

THE SAGA OF HALVAR THE HIRELING

MADNESS IN MANATAS



Roberta Rogow

Halvar let the boy go.

He started again for the Rabat, mulling over what he had learned in his conversation with Devallon. He was certain Milord Henry Summersby was connected with the smuggled muskets somehow. If only he could prove it! Then he could arrest this so-called milord... He bent forward, trying to ease the effects of the biting wind that blew across the island.

“Capitán! Capitán!”

His head jerked up as a sharp cry brought him out of his thoughts.

“There’s trouble in the souk!” Musa, one of the guardsmen who had accompanied him to the Yehudit quarter, grabbed his arm.

“What now?” Halvar grumbled as he followed the guardsman across the Broad Way, past the posts that marked the boundaries of the souk and into the tangled maze of stalls and stands.

A crowd had gathered in front of Yussif the Tailor’s shop. Halvar shoved through to the center of the action.

On the ground in front of the tailor’s shop lay the body of a Town Guardsman; Halvar guessed at his identity by the size and shape of him. Guardsman Zoltan had not heeded the warnings, and had come to a violent end.

Also By Roberta Rogow

Murders In Manatas

Mischief In Manatas

Mayhem In Manatas

Menace In Manatas

Malice In Manatas



MADNESS
IN
MANATAS

The Saga Of Halvar
The Hireling
Book 6



Roberta Rogow



ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

AUSTIN TX

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

MADNESS IN MANATAS

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To
Debby Buchanan
and
Eileen Watkins
My Sisters In Crime

Acknowledging...

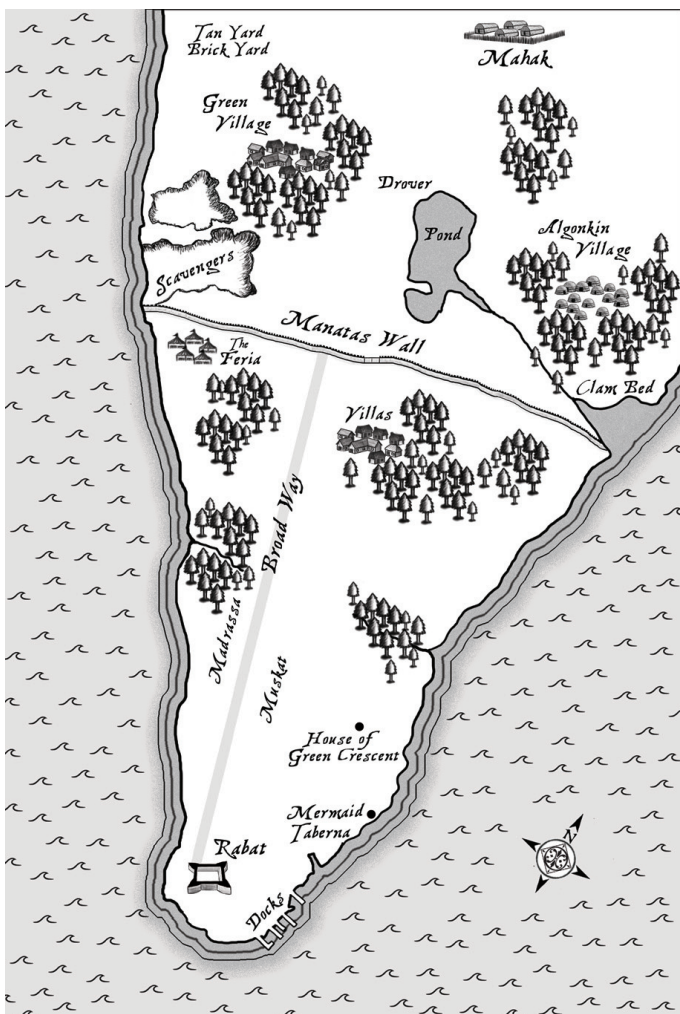
Lynn Holdom and Rachel Kadushin were present when I first invented the world of Manatas.

Liz Burton has stuck by me and encouraged me to continue to write the Saga of Halvar the Hireling.

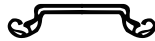
Thanks to Debby Buchanan, who read the manuscript and made suggestions for improving the story, and Eileen Watkins, who insisted that I give the horse a name..

And thanks to the many people who gave me nuggets of information that found their way into this story.

Manatas Town And Environs



Chapter 1



HALVAR DID NOT WANT ANY MORE EXCITEMENT. He'd had a whole week of it, and he was ready to be bored.

Instead of rejoicing at Yule, thanking Thor and the All-Father for returning the sun to the Earth, he had been dealing with the death of Captain Franz Girard. He had faced down fierce beggars, battled enraged chickens, and fought a duel on the docks. He had watched helplessly as the ship *Belle Fleur* was wrecked on the rocks across the bay.

Then came the death of the messenger boy Snake, and the complications that arose when muskets were found in the ballast of the wrecked ship. When he should have been praising the Redeemer and Mother Mara in chapel, he had spent Nativity Day chasing up and down Manatas Island—dealing with fanatic Purist Kristos in Green Village, devious Afrikans in Manatas Town, and a furious wild cat in the hills north of the settlement. Two more deaths, two more bodies, and still no answers!

