

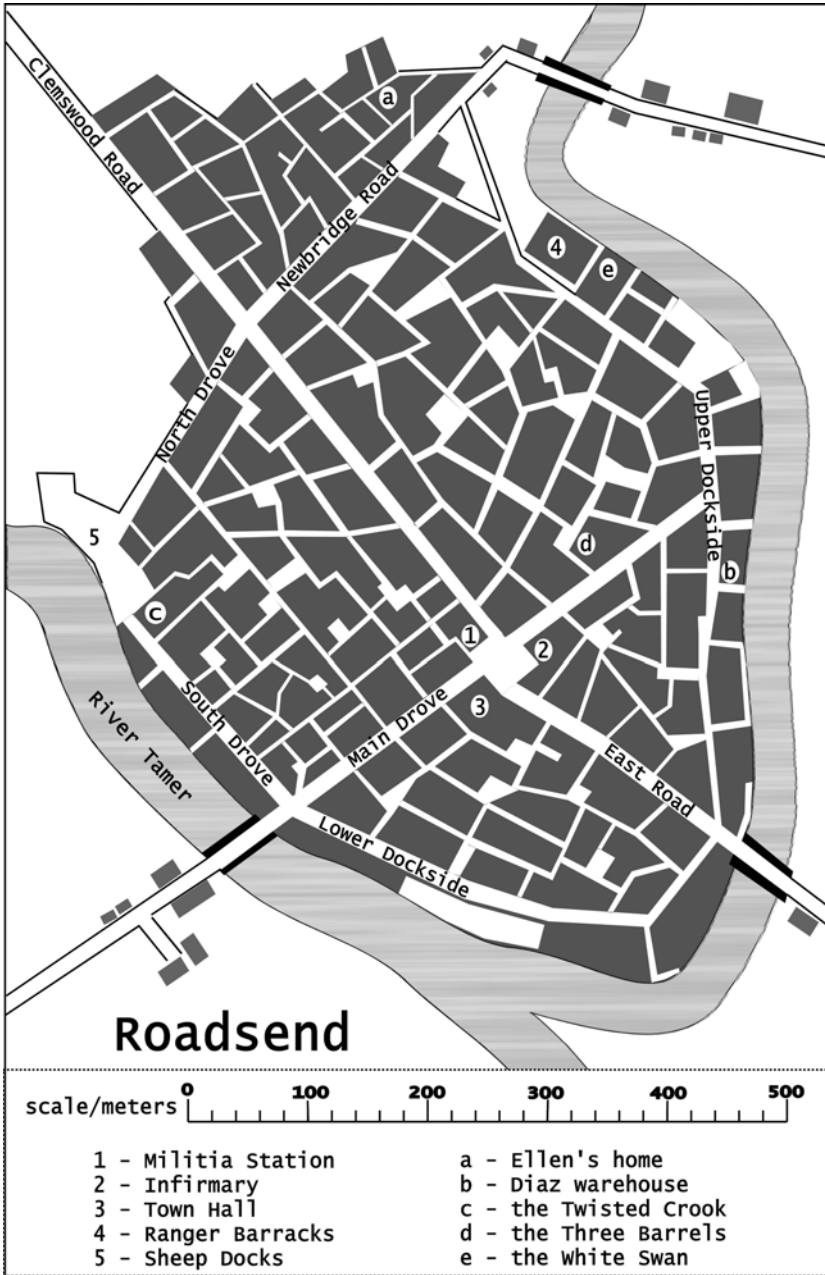
Shadow of the Knife

by

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CHAPTER ONE—BLACK AND WHITE

The crew of the *Alisha-Marie* cast off its moorings and the barge moved away from the quay, slowly picking up speed as the current took it downriver, bound for the city of Landfall. As it drifted into the dusk, the skipper's shouted commands carried softly on the warm evening air, a counterpart to the bleating of sheep from the surrounding hills. Eventually the shouts faded in the distance, leaving only the sheep.

