

THE SAGA OF HALVAR THE HIRELING

MENACE IN MANATAS



Roberta Rogow

Halvar Was Shocked Awake

By A Blast Of Cold Air.

He rolled off the pallet, stiff and achy, to find a pair of boots looming over him.

Hands heaved him to his feet. It was Flores his face a mask of chagrin.

"Bad news, Capitán," he stated. "We've found another one."

"Another what?"

Halvar ran a hand through his hair and scratched the stubble on his chin. He wanted the latrine, the *hammam* and a barber, and mokka, not necessarily in that order.

"Body," Flores said, handing him his clothes.

Halvar hauled his breeches over his braies and shrugged into his coat. He looked for his two caps. Both had served well to protect his head from blows. He felt naked without them.

"Whose body"

"Long Liz."

That got Halvar's attention.

Also By Roberta Rogow

Murders in Manatas

Mischief in Manatas

Mayhem in Manatas



MENACE in MANATAS

The Saga Of Halvar
The Hireling
Book 4



Roberta Rogow



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MENACE IN MANATAS

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To My Husband, Murray

Rogow

1925 – 2002

I only wish you could have stayed
around long enough to see my late-
blooming career.

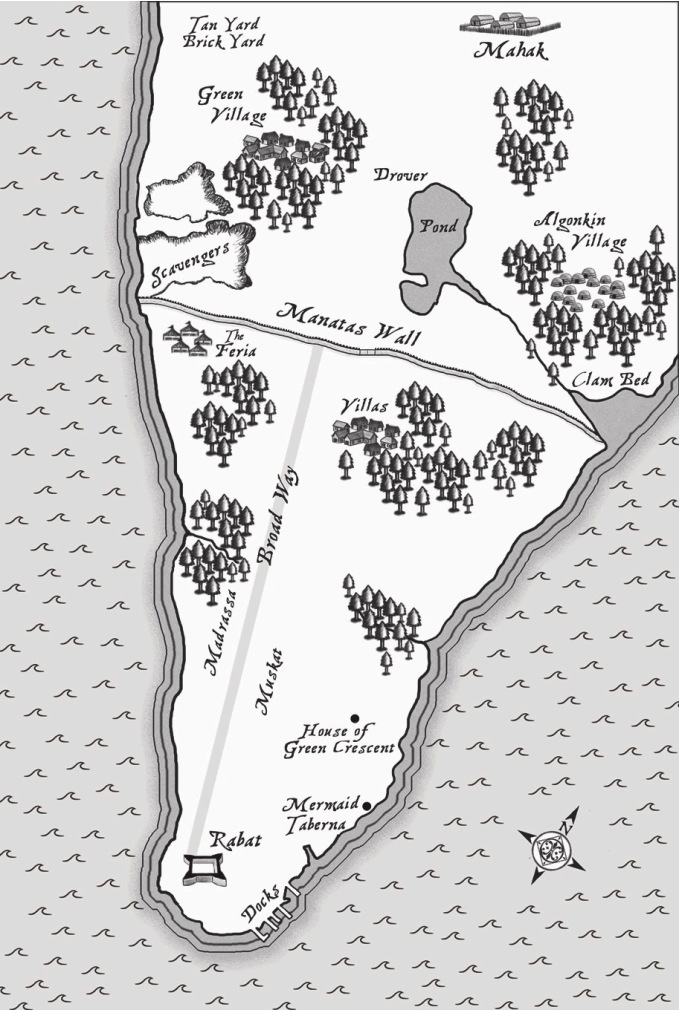
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Manatas Town and Environs



Chapter 1



HALVAR DIDN'T WANT TO BE THE CAPITÁN OF the Town Guards of Manatas. He was not an officer. He had never been in charge of anything. He had been a pikeman in the Free Company of Danes, standing with his fellow pikemen under the watchful eye of Old Sergeant Olaf to hold off the onslaught of enemy troops, until the cannons had decimated the company and he had been left for dead on the field of battle before Pisa.

Then, after Fate, in the form of a zealous battle-nurse, had taken him to Al-Andalus, he'd been a part of the complex network of servants protecting the young man who was heir to the Califate. As the Calif's Hireling, he worked alone.

However, he had been appointed *capitán* by Calif Don Felipe of Al-Andalus-in-Exile, who had told him to keep Manatas safe, and he would do what he had

been told to do. He would maintain the Laws of Al-Andalus, laid down by the Prophet in Sharia and the Council and califs of Al-Andalus over the centuries, in this small outpost at the tip of an island in the middle of a river on the coast of a whole new world.

