

CHAPTER FOUR

Lightning speared down from the sky and thunder raved and roared overhead. Mordecai tried to keep his footing on the slippery, rain-drenched deck as the ship heeled over once again. Men were rushing hither and thither, pulling frantically on ropes and yelling incomprehensible orders at each other, and there was no sign of Prince Varnak. The ship toppled again, this time forward, and faced down into a seemingly bottomless black funnel of churning water, and from the depths of it something with too many arms and too few eyes lay in wait to catch Mordecai as he slid helplessly along the slimy wood and began to fall away from the ship, into the gaping, insatiable, cold wet maw of the sea—

Mordecai woke up with a scream ringing in his ears, and was unsure if he had uttered it or only dreamed it. He was in bed, dry and warm, and as his brain caught up he remembered where he was.

“Are you all right, Mordecai?” Varnak said, appearing from his tiny room in a nightshirt and a hurry.

“I am sorry, Highness,” Mordecai said. “I had a bad dream.”

“Yes, so we gathered,” said the prince dryly.

“We?”

“I imagine the entire boat heard you.”

Mordecai flushed. “I apologise.”

“Time we got up anyway,” Varnak said briskly. “Today we go out and meet our fellow travellers.”

“Meet them?” Mordecai looked blank.

“Yes, meet them. Scrape acquaintance. Engage them in conversation and see if we can winkle out our spy.”

Mordecai rolled his eyes. “You mean with subtle and indirect questioning?” He assumed an imitation of Varnak's voice and posture. “I say there, excuse me, sir, but my friend Mordalonso and I were wondering if by any chance you were interested in overthrowing the King of Tamland?”

Varnak's eyes narrowed under his frown. "I have a fairly high tolerance for disrespect, Mordalo—I mean Mordecai, but there are limits, you know."

"I use it, Highness," Mordecai said, "as a surgeon uses a blade, to reveal the diseased organ, in this case your brain. Neither of us is trained as a spy, and you have not even the practical experience of life at the sharp end that I have had. Not only that, but it seems more and more likely that someone on this boat may recognise you."

"Why?"

Mordecai dug in his pocket and produced a handful of change. "Look."

"Well," Varnak said, fidgeting uneasily, "maybe if I were six years younger and metallic—"

"It would take more than a haircut and a change of clothes to disguise that profile," Mordecai persisted, "especially if you go around asking questions. At best we will alert our enemy to our presence, at worst precipitate Willibald's death or—"

"Aha!" Varnak pounced. "I knew your mind wasn't on the job."

"Well, what do you expect?" Mordecai flashed back. "I am stuck here, helpless, while my—my apprentice is undergoing who knows what horrors. Anyway, it's obvious that the two things are connected, so my mind is 'on the job,' as you rather crassly put it."

Varnak opened his mouth, stopped and sighed. "Yes, well. You're right of course, Mordecai. I'm sorry."

"But I think talking to the other passengers is a good idea," Mordecai went on, "as long as we do nothing to make them suspect that we are anything other than merchant and clerk. It can do no harm, will make this interminable voyage pass more quickly, and who knows, someone may let something slip that will be useful."

"All right." Varnak brightened.

"So, master Humpoletz," Mordecai said, striking a conversational pose, "how is trade with you these days?"

"What?" Varnak caught up. "Oh, I see. Jolly good. Oh." He assumed a mournful expression. "Terrible. Times are very hard, my workers are always complaining about their wages, and no-one seems to want to let an honest trader turn a modest profit. I blame the king."

"Well, that certainly sounds like a merchant to me," Mordecai muttered, "if a little condensed. How many barrels did you sell last month?"

Again, Varnak took a moment to register what was going on. "Oh. Er. Seven. Teen. Seventeen...er...hundred. And thirty. Yes. Seventeen hundred and thirty."

"You don't sell barrels," Mordecai said softly.

"I don't sell barrels," Varnak echoed.

