

Chapter XVI - Ways and Means

I couldn't find my apartment if I tried.

My feet take me where they want—for the next hour, I become just another shadow in a city full of them. My mind takes a cue and does the same.

The license plate puts Korichnnevy in the Poranek. Meisien says a rat plugged Campion Bogaty. Honey Zeylanica had history with the Bogaty family. Korichnnevy was Zeylanica's agent and, according to the paperwork from his abandoned office, adopted father to her daughter.

The dots make a picture and I don't need a Marshal's cloak to connect them. Trouble is, without speaking to the rat, I can draw any picture I like.

I'm out of smokes by the time I start back toward the office. A corner shop throws me a lifeline and offers the evening headlines. The rags are full of Aspen's announcement, many tipping him to win over the working mice his brother alienated by favouring rats. One newspaper runs an interview with Yaz Glavnie, who has also announced his own candidacy to no applause. An editorial puts his chances at only slightly better than the Cat Lovers.

Politics, they tell me, ain't for the faint hearted.

I'm turning onto Beech when Zielen steps out of the office and starts for a rickshaw. I call her name.

Paw on the running rail, she turns. Sighs like she means it. "You didn't go home, did you?"

"I got lost," I say, handing her the paper as I get into the rickshaw. "Glavnie's running, too. At this rate, every registered voter'll be standing by next week."

The ride to Club Polnoch is three cigarillos and change. I tell the driver to keep his feet warm and I head for the front of the queue.

The bouncer is the same bright spark from before. This time, he's not looking for a greased paw. He opens the door and ushers us inside. "Boss said you was to go straight to his office."

We cut through the club. Campion Bogaty has more life than the mice on stage. At the bar, a rat in a tuxedo stops us, checks our names against a list, and nods for us to follow him.

He leads us down that corridor with peeling wallpaper. The smell of cigar smoke and booze oozes from beneath closed doors on either side; muffled staccato conversations followed by the clink of acorns prick my ears.

"How's your gambling license?" I ask the tux in front.

He glances back at me, grunts *dunno what're you're talking about*, and starts up a flight of stairs.

At the top, we cross a short landing to an ornate door. Our escort raps on the wood, waits for a heartbeat, and opens it. I enter first, Zielen on my tail. The door whispers closed behind us.

Tiz Prestupnik stands at a round window overlooking the club. He turns, spreading his arms wide. "Marshal Obcas, dearest of all..."

"Cram it." I light a match on a polished sideboard. "What've you got for me?"

The rat's white suit glistens like a pearl as he crosses to his desk. He lounges in a leather chair and smiles at Zielen, all teeth. "I try to be nice. You understand manners, don't you, sweetheart?"

Zielen stiffens. "Call me 'sweetheart' again and we'll see how much I understand."

A storm drifts across Prestupnik's face. Lightning flashes in his eyes as his gaze shifts back to me. "They grow up so fast."

“I wouldn’t know.” Ash falls from my cigarillo onto his expensive carpet.

“You need a new song, my friend.” He holds a finger up to stop me from interrupting.

“Yes, yes, I know: we’re not friends. Maybe this will help.”

From a drawer, he pulls out a folded piece of paper. He slides it across the desktop and sits back.

I glance at Zielen. She marches forward, snatches the note. “Apartment 215, Maple Heights, Finchly Street. About eight or nine blocks from here. ”

Prestupnik nods. “Zeylanica’s agent is there.”

I study the rat as I finish my smoke. “How’d you find him?”

“Ways and means, my dear Blueberry.” He grins. “If I told you all my secrets, you would have no use for me. And speaking of uses...”

My stomach lurches. “Yeah, I owe you a favour.” The words choke me. “What d’you want?”

“For now, nothing. But there will be a time when I will collect.” Prestupnik rises and lumbers to a line of decanters. “Drink?”

“Only if it’s deep enough to drown you.” I grind my cigarillo into the carpet and make for the door. Zielen throws a civil goodbye at the rat and follows me.

Outside, I pause on the sidewalk and look in the direction of Finchly Street, near the heart of the Midden. Law and lawkeepers have no business there at this time of night. PB dealers, strung out nut-fiends, petty crooks and rising gangsters: they’ll all be out in force. By dawn, there could be a dozen bodies, none of which will be solved this side of eternity.

“We’ll wait for the light,” I tell Zielen before getting into the rickshaw.

After a life as a Watchmouse, she doesn’t argue.

We hit the Midden a little after ten.

Maple Heights is a ten-storey hovel stretching into the overcast sky. Zielen's first out the rickshaw. I drop to the sidewalk and stretch my back. Another night on the office couch hasn't helped my broken tail any. I strike a match, give the street the once-over as I light my breakfast.

Slumped figures huddle in boarded doorways. Their reek wrinkles my whiskers. Red-eyed junkies shuffle from shadow to shadow, blinking against the drab daylight. A pawful of parked carts and carriages line the block. Most have missing wheels or smashed windows, but the one right outside Maple Heights looks like it could still work. The plate is a match for Korichnnevy's, although there's no sign of the beetle to haul it.

Zielen follows my gaze. "Looks like Prestupnik was right." Her voice is about as happy as I feel.

A slamming door has my ears alert. Back the way we came, a short rat staggers from a taxi to a doorway. He leans against the brickwork and, for the briefest of seconds, looks in our direction. Then he finds his keys and disappears into the apartment block.

Time for us to do the same. I open the doors to Maple Heights and step inside.

