

CHAPTER EIGHT

The hair-frames of Tsenesh were marvels of craftsmanship, and each witch traditionally made her own, though inferior imitations were to be had at markets across the three kingdoms. At rest, they lay down the middle of the back, usually concealed by the witch's hair; but when needed, by simply pulling two cords that hung over her collar bone, the witch could cause the frame to rise, slowly and menacingly, to unfold behind her head like demonic wings, her hair pinned to it in complex weaves and patterns of magical significance. Once locked into place, the frame would stay erect till the witch pulled the cords again to unlock it. The sight never failed to strike awe into the hearts of men of other lands; what the men of Tsenesh thought of it, since they were forbidden to speak in public, few people knew.

As Mordecai and Varnak eyed each other across the table, one thought was running through both their minds. It was Varnak who put it into words.

“Real Tseneshi frames,” he said, “don't shed rivets.”

“True, your Highness,” Mordecai said. “Which means...”

“Which means,” Varnak said, straightening up carefully in the low-ceilinged room, “that someone wants us to think the Tseneshi woman did this.”

“If she is a Tseneshi woman,” Mordecai said.

“You said she recognised you. You said she spoke to you by name.”

“There are many who know my name, Highness. Not all are Tseneshi.”

“I suppose so,” Varnak said with a sigh.

“Of course, the other possibility,” Mordecai went on, “is that someone, maybe the Tseneshi woman...”

“If she is a Tseneshi woman,” Varnak put in.

“Thank you—put this here knowing we would come to exactly this conclusion, and look elsewhere for the culprit.”

“And the third possibility,” Varnak pointed out, “which has just occurred to me, is that given that the man was a swordsmith, this rivet was just something he happened to have on him as part of his trade.”

They lapsed into gloomy contemplation of the rivet.

“Who was at the door?” Mordecai said.

“A steward to say we were missing lunch. I told him I knew that.” Varnak waited for Mordecai to react before continuing, “And asked him to bring us both something. Don’t worry, I know you need to eat regularly.”

“So do you,” Mordecai said, a little defensively.

“Yes, but I don’t have magic to sustain.” There was another knock at the door, and Varnak went to answer it. “Ah, thank you,” Mordecai heard him saying. “No, not yet, but we’re hard at it. Yes, I can manage, thank you.” There was a brief pause. “Ah. Er, Master Alonso?”

Mordecai sighed, got up and went to the door, delving in his purse as he did so.

“The falcon of nobility spurns the platypus of indigence,” he muttered, “or something. Here you are.”

“Thank ‘ee, master,” said the crewman, bowing as he pocketed the coins.

“Why don’t you think up a collection of those beforehand and write them down?” Varnak said, once the door was closed again. “Much easier than making them up on the spur of the moment like that.”

“That may actually be a good idea.” Mordecai rummaged in his pouch and produced a small, unused notebook and a stub of pencil.

“Not now, you fool, after we’ve eaten,” Varnak said, laughing.

Mordecai put the book and pencil down as Varnak unloaded the tray onto the table, and rescued the rivet a second before a plate would have come down on it.

“I will tell you what our problem is,” he announced some while later. “We are not going about this in a systematic manner.”

“Surprise me, do,” Varnak said, stacking the empty plates on the tray.

“We should be...” Mordecai waved his hand vaguely. “Marshalling our facts, questioning everyone on this boat, applying logic and reason to the problem, stop laughing at me. You said something ages ago about Parrunz not being as innocent as he appeared, and you never explained that. You just looked enigmatic, or possibly constipated, and went *Aha* at me.”

“Oh, yes, so I did.” Varnak fumbled in the pocket of his surcoat and produced a grubby slip of paper. “When I spoke to the boatmaster—nice chap—he told me he had seen Parrunz the night before he died, standing on his own up at the front end, where we were earlier, talking into something. I asked him into what, and he drew it for me.” He unfolded the paper and turned it towards Mordecai, who drew in his

breath sharply as he recognised the crudely sketched shape.

“A Correspondence Shell,” he said.

