



ELMWOOD

LORD EROL ELMWOOD had never ridden in a rented carriage before, and he wasn't enjoying it. In simpler times, he would have chosen horseback over any manner of wheeled conveyance at every opportunity where travel was required, but the days of that were, he thought with a shudder, over for good. If one was obliged to ride in a carriage, one preferred one's own post chaise, with its applewood-scented lanterns, its black velvet curtains, and its terrifying team of grays who plowed through villages like the Reaper's own steeds on a mission. Now he couldn't even bear the sight of his grays, so it was perhaps just as well that they had been impounded, along with the post chaise and everything else he'd ever owned.

Most of all, Elmwood missed the post chaise's padded seats. The benches in the rented carriage were rough fabric, stuffed with something that was likely sawdust but that had the give of iron, especially when the driver went over a pothole, flinging Elmwood from one end to the other. His bad hip had hurt him incessantly

for months, but that pain was now an almost pleasant memory when compared to his current agony. It felt rather like someone had replaced his bones with lightning eels.

Frankly, he would have preferred not to have escaped at all, but Winthrop, who was an excellent friend and an even better lawyer, had gone to so much trouble to spring him out of prison and spirit him away that it had seemed gauche to protest and explain that Elmwood frankly didn't care much if he was banished, hanged, or shot out of a cannon into the moon. Now he was beginning to think any of those things would have been preferable to this interminable carriage ride to the Far Reach of the King's fucking Gaze, which was as far away from Neck and civilization as it was possible to get while remaining in Eldmere.

At least he wouldn't be obliged to fight anymore. The war with Relance had been going on for the better part of five hundred years as the two countries fed countless lives into a dispute over which of them controlled what part of an absurdly small strip of land. One army would advance and the other would fall back, and then the whole process would reverse. Every twenty years or so, one country would succeed in pushing over into the proper territory of the other, and the disputed border zone would widen. The war was sold to recruits on both sides as a matter of patriotic pride and honor, but the truth, as far as Elmwood could see once he foolishly fed himself to the monster of it, was that countless men had died for the sake of passing a few squalid towns and some miserable, ruined farmland back and forth.

So if he was to be in exile, at least it was someplace where it was highly unlikely that anyone would expect him to stick a saber through some poor Relancian whose only crime was being as foolish as Elmwood. He should thank Winthrop for that.

His thoughts kept straying to the moment when Winthrop had bundled him into the carriage under cover of night and then lin-

gered, half-inside himself, peering at Elmwood in the light of a small lantern with a concerned frown that Elmwood was all too familiar with.

“Are you coming?” Elmwood had said.

“No. I’ll follow after you in a day or two.”

“I hope you haven’t done anything foolish to get me out of there. If this puts your career in danger . . .”

Winthrop had grinned, and the lantern danced shadows across his dark skin.

“This, my friend, is the beginning of a scheme that will *make* my career. Now, get some sleep, and do try not to wallow.”

Thus, he had forced Elmwood to flee to Merewyth—his tiniest, most backwater estate.

Elmwood had only ever been to Merewyth a single time, when he was seven, ostensibly to hunt with his father. It had the dubious distinction of being the place where he had discovered his Charm, quite by accident.

It was on the third day of the hunt. His father took it into his head to spend the day hunting woodcocks, which seemed like a pointless endeavor to Elmwood, as he didn’t enjoy crunching up tiny bones between his teeth. That evening, when Elmwood came down to the kitchen in search of a treat, he found twenty little woodcocks laid out on a board, waiting to be prepared for supper. Whatever wounds had killed them were covered by the fluff of their feathers, and it looked for all the world like they were sleeping.

Without any intention, he reached out and touched each of them in turn, running his fingers across their soft feathers.

The cook discovered him, surrounded by woodcocks flying every which way about the kitchen as he tried to catch them. Elmwood had been delighted, laughing as the silly little birds fluttered in haphazard circles around him. His happiness had faded precipitously when the cook began screaming.

Then his father came to see what the ruckus was, and there was a long, terrible pause where Elmwood watched him realize what the scene before him must mean. There was only one way for a fall of dead woodcocks to suddenly live again, and it meant that his son was possessed of a trait far more shameful than the worst fears he could have conjured.