And, as an added distraction, there was the matter of the poisoned professor at the Manatas Madrassa, which might (or might not) have been linked to the musket-smuggling, since the confessed killer was an alchemist known for his experiments with gunpowder.

Finally, just to make his life complete, Halvar had to cope with Milord Henry Summersby and his servant, Edgar Norris, who had taken over a cottage on Pearl Street, in the very shadow of the Rabat, along with Andres Devallon the ex-musketman, an unwelcome reminder of Halvar's early life as a mercenary in Oropa. Milady Summersby and her foul-mouthed companion had tried to get away from Manatas; but Dame Brigitte had fallen into the bay, and Milady was stranded on the Long Island when the ship foundered on the rocks.

All this in the space of ten days!

He had had enough! This morning he sat at the table in his small office at the Rabat. The stone fortress dominated the southern tip of the island between two rivers—the Great River flowing north, and the East Channel that separated the island called Manatas from the Long Island to the east. There were times when the closeness of the walls, and the dim light provided by the high window and the two lanterns oppressed him. Even so, he reveled in its coziness, the way the brazier in the corner let off just enough heat so he could undo the frogs that held his green wool coat closed against the winter chill.

He shifted in his wooden chair and stretched his long legs under the table, trying to find a comfortable position, one that would ease the pain in his shoulder where a stray bullet had nicked him. He still wasn't sure who had shot at him, and whether it had been deliberate or if the shooter had been aiming at the mountain cat ravaging the settlement. Halvar had killed the cat the following day, to the acclaim of onlookers, but his shoulder still hurt.

He yawned mightily, and tried to focus on the reports being read aloud by his self-appointed adjutant, the willful daughter of Sultan Petrus. Salomey preferred to be called Selim, just as she preferred the padded jacket and trousers of a young man to the filmy skirts and veils considered suitable dress for a marriageable Islim girl. She had assumed the post of Halvar's amanuensis, taking notes on his observations and organizing his meetings, and would not be deflected from this office, no matter what her father said, or for that matter, what Halvar wanted.

She continued to read aloud from the papers collected on his desk over the past week.

"Item: The butcher Gavril wants payment for the sausages consumed by the dog during the fight in the souk yesterday."

"I thought we did that."

"Gavril says five white wumpum wasn't enough."

"Let him take it to the sultan at the next Grand Divan," Halvar grouched.

"This is the sort of thing Tenente Gomez used to handle," Selim pointed out.

"Tenente Gomez did a lot of things he wasn't supposed to do." He *was making himself the ruler of Manatas in the stead of the sultan appointed by the calif*, Halvar added silently. *He killed at least one innocent that I know of, and very nearly killed me!*

"He said he was taking the burden from my father," Selim said.

"And how would he have taken care of the butcher? Paid him off?"

"Oh, the butcher wouldn't have bothered to ask for payment, because if he had, the Guards would have made sure he didn't get any business at all."

"What else is there?" Halvar grimaced at the papers neatly piled on the table, all written in characters completely beyond his reading ability. He could barely make sense of the

angular characters of Rune. The curves of Ogham and swirls of Arabi baffled him.

"A letter from Rav Nahum, from the madrassa, about detaining one of their learned colleagues on a charge of murder. The Yehudit want him to be released, since the Rabat is no place for an esteemed teacher of alchemy."

"Albrecht LaPierre, the esteemed teacher of alchemy, gave one of the other esteemed teachers a cake he knew could poison him. That makes him a murderer, in my eyes. He stays where he is. What's next?"

Selim picked up another paper. "Rav Shimon Layzar regrets to inform the Capitán that one of his guardsmen has been making improper advances to Yehudit women shopping in the souk, and begs that he will restrain this guardsman from such offensive behavior. Tenente Flores told you it was a bad idea to take Zoltan and Fergus off the waterfront and put them into the souk."

"Zoltan was taking bribes from the women on Maiden Lane and their, um, protectors," Halvar said. "He was even running a few of them himself. It sets a bad example. The Town Guard should be honest, brave, trustworthy."

"Whereas Zoltan is large and strong, but not very trustworthy." Selim frowned at him, her heavy eyebrows nearly meeting over her nose. "You don't look well, Capitán. You should get some rest."

"So say all my physicians." Halvar grinned ruefully. Dr. Moise, the official surgeon of the Manatas Town Guard, had dressed his shoulder with a combination of salves from his store of medications. Eva Hakim, the nizim of the Sisters of Fatima, had told him to spend a day in complete repose to allow his humors to balance. Frater Iosip, the apothecary at the Green Village Fraternity, had recommended bed rest after his fight with the mountain cat. "I tried last night. I went to my quarters..."

"But...?" Selim's heavy eyebrows rose above her snub nose in silent question.

"I had to deal with...a situation. Milady Summersby was waiting at the taberna."

