

THE SAGA OF HALVAR THE HIRELING

# MALICE IN MANATAS



Roberta Rogow

## *“Thor’s Hammer!”*

The large predator yowled again, and Halvar stared at the creature. It was a cat, to be sure, but larger than any he'd ever seen. He'd seen a lion's skin from Afrika; this animal seemed to be of a similar size. So, this must be the mountain cat he'd been warned about.

The animal bounded away as Avaram drove up beside Halvar with his cart, just visible by the light of the lantern hung on a pole jammed behind the driver's seat.

“Capitán! Are you all right?”

“Well enough...I think. Was that the mountain cat?”

“I didn't see it,” Avaram confessed. “But you're bleeding. And your jacket's torn at the shoulder.”

Halvar pressed a hand to his shoulder. It came away red.

“Thor's Hammer!” he swore again. “I've been shot!”

## **Also By Roberta Rogow**

*Murders In Manatas*

*Mischief In Manatas*

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MALICE  
in  
MANATAS

The Saga Of Halvar  
The Hireling  
Book 5



Roberta Rogow



ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

AUSTIN TX

2017

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MALICE IN MANATAS

© 2017 by Roberta Rogow

ISBN 978-1-61271-345-8

Cover art and design © William Neagle

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<http://www.zumayapublications.com>

### Library Of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data

Names: Rogow, Roberta, 1942- author.

Title: Malice in Manatas / Roberta Rogow.

Description: Austin TX : Zumaya Otherworlds, 2017.

| Series: The Saga of

Halvar the Hireling ; book 5 |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017012604 (print) | LCCN

2017022035 (ebook) | ISBN

9781612713458 (Electronic/Kindle) | ISBN

9781612713465 (Electronic/EPUB) |

ISBN 9781612713441 (softcover : acid-free paper)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Alternative histories (Fiction) | Mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3568.O492 (ebook) | LCC

PS3568.O492 M34 2017 (print) |

DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017012604>

To My Grandfathers

Harry Heller

and

Irving Weinstein

who introduced me to Sherlock Holmes stories and Rudyard Kipling's poems, both of which still influence my writing.



## 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.

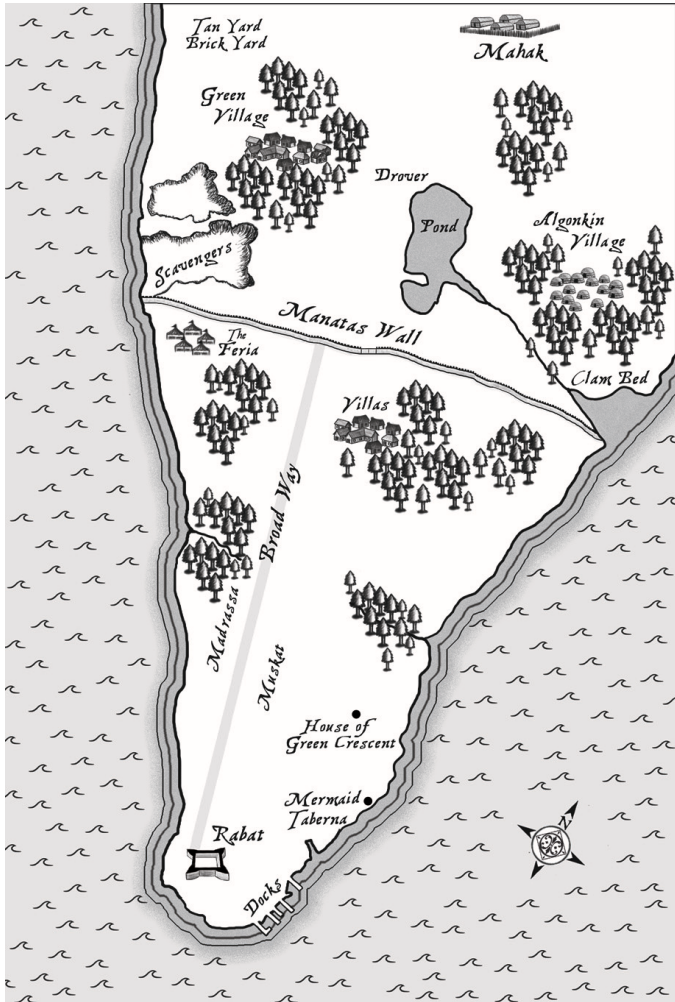
Thanks to Debby Buchanan, who read the manuscript and made suggestions for improving the story.