It was only then, watching his father's face crumple into horror and disappointment, that it occurred to Elmwood that what he had done might have something to do with the forbidden magic of Charming. The only Charmer Elmwood had ever encountered up to that point was a miserable wretch who had been brought before his father for justice, accused of using his Charm to steal horses from the Elmhouse stables. The man had technically been hanged for the theft, not the Charming, but it was clear that everyone involved thought it was a job well done. All of that seemed quite incompatible with the joy Elmwood had experienced watching the birds revive.

His father confirmed the reality of the situation with a smack to Elmwood's head that was so hard he couldn't hear properly out of one ear for a month.

You disgust me. Never do this again.

Elmwood had done it again, of course. What good was having eyes if you couldn't rest them on something beautiful? What good was having a tongue if you couldn't taste something delicious? What good was having a heart if you didn't give it away to every other person you met? And what good was having the ability to raise the dead if you always let nature take its course? That had been his philosophy when he was young.

Things were different now.

Now when he thought of dead woodcocks, they shifted in his mind from sad little feathered lumps into the twisted limbs of men.

No, he would not think about that. No amount of pastoral

quietude was dull enough to make entertaining such thoughts tenable—and he would never use his Charm again.



Elmwood arrived at his tiniest—in truth, his *only*—estate resembling a vagrant. The carriage driver deposited him at the bottom of the muddy lane, so Elmwood hobbled his way up to the house with the help of a garish cane that Winthrop had tossed after him into the carriage. It was gold, with a handle shaped like some sort of bear-creature with ram's horns.

Elmwood reached the house coated in mud from the knees down and with no earthly possessions aside from the cane, the clothes on his back, and whatever Merewyth held. Gazing up at it, he wasn't hopeful about his prospects.

In the near dark, Merewyth looked atmospheric, in the sense that there were likely so many holes in the roof that whatever atmospheric events happened above it would soon also happen within. When Winthrop had told Elmwood that this was where he was headed, he'd mentioned that the account books showed a man was being paid to keep the place running and tidy. From what Elmwood could see, he was overpaid.

He limped up the drive. There were no lights in the windows, and when he tried the front door, it was locked. He knocked. Nothing. The place had the air of an abandoned ruin, full of ghouls and ghosts—though, Elmwood supposed, that had been just as true of it back when he was a boy. Some houses were just built on a foundation of gloom and dreariness.

Making his way to the back of the house, he saw a dim light shining in what must be the kitchen. A short flight of steps led from the mudhole of a garden down to a door. Finding it unlocked, Elmwood let himself in.

There, with his unshod feet propped up on the long kitchen table, was a tall, steely sort of fellow. He had on a rather nice waistcoat, but there were holes in his stockings.

“Who the fuck are you?” said the man.

Elmwood drew himself up from his pained slouch.

“It’s ‘Who the fuck are you, my lord,’” he said. “Now, what do I have to do to get a hot bath?”



As far as Elmwood was concerned, the kitchen was a fine place to bathe. There was a time when he would have recoiled from the mere suggestion of bathing in a tin tub in front of the oven like a peasant, but years of fussy bucket-splashing on the front followed by months of languishing in the barracks prison had washed away all such pretension. As heat soaked from the water into his aching hip, he sighed.

He managed to pry a cup of mulled wine out of the man in his kitchen, followed by his name, which was Nimsby. The fellow accepted the sudden arrival of his master with fairly stoic grace, given that no one of note had turned up at Merewyth for a good ten years. Certainly not since Elmwood’s father’s health had declined.

He decided to think of Nimsby as his steward and wondered how long the man would continue to receive his salary. According to Winthrop, all of Elmwood’s assets had been seized, aside from Merewyth. Did the funds that kept Merewyth running stay with Merewyth, or would they be funneled off to whomever the courts decided to award with Elmwood’s fortune? What a terrible bother, having to think about money.

As he brought the cup to his lips, he noticed his hands were shaking. A bit of the red wine splashed out and fell into his bath-

water, swirling like blood before dissipating. The tremors came and went. They seemed to happen when he was tired, or if he overtaxed himself. Perhaps it was time to sleep.

Getting out of the bath was a bit of trouble, and in the end, he called in Nimsby to help. He was grateful that if Nimsby had any thoughts about the tremors or his lameness, he kept them to himself.

“I say, Nimsby?”

“Aye?”

“When was the last time you were paid?”

“I’m paid yearly, at Wintertide.”

“Oh, good.” That was only three or so months past. “Are there many folk about the house? A chambermaid or cook? Your wife, perhaps? Nosy neighbors?”

