

THE SAGA OF HALVAR THE HIRELING

MISCHIEF IN MANATAS



Roberta Rogow

“You don’t have Leon,” Sultan Petrus pointed out.

“How are you going to get him out of the Fraternity?”

“Place Green Village under Al-Andalus rule, and I’ll get him out!” Halvar said firmly.

“Green Village has always been under Mahak rule,” Petrus said.

“If the Mahak cede their village to Al-Andalus and go upriver to their own territory, that means Green Village is no longer Mahak,” Halvar reasoned. “And once Green Village is under Andalusian rule, Sharia law applies, and Leon di Vicenza must answer to it, along with everyone else on Manatas Island. I’ll have him on that ship before winter!”

“Unless something else comes along to distract you,” Sultan Petrus murmured.

The Afrikan servant put his head into the room to announce, “A messenger, Excellent Sultan. From Green Village.”

“What does Green Village want with me?”

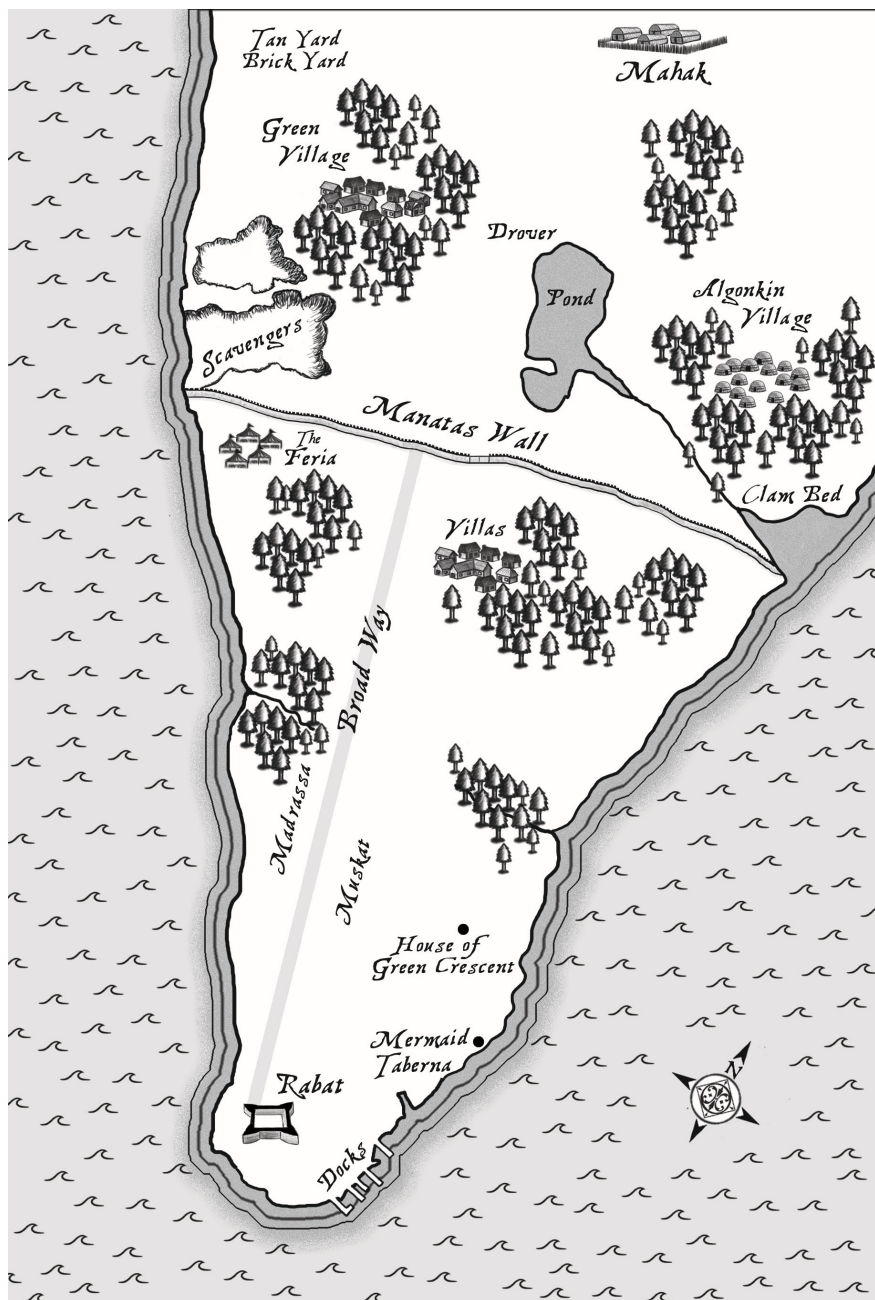
“Not you, excellent Sultan—the Calif’s Hireling. They’ve just found another body.”

Also By

Roberta Rogow

Murder In Manatas

Mayhem In Manatas



MISCHIEF in MANATAS

The Saga Of Halvar The Hireling
Book 3



Roberta Rogow

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MISCHIEF IN MANATAS

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TO MY DAUGHTERS, MIRIAM AND
LOUISE: THIS ONE'S FOR YOU.

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I thank these people who helped make this book possible:

For the song “Under the Stinking Beast”: lyrics by Gary McGath, which is based on “Under the Griping Beast,” music and lyrics by Cat Faber c.1997.

Lynn Holdom and Rachel Kadushin were there when Halvar the Hireling and his world were imagined.

Most of all, Elizabeth Burton, editor and publisher, who continues to support this odd mix of history and mystery.

PART ONE

A fatality In The
feria

1

HALVAR HADN'T INTENDED TO DISRUPT THE LEADERSHIP of the Manatas Town Guard. He'd have preferred to leave the ordinary business of Manatas to its own people—Sultan Petrus and his underlings. It wasn't his fault that said underlings had tried to kill him, and he'd had to take action against them.