"What do you sell, master merchant?"

Varnak searched his memory. "I don't know." He brightened again. "That's what I have a clerk for, to remember things like that for me."

Mordecai put his head in his hand and moaned softly.

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The tall man got up from his chair on the verandah as the rider reined in her exhausted horse and swiftly dismounted. The house behind him was big, but not flashy, and starting to go gently to seed, and the view from the chair across the fields and pastures, with their toiling workers and peacefully grazing livestock, was excellent in the mid-morning sunshine.

"My Lord Shurath," said Gisel as she tethered the horse to the rail.

"I go by Zivano now," said the man. "No more need for pretence. Lady Andemar." He bowed formally. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"First things first," Gisel said. "I've ridden most of the night and I'm extremely thirsty, so excuse me if I cut through the proprieties and ask you if you can spare some food and drink for my horse, and possibly a glass of water for me."

"Of course," Zivano bowed again, and rang a small bell that hung from the wall by his chair. Almost immediately a servant appeared, and hurried away again to return with a clear glass jug of water and two glasses. Behind them a groom led Gisel's horse away towards the distant stable block, talking to it quietly.

"You'll forgive me if I sit down again," Zivano said, suiting the action to the word. "I imagine you would prefer to remain standing for the moment."

"You imagine correctly," Gisel said with a grimace, setting the empty glass down.

"And now?" Zivano cocked an eyebrow.

"The King has asked me to request your help," said Gisel.

“The king?” Zivano laughed shortly. “I am no longer in the royal service, my lady, or had you forgotten?”

“You are still a citizen of Tamland and under the King's protection,” Gisel said tartly. “If he requires aid of you, you are in honour bound to provide it.”

“Oh, 'in honour bound,' am I?” Zivano's eyes danced with mockery. “Well, I am a little bored at the moment, so gratify my morbid curiosity and tell me what kind of mess King Brainless has landed himself in this time. And if it happens to concern del Aguila, as I suspect it does, that will merely add spice to the dish.”

“The Court Magus is away on a secret mission for the King,” Gisel said.

“Trying to get his hands on the Chotani's *úllama*,” Zivano said. “Buz, buz, my lady. That mission is about as secret as the colour of the sky. Oh, don't look so shocked. Once the fact that it existed became general knowledge, it was a foregone conclusion that every government in the world would try to seize control of it, or at least get a decent share. Very well. So del Aguila is out of the city and King Bran is hiding under the blankets. Surely the man has an apprentice?”

“Master Willibald is missing. It's believed he has been kidnapped in connection with the mission.”

Now Zivano let out a huge shout of laughter. Gisel found herself thinking that laughter was not so much a spontaneous expression of amusement with him as a kind of battle cry. “Oh dear,” he said, chuckling. “Oh but how exquisite. How precious. So Tamland has no real magicians left.”

“Not quite true,” Gisel said steadily. “We have you.”

Zivano turned away sharply. “Out of the question. I renounced the arts of magic after—“ He broke off. “I simply tend my estates now.”

“Really?” Gisel also turned, to gaze out over the fields. “Very impressive, I must admit. The King's been keeping an eye on you. Your cows consistently out-perform everyone else's in the area. Your harvest last year was quite spectacular, and this year looks to be another bumper crop. Are you sure you don't use just a little bit?”

Zivano hesitated.

“Magic is in your blood and in your bones,” Gisel said. “You were committed to it, so committed that you were prepared to kill to get control of the Panergodyne and become the greatest magician in the land.”

“The Panergodyne rejected me,” Zivano snapped.

“But you still have the magic,” Gisel persisted. “You're still the only magician in the

land with the necessary ability to do this. We need you, Shu—Zivano. The King needs you.”

Zivano hesitated again. “And what for me if I do this?”

