



The Stories of
The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea

Book 12

Lord Efran and the
Battle of
Kittim vs Nephilim

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

It was late in the day of November first when Minka wandered out to the back fence to watch the sun set over the Sea. The platforms that had been built for this purpose were demolished by Symphorien's nest building of three weeks ago, and had not been rebuilt. Since that cataclysm, the cliffs had fallen to the point that no one was tempted to climb the fence for a view of the Sea.

Minka was mostly alone this far out on the grounds; training was done for the day, so the archers and sparring groups had been dismissed and everyone was going in to wash up for dinner. Minka knew that if she didn't show up to the dining hall shortly, Efran would come looking for her.

But she had to watch, especially today. The fiery light spreading across the water was the only thing that seemed to comfort her each time she discovered that she was not pregnant. She and Efran had been married for 17 months now, and she knew that her failure to conceive was not his fault—he had fathered two children already, one when he was only eleven. No, it was entirely her inadequacy.

She leaned her forehead on the balusters while the light continued to diminish, painting the cloudy sky an exuberant purple, orange, and pink, and the Sea a golden red. She breathed the colored light in with the air, and heard the bells sweetly tolling a call to prayer. She whispered, "Thank You. Even if You do not bless me with that, You have greatly blessed me in many, many other ways, especially with Efran and Joshua—"

Feeling someone draw near, and expecting Efran, she turned with the promise on her lips to come in shortly. But it was Wyeth beside her, and she quickly looked around for his new wife. "Wyeth! Where is Cyr?"

"She has gone in for dinner, and I will join her soon. You should come in, too, *apele*," he said.

"*Apele*," she repeated. "I don't know that word."

"Apricot," he said—generally regarded as the Polonti's favorite fruit.

"No, Wyeth," she groaned, looking out to the Sea. The sky was dark purple now, the red dissolving into black.

"Thank you for finding me a good wife. I will love her and be faithful to her. But you will always be our *moiwahine*"—queen. He took her hand to kiss it, then leaned down to kiss her cheek fondly and correctly as a subject of the Queen. Stepping back, he bowed and walked away.

"Oh, no." She didn't want to be anyone's queen—not the Polonti's nor the faeries'. She closed her eyes, then looked around at how dark it had grown. Wiping her face, she turned to run toward the back door, lit by a lantern, then she had to slow down again. It had been only two weeks since she had cracked a rib getting Symphorien's egg unstuck, and whenever she overexerted herself, she felt it.

She entered the back corridor to see Efran standing at the nursery door, looking around anxiously as he held ten-month-old Joshua. Spotting her, he came toward her, demanding, "There you are! Why were you out so late?" Seeing her face, he stopped. "What happened?"

Minka lowered her head, smiling in reassurance. "You will just have to keep trying," she said, quoting his standard attempt at consolation whenever she grieved her infertility.

“Oh.” He let down in sympathy, reaching to encompass her shoulders with his free arm. “Yes. I will.”

He walked her to the dining hall, to their usual table in the back, and held her elbow to assist her stepping over the bench. Glancing down the table, he sat with Joshua. Efran’s 16-year-old daughter Ella was two places down, those being filled by potential suitors. She had men on all other sides of her. One of them had to get up for her half-brother, 18-year-old Cyneheard, to sit with his plate and ale across from her.

Ella and Cyneheard both looked over as Efran and Minka sat. The two men in the intervening places made as if to move, but Efran said, “Stay; I’m sure you had to fight for those seats.”

“Yes, sir, and all I had was a fork,” the man next to Ella said, and they all laughed.

Digging into his sausage and cabbage, Cyneheard said, “Captain Towner says I’m coming along quite well in my training, Captain. I’m particularly deadly with the javelin.”

This observation caused some of the men nearby to quietly choke, but Efran restrained himself to a mere smile as he said, “Yes, I heard. Don’t worry about the window.”

“Thank you, sir,” Cyneheard said as if he had been expecting to hear just that.

Ella looked toward Minka with something on her mind, but a sentry leaned down between Efran and the man on his left. “Letter just arrived from Surchatain Auber of Crescent Hollow, Captain. His messengers have been put up at Croft’s for the night.”

“Very good. Thank you,” Efran said, taking the letter and breaking the seal. He leaned toward Minka, holding the letter so that she could read it with him:

“From: Surchatain Auber of Crescent Hollow
“To: Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands

“Greetings from your ally and admirer to the west. It is my great privilege to invite you and your beautiful wife to attend our newly reinstated Autumn Faire, which begins November 3 and runs for the next three days. In gratitude for your great kindness and generosity to our own Lord Bache with the return of his gold, and Lord Chorley with the receipt of his sister Lady Fallis and her children, I and my wife Surchataine Gaea earnestly desire to host you and your wife at our estate Plumtree.

“We are also thrilled at your conferring a title upon our Lord Goadby, and inducing him to build a second ale plant on your lands. Lord Goadby earnestly desires to greet you, and also, if possible, the young woman, Geneve, the construction supervisor’s assistant who managed to acquire the necessary stone for the completion of that building.

“Anxiously awaiting an affirmative reply to our invitation.”

“Oh, we need to go. Do you think you can?” Efran whispered.

“Yes, if we take a carriage. I’d love to go,” Minka said.

“Good. We’ll make it for just one day—although, it would have nice had he given us more notice,” Efran said,

looking around for a sentry. He caught the eye of the man he wanted, who came over to salute.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Ellor, take this over to Estes; tell him we’d like to go for one day. We’ll need a carriage and a bodyguard,” Efran said, handing him the letter.

“Yes, Captain.” Ellor trotted toward the head table with the letter, where Estes and DeWitt sat with their wives.

“Oh, please put Martyn in the bodyguard. He’s been wanting to say hello to Geneve again, but can’t seem to catch her,” Minka said.

“You pick the bodyguard,” Efran said, smiling.

“How many?” she asked, grinning.

“Four. Will that accommodate your favorites?” he asked, brows lifted humorously.

“Yes, if you multiply that by ten,” she said. He laughed, hugging her.

On the morning of the following day, November 2nd, Surchatain Auber’s messengers were sent back with Efran’s acceptance of Auber’s invitation to him and his wife for November 5th. Their party would arrive in the late afternoon, attend the Faire on the 6th, and then leave on the following morning. Geneve would accompany Minka in the carriage.

Preparations for the departure began at once. Efran had the stablemen pull out the Abbey’s best carriage so that they could clean and buff it, but especially refurbish the suspension system. Greves’ crew replaced the metal springs with leather straps that would swing instead of bounce, making for a much more comfortable ride.

The men that Minka chose for the bodyguard—Martyn, Rigdon, Tourse, and in deference to Geneve, her husband Melchior—were notified to appear in the courtyard early on the 5th in uniform for a three-day assignment to Crescent Hollow.

Geneve was ecstatic at the opportunity, of course. She had actually been to Crescent Hollow about five months ago as part of the bodyguard that escorted Lord Bache back home with a great deal of gold that had been stolen from him. She had been wearing an Abbey uniform at the time, and much ado was made of the attractive woman soldier. But she had noticed the particular attention that Crescent Hollow women paid to their clothing, and the styles that were de rigueur in the upper class. So she packed royals accordingly for Melchior to carry.

She was also, frankly, a little perturbed that he had been chosen for this assignment, because she remembered quite well how Polonti were shunned in Crescent Hollow—more so than in Eurus, even. Barr, who had been part of that bodyguard, had elicited gasps upon his entrance at Bache’s estate. He was accepted only because of Bache’s hearty greeting, as well as his own courteous, almost refined manners and attractive appearance. Melchior was neither refined nor attractive, just a good man.

Someone else took note of the Abbey Lord’s scheduled departure for the morning after next, and quietly slipped out to run to Westford and hire a fast carriage to Eurus.

That afternoon, Efran sat in the second-floor workroom to discuss security with Estes, DeWitt, and Commander

Wendt. Efran told them, “Estes, you’ll be in charge, but Lyte will be in command of the army. Anything that comes up involving the men or defenses, he’ll have complete authority to act. What do you think, Commander?” He turned to the blind Wendt with a wry smile.

“Ohhh,” groaned Wendt, “you’re referring, of course, to the Great Debacle of Forty-Nine when vagrants attacked the outpost at Nicarber, and Lietes had left on a wolf hunt without investing command authority in me or anyone for areas outside of Westford. The residents were reduced to fighting for their lives on their own. One man finally rode in to tell me that Lietes had been located and given his blessing for my interference, so you and I and all the men we could gather high-tailed it down there and took out about a hundred vagrants in the first half-hour.”

“That was fun,” Efran said, remembering.

Wendt retorted, “You can well say that, because your head wasn’t on the chopping block when Lietes returned to Westford and we were all gone. He hadn’t been contacted by anyone; it was just some desperate Nicarbran who enlisted the army of Westford on the spot.”

Contemplatively, Efran said, “Watching you ’splain matters to Lietes was a master class in spanking a superior.”

Estes chuckled and DeWitt said, “The moral of the story is, Lyte can act if he needs to without securing permission from anyone.”

Efran said, “That is correct. Be sure to tell him that.” He paused. “I have a pricking in my thumbs about something here. Has anyone heard from Justinian? The last letter we got was a week ago, when he told us about Symphorien dropping Eadgifu into the middle of Blairgowrie and Adele’s garden party. I need to know whether Blairgowrie has recovered or if someone else is in charge.”

There was a brief silence, then DeWitt said, “We’ll send up a pair of scouts to Eurus tomorrow morning” —November 3rd.

“Good,” Efran said, and Wendt nodded.

Efran’s prickings were warranted, for by this time Blairgowrie, unrecovered, had vanished from his bed; Adele had flown, and the Councilors of Eurus were convening about a strategy to make their presence felt in the Southern Continent.

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Chapter 2

The morning of November 5th arrived, at which time the carriage was brought around to the front courtyard to be loaded with traveling provisions, a few weapons, and the women’s luggage. Minka packed a few good dresses for tonight and tomorrow night, but mostly casual clothes for riding and walking at the Faire.

She was greatly looking forward to it, remembering the trip she and Adele had made with their father and his courtiers when she was about nine years old. It was perfectly delightful, with treats and puppet shows, singers, minstrels, acrobats, and much good food. For this trip, she made sure to pack at least one pair of pants, which

had so intrigued Lord Bache. Other than that, she hardly gave a thought to her clothes and it never occurred to her to wonder what the fashions were in Crescent Hollow.

She and Efran stopped in the nursery before leaving. He picked up Joshua to hold him and caress his head. Whether he could understand or not, Efran told him, “You mother and I have to leave for a few days. We will be back by the evening of the third day, and I’ll come get you then. Don’t cry; we’ll be back.” Minka kissed the little head and Efran reluctantly gave him back to the nursery helper. Joshua turned in her arms, his face screwing up, and Efran had to leave quickly. The older children were more sanguine about their upcoming absence, as Efran explained it as a diplomatic visit and not a trip to a Faire.

With the carriage harnessed to two sturdy horses, Rigdon in the driver’s seat, and Martyn, Melchior, and Tourse mounted and ready, Efran lifted Minka into one seat while Geneve climbed into the seat opposite her. Since the day was clear and mild, the stablemen had left the leather top down. “How are you feeling?” Efran asked Minka with a shade of anxiety.