In her black Militia uniform, Rookie Ellen Mittal rested her forearms on a rail, listening to the familiar sounds of her birth-town. The working day was coming to a close and the pens were empty. Around her, activity on the sheep docks was quieting, while that in the nearby Twisted Crook Tavern was rising. The voices from its taproom were the softest rumble, though it would be a rare night in Roadsend if they stayed that way.

"Having a nice time, are you? Gawking at nothing. How many sheep have to get stolen before you clowns stop farting around and put some effort into catching the scum who took them?"

The harsh voice jolted Ellen back to her surroundings. Jean Tulagi, owner of South Hollow Ranch, was glaring down at her from horseback.

"We've done everything we can."

"Well, since you've done squat, I guess it proves the Militia are even more frigging useless than they say." Tulagi urged her horse an intimidating step closer. "And supposing they do it again this year? How long do you think we can take these losses?"

"Lieutenant Cohen says it won't be—"

"Your lieutenant has her head so far up her own ass she can't tell whether it's day or night. I wouldn't trust her to—"

A new voice cut in. "If you have any concerns about Lieutenant Cohen's competence, it would be more productive to make a formal

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complaint to a higher officer, rather than bitching about it in the street to a rookie.”

Ellen looked over her shoulder with gratitude. Sergeant Christine Sanchez had joined them and had clearly decided to take charge. Tulagi glared at the new arrival for a few seconds before steering her horse away without another word.

“Thanks, Sarge.”

Sanchez merely pursed her lips as she watched the farmer ride off, and then shifted her gaze to Ellen. “Come on. There doesn’t look to be too much illegal activity going on here. Let’s carry on with the patrol.”

Sanchez left the dockside, heading down a dogleg alley squeezed between the backs of warehouses. Her footsteps slipped into the firm, unhurried pace of Militiawomen pounding the beat, the rhythm unbroken even when she “shook hands” with the doors she passed, checking that none had been left unlocked.

Ellen fell in beside her. “Tulagi seemed pretty angry.”

“Wouldn’t you be, in her place?”

“Farmers always blame the Militia for their problems.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s always unjustified.”

Ellen frowned. Even though the sergeant had backed her up on the docks, it sounded as if Sanchez had more sympathy with Tulagi. Ellen tried to take an unbiased view. “I know we didn’t get her sheep back for her.”

“And we didn’t catch whoever did it.”

“You think we ought to have done better?”

“Could we have done any worse?”

Ellen thought about the question. “Probably not, Sarge.”

“And everyone knows we’ve given up on it.”

“But no new sheep have gone missing for months.”

“So that’s supposed to be an end to it?”

“Well, Tulagi was worried the thieves will strike again this year.”

“She’s not the only one.”

“Lieutenant Cohen is sure the gang have moved on.”

Sanchez stopped and swung to face Ellen. “And what do you think?”

In the fading light, Sanchez’s face was twisted in a taunting pout that might have masked either irritation or humor, or maybe a

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combination of the two. She was in her late twenties, shrewd, firm, and capable. Everyone knew that she was the one who organized the day-to-day running of the Roadsend Militia, as well as making all operational decisions, except for occasions when Lieutenant Cohen wanted to make a show of being in command.

The series of thefts the previous autumn had been one of those occasions. Lieutenant Cohen had stepped in and taken over, issuing a series of orders that had made progressively less sense to Ellen. Yet it was hardly appropriate for a rookie to criticize a senior officer.

“I’m sure the lieutenant has her reasons for thinking what she does.”

“I’m sure she does too. Everyone always has her reasons. It’s a question of whether those reasons make sense to anyone else.”

“You think Lieutenant Cohen is wrong?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Ellen chewed her lip. Maybe Sanchez had not said it in so many words, but the implication was there. “Lieutenant Cohen is the one with all the information. Maybe she knows things we don’t, and that’s why she set our priorities like she did.”

“And that’s what you honestly think?”

“Does it matter what I think, Sarge? Our duty is to obey orders.”

