

CHAPTER SIX

Lonira ap Gavrus subsided into a hastily produced chair, shaking and pallid with fright. Varnak hovered solicitously over her while Mordecai inspected the body.

Dardash Parrunz had been crammed, head first, under the stairs that led up to the deck at the bow end. His eyes were open and staring, and the back of his tunic and surcoat were soaked with blood from the jagged wound between his shoulder blades.

“This must have been done in a hurry,” Mordecai said, “and quite recently. The murderer probably meant to return later and move the—what?” Varnak was making furious faces and not-*now*-you-idiot gestures at him, while simultaneously trying to be reassuring for the sobbing lady. “Forgive me, Master Humpoletz,” Mordecai said. “The hare of my tongue outstripped the tortoise of my—well, anyway. May I suggest you take the lady up on deck for some air while I continue my investigations?”

“An excellent suggestion, Alonso,” said Varnak, assisting Lonira to rise.

“You have hair on your *tongue*?” she whispered as she passed Mordecai. He stared after her for a moment, then shook his head and began looking around the area where the body had been put. It was far more likely that the killer had taken his weapon with him, but you never knew. Besides, activity of some kind was helping him deal with his own shock. It is one thing to know intellectually that you are surrounded by enemies and desperate people who will resort to murder to achieve their ends, and another thing when it actually happens.

“Excuse me,” said a voice from above, and the silhouette of the teacher, or whatever he was, appeared in the hatchway. He started to come down the stairs, wrinkled his nose at the smell of the blood, and slid down the rest of the way with his hands on the banisters.

“Oh dear,” he said faintly. “Oh dear oh dear. Oh dear oh dear oh dear.”

For some obscure reason, the words *shut up, Spike* drifted through Mordecai's consciousness and faded again. “I apologise for this inconvenience, sir,” he said.

“Inconvenience?” The teacher looked alarmed. “You didn't kill him, did you?”

“Me? No!” Mordecai was genuinely startled. Then he remembered. *Of course. I am a Sinjaro with a hairy tongue. If this was done with a cutlass I will be the prime suspect.*

“Oh, good.” The thin man mopped his brow with a handkerchief. “Not that you'd tell

me if you had, I suppose. It wouldn't be very clever, after all, would it? Mind you, killing people isn't a job that requires that much cleverness, not like being an architect, or planning a battle, or cooking a meal. Of course, some people's cooking is rather like a battle, or a building, and they can't be that clever. Excuse me, I'm rambling."

"I am Alonso del Cazargua," said Mordecai, bowing. "I am honoured to meet you, Master Rambling."

"Thank you—no. No, that's not what I meant at all." The man's eyes, paler blue than Willibald's, stared at Mordecai. "My name isn't Rambling. It's, er, Stychel. Aldro Stychel. I believe my young charges call me Old Stick."

"Master Stychel," Mordecai said, and bowed again.

"Poor man," Stychel said. "I didn't like him much, but he didn't deserve to die like that."

"Like what?"

"Pardon?"

"You said—"

"Well," Stychel said, "stuffed behind the stairs like that. I mean, it's not very dignified, is it? I assume he is dead, by the way, otherwise you would be trying to find a healer or something, wouldn't you?"

"He is dead," Mordecai said, "stabbed, in fact. And given that his face is not visible from where you are, I am even more interested in the fact that you seem to recognise him."

"His shoes," Stychel said, "are quite distinctive. That is, if I am not mistaken, Master Parrunz, the traveller in blades, now apparently fallen foul of his own merchandise. And I am not at all sure, Master Alonso, that I am entirely comfortable with the way you are talking to me. You seem to suspect me of something." His mask of fluffy good nature seemed to have disappeared, revealing behind it something altogether colder.

"I suspect everybody," said Mordecai, "and nobody." He narrowed his eyes shrewdly.