“Restoration of your ranks and titles,” Gisel said promptly. “I’m sure the King will be extremely generous—“

“I want only one thing,” Zivano said, “and if the king is not prepared to grant it then this conversation is over and you have ridden all night for nothing. Most dramatic, by the way, if I may say so. A more sensible person might have allowed a servant to carry the message, but not his royal majesty. How he cherishes his illusions.”

“Your condition,” Gisel said abruptly. “What is it?”

Zivano told her.

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“Oh no,” said the lady in the pale green, whose name was Maranni. “Not all the way. I mean, one hears such stories, does one not? No, my sisters and I are only going as far as Brokenbowes. That is where Lord Clatterack has his estates, you know. He is—“

“Hush,” said the lady in pale blue, tapping Maranni on the arm with her fan. “Your pardon, sir, my sister does chatter so.”

“No pardon is necessary,” Mordecai said. “The, ah, the brighter the plumage of the bird of conversation, the more its song gladdens the eye. Ear.” He was finding the persona he had adopted for Alonso rather more of a strain than he had anticipated. “This Lord Clatterack. He is a person of some importance?”

“Oh yes,” said Maranni. “He advises King Glendaleuc on all matters of state, though he has no formal title, you understand. The king refers to him as—“

“Wait,” Mordecai said desperately. “King Glendaleuc? I thought the king of Briom was Valbogast.”

“Allow me to explain,” said the lady with the glasses, who wore pale grey and had hitherto taken no part in the conversation. She closed her book with a snap. “Lord Clatterack is the hero of a series of romantic novels set in the reign of King Glendaleuc, a series with which my younger sisters are impossibly besotted despite their conspicuous lack of historical accuracy, literary merit or even common plausibility.”

“Oh, but they are such exciting stories!” Maranni gushed.

“‘Besotted’,” said the other lady, “is not a term I would choose to employ—“

“How else to characterise it, Lonira?” the lady in grey responded. “You insist on spending good money on your own set of the books despite the fact that we already have a perfectly good one—“

“Indeed ‘we’ do not!” Maranni said. “Those are mine, Idyla, and I could not bear to be for ever lending them out. Lonira was perfectly sweet about agreeing to buy her own, and I cannot see why you are being such a bear about it.”

“It may have escaped your notice, Maranni,” Idyla said coldly, “that since our dear father passed to the embrace of Sasama our circumstances have changed from bad to worse. We have very little—” She broke off, glanced at Mordecai and coloured a little. “Forgive me, sir,” she muttered. “I am sure you have no wish to be burdened with our familial quarrels.”

“A quarrel,” Mordecai began, “is like a—a—“ He searched for a phrase, and gave up. “I shall leave you, then, in peace, madonnine,” he said, rising from his seat, “but I hope to see you again soon.”

“Indeed you must,” Maranni said. “You shall come with us on our tour of Brokenbowes, and we shall show you where Lord Clatterack’s house would be.”

“I am sure I shall find it admirable,” Mordecai said, bowing, and beat a hasty retreat.

The boat was doing good time down a stretch of river flanked on either side by trees whose canopies provided welcome shade. It was a brilliantly sunny morning, and the woods were alive with the sounds of various forms of wildlife. Mordecai made his way forward, and found Varnak deep in conversation with a man Mordecai had not seen before, a stocky shaven-headed fellow with a broad grin and a short chin-beard.

“—and for three coppers extra you get a blade that will last you a lifetime,” the man was saying. “Mind you, they take two days longer to make, so you have to put a bit more than that on the final price, but that’s the way of the world, eh? Everyone buys a slice of the butcher’s thumb, eh? Eh?” He nudged Varnak, who wore the numb expression of a man in purgatory.

“Oh, absolutely,” Varnak said hurriedly.

The man spotted Mordecai, and nudged Varnak again. “But here’s your bedamned clerk come to see you, so I’ll be off,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper that carried the length of the boat. “Clerks, eh? Can’t be doing with ‘em, can’t be doing without ‘em, eh? Eh?” He chuckled, got up and wandered off, humming to himself.