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





# Manatas Town And Environs





Part 1

# The Murdered Messenger





# Chapter 1



**HALVAR TRIED NOT TO KILL ANYONE AT THE PARTY.** He sincerely hoped none of the other guests would kill each other, either.

It was supposed to be a friendly gathering of intellectual equals, a meeting of minds, held by the students of the Manatas Madrassa to honor their masters during the turning of the year when, as sometimes happened, the calendars of the three major religions of Manatas happened to coincide. The date of the Redeemer's Nativity had been fixed ages ago; and the Festival of Lights, when the Yehudit celebrated their deliverance from an ancient tyrant, was usually held at some time near the Longest Night. The End-of-Fast, however, when Islam marked the end of Fasting Month, tended to wander through the seasons.

This year, they had all come on the same day, and this party was supposed to be a unique opportunity for teachers and students to mingle on terms of relative equality.

At least, that was what Halvar had been told by his host, Benyamin ben Mendel, a stout young Yehudit whose assistance had led to the solution of several murder investigations. Benyamin had been most insistent that Halvar attend this social occasion, held in the Assembly Room of the largest of the many buildings that formed the Manatas Madrassa. That center of learning drew scholars from all over Nova Mundum to this island in the middle of the Great River between the Afrikan territories to the south and the Britain and Franchen colonies in the north.

"It will serve to introduce you to the Madrassa elite," Benyamin had assured him. "They do not care to mingle with the rest of Manatas folk, but they can be very influential with the sultan and the Afrikan merchants who send their sons north for their education. Even the Britains of West Caster send their sons to the Manatas Madrassa. Although," he added, "I hear there is some kind of collegium being formed at Bos-Town that instructs the Kristos in their version of our scientia." He sniffed derisively at the idea of any seat of learning that was not totally Andalusian in its orientation.

Once he had done his duty by presenting himself to the assorted masters of literature, alchemy, history, and natural philosophy, Halvar was free to mingle with the crowd.

They did not wish to mingle with him.

So, he stood beside a table loaded with foods he barely recognized and regarded the company sourly. He towered over most of those present, a tall Dane in the green coat of the Manatas Town Guard, which had been adapted with gussets in the shoulders to accommodate his muscular frame. His fur hat, worn over a leather-lined Danic cap, also distinguished him from the rest of the Manatas Town guardsmen.

Given the choice, he would have preferred to remain as the chief bodyguard of Calif Don Felipe, ruler of Al-Andalus-in-Exile; but Don Felipe had other plans for his Hireling. Halvar now faced the impossible task of orga-

nizing a militia and policing force in this northernmost outpost of what had become Hispania in Nova Mundum.

It was a position he had neither wanted nor expected, and he was still finding his way. Part of his duties, according to his immediate superior, Sultan Petrus, was to make himself known to Manatas society. His name was already associated with such events as the public shooting of a Franchen innkeeper and the even more public drowning of a fleeing woman. His exploits had been rendered into verse, and sung by the popular entertainer Willem of Cos so that most of Manatas now knew him as “The Stranger Who Faced the Sekonk.”

None of this added to his status with the intelligentsia of the Manatas Madrassa, whose voices now filled the Assembly Room with a babble of tongues that grew louder as the party progressed.

He scanned the room, trying to find a face he recognized. There were a few youngsters at the edges of the crowd, among them his fervent follower Salomey, the sultan's daughter, who preferred to be called Selim and wore the embroidered silk jacket and trousers of a pampered teenaged boy. Most of the other guests were unknown to him, men decked in garments ranging from the dark-green kaftans and turbans of graduates of the Ulema of Baghdad to the black gowns that covered the breeches and jackets of the few Bretons and Danes who had managed to escape the clutches of the Questioners in lands conquered by Emperor Lovis.

