

THE PRINCE'S MAN

Prologue

DOMN

Risada tiptoed across the darkened bedchamber and felt behind the tapestry for the hidden niche. Her tiny fingers located it and she grinned as the lock tripped with a faint click.

She heard voices in the outer chamber and light flickered around the doorframe. Heart thudding against her ribs, she dropped to her knees and scuttled forward through the swinging panel into the secret room. This was such fun!

Careful to close the panel behind her—Daddy said you must always lock doors when you were going to have your back to them—Risada wasted no time clambering onto the chair she had positioned beneath the spy hole. Her nose wrinkled at the smell of dust. It seemed like ages since Daddy had shown her how to work the hidden catch. Certainly it had been before *that woman* had arrived.

At thought of Mistress Chalice, Risada scrunched her face up into a ferocious scowl. How she hated her dancing tutor. Oh, the woman was very polite, and she was very beautiful—all the servants said so—but Mummy didn't like her so Risada didn't either. And the maids were saying such wicked things about Mistress Chalice and Daddy. Well, tonight Risada was going to see for herself.

Jaw jutting with determination, Risada stretched up to put her eye to the spy hole. Darkness loomed on both sides of the hole, but she knew precisely where everything was: first rule of the game—always know your surroundings intimately.

Some word like that, anyway.

Mummy didn't like Daddy teaching her about the game, but he said it was never too early to start, so now she knew all the hiding holes in the house and the one in the stables too. She knew which guards she could talk to and which she mustn't. Daddy had even given her a little dagger of her own, a pretty silver one with tiny green jewels in the hilt, which she kept hidden in the sash of her dress. Mummy wasn't supposed to know about it and Risada liked keeping secrets.

The bedchamber door swung open. It was to one side of the spy hole and Risada couldn't quite see who was there. Someone walked across in front of her and she caught the glimmer of candlelight on silvered hair. That was Daddy. He stopped beside the dresser, unbuckled his belt and laid his sword down.

But there was someone else as well. Risada leaned across as far as she could without losing her balance and grinned in triumph. It was Mummy. It must be because Mistress Chalice had red hair and Risada could see a head of pale blonde, almost white hair done up in braids like Risada's own.

So much for those prattling maids. Risada began to imagine all the tales she would tell Daddy about what they'd been saying when they'd thought her safely asleep. Carefully she got down from the chair and felt about for the catch on this side of the panel. But what was that? Mummy was shouting at Daddy!

Spinning around, Risada lunged in the dark for the chair and banged into it. She held her breath. Had they heard? As quietly as she could she clambered back up to the spy hole and peered out. Mummy and Daddy were standing directly in front of her, but they couldn't have heard because they were glaring at each other, not at the hole.

"Keep your voice down Arton, you'll wake the baby."

Risada peered downward and now she could see that Mummy was cradling her baby brother, Iain.

"I didn't start this Sharlanne. You shouted at me!"

"Of course you started it! You were the one who brought that woman into our household."

"Mistress Chalice is an excellent tutor for Risada. Hal sent her with the highest references."

"For doing what?" snapped Lady Sharlanne. Then she sighed. "Arton, Prince Halmashead might be your cousin, but does it not occur to you that he might be making some play of his own? There's every good chance she's one of his spies; she's certainly served his House for long enough."

"Why in all Five Kingdoms would Hal want to put a spy in our House? He knows we're loyal to the crown. Besides, I refuse to believe that he would use such a defenceless young woman for that sort of task."

Sharlanne laughed; a short, sharp bark of disbelief. "You dare to say that? You, who've started teaching our daughter—our *six-year-old* daughter—to be a player? And don't think I don't know about that dagger either."

Risada could bear it no longer. She hated Mummy and Daddy arguing, and now they were arguing about her! She slipped down off the chair and opened the secret panel. She was going to make them stop.

"It's for her own safety," Arton was saying as Risada struggled up from behind the low sofa that squatted in front of the tapestry. "You've heard the rumour."

Sharlanne made a most unladylike noise. "You take that seriously? Really, Arton, no House has dared make a final play against another Family in over seventy years; not since the King made such an example of Sencarten House."

"Sencarten was careless. But if nothing could be proven? Just suppose it were true: do you think they'd spare the children?"

As if Arton's words had conjured up just such a play, something dark moved in the shadows beside the window.

“Arton!” screamed Sharlanne, but the Lord of Domn barely had time to turn before a flicker of light—a knife, realised Risada in horror—embedded itself in his neck. Something gushed from around the blade, and Risada smelled a sharp taint in the air. She whimpered and her mother looked around wildly. Sharlanne’s eyes lit upon her daughter standing frozen beside the sofa.

She thrust the sleeping baby at Risada. “Take Iain. Quickly: hide!”

Risada clutched her brother but stood rooted to the spot. Her mother had turned back to face the assassin over the body of her husband. In her fist was a silver dagger with emeralds in the hilt; a larger version of Risada’s own.

“Guards!” cried Sharlanne, but no one appeared.

The assassin, a short, powerful figure clad entirely in black with his face anonymous behind a mask, stepped silently over his first victim. Sharlanne wove her dagger back and forth menacingly, but the figure seemed made of smoke and where she struck, he faded away. Sharlanne lunged again and finally made contact. Her silver blade slashed through the mask, the fabric parting to reveal blood welling from a deep cut to the assassin’s jaw, but it was Sharlanne who gave a strangled cry as the crimson-stained tip of a blade appeared in the centre of her back. She sagged forward, collapsing into the arms of her killer.

The assassin cursed as he staggered back and was pinned momentarily against a settle by Sharlanne’s weight. Blood dripped from a ragged gouge along his jaw line, but it was the man’s cold black eyes that snared Risada’s attention as he looked across the room, straight at her. The child’s heart lurched against her ribs. In panic, she spun and dropped to her knees, fumbling for the niche. The tapestry seemed to wind itself around her arm and she sobbed with fright, but she could hear the man still cursing as he struggled to free his sword from the body of her mother.

At last she had it. The panel sprang open and Risada shuffled awkwardly through on her bottom, clutching the baby to her chest. She slammed the panel behind her and snapped the lock, then collapsed against the wall, gasping for breath as tears streamed down her face.

