

THE SAGA OF HALVAR THE HIRELING

MURDERS IN MANATAS



Roberta Rogow

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The Saga of Halvar the Hireling
Book I

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TO MY FATHER

Stanley Winston, 1918-2012, my
severest critic, and biggest fan.

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PART ONE

MURDER IN
MANATAS

Chapter 1

HALVAR DIDN'T MEAN TO STEP ON THE CORPSE.

He was still unsteady on his feet after the six-week journey across the Stormy Ocean. Dhows might be able to weather the tropical monsoons of the Indian Ocean, but they were not made for the battering of the waves on the expanse of water between Al-Andalus and Nova Mundum.

Like his forebears who went a-Viking, Halvar was not one to give his dinner to the fishes, unlike the frater who'd shared his tiny cabin and spent the entire voyage calling on the Redeemer to end either the voyage or his life. Still, his feet were used to shifting decks; and now he was on solid ground, he tended to overbalance and stumble at odd moments.

He had landed on the island called Manatas some thirty hours before, and had been swept up in ceremonies befitting the Hireling of the Calif Don Felipe, ruler of Al-Andalus. He'd taken part in a welcome from Sultan Petrus and a parade through the tiny settlement of Manatas Town. There followed a feast that introduced him to the local delicacies of maiz and gobble-birds, with a spicy sauce made from red tomatl, all washed down with sweet cider.

He had met the Sachems of the Mahak and Algonkin tribes. He had been warily polite to the trading-masters from Britain and Franchenland, who were just as wary of him. He had exchanged salaams with the Afrikans who had come from their

vast farms in the southern territories of Nova Mundum to sell kutton, rice and indigo to the Franchen and Bretains. After all, this was why everyone was on this island in the middle of the Great River—to trade at the Fall Feria, the great gathering of merchants overseen by Al-Andalus as the one nation that claimed neutrality in the incessant wars between the followers of the Redeemer and the Prophet.

After the feasting, Halvar had retired to the room assigned him in the Rabat, the stone pile that dominated the “toe” of the island shaped as it was like a man’s leg cut off at the knees. He’d tried to settle his brain and his stomach, both of which had absorbed a great deal of strange stuff in a short amount of time.

He was tall, by the standards of Al-Andalus, with fair hair thinner than it had once been that started higher on his forehead than when he had first joined the Free Companies of Dane-March as a lad of seventeen. His face was weathered from ten years of fighting across the fields of Oropa, and browned from the last five years in Al-Andalus, with the jutting nose and gray-blue eyes common in the Dane-March. A fair mustache swept from his upper lip down to his chin, adding to his fierce expression.

He had on his common gear—baggy woolen breeches tucked into the tops of his walking-boots, linen shirt under leather jacket, and a round leather cap, decorated only with an embroidered band of heavy silk. No one needed to know that the supple outer layer was lined with a stiffer cap of boiled leather, as tough as iron, but much lighter on the head.

He could not sleep on the hard plank bed, and the walls of the tiny cell seemed to close in on him after the spaciousness of the sea. Instead, he walked through the predawn quiet of Manatas. The Broad Way that had been laid out on the ridge of rock that formed the “long bone” of the island took him past the Muskat and Madrassa buildings—the largest and finest, after the Rabat—and the houses of the merchants, barred and shuttered against beasts, both animal and human, that might seek to enter. He slipped through the gate of the newly built Manatas Town Wall without being challenged (and made a mental note to question whoever was supposed to be in charge of the guards) and proceeded along the path to the Feria.

The Feria was laid out in a rough square, a small, if temporary, village of flimsy wooden sheds and tents with sectors devoted to a particular sort of merchandise. By far the largest and most complete buildings were those of the kutton merchants, where bales were stacked in locked wooden sheds protected from the rain that might fall. Kutton would be traded for furs from the North and West, and Al-Andalus would collect a payment on each exchange for providing the Feria and overseeing the honesty of both sides. Such had been the custom in Oropa for the thousand years since the armies of the Prophet had swept across the Middle Sea, dividing those who followed Ilha from those north of the Alps who continued to worship Chesu the Redeemer and his Mother Mara..

