

CHAPTER NINE

They found the man with the red nose sitting in a folding chair in the stern of the boat, peacefully sketching the passing landscape with a stick of charcoal in a large book. Mordecai could glimpse other sketches among the pages as a vagrant breeze caught them. The *Pride of Tamland* was still moving quite steadily without benefit of horse, and the landscape was certainly of a sort that might inspire one to drawing; on the right bank the scrubby, rock-strewn heathland of Tsenesh still prevailed, but on the left, the forests had given place to lush meadows on which plump sheep grazed contentedly. In nearby fields, men were walking up and down, doing whatever it was farmers did at this time of year. Mordecai had never troubled to inquire.

“Good afternoon to you,” Varnak said pleasantly.

“And to you, sir,” said the artist, revealing an orotund yet strangely breathy voice, with no trace of the accent Mordecai had heard the first and only other time the man had spoken in his presence; it seemed weeks ago. With one final, almost regretful stroke of the charcoal, he laid the book aside and rose to offer them a florid bow. “A pleasant afternoon indeed,” he went on, “though I fear we may be voyaging into some small inclemency before too long. You are Lord Ildras of Clenth, I believe.”

“Indeed,” Varnak said. “But I fear you have the advantage of me, sir.”

“That is so, yes indeed,” the big man said, smiling as though the thought gave him pleasure. “Allow me then to render all equal. My name, sirs, is Hudge, and I am by profession an Extricator.” He pronounced the word with the capital letter, every vowel given its full value, the final one perhaps even a little extra.

“And what do you extricate?” Mordecai asked, and Hudge looked at him curiously.

“My clerk,” Varnak said hurriedly, “Master Alonso del Cazargua.”

“I am delighted to meet you too, sir,” said Hudge, bowing again. “And to answer your question...but please, gentlemen, let us be seated. You are, I perceive, both young and fit, but my old bones crave rest.”

Varnak and Mordecai found two more folding chairs and sat down, while Hudge lowered himself into his own seat once again, with many little gasps and grunts of satisfaction.

“To resume, then,” he said at last. “There is, as you will have perceived, dear sirs, a mort of trouble in this wicked world. That is as the good gods have decreed, no doubt, and who are we to question? However, it will readily be apparent to you

that in many cases the wrong people are afflicted while those deserving of misery go singing about the world. It is to remedy this imbalance, this injustice, that my profession and that of my colleague's was invented."

"Your colleague?" Mordecai prompted.

"A dear good fellow," Hudge enthused, "by the name of Gudge. These are, of course, merely professional names, you understand. I am an Extricator, and Master Gudge is an Implicator. We often work together. I get people out of trouble, and Master Gudge, using his considerable skills, gets other people into it." His tranquil smile broadened. "By whatsoever means may come to hand."

"And who decides?" Varnak said, his tone unexpectedly hard. "You?"

Hudge tittered. "I? Oh dear me no. Master Gudge and I are but servants, mere functionaries. We have no say at all. The issue is decided by whomsoever places the requisite amount of gold into our coffers."

Varnak looked scandalised.

"Master Gudge and I are not philosophers by nature," Hudge continued, studying his fingernails complacently. "Abstract morality, we find, is a tricky and evanescent thing, varying from place to place, from person to person, from time of day to time of day. Ask a man a moral question in the bright morning, when he has just eaten and all seems harmonious, and ask him the same question in a howling rainstorm after he has worked all day and been jilted by his light-o'-love, and you will get two very different answers. Yet ask him how much coin he has in his pouch and—ah, that is a simple matter, easily determined and clear to all. I put it to you, gentlemen, which is the surer guide for a humble artisan struggling to provide for his solitary old age?"

"So you are—what?" Varnak said. "Blackmailers, informers, spies for hire?"

"We can turn our hands to many trades," Hudge said equably. "Not all perhaps of the sort that would sit well among the gossip of Tamland's nobility. In my country we are more realistic."

"And are you engaged upon business now?" Mordecai asked casually.

"I have undertaken a commission for a client." Hudge's air became apologetically guarded. "You understand, of course, that I can not disclose any information regarding the identity of my client or the nature of the commission. Professional integrity is so very important in a line of business such as ours."

"Professional integrity!" Varnak exploded out of his chair, which promptly folded up under him with a clatter, and Mordecai, standing up likewise, forestalled him before the tirade could begin in earnest.

“Perhaps you had better let me take it from here, my lord,” he said loudly. “I will join you in your room when I have finished.” He caught Varnak’s gaze and held it, willing him to understand.

“Very well, Master Alonso,” Varnak said unwillingly. “I’ll leave you to finish...this.” With one disgusted glance back at Hudge, the prince turned and stalked off.