Almost all were bearded—neatly-trimmed pointed goatees and mustaches for the Bretons and Franchen and flowing bushes adorning the chins of the Islamim imams and Yehudit ravs. Only one face was scraped clean, and that was the one Halvar most detested of all the inhabitants of Manatas; it belonged to the former Leon di Vicenza, now known as Frater Leonidas.

Three persons he had least expected to see at such a gathering emerged from the crowd to partake of the refreshments laid out on the table.



"Devallon." Halvar acknowledged the Franchen ex-musketman who had arrived in the ship *Belle Fleur*, whose hulk lay across the bay on the shore of the Long Island. "What brings you to the madrassa? Free food and drink?"

"Not my idea, to be sure," the dapper veteran replied, scanning the table for something that looked remotely familiar. "Blame Master Edgar Norris."

He nodded at the slender man clad in the sober black breeches and coat favored by Franchen servants who hovered protectively behind his gaudily-clad master. Milord Summersby had chosen to wear his most elaborate green coat, embellished with silver braid, worn over a red waistcoat. He stood out like a burning coal in a dying fire.

"Milord is unhappy that he can find no one worthy of his company in Manatas Town. I thought he might find someone of suitable status among the students, but apparently not." Edgar, who had overheard their discussion, said as he scanned the room. "I met Master Albrecht La-Pierre while I was buying food in the souk. He was at the Oxenbridge Collegium when Milord and I were studying there. I dared to speak to him, and he suggested Milord might find someone of his own rank among the masters."

"He won't find any Bretain milords at this party," Halvar observed. "As far as I can tell, this lot are mostly Andalusian and Yehudit teachers, ravs and imams. The Breains and Franchen are sons of tradesmen who have lifted themselves into a higher place in life through their scholarship.

"Still, whatever their rank was when they entered the madrassa, once they get their status as professors, they're accorded the respect due an imam. At least, that's what they claim. If you're looking for sociable Breains, you'd do better to go to the gathering for Redeemer's Nativity Watch-night later tonight at the Gardens of Paradise in Green Village, beyond the open field where the Feria is held. Most of the Breains and other Oropans who live in Manatas wind up there, no matter what their rank was

over the water. Everyone's welcome at the Gardens of Paradise, especially if they throw silver around."

"I'm still trying to get the hang of this place," Devalon complained. "There's the souk, over past the Broad Way, and there are small houses north of the souk that folk live in. I saw some big villas at the north end of the Broad Way that look empty. What's this Green Village?"

"It's the settlement beyond the town wall," Halvar explained. "Until two months ago, it was under Local control, but once the calif got here, the Local sachems and our own sultan decided to combine the two settlements into one. Easier to keep the peace, since they'd be under one law.

"As for those empty villas, they belong to the Afrikan merchants who sell at the feria. They go south for the winter, like the birds. Then they come back for the Spring Feria and spend the summer here, or even farther north, in the mountains, trading for furs with the Locals. They sell what they've bought at the Fall Feria, then go back south, according to my associates in the Guards.

"Green Village is where the Bretains and Oropans settled. They don't have big houses there—it's cabins and cottages, unless you count the Gardens of Paradise."

Before Halvar could explain the status of Green Village further, Milord Summersby spoke up from the far end of the table.

"What is this stuff? Why don't they have any meat? Sausages? Roasts? Fowls? And what is there to drink?" He regarded the delicacies before him with contempt.

"It's all halal," Halvar reminded him. "And with Yehudit present, no meat is served with cheese and yoghurt on the table. Plenty of sweet cakes, though."

"Fit for women!" Milord sneered, scooping up a handful and cramming them into his mouth. "I don't see any here."

"Most of the students are men, although I believe some women are allowed into the medical lectures, under the

supervision of Eva Hakim and the Sisters of Fatima." Halvar refrained from asking about Milady Summersby. As far as he knew, she was still across the bay among the Pure Sect in Brook-line Settlement. Instead, he said, "Devallon was asking about the housing here on Manatas. I understand you are unhappy with your cottage, Milord."