Manatas was the principal trading spot in Nova Mundum, where the Bretain and Franchen merchants from West Caster and Kibbick could meet with the Afrikan providers of kutton, indigo, timber and furs twice a year, at the spring and fall equinoxes. The moon had waxed and waned twice since the buyers and sellers of the Fall Feria had returned to their home ports, leaving the craftspeople from Green Village, the vendors who sold their output in the souk, the students who had come from all over Nova Mundum to learn from the lecturers at the Madrassah, the owners of mokka-shops, and the Local women who cultivated farm plots that served one or the other of these groups to go back to everyday life.

With the itinerant population gone, Halvar found his task easier. There were fewer sailors on the waterfront, and so fewer fights to break up. The students at the Madrassa were intent on their studies for the first weeks of classes, and the mokka-shop debates hadn't gotten to the point of knives being drawn. The god Thor had apparently listened to Halvar's pleas, sending cold drizzle, fog, and wind across the bay, driving the people of Manatas indoors where they could keep their disputes private.

On this day before the longest night of the year, the drizzle had stopped, and a brisk wind was blowing across the bay. Halvar felt confined in his office at the Rabat, previously the domain of the late Tenente Ruíz. The salt breeze blowing in through the small window seemed to urge him to stretch his long legs

with another walk around town. The chilly air was refreshing after the heat of summer, and he had purchased a new green coat for winter wear, constructed to order by Yussuf the Tailor, who boasted of his connection to the Calif's Hireling.

Halvar wore his leather-lined cap indoors but the araghoun-fur hat he had bought at the Feria hung on a peg by the door. Baggy breeches and boots completed his outfit, combining the uniform of the Manatas Town Guard with his own common gear. He had been to the *hammam* that very morning to have his twice-a-week shave, and his mustache and hair had been trimmed in anticipation of Yule and the Redeemer's Nativity festivities to come. He was ready to face whatever the Three Old Women wanted to throw at him.

What he currently faced were his immediate subordinates—the three men he had named *tenente* and put in charge of the various sectors that made up the newly-incorporated Manatas Island City, renamed by the calif and the Local sachems in council.

Tenente Flores, the squat Andalusian, had been one of the late Tenente Gomez's staunchest supporters, until the arrival of Halvar and the tumultuous events surrounding the Fall Feria had elevated him from the ranks of Manatas Town Guards. His broad face was pitted with smallpox scars, his bulbous nose had turned red in the wind, and his black beard held, as usual, bits of whatever he'd been eating.

Flores was loyal to Manatas, though, if not Halvar.

Halvar had some reservations about the man's tendency to use force where persuasion might get better results. There were still guardsmen who regarded the Calif's Hireling as an outsider, whose orders they

could ignore when they conflicted with what the guards had done in the past. They would obey Flores.

Towering over Flores was Tenente Donal MacDonal, the Britain who had served as constable in Green Village when he was not removing obstreperous patrons from the Gardens of Paradise, the major entertainment hub of Manatas. Donal insisted on wearing his Britain woolen trews and a smock woven in the Britain style of checks and stripes Halvar had learned was called a “tartan” with his regulation green coat provided by the Manatas Town Guard commissary.

Under the former administration, Green Village had been a separate entity on the island of Manatas. Following the events of the Fall Feria and the arrival of Don Felipe, Green Village had been made a part of Manatas Island City, and its constabulary had been put under under Capitán Halvar Danske’s control. This had not set too well with the Green Villagers, most of whom were Kristo, not Islim, with a few dissident Yehudit. Halvar devoutly hoped that Donal’s appointment as *tenente*, and the support of Fru Dani Glick for the merger of the towns, meant that Green Village would no longer be a haven from Sharia and Andalusian justice. As the owner of the Gardens of Paradise, Dani Glick held a unique position in Green Village; without her good-will, Halvar’s efforts would be made ten times harder.

The third member of the trio was the Mahak warrior known as Firebrand, the name he had earned by his vehement opposition to Oropan and Andalusian incursions into territory held by Mahak or Algonkin Locals. He scorned the heavy coat and high-crowned *tarboosh* demanded by the Town Guard but had added a fine deerskin *wamus*, or hunting-shirt, and

fringed leggings to his usual breech-clout out of respect for the customs of Al-Andalus and as a nod to the increasing chill.

Behind the low desk, notebook open, pen in hand, inkpot open, ready to record what was said, sat Salomey, the daughter of Sultan Petrus, who preferred to go by the name of Selim. Her braids were tucked under a small turban, her ripening figure was swathed in a padded green silk jacket and loose trousers, and she bent to her task with all the fervor of one who has found a calling.