“Ah, youth,” Hudge said sadly. “So idealistic, so uncompromising. You handle him well, Master Alonso.” He sighed gustily as Mordecai sat down again. “But now to important matters. You and the noble lord are investigating the death of this poor fellow, what was his name? Ah yes, Parrunz, thank you. And you wish to know if I was involved. Very natural, very natural.”

“Was he part of your...commission?” Mordecai asked.

“I do not believe I will be violating confidentiality if I say that he was not.”

“Did you know him?”

“We had never met till we boarded the boat.”

Bain’t what he said. The thought, in Willibald’s voice, was so clear that Mordecai almost looked over his shoulder. Very occasionally he found himself imagining the apprentice in his thoughts, reminding him of things that he had forgotten. Usually it was strangely comforting. Now, when Willibald was missing, possibly already dead, it was simply painful.

“I see you doubt me, Master Alonso.” Hudge was looking quizzically at him. Mordecai shook his head. “Please,” Hudge went on, raising one hand. “In your position I would do the same. To you, I seem doubtless like some species of ruffian, a most suspicious character. Say no more. I quite understand. It is for me to establish my good faith in your eyes. But how?”

“I have no idea,” Mordecai admitted. “To be honest, I barely know where to begin with this business.”

“Not your usual line of work?” Hudge laughed suddenly. His laugh was almost silent. “I fancy not. Oh dear. Well, perhaps I can be of some help after all.” He thought for a moment. “On that morning, in Imhalca, several passengers went ashore, did they not?”

“Yes...”

“And Master Parrunz’s body was not under the stairs at that time?”

“No, it could not have been.” Mordecai felt very stupid. “Of course. That means he must have been killed while we were all off the boat.”

“Who found the body?”

“One of the ap Gavrus sisters.”

“Did they go ashore?”

“Yes, all three of them.”

“But you did not see them come back?”

Mordecai had to admit it was so.

“How many went ashore that morning, besides yourself?” Hudge’s tone was genial.

“The sisters, one of the students...” Mordecai racked his brains. He was not in the habit of observing closely what went on in the material world. It was a weakness. “And I think the teacher must have gone ashore as well, because he appeared on deck while we were looking at the...at the body.”

Hudge shook his great head in mock reproof. “He could, you know, have come up the other stairway and simply walked around the deck...but I confess I see no reason why he should have done so, unless of course he is the man you seek. On the whole I doubt it.”

“Do you know him?”

“No more than I knew Master Parrunz,” Hudge said definitely. “And now I must crave your pardon, Master Alonso. The light is departing, and it seems we are in for some unpleasant weather. I should like to try to capture these last moments, if I may.”

“Thank you, Master Hudge.” Mordecai rose and bowed. “You have been most helpful.”

“That,” said Hudge, sketching a bow from his chair, “is my sole desire.”

As Mordecai left him to his artistic endeavours, he saw that Hudge was right; ahead of them, where the river wound into the distance, dark clouds were massing, and he could see the drifting veils that betokened heavy rain, deceptively tenuous at this distance.

Mordecai suppressed, yet again, the longing to be home that rose and threatened to choke him. There was no help for it. He sighed and went downstairs.

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“Your Majesty!”

King Bran hurried past Gisel into her hall. “Close the door,” he snapped. “I had to use four separate secret passages to get out here. Everyone thinks I’m—well,

never mind, doesn't matter. I had to talk to you."

Gisel looked carefully around before she closed the big front door. Nobody was about in her quiet street, at this hour of the evening.

"What can I do for you, Bran?" she said as the King shrugged out of his enveloping cloak.

"A drink," Bran said definitely, "and some warmth. Does it seem cold to you? No? Maybe just me, then." He was looking closer to his actual age than he ever had, and his hands as he hung the cloak on a wall hook seemed almost to be trembling.

Gisel led the way into her comfortable drawing room, opened a sideboard and poured two small glasses of brandy. The King took his, sat down unbidden in one of her deep armchairs and drained the glass as if it had contained water.

"Tell me," Gisel said, perching on the arm of the sofa.

"Court met in secret session this morning," Bran said heavily, toying with the empty glass in his hand. "I had to tell them, Gisel. I had to. They're no use to me if they don't know what's going on, spies or no spies. Anyway. Advisers were no help. Trade wants this filthy stuff, Foreign Relations says we can't let either of the other two get there first, Defence simply isn't bothered—" He broke off. "You get the idea. Tomes were no help either. So by the end of a long, dull, pointless discussion I was no further forward. Spent the whole of the rest of the day thinking about it, going round and round and over and over."

A chill touched the back of Gisel's neck. "And what did you conclude?" she asked softly.