Halvar frowned as he paced along the beaten-earth path in the growing light of the rising sun. The stalls of the metalworkers were each marked by a signboard with a symbol on it specifying which metal was being sold—iron, bronze, copper. He had his orders, but how was he to carry them out? He didn't know this place, didn't have his usual allies, didn't even understand half of what was being said to him. The Arabi spoken in Manatas had an odd twang to it, and the Nova Mundans had incorporated local words to describe things not found in Al-Andalus. Even the people here were strange, merchants and craftsmen carrying themselves with a pride that went beyond a warrior's swagger, ready to argue any point at any time.

Then, he stumbled over a rock in the path and knocked his toe against something under a bush beside the path. As he caught his balance, he glimpsed two legs clad in the fringed leather leggings worn by some of the Mahak. He squatted to take a closer look.

It was the body of a man, sprawled face down. Flies swarmed about the bloody dent in the back of his head, and more buzzed angrily when Halvar gingerly turned the body over to see the face.

He gasped. He had seen many horrible sights, but even he had to swallow hard when he saw the ruin of what had been the man's face. The bones had been mashed to a pulp, crushing the teeth into the cavity of the mouth and shattering the skull. Whoever had killed this man had been very strong, or very angry, or both.

Halvar stood and looked about him for assistance. He didn't know who this was, or why he was dead, but he knew one thing—the mysterious message to the Calif had been correct. Something nasty was happening in this supposedly peaceful settlement, and it was up to him to correct it. After all, he was the Calif's Hireling.

Murders in the Feria endangered the collection of funds. If Calif Don Felipe was to finance his wars with the taxes taken in at the Feria, it was Halvar's duty to see those funds made their way to Al-Andalus. The letter sent to Don Felipe had suggested they were, instead, being diverted to other purposes.

Halvar Danske, the farmer's son who had been made into a soldier, then a delver into the tangled thickets of court intrigue, decided it was necessary for him to restore order in Manatas.

Chapter 2

HALVAR LOOKED BACK ALONG THE PATH. THE NEAREST stall bore the sign of the ironmonger—a large hammer. A man had stopped in front of it with a donkey and cart, ready to unload his wares for the day's trading.

"Hoy!" Halvar called

The man peered down the path at him.

"Come here!" Halvar gestured with his arm. "There's a dead man here!"

The man trotted down the path. Now Halvar could see he was almost as tall as himself but much wider through the middle, with a broad red face mostly covered with a chestnut-red mustache. He wore the tight-fitting, garishly patterned trows favored by Bretons, topped with a red wool smock.

"What's this about?" the vendor asked in Erse-accented Arabi.

"I just found a dead one on the path," Halvar explained. "Who is in charge here? I have to report this."

The ironmonger stared down at the body.

"The Feria's not part of Manatas Town, nor Green Village, but in between," he said. "We've never had this kind of trouble before. Might as well send for Tenente Gomez, he's the head of the Town Guard. He's dealt with killings on the waterfront."

"You do that," Halvar ordered. "And who are you?"

"I'm Cormack mac-Cormack, of West Caster." He waved in the direction of his stall, indicating where a large youth was

now unloading the donkey cart. "That's my boy, Padraig. We sell the finest iron tools in the Feria," he added with a self-satisfied smirk.

"And I—" Halvar began.

Before Halvar could respond to this, Padraig joined them. The boy took one look at the body and yelled, "That's Leon!"

"Oh, we know all about you, Don Álvaro," Cormack said with a knowing wink. "The Calif's Hireling, come to make sure we all pay our wumpum for the privilege of trading at the Feria."

"How can you tell who it is?" Halvar asked the boy.

"Those are the leggings he wears, and that's his jacket." Padraig gulped. "Oh, Redeemer save us! He's dead!"

The cry of the muezzin echoed on the early morning air, summoning all who heard it to prayer. Both Britains made the gesture of the Crux, went down on one knee, and spoke the words "Patri Nostro." Halvar bowed his head and gripped the amulet he wore under his shirt, the little brass object that could have been the Crux or Thor's Hammer. Beside the tents and booths of the Feria, Afrikans, Andalusians and those Locals who had accepted Ilha and his Prophet prostrated themselves.

As he murmured his standard prayer—"May the Redeemer and his Mother and the God Thor help me this day"—Halvar's eye was caught by something in the leaf-litter on the path. He picked up a small blue bead. As far as he could tell, it was not from anything worn by the man lying in front of him. He tucked the bead into the pocket sewn into his jacket. Whether the owner of this bead was a murderer or a witness was yet to be determined, but Halvar would make it his business to find out.