“Fine,” she said. “The carriage is no problem, but I can already tell I won’t last long on a horse. Wallace told me I need to stay out of the saddle for six weeks; it’s only been two.”

“Well, I’ll make sure you’re not pressed,” he said. He glanced vaguely toward Geneve, then said. “All right. We’re off.” He leapt onto his horse with classic Polonti ease and turned its head to lead out of the courtyard gates and down the switchback to Main, and from there, north. All of the men wore Abbey red for travel, as uniforms indicated weaponry which discouraged attacks.

They rode over the old stone bridge, turning west onto the clearly marked road to Crescent Hollow. Though it was a little bit farther to Crescent Hollow than to Eurus, it was a ridiculously easy ride. The road was straight, wide, paved, smooth and flat. Minka lay down on her seat and went to sleep.

The farther they rode, the more flummoxed Efran became. “Why don’t we have a constant stream of carts going back and forth from Crescent Hollow over this road?” he vented to Tourse.

He replied, “Eh, the main route from Westford to Crescent Hollow is north of us. To take a road straight to the Abbey Lands, they’re going to wonder, who the hell are you, Captain?” The other men laughed wryly at this assessment.

At the laughter, Minka rose up yawning from the seat to murmur to Geneve, “Well, they’re having fun already. Oh, my, are you excited? The new plant is almost finished!”

“Yes, it’s gratifying,” Geneve admitted.

“Have you ever met Goadby?” Minka asked.

“No, not face to face. He sent a congratulatory note and approval for my bonus by messenger,” Geneve said.

Minka turned to watch Melchior riding abreast of Efran. “Melchior is so cute. I’m dying to hear how you decided to get married!”

Geneve shrugged. “We started talking, and, it just seemed like it made sense.”

Minka looked disappointed. “He didn’t romance you or anything?”

“In a way. He’s practicing Efran’s smile,” Geneve laughed.

“Oh, I have to see that,” Minka said, twisting in the seat to look ahead. Then she winced, feeling her ribs.

“What’s wrong?” Geneve asked.

“I cracked a rib a couple of weeks ago. It still bothers me when I try to do too much. Wallace told me no horseback riding for six weeks, but here we are,” Minka said.

“I hope you don’t strain yourself,” Geneve said.

“Me, too,” Minka murmured.

They pulled off the road midway to eat and stretch their legs. Efran helped Minka down from the carriage. “How are you?” he whispered anxiously.

“Fine. Just sleepy,” she said. “The carriage rocks like a cradle. I can’t stay awake.”

“Good,” he laughed. “As long as you’re not hurting.”

“No,” she said. *Not yet.*

Not long after they had set out again, they passed an unmarked compound on the left with high stone walls and a pair of solid wood gates. Efran noted it every time he came down this road, and he always felt the urge to ride up to the gates and ask who they were and what they were doing—which was an irrational impulse. But it persisted.

They arrived in Crescent Hollow by mid-afternoon. The Surchatain’s scouts who spotted them split up—one rode back to apprise Surchatain Auber; the other led the party to Plumtree. It was a beautiful, sprawling estate in the middle of the nobles’ district of Crescent Hollow. Appraising the area as they rode, Efran was peevishly envious: it was just what he wanted to see the Abbey Lands become—prosperous, even elegant.

The party pulled up in the courtyard of Plumtree to be welcomed by a man in luxurious robes and an honor guard. The robed man bowed to Melchior in front. “It is our great honor to welcome you to Crescent Hollow, Lord Efran. I am Surchatain Auber’s Steward Bleibtreu.” All the Steward knew of Efran was that he was Polonti.

Melchior pointed behind him discreetly, looking to where Efran was lifting Minka down from the carriage. Efran brought her forward to bow, and she curtsied prettily. “Thank you, Steward; I am Efran. We are delighted to finally see your beautiful city in person. This is my wife, the Lady Minka.”

The Steward skillfully covered his shock at the disheveled child (age 17) who was presented to him. “Welcome, Lady Minka. Lord Efran, if you and your party will come in, you may refresh yourselves from your travel, then Surchatain Auber wishes to welcome you with a small gathering of your admirers here.”

“Thank you,” Efran said, his hand at Minka’s back as his men dismounted and Geneve exited the carriage by herself.

As she was entering, the Steward stopped her with a bow. “Excuse me. Are you by any chance Lady Geneve?”

“Just Geneve, yes,” she said.

“Ah. Excellent. Surchatain Auber, Surchataine Gaea, and Lord Goadby are most anxious to welcome you. Escort Lady Geneve to her quarters; see that she is provided whatever she needs,” Bleibtreu said, gesturing to a servant.

“Thank you, Steward. Frankly, my first need is for adequate attire to meet Surchataine Gaea and her guests. Can you possibly send a clothier with emergency wear for me?” Geneve whispered.

He almost gasped in delight. “Immediately, Lady Geneve. Please allow yourself to be escorted to your quarters, and I will have Crescent Hollow’s premiere dressmaker to attend to your needs.”

“Thank you,” she said, then followed the servant up to the second floor. It never crossed her mind to suggest that Minka receive the same benefit; as it was, Minka would not have wanted it. She had brought Elvey’s best dresses, which she considered good enough anywhere on the Southern Continent. Nor did Geneve suggest that her husband share her quarters: here, bodyguards were considered servants.

So while Geneve was being quickly fitted with upper-tier Crescent Hollow clothing, Minka was asking Efran, “What do you think? Should I wear my pants?”

“Probably tomorrow, for going to the Faire,” he said, distracted. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“No pain at all,” she assured him, selecting the second-best dress that she had brought. “The carriage ride was very easy; I don’t know how I’ll do on a horse,” she added cautiously.

“We’ll address that. I won’t have you in pain,” he said. He washed up minimally, but remained in his red Abbey uniform, identical to that of his men.

Minka put on her Abbey Lands dress proudly. Mindful of her wild hair, she smoothed it down with water and put a jeweled band in it—the exquisite one from the barge. Turning in front of the full-length mirror, she asked, “How do I look?”

Efran stopped fretting to look at her. “You are beautiful,” he breathed, taking her in his arms to kiss her.

“Don’t muss my hair,” she chastised, pulling back. Then she smiled, “Later.” He nodded, satisfied.

They followed the servant who had come to summon them to a downstairs drawing room. Steward Bleibtreu met them immediately, extending his hand to a pair of unbearably elegant royal personages. “Surchatain Auber, Surchataine Gaea, may I present Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands—and his wife.” In the shock of first seeing her, he had forgotten her name.

Efran bowed to Auber and turned his beautiful smile on Gaea, who almost melted where she stood. He said, “I am so pleased to finally meet you. This is my wife, the Lady Minka.” She curtsied nicely.

Auber, in his early sixties, was the rare kind of man who enjoyed everything presented to him. Therefore, he was quite taken with the poised Polonti lord and his sweet young wife, and said so: “Lord Efran, what a pleasure! What a lovely wife you have; she must be a constant delight to you.”

“She is, thank you,” Efran said, his radiant smile perfectly genuine. “She has been so excited to come to your Faire that not even cracked ribs could stop her. She will accompany us as far as comfort allows.”

“Oh my dear, we will accommodate you however you require,” Auber said earnestly to her.

“Thank you; you are very kind,” she replied with a sincerity that made him grasp her little hand and pat it with fatherly care.

“My wife Gaea,” he said, extending his hand to her, but was distracted by his Steward’s introduction of Geneve. Having heard all about her, Auber turned eagerly to extend his hand in welcome.

Meanwhile, Gaea’s appraising eyes swept past the child to take in the woman perfectly dressed for the occasion, and the Surchataine’s rouged lips widened in approval. The bodyguards were being fed in the kitchen.

A few other notables entered, including Lord Bache. He came over immediately to wring Efran’s hand and kiss Minka on her cheek. Then he repeated for the twentieth time the story of the Polonti lord’s amazing restoration of his stolen gold. Lady Fallis, widow of Surchatain Loizeaux of Eurus, and her brother Lord Chorley were also there to welcome Efran and Minka. The luscious Lady Leila swept in alone to head straight for Efran. He bowed genially to her as his upper lip began to sweat.

But then Lord Goadby appeared, and the whole room turned to him. He received Efran warmly, grasping his shoulders in welcome. But the primary object of his interest was Geneve, the wonder worker. So he required her to repeat to a roomful of admirers how she acquired the elusive tivoli stone to restart the construction of his new plant.

Her explanation was interrupted by frequent questions or exclamations, which she entertained gracefully. Between her dress and her manner, she thoroughly won over the Hollowans (as they called themselves). Efran also drew intense interest among the women, so much so that he was partially immobilized by the waves of *moekolohe* hitting him from all sides (that being Southerners’ sexual interest in Polonti to the exclusion of courtesy). Minka was ignored, which disturbed her not at all.

Then someone said, “Be careful, Lady Geneve, Lord Goadby is on the market”—that is, available and interested in marrying. Although not the physical specimen that Efran was, Goadby had his own allure, and he glanced at Geneve with a teasing smile.

“Are you married?” he asked.

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Chapter 3

Geneve laughed as in embarrassed disavowal. Minka looked at her in dismay. Efran, oblivious to this, had his head down in an effort to avoid eye contact with a woman who was gazing intently at him.

As Goadby’s Best Ale and hors d’oeuvres were circulated by uniformed servants, one matron finally looked over at Minka. Shortly, the woman and a few others approached her as barracudas around a minnow. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I am Efran’s wife Minka,” she said, smiling.

The women evaluated her from head to foot, taking special note of the messy hair. One asked, “What do you do?”

“Whatever he asks,” Minka said, shoulders elevated, still smiling.

“Oh,” the woman said. They wandered away in disinterest, finding the minnow too small to eat.

Minka was tiring by this time, but needed reassurance on one point before going to bed. So she found Efran in the crowd. He turned down to her immediately, and she whispered, “Where are the men?”

He looked up, then gestured at a servant. He came over, bowing. “My lord?”

“Yes, where are our bodyguard?” Efran asked.

“In the kitchen, my lord,” the servant said.

“Where is that?” Minka asked, looking around.

“If my lady will accompany me,” the servant said, bowing. She nodded, and he led her through one door and down a short corridor into the kitchen.

There, she found Tourse, Rigdon, Martyn, and Melchior sitting around a large table with ales and hors d’oeuvres as well. “Oh good,” she said. Upon seeing her, the four of them lurched to a stand.

“Sit down!” she ordered. They did, so that she could place a hand on Rigdon’s shoulder. “I wanted to make sure you were being fed.”

“Thank you, Minka,” Martyn smiled.

But Tourse said, “Dear lady, you misjudge us to think that we would not pillage for ourselves.”

The others grinned, and Minka said, “Just checking for bodies on the floor.” They snorted, but she added, “Thank you for your service. I feel better knowing that you’re here.” She cast momentarily sad eyes on Melchior, then said, “As you were. Wash your own plates.”

They stood again as she turned to go, but she waved them down. No one looked at Melchior as they sat back down. That troubled him not nearly as much as the pounding headache that frequently afflicted him, due to an old battle injury.

