

The One-Legged Assassin

By

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My hand brushed the shoulder of his jerkin before he twisted away. Even with his limping gait, he was soon lost in the crush of the market crowd. I was that close.

By the Immaculate Calf's steaming feces! I was that close!

As I cursed and pushed and tried to peer through the sea of sweating faces and unwashed bodies, I felt something clench the sleeve of my robe. I looked down, expecting a beggar brat or inept pickpocket. Despite the sun baking the bazaar, I shivered – so close that I had to die.

A neck-seeker, its gleaming red-brown body almost as long as my hand, was crawling up my right arm. If it reached the great vein in my neck....

Suppressing a shudder, I reached down with my left hand, grasped the thing and tugged. Unclean magic tingled against my palm. Although I had a firm grip, it would not come free, moving as if my hand wasn't on it.

Continuing to tug at it, I shoved through the crowd. Gooseflesh pimpled the spot on my neck where I expected to feel the piercing bite at any moment. I slammed into a bent, old woman, spilling the platter of flarefruit on her head and shoving her against a snake charmer, who, flailing wildly for balance, sat down abruptly in his basket of vipers.

I reached the well and, vaulting its low wall, jumped in feet first. I didn't know how deep it was, but if the fall killed me at least I wouldn't die from the neck-seeker's bite. Bouncing off the stone-lined walls more times than I cared to count, I finally plunged into water, its coolness a shock after the desert sun above. I treaded water for a moment to catch my breath. A small reddish-brown body floated beside me, its unnatural shell of metal-blended chitin gleaming faintly in the dim light.

That part of the lore was right, at least: water killed neck-seekers. I had no desire to confirm the rest: that a neck-seeker's venom rushed to a victim's brain, killing it off, bit by bit, a roulette of agony and insanity. Sight would fail, then the ability to control bladder and sphincter, then speech, then memories – a hard death, a death that could take weeks.

I picked up the neck-seeker and stuck it into a pocket of my sodden robes.

Even if I hadn't been battered, chimneying up the well's slime-slick walls would be a challenge, so I yelled for someone to throw a rope down. It came with a bucket still attached, narrowly missing my head. A few curses floated down after it. Someone didn't much like people diving into the public well, I guessed as I half-climbed and was half-pulled from the shaft.

A sergeant of the City Troop was waiting, his squad arrayed behind him. I had seen this one around town. I didn't remember his name though he recognized me.

"Agent Morala!" He quickly put his hand behind his back, but not before I caught a

glimpse of the leather bindings intended to pinion the well-jumper's wrists. I smiled up at him and his name came to me. "I don't think those will be necessary, do you, Sergeant Dallek?"

"No, ma'am...I mean, no, Agent Morala...S-S-Senior Agent Morala!" Whistling up his squad, Dallek shoved his way through the crowd that had gathered, knocking the snake charmer back into the vipers. The man picked himself off the ground, cursing, but I had little sympathy for him. His snake-charming was entertainment without risk, and what sort of entertainment was that? The vipers, no doubt, had had their fangs pulled, or he wouldn't have gotten up the first time. He had the audacity to shake one crushed reptile in my face as I followed the sergeant. "You ruined my snakes!"

Sore, wet, and frustrated, I pulled the serpentine dagger from its sheath and waved it back in his face. "Mine has a bite left!" I snarled. The words made me think of the dead thing in the pocket of my robe, which made me think of the assassin who had eluded me again. My anger became a cold, heavy weight in my gut. Sheathing my blade, I pushed past him, deliberately angling my leg behind his ankles and thrusting my shoulder into him so that he made a third trip into his snake basket. He was still sitting in it, cursing, when I reached the horse that Dallek was holding for me. The squad was trying with little success to hide their guffaws.

By the time I swung into the saddle, the crowd had dispersed. There were wares to be sold, scams to be sprung, wine to be drunk, stories to be told – no doubt one of them would be an exaggerated account of the well episode. At least there wouldn't be any stories today about the One-Legged Assassin escaping from Morala the Imperial Agent. Again. I would tell that story to myself as we rode back to the palace. It wasn't a very entertaining tale.