"What I had to conclude," the King said, putting the glass down on a small table. "What I had no choice but to conclude. We need a magus. We don't have one, not even an apprentice. I've sent to Zivano." He hesitated. "I accepted his terms."

Gisel opened her mouth to shout at him, thought about it and stopped.

"I can't do anything else," Bran said. "We are so horribly vulnerable, Gisel, you must see that. Magic is the only reason Tamland has lasted this long, the only reason it exists at all. By rights Tam and his rag-tag should have died in the wilderness. If we are going to preserve our land, we must have a visible, functional Court Magus, and he is the only man." He frowned. "In a way Mordecai brought this on himself."

"So you are going to abandon him." Gisel's own voice sounded odd to her. "You are going to betray—"

“I am betraying *nothing*,” Bran said sharply. “Mordecai’s life is pledged to the service of the kingdom. That’s why he went on this insane journey in the first place when he would far rather have stayed here.”

“You’re betraying his friendship!”

Bran slumped in his chair. “Who was it said kings can’t afford to have friends?” He looked up. “He’ll be here tomorrow afternoon. I expect you to help him settle in and to continue in your current capacity as his assistant. No,” he went on as Gisel drew in breath, “you must. I need an eye kept on him. I trust you to do it discreetly, to let me know anything he does that seems to you—” He waved his hand helplessly. “Wrong.”

“This whole thing is wrong,” Gisel said flatly. “And you know he’ll suspect me of doing exactly that. He will suspect me, he will neutralise me, he will probably have me killed.” She got down on her haunches so as to look up into his face. “Tam’s life, Bran, I see the trap you’re in, but did you really have to commit yourself to doing—to doing that to Mordecai?”

“Well,” Bran said, looking down at his cousin with a hint of affection leavening the worry on his face. “I read this story once. Won’t tell it, I’m hopeless at telling stories, but the end of it was something like...um...” He thought for a second. “A lot can happen in a year. Maybe the King will die. Maybe I will die. And maybe—”

“And maybe the horse will learn to sing,” Gisel finished wearily. “So you’re basically hoping to have thought of a way out of this by the time Mordecai gets back.”

“And in the meantime, Tamland is safe.” Bran tried on the fading memory of a smile. “I’m doing my best here.”

Gisel softened. “I know. I only hope it’s good enough.” She picked up his empty glass. “Any news of Willibald?”

“Nothing.” Bran looked disgusted. “We’ve peered into every space in Tamland that’s big enough to hold a body, living or—or otherwise. I’ve notified our agents in Briom and Tsenesh, but they’re such damnably big places, Gisel.”

“Well,” Gisel said, “when Mordecai gets back, there won’t be a place in the entire world big enough to hide in. Assuming you can find a way to break your word without forfeiting your honour.”

“If I can do that,” Bran muttered, getting up, “I might try for the Magus job myself. That would be a trick worth ten of any Mordecai can do.” He looked at Gisel.

“Thank you, Gisel.”

“Don’t thank me, your majesty,” she said, as they emerged into the hall. “I haven’t done anything yet. Off with you, quick now. Don’t forget your tent.”

“Bedamned thing,” Bran muttered, swathing himself in it. “It’s Varnak’s. I couldn’t find anything of mine big enough, and this is several sizes too big.”

Gisel watched him from the doorway as he unsuccessfully tried to skulk away through the gathering gloom. There was still nobody around, but had there been, the king could hardly have failed to attract attention. One might have been forgiven for thinking the circus was coming to town.

Then she went back inside, sought out the brandy bottle and poured herself a second glass, closing the sideboard firmly on further temptation. She would need all her wits about her to deal with Zivano in the morning.

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“And you believed him!?” Varnak was appalled and incredulous.

“It was not a case of belief,” Mordecai insisted. “He simply pointed out facts I had overlooked.”

“Did he tell you where he was at this time? No! He’s our man, Mordecai, I’m sure of it.” Varnak was pacing the room restlessly.

“We have no proof,” Mordecai pointed out.

“The man freely admits he’s a criminal!”

“Only under Tamlandish laws. Maybe in Briom they allow this kind of thing.”

“Well, he’s in Tamland now—technically—and we don’t allow that kind of thing. Not blackmail, not extortion, not entrapment, and most definitely not murder.” Varnak rubbed his hands. “We’ll soon get him to confess. Come with me, Mordecai.”

“We have no proof.” Mordecai did not move.

“That’s why we need him to confess,” Varnak explained patiently.

“Sometimes you are altogether too much of a king for your own good,” Mordecai said. “Come back here and listen to me. We are carrying out the law of Tamland, yes?”

“Yes.” Varnak was impatient.

“Which states that a man must be proved guilty before he is punished, yes? Proof before punishment. I am sure I remember that.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Now if you go beating someone up to get them to confess before you have proved them guilty...purely because you do not like them...” Mordecai paused. “Yes?”

