

Confession of a Misadventurer

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Assassination is not a word one normally associated with Bretonnia. Tilia, certainly, even the Empire, but to suggest that the noble lords of Bretonnia would stoop to such means is tantamount to heresy. No, in this country we prefer to say that such-and-such a noble 'met with misadventure'. Thus, I am not, and never have been, an assassin, just a facilitator of such misadventures or, as I prefer to call myself, a misadventurer.

So, who is it that requires services such as those I offer? One might think, if one considered it at all, that it would be merchants and the like, particularly those involved in the Tilean trade. And one would not be totally wrong; rivalries between merchants certainly bring in a large proportion of my trade. But a similarly large proportion comes from those in the upper echelon of Bretonnian society – the nobles who talk so piously of honour and duty. Perchance they do protest too much.

It is not, of course, affairs of honour that bring in my commissions. If a noble impugned another's honour, then that would be settled in single combat – almost certainly between their champions as they would be loath to risk their own skins. No, my commissions come from those occasions when it is expedient that someone be out of the way, either permanently or temporarily, but no suitable excuse can be found for combat. My way is both subtler and more reliable.

Of course, there are those nobles who disdain the use of my services. The Grail Knights are truly bound by their code of honour, although fortunately for those in my trade they normally refuse to take up high office. Many other nobles also choose what they term the path of honour and decline to make use of my services. However, a large fraction will use misadventurers when the need arises and, in my experience, the higher the office, the more likely the need is to arise.

I have worked for dukes who needed a recalcitrant vassal to suffer misadventure, before they grew to challenge their power. I recall one particular case in a duchy on the west coast where one of the barons refused to pass on the full river tolls to the duke, as was his duty as a vassal. Nothing could be proved, of course, but it was clear that it was happening. Clear enough for the duke in question to make arrangements with a certain merchant in Bordeleaux in any case.

Anyway, I dressed myself as a servant and accompanied the Duke when he paid a visit to the Baron. Easy as anything, I got talking to his servants and found where the

grain store was. It didn't take much to slip in there one night; it wasn't guarded as they reckoned nobody inside the castle could possibly want to steal grain. Then I set to work, spreading certain substances, which I shall not name here, around the grain store. Then out again and back to my room, and away with the Duke a couple of days later.

Nothing happened for a couple of weeks, and then everyone in the castle started to sicken. Within a few days, they were all dead – apparently from food poisoning, which was technically true I suppose, but not in the way it is normally meant. With the whole family gone, the Duke was free to put someone of his own choosing into the barony – and this time he made sure it was taken by someone who knew his duty to hand over the river tolls.

Another case involved a border dispute between neighbouring barons in different duchies. I know what you're thinking, if you've not got personal experience of this, the borders of the Bretonnian duchies all appear to be either well defined geographical features or nice straight lines. If so, let me tell you something – there's no such thing as nice straight borders except in the imaginations of court scribes. In the real world, borders follow field boundaries, streams, ridges, even disused tracks, but they are never straight lines. I suppose they might look straight if viewed on a small enough scale, but on the scale where disputes occur, they're all over the place.

In this particular dispute, there was debate about whether a certain area that one baron had cleared for grazing had rightfully belonged to the other, who claimed his family had hunted it since time immemorial. One baron therefore claimed damages for his land being wrongfully cleared, the other for illegal hunting. Normally a case such as this would go before the duke to be resolved, but as the disputed border was also a ducal boundary, this could not be done. The correct course here would be for both dukes to petition the King to arbitrate which duchy the disputed field fell into, which would solve the border dispute but not the damages. The King would have to be petitioned again for these, by which time, what with the court scribes pouring over old histories and contradictory records, both barons would probably be in their dotage.

A much simpler recourse was, obviously, to fight it out on the field of honour. This was agreed, with the winner taking the field and the loser paying the damages. So where do I come into this? Well, one of the barons, the one who had cleared the woods, was well renowned as a jousting knight, strong of arm and clear of eye. The other, while still competent, was past his best and was, let's say, not favourite in this contest. Many said that this was why the first had dared clear the woods in the first instance. I was therefore contacted, not to kill the favourite but to 'equalise' things out sufficiently for justice to take its course. This meant, of course, sufficiently for the weaker to win.

This sort of assignment is a lot trickier than facilitating a fatal misadventure.

Here, I had to make sure the stronger baron did not suddenly die, at least not of anything other than injuries sustained in the joust, but I had also to be sure that he would be sufficiently below par to be sure of losing.

As it was, I carried it off to perfection. A third baron hosted the joust and hired many servants to help serve the barons and the dukes and all those who came to witness. I was one of those servants and managed to contrive that I was one of those serving drinks on the night before the contest. I had spent many hours preparing the correct dosages and calibrating them to the baron's weight and constitution, but it was the work of seconds to slip the powder into his drinking goblet.

The next morning, he felt nothing. It was only when he took to the tilts that he found his reactions slower and his balance less steady than normal. He was, of course, unhorsed in the first pass – a surprise to all but me, which meant I got a hefty bonus from the wagers I had made with the other servants. He was gracious in defeat, allowing that the Lady had clouded his vision and unsteadied his hand, and making reparations for the clearance of the woods.

There's an amusing epilogue to this tale as it happens. A few years after these events, the loser married his daughter and heir-apparent to his neighbour's son. Eventually the two baronies will be united, when both the old barons die, so the dispute won't have mattered at all.

One of my most interesting contracts, and again one that involved no actual killing, concerned the eldest son of a duke. It seemed that this son had a hankering after boats, even though (or possibly because) he came from one of the inland duchies. He had therefore resolved to become a captain in the Bretonnian navy. Obviously with his connections, he could easily obtain a position and, with a decent second-in-command, he couldn't do much harm. The navy are used to younger sons of junior nobility being made captains, after all, and know how to deal with the situation.

This was no younger son of a junior noble, however, but the eldest son of a duke. The dishonour on the family name if he should get his way was not to be tolerated; yet he still persisted. It was eventually agreed that he should take a short cruise as acting captain, just up and down the coast a bit, and see how he liked it. This is where I came in. I was commissioned to ensure that the son spent the whole voyage 'sea-sick' in his cabin, so that he would decide to give it up as a bad job and come home. With the Duke behind me, it was simple to get myself installed as the captain's steward and to season his meals suitably.

Well, I did my part. He hardly saw deck on that voyage, even in the flattest calm. However, his second-in-command kept telling him that many folk are like that the first time out and that he would get used

to it. I suspect he saw the advantage of having a captain who never ventured out of his cabin, personally. Whatever the reason, the son decided that he did like life at sea more than in a castle – which makes one wonder if it was all really done to spite his father – and took the job full time. The Duke disowned him, of course, and tried to avoid paying my fee – until it was gently pointed out to him that he was not immune to misadventures himself, while he was suffering from severe stomach cramps one night. I received my payment, with interest, the next morning.

Anyhow, these are some of the more unusual situations I have had to deal with. Along with these have come many more mundane outings: cheating merchants, those with too much knowledge, pregnant mistresses, and the like. I’ve always found the hypocrisy of the upper classes is what makes them interesting and sets them apart from the common folk, however. They can lecture us about honour, duty and chivalry one day, and the next I will be popping into their privy cabinet for a quick chat concerning one or two problems they think I could help solve.