"There are no inns of any size on this island, and the house we have been allotted on Pearl Street is not what we are used to," Edgar said. "We were told there is some kind of annual fair. Where do the folk who attend that stay?"

"With their friends," Halvar said. "Or in the sailors' lodging-houses. Or they set up tents. What's wrong with your cottage? Seems comfortable to me."

"The place is far too small," Milord declared loudly. "There must be something larger in this benighted place."

"Those empty villas..." Devallon began.

"Belong to the Afrikans, and Sultan Petrus won't com-mandeer any of them," Halvar said firmly.

"But surely, some of those people stay for the winter?" Edgar suggested. "Or the servants of those who have left might not mind if we use the facilities, at least until we can arrange transport to Bella Mara? To whom may we direct our inquiries?"

"There's one or two merchants still in Manatas," Halvar admitted grudgingly. "There's Samuel Igbo, and his neighbor, Lady Tekla. She's the widow of a recently-deceased merchant, She stays here on the island year 'round. Her house is certainly large enough to accommodate your party, if she's of a mind to allow you to stay in it. Unfortunately, she does not speak Franchen, only Arabi and some Erse, so you may have some difficulty in getting her permission to quarter yourself on her. And without it, you are likely to be arrested for trespassing."

"And you would be glad to do it, I'm sure. I am fluent enough in Erse, and I've picked up some Arabi, so I am sure I can come to some kind of agreement with the

lady," Devallon said with a sly wink. "When would be a good time to call on her? I'm not familiar with the protocols of Al-Andalus."

Halvar suppressed a smile. Lady Tekla was a formidable woman who would undoubtedly show this Franchen upstart just how unpleasant an Afrikan could be when provoked.

"Fasting Month is over," he said. "You might call on her tomorrow, between mid-morning and mid-afternoon prayers. You can tell when that is because the muezzin will call from the muskat, and the bells will ring at the waterfront chapel. You should hear both at your cottage."

"I shall take your advice on both counts, Capitán." Devallon made a sweeping bow and escorted his Britain charges from the room, leaving Halvar to wonder just how long the unwanted trio was going to stay in Manatas.

The ships from the south weren't due for at least another two months, by which time almost anything might happen. He only hoped Devallon would be able to control the irascible Milord Summersby and his insufferable servant, and that the pair would manage to stay out of trouble until they could be sent off the island.

Alone once more, he tried to catch some scraps of conversation, but it was difficult enough for him to follow ordinary speech in Arabi, the language of Al-Andalus. The lingo of Manatas sounded like Arabi, but it was spoken at a brisk rate, with a nasal accent, and laced with colorful metaphors that referred to events and places the Dane had never heard of. As for the learned teachers, their Arabi was precise and pedantic, but what they were saying was so abstruse he couldn't understand half of what they were fighting about.

He leaned against the wall and wished he could be almost anywhere else. He was not a solitary sort; he'd spent half his life with the Free Company of Danes, marching here and there across Oropa. He liked the easy camaraderie of soldiers like himself. He enjoyed an evening spent around

a campfire or in a tavern, telling war stories and singing old ballads. Here in Manatas, he'd made a temporary home at the Mermaid Taberna, where he could find a game of tables and a drink of ale, catch up on the news of the marketplace and the surrounding settlements, and retreat to a room of his own up the stairs.

*When can I take my leave?* he wondered, sipping from a mug of fruit-flavored drink. It smelled of apples, but he tasted no alcohol, which was probably a good thing, from the tone the conversation at the other end of the table was taking.

"No, no! You are wrong, you are completely wrong!" That was a rotund personage in the black gown and white neckband of a Pure Sect Erse Rite Kristo, his bald head covered by a felt skullcap, his gray wisp of a chin-beard wagging fiercely as he spat out his condemnation at the shorter man in front of him. "It is clearly written in the Holy Book! There is the incident when the Prophet Moshe commanded the sun to be still..."

"It was the Battle-lord Yeshua, and it was a metaphor for a battle that seemed to last all the day and the night!"