“Haven’t got a wife,” said Nimsby. “No maid nor cook. I do for myself. Nearest neighbors are at Croftholde and the village.” He jerked his chin, as if Elmwood could tell the direction from that alone. “Most folk hereabouts keep to themselves.”

Well, that was a bit of luck. Elmwood finished his wine, then asked Nimsby to show him to the Lord’s bedchamber.

When Elmwood’s father died, Elmwood was given a week’s leave to attend to the funeral. He’d spent it drunk, making a tour of his father’s favorite beds, offices, carriages, and chairs, fucking a selection of the kingdom’s prettiest people in all of them, out of both spite and the futile hope of feeling something pleasant for a moment. He managed to remember to attend the actual burial, also drunk, where he contemplated using his Charm to resurrect his father just so he could brag about all the fucking and perhaps shout at him a bit, but fortunately the casket had been closed.

Looking at his father’s massive canopy bed at Merewyth, he was rather sorry there wasn’t anyone handy to defile it with. It had been a very long while since he’d been inclined to defile, and he wasn’t even remotely inspired now; the thought was more of a

matter of principle, as it would have irritated his father enormously. He cast a sideways glance at Nimsby, who did not, after all, have a wife, but decided that was a complication he didn't need. Besides, Elmwood did have some morals. He made it a policy to never bed anyone on his payroll. There was no way of knowing if they actually wanted to or if they were doing it only because they felt obliged.

It was probably just as well. He doubted he currently had the wherewithal to perform in the style on which he prided himself.

The bed was not comfortable, but it was a good deal better than the rented carriage or anywhere else that he'd slept in recent memory. As soon as he closed his eyes, he was asleep.



Everything hurt when Elmwood woke up the following day, part-way through the afternoon. Light pounded in past the curtains that no one had thought to close, and somewhere outside, a dog was barking.

Elmwood climbed painfully to his feet and went over to the window.

There was a carriage in the drive, and standing in front of it was Winthrop. He was dressed very smartly, with a fashionable henge-style hat rising out of his tight black curls and a canary-yellow frock coat that practically glowed in contrast to his ebony complexion—which was all nothing short of remarkable given that he'd been on the same journey that had practically incapacitated Elmwood. There was a small, fluffy, improbably long dog with tiny little legs dashing about his ankles, yapping madly.

"Winthrop!" Elmwood shouted. "What manner of silly creature is that, and will you please make it stop?"

Winthrop looked up at him with a smile.

"He's a badger hound, and he's your salvation!"



Elmwood's father's study was unspeakably dusty. He made the mistake of patting a pillow for Winthrop and it sent both of them into a coughing fit. Winthrop took it all in with his usual good nature. Elmwood was convinced that he could have gone to Winthrop and told him that his own mother had been arrested for Charming men's cocks clean off and making them fly about like birds and was to be sentenced to death for it, and Winthrop would have been delighted by the challenge of defending her in court. Not that Elmwood's actual situation was any less catastrophic.

The little badger hound had stopped barking but was perhaps even more annoying when silent, snuffling around Elmwood's ankles as if it thought there might be badgers hiding in his stockings. He tried to nudge it away with one foot.

"Careful, Elmwood. It would avail you to endear yourself. That dog is all that stands between you and complete destitution," said Winthrop, falling into his dusty chair with a gusto Elmwood found exhausting. He pulled off his silly hat and tossed it like a skipping stone so that it landed on the desk.

"So you say, but you have yet to explain how such an annoying creature could possibly be of any help to me."

"Well, you haven't given me the chance! Say, how's your leg?"

Winthrop said this as he watched Elmwood lower himself slowly into a chair.

"Dreadful. Now, tell me about the dog. What scheme are you hatching?"

"Answer me this: Why do you think they didn't take Merewyth when they took everything else?"

"I assumed they forgot about it. I certainly had. I wish I wasn't remembering it now."

"I thought that at first as well, but I decided to investigate, and

am I ever glad I did. You see, my friend, they didn't take Merewyth because it doesn't belong to you."

Elmwood hadn't thought his spirits could possibly be further dampened, but that managed it.

"That's terrible news, Win."

"Let me explain. It doesn't belong to you because when your father died, he left it to someone else."

"Who?" A familiar resentment uncurled in his chest. He was so accustomed to being disappointed by his father that the sensation almost resembled an old friend.

Winthrop gestured to the dog. "Your father left Merewyth to his favorite badger hound, Rollo."

Elmwood found himself at a loss.