She had decided she would keep the records and act as amanuensis for the otherwise illiterate Capitán Halvar Danske. Sultan Petrus had reluctantly allowed his wayward child to take on this responsibility rather than have her running loose in Manatas getting into trouble. At least, under Halvar's eye, she would be safe from possible danger...or so the sultan hoped.

His three officers currently stood before him, eyeing one another with suspicion. Each protected his own small bailiwick jealously, each wondered what the sudden changes meant to his own status.

Halvar looked them over. Clearly, one of his jobs would be to get these three to work together. He had no idea how to do it, unless there was some danger that could unite everyone on the island. So far, the only enemy he had seen was the threat of a hard winter, and there was nothing he could do about that.

Instead, he relied on routine. It had worked in the Free Company of Danes. Maybe it would work in Manatas.

"Morning reports. Disturbances? Fights? Burglaries?"

He looked from one *tenente* to the other.
Flores shrugged.

"All is quiet, Capitán. Bad weather keeps folk indoors, so no riots, even after Mullah Abadul's Resting Day sermons. It's Fasting Month, so mokka-shops are closed during the day, by Mullah Abadul's order."

"That doesn't sit well with the Kristos and Yehudit who want their mokka and nibbles," Donal put in. "And the Local women who bake maiz cakes and roast nguba nuts have all gone back to their own villages, so no food in the souk. We all fast, even though we're not not Islim and don't need to."

Flores ignored the interruption and went on with his report.

"Students are too busy with their lessons to get into pointless arguments. No ships in harbor, so no sailors' fights—the whores are complaining about lack of business on Maiden Lane. There are the usual thieves in the souk, but we've let Emir Achmet's two rascals, Osman and Rachev, know we have our eyes on them. Things should pick up soon, once the End-of-Fast feasting starts, but for now, all is quiet."

Donal took up the narration.

"Green Village is preparing for Nativity, nothing to report yet. After the Yule parties get going, and folks start drinking something spicier than mokka, maybe things will get livelier."

"No sign of trouble on the river," Firebrand stated. "My watchmen have seen nothing. But a ship has come into harbor, so perhaps the women in Maiden Lane will stop their complaining. It came with the high tide, when the muezzins called in the *muskats* and the bells in the chapels rang for evening prayers."

Halvar frowned. "I thought all the ships taking goods from the Feria had left."

"There's always the fishing boats," Flores said. "And the mailboat from Bella Mara and Salaamabad

arrived this morning. I saw the messenger bringing the packet to the sultan when I came in from my lodgings."

"Not a fishing boat." Firebrand was firm on this point. "And not the dhow that goes along the coast. A round ship. My cousin Muskrat showed it to me when we met last evening. I saw people being rowed ashore. At least four at the oars, three sitting. I think one was a woman, but they all wore capes, so I can't be sure."

"Cargo?" Halvar asked.

Flores stepped into the discussion.

"My man Zoltan didn't tell me about any cargo coming in."

"Would he, if he'd been paid to look the other way?" Donal said with a sneer. "We all know how Gomez worked, turning his back to let extra cargo come ashore for a small 'docking fee'."

"Do you call my men liars and thieves?" Flores's hand flew to the knife at his belt, the same as was carried by every male over the age of thirteen everywhere in the known world.

"Tenente Gomez was known to take a bribe or two," Donal shot back. "Anything to put money into his pocket and take it out of the sultan's."

"What if he did? Anyway, it's not the time for cargo," Flores said. "Whatever that ship is doing, it's not delivering anything that will bring a profit to the calif's treasury."

"Enough of this." Halvar stopped the argument before it went any further. "I'll look into this matter. Whatever this ship is doing here, its captain and crew will have to find lodging and food, and we can question them when we find them. To our other business. Tenente Flores, how goes the recruiting? Anyone ready to join the Manatas Town Guards?"

Flores shrugged again. "We don't even offer as much as Emir Achmet," he said. "All we give is a string of white wumpum every week, a place to sleep and a meal twice a day at the barracks. He's got his own squad in the souk, he's offering one of those shacks he's building against the wall by the pits, plus whatever can be picked up, less his take, of course."

"Of course." Halvar said. "Not much we can do about Emir Achmet. His Scavengers are there to pick up the oddments folks discard, after all. Just keep an eye on those in the souk, make sure they only pick up the discards, and nothing else! Now that the dark days are here, there's more opportunity for those busy fingers to pick things up they shouldn't."

