

CHAPTER FIVE

Imhalca, unlike Clesterbyne, was a sizeable town, bristling with the steeply-pitched slate roofs and intricately-carved woodwork of lowland Tsenesh. Mordecai could not repress a shiver as he stepped ashore in the early morning sunshine, even as the memory of his shameful collapse burned within him.

I cried in Varnak's arms. I was terrified of one single woman...and it was not Gisel.

I must remember to tell Varnak not to tell her.

No. It would be the first thing he would do.

Fish.

Fish?

Mordecai stopped dead, causing the man behind him—one of the possible students—to cannon into him. He muttered an apology and stepped aside, looking about him. Up on the rail of the barge, a black and white cat looked at him nonchalantly while washing a paw.

Fish!

Get your own fish, Mordecai thought back at it, and the cat turned at once and jumped down on to the deck of the barge. He had not noticed that there was a cat on the boat, but he had heard that boatmen sometimes kept them, to get rid of vermin. It seemed quite a handsome specimen, not the mangy mog he would have expected, but Mordecai was no cat expert, despite the fact that some felines seemed to be in some way attuned to his mental vibratory rate.

He turned away and set off down the narrow streets of Imhalca, looking for a book shop.

Gorol Felk watched the peculiar fellow disappear into the crowds, and adjusted his clothing, somewhat disarranged by the collision. There was something odd about this merchant's clerk, something neither Gorol nor his friends had been able to place precisely. Old Stick hadn't noticed it, as far as they could tell, but then it was never easy to be sure what Old Stick had or hadn't seen. The slightest hint of inattention in his classes never seemed to escape his beady eye, and yet he had been known to walk into lampposts, when he wasn't even reading at the time.

Anyway, this airy speculation was not to the purpose. They had drawn lots, and the task of getting the beer in for the day had fallen to Gorol. Truth be told, he wasn't actually too comfortable with the idea of spending the whole day drinking, but as Thavaar had explained it, if you didn't keep the alcohol levels up during the day, then when you went to the tavern in the evening the drink went straight to your head, and that would never do.

Mind you, it seemed to go straight to everyone's head anyway, Gorol thought. They had nearly been thrown out of that place in Clesterbyne, would have been if Old Stick hadn't happened in and spoken up for them. Good thing he chanced to be passing, really.

Gorol banished his wandering thoughts, and headed for the nearest alehouse.

From the shadows near the boat, Dardash Parrunz watched him go.

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“Morning, cully.” The girl Meila was irritatingly cheerful for someone who had been tied to a chair for over two days. It was possible, Chaz thought, that she was using magic to dull the pain she must be feeling. No matter. The witches had sworn that no magical energy could pass the wards they had sold him. He had followed their instructions most carefully.

“Have you been fed?”

“Oh, good day to thee, Miss Meila, and how be thee this fine morn?' 'Passing well, your honour, and thank thee kindly for askin'.”

“Answer the question, slut!” Chaz snapped. He had not slept well.

“Aye, I've been fed,” Meila said, rolling her eyes. “Dost tha talk to all thy women thuswise?”

“In the kingdom of J'tahn it is understood that women are the servants of men,” Chaz said. “This truth is ignored in your heathen lands, much to the detriment of your society.”

“Sayst tha so?” Meila cocked her head.

“Are not the women of Tam'land discontented, shrewish and prone to greed and vanity? Such is the consequence of granting them a freedom with which they are not equipped to cope. Rest assured that when you are housed in my father's palace such irritations will no longer be a part of your life.”

“Pity,” said Meila softly. “I were starting to get right used to 'em.”

“That is because—“ Chaz broke off in frustration. “This is not to the purpose. You must tell me more about Mord'kye del Ag'la.”

“Not much more to tell,” said Meila. “Long streak o' piss, likes his fancy clothes, likes to dip his pinkle where mood takes him but preferably in other men.”

“Very well, then. What about Prince V'nak? Presumably, working in the palace, you must have encountered him.”

“A question afore I tell thee ought,” Meila said slowly. “Suppose tha caught one of thy servants—a lass like to I—telling thy secrets to king o' Tamland. What would tha do to she?”

“I would set her to the torture and finally rip out her entrails with my bare hands,” Chaz said.

“Then tha'd best make sure I never get caught,” Meila said, “'cause Prince Varnak be ten times worsen nor thee.”

“Worsen? I mean—worse?” Chaz caught himself. The chit's way of speaking was not so much an accent as a condition, and a contagious one at that. “How do you mean?”

Meila leaned closer, as best she could in the confinement of her bonds, and jerked her head to Chaz to do likewise. “Well, thy spies'll have told thee he comes across as harmless clown, aye?”

Chaz nodded. “Not that I necessarily believe anything my spies tell me these days.”

