

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was silence in the students' room for a moment.

"Is it your intention," Thavaar inquired, "to make our flesh creep?"

"I'm just telling you what I saw," Burlox insisted.

"How many packages?" Gorol asked.

"About nine, I think. Of course I don't know how many he started with."

"Could be a body," Driskil said. "Could be Hudge." He seemed pleased at the idea.

"Was anyone else in the kitchen at the time?" Gorol said.

"Just the girl," Burlox answered. "She was busy at the sink. But she didn't seem at all upset."

"You asked her, presumably?" Thavaar inquired.

"No, of course I didn't," Burlox retorted aggrievedly. "I know you all think I'm stupid, but I'm not that stupid. I got out of there with the stuff as quick as I could."

"Very sensible," Thavaar agreed. "Well, this clearly requires some thought. If it is Hudge, or some other poor soul, did the cook do the deed himself or was he merely disposing of the body for some other person? And if so, for whom?" He absently took the bottle from Burlox, took hold of something on the neck, pulled, twisted, pulled again, removed the cork, and took a long swig, all seemingly in one movement.

"We've got to tell Old Stick," Gorol argued. "This will get him going."

"No, I think not," Thavaar said.

"I jolly well think not too," Burlox said emphatically. "If you want to tell him, Gorol, you can say it was you who went down to the kitchen to fetch wine."

"No, I do not think we should tell him at all," Thavaar said. "I mean, we don't want to make it too easy for him." He swigged again. Driskil was eyeing him resentfully, licking his lips and twitching, and Thavaar hospitably handed him the bottle. "Apparently, good Burlox, all our furtiveness has been for naught. Old Stick knows all, about my potationary practices at any rate. I would far rather not excite the beautiful memory again." He took another bottle and moved to his bunk. "I think this new development must be mulled," he said, "and possibly slept on. In the morning, we shall confer anew, and by the time this vessel has docked at Mattockhay, doubtless a plan of action will have suggested itself. For are we not," he said, looking from one to other of them, "are we not among the brightest and the best of the youth of our nation? Do we not, between us, possess enough mother wit to solve a trifling enigma like this? Gorol, you seem doubtful. Burlox, you frown. Banish these uncertainties. Cleave, I beg

you, to the positive. We have a piece of information. Given that, how can it be possible we should not increase our store?"

"Less do it now," Driskil said, finally detaching his lips from the neck of the bottle.

"Do what?" Burlox, refusing Thavaar's offer of wine, had stretched out on his bunk and seemed already disposed to sleep.

"Get the cook up here an'—an' put him to the question." Driskil fingered his knife, which he had recovered while Thavaar was orating.

"And then who would prepare the breakfasts of which, after such a strenuous night's work, we would all no doubt be in sore need? No, Master Driskil, keen though you manifestly are to inflict gratuitous pain on some human being, I fear your lusts will remain unslaked for the moment. Data, dear boy, we need data before we can in conscience start slinging around the old enhanced techniques. And before I am in a position to assimilate data," Thavaar said, taking off his shirt and folding it neatly, "I shall require the remainder of the contents of this bottle and a period of slumber not less than six hours in length. I suggest that you follow my example and that of bully Burlox here. We must be fresh, fresh, if we are to fathom the toils of this web of intrigue."

"You sound as if you're enjoying it," Gorol said, taking off his own shirt with some relief.

"It is happening," Thavaar said. "My choice is to enjoy it or not to enjoy it. I cannot escape it. I choose the more congenial alternative." His head emerged from his nightshirt and he took a last long drink from the bottle that had somehow never left his hand. "I suggest you do likewise," he went on, hoisting himself into the upper bunk and lying down. "In fact, I would recommend it as a universal response to any event which does not involve you personally. And now, dear friends, while I could never weary of your constant chatter, there comes a time when we strong, silent types must unwillingly enjoin upon those about us a certain degree of hush. Sleep calls to me with its siren voice, and I am bound to follow."

Driskil was sitting on his own bunk, cleaning his fingernails moodily with the point of his knife. Gorol edged past his dangling legs, sat on his bunk and quickly slipped on his nightshirt. Sleep, he knew, would be a long time coming that night.

In fact it took all of two minutes before he was snoring quietly, a fact which was no small gratification to the occupant of the bunk above his.

*

"Well," Varnak said.

They were still sitting in the boatmaster's office. It was still raining.

“That is very interesting,” Mordecai said.

