

# THE MIND THIEF



THE ISLAND OF SLAVES

Colbby

# The Mind Thief

## Chapter 1

### *The Blue flowers*

Markel couldn't pay his taxes on the smallholding just outside the capital Taal. His only large cow had suddenly collapsed and died, and he'd sold what little he had of value and used the money for living expenses, and now there wasn't any money for seeds to plant anything in his two fields. The two old slaves that he let use an old wooden shack at one corner of the field were better off than him. They lived on a small pension from the state and they grew some vegetables that helped out their meagre living but he had nothing.

There's nothing else for it, I'll have to go, he thought. Markel had existed by doing some entertaining in the large manor houses for children's parties. He had some amusing stories and did a few tricks that seemed to go down well, but it wasn't enough to earn him a living. He'd put it off as long as he could hoping that something would turn up but it hadn't, and now the final day had come to pay, and if he didn't then his land would be claimed and he'd be left with nothing to his name but the clothes on his back. The only way to avoid losing the land was

to register for work in the labour office where he could work off the tax.

The labour office was the states way of making sure everyone paid their way and the work it did was all the unpleasant tasks that needed doing and the minimum length of time was a six month contract, and that meant hard labour anywhere in the country. He started to pack his bag with a few possessions, a spare tunic and underclothes, a little bit of food and a cloth for use as a towel. After closing the door he walked over to where the two old slaves were weeding their plot and told them that he was going away for a spell and that they must look after his house and keep it clean. He walked up the mud track leading to the capital dreading the labour office but knowing that he'd no choice.

Two days later Markel was on a ship heading north to where a river delta spilled out to the sea. Along with a hundred other 'volunteers' as they were called their task would be to drain a part of a swamp and that meant digging a canal through the black stinking mud full of poisonous insects and animals.

Out of the men starting the project the labour office accepted that around half would not last their six months contract, but the men knew that the office wasn't an easy option when they'd signed on. The small ship sailed up the coast hugging the shore.

Down in the only hold the men were crammed in already cursing their fate for putting them in this uncomfortable ship, taking them to an uncomfortable place where there was extreme danger. The voyage came to an end as the ship sailed up a small river and docked at quay. Thankfully the men disembarked and were formed into ranks to be marched away to their place of work.

The swamp was a vast expanse of mud and scrub with a few stunted trees. The men marched to two large huts at the side of partly built canal. This was the start of the drainage channel that would make the swamp into good farmland. The huts had been used by the first crews and around the rear was a graveyard with thirty two graves. The ranks fell silent as they passed wondering just how many more graves would it take before the job was done.

The huts held fifty men in double bunks set against the walls. One long table and a cooking range was the only furniture. Markel hope he could be the cook and stay in the hut as the others went to work but the cooking was done by slaves. He thought that it was a little ironic that the slaves were better off than the workers. The overseers had their quarters at the quay far away from the swamp and they also had the slaves to wait upon them. They came and set the work and then went away from the flies and mud back

to their camp where they were safe.

Markel and another nine men were separated and given a section to dig out.

After it was dug carts brought rocks to the section and they had to hammer them flat to make a level bottom for the water to run away. Masons finished the section by building up the sides with stone and then it would start again with a new section. The heavy carts of rock had to be pulled by men from a quarry an hour away and then be unloaded by hand. All the quarry work was done by prisoners sentenced to hard labour before being sold at auction to be slaves. It was debatable who was worse off, the slaves or the workers.

Markel's section had just finished hammering the stones to form a new drainage bed. The overseer came and saw that the work was satisfactory and ordered everyone out as the masons arrived to start their work. The overseer led the group to the head of the work to start a new section. The men looked and saw it was the start of a maze consisting of many small rivulets and scrub brush. A dam of boards would have to be built to divert the water before the digging could begin, all extra work that they could do without. Tramping through the dirty water sometimes up to the waist wasn't easy as the boards had to be man handled to the head of their section and then driven into the mud.

It was a break for lunch as Markel sat down on the only piece of dry land around and mopped his brow with a filthy cloth. The work was heavy going and the flies were thick and landed upon their sweaty bodies as though it was a feast day. He breathed a sigh as he ate his rations and watched as the overseer and his slave departed for their meal.

At the edge of the island was a small patch of flowers with pretty blue petals. The flowers would be lost as the digging started and Markel picked a small bunch to smell the perfume.

The overseer returned and it was time climb into the black mud once more. Markel placed his small bunch of flowers on the fork of the bush where they were sitting and picked up the shovel.

The water bucket had been left at the side of the bush and one of the men scooped a last drink with the ladle before returning to work. He tossed the ladle back into the bucket when he'd finished drinking and the handle caught the branch of the bush and knocked the bunch of flowers into the water. Markel saw the flowers fall into the bucket and when he had a break he fished them out and returned them to the branch. The man who drank the water seemed to stare into space and didn't appear to know what to do. He stumbled around and finally trod on Markel's toe. As the men didn't wear sandals while

working in the mud it hurt. He rounded on the man pushing him away from his bruised toe.