“I’ve never seen one,” Varnak said, “but there’s a reference to them in the Commentaries on the Tomes. How many are there?”

“There were only twelve in the world,” Mordecai said dubiously, “and I cannot believe Valbogast’s mages have rediscovered the secret after all this time. That must have been one of the twelve.” He suddenly looked stricken. “If it has been lost—if the killer simply threw it away—”

“Then there’s one less,” Varnak said. “There’s also one less man in the world, and I admit we don’t have the scarcity value, but I still think—”

Mordecai was already heading for the small room. Varnak got up and followed him, to find him searching the dead man’s clothes with feverish haste.

“Nothing,” he said disgustedly, straightening up.

“Well, don’t give up the quest just yet,” Varnak said, bending over the bed to look more closely. “Look here, there’s a kink in his belt. He’s had a pouch hanging there for some time, and it’s not here now. It wasn’t where we found him, was it?”

“I did not see it.”

“Well, go and look!”

Mordecai ducked out of the small room, through the main room to the corridor, and climbed up to the first level. He quickly searched the recess under the stairs where Parrunz had been so brutally stowed away, but nothing pouchlike presented itself. He did find a length of leather strapping, about half an inch wide with a sharp crease in the middle, and this he bore back to Varnak in triumph.

“That’s what I thought,” said the prince at once. “Our murderer cut it off and took it away. It was obviously done in a hurry, and at a time when shoving the body over the side would have attracted attention. That means the pouch, and your precious Shell, are probably still on the boat. Now don’t leap down my throat, I know all about your dwindling powers and all the rest of it, but can you find anything out about how and when he died without losing too much of your oomph?”

Mordecai considered. “Possibly. It would have been easier before we moved him, but that would have revealed to anyone who happened to be passing that I am no clerk. I will need to be alone with the body, though, so you had better go and do something useful.”

Varnak bowed low. "What do you suggest, oh master mind?"

"What about that big fellow with the red nose?" Mordecai said.

"The one you were going to talk to and didn't because you were all up in the air about the Tseneshi woman if-she-is-one?" Varnak shrugged. "Of course, but I'd rather you were there for that. Look, why don't I talk to the Tseneshi woman if-she-is-one? I know you won't want to be around for that. We'll tackle Red Nose together."

"And with my luck I will begin by saying 'Now, Master Red Nose...'," Mordecai muttered. "Go. Talk to people. I will see what I can do."

Varnak grinned and withdrew.

All right, Mordecai thought, and startled himself. It had been so long since he had felt alone with his thoughts that the mental voice startled him as if he had crept up on himself from behind. He mastered the impulse to look round. *All right. I'm in a room the size of a salt cellar with a dead body, but that is not important right now. I have to find out how he died, when he died, and if possible who killed him.*

How was easy enough. The knife wound in the lower back, slashing through short cloak, gilet and tunic, had been obvious from the moment they had seen the body. When was trickier. Mordecai was no specialist in the arts of healing; he knew dead bodies went stiff and then went floppy again, but when and for how long was beyond him. It had happened some time after they had seen Parrunz alive and before they had found the body. *Brilliant deduction, Mordecai.* He shook his head in disgust at his own ignorance.

Perhaps the spirit of the man was still around somewhere on the astral plane. If so, Mordecai might be able to find him and question him. Sometimes spirits lingered so for about a day before going on to what awaited them. Tamlanders rarely speculated about what that might be; their mutual non-interference pact with the gods ended at death, and while everybody knew that the soul survived, it was generally regarded as being up to the individual to find his or her own way to whatever came next.

Well, that was all very well, but there was no way he was going to find his way on to the astral in here. Mordecai looked around the tiny room with distaste. Then he gathered himself, went out into the main room, quickly removed the horrible clerk's clothes, positioned pencil and paper within easy reach and lay down on the bed. It wasn't as comfortable for this purpose as his own, but it would have to do.

He steadied his breathing, stilled his mind and went through the familiar ritual. When he was quite certain that he was in fact standing at the foot of the bed looking down at his own naked body, he turned and opened his senses to the changed world around him.