“So, if I’ve got this right,” Varnak said, “the Witchring don’t want...Amiya...back, presumably because they have another Princess-Elect installed and it would destabilise the situation...”

“But as a Tseneshi witch in herself, who has been high in the councils of that nation, she is so precious that the Tseneshi would tear Tamland to shreds if they knew we had lost her,” Mordecai finished.

“Interesting,” Varnak repeated.

“I said that.”

“It’s still true.”

“Which makes finding Willibald, as I have said all along, more urgent and important than this stupid *úllama* stuff,” Mordecai said.

“Yes, I know Mordecai, but we’re doing that as well,” Varnak said.

“How?”

“We’ve just ruled out Tsenesh as the source of the kidnappers,” Varnak said. “That leaves Briom and the Chotani. If we can rule out one or the other of those, then we’ll have our answer. And if it’s the Chotani, as I think it must be, then we’ll find out for certain in Freeport.”

“By which time it might be too late!”

“Don’t shout, Mordecai,” Varnak said tiredly. “Now, it seems to me that if Parrunz was a Penny, as he was, and he hasn’t reported in since he was killed, then there’ll be another Penny turning up fairly soon to replace him. We can talk to him or her, as the case may be, and establish some sort of co-operation, and that will enable us to find out how Briom feels about Tamland at the moment. And having a trained investigator working on this case can only help.”

Mordecai could think of several ways in which Varnak’s summation might be somewhat drastically oversimplified, but he realised at that moment that he was deadly tired. It was late, it was raining, and he needed to sleep.

“I hope it is all as you say, Highness,” he said. “Let us go to bed. Perhaps it will all look different in the morning.”

“If it does,” Varnak quipped, “you’ll know you’re on the wrong boat.”

Pulling their collars up round their necks, they dashed through the rain to the hatch and made their way down to their quarters. Mordecai waited behind Varnak as the prince opened the door, entered the room and stopped.

“Mordecai,” he said, in an altered tone.

“Highness?”

“Why are there a cat and five kittens on your bed?”

*

Zivano strolled into the magery and looked about him approvingly.

“Very nice,” he said. “I always thought del Aguila did himself remarkably well. The living quarters are upstairs?”

Gisel was ready for this.

“Yes, lord Zivano,” she said. “You will, of course, be quartered in the palace itself.”

Zivano swung round. “Is that so?” he said silkily. “And why would that be?”

“We expect the Magus’s return within a week or so,” Gisel said firmly. “It is the King’s wish that you allow him a decent interval to collect his belongings and put his affairs in order before leaving. He can hardly do that if you are living in his apartments.”

“Come, Lady Andemar,” Zivano said briskly, “if we are to work together there must be no dissimulation between us. You and King Bran intend to cheat me of my promised reward and keep del Aguila in his post. I have no idea why—the man is barely competent and personally revolting—but loyalty, I suppose, deserves some respect, even when so thoroughly misplaced. Well, I shall play your game and live in the palace as you say, and for my part, my lady, you should know that I will fulfil my end of the bargain to the letter. The better to destroy you both when you renege on yours.” He clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. “The office is through there?”

“Yes, my lord,” Gisel said neutrally.

“Now, now,” Zivano said, almost playfully. “What do we say?”

“Yes,” Gisel said through her teeth, “Magus.”

“Get used to it,” Zivano said, opening the office door, “Gisel. You may open the magery for business. I am quite ready.”

I’m not sure I am, Gisel thought, going out to put up the sign.

*

After breakfast, which came with an announcement by the boatmaster that their arrival at Mattockhay would in fact take place some time after noon—an announcement which drew annoyed huffs and grumbles from the ap Gavrus sisters—Mordecai and Varnak returned to the office and their task. The rain was still coming

down in sheets.

The matter of the cat and her kittens having been thoroughly explored, Varnak had reluctantly given his approval to the *fait accompli*, on the understanding that alternative accommodation be found for the animals as soon as possible. Mordecai had readily assented to this, though he had no idea how this was to be brought about. The boatmaster's daughter, whose name was Ollamy, had knocked at the door (rather tentatively, it must be said) just before breakfast with a dish of various fish parts and another of milk, and Mordecai had taken the opportunity while the mother was distracted to move the blind, squeaking furballs on to a cushion on the floor, close to the food. There was still the problem of output to be dealt with, but Varnak had been visibly chafing by that point, so he had resolved to absent himself from the interviews briefly and address that problem, hopefully, before it became immediate.

