

Mistress of the Art of Death

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Extract

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Prologue

Here they come. From down the road we can hear harness jingling and see dust rising into the warm spring sky. Pilgrims returning after Easter in Canterbury. Tokens of the mitred, martyred St Thomas are pinned to cloaks and hats – the Canterbury monks must be raking it in.

The pilgrims offer a pleasant interruption in the traffic of carts, whose drivers and oxen are surly with fatigue from ploughing and sowing. These people are well-fed, noisy, exultant with the grace their journey has gained them.

But one of them, as exuberant as the rest, is a murderer of children. God's grace will not extend to a child-killer.

The woman at the front of the procession – big woman, big roan mare – has a silver token pinned to her wimple. We know her. She's prioress of St Radegund's nunnery in Cambridge. She's talking. Loudly. Her accompanying nun, on a docile palfrey, is silent and has only been able to afford Thomas Becket in pewter.

The tall knight riding between them on a well-controlled charger – he wears a tabard over his mail with a cross showing that he's been on crusade, and, like the prioress, he's laid out on silver – makes *sotto voce* commentaries on the prioress's pronouncements. The

prioress doesn't hear them, but they cause the young nun to smile. Nervously.

Behind this group is a flat cart drawn by mules. The cart carries a single object: rectangular, somewhat small for the space it occupies – the knight and his squire seem to be guarding it. It's covered by a cloth with armorial bearings. The jiggling of the cart is dislodging the cloth, revealing a corner of carved gold – the object is either a large reliquary or a small coffin. The squire leans from his horse and pulls the cloth straight so that it is hidden again.

And here's a king's officer. Jovial enough, large, overweight for his age, dressed like a civilian, but you can tell. For one thing, his servant is wearing the royal tabard embroidered with the Angevin leopards and, for another, poking out of his overloaded saddlebag is an abacus and the sharp end of a pair of money scales.

Save for his servant, he rides alone. Nobody likes a tax-collector.

Now then, here's a prior. We know him, too, from the violet rochet he wears, as do all canons of St Augustine.

Important. Prior Geoffrey of St Augustine's, Barnwell, the monastery that looks across the great bend of the River Cam at St Radegund's and dwarfs it. It is understood that he and the prioress don't get on. He has three monks in attendance, also a knight – another crusader, to judge from his tabard – and squire.

Oh, he's ill. He should be at the procession's front, but it seems his guts – which are considerable – are giving him gyp. He's groaning and ignoring a tonsured cleric who's trying to engage his attention. Poor man, there's no help for him on this stretch, not even an inn, until he reaches his own infirmary in the priory grounds.

A beef-faced merchant and his wife, both showing concern for the prior and giving advice to his monks. A minstrel, singing to a lute. Behind him, there's a huntsman, with spears and dogs, hounds coloured like the English weather.

Here come the pack mules and the other servants. Usual riff-raff.

Ah, now. At the extreme end of the procession. More riff-raffish than the rest. A covered cart with coloured cabalistic signs on its canvas. Two men on the driving bench, one big, one small, both dark-skinned, the larger with a Moor's headdress wound round his head and cheeks. Quack-medicine pedlars probably.

And, sitting on the tailboard, beskirted legs dangling like a peasant's, a woman. She's looking about her with a furious interest. Her eyes regard a tree, a patch of grass, with interrogation: What's your name? What are you good for? If not, why not? Like a magister in court. Or an idiot.

On the wide verge between us and all these people (even on the Great North Road, even in this year of 1171, no tree shall grow less than a bowshot's distance from the road in case it give shelter to robbers) stands a small wayside shrine, the usual home-carpentered shelter for the Virgin.

Some of the riders prepare to pass by with a bow and a Hail Mary, but the prioress makes a show of calling for a groom to help her dismount. She lumbers over the grass to kneel and pray. Loudly.

One by one and somewhat reluctantly, all the others join her. Prior Geoffrey rolls his eyes and groans as he's assisted off his horse.

Even the three from the cart have dismounted and are on their knees, though, unseen at the back, the darker of the men seems to be directing his prayers towards the east. God help us all, Saracens and others of the ungodly are allowed to roam the highways of Henry II without sanction.

Lips mutter to the saint, hands weave an invisible cross. God is surely weeping, yet He allows the hands that have rent innocent flesh to remain unstained.

Mounted again, the party moves on, takes the turning to

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Cambridge, its diminishing chatter leaving us to the rumble of the harvest carts and the twitter of birdsong.

But we have a skein in our hands now, a thread that will lead us to that killer of children. To unravel it, though, we must first follow it backwards in time by twelve months . . .