“Like it says in the rule book, where it’s all written down in black and white?” Sanchez shook her head ruefully. “How about our oath to uphold the law?”

“But isn’t upholding the law all about obeying rules? I’m sure Lieutenant Cohen has it covered.”

“Oh to be seventeen again and untouched by cynicism!”

“I’m nearly eighteen.”

Sanchez threw back her head and laughed, then patted Ellen’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I used to be as naïve as you once. But take it from me, life can’t be reduced to simple black and white.” She resumed walking.

Ellen followed, feeling that she was neither as green nor as foolish as Sanchez had implied. Of course she knew the situation was not right, but what could she do other than hope for the best and follow her commanding officer’s orders to the letter?

At the end of the alley, they emerged onto Catsfield Road and turned toward the center of town. The streets were almost deserted and

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the few folk on view were all behaving in an exemplary law-abiding fashion.

“So what do you think about the stolen sheep, Sarge?” Ellen had spent the previous three minutes wondering if it was a breach of protocol to ask, but her curiosity had won out.

“What do I think?” Sanchez pursed her lips. “I think even if you allow for exaggeration and farmers making use of the fuss to swipe a few sheep from their neighbors, it’s still over five hundred gone missing. We’ve never had anything close to that number of thefts before. And stealing five hundred sheep is one thing, being able to unload so many for a profit is quite another. But I can’t see a gang going to the bother of stealing all those sheep just to let most wander off into the Wildlands.”

“You think there’s some other explanation? They weren’t stolen at all?”

“No. I think they were stolen by someone who works on a different scale to what we’re used to. Someone with a whole organization to call on. When I add it all up, I’m worried the trouble in Eastford has spread out here.”

“Oh.”

Over the previous months, the same idea had niggled at Ellen, but she had fought to dismiss her fears, telling herself that she did not know enough to understand what was really going on. Surely if there were reasonable grounds to think the Eastford gang might be involved, Lieutenant Cohen would have notified central command at once and asked for extra resources, rather than downplaying the thefts as she had. Cohen had decades more experience than any rookie. Yet now Sergeant Sanchez was also suggesting it as a real possibility. Ellen walked on in silence, mulling over the implications. It could not be true—could it?

They crossed a side street. The slow, deliberate pace gave Ellen plenty of time to look down it, but her thoughts were preoccupied and they had walked on another ten meters before she registered the face she had seen. Ellen came to an uncertain halt.

“Er...Sarge.”

Sanchez looked back. “Yes?”

“You know you were saying about trouble from Eastford?”

“And?”

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“I think some of it’s here already. Except it was ours to start with.”

“What?”

“Down that last street, I think I saw Ade Eriksen.”

“Damn. Too much to hope that we’d heard the last of our little Adeola.” Sanchez sucked a sharp breath between her teeth. “What was she doing?”

“Just standing there.”

“Loitering?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, let’s go and say hello, and make sure she knows we remember her.”

They backtracked to the junction. Ade was in the same spot as before, leaning against a wall with her arms crossed. An alleyway opened directly behind her. Her pose was casual, as if she was just passing the time of day by propping up the wall, but at the sight of the advancing black uniforms, her manner changed. She pushed away from the brickwork and took a cautious backward step, retreating. Then she spun and dived into the alleyway, disappearing from view.

“She’s keeping lookout for someone.” Sanchez was slipping her heavy wooden baton free from her belt even as she started in pursuit.

Ellen chased after. It was a sure bet that whoever Adeola Eriksen was keeping lookout for was engaged in something illegal. Ellen had lived in Roadsend all her life and knew every pathway. The alley Ade had fled down was a dozen meters long, leading to a small courtyard where carts were unloaded. This section of town was mainly commercial, and a warehouse robbery the most likely crime. However, as soon as she left the main street, Ellen heard groans and the thud of blows echoing from up ahead, and then Ade shouted out, “Blackshirts.”

As they raced along the alley, the sound of Militia boots ricocheted off the brick walls like whip cracks. Ellen burst into the open a step behind Sanchez. In the center of the courtyard stood a small intertwined knot of figures—three women, assaulting a fourth. Ade skidded to a stop beside them.