Most of the souls he sensed were, as he had expected, immured within the flesh, only perceptible as presences. He flicked past them, searching for a flash of colour, a breath of sound, the unmistakable shape of a soul unhoused.

There.

Mordecai began to move, the walls of the room as insubstantial as drizzle, the floor only supporting him because he willed it so. The soul was here, and it felt like Dardash Parrunz's. He cast about him, and found that the way was down. *What's down from here?* he thought, a little wildly. Running water was a problem for spirits.

He turned himself in mid-air till he was almost upside down, and gingerly pushed his face through the insubstantial planks, remembering Werness, his first tutor in the art. *Yes, boy, of course you can see with any part of your spirit, but once you start that you're in a fair way to forgetting your shape, and once a spirit does that...well, the next thing is forgetting your name, and then it's downhill from there on.*

To his surprise, instead of murky, rushing water, he found more boat. The barge had yet another level, though with barely enough room for a child to stand up. It was damp, unlit, and warm, and Mordecai was glad that odours did not penetrate the astral; he felt instinctively that this place would smell. Strange blocky shapes were piled randomly here and there, and the glow which indicated the presence of a disembodied soul was hovering near one of these piles. Mordecai willed himself closer.

There was something living on the pile of whatever it was, something with the deep-banked soul-fire of an animal. It looked up as Mordecai approached, and he felt something familiar.

Fish?

What on earth are you doing here? Mordecai thought.

Busy. Not sure. Hurts.

Who are you?

Mordecai turned to the dimly glimmering soul at his side, which still showed the unmistakable lineaments of Dardash Parrunz.

A friend, he thought. I need to ask you some questions.

Pick your moments, don't you, eh? Eh?

Do you know who killed you?

The soul shrugged. Could have been anyone. They all had it in for me. Look, friend, I'm a bit preoccupied just now.

What do you mean, all?

Everyone on the boat. Hudge, Stychel, the Gavrus girls...they all knew I was a Penny. All wanted me dead. Now I am, and to be honest I don't care any more. Someone else can sort it out.

But you must have some idea, Mordecai thought desperately. The cat's mind was feverishly active, huge swathes of stored instinct unpacking themselves and slotting into place. Parrunz's shade seemed fascinated by it.

Doesn't matter any more, it thought. That life's over. You don't spend ages agonising about a book when you've finished it. You just put it back on the shelves and pick out a new one, eh? Eh? No regrets.

But we need to know!

Then ask around, the shade said. Something was moving under the cat's hindquarters, something squirming and glistening. As Mordecai watched, the cat leaned over and began to lick it, and the glistening coating peeled off, revealing a damp, furry sausage which opened its mouth and made a lost sort of squeak.

Mordecai turned to look at Parrunz, but the shade had vanished completely. The cat picked the kitten up tenderly in its mouth—her mouth, Mordecai realised—and conveyed it to the nearest nipple, where it settled down contentedly to its first meal.

Go away, thought the cat, looking directly at Mordecai.

If he had had his body, he would have sighed. It was clear that Dardash Parrunz, as he had been, was now definitely no longer concerned with the question of his own murder, or indeed anything except milk and sleep.

Next time, the cat told him as he turned to go, *bring fish*.

And that was the exact moment when an ear-shattering scream jerked Mordecai back into his body.

*

The stranger rode into Mattockhay as the sun was declining marrenthward. Workers in the fields watched him from under their eyelids. It was best not to show too much interest; strangers in town usually meant bad news for somebody. The king's spies were everywhere, and a chance utterance could get you hauled off to the Sable Chamber before you had quite finished speaking.

This particular stranger, tall, spare and keen-eyed, felt the sullen pressure of their gazes but chose to ignore it. She entered the village by the old north road and dismounted outside the inn, whose garden backed on to the river and boasted a mooring point for the riverboat service. The inn, whose faded sign bore the name Toller's and a stylised image of an outstretched palm, was quiet at this hour, and the stranger tied up her horse and strode into the beer-scented gloom of the common bar.

"Afternoon, m'lady," said the innkeeper, popping up from behind the counter like a spring-mounted toy. "How may I serve?"