“Tam be thanked you showed up,” Varnak said fervently. “I was coming to the conclusion that I would have to kill him. Do you happen to know anything about farm machinery at all?”

“Only,” Mordecai said, “that it is what you decided to pretend to be a dealer in.”

“I wish I'd done as Dad said and gone and helped on the estates come harvest time,” Varnak said. “I might then know the difference between a harrow and a whatever the other thing is.”

“Who was your talkative friend?”

“Dardash Parrunz. Swordsmith from Forresfane in Briom. I think we can rule him out—I don't believe any spy could be that convincing a self-satisfied bore. How did you get on?”

“The three ladies are sisters, recently fallen on hard times, and on some sort of literary pilgrimage I think. Idyla, Lonira and Marrani ap Gavrus.”

“Ap, eh? That puts them in—what was the damn place called—oh yes, Kellek Province. Tiny place in the far renmarth of Briom, was a kingdom on its own till one of the Kings needed a distraction. They're a long way from home.”

“I get the feeling there is some other purpose to their journey,” Mordecai said.

“Well, we'll put them down as a possible, then.” Varnak had inherited his father's mania for taking notes. He was now listing the passengers down one side of a page in a small notebook. “What about those four boisterous young men? Tamlandish by their dress, I'd say.”

“I have not had a chance to speak to them yet,” Mordecai admitted. “And as soon as their teacher saw me approaching he—”

“Teacher? I thought he was some sort of bodyguard.”

“He struck me as the teacher type. Anyway, he bolted into his room as soon as he saw me, and the students have not emerged from theirs yet. I believe their firm intention is to get off the boat at every stop where there is a tavern and get as drunk as possible, and their—their guardian, if you prefer—seems incapable of controlling them.”

“Interesting,” Varnak said softly. “Definite possibles, then.”

“What? Four young louts and a scholar?”

“Four young men who take care to be unapproachable when they are out of their rooms and unavailable when in them, and a man who strikes you as a teacher and me as a bodyguard and does not very well in either capacity. I call that suspicious.” Varnak made another note. “What about that big chap?”

“I thought you were doing him.”

“My dear fellow, it's taken me all my time to get clear of friend Dardash. I'm seriously considering getting incapably drunk at the next stop myself.”

“You don't drink.”

“I'll start.”

Mordecai sighed. “All right, I will seek out the big one. Who else is on the boat?”

“That mysterious veiled lady.” Varnak sighed. “There we have a problem. If she is genuinely in her first year of mourning, then it's improper for any man to speak to her unless she has a chaperone, and she obviously doesn't. On the other hand, I don't need to remind you what other reason there might be for a woman wearing black.”

“If she is a Tseneshi witch, then she will have a hair-frame,” Mordecai pointed out. “This could be ascertained—”

“What, so I just brush up against her and feel around her back?” Varnak said. “I somehow think that could be taken as even more improper. Really, Mordecai—”

Mordecai threw up his hands. “All right. All right. I should be surprised, though, if before this little trip is out we find ourselves having to be a little more than simply improper.”

“There are eight other passengers on the manifest,” Varnak said, ignoring this. “I spoke to the boatmaster. A family with two children, that's four, and a—a troupe of jugglers and musicians.”

Mordecai grimaced. “I suppose they will be practising out here at some point.”

“The boatmaster's got their promise that they'll keep strictly to their rooms and not bother the other passengers, Tam be thanked. The last thing we need is a bunch of moon-faced idiots cavorting around the boat and bellowing folk songs at everybody.” Varnak grimaced. “Of course, Dardash disagrees. He likes a good tune, eh? Eh?” His imitation was quite good.

“Nevertheless, we ought to investigate them,” Mordecai said grudgingly. “And the family. There is nothing to prove they did not bribe a crewman to steal your papers.”

“Mordecai, the children have zerb.”

Mordecai paled. “Zerb?”