At the arrival of the Militiawomen, the three attackers released their grip on the victim, who staggered away, bent double and whimpering. One of the hoodlums turned and fled, heading for an exit on the opposite side of the courtyard. Ellen expected the others to follow, but instead with Ade, they stood their ground, clearly ready to fight.

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If the resolute response caught Sanchez by surprise, she reacted quickly, swinging her baton at the nearest woman, forcing the thug to duck. Before she had time to think, Ellen found herself face-to-face with another. The stocky woman was in her thirties, with a scar running down her chin and a nose that looked as if it had been broken on more than one occasion. Ellen was sure she was not a resident of Roadsend. The face was not one that could easily be forgotten.

The last of the daylight caught the gray sheen of metal across the woman's knuckles as her fist swung for Ellen's jaw. Ellen brought her baton across defensively. The crack of wood on bone drew a yelp of pain. The baton had made sharp contact with the woman's wrist, knocking her arm aside. Ellen followed up with a solid backswing into her opponent's stomach. The thug grunted as the air was thumped from her lungs and she curled forward, falling. Ellen completed the job by taking her feet from under her with a kick. The woman landed on the ground hard and made no immediate attempt to get up.

Ellen glanced across the courtyard, hesitating between securing the prisoner and going to help Sanchez. Despite being outnumbered two to one, the experienced sergeant had Ade in retreat. Ade's accomplice also looked to be withdrawing from the fight, but then shifted to the side and slipped swiftly through the shadows to a position behind Sanchez. The woman darted forward and a knife flashed out, thrusting for Sanchez's back. The attack took only an instant, giving no time for Ellen to shout a warning. The blade plunged into the black Militia jerkin.

Sanchez spun around, wrenching the hilt from the woman's hand. She lifted her baton and then froze. Her expression was a surprised frown. Clearly she realized that something significant had happened, but she looked more confused than alarmed. Then her right knee buckled, sending her staggering sideways. The thug moved forward, fists raised, for another attack.

Ellen charged across the courtyard, hoisting her baton. The sound of footsteps must have alerted the woman, because she ducked aside at the last moment. Yet she was too slow to avoid the blow completely. Ellen's heavy baton connected with the woman's collarbone to the unmistakable sound of cracking.

Ellen's momentum carried her on. Her shoulder drove into her target's back, catapulting the woman off her feet. She crashed to the

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ground and rolled over, squealing while trying to protect her broken shoulder, clearly no longer a threat. Ellen looked around. Ade and the other hoodlum had gone.

Nearby, Sanchez was on all fours, head sagging. As Ellen watched, the sergeant's arms gave way and she slumped to the ground. Ellen dropped to her knees beside her. Rivulets of blood were trickling between the cobblestones. Ellen stripped off her own jacket to press around the protruding knife hilt and stanch the flow.

The sound of movement made Ellen look up. Ade had returned, but only to help away her accomplice with the broken collarbone. The fight was over. In a dim corner of the courtyard, the initial assault victim had recovered sufficiently to stand upright, but was swaying like someone drunk. Dark blood stained the front of her clothes. More was smeared across her face. Despite the gloom and the blood, Ellen recognized her: Sally Husmann, the owner of a warehouse on Lower Docksides.

"Get help," Ellen shouted.

Husmann took a step backward. She did not look in Ellen's direction, showing no awareness that the Militiawomen were even there.

"The sergeant needs help. She's losing blood."

Again there was no answer. Sally Husmann's eyes were fixed on the departing hoodlums. She retreated another step and then turned as if about to flee in the opposite direction.

"Husmann, listen to me!"

The name drew a response. Husmann glanced back at Ellen, and then to the exit her assailants had left by, although they were no longer in sight. Her eyes returned to the blood-covered officer on the ground and she froze as if noticing Sanchez's condition for the first time. For the space of five heartbeats she simply stared, wide-eyed.