"The dog?" he finally managed to splutter out. "My father left this place to his *dog*?"

"Yes!" The delight that Winthrop exhibited at this revelation was almost as vexing as the news itself.

"I fail to see how this is anything but humiliating for me."

Winthrop rolled his eyes.

"Keep up, man. Merewyth is owned by Rollo and not by you, so it was not seized. That itself is good news, but the better news is that Merewyth is Rollo's, but Rollo is yours."

"He is?"

"Yes!"

"Then wouldn't Rollo—and Merewyth by association—be forfeited along with all of my other holdings?"

"No!" shouted Winthrop, so excited that he jumped out of his chair. "Your father, strange and contrary man that he was, added a special codicil to his will. I suspect he was afraid that you'd dispose of poor Rollo here instead of treating him like the son your father wished he had."

"First of all," Elmwood interrupted, "you know I would never

dispose of a dog. I'm not a monster. Secondly, my father did in fact have a son, and this sort of betrayal on his part is exactly why—”

“Yes, yes, your father was an ass. Do stop nattering and listen to me. The codicil states that Rollo isn't property, he's a ward. You've been assigned as his guardian. For as long as he lives, Rollo owns Merewyth and you are entitled to live here as his guardian. Except for the issue of you being banished, which would override that; I'm still working that part out.”

“Well, that's . . . something.”

“There's more! I have an idea for how to get the rest of your property back. You see, besides you, Rollo is the only beneficiary of your father's will. Now, having seized your assets, the Crown must pass them on to any other heirs, either yours or your father's, and lacking any heirs, they can be gifted as the Crown sees fit. I think a legal argument exists for claiming that Rollo is a clear potential heir for your father, given that your father already passed property on to him. If I can prove that, then all your property will pass to Rollo, and ergo back to you as his guardian. Now, I do need to file a petition to formally grant Rollo a lordship so that the laws of estate inheritance apply to him, but there is precedent for it, this case about fifty years ago where a lord tried to marry his horse . . .”

“Stop, Win. This is insane.”

“It's the law, Elmwood! It doesn't matter if it's insane if you can make a good argument and show precedent for it.”

“Why are you so excited? Even if this works, I won't be the Earl of Elmwood anymore. A fucking dog will be the Earl of Elmwood, and I'll be his steward!”

“First of all, you're still an earl, technically, even if Elmhouse and your other holdings pass to someone else. Only the King's Council could take away your title, with a writ of attainder. Second of all, if I can win this, I'm going to be set for life. I'll be the genius lawyer who won an impossible case.”

“I keep getting caught up in the fact that it's impossible.”

"You let me worry about that. Now, I need you to lie low. Lower than low. If they catch you and complete your banishment before I can work all of this out, the whole thing goes up in flames. I mean it, Elmwood. I know how you get when you're bored. You are absolutely not allowed to lure a bunch of nubile bumpkins in from the fields to despoil them, or invite friends from Neck to run around in the woods naked and play cards. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes. Lie low, have no fun, and get used to being second in line to a mangy hound. Don't worry yourself. I'm in no state to do any despoiling, and I don't have any friends left, aside from you."

"It's not all bad. A year from now, all of this will be another colorful episode in the grand story of your life."

Elmwood stared at his friend, stricken by the depth of his despair.

No matter how clever a scheme Winthrop managed to pull off on his behalf, there was no means by which the last six months of Elmwood's life could ever be rewritten as some sort of adventure. The simple fact was, after what he had seen—what he had done—nothing mattered. He didn't care about regaining his property or weaseling out of banishment. He didn't care about anything beyond finding the will to drag himself out of bed in the morning and making himself do some semblance of the same the following day and the day after. Even that, most days, felt like too much.

But with sweet, eager Winthrop sitting there staring at Elmwood with such a look of pride and hope on his face, there was no way for Elmwood to tell him that. There was no way to do anything but go along with what he wanted and try to appreciate having the love and dedication of someone so good. It was why Elmwood had let himself be bundled into the rented carriage in the first place, and he certainly had not found the strength since to deny his best friend what he so dearly wanted. Even if what he wanted was to save Elmwood, when Elmwood knew in his heart that he was already far too lost to be saved.

Elmwood's dark thoughts must have showed on his face, because Winthrop reached out and placed a hand over his.

"I know I've already said it, but it bears repeating. I'm very glad you did what you had to do to stay alive, old friend. Glad indeed. Now you must trust me to set things right for you, just as I know you would do for me if I were ever in such a predicament."