Upon finding Efran in the drawing room again, Minka leaned on his arm to whisper, “They’re eating and drinking. I’m going up to bed.”

“I’ll be there shortly,” he said, kissing her hair.

A servant escorted her up the stairs, and Efran did indeed appear a few minutes later. They fell on the downy bed, far more exhausted by the reception than the travel.

The following morning, a servant brought breakfast into their receiving room and told Efran, “Surchatain Auber and Lord Goadby wish to begin the tour at eight of the day candle.” He pointed to the large candle, always kept burning, that was marked in hourly increments.

“Yes, we’ll be down by then. Thank you,” Efran said, taking the breakfast tray.

This he took into the bedroom, waking Minka by kissing her neck. As she murmured something, rolling over, he whispered, “We have about an hour to get ready.”

Rolling back to him quickly, she asked, “For the Faire?”

“I expect so,” he said, smiling.

Covers were flung as she scrambled up to get ready. She stopped to lift appraising eyes. “Pants today?”

He paused. “If you like. I haven’t seen any other women in pants.”

She smiled devilishly: “Thank you. Pants it is.” He laughed at her.

At exactly eight of the candle, they emerged from their room as Geneve exited the room next door, and they greeted each other. While Geneve glanced at Minka’s pants with slightly widened eyes, Efran registered Geneve’s sophisticated Crescent Hollow riding ensemble.

But Minka felt glorious in her pants, with a lovely Elvey shirt and jacket for the cool morning. Her boots were custom made with Abbey Lands leather from the tanner Weber. Her hair was partly pulled back, enough curls remaining loose to satisfy Efran. With the long strap of a leather purse over her shoulder, she was as excited as any child to see the Faire again. Efran merely wore his red Abbey uniform again with a fresh shirt.

In the foyer, they met up with Auber, Goadby and their bodyguard of Melchior, Martyn, Rigdon, and Tourse. Minka grinned at them all; Auber, catching sight of her, cried in delight, “Pants! My, how daring you are, sweet child!” Goadby pursed his lips in a tight deprecatory smile, glancing at Geneve’s smart Hollowan outfit.

Geneve cratered under the pressure of his glance and rolled her eyes, signifying that she was above her lord’s silly little wife. Auber was the only one who didn’t see it, as he had turned to give directions to his steward. Goadby smiled at Geneve; Efran looked contemplative; Martyn depressed; Rigdon and Tourse interested; Melchior blank. But Minka was unbowed, shaking out her rebellious curls.

The group mounted in the courtyard and began riding out. After just a few minutes, the gates of the Faire were seen down a side street leading away on their left. Minka’s face opened in joy, but Auber said, “The first thing Lord Goadby wants you to see is his brewery here. And then you’ll understand his desire for the tivoli stone.” And the group rode past the Faire to another street snaking out of the city. Minka’s heart sank. To top it off, the purse she was carrying was very heavy.

At that time, a Polonti riding barebacked careened up to the Abbey Lands wall gates, crying, “Help us! Help! We need help!”

With assurances from the wall gate sentries, he collected himself to say, “I am Nute from Venegas. There is an army approaching from the north—a great army of a thousand, at least. We cannot meet it; we need your help. Surchatain Sewell begs your help.”

A sentry leaned over to begin clanging the wall gates bell and the gate messenger rode furiously up to the hilltop. With the courtyard bells clanging, DeWitt, Estes and Commander Lyte gathered to hear the message. All three agreed on immediate action under Lyte.

So he ordered all available men to weapon up on all available horses to ride out at once. Within minutes, about four hundred men under Commander Lyte, including his Second Cutch, his Aide Joles, the Lieutenants Wyeth and Nyland, and the Captains Neale, Towner, Younge, and Barr were leading the men down the Coastal Highway South, going east.

They left behind hundreds of new men, almost all Polonti, because there were not enough horses. But the Polonti looked at each other and said, A battle! A chance to fight! Why do we need horses?

So these hundreds of men gathered whatever weapons they could find and set out trotting on foot eastward. As there were not weapons enough to arm all of them, some carried nothing beyond their fists. As there was not even gear enough for all of them, some were barefoot. But they shrugged, So what? A chance to fight! And they set out in orderly rows, trotting according to a centuries-old cadence.

The touring group in Crescent Hollow trotted on horseback toward the original Goadby's brewery in the industrial district. Auber and Goadby led, with Geneve in between them. On the edge of a crest overlooking the valley in which the brewery resided, Auber pointed out features of the landscape which led itself to productive use, including the river by which the brewery had been built. Then Goadby elaborated on all the components of his plant which he expected to be reproduced in the Abbey Lands building.

Goadby added, "We've improved our process, so the ale has a more distinctive taste—not so bland. If we weren't already the premiere ale on the Southern Continent, we will be now."

"How wonderful!" Geneve said. "Tell me exactly what you changed." As he talked about gruit versus hops, she listened intelligently, asking questions and remarking on various aspects of the landscape and building that the men had neglected to mention.

As those three were engrossed in all facets of ale, Efran found himself tense, tightly wound, looking around. His blood screamed, *Ride!* But where? He looked back to Melchior, who also looked distressed, out of place.

Efran dropped back to talk to him, then saw Minka flagging behind with Martyn. She was breathing hard, definitely in pain. Efran turned his horse to stop her. "Minka?"

"I can't ride farther, Efran. I'm sorry," she gasped.

"Don't apologize. Martyn, you, Rigdon and Tourse accompany her back. Melchior, you ride with me," Efran said, trembling.

"Captain." Minka's guards turned back with her at a walk. Efran and Melchior brought their horses around to see that the other three were waiting for them.

"Is there a problem, Efran?" Auber asked.

"Only Minka; she's finding it too hard to ride with her cracked ribs, so I'm sending her back with some of the bodyguard," Efran said distractedly, wiping his mouth.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Auber said, while Geneve looked concerned and Goadby impatient.

"She'll be all right. Carry on," Efran said, tapping his horse with his heels. The animal unexpectedly bolted,

reading his rider correctly, but not the situation. Efran pulled back on the reins. “Excuse me. Please proceed.”

The three in the lead did so, resuming their discussion. Efran turned to Melchior, asking, “You feel it?”

“Yes, Captain. There is fighting,” he said heavily.

“Where? At the Abbey?” Efran gasped.

Melchior reached out, searching. His training under Master Crowe, especially the mental discipline, gave him great sensitivity to Polonti matters, even those a ways off. “No. Not at the Abbey. But Polonti are out to battle.”

“Ours? Our Polonti?” Efran asked, on the verge of wheeling his horse back east.

“Yes, Captain. Ours.” His craggy face sagged. “But we must wait this one out, Captain. We wait for the fights to come.” And Efran heard far-distant bells ring the call to arms.

“How are you, Minka?” Martyn asked as he, Tourse, and Rigdon walked their horses in a tight group around hers.

“Better, Martyn; thank you. I’m all right as long as I’m not trying to trot or lope,” she breathed, shifting the heavy purse strap on her shoulder.

Martyn began, “Well, hang on; we’re almost back to—”

“Oh, let me walk around the Faire!” Minka pleaded, stopping at the side road with colorful banners and music.

“Sure,” Tourse said, stopping beside her. “Are you more comfortable walking or riding?”

“Walking,” she said, sliding down from the saddle.

“Well then, let me take your bag, there.” Tourse dismounted for her to gladly hand over the purse. As the senior bodyguard, Tourse said, “Martyn, if you and Rigdon will take our horses back to Plumtree right around the corner there, the lady and I will meet you in this open area in front.”

Smiling, Martyn glanced at Rigdon, who said, “Yes, sir.”

Gathering reins, Martyn urged Minka, “Wait for us.”

“We’ll be right here. Thank you,” Minka said happily.

When Rigdon and Martyn returned, they found the lady and Tourse already eating toffee, which she shared with the first two, whether they wanted it or not. Then they walked the grounds, watching acrobats and fire-eaters, minstrels and puppet shows, all as Minka so fondly remembered.

Better, with all the money she had brought this time, she was able to spend freely in any booth that caught her eye—small paintings, trinkets, gadgets, toys and candies—*many* little candies, cookies, toffees, all separately wrapped in cheerful papers. She especially pressed food and ale on her escort until they were groaning (but that was their fault, for eating multiple servings of pork on a stick). All three of them carried bags containing her purchases.

Tourse and Rigdon also made purchases, quietly. Following the Captain's instructions, they bought bits and pieces of standard workers' clothing in various sizes, especially used clothing. For Efran had in mind to send scouts to Crescent Hollow who would perfectly blend in with the social landscape.

As those two dug through the used clothing bins, they also made small talk with vendors about what jobs were available where, and what kind of workers could be expected to have their own horses. All this information would be put to use when they returned to the Abbey Lands, as Efran would send out appropriately dressed scouts immediately, and keep them going back and forth.

Meanwhile, Minka in her daring pants had so much fun laughing, walking, and buying that she unwittingly drew a great deal of attention. But her bodyguard was prepared for it, so nothing remotely happened. Also, Tourse let her buy a demon mask for him, which he wore. And he turned it toward anyone watching her for a moment too long. Therefore, passersby gave her and her entourage plenty of space.

Tourse was actually the one to find the mask. As she was browsing in one booth, he picked up the mask in a neighboring booth, put it on, and poked his head around the corner to say, "What do you think? Is it the real me?"

She turned, then started. "Tourse! You scared me!"

A young man browsing next to her said smilingly, "Perhaps I could help you?"

She glanced in his direction, but turned away again. Rigdon was walking toward them when Tourse came between her and the young man, uttering, "Step back."

The man lifted his hands, laughing, "Call off your demon, Lady Minka; it's a friend. I'm Reinagle's son Follriott."

"Hey! If you put it on, buy it!" the proprietor of the booth with the masks demanded of Tourse.

"Happily, sir. I've got it," Minka said, turning into his booth. Tourse kept his mask turned toward young Follriott until he bowed and departed.

But he only went as far as the booth Minka was in. He picked up another demon mask, saying, "I think I'll take one as well. And this old lady mask, too."

Follriott was turning to smile at Minka when Rigdon pushed his way in between them to lean on the counter, ostensibly looking at the merchandise. Backing away from him, Follriott found himself face to face with Tourse in the demon mask again. Unruffled, Follriott handed his money over for the masks. Upon taking them, he almost ran into Martyn behind him. With Minka ensconced in her bodyguard, Follriott drifted away.

Martyn was mostly quiet during this outing. He enjoyed seeing Minka happy, but, felt in his bones that there was something going on somewhere, something that he needed to be doing. He didn't know what it meant; he only wished he were with Efran right now. And Melchior. And Wyeth, doing . . . whatever they were doing.

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Chapter 4

Commander Lyte saw the oncoming mass of soldiers long before his own troops came into a position to strike. And his first reaction was outrage: “They’re in Eurasian purple! Who is leading them? Idiot!”

As his men continued to pound down the eastbound coastal highway toward Venegas, he grappled with strategy: how to approach a force so much larger than his own? Without question, just of those he could see, they had twice as many as he did. Stopping to strategize was not an option when the attack was upon you. The only thing to do was ride hard into them and take what little advantage there was in surprise.