"Oh." Selim packed a world of meaning into one syllable. "How did she get off the Long Island?"

"I suppose she bribed someone to sail or row her across the bay. She's here on Manatas Island again, and she's not happy about it." He closed his eyes, recalling the evening's activities.

Devallon had joined him as he headed for his quarters at the Mermaid Taberna. intent on having a simple meal, a game of tables, and a long night's rest in his very own, very large, very comfortable bed.

Instead, they had been accosted in front of the taberna by Milady Summersby. As soon as she saw them, Charlotte had launched into shrill recriminations in Franchen, translated into Franchen-accented Erse by Devallon.

They had taken her into the taberna, where the host, Hannes Zilberstam, made it clear the only woman welcome in his establishment was the Danic cook, Fru Marta, and she remained in the kitchen. He sneered at Milady Summersby, and announced loudly that if she wanted to find shelter, she could go to one of the hostels on Maiden Lane.

Halvar had consumed his gobbler-giblet soup and stale bread with Charlotte on one side and Devallon on the other, each demanding his attention, trying to outdo each other in volume. As far as he could tell, Charlotte needed somewhere to stay, and Devallon wasn't sure where he could put her. The lodgings for whores on Maiden Lane were clearly unacceptable for Milady Summersby, who claimed she was now a respectable married woman, no matter what she had done in the past. On the other hand, the cottage on Pearl Street where Milord Summersby had taken residence was full with men, with no room for Milady.

Selim's voice brought him out of his reverie.

“What did you do about the Franchen woman?”

“Fru Marta, the cook at the Mermaid Taberna, took her in. She’s got the cottage on Pearl Street next to the one Milord and Edgar are using. Her daughter’s the girl who milks the goat and collects the eggs from the chickens in the yard across from the cottages. “

Selim sniggered. “At least she’ll get fresh cheese and baked eggs.”

Halvar stretched again. “Is that the end of it?”

A bang on the door ended the session. A guardsman poked his head in.

“Someone from Green Village to see you, Capitán!”

The guardsman was shoved aside by a lanky youngster incongruously clad in the green coat of the Manatas Town Guard, worn over the multi-colored trews favored by Bretons.

“Capitán Don Alvaro! Message from Tenente Donal. They’ve found the body of Ned the Cooper. He’s dead, and Frater Iosip says it’s murder.”

Chapter 2



HALVAR STIFLED THE IMPULSE TO SNARL AT THE eager youngster. Ordinarily, he would have bounded out of the Rabat, eager to get away from the confinement of the office. Not today. He eyed the messenger and asked, "Who is this Ned Cooper, and why should anyone want to kill him? And why am I supposed to run to Green Village to look at him?"

The young man stood straight, at attention, and stared somewhere over Halvar's head.

"Tenente Donal told me to remind the Capitán Don Alvaro Dánico that all such deaths are to be referred to the Capitán. By his own orders."

"True enough," Halvar groaned. "I don't supposed Tenente Donal is mistaken? That this Ned died naturally?"

"He didn't," the constable said firmly. "And Tenente Donal insisted that you come, in person, to look at him,

before they take him to the fraternity to be made ready for burial."

Selim added, "After the fuss you made about the messenger boy being moved, if this man Ned *was* killed, you really ought to go and look at him."

The constable grinned gratefully at her, then snapped back to attention.

"Tenente Donal told me to say that he has already summoned Frater Iosip and Frater Leonidas from the fraternity to examine the body, so you don't have to bother Dr. Moise to come."

Halvar lifted himself from his chair with some effort.

"Very well, Constable..."

"Bertram." The youngster salaamed clumsily. "They also call me Bouncer, because I bounce the drunkards out of the Gardens of Paradise."

"Constable Bertram, go to the gate and summon Avaram the Donkey-man. We'll need a cart to take us to Green Village. Selim, bring your notebook and pen-case. Let's get this done."

Bertram bolted from the room. Halvar fastened the frogs on his coat, adjusted his fur cap, and prepared to face the freezing wind that swept across the tip of Manatas Island from the cliffs across the Great River to the Long Island on the other side of the bay.

The cold air hit him like a fist in the face when he opened the door to the courtyard, after the warmth of the office. He braced himself against the wind and nearly ran into the bulky person coming in.

"Capitán!" The Andalusian guardsman Flores, whose scarred face and crushed nose belied his fragrant name, stepped aside, to let Halvar pass. "You're going somewhere?"

"They've found another body," Halvar explained. "Tenente Donal's sent for me to go to Green Village."

"That's too bad, but I've just come from the sultan's rooms. He wants to see you."

Halvar hesitated. This was a breach of chain of command. Usually, Sultan Petrus gave *him* the orders to be directed to his underlings, not the other way around.

"Tell him I'm called away to Green Village. One of the Bretains has been murdered."

"Which one?" Flores looked almost cheerful at the news.

"Someone called Ned the Cooper."

"That one? A judgment upon an infidel, preaching against the Prophet's Word!" Flores spat on the cobbles.

