

Chapter One

Every drunk is a magician. Or rather, there is a brief moment within drunkenness when magic is a hair's breadth from reach. As I leaned on the rough sandstone of the bridge and stared at the dark river below, I knew that, with one more effort, I could transport myself from this dismal valley to the warm riverbank of my home. A three-quarter moon rising over my shoulder picked out the sinews of the water. I squeezed my eyes shut, and in the same moment knew that I had lost my chance. The magic had gone. These things are a matter of timing. I have still to get it right.

I opened my eyes to find that, indeed, I was still in the wretched city. A northerly breeze blew cold, marshy air around my neck and ankles, and I gathered the thick worsted of my robe hard against my body. But the hiss and gurgle of the river beneath me and the moonlight overhead combined agreeably with the ale in my stomach, and for a drowsy moment I fancied I could hear the spheres of heaven turn and ring somewhere in the distance.

Enough. There was ale to be drunk, and warmth to be enjoyed. I walked to the far end of the bridge, took a couple of steps down the bank and pissed long and hard into the flood, my little stream arching over in a pretty silver thread. Arranging my robes, I made my way back towards the tavern where I had left my friends.

The Crozier, if it still stands, is a small, mean building from the outside. Its cob walls are melting back into the ground like cheese left in a hot sun. The innkeeper, whose sallow

skull-face turned many would-be clients away at first sight but who was in fact a cheerful soul, once told me that an ancestor of his had built the place in the time of the last Danish king. Given the cheesy nature of the walls and the toadstools springing lavishly from the eaves, I was inclined to believe him. But once past the door – big rusting iron studs keeping warped planks in some sort of order – the brave or foolish found a big room warmed by a fire that takes up most of one wall, long benches polished into dark mirrors by countless arses, sweet herbs among the clean rushes on the floor stones and two huge butts of strong, sweet beer. This was – and for the sake of that dismal city, I pray it still is – the finest brew in the Bishop's domain.

The Crozier's beer was the best I have ever tasted. It had . . . but no. One man's favourite drink is another's pond-water. If I could have tasted every drop described to me by thirsty bores far from home (or just far from drink) I would be drunk for all my life and half way through the life to come. Sufficient that this was honey-sweet and strong as sunlight, with a lingering something of heather in the taste.

The breeze picked up a notch and all of a sudden I was chilled. I turned into Crozier Lane and there was the tavern, just a few yards away. At that moment, the door opened and yellow light poured into the alley, along with raised voices. Three figures lurched out. By the way they staggered around each other, arms plucking at clothing and heads lifted, a fight was obviously about to happen. Cold, homesick and thirsty, the last thing I wanted at that moment was to push through a brawl, and so I turned left up the narrow passage that separated the tavern from its neighbours, keeping my feet wide apart to avoid the runnel of night-water that trickled down the middle. A right turn, and I was at the side door.

The Crozier's side entrance was a stone archway over an old iron-bound door, behind which a short, stone-floored corridor led to the tap-room. As the door squeaked shut behind me, I

noticed something peculiar about the old straw that lay on the flagstones. Something was reflecting back the light from the reed spill that burned in the one wall-sconce, something bright and golden. I bent down to get a closer look.

It really was gold. Sharp-cornered pieces that had been cut from bigger coins. There were a lot of them, scattered over the rotting straw, which, now that my nose was closer, stank of mould and nameless fluids. Without thinking, I reached out to the piece nearest to me, but something made me stop. Looking back, I like to think that I was prompted by divine guidance or my own sharp senses, but in fact I had realised that the floor was alive with lice that skipped over the straw and coins like fat jumping in a hot pan. So instead, I straightened up.

The next moment I felt someone grab me from behind and the weight of a body slam me against the wall, knocking the air from my lungs. Then I was spun round. A hand clamped itself over my mouth.

'This is how you kill someone quickly and efficiently. Knife forward, your thumb on the blade. Strike upwards under the ribs and keep pushing upwards.' The voice was like wind seething across frozen snow. 'If your man is against a wall, put your hand over his mouth until he stops moving. That way, he will not cough blood into your face.'