He had been sent by the Calif Don Felipe of Al-Andalus to this outpost settlement in the New World with orders to collect the revenues due from the fall Feria. The funds would be used to purchase arms and men to fight the incursion of the Franchen Emperor Lovis and his bloodthirsty troops, who had invaded Al-Andalus from the north. Instead, he had been inveigled into solving a series of murders.

Moreover, Halvar was supposed to find the louche artist, inventor, gadfly and pain in the bottom once called Leon di Vicenza, now known as Frater Leonidas, and fetch him home.

He had been on the island for three weeks, and in that time he had solved curious puzzles, uncovered murderers, scotched a scheme to destroy the bead currency of the island, and faced various foes with two legs and four. Now, however, he was finally free to accomplish his mission.

He strode through the Feria, a tall Dane in the green woolen coat devised especially for him by Yussuf the Tailor, adapted from the garments provided for the Town Guard. Gussets had been set into the back seams to accommodate Halvar's broad shoulders, and

bone buttons opened readily so that he could reach the dagger with the lump of amber in the handle, the only reminder of his youth in the Dane-March. His cap sat squarely on his head, concealing his rapidly receding hairline, although ample strands of fair hair straggled over the high collar of the coat. His jutting nose seemed to point the way through the grounds of the Feria.

His sweeping mustache had been newly trimmed, and his chin scraped clean of stubble. His booted feet scuffed among the leaves blown from the trees that stood just beyond the open space where the Feria assembled, a reminder that only the southern tip of the island had been settled. Beyond the makeshift stalls, stands and tents, oaks and maples, birches and aspens crowded the boundaries, their leaves blazing gold to yellow to russet to dark brown in the autumn sunlight.

"Business is good," he said, aloud. "The Feria should bring in a nice sum. It's too bad about the storm, but Don Felipe should be pleased."

"It's almost over," said his companion.

Sultan Petrus's daughter Salomey had insisted on accompanying him on his jaunt through the Feria. Her braids were tucked up under a turban, and she was dressed in a padded silk jacket and trousers tucked into the tops of soft leather boots. Her heavy eyebrows nearly met over her snub nose, and a few hairs on her upper lip added to her masculine disguise. To the rest of the world, she was Selim ibn Petrus, the insufferable son of the ruler of Manatas.

Halvar wished she had not taken her role as apprentice investigator so seriously. The "youth" dogged his steps whenever he left the Rabat, as if she expected him to be attacked at any moment. Not that a fifteen-year-old would be much use, except perhaps to summon help!

The Feria, occupying the space between the Mahak long-houses to the northeast and, the Algonkin wigwams on the southeast, and the collection of Oropan-style houses known as Green Village to the west was the settlement's chief reason for existence. The island of Manatas had been a focus of trade between the local tribes before the Oropans came to Nova Mundum, but when the strangers arrived, trading-ground quarrels had broken the peace, and accusations had led to bloodshed.

Then the soldiers and tally men from Al-Andalus had taken over the proceedings, imposing their regulations, checking the weights

and measures, and assuring the participants that all would be treated fairly. Now, Bretains and Franchen brought cloth, metal tools, finished pottery and processed foodstuffs like smoked and cured meats and dried fish to the island, where they traded for fur pelts from the west and bales of kutton, barrels of tabac leaves, and sheaves of indigo carried from the southern territories claimed by the Afrikans. The kutton would be woven in the mills of Nova Britain and dyed with the indigo; the tabac would be sent over the Storm Sea to Oropa, where it would fetch a good price.

Overseeing every sale were the Andalusian tally men, their abacuses clicking off the percentage owed to the calif for his guidance in keeping the Feria honest and Manatas safe for traders of every nation and religion.

The Feria usually lasted the two weeks before and after the full moon of the autumnal equinox. This year, a terrible storm had disrupted the trading, and Sultan Petrus and the Mahak and Algonkin sachems had decreed the Feria would remain open for an additional week.

Daoud, the leather-lunged news-crier, marched through the Feria announcing there would be a Grand Divan in two days' time, when all claims and lawsuits would be settled. For those who needed advice, there would be tables near the tally men where advocates would offer their expertise in the intricacies of Sharia, Britain, and Local law. What is more, Daoud announced, "The end of the Feria will be marked with sports, games, contests of strength and skill, and musical performances."

Halvar winced at this last announcement. He had already heard the buskers' rendition of "The Ballad of the Stranger and the Sekonk" repeated to the amusement of the crowd, and knew there would be more buyers for the broadsheet that depicted his encounter with the stinky creature. He was not sure whether the whispers of "There goes the Calif's Hireling" were admiring or were accompanied by a snicker and the rattle of the broadsheet with the lyrics to the ballad with its the drawing of a tall man and a small, bush-tailed animal.

He noted gaps in the lines of tables and tents. Some of the major dealers had already packed their belongings, preparing for the long trek back south or north. A few of their places had been taken by lesser vendors, who set out a cloth or mounted a small stand and announced their wares in Arabi, Erse, or Munsí, the trade lan-

guage devised by the Locals. A healer touted the virtues of his herbal potions.

A woman in a gaudy red shirt and Britain plaid skirt called out to passers-by, praising the colors of her knitted caps and scarves. A stern imam in the long dark coat and green turban that signified a graduate of the Ulema of Baghdad harangued a few listeners about the evils of gambling, which he claimed was a defiance of Ilha's word and the workings of kismet, and offered copies of his sermons.

Halvar grinned under his mustache; he had no doubt that bets were already being laid as to whether the lanky Mahak or the sturdy Britains would win the footrace whose course was being set out around the perimeter of the Feria.

The last days of the Feria brought the residents of Manatas Town to the Feria to pick up whatever they could find at a bargain price. Yehudit in long black coats and broad-brimmed hats trimmed with fur; Afrikans in striped tunics and patterned shirts worn over loose trousers; Andalusians in robes and turbans, accompanied by women whose "modest garb" ranged from a simple hijab to cover the hair to a full burka. The air was filled with the scents of sizzling oil and meat as Local and Afrikan women hawked refreshments—the ever present hot maiz-cakes, ground-nuts called nguba, and dried berries, all washed down with sweet cider.

Halvar caught sight of a familiar face.

"*Salaam aleikum*, Firebrand. What cheer?" He accosted the Mahak warrior who had assisted him in one of his investigations.

The Mahak greeted Halvar with an upraised hand to show that he held no weapon.

"Good cheer, Hireling. As you can see, I have taken the advice of my sachem and made some of our warriors watchmen. They will see to it that there is no more fighting, no one will pass bad wumpum, and no one will sell fiery water to those who should not drink it."

Halvar noted the presence of several young Mahak among the crowd.

"Good thinking. "

"The Scavengers have grown very bold since you threw Tenente Gomez into the river," Firebrand said as they strolled along the path lined with small stalls and blankets.

"That wasn't my fault," Halvar protested. "He came at me with a halberd. Has anyone found the body?"

"Not yet," Firebrand admitted. "But it is possible he was swept out to sea. The river current is strong. He is surely dead by now. In a way, it was not a good thing. He kept the Scavengers in Manatas Town, would not let them into the Feria."

"You mean he paid them off," Halvar said. "And I didn't kill Tenente Ruíz. That was your doing."

"Would you prefer that he had skewered you?" Firebrand countered. "Hya!"

He stopped a pair women dressed in gaudy loose trousers and long silk tunics trimmed with glittering beads, and their male companion, a slender Andalusian with a neatly-trimmed beard, in a brightly-striped kaftan and turban.

"Are you buyers or sellers?" he demanded of the trio.

The man smirked. The women simpered.

"Just looking about, you know. Not here on business, Mahak."

"Good. Because such business belongs on Maiden Lane!" Firebrand warned the doxies and their protector.

The hubbub of the Feria was broken by the cry of the muezzin and the clang of the chapel bell in nearby Green Village. All other activity stopped as the faithful Islim prostrated themselves and the Kristos knelt for their midday prayers.

Selim obediently bowed, hands at her waist, then knelt on the grass—better than the muddy path. Firebrand stood erect and murmured something that might have been a prayer or a curse. Halvar simply gripped his amulet that could have been Thor's hammer or the Crux and recited his usual plea to the Redeemer and Mother Mara and the god Thor for protection. He hoped he wouldn't need it, but one could never be sure in Manatas.

So far, he'd been poisoned, drugged, beaten, stabbed, shot, garroted and skewered, and this was only his third week on the island. On the other hand, he'd actually been able to remove his meager belongings from the grim cell assigned to him at the Rabat to the more congenial rooms at the Mermaid Taberna formerly occupied by Leon di Vicenza without incident.

Selim said a final "Ilha is the One" and scrambled to her feet.

"Are you praying that you won't get killed today?"

"A whole day, and no one's tried. I must be doing something wrong." He stopped to admire a pile of furs on a table. He recognized the silky brown of mink and the gray-white of sable, but the bits of orange-and black-striped fur puzzled him. He noted the dis-

tinctive black and white of sekonk fur and wrinkled his nose at the pervasive odor.

An odd item caught his eye.

"What's that?"

The vendor, a Local woman of indeterminate age in the kutton blouse and leather skirt favored by the Algonkin grinned at him expectantly.

"Araghoun," she explained, holding up the skin, which had been made into a round cap with a flat crown, decorated with the animal's tail swinging jauntily on one side.

"One string ten purple," she said in Arabi.

"Too much!" Halvar knew how the game was played. "One purple, no more. Besides, I have a hat." He patted the round cap on his head.

The Local woman wrinkled her nose.

"Too much sekonk! Better you should have this, good and warm in winter."

"You really should get rid of that awful cap," Selim commented.

"I like my cap." Halvar settled the smelly object more firmly on his head. Its boiled-leather lining had protected him from assaults for many years, and it reminded him that he was, after all, a Dane, no matter how long he had been in Al-Andalus.

"It reeks of sekonk."

All conversation stopped when the Local woman shrieked out, "Thief!"

A boy in a tattered shirt and patched trousers darted away from the furrier's table, the fur cap in one hand. He barreled into Halvar, snatched at the strings of wumpum dangling from Halvar's belt, and danced away before the Dane realized what was happening. Firebrand tried to block his path, but the the youngster veered to the left when Firebrand went to the right.

Selim pelted after him, slipping on occasional muddy patches in the grass as he darted in and out of the spaces left by the departing vendors. Firebrand shouted something in Munsí. The watchmen came together at the end of the steep path that led to the Scavengers' settlement, near the garbage pits at the end of the Manatas Town wall near the Great River.

Halvar joined the chase through the lines of stands and tents, while the vendors yelled encouragement. The young thief skidded to a halt in front of a solidly built Mahak hefting a war-club. Selim nearly bumped into him.

"Ali! What are you doing here? You're supposed to stay in Manatas Town!"

"Please!" the youngster pleaded. "He'll kill me if I don't come back with something!"

"Emir Achmet?" Selim panted. "I thought the Feria wasn't to be touched."

"That was when Tenente Gomez paid him to stay away," the boy said. "Gomez isn't here, Ruiz isn't here. Even a Scavenger's got to make a living."

"Not at the Feria!" Halvar came down the path, breathing heavily. "Gomez or no Gomez, the ruling still stands. Scavengers stay behind the wall!"

"But Emir Achmet said—" Ali whined.

"The Mahak watchmen rule the Feria," Halvar said. "What do you do to thieves, Firebrand?"

"They face punishment!" Firebrand said sternly. "Your Sharia law is too easy. What is it, to lose a finger or a hand? The thief can always use the other fingers, the other hand. We Mahak know how to deal with those who take what is not theirs. They are sent out into the forest with a knife and one day's food, and they are not to come back. Let Manitou judge them."