Chapter One

England, 1170

A screaming year. A king screamed to be rid of his archbishop. Monks of Canterbury screamed as knights spilled the brains of said archbishop on to the stones of his cathedral.

The Pope screamed for said king's penance. The English Church screamed in triumph – now it had said king where it wanted him.

And, far away in Cambridgeshire, a child screamed. A tiny, tinny sound, this one, but it would reach its place among the others.

At first the scream had hope in it. It's a come-and-get-me-I'm-frightened signal. Until now, adults had kept the child from danger, hoisted him away from beehives and bubbling pots and the blacksmith's fire. They *must* be at hand; they always have been.

At the sound, deer grazing on the moonlit grass lifted their heads and stared – but it was not one of their own young in fear; they went on grazing. A fox paused in its trot, one paw raised, to listen and judge the threat to itself.

The throat that issued the scream was too small and the place too deeply isolated to reach human help. The scream changed; it became unbelieving, so high on the scale of astonishment that it achieved the pitch of a huntsman's whistle.

The deer ran, scattering among the trees, their white scuts like dominoes tumbling into the darkness.

The scream was pleading now, perhaps to the torturer, perhaps to God – Please don't, Please don't – before crumbling into a monotone of agony and hopelessness.

The air was grateful when eventually the sound fell silent and the usual night noises took it over again: a breeze rustling through bushes, the grunt of a badger, the hundred screams of small mammals and birds as they died in the mouths of natural predators.

At Dover, an old man was being hurried through the castle at a rate uncongenial to his rheumatism. It was a huge castle, very cold and echoing with furious noises. Despite the pace he had to go at, the old man remained chilled – partly because he was frightened. The court sergeant was taking him to a man who frightened everybody.

They went along stone corridors, sometimes past open doors issuing light and warmth, chatter and the notes of a viol, sometimes past others closed on what the old man imagined to be ungodly scenes.

Their progress sent castle servants cowering or flung them out of the way, so that the two of them left in their wake a trail of dropped trays, spattered piss-pots and bitten-off exclamations of hurt.

One final, circular staircase and they were in a long gallery of which the near end was taken up by desks lining the walls and a massive table with a top of green baize partitioned into squares upon which stood varying piles of counters. Thirty or so clerks filled the room with the scratch of quill on parchment. Coloured balls flicked and clicked along the wires of their abacuses so that it was like entering a field of industrious crickets.

In the whole room, the only human being at rest was a man sitting on one of the window-sills.

'Aaron of Lincoln, my lord,' the sergeant announced.

Aaron of Lincoln went down on one painful knee and touched his forehead with the fingers of his right hand, then extended the palm in obeisance to the man on the window-sill.

'Do you know what that is?'

Aaron glanced awkwardly behind him at the vast table and did not answer; he knew what it was but Henry II's question had been rhetorical.

'It ain't for playing billiards, I'll tell you that,' the king said. 'It's my exchequer. Those squares represent my English counties, and the counters on them show how much income from each is due to the Royal Treasury. Get up.'

He seized the old man and took him to the table, pointing at one of the squares. 'That's Cambridgeshire.' He let Aaron go. 'Using your considerable financial acumen, Aaron, how many counters do you reckon are upon it?'

'Not enough, my lord?'

'Indeed,' Henry said. 'A profitable county, Cambridgeshire – usually. Somewhat flat, but it produces a considerable amount of grain and cattle and fish and pays the Treasury well – usually. Its sizeable Jewish population also pays the Treasury well – usually. Would you say the number of counters upon it at the moment do not provide a true representation of its wealth?'

Again, the old man did not reply.

'And why is that?' Henry asked.

Aaron said, wearily: 'I imagine it's because of the children, my lord. The death of children is always to be lamented . . .'

'Indeed it is.' Henry hoisted himself up on the edge of the table, letting his legs dangle. 'And when it becomes a matter of economics, it's disastrous. The peasants of Cambridge are in revolt, and the Jews are . . . where are they?'

‘Sheltering in its castle, my lord.’

‘What’s left of it,’ Henry agreed. ‘They are indeed. *My* castle. Eating *my* food on *my* charity and shitting it out immediately because they’re too scared to leave. All of which means they are not earning me any money, Aaron.’

‘No, my lord.’

‘And the revolting peasants burned down its east tower, which contains all records of debts owed to the Jews and therefore to *me* – to say nothing of the tax accounts – because they believe the Jews are torturing and killing their children.’

For the first time, a whistle of hope sounded among the execution drums in the old man’s head. ‘But you do not, my lord?’

‘Do not what?’

‘You do not believe the Jews are killing these children?’