"You would never get yourself into a mess of this measure, Win, but you're a good friend to say so. Better than I deserve. Will you stay here awhile and keep me company?"

"No, it's back to Neck for me. I have a case to sniff out, and you know there's nothing I like better than the chase. But Elmwood? Please take good care of the dog."

"I shall treat it as though it were my only living family."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

Elmwood placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I promise, Win. I'll do my best, for your sake."

Winthrop shook his head.

"I'd rather you did it for your own sake, but I'll take what I can get."

Most people would imagine that after badly dislocating a hip, one might not be keen on going for a stroll, but Elmwood found that walking helped. If his hip remained too still for too long, it froze up. He'd discovered this during his first few months in military custody, after his fever had broken and he'd been moved out of the medical ward. Then he had taken to pacing to keep things moving, gritting his teeth against the pain as he shuffled around the various rooms he had been locked in. In his current situation, he found that the garish cane Winthrop had given him helped enormously.

Yes, walking was necessary, and even had it not been, there was the dog to think of. On the first night, Elmwood had ignored the

dog, who then shat on his rug. At that point, Elmwood had asked Nimsby to take care of the creature, but Nimsby had snorted, left the room, and then disappeared for two days, during which time Elmwood was forced to fend for himself. He couldn't get the beast of a kitchen hearth to do anything except smoke, so he and the dog ate their way through a massive jar of pickled carrots and were half-starved and frozen by the time Nimsby turned up again, acting as though he'd never left. Elmwood didn't think either of them would survive another abandonment, so he didn't broach the topic again.

So, walks it was. Each day, Elmwood forced himself out of bed, then he and Rollo wandered through the shabby brown gardens behind the house and past the unused stable, carriage house, and other outbuildings until they came to a little trail through the woods. Spring was slow to start, so the ground underfoot remained a dreary carpet of dead leaves. If he looked at it for too long, it reminded him of the grim roads that ran endlessly through his dreams at night, torn to ribbons by countless hooves plodding and carts dragging and men marching.

Almost a week after his arrival at Merewyth, he set out with the dog for their daily walk. It was a much warmer day than the one before, and he noticed that little white flowers had bloomed across the forest floor like a small miracle. The dog immediately urinated on one.

"Stop that," said Elmwood. "You're pissing on nature's glory, and I won't have it."

The dog tilted his head to one side.

"Yes, I mean you."

Rollo barked once, then dashed away.

"Come back here!" shouted Elmwood, to no avail. "Come back at once, or there will be no more walks for you!"

He hurried after the dog as quickly as he could manage, rounding a bend in the trail in time to see the dog totter along the edge

of a steep ravine. The little beast seemed to have spotted something in the trees beyond it—a badger, Elmwood supposed—and Elmwood was about to try to reason with him and recommend stepping back from the edge when the dog jumped forward, tumbling headlong over it and directly into whatever lay below with a little remorseful yap.



Winthrop was going to banish Elmwood himself, or possibly worse, if Elmwood allowed all his grand plans to die in a heap at the bottom of a ravine. With this thought in mind, Elmwood crept as close to the edge as he dared and peered down.

“Yip!” barked the dog, delighted to see Elmwood—though Elmwood could not imagine why.

The dog was not dead. He had managed to land unscathed a good ten feet down upon some jagged rocks. Now he was wagging his whole body enthusiastically.

Relief flooded Elmwood. It was not, he thought, that he had any fondness for the inane creature. It just would have been so unpleasant telling Winthrop he’d accidentally killed the beast.

He did still have a problem. There was no way the dog would be able to climb back up to Elmwood, and there was most certainly no means by which Elmwood could descend to retrieve him. Perhaps if he went far enough along the edge, there would be a spot where it grew less steep? The very thought of it made his hip ache and his spirits disconsolate. Perhaps he ought to fling himself down onto the rocks and have done with it.

“Is something amiss?”

Elmwood turned and saw a woman approaching him.

No, he corrected himself immediately. This was not a mere woman, but rather a vision of delights.

She was almost as tall as he, with the promise of a luscious fig-

ure hidden beneath her tucked-up petticoats. Her thick black braid was wound round and round her head and made him immediately imagine uncoiling it slowly and then running his hands through the waves of her hair. Her skin was a shade of brown a bit darker than sun-burnished, and with her little laced-up waistcoat and a large wooden bucket slung over her arm, she looked for all the world like a milkmaid from a lusty broadside. Though there was nothing girlish about her; this was a woman grown—around five-and-thirty, he would guess—with knowledge and wit in her eyes. Those eyes: they were huge and dark and had little lines at the corners.