My blue-and-white robes were steaming and the sun was hot on my head as we entered the palace grounds. My blue silk turban with its scale-mail lappet, distinctive of the Corps of Imperial Agents, was drying on the saddle horn.

"By the Bull's Blessed Balls! You're quite a sight, Morala!" The Emir's plump adviser, Xinko the Eunuch, was watching from the shade of an arched doorway. He looked downright girlish in his sequined caftan and crimson slippers.

"What would you know about balls?" I asked him as I slowly climbed down from the horse. Even though the ride had been short, every joint in my body was stiff.

Xinko had always treated me fairly and deserved better than a sour comment, I thought, as I stamped down the hall toward the barracks, wringing my turban as I went. He hastened to keep stride, the caftan's glittering weave threatening to split at each sashay of his broad hips.

"About as much as you do, I'd say," he answered. "At least I had 'em until I was six, and that's a half-dozen more years than you ever had any."

I stopped, mouth agape, and looked at Xinko. He was grinning, and there was nothing left for me to do but laugh. "I'm a mess," I told the eunuch.

"You're a mess," he agreed, chubby fingers straying to smooth his caftan. He turned back toward the main hall. "And the Emir wants to see you."

I didn't ask when, because when the Emir wanted somebody, there is no *when*, there was only *now*. I squelched after Xinko. "What about?" I asked in a low voice.

He could have ignored me, but I had served the Emir for a dozen years. Xinko had served him twice as long, so he whispered back, "About what do you think? The One-

Legged Assassin, of course.” He hustled ahead of me, signaling for the slaves to throw open the tall bronze doors.

There were the usual dozens of court functionaries, sycophants, guards, wives, and slaves gathered in the high-roofed hall, talking in small groups by the fountains, lounging idly on the benches, or running to and fro on a variety of missions secret and mundane. At least there weren’t any Screaming Priests present. They might be favorites of the Holy One, but their carryings-on always stretched my patience. It was a fine thing to respect religion, but being devout at the top of your lungs was wearying to others’ ears.

Amid the usual bustle, there was one unusual thing, and I felt my brows draw into a frown. Karanya. In blue and white with her mailed turban under her arm, she stood in a position of honor on the dais, no less, only a few feet away from the Emir’s divan. I knew where she should have been: making the rounds of the caravans, trudging through mounds of mule dung, breathing in camel flatulence, keeping her eyes peeled for smugglers. I had assigned her there.

Karanya – sleek, cold-eyed, five years younger than me. As ambitious and ruthless as any fire eagle’s hatchling. I had been her mentor when she joined the corps, close as sisters, close as lovers, and now bitter rivals. Her hair shimmered like a desert mirage in the hall’s lamplight. Even if protocol hadn’t demanded her to be bare-headed before the Emir, she would have found an excuse to remove her turban. Karanya was overly proud of being the only blonde in the corps.

We used to laugh at the sight of her golden locks mixed with my own dark hair. Did she love me then? Did she ever love me, or was I just another rung on her ladder? I shook those thoughts out of my head. I was still Senior-Agent-in-Charge – at least for now – answerable only to the commandant and the Emir. The One-Legged Assassin would be mine, I vowed. And when I threw his head down in front of the Emir, perhaps this grasping slut would weep tears as bitter as I had when she had moved out.

I made my obeisance to the Emir and remained kneeling, waiting for his permission to rise. It seemed much longer in coming than usual, and I felt his dark eyes and her gray-blue ones on my back the whole time.

“Well, Morala, what have you to say for yourself?” The Emir’s voice was as rich and cold as *sharbat*, a confection of ice, sugar, and limes that had recently become the rage at court. The thought of that sickly dessert, as well as something in his voice, set my teeth on edge.

“I had my hands on the One-Legged Assassin, My Lord,” I heard the pleading note in my voice and hated it. “I had been tracking him for a week, and caught up with him in the South Marketplace today... He slipped away and left me this.” I pulled the dead neck-seeker from my still-damp robe and tossed it in front of the divan.

In retrospect, it was a rash act. Those closest to the dais gasped and drew back, except for Karanya. Well-trained, I thought bitterly, as her long dagger flashed from its sheath and arced to a halt an inch from my throat.