"I need a room for the night and stabling for my horse." The woman's voice was low-pitched and a little husky, but her tone was brusque and businesslike. "I'll be meeting the riverboat tomorrow."

"Business down the river, have you?" The innkeeper rang a bell, and a boy and a girl, hurriedly adjusting their clothing, appeared with suspicious alacrity from a door behind the counter. "Shallie, a room for the lady. Ketto, see to her horse. And mind you care for her proper like."

"That will depend," the lady said dryly. "Your own?" she added, inclining her head toward the disappearing youngsters.

"Ketto is, gods blast him," the innkeeper replied promptly. "Shallie's working off her father's tab. I wouldn't mind if they'd just keep it to after hours. Next thing you know he'll push too far and then I'll lose the both."

The stranger shrugged, indicating some sympathy but no desire to delve any further into what were, after all, his problems.

"What's your beer like?" she asked.

“Good enough for most hereabouts,” the innkeeper replied honestly, selecting a mug from a hanging row and going to the leftmost of the three large barrels. There he hesitated, glancing back, and on receiving her nod filled the mug and carried it carefully back to her.

“Three coppers, if you please,” he said, once she had taken the first sip and nodded approvingly. She produced the coins readily from a well-worn pouch and tipped them into his hand.

“Good enough for most anywhere, I should say,” she said, after a more measured appraisal. “Do you get many visitors from otherwheres?”

“Well, there’s the riverboat trade, of course,” the innkeeper said, “but as a rule, not so many. Mattockhay’s a small place, m’lady. We’ve nought much to attract outsiders.”

“How about right now?” Her voice had acquired an edge. “Any strangers staying here at the moment?”

The innkeeper paled. “Is there...will there be trouble, m’lady?” he whispered, leaning close.

The stranger copied him. “Not for you,” she whispered back, “unless you want it.”

The innkeeper hesitated for a long moment. Then he bent even closer.

“May I know...” he said, almost inaudibly, “what it’s about?”

“It’s the King’s business,” said the stranger, drawing from her pouch a small gold medallion stamped with an open eye. The eye was emitting stylised rays of light. “That’s all you need to know.”

“He’s up there,” the innkeeper croaked. “Room at the end of the passage. He’s waiting for the boat and all.”

“Thank you...” The stranger waited.

“Rovak,” the innkeeper said quickly.

“Thank you, Rovak,” the stranger said. “What time do you serve dinner?”

“First bell after sundown.” Rovak was starting to relax. “You’re sure there won’t be any trouble?”

“You won’t even know I was ever here.” She paused, and added, “Will you?”

“No!” Rovak blurted. “I mean...no, m’lady.”

“Good.” The stranger finished her beer in leisurely fashion, got up and moved towards the stairs. “Have my saddlebags put in my room when it’s ready. The boy

won't tamper with them if he knows what's good for him. I can always tell."

"He'd never do that, m'lady," Rovak affirmed. The woman favoured him with a thin smile, and went up the stairs.

Once at the top, she moved, suddenly as silent as a ghost, down the passage to the door at the end. She paused a moment, listening, then in one swift movement, as footsteps creaked on the stairs below, opened the door and passed inside.

The skinny little man with the protuberant eyes who had been making notes in a small red book, seated at the table under the window, spun round in sudden shock, and his face registered stark terror.

"M-Master Churidang," he quavered.

"Gudge," said Master Churidang of the Exalted Order of the Penetrating Light, in a tone of complete affability. "This *is* a pleasant surprise."

*

As Mordecai jolted into consciousness he was aware of the desperate need to write down what he had seen and heard before it vanished. It was remarkably difficult, though, with all this screaming going on. He managed a few scribbled lines, and then was forced to let the rest go and deal with the immediate crisis.

It proved to be a woman, young and unknown to him, standing in the open doorway with her hands over her mouth, still emitting piercing shrieks. Now Mordecai looked more closely, she was hardly a woman at all, not much over fourteen if that, and another salient aspect of the situation suddenly struck him with considerable force.