“Well,” Meila said. “They be right enough, save that that be just face he puts on for public. In private he be a monster, a beast. I tell thee, e'en his own da be frit on him. And as for appetitties—“

“Happy—what?”

Meila snorted. “What he likes,” she explained. “To eat, to drink, and—well, and so on.” She shuddered. “Every maidservant in palace have known him,” she confessed frankly. “Save I, that is.”

“Why not you?”

“Cause I guised mysen as boy, o' course, clotpoll,” she answered. “Truth be told, 't was chief reason I started doing un, to scape Varnak's bed.”

“Why?” Chaz was nonplussed. “It is the purpose of woman to serve her master. Admittedly, it is somewhat...unhygienic for a prince to resort to servants, but—“

“Tha kens not whole tale.” Meila lowered her voice still further. “Once only they visit's chamber. And half on 'em never come out no more.”

“You mean—“ Chaz's lips pursed. “That is simply wasteful.”

“I kened tha'd understand,” Meila said dryly. “His da durst not speak to un, but turnover in maidservants be bankrupting palace. And parents be startin' to complain and all.”

“This fellow is not fit to assume his father's throne,” Chaz declared.

“Aye,” Meila agreed, “but who else be there?”

Chaz did not answer straight away. A slow smile spread over his face.

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Gorol Felk, weighted down on either side with jugs, staggered down the stairs and knocked on the door of the room.

“Beer!” came a hoarse cry from within, and the door was wrenched open and Gorol and his booty dragged inside in one smooth movement.

The room was a mess. Two of its four occupants were still abed, Driskil with his arm flung over his face like a tragic heroine in a play, Burlox face down and snoring like a rip saw. Thavaar, however, was up and already breaking the seal on one of the jugs.

“I don't know how you can face that,” Gorol said primly, “it being so early in the morning.”

“Say rather,” Thavaar said, wiping his mouth, “how can I face it being so early in the morning without this? And answer came there none. The secret of life, Gorol my boon companion, is beer. A constant intake of good beer regulates the bowels, clarifies the mind, soothes the passions and improves one's prowess in all sorts of areas. Just ask my father, he's been living on it for years. Now help me put the rest away in case Old Stick comes in.”

They stowed the rest of the beer under Burlox's bed. As they did so, he rolled over, emitted one last titanic snore and opened his eyes.

“What time is it?”

“Time you got up, you slug,” Thavaar said cheerily. “Past breakfast time.”

“Oh, gods,” Burlox said. “I couldn't eat a thing.”

“Who said anything about eating?” Thavaar reached under the bed and extracted the opened jug. Burlox moaned and rolled over again.

“Gentlemen, you are a bunch of feeble little children,” Thavaar proclaimed, and took another deep draught from the jug. “I see it as my sacred duty, one way or another on this trip, to turn you into men.”

“If you don't kill yourself first,” Gorol muttered.

“What makes you think we need you to do it for us?” Driskil was awake. He swung his legs out of bed, got to his feet, wincing at every movement, grabbed the jug from Thavaar and held it to his lips, his throat working. “Aaaaah,” he said, wiping his mouth and handing it back. “That's better.”

“You see?” Thavaar said. “Driskil has the right spirit. Driskil is ready for anything. Driskil is a man among pygmies.”

“Driskil is a lunatic,” Burlox said into his mattress.

“What was that?” Driskil turned on him. “What did you call me?”

“Nothing,” Burlox said quickly.

“I don't believe you. I think you called me something.” Driskil was a weathervane, his mood responsive to the faintest breeze. “Tell me what you called me. Tell me —”

“Enough, children,” Thavaar said loftily. “Driskil, let it go. Gorol and Burlox, you shall both drink some beer, because it is so ordained by the Lords of Fate, and then we shall clothe ourselves in our costliest raiment and seek what sport can be had before our esteemed pedagogue awakes and resumes his duties.”

Gorol sighed. He didn't really like beer that much, especially when he'd had nothing to eat, but there was no arguing with Thavaar, especially when Driskil would

certainly back him up. He wished Old Stick were here right now.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I need to let some out before I can put more in.”

The others laughed—this was the kind of manly thing Thavaar liked to hear them saying—and Gorol left the room with some relief. Once outside, though, he made his way quickly to Old Stick's room and knocked on the door.

There was no response. Gorol knocked again, and then got down on one knee and looked through the keyhole. He had a clear view of the bed. It was empty, and still neatly made from yesterday.

“Oh no,” he muttered. “Not again.”

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There was, of course, no such thing as a book on farm machinery to be had. There was a sour-faced bookseller, working from a stall in the market square under the watchful eye of the town's invigilatrix, but the volumes on sale were all either cheap novels for men or abstruse religious and magical texts for women, and while Mordecai was strongly tempted by the latter, he had no wish to attract undue attention by showing interest in a volume for which he was the wrong gender.