The Emir’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t flinch nor cry out. “By the Bull! Where did that thing come from?”

Xinko squealed. “My Lord! I had no idea! She—”

“Quiet, Xinko,” the Emir snapped. “The unholy creature is dead.” He steeped his fingers, bringing the tips to rest on his bottom lip. “If the One-Legged Assassin is in league with the Magicians’ Guild – and where else could a neck-seeker come from? –

then that makes him even more formidable than we thought.”

“I can find him again,” I said, my voice rising despite my best efforts to control it. “I was so close. Let me go, before the trail grows any colder.”

“Colder than the water at the bottom of a well?” Karanya sneered. “You’ve had your chance, and then some.”

The unfairness of her comment re-ignited my frustration. It was under my leadership that the Corps of Agents had harried the wizards, had thinned the ranks of their banned guild until only a few remained scurrying from hole to hole like the vermin they were. “It’s not your place!” I shouted.

“If I wanted to hear bitches caterwauling, I would go to my harem!” the Emir yelled. Immediately, the hall fell silent. The only sound was the tinkling of the fountains, and even that seemed hushed.

He waved his hand impatiently and continued in a quieter tone as the conversations and activity resumed. “The Holy One is supposed to make an appearance in Beggars’ Plaza tomorrow at midday. There will be hundreds of people gathered. You know the Holy One won’t tolerate the City Troop or the Royal Guard or any overt show of weapons.” The Emir humphed. “Clashes with his message, he claims. I had to argue for days to get him to accept a half-dozen Imperial Agents as escort.” He turned to Karanya. “You will lead them.”

“But I am—” I sputtered.

“If you had done your job, it wouldn’t have come to this,” Karanya said.

I felt like continuing the argument, in truth, felt like pulling a handful of blonde hair from her scalp, but I heard the Emir growl again, and I took my leave. The distracted wave of the Emir’s dismissal was just another bruise on what was turning out to be a black-and-blue day.

I lingered outside the hall a long time, waiting to intercept Karanya as she headed back to the barracks. When she saw me, she scowled.

“Kari, listen,” I said, falling into step with her. No problem, that, I topped her by a good three inches. “I know we have had our differences of late, but I’d like to be part of the escort tomorrow.”

She laughed scornfully. “Not a chance.”

I grabbed her arm and forced her to stop. “Then at least think about what you’ll be up against, Kari. Hundreds of beggars, both the normal kind and the professional ones. Dozens of maimed war veterans. Rich, old dowagers in covered palanquins. That plaza is a warren of windows, doorways, alleys, street booths. There will be scores of opportunities for the One-Legged Assassin, and, don’t forget, he can wear a thousand different faces.” I knew I was talking too fast, my words stumbling over each other, desperate to be understood before she turned away.

Karanya’s eyes narrowed and her beautiful face set in hard, alien lines. “I know what I’m up against.” She shook herself free. “No thanks to you.”

She strode away, stiff-backed with arrogance. Karanya had a right to think she was good. Her talents and my teaching had made her formidable indeed, but I hadn’t spent a dozen years working my way to the top only to be tossed aside. Before this was over, I told myself, she would realize that there were worse duties than caravan inspection.

The rough fabric of the homespun robe itched, and the heat of the midday sun beating down didn't help matters, nor did the fact that my hair was braided and piled up under layers of dirty rags that swathed my head and passed for a turban. At least my disguise allowed me to scratch as much as I wanted, although the pig testicles in my hand had begun to stink in the hot sun.

Some butcher's boy had thought it a great joke. "Hoy! Would you like to hold the jewels?"

As I imagined a village idiot would have responded, I drooled and grinned and made some grunting noises of assent. He slapped the pig testicles in my hand. The crowd around me had got a great laugh out of it. I had been carrying them around for an hour and noticed that the crowd had thinned out a bit, so that was to the good. At least he hadn't tried to put *his* family jewels in my hand.