"Don't just stand there. Go and get help." Ellen heard her voice breaking in panic.

Husmann's expression cleared and she nodded. "I'll be back. I promise, I'll get someone." She turned and stumbled away.

Ellen heard Husmann's uneven footsteps fade down the passageway. The light in the courtyard was going, thickening the shadows. Something wet soaked into the knees of Ellen's trousers and she knew it was blood. Sanchez's eyes were open and her lips moved, trying to speak.

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“Knew it...the Mad Butcher...you’ve—” Then all movement ceased except for a trickle of blood from Sanchez’s mouth.

Tears of desperation stung Ellen’s eyes. She felt so useless. Anger flared, aimed at herself and her complete lack of the healer sense. Tests during childhood had shown that she was as devoid of the psychic ability as it was possible for any woman to be.

She pressed around the knife hilt, trying to block the outpouring of life. Her hands were sticky with congealing blood. Was she helping? Ellen did not know what else she could do. She was alone and out of her depth. Sanchez’s face was drained white against the black of her uniform. Black and white—and it was not simple at all.

“Hang on, Sarge. Just hang on.”



The main room of the Roadsend infirmary was silent. Ellen stood with her back braced against the wall, staring rigidly at the ceiling. She dared not lower her eyes. There were too many things in the room she did not want to look at. In the corner, one of the healers was tending to Sally Husmann. Not only would it be rude to watch, but the raging purple bruises and raw cuts on Husmann’s body were appalling. Ellen felt nauseous enough without unsettling her stomach further.

The door straight ahead was another thing Ellen did not want to stare at. On the other side was the room where Sanchez was lying. She had still been breathing when Ellen had helped carry her in, but would she keep doing it for much longer?

Dr. Miller was the most senior healer in Roadsend, responsible not only for running the infirmary, but also for overseeing all the healers and medics in town. That she had elected to treat Sanchez personally ought to have been reassuring—the town Doctor was blessed with the psychic healer sense to a high degree and very experienced in its use. However, it implied that Dr. Miller thought the injury beyond her assistants’ abilities. When she had seen the stab wound and the blood bubbling between Sanchez’s lips, her face had set in a grim expression that gave little grounds for confidence.

Most of all, Ellen did not want to look at her own hands. She had rinsed them, but she knew blood was still encrusted under her nails. She felt as if it had sunk into her skin, marking her like a tattoo, a visible sign

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of her shortcoming. What should she have done? If she had been less inexperienced and more alert, reacted faster, moved quicker—would she have been able to prevent the knife attack?

The sound of the street door made Ellen flinch. Corporal Terrie Rasheed and Patrolwoman Jude McCray bustled in and then stopped uncertainly, peering around until their eyes fixed on Ellen. They hurried over. Both were officially off duty and in civilian clothes.

“We heard Chris has been hurt. Where is she?” Corporal Rasheed asked.

Ellen pointed to the door. “In there.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. It was bad. Dr. Miller didn’t say anything, but...”

Ellen bit her lip. “We’ve just got to pray.”

“What happened?”

“We were on patrol. We came across a gang beating up Sally Husmann. I thought they’d run when they saw us, but they didn’t. We ended up in a fight and one of them stabbed Sarge.”

This was the point that Ellen could not come to terms with, making her doubt her own memory. Criminals ran from the Militia. It was the way things were. In order for a law-breaker to fight back, she had to be blind drunk, or panicked, or out of her head in some way—but not with this gang. They had coolly and purposefully taken on the Militia, and had been ready to kill. The thrust of the knife might not have been entirely in cold blood, but the initial decision to fight had been.

“Who were they?”

“Don’t know. I’ve never seen them before, except for Ade Eriksen, who was with them, acting as lookout.”

“Eriksen? I thought she’d gone to Eastford.”

“She’s come back.”

Jude McCray sighed. “That’s all we need.”

