

### Assassins Always Get Their Man?

‘Shit!’

Marchan, senior percussor of the Nuarinamere Guild of Percussors was clean across the world from his home, staring at the hunting party riding out through the gate of the royal castle, down across the glacis and in through the town gate before him. His heart sank. He was engaged upon a discrete pursuit and was thus not wearing an assassin’s customary black cloak, but was garbed instead as a warrior. He had been chasing the thief and murderer variously called Glaslar and Rasgall for nearly two full years now, and had pursued him all of the way here to Ryadur, to Highcastle, capital of the Princedom of Eastern. His description of the thief was frustratingly vague: ‘Quite tall, quite muscular, darkish hair, quite rugged or perhaps handsome looking, no distinguishing features except for an annoying habit of ending his sentences with the words ‘you know?’.’

However, the description of the horse which ‘Rasgall’ had stolen from the Riverlord Jakyde was most precise: ‘An outstandingly fine roan stallion with a near black mane and tail and with white socks on its forelegs, larger on the left than the right.’

He was watching that horse - or its identical twin - trot past him now. The rider was tall, and quite muscular, and dark haired, and handsome... and a prince - Prince Lynakris of the Ryaduran Realm of Eastern to be precise.

‘Bugger and shit and plague!’ Marchan muttered.

So the stories were true then. Marchan had picked up the first clues at Roadsend, the first settlement at the Ryaduran end of The Ryaduran Road; that a horse very much like the one he had tracked half way across the world now belonged to a Ryaduran lord. As he progressed across the Ryaduran Princedoms more of the story had unfolded. Lord - or Prince - Lynakris had been Captain of the travelling company waylaid by brigands in Echo Gorge, the same brigands who had famously been thwarted by a courageous slavegirl called Tria - Tria of Hammer Pass. Lynakris had seized the horse as booty from the captured brigand chieftain.

Marchan had therefore resolved to pursue the horse... and the captured brigand.

Then Marchan had stuck unlucky. He had never been to Ryadur before, and the winter had taken him by surprise. For four full months he had found himself snowed up between two impassable mountain passes, fortunately in an inn. With the coming of spring he had then struck unlucky again. He had followed directions to Lynakris’s castle at Farcastle - across a whole series of mountain passes - and discovered that he wasn’t there. His brother, the ruling ‘Crown Prince’ Felaris had set out to tour the western lands, and Lynakris was presently ruling Eastern from his brother’s castle at Highcastle. Cursing some, Marchan had ridden back to Highcastle across some suspiciously familiar mountain passes.

There, still wearing his disguise as a warrior, he had first confirmed that the stallion had been seen there, and had then managed to track down a member of Lynakris’s personal guard who had travelled The Road with him, and the worst possible details had unfolded over several ales. The captured chieftain’s name had indeed been Rasgall, but he had escaped one night at Twin Moon Lake, stolen two horses, and ridden back west over The Wayward Hills.

Marchan was not enough of a fool to believe that Rasgall had really continued in the same direction in which he had set off, but what he struggled to fathom was how Rasgall had become chieftain of the Grassland brigands in a matter of a few months - although probably in much the same manner in which he had risen to be Captain of The Guard at Delarke in a similar length of time. He had eventually concluded that previous captains and chieftains always seemed to suffer unexpected accidents in Rasgall’s immediate vicinity... invariably fatal ones.

Now Marchan was at a dead end. Rasgall had completely disappeared. His only chance

of ever finding him had been to find the memorable horse he was riding; so now his only - very faint - hope was that Rasgall would be fool enough to try to steal back his horse. Otherwise? Otherwise he was going to have to admit defeat. It was commonly said that a percussor always gets his man, but not this time. Rasgall could be anywhere, had probably changed his name again, and, separated from his horse, would be impossible to identify.

‘You know?’ he muttered ironically to himself

He scanned the crowds carefully. There were probably half a dozen men who could have been Rasgall, but weren’t. Fed up, he retreated towards his inn.

‘Your pardon, warrior?’

A ragged waif was trotting beside him, a young girl with a tattered head scarf shadowing her face but not quite managing to obscure dark hair cropped short as a punishment for some minor crime.

Marchan glowered at her. ‘Go away! I’ve no silver to spare.’

To add to his problems his funds were definitely running very short now.

‘I heard you were seeking news of a brigand named Rasgall?’ the girl persisted.

Marchan stopped dead in his tracks.