His opponent was Yehudit, round-faced with a short black beard and whose long black coat and broad-brimmed felt hat trimmed with fur marked him as Ashkenat, one of those Yehudit who had settled in the lands east of the Dane-March.

"I can prove it mathematically. The sun does not go around the Earth, but the Earth goes around the Sun. It is a fact, not a metaphor."

"Mathematics is numbers. You can make numbers dance to any tune you like, Master Kupernik, but the Holy Book is the Word, and the Word is of the Almighty One!" the Kristo pronounced.

"Numbers do not lie, Master Boyle!" Kupernik repeated "One can quote any book written by men..."

"By the hand of the Almighty...!"

Halvar sighed. "How long is this going on?" he muttered aloud in Danic.

"Oh, they can argue in circles all day and all night," someone drawled at his elbow in the affected Arabi of Corduva. "It doesn't really matter, does it, whether the Earth circles the sun, or the other way 'round."

Halvar turned to the one person in the room he did not want to talk to.

"Leon, I didn't think Abbas Mikhail ever let you out of the Fraternity on your own."

"He didn't. I have a pair of bodyguards to make sure I return to the sanctuary." Leon di Vicenza nodded towards the door, where two stalwart fraters in undyed wool robes like his own stood, arms folded, not partaking of any of the delicacies laid out before them.

"I suppose you're here to give your Seekers of Truth some words of wisdom at the season of the Redeemer's Nativity?"

Leon shrugged. "Benyamin asked me to come, and I decided to do so to remind certain people that I was once rather well-known for my views in academic circles. Even when I was a mere tutor in the sultan's household, my merit was recognized. I was allowed the honor of attending lectures and responding in debates here at the Madrassa. And, as you say, I had my little meetings at the Mermaid Taberna." He nodded smugly, recalling past triumphs. "They were very well attended."

"So I heard," Halvar said. His predecessor, the late and unlamented Tenente Gomez, had hinted those discussions could get fierce, leading to brawls that brought the Town Guard out in force. "Who's the Yehudit in the middle of the argument?" Halvar nodded towards Kupernik. "One of your mentors?"

"Master Kupernik? Hardly! He claims to be from Muscovy. According to him, he studied and then taught mathematics at the Collegium in Parigi but was forced out when Lovis started playing hail-stranger with Episcopus Innocente. Who, by the way, has now declared he is the Papa, the Holy Father of all Kristos, whether Roubi or Greco

or Erse Rite; and that all Kristos therefore owe their allegiance to him, personally, and to the Roumi Rite religiously. You can imagine how well that sits with Abbas Mikhail!

"As for Kupernik, I've read his treatise on the movements of celestial bodies," Leon continued, with another dismissive sniff. "He may be right. I'm not a mathematician, myself, so I can't check his figures. He deigned to argue them at one of my debates at the Mermaid Taberna last summer. That was before you arrived in Manatas."

"I'm surprised you admit there's something you can't do."

"My field is natural philosophy," Leon said with affronted dignity. "Of course, I am adept at simple mathematics, but Master Kupernik's advanced theories are quite beyond the comprehension of a mere painter like myself. Or so he says," he added bitterly.

"Frater Leonidas!" Benjamin had found his way through the crowd to seize his leader by the arm. "What is your opinion of Master Kupernik's theories?"

"I've been telling our noble capitán that I am not an expert on the movements of celestial bodies. I am far more conversant with the world below, that of natural philosophy and the origins and uses of what has been given to us here on this earth."

Leon allowed himself to be drawn into the circle of intellectuals gathering at Halvar's end of the table.

"Of course, the son of an apothecary would know all about such matters as plants and minerals." Kupernik sneered as he caught sight of a new opponent.

Leon's mouth tightened, but he kept his voice even as he replied, "Just as the son of a landowner's agent would be conversant with numbers. May I remind you, Master Kupernik, that we are in the territory of Al-Andalus, and at the madrassa, where one's ancestry is to be considered of no account. The only achievements that matter are one's own. In my case, I admit to a lack of knowledge in the field of numbers, but I make up for it as a designer of bridges, one of which is even now under construction."