‘I don’t know, Aaron,’ the king said pleasantly. Without taking his eyes off the old man, he raised his hand. A clerk ran forward to put a piece of parchment in it. ‘This is an account by a certain Roger of Acton saying that such is your regular practice. According to the good Roger, Jews usually torture at least one Christian child to death at Easter by putting it in a hinged barrel inwardly pierced by nails. They always have, they always will.’

He consulted the parchment. ‘“They do place the child into the barrel then close the barrel so that the pins do enter his flesh. These fiends do then catch the blood as it seeps into their vessels to mix with their ritual pastries.”’

Henry II looked up: ‘Not pleasant, Aaron.’ He returned to the parchment. ‘Oh, and you laugh a lot while you’re doing it.’

‘You know it is not true, my lord.’

For all the notice the king took, the old man’s interjection might have been another click on an abacus.

‘But this Easter, Aaron, *this* Easter, you have started crucifying the

children. Certainly, our good Roger of Acton claims that the infant who has been found was crucified – what was the child's name?'

'Peter of Trumpington, my lord,' supplied the attendant clerk.

'That Peter of Trumpington was crucified and therefore the same fate may well overcome the other two children who are missing. Crucifixion, Aaron.' The king spoke the mighty and terrible word softly, but it travelled along the cold gallery, accreting power as it went. 'There's already agitation to make little Peter a saint, as if we didn't have enough of them already. Two children missing and one bloodless, mangled little body found in my fenland so far, Aaron. That's a lot of pastries.'

Henry got down from the table and walked up the gallery, the old man following, leaving the noise of the crickets behind. The king dragged a stool from under a window and kicked another in Aaron's direction. 'Sit down.'

It was quieter at this end; the damp, bitter air coming through the unglazed windows made the old man shake. Of the two, Aaron was the more richly clothed. Henry II dressed like a huntsman with careless habits; his queen's courtiers oiled their hair with unguents and were scented with attars, but Henry smelled of horses and sweat. His hands were leathery, his red hair was cropped close to a head as round as a cannon-ball. Yet nobody, Aaron thought, ever mistook him for other than what he was – the ruler of an empire stretching from the borders of Scotland to the Pyrenees.

Aaron almost loved him, could have loved him totally, if the man had not been so horrifyingly unpredictable. When this king was in a temper, he bit carpets and people died.

'God hates you Jews, Aaron,' Henry said. 'You killed His son.'

Aaron closed his eyes, waiting.

'And God hates me.'

Aaron opened his eyes.

The king's voice rose in a wail that filled the gallery like a despairing trumpet. 'Sweet God, forgive this unhappy and remorseful king. Thou knowest how Thomas Becket did oppose me in all things so that in my rage I called for his death. *Peccavi, peccavi*, for certain knights did mistake my anger and ride to kill him, thinking to please me, for which abomination You in Your righteousness have turned Your face from me. I am a worm, *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa*. I crawl beneath Your anger while Archbishop Thomas is received into Your glory and sitteth on the right hand of Your gracious son, Jesus Christ.'

Faces turned. Quills were poised in mid-account, abacuses stilled.

Henry stopped beating his breast. He said conversationally: 'And if I am not mistaken, the Lord will find him as big a pain in the arse as I did.' He leaned over, put a finger gently beneath Aaron of Lincoln's lower jaw and raised it. 'The moment that those bastards chopped Becket down, I became vulnerable. The Church seeks revenge: it wants my liver, hot and smoking, it wants recompense and must have it; and one of the things it wants, has always wanted, is the expulsion of you Jews from Christendom.'

The clerks had returned to their work.

The king waved the document in his hand under the Jew's nose. 'This is a petition, Aaron, demanding that all Jews be sent away from my realm. At this moment, a facsimile also penned by Master Acton, may the hounds of Hell chew his bollocks, is on its way to the Pope. The murdered child in Cambridge and those missing are to be the pretext for demanding your people's expulsion and, with Becket dead, I shall be unable to refuse, because, if I do, His Holiness will be persuaded to excommunicate me and put my whole kingdom under interdict. Does your mind encompass interdict? It is to be cast into darkness; it is babies refused baptism, no ordained marriage, the dead to remain unburied without the blessing of the Church. And

any upstart with shit on his trousers may challenge my right to rule.’

Henry got up and paced, pausing to straighten the corner of an arras that the wind had disarranged. Over his shoulder, he said: ‘Am I not a good king, Aaron?’

‘You are, my lord.’ The right answer. Also the truth.

‘Am I not good to my Jews, Aaron?’

‘You are, my lord. Indeed you are.’ Again, the truth. Henry taxed his Jews like a farmer milked his cows, yet no other monarch in the world was fairer to them, nor kept such order in his tight little kingdom that Jews were safer in it than in almost any other country of the known world. From France, Spain, from the crusade countries, from Russia, they came to enjoy the privileges and security to be found in this Plantagenet’s England.

Where could we go? Aaron thought. Lord, Lord, send us not back into the wilderness. If we can no longer have our Promised Land, let us live at least under this Pharaoh who keeps us safe.

Henry nodded. ‘Usury is a sin, Aaron. The Church disapproves of it, does not allow Christians to sully their souls with it. Leaves it to you Jews, who don’t have souls. It does not stop the Church borrowing from you, of course. *How* many of its cathedrals have been built on your personal loans?’

‘Lincoln, my lord.’ Aaron began counting on his shaking, arthritic fingers. ‘Peterborough, St Albans, then there have been no fewer than nine Cistercian abbeys, then there’s . . .’

‘Yes, yes. The real point is that one-seventh of my annual revenue comes from taxing you Jews. And the Church wants me to get rid of you.’ The king was on his feet and, once again, harsh Angevin syllables blasted the gallery. ‘Do I not maintain peace in this kingdom such as it has never known? God’s balls, *how do they think I do it?*’

Nervous clerks dropped their quills to nod. Yes, my lord. You do, my lord.

‘You do, my lord,’ Aaron said.

‘Not by prayer and fasting, I tell you that.’ Henry had calmed himself again. ‘I need money to equip my army, pay my judges, put down rebellion abroad and keep my wife in her hellish expensive habits. Peace is money, Aaron, and money is peace.’ He grabbed the old man by the front of his cloak and dragged him close: ‘Who is killing those *children*?’

‘Not us, my lord. My lord, we don’t *know*.’

For one intimate moment, appalling blue eyes with stubby, almost invisible eyelashes peered into Aaron’s soul.

‘We don’t, do we?’ the king said. The old man was released, steadied, his cloak patted back into shape, though the king’s face was still close, his voice a tender whisper: ‘But I think we’d better find out, eh? Quickly.’

As the sergeant accompanied Aaron of Lincoln towards the staircase, Henry II’s voice called: ‘I’d miss you Jews, Aaron.’

The old man turned round. The king was smiling, or, at least, his spaced, strong little teeth were bared in something like a smile. ‘But not near as much as you Jews would miss me,’ he said.

In Southern Italy, several weeks later, Gordinus the African blinked kindly at his visitor and wagged a finger. He knew the name; it had been announced with pomp: ‘From Palermo, representing our most gracious king, his lordship Mordecai fil Berachyah.’ He even knew the face, but Gordinus only really remembered people by their diseases.

‘Piles,’ he said triumphantly, at last, ‘you had piles. How are they?’

Mordecai fil Berachyah was not easily disconcerted; as personal secretary to the King of Sicily and keeper of the royal secrets, he could not afford to be. He was offended, of course – a man’s piles

should not be bandied about in public – but his big face remained impassive, his voice cool. ‘I came to see whether Simon of Naples got off all right.’

‘Got off what?’ Gordinus asked, interestedly.

Genius, thought Mordecai, was always difficult to deal with and when, as here, it was beginning to decay, it was near impossible. He decided to use the weight of the royal ‘we’. ‘Got off to England, Gordinus. Simon Menahem of Naples. We were sending Simon of Naples to England to deal with some trouble the Jews are having there.’

Gordinus’s secretary came to their aid, walking to a wall covered with cubby-holes from which rolls of parchment stuck out like pipe-ends. He spoke encouragingly, as to a child. ‘You remember, my lord, we had a royal letter . . . oh, gods, he’s moved it.’

This was going to take time. Lord Mordecai lumbered across the mosaic floor depicting fishing cupids; it was Roman, at least a thousand years old. One of Hadrian’s villas, this had been.

They did themselves well, these doctors. Mordecai ignored the fact that his own palazzo in Palermo was floored in marble and gold.

He sat himself down on the stone bench that ran around an open balustrade giving on to the view of the town below and, beyond it, the turquoise Tyrrhenian Sea.

Gordinus, ever alert as a doctor if as nothing else, said: ‘His lordship will require a cushion, Gaius.’

A cushion was fetched. So were dates. And wine, Gaius asking, nervously: ‘This is acceptable, my lord?’ The king’s entourage, like the kingdom of Sicily and Southern Italy itself, consisted of so many faiths and races – Arab, Lombard, Greek, Norman and, as in Mordecai’s case, Jew – that an offer of refreshment could be an offence against some religious dietary law or another.

