

Strychnine for Beginners

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Calpurnia's such a tease. I really don't know what we're going to do with her.

Of course I blame Nahti. He always had a soft spot for children, especially those here at court. I must admit that Calpurnia's winsome big-eyed looks are hard to resist. But I still maintain he started all the trouble by indulging her with those spells of his.

"Just trinkets, ma'am," he used to say to me in that idiotic sing-song voice I remember so well. And Odo was inclined to take the same view. Perhaps they were right; perhaps it was hard to see the *imaginative* use Calpurnia would put them to.

"Creative," Nahti called it. He was vain like all wizards. No doubt he thought it reflected well on him. Even Odo didn't seem bothered – although I remember him saying to me, "Look at what *your* daughter's done, my dear." That's a sign of guilt if you like, even if he was smiling as though it was nothing. Well, I don't call using an inside-out spell on the castle's cats nothing – I call it positively sickening. And as I said to Odo, it's all very well saying they're her pets, but what about the servants who have to clean up the mess?

I realise now that a number of things that happened around the castle must have been her doing. It was probably the cats episode that set her off on that particular road. Just a few months later, I recall, there was Vartin's mishap in the air-lock. He was clumsy, that was true, and as Odo said, we had enough princes – more than enough, if it came to that; but he was my son. I feel quite strongly about things like that: the maternal instinct, I suppose. She certainly had us fooled, though. That convincing performance with the tears when she was still sitting just a few metres from the vacuum controls! And pointing the finger at that dreadful Chamberlain was a master-stroke.

As for the business with the servitors, a lot of people will say it's an entirely different thing. Giant moths, Odo called them in that contemptuous way of his. I rather think his youngest daughter inherited something of that attitude. But they're mild, very good with children and can reach all sorts of inaccessible places. And it's such a trial to keep the venomous fungi clear of the roof gaps, now that they're all gone. I'm sure she must have used a spillkorn bat on them. That phrase of hers, "Whack on the back!" takes on a horrid new meaning in this light. It's true, too. A whack on the back with one of those things, and the room's full of ex-servitor.

I won't deny that she had her uses. When that ugly Ramon arrived with his fleet, Odo was all for outright war. But I told him not to be a fool. "What chance do we have with starcruisers surrounding the castle? Play along with him," I said. "Let's flatter him and string him along. And send Prince Valdemar out in a trader to your cousin Harada. It's time that gangling oaf did something to help."

Well of course we never needed Harada's battalions.

"This is my youngest daughter, Duke," said Odo; and I must admit that the sight of such a little girl, in pink bows and yellow frills, softened the heart of the old curmudgeon. Yes, she was really very good.

"What's this?" she asked, as if she didn't know, touching his alarm torc. And needless to say he took it off and put it on her golden curls. He even smiled as he did so – although I think that wrinkled old gaza-nut nearly broke with the effort. Then of course it was a simple thing to offer him that plate of snappers. She offered some to me too, the little minx! But something in those innocent silver eyes put me on my guard.

"A bitter flavour," Ramon observed as he chewed his snappers. That has to go down as his last actual sentence, since it would have needed a language master to make anything of his subsequent utterances. Jalan, the physician, certainly thought on his feet. He diagnosed a fatal flare-up of Tri-Aleph fever, a clever move since Ramon had lived there for several years as part of another of his interminable wars of conquest. Ramon's officers were stunned by what happened, but somehow nobody could believe that such a sweet little girl could have anything to do with it. Some of them even tried to comfort her and dry her tears.

You'll think me stupid, but even when I tucked Calpurnia up in bed later I missed the significance of Nahti's books on her screens: *Strychnine for Beginners*, and *Practical Vivisection*. Of course they're classics, in their own mordant way. I've read them myself, and I've never poisoned anyone. Well, certainly not with strychnine, anyway. It's not something you'd think of in this day and age.

Still, Nahti, if he encouraged her, certainly paid the price. Again it's another one of those incidents that can't definitely be laid at our little schemer's door; but knowing what we now know it seems the sort of prank that would amuse her.

Astamar, Nahti's acolyte, supplied the few details we have of the incident. Piecing together his whispered fragments, it seems that Nahti was engaged on his usual monthly convocation of spirits and demons. Then one of them – I think the name was *Schrank* – appeared unbidden and advanced towards Nahti. This sort of thing happened from time to time, but what was different on this occasion was that

Nahti's spells failed to stop the demon. Even the pentangle was no protection. Schrank *expanded* in the way that demons do until he became all mouth, and that was, naturally, the end of Nahti.

Knowing his puny powers were useless, Astamar fled the chamber as soon as things began to go wrong. He just had time to place a closing spell around it while those horrible scraping sounds echoed throughout the castle. Odo went at once to his brother Kyril who very kindly lent him his wizard. Apparently it was no problem dispelling Schrank. But my brother-in-law's wizard did say that something must have acted to prevent Nahti's spells. Even some fresh blood in the chamber, apparently, would be enough. And knowing my youngest daughter's penchant for that particular substance, I drew my own conclusions.

I won't deny I was upset. Nahti was irritating at times, even a nuisance: his constant bragging got on my nerves. But he was useful to us on plenty of occasions. The annoying thing is that Astamar was also no further use, after what he'd witnessed in Nahti's chamber. As Odo put it, his mind went wandering in other caverns. We had to have him shut up, which was annoying. So there we were without a decent spellcaster in the whole castle! – barring my own little pixie, that is. It was such a job to get hold of a new wizard without the other warlords finding out we were defenceless.

Still, I think I could have forgiven Calpurnia all these tricks and trials if it wasn't for what she did yesterday. She is my own golden-haired daughter, after all. But this time we caught her red-handed.

Literally.

Trying out her vivisection skills on my dearest Odo! That was just too much. She wouldn't say how she tricked him into putting his hands into the power cuffs, but it was hard to resist her appealing ways.

I was especially annoyed by her naughtiness yesterday because I was looking forward to eating Odo myself soon. (Not *alive*, of course! I'd have taken care of him properly.) But more than that, I realised just how much he'd come to mean to me. Of course we had to have a guard put him out of his misery straightaway – and there wasn't even any good eating left.

So, as I say, it's difficult to know what to do with Calpurnia.

But on reflection, I think a fricassee might be best.