The girl licked her lips. ‘But I’ve not eaten for two days, sir?’

‘If you know anything about Rasgall’s whereabouts I’ll give you enough silver to feed you for the next week,’ he enthused.

‘I know where to find someone who knows where he’s gone, sir...’ The beggar girl hesitated, and licked her lips again. ‘I also know an inn with a back room where they’ll serve a girl like me, sir?’ she offered hopefully.

‘Lead on, girl,’ said Marchan. He was sceptical whether she really knew anything useful, but he still had silver enough to treat the poor girl to a bowl of pot stew.

She led him down a side passage, along a back street, and down another passageway alongside a lowly ale house. She opened a side door, ducked herself and politely gestured him to enter. ‘After you, sir.’

The room was dimly lit and empty except for a cloaked man sat hunched and shadowed over a table bare except for an ale jug and two mugs.

The hairs on the back of Marchan’s neck prickled. He cursed silently and his hand slid surreptitiously towards his fighting dagger. Something cold and pointy tickled his neck. He froze. Behind him, the girl had produced a small dagger from her rags and had positioned it with unnervingly professional skill.

‘Ah, ah,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Hands plain, fingers spread.’

Marchan eased his hands away from his sides and splayed his fingers.

‘You recognised him easily?’ the figure at the table enquired.

‘Exactly as you described, lord: medium height, brown hair, brown tunic, brown cloak, a fingerless glove covering his left hand and wrist, clean shaven and a little portly looking.’

‘Well done, a commendably smooth discrete arrest of a... a... non-violent subject.’

The figure at the table collapsed in a fit of laughter.

Marchan peered harder at the figure. ‘You utter bastard!’ he growled.

‘I think he could get violent, lord,’ the girl cautioned.

‘No, he couldn’t actually. I’m safe enough. You can return to your master now with my deepest thanks. I shall visit him to compliment your performance in due course.’

The dagger withdrew from Marchan’s neck. ‘As you command, lord.’ The knife disappeared, the girl curtsied very prettily and slipped silently back out into the passageway, drawing the door shut behind her.

‘Ho, Marchan, you look like you could do with a drink,’ said Cormell. He smirked. ‘You Know?’

Marchan sat himself opposite Cormell. ‘I’m not portly,’ he complained, ‘it’s muscle.’

'I know,' Cormell placated him, pouring two ales.

'You have information about Rasgall?' Marchan urged hopefully.

'Not a word,' Cormell confessed, 'but I have urgent need of your services.'

Marchan digested that, and also that, to have arranged a meeting like this, Cormell obviously needed to speak about this in private. He reconsidered Cormell. Under his cloak Cormell was wearing his dark blue robes.

'I thought you were going to become a priest?'

'I did,' Cormell reconsidered that, 'bless you, my son,' he intoned offhandedly, 'but I'm in disguise.'

'You're an illusionist disguised as an illusionist?'

Cormell nodded. 'Clever, isn't it? Can I rely upon your absolute discretion?'

Marchan waved his left hand and thus the concealed tattoo of a striking serpent - 'the assassin's left'. 'By my oath.' He pondered. 'But how the pox did you find me?'

'Oh that was quite simple, actually. Have you read Lynakris's book, 'A Woman of Courage'?'

Marchan glowered. 'I've been too busy about my craft to spend time reading books.'

'It's a rather good read actually. It's the story of the Heroine Tria... Hammer Pass and so on? It mentions the horse, and the escape of the brigand chieftain, a dark-haired brigand named Rasgall?'

Marchan gaped. 'It does? Oh, bloody plagues of Aspoteth!'

So Cormell had discovered as much as he had done in nearly a year of travelling all over Ryadur... by reading a book? That was profoundly annoying.

'There is even a woodcut of Tria confronting the captured brigand chieftain,' Cormell continued, cheering Marchan some more, 'though I doubt if it's a reliable portrayal of him. But I reckoned you'd end up here, checking on the horse,' Cormell continued blithely. 'I made enquiries at the ass... er... Percussors' Guild...' He frowned. 'Does every Percussors' Guild have identical front chambers, comfy chairs, a roaring fire and stained glass windows?'

'Pretty much,' Marchan agreed.

He could already imagine Cormell profoundly annoying the local Percussors by relaxing nonchalantly in one of the comfy chairs, toasting his feet, probably eating a pasty, and being unnervingly not unnerved.

'What sort of pasty was it?' he inquired.