"Well, that's not much use either way, is it?" said Stychel. "In any case, I've only just this minute come back aboard, and if you really wish it you may search me for the murder weapon, but I assure you I have nothing to do with this unfortunate affair. Now if you will excuse me, I had better go and see my young charges and apprise them of the situation."

With this he eased past Mordecai and went down the passage to knock at the

students' door. There was a pause in which Mordecai thought he detected frantic movement and whispering, then the door opened and Stychel passed inside.

“There is definitely more to you than meets the eye, master teacher,” Mordecai muttered, as Varnak returned.

“I've had a word with the boatmaster,” he said, rubbing his hands together.

“Apparently this boat counts as Tamlandish soil, since neither Briom nor Tsenesh lay claim to the river itself. Which means that the crime must be investigated by the nearest available Tamlandish authority, which would be you and me...”

“Except that we are pretending to be other people,” Mordecai said.

“Well, I think that's going to have to go by the board, don't you, Mordecai?” Varnak said. “I mean, a man's been killed here. Besides, according to you everyone already knows who I am and they're only calling me Humpoletz to be polite.”

“I may have been wrong about that,” Mordecai said. “But you are quite right, your Highness, the time for pretence is past. If you will gather all the passengers in the dining salon—“

“There's something else we have been wrong about.” Varnak spoke soberly. “It seems clear that our friend Parrunz was not as innocent as I first thought.”

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“My prince?”

“What is it, Zorn?” Chaz turned irritably as the servant poked his head round the door.

“There is news.”

“Well, what is it?”

Zorn hesitated.

“Ey, don't tha mind I, chuck,” Meila said. “I be not even listenin'.”

“My prince,” Zorn said desperately, “if we could speak privately—“

With a grumbled curse in his own language, Chaz got up and joined Zorn in the narrow passage between the two rooms.

“I await your excuse for disturbing me when, as you can well see, I am busy,” Chaz said with deceptive good humour.

“There is news, my prince,” Zorn began.

“You said that before,” Chaz remarked. “Is there any more to this, or have you

dragged me out here simply to repeat one phrase like a *tenkush* bird?"

"A man is dead, my prince."

"And what of it?" Chaz demanded.

"Stabbed, my prince."

"Zorn, you are boring me."

"He was seen when we took the woman," Zorn blurted.

"By which you mean that *he* saw *you* take the woman," Chaz translated. "And now he is dead. Rejoice, Zorn. You have escaped the consequences of yet another mistake, and one you did not mention to me. Why is that, I wonder? Did *you* have him killed?"

"I? No, my prince!" Zorn protested.

"Good. You show signs of progress, Zorn. At this rate, by the time we return home, you will be merely a buffoon."

"Such is my deepest hope, my prince," Zorn said humbly, and Chaz threw back his head and uttered his battle-cry laugh.

"I will return to my questioning of the woman," he said. "If you hear any more news, save it till two turns of the drip-bowl from now, unless of course it be urgent."

"Yes, my prince." Zorn ventured a question. "Are you gaining anything useful from the creature?"

Chaz's handsome face closed up. "What I gain is my affair," he said abruptly.

"Remember that, Zorn."

Zorn bowed, and retired into the other room.

*

Gisel got up from behind her desk, went to the wall, straightened a framed print of Klaggen Gorge, stepped back, adjusted it again, stepped back, reached to fiddle with it again, changed her mind, went back to her desk, sat down, sighed.

For all the use she was being she could be at home embroidering or playing the lute. If she could embroider. Or play the lute.

Most women in Tamland had work of their own to do, to fill their days. If they chose not to help their husbands or fathers, they could find jobs in any number of

places. Only the noblest of the noble, the blood relatives of the king, were expected to sit and do nothing. Gisel's had been a token rebellion, her "work" for Mordecai universally recognised as a hobby, but it had become an essential part of her life.

Which was why, with Mordecai gone and Willibald missing, she felt so empty and useless.