"Don't forget the End-of-Fast festival is coming," Selim reminded him. "And the Yehudit have a festival of their own, where gifts are exchanged. That should make the vendors in the souk happier. And there's their custom of lighting lamps, which will make the candle-sellers happy, too."

"And then there's the Nativity celebration," Halvar added. "Shops will be open late in the souk. Mokka-shops on the Broad Way, too, once the End-of-Fast starts. Flores, can you put extra men to watch the souk?"

"I haven't got an army!" Flores complained. "I've only got a dozen, plus Zoltan and Fergus, and they're needed on the waterfront."

"Donal, can you send some of your people into the town?"

Donal's red face grew redder under his auburn beard.

"We've got Yule festivities at the Gardens of Paradise. Things can get a little noisy, especially once they get into the cider and the uskebaugh. And my folk don't like Manatas Town, don't know the place."

"So much the better," Halvar said. "Send two to patrol the Broad Way, keep the students from starting fights over whether Ilha or Chesu will keep a soul from torment in Sheol. Or whether the Earth goes around the Sun, or t'other way around. Or anything else students at Madrassa will argue about."

"Mullah Abadul says it's in the Holy Book—" Flores began, but Halvar cut him off.

"Firebrand, can you spare some of your watchmen to keep an eye on the comings and goings at the waterfront so this Zoltan can be sent to the souk, where he can do more good?"

Firebrand nodded. "I have good warriors, and Sachem Mahmoud sent two Algonkin. Not as good as Mahak, but they will watch the river. Four will keep watch outside Green Village, to see if any of the wolves are hungry enough to hunt near the town. Two more can watch the East Channel. No one will try to sail on the Great River at this time of year—too cold, too much danger. Not even the Huron would dare to attack in winter."

Before Halvar could continue with the next item on his list, a guardsman shoved a Halfling lad in patched coat and trousers into the room.

"What's this?" Halvar snapped. "We're having a meeting here."

"Message from the waterfront," the guardsman announced.

The lad salaamed awkwardly.

"I was sent by Guardsman Zoltan to tell you there is a dead man found on the waterfront, behind Maiden Lane. He asks that someone come quickly and take him away."

"Selim, get Dr. Moise and the dead-cart and follow this lad to the waterfront. Flores, Firebrand, Donal, come with me. You, lad, show us this dead man."

Halvar grabbed his fur hat and was out the door before the lad could say any more. At last, he could get out of that office!

Chapter 2



THE MORNING FOG HAD LIFTED, BUT THE AIR was still chilly when the group left the Rabat, following the Halfling lad through the curving streets that led to the waterfront district. Halvar settled the fur cap on his head, grateful for its warmth, aware that his hairline was receding faster than he would like. Overhead, the sky was bright blue, belying the predictions of a cold, harsh winter to come.

The lad turned north before they got to the waterfront plaza, leading the party along a narrow path between the blank walls of the warehouses and the back doors of the small wooden houses on Maiden Lane that offered lodging and food to temporary visitors, whether merchants or sailors. They were met by a tall Andalusian Guardsman whose regulation tarboosh added six inches to his already impressive height. He smoothed his neatly trimmed mustache with the air of one who knew just how good-looking he was.

"Guardzman Zoltan," he introduced himself, offering a brisk salaam by way of greeting.

Halvar returned the salute.

"You found this body?"

"Me and Fergus, he's my partner." He indicated the shorter man lurking behind him. "We was doing our rounds, as per orders, checking to see if anyone had tampered with the warehouse locks, and we saw him, just like you see him."

"And sent this lad to fetch us. Good thinking." Halvar turned his attention to the body in question.

It was folded on its knees against the wall of one of the small wooden shacks. Halvar looked right and left and saw only blank walls in either direction. No windows for an interested bystander to peek out of, no one to hear an anguished cry.

Donal and Flores stayed well away from the body, making room in the narrow alley for Dr. Moise and Selim in the donkey cart. Firebrand stepped around the cart to scan the walls and path as the shadows faded back and the sun rose enough to illuminate the stretch of trodden earth.

"We haven't moved him," Halvar assured the slender Afrikan physician.

"Thank you for that," Dr. Moise maneuvered himself alongside the dead man. "Selim, note this—a wound in the back of the neck. Triangular in shape, very small in diameter."

"You think that's what killed him?" Halvar asked.

"I don't think anything yet. It's likely, but we've been mistaken before. I won't know for certain until I've examined him." Dr. Moise beckoned to the two guardsmen. "Come here, you two, and help me move him."