I felt the man's breath flutter across my own face as he spoke. My eyes were so tightly shut that I was seeing stars. Somewhere in the back of my skull a small, calm voice seemed to be telling me to open them, that I was going to die anyway and that I might as well find out how and why. And so I did.

And found myself looking into a long, thin face. Copper skin stretched tight over angular bones. Thick black hair cut to wear under a helmet. A jutting beard, and dark eyebrows arching over shining slate-grey eyes. A slash of a mouth, which began to laugh. The hand left my face.

'How now, my little monk! Still alive?'

'Yes,' I squeaked with the air that remained in my chest.

'Well, well. And are you wondering why?'

I could only manage a nod.

'The reason, priestlet, is that you kept your delicate fingers away from my gold. That told me what a wonderful little fellow you must be.'

I tried to say something. I felt the sudden need to tell this man how grateful I was to him, and at the same time to stand up for myself. A word formed itself on my dry tongue.

'Fuck,' I croaked.

The dark man roared with laughter. He let me go, and my knees almost gave out beneath me. Hardly daring to look, I nevertheless saw that my attacker was tall and slim, and wore clothes of some fine green damask. Then I noticed his right hand. It held a very long, narrow and sharply pointed knife. Seeing my eyes flick down, the man whipped his blade up, holding it a finger's length from the tip of my nose. At this unwelcome distance I could see that the blade was finely chased with swirling patterns in silver, and that the handle was some pale green substance, inlaid with red stones.

'Pretty, isn't she?' said the man. 'Her name is Shauk. She and I were playing a game.'

'A game? What sort of fucking game?' I did not feel this brave. It just came out.

'A game to find the greedy people.'

'I'm not greedy.'

'No indeed. You were blind to temptation. A veritable Saint Anthony!' The man laughed coldly. 'Shauk means "Thorn" in the Mussulman tongue. She can be a sharp little thing.'

And he pressed the tip of his thumb down onto the point of the blade. It came away with a bead of blood already welling from it. He raised his hand and flicked the blood at me. I felt warm drops spatter my face.

'Now it is time for you to run along, *Brother Petroc*.'

He hissed the last two words. I hesitated for a moment,

trapped by his dead blue glare, then turned and ran, kicking up straw and gold as I stumbled up the corridor, heaved open the tap-room door and burst inside.

It was like stepping into another world. Later that night, when my humours had settled into something like their normal configurations, I decided that it had felt like a story my mother used to tell, about a young man called Tom. Young Tom was a tinner, and had dug into one of the mounds that cropped up on the brown and windy slopes of Dartmoor. Deeper and deeper went Tom until his spade struck empty air. He wriggled into the hole, and tumbled into a great hall where the faery court was feasting. In the story, roguish Tom had been welcomed, given a comely faery lass to wed, and returned to the moors after a happy day underground, only to find that the seasons had turned twelve times in his absence. But here in the Crozier, no one had missed me. An eternity had passed outside, and inside time had taken its usual slovenly pace as beer levels crept down, logs turned quietly to ash, and dirty laughter faded in the rafters like smoke. This world was the same, but like Tom the tin miner I had been changed, although I did not know it then. The sparkle of gold and the wave of the steel thorn had worked on me as surely as any faery glamour, and would go on working like slow poison until the old Petroc became merely the person telling his story, a world away in distance and an age away in time.

But now I hung in the doorway like a dead crow on a gibbet, panting, waiting for my heart to burst out through my ears. Then I remembered there was a sharp knife and an open door at my back. The slam turned a few ruddy faces in my direction. I reeled over to the bench where my friends sat. Welsh Owen glanced over his shoulder, and shifted his bum over to make room for me. I sank down next to him. Suddenly I was very angry. I slammed the palm of my hand down on the table. That got the company's attention. William of Morpeth turned his pox-marked face to me.

'Where in the name of Saint Agatha's dugs did you get to?' he asked.

My friends were staring at me now. My five friends: Welsh Owen, Cornish Owen, William, Alfred and Martin de Gallis.

'Someone get me a beer,' I said. 'Then I'll tell you.'

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