“Why don’t you take a running jump into the swamp,” said Markel. The man promptly did just that. All the men looked in amazement as the man landed in the thick black mud.

“Come out of there,” shouted Markel, “and go and get cleaned up.” The man set off to the hut without a word and without waiting for the overseer. Markel thought quickly.

The only difference the man had or did was to drink the water after the flowers had been soaking for a while. He wondered if it could be anything to do with the man doing as he was told. He decided to carry out an experiment and collected a few more leaves.

The next morning he dropped the petals into the water and waited for an hour and then said to everyone that he thought that he’d worked hard enough and deserved a rest for the whole day, what did they think? All the men promptly agreed with him and when the overseer came they pressed the man to let Markel go back to the hut to rest. As all of the men were insisting the man agreed and Markel took his leave with a smile on his face. He had made a discovery and now needed to learn how to use it.

It wasn’t practical to carry a water bucket around with him and therefore some other means had to be found to carry the petals.

After the workers had finish for the night he returned to the site. In all the swamp this was the only place where the flowers grew, and soon the men would dig it up as the canal progressed. He had to save them and looked for a way. The flower heads had seed pods. He wondered if this was the answer he was looking for?

Why not store the seeds and grow the flowers when he got home? After collecting as many seed heads as he could and returning to the hut he shook out all the seeds and wrapped them in a cloth. All he had to do now was to survive until his contract was fulfilled.

Markel sailed for home some weeks later. Of the men in the swamp thirty seven had died due to illness and accidents but he was lucky and now only the trip back to the capital remained.

Arriving back Markel planted his seeds in a warm place and waited for the plants to grow. In the hot climate and giving them plenty of water the plants grew and soon a few of the blue petals were waving in the breeze. There wasn't as many as he had hoped but enough to make a start. Now he had to think of a way to transport them. Sitting at his table with a few petals he tried to roll them but the crumbled into powder. Then he had a brainwave, if whatever the ingredient that made men obey was in the petals then it should be still in no matter what form it took and he could simply roll the powder into a

ball to make little pills that were easily transportable.

A test was needed using the pills that he'd just rolled and he knew where to test them, at the office who stamp the tax returns. The next day he turned up at the office uninvited and began to drink wine from a wineskin. The clerk snapped that he was busy and to make an appointment but Markel carried on drinking. Finally the clerk came over to where he was sitting but before anything was said a cup of wine was pushed into his hand.

"Just a moment of your time if you please." The clerk sat down and took a drink.

"Make it quick, I've a lot of work to do." Snapped the clerk as he took another drink of his wine. But Markel didn't get to the point right away but instead just smiled at him and said that it didn't matter. The clerk snapped back "Fool," and returned to the desk. A short while later Markel said come here and the man meekly came and sat at the table.

"Go and prepare me a certificate showing that the tax on my land has been paid for the next year, no make it two years and you will forget that I was ever here, do you understand."

Markel left the office quietly smiling, it was so easy. Now he needed money and he knew just where to get it.

A large market took place every month in the capital. The market was where dealers met and bought goods for sale, and bankers arranged loans and met clients. Some of the richest people in the country came there but this month there would be one extra.

He found work as a waiter and general labourer and proved very helpful. The waiters usually came to help out just on market days when it was busy.

The other times the market used its own slaves. One blue pill later and the owner had appointed him to serve the drinks. Every time a customer ordered wine or ale a pill was dropped into goblet and a short while later Markel told the man to give him one tenth of his profit at the end of the day. Markel went home with a bag full of money and nobody was any the wiser and wouldn't be until they added up their accounts and found out that the cash didn't tally.

Markel celebrated his good fortune by having plans draw up for a large villa that he planned to build. Then he decided that a meal at a fancy eating place in the city would be nice and he could now afford it. He met a woman and bought drinks and a meal for her.

She was good company and the two started seeing each other. Her name was Fela and soon she was his mistress.

The next month the same situation occurred

as the accounts at the market once more were wrong. Now someone complained to the authorities that they were losing money at the market and didn't know why. The third month Markel was going to report for his work when he saw a lot of soldier stopping and questioning all the workers. He decided not to go to work and returned to his smallholding. He realised it would look suspicious when he was found to be missing be that couldn't be helped. It was time to leave for a while and anyway he needed a better place to grow his plants, somewhere warmer like another swamp.

After collecting all the seed heads for his plants he pulled them all up and burned them. Then taking the seeds and his gold he packed a bag and made his way to see Fela and told her that he was responsible for the shortage at the market and that he was leaving for a while until the row had died down. Fela decided to go with him and together they left for the coast where he booked a passage on a ship going to the south where the population was scattered and the land unexplored and wild. There ought to be a swamp or two that should suit his purpose.