His religious duty done, he turned back to Cormack and his son.

"Get someone from the Town Guard," he ordered.

"I'm here!" announced Tenente Gomez, the commander of the Town Guard.

He was a burly man whose dark eyes were shadowed by heavy brows, his nose squashed flat in some long-ago brawl, mouth and chin covered by a thick black beard neatly trimmed in the round style that was no longer considered fashionable in Al-Andalus. He wore the long green woolen coat and black

breeches of the Manatas Town Guard and a green tarboosh stiffened with a leather lining to absorb blows from those who would dare to attack a representative of the Law. He strutted down the path, the built-up heels of his riding boots kicking stray leaves out of his way.

"What's this about a body?"

"I found him like this," Halvar said. "This boy has identified him as Leon. Leon who?"

Gomez squatted by the body and peered at it.

"Leon di Vicenza. That's his coat, all right, but it's hard to tell for sure with his face smashed in like that."

Padraig gulped and retreated up the path, pausing to lose his breakfast in the bushes.

Halvar was made of sterner stuff. He joined Gomez beside the body, studying the wounds in the man's head.

"Something hard made this," he pronounced. "We'll have to look around for the weapon."

"We?" Gomez snarled. "What have you to do with this, Hireling? *I* am tenente of the Town Guard, I will take charge of this matter."

Halvar shook his head.

"Oh, no, Tenente. According to what I've been told, your Town Guard only serves the town. This murder took place on the Feria grounds, beyond the Manatas Town Wall. Don Felipe, may he reign long, put me in charge of the Feria. Therefore, I'll deal with this murder."

"What do you know about murder, Hireling?" Gomez argued. "The story we heard was that you were a soldier, out of luck and out of place, picked up after a tavern brawl to body-guard the young prince. All you've done since the Wars is follow a boy around the Madrassa in Corduva."

Halvar regarded Gomez through half-closed eyes, taking in the man's resentment at being replaced by a mere servant.

"If you don't like me, that's your business," he said evenly. "But let me remind you, Tenente Gomez, the calif sent me here. One reason was to oversee the goods and the revenues due from the Feria to Al-Andalus. The other is that Don Felipe wanted to find out what became of his fellow student from the Madrassa in Corduva, one Leon di Vicenza. And you tell me this is he, and he is dead? Don Felipe will be very distressed to hear it."

Gomez sniffed in utter indifference to the calif's distress.

Halvar looked up and down the path, noting how far it was from the stalls of the Feria.

"What was he doing here, anyway?"

"Doing?" Gomez echoed. "Knowing Leon, probably some lover's tryst."

"At the Feria? Why not somewhere more suitable?"

Gomez looked over at Padraig, who was still white around the mouth, making the freckles on his pale skin stand out more clearly in the growing sunlight.

"Leon liked 'em young," he said with a knowing nod in the boy's direction.

"And what do you suppose his father would say about that?" Halvar murmured, with a glance at the glowering ironmonger.

"It goes against the Prophet's Word," Gomez stated. "The Redeemer's, likewise. Even the wretched Yehudit say it's against their Law."

"But it happens," Halvar said philosophically. He frowned as he looked at the body. "There's something wrong. He wasn't hit here. Not enough blood." Now that it was light, he could see a trail of beaten-down weeds and shrubbery leading to a small dip in the landscape. "He must have crawled up here. Look at that trail."

He followed the signs to a small spinney of slender birches.

"He was struck down here," he said, pointing to drying blood and the cloud of flies feasting on the spatters of tissue on the ground. He stalked around the little clearing. His eye was caught by something tangled in the branches of one of the shrubs. "What's this?"

It was a club something like a mace, with a carved wooden handle that had been bent around an iron ball, secured with leather straps. More flies buzzed angrily around it as Halvar plucked the club out of the shrubs, holding it carefully by the very end, noting the carved symbols picked out with red and black paint. Someone had taken a good deal of time to make this object more than just a weapon.

Gomez frowned at the club.

"This is not good, Hireling. That's a Mahak war club, and if the Mahak are involved in this murder, we are going to have to deal with the Sachem."

"I thought we had made peace with the Locals," Halvar said.