He gathered the counterpane over him as best he could, trying to make conciliatory gestures with his other hand, just as Varnak appeared behind the screaming girl.

"Mordecai, what—?" Varnak stopped dead, and Mordecai could see the wheels going round in his head and knew exactly what he was thinking. He sent an exasperated look over the girl's head and dragged the counterpane off the bed completely as he got to his feet. Backlash would follow, but there was no time for that now. He knotted the counterpane round his waist and, with what dignity he could find, retired to the smaller room, taking his half page of notes with him.

By the time the screams had subsided, he had managed to tease a few more

fragments from his memory and add them to the notes. He could hear Varnak talking in the next room, and assumed he was making up some suitably scurrilous and discreditable explanation as to why Master Alonso the clerk had been stretched out on Lord Ildras's bed stark naked and apparently dead. Mordecai knew his prince. *If she laughs*, he thought...

But no laughter came, and presently Varnak knocked on the door.

"Are you decent?" he said.

"Compared to what?" Mordecai responded wearily.

Varnak opened the door and came in.

"She's the boatmaster's daughter," he said. "She came to collect the tray. Honestly, Mordecai—I assume you were astral travelling or something, but you could have bolted the door."

"I did not think of it. Besides, how would you have got back in?"

"I'd have waited for you to be finished, of course."

"What did you tell her?"

"That you were very tired and didn't pack any night clothes." Varnak caught his startled expression, and grinned. "It's no fun spreading stories about you if they aren't going to come back to you. No, she went away full of apologies for disturbing you."

"Thank you, your Highness," Mordecai said, bowing as formally as he could while wrapped in a counterpane. "Is the door bolted now?"

"Oh yes."

"In that case, with your permission, I will get dressed," Mordecai said, edging past Varnak and out into the main room.

"Tam, your handwriting hasn't improved," Varnak's voice followed him as he picked up shirt and breeches.

"Being screeched at does not make for exquisite penmanship," Mordecai said from inside the shirt.

"Nobody would ever describe your penmanship as exquisite." Varnak was in the doorway of the small room, frowning down at the sheet of notes. "I always assumed magicians were taught to write like that on purpose. What's a hudge?"

"A hedge with a grudge," Mordecai told him. "I do not know. It was a name Parrunz mentioned. And I can write perfectly well if I am left in peace. Give me that."

“Breeches first.”

“Oh, all right.”

“You’ve written ‘Penny’ here as well,” Varnak said, as Mordecai hopped on one foot, “unless it’s ‘Denny.’ What does that—” He stopped, and his eyes widened.

Mordecai paused in his hopping to nod. “Master Parrunz was a member of the Exalted Order of the Penetrating Light. Quite a senior member, to judge by his having a Correspondence Shell.”

Varnak nodded soberly. “King Valbogast’s most secret enforcers. It’s over there by the window. Why you have to throw your clothes in all directions—”

“They are not my clothes,” Mordecai said, retrieving the errant boot. “I see no reason to keep them neat when the object is that I should look down-at-heel and impoverished.”

“Yes, but you do that with your own clothes as well.” Varnak waved his hand dismissively. “Anyway. So, Parrunz was a Penny. Guess why he was on this boat.”

“So much for our secret mission,” Mordecai grunted, tugging on his bootlaces. “I might as well have come as myself, and appeared on the deck in a flash of purple light with a sound of trumpets.”

“Your secret’s still safe,” Varnak said seriously, “and I want to keep it that way. So no flashing. I’m sorry,” he added hastily, as Mordecai looked daggers at him. “It just popped out...oh *Tam*.” He went very red.

“Your face clashes with your hair when you do that,” Mordecai said. “There. I am dressed. For want of a worse word. Did you get as far as the Tseneshi woman?”

“Oh yes,” Varnak said, handing Mordecai the paper. “And she is one, too. We had a brief but illuminating chat. Do you remember last year, when the Princess came to visit?”

Mordecai rolled his eyes. “Vividly,” he said. “Was she there?”

“Rather,” Varnak said. “Mistress Elouyne—I started off calling her Lady Elouyne and she got very high hat with me—was the Princess’s Duenna.”