“Mu, Mu, Mummy,” she wailed, and then clamped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide, staring into the blackness as she heard the telltale sounds of someone on the other side of the wall hunting for the hidden catch. She stayed that way all the while he hunted, and even when she knew he was gone, just in case. She was still sitting there, cradling the sleeping baby, when the panel slid open and Mistress Chalice poked her head in, preceded by a guttering candle.

“Praise the goddess; they’re in here!” she cried to someone behind her, and other voices joined her in thanks to the goddess Chel.

“Come on Risada, it’s safe now. You can come out. Here, let me take Iain.”

The little girl shook her head and clutched her brother so fiercely he woke and began to cry. Reluctantly she crawled back into the blood-soaked bedchamber.

Ignoring the weeping maids and grim-faced guards, still cradling the wailing baby in her arms, she walked over to the bodies of her parents and stared down at them. No one was

ever going to do that to her or Iain, she vowed silently. Then she glared up at Mistress Chalice.

“I hate you! It’s all your fault!” she screamed.

Chapter 1

THE GAME

Twenty years later...

Rustam Chalice eased his way down the rose trellis. His hand closed around a thorny stem and he sucked in a sharp breath, stifling a curse. He exhaled slowly and looked up.

No lights.

Good.

He could not see far enough to be certain, but reckoned he was around man height above the flowerbed. In many ways this moons-dark night was ideal to his purpose, but a little illumination would have helped just now. He let go the trellis and jumped.

His estimate proved a touch short, and as his feet hit dirt Rustam tucked into a roll, clutching the precious glass bottle tightly to his chest. He swore under his breath and picked himself up. The bottle was undamaged but he doubted the same could be said for his clothes. Burrs from a dantseg bush clung to his sleeves and the right leg of his breeches was sodden.

Brushing himself down, Rustam glanced back up at the Fontmaness's mansion. Still no lights. The goddess Chel must favour him this night.

A warm glow of satisfaction suffused his chest, and he allowed himself a minute smile. Prince Halnashead, the kingdom's spymaster, would be pleased with his work tonight.

He felt his way forward, remembering the barbed throne tree he had nearly walked into two nights earlier. That foray had been after his official departure from the estate, on the first of his clandestine visits. Then, the young and delightfully attractive Lady Betha had hung a lantern from her bedchamber windowsill so that he might see his way. She had also sent the guards to investigate a fictitious noise on the other side of the mansion.

Tonight Rustam had no such assistance.

The throne tree loomed before him as a darker patch against the faint sparkle of stars. He skirted it and stepped out onto the gravel path bordering the lawns, wincing as each step crunched rudely into the still blackness. The smell of dew-drenched grass beckoned him on and at the first feel of the cushioning, silent turf beneath his feet he broke into a sprint.

As he reached the cover of the trees, his luck deserted him.

Rustam's heart lurched as a hound bayed in the dark. Lady Betha's elderly husband, Lord Herschel, had taken him on a grand tour of the estate when he had first arrived to take up his position as Dancing Master to her Ladyship. He had seen the guard hounds then. His most vivid recollection was of the size of their jaws, but he had the uneasy feeling they had legs to match. And now they had scented him. He gulped a deep breath and ran for it.

Goddess have mercy, he pleaded as the baying closed on him, only now there were two, with men shouting somewhere behind.

Rustam burst out of the trees. Every breath seared his lungs, and his vision tunnelled until all he saw was the ghostly white perimeter fence ahead. He gathered his last shreds of energy to make the leap.

Agony shot through him as teeth tore into his leg and he was thrown to the ground. Locked together, Rustam and the hound skidded along the damp grass and slammed into the fence.

In a world turned black and white and laced through with pain, time seemed to slow. Rustam slipped his dagger from its wrist sheath, swung an arm that moved with the speed of an obstinate mule, and plunged the narrow blade into the looming bulk of the hound. The beast fell away, howling.

A hammer bird drilled inside Rustam's head and something vile threatened to erupt from his stomach, but his body began to move again with some semblance of speed. Teeth clamped firmly against the nausea, he grabbed hold of the fence, dragged himself up and over. A horse whickered nearby and he gasped in relief—good old Nightstalker, always where she was most needed. He could not see the black mare, but she found him and he clambered into the saddle just as the second hound leaped the fence.

“Go girl, go!”

Nightstalker surged forward with Rustam clinging to her mane. Only when they were half a league away, well beyond the outlying estate farms and into the wild hills did he slow down long enough to tear a strip from his silk shirt—*damned expensive bandage*, he thought sourly—and wrap it around his bleeding leg. It was still too dark to see but he could feel warm fluid trickling into his boot and, *Charin's breath*, it hurt! He would have to stop somewhere soon and build a fire, see what the damage was. But not here. Not yet. He clenched his teeth and rode on.

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The palace guard frowned at the tall, slender, brown haired young man limping towards him through the early morning shafts of sunlight that pierced the colonnaded walkway with military precision. During his duties on this particular entrance to the private wing the guard had seen many odd characters pass, but in time they had all become known to him. He had been in Prince Halnashead's employ some years now.

This man, though; his even, fine features looked familiar, as did the expensive cut of his breeches and velvet doublet, but that limp—

“Master Chalice! Whatever happened to you?”

Rustam grimaced. “Took a damned stupid fall from my horse. I know it's early, but is His Highness available, Dench?”

“To you, sir, yes,” Dench replied, frowning as he studied the pallor of Rustam's skin. Dark rings framed the deep blue eyes, and the easy grin that the ladies found so appealing was absent from the dancer's generous lips.

“Are you sure you’re well, sir?”

“No, Dench, I’m sure I’m not. But the prince is expecting me so, here I am.”

“As you say, sir. He’s in his study.”

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“Rusty, you look dreadful!”

Rustam collapsed gratefully into the depths of a plushly upholstered chair. “Well thank you, sir! I did it especially for you; it’s about the only chance you’ll ever have of knowing for certain that you look better than me.”

Prince Halnashead threw back his head and guffawed. He was a large, ruddy-faced man with an impressive girth which shook with his amusement. Rustam watched in fascination as the silver buckle of the prince’s belt leapt up and down with the regularity of a metronome, and then vanished suddenly as Halnashead leaned forward to peer across his vast desk. “It can’t be so bad if your vanity is still intact, lad. I presume it’s all in your report?”

“It will be, as soon as I’ve had time to make one.”

“You’ve come straight here? Then you have it?” The prince’s voice rose eagerly.