Zoltan and Fergus obediently stepped forward. As they pulled the body away from the wall, the man's head

fell back, revealing regular features and a neatly-trimmed beard, pointed in the Franchen style, with a thin mustache. His coat fell open to reveal a fine linen shirt and Franchen-style trousers with the flap hanging open.

Fergus made the sign of the crux.

“For Chesu’s sake, it’s Girard!”

“You know this man?” Halvar asked.

“He came in last spring with that shipload of Afrikans,” Fergus explained. “Made an almighty stink, they did. Remember, Zoltan?”

Zoltan shrugged. “Could be. So many ships in and out at feria time, I don’t recall them all.”

“But this Franchen, he was the one who wouldn’t pay Gomez the extra docking fee.” Fergus persisted, ignoring the warning looks from both Flores and Zoltan. “Remember? He said he’d been to Manatas before and never had to pay such a fee, and besides, he said, he wasn’t docked, he was out in the bay.”

Halvar said nothing. This was more proof that the Manatas Town Guard had to be taken in hand by someone scrupulously honest...like himself.

Selim had wrinkled her nose as the body came away from the wall, revealing an odorous stain.

“Couldn’t he wait to get to the latrine?” she said with an expressive grimace.

“Guess not,” Zoltan said. “The public place is all the way down there.” He gestured towards the opening of the alleyway. “Sometimes, you just have to go.”

“How long do you think he’s been dead?” Halvar asked.

“Not long,” Dr. Moise said. “Flesh is cold, but that’s understandable. There was frost last night, and it’s still chilly.”

“When did you two find him?” Halvar turned to Zoltan and Fergus.

"We left the barracks right after dawn prayers." Zoltan answered for both of them. "We must have got here not long after that. Plenty of light to see what was here. Took aback, was Fergus."

"At first, we thought it was one of the Scavengers, or a Local what had took too much fiery-water," Fergus explained. "But then we saw the coat."

"Too fine for a Scavenger, and not the sort the Locals wear," Zoltan added.

"I agree," Halvar said, fingering the material. "This coat's got gold braid on the collar and cuffs, and those are shiny buttons, maybe gold or silver."

"It could still be one of the the Scavengers did it," Donal said. "If it was, all we have to do is find him and get him to the Rabat, and that's that."

"Scavengers wouldn't have left that coat. No, Tenente Donal, this is no mere robbery. Whoever did this meant to kill his victim. The question is, why do it here?"

Halvar looked up then down the alley, to where Firebrand had squatted.

"Tenente Firebrand, what have you found?"

"There is ash here. Someone smoked tabac." Firebrand stood and pointed to a small pile, stirred by the rising wind.

"No footprints," Halvar said. "Ground's too hard."

"I will see if I can find anything else." Firebrand headed towards the end of the alley that led directly to the waterfront plaza.

Selim called out, "There's a passage over here. I think it leads to Maiden Lane."

"Aha! Whores. That's why this fellow was here," Flores said. "He was taking a short break from, ah, important business."

"No one's going to interrupt Long Liz at her work," Zoltan sniggered as they followed the Mahak to his destination. "This is her crib."

"How do you know that?" Halvar asked.

Zoltan's handsome face flushed red.

"I patrol the waterfront," he said, his tone stiff. "I know whose crib is whose."

Halvar said nothing.

"These cribs are where the whores take their men," Zoltan continued. "They do their living at other lodgings on Maiden Lane."

"No windows on this side, no peepers," Fergus reported, stating what Halvar had already observed. "Front windows only." He smirked at Donal. "Showing off the goods."

Halvar grimaced in frustration.

"Thor's Hammer! *Someone* must have heard something! Did you two see anyone when you came into this alley? Hear anything?"

Fergus looked at Zoltan, who shook his head.

"It was misty, so we couldn't see nothing. Maybe heard a donkey, all the ways down the alley, at the plaza end."

Firebrand had been walking along the alley, carefully scanning the beaten-earth path.

"Hoy!" he shouted. "Come here!"

When they reached him, he pointed to two ruts in moistened earth where a frozen puddle had recently melted. A small pile of dung still steamed between the marks.

"Someone has been here. Not us. Smaller cart."

"There's your donkey." Halvar thought a bit, then said, "What's the name of that Afrikan halfwit who cleans the waterfront latrine? I see him every morning when I go to the Rabat. He does his rounds regularly. He might have seen or heard something."

"Tbo?" Fergus answered. "You don't think he did this. Never!"