She had to be here. By now everyone in the palace knew there was something wrong, that the magery was closed, but Gisel stayed, just in case. She couldn't do magic herself, but sometimes advice, or even just a sympathetic ear, might be enough.

She thought of King Bran, poring over books and papers in his cluttered, comfortable office, trying not to worry about his only son and his Court Magus, trying not to panic about the thought that the longer they took to complete this mission the more likely it was that one of Tamland's huge, greedy, lazy neighbours would reach out with a finger and squash the irritating anomaly. She thought about Briom, old and sprawling and affluent, and the ancient grudge that had lasted since the day General Tamarack and his band of followers had shaken the dust of King Glendaleuc's court from their feet and set off to find their own home in the wilderness. She thought of Tsenesh, the land and the people as hard and hot and fierce as each other, looking with envious eyes at the wealth and ease of their tiny neighbour. She thought of Tamland itself, sustained by the unearthly and capricious power of the Panergodyne, whose human keeper might never return to keep it in balance. She thought about Willibald, and was afraid.

"Oh, Mordecai, you godsbedamned idiot," she said softly to the empty room, "come back safely. Come back soon."

*

Far away, in the crumbling palace of King Valbogast of Briom, there were scurryings.

There were always scurryings. Nobody had the leisure to move slowly. In the sunlit upper levels, where throngs of brightly garbed functionaries, members of various floridly titled Immaculate Colleges and Exalted Orders, carried out the work of the

vast bureaucracy that had grown up around the Royal Court, one did not walk, but neither did one run; the one betrayed an insufficient grasp of the urgency of whatever one's job might be, the other an unseemly and worrying haste. One scurried. Scurrying meant that work was being carried out with pleasing efficiency, and that no sudden crisis had supervened. The Elect Brotherhood of the Admonitory Hand, whose well-armed officers guarded every door in the palace, watched both for dawdlers and dashers, and were prone to question them somewhat pointedly.

Below, where shadow met deeper shadow in the gloom of the subterranean levels, the scurryings were more purposive. Here nobody watched the scurriers, unless it were they themselves; for these were no clerks or paper-pushers, but messengers bringing news of great importance, or agents leaving on vital errands. They needed no guards; they were the guards.

Somewhere, presumably, there was the King himself. He was still occasionally seen, at state festivals and other public events, waving benignly from his balcony or riding serenely in his open carriage. Nobody could mistake his tiny figure even at a distance, his long white beard intricately forked and plaited after the manner of his grandfathers, his little blue button eyes ever alert for any sign of disaffection. His people found his appearances reassuring, or so they always said when questioned on the subject. Nor did anyone ever doubt, even for an instant, that his was the gnarled but firm hand on the tiller of the ship of state, his was the somewhat hairy ear into which the Pennies and members of the other secret agencies poured their detailed reports, his was the mind that originated the decrees which the Royal Prolocutors relayed to the people via town crier and public billboard.

And when, on rare occasions, the black-clad horsemen who patrolled the streets descended upon some random citizen and carried them off to the dreaded Sable Chamber, never more to be seen or heard of in the sunlit world, there was never a moment's doubt that that citizen had offended their kindly old monarch in some way; and heads were dolefully wagged over the depth of perfidy that could lead anyone so to mistreat such a benevolent ruler. It was certainly the work of spies in

the pay of Tamland or Tsenesh, people said, and sighed for the evils of the world outside their borders.

The two worlds of Valbogast's palace met, as it were, in a sort of twilight zone, on the broad stone steps that led up from the Gilth Courtyard. Here, on this particular morning, a dark-garbed agent, scurrying up from the cellars, met a gaudily-clad functionary scurrying down from the main atrium, and a brief muttered colloquy ensued. Then the functionary turned, sashes and ribbons flapping, and scurried back into the main atrium and right across its expanse of marble floor. Out into the Marth Courtyard she scurried, to accost a tall lean figure who was in the act of wearily unsaddling an equally weary chestnut horse.