In answer Rustam reached inside his doublet and withdrew a velvet-wrapped bundle. He levered himself wearily out of the chair and leaned across the desk to hand it to the prince.

“At last,” breathed Halnashead. “You’ve outdone yourself this time, Rusty.”

“You may not say that when you see my tailor’s bill,” muttered Rustam beneath his breath as he sat down again, but Halnashead was too busy extracting the glass bottle from its protective layers to notice.

He held it up to the light and swirled the carmine fluid thoughtfully. “So this is it: the so-called ‘elixir of eternity’.”

“That’s it,” confirmed Rustam tiredly. “Doesn’t look like anything special, does it?”

Halnashead turned his head sharply from the bottle to Rustam’s face. “Did you discover how much Herschel paid for this?”

“Not exactly, Your Highness. But the Lady Betha was bemoaning the loss of her diamond tiara.”

“*That* much?” The prince looked startled. “That could pay the wages of ten mercenaries for a whole year! Multiply that by the number of sales we know about, let alone the ones we don’t...”

He allowed the thought to trail away but the implications were clear to both men. The political stability of the Kingdom of Tyr-en relied largely upon the certainty that in a land where manpower was in desperately short supply, the only House wealthy enough to support an army was the Royal House itself.

Halnashead looked grim. “It seems the situation may be worse even than we suspected.”

“Mmm,” Rustam agreed. “But surely the real question here, is does it work? And if so, what is eternal life worth?”

Prince Halnashead shook his head as he re-wrapped the bottle and placed it gently in the bottom drawer of his desk. “Rusty, of this I can assure you: it doesn’t work. There are no elves left in Tyr-en to part with that secret. They either took it with them through their accursed magical Gates into Shiva, or to the grave.”

My prince, I know your instincts are most often true, thought Rustam worriedly, but what if this time you’re wrong?

“Are you absolutely certain?” he questioned aloud. “We’re talking about something many would kill for.”

Halnashead leaned back in his massive leather chair and drew a heavy breath. “Yes, m’boy, I am. It was a death that alerted me to the elixir’s existence in the first instance. One of my agents witnessed a perfectly natural death staged to look like an accident, to deny age as the culprit. This whole operation is a masterful undertaking in deceit, but of this I have no doubt—the potion is a fake.

“What must concern us is where the money is going. *Goddess preserve us*, we may be facing a private army!” The prince scowled angrily but Rustam knew him well, knew the incredible depth of feeling was not directed toward him, rather at those who would threaten the fragile peace of the kingdom ruled by Halnashead’s young nephew.

“Rusty, in this century alone, the people of Tyr-en have survived the tyranny of my grandfather, the drunkenness of my brother and two generations of Shivan Wars; I simply will not permit them to be subjected now to civil war!” Halnashead slammed a meaty fist down on the desktop. “I must know who is selling this concoction and what they are doing with the proceeds. Did you find any clues?”

“None, I’m afraid. I don’t believe Lord Herschel confided that information to his wife.”

“Or you would have been able to persuade her to tell you, hmm? Oh Rusty, I know how skilled you are, but this is one of the most frustrating cases I’ve ever had the misfortune to handle, and the lack of information points to a highly skilled player in the game.”

“Well sir, if the suspected client list I’ve compiled so far is any true indicator, the supplier must be one of the major Houses.”

“Hmm. That we are agreed upon. Ah, and that reminds me.” The prince sifted through a pile of parchments, drawing one from near the bottom. “Something I doubt you’ve heard yet, Rusty: the De Launays have moved up from Sixteenth to Fourteenth House.”

“How did they do that?” asked Rustam in surprise. He had been too long at Fontmaness in the goddess-forsaken wastes near the sea. Important moves in the game had passed him by.

Halnashead scowled at the parchment. “It seems the widowed Lady of the Fifteenth was tricked into a grain contract she could not fulfil. Being rather naïve in such matters, she was unaware of the difference in yields between this year and last.”

“And De Launay offered to save her honour by fulfilling the contract,” Rustam finished for him. “In return for land.”

The prince nodded. “De Launay’s new holdings raise their ranking above the former Fourteenth. An astute move, if callous.”

Falling silent, Halnashead began distractedly rearranging the heap of parchments, deep in thought. Rustam’s tired eyes wandered to the huge tapestry behind the desk, as they always did while the prince cogitated upon his next move. The early morning sun lit the threads with a blaze of glorious colour somewhat at odds with the dark scene depicted—that of a crowded ship being pulled beneath the waves by a huge, tentacled horror while helpless refugees either threw themselves to their doom from the crazily slanted deck, or clung hopelessly to the masts and railings. At the far edge of the weaving the rest of the fleet sailed into the distance.

Was this, Rustam wondered, Halnashead’s way of reminding his agents that once in the field they were on their own, without hope of rescue should a situation turn ugly? Or did he keep it as a true memorial to all those lost during the Crossing—the mass exodus when humankind fled the magic-ravaged land of their birth to arrive in straggling handfuls upon the shore of this remarkably hospitable continent four hundred years earlier.

Perhaps it was a token of hope, illustrating that even the grimmest situations could prove to have unexpectedly good endings.

Halnashead slapped his open palms down on the desk, decision reached.

“Rustam, I want you and Dart to work together on this.”

Rustam jerked upright in his chair. Surprise and indignation warred with curiosity. “My prince,” he said. “If you have a task you want doing, you know I am your man, but why would you want me to work with a hired killer?”

Halnashead’s face hardened, though Rustam fancied there was a hint of amusement in the prince’s flinty grey eyes. “Because I’m ordering you to,” he replied. “And Rustam, an assassin is a lot more than just a hired killer. Despite your years as a player, you’ve no idea who Dart is, have you?”

“No, but I could make some educated guesses.”

“And they’d all be wrong, I guarantee it.” The prince rubbed his large hands together and smiled slyly. “I do believe I’m looking forward to introducing the two of you. Meet me here at the second hour. Most of the guests will have started to drift away by then.”

Rustam groaned. “The Solstice Ball’s tonight? I thought I had another day yet.”

“You’ve lost a day somewhere, Rusty. Perhaps the Lady Betha was more absorbing than you expected, hmm?”

Rustam snorted. “Betha? Absorbing? Sweet, perhaps, but I’ve had more interesting dinners than—”

“Please! Spare me the details. Now go and get that leg seen to. Did you have any other misfortunes on this mission?”