He looked into the bright, alert smile of Maranni ap Gavrus and wondered if he should do it now.

"Madonnina," he said, "would you please explain to my lord your purpose in undertaking this voyage?"

"Indeed I shall," Maranni said. "As you well know, my lord, my sisters and I are fanatical devotees of the adventures of Lord Clatterack, who—"

Varnak raised one hand. "Both your sisters?"

Maranni laughed merrily. "I pray you, sir, do not be cozened by Idyla's forbidding aspect. She may pour scorn upon our girlish enthusiasm, but I warrant you she devours each new chronicle with an avidity fully the equal of our own, for all she claims her interest is 'pure scholarship.'"

"I see," Varnak said. "Thank you. Please go on."

"Well," Maranni said, "as you will also know, my lord, the Clatterack estates are sited at Brokenbowes, on the Briom bank of the river, and in two days' time there is to be a Grand Gathering there of admirers of the noble lord and his adventures. And, assuming this slow-worm of a boat can be induced to reach Brokenbowes within that time, my sisters and I plan to attend. Hence our costumes. You surely do not imagine we wear these all the time." She swept a hand downward, indicating her antiquated gown, and Mordecai and Varnak, who had, murmured uncomfortably.

"And," Varnak said, "why did you come from Tamland and not from Briom?"

Maranni faltered, and lowered her gaze. "We—we were sent to Tamland on business for our uncle," she said haltingly. "In truth, it was the only way whereby he could be induced to give his consent for us to attend the gathering."

“Your uncle?” Varnak said.

“A most ill-natured gentleman,” Maranni declared, making a disagreeable face, “though I dare say it is terribly improper of me to venture an opinion. He has been our guardian since our dear papa heard Sasama’s call.”

“And his name?”

Maranni paled. “You—you surely do not intend to involve him in this—this inquiry, my lord? If you do—” She blushed. “I must be candid, I see. When I told you that our uncle had given his consent for us to attend the gathering at Brokenbowes...”

She paused, evidently expecting Varnak to take the point. The prince, however, showed no sign of doing so. Mordecai took pity.

“If the humble thrush may crack the shell of the snail of propriety, my lord,” he said, “the lady, I think, is endeavouring to convey, without actually saying so, that their uncle is not aware of the existence of any such gathering, and may have imagined that he was merely granting them permission to travel homewards on the river. This is of course pure conjecture on my part and should not be taken as anything in the nature of an admission.”

Maranni ap Gavrus flashed him a grateful yet wary glance.

“Your clerk is exceedingly astute, my lord,” she said.

“I see,” Varnak said. “Well, my lady, you may be assured that the disclosure will go no further. How long is this gathering supposed to last?”

“Three days, my lord,” Maranni said, “but we plan to stay no more than two. Idyla has everything planned to a nicety. We can hire a fast coach and be at our uncle’s house in good time, with never a suspicion.”

“I wish you good fortune and a smooth road. Now, if I may move on to the matter in hand...”

The interview was swiftly concluded. Maranni and her sisters had gone ashore at Imhalca as soon as the boat had docked, had stayed ashore till the last possible moment wandering around the village together, and had not seen Master Parrunz alive at any time that morning. Mordecai managed to head Varnak off from asking if any of the sisters had spoken to him or knew him socially. Similarly, while they had registered the presence of Master Hudge, they had had no conversation with him and had not marked the moment or manner of his passing.

“Thank you, my lady,” Varnak said. “If you would ask your sister Lonira to step in now, that would be most kind.”

"I am quite sure she is all eagerness," Maranni said, with perhaps just a hint of the feline. "For myself, I am glad to have done with this part of the proceedings, and look forward to making your further acquaintance, my lord, in less formal circumstances." She opened the door, grimaced at the rain drumming on the deck, and picked up her still sodden parasol. "I could wish that you had chosen a more pleasant morning, though," she said.

"The rain of adversity nourishes the blossoms of virtue, Madonnina," Mordecai said. Maranni ap Gavrus gave him a very odd look, raised her parasol and dashed for the stairs.

"Tam take it, Mordecai," Varnak said, flinging down his pencil, "the lady Idyla was right. Interviewing them separately is pointless. They'll all say exactly the same."

"Maybe," Mordecai said absently, staring at the closed door.

"How can we even know they're telling us the truth, if they think the whole thing is a stupid game? They could be just giving us what they think will make it a good story."