“Confirmed cases, so the boatmaster said. They're not contagious at the moment, of course, but the slightest change in atmosphere could bring on the worsening. Their parents are taking them to the shrine of the Two in Freeport.”

“They are tramontanes?”

“So it seems.” Every once in a while, prompted by who knows what mad impulse, someone from one of the lands over the Pointy Mountains would take it into his or her head to try and cross them. A few would arrive, frozen, exhausted and starving, in Briom or occasionally in Tamland, and be made welcome, but they rarely essayed the return journey. “Freeport's the only place they can pray to their heathen gods for healing,” Varnak continued.

“I hope they hear,” said Mordecai soberly. There was no known cure for zerb, though there were magical protections which, if applied in infancy, could reduce the chances of contracting the disease to almost nil. Obviously these children had not had the benefit of such treatment.

“I too.”

There was a short silence.

“So.” Mordecai said. “How about this? I will risk my reputation as a gentleman and speak to the veiled lady, if you will talk to the large man, and we will go together to interview the jugglers.”

“After lunch,” Varnak said decisively. “I've done enough listening for one morning.”

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“Well, that's out of the question.”

Gisel nodded. Her face was shadowed with weariness and road dirt, and her mousy-brown hair hung loose about her head. She was still in her riding habit.

“I mean, the man must be mad,” King Bran went on.

“No,” Gisel said slowly, “your Majesty. No, he is not. He is quite sane, in his own rather abhorrent way, and he knows, because I was honest with him about it, that we have no real choice.”

“Oh, that's nonsense,” Bran said. “We can simply say that the Court Magus is...is...engaged in secret experiments.”

“And how long before Valbogast or the Witch Queen launches a magical attack just to see what happens?” Gisel said. “I wasn't alive for the last attempt to conquer Tamland, but I read about it at school, and I know it would have succeeded if it hadn't been for Tudny and his magic. No, we need someone to be Magus, and Shurath—I mean Zivano—is the only magician we have who has the ability to make it remotely convincing.”

“I know,” Bran said. “When this business is over, we need to persuade Mordecai —“

“Or whoever,” Gisel said.

“—to start training up a corps of middle-rank magicians like we used to have. We've been putting all our sheep in one fold for far too long.”

“An excellent plan, your Majesty,” Gisel said, “but it doesn't help us with the present problem.”

“Maybe if I went out there and tried to negotiate with him—“

“He would simply laugh in your face. I'm sorry, your Majesty,” Gisel said, getting up with a huge effort, “but he's utterly resolved. He will only perform this service if Mordecai del Aguila is dismissed as Court Magus and formally severed from the Panergodyne immediately upon his return to Tamland, and on that he requires your solemn and binding word.”

“Oh, he does, does he. Well, as I said, he's mad. He tried for the job once and the Panergodyne rejected him. As I understand it, you don't get a second go.”

“He doesn't want the job himself. He doesn't care who gets it, just as long as Mordecai loses it. It's pure revenge, your Majesty. He's got nothing to lose.”

“Well, we'll see about that,” Bran said, shuffling papers on his desk. “Blackmailing the king, eh? I'm sure there's a law against that, and if there isn't it won't take me long—“

“And then whom will we get to do the job?” Gisel said, and yawned cavernously. “I'm sorry, your Majesty, I am a little tired.”

Bran was contrite at once. “Of course you are. I'm sorry, Gisel. I'm going to have to think about this.”

“Don't think too long,” Gisel said. “I'm sure the news that the magery has been closed for two days has already reached Briom and Tsenesh. Many more days and they'll try something just to see if we're awake. We'll have to have someone in place by then.”

“You go and get some rest,” said the King. “I'll consult the Tomes and see what they say. But it does occur to me...” He hesitated.

“Don't even think that, Bran,” said Gisel, and she came round the desk and bent forward to hug him. “We're not beaten yet. Tamland has withstood worse than this.”

