

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 Halmashead'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 Halmashead 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 Halmashead 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 Halmashead. “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 Halmashead 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-smeared 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.