“How about Sally Husmann? Does she know who they were?” Rasheed continued her questions.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk to her yet.” Ellen nodded toward the corner where Husmann was being treated. “Lieutenant Cohen was here a few minutes ago. She’s in the Militia station now, but she left me to escort Husmann over as soon as the healers let her go.”

Again the street door opened. The new arrival was yet another distressing sight. Sanchez’s partner, Rhonda Tomczyk, slipped in and

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stood defensively, as if expecting bad news to fly at her in a physical attack. Her face was twisted in dread and confusion. She showed no sign of recognizing anyone until Corporal Rasheed scuttled to her side and put a hand on her arm.

Tomczyk turned to Rasheed. "Is Chris..." Her words ended in tears.

Rasheed shifted her hand to put a supportive arm around Tomczyk and started speaking in a voice too low for Ellen to make out. Jude McCray shuffled over, clearly ready to also offer what comfort she could. The three huddled in a knot, heads together.

Ellen rubbed her palms on her legs. Both her hands and the black trousers were stained. She felt awkward. Should she go over? Would Rhonda Tomczyk want to talk to her? Would the sight of Sanchez's blood be unbearably distressing? Ellen clenched her jaw. And was her dithering due to a fear that Tomczyk would hold her responsible? Yet Ellen knew she had to say something. She was present at the attack and the last person to talk with Sanchez. She was not the one in the most pain, either physical or emotional. Hanging back was pure cowardice on her part.

However, before Ellen could summon her resolve, another sound claimed her attention. In the corner, Sally Husmann had stood, all her clothing back in place and a trace of normal color to her cheeks. She was exchanging a few words with the healer, but then glanced nervously in Ellen's direction. Her expression wavered and her eyes flitted between the three Militiawomen present, as if she were estimating her chances of running away. Yet even had Ellen been alone, fleeing would be pointless. They all knew where she lived, as well as her place of business.

Husmann plodded across to Ellen. "Lieutenant Cohen wants to talk to me?"

"Yes. I'll escort you."

"There's no point. I don't know anything."

"You still know more than us. She wants to talk to you."

Husmann's expression crumpled in panic. Clearly she did know something. Had it been a random attack or robbery there would be no reason for her reaction or her unwillingness to talk to the Militia. Ellen took a firm grip on Husmann's arm and coaxed her forward.

As they passed the huddle at the door, Ellen was caught by the anguish in Rhonda Tomczyk's eyes, and her footsteps faltered. She could not walk by without speaking.

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“I’m really sorry. I did what I could. It was all so quick, but I’m sure Sarge is going to be fine. She’s in—” Ellen bit back the words that were perilously close to lying. She was not sure at all, and she knew it showed on her face. Ellen turned to Corporal Rasheed. “As soon as you hear anything, can you send a message over to the station?”

Rasheed nodded sharply.

Outside, night had fallen. The stars over Roadsend were in the same constellations as ever, but Ellen could not get over the feeling that the world they shone down on had changed.

The Militia station was only a few dozen meters away, on the opposite side of the main town square from the infirmary. Word had gone out and the remaining three patrolwomen of the Roadsend Militia were gathered in the briefing room. The faces turned anxiously to Ellen when she entered, although nobody spoke. Voicing the question aloud was unnecessary.

Ellen shook her head. “Dr. Miller is still tending to her.” She indicated the door of the lieutenant’s office. “Is Cohen in there?”

“Yup,” Penny Rambaldi answered. She raised her hand over her shoulder and rapped her knuckles on the door behind her. “Ma’am. Mittal is here with Husmann.”

“Send them in.”

Lieutenant Cohen was seated at her desk in the small office. The leader of the Roadsend Militia was in her mid fifties, fit and strong for her age, with a decisive manner. During her first year in the Militia, Ellen had respected Cohen and been pleased to serve under such an experienced officer. However, as the months passed, Ellen had come to realize that although Cohen’s manner might appear decisive, it was due solely to her habit of barking orders, regardless of her mood. Decisions were not something that came easily to her, and once she had set her mind, changing it was impossible, regardless of what fresh information might turn up.