As he pushed his panting horse harder, Lyte muttered, “Here we go, then. This is the time to prove yourself—for Father.” And he drew his sword, extending it as the command to attack.

Driving into enemy lines, he saw their helmets whip around in surprise. And then his men struck.

As Efran and Melchior were lagging behind the three in front again, they paused to wait, watching in mild concern while Efran weaved in his saddle. “Efran? Are you well?” Auber called.

“Yes!” he shouted hoarsely.

“All right, well, follow as you can. Goadby wants to show us his vineyards,” Auber said. Goadby was talking to Geneve at this time.

“Yes, we’re coming!” Efran shouted back. “Melchior,” he gasped, “they’re fighting, and I am not there.”

“Yes, Captain. It may have been planned that way,” Melchior replied.

“What? How?” Efran asked.

“An attack may have been planned for when you were away,” Melchior said.

“Then we should return at once,” Efran said.

“Going back now would not affect what is already in progress. Pray to God who determines the battle and let us wait for what is ordained,” Melchior said.

“I had no idea you were a theologian,” Efran muttered.

“Only recently,” Melchior said.

Efran blinked. “What? As of when?”

“When I married Geneve,” Melchior admitted, and Efran stared at him.

Minka happily walked back to Plumtree with an empty pouch and her escorts laden with food, gifts, souvenirs, and treats. “That was *so much fun*,” she sighed in exhaustion. “Be sure to keep the demon mask,” she told Tourse, glancing back at him. “I’ll want you to wear it next time you ward me.”

“That would either simplify things or get me killed. Which would simplify things,” Tourse thought out loud.

She snorted. As they paused in the empty courtyard, she said, “Wouldn’t it be easier to just go around to the side door? Let’s do that.”

So they went around the house to the servants’ entrance to the kitchen, where Minka had them deposit most of her purchases on the large table. “Ask Bleibtreu to please have all this packed up for me—”

“All of it?” Tourse asked in horror, and they laughed at him.

“Yes, all of it. I’m going up to nap. Ask them to come wake me to get ready for dinner,” she said, yawning. “Thank you. You’re all so sweet.” She patted Rigdon’s arm, adding, “I can’t hug you, even though I want to.”

“I’ll accept the thought, Lady Minka. Rest well,” Rigdon smiled at her.

She left, and they turned to look at her bounty, shaking their heads. A kitchen assistant came in, and Rigdon told him, “The Lady Minka asks that her purchases from the Faire be packed up for their departure tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, yes, certainly,” he said. Satisfied, Rigdon left with his fellow guards. He and Tourse took their own purchases to pack in their saddlebags. But after that, they two had a quiet look-see around the kitchen, and stumbled upon an obscure exit. This they explored, because you never knew when one might be needed.

The Faire bounty was piled up near the stack of dinner place cards for that evening, and that for “Lady Minka” happened to be on top. Since the assistant had numerous chores that afternoon, he picked up her place card to put it in front of the pile as a reminder. Then he turned out on one of many errands, during which he remembered to tell a serving girl to pack up Lady Minka’s Faire purchases and put them in her carriage.

Agreeably, she found a large burlap sack into which she put all the Faire souvenirs. This she tied neatly at the top with a festive ribbon and took it out to the Abbey ladies’ carriage. Lady Minka’s place card remained on the large table in isolation. So when the dinner master came in later looking for the place cards, he took the stack, never noticing the one left out by itself.

Efran and Melchior sat on their horses on a bluff overlooking Goadby’s vineyard while the others of their party were down below. Efran was bent over his saddle, gasping. “It’s bad.”

“Yes, Captain,” Melchior said.

“God of heaven,” Efran pleaded, raising his face. “God of heaven, as many times as You delivered me, when there are men fighting who are worth so much more. God of heaven, have mercy.”

Lyte had lost his horse some time ago, and now held his sword with both hands, striking at every purple tabard he glimpsed. And now that’s all he saw. Lyte’s helmet, sword and breastplate had served him well, but hours into the battle, he was flagging, and he didn’t know how long he could stand. He no longer saw any Abbey men around him.

He fell to his knees, then was pushed to the ground by someone falling on top of him. Panting, he raised his face

to see bare feet in front of him. Dancing. Stomping—*bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM!* Vibrations spread through the ground from the rhythmic stomping, and bodies in purple tabards began falling all around him.

Pushing aside the body that had pinned him to the ground, Lyte rose to his knees. There were men, Polonti, dancing to a raucous war chant as they drove their knives into the gaps of the breastplates covered with the purple tabards. The chants appeared to arrest the enemy long enough for the unseen blades to find an opening. *uh huh HUH! uh huh HUH! uh huh HUH! uh huh HUH!*

Lyte staggered to his feet to look around. Suddenly there were loose Polonti everywhere. Not all of them were doing the war dance; they were each fighting their own way, with no uniformity except effectiveness. He glimpsed several swinging cords over their heads, which then loosed projectiles that dropped the purple tabards in their tracks.

Lyte turned in a circle. The Polonti surrounded him, striking outward. And they weren't the only ones. There seemed to be a sudden influx of Polonti disrupting the forward march of the purple tabards like an earthquake. Where had they come from? Venegas? Westford?

There was a hearty slap on his back, causing Lyte to stagger as a smiling Polonti said, "Commander! We come now. All good." Gazing around, Lyte comprehended that these were *his own men* who had followed on foot to join the battle. Had they turned the tide? The purple tabards seemed unable to deal with hundreds of crazy Polonti who paid no attention to Southern Continental fighting forms; they just killed however they liked. And they had walked—or run—a good long way to do it.

Lyte watched the invaders turn to flee north, pursued by defenders unwilling to let them go. Polonti all around him leapt up on riderless horses to chase down the runners. "Come back! Fight!" they called.

Then Lyte looked at the red Abbey uniforms converging on him, and he almost started to cry. But he shook his head—only the Captain could get away with that.

The touring party returned to Plumtree in two parts. The first part, consisting of Auber, Goadby, and Geneve, was convivial, making plans for the further expansion of Goadby enterprises. The second part, consisting of the Polonti Efran and Melchior, looked as though they had just returned from a bruising battle.

"It's over, isn't it?" Efran asked.

"Yes," Melchior said.

"Are we beaten?" Efran asked, trembling.

Melchior hesitated. "No," he finally said. "There are some dead, but . . . no. But matters remain unfinished."

They all went in to get ready for dinner. Goadby stopped Geneve on her way upstairs. "Please think about something, Geneve."

"Certainly," she said cautiously.

"I want you to come work for me here. I will pay you twice whatever Lemmerz is paying you," he said.

“That’s—very generous of you. I will think about it,” she promised, then turned upstairs as he watched her.

Efran went upstairs to wake Minka and hear her chat happily about her fun afternoon while she dressed. He sponged down and changed quickly into his undyed linen dress uniform, then kissed her and said, “I’m going downstairs to talk to Melchior before we’re seated. Come down when you’re ready.”

“All right,” she sighed, reaching up to kiss him again before he left.

Melchior went into the kitchen to sit at the large table, where he immediately saw Minka’s place card. Taking it up, he turned to a passing kitchen assistant. “Lady Minka will not dine in the kitchen,” he said, handing him the card.

Paling, the assistant took the card, as he was the one who had left it there. He ran out into the dining room, just now beginning to fill with guests. The places were all set; the chairs all in place; the table exactly filled, and cards at all the places. What to do when an important guest is accidentally left off the table?

Surchataine Gaea came in to look over the arrangements, so the assistant handed her the card in trepidation. “Surchataine, this was—accidentally left on the kitchen table.”

She looked at it in concern. Seeing the name, she raised a brow. “Oh, no, she asked to eat in the kitchen with her bodyguard.” She gave the card back to him and walked off.

Miserably, he returned to replace the card on the kitchen table while Melchior looked at him. Shrugging, the assistant said, “She asked to sit here.” Then he ran away.

Melchior picked up the card again and entered the dining room just as Efran came in. They started toward each other, meeting in the middle of the room. Melchior handed him the place card and whispered in his ear. Efran’s eyes shot toward the table, then he walked over to begin scanning places, looking for his card. When he found it, he saw that Geneve was to his left and Lady Tudi to his right—the woman who had been drowning him with *moekolohe*.

While guests milled around the room, Efran switched Minka’s card with Lady Tudi’s, which he gave to Melchior. “Seat her in the kitchen instead. She likes Polonti,” Efran told him. Melchior smiled, taking the card with him.

Minka entered the dining room, and there was a slight lull in the conversational buzz. Although not dressed in Crescent Hollow style, she looked lovely in an off-white beaded gown by Elvey with a scalloped neckline and a matching headpiece. She saved it for special occasions—that is, whenever Efran wore his dress uniform—because his and hers went so well together.

He came forward, smiling, to take her hand and lead her to the table, where he sat her at the place he had obtained for her. That was the signal for people to start sitting, which they did all at once—even though it was contrary to established protocol. Efran remained (correctly) standing behind his chair next to her. When Auber and Gaea entered, he bowed to his guests and sat in good humor. Somewhat put out, Gaea sat without noticing yet that Minka was sitting directly around the corner from Auber.

Goadby seated Geneve before sitting to her left. When everyone was seated, they all looked up at Lady Tudi, standing in bewilderment at the foot of the table. “Where am I?” she asked.

Chapter 5

“Why—you should be—” Gaea began in reply to the lost Lady Tudi, then looked at Minka sitting next to Efran on her left and Auber on her right, around the corner. Auber leaned over to ask her how she was feeling. She replied, so much better, thank you, and part of the reason for that was the wonderful time she’d had at the Faire that afternoon. She told him about all her purchases, and the demon mask for Tourse, and the fire swallower who had set his feet on fire. The whole upper table was listening because her exuberance was so watchable, and it was about something very important to Auber: the success of the reinstated Faire. Meanwhile, Lady Tudi was squeezed in at a lower corner.

Auber attended Minka’s recital in fascination. When she paused for breath, he said, “Dear girl, I’m afraid I’m falling in love with you.”

Efran laughed quietly, nodding. Disturbed, Minka said, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” Glancing down the table, she picked up a small meat platter (one of six) to hand to him. “Try the veal. That will help.”

There was a mild outburst of laughter, and Efran handed her a small cup, whispering. She said, “Oh yes, don’t forget the sauce.”

“Thank you,” Auber said, laughing, while Gaea looked off in strained patience. Minka picked up her own fork in satisfaction. Efran was still smiling.

Goadby was laughing at Minka, so Geneve turned to mutter, “Abbey provincials.” Either she forgot that Efran was right next to her or forgot his acute hearing, but his smile faded in contemplation.

Dinner progressed tamely from there, with much enthusiastic conversation about the expansion of the Goadby empire. When the guests had finished eating, the dinner master ushered them into the drawing room for conversation and digestifs. Lord Bache drew Efran aside to introduce him to some other Crescent Hollow nobles, but Minka watched Martyn enter the drawing room to look around uncertainly.

Before she could catch his eye, Martyn went up to Geneve, who was talking to Goadby and another important man. Interrupting, Martyn said, “Excuse me. Geneve, Melchior needs the willow bark.”

The men looked in astonishment at his impertinence; Geneve merely hissed, “That’s not my job.”