"So we have, but there are always difficulties, especially if they take strong drink. They can't deal with it, it makes them mad," Gomez explained.

"Why would a Mahak take a club to an Andalusian? Especially one like Leon?" Halvar wondered as they made their way back to the path.

"You'd have to ask them," Gomez said, with another grimace and an expressive shrug.

Young Padraig was standing next to the donkey cart, which had been emptied of ironware to hold the body. Some of the other metal-dealers came to lift the corpse into the makeshift hearse.

"What now, Hireling?" Gomez asked with a slight sneer.

"We take this body into Manatas and let someone look at it who knows his business," Halvar said. "And then we find out just what Leon di Vicenza was doing in the Feria after dark."

"He was waiting for someone," Padraig blurted out, with an agonized glance at his father. "I saw him just as we were leaving for our lodgings in Green Village. He waved to me as I was leaving with Father."

"When was this?" Halvar asked.

"Just after sundown prayers," Padraig said. "I...I knew him. He...we...that is..." His voice trailed off. "I was one of the Seekers of Truth," he said finally. "There were four of us—me and Benjamin and Selim and Otter Tail. Leon was our teacher. He knew all about the stars, and the Old Rumi, and the Old Greco."

Cormack turned on his son.

"I thought I told you to stay away from that lot! Unbelievers! Heretics! Yehudit and Locals, all mixed up together, just like Leon's clothes. Local leggings, Andalusian jacket, and his face shaved like the fraters'!"

"But that was what Leon was telling us," Padraig protested. "He said that this was Nova Mundum, that we must turn outward, away from the old ways of Oropa, and become something totally new."

"Hmh!" Cormack grunted. "And look what it got him. Take that...Leon...into Manatas to the Rabat. Then come right back with that cart, do you hear? And if I hear any more about those Seekers of Truth, I'll see to it that you don't sit down for a week. You're not too big to beat, boy."

Padraig took his place at the donkey's head. Halvar recognized his expression of mingled fear and determination. *This lad wants to know how the world works, he thought. Leon di Vicenza, you would start a rival to Parigi or Corduva or Oxencross here in Nova Mundum? And see what it gets you!*

He caught sight of the green-and-yellow tabard of the Official Newscrier.

"Hoy! You!" he called out. The newscrier trotted over to him. "Get this message out—the body of Leon di Vicenza has been found in the Feria. Anyone with information about his death should bring it to Don Álvaro Dánico at the Rabat in Manatas Town."

The newscrier began declaiming the message as Halvar, Gomez, Padraig and the late Leon went through the gates of the town wall and down the Broad Way to the Rabat.

Chapter 3

THE DONKEY CART WITH ITS GRIM BURDEN GATHERED followers as it went as the newscrier's summons brought a crowd of chattering folk from the side streets and plazas. The town had been laid out in the same fashion as those of Al-Andalus, a style that had been established centuries before when the Old Roumi had first settled the farthest reaches of Oropa. On either side of the Broad Way, brick houses formed square blocks facing an inner courtyard, where a well or fountain had been sunk to provide water for the inhabitants.

Halvar noted the variety of people who stopped their work to watch—tall Afrikans in their striped kutton robes; Locals in a mixture of deerskin and woolen cloth; Andalusians in colorful shirts and baggy breeches; Franchen in wide-brimmed hats and tight-fitting coats; Britains in their checked and striped trews and smocks. There were few women in the crowd, mostly Locals in deerskin skirts and kutton smock tops decorated with beads or Afrikans wrapped in wildly patterned draperies topped with extravagantly folded turbans. It was too early in the day for the Andalusian women to be out; and they would be well-hidden, some in full burka, some only with the hijab, fulfilling the Prophet's dicta on modesty.

The procession stopped as the Grand Mullah emerged from the Muskat. Mullah Abadul was as tall as Halvar, made even taller by his turban, which topped a long ascetic face that

seemed to be all burning black eyes, jutting nose, and long gray beard.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"Leon di Vicenza," Gomez explained. "He's dead."

"He has met the end of all evildoers!" the mullah pronounced. "Shaitan has claimed his own!"

"He had some help," Halvar said. "Leon was murdered."

"And the one who did it will reside in Paradise!" Mullah Abadul announced. "This is what happens to those who question the Word of the Prophet and dispute the teachings of the fathers!"