"That is not for us to decide... not yet," Halvar warned him. "And Tenente Flores, a word in your ear. Tell Zoltan to keep his tongue in his head, and his hands on his cudgel, not on Islim or Yehudit women doing their daily business in the souk."

"I've already told him, but Zoltan is Zoltan, and it was your orders, not mine, put him in the souk," Flores said.

"Tenente, you are his commanding officer, and you are responsible for seeing that he behaves himself. And I want a muster, all the men who are on duty, this afternoon between mid-afternoon and evening prayers. Drill, with halberd! Here in the courtyard."

"In this perishing cold?" Flores's scowl deepened into a frown. "The men won't like that."

"They'll like it even less if one of those rascally Scavengers gets near them with a knife," Halvar retorted. "Tenente, you have your orders!"

Flores salaamed and stamped away, muttering angrily in Arabi.

Halvar gritted his teeth and reminded himself these people lived far from the tightly regulated towns of Al-Andalus. Donal had acted as keeper of the peace in Green Village, more or less on his own, and Flores had been a mere guardsman until chance and the elimination of two seniors had elevated him to his present rank. Both were used to

going their own way, doing what they thought needed to be done without notifying Sultan Petrus.. Not for the first time, Halvar wished that Old Sergeant Olaf were alive to take these rebellious soldiers in hand, as he had once done with a certain Danic recruit so many years ago.

A cry from the Rabat gate brought him back to reality. Constable Bertram called "Donkey cart's here!"

Avaram had attached a yellow banner to the back of his cart to indicate he was now on official duty for the Manatas Town Guard. Halvar, Selim, and Bertram climbed on board, and the donkey jogged off northward on the Broad Way.

The cold wind had sent most of the usual passers-by indoors. There were no vendors on the street hawking small trinkets or pamphlets opposite the rambling buildings of the Manatas Madrassa. Students were either at their classes or huddled inside the mokka-shops that catered to them. With most of the holy days done, merchants were safely in their offices, adding profits and losses for the past year and calculating how much they would make or lose in the next one. The Spring Feria was three months away, but it was not too soon to start making arrangements for the next crop of kutton and tabac from the south.

Halvar turned to Bertram.

"Tell me about this Ned Cooper. Who was he, and why would anyone want to kill him?"

"He was one of the Pure Sect," Bertram replied. "You may have seen him with Andrew MacAlan, when he tried to stop people from going to the festivities at the Gardens of Paradise on the Watch-night of Nativity.."

"The big fellow next to MacAlan?"

"One of them. The other was Angus MacKay, the cloth merchant from Bos-Town. MacAlan and MacKay were staying with Ned at the cooperage, along with Angus's son, Seth, and the trapper Kevin MacFergus."

"And none of these people noticed their host was missing all night?"

"I can't say, Capitán. Tenente Donal sent me to fetch you when I got finished cleaning out the taproom at the Gardens of Paradise."

Halvar grunted, partly from the twinges in his shoulder as the cart jolted along, partly at the confirmation of his suspicion that Donal's men were largely recruited from his team of bully-boys who kept order at Manatas's chief center of entertainment.

"Was it Ned the Purist who got in the way of the good folk trying to enter the fraternity chapel on Nativity Watch-night, too? Just how fervent was this cooper?"

"Very," Bertram said as the cart approached the wall and the gate that set Manatas Town apart from the rest of the island. "He'd stand in the middle of the common green and call out verses from the Holy Book. He'd rail against the Gardens of Paradise, said it was a hotbed of sin and vice."

"And it is!" Selim agreed, with a grin. "I hear they allow women to eat and drink there, with their menfolk, and there are women performers who sing aloud, and tell bawdy tales."

"And they dance in scanty clothing, and there is hemp as well as alcohol." Halvar added, recalling the pleasures offered on his past visits to the Gardens of Paradise. "And gambling and, um, other activities." He glanced at Selim, and hoped the girl did not understand quite what that entailed. "But Mullah Abadul preaches against the same vices, and no one has stuck a knife into him."

Not yet! he added to himself.

"Ned would get fits when the Spirit of the Lord God moved him," Bertram went on. "He'd yell out that we were all doomed to Sheol, that the Pit yawned beneath our feet..."

"I'd yawn, too, if I had to listen to a lot of that jabber," Selim sniped.

"But it still doesn't merit a knife in the back," Bertram retorted.

"Is that how he died?" Halvar asked.

"So I heard Frater Iosip say."

Avaram guided the donkey across the field where, in a few months, the Spring Feria would be set up. Now it was barren, only patches of stubble remaining, with a flock of geese pecking and squabbling here and there. They scattered as the cart went through common ground, hissing and flapping their wings in outrage at being disturbed in their search for food. The donkey protested loudly, the geese squawked back; but the cart proceeded unimpeded across the field towards the cluster of houses on the other side.

They crossed a little stream, now frozen over, and plodded along the path around the common ground past the three-story building surrounded by an iron fence that dominated the settlement. The Gardens of Paradise never quite ceased business, but today its windows were shuttered against the wind, and the door was shut. Only the smoke from the chimney indicated there was life within.