"Then you agree that the material world has merit?" another voice chimed into the discussion, a stout young man in the striped robes and blue cap of the Sefarat Yehudit whose beard had barely reached the chin-covering stage.

"Of course it does! We have to live in it, don't we?" Leon waved his hands at the refreshments. "Look about you! This place, this Nova Mundum, has proven there are more different plants and animals than the Holy Book described. On this very table, we see not only the grains and vegetables and fruits we brought from Oropa but the maiz and beans and nuts grown here by the Locals. We have cheese and butter from the cows and goats imported from Oropa, but also these cakes made from yams, which were brought here by Afrikans. And these white cakes...I haven't seen these before..."

"Batatas, from the far south, beyond Mechico," Benyamin stepped in to explain. "One of my friends who lives at the Afrikan Hostel gave them to me. He says they must be carefully cooked because the raw plant is poisonous, but cooking removes the element that makes it dangerous. Our cook grated them together with onions and cooked them in olive oil, to recall the sacred lamp that burned for eight days—the Great Miracle."

"How can the plant be poisonous only when eaten raw? How does heat change it?" the Sefarat asked, instantly curious. "I am an alchemist and a student of medicine," he added, flushing at the sudden attention. "I am interested in all things material. I leave the theories to the mathematicians."

"Another facet of natural philosophy," Leon pointed out. "The exploration of the mixtures of minerals and plants."

"Cookery!" Kupernik sneered. "You talk of alchemy as if it were something based on reality, Efrem Russo. It is not. You have no idea what you are doing. You mix a little of this, a little of that, add a little of something else, and boom!" He flung up his hands expressively. "That is



not what one would call *scientia*—science! It's accidental! True science is to logically devise a theory and use numbers to prove it."

"Do not be so scornful of cookery, Master Kupernik," Leon warned him. "It's more precise than you think. Take salt, for instance. Not enough, and the meal is tasteless; too much, and it's inedible. And there are substances which are quite innocuous by themselves but dangerous when combined."

"As in alchemy," another voice added, that of a wild-haired young man in a shaggy woolen over-tunic whose bushy mustache rivaled Halvar's, speaking in Arabi that, like Halvar's, had Danic overtones. "One must get the ingredients in correct proportion, as you have noted in your review of my recent lecture."

"Your *recipe*, you mean, Master LaPierre?" Kupernik sneered. "Have you completed your so-called experiments? Have you managed to perfect your smokeless gunpowder? You should not offer your theories until you can prove them mathematically, and reproduce the results every time. That, Master La Pierre, is science! As for your experimentation with dangerous materials, I suggest you do it farther up-the-hills, or you will set all Manatas ablaze. As it is, your alchemical explosions are enough to keep us in terror of our lives."

Halvar had had enough of this. He had to find some excuse to get out of this tedious party and go somewhere he could do some good.

A knock at the door turned out to be his release.

"Capitán!"

He turned to greet the scarred and black-bearded face of Tenente Flores, the chief remnant of the previous administration under Tenentes Gomez and Ruiz.

"What is it?"

"Come with me, Capitán. The Locals have found a body"

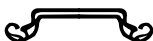
Halvar waved eagerly to the youngest person in the room.

“Selim! With me!” He turned to Benyamin, trying hard not to grin. “I fear I must leave this delightful gathering, Heer Benyamin. I thank you for inviting me, but duty calls. Selim, you are needed!”

With that, he fairly ran out into the Broad Way, took a deep breath of icy air, and turned to Flores.

“Show me this body!” he ordered. He had never been so glad to hear about a corpse in his life!

# Chapter 2



**HALVAR'S LONG LEGS FAIRLY ATE UP THE MILE** or so along the Broad Way between the madrassa and the wall. Flores scurried beside him while Selim trotted behind, her loose trousers flapping in the rising wind.

"This body, it was found by the Mahak Firebrand and his team of Watchmen," Flores panted as they passed from the district of shops and offices to that of the elegant villas of the Afrikan and Andalusian merchants. "They sent one of their runners to the Rabat to find you, and I told them to go back to the body while I got you from that gathering at the madrassa. What a crew those professors are! Hifalutin' know-it-alls! I'd bet wumpum to silver you were glad to get out of there."