Taken aback, Martyn stepped aside. Then he began looking around. Seeing Minka watching, he went over to her. “Minka, Melchior gets bad headaches from an old injury—Geneve has the willow bark that gives him some relief, but—”

“Come,” she said, turning in a swirl of elegance. Efran glanced up to see her go out, but as she was with Martyn, Efran continued listening to the lord beside him.

Minka and Martyn trotted up the stairs, where she took him directly into Geneve’s room. Going to her traveling bags, she opened one of them, the largest, and asked, “What is it in?”

“Merely a box,” he said. “There.” He pulled out a battered wooden box, from which he took a few sticks.

As he was replacing the box, Minka took it instead. "I will carry it back. If I forget to give it to him, tell him I have it."

"Thank you, Minka," he said. He started to say more, then closed his mouth and went out.

They parted at Geneve's door; he went downstairs to the kitchen while she stashed the box among her own belongings before returning to the drawing room. Efran summoned her with a glance, and she went over to lean into his side. "Are you tired?" he asked.

"A little," she replied.

So Efran turned to bow to the group around him. "Excuse me, gentlemen; we must make an early start in the morning."

Their faces registered disappointed understanding. "Certainly. May we send letters back with you?" Bache asked.

"Of course. But we'll be leaving by early light," Efran said.

"Understood. Rest well, Lady Minka," Bache said.

"Thank you." She curtsied nicely to them, which made them smile. It was a provincial gesture that was nonetheless courteous and gratifying.

The Landers began preparing to leave before daybreak the next morning, November 7th. Minka bounded up the moment Efran kissed her head to wake her in the darkness. "Make sure they pack my Faire purchases," she said before entirely conscious.

Efran assured her, "They're packed and in the carriage."

Minka dressed in her pants, jacket and boots again, then flew to gather all the rest of her things by candlelight. As the men were carrying Minka's belongings downstairs, Martyn paused to bang on Geneve's door. But their priority was making sure everything of Efran's and Minka's made it down to the carriage. Hers were the greater challenge: she had three bags to his one, in which were deposited letters from Hollowan nobles.

In passing, Melchior also paused to knock on Geneve's door. "Leaving soon!" he called.

The departing group enjoyed a light but satisfying breakfast, then the bodyguard brought out their saddlebags while their horses were made ready. As light was breaking in the courtyard and Auber's stablemen were harnessing the horses to the Abbey carriage, Efran told Minka, "I don't see Geneve or her bags. Is she ready?"

"I'll go check," Minka said, turning to run back into the great house and up the stairs. Going directly into Geneve's suite without knocking, Minka paused in the darkness, then went into the bedroom to fling open the draperies.

Geneve, still in bed, murmured something and rolled over. Minka looked around at her things scattered about the suite. Shaking Geneve's shoulder, Minka said, "Get up! We're about to leave." Minka feared, correctly, that the men were prepared to leave Geneve here if she didn't come at once.

"I'm coming," Geneve murmured without moving. She had been up very late talking with Goadby last night.

Minka flew through the rooms gathering everything she could find into Geneve's bags, which she deposited into the corridor one by one as they were filled. She emptied the wardrobe of all of Geneve's clothes except a long Crescent Hollow jacket and house shoes. Periodically, she stopped to jostle Geneve by the shoulder. "Get up! We're leaving!"

Geneve finally sat up for Minka to force her arms into the sleeves of the jacket and put the house shoes on her feet.

There was a knock on the partly open door. "Minka?" Martyn called.

"Yes, take the bags in the corridor. We're coming!" Minka shouted. Geneve frowned at her.

"They're already down. Do you need help with her?" Martyn called.

"No, we'll be right there!" Minka called. She hoisted Geneve up by the arm and dragged her out.

Coming down the stairway, Geneve woke up enough to descend without assistance. Auber tried to corner Minka for a private word, but she evaded him to run over and prod Geneve out the door.

Then Auber, Bleibtreu, and all the servants and stablemen got to watch Minka guide Geneve into the carriage, lay her down on the pillowed seat, and throw a heavy woolen blanket over her. All the rest of the party were already mounted, with Tourse in the carriage driver's seat.

When Tourse observed Minka flinging herself down into the seat, waving, "Go," he gestured in obedience with two fingers and cracked the reins on the horses' backs. Efran lifted a hand in farewell to the laughing Surchatain, then Efran and Melchior rode ahead of the carriage to lead while Martyn and Rigdon provided the rear guard.

Efran set a pace as fast as the horses could comfortably maintain eastward into the rising sun. Minka stretched luxuriously on the seat opposite Geneve to rummage in her large sack of Faire treasures, debating what souvenir should go to whom. In sudden anxiety, Minka pawed through the sack, then pounded Tourse on the back. He looked over his shoulder.

"Do you have the mask?" she demanded.

"Yes, in my bag." Tourse nodded to the saddlebag beside him.

Getting on her knees to look at the small bag, she asked, "Is it getting crushed?"

"Only enough to make it more scary," he said. Efran, riding ahead of them, turned his head slightly.

"You'll wear it when I tell you," she said, plopping back down in the seat.

"I hear and obey, Madam," Tourse replied. The sudden uplift of Efran's head indicated amusement.

"Minka's day at the Faire was the best part of the whole trip," Martyn said. Rigdon nodded; Minka turned to grin at them.

Shortly thereafter, Geneve sat up groggily to look around. "What . . . ?" She pushed her disheveled hair out of

her face, then looked down at the jacket she wore over nightclothes. “I’m not even dressed!” she said angrily in Minka’s direction.

“Should the Lord Sovereign wait for you to decide when we start out?” Minka asked, still rummaging in her treasures. “You’re fortunate they didn’t ride off without you.”

Geneve sat back, wrapping the blanket more tightly around herself. She thought that might have been all right, as it would have given her an easy out. Goadby wanted her as more than an employee. In fact, he had proposed last night. They had been up very late talking it over. She expressed great reservations due to the job she had just been given, and her many friends in the Abbey Lands, especially her brother. These arguments Goadby met with energetic counterarguments.

But, of course, she wasn’t being honest. At all. And she had treated her Abbey friends, and her husband, very badly on this trip. This she regretted, whether she stayed or left. Staying in the Lands would require apologies. The problem was, she didn’t know whether she was already past the point of making amends. However, her leaving Melchior in order to marry Goadby would certainly burn all the bridges, and bring more grief to the brother she adored.

Yet she felt that, in a way, she had surpassed him. Since his ambition had always been army service, that had once seemed to her the height of accomplishment. And while she loved Gabriel, she had also been competing with him. Whatever he did, she wanted to do just as well.

Now, however, she saw that there were fields beyond the army in which she could outperform him. He was, after all, just a soldier, as yet without rank. Apart from marriage, the position Goadby had offered her certainly eclipsed anything the army could offer short of Commander—which was clearly out of reach for her.

This left two divergent paths before her: to apologize, stay with Melchior and Lemmerz, and remain at the Abbey Lands, or break with Abbey life completely, spit on everyone there—including Gabriel—and embrace life among the upper crust of Crescent Hollow.

“I can’t do that,” she whispered. “I will stay and make it work.”

When they stopped at the midpoint to rest the horses and eat, Geneve fished in her bags for some decent day wear, and took that out to a wooded area to change. She returned to stuff her night clothes into the bags and eat some jerky and apple rings from their travel stores. Minka stretched her legs in the trees, then returned, yawning, to lie down on the seat and snuggle under a blanket.

After only a few minutes’ rest, Efran remounted, anxious to return. *For any more trips like this, I’m going to send subordinates*, he vowed. Except—he had promised Minka a trip to the Faire in Crescent Hollow. It was important that he keep his promises to her.

After another few hours of fast travel, they came within sight of the hill. The wall gates bell began clanging, which the courtyard bell repeated. But the bell tower had been pealing welcome for miles. Efran began racing his horse toward the gates; Minka stood in the carriage to cry, “Get Joshua!” Far up the road, he waved a hand over his head in acknowledgment. Melchior was right with him.

Dismounting in the courtyard, Efran leapt up the foyer steps to begin running down the corridor toward the nursery. But he careened to a stop at the entrance of the dining hall. It was no longer a dining hall, but an infirmary.

Benches and tables had been stacked against the wall to allow cots for the wounded, which filled the whole hall. Several heads raised, and a few attempted to salute. “Captain!” “It’s the Captain.”

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Chapter 6

Efran turned to a sentry, Doudney. “Bring Joshua to me.”

“Captain,” he saluted, running out.

Efran looked at the soldier medic, Milo, to ask, “How many dead?”

“Thirty-two at last count, Captain,” he replied. “Including Captain Younge.”

“Thirty-two,” Efran gasped. “Younge.”

Doudney returned to report, “Captain, the nursery worker won’t give the baby to anybody but you or the Lady Minka.”

“She’s correct. I’ll be right back,” Efran said, turning out.

When the carriage reached the courtyard, Minka bounded out with her sack of treasures. She took it to her and Efran’s quarters, first. There, she dumped everything on the bed to separate out the special gifts for their adopted children and the orphans (of whom only a handful remained at the Abbey, most having been adopted out to leaseholders).

Then she put the rest of the treats—about fifty pieces of candy, toffee, mints, and cookies—into a basket for distribution. Not knowing yet to whom these should go, she took them down the hall toward a storage room. But when she glimpsed Efran with Joshua in the dining hall, she turned inside.

And there she stopped in shock, looking around at cots on which the injured lay filling the large hall. “What—?” she gasped. Then she burst into tears. “Efran, what happened?” she cried.

“I’m finding out,” he said quietly.

Sobbing, she went to the cot closest to her to bend down and hug the man lying on it. Then she reached into her basket to give him a piece of candy. “Thank you, Lady,” he said, grinning at her.

Efran watched her to go the next cot. The man raised up, groaning, to receive her hug and piece of candy. Weeping, she went to the next cot. He could not sit up, but lifted his arms in request, so she leaned down to hug him. And then she lifted up to put a cookie in his hand.

The next cot she turned to made her gasp. A young Polonti boy lay there, no older than 14. The ends of his long hair were stiff with dried blood from a gaping wound on his upper chest that an inadequate bandage covered. He was trembling from the pain, unable to lift his arms.

Careful of his wound, she leaned down over him, pressing her cheek to his, holding him gently around his

ribcage. Rising, she barely noted the sudden life in his eyes as she went on. But the boy lifted up, no longer trembling, to pull the useless bandage away from a large purple scar that traversed his chest.

Efran was silent during this spontaneous ritual of hugs and treats, as was Milo beside him. The greater portion of injured men here were Polonti, and all that she had hugged so far were Polonti. Also, all that she had hugged got up in surprise to see their wounds healed. They looked at each other, stricken, and the men waiting for a hug sat up on their cots. Having heard that the Captain was back, Lyte entered, then stood by the door watching. Something was going on. . . .

Minka was unaware of this; all she knew was that a lot of Efran's men were suffering. She continued to go from cot to cot as they reached up eager arms to her. None was lascivious or disrespectful, but they all saw men whom she had hugged getting up and walking off—eating their candy, of course. Efran watched, then looked down at Wyeth lying on a cot nearby. Cyr was sitting beside him, red-eyed, for he had taken such a severe slash to his right arm that Wallace believed it would have to be amputated.