"Where is this body?" Halvar asked,

"In a room in the cooperage," Bertram said, pointing to a rambling wooden building at the northern end of the green, just past the palisade that separated the fraternity from the rest of Green Village. "Stiff and cold, like I said."

Avaram pulled his donkey cart to the door of the cooperage. Two Mahak watchmen stood to the right of the door, glaring at an Oropan constable who guarded the left. Tenente Donal, the burly Britain bouncer from the Gardens of Paradise, greeted them in Erse, while Firebrand, the leader of the Local watchmen, regarded Halvar impassively.

Both had adapted their usual garb to the brutal cold. Donal's green coat covered his red-and-blue-checked trews, while Firebrand had added a cape of fox fur to his deerskin hunting shirt and leggings. Donal wore the red

tarboosh of the Guards, whereas Firebrand insisted on keeping his head bare, displaying his Mahak warrior's scalplock in defiance of the cold.

Halvar clambered out of the cart.

"Tenente Donal, Tenente Firebrand...show me this body. I hope you haven't dragged me all this way on a fool's errand, chasing a wild goose."

"Not at all," Donal said. "It's a puzzle. Here's a man, dead in his own house, and no one seems to know how or why."

"Don Alvaro is known for solving puzzles," Selim stated, with a glance at her idol.

Halvar grimaced under his mustache. He only hoped he could live up to the girl's expectations.

Chapter 3



THE COOPERAGE WAS A LARGE BARN-LIKE STRUCTURE, built in the Britain style of sawed boards fastened together with wooden pegs, covered with a sharply-pitched thatched roof. Donal and Firebrand led Halvar into the main workspace, an open area that ran the length of the building. The air was fragrant with the scent of freshly-cut wood.

Tools hung neatly on pegs over the worktable where Ned had shaped the smaller barrels, kegs and firkins. Heat came from a small forge in the middle of the room, where Ned could shape the copper bands that held the wooden staves in place. A small table near the forge held sharp instruments whose function Halvar could only guess at, and some small copper circles with toothed outer rims..

Waiting inside were a large man and larger youth in typical Purist dress—long woolen coats of fine gray wool, wool breeches, and the distinctive high-crowned, broad-brimmed hats favored by the sect. The third man could have been a

Mahak, except for his heavy black beard, being dressed in a leather hunting shirt that mimicked the one Firebrand wore. Like his countrymen, he wore woolen breeches; like Halvar, he wore an araghoun fur cap; and like Firebrand, he preferred macassin to heavy boots.

Donal made the introductions in Erse.

"These are the men who have been living with Ned Cooper since the Fall Feria. The big fellow is Angus MacKay; the stripling is his son, Seth. And this is Kevin MacFergus—he's one of those who goes up-country, into Mahak territory, to bargain for furs."

Halvar nodded. "Where's this body you want me to see?"

"Up the stairs. There's a loft with a small room where Ned did his business accounts." Donal pointed to the narrow staircase, not much more than a ladder, that led to the storage space. Halvar followed him up, with Selim close behind them.

Ned Cooper was not one for elegance. His office was little more than an enlarged cabinet holding a table with writing materials, a shelf for his accounting-books, and a neatly-made wooden chair. Ned had sat down in that chair and apparently died in that chair.

Frater Iosip, the rotund frater whose bulbous nose was adorned with a set of spectacles, and Frater Leonidas, tall and graceful, stood over the body. Halvar edged into what little space was left; Donal and Selim hovered just outside the opening. There was no door as such, just a heavy leather panel attached to a rod that separated the private office from the storeroom. Clearly, Ned Cooper had thought he had nothing to hide from his fellow Villagers, and had no fear of thieves.

"Have you moved him?" Halvar demanded.

"Only to ascertain that he was dead, and that the cause was not natural," Frater Iosip stated.

"When was he found? By whom?"

"Young Seth came to the Gardens of Paradise to fetch me at dawn, just before morning prayers," Donal said. "I came,

I saw what you see, I called on the fraters, They came, took a look, saw he was dead. Frater Leonidas tried to move him to see if he'd had some kind of attack of the heart, or a sudden brain-stroke."

"It was neither of those," Frater Iosip stated firmly. "I am all too familiar with the symptoms of both. I am also familiar with Ned Cooper. A misguided soul, but ardent in his beliefs. Not a drinker of alcohol, nor a smoker of tabac or hemp. Quite robust, with a good set of lungs to proclaim his views on everything from the Redeemer's words to the evil state of affairs that has led Green Village to unite itself with Mantatas Town."

"Any ideas as to what killed him? Or who?"

"It's clear enough what killed him." Frater Leonidas turned the chair so the back of the body could be seen through the wooden rods set into the seat. "He was stabbed, right between the ribs. Neatly done, with a very thin, sharp blade. Not a rapier, nor a short sword, not a Franchen poignard, which leaves a triangular mark. This was a flat knife, more like a Britain dirk. Do you agree, Frater Iosip?"