'Mutton, and rather good,' Cormell replied absently. 'I knew you would have reported there if you were here. The girl's good, isn't she? A sort of female percussor?'

Yes, Marchan had been there. A female percussor? Bloody Ryadurans! He shuddered in horror at the sacrilege of it and quaffed some. What was worse, Cormell was getting disturbingly good at this.

'So why do you need my services?' he asked.

'I'm on a mission, a secret one - and a very urgent one too - for the Ryaduran priesthood.'

Marchan's eyebrows rose. 'The Ryaduran priesthood do secret missions? I thought that was a Bakkomite thing?'

'Ah, but this is a godly mission, for the good of all mankind.'

Marchan grimaced. 'So you're not pursuing Tria of Hammer Pass then?'

'She's dead,' Cormell answered, shaking his head sadly. He saw Marchan's surprise. *Perhaps the training in truthsaying is actually doing some good?* he reflected. 'Drowned in the Barbin Sea last year, heroically fighting pirates,' he explained.

Marchan shrugged. 'That's what comes of being too heroic; fame, fortune and an incredibly short lifespan,' he opined unsympathetically. 'So, what's your secret mission and why do you need my help?'

'I'm pursuing another girl, Tria with some 'esse's.'

‘What?’

Cormell produced a booklet from his robes. ‘Read this. I’ll order some more ale and some food. The priesthood will pay. It’s called expenses,’ he added breezily. He rose and opened the door to the alehouse’s main room a fraction. ‘Ale and food,’ he commanded.

Marchan glowered at him. Was he doing this on purpose? He was certain that his expenses two years ago were at least a part of the reason why Guildmaster Corbrak had been so insistent that he should undertake this poxy pursuit. *Miserable parsimonious bastard!* He glowered at Cormell some more and set to reading...

Cormell watched as Marchan’s eyebrows rose, then jiffled about some on his forehead.

Marchan had certainly come across this story before, the tale of a branded whore who had sought and found redemption, this one at the hands of a mysterious hermit with magical powers who lived in the foothills of the Barrier Mountains...

‘This is a rewrite of ‘A Slave’s Tale’,’ Marchan complained.

‘There are similarities,’ Cormell conceded, ‘but Trissa is definitely not Tria, the priesthood have a good description of her...’ He paused. ‘And, Marchan, she is definitely no longer poxed, nor branded. That has been established by Truthsaying and Entrancement.’

Marchan digested that. There was no known cure for the ‘whore’s pox’, but, if the Ryaduran Priesthood had proof that this girl had truly been cured... He pondered. ‘I guess you don’t want me to terminate her?’

‘By the gods, no! We’re not bloody Bakkomites! We’re seeking to acquire the secrets of the decoction which this ‘hermit’ used to cure her; so that our travelling priests may use it to ease suffering and end barbarities like branding the faces of unfortunate whores.’

Marchan grinned wryly. ‘You’ve gone native, you know?’

Cormell shrugged. ‘I always was a little inclined that way, pure of spirit...’ he smirked ‘...You Know?’

‘Bugger the man!’ groaned Marchan, then he scowled. ‘But you know where you’re going, so this isn’t a pursuit, or an arrest. So what do you need me for?’

‘Same as on The Road, bodyguard.’

Marchan scowled. ‘I don’t do ‘bodyguard’, Percussor, you... oh, bugger!’

‘Warriors’ Guild rates - plus a half,’ Cormell offered. ‘And you’ve lost Rasgall, haven’t you?’ He took Marchan’s scowl as a tacit admission of that. ‘He could have gone this way?’ he prompted. ‘More, I want your professional skills at my disposal.’

Marchan studied him enquiringly.

‘Prince Lynakris is showing an uncommon interest in this mission, and I don’t quite see why. The priesthood trust him, and not much gets past the Ryaduran priesthood...’

‘Truthsaying, fear of the gods and suchlike must help,’ Marchan conceded.

‘Quite so, but what they haven’t explained is his motive.’

Marchan’s ears pricked up.

‘Now that is your forte, isn’t it? We’re expecting him to send a representative with us. I want you there to watch him, as well as to guard my back.’

The door began to open.

‘Ah, here is my concubine with our food.’

‘You’ve bought a slave...?’ Marchan’s words died on his lips. He gaped.

‘Good day, lord,’ Avrilla said, smiling.

No, Marchan resolved, this really wasn’t going to be one of his better days.