“Apart from two shirts and a pair of breeches? I half killed my horse getting back here in two days instead of five.”

Halnashead smiled indulgently. “That beast means more to you than all the ladies, doesn’t it?”

“She doesn’t have a jealous husband to avoid.”

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The wretch strapped to the table screamed again; a hoarse, mindless howl that ended in a bloody gurgle. Lord Melcard Rees-Charlay backed up to the wall of the dungeon and dabbed with distaste at the flecks of foamy blood marring his white lace cuffs.

He glared down at the torturer and enquired in a slightly nasal voice touched with impatience, “Are you quite finished?”

“Nearly, my Lord,” replied the squat figure bending over the hapless victim. Doctor Hensar, the Fourth Family’s retained physician, was more practically attired than his master. All in black, he resembled nothing so much as an overgrown beetle, the only point of colour about his person the glittering crystal that dangled from a chain around his neck. As he turned to replace the gore-smearred bone cutters on the tray beside the table, the pendant swung and spun in the torch light, refracting tiny rainbows that chased each other endlessly across the stained walls of the torture chamber.

Selecting a far more precise instrument for his final manipulation, Hensar turned back to the quivering mass of flesh that had once been a man—a guard to be precise; one whose odd personal habits had led to accusations of magic-wielding—and looked up at his master dispassionately.

“There is little left to be done now. You need remain no longer.”

For a moment it looked as though Melcard would take his advice, but the Lord squared his shoulders and shook his blond head. “No, Hensar. I ordered this execution. I will see it to its end. Proceed.”

Masking a scowl of annoyance, Hensar turned and replaced the tool he had chosen, reaching instead for a glowing poker that rested in the brazier near the foot of the table. The stench of burning flesh was usually enough to drive Lord Melcard from the close confines of the dungeon, but today, despite the sickly green shade that tinged his already waxen face, the Family Senior stayed obstinately put.

When even the doctor’s most expert ministrations failed to raise more than the faintest of moans, Melcard’s patience reached its limits. “Enough!” he snapped. “It is finished. Slit his throat and be done with it.”

“As you command, my Lord.” Hensar swept a respectful bow, and then made one final attempt to remove his unwanted observer. “Might I suggest you leave before I perform this last duty, or your clothing may suffer greater soiling than can be repaired?”

“Hensar! I am still head of this Family and I will not be treated as a gutless weakling. Do it, and do it now!”

The doctor smothered his anger. His time would come, but that day was still in the future. For now, he must play the faithful servant. He nodded shortly and picked up the knife. One quick slash and it was over, but Hensar could not resist the tiny smirk that twisted his lips as Lord Melcard shrieked, doused by the apparently random spray of blood. Hensar had long ago learned just how to angle that particular incision.

Cursing everything to Charin’s hell and wiping blood from his eyes, Melcard finally left Hensar alone with his grisly handiwork. The doctor seized the slim chance that something productive could still be salvaged from this afternoon’s labour. Paying little attention to the finesse he would have employed earlier had he had the opportunity, he plunged a hand into the open body cavity of the corpse. His face took on a detached stillness as his fingers sifted through the internal organs for a mass the size and shape of which he knew intimately. When he found what he was searching for, he simply closed his fist and yanked.

Hensar examined the small yellow gland that lay cradled in his gory palm, but even as he watched the colour faded to the indeterminate shade of grey that told him it was useless. He flung the dripping lump of cells against the wall in disgust and watched with jaundiced eyes as it burst like an over-ripe fruit and slithered down the wall.

What a waste! To be of any use it was essential to remove the gland before the donor died. Melcard’s stubborn insistence on remaining to the bitter end had robbed Hensar of his carefully planned harvest.

He stepped over to the bucket of water set beside the brazier and fastidiously rinsed his hands while he reviewed his requirements. If he was careful he could make his current supply last for at least one more batch, possibly two. More than that, no. He shrugged his shoulders. Beyond that, the apparent efficacy of the elixir would diminish, and that might make Melcard suspicious. Not to mention the clients.

Which gave him barely enough time to engineer the disgrace of yet another vassal of the House of Rees-Charlay. And next time, to ensure Lord Melcard’s co-operative absence, he would have to be just that little bit more inventive.

Chapter 2

SOLSTICE BALL

“Lord Iain Merschenko vas Domn!”

Rustam craned his neck to gain a better view of the sweeping marble staircase. For hours now the nobles of the higher Houses had been making their grand entrances down the curving steps, but none had caused such a stir of anticipation as the arrival of the Lord and Lady of the Second House.

The Lord of Domn stepped forward, and Rustam’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. In the half year since winter solstice Iain seemed to have aged considerably. Then, he had been a dashing young man full of energy and zest, an annoyance to his elders with his frequent pranks and a huge frustration to the unattached court Ladies to whom he paid scant attention. Now he looked tired and old, with the first hint of silver frosting his dark hair.

We’re almost the same age, thought Rustam, yet he looks ten years my senior.

For once, Rustam was glad he had not been born a noble: the responsibilities obviously had harsh results. Iain had recently ascended to Lordship of his Family, finally being deemed ready to take over from the estate’s trustees. Now as a *younger* son one might have far more freedom...

“Lady Risada Delgano vas Domn!”

A hush fell as the crush of guests turned to stare up at the balcony. Ladies eyed their husbands in irritation before glancing upward themselves. What would she be wearing tonight? How would her hair be coifed? What jewels would grace her swan’s neck?

Lady Risada glided to the top of the stair. She did not disappoint. Six years older than her brother Iain, she looked barely out of her teens, yet with an air of grace and maturity to which most Ladies aspired but never attained.

Dressed in ivory silk embroidered with gold and pearl beads, her pale hair rolled low to frame her oval face, she looked to be the queen the Kingdom yet lacked. Ladies sighed in admiration or envy, their Lords captivated by the most eligible and desirable woman in all Tyr-en.

A tug on Rustam’s sleeve drew his attention back to the portly woman beside him. Lady Merisa Stormsel was not one to lose out on an evening’s enjoyment and her plans included Rustam. “A trifle overdone, don’t you feel?” she whispered sourly. “All that cream and gold. One might think she was the after dinner dessert!”

“I wouldn’t mind a taste,” muttered Rustam under his breath.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, I agree absolutely, Lady Merisa. Simplicity is the essence of style.”

