

Dollhoused

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The tall amber grass slow-danced in the breeze. The lake beyond the tiny town gave the wind a pleasant, cold bite, and Newander stripped off his shirt to better feel it. The chilly air played over his sore, hot muscles, and swept away the sweat clinging to his body. It had been a long journey.

He took his time down the long slope toward the town, making certain that someone would have time to see him and report his presence. Stealth wasn't necessary, and he didn't expect danger. He'd even tucked his pair of ornate axes, the tools of his trade, into the large travel pack on his back.

The buildings of the little town huddled together, and Newander thought of a herd spotting a wolf. Not a bad analogy, he thought.

A hundred yards out from the town's low stone wall, a voice drifted over the swaying grass. Newander searched for the source, but could see no one.

"Ho, the traveler!"

Newander stopped, bowed, and held both open hands above his head. After three solid beats, he dropped them again. His pack went into the dust beside him, and he yanked his shirt back over his chest.

"Ho, the town!" he shouted. And waited.

"What brings you to Thistleleglen?" The voice returned.

Ah, so he was in the right place.

"Passing through!" he shouted back. A lie.

"Are you a beggarman?"

Newander shook his head, "I want for nothing. Though I would not turn down a bath!"

Laughter trickled over the grass, and short, stout balding man stepped out from the shadow of a building and into the light. He wore peasant's clothes and a leather apron.

"Come on then," the Smith said. He waved, turned, and disappeared again into the cluster of buildings.

Newander scooped up his pack and followed after.

The Smith led him through the short cluster of lanes that was the entire village of Thistleghen. Other than a large number of bonnets, the only thing of note was a powerful smell of scorched wood that seemed to hang over the entire village, as if every chimney in the entire town was burning at once. Still, it took less than ten minutes. The Smith introduced himself as Buckley, and Newander told the man his real name. Newander saw a dozen more villagers in the street, and most of them wore faces of shock and dismay. The Smith, by contrast, couldn't be more relaxed.

Newander accepted the Smith's offer of a bed for the night. Newander made no overtures to turn down the offer - "Oh, no, I couldn't" - and the Smith clearly didn't expect them.

Newander bathed in a nearby stream before dinner, and ate a delicious roast with the Smith's wife and young daughter. When he was

finished, he explained that he enjoyed a long walk after dinner and bowed out. The Smith nodded, not believing a word but saying nothing, and so Newander left to stroll through the village. He realized that the roast had done nothing to fill him up - perhaps his duty would nourish him more.

He knew the girl's location - his master had provided him with as much. And he knew the girl had power, though of uncertain character. Whatever she was conjuring here in this tiny village, she was doing it constantly and powerfully enough to warrant Newander's master's attention. Which, to say, was a double-edged blade on the best of days.

And so Newander walked down the main thoroughfare, bearing fewer stares than he would have imagined - it seemed that past suppertime, Thisleglen shut down. No businesses were open, and the town didn't play host to a single bar or pub. Newander made a face when he made the realization. It was places like Thistleleglen, bastions in the middle of nowhere, that needed the escape-hatch of alcohol the most.

He turned down a long dirt lane on the edge of the village and headed for a tiny thatched cottage. A lashed wooden fence surrounded the entire property, and so Newander headed for the gate. He open and closed the gate three times, loud enough for the occupants to hear it.

Nothing moved, and no sound broke the stillness. A rising tension stretched across Newander's back, and made his neck-hair stand on end. He wished now he had brought his axes. He opened the

gate and strolled with a confidence he didn't feel toward the front door of the cottage.

After almost nineteen knocks, the door swung open with alarming speed. Newander didn't flinch, but he certainly wanted to, and his first urge had been to either attack the darting silhouette at the door or to turn and run.

"Can I help you?" the woman in the door asked. As his eyes adjusted, Newander realized she was quite a lovely woman. Far beyond youth, but nowhere close to aged, she wasn't terribly older than Newander.

Newander smiled and nodded, "I was hoping that you could. Do you know a Lariah Asura?"

The woman stiffened. In the dying light, he could see the expression on her face twist toward annoyance. Newander did not move or speak, and after a long moment she let out a slow sigh.

"Who wants to know, I wonder?"

Newander shook his head, "I do," he said, and quickly introduced himself. "And I would like to speak to her, if you'll allow it. Are you her mother?"

The woman crossed her arms over her chest. She shifted, and then put her hands on her hips. It was almost as if she couldn't decide which angry-mother pose to adopt. Newander made his best efforts not to smile at the thought.

"I am," the woman said. "And my daughter is very fragile - "

"She is no such thing," Newander said, maintaining his even tone

and pleasant smile. "I'm sure I couldn't harm her if I tried."

Newander held out his hand. She glanced down at it, then back up at him. After a moment, Newander dropped his hand, his face unchanging despite the, albeit mild, sting of rejection.

"Sir," she said, and her voice tightened up, like a bowstring,

"I would ask you to leave."

Oddly formal, Newander thought, "I would not go, if you did."

A man appeared behind her. Largely built, though nowhere near Newander's admittedly massive frame. Black hair hung low in his eyes, and the look on his face promised bodily harm. As a matter of fact, Newander greatly preferred the look of the mother.

"My wife asked you to leave, Rhysian," the man growled.

Newander started, and for the first time his face betrayed shock. He grabbed the feeling and tucked it away.

"How did you know that?" Newander asked. "How did you know my home?"

"Rhys is no big secret, stranger," the man said. The wife looked even more agitated.

"No," Newander said, and forced a stiff-sounding laugh, "I meant how did you know it was *my* home?"

The man now looked surprised, and he shook his head like a dog trying to dry off. Newander raised an eyebrow. He wondered briefly if they hadn't done something horrible to Lariah - they radiated guilt.

Newander took a step into the doorframe. The woman and the man both took a corresponding step back.

"Let me speak to her," Newander said, summoning his most fearsome voice and relying more than a little on the effect his massive frame could create, "and I will darken your doorstep no longer."

The women shook her head, turned, and disappeared into the house. The big man, the father no doubt, looked Newander up and down. After a long moment, which Newander spent stiffening two of his fingers and sizing up the man's larynx, the man let out a loud grunt and shook his head.

"Fine," he said, "Come in. Go to the table. I'll fetch her."

Newander held out his hand, and told the man his name. The man *harrumphed*, turned, and lumbered away down the hallway. Newander glanced down at his hand, flexed his fingers, and dropped it back to his side.

The inside of the cottage glowed with decoration. Beautifully gleaming wooden furniture, almost wet looking, crowded every corner of the small cottage. All of the windows were thrown open, and the living room was redolent of a combination of lake-breeze and ash.

Newander found the sitting table with no problem, and managed to squeeze himself onto a tiny, intricately carved wooden chair. He steepled his fingers and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The big man came down the hallway, his black beady eyes working very hard to bore two holes in Newander's forehead. The man turned, and behind him, hidden by his bulk, was Lariah. A tiny blonde thing, ethereal in a white dressing

gown, her thin graceful limbs moving in slow circles. The gesture looked odd, at first, until Newander stared into her eyes. They were screwed up, at the ceiling. Daydreaming. Pretending to dance, but only showing half of it in her movements.

"Lariah?" Newander asked. Her father *harrumphed* again and disappeared down the hallway, pausing only to shoot another scathing look his way.

She hummed softly to herself, and took a few more dancing steps forward. Her eyes stayed on the ceiling.

"Lariah, baby, are you alright?"

He felt his chest compress, but only for a moment. He hadn't meant to let that bit of affection slip out. Something about her triggered long dormant memories of his own daughter, who hadn't felt wind or rain or sun for almost ten years now.

"Lariah," he said, loudly, letting his voice drop an octave.

Her drifting eyes slipped away from the ceiling, coming to rest about a foot to the right of Newander's eyes. An improvement, he thought.

"Lariah, did you know I was coming?"

The girl nodded, and kept half-dancing and humming. She was moving, little by little, much closer to Newander. Newander held out a hand to her, and she touched it lightly. Her hand felt rough, he noticed. He glanced down at her pale, alabaster hand and frowned.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

She shrugged, and did a stunningly perfect pirouette. Newander

sat up in his chair, and set his hand in his lap. The hair on the back of his neck was dancing with electricity. Nothing here was right.

"I know a man, a nice man," he said, lying again. Well, the nice part anyway. "He is special, like you."

Lariah shook her head, her long cascade of golden hair falling over one shoulder. She couldn't be over ten, Newander thought.

"He's special? He can make things change?"

Newander frowned at this, but nodded, "Yes, in a matter of speaking."

"You don't think he's nice," the little girl said, and Newander took a slow, deep breath. He touched the loops on his belts, where his axes weren't.

"That's true," Newander said, "You're very smart."

Lariah nodded, "Yup yup. What do you want from me?"

"I want to offer you a future. A place to learn, and belong. Somewhere you can live and be safe."

"I'm safe here," Lariah said, and Newander didn't doubt that for a second.

Newander glanced around the room. The walls had changed color. When he'd entered, they had been blue. Now, they were a deep, chocolate brown. Newander pursed his lips. Could it be?

"Well," Newander said, and stood up. Lariah's eyes focused, and she turned to look up at him for the first time. "If you do not wish to come with me, I can go."

"Wait, what?"

Newander began to move around the room, sliding his hands along the walls. They did not match their appearance. Instead of smooth paint, he felt rough, raw wood. When he pulled his hands away, they were stained black.

Finally, he found a place where his hand punched through the wall. Or, slipped through it, up to his elbow in what appeared to be solid wood. His submerged hand tingled, and he turned around to see Lariah's reaction.

She was dancing. Full on, without the half-formed gestures she had been using. Her movements unearthly, her grace impossible, she twirled and dipped, her form perfect, as far as Newander knew such things. The sight filled him with an uncanny mixture of cold fear and admiration.

Newander turned back to his submerged hand, took a deep breath, and walked through the wall. The top of the hole was lower than he thought - his head slammed into a crossbeam, and his vision went white. The taste of blood shot into his mouth, and the world dipped and spun in front of him. He went to his knees in the tall grass outside the cottage, holding both hands to the top of his head.

He didn't bother turning around - he knew he would see only solid wall. Newander clambered to his feet, one hand pressed tight to his forehead. A gash on his brow dripped blood into his eyes, so he staggered, half-blind, through Thistleglen.

As he stumbled through the empty, darkened lane, the stench of

burning wood grew stronger, filling his senses, making his eyes sting and his mouth dry up.

In front of the Smith's house, Newander fell to one knee, using a cupped hand to scoop blood out of his face. His head throbbed, and the world swayed around him.

"Newander?"

Newander shuffled on one knee, looking over his shoulder. Lariah, ghostly white still, but her dressing gown no longer appeared immaculate and gauzy. It was stained black in parts, and riddled with huge scorched holes.

"How did you know? No one ever knows."

Newander pivoted as well as he could to face her fully. He closed one eye - it was filling rapidly with blood, turning his vision into half-shades of crimson.

"I ate about six pounds of roast, and I didn't feel full," Newander said. "No one but you has touched me, either. Not to mention the smell."

Lariah bowed her head slightly, and smiled.

"You are very clever," Lariah said.

Newander nodded, "And you are in very deep agony."

"The burns aren't so bad," she said, softly, at the ground. "Not anymore."

"That's not what I'm talking about," Newander said.

Lariah spent a long moment staring at the ground. Newander waited - he knew better than that.

"Do you want to see?"

He didn't. There were few things in the world he wanted to see less than what she planned on showing him. He took a deep breath.

"Yes I do."

She showed him. She dropped the veil long enough for him to see the blackened, burned out husks of the buildings around them. The scorched skeletons, half-leaning out of windows, screaming their last screams. The burnt grass ringing the village, a blackened border.

He looked to her, finally. To see the ruined mess of the Lariah that had been, or rather, the Lariah that was. The once beautiful ten-year-old girl, her flesh smooth and shiny where it wasn't pocket with terrible scars. The disfigured, apple-doll look of melted skin. Newander closed his eyes and looked down at the dirt.

Lariah spoke again, and her voice no longer had its airy quality. It sounded old - much older than any ten-year-old should ever sound.

"You are disgusted," she spat.

"I am," he said. "But for the god that would do this to you."

Lariah flashed a lipless variant of what had to be a wry smile.

Newander felt his chest squeeze again, and he fought to get to his feet. The world swayed and dipped beneath him.

"It wasn't Eun who did this," Lariah said, and spent a long moment surveying the shattered remnants of her home.

Newander closed his eyes, "I'm so sorry."

Lariah whispered, "I thought you might be."

"How long ago?"

"How long ago did I burn down my entire town and kill everyone in it? Except for me? What day was it that I scorched my family alive?"

"If you come with me," Newander said, "you'll never have to be scared of losing control ever again."

Lariah laughed bitterly, and Newander felt his heart break.

"Does it look like I have problems with control anymore?"

Newander, on his feet now, said nothing.

She cocked her head to the side. Newander noticed she still had tufts of hair, growing out of the unburned parts of her head. She looked filthy, too - she hadn't bathed since it happened.

"Are there people like me with your master?"

Newander nodded, "There are."

Lariah nodded, and took another look around the skeleton of her life. She made a soft humming noise and twirled slowly, achingly, that impossible grace gone. The world shifted, and Newander's eyes went blurry. When they came back into focus, the illusory town was back - the faces of false citizens stared out at them through darkened windows. He did note, however, that she hadn't changed back to that dream girl.

"Do you want to take anything?" Newander asked.

Lariah laughed. They were on the road within minutes. She didn't speak very often, but whenever Newander spared a glance in her direction, he hoped beyond hope that the little twitches he saw in

her face meant hope. Meant that, despite everything, maybe should be herself one day. In spirit, if nothing else.

Newander made it five miles before he turned and, with a sad little laugh, tried to grab her wrist. His hand slid right through it, and with a cry of anguish, he sat down right there in the dirt. The Not-Lariah looked down at him and smiled.

"Not so clever," she whispered.

Newander nodded.

"Don't come looking again," Lariah said, "You won't find me."

Newander believed her. After she faded away, he stood up. He spent the next week looking for that town, looking for that girl.

He found neither.