“But if we do fall,” Bran said, “it won't be Zivano, or Valbogast, or anyone else but me to blame. I let myself get complacent, Gisel. I placed too much reliance on one

man.”

“One man can make a difference, Michael,” Gisel said, and then blinked.

“Michael?” said the King. “Who's Michael?”

“I have no idea,” Gisel said. “I think my brain is failing. I'll see you later, your Majesty. And don't give up on Mordecai yet. He may still surprise us all.”

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Mordecai slammed the door, bolted it and leaned against it, breathing hard.

“What in the kingdom is the matter?” Varnak said, looking up from his book.

Mordecai was too out of breath to speak for a moment. Then he swallowed, mastered himself and turned to face Varnak. “The lady in the veils,” he said, “is indeed a Tseneshi witch, of high rank if the richness of her clothing is anything to go by. I shall therefore be leaving the boat at the next stop and—“

“Wait, wait, stop. What's all this about leaving the boat?”

“She recognised me!” Mordecai yelled. “She spoke to me by name!”

Varnak stared.

Finally he said, “Well? You said that was likely, if you remember.”

Mordecai composed himself a little more and tried again. “If she is an agent of the Witchring, who you may remember have something of a grudge against me, and she knows I am here, then the most elegant way to thwart your mission and to satisfy her rulers at the same time is to kill me. We have no guards, no protection, and I cannot rely on my magic. You will have to negotiate with the Chotani yourself.”

“Mordecai—“

“No. I have listened to all your arguments, and all of a sudden they seem to have lost a considerable degree of their force. We are not in Tamland now. Now will you let me leave at the next port or will you force me to jump overboard now?”

“And what about Willibald?” Varnak said.

Mordecai stopped dead. “What about he—him?”

“What will happen to him if you run for your miserable life now?”

Mordecai was ready for this. “Obviously, when it becomes clear that I am no longer part of the negotiations, he will lose his value as a hostage to whomever has him.”

“And?”

“And...and they will let him go.”

“Do you really think so, Mordecai?” Varnak's voice was quiet but forceful. “Do they ever?”

Mordecai considered. Then he shoved his hands into his shorn hair and sat down where he was, in front of the bolted door, head bowed and eyes closed, shoulders spasming with silent sobs.

“You're not as big a coward as you pretend to be, Mordecai,” Varnak said.

“You've faced dangers that would have had me dribbling in terror. You know that the only way you can ensure Willibald's safety now is to see this thing through.”

Mordecai raised reddened eyes to him. “You do not understand,” he whispered. “Ever since I lost my magic last year—ever since the Panergodyne was taken—I have been dreading something like this. I have nothing if I have no magic. Nothing! You could never understand that. And to be stuck on this *thing* with a full-blown Tseneshi witch when my powers are growing less with every hour that passes—“

“All right. How weak are you right now?” Varnak's tone had changed again. Now it was brisk and businesslike, with more than a hint of his father.

“What? How should I know?”

“Try a spell. A fairly complex one.”

“You want me to waste my power—“

“You're not using it for anything else right now, unless that's what's keeping you from soiling your breeches. Come on. Show me how desperately depleted you are. You should be able to recover the power of one spell quite easily.”

“All right,” Mordecai said. “All right. I still have most of my magic, at the moment, while we are still close to Tamland. But that is not the point! The point is that it is getting less and less. Tomorrow I will not have as much, the day after even less.”

“And you really find that so terrifying?”

“Yes!!” Mordecai shouted. “Especially,” he went on, forcing his voice to quietness, “when there is a sworn enemy of mine on this boat with ample power to kill me before I can even raise my defences.”

“You know I can't possibly win this negotiation without you,” Varnak said. “You know how important it is to my father, to your adopted country. And you don't care about any of that next to your own rotten skin. Fair enough. You don't have to. I hoped you might, but I was wrong. But you care about Willibald, and you know that while you're on the way to Freeport whoever's got him will keep him alive, and if that's what I have to use to make you go through with this, then I'm not above using it.”