“Quite so, Rustam.” She patted his arm approvingly. “You have uncommon discernment for a Craft Master. Surely Lady Risada—ah, here comes the king, may Chel guard and guide him.”

King Marten’s entrance was as reverently received as Lady Risada’s, though the quiet was broken by the rustle of expensive fabrics as the massed nobles of Tyr-en made obeisance to their young ruler. Privately, Rustam thought the king looked terrified, though he hid it well enough from all but a highly trained eye. Prince Halnashead stepped forward to greet his nephew, and led him away through the throng which quickly resumed its mind-numbing chatter.

Lady Merisa linked her arm through Rustam’s and tugged, none too gently. “Listen Rustam, the orchestra is tuning up. Shall we make our way to the ballroom? No Ball would be complete without at least one dance with the Kingdom’s finest, so I am forced to claim you now, before the more highly placed ladies come to command your attentions.”

Rustam deftly disengaged his arm and made a slight, apologetic bow. “Alas, Lady Merisa, I shall be doing no dancing tonight.”

“You jest, surely?” Merisa snapped, unaccustomed to having her wishes refused, and certainly not by one who was, after all, merely a dancing Master.

“Sadly no, my Lady. I took a fall from my horse not two days since, and I can barely walk yet, much less dance.” He displayed his silver shod walking cane, chuckling inwardly at the frown of annoyance that marred Lady Merisa’s chubby features. He had had cause to tutor the lady some months ago and was much relieved his toes were to be spared a repeat bruising. As for what else his duty had demanded of him during that time—he shuddered in remembrance.

“What’s this I hear? Fallen off your horse, Chalice?”

Rustam’s heart jolted and he took care to school his expression before turning to answer Lord Herschel Fontmaness.

“Indeed, my Lord. During my return to Darshan following your excellent hospitality.”

“Damned shame. Betha was so looking forward to dancing with you tonight. Evening Merisa.”

“Good evening, Lord Herschel. Excuse me, Rustam. Perhaps we will have the chance at Winter Solstice?”

“I trust so, my Lady. Have a pleasant evening.”

Lady Merisa’s place at Rustam’s side was quickly filled by the eager Lady Betha, whose pretty, childlike face fell in disappointment as her elderly husband informed her of Rustam’s indisposition.

“I wish you’d travelled with us, Rusty. A carriage is so much safer than a horse!” The fragile Betha shivered at the very thought of riding such a dangerous beast.

“It was kind of you to offer, Lady Betha, but I needed to attend to some family business on my journey. It was an unfortunate accident.”

A harassed-looking servant in Fontmaness’s livery of green with yellow chevrons appeared out of the multitude at Lord Herschel’s shoulder. “Pardon the intrusion, my Lord, but there is an urgent message from your estate.”

Rustam’s attention sharpened, though he let no more than mild curiosity show on his face. Lord Herschel took the parchment and peered short-sightedly at it. “Betha, my dear, read this for me, will you?” He handed the scroll to his wife.

“My Lord,” read Betha, “I regret to inform you there has been an attempted burglary—”

“What!” roared Lord Herschel and snatched the scroll back. Holding it close to his face he scanned the writing, muttering to himself. Lady Betha glanced at Rustam, confusion in her eyes. “I don’t understand; we’ve nothing of any real value. It’s not as if we’re a major House.”

“My dear Lady Betha,” said Rustam, “it may appear that way to you, but I’m afraid that to a guild-less outlaw even the most humble of your belongings would seem priceless.”

“I suppose so,” conceded Betha, not sounding convinced.

“Dear me, trouble at home, hmm?” interjected a new voice. Rustam moved to allow Prince Halnashead to join them.

“I fear we must leave, your Highness,” said Lord Herschel. “I do hope you will not be offended.”

“No, no. Of course not, Herschel. You must attend personally to such a disgraceful affair, and your lovely wife seems quite upset. I will provide an escort, if you wish?”

“You are too kind, Highness, but I fear it would serve little purpose. The thief is probably long gone, but it would be unthinkable for me to leave the investigation of this outrage to an underling.”

“As you say. I trust nothing valuable is missing?”

Rustam’s eyes sidled to the prince’s face. Halnashead was enjoying every moment of Herschel’s discomfort.

Herschel shifted uneasily. “I cannot say, Highness. It seems the thief only entered my study before being disturbed—”

Disturbed? Rustam thought. *That’s a good tale from a bunch of inept guards.*

“—so he could not have had time to remove anything of great import.”

Rustam smiled inwardly at the beads of sweat that had sprung out on Lord Herschel’s brow. Halnashead beamed openly. “Good, good. Then off you go. And don’t forget to comfort your delightful wife.”

The prince kissed Betha's hand, and inclined his head to Herschel's bow. As Herschel turned to leave, Betha hesitated and crowded close to Rustam. Her slim fingers slipped a small scroll into his hand before she hurried after her husband's retreating back. She glanced back once, a tiny, conspiratorial smile on her delicate face. Then she vanished into the crowd. Rustam tucked the scroll up his sleeve, well aware that Halnashead had marked the exchange.

"Well, m'boy. That courier wasn't far behind you, was he? I trust you weren't followed here."

"Your Highness!" said Rustam indignantly, matching the prince's low voice. "You know me better than that. And if the Lady Betha suspects? Well, she can hardly tell her husband, can she?"

"I cherish your confidence, Rustam. Now, you haven't forgotten our meeting, have you?"

"As if I would. I'll be there."

"Good, good. See you later then." And the prince wandered away, calling loudly for another glass of wine.

Partner-less for the moment, and unlikely to be anything else if Merisa had spread the tale of his injury, Rustam limped through the crowded state chambers, drawn to the banquet hall by the delicious mingled aromas of roast poultry, baked fruits and pastries. He picked at the sumptuous buffet and meandered from group to group, ears open for any titbits of information. The scrutiny of the guards posted at intervals along the banner-draped walls, he ignored. Tonight their swords were ceremonial only, for to draw a weapon in the presence of royalty was to invite swift execution, and it had been many years since any House had made an overt play in the game. Not since the bungled Sencarten affair. Even though it had occurred years before Rustam's birth he knew the story, as did all players and nobles. The annihilation of everything to do with that misbegotten House, even to the razing of their manor, was a clear warning to any who might dare to move so openly against another House.