Cohen waved Husmann to the seat opposite. Ellen took up position in the corner. Cohen had not told her to go and she wanted to hear what Husmann had to say.

The lieutenant pushed aside the papers on her desk and then looked up. “Thank you for coming. Do you feel all right?”

Husmann gave a sharp nod in reply.

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“I won’t keep you long.” Cohen leaned forward, resting her elbows on her desk. “Do you know the women who attacked you?”

“No.”

“They hadn’t been hanging around your warehouse?”

“No.”

“So you’d never seen any of them before?”

“No.”

Clearly Husmann was going to deny knowledge of everything, and Cohen was showing no sign of challenging her. Ellen knew she ought to keep quiet. The lieutenant was the one conducting the interview, and a rookie should not butt in without invitation, but after the trauma of the evening, she could not stop herself.

“You must have recognized Ade Eriksen.”

Husmann swiveled in her chair and looked back, eyes wide in alarm. “Well, yes, her of course, but none of the rest.”

Cohen glared at Ellen and raised her voice a notch. “But as I understand it, she was just keeping watch and wasn’t one of the people who assaulted you.”

Husmann turned back to the desk. “No...no, she wasn’t. That’s why I didn’t mention her before.”

Ellen tried to conceal her frustration. Husmann was lying, but rather than exploit her lapse to get to the truth, Cohen was giving her a hand in covering up.

The lieutenant continued. “So, can you tell us what happened?”

“I was on my way home, and I was going through the courtyard when they jumped me.”

“Did they say anything?”

“No.”

“Did they try to steal anything?”

“No...I don’t think so.”

“They were waiting for you in the courtyard?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean, they hadn’t followed you?”

“Oh, no.” Husmann’s voice was firmer. It was, Ellen judged, the first totally honest answer she had given.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“No.”

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Ellen could keep silent no longer. “You said you were on your way home.”

Again Husmann glanced around. “Yes.”

“Surely it’s off your route.”

“I was...ah...on my way to buy something,”

“What?”

Cohen slapped her hand angrily on her desk, reclaiming Husmann’s attention. “That is hardly important. I don’t think—” A knock on the door interrupted her. “What is it?”

“Ma’am, there’s a messenger from the infirmary,” Penny Rambaldi called from the briefing room.

“I’ll see her in a second.” Cohen looked at Husmann. “You can go. If you think of anything else, let us know.”

Husmann scooted from her seat and was through the door almost before the lieutenant had finished speaking. Ellen was about to follow, but Cohen called her back.

“Mittal.”

Ellen shut the door and stood at attention. The lieutenant’s tone had been decidedly officious. “Ma’am.”

“When I am interviewing someone, I do not appreciate interruptions.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. But Husmann was lying.”

“In your opinion.” Cohen’s tone made her words a challenge and a criticism.

“Ma’am, every trader in town knows all about Adeola Eriksen—she’s stolen from half of them. If Husmann was genuinely trying to help us, she’d have volunteered her name straight off. She wouldn’t have needed me to prompt her for it.”

Cohen looked unconvinced. “You seriously think that Husmann is trying to protect the people who attacked her?”

“I think she’s so frightened of them, she won’t risk upsetting them more.” Ellen took a deep breath. “Before she passed out, the last thing Sergeant Sanchez said was that she thinks it’s the big Eastford gang, spreading into our area. I’ve heard they—”

“No!” Once more, Cohen slammed her fist on her desk. “That’s ridiculous. And I don’t want you spreading those sort of wild rumors.”

“But—”

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“No buts. It’s an order. You’re not to say anything like that again.” Cohen sucked in a deep breath through flared nostrils. “Okay. Maybe Husmann is lying. In that case, I can tell you what the truth is. Husmann is in on some illegal deal. She tried to out-cheat her associates and they took their revenge. That’s why she’s covering. She’s as guilty as they are.”