"Ibo's harmless," Zoltan agreed. "He picks up the nightsoil from the cribs and the lodging houses, then he cleans the public bog. "

"He must have been through here either just before or just after the crime," Halvar decided. "Tenente Flores, you go back to the Rabat with Dr. Moise and the body. Get your men out, and find this Ibo fellow. I want to talk to him."

"You won't get much out of him," Zoltan said with a shrug. "He can barely speak Arabi, doesn't understand half what he's told."

"He likely saw or heard something," Halvar insisted. "Even if he didn't understand what it was he saw or heard. Tenente, you find him!"

"And what are you going to do?" Donal asked.

"I'm going to have a word with whoever lives in this crib," Halvar said as the donkey-cart moved forward with its sad burden. "Donal, you might as well come along, just in case these women only speak Erse. Firebrand..."

"I stay with you," Firebrand stated. "I was told by my sachem to learn from you how to catch murderers. I will watch how you do it."

"And I'll take notes," Selim said.

Halvar sighed again. He could not control this willful teenager. His only hope was that she would eventually tire of this sordid work and take up another pastime.

In the meanwhile, there was a murderer to catch.

Chapter 3



FLORES CLIMBED UP ON THE CART NEXT TO Dr. Moise, and the grim cortege headed for the Rabat. Halvar and his party squeezed through the narrow passage onto Maiden Lane, a brick-paved street that ran parallel to the East Channel.

There, hastily-constructed wooden houses in the Oropan style jostled Andalusian brick villas. Small passages between each building to provide access to the noisome alley that separated them from the warehouses that held the goods that brought buyers and sellers to Manatas in the first place.

Facing the line of dwellings were a number of small sheds where vendors of fish and vegetables could take shelter during rain or snow showers. The Roumi Rite chapel's bell tower was just visible at the northernmost end of Maiden Lane, with the Kristo burying-ground and the Manatas Town Wall north of that.

Early vendors were making their rounds. A man in a rough kutton jacket led a donkey pulling a cart full of crates of fresh fish. A Local woman in long deerskin skirt and woolen Britain-style jacket strolled along the street with a basket of esquash, stopping at one or another of the houses to sell her produce to the dwellers therein. Another donkey-cart held lengths of logs, ready to burn in the fireplaces and stoves that kept the inhabitants of Manatas warm during the harsh winter months.

Halvar eyed the nearest shack, built of boards fastened together with wooden pegs, its roof layered with thatch in the Britain style.

"Is this the one?" he asked Zoltan.

"That's Long Liz Lonergan's crib," the guard confirmed. "She's one of the best on Maiden Lane." He stopped and added, "Or so they tell me."

Halvar nodded. "Of course, you wouldn't know by your own experience."

Zoltan rapped on the door to the crib.

"Long Liz! Open for the Guards!"

"Zoltan, it's too early for collections," a woman shouted from inside. "Come back later for your cut."

Zoltan's face took on a red tinge under his neatly trimmed beard and mustache.

"Liz is a...a friend," he stammered. "We, um, share a meal sometimes."

Halvar said nothing. He understood the relationship between the women who worked the waterfront and the men who were their protectors. If one of his guards acted in that capacity, he would not stand in the way. Of course, he wouldn't make it easy for a guard to take advantage of his position, either. He'd have to consider what to do about Zoltan.

The door flew open to reveal a woman almost as tall as Halvar, her body barely covered by a linen shift

under an open kutton robe. Her flaming red hair was a tangle around a face still bearing the signs of the previous night's debauchery.

Halvar tried not to look at the abundant flesh revealed with no effort at modesty.

"I regret to tell you that your, um, client is not coming back."

She looked at the party on her doorstep and fixed her scorn on Zoltan.

"What d'ya mean, not coming back? He's left his gear here, of course he's coming back." She finally appeared to register the significance of the squad standing before her. "Who's this lot?"

Zoltan made hurried introductions.

"This here is Capitán Halvar Danske. And his assistant, Selim ibn Petrus."

"You're the one who got rid of Gomez." Long Liz appraised Halvar with a grin. "Good riddance to that one."

"May we come in?" Halvar asked. "What we have to say is not for the neighbors to hear."

"They'll know soon enough," Fergus said, looking up and down the street. The presence of a squad of Town Guards had people poking their heads out of doors, eager to see what was happening so early in the morning.

Long Liz bowed ironically, with a sweeping gesture that rivaled the play-actors of Britain.

"Do come in, Capitán Don Alvaro, welcome to my humble abode." She stood aside while Halvar, Zoltan, and Fergus crowded into the room beyond. Donal and Firebrand stayed just outside the door, while Selim hurried in last, tried to find a place to prop her inkpot and notebook and found none.