At least something good had come out of that dreadful business, mused Rustam as he perused the assembled nobles in all their finery. The current rounds of social gatherings had been instigated by the king at that time—Halnashead's great grandfather—to prevent his major Houses from hiding away inside their heavily guarded mansions, scheming against one another and splitting the countryside into miniature kingdoms that were all too often at war. The parties and fests obliged the Families to interact socially and maintain the standards of ethical niceties by which they were supposed to live.

Coincidentally, the new social structure had created vast opportunities for agents like Rustam, and the whole spy network had burgeoned until the noble Houses were awash with players. Information gleaned had become such a well realised art form that moves in the current phase of the game were more likely to be financial or face-saving than military, although it was not unheard of for a minor player to turn up dead once in a while.

Yet now it seemed one of the major Houses was preparing to move against the king. May, in fact, have been preparing for years. Rustam found himself struggling to believe that such a possibility could become reality.

Meandering amongst the trestle tables so artfully arranged with foods from each of the Five Kingdoms, Rustam popped another sweetmeat into his mouth and studied the little clusters of highborns; those members of the twenty major Houses who formed the highest levels of the nobility. Respectful circles of privacy surrounded each gathering, and Rustam could not help but covet their conversations. What treacheries did they plan? What secret coups were they celebrating? Which House was plotting treason?

Rustam loved the game—the intrigue, the danger, the thrill of being one step ahead of an opposing player. He had always known the part he would play, and the House that would command his loyalty. The prince had been good to him, even paying for his tutoring after his mother disappeared, but it was not the money which had bought his allegiance, it was the importance of working for the Royal House and so, in a way, for Tyr-en itself. Halmashead's players assured the security of the kingdom, and the Chalice family had long been his finest.

Other craft Masters and minor nobles drifted amongst the guests and eventually Rustam found a seat and settled down to watch their movements. Any one of them could be a spy like himself. Most probably were. And there were the servants too, many of whom had access to nobles of all classes. For a while, Rustam amused himself trying to figure out the identity of the assassin, Dart.

He wondered if it would be anyone he knew. Certainly to be effective Dart must be free to move in even the highest circles, so no mere Craft Master would fill the role. No, he was more likely to be a well-positioned servant, or just possibly a noble of one of the twenty Great Houses.

A bell rang once. Another hour still to go. Halmashead was certain Rustam would not deduce the assassin's identity, and Rustam respected the prince's judgement. With a wry smile he turned his attention to his surroundings, and checked that he was unobserved before slipping Betha's scroll out of his sleeve. He raised it to his nose. Sure enough, her favourite lavender perfume permeated the parchment and its lilac ribbon. Rustam smiled. If he had an oat for every one of these he had received, he could have fed Nightstalker for a month.

The contents were much as expected, although the young and apparently fragile Lady Betha obviously had more imagination than most. Perhaps the Fontmaness mansion would merit another visit after all.

Tucking Betha's letter safely back into his sleeve, Rustam became aware of a pair of gossiping Ladies seated in a nearby alcove. The acoustics of the Great Halls had been carefully considered during construction and a number of places existed where one could sit and hear conversations from further away than normal earshot. Out of habit Rustam had chosen to sit in such a spot.

He identified the tattlers as a pair of minor nobles, one of whom he had had the misfortune to be required to interact with in his professional capacity, early on in his career. Her sharp tongue showed no improvement.

“—of the Fifteenth, or should I now say, the Sixteenth House? Do tell all, my dear,” invited her companion.

“Darling, you haven't heard yet? She's just given birth!”

Rustam could hear the malicious glee in the lady's tone, and pictured the nasty little smile that would go with it. Her friend was obviously shocked.

"But how could she? Her husband has been dead for over a year!"

"Ah yes, but she's taken no end of lovers since then. But can you imagine? How could anyone, even someone so witless, become pregnant by one of them and not do something about it? For Chel's sake, it's hard enough to keep a pregnancy even when you want it!"

Rustam winced in sympathy. Not for the Lady in question—he was in absolute agreement about her stupidity—but for her child, who throughout life would bear the appalling stigma of bastardy.

No woman should be that thoughtless.

In his mind, Rustam gazed up at a slim, elegant woman with long auburn ringlets that seemed to have a life of their own. He reached up with a four year old's pudgy hand to pull one and the woman laughed; a clear, bell-like sound engraved on his memory. She stooped to plant a kiss on the top of his head then turned away and walked out of his life forever.

Soria Chalice.

His mother.

"Wine, Master Chalice?"

Rustam glanced up, startled out of reverie. An exceptionally pretty girl wearing the low cut, puff-sleeved white blouse with the purple and white striped skirt of a royal servant stood in front of him, proffering a tray of drinks. He glanced appreciatively from her masses of fair curls down her trim figure and back up to her freshly scrubbed face.

"Thank you, but no," declined Rustam with regret, and raised his glass of fruit juice by way of explanation. "Achieving a drunken stupor on my own isn't quite my style."

"Do you have to be on your own?" the girl asked huskily, moving closer until her thigh brushed Rustam's knee.

He smiled. "Is that an offer?"

"Have you had a better one this evening?"

"I haven't had one at all. But, my dear, appealing though you make it sound, I fear I must decline."

The girl raised her chin and looked down at Rustam with an air of arrogance at odds with her position. "Oh? I'm not good enough for you?" she demanded.

"I have a reputation to maintain."

"So I've heard," she said acidly and moved away, casually kicking Rustam's walking cane well out of reach as she did so.

Rustam smiled to himself, and thanked a passing waiter who returned the cane. *I wonder who she works for, and what they want from me*, he mused. It was unusual for a woman to become a player, but even if the offer had been genuine, Rustam wasn't going to risk taking her up on it; consorting with a peasant serving girl, no matter how attractive, could tarnish his image irreparably.

He glanced around at the crowd. The multitude was beginning to thin out, the older and less energetic guests drifting homeward, or to one of the many guest rooms within the palace itself. Nearby, Rustam noticed the king, a youth barely old enough to grow a beard, hide a yawn behind his raised glass. Marten's brown hair was tousled and his eyes shadowed, yet he struggled to appear interested in the conversations around him. A great improvement on his late, wine-sodden father, thought Rustam.

The king's group was joined by a tall, fair-haired figure in unadorned maroon, and Rustam's distaste for the man turned his fruit juice bitter on his tongue.

