the obvious first, I went to Old Parata. If he knew where to contact the source of his rumors, he concealed his knowledge well. Obviously, I felt reluctant to press the matter; I didn't want anyone knowing quite how badly I needed to find a buyer for my prize.

Reluctantly, I turned to the emerald itself. "I need to find Kossinli's faithful," I whispered to it that night. "Please, don't mock me this time. I'm asking you seriously. Please answer me seriously."

For a change I slept well, but there was no answer when I woke. I sighed a little and went out to the baker's for something to break my fast. Really, I must have been dazed by all that lost sleep to think that praying to the source of my problems could solve them.

The bakery faces a little square with a fountain in the middle, all shaded by an enormous jacaranda. It's free pleasure to sit there and eat, if you're content with the edge of the fountain for a seat. I sat there feeling sorry for myself, a foolish luxury for one like me. It meant I didn't notice the woman's approach until she spoke to me.

"Greetings, little sister." It was the tall woman, wearing a different fringed headscarf. She smiled gently. "Do you not remember me?"

"Forgive me, of course I do. It's only that I was surprised to see you here, in such a humble part of town." And why in the name of all the deities and djinns are you here? I thought. She smiled again.

"Why surprised? You asked me to come." I detest that sort of ostentatiously mystical answer. For a moment I was too angry to realize that this time I knew the answer to the riddle.

She had been waiting patiently for me to understand. She could tell when I did, too. "Will you come with me to my own house? This square is lovely, but not the best place for the sort of conversation we need to have."

Oh, yes, and be buried tidily in your garden, I thought. "I'd prefer to go to the shop of a jeweler I know." Old Parata would demand a cut, but better his sort than a slit throat. "It's humble, but more convenient to where what you want lies hidden."

"Do you think I carry that much money on my person?" she asked. "I haven't your skills." When I still didn't agree, she frowned. "Layla,"-- So she knew my name, too!-- "If we'd intended to kill you and take what we seek, we could have done so any time during this last week that you've been...wishing. And I know you have it with you. That's how I found you. I might mention that I am trusting you in taking you to my own house." She smiled as she whispered, and so did I; two women gossiping in the cool morning.

They probably could have killed me. I'm strong for my size, and quick, but I'd been too bewildered and weary the last few days to be as alert as I usually am. Perhaps they'd continue to be so peaceable. Not everyone would. I needed to be free of that emerald, whatever deity claimed it.

"I would be honored to go with you to your home, Madame," I said. "However, it's quite safe to tell me here how much you're willing to pay for the gem."

"I'm called Firousi," she said. "As for price...my family is not wealthy..."

There are times when I could wish it wasn't always necessary to haggle.

"But I have help in this matter from those who share my interests. Shall we say, an even hundred liralis?"

I did not gasp. I was silent for awhile as I tried to decide whether or not to go through the motions of haggling over a price that was better than I'd dared hope. Even the best of my previous efforts had never brought me a tenth that sum. Money had been scant since a certain bright-eyed man left at midnight with my savings. I'd planned to burgle some truly ugly bridal jewelry later that night (the girl would be better off without it) and my ex-lover made sure I wouldn't follow him by alerting the householder. Bribing my way out of prison before they could remove a hand kept me very busy, and very poor.

I wanted that money, but I wondered whether I should simply run. Perhaps she made such a splendid offer because she'd no expectation of actually paying? People talk of the old town as dangerous, but if I wanted to cause someone to disappear quietly, the high-walled houses of the rich would serve as well.

Running would leave me still stuck with the emerald, unless I simply threw it away, and all that risk and effort with it. Also, for all the strange things one hears about Kossinli's faithful, Firousi didn't have the look of a murderess.

Ah well. If I'd wanted a long quiet life, I could have stayed home in Nahouendar.

"Your offer is a reasonable one, Firousi. I'll not ask any more of your patience by hag-gling now."

Together we walked back out of the old town, but not out to Sarinsat's quarter. "I told you we were not wealthy." Firousi said when I hesitated. "It isn't far now."

Nor was it. The house had been splendid, once; the outer wall was faced with marble all the way up to spikes which had once been gilded. Most of the gilt was long gone, and the intricately patterned tiles of the courtyard were cracked. Were a hundred liralas going to come out of here?

It might be so. Whatever they'd lost, the courtyard was still filled with flowers and cooled by a fountain. A stocky, gray-haired woman shuffled in with sharba in silver cups that would have kept me for six months. As the cool sweetness slid down my throat, I began to believe that Firousi truly meant to pay that handsome price.

It was a disappointment, then, to hear her say, "There's one other offer I would like to make you, Layla."

"Oh?" I said.

"I want you to consider it carefully before you answer. It could affect the rest of your life."

There was no good way out of that flowery box. Oh, there were several doors, but I only knew where one of them led. I could hear people moving around in the rest of the house. Though I'm quick with my knife when I must be, my reluctance to use it has kept me from becoming expert.

"Layla, it's all right. You're safe here, whatever you decide." Firousi frowned slightly. "I only meant that this is a serious offer, which could bring you much more than a hundred liralas in time."

By all the gold in Issrandar, what did she want me to do? Were there more sacred jewels to be stolen? Thank you, no. I've had enough of temple treasure. I waited for her to continue.

"You obviously have a talent for magic. Did the emerald ever do any miracles for Sarinsat? No, because no one with talent worships there. Also, they've confused the means and the end--but I doubt that theology interests you."

"I fear not." Would she ever come to the point?

"Would you like to learn to control the sort of thing you did with the emerald?" she asked.

"What's the price?" I asked quickly, before my own visions of wealth swept me away.

"Oh, Layla..."

"There's always a price. Always. You can call it whatever sort of divinely-ordered balance you like, but nothing's free in this world, and I don't think the gods give anything away either. So I ask you, what price?" Crude, perhaps, but she had that intent look that believers get before they tell you how much good it would do you in the next world to do well by them in this one.

She sighed. "There is no cost in money. You may keep the entire hundred liralas, if you like."

If I liked! With much effort, I kept silent.

"But you must agree to be guided by us in matters of magic. Consider the trouble these

few small attempts have brought you, working blind. Please believe me--you must learn to see.”

“That sounds reasonable.” Remarkably reasonable for one of Kossinli’s faithful. I waited for the rest of the conditions.

“Forgive me, but there is one other thing. You must also be guided by us in your thieving. There are people to be left in peace, and there are other...objects that do not properly belong where they are.”

So. All they really wanted, then, was to control my every move, in return for which they might be able to teach me something about what had just happened to me. And she sat there looking as if she’d just offered me something wonderful! It’s best to be gentle with the mad.

“Thank you, Firousi, but I’ve been working alone for too long now to welcome working under direction again. I can accept only your first offer.”

“We don’t compel anyone,” she said, and called the servant. She brought a small bag with her this time, and in it were my hundred liralis. It’s a tiny coin to be worth so much, but then, it is gold.

Even though the emerald had lain snug against my body all day, it felt cool in my hand as I fished it from its pouch. After one last look at its flawless green glow, I handed it to Firousi.

“If you ever change your mind, the second offer will still be open.” Firousi said. She looked almost sad. “Take care of yourself, little sister.”

“I always do,” I assured her.

What I did then still surprises me. I gave her back five coins and asked her to thank Kossinli for me. For a moment I thought she wasn’t going to take them, but then she smiled and handed them to the servant.

She was still smiling as if at some private joke when I left. It is funny, I suppose, to see a temple robber turn religious even for a moment. I’ve no intention of doing that again.

I have been trying very hard to be careful about my wishes, but this morning there was another donkey.