"And you wouldn't even get that much of a chance in Britain or Franchenland," Halvar added as the young thief contemplated his fate. "You took a fur cap, worth at least five purple wumpum. That's a hanging offense in the Dane-March."

"Your choice, thief! Mahak or Sharia justice?" Firebrand asked the boy.

"You mean, do I want to lose a finger or try to live on my own in the forest?" The boy shrugged. "I'll take the Rabat. At least the sultan will hear me out. At the worst, I lose a finger; at the best, I get to work on the streets, and maybe I can find a better master than Emir Achmet."

Firebrand snorted his disgust at the leniency of Al-Andalus, but allowed Halvar to walk the boy back to the gate in the wall that separated Manatas Town from the rest of the island. He and his watchmen sauntered off to continue their surveillance of the grounds.

"Take this miserable thief to the Rabat for the sultan's justice. He stole a fur hat." Halvar handed the boy over to the bored guard, who grabbed the young thief by the arm, glad to have a reason to leave his post.

Selim coughed gently. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

Halvar realized he was holding the evidence of the theft, and that he hadn't paid for it. He found the furrier, handed her five purple wumpum beads, and placed the hat over his all-too noticeable cap.

"Not an improvement," Selim remarked with a sniff. "You can still smell sekonk."

A sudden burst of noise from a large tent ahead of them drew Halvar's attention from the virtues of fur hats.

"You must pay your share, Ochiye Aboutiye! It is the law!"

A tall Afrikan tally man in a striped kaftan and turban waved a sheaf of papers at an Afrikan man draped in the patterned cloth favored by the settlers in the southern territories of Nova Mundum.

"No! Why should I? I do not wish to support a useless cause!" The stout Afrikan waved another paper at the tally man.

"What's going on here?" Halvar demanded as he strode up to the pair.

The tally man explained.

"Ochiye Aboutiye is a vendor. He brought goods from the southern territories to Manatas to be sold or traded to Bretains or Franchen. He has made many sales, he owes the Calif his share."

"And I say, why should I pay for something that is of no use to me?" Ochiye sneered. His barrel chest, barely covered by the cloth that swathed his bulky form, heaved with indignation. The tribal scars on his broad face seemed to inflate in his wrath.

Halvar frowned at the paper thrust under his mustache with a grimace of distaste.

"What's this?" He stared at the paper, unable to read either the twisting Arabi or the rounded Erse letters.

"I'll take it." Selim scanned the front of the document then turned it over and grinned. "It's nothing. Just a news-sheet—they call it the *Gazetta*." She hurriedly folded the paper.

Halvar caught a glimpse of something that was neither Arabi nor Erse writing.

"Let me see."

He unfolded the paper to reveal a drawing of a large cow with Arabi and Erse letters on its side being milked by a person in a turban decorated with a large gem and a plume, clearly indicating someone of high rank. Two buckets alongside the cow also bore labels in the two languages.

"I can't read, but I can guess," Halvar said grimly. "The cow is the Feria? What are the buckets?"

"One is marked *War* and the other is marked *Mother*," Selim said, with a grimace of distaste.

"Meaning that the Feria is being milked to provide the calif with the wherewithal to pursue the war. And whatever is left, he gives to his mother Lady Zulaika for her pleasures." Halvar's frown deepened as he considered the implications of this silent rebellion against the authority of Al-Andalus.

"And I will not pay for a war that is lost, or for a loose woman to adorn herself!" Ochiye declared. He glared at the tally man, transferred the glare to Halvar, and turned his back on both of them to re-enter his tent.

"Ochiye is an important man among the Afrikans," the tally man told Halvar. "If he refuses to pay his tariffs, others will follow his example. Already, some are sending their kutton directly to West Caster, circumventing Manatas and so not paying any tolls to Al-Andalus at all."

"Don Felipe needs that money," Halvar said. "I'll have a word with this Ochiye and change his mind."

With that, he stepped into the Afrikan's pavilion, with Selim close behind. This revolt must be stopped before it got out of hand, and since he was the calif's man on the scene, it was up to him to do it.

2

OCHIYE'S DOMAIN WAS A CANVAS TENT WITH SIDE PANELS tied back to allow air and light to circulate around five trestle tables arranged in an open rectangle around a chair from which Ochiye held court like an Afrikan king. A smaller table next to Ochiye's chair held a rush basket and a pottery jug and cup.

Lanterns hung from the sturdy poles that held up the tent, so that customers could get a good look at the products laid out for their inspection. Two Afrikan men stood behind each table, ready to help customers decide on their purchases or to deter would-be thieves. Two more Afrikans stood at the door, hands on their curved swords. Ochiye was taking no chances on thieves making off with his valuable merchandise.

This included large crocks, and wooden kegs, pottery jars and small glass vials on the table to the right of Ochiye's large chair. Lengths of gaily-patterned cloth were laid out on two of the three tables in front of him. The table on Ochiye's left held the tanned hides of large animals, and the table directly before him had a selection of ornaments for body or dwelling—bead necklaces and bracelets, elegantly embroidered cloths to be used to shade windows from the heat or wind, and most interestingly, glittering metal bracelets and rings incised with patterns that fused Afrikan and Local imagery.

The buyers who crowded around the tables included several Breains in their distinctive checkered trews and shirts, two Fran-

chen in tight-fitting breeches and coats with nipped-in waists, and at least one person Halvar recognized all too well.

"*Salaam aleikum*, Dani Glick!" he greeted his one-time lover and current proprietor of the Gardens of Paradise, the entertainment center of Manatas that drew revelers from all over the island to Green Village.