"If that were so, highness," Mordecai said, "we would have been treated to a breathless account of a hand-to-hand tussle between the lady Maranni and a hairy Sinjaro pirate with a knife between his teeth."

"Between his teeth?" Varnak was startled. "Why there? Surely in his hand would be a more useful place. Besides, he'd cut his tongue."

"Do not tell me," Mordecai sighed. "Tell the artist who paints the covers of these infernal books."

There was a sharp knock at the door.

"Come in, lady Lonira," Varnak called.

But it was the grey-clad Idyla who entered.

"I hope you will forgive my presumption," she said, in tones which plainly indicated that she cared not a whit whether they did or not, "but I am keen to dispense with my part in this charade as swiftly as may be." She planted her own parasol in the corner, where it dripped into the puddle already there, and sat down briskly. "What would you like to know?"

Varnak went through the preliminary questions again, eliciting much the same answers, though Idyla refused to be drawn on the matter of their uncle. When they came to the shore visit at Imhalca, however, her answers took a surprising turn.

"Indeed, my lord, no," Idyla said. "My sister Maranni absented herself for fully ten minutes, after we left your clerk at the book shop. She did not say where she was going, and we did not inquire. We assumed she felt a bodily need."

“A bodily—” Varnak caught up just in time. “What about ‘where one goes, all go, what one sees, all see’?” he asked mildly.

Idyla froze him with a stare. “I hope, my lord, you are not inferring that we follow each other to the—to the—”

“Privy,” Mordecai suggested helpfully, and got an extra helping of the stare for his pains.

“I can quite see how a dull and pedestrian mind might so mistake my meaning,” she said, still staring at Mordecai, “but I confess I hoped for better from you, my lord.”

“And you were quite right, my lady,” Varnak said quickly. “I spoke without thinking. Um...is there anything else you might have said that a dull and pedestrian mind might misinterpret?”

Idyla considered. “I think not,” she said at last. “It is my constant goal to express myself in terms of such clarity as may be readily comprehended by the veriest booby. I regret that on this occasion I clearly failed in that endeavour.”

Asked about Master Parrunz and Master Hudge, she disavowed all knowledge of them, to neither man’s surprise. “They are in the embrace of Sasama, where all dissensions are ended and only peace prevails,” she declared. “Happy souls. One day we too will hear the call that ends all strife.”

“You are actually followers of the Way of Sasama?” Mordecai asked with interest. Each of the many gods of Briom had their own cult, and in less civilised ages there had been fierce warfare between them, but few people went so far as to join in these enlightened times. Mordecai had never met a devotee of the god of death before, and his curiosity was piqued.

“I am,” Idyla said proudly. “My sisters, however, merely play at it. They are too easily distracted by the bright baubles of this life. I hope someday to lead them to a deeper understanding. And now, if that is all...?”

Varnak thanked her and rose from his seat.

“I should like to speak further with you about Sasama, if I may, Madonnina,” Mordecai said.

Idyla surveyed him coldly. “I fear, sir,” she said, “my observations indicate that your spirit is too mired in sensuality to be receptive to the teachings of Sasama. However, should you wish it, I believe there is a presbyter of our cult living in Tamshold who will be happy to instruct you.” She turned back to Varnak. “I shall send Lonira in to you directly, my lord. Good morning.”

“Mired in sensuality, eh?” Varnak said, when she had gone. “Doesn’t sound too bad to me.”

Mordecai, chafing in his clerk’s garb, said nothing.

“What’s this Way of Sasama then?” Varnak inquired.

“I know very little about it, highness, hence my question to the lady. As far as I am aware, Sasama’s followers believe that this life is but a short, uncomfortable prelude to a far happier existence in the kingdom of death. What evidence they may have for this supposition I do not know. One thing I do know is that they absolutely abhor the notion of suicide; one must wait to be called by Sasama. To attempt to hasten the proceedings is to be barred forever from his courts.”

“How are they on murder?”

Mordecai shrugged, and a knock on the door prevented further discussion.

Lonira ap Gavrus came in, with her hair half down and plastered to her head and looking very bedraggled.

“I vow, my lord, my sister Idyla is a perfect bear,” she said at once. “She positively refused to allow me the use of her parasol, simply because mine has somehow gone a-voyaging without me. What must you think of me, looking like a drowned rabbit?”