More muttering; and as the functionary spoke the tall one's expression changed. Exasperation, shock, intent concentration and grim resolve crossed the lean, weathered face. As the functionary bowed hastily and turned to scurry away, the other whistled and beckoned to a groom, and then picked up the saddle again.

A fresh horse would be required.

*

"What are you talking about, Master Felk?" said Old Stick testily.

Gorol, still aquiver with excitement, explained. "I happened to overhear a conversation between that merchant Humperdink and his clerk."

"Eavesdropping is a distinctly vulgar pastime," Old Stick stated, "and also can be prone to misinterpretation if discovered. I trust you are not making a habit of it, any of you. And I believe the name is Humpoletz, actually."

"I try to keep them in line, sir," Thavaar said with a long-suffering air, "but it is hard, very hard."

"They were talking about someone who's been kidnapped, sir," Gorol said. "Someone who looks like a man but is actually a woman."

Driskil sniggered, as he did whenever the word "woman" entered the conversation, and Burlox glowered at him.

"The clerk talked about using magic. And they mentioned the Witch Queen and a ransom."

"How very interesting," Old Stick said casually. "Now then, I am sure that you have

better things with which to occupy your time than these rather sordid revelations. Please open your copies of *Conversational Tseneshi* and turn to page eighty-three. We shall practice some vocabulary exercises. This is, after all, supposed to be an educational excursion.”

Gorol glowed inwardly. He knew how this worked. The seed had been planted. At some point a few days from now, when the current operation was over and he had amassed the information he needed, Old Stick would unveil his plan, and they would swing into action. No damsel in distress would remain so for long if he had anything to do with it.

Before he could even find his place, though, there was a knock at the door, and Old Stick tutted impatiently and went to open it. Gorol strained to hear the muttered conversation, but beyond the fact that the visitor was a member of the crew he could tell nothing.

The teacher turned back to his class. “It appears,” he said in his driest voice, “that Master Humpoletz the merchant wishes all the passengers to join him in the salon. Education will have to wait, I fear.”

“Do you happen to know why he wants to see us, sir?” Thavaar was at his most languid, but Gorol could sense the undercurrent of excitement running through all of them.

“I may have some idea,” Old Stick said, “but speculation in the absence of data is, as you know, a capital error. Come, gentlemen.”

He held the door open for them as they passed through, and fell in behind them. The crewman directed them to the aft staircase, and joined himself to the line behind Old Stick, as Gorol contemplated his fellow students. Driskil was bristling with suspicious hostility, Thavaar seemed to be anticipating some sort of treat, Burlox was merely puzzled. For himself, Gorol was curious, and a little afraid. Who was this mysterious merchant, and what game was he playing?

He was very much aware of Old Stick’s presence behind him as they filed into the salon and found chairs. Humpoletz was already there, his clerk at his elbow, as were the three young women, sitting demurely in a line looking up at the merchant expectantly. A big, grizzled man with a bulbous nose and a veiled woman swathed in black sat alone at separate tables, looking complacent and enigmatic

respectively, and by the far door the boatmaster hovered uneasily, twisting his pointed woollen cap between his big hands.

Humpoletz waited till the students and Old Stick had found seats. Then he turned slowly, looking at each of them in turn, and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said slowly, “I fear I have some very serious news.” Driskil emitted a spluttering snigger, tried to turn it into a cough and went very red. “A short while ago, the body of one of our fellow passengers, Dardash Parrunz, was discovered hidden under the forward stairs. He had been stabbed to death.”

One of the young women emitted a rather theatrical sob and buried her face in her hands. The other two put their arms round her and made comforting noises. Driskil stiffened and cast rapid glances around him, Thavaar made an indeterminate noise and put his hand to his cheek, and Burlox merely continued to look puzzled.

“Clearly,” the merchant continued, “this is a violent death and must be properly investigated.”