Halvar stopped to let Selim catch up with them, stifling a grin. Flores might not be the cleverest of men, but he certainly understood a soldier's mind.

"Firebrand's men? What are they doing at the wall? That's Donal's charge. The Locals are supposed to be guard-

ing the shores, keeping their eyes open for Huron and Fran-  
chen invaders."

"Seems they found tracks of one of the big cats come  
down from the hills." Flores explained. "They were follow-  
ing the animal when they spotted the body."

"A cat?" Halvar considered this new addition to his  
knowledge of the wildlife of Manatas. "Just how big is this  
wild cat?" He imagined something like the lynx that lurked  
in the woodlands of the Dane-march where he had spent  
his childhood.

Selim and Flores exchanged looks. Halvar had already  
met one of Manatas's more unusual animals, but the moun-  
tain cat was considerably larger and fiercer than the rela-  
tively mild-mannered sekonk.

"It's very big," Selim said, spreading her arms as far  
as they would go. "Big enough to kill deer."

"Dangerous, then."

"Very," Flores said. "It's known to kill donkeys and  
goats left out overnight."

"Then I hope Firebrand and his men find it and kill it  
before it does too much damage," Halvar said. "Where's  
this body?"

"Just past the gate." Flores steered him past the gate  
guardsman, who had come out of his tiny shed to stand  
at attention, his halberd properly grounded.

Halvar nodded approvingly. Perhaps his drilling and  
chiding and surprise strolls through Manatas were hav-  
ing an effect on the ragtag assemblage of out-of-work ar-  
tisans, landless farmers, and former soldiers who had  
answered his call for recruits to the Manatas Town Guard.  
In the two months since he had been given the charge,  
he had tried to bring some kind of order to the disorder-  
ly gang that was still smarting from the loss of their for-  
mer leaders. At least this fellow knew how to behave when  
his superior officers passed by.

Flores ignored the guard and hurried to where Fire-  
brand and his band of Locals, Tenente Donal of the Green

Village Constabulary, and the inevitable donkey cart were standing next to something huddled beside the stone wall that divided Manatas Town from the rest of the island.

"What cheer?" Halvar greeted the tall Mahak, whom he had appointed one of his tenentes.

"No cheer," Firebrand answered, pointing to the object at his feet. "My man Muskrat found this when we were tracking the cougar."

"That's their name for the mountain cat," Selim explained from her usual post at Halvar's elbow.

"Has the cat been at this body?" Halvar asked, turning to the tall Afrikan bending over the corpse.

"Not so that I can tell." Dr. Moise, the resident medico attached to Sultan Petrus's Andalusian force straightened his lanky frame and rose to face Halvar.

"How long has he been there?" Halvar asked, looking at the assembled Breains and Locals.

"I should say, by the laxness of the limbs, perhaps two days, perhaps three," Dr. Moise eyed the Green Village constable. "The first rigor has passed, but the flesh is frozen, thanks to the snowfall and the cold. He should have been found long before this!"

"He was covered with snow," Donal protested. "And in the shadow of the wall. And my men aren't used to patrolling the wall—they never had to before." He glared at the Mahak. "That's *their* job."

"True," Firebrand said. "But Capitán Halvar has given us the duty of watching the water. You are supposed to watch the land."

Halvar broke into the squabble. "Whoever he is, he's bound to be missed." This constant bickering and jockeying for position was getting annoying, but he had no idea how to stop it, short of punishments he didn't want to impose. "Has anyone reported a missing person at the Rabat?"

"Not this one," Flores said with disdain. "Look at his clothes. Worn-out macassins, patched trousers, ragged jack-

et. Scavenger, I'd say. Probably knifed in some petty dispute over a dice game or a woman. Tenente Gomez would not have given him a second thought. Why send for Capitán Don Alvaro? If he's a Scavenger, you should notify Emir Achmet. If he's not, why bother with him at all?"

"Because of this." Firebrand pointed to a large jagged hole in the middle of the body's back. "That's why we called you, Capitán. This is what must have killed him, and it is not a knife that made this wound."