After landing at a small port on a river he booked a barge and return inland. Then the bargee told him that the barge was taking supplies to a large army garrison. Markel didn't like that and asked if there were any swamps in

the area but was told that there wasn't. The man didn't know what lay to the west but the east led back to the sea. Markel left the barge and took the road to the west a little disappointed.

After two days of travel he came to a place where he could see a volcano smoking in the distance. He was about to turn around when a cart trundle by loaded with supplies. The driver had two guards with him and viewed Markel with suspicion but when he saw that Markel wasn't armed and with a lady, he told him he was taking goods to the fortress on the side of the volcano and that it was perfectly safe as it hadn't erupted for hundreds of years. Markel missed company and asked if he could come along as he was as entertainer. The man gave them a hand up onto the cart.

Inside the fortress in the great hall Markel amused the owner and his sons and also a young girl of around ten. He could be very charming when it suited him and good company. Later he was given a bed and relaxed in a large bath of hot water. Koda whose fortress it was, told him that a spring ran through the fortress giving piping hot water that when cool was also good to drink. Markel asked to be shown around and Koda obliged.

Down a flight of steps they came to two rooms. One room had a door that led further

down to cells and the other room led to a natural cavern that was as large as a football field. It had water and was very warm. All it needed was soil and it was the ideal place for growing flowers. That night Markel counted his pills and found that he hadn't enough. If he took over then some would have to go into the cells until the flowers grew. Descending to the cells he found some collars and a jar of beetles. He'd heard of these from travellers and they were a method of controlling men. That would save some pills he thought and now he could put his plan into action. A month later and Koda and his sons awoke in the cells collared with the thick collars and the fortress under control of Markel.

The first men Markel took were just farm labourers who were big strong men who could work hard all day using a wheelbarrow to fill the cavern with soil and then planting the seeds. After closing some vents that directed warm air around the fortress, the flowers grew in abundance. Soon Markel was making a hundred pills a day and now could fulfil his plan of making an army. He decided to make savages out of his labourers to frighten the people. He told them undress and saw that one man had a brand mark and that he looked very scary. Soon all the men carried brands in the form of a letter 'M'. A nice touch he thought as the men didn't feel being branded. Now he was ready.

The fort was the main depot in the south of Mordia. With over six thousand men and stone built it was in a strong position. At the entrance a lone guard kicked an offending pebble from the track. He was bored and tired from having been on duty throughout the night. The new guard was parading on the barrack square while being inspected by an officer who appeared to be taking too long. A single track ran from the square through the large wooden gate to a small hamlet in the distance. A noise from far down the track caught his attention.

He could just make out a group of men running towards him. His sergeant was talking to another soldier outside the guardroom. The sentry called to the sergeant.

"There's something going on," he said, pointing down the track. The sergeant came over to see for himself. The two men stood side-by-side, watching as the mob approached. Suddenly a bolt from a Crossbolt, a type of crossbow, thudded into the gatepost between the two men. The sergeant called to the guards to close the gates and sound the alarm but the rest of the guard was a little slow to obey. They could not believe a small group would attack the main garrison, as it would be suicide. The mob reached the gates before they were fully closed and burst through into the fort, slashing with swords and firing their Crossbolts. The new

guard on the square joined in to repel the attack and fighting erupted around the guardhouse. A desperate rearguard action checked the initial charge, and then more of the garrison appeared and the mob was halted. Fighting erupted around the huts surrounding the square where the main magistrate's court had their headquarters. In doing so, the mob had depleted the numbers at the front of the charge and the defenders gradually drove them back. One by one the attackers, still screaming and shouting, were cut down but wouldn't give ground; they preferred to fight to the last. More soldiers arrived armed with crossbolts that at point blank range took a terrible toll. The attacker's ranks were thinner now but the fighting continued. The only way they could be forced back was over the bodies of the fallen. Their swordsmanship was poor but willpower kept them fighting until the last few, surrounded and outnumbered suddenly turned their swords and drove them deep into their own bodies. The guard captain, his sword still dripping with blood, surveyed the carnage in the square. Bodies were everywhere. All the attackers were now dead, not one had surrendered. The captain examined the man closest to him. All the man wore was a loin cloth tied with a piece of cord. On his right thigh was a brand mark in the shape of a letter 'M'; this was repeated on the left breast.

The sergeant approached.

“There’s something odd about this attack. Take that man there, I know him, he’s a farmer and that man there is a street vendor and worst of all, the men leading the assault are our own men. It’s the platoon we sent out two weeks ago that failed to return, and now they are naked, screaming savages attacking their own people. What could have happened in two weeks?”

As the noise ceased a lone figure with a smile upon his face walked down the track away from the fort.

“A good day’s work,” he said to himself

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