

# Volume 3 – Minda falters

## Opening

(Preceded by **The story so far** and **catch-up with people and places**.)

Minda had never been moody before. Now her whole life was a broken basket, full of talon-edged holes, unable to keep its shape, every load working it apart a little more. A pauper's forlorn hope not a duchesses' cradle for new hopes. She had woven her servants to the best of her ability but each was a small part and had to be joined to the others. If only she could weld them like iron into a single piece that rang when struck. What had gone wrong? She didn't know, it was like trying to catch butterflies.

Her accounts, and more importantly her finances, were getting sorted out by Francis Tomlyn and the two clerks. She'd worked hard on them in the last month and they were becoming a trusted and happy team. She knew clerks didn't like responsibility so it was up to her to train them. She gave them little tasks, explained what she wanted, then gave them praise and happy treats when they found they could-if-they-tried. She whistled for her private clerk Paul. "Get the painter to put a nice sign on the door to the Business Office saying 'Exchequer'. You'll have to spell it right for him. Ask Derek Driver to screw it on one night as a surprise for them."

"Please Minda Allesandro has just arrived as you requested and a messenger from Melbun has arrived with him. He has a handful of official letters and dozens for the cadets. Also three personal servants have been sent for the cadets."

"Thank you Paul. Can you spare a minute?"

"Yes Minda."

"Paul – You still call me Minda but everyone has gone back to calling me 'miss'. Why?"

"Because you insisted. I follow your commands not fashion Minda."

"That's very sweet of you. I meant why have the others changed?"

"Um. You are more direct now. More like a master than a maid. I would call you miss."

"Do you remember those days between Mid-winter and Christmas Paul?"

"Yes of course. You trapped me with your charm just like the Abbot said all women did! It was lovely miss. Ice inside me melted and for that I will ever be grateful."

"You should know I worked hard at that. I do love you Paul but I'm not a lovable person myself. I thank you for your loyalty through all our troubles."

"What troubles Minda?"

"My troubles."

"Please Minda may I say something?"

"Yes please Paul. I wish somebody would."

"Lucky and I – begging your forgiveness – have spoken about a thing Lucky called the 'scum on the surface of your well'. I'm sorry Minda. When he said it I could see what he meant. We pray together when we can."

"I don't pray to God Paul. You don't pray to me or the King. He will either look after us or leave us at the mercy of evil whatever he wants. On this earth I will be doing the King's work for him and giving him a few hints how he could do better. And I will do it direct not through a courtiers. If God himself asked me for a dozen angels to do good work then I would set about it. You know for yourself what the Church is good at..."

"I have my doubts Minda. Where was God when the Abbot tried to poison Little Arthur? – His own son."

"Or tried to poison me?"

"You have your own guardian Minda. When you are dead your legend will live brightly everywhere they work iron."

"But I'll be dead."

"We all will be one day."

"I tell you what Paul. Shall the two of us have a meal together to deal with the smouldering feud between the Abbey and the Dukedom that hasn't been put out yet? You tell them I want to damp down the embers of past fires – we have to work together – they know I'm not evil by now. Oh and get two really good bottles of wine off them and they can have their poisoned one back. Make that three!"

"Yes mis//Minda."

"See! It's getting to you as well. Hmm – Please tell Allesandro he will be most welcome even in his road-clothes."

That had been a moment of interest. Paul was nice, she could rest in his arms watching the fire – the sort of man you'd want as an older brother but not as sparkly as Tom Watts. She must have a daughter-to-mother talk with Doreen about Tom.

With her characteristic reaction Minda had turned the castle from the cowering hole of inhospitality she found at mid-winter to an efficient machine for dealing with every sort of visitor from King to beggar. Even when their own returned tired, say from team exercises someone was automatically detailed to ease their exhaustion. Minda said that any enemy appearing at the gatehouse would be confused and any enemy who had taken the trouble to find out about the castle would have understood that a castle that looks after its visitors would be really really good at looking after its own. Derek Driver, ex-steward now clerk-of-works, husband of the current steward, had so many men and so much timber being needed for barracks and stables contracted and delivering that the gatehouse made the obvious place to check and direct people quickly. Allesandro arrived at Minda's parlour after a servant had helped him wash and quickly dress in his show clothes. Five seconds after he entered cakes and sweet wine were brought.

"Your servant Your Grace."

"I've just been telling my staff they're to call me Minda. Sorry. I'm confused. Welcome to Bartonbry Allesandro."