"Quite right," Dr. Moise said. "It is my opinion this wound was made by some sort of firearm—probably a pistoia, from the size of the wound—fired at a distance of some ten paces. Any closer, and there would be burn marks on the body."

"But not here," Halvar said. He'd knelt beside the body and brushed the melting snow aside. "No blood. No blood on the wall, either." He frowned at two marks in the rapidly-thawing earth beside the body. "This wasn't made by a donkey cart, but somebody moved this body from somewhere else. Turn him over, and let's have a better look at him."

The two guardsmen gingerly poked the body with their halberds, rolling it over to reveal the pallid face of a young man just past the teen years, with a face marked by acne and sporting the beginnings of a fair beard. He had straggling fair hair, and his eyes had already been taken by crows. As his head fell back, the collar of his jacket opened, revealing a small crux on a string around his neck. Below the crux was another dark-brown patch, presumably where the bullet had left his body.

"Anyone recognize him?" Halvar scanned the group, then frowned down at the dead lad. "He looks familiar..."

Donal took one look and turned away, muttering a formula against evil spirits. Selim steeled herself to look closer.

"Maybe..." she quavered.

"Maybe what?"

"I think I've seen someone like him on the waterfront. He might be one of Prester Nicodemus's boys, the ones who carry messages and packages around town. He's wearing a crux, so he's a Kristo."

Halvar thought this over. "Dr. Moise, take this lad to the Rabat. There's blood on his front as well as his back, so we have to find the bullet that killed him."

"You won't find it here," Dr. Moise said firmly. "By the way the limbs were arranged, I would agree this body was definitely moved. You will have to find out where he was killed before I can say definitely what the weapon was that did it."

Halvar grimace. "That won't be easy. We have to find out who he was first, then trace his movements." He considered for a moment, "Tenente Donal, you and your men go to Green Village. Ask around, see if anyone remembers a youngster like this fellow hanging about just before the storm. And tell that fellow Simon to print up another issue of the *Gazetta* with information about this poor boy.

"But don't say exactly how he was killed, just that he was found dead. Maybe someone will read it and know who he is. Might as well get some use out of that wretched printing press." He turned to the Mahak. "Tenente Firebrand, what do you know of this animal—this cougar, or mountain cat, or whatever it's called? How dangerous is it? Will it stop folk from going to the Nativity Watch-night festivities in Green Village?"

Firebrand consulted with his men in Munsu then turned back to Halvar.

"We've seen the tracks, but so far, no cougar. It could be denning for the winter, up-the-hills." He gestured toward the pile of rocks in the distance that formed the northernmost end of Manatas Island. "I suggest all goats and donkeys be kept in sheds at night, and a watch put on the Feria grounds where they graze.

"Cougars generally do not come into the open during the day, but prefer to do their hunting at night. We

will keep watch for it. It's not likely to come close to a place where there are many people, so your Kristos can have their Holy Meal when they will."

"Let me know if you see any more signs of it." Halvar turned to Flores. "Tenente Flores, you and Selim come with me. We'll see if any of Prester Nicodemus's lads are missing."

"Why bother?" Flores shrugged. "Those boys are nothing but trouble. They call themselves Waterfront Rats. They're always fighting with Emir Achmet's Scavenger lads, they steal from respectable waterfront peddlers, and they're all Kristos, too."

"They are people of Manatas, and they deserve protection," Halvar stated firmly. "Someone took this lad's life, and that is not right. Come along, Selim, Tenente Flores. We have work to do!"

The donkey-driver and two of Donal's men heaved the body into the cart and covered it with a piece of coarse sacking. Dr. Moise took his seat next to the driver. Selim looked longingly at the cart. She would have preferred to ride, but her self-appointed place was with Halvar.

For his part, Halvar wanted to stretch his legs again. He needed the fresh air against his face after the fug of that detestable party.

He headed back to town, shoulders squared, happy to have something to do besides shuffle papers and instruct underlings in the skills they ought to have learned as children. He would find out who'd killed this lad, and show the people of Manatas their capitán was looking out for their welfare, in the name of the Calif Don Felipe.



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