“Your father thinks it matters who gets this stupid tree sap stuff first,” Mordecai said raggedly. “It does not. Within a year everyone else will have it, by theft or force or whatever other means, and whatever advantage he thinks he can gain will be gone. You have put Willibald's life and mine at risk for a worthless prize that will vanish before the grass grows on our graves!”

“Mordecai, there's much more at stake here than the sap. Tam take it, I thought I was the political idiot here. This negotiation could give us effective mastery of the Lost Ocean.”

“What?”

Varnak began to pace. “Chotan is the first of the northern kingdoms to open up the possibility of a trade agreement with one of our three nations. If we can clinch it, we'll have an open door to all the others, and a head start in negotiating with them, and who knows, maybe even access to the lands beyond. The other side of the world, Mordecai!” Varnak's eyes were shining. “Haven't you ever wondered what it's really like there? We get snatches of tales from tramontanes like those poor people below, stories about lands where magic is bound up with music, or where the shape of things gives them power...but we never get to see those places, cut off from them by the Pointy Mountains on one side and the Lost Ocean on the other. We can't level the Mountains, but we can cut a way through the Ocean, and this is the first step. Do you think Dad's that much of an idiot, to risk both you and me on something trivial or ephemeral?”

Mordecai's head was spinning.

“If Briom get it, they'll send their ships of conquest out, loaded with missionaries to 'educate' the 'savages' and make them into servants. If Tsenesh get it, who knows what could happen, except that we'll never be allowed anywhere near. Don't you see it, Mordecai?”

“I...” Mordecai forced himself to his feet. “I am just so afraid...” His voice broke.

“Hush now.” Varnak held out his arms and Mordecai all but fell into them, eyes

blinded with hot tears of shame. "I thought you knew," Varnak said softly, patting Mordecai's back. "I thought you knew all that and you still didn't care. I'm sorry, Mordecai, I misjudged you."

Mordecai's throat was too full to speak.

"The bad dreams...the thing about the smaller room...they're all part of the same thing, aren't they? Fears multiplying and spreading. I know, Mordecai, I know. But trust me," and Varnak took Mordecai by the shoulders and held him at arm's length, "whether you have your magic or not, there's still nobody else in the kingdom who could help me with this the way you can. If there were, Dad would have sent them."

Fighting for self-control, Mordecai nodded jerkily. "I apologise for this display, your Highness," he said. "It shall not happen again."

"It'll happen whenever it needs to," Varnak said. "I don't want you bottling all this up. Just try to keep it in this room, all right?" Mordecai nodded again. "Now, about the Tseneshi witch. We can't do anything overtly about her, but I presume you can somehow keep a magical eye on her, yes?"

Mordecai considered. "I think I can arrange for her to be watched without her realising it, yes."

"Good. That way we may be able to find out why she's on the boat, where she's going, and why she's posing as a widow. When you think about it, why should she not be open about who she is? There's nothing to prevent Tseneshi using the river. I was thinking just this morning how odd it was we don't have more of them on this boat. I think she's hiding something."

"She is Tseneshi. It follows." Mordecai was recovering his composure quickly. He went over to the basin of water on the sideboard and sluiced his blotchy face quickly. "So. How did you get on with the other man?"

"Not well," Varnak admitted. "He got up and walked away as soon as he saw me coming, and I didn't like to follow him because it would have looked a bit odd."

"Mffle whffle mmff," Mordecai said from inside a towel.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, your Highness, just clearing my throat. Well, then I shall have to try to approach him. Where is our next stop?"

"Imhalca, on the Tsenesh bank, tomorrow morning. Just a brief rest stop. If you want to, you can stay in here—"

"Thank you, your Highness," Mordecai said, brushing his dishevelled hair, "but I think not. I have allowed my fears to rule me long enough. Besides, I need to buy

you something.”

“What?”

“A book on farm machinery.”

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