The older man peered at the wound through his lenses and nodded.

"We will have to examine it further, but I expect we will find the wound was made by a Britain dirk. Quite a long one, to penetrate his coat and waistcoat."

Frater Leonidas opened the cord that kept the dead man's shirt closed around his neck.

"Woolen undershirt as well."

"And when do you think he died?" Halvar edged out of the room so Selim could squeeze inside to make a sketch of the wound in Ned's back.

"By the stiffness of the limbs, and the color of the flesh, I would say at least twelve hours before he was found," Frater Leonidas drawled. "Agreed, Frater?"

"I concur. And I'm sure your Islim bone-setter would, too."

Frater Iosip couldn't resist getting in a dig at his rival at the Rabat.

"That would be, perhaps, sundown yesterday?" Halvar frowned. "And no one missed him? No one looked for him? Not even those three downstairs, who lived with him?"

"They say they were upset by what happened to Mac-Alan," Donal said.

"As well they should be." Halvar paused to let Selim out of the room, "An assassin's blade, you think? I thought we'd got rid of them when we killed off the Franchen at the Mermaid Taberna."

"This one's not Franchen. I'm sure of it," Frater Leonidas pronounced. "Of course, we will have to make a more detailed examination, with your permission, Capitán."

Halvar descended the stairs carefully, trying not to strain his wounded shoulder. He could see a crowd forming outside the cooperage. Word had already got out that Ned Cooper was dead, in his own chair, slain by a mysterious enemy.

"Tenente Donal, get some of those men to bring the... Ned...to the fraternity, so that Frater Iosip and Frater Leonidas can get a better look at him. And I want to have a word with those friends of his, the Purists who were staying at his cottage. There must be somewhere warmer to question these three witnesses."

The three Purists were huddled over the glowing forge, absorbing what warmth they could from its coals.

"There's always the Gardens of Paradise," Donal suggested.

"That place of filth? Never! I will not step over that cursed threshold!" MacKay protested. "Nor will I expose my son to its vices. We can go to the cottage next to the cooperage, where we have been staying these last two months."

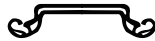
Halvar gave a flurry of orders. "Constable Bertram, take these witnesses to their cottage, and make sure they don't leave until I get there. Tenente Firebrand, your men can assist

Frater Iosip in taking this poor fellow to the fraternity. Tenente Donal, inform the Green Village council that I will meet with them at the Gardens of Paradise after I have questioned these Purists. I want to know more about Ned Cooper, and whether or not he was tied into whatever Andrew MacAlan was doing with Albrecht LaPierre.

“Leon...that is, Frater Leonidas...will you come with me and Selim? I want a better look at that cabin where Master LaPierre worked. I want to see for myself what went on there. And Selim, take Ned Cooper’s business papers with you. If he made barrels for Andrew MacAlan, I want to know how many, what size, and what they were going to hold.”

He strode back out into the freezing wind. He wasn’t sure what good any of this would do, but at least he was doing something!

Chapter 4



HALVAR STOPPED OUTSIDE THE COOPERAGE TO take a brief survey of his surroundings. The houses, barns, businesses, and workshops of Green Village had been erected around the common green, with the three-story Gardens of Paradise towering over all of them. The fraternity palisade was to the northwest, the cooperage to the northeast of the common.

Between them, the path straggled northward through the trees toward the rocky outcrops that gave the island its unique shape. Halvar knew it forked about half a mile north of the settlement. One path led east past the Algonkin and Mahak villages to where Leon di Vicenza was planning his bridge. The other went west on a ridge skirting the Great River, past the brickyard and tannery to the hilly outcrops where wild cats, bears, and wolves were rumored to roam.

The woods beyond the settlement had lost their leaves. Spindly branches of birch, aspen, and willow waved in the

wind, a lacy web across a sky that was turning from a clear blue to a misty gray, indicating an impending storm.

The crowd outside the cooperage parted to allow Firebrand's watchmen to carry the contorted body of Ned Cooper from the cooperage to the fraternity, a matter of a few steps. Firebrand joined Halvar and Selim, while Frater Leonidas consulted with Frater Iosip.

Halvar looked towards the woods north of the settlement.

"Has anyone been near that cabin since the lion hunt?"

Firebrand frowned. "The dead ones—the Afrikan and the Britain—were gone from there. Their ghosts will not disturb us. We took the dead cougar away to be skinned. You may take the hide as a trophy, and use the teeth for a talisman. Not everyone can say they fought the cougar at his lair and won.

"As for the rest of these people, they came back with us to Green Village. I did not see anyone staying behind. Why would they?"

"There might have been something of value in that cabin."

"Gunpowder," Selim put in. "Or the notes he was making on how to make it. That was what the cabin was for, wasn't it?"

"I want to see that cabin," Halvar decided. "Frater Leonidas! Leon!"

The erstwhile frater stopped in mid-stride.

"Capitán?"