I was beginning to get weak-kneed from thirst but I was only a half-dozen paces from the street the Holy One would be using, and didn't want to lose my spot. Putting on an even more slack-jawed expression to complement the dirt and bits of hair I had glued to my face, I whistled to a group of street urchins lolling nearby. One of them came over. Acting thick-tongued and stupid – not much of a stretch after hours in the sun – I pantomimed and grunted that I'd like a drink. I held up two coins, but when he went to grab them both, I snatched the larger one back. "Wineskin," I slurred.

I figured greed would win out, and I was right. His return with the wine and my enthusiasm to grab the skin allowed me to drop the pig's balls without anybody noticing. I purposely spilled a third of the wineskin down the front of my robe, which drew more laughs and hoots from those standing nearby. All the better, I thought.

Acting as clumsily as I could, I squeezed a sloppy mouthful from the skin. As much as I wanted to gulp it, I let most of it dribble down my chin. The wine the brat had bought was cheap, red stuff, even more vinegary and bitter than I expected. Perhaps the boy had been ignorant, or maybe he was trying to increase his profit margin. No matter, the wine was wet and I was thirsty. Besides, I didn't want to reveal myself by getting into a noisy squabble with some urchin, so I grinned foolishly and handed him not one, but three more coins. He turned and waved the coins at his friends, and they all enjoyed another laugh at the idiot. I took a long, sloppy pull, again purposely causing most of it to run from the corners of my mouth and down my neck.

Acting the idiot saved my life.

My tongue went numb and fiery pinchers stabbed my throat. Red waves of pain lashed the back of my skull. Poison!

"Boy!" I grabbed him so hard that his eyes bugged in pain and fear. I don't know what frightened him more, my hand clenching his throat or the fact that the village idiot was speaking in sentences rather than drooling and grunting. "Where did you get that wineskin?"

"T-t-there!" He pointed. Not relinquishing my grip, but lessening it a bit, I turned and looked. I must have turned too quickly because the drug in the wine made my vision swim and I almost lost my balance. The awning he indicated, set up against the plaza wall, was deserted. "He was there!" the boy blubbed, tears tracking down his dirt-stained cheeks. "An old man with yellow teeth, a patch over his eye!"

"He's not there now," I snarled as my eyes watered. "Did he ever exist beyond your imagination?" My grip on his throat tightened again.

“He couldn’t have got far,” the boy gasped. “He had a wooden leg.”

Reeling, I released the urchin. Despite being half-throttled, he scurried across the plaza and disappeared around a corner. I tried to scan the crowd, but the poison was gripping my belly and I staggered to a wall. Leaning against it, I stuck my finger as far as I could down my throat. I was still retching when I heard the Screaming Priests in the distance.

“May I help you?” I looked up dizzily.

Bauda, a jewel merchant who favored bright red robes splashed with golden highlights, was bending over me. He was a kindly man, I recalled from past encounters, though even in my pain, I found myself surprised that he would stoop to help someone as lowly as a village idiot. He looked at me with pity, and kicked the wineskin away. “I never touch this stuff, man, and neither should you. Plain water or Mother Cow’s Blessed Milk is all you’ll ever need to slake your thirst.”

One of those, I thought. New converts were often the most enthusiastic. That explained his kindness, and his presence in Beggars’ Plaza. The idea of warm milk on a hot day made me want to gag, but it probably would help coat my stomach and maybe absorb some of the poison. Bauda looked on in no little surprise as I drained his flask of milk and half of his water skin. Some of it came right back up, but I felt a little steadier, as long as I didn’t move.

The dozen or so Screaming Priests – just a fraction of the Holy One’s Herd – had stopped near my spot and were dancing and screaming their praises, punctuating each leap with “Blessed Bull!” “Mother Cow!” and other such claptrap. I weaved toward them, my throat and gut still on fire, catching glimpses of the Holy One’s open litter held on the shoulders of eight patient slaves, and the six mounted Imperial Agents around it. I noticed the flash of golden hair peeping from under the edge of the front left rider’s mailed turban. Karanya’s face looked harsh and old in the bright sun, like a stranger’s. My eyes watered uncontrollably. The poison, I told myself, wiping furiously.