“I think you are very good to come out in this weather at all, my lady,” Varnak said gallantly. “Please, be seated. Master Alonso, have we a towel at all?”

“I fear, my lord,” Mordecai said, “the falcon of providence has returned to the wrist of nobility without the prey of—er—” He ran down under Varnak’s pointed stare. “I will go and get one,” he said, and got up.

“Indeed, Master Alonso, but you must not,” Lonira said promptly. “Since my lord Ildras is so good, I am sure I can abide a little discomfort. Besides, I should only be drenched anew when I leave.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “In any case, to leave me here with his lordship...unchaperoned...would scarcely be proper.”

Mordecai sat down again.

“Ask me your questions, my lord,” Lonira said. “I shall answer truly.”

This time, Varnak started with Parrunz and Hudge, and like her sisters, Lonira disclaimed any knowledge of either. “I thought Master Parrunz seemed a pleasant enough man, though,” she said. “That is why I was so distressed when I discovered his—his body.” She stifled a giggle. “I truly thought he was—”

“For the purposes of our investigation, my lady,” Varnak said, “he is.”

“Oh, of course,” Lonira said at once. “You may rely on me, my lord.”

Questioned about her and her sisters’ purpose in making the boat trip, she corroborated Maranni’s and Idyla’s accounts, with several additional details on the manifold perfidies of their uncle.

“You will scarcely credit it, my lord,” she said, “but he confines us to no more than three good day dresses and two for evening wear, with but a single pair of shoes apiece. I ask you, how may a lady of quality conduct her self in good society with such a niggardly wardrobe? Not only that, but he has us dress each other’s hair, and Maranni is all thumbs and Idyla persists in pulling when she gets the chance. I vow I have lost so much hair under her ministrations I shall be quite bald before I am thirty.”

“What was the business upon which he sent you to Tamland?” Varnak asked.

At this Lonira became even more animated. “Why,” she declared, “for no other reason than to find rich husbands. He says that the nobility of Briom are too impoverished to provide a sufficient dowry to support us, let alone him, and since his ventures into investment have proved so disastrously unprofitable, he relies on rich marriages for the three of us to support him in his dotage. Which cannot be far removed now, for he is nearly fifty.”

Varnak, whose father was fifty-three and nowhere near doting yet, made no comment.

“But I am glad to say we were unsuccessful,” Lonira said. “Three whole weeks we spent in Tamland, and not a single husband did we find.”

“Where did you look?” Mordecai asked.

Lonira became vague. “Oh, here and there, you know,” she said airily. “Idyla has all the details should my uncle inquire. Clearly we could not in conscience think of allying ourselves to merchants and the like, and nobility in Tamland seems somewhat scarce. Had we known the country boasted such nobles as you, my lord,” she added with a coquettish laugh, “we might have stayed longer.”

Varnak looked apprehensive for a moment, and then clearly remembered who he was supposed to be under all the layers.

“And were I genuinely a nobleman, my lady,” he said, “I should have been desolated if you had not.”

“Why, Lord Ildras,” Lonira said, and reached for a fan which she did not have on her. She contented herself with covering her mouth with one hand and batting her eyelashes again.

Varnak moved swiftly on to the morning stop in Imhalca.

“And were you together the whole time?” he asked.

“No, my lord,” Lonira said, “and I found it quite strange. We passed the time of day with Master Alonso here at the bookseller’s, and then moved on, but almost at once Maranni informed us that she had a private call to make and deserted us. I watched her go, and turned to Idyla to pass some remark...” Her eyes widened. “I was quite alone, my lord. In a strange village, with no guardian and no chaperone. My lord, I am not reckless like Maranni nor confident like Idyla, and I confess my heart was in my mouth for fully ten minutes till they both returned.”

“You could hardly have been under threat from male harassment in a Tseneshi village, Madonnina,” Mordecai said.

“Well...no,” Lonira said reluctantly, clearly unwilling to relinquish the dramatic potentialities of the situation, “but one never knows, does one? And one hears such terrible stories, if it comes to that, of the Tseneshi women and their...and their proclivities. So I was very glad when I saw them both returning.”

“Did they return together, my lady?” Varnak said.

“Indeed they did, my lord.” Lonira frowned prettily. “And now I remember what puzzled me at the time. Finding poor Master Parrunz drove it straight from my head.”

“What was that?”

“Why,” Lonira ap Gavrus said, “I could not fathom why my sister Maranni should have seen fit to purchase a knife.”