Most people would characterize Elmwood as a rake, and they were more or less correct. It was true that he had been something of a wayward lover to an excessive number of people. Though he had received no complaints from anyone who merited the right to an opinion, he would be the first to admit that while he excelled at matters of bodily pleasure, matters of the heart had eluded him for some time.

In his youth, it had been a different matter. Back then, he couldn't meet a beauty of any sex without offering up his heart to them, along with his libido. Wanton in every conceivable way, Elmwood had fallen for anyone who seemed inclined to be kind to him with every morsel of his dubious soul and body. Experience and time had eventually schooled him to keep his heart, if not his hands, to himself.

Then there had been Relance. Now he sincerely doubted that there was enough of his wizened heart left to love even a badger hound. To be honest, he was not even entirely certain he retained the adequate humanity to be a good bedfellow.

But for this apparition of a woodland milkmaid, his dead heart gave a little stutter. No, that was a romantic fancy. It was only his cock waking up for the first time in an age.

"Have you lost something?" she said, and he noticed that her

voice was low and melodic. He wanted it to whisper things into his ear. He wanted to write her terrible, sincere poems that perhaps she could keep tucked away in her bosom while she . . . milked her dryad cows? Or whatever it was forest milkmaids did.

He marveled then at how good it was to feel something other than pain, regret, disillusionment, or despair.

“Yes,” he said, attempting to dazzle her with one of his more alluring smiles. “As a matter of fact, I seem to have misplaced a dog.”

She walked over to him and peered down over the edge.

“Ah, yes, I see. Your badger hound is stuck in my crevasse.”

His neck grew hot. Was she . . . flirting with him? By means of bawdy innuendo? When was the last time someone had made him blush? This required him to make an effort. He quirked an eyebrow.

“In truth, I don’t think my badger hound is stuck in your crevasse, precisely. I think he dove into it willingly and is reluctant to withdraw.”

How would she respond? He took a step toward her. How was she managing to maintain such a serious expression while toying with him? She even frowned at him a bit as he drew closer. She’d be excellent at cards. Did forest milkmaids know how to play cards? He’d like to teach her to play. Preferably in bed. Wearing as little clothing as possible.

“Perhaps I could help you pull him out,” she said dryly. “Unless you’d prefer to leave him in there?”

He chortled, and she seemed surprised by it. Well, not everyone could keep a face as straight as hers while engaging in such banter.

“As reluctant as I am to withdraw anything from your lovely crevasse, there is no one I would rather have assist me in pulling him out.”

She was beginning to look . . . confused? Oh, no . . . had he been misreading their exchange?

"Let me see if I can lure him into my pail," she said, and he was afraid that he had indeed heard innuendo in her words when there had been none intended. Then she said, "Here, hold these, will you?" and extracted several absolutely enormous, phallic mushrooms from the bucket she carried and waved them in his face. "There won't be an inch of room for your badger hound in here if it's full of these." Thank all the saints and kings, the game was on! He hadn't misunderstood after all.

"With pleasure, lady, though I'll admit, I was rather hoping you'd hold mine instead of the other way round."

He was pleased with that one, but she seemed not to have heard and was already stepping over to the edge of the ravine again. She unbuckled her belt, which was long and wrapped twice around her waist, and there was a heady, buzzing second where he thought she was disrobing here and now in front of him. He was about to toss her mushrooms to the ground and tear his own clothes off when she stopped after the belt, and instead attached it to the handle of her pail.

Oh. She was actually helping the dog. Well, quite right. Rescue first!

He watched intently as she got down on her knees and bent forward to lower the bucket over the ledge.

"Name?" she said.

"Elmwood," he replied, indulging in the fantasy that, soon, she'd be moaning it.

Her head shot back up and she frowned.

"The *dog's* name."

"Oh. Um, Rollo." He should have realized that was what she meant. He also shouldn't have given her his real name. Winthrop had told him to lie low, after all, but Winthrop hadn't known that Elmwood would meet a flirtatious, forest-dwelling milkmaid. Surely, he would grant Elmwood a dispensation for lust-induced stupidity, given the circumstances. But one thing irked him.

“How did you know the dog’s name wasn’t Elmwood?” he asked.