Lord Melcard Rees-Charlay. If ever there was a candidate for Dart's attention, the ruling Lord of the Fourth House was surely it. Insular and secretive, Melcard always came out of awkward political incidents in ostensible support of the Royal Family, yet all the intelligence Halmashead could lay his hands on—pitifully little where Melcard was concerned—suggested that the Fourth House itself was more often than not the instigator of those very situations. Combined with the fact that Melcard's rivals always seemed to be the ones ruined or disgraced, there was little doubt of Melcard's mastery of the game.

Rustam's reasons were more personal: Melcard made his job harder. On more than one occasion it had taken Rustam far longer and every minim of his skills to win the confidence of ladies who had previously been courted by the older but still handsome Lord Melcard. Rustam had yet to draw out of any of them exactly what Melcard did to hurt them, but whatever it was, the marks he scored into their lives were slow to fade and Rustam doubted any of them would ever truly trust a man again.

He wondered if Melcard had been different before his wife and infant son died in childbed.

Drawing his attention back to the present, Rustam strained to hear Lord Melcard's words as Marten's already pale face turned white. He caught mention of King Saimund—Marten's father and a contemporary of Melcard's—and the words 'drunk' and 'wine'.

The bastard! Rustam felt his guts clench in impotent rage. Melcard was taunting the king about his father, in public, and with such a commiserative demeanour Marten could not even retaliate. Outraged but helpless, Rustam could only watch as the young monarch raised his chin defiantly, and endured the thinly veiled insults with all the dignity he could muster. As the other members of the group excused themselves with embarrassed faces, Rustam's eyes searched the hall for Halmashead, but Marten's salvation came unexpectedly in the form of a vision in ivory and gold that glided to his side amidst a cloud of exotic fragrance.

Lady Risada Delgano vas Domn exuded such an intoxicating air of vibrant sensuality that she drew others simply by her presence, and the flock of highborns that trailed endlessly in her wake spread quickly between Melcard and his victim. Rustam lost sight of Lady Risada's tall, elegantly dressed—despite Merisa's assertions—slender form until she emerged from the crowd with one arm linked through Marten's, leading her cousin towards the safety

of Halnashead's company. As they passed close to Rustam, he heard the Lady's softly musical tones murmur words of comfort and encouragement to the humiliated king, and he watched in envy as her long, delicate fingers stroked Marten's tightly clenched fist.

Rustam drew a deep breath and tugged ineffectually at his highly starched collar. What he wouldn't give for just one night with the ravishing Lady Risada.

He smiled to himself and shook his head. One could always dream.

Rustam Chalice limped away down the long hall with the sound of refined gaiety at his back.

* * * * *

At the second ring of the bell, Rustam knocked on the door to Halnashead's study. He glanced uneasily up and down the empty corridor. Where were the guards? Perhaps Halnashead had sent them away to protect Dart's identity, but the back of Rustam's neck prickled, and that was a warning sign he never ignored. He slipped his small dagger from its wrist sheath, and eased the door open. The room was mostly in darkness, with just a row of candles flickering on the front edge of the prince's substantial desk. There was someone behind the desk, though Rustam could not make out who stood there.

Wending his way between the high backed chairs and ornate tables that cluttered the main floor space of the study, Rustam trod as lightly as he could with his injured leg, balancing on the balls of his feet, prepared to dive for cover at the slightest hint of trouble. He held the walking cane poised in his left hand like a javelin ready to throw, the dagger nestling coldly in his other palm. His eyes roved the room for signs of a third person. If that was Halnashead behind the desk, then Dart could be anywhere. And if it wasn't...

With a rustle of ivory silk, the figure behind the desk sat down, bringing her face clearly into the candlelight. Rustam stopped in confusion, hastily lowered the cane to a more conventional position and made a small bow. "Your pardon, my Lady. The prince asked me to meet him here..."

Rustam's voice trailed off as the Lady Risada Delgano vas Domn laughed; a resigned, self-mocking sound.

"My Lady?"

Risada shook her head. "Ah, Chalice. I suppose it had to be you, with your pretty face and your courtly manners."

The study door opened, and Rustam spun around. Silhouetted against the light from the corridor was Halnashead's bulky figure. The prince shut the door and strode across the room. "Splendid," he said, rubbing his hands together. "I see you two have met at long last."

"What?" blurted Rustam, his famed manners deserting him. "You mean—"

Lady Risada vacated the prince's chair, and moved around the desk, preceded by her exotic perfume. Rustam's breathing became rapid, though whether in response to the heavy scent or the lady's proximity, he wasn't sure. Halnashead sat down and beamed at them.

“Dart, meet Charmer. Charmer, meet Dart.”

Rustam looked pleadingly at Halnashead. “You’re joking, surely? You must be. She can’t be Dart; she’s—”

“What?” cut in Lady Risada. “A woman?”

“No! Well, yes. I suppose so.” Rustam shifted uncomfortably, his mind reeling as it tried to adjust to the concept of a noblewoman as a player. Female servants on occasion, yes. But a *lady*?

He glanced aside at the lady in question. She stared coldly back.

“Please, please!” Halnashead drew their attention. “I want you two to get on with each other. Does it surprise you so much, Rusty?”

“*Rusty*?” echoed Lady Risada derisively.

Taken aback by the lady’s obvious animosity, Rustam considered the prince’s question. “I suppose it shouldn’t. With her court position, the lady has access to all levels of nobility. Certainly a great asset to your Highness.”

“And don’t you forget it, dancer boy,” muttered Risada.

Halnashead frowned. “Be nice, Risada. Rustam is my most skilled agent.”

“Most skilled womaniser, you mean!”

“Risada, enough.” Halnashead did not raise his voice, but his displeasure was clear. The corners of Rustam’s mouth quirked up, but he quickly dropped the smirk when the prince scowled at him.

“You *will* get on with each other. This is a serious matter and you are both professionals; I expect you to behave as such. Now sit down. This could be a long meeting.”

Rustam fetched two chairs while Risada stood stiffly, staring into the darkness behind Halnashead where the great tapestry hung. She took elaborate care to arrange her bulky skirts before sitting on the chair Rustam held for her, yet managed to ignore him utterly. Rustam shrugged to himself, and sat down to her right.

“Now, Risada. You know the background to this affair?” asked the prince.