The Holy One was leaning over the side of the litter, talking to people, touching babies, grasping hands. I edged as close as I could, just as a Screaming Priest pranced by yelling praises in a voice already going hoarse. Our eyes met and, for an instant, it was no longer priest and village idiot. In that timeless moment, it was Karanya and Morala staring intently at one another, just like old times. And if Karanya was here, scrutinizing the crowd, then the mounted figure couldn’t be a blonde agent....

The Holy One was still leaning over, his back a broad target for the One-Legged Assassin, who was reaching across the horse’s neck toward him, turban and blonde wig slightly askew, sunlight flashing off the steel in his hand.

Whirling at my shout, Karanya reacted with a speed that surprised even me, leaping for his arm. I took a deep breath and threw myself under the horse’s front legs.

The horse reared up and then a hoof crashed down on my head and everything became a series of disconnected blurs: Imperial Agents forming a wedge, the Holy One waving and smiling as the slaves trotted briskly away, a horse careening riderless through the plaza with a boot and wooden leg still dangling from the stirrup, a splash of crimson spreading across the robes of.... I was still weeping bitterly for Karanya when the sights and sounds dimmed, then faded to gray.

Xinko’s round face beamed over me like a happy, though indescribably homely, full

moon. "Well, Morala, the Holy One is alive, thanks to you. You are to be guest of honor at a banquet tonight. In fact, within the hour." His lips made a wet, blubbery sound as he smacked them together. He shook me again. "Come on, sleepyhead! Get up! They have had teams of slave runners bringing ice from the mountains so that we can feast on *sharbat*. Not just made with limes, but with oranges and strawberries, too!"

Just imagining the icy sweet made me grit my teeth. I groaned and rolled over, my mind still dull from the drugged wine and the hoof blow, my stomach still griping over the potions of the Emir's physicians that had emptied me from both ends. "You can have my share, Xinko. I need my sleep."

The eunuch pulled me into a half-sitting position and started to strip off my robes. "All right, you old pervert," I said, slapping his hands away. "Vaina will help me. Come back in half an hour."

Vaina, a recent recruit, had a firm but very gentle touch. We dallied longer than the time I had allowed, but eventually I was clean, massaged, and scented with oil. The robes she picked were so brightly white that even her peach tones seemed dark against them. Vaina's hair was darker than Karanya's, I thought with a pang as she helped me into the robes, but her eyes were a pure blue. Her Agents' turban would set them off well. Those eyes were brimming with tears as she tied the mourning colors on my sleeve. It wasn't until I saw teardrops fall on the front of my robe that I realized I was crying too.

"Come, come!" the eunuch said, stamping his red-slippered foot with impatience as I came out of the barracks. We started down the corridor, when I heard a call behind me and Vaina came running. "Your dagger, Senior Agent Morala," she said breathlessly, holding out the sheathed weapon. I thanked her with a kiss on her fingertips.

"It's a banquet," Xinko fussed. "You won't need that."

"You are such an old woman, Xinko," I said, strapping the sheath to my belt.

"One of us has to be," he retorted as we resumed our walk. He was fairly dancing with impatience.

"The guest of honor should be allowed to arrive a little late, Xinko," I said, deliberately slowing my pace.

He sighed and rolled his eyes and fretted about our tardiness – and about his *sharbat* – all the way to the main hall.

"Have you ever thought that if the Blessed Bull wanted us to mix ice and sugar and fruit, then sugar cane and fruit trees would grow on mountaintops?" I said, avoiding the question I really wanted to ask and the answer I knew would follow. The words forced themselves out anyway. "Any word yet on the One-Legged Assassin?"

"None," he said soberly. "The dungeons are full tonight of one-legged beggars and war veterans. The Imperial Agents are examining them, but he's probably not among them."

"Probably not? Most assuredly not," I said, my stomach cramping again.

The hall, furnished now for the banquet, was crowded. Judging by the rainbow of pastel silks and the gleam of precious metals, it appeared that the whole first rank of wives was present, as well as the oldest of the princelings and the whole officer corps. The air was thick with perfume and greed, incense and ambition.