It would be easier at a Briom village, he thought. Maybe someone there would have a book for children, with big pictures. *Down On The Farm With Farmer Froonie* or some such. He could picture Varnak's face, and the thought brought a smile to his own. The *Witchring*, however, did not hold with children having their own books.

A title caught his eye, on the men's side of the stall—“*Lord Clatterack Sails To Sinjaran*.” The garishly painted cover depicted a man in the full fig of a nobleman of Briom brandishing an epée at a swarthy, hairy man in a brightly coloured bandanna and leather trousers, who was apparently being propelled towards him from a trampoline, with a cutlass gripped between his teeth. Mordecai idly picked it up and flipped it open to the title page, looking for the author's name.

“By A Lady Of The Court,” he read.

“Put that book down!” cried a female voice peremptorily, and Mordecai almost dropped it in his shock.

“You cannot possibly start there, Master Alonso,” said Maranni ap Gavrus, descending upon him in a flutter of pale green, flanked by her sisters. “That is the eighth book in the series, and not in my opinion the best. Let me see...” Her gaze flicked over the racks of books. “As I thought, the first and third books are not here. It is essential that you begin at the beginning, or you are certain to spoil yourself.”

“Spoil...?”

“I mean, sir, that if you begin with the later volumes you will discover things which, once known, will decrease your enjoyment of the earlier books when you come to read them. Let me draw you an analogy. Suppose that while you are at work, your lady wife were to have the servants prepare you your favourite meal as a surprise. However, one of your colleagues overhears her issuing the orders, and informs you of her plans. The surprise is spoiled, is it not?”

“I have never been fond of surprises,” Mordecai retorted feebly. *How many servants does she think a merchant's clerk can command?* he thought.

“When we next stop in a civilised community—” Maranni glanced around her with superb disdain. “—we shall indicate to you the order in which the books should be read, and you shall decide for yourself how many you wish to buy.”

“How many are there?”

“There are twenty-three volumes in the series at the moment,” Idyla put in icily, “not to mention four in a related series concerning the equally improbable adventures of Lord Clatterack's young friend, Sir Ambril Vodantis, known to his enemies as the Grey Ghost. The author—if there is but one and not a room full of them—produces one of each every year without fail. As you can see, sir, to acquire the full set at once is a considerable financial outlay, particularly in the high-quality editions which my sisters appear to favour.”

“Pay no heed to my sister, sir,” put in Lonira. “These books are well worth whatever you may care to spend on them, and the more expensively made editions will last longer and hence give pleasure to more people.”

“You sound as if you wrote them yourself,” Mordecai tried.

All three sisters recoiled in shock.

“Sir!” Maranni said. “Do you imagine that we would stoop so low as to engage in *trade?*”

“Well, if a Lady Of The Court—”

“The title is clearly a pen name,” Lonira said, her tone almost as cold as Idyla's. “No true person of breeding would barter her skills in the marketplace.”

“I apologise,” Mordecai said desperately. “I meant no offence.”

Maranni mellowed a little. “You are, I perceive, Sinjaro, sir,” she said, “and therefore cannot be expected to comprehend the subtleties of civilised discourse.” *Especially with this habit we have of sticking cutlasses in our mouths*, Mordecai thought. “We pardon your solecism, this once. And now we must leave you, for we have business elsewhere and to be frank, the sooner I am back on the boat the more comfortable I shall feel. Come, sisters.”

Mordecai bowed, and the three ladies answered him with complicated curtsies and swept on their way.

On a perverse impulse, he picked up the Lord Clatterack book and paid for it.

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A conversation, elsewhere in the winding streets of Imhalca:

“You're late.”

“It's not easy for me to move about in this bedamned country.”

“What news?”

“She'll be joining the boat at the next stop on the other bank. Mattockhay.”

“That will be a considerable relief. I'm not happy about this assignment.”

“You should have thought of that before you took it.”

“Oh, believe me, I did. It wasn't as if I had much choice.”

“Nobody suspects you, do they?”

“Give me some credit. I'm worried about ginger and his little friend, though.”

“What about them?”

“Well, if he's who he says he is, I'm an exotic dancer.”

“He isn't. We know who they are. They're nothing to do with this.”

“Are you sure?”

“You have nothing to worry about from them.”

“Tell me another one, do. That Sinjaro bastard's eyes are everywhere.”

“You worry too much.”

“In this trade there is no such thing, friend, believe me. Now, much as I hate to press you—“

“Here you are. Count it if you like.”

“Thanks, I will. Later. And if it's short a copper, I'll be letting her know.”

“Such a suspicious mind.”

“That's why I'm the best.”

“I have to go. Here's the word for the day. Burn it when you've read it.”

“Don't teach your dog how to hunt fleas.”

“Freedom for all.”