“An interesting choice of words considering the company, but yes, I do.”

“And you, Rustam. You’ve done much of the information gleaning. What you may not know is that a second vial of elixir has found its way into our possession this evening.”

“From who?” queried Rustam.

“From a highborn noble of the Eighteenth House. Incidentally, Risada, we have since bought his loyalty.”

“Will he stay bought?” asked the lady, sounding sceptical.

“I think so, yes. You see, he committed an indiscretion with a certain young lady of a higher family.”

“One of yours, I assume.”

“But of course.” Halnashead beamed, his good humour returning. “My daughter, Annasala, as a matter of fact. It was good field experience for her.”

Rustam stared in open astonishment. The princess too? To mention nothing of the fact that she was barely seventeen.

“You seem shocked, Rusty. Sala is a very confident young woman.”

“I don’t doubt it, Highness. I was merely surprised that you would choose to use her in such a capacity.”

Halnashead laughed. “Rusty, I doubt anyone could use Sala in any capacity in which she didn’t wish to be used. It was her suggestion.”

“Oh.”

“Might we get back to business?” enquired Risada rather tartly.

“Quite so, quite so. Unfortunately we are no closer to discovering the supplier of this substance. He meets with his clients only in a darkened room and speaks through a servant. As to the elixir itself, our alchemists have done some tests on the bottle you brought in, Rustam. So far all they can tell me is that the fluid is rich in iron, and that it has been distilled from a living creature—something quite unusual, possibly unique. Certainly nothing they have come across before.”

“Any signs of magic?” queried Risada, her voice heavy with loathing at the idea of arcane involvement.

Halnashead shook his head. “Praise Chel, no. But it does give you two a starting point. This living source, whatever it is, must be tracked down. It must either be secured or destroyed.”

“And that is why you want me,” concluded the lady assassin as she inspected the set of perfectly shaped nails adorning the tips of her long, slender fingers. Rustam wondered how many lives had been terminated by those impeccably manicured hands.

“Indeed, my dear,” confirmed the prince, “though a more pressing point prompted me to this decision even before we obtained a sample of elixir. The resolution of this matter may be crucial to the survival of the Royal Family. I am convinced that whoever is supplying this concoction is gathering money for military purposes, and it may become necessary to make immediate decisions in the field without the opportunity to refer back to me.”

“And as I am cousin to the Royal House, you rely on my personal motivations to make the most advantageous decisions for both our families?”

“You see it truly, my dear.”

“Excuse me,” broke in Rustam. “Does this mean I’m working *for* the lady, rather than *with* her?”

Halnashead frowned slightly and propped his elbows on the desk, fingers steeped before his face. “In a sense, Rustam, yes. Risada is, after all, of the Second House. But I’m sure she won’t interfere in your areas of expertise.”

“I have no wish to come that close,” said Risada, fixing Rustam with a warning glare. “My friends have warned me about you.”

Thoroughly irritated, Rustam’s mouth got the better of him. “You have *friends*?”

“That will do!” roared Halnashead, his open palms slapping heavily onto the desktop. “Rusty, I tolerate a fair degree of familiarity from you because it amuses me to do so, but you will remember Lady Risada’s position.” He frowned at them both. “You are my two best operatives and I’m relying on you.”

“Sorry.”

“I apologise.”

“Good. That’s settled then. I don’t expect to hear any more bickering from either of you.” The prince folded his arms over his belly and Rustam knew he would brook no further indiscipline.

“Your Highness, does the king know of this matter?” Risada enquired.

“No. And I don’t intend that he should until it is resolved.”

“Surely—”

“Risada, I have been in charge of royal security since before you were born. My brother was a fool and our father a tyrant. So far, Marten is neither. But he is beginning to learn about the game and to develop his own moves. Only ten days ago we uncovered an agent of his within my own staff.”

Risada raised a delicately arched eyebrow.

“Oh, I’ve left the man where he is,” Halnashead continued. “It gives me the opportunity to feed the information I want to Marten without him realising. But the point is, if he found out about the elixir, he could start interfering and that might prove disastrous for such an infant player.”

“Not to mention for us,” muttered Rustam.

“So where do we begin?” Risada asked, ignoring him.

“We know the elixir is coming from one of the more highly placed Families, yes? So. The annual round of Family fests begins shortly. It has been on my mind for some time to send Annasala as our representative on the circuit this year, but as she is still of tender age, she will require a chaperon.”

Risada folded her long white hands demurely in her lap. “A cousinly chaperon, I presume.”

“Precisely, my dear. And Rusty, m’boy; it’s time your social standing moved up a notch. I fancy Sala to be in need of her own personal Dancing Master. What do you say?”

“Your Highness, how could I say anything but yes?”

“You couldn’t, of course, but I’d like to know you won’t consider it an onerous duty, with Sala being so young.”

“Rest easy, your Highness. Princess Annasala must have the best, so no other would do.”

Rustam noticed Risada’s eyes roll upward. Well, there was no point being modest when it was the truth.

“Fine, fine. We are agreed. It is imperative that you locate this living source and deal with it, one way or another. As I see it, this is the best possible opportunity we have for a thorough investigation of all twenty Families.”

Risada frowned. “I’m reluctant to be away from Domn—from Iain—for so long, but I see no suitable alternative. And I suppose it will provide further opportunity to screen the Families for signs of the Bastard’s presence.”

“My thoughts also,” agreed Halnashead, and Rustam’s mind flicked over the quest that had been ongoing for longer than he had been alive—the search for the rumoured third son of Halnashead’s father, King Belcastas. Hints and whispers kept the hunt alive, and whilst no firm evidence for the Bastard’s existence had ever been found, the possibility of a hidden pretender to the throne was too great a threat to ignore.

“And now,” said Lady Risada, “If you will excuse me, I must return to my brother.”

“Go on, go on. We can discuss this at greater length with Sala. I’ll arrange a meeting.”

Lady Risada stood, smoothed the many layers of her gown, and then swept to the door amid the rustle of silk and a trailing waft of scent. “Good night, cousin. Master Chalice.”

The prince inclined his head. Rustam rose hastily and bowed, but she was gone before he straightened.

“Well, Rusty, were any of your guesses near the mark?”

Rustam shook his head. “No, Highness, but I should have known. There’s nothing more dangerous than a beautiful woman.”