Padraig burst out, "That's not so! Leon was a natural philosopher; he studied the workings of our world. Just because he didn't study all those musty old books—"

"You tell 'em!" A stocky young man whose round face was framed with the beginnings of a black beard on his cheeks and chin and two twisted curls in front of each ear, dressed in the black coat and fur-trimmed hat of the Askenat Yehudit, pushed to the front of the crowd and joined Padraig, arms folded, staring defiantly at the Mullah.

"Benjamin ibn Mendel," Gomez snarled. "Another of Leon's 'Seekers of Truth.'"

"Seekers?" Halvar echoed. He turned to the young Yehuda. "You're one of Leon's students."

It was a statement, not a question.

Benjamin stood his ground.

"Leon di Vicenza was a great man," he announced reverently, with a glance at the donkey cart. "Whoever killed him robbed the world of a mind that comes only once a century, if that. He observed Nature, and drew conclusions from what he saw not what someone else wrote years ago. He could draw images of what he saw—"

"Images!" roared Mullah Abadul. "Is it not forbidden, by both the Prophet's words and your own Yehudit Law, to make an image of any living thing?"

"Only to worship such images," Benjamin countered.

"And besides," Padraig added, "the images Leon made were like life itself!"

"Life itself!" The mullah was completely outraged. "Evil images! One does not create Life. Only Ilha may do that!"

"Ilha didn't smash this man's head in," Halvar pointed out. "Sir, I ask that you permit us to continue on our sad mission so that we may take this body to the Rabat, where the sultan may be consulted as to how we shall proceed. Whatever else he was, Leon di Vicenza was of Al-Andalus, and as such, his killer must be found so that his death may be properly avenged. Padraig, go on!"

Mullah Abadul had to step aside to let the cart and its followers proceed to the gates of the fortress, where the Broad Way stopped.

"Go back to your shops and houses," Gomez ordered the crowd. "News will be cried when we know more."

They dispersed, muttering and mumbling. The cart continued through the gates and into the courtyard of the Rabat, where Padraig brought the donkey to a halt.

The high walls of the Rabat cut off the winds from the bay. A straggling set of wooden sheds had been built against the walls, whose roofs provided access to battlements where cannons had been placed, facing into the narrow gap between the Long Island and the Round Island.

Benyamin and Padraig approached Halvar.

"We want to help find out who did this," Benyamin said. "Leon was our teacher, but more than that, he was our friend."

"Oh?" Halvar put a world of meaning into that one syllable.

Padraig's freckles nearly disappeared into the blush on his face, while Benyamin sputtered, "No, no, nothing like that, he was more friendly to Otter Tail, but we understood that they were, um, special to each other. My father would never have allowed Leon into our shop if he thought...um, what I mean is..."

"It's all right, lad, I get your drift. Who is this Otter Tail?" Halvar asked, grinning under his mustache.

"Otter Tail is the Mahak apprenticed to Malik the Smith," Padraig explained. "Malik and Leon knew each other in Al-Andalus, I think, and they worked together. Leon would think of devices, and Malik would try to make them."

"They didn't always work," Benyamin admitted.

"Where is this Otter Tail now?" Halvar asked.

Padraig and Benyamin looked at each other and shrugged.

"At the forge, I suppose," Padraig said.

Halvar thought he might have added something else, but instead the Britain youth shut his mouth over whatever words might have inadvertently popped out.

"If you see him, tell him I want to talk to him," he told the boys.

Gomez growled, "Enough of this schoolboy's chatter! You, Britain, get back to your father in the Feria, and you, Yehudit, get back to your shop. These are men's affairs, no business of yours."

Halvar was kinder.

"Thank you for your help," he told them. "I may want to talk to you again."

"You'll find me at the Feria, or at our lodgings in Green Village," Padraig told him. "We have rooms with the Widow Nic-Kinnock."

"My father is Mendel the Bookseller," Benyamin said. "We have a stand in the Souk, behind the Madrassa on the west side of the Broad Way."

"I'll find it," Halvar promised.

"The sultan is waiting," Gomez prodded him.

"One more thing to do," Halvar said. "Where's the doctor? I want this body examined before we bury it."

"Examined? Do you mean taken apart?" Gomez gasped. "Forbidden!"