“Be seeing you.”

*

“Did you find anything?” Varnak said, as Mordecai approached him. He was sitting on deck, basking in the sunshine. Nobody else was about.

“It was a fairly remote possibility that I would,” Mordecai admitted. “However, on the way out of the town I came upon an actual farm, and I was able to make these.” He produced a number of drawings from his sleeve and unrolled them with a flourish.

“Do you normally carry drawing paper around with you?” Varnak said, studying the pictures.

“No, I bought it in the town, along with the charcoal. This will be going on expenses for this trip.”

“These are good,” Varnak said. “But how did you work out what was what?”

“I spoke to the farmer,” Mordecai said. “I pretended to be a young nobleman on the way to claim his inheritance and completely ignorant of the finer points of agriculture. She was very helpful. In a Tseneshi sort of way.”

“You didn't use magic, did you?” Varnak said, lowering his voice still further.

“No. I explained my garb by saying that it was a condition of the inheritance that I dress and conduct myself in every way as a common worker. The farmer naturally

approved, though she thought my costume somewhat too good.”

“And you're sure these names are accurate?”

“As sure as I can be.”

“Well, thank you, Alonso, these will be very useful.” Varnak folded the drawings and tucked them into the book he was reading.

Mordecai glanced around the deck. They were still alone as far as he could see. “I am still worried about Willibald.”

“I know,” Varnak said. “So am I.”

“Even without using active magic, I should be able to perceive him somehow,” Mordecai went on. “Just as I would know if he were dead. The fact that I have no indication of his location, and that he has failed to get in touch with me, is troubling me a great deal.”

“He may just be being held somewhere. Possibly out of range of your senses.”

“Yes, but what worries me even more is what happens when his kidnappers discover, as they must already have done, who he—she—is.”

“If they're Tseneshi...” Varnak said.

“They would probably simply have killed her,” Mordecai said. “If they're from Briom, they would inform the Witch Queen, probably try to get a ransom, same result.”

“But you said you'd know if that had happened,” Varnak pointed out.

“I don't know that for certain,” Mordecai said, “especially since my magic is no longer reliable—and don't try to tell me that it shouldn't make a difference. So, not Tsenesh and not Briom.”

“Unless it's someone—erm—unofficial,” Varnak said. “There are anti-government elements in Briom that we know of. Maybe they'd think nabbing the Witch Queen's daughter-elect would give them leverage to persuade Tsenesh to—”

“Maybe, maybe, maybe.” Mordecai shook his head. “And maybe an eccentric nobleman has one scruffy hedge-wizard on his mantelpiece already and wants to complete the set. We know nothing. Your Highness, I must go out tonight. I must try to find something out, about these people we are going to be negotiating with, about Willibald, about something, or I will find a pointed stick and start making holes in the bottom of this thing. I must put what power I have to a useful purpose, while I still have it.”

“All right,” Varnak said, looking somewhat taken aback. “Fine. Go ahead. What's that?”

“What? This?” Mordecai took the Lord Clatterack book out of his pocket. “Nothing. Merely some light reading. I need some kind of distraction, your Highness.”

“I understand,” Varnak said. “I know how I'd feel. Well, in theory. Don't worry, Mordecai, we'll get her back. Yes, Alonso, by all means go and deal with that right away,” he went on in a louder voice, as someone came round the corner of the dining salon—one of the students, walking quickly.

“The mantle of obedience shall be the wings of my duty,” Mordecai said, bowing low. Varnak pulled a face at him and leant back, closing his eyes.

You do not know how I feel, Mordecai thought as he went below. It was amazing how everyone who knew the secret of Willibald's true identity immediately jumped to the conclusion that she and Mordecai were romantically involved. As if that would even be possible. Why, the girl was quite graceless, clumsy in the extreme, and completely lacking in the respect that was due him as her master and as a magician. Her face appeared before his inner eye, laughing at him for something he had said or done, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue when he tried to assert some degree of authority. No. Quite out of the question.

It was for the good of the kingdom that he wanted her back. And because, in taking on this stupid—but, he had to admit, necessary—mission for the King he had inadvertently put her in peril. He felt responsible. That was it.

He closed the door of the room, plumped down in a chair and opened the Lord Clatterack book. The first paragraphs described a grand ball at one of the noble houses of Briom, and Mordecai understood why the three ap Gavrus sisters affected such an outmoded style of dress. The anonymous author certainly had a way with words; as Mordecai read on he could almost see the great hall, brilliant with magical lights, hear the soft, lilting music and the *frou-frou* of the ladies' dresses brushing the floor...

He caught himself on the point of falling asleep, roused himself with an effort and went and sat on one of the hard chairs at the small table by the window. *If I sleep all day I will not be able to project tonight. I need something to do.*

As if on cue, a piercing scream brought him instantly to his feet.