Wyeth was in such pain as to be unaware of what was going on around him. But Cyr was watching.

“Barr!” Minka cried, seeing him leaning against the wall on a cot with his foot propped up, covered in bloody bandages. “Oh!” She fell on him in tears, and he held her gently. The Crescent Hollow bodyguard—Melchior, Martyn, Tourse, and Rigdon—had come in by this time, and were watching.

“It will be all right, *apele*,” he said quietly. Trembling, she gave him his cookie, then turned to the next man who was reaching out to her. After popping the cookie in his mouth, Barr leaned over to unwrap the stiff brown bandages. He exercised the healthy foot for a moment, then stood on both feet, one scarred, to salute Efran. “Request to be dismissed, Captain. I have much work to catch up on.”

“You’re dismissed,” Efran whispered. Estes and DeWitt had come to the door to look on silently.

Not all the men she hugged were healed, especially the Southerners. But even they were better, enough to leave the makeshift infirmary. Minka was still unaware of the quiet cataclysm of mercy going on behind her as she came to the last man, Wyeth. But she turned to his wife. “Oh, Cyr, I’m so sorry,” Minka said, hugging her.

But Cyr uttered a little cry, breaking away. “Him!” she said, pantomiming a hug. “Uhug him!”

Confused, Minka glanced up at Efran, who nodded emphatically, hearing the rooftop bells ring in power. Joshua had gone to sleep in his arms. Wyeth opened his eyes, smiling slightly. “*Moiwahine*.”

“Oh, Wyeth.” Fingers at her lips, she dropped the basket and sat on the cot to put her head on his chest and cry. He pushed up on his good left arm so that she could get her arms around him. Slowly, he raised his injured arm to place his hand on her back.

After a moment, she pulled away to reach down to the nearly empty basket for a toffee. This Wyeth received in his right hand.

She stood in front of Efran, weaving. “I’m tired. I think I’ll go lie down,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said, kissing her head. Gesturing to the very young sentry, Salk, Efran said, “Escort her and stand at the door. No one goes in.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said. “Lady Minka?” Salk offered his arm, which she took. Efran watched them walk off.

Then he and the rest of the men looked back down to Wyeth on his cot.

He had unwound the bandages on his arm to reveal a nasty scar. But he flexed and twisted the arm, which was perfectly functional. Cyr, pouring tears, signed, *How? How did she do this?*

Wyeth signed in reply, then looked up at Efran to say, “She is *moiwahine*. She is our queen.”

Efran exhaled, having been informed by the bells what was happening. “The power is not in Minka. It’s in the fortress, and the hill. Today, for you, Minka is the channel. Now tell me what happened.”

DeWitt said, “Excuse me, but can we pull out a table? I need to sit down. I’m a little light-headed.”

“Yes.” Efran nodded to the bodyguard, but they paused as Wyeth got up, popping the toffee in his mouth. He and Melchior pulled out a heavy table while the rest of the bodyguard lifted out the benches to go with it. They all sat around it; Efran held Joshua, and Cyr ran a finger along the curved scar on Wyeth’s upper arm. He grinned at her and she leaned on his shoulder, faint.

Efran wiped his upper lip, taking a moment to look around the table. Then he said, “Commander Lyte, the floor is yours. *What happened?*”

“Thank you, Captain,” Lyte said. “Yesterday morning a rider from Venegas showed up telling us a great mass of men was marching on them; they didn’t know who. We geared up at once; rode out with about four hundred. We intercepted the invaders right before they reached Venegas, but, we were pretty quickly overwhelmed by the number—about twelve hundred, I’d guess. We lost at least thirty, including Captain Younge and my new aide Joles. There would have been a great deal more casualties, and the loss of Venegas, as well, if it hadn’t been for about three hundred fifty Polonti that followed us on foot. They came at just the right time, a complete surprise to everyone. Also, Venegas turned out upwards of three hundred in their own defense.

“Between the three defensive waves, we were able to turn them away. I don’t have a casualty count for them; am guessing at least eight hundred. Venegas took some captive for questioning. We’re awaiting a further report from them. Oh—our unarmed foot soldiers supplied themselves very well from the battlefield. They’re at work now building pens, stables and another armory east of the new northbound road for all they collected. Some of them also stopped in Venegas to help out there. The city was not breached, but they suffered a great deal more casualties than we did. They don’t have a wall.”

Efran asked, “Do you have any clue who’s behind it?”

Lyte paused. “They wore purple tabards, similar to Loi—Eurus’ armies. And I didn’t see any Polonti in their ranks. Since Blairgowrie is almost certainly dead, and the Council of Eurus back to ruling, they must have a hand in it somehow.”

DeWitt asked him, “Do you suspect the attack on Venegas is due to its proximity to the Abbey Lands?”

“Almost certainly, Administrator,” Lyte replied. “It would make an ideal launch point for attacks on us. But it—doesn’t make any sense,” he vented, then shut his mouth.

There was a period of silence, then Efran asked, “Any more questions?”

DeWitt said, “A great many, but we probably have to wait for answers from Venegas.”

“Right,” Efran said. “You’re dismissed—except you stay, Commander. And DeWitt and Estes, if you will.” The rest of the men stood, saluting, and Efran looked in particular satisfaction at Wyeth, his wife clinging to his left arm as he saluted with his right.

When the rest of the men had departed, Efran said, “Commander, if you will, please consider Gabriel for the position of Aide and Rigdon for Captain.”

“Excellent choices on both counts, Captain. Consider it done,” Lyte said.

“Thank you,” Efran replied. “DeWitt, please give the families of the slain a generous bereavement gift, along with their gold ribbons.” Another tradition from Westford, the ribbons were awarded to families of soldiers who die in battle. “And, send me a list of the names, so I can express personal condolences to the families. Ask Ryal to post the list in his window, as well. Anything else?” Efran shifted Joshua on his chest, still deeply asleep.

Estes smiled, eyes on the baby. “I checked on him several times while you were gone, Efran. The nursery workers complained that he wouldn’t sleep for watching the door. Now, what of your trip?”

“Oh,” Efran said blankly. “Geneve will probably go to work for Goadby. Minka had a wonderful time at the Faire. And . . . that’s about it.”

The others laughed. “Was it worth going?” DeWitt demanded.

“Oh, yes. I had promised to take her. I’m afraid she might have bought gifts for you,” Efran added tentatively.

They laughed. “We’ll act surprised, Efran,” Estes promised.

“Good. Carry on,” he said. They got up to pat his shoulder, and Lyte saluted.

The doctor, Wallace, came to the door at that time. He gazed around at empty, blood-stained cots to sputter, “What the hell?” Estes took him aside to tell him what happened, as best he could.

The kitchen crew, finding themselves back in possession of the dining hall, came in to begin replacing tables and benches. Efran asked for a trencher to be brought to his quarters, then walked the corridor to his door.

“We’ll have a trencher coming, if you’ll receive it for me,” he told Salk.

“Yes, Captain,” Salk said, opening the door into the receiving room for him. So Efran took the sleeping baby back to his bassinet on the floor of the bedroom next to the bed. Minka was asleep, and he’d let her stay that way a while longer.

At the knock on the door, Efran opened it to receive the dinner tray with thanks. He put the trencher on the small table in the receiving room and opened a bottle of ale. Taking a swig, he paused. Was it his imagination, or was it different?

He looked at the label. Yes, it was Goadby’s Best Ale. He took another swig, evaluating. Yes, it was stronger, a little more bitter. He didn’t particularly like it that way.

Efran put it down for now, going into the bedroom to see that Joshua was still asleep, but Minka was waking. “Do I smell sweet and sour something?” she murmured.

“Yes, come eat,” he said, taking her hand. “Watch out; Joshua’s below. The nursery girls said he wouldn’t sleep while we were gone.”

“Oh no,” she murmured, sitting up. “We need to go in to dinner, to see Ella and the children.”

“Yes, you’re right,” he said. “We’ll just take the trencher. And Joshua.” He searched around for the sling in the bedcovers, glancing at her. “Did it tire you out, hugging all the wounded men?”

“No, I was just so upset to see them hurt,” she murmured. “Oh, Wyeth, and Barr. Efran, how will they do their jobs, wounded as they are? What will happen to them?”

“Don’t worry; I think they’re already on the mend,” he said cautiously.

“Oh, I hope so,” she breathed. She sat on the bed for a few minutes, watching Efran rummage around the bedclothes for the baby sling. Stretching, she got up to wander into the outer room and pick up an ale, opening it for a drink. “Yeech,” she grimaced, setting it down.

Finding Joshua’s sling to drape it over his shoulder, Efran looked up. “So it does taste different, doesn’t it?” He picked up Joshua to tuck him into the sling, and the baby settled back down on his chest.

“I never cared for it all that much, but it’s awful, now,” she muttered. He nodded as he picked up the tray with one hand to carry it and Joshua after her to the dining hall.

Geneve was rearranging her clothes in her wardrobe when she heard a loud knocking at the door. She hurried to open it, finding an unknown Polonti on her doorstep. He bowed. “Pardon, Geneve; Melchior apologizes he is kept late seeing to burial of those died yesterday.”

“Oh. I see. Well, if he has to,” she said, having no idea who died or why. He bowed again and ran off. Troubled, she closed the door. Did that mean he wouldn’t pick up dinner as he usually did? Faced with having to do it herself, she exhaled in aggravation. But she changed into good walking shoes to trek the long way from Melchior’s house to Croft’s.

Arriving, she found the tavern already full, so asked for stew and an ale to take with her. Ackley, the barkeeper, asked, “Goadby’s Ale?”

“What? Yes, of course Goadby’s. What else is there?” she asked.

“Oh, we’re carrying Delano’s Mild Ale now, too,” he said.

“Well, I’ll have two Goadby’s, please,” she said.

“Two stews?” he asked.

“I guess so,” she shrugged.

“Coming right up, then,” Ackley said.

Geneve lugged two ales and two stews all the way back to Melchior’s house, and was aggravated that he didn’t come home all night.

That evening in the keep, Efran held a memorial service for the soldiers killed defending Venegas. Those gathered to hear him filled the small hall and overflowed to occupy most of the foyer. He read each name aloud, commented on their service, and presented each soldier's family (if any were present) with a gold ribbon. DeWitt, standing to the side, gave each family representative a small velvet bag of 20 royals. Then Efran read part of Psalm 90 from the Holy Canon:

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place
for all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever you had formed the earth,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

“You turn us back to dust,
saying, ‘Return, you mortals.’
A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just passed,
or like a watch in the night. . . .

“Satisfy us in the morning with your unending love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
May your deeds be seen by your servants,
your splendor by their children.”

And he bowed his head to pray for the dead and those they had left behind.

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Chapter 7

The next day, November 8th, Efran grabbed Minka up out of bed before she was entirely awake. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” she murmured, holding his neck. “I can ride if I don't trot or lope.”

“Good.” He nuzzled her. “I have a lot to do today, but if you need me, someone will find me.”

“All right.” She lifted her head for a warm kiss, then he deposited her back on the bed.