Mordecai went cold.

The Duenna.

The Duenna, who had so enjoyed his discomfiture at the cunning hands of Shurath, the Lord Chancellor. The Duenna, who had with such fervour called first for his,

Mordecai's, death, and then for his ritual gelding. The Duenna, whom he—and Willibald—had so drastically put out of countenance. Apart from Shurath himself, Mordecai could think of no-one in the world with more reason to hate him.

“Apparently she was ejected from the Witchring.” Varnak was still talking. “They have some special term for it, but I wasn't really listening. So she left Tsenesh for ever, destroyed her hair-frame and now lives in Freeport. She was up here on some errand, but I didn't find out what that was because of...well.” He made an expressive gesture.

Mordecai stared at him. “Is it not obvious?”

Varnak looked back at him. “What, you mean she hired Rylome to scrobble Willibald just to get back at you?”

“Exactly,” Mordecai said, “but not just at me. If Valbogast knows about our mission, then the Witchring certainly do. This ejection, whatever, is a trick. The Duenna's mission is the same as it always was; to weaken Tamland for conquest. Your Highness, answer me one question.”

“I'll try,” Varnak said.

“Which seems more important to you right now: to travel the rest of the way down this river, in the company of at least one known enemy, in order to negotiate with a foreign power over some possibly mythical substance which may or may not be of any use, or—” Mordecai held up one finger. “To return to Tamshold at once by the fastest available horses, to strengthen the kingdom against an inevitable magical attack from Tsenesh for which all this has been the prelude, and to find my missing apprentice using all the means at my command when I am actually in my home?”

“I don't know.” Varnak suddenly looked quite small and wretched. “I thought I did, but the worse this gets...Tam take it, Mordecai, I didn't expect somebody to scrobble Willibald. I just thought—”

“You thought you would have a jolly junket down the river, with me along for comic relief, and enjoy a change from the stifling routine of court life.” Mordecai was scathing. “This, your Highness, is the same impulse which led you to plot with an agent of King Valbogast last year to overthrow your own father.”

“I know.” Varnak's voice was almost inaudible. “And I would be happy to say yes, Mordecai, let's go home, I was wrong to tell Father you and I could handle this. We're not up to it, I see that now.”

“Now wait just a minute,” Mordecai began.

“No, you were right, Mordecai,” Varnak went on. “You're completely useless without the Panergodyne to back you up, and I...I'm just generally useless. I'm a

breathing body being grown to prop up the damn crown when the current body dies, and till I'm needed for that I should just sit quietly in the palace and stay out of trouble."

"I did not mean—"

"There's only one problem, Mordecai." Varnak said, looking up at him. "We're here now. A man has died. Someone has to find his killer, and useless as I am, by law that someone is me. And I can't do it without you. And even if we were to jump off this boat right now, swim to shore and find the fastest horses in Tamland saddled and ready, we might still be too late to save the kingdom or Willibald."

"But—"

"The thing is, Mordecai," Varnak went on, his voice growing stronger, "sometimes when a thing's done you can't undo it or take it back or make it right. You have to accept that it's done and deal with it. I've been very stupid in taking Father's orders on your behalf and mine, in letting him trust us when we aren't either of us worthy of his trust, but now we've got no choice but to see this thing through and try to make the failure not too catastrophic. If we're very lucky—"

"Will you be quiet!" Mordecai shouted. "I know what you are doing," he said more quietly, "and it will not work. You want me to say that I am *not* useless without magic, and that I *am* worthy of the king's trust, and that you *are* perfectly capable of dealing with this murder investigation, and of course all of that is quite true, but I am not going to admit it."

"You're not?" Varnak said.

"Absolutely not," Mordecai said.

"As long as that's understood, then," Varnak said with a grin.

"Definitely."

"Good."

"Good."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"Shall we go and find the man with the nose?"

"Why not?" Mordecai said. He was still not quite sure what had just happened, but he was determined to stay on top of things.

Varnak unbolted and opened the door, and ushered Mordecai through with a bow. He was smiling as he did so.

*