"Would you be called Minda then Your Grace?"

"Go on. Nobody else does!"

"You English ladies are so elusive! So my friend Ripetto says."

"How is he?"

"The doctors say he won't use his legs again. He sent a message for you."

"Did you give it to Paul?"

"No your//Minda. He said I had to give it to you myself. He said I was to put my arm around your waist, look away, get a soft kiss then give you the most passionate kiss ever."

"Poor man. I suppose you'd better give me his message."

"Did he really give you that message Allesandro?"

"Yes. He said you'd ask."

"Then I know it came from him. And I know if he trusted you then I can trust you."

"But please miss, and / / Minda! How can you trust me when you can't trust him."

"I didn't stab him. I sometimes wish I had done because he was cruel to two women and deserved to be hurt in return. But the past is where the dead men live."

"He asked to be forgiven."

"I won't forgive him. It's for his wife and Rose. Do you know his wife Allesandro?"

"Johanna."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you she couldn't bear him leaving on his missions and he couldn't bear to be held back. Physically she would hold him and he would reject her."

"No."

"When he went away she was blind and friendless again. No wonder she clung to him." There was silence. "I can't get married but what about you Allesandro?"

"I tried as a youth and had to escape my country as a result. Then I left it alone for fun on the road. Then I wished I had a wife. Then I found one but – hm – she had a different way of adding-up than me. I tried, God if he is listening knows I tried, I tried to show her the balance of income and expense how to build friendship to earn a free night under another's roof but her soul had been eaten by magic."

"Your magic. You're very clever so I'm told. Little Arthur's memory of you is just a confused blur."

"Little Arthur Griggs? The one that dressed as the Abbot and was given a jewelled dagger by the King at Melbun?"

"Yes. You took a penny off him at the Mid-winter fair for a display of magic."

"That knife must be worth a thousand pounds or more. He's worrying about a penny!"

"That knife is useless in a fight. The King really gave it to me and I don't know what to do with it. The sooner I can give it back in exchange for a jest or two at his table the better I will be pleased."

"Why did he give it to you Minda?"

"Allesandro. I have heard of you at Bartonbry at Midwinter and Ripetto has hinted good things about you but we have been sharing a little sweet wine and already you are a councillor!"

"It is you who are searching for council Minda." Allesandro tried to look like the uncle he never was. "You called me. My best friends say you are worth every support. How may I support you? I have no more to say."

She whistled for Paul... "Note for Silks – Allesandro has arrived. His gift is more welcome than he knows. My love to him and Johanna and Rose and he is to convey my love to them himself. I am safe and well and Allesandro will be fishing with me for a month or two. – Sorry Allesandro. This is Paul who is Xavier's agent and my private secretary. If you have a private name to use in that letter the choice is up to you."

"How did you know?" asked Paul.

"It was so obvious I asked Xavier to his face when I was at Melbun and he admitted it. That was lucky for you really. If it is any consolation Lucky knows too. If you have been confessing secrets to him then remember he is only looking after me. You could be a really bad person, you know, one day a poisoner next a really efficient collector of names at the Melbun cadet trials. I have agreed with X that your reports will continue and I will make sure they are accurate and complete. That will be all."

Allesandro asked "Minda. Ripetto has told me about how Paul attempted to poison you. Why do you trust him."

"A person can only be in one place at a time. Either they are with me or against me. Paul decided to change sides. I'm sure you have been told to look after me even though it was me that commanded you to come. Ripetto was right to warn you about me but you have nothing to fear if you're not afraid of anything."

"Um. That sounds like a promise of violence and storms."

"What are you afraid of Allesandro?"

"Nothing."

"I'm afraid of owls."

"Owls?"

"An I get very cross when people repeat what I say."

"Get cross then Your Grace. Owls?"

"Point taken. We have more important things to talk about. I sent for you because I was bored and had a thought you might brighten up Bartonbry. Between then and now I remembered your connection with Ripetto and possibly Italian banking families. You have already lifted my spirits with a fresh breeze of trust and understanding."

"Ripetto told me that I must demand to be paid in true money but I should expect a bonus worth twice that."

"I will pay you ten pounds tomorrow. When you want more come and ask."

Allesandro had never made a bargain that ate its own tail like this before. "Now I know what Ripetto meant when he said you walked in loyalty like others walk in the rain. That's a very good bargain."

"When we find a worthwhile bonus you can have it. Is that fair?"

"Very fair. What do you want me to do?"

"First you must see Doreen. She is the steward and chief-of-staff. I employ her and she employs everyone else. She runs the whole castle. She'll see you're properly looked after but will use your balls for bullseyes if you pester the women – I'm afraid that was a sad time before I arrived. Second – No!" She gave Arthur's whistle...

...A servant appeared. She said "Please miss Arthur has been taken by the Black Team."

"Thank you Agnes. Agnes this is Allesandro an old friend of mine. I trust him but you shouldn't." She winked and smiled. "Allesandro this is my maid Agnes. She's only been with me a few weeks. – Send him to me when he returns please."

"Yes miss."

When she'd left Minda admitted "She's not the right person to be a maid but I said I'd take her from the home that was crushing her. She's harmless but can't hit the nail on the head. – Like me I suppose."

"From what I've heard you are hitting a lot of nails on their heads Minda."

"It might seem like that to you but everything is wherrity. The quartermaster of Scamson's soldiers was corrupt and while he never needed to eat again the soldiers went hungry until I could do something. The price of lead has doubled and suddenly builders are demanding concessions and perks – Just because I have to build stables and barracks quickly they think they have me over a barrel. There's going to be some very sorry builders soon as soon as I bring in men from Lostnock. And I'll make sure the Lostnock builders show me where the Bartonbry ones have cheated me."

"Your Grace. I must be formal for a moment. Ripetto sent me to see X before coming here. I am one of us. But Ripetto said you never had a father and that's what you might need if Mr. Bob was back at Lostnock. I have no living children and I wouldn't tell you as a father what to do but I am now fifty years old and have seen the world and I will do my best to be the understanding father you never had if you want old arms to catch your moods."

Minda saw the brute black of the intelligencers manipulating her and the stronger white of their care for a sword that they hoped would defend them. "I am my own mistress Allesandro but I work with others. I should have said you'd be paid nothing

and watched! – No! Don't worry Allesandro. It is nice to have friends watching over you. When I know you better we must share our worries."

"You still haven't said what you really wanted me for Minda."

"As I said I called for you on a girl's whim. I'm pleased at the outcome. I miss Silks and Mr. Bob – You will have to do in their stead. I thought perhaps you might show the Black Team some skills."

"What is the Black Team?"

"Ripetto asked me to take his son away from the feckless youth of Melbun and train him a bit like I had been. I said he needed some friends with him. The next day the King announced that I will be taking fifteen year-old boys and that the leading families should put theirs forward. I added I would take girls and one of my servants decided to add a couple of half-criminal orphan boys from the quays. I now have twenty in the castle in four teams of five. The Black Team is Jane Weston – the Duke of Weston's daughter, John and James Taylor orphans and quay labourers, Maggie Ulex daughter of a spicer and Rachel Whin daughter of an armourer. The last two ran away to be with me. We held a trial at Melbun to cut out the runts and the Black Team were brilliant. The other teams were all boys from leading families."

"Ripetto told me about the school for teenagers to learn respect but not the detail. Have you thought that every leading family is watching you and talking about you every day?"

"Yes. And what have I achieved?"

"I don't know. What?"

"I have the Black Team that are – I admit it – my favourites who keep climbing higher hills so they can enjoy rolling down them together. I love them all! Then the others. Boys are so boring. They get given tasks and muddle through but won't stop and think first, they won't trust each other and they can't enjoy learning. I'm sure some are beginning to see that really practising sword fighting is better than playing and posing but they don't have the fun of life. I thought of spreading the girls between them but that wouldn't last. My criminals and runaways have a magic of their own they made in an hour."

"Like you charmed me within seconds of my arrival. I thought I was the one with the magic! I must meet this Black Team."

"I was hoping you could show them the arts of deception."

"Why? What good would it be to them?"

"The boys were petty thieves. The girls appear completely honest. I would like the girls to be confident of picking pockets and the boys to appear above suspicion. These are X's apprentices. But mind! – They don't know it."

"Um. I can't teach them pocket-picking but I may be able to show them many frauds and how to conceal and confound suspicion. From what you say they may have the right minds."

"How so? The right minds?"

"Practice, attention, practice, attention, practice and attention. If the boys in the Black Team will take their lead from the girls then you will have a weapon. How would you use it though?"

"I thought they might steal things."

"What things?"

"Papers."

"Substitute. Er – Sorry to be blunt. You would take one away and put a similar one in its place. For example your will to say everything should be left to the Abbey. This isn't street crime but team-work over weeks."

"Good. That's what I want to hear."

"But do you know what you're trying to do in the first place?"

"No. I just want them ready for whatever may come. All I can do is train them and they will have to use their sense and my training as best they can."

"So you'll be sending children to war?"

"Not yet I hope. Give me two years. With uncles like you they can live lives that don't burn them up but when we need flames to fight flames we have them ready."

"You really are deep Minda."

"No. It only came clear talking to you Allesandro... ..Will you have a room in the castle? It's up to you. Ask Doreen – She deals with everything."

"What about Arthur?"

"Say hello. Teach him a trick to show the Black Team. I let them borrow him – It gives them a focus of responsibility. Even if he is not good at it he will encourage them to try themselves. They will find out from him how it is done anyway but it's a really good way to get them interested in tricks so they can come to you for more."

"You take my breath away with your guile Minda."

"Are we done for now Allesandro?"

"No! I have another message."

"Who from?"

"Guess."

"Oh I hate it when people say 'guess'. "

"The King himself. I was shown into a room and the King questions me and I told him how we both knew Little Arthur. His face lit up. He held my arm close and said he understood I was being sent to keep a fatherly eye on you – I'm only reporting what was said! He said you were precious to him as a daughter and as the whip to a horse. I asked him to explain because it made no sense to me. He said the horse may be willing but sometimes it needs a reminder for its duty. He says 'You are his daughter. He doesn't know how much love he has but you can have all you want. He doesn't know how much strength he has but if he needs some can he borrow it from you?' Minda went into what Delphia called a 'thought egg'. Allesandro understood concentration,

kept silent and observed closely. When she 'returned' he smiled and stayed silent.

"So! I'm to be the next king. That's what he thinks! Just because I'm innocent of the corruption of the court he thinks of me as his successor! What an idiot! Let him sweep the shit away himself not leave it to a woman to do the dirty work! Men! Simple and stupid!"

In the castle Minda only had Doreen or the Black Team to talk to as sensible women and the Black Team were half boys and half girls. Agnes had the mind of a weathervane. Brand was a good teacher of what he knew but not a confidant. Flor was finding how to make things happen, but even though they'd spent many nights wrapped in the same blanket under a hedge he was incapable of strategic or sensitive thought. Lucky was her hovering angel, he could find a way to blunt a sharp edge but not to guide her. She was so lucky with what she had but she needed something more.

It took her a while of solitary concentration to admit she didn't know what she was doing or why. Everyone else seemed to know but not her. 'Making a generation of administrators', 'Sweeping away outlaws', 'holding my son hostage when he could be... ', 'A mere child teaching mine! What does she know? The King is bewitched' NO! This is what other people wished! These were side branches! She must be the main trunk. How did the main trunk know it was the main trunk? She remembered mistress Marline saying she was a bud waiting to flower. Now she was the bud at the top of the main trunk! But she was more worm-eaten than ever! Ever-crippled and wind between the ears. Nothing joined properly.

Doreen found Minda crying. Minda couldn't explain why she was crying. "Hold my hand daughter." was the best Doreen could improvise. A hug would have been too demanding for the fragile teenager.

The setting sun coloured the sky and the veined river pink as a regiment of silhouetted geese honked their way to roost in the meadows. Shadows full of velvet colours crept out of the banks onto the fields. Thin layers of mist sketched their beds for the night across the valley. Three of the Black Team were whispering and waiting for the others who were fumbling a hundred paces away in a nervous experiment for two.

The other three teams were busy at their desks in the schoolroom writing home. Minda had insisted that this should be before supper. Poor writers would get all the help they needed if they asked but there was no supper for a team until there was a clear letter from everyone in the team. (The boys in the Black Team were exempted on the grounds they were orphans and had nobody to write to. The fact they had never had an hour's writing lesson in their lives was also a factor. Minda compensated by saying to them all that one day they would have to write to the King himself to make up for it. They made



an effort and were helped by the girls but learning to write takes time.)

Sam Scamson's recruits were restless. They'd assumed that the royal messenger would be carrying their pay. They had picked-up enough from the residents of Bartonbry to guess the Duchess would sort things out but there seemed to be a wall of not wanting to know from the castle. At least now they were getting their meals but that was about all. They drew lots to see who should put their grievance to Lord Scamson or 'dough-head' as he was more generally known. His response was understanding but worthless.