"*Shalom*, Halvar Danske." Dani was dressed in her "modest Yehudit" attire—long woolen skirt gathered at the waist, and neatly-fitting bodice, its low neckline filled modestly with a white kerchief. Her suspiciously red hair was tucked under a starched white cap. She wore no cosmetics, and Halvar noted the faint lines around her mouth and eyes. Except for the bracelets jangling at her wrists, she looked like any other Yehudit woman hunting for bargains on the last days of the Feria, when vendors dropped their prices so they need not carry unsold goods back home.

She stood by the side table with the jars, crocks, and vials, her Britain bouncer Donal beside her and a halfling girl holding a large basket behind them.

"What does this Afrikan sell that a respectable Yehudit would buy?" Halvar sniffed at the crocks and wrinkled his nose at the sharp odor. "That's alcohol. I thought it was forbidden to sell it at the Feria."

"It's rum," Dani said. "They make it in the far south from al-zucar. And it's only for sale in bulk, not by the glass, not for use at the Feria."

"Sweet grass?" Halvar translated. "What we call sugar in the Dane-March? I thought that only grew in Afrika."

"They brought it from India," Dani explained. "It grows anywhere it's hot and wet. There are places like that along the Mechi-can Sea, and in the islands that surround it, and the Afrikans have started plantations to grow it here in Nova Mundum. They press the juice out of the stems, boil it down, and what comes out is sugar. Then they ferment the syrup into rum. It's only Ochiye who brings it north, so anyone who wants it has to come to him."

"It's against Sharia to sell alcohol in Manatas," Halvar warned.

"The Gardens of Paradise isn't *in* Manatas Town," Dani reminded him. "And as long as I don't sell it to Locals, they allow me to have it in Green Village. There are some sailors who will come all the way to the Gardens of Paradise for a drink that isn't mokka or cider, and there are folks who don't like the taste of usque-

baugh. And I need sugar for the cakes we'll serve at the end of the Harvest Festival in three days."

She beckoned to the Afrikan standing behind the table and began the bargaining process in the jargon of Manatas—Arabi mixed with Munsu and Afrikan words, laced with slang allusions, spoken too fast for Halvar to understand more than a few words.

Halvar moved to the table with animal hides. He'd never seen anything quite like them—nearly as long as a man, with a pattern of scales that ranged from as big as his hand to as small as a fingernail. One of the Bretains grinned at his look of amazement at the size of the creature that had produced such a piece of leather.

"*Al-largato*," the Britain buyer explained. "Lizard."

"Biggest one I ever saw!" Halvar gasped.

"From the wetlands in the far south," the Britain went on. "They don't get much farther north than Powhatan territory—the winters are too cold, and there's not enough water for them to swim in. Those hides are much in demand for boots, bags, or for trimming a coat or cloak."

"When it's alive, it looks something like a crocodile," the second Britain buyer added. "I've seen the heads. Nasty! Full of teeth! Locals use them for charms against evil. That's what those are."

He pointed to a basket of ivory-white pointed objects, some as thick as Halvar's thumb, interspersed with colored stones. Some were striped or spotted, and three or four with yellow flakes.

Selim's attention was drawn to the glittering objects on the table in front of Ochiye, where he could keep his eyes on them as he sat, surveying his kingdom.

"Look at these!"

Halvar grinned under his mustache. There was a girl under that turban after all! Then the grin faded as he realized what he was seeing.

Those bangle bracelets and bead necklaces were made from yellow metal, worked in the Afrikan technique he had seen in Al-Andalus but decorated with the linear patterns used by Locals. These were not the weirdly shaped Mechican objects that occasionally appeared in the Feria but newly made, carefully crafted pieces of very expensive jewelry.

He picked up one of the necklaces, a collection of colored stones like the ones he'd seen in the basket of teeth alternating with lumps of the same yellow metal.

Gold nuggets! The implication hit him like a blow. Somehow, Ochiye or someone he had traded with must have found found a source of gold, not in Mechican territory but in lands controlled by the Afrikans!

Gold was the great lure that had sent ships across the Storm Sea. Once it became known there was gold to be had from the Mechicans, adventurers set sail to try to find the source of it. So far, the only gold in Nova Mundum had come from the lands of the ferocious Mechicans, and it could be had only after long negotiations, and at the risk of being hauled up the steps to the top of one of their stone temples and being sacrificed to their bloodthirsty gods. If someone had found gold closer to the Afrikan settlements, men would leave their families and businesses and descend on the Afrikan farmers of the south and their Local allies, and mayhem would surely follow.

Halvar had seen what the lure of treasure could do to otherwise sane people. He'd even felt a touch of it himself in Italia, where he had been tempted to join his company in looting a Roumi Rite chapel of its gold candlesticks and silver platters. Only Old Sergeant Olaf's steady hand had kept him from stealing whatever he could carry away, and he had been spared the lashing the other thieves had received for their greed.

Halvar's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Ochiye. The Afrikan merchant was settled in his chair, a throne-like wooden object carved and padded as befitted the virtual king of the Feria merchants. He even held a scepter of sorts, a carved wooden stick with a whisk of horse's hair on the end to brush away the insects that made life miserable, even in the Feria.

"Interesting jewelry," Halvar commented.

"Very expensive," Ochiye said with a smug nod. "I only take double its weight in silver for each piece. Not wumpum."

Halvar reached out to pick up one of the bangles, but Ochiye smacked his hand away with the scepter.

"Not for hirelings," the Afrikan snarled.

"The calif might want one," Halvar said meaningfully. "As a gift, you understand."

"Your calif is a foolish boy being led by the nose by his mother!" Ochiye shot back. "I hear this from the Ashanti and Igbo when I come north. The last time anyone saw him, he was pleading with the Sultan of Tunis for arms and soldiers. He did not get them. No one will help a coward who runs from battle!"

"He is not a coward!" Halvar insisted. "He's outgunned, and he needs every ounce of silver or gold you've got to get his land back!"

Ochiye stood up, radiating fury, waving his staff.