The single room was lit only by the morning light coming in at the front window. A huge bed dominat-

ed it, with two three-legged stools and a small table to one side. Heat came from a brazier of charcoal set under the window, where the smoke could be carried outside by the draft flowing through the house.

Halvar noted a sword and belt hastily thrown on the floor next to the bed. Clearly, the customer had been in a hurry to begin his amorous activities.

Long Liz sat down on the bed, leaving the rest of the group to stand.

"What's this about the captain not coming back? He's left his sword, he's left his purse..."

"We believe we found him behind this house," Halvar said. "About the size of Guardsman Fergus, but slimmer. Dark complexion, small beard and mustache cut in the Franchen style. Wearing a fine coat dyed dark purple, gold lace on the sleeves, gold-looking buttons. Does that sound familiar?"

"*Pie Chesu!*" Liz gasped. "It does sound like Franz. That would be Captain Franz Girard, owner and captain of the *Belle Fleur*," she added proudly. "He always comes to me when he's in Manatas."

"Does he now?" Halvar said. He looked around the room then took a seat on a small stool, studying his surroundings. "Is this where you live, or just where you, um, do business?"

"It's mine," Liz said. "It do get a bit cold in winter, though, so I have a room at La Maison Rouge next door. Fat Gaston lets us women stay there in the winter, when there aren't any sailors to take up space."

Halvar nodded. "This Captain Franz Girard. You say he came to you last night?"

"That he did. I was in Maison Rouge."

"You don't do your, um, business there?"

"It's a taberna, not a brothel," Liz said with a toss of her head. "I don't work a house, I work alone. There's no

sailors coming in after the Fall Feria, just a few of the regulars from the Madrassa. Still, they don't appreciate a cold crib, and Fat Gaston don't mind a few extra customers, so long as they don't take up room without they pay for a drink or two."

Halvar nodded. Clearly, the management of whores was more complicated than he thought.

"About this man, this Captain Girard," he said, trying to get back to the reason for their visit. "You say he found you at the Maison Rouge. When was that?"

"Last night, around the time the Holy Meal ended. I was just back from chapel when I saw him and his men coming from the dock. I wasn't expecting him until Spring Feria, but there he was, and right glad to see me he was, too.

"Ask Zoltan—he was there. We was having our evening meal, right after sundown. Up come the captain, fresh from the waterfront, still had the spray on his coat. Said he'd make the usual arrangements. So, we three had our meal, and then we come here, and the captain and me had a fine time."

Zoltan's blush had deepened with each sentence of Liz's blithe recitation.

"It's not what you think..." he began

"What I think is that this dead man is Captain Franz Girard," Halvar said. "And what I want to know is, who killed him, and why was he killed. Have you any ideas on that subject, Fru Liz?"

"He can't be dead," Liz said, desperate. "He's left his gear, his belt, his sword, even his purse. See!" She scrabbled in the pile of oddments at the foot of the bed till she found a small pouch that clinked pleasantly. She shook out a coin and held it out for Halvar's inspection. "He paid for the night, said he'd give me more for Nativity feasting. He said he'd be here until after

Nativity, that he had business with someone in Green Village, and that he'd give me a fine present from the souk."

Halvar frowned as he took the coin and made out the face of Emperor Lovis on the coin and carefully spelled out the inscription. They were written in the Roumi letters that were similar to the Rune he had tried so hard to learn as a lad in the Dane-March.

"Shiny," he commented. He hefted the coin. "Silver, full weight."

"This is new," Selim observed, taking the coin from his hand. "See? It's got the Roumi year—this year—on it. They count from Chesu's Nativity, not from the Prophet's Flight. I think they call these coins 'imperial,' from the inscription of Emperor Lovis."

"What they call these coins doesn't matter. What's important is that Lovis has got his hands on enough silver to mint them." Halvar took the coin back and held it up to the light coming from the small window. "The question is, where did Girard get it, and when?"

Liz stuck her hand out. Halvar gave her back the coin, and she replaced it in the pouch, glaring defiantly at Zoltan.

"That's a gent for you. Don't keep what ain't his."

Halvar grinned.

"You keep it, Long Liz. You've earned it."

Liz tucked the pouch under her pillow and leaned back, twitching the coverlet over her lap and folding her arms, daring anyone to take her prize from her.

"What has this to do with the body?" Firebrand asked from just inside the door.

"A good question," Donal said. "Well, Capitán? Now we know who the dead man is, what do we do about it?"