"Not cut," Halvar assured him. "But without a face, who is to say that this is, indeed, Leon di Vicenza?"

"He's wearing Leon's coat and leggings," Padraig pointed out.

"A coat and leggings may be put on and off," Halvar persisted. "But there are other ways of marking a body."

A slender dark-skinned man in a long Afrikan tunic and round knitted hat emerged from one of the wooden sheds.

"Hah!" Gomez hailed him. "Dr. Moise! We have a client for you. That is, he would be, except he is already dead."

"So I hear," the Afrikan said. "What do you want me to do about him? I cannot cure him."

"I want him examined," Halvar said. "His face has been bashed in, but there are other ways of identifying a man."

"You doubt that this is Leon?" Gomez asked.

"I doubt everything until it's been proved true or false."

“Well, you’ll have to take that up with the sultan,” Gomez said. “Follow me, Hireling. Doctor, I wish you the joy of Leon.”

Halvar tugged at his mustache to hide a grimace. He was not looking forward to this interview. Sultan Petrus was known for his explosive temper; what he’d say when he found out one of his own people had been murdered would not be pleasant.

Chapter 4

HALVAR AND GOMEZ CROSSED THE STONE-PAVED courtyard to the central of the three towers in the fortress that loomed over the rocky tip of Manatas Island. They mounted the winding stair to the second story where Sultan Petrus had his private quarters, which consisted of one large room that filled most of the tower. A second, smaller stair led to the third floor and the Harem, the sequestered domain of Lady Ayesha and her maids.

An Afrikan with a gold ring dangling from his left ear stopped them at the door to the sultan's rooms.

"Be careful," he warned them. "The leg is bad today."

Gomez grimaced. "Let's just hope the sultan isn't too addled with hemp to listen to us."

"Hemp?" Halvar's eyebrows rose. "That's almost as bad as poppy juice."

"He uses it when the pain gets too much," Gomez explained. "But don't think less of him for that. Old Silver-Leg was a great fighter."

In his time, Halvar amended.

Sultan Petrus, Governor of Manatas Town by order of the Calif of Al-Andalus, was a full-bodied man, once muscular, now running to fat, whose watery dark eyes looked at the world over his grizzled beard. He sat in a chair of the Oropan mode rather than reclining on the pillows of a divan in the style of

Al-Andalus, draped in blue and green silk robes with a blue silk turban secured by a large turquoise pin. His silver-mounted ivory peg-leg rested on a small footstool in front of him,

The table beside him held charts and maps of the Nova Mundum coastline as well as a bowl of odd orange fruits and a tall brass pot with a spout for the serving of mokka. Halvar's midsection suddenly recalled that he had not eaten since the night before.

The sultan glared at them from under heavy dark brows. His round face flushed darker, and his very beard seemed to exude energy.

"What's this about Leon di Vicenza being found dead in the Feria?" he snapped before they could give the customary "Salaam aleikum."

"I found a body in the Feria wearing Leon's coat," Halvar said cautiously.

"But you don't think it's him?" Sultan Petrus drove straight to the heart of the matter.

"It might be, it might not be," Halvar said. "Leon di Vicenza had enemies. He also had a nasty sense of humor. He might think it a good joke to pretend to be dead for a while."

Sultan Petrus frowned. "Gomez, that's what you and your men are here for. To keep order." He glared fiercely at the guardsman, who seemed to shrink under that gaze.

Gomez cleared his throat.

"I keep out the riffraff," he said in a respectful tone. "What happens on the waterfront or in the Feria—"

"Is no concern of mine," Sultan Petrus said with a wave of his hand. "When one sailor stabs another in a brawl over women or dice, that's for the Town Guard to sort out. When someone like Leon, my own son's tutor, is found outside the town wall with his head bashed in, that's something else. I want his killer found, and found quickly."

"And I will put all my men on it," Gomez promised.

"I welcome your help," Halvar said evenly, "but let me remind you, Excellent Sultan, I am in charge of the Feria, and since this death occurred on the Feria grounds, it is up to me to find the killer."

Sultan Petrus regarded Halvar with half-closed eyes, taking in the long face, plain clothing, and businesslike dagger with

the lump of amber in the hilt, worn where another man might have carried a sword.