"He will not get it from me! And I will tell my brother merchants. We will not pay tolls to someone who will only waste them in this useless attempt to turn a tide that is against him. Ilha has turned his back on this calif!"

He took a deep breath then gasped and sagged into the chair. A slender girl darted from where she had been cowering behind it, holding out a small basket. Ochiye reached behind him, found something and popped it into his mouth without inspecting it.

Immediately, he knew he had made a bad mistake. He let out a roar of anguish and tried to spit out what he had just put into his mouth.

"What's wrong?"

Ochiye gagged and fell into his chair. Halvar stared wildly about.

"This man is ill! Fetch a doctor!"

Selim shoved the curious onlookers away as she ran in search of medical help. Dani shoved the basket-toting serving-girl out of the tent to follow her.

"Fetch Frater Iosip from the fraternity!" Dani shouted.

"And have him bring Frater Leonidas with him!" Halvar added. "This looks like poisoning, and he's an apothecary's son. He knows poisons."

He noticed the pitcher and cup on the table next to the chair and took a step towards it but the girl had already poured liquid into the cup, and held it to Ochiye's mouth. The man swallowed one sip, roared again, spat the liquid out, and pushed her hand away.

"Mmmmmaaaaa.... "

"What are you trying to tell me?" Halvar leaned closer.

"NNNNNNooooooooommmmmaaaa....." Ochiye's mouth could not bring sense to the sounds. His dark face took on a deep maroon hue. He struggled to breathe while his bodyguards stood, helpless, unable to rescue their master.

"AAAAHhhhhhhhhh!" Ochiye gasped, and screamed, then let out a very long sigh.

Selim popped her head into the tent.

"I've got medicals!" she announced.

Halvar eased Ochiye to the ground and looked at the new arrivals.

"Too late," he told the doctors. "This man is dead."

3

THE AFRIKAN SERVANTS HUDDLED AT ONE END OF THE tables. The young girl shrank back into her place behind the chair. The customers were torn between morbid curiosity and fear of possible contagion from whatever had killed Ochiye.

Halvar solved that problem.

"Selim! Get Firebrand! He should be somewhere nearby—look for the watchmen. You!" He turned to the customers. "As soon as the watchmen get here, you tell them exactly what you saw." He glared at the two men approaching Ochiye, one in an elegant green kaftan and high tarboosh, the other in a short jacket, baggy pantaloons, and turban. "Who are you?"

"I am Doctor of Medicine Georgi di Athens. I have studied at the Madrassa in Corduva, also the Ulema of Stamboul, also the medical schools of Parma and Napoli in Italia," the tubby man in the kaftan and tarboosh announced. "I bring my knowledge and expertise to this miserable place only because ill-natured gossip destroyed my reputation in Savilla."

"He means too many of his patients died of his hasty diagnoses," the taller man in the turban snarled. "This man still practices the ancient arts of the Greco and Roumi, who have long been found to be mistaken in their beliefs, and who are pagan into the bargain."

"I am Caroli, once surgeon to the Free Company of Genoese, an apothecary and dealer in herbal preparations that are far more ef-

fective than this charlatan's preposterous potions, based as they are on the theory of humors. I also draw teeth and set bones."

"A mere surgeon!" Georgi sneered. "You think your cures are better than mine? I, who have studied under the greatest minds in Baghdad and Corduva!"

Caroli shouted him down.

"At least my patients have a chance of living! You medicos are too proud to look at what is in front of you! You do not wish to dirty your hands with the real world, your head is in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land!"

Halvar stopped the argument.

"Thor's Hammer! Both of you, shut up and take a look at this man! He was alive a minute ago, and now he's dead. Why?"

The two medical experts peered at Ochiye in fascinated horror.

"His humor was hot, choleric," Georgi said. "I have heard him bellow for the last week. My tent is in the row behind this one," he explained.

"Next to mine," Caroli grouched. "This charlatan takes away my patients with his hifalutin talk of humors and such nonsense. And he casts horoscopes, too, for all the good that does."

"Our kismet is written in the stars," Georgi told him. "And your potions are worthless in the face of disease. All they do is alleviate pain and reduce fever."

"Your wordy babble doesn't even do that much!"

While they argued, an Algonkin woman crept into the tent. Halvar tried to block her entrance, but she ducked under his arm and knelt beside the dead Afrikan.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I am Corn Woman, I know herbs. I sell good medicine, not like silly men. I am shaman."

She ran her fingers into Ochiye's mouth, frowned, looked around, spotted the rush basket on the table, and pointed to it.

"He eats from this this?"

Halvar shrugged.

"He put something into his mouth, that I saw. As soon as he did, he started choking. He tried to drink, choked again."

"Not water." The Local woman sniffed at the cup and grimaced. "Bad stuff. Fiery water!"

"Alcohol?" Halvar dipped a finger into the cup, touched it to his tongue and spat. "What's that stuff? Sweet and hot at the same time?"

"Rhum." Dani Glick pronounced. "It looks like water, it's clear, not tinged with red like wine, or yellow like cider, or brown like ale or usquebaugh."

"What's in this basket?" Halvar peered into the woven rush receptacle, a match for dozens of others used to carry small items in Manatas.

The Algonkin woman poured the contents onto the table. She and Dani carefully sorted out bits of fruit and nut-meats.

"That's crane-berry," Dani said, as she separated a small red object from the rest of the bits of fruit and explained the contents of the basket to Halvar. "It grows in wetlands, the Bretons dry the berries and save them for the winter. Same with these blue berries, and these—they call them huckleberries."

She pointed to a crescent-shaped sliver of something orange.

"This is from the south, they call it persimmon. Locals dry them, like the crane-berries, for the winter, and merchants carry them here to the north. Sometimes they mix them with sweet cider to make a preserve; sometimes they use them to make a kind of cake with animal fat, dried meat and berries pounded together."

"Pemmican," the Local woman added.