His lordship nodded; he felt better. The cushion was a comfort to

his backside, the breeze from the sea cooled him, the wine was good. He shouldn't be offended by an old man's directness; in fact, when his business was over, he would indeed bring up the subject of his piles; Gordinus had cured them last time. This was, after all, the town of healing and, if anyone could be described as the doyen of its great medical school, it was Gordinus the African.

He watched the old man forget that he had a guest and return to the manuscript he'd been reading, the drooping brown skin of his arm stretching as the hand dipped a quill in ink to make an alteration. What was he? Tunisian? Moor?

On arrival at the villa, Mordecai had asked the major-domo if he should remove his shoes before entering: 'I have forgotten what your master's religion is.'

'So has he, my lord.'

Only in Salerno, Mordecai thought now, do men forget their manners and their god in the greater worship of their vocation.

He wasn't sure he approved: very wonderful, no doubt, but eternal laws were broken, dead bodies dissected, women relieved of threatening foetuses, females allowed to practise, the flesh invaded by surgery.

They came in their hundreds, people who'd heard the name of Salerno and journeyed to it, sometimes on their own account, sometimes carrying their sick, blundering across deserts, steppes, marsh and mountains, to be healed.

Looking down on a maze of roofs, spires and cupolas and sipping his wine, Mordecai marvelled, not for the first time, that this town of all towns and not Rome, not Paris, not Constantinople, not Jerusalem, had developed a school of medicine which made it the world's doctor.

Just then, the clang of the monastery bells sounding for nones clashed with the call to prayer from the muezzin of mosques and fought with the voices of synagogue cantors, the cacophony rising up

the hill to assault the ears of the man on the balcony in an untidy blast of major and minor keys.

That was it, of course. The mix. The hard, greedy Norman adventurers who'd made a kingdom out of Sicily and Southern Italy had been pragmatists, but far-seeing pragmatists. If a man suited their purpose, they didn't care which god he worshipped. If they were to establish peace – and therefore prosperity – there must be integration of the several peoples they'd conquered. There would be no second-class Sicilians. Arab, Greek, Latin and French as the official languages. Advancement for any man of any faith, as long as he was able.

Nor should I complain, he thought. After all, he, a Jew, worked with Greek Orthodox Christians along with popish Catholics for a Norman king. The galley he'd disembarked from was part of the Sicilian royal navy in the charge of an Arab admiral.

In the streets below, the jellaba brushed against knightly mail, the kaftan against monkish habit, their owners not only *not* spitting at each other but exchanging greetings and news – and, above all, ideas.

'Here it is, my lord,' Gaius said.

Gordinus took the letter. 'Ah yes, of course. Now I remember . . . "Simon Menahem of Naples to set sail on a special mission . . ." nymm, nymmm, ". . . the Jews of England being in a predicament of some danger . . . Native children are put to torture and death . . ." Oh dear, ". . . and blame falling on the Jews . . ." Oh dear, dear. "You are commanded to discover and send with the aforementioned Simon a person versed in the causes of death, who speaks both English and Hebrew yet gossips in neither."'

He smiled up at his secretary: 'And I did, didn't I?'

Gaius shifted. 'There was some question at the time, my lord . . .'

'Of course, I did, I remember perfectly. And not just an expert in the morbid processes but a speaker of Latin, French, Greek, as well

as the languages specified. A fine student. I told Simon so, because he seemed a little concerned. You couldn't have anyone better, I told him.'

'Excellent.' Mordecai rose. 'Excellent.'

'Yes.' Gordinus was still triumphant. 'I think we met the king's specification exactly, didn't we, Gaius?'

'Up to a point, my lord.'

There was something in the servant's manner – Mordecai was trained to notice such things. And why, now he came to think of it, had Simon of Naples been concerned at the choice of the man who was to accompany him?

'How is the king, by the way?' Gordinus asked. 'That little trouble clear up?'

Ignoring the king's little trouble, Mordecai spoke directly to Gaius. 'Who did he send?'

Gaius glanced towards his master, who'd resumed reading, and lowered his voice: 'The choice of person in this case was unusual, and I did wonder . . .'

'Listen, man, this mission is extremely delicate. He didn't choose an Oriental, did he? Yellow? Stick out like a lemon in England.'

'No, I didn't.' Gordinus's mind had rejoined them.

'Well, who did you send?'

Gordinus told him.

Incredulity made Mordecai ask: 'You sent . . . whom?'

Gordinus told him again.

Mordecai's was another scream to rend that year of screams. '*You stupid, stupid old fool.*'