The lobby bears the scars of neglect. Cracked floor tiles shift with each step. A bank of mailboxes hang along one wall, the trays home to black aphids instead of letters.

We tiptoe up the stairs. On Two, we creep along the corridor toward the rear of the building. The stench of burnt peanut butter fills the air. I stuff my nose inside my cloak and force myself to keep going.

Empty bags, black with PB residue, lie scattered like autumn leaves around the hallway.

No wonder Prestupnik found Korichnnevy so quickly. Nothing escapes the beady eyes of a junkie looking for a fix, and, for a few acorns, they're only too happy to share.

Apartment 215 is the last door on one side. From the smell, I'd guess the PB lab is in 216 opposite. Below us, the front door slams shut. The staircase creaks. I keep an eye on our exit while Zielen knocks on 215, but nobody appears.

She knocks again, louder. A Watchmouse's knock.

From behind the door, a pained groan. Faltering footsteps approach. "Wha...Whaddya want?"

Zielen holds her brooch to the peephole. "Balsam Korichnnevy?"

"I don't have anything to say to Marshals!" The voice quivers as he shouts.

I'm still focussed on our retreat. A shadow slinks along one wall in our direction, head down.

I step forward. "Sure you do. Starting with Cassia."

Zielen scowls at me, but a bolt slides. The door to 215 opens enough to let a sliver of grey light spill over us. "What do you know about Cassia?" The brown rat keeps everything but his face behind the door. Dried vomit rings pallid lips. There's no scar on his snout, despite what Meisien told us.

I put a paw on the door. Take a gamble. "We know she was with Champion Bogaty the night he got killed."

The door opens further. Korichnnevy is stripped to the waist, a bloodied bandage wrapped around a crossbow bolt in his shoulder. He sways, using the lintel to keep himself upright. "You'd..."—he swallows—"You'd better come in, then."

Zielen tosses me a look. I wave her in and spare a glance back down the corridor. No movement disturbs the darkness.

I enter 215. The apartment is a battlefield. The lounge and kitchenette fight for space, the casualties a host of broken furniture and unwashed dishes. Two doors on the back wall lead out of the war. Through one, I spot a dishevelled mattress. The other, presumably the bathroom, is closed.

Korichnnevy drops into a sagging chair. Zielen opts to stand rather than use the mouldy couch. Old sheets hang over the windows like torn tapestries.

I stand beside Zielen and spark up. "You don't look so good, pal."

The rat's chuckle becomes a wet cough. Blood dribbles between his teeth. "You should see the other guy," he manages after a while.

"I think I did." I patrol the room, not knowing what I'm looking for. "Bogaty's security tagged you, right?"

He shakes his head, but doesn't answer. "How'd you find me?"

"Ways and means, pal. Ways and means." I use a coffee-stained cup as an ashtray. "Tell us about that night. Tell it straight, and we'll get you fixed up."

"I was only trying to help Cassia get what was coming to her." He winces as he shifts his weight. "I didn't know anybody was going to die, honest."

Zielen cocks an eyebrow at me. "Cassia, not Honey?"

"Honey?" He tries for another laugh, but it's as convincing as a two-acorn bit. "Honey's dead, Marshal."

"Dead?" my apprentice and I say in shocked unison.

"That's how I figure it." He reaches for a pack of cigarettes and nearly cries out. Zielen fetches them for him. I do my party trick with a match. Korichnnevy nods his thanks at us. "Can't prove a damned thing, though. That was also part of what we were trying to do."

I step back, resume walking the room. At the bathroom door, my whiskers twitch.

Cinnamon.

I lean against the wall, keeping an eye on the shifting shadow under the door. “What does Cassia have coming to her?”

“Her inheritance.” Korichnnevy takes a drag, which becomes another ragged cough.

Dots connect. “She’s Chervil Bogaty’s kid.”

The rat, still coughing, nods. “Honey took her to meet him. Fifteen years ago. I’d ditched her as a client by then.” He spits blood onto the bare floorboards. “I’m not proud, but I was young and stupid. Nobody’d hire a pregnant singer, and after Cassia was born, Honey’s shine had shone. That stunt cost her mystique.”

Zielen folds her paws. “I love this city.”

Korichnnevy tries to shrug with one arm, grimacing. “That’s the business, sweetheart.”

My apprentice bristles, but keeps her mouth shut.

“I kept in touch with Honey, though.” He wipes his mouth with the back of a paw. “Enough that I knew when she was going to see Bogaty. And that neither she nor the kid came back. You know what guilt does to a rat?”

I drop my cigarillo into another cup and try to ignore the void in my chest. “Same thing it does to a mouse.”

“I spent every acorn I had looking for them.” The rat sighs, stubs his half-smoked cigar out. “It cost everything and took years, but eventually I found Cassia in an orphanage here in the Midden. I got her out, and she’s been with me ever since. I don’t know what happened up there, but to keep her safe, I gave up the singers, the clubs, the money. If they knew she was alive before we wanted to make a move, who knows what they’d have done?”

Zielen rubs her whiskers. “The Bogatys?”

“Damned Big Squeaks,” the rat says by way of confirmation.

I chew that over. “So you hatched a plan to, what, hold Campion hostage? Kill him? Extort him? How were you going to get the money?”

The bathroom door opens. Korichnnevy starts to stand, shaking his head.

Cassia Spievatchka is her mother’s daughter, right down to the shape of her ears. “Amaryllis,” Her voice is silk. “It was the old bag’s idea, after all.”