Dani nodded. "It's not very tasty, but it's enough to keep a body going until spring planting if the winter is very long."

"You've eaten it." Halvar judged, by the look of distaste on his old friend's face.

"I have. I'd prefer not to eat it again."

Halvar frowned at the basket of dried fruit.

"No apples? No pears?"

"Apples are used for cider," Dani said. "The Bretons grow them. They don't do well in the south—they need a cold winter to rest before they put out fruit. No one's managed to grow pears in Nova Mundum yet, but I hear someone brought peach trees to the Afrikan territories, and the orange fruits from India that need a long, hot summer to ripen. This doesn't look like either of those."

She reached for a round flat piece of pale greenish-white fruit. The Algonkin woman gasped and batted Dani's hand away from the fruit.

"No touch! Bad, bad, bad! Mal-chinee!"

"What's that?" Halvar sniffed at the fruit. It smelled faintly sour.

"That," said someone right behind him, "is something I've only heard about until now. That is the fruit of the most poisonous tree on earth, and if he ate it, it is undoubtedly what killed this Afrikan."

Halvar turned around.

“I wondered how I could get you out of the Green Village Fraternity, Leon, but I never expected it would be a corpse that did it.”

4

LEON DI VICENZA, KNOWN TO THE GREEN VILLAGE FRATERY as Frater Leonidas, swaggered into the tent, followed by Frater Iosip and two of the brawniest clerics Halvar had ever seen. The painter wore his shabby woolen frater's robe as if it were the most elegant of kaftans. His fair hair had been cut short, and a tonsure shaved front to back, as a sign of humility; but his delicate features were set in his usual expression of hauteur, and his bearing was that one of one who knew his own worth—and valued it higher than anyone else's.

Behind him Frater Iosip, short and stout, a pair of lenses perched on his bulbous nose, fussed and fretted.

"What is all this about? We were just starting our mid-afternoon prayers when a girl came pounding on the door saying there had been a death at the Feria, and that we should come immediately. Abbas Mikhail would not have allowed it, but Frater Leonidas insisted this was something that must be looked into. Especially when your name was mentioned, Don Alvaro."

Halvar eyed Leon sourly.

"You came because of me? You weren't looking for an excuse to get out of the fraternity?"

"Never think it," Leon protested. "Where is this dead man of yours?"

Halvar indicated the body of Ochiye.

"Here he is, and he's not mine—he's Afrikan, not Andalusian. According to this Local woman, he's been poisoned."

He turned to look for her. The woman had been stopped at the entrance to the tent by one of the Afrikan bodyguards, who thrust her back into the center of the circle around the dead man.

Leon smiled winningly at her.

"You are Shaman Corn Woman. You know all the herbs and medicines on Manatas. Why do you say he was poisoned with mal-chinee? That is not common here."

"You know this stuff, this mal-chinee?" Halvar asked with a suspicious frown.

"Not really. Poisons are more my sister Eva's specialty. I am a maker of scents, so I am familiar with certain odiferous plants, some of which can be nasty if taken internally. I know the minerals to grind for colors, some of which are extremely dangerous if ingested, but I don't think this fellow ate one of my pigments."

Corn Woman looked around for support and found none. She muttered to herself in Munsu.

"What do you know about this mal-chinee? I can't make out what this Local woman is saying."

Leon wrinkled his nose as he observed the mess that Ochiye had spat up in his last moments of life.

"She's saying that it's so evil no one can even touch it. There are sailor's tales of the stuff, They say the tree's sap is so venomous that breathing it is deadly. Something like having burnweed go into one's lungs."

"Ugh!" Halvar grunted. "Nasty indeed!"

"The runner has brought Dr. Moise," Selim called out from the door of the tent. The place was getting crowded.

Halvar looked at the assorted customers and vendors.

"All of you, outside. You will tell this lad exactly what you saw, and he will write it down. Then you may all be on your way. One more thing: you will not discuss this with anyone until the newscriers make the official announcement of Ochiye Aboutiye's death."

He only hoped the gossip chain would not start until the doctors left the tent.

Dr. Moise, the tall, slender Afrikan doctor who served at the Rabat, stepped aside as Halvar herded his witnesses out. Dani Glick joined Halvar and Selim.

"These two are staying at the Gardens of Paradise," she said, indicating the Bretains. "I can vouch for them. They haven't been anywhere near Ochiye until today. They sell boots and shoes and buy hides to make them."

"What did you see?" Halvar asked the two Breains in Danic-accented Erse.

"He put something in his mouth and choked on it," the taller Breain said with a shrug. "Don't know what it was. Was that what killed him? Don't want to bring home some plague or pestilence."

"Whatever killed him, I don't think it's contagious," Halvar assured him. "He was roaring with anger a minute ago, and he wouldn't have been so lively if he'd been sick. You may go, but keep yourselves available. You may be asked to give evidence at the Grand Divan."

The Afrikan servants, each with the gold ring in his ear that denoted a slave, were of little help. They, too, had seen nothing amiss. Ochiye was angry, but he was often angry. They could not say who would be angry enough with Ochiye to put poison in his fruit or alcohol in his drink.

The two doctors fussed at Halvar while he tried to question the servants.

"We know nothing of this man," Caroli told him.

"Except that he was of a hot and choleric nature," Georgi added. "One could hear him venting his wrath at the calif and his tolls all day long."

"Rebellious, was he?" Halvar frowned.

"He turned the tally men away from his pavilion," Caroli said. "I, on the other hand, am grateful for the protection of the calif at the Feria."

"So that you can peddle your worthless potions and powders!" Georgi snarled.

"Get back to your stands, but hold yourselves in readiness to give evidence at the Grand Divan." Halvar dismissed the doctors and re-entered the tent. He spotted the slender girl with long black hair and blunt features, dressed in a simple kutton tunic, who had handed the basket of fruit to Ochiye.

"Come here, girl," he ordered.