“Rollo!” she called down into the ravine. “Hop in! Get in! That’s a good boy! Hop in! Yes!”

Then she was pulling on the belt, the bucket breached the edge, and the badger hound tumbled out beside her. Rollo jumped on her, showering her with sloppy kisses. Elmwood wanted to do the same and was about to hop right to it when she turned to him, rising to her feet, and said, “I knew that Elmwood was your name, not the dog’s. I’m afraid I have you at a bit of a disadvantage. We are neighbors, you see.”

Neighbors? “Do you mean you’re my tenant?” he said, hoping this wasn’t the case. Tenants were much like staff, in that one couldn’t be sure if they were fucking you because they liked you or because they didn’t want to find themselves evicted.

“You haven’t got any tenants at Merewyth,” she said.

This gave him pause. He supposed he had known that, but then . . .

“Who are you?” he asked, with a sudden sense of unease creeping over him.

“Lady Hildegarde Croft.”

Croft. Croft? Oh no.

The name sent him tumbling headfirst into a memory: the image of a man sneering down at Elmwood from atop a charger. Elmwood clung to it desperately, lest he slide from there into even worse recollections. Duke Engelbrooke. The Western Harrier.

He forced his attention back to the present with every ounce of will he had.

Surely this vision of beauty couldn’t possibly be married to the Harrier? Surely fate would not be so unkind—either to her or to Elmwood.

“Croft?” he managed.

“Lord Thorgoode Croft is my husband, my lord,” she said.

“Though I don’t know that the two of you have had occasion to meet.”

Well, thank fuck for that. Thorgoode must be the youngest of the brothers Croft, not the elder one who died and irresponsibly made his horrible brother a duke.

Regardless of which Croft was her husband, he ought to make his excuses and flee. She was exactly the sort of person he was supposed to be avoiding at all costs. In his experience, ladies wielded gossip as power—rightfully so—and the last thing he needed was news of his whereabouts being spread around. Though perhaps word of his situation had not yet reached these parts? In any case, there was no use pretending, as she already knew who he was.

“My lady,” he said, doing a half bow. “Lord Elmwood, at your service.”

“Yes, I know. Will you be visiting the neighborhood for long?” said Lady Croft, not returning the bow. Well, perhaps it was silly to be formal when she’d been flirting with him shamelessly mere moments before.

“Only a short visit,” he said.

“Well,” she said, visibly weighing something in her mind before continuing, “do you think you might do me the honor of joining me for dinner at Croftholde during your visit?”

That was an encouraging sign. She’d hardly ask him to dine if she knew he was a filthy Charmer on the run from the law. Though it was quite brazen of her to ask him like this. She ought to send someone to Merewyth with a formal invitation, and he ought to decline it with a polite excuse. Winthrop would want him to decline—insist upon it, even. Would it really be so unwise for Elmwood to accept?

The fact was, the thought of dining with her had caused a strange sensation to bloom somewhere beneath his ribs. It felt remarkably like looking forward to something.

“Will Lord Croft be joining us?” he asked.

“No,” she said, lowering her eyelashes. “He’s away, I’m afraid.”

“Away, you say?” Wait, was she flirting with him again? She certainly had been before, and now she was spontaneously inviting him to come to her home while her husband was away. In Neck, that would almost certainly be flirting. Not to mention the mushrooms.

“Are you free tomorrow night?” she said.

So soon? Definitely flirting.

“It would be my pleasure to dine with you at your earliest convenience, Lady Croft.”

He reached out and took her hand, intending to kiss it.

Instead, when he touched her, a strange sensation ran through him like the static from a wool blanket on a dry winter morning.

She had a Charm. Touching someone else with a Charm was the only thing that felt like that.

In Elmwood’s life, he had encountered only a handful of other Charmers, as far as he knew. Most of them had been killed off by order of the king five hundred years prior, and the Charm thrill was the main way they’d been hunted down. For one Charmer to catch out another with a touch was beyond intimate. It was very rare, and still very dangerous, even if it was no longer a death sentence by law.

He tried to school his surprise. She didn’t manage to control hers, her mouth forming an adorable circle of shock.

She pulled her hand out of his abruptly, stepping back.

“Until tomorrow night, Lord Elmwood,” she said.

It was only after she’d disappeared into the forest that Elmwood realized she had forgotten her mushrooms.

Winthrop and good sense be hanged, Elmwood would dine with her if it was the last thing he did.