Ellen stared at Cohen in bewilderment. Husmann was an established merchant, with no criminal record, and the scenario painted did not begin to explain the hoodlums’ willingness to fight and their ready use of lethal weapons. Yet a rookie could not argue with a lieutenant.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Send in Dr. Miller’s messenger.” Cohen nodded. “And I mean it about spreading rumors. At times like this, we need to keep calm heads.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ellen slipped from the room. One of the healers was waiting to go in. At the sight of her, any concerns over Husmann and the Eastford gang were blown away. Ellen felt her stomach knot. What did the messenger have to report? The healer’s face was professionally somber, but an instant later, the smiles from the others in the briefing room registered. Clearly, they had already heard the news, and it was good.

Ellen waited until the door had shut and then turned to a beaming Penny Rambaldi. “Sarge is going to be okay?”

“Yes. Dr. Miller is sure she’s going to be fine.”

Ellen found herself laughing in relief. The agony of the previous hour dispersed, like mist burned off by the rising sun.

Terrie Rasheed and Jude McCray arrived soon after to join the happy gathering and give a fuller report. Sanchez’s injuries included a collapsed lung. She would not be back on duty that month, but a complete recovery was promised. Ellen was called on to describe the incident again and then the informal meeting broke up.

The healer was still in with Cohen, and Ellen did not want to interrupt them, especially after already angering the lieutenant that evening. She sidled over to Corporal Rasheed. “What should I do now? There’s still half an hour of my shift to go.”

Rasheed ran her hands through her hair, looking unsure, but then sighed. “There ain’t much patrolling going to get done tonight, and

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you've had a tough time too. Go on. Clear off early. If your parents have heard the news, they'll be worrying about you."

"Thanks."

Ellen stopped by her locker to drop in her equipment belt with its baton and whistle, and also her heavy leather jerkin. She paused a moment over this last item. The leather was thick, intended to offer protection in a fight. A normal penknife would not have pierced it. The hoodlum's blade must have been heavy and sharp. A weapon, not a tool—as if any more proof were needed that the gang had set out prepared and ready to commit murder.

Ellen pushed the thought away and glanced at Penny Rambaldi, who was standing nearby, also sorting through her belongings. "Corporal Rasheed told me I can go home early."

"Now there's a surprise."

The dry, sarcastic tone surprised Ellen. "Why?"

"Because you can't send a rookie out on her own. Terrie would have had to give up her own free time to puppy walk you."

"Oh." That had not occurred to Ellen, but regardless of Rasheed's reason, she was not about to complain.

The town square was now in darkness, except for moonlight splashed across the cobbles and strips of thin yellow lamplight escaping between window shutters. Ellen's family lived on the north end of town, on the far side of Newbridge Road—the wrong side of Newbridge Road in the eyes of many. Ellen had grown up with the disdain, and daydreamed of the day when promotion would give her the salary to move her family to a better part of town. For now, though, it was home, and she set off eagerly.

However, before she had gone a dozen steps, a whisper hailed her from a darkened alleyway. "Officer."

She stopped. "Who's there?"

Sally Husmann stepped from the shadows. "It's me."

"What do you want?"

"How is Sergeant Sanchez?"

"She's going to be okay."

"Oh, that's good. I'm so pleased."

Ellen folded her arms and considered the warehouse owner. "You weren't telling the whole truth to the lieutenant, were you?"

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“I...it’s not easy. I don’t mean to...it...” Husmann’s voice drifted into incoherence as her eyes sank.

“It’s the Eastford Butcher and her gang, isn’t it?”

Husmann’s head jerked up. “I can’t...they’ll—” She broke off, panting in fear. “You don’t understand.”

“We won’t understand unless you tell us. We need to know what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s it?”

“I wish I could help, but I—” Husmann stopped. “Here. Take this.”

Ellen held out her hand, wondering what sort of clue Husmann would pass over. Instead, several coins landed in her palm.

“Can you see that gets to Sanchez? I’m sure she can use it, what with the new baby and all. And tell her I’m sorry.”

Husmann backed off into the darkness and fled, leaving Ellen alone in the town square, holding a fistful of coins.