She shrank away from him.

"What's the matter with her?" He turned to the Afrikan men. "Who is she? What's her name?"

"Maya," the largest of Ochiye's bodyguards spat out.

"I don't think that's her name," Leon put it. "Maya is the name of a tribe of Locals far to the south. The Mechicans conquered them before the Oropans and Afrikans got to Nova Mundum. She must be one of their slaves."

Halvar glared at him.

"I suppose you know everything about these Maya."

"There's not much anyone knows about them," Leon admitted.

"There aren't many of them left. There are rumors of vast temples and palaces in the middle of the jungle, and stores of gold and silver and precious stones, but so far, no one has found any of them. Tales of huge cats like leopards, and snakes that will squeeze the life out of a man, are matched only by the reputation of the Mechicans for slaughtering anyone who dares to encroach on their territory. As a result, no one has been foolish enough to venture into the forests barring a few adventurers who tried to chop their way through the vines and trees. They never came out of the jungle.

"There are also rumors of flesh-eating ants, and fish that chop anything that enters their waters into shreds in minutes." Leon grinned with delight. "I'd love to go and see for myself!"

"I don't suppose your studies in Local culture have included languages. Can you talk to this girl? Find out what she's doing here?"

"Concubine. Whore." The second Afrikan bodyguard sneered. "Ochiye Aboutiye brought her with him from his last trip, when he went to buy from the people by the Mechican Sea. He came home with hides, sugar, and Maya."

"That should have pleased his wife," Halvar remarked.

"Wives. There are two of them."

He had forgotten Dani Glick was still there.

"One is Afrikan," she continued, "and stays here in Manatas all year around, selling Afrikan beads and cloth in the souk when the FERIA is over. She also arranges the shipments of Ochiye's goods during the year. I've bought some very nice pieces from her." She arranged the bracelets jangling on her wrist. "The other wife is a Local—I think her people are called Cherokee.

"From what Tekla says of her, I assume the Afrikan wife doesn't think much of the Cherokee one, but Tekla lives in Manatas and the other stays in Savana Port, in Yoruba territory in the south, which suits both of them."

"Cherokee Yona is here," the Afrikan bodyguard said. "She came with Ochiye to Manatas for the spring FERIA. She brought Cherokee guards with her. She stays to look after her son, who is at the Madrassa."

"An interesting household," Dani commented wryly.

Halvar ignored the snide remark.

"Selim, we have to get Ochiye's body back to Manatas."

"I came with a donkey-cart," Dr. Moise stated.

"And I sent a message to Tenente Flores to meet us at Ochiye's villa with a squad of guards. You'll want to question the household." Selim added perkily.

Halvar nodded. The lass was getting too full of herself. But it was what he'd have done, and he couldn't fault her reasoning. No one at the Feria could have introduced poisonous fruit into Ochiye's basket. It had to have been someone in his household.

Halvar bowed his head in respect as the body of Ochiye Abou-tiye was carried out of the tent to be placed in the waiting donkey-cart.

Dr. Moise turned to him.

"I am not sure about this mal-chinee. It is possible that it is the primary cause of this man's death, but there may have been other factors. I prefer to defer judgment until I have examined him more closely. I will also consult Eva Hakim about this mal-chinee fruit."

"Leon says she is the expert," Halvar admitted, glancing at Leon, who was sniffing at the vials and jars on the table in front of him.

"Eva Hakim has been working with Local women, learning their secret cures. She may know more about this mal-chinee than I, particularly if it is used by the Locals. As for Ochiye, I suggest that the effects of the poison, if any, may have been exacerbated by some other physical condition. I will not know until I conclude my examinations. I only wish I had been called here sooner. A sample of his urine would be helpful."

The girl, Maya, looked from one medical man to the other as if trying to make out their rapid Arabi. Leon smiled sweetly at her. He mimed urinating.

She nodded. "Pissy."

She pointed down at a jar placed under Ochiye's throne.

"I think you have your sample, Doctor." Leon smirked. "It would seem our Afrikan is so careful of his goods that he won't even leave his tent for the most basic of reasons. Typical Afrikan merchant mentality."

Dr. Moise sniffed at the jar and frowned.

"I will take this with me," he announced. "I will perform the autopsy at the Rabat. Frater Iosip, I do not think your services will be required."

"What about Frater Leonidas?" Halvar laid his hand on Leon's sleeve. "He's the expert on poisons. You'll come to the Rabat, won't you?"

"That I will not, Halvar Danske." Leon picked Halvar's hand between thumb and forefinger and removed it from his arm. "I am a faithful Kristo frater. These two fraters have orders from Abbas Mikhail to bring me back to the fraternity, with or without your goodwill. I have a painting to complete, prayers to say. And you can't take me by force."

"You're still needed in Al-Andalus," Halvar stated.

"Not if what I hear is true," Leon sneered. "You're too late, Halvar. There is no more Al-Andalus, and no need for me to cross the ocean and waste my time there. There are other things I want to do, here in Nova Mundum, and I'm going to do them!"

"Only if you get off this island," Halvar reminded him. "Go back to your fraternity. Hide your face under a woolen hood. Let Al-Andalus be swallowed up into Lovis's Kristo Imperium."

"Why does it matter so much to you?" Leon asked. "Al-Andalus isn't even your home."

"It's the only country I know of where folk don't give a blank bit what you think so long as you pay your tolls and keep the peace."

"There's one other," Leon said with a nasty grin. "And you're standing right in it."

With that, the alleged frater swaggered back down the path to Green Village, leaving Halvar fuming beside the donkey-cart.

Selim jogged his arm.

"What next?"

"Back to Manatas," Halvar said, getting into the cart beside Dr. Moise. "I hope Flores has more sense than either Gomez or Ruiz. It'll be hard enough getting information out of those Afrikans. If he menaces them, we'll never learn which of them poisoned Ochiye."

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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