"We find out what brought him to Manatas," Halvar said. "Long Liz, what can you tell us about that?"

Liz shrugged, her shift opening over her full breasts.

"I didn't ask. I was just glad to see someone new, that's all. It's been slow since the Fall FERIA. I've got a few customers, they come in regular, but Franz was special.

"You know what they say about Franchen? That they love like they cook? Well, Franz must have been one grand cook, 'cause he kept me busy all night long." She smiled happily; then, tears began leaking from her eyes. "You say he's dead? How?"

"A knife in the back of the neck," Zoltan said.

Liz let out a howl and fell back on the bed, kicking the covers aside, her long legs fully revealed.

"He was alive when he left this morning, I swear to you by Chesu and Mother Mara!"

"When *did* he leave?" Halvar asked, trying not to look at the bare legs.

"He'd filled up the pot, had to piss, and went outside just about daybreak," Liz said. "He said he was only going to be a moment, he was coming back for another round." She tossed about on the bed, weeping. "Who would do such a thing? Why?"

"Cover yerself, woman, you're embarrassing the lad!" Donal admonished her, with a glance at Selim.

"Time he learned what his parts is for," Liz replied, but she wiped her eyes, twitched the coverlet back over her legs and propped herself against the wall at the head of the bed.

"Franchen coin, Franchen ship. Girard was Franchen, then," Halvar mused.

"Oh, yes, that he was." Liz took a last shuddering breath and composed herself, pulling the coverlet over her exposed breasts.

"In that case, what was he doing here, in Andalusian waters?" Halvar wondered. "Unless Lovis is now

claiming that he rules all the territory once claimed by Al-Andalus, including Nova Mundum..."

He frowned, considering the implications of that idea.

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask," Liz said, wiping her eyes on the coverlet. "We had better things to do than talk politics."

Firebrand poked his head through the doorway, interrupting Halvar's thoughts on international politics.

"There are two women here. They say they have come to speak with Long Liz Loneran."

"If that's the Islim busybody and her Yehudit pal, I don't want to see them!" Liz called back, pulling the bedclothes around her neck.

"You will answer to us, Fru Loneran, or be carried to the House of the Green Crescent for examination."

Halvar turned around, startled by the sound of the one voice he'd never have thought to hear on Maiden Lane.

Eva Hakim, the *zyim* of the Manatas Sisters of Fatima, strode into the room in her green hijab and overrobe and brown trousers. She was followed by Dani Glick, proprietress of the Gardens of Paradise, in a snug woolen jacket buttoned to the chin, worn over a full skirt that covered several petticoats. Both women ignored the men and concentrated their attention on Long Liz.

"It is the will of Sultan Petrus and the Town Council of Manatas that all whores must be medically pure," Eva Hakim stated. "To this end, they will submit to our monthly examinations."

"And Old Nokomis of the Mahak is ready to enforce the ruling, Liz," Dani Glick said, "so let's get to it. You've missed the last two months, but this time we've

got you. All these men will leave, and we can do what we have to. I get no joy out of it—I've seen enough women's parts to last me a lifetime."

Eva Hakim regarded the males in the room with lofty disdain.

"You may go about your business," she declared.

Dani Glick advanced on the woman cowering in the bedclothes.

"Keep your hands off me, you interfering Yehudit bitch!" Liz snarled.

"That's *Fru* Yehudit Bitch to you, Mistress Loner-gan. You would not keep yourself clean at the Gardens of Paradise, but you'll wash yourself now or find somewhere else to do your work. Bos-Town, maybe?"

"Among the Pure Sect?" Liz retorted. "No, Man-atas is where I fetched up, Manatas is where I stay."

"In that case, you will comply with the ukase of Sul-tan Petrus that all women who work on Maiden Lane should be examined," Eva Hakim said sternly. She regarded Fergus and Zoltan with even more distaste. "This is not something men should see. Remove yourselves!"

They left without a further word.

"There's still the matter of a dead man behind this house," Halvar objected. "This woman was the last to see him alive."

"I didn't kill him," Liz cried out. "When he left, I took a nap. I thought I'd need my strength for when he came back."

"He's not coming back now," Donal, who had followed them inside, told her. "Do what you have to, Fru Glick, Eva Hakim."

He and Halvar joined Firebrand in the street, Selim trailing behind them.

"What now?" he asked.

Halvar stared at the bay, where a single ship bobbed at anchor.

“If Girard’s men lodged at the Maison Rouge, then they should be there still. We’ll see if any of them know what brought their captain to Manatas at this time of year.”

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