“Why?” It was the woman in black who interrupted before Humpoletz could get another word out. “He was a man. Men kill each other, unless they have been gelded. It is in their nature. It is the only thing they may be relied upon to do with any degree of skill or relish. Why waste time inquiring into how or why this particular man was killed? Some quarrel over a bauble, no doubt. I would say cast the carcass over the side and let us forget the entire affair.”

“That, no doubt, is the wisdom of Tsenesh, madonna,” the merchant’s clerk interposed, “and were we in that country it would very probably prevail. But we are on the river in a vessel of Tamland, the crime took place on Tamlandish soil—legally speaking—and the laws of Tamland must apply.”

“Under Tamlandish law,” the merchant took up the thread, “any wilful act of killing, whether the victim be man, woman or child, is treated in the same way. An investigation is carried out to discover the circumstances, if they be hidden, and the malefactor is discovered and punished according to the laws laid down in the Tomes.”

“And do they usually let brush salesmen do the investigating?” Driskil called out suddenly. Gorol shushed him frantically, and Old Stick bestowed on him a withering glance; but the merchant seemed unmoved.

“The investigation is normally carried out by the King’s Inquisitor, or, if he be not available, a noble of the court in good standing may be deputised,” he said smoothly. “Now there are two ways we can do this. One is, of course, to turn the boat around and return to Tamshold—”

He seemed unsurprised at the outcry that greeted this suggestion. “Alternatively,” he continued, “with the leave of the boatmaster, and of course your good selves, I would be willing to undertake the investigation myself. I should reveal at this point,” he went on, “that I am not, as I have pretended to be, Humpoletz the dealer in farm machinery. I am in fact—” He paused, looking a little hurt by the general lack of surprise.

For some reason, Gorol’s eyes were drawn to the clerk’s face. His eyes were closed, his expression unreadable.

“I am in fact,” the erstwhile Humpoletz repeated, “Lord Ildras of Clenth, a noble of the court of King Tam, and thus eminently qualified to take the place of the King’s Inquisitor in this case.”

The clerk’s eyes opened very wide.

“Master Alonso del Cazargua is indeed my clerk,” Lord Ildras said, “and will assist me in this matter. First of all, I must ask that nobody leave the boat till the investigation is concluded. Like it or not, we are all suspects—I do not except myself—and the departure of any passenger must of force raise serious questions as to that person’s innocence.”

The Tseneshi woman seemed about to speak, but changed her mind. Not so the three young women.

“We must protest, sir,” said the one in the grey and the glasses, rising at once to her feet. “Surely even you cannot be so crass as to suspect—”

One of the others reached across her companion to pluck at the speaker’s skirts. Irritably she turned, and something passed between them, a glance or a signal of some kind that Gorol could not decipher. The lady in grey took a deep breath, controlled her temper and turned back to Lord Ildras.

“Very well,” she said coldly. “My sisters and I shall co-operate.”

“I am gratified to hear it,” Lord Ildras said mildly.

“But if we are prevented from going ashore at Brokenbowes,” the lady continued, “we shall register the strongest possible complaint.”

Lord Ildras considered her for a moment. “Then it is in your own best interest,” he said, “indeed, in all our best interests, to co-operate fully with us so as to bring the investigation to a successful conclusion as soon as possible, wouldn’t you say?”

“Wait just a moment.” Gorol was taken by surprise. It was Driskil, on his feet despite Thavaar’s restraining hand. “I’ve got something to say,” he said.

“Then say it, by all means,” Lord Ildras said.

Driskil thrust out an accusing finger. “How do we know you’re who you say you are? This Lord Ildras of Clenth—I’d wager he’s no more real than Humpalot the merchant.” He stood, triumphant and belligerent at the same time. “We don’t know, do we? For all we know you killed the man and now you’re taking command of the investigation just to hide your own guilt. What do you say to that, whoever you are?”

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