"Come with me." Halvar set out on the path northward, through the trees. "Frater Iosip, tell Abbas Mikhail that Frater Leonidas is assisting in the investigation into the death of Ned Cooper, and will be back in the fraternity before noon prayers."

Frater Leonidas smiled at his colleague. "I promise I will not run off," he assured him. "I prefer the comforts of the fraternity, bleak as they are, to the perils of the forest in winter."

Firebrand led the way through the woods. Bare trees and prickly shrubs lined the path that had been trampled by many feet over the last two days. Frozen puddles crunched underfoot, their crackling the only sound besides the ever-present whine of the wind.

Halvar knew when they passed the brickyard by the smell of burning wood, and the tannery by the foul reek of urine and rotting flesh. Then they reached the outcrop where he had fought the mountain cat the Locals called a *cougar*.

The cabin had been built against the rocky slope to take advantage of what little shelter it could give, a square structure made of logs, cut and shaped in the Scanian style, topped with a peaked roof of Andalusian tiles. A brick chimney protruded from one side wall, evidence of a fireplace within. A small wooden shed a few feet away from the cabin was apparently the necessary.

Halvar circled the cabin, checking for exits. There was only the one—the wooden door, with its wrought-iron hinges and latch. He scanned the ground around the cabin and the attendant woodpile.

“Ground’s frozen,” he muttered. “No footprints. Anyone could have come here since the lion hunt.”

“Could have, but didn’t,” Firebrand stated. “My men would have seen anyone on the path.”

“There was quite a crowd,” Halvar reminded him. “The students from the madrassa, the layabouts from Manatas that Milord Summersby called out to help find the mountain cat, most of Green Village, even a few of the Local women who stayed behind to sell maiz and trinkets for the holy days.”

“None of them stayed here after the sun set,” Firebrand insisted. “There are no lanterns or torches here to light the path. The moon is narrow, and rises late at this time of the month. The only folk this far away from Green Village are the Afrikans at the tannery and the brickyards, and they don’t

go out after dark. There are worse things than cougars in these woods.”

Halvar tried the door. The hasp on the large lock that was supposed to deter intruders had not been fully engaged. The door opened with a squeal from the iron hinges.

The only light inside the cabin came from the open door. Selim slithered around Halvar, poked around, and found a small oil lamp of the sort used by scholars at the madrassa. She used the fire-starter in her pen-case to light the wick and held it up so that Halvar, Firebrand, and Leon could see the rest of the room.

Halvar and Leon followed her into the cabin. Firebrand remained in the shelter of the doorway, unwilling to trespass on the property of someone recently deceased.

A large lantern hung from the ceiling; Halvar lit it from the feeble flame of the lamp and took a harder look at the interior of Albrecht LaPierre’s experimental gunpowder manufactory.

There was a lot to see, but little of it made sense to him. A table had been placed against one wall, with shelves above it containing copper and brass vessels of various sizes. Baskets lined another wall, two filled with yellow stones that gave off the odor of bad eggs. Another basket held chunks of half-burned wood. On either side of the door were more shelves, with crockery jars that reeked of urine.

Halvar watched Leon poke his elegant nose into the odoriferous jars. Selim was checking the elaborate apparatus next to the fireplace, a weird construct of copper tubes and glass beakers, ending with a small stand with a sieve propped into the top of a wide pan.

“What do you make of this?” he asked as Leon and Selim continued to search the cabin.

“The rocks are sulfur,” Leon explained. “Charcoal, sulfur...”

“Piss?” Halvar pointed to the jars near the door.

"Not quite," Leon said. "Saltpeter. Made from urine, distilled and purified. What you see here, Halvar Danske, are the ingredients for gunpowder."

"But not the black powder itself?" Halvar said, a note of hope in his voice.

Selim had been investigating the tightly-woven baskets on the worktable.

"A little, here, but nothing worth killing over."

"Barrels, kegs," Halvar muttered, looking around the cabin again. "Andrew MacAlan wanted kegs of gunpowder, not a few grains in a basket. But there are no kegs here."

Leon smirked. "I'm sure Master LaPierre promised him enough black powder to fill many kegs. Anything to keep the ingredients coming in. LaPierre is one of those scholars who are willing to promise the moon, whether they can deliver it or not, just to get the wherewithal to continue their studies."

"Not like you, Leon," Halvar jibed. "You charm your way into the halls of power. All you promise is a good time."

"That was in the past," Leon said. "I have given all that up. I am Frater Leonidas, a good Kristo. Leon di Vicenza is no more."

"Perhaps," Halvar said. "Selim! Have you found anything else?"

"It's what I didn't find that I don't understand," Selim said. "Didn't you once tell me that it's not just what's there, but what isn't there that's important? Well, if this is where Master LaPierre was doing his work, where are his notes? Where did he write? There's no paper, no ink, no record of what he did here. And the fireplace is bare—there's no ash or even soot."

"Wood's been chopped for a fire." Halvar waved toward the stack of logs outside the door.

"Chopped, to be sure, and logs stacked, but not used. I don't think Master LaPierre has done any work in this cab-

in at all. He might have been making ready to do it, but hasn't done it—not yet, anyway.”