Unwillingly Varnak nodded.

“Now. While you have been storming up and down and working yourself up, I have been thinking about what Hudge told me. It seems to me that the person who killed Parrunz must have had three things.” Mordecai ticked them off. “A reason to kill him. A weapon to do it with. And a chance to do it without being seen. Only someone who had all those three could have done it. That is the person we must find.”

“Well, how?” A thought occurred to Varnak. “The weapon’s no good. He was a swordsmith, hawking his own wares. Obviously the man Hudge simply used one of Parrunz’s own blades and chucked it in the water when he was done.”

“You think so?” Mordecai considered a moment, then got up. “Come along, your Highness. You want action, I will give you some.”

“That’s more like it,” Varnak said. “Hudge?”

“No. Forget Hudge. We are going to look at Master Parrunz’s room. Probably we will already be too late, but that cannot be helped.”

“Why in the kingdom are we going to do that?”

“Because,” Mordecai said, “I am interested in what we might find in the room of a man who claimed to be a seller of swords on a business trip, but who carried no swords with him and whose belt had held a pouch...but never a scabbard.”

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“Well, that settles it,” Varnak said. “Not a pocket knife to be seen.”

Dardash Parrunz’s room, apart from the furniture that belonged to it, contained a travelling bag with two changes of clothes, washing and shaving tackle, a small black book full of incomprehensible lines of squiggle and a statuette of i-Kishryaak, the patron deity of the Exalted Order of the Penetrating Light.

“Perhaps,” Varnak went on, “perhaps he dumped Parrunz’s entire stock overboard. To confuse things.”

“It certainly does seem strange,” Mordecai mused, “that a secret agent posing as a merchant should have no stock with him. I mean of course a real secret agent,” he added, “not a bored prince playing a game.”

“I guessed that,” Varnak said, without rancour.

“He said—” Mordecai stopped dead. “I have forgotten something,” he said. “Where would I find the boatmaster’s daughter?”

“Probably in the kitchen preparing dinner, at this hour,” Varnak said. “But Mordecai, I already explained about—”

“This is something else,” Mordecai said, “and probably quite urgent. Excuse me.”

He had no idea where the kitchen might be on a boat like this, but a simple process of elimination and the smells of cooking combined in his favour. And there she was, chopping onions in a haze of steam and furious activity. Mordecai introduced himself and made his wishes known.

The girl’s face lit up. “Oh yes, sir,” she said, “I can get down there, no bother.” Then she looked crestfallen. “Oh, but my da,” she said, “he don’t like ’em. He’d likely put ’em all in a sack and—”

“Your da does not have to know just yet,” Mordecai said in a lowered voice. “We can keep them in our room till we get to Freeport. Lord Ildras will not mind. After that we can think of something else, but right now it is important. The mother will need food.” He thought about it. “She likes fish.”

“I can save her some,” the girl volunteered. “We has fish every day on account it’s so cheap. Oh, thank you, sir,” she burst out suddenly, and the cooks both looked round suspiciously. Mordecai smiled, bowed to them, and withdrew.

His obligation to the shade of Dardash Parrunz thus discharged, he returned to Parrunz’s room, but Varnak was no longer there. Mordecai took the opportunity to scan the room quickly with his magical senses, but nothing of note revealed itself; the statuette of the patron god exuded a faint numinous aura, as all such trinkets did, and that was about all. There also did not seem to be any obvious boxes of rivets lying about. Mordecai fingered the one in his pouch, and considered trying a small spell to find its point of origin, but dismissed the idea; that could lead him anywhere, to the forge where it was cast, or the mountain where the ore was mined. Objects rarely retained any associations less important than that. In any case, it was almost certainly a false clue, left by the killer to mislead any investigator.

Frustration abruptly overtook Mordecai. This was stupid. They were no further forward than they had been when the body was discovered. It was almost as if Dardash Parrunz had *wanted* his killer to go unpunished. And there was always the

possibility that it had nothing to do with Varnak's insane mission at all. He briefly considered wrecking the room, and decided that the satisfaction to be gained was not outweighed by the trouble of tidying it all up again. And Varnak would insist.

Where was Varnak anyway?

As if in answer, a shout suddenly resounded from somewhere up on deck.

"Master Alonso!"

He can't be that panicked if he remembered to use the right name, Mordecai thought; but all the same he hurried from the room and up the stairs, to find Varnak staring in mute astonishment at an empty folding chair, beside which there lay, as if just put aside, a sketchbook and a small box containing three or four sticks of charcoal.

Of Master Hudge, the Extricator, there was no sign.

Ahead of the boat, the storm clouds continued to gather.