"I know you," he said at last. "You were in the Free Company that made the final assault on Pisa. You were the one who dragged the old man out of the fighting and took a piece of lead in the arm doing it. That was very brave, and very stupid. You could have been killed yourself."

"We got cut to shreds when they brought up the muskets. You don't send pikemen against guns." Halvar's face twisted in a spasm of grief then resumed his usual placid expression. "The old man—that was Old Olaf, my sergeant, the finest man I ever knew, and the wisest. I got him out of the line, but he died before the surgeons could get the lead out of him. It was like seeing my father killed, and for what? The Pisans stayed where they were, Al-Andalus had to withdraw, and that Episcopous Innocente in Rouma, the one who started it all, claimed it was a sign that the Redeemer wanted all of Oropa for himself, free from the Prophet and Islam.

"And so the wars go on and on, and the Franchen and Breitains have made a truce and are aiming their guns together at Al-Andalus. But we're not here to talk politics, Honored Sultan. I'm here because the Calif Don Felipe, may he live long and reign well, received a communication from his old schoolmate Leon," Halvar said. "He won't be happy to find out that Leon's dead. I'll have to have a very good explanation for him."

"A communication?" Sultan Petrus echoed.

"A letter. It got into the packet of receipts from last year's Fall Feria. It took a while before it came to Don Felipe's attention, but when it did, he was not pleased. Certain charges have been made, and I am to investigate them."

"Charges? Against whom?" Sultan Petrus shifted testily in his chair.

"I cannot say at this time. My orders were to find Leon di Vicenza and verify his accusations. If Leon is dead, it is possible it is because of what he was about to tell me."

"Mmmph," Sultan Petrus grunted. "Very well. Tenente, you will assist Don Álvaro in every way possible. He is the Calif's Hireling and must be respected as such." There was a note of warning in that last statement.

"As you will, Honored Sultan." Gomez bowed and salaamed, but Halvar could sense the resentment lurking under the apparent acquiescence.

"So, Don Álvaro," Sultan Petrus continued. "Just how will you go about following these orders of yours?"

"I will need to question everyone who had any dealings with Leon. Beginning with your son Selim. I recall that he came here with you as Selim's tutor. Is that still true?"

"He taught Selim mathematics and history until about a year ago, at the time of the last Fall Feria. I had to let him go. He was making himself too obnoxious to Mullah Abadul, and there were questions about the, um, propriety of his being with my son when he was notorious elsewhere, especially at the Mermaid Taberna on the waterfront and the Gardens of Paradise in Green Village."

"Is that the settlement outside the walls?" Halvar queried. "Why don't those people stay here, safely in Manatas Town?"

"In any other place, it would be the foreigners' quarter," Gomez explained. "Here, we keep them out of the town altogether. They can consort with each other and stay away from good Believers. And keep their filthy goods there, too," he added piously

Halvar grinned under his mustache.

"Meaning that those things forbidden by the Prophet are for sale there," he said. "Alcohol, hemp, and swine's flesh."

"And other flesh, too," Gomez added with a smirk. "Leon spent a good deal of time there. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was bewitched by that Yehudit siren Dani Glick."

Halvar's grin faded.

"Dani Glick?" he echoed. "A Yehudit woman? With red hair?"

"You know her?" the sultan asked.

"I knew someone of that name...many years ago."

"Well, you might want to renew the friendship," Gomez said snidely. "If anyone can tell you what Leon was doing outside the walls after dark, it is she. For all we know, he was meeting her!"

"I'll ask her when I see her," Halvar said evenly. "Now, Honored Sultan, I would like to speak with your son. And then I want to see where Leon was living. You can tell a good deal about a man by the things he owns."

"I can have Selim called," Sultan Petrus said. "But he is of an age where he comes and goes as he pleases. Young people will do that, you know." He gave an indulgent smile. "He may not even be in the Rabat."

"While my men look for him, we can have something to break the night-fast," Gomez decided. "I can smell the mokka brewing."

"One thing more," Sultan Petrus said as Halvar and Gomez turned to leave. "Don Álvaro, you may be the Calif's Hireling, but I am sultan here in Manatas. You will report your findings to me. I will decide what to do about them."

"As you say," Halvar said, with a bow. To himself, he added, *If what Leon has to say is true, you may not be sultan for much longer, Petrus Silver-leg. How far would you go to silence him?*



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