The city's wealthiest merchants had been invited to fill out the lower tables, and as we went in, they were filing in front of the dais to make their obeisance. The Emir seemed in a good mood and was allowing the guests to brush lips against his ringed hand. The

Holy One sat beside him, nodding and smiling benignly. At least there were only two Screaming Priests present, and their clamor thankfully was drowned out by the hubbub of the crowd.

Near the front of the line, I noticed the crimson and yellow robes of Bauda, the jewel merchant. The dozens of lamps hung about the hall were making the material flash as bright as the jewels he sold. I noticed just the faintest bit of a stagger as he approached the dais, and hoped his head start on drinking didn't make him do anything embarrassing. He was a kindly man, and didn't deserve the Emir's ire.

Then, I remembered the taste of warm milk under the midday sun and the look in Bauda's eye as he kicked away the wineskin. I yelled, but the noise was too great.

The aisles between the tables were clogged with people coming back from greeting the Emir and those still trying to pay their respects. I took the only shortcut I could see – across the table tops. Yells and curses and the sound of breaking glass followed in my wake as I reached the last table and launched myself through the air. I crashed into Bauda and knocked him sprawling face first onto the dais, practically onto the feet of the Holy One, who muttered some shockingly un-holy things as a carafe of ruby-colored wine spilled in his lap.

Rolling to my feet, dagger in hand, I spun Bauda around. One quick glance to his face was all it took, and I buried the dagger to its hilt in the One-Legged Assassin's heart. Or tried to – he was quick. Seizing my wrist, he managed to deflect the blade away from his heart, deep into his shoulder. A murmur of pain escaped his lips as his grip on my wrist tightened. My fingers were going numb by the time I managed to bring my other hand up and twist the dagger in his shoulder.

I heard his cry of agony, and realized a heartbeat later it was not from my blow. Red-brown gleamed an instant at his throat before a neck-seeker, trailing a ribbon of blood, leaped free and scurried toward the Emir.

I almost lost my grip on the hilt as the One-Legged Assassin fell twitching, his false leg coming free and clattering across the floor. Wrenching my dagger out of his shoulder, I pinned down the creature, which only seemed to make it angrier. It buzzed loudly and had almost worked its way off the tip of the blade by the time I flipped it into a finger bowl on the Emir's table. As it struck the water, the neck-seeker made a sound like a sizzling coal and fell silent.

It was then that I heard a moan, and turned just in time to see the Holy One swoon, his head bouncing off the table. Holy headache, I winced.

Noting with satisfaction that the Imperial Agents had reacted the soonest, arriving ahead of the Royal Guard to whisk away the Emir and the Holy One, I returned my attention to the One-Legged Assassin. He had voided his bodily wastes and was drooling and clawing his face as I cautiously probed his clothes and body with the tip of my dagger. It would have been a mercy just to slip the knife in deep again, but then I wondered briefly if kindly Bauda had merely been diverted or was dead. Most probably dead. I set mercy aside and continued probing.

My search turned up three razor-edged knives, half a dozen throwing darts with discolored tips safely sheathed in cork, a braided copper garrote, and four different vials, three holding powders and one with a noxious-looking green liquid. I found no more neck-seekers, and left the rest of the examination to the officers who were now crowding the dais. The One-Legged Assassin was puking blood and trying to sing a child's lullaby

when I turned away.

Tables had been overturned as the panicked guests fled; cushions were strewn everywhere. Rounds of bread soaked up sauces spilled from the gold and silver tureens and the floors were sticky with spilt wine and pulped fruit. I kicked aside a roast suckling pig and almost sprained my ankle tripping over a flock of honey-broiled fowl. Amid all the mess, I saw, nestled in a broken bowl, one perfect pear. Its smooth skin gleamed with rosy highlights; its fullness was a promise of the delectable juices within.

As I picked it up, I noticed Xinko's fat face peering between the curtains. He looked positively stricken and I followed his gaze. Three huge bowls had been upset and the contents – shaved ice, sugar, and fruit – were melting on the floor in a great puddle of green, orange, and red.

I was still laughing as I made my way back to the barracks, cradling the perfect pear in my hand, the vision of a long, hot, shared bath hastening my footsteps.