“Could all this be a scheme to get money out of Mac-Alan?” Halvar tugged at his mustache. “Just an elaborate swindle?”

“That doesn't sound like Albrecht LaPierre to me,” Leon said. “I don't like the man—he's far too much of a fanatic and narrow-minded, and he was far too taken with that scrubby messenger-boy, the ugly one—”

“Snake,” Selim put in. “He even killed Master Kupernik for Snake's sake.”

“Not knowing that the lad was already dead,” Halvar concluded. “But all this makes no sense. Why go to all this trouble, and then not use the cabin... unless it's a part of something else?”

Leon sniffed loudly. “That's up to you to find out, Capitán. I am needed at the fraternity. They appreciate my voice at prayers, and I have a painting to complete.”

“And the journal of the late Captain Franz Girard to translate. Have you finished that?”

“As much of it as I can. I've finished my transcription and sent it to the Rabat. Selim will find it... interesting reading. Unfortunately, it doesn't say much about Girard's business dealings, and most of that is in his private code. Not a very forthcoming man, Captain Girard, except about his romantic exploits.”

“You *have* been busy, Leon. And you still had time to organize the building of the bridge. How are you doing with that?”

“We've shut down for the winter,” Leon said. “I've secured the scow that carries supplies back and forth, and notified the foreman across the river that we're not going to risk building again until the ice breaks in the spring. Until then, we can stockpile bricks, and take measurements of the water levels.”

Leon grew more animated, forgetting to be blasé and superior in his enthusiasm for this new project.

"I've had the brick pylons banked with reeds to divert the ice from the bricks. The wooden pier has been reinforced, made into a jetty, so that barges can land with more bricks from either bank. There's a ferry towline, and the path down to the East Channel has been widened and straightened. We should be able to get to West Caster easily once the spring thaw sets in."

"And you can make your escape from Manatas," Halvar finished for him.

"Now, why would I want to do that?" Leon asked innocently. "Everything I ever wanted is right here. Food, clothing, shelter, meaningful work, good company..."

"Everything but the freedom to go your own way," Halvar said. "To do as you please, when it pleases you, with whomever you like to do it with. You don't have that."

"Oh, that. Yes." Leon's innocent smile vanished.

Halvar headed down the path back to Green Village, mulling over what he'd seen in the cabin. None of it seemed to make any sense. Perhaps a chat with Master LaPierre was in order. He considered the next steps in this investigation.

What was it Old Sergeant Olaf had told him, when he complained about standing night guard while the officers slept? *You don't send an officer to do what a soldier can do. We stand guard so they can think*, he'd told the young men under his command.

Very well, Halvar told himself. *I'm an officer now. I'll do the first questioning, then Donal can take over in Green Village while I finish the job on Master LaPierre. Making gunpowder is more important than the murder of an artisan, no matter how mysterious the manner of his death.*

They passed the tannery and the brickyard and came to the edge of the woods that marked the boundary between Green Village and the rest of Manatas Island. Firebrand and

Leon stopped for a moment with Halvar, to breathe and wait for Selim to catch up with them.

"What did you think of Ned Cooper?" Halvar asked the two.

Leon smirked. "I didn't think of him at all. Why should I? He didn't come to the fraternity chapel for prayers. He led the Purists in singing their hymns—doggerel verses set to banal tunes. He howled sermons on the green. I don't know whether he made good barrels. I have no use for them.

"On the other hand, this Mahak may have another opinion. He was the target of some of Ned's wrath."

Halvar regarded the Mahak with raised eyebrows.

"What did he have against you?"

Firebrand grimaced. "He was fanatic about his Lord God. He called Manitou a demon and a false god. He called for fire to come down and remove the Mahak and Algonkin.

"Sounds like a good reason to hate him," Halvar observed.

"He was not worth hating," Firebrand declared.

"For once, I agree with you, Mahak," Leon said. "Ned Cooper was a ranting bigot. But he was also a good craftsman, which counts for something in this world."

"I suppose, along with his other rants, he might have singled *you* out for some attention," Halvar persisted.

"If you mean concerning my personal life, that was nothing. He accused me of the Sin of Sodom, and I have never denied my taste for young men. He was quite annoying, but I tell you again, not to the point where I would try to silence him with a knife in the back.

"And now, with your permission, Capitán Halvar Danske, I have several things to do at the fraternity, not the least of them joining Frater Iosip in examining the body of Ned Cooper. I think I know how he was killed."

"No ideas as to who did the deed?"

"Oh, that's your business, my dear Halvar, not mine. I will send word as soon as Frater Iosip finishes his examination. May the Redeemer send you a good year!"

With that, Leon strode toward the palisade of the fraternity, leaving Halvar to seethe with frustration.

"What now?" Selim asked.

"Let's have a word with Ned's companions," Halvar decided. "Living in close quarters, folk get testy with each other. It could be one of them found Ned Cooper's preaching unbearable and decided to end it."

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