Minka got up and dressed because she had a lot to do today, too. She ate a quick bowl of cobbler from the kitchen, then grabbed her bag of toys from the Faire and went right to the children's schoolroom, where they were sleepily settling at the tables with their slates to start their day.

Sweeping into the room, Minka smiled at the tutor. “Please excuse me for a few minutes before you begin. We

got back from the Crescent Hollow Faire yesterday.” The tutor nodded graciously, as there was nothing else to be done about it; the children saw and heard her.

They were in the process of springing up from their seats when Minka froze threateningly. “Sit!” They obeyed at once, grinning. So she went down the tables, putting a toy before each child—fifteen of them.

They squealed and grinned; Toby left his seat to put his arms around her. “Thank you, Minka.”

“You’re welcome, darling.” She kissed his head, then told them all, “You have to do all your work before you play with them, and the tutor can take up any of them until you do.” They groaned to sit again. Finding that she had one more toy in her bag, Minka deposited it on the tutor’s table, then left again.

She took Faire gifts up to the second-floor workroom, knowing that Efran was not here. Upon entering, she put a small painting on an easel in front of DeWitt. He glanced at it, then said in surprise, “That’s the fortress!”

“Isn’t it cute? I got it at the Crescent Hollow Faire,” she said. Turning to Estes to hand him a stuffed monkey, she told him, “It’s chewable. I tested it out; it’s safe for Malan.”

“Thank you, Minka,” Estes said warmly.

DeWitt said, “Are these the gifts Efran warned us about?” At a pained look from Estes, DeWitt added, “It’s lovely, Minka. Thank you.”

She smiled at him, then went over to Commander Wendt, silent in his chair. “Will you please stand up, Commander?” she asked. When he did, she placed a large red pillow with gold tassels on the chair seat. “Now sit again, and tell me how you like that.”

He sat, then lifted his chin. “That is heavenly, Minka. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, kissing his cheek. She went to the door, pausing to look back at them. “I love you all.” And she left.

The men were silent a moment, then DeWitt said, “She means it.” The others nodded.

She returned to her quarters to unpack, finding the box of willow bark. “Oh, no! Melchior needs this.” So she turned out to see if she could find him.

Not much later, Tiras appeared at the workroom with a request for the administrators to come down to Barracks #1 for a brief follow-up on the battle. Estes was working on needed protocols, so DeWitt and Commander Wendt left him behind. Shortly, Efran came up to the workroom with additional information he had received about the attack that was being reported in Barracks #1 right now.

Efran told Estes, “A messenger from Venegas just now arrived—they questioned their captives, who said they had been gathered and equipped in the fields south of Eurus, then moved in units to a location east of Eviron. They were paid in advance to fight—for whom, they have no idea. I sent the messenger back to ask Sewell not to kill the survivors, but to send them to me.”

“Oh, good,” Estes said.

“Have we had any more die?” Efran asked.

Estes eyed him. “Not after yesterday. Efran, how did she do that?”

Efran inhaled, shaking his head. “It wasn’t her doing. She still doesn’t know that anything happened. Commander Wendt talked about sensing the power in the fortress, the hill—it brought everything back together after Symphorien’s nest building. Minka loves the Polonti—I think because they all look like me. And her love served to focus the restorative power in this place. I thought about it all night; that’s all I know to explain it, but it’s certainly not the half of it.”

Estes nodded, then they both looked over at the appearance of a sentry, another new Polonti. “Captain,” he saluted. “A leaseholder requests your ear.”

Efran was inhaling to tell him “later” when the rooftop bells clanged at him in discordance. He stiffened, having never heard bells toll a rebuke, but there it was. “Send him up,” he said. Estes was back to his protocols.

Shortly, a late middle-aged man came up bearing a wooden case, which he set on the table. Barely glancing at the faerie tree, he looked in sudden confusion between Efran and Estes. Efran said, “I am Lord Efran. What can I do for you?”

“Thank you for seeing me, Lord Efran. I know you’re a busy man. My name is Delano; I’ve been brewing lager and ale in Westford for years. I’d like to relocate here, but I see it’s all Goadby’s. So, I’ve brought a sample of my ale, if you’ll try it. And if you like it, I’d much appreciate your patronage.” He reached into the case to take out a bottle to hand over.

Opening it, Efran took a swig. “That’s good,” he said in surprise, looking at the label: “Delano’s Mild Ale.” Estes looked over, so Efran gave him a bottle from the case.

Taking a drink, Estes said, “Yes, that’s better than Goadby’s.” He kept it beside him while he worked.

Efran paused over a third drink. “Goadby said something about improving his production process,” he mused. “This is milder, smoother.”

“We like to produce an ale the ladies can drink,” Delano said.

“Minka hates the new Goadby’s,” Efran noted.

Delano handed him a sheet. “Here’s our ordering information, sir. We have an office in the east section, as is noted there. We’d like to build a brewery here, if we can sell enough. Since we also brew lagers, I included a few in this batch.”

“I can’t promise anything—my kitchen mistress has final word on all ordering. But I will give it to her with my encouragement to try it,” Efran said.

“Thank you, Lord Efran; that’s good of you, sir.” He bowed and turned away for the sentry to show him back downstairs.

Efran finished off the bottle, then took the case and paper downstairs. He brought them into the kitchen where Madea was holding court with her staff on the day’s meals. “Pardon me, O Queen,” Efran said to their smiles. “But I have a proposition for you.”

He began handing out bottles from the case to her and her assistants, explaining the visit from Delano. Her three assistants opened their bottles as Madea said, “Goadby has doubled his price in the last month. It’s ridiculous. What do you think?” she asked them.

“This is good,” Dobell said, checking the label, and the other two nodded.

Madea scanned the price list. “Oh, this is much more reasonable. Yes, order fifty cases and cancel our order to Goadby that was going out today,” she said, handing the sheet to Dobell.

“Yes, O Queen,” he said, glancing at Efran, who left smiling.

Minka had gone to the door sentry with the box of willow bark. “Do you know where Melchior is?” she asked.

“Somewhere below, Lady Minka,” Conte said. He was one of the Polonti who had gone with Efran to Eurus to retake Marguerite’s estate from Master Crowe and Lady Fanny.

“All right, I’ll just go down and look for him. He needs this,” she said, clutching the box.

“Let me send two men down with you,” Conte said. As she began to object, he added, “They will help you look for him.”

“Oh. Yes, all right, then,” she said, going out to the courtyard to wait.

When the men, both young Polonti, came out with three horses, she glanced at them. “I only need to—” She suddenly looked at one of the Polonti, who was grinning broadly at her. He had long hair, to his shoulders, but it was clean of blood today. She began, “You . . . were on a cot yesterday. . . .”

“Yes, Lady Minka, and you hugged me!” he said joyfully, unbuttoning the top buttons on his jacket and pulling down his shirt so that she could see a portion of the scar.

“You’re” That’s all she got out, staring at his chest.

“Yes. I am Telo. You hugged me, and I am all better,” he said.

“From the hug?” she said, squinting in disbelief.

“Yes!” he cried. The other young man was nodding authoritatively while the gate sentries watched.

Minka turned abruptly to jam her foot in the stirrup and throw a leg over. Since she couldn’t understand it, she discounted it entirely. “I have to find Melchior to give him his willow bark,” she said.

“Just hug him!” Telo said, laughing. The other man, a few years older, admonished him to shut up and be respectful. They mounted on either side of her. Telo sobered, but only a little, because he was not only healthy and whole, he was riding down the switchback with *Moiwahine* Lady Minka.

“I can only ride at a walk,” she said despondently.

“We will do that, Lady Minka, and we will find Melchior for you,” the older one assured her. “I am Mathurin.”

“Yes, thank you, Mathurin,” she said.

When they emerged through the waving trees at the end of the switchback, they rode on to Barracks #1, and Telo dismounted to run in and inquire after Melchior. Telo came back out immediately to tell her that Melchior was at Barracks #2. So they rode around to the second barracks, where Telo dismounted again to inquire, and was told that Melchior had gone to the construction site of Barracks #3.

On their way to the third barracks under construction, they saw Melchior riding toward them. He spurred to a lope, so they stopped to wait for him to rein up beside them. “Yes, Lady Minka?”

She looked in concern at the lines of pain in his face. Some days he was less successful in concealing it than other days. “Here is your willow bark,” she said, handing it over.

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” he said, and paused. He did not open it, but he would not presume to ask her for anything.

After a moment’s silence, she asked, “Will it help if I hug you?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, so that Telo was bouncing in his saddle.

Minka turned her horse close to his and he drew forward. She leaned over to put her arms around his thick neck, a hand on the back of his head. After holding him for only a moment, she pulled back in dark suspicion that it didn’t work. But he inhaled in sweet relief, tossing away the box of willow bark. “Thank you, Lady Minka.”

She put her fingers to her lips in surprised gratitude. “You look like Efran when you smile like that,” she said. He lifted his craggy face, laughing.

The four of them began riding back to the fortress at a walk. They glanced at the office of Delano’s Lager and Ale, just past the new northbound road that ran behind Barracks #3. The office was spewing excited messengers who galloped up the new north road with an urgent summons for all hands to get to the brewery in Westford to fill an order of 50 cases of mild ale for the Abbey Fortress. Then there was further upheaval as a new order came down from the Fortress for 20 cases of lager.

“Did you need to see Efran?” Minka asked Melchior.

“Yes, he asked for an update on the construction of barracks, now that we have so many new men,” Melchior said.

“Do you really feel better or are you trying to make me feel good?” she asked suspiciously.

He laughed. “I am really better, Lady Minka, and if I was not, I would not throw away the willow bark.”

“That’s true,” she said in consideration. “I just don’t—understand it.”

Melchior observed, “It’s this place. There is power here. And power flows where there is nothing to block it.”

“I don’t understand,” she repeated, looking over to Telo. “But I am glad you’re better.”

“You honor us, Lady,” Telo said. She still looked conflicted.

They gave up their horses at the courtyard and Melchior escorted her into the fortress. He held out his arm to support her up the stairs, which she accepted. When they entered the workroom, Minka withdrew to sit at the table while Melchior saluted Efran, who glanced at her before nodding to him. Joshua crawled over to her and she began to pick him up, but he was just saying hello and didn't want to be lifted. Since she couldn't lift him anyway, she released him. He went back under the table to continue playing among the tree roots.

"Captain, Barracks Three should be completed in a week. With Barracks Four nearing completion east of the new north road, and the new armory under construction behind that, the building engineer Gerard is looking at other locations for more barracks. He is preparing a complete report for you and the Administrator," Melchior said. Estes glanced up from his paperwork to nod.

"Very good. Thank you," Efran said. He didn't like to dismiss men who had outranked him in previous service. Still, Melchior saluted before leaving.

Looking back to Minka, Efran patted his leg. She rose to go over and drop onto his lap, twining her fingers in his shirt. "Are you hurting again?" he whispered.

"No. Efran, what happens if I try to heal someone and it doesn't work?" she asked anxiously.

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Chapter 8

"How did you find out that you can do this?" Efran asked quietly.

"One of the bodyguards, Telo, showed me his scar. And I recognized him. Efran, did I heal all those men by hugging them?" She was shivering.

"Most of them. All of the Polonti. Some of the Southerners were still injured, but not badly enough to stay lying down," he said.

"Will I be responsible for going around healing everyone who gets hurt? What if I can't?" she asked.

He sighed, looking around her to watch Joshua pat the tree roots. "Let's look at this way: God is the healer. You were accidentally able to help this time. If you can again, good; if you can't, that's because it was never your job to start with," he said. "We are glad and grateful for the men you helped restore, but there's no—promise here that this is something you'll be able to do all the time."

She sat up. "I can understand that. Thank you."

He crinkled his eyes at her, and she sighed, "I need to walk around out back. I may have to go down and fight Commander Lyte to get Wendt up here to walk with me."

"Or Joshua and I could walk with you," he said.

"Will you?" she smiled.

“To prevent your picking fights? Yes. You go on out—you can take a blanket if you like. Joshua and I will send a man to see if DeWitt and the Commander are done at the barracks.” He hoisted her up and reached over for the sling. After he had caught Joshua, they three went downstairs to part at their quarters. She ran in for a blanket to take out while he went on to the front doors to speak with a sentry, who rode down to check on the location of Commander Wendt.

As Minka was skipping out the back door, she paused at the young Polonti sentry bowing to her. Another man whom she didn’t know limped up to her. “Lady Minka, I’ve twisted my ankle and need a hug,” he said curtly.

She was put off by what sounded like a demand, but the young Polonti stepped in front of her to order him, “Leave her alone! That’s for Polonti only!”

The man scowled at the kid in uniform, “Go play.” He attempted to push him away, at which the boy hit him in the face. He staggered back, grabbing the boy by his uniform jacket.

“Stop! Stop!” Minka cried. “Here!” She gave the laborer a quick hug and backed away.

The man let go of the boy’s jacket to put weight on his foot, then yelped. “That didn’t do a dam’ thing for me!”

The boy shouted, “I told you! Now keep your distance!” He shoved the man back, and they were fighting again. This was drawing attention from around the grounds.

“What’s going on?” Efran said mildly behind Minka. Despite the laborer clinging to his jacket, the young sentry turned to salute. At this clue, the man let go of him with a mildly disgusted look at Minka.

Efran’s eyes went cold, but Minka quickly turned to him, placing a hand on Joshua slung on his chest. “Just a misunderstanding. He wanted a hug but it didn’t help,” she said. The boy straightened his jacket in vindication.

“What is your name?” Efran asked the laborer in a toneless voice. The man snorted mildly and turned to limp away.

So Efran looked down at the young sentry. “What is *your* name?”

“Salk, Captain.”

“Salk, find out who he is and get him off the grounds. If he won’t go peaceably, any of the men in the archery or the sparring groups over there will be interested to hear that he demanded a hug from Lady Minka,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain!” he said joyfully, and turned to run. Efran watched, smiling.

“I was afraid of that,” she sighed.

“No, that was good,” he said. “I don’t think you’ll be bothered much after this.” He was watching the archers pause and look at the boy chasing down the limping laborer.

“Where is Commander Wendt?” she asked, looking over Efran’s shoulder.

“Somewhere,” he grouched humorously. “They’ll bring him up when they locate him. Meanwhile, you’re stuck with me.” She grinned, holding his arm.

Geneve was sitting at the table in Lemmerz's new office, waiting. Almost all of the tivoli stone had been set in mortar, and the laborers were in the process of placing regular rock around it. But Goadby was unhappy about something else, which Geneve was waiting to hear about. After deciding against marrying him and moving to Crescent Hollow, she was reconsidering it after seeing Minka hug Melchior.

But now she wondered about the wisdom of accepting a job with—or being married to—a man of such an imperious temperament. For all the talk about Polonti wildness, those she knew were remarkably sober, including Melchior.

But she was still upset after catching a glimpse of Minka leaning over to hug him on horseback. It didn't look like he hugged her back, but he certainly wasn't beating her off. Yes, Geneve was angry about that. She really kind of wished that she hadn't married him now. Why in the world had she done that? She'd just gotten a job with Lemmerz and a 50-royal bonus for getting the tivoli. But she wasn't sure that she wanted to marry Goadby, either. Or work for him. She needed to think about all that.

Lemmerz entered looking disturbed, which she was beginning to recognize as his normal demeanor. "Hello, Geneve," he said, perusing a parchment in hand. "Come on over to the brewery."

"What is the problem?" she asked, rising.

"I'll show you." He walked her into the nearby Goadby's building, almost completely finished on the inside. From the office area in front, they went back to the storerooms—two very large rooms to hold cases of bottled ale. And he looked all around.

"Well, now, that's going to be a job," he said.

Geneve felt that he had skipped a paragraph. "What is?" she asked.

"Lord Goadby decided he wants these storerooms finished out in cedar instead of oak," Lemmerz said thoughtfully.

"What?" she gasped.

"But we can't return the oak. Lord Guillalme made plain the sale was final," Lemmerz argued.

"Lord Guillalme?" she asked.

"Yes, that's Lord Monsell's brother-in-law. He took over his logging operation after Monsell disappeared. Guillalme is doing right well with it, too, and he's not going to take back all this lumber because Goadby changed his mind. I'm not even sure where we can get that much cedar. Let's see—each storeroom is fifty by twenty feet with an eight-foot ceiling. So that gives us. . . ." He was scratching figures with a charcoal pencil on a scrap piece of wood.

"Eleven hundred twenty square feet per room, which makes twenty-two hundred forty square feet of cedar for both storerooms. They probably have cedar in Eurus, but it's going to take us weeks to even find it all, much less get it down here and install it. That's after we tear out the oak, of course," Lemmerz mused.

"Who's paying for all this?" Geneve asked.

“Goadby, of course,” Lemmerz said, then he eyed Geneve pensively. “But he’s late on payments for supplies and labor as it is.”

Geneve exhaled. “Let me write to him; see if I can convince him to stick with what’s already done.”

“Thank you, Geneve. That would be greatly appreciated,” Lemmerz said anxiously.

As she started out, he said, “Oh, by the way—” Geneve turned back as Lemmerz added, “Congratulations on Gabriel’s promotion to Commander’s Aide. That’s a right leap up. Good man.”

She nodded, then returned to the construction office to pull out the good quill and fancy parchment.

Minka spread the blanket on the ground in the benign November sunshine on the hilltop. Efran lay right down on his back to bask like a lizard while Joshua crawled all over him. Minka lay on her front beside him with a book that she had been trying to read for weeks now. But she was too distracted by the bustle on the back grounds. If she looked straight ahead, she saw the harvesting and winter planting in the gardens. Ahead and to her right, apples were still being taken in by the bushel.

If she looked back over her left shoulder, she could see the men sparring, led by Nyland and Wyeth (this was after the laborer had been escorted out not too roughly). And if she turned far around, she could see archery practice, where Quennel was teaching *aike* shooting—the Polonti method of aiming intuitively instead of visually. Beyond that were the woods, with the hilltop barracks, the small armory, and the wild child Pia and her animal friends. And to the north, barely visible, were the stables and pens. Seeing Ella head out now for her session of horse training, Minka realized that she had forgotten about Law class today. She needed to start going with Ella again to be tutored by Soames on the provisions of Roman’s Law.

She looked down at Efran, almost asleep in the sunlight. But his eyelids cracked at her leaning over him, and he hazily regarded her face in shadow haloed by sunlit hair. “My treasure,” he murmured.

A larger shadow fell over them, and both looked up at a saluting sentry. “Message from Goadby, Captain,” he said, extending a sealed letter down to him.

“Thank you,” Efran said sleepily, reaching up to take it. The man saluted again and departed. “You read it to me,” Efran yawned, extending it toward her. She took it and he moved Joshua down to drool on his shirt instead of his face.

Minka took the letter to break the seal and begin reading: “To Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, from Balfager, Manager of Southern Continental territory of Lord Goadby’s ale.” She paused while Efran squinted up at the title.

Clearing her throat, she continued, “Dear Sir: It has come to my attention that you are late with your regular order of Goadby’s Best Ale. I must strenuously encourage you to place your order promptly with our Managing Director of the Westford/Abbey Lands region Trinkenschuh, else the quantity you desire may not reach you in time of your need. Please also note the tiny price increase which takes effect with this order. Best wishes, and remember to Go to Goadby’s.”

Efran sat up to take the letter from her hand and look at it. Brows drawn, he said, “I thought you might be making it up as you went, to tease me. It sounds just like you when you’re being devious.”

“I don’t know that I could pull it off so well,” she said. “Efran, can we find another supplier for ale?”

“We already have. You’ll try Delano’s Mild Ale at dinner,” he said.

“That sounds nice,” she said, looking at his lips, and his heart started thumping.

The same sentry approached with another letter. “Excuse me again, Captain. This one’s from Justinian.”

“Ah. Thank you,” Efran said, taking it and inadvertently crumpling the first.

“Do you want me to read it?” she asked, grinning.

“I’m afraid of what you’ll do to it. Here, you can read it with me.” Efran scooted close to her on the blanket, checked Joshua’s location, and then they both looked at the parchment to read:

“My dearest Minka:

“Note scribbled in haste to get it off today, November 8. Blairgowrie officially deposed, whereabouts unknown. Adele also vanished. Council of Eurus ruling once again, Grand Councilor Mounoussamy presiding. He is new to Eurus, reportedly has brought down great wealth from Corona, north of the Fastnesses. Impressive in appearance—calls himself ‘of the race of Nephilim.’ His immediate goal is to destroy his enemies, identity unknown.

“Desiring to see your sweet face at earliest opportunity.

“Your Own Justinian”

“It might be convenient to know who Mounoussamy’s enemies are,” Minka murmured.

“Yes, but first, I’m going to see if we can find out who the Nephilim are,” Efran said. He put on the sling, then captured the roaming child to tuck him into it and shift it to his back.

Watching Efran settle his son in the sling on his back, Minka noted, “You do that so deftly, almost like you shoot.”

Efran glanced up. “I hope I don’t get the two confused.”

Minka cried out, laughing. “Oh, no! But—how do you plan to find out who the Nephilim are?”

Stuffing Justinian’s letter into his pocket, Efran said, “Where do I go to find out anything? Do you want to walk or ride?”

As he began leading her around the west side of the fortress, she said, “Let’s walk to Ryal’s”—seeing that the baby in the sling was enjoying the view over his father’s shoulder. But his head was supported by the sling, and he could put his head down whenever he was tired. Efran nodded.

At the courtyard gate, Efran told the sentries, “We’ll be down at Ryal’s.”

“Captain!” The young Polonti Telo saluted him joyfully in response. Minka smiled at him.

On their way down the switchback, Efran muttered, “No one is as happy as a Polonti who has earned scars without lasting pain or impairment.”

Minka said, “I hugged Melchior today, Efran. He swears it took away his headaches.”

“Then it did, and that’s good. But we won’t try it out on *everyone*,” he said. She looked at him from under her lashes and he affected indifference.

They entered the notary shop, and had to wait a few moments before Ryal came out from the back room to the front counter. “Ah, good to see you, Efran. Minka. I hope your trip to Crescent Hollow was profitable?”

Efran replied, “Yes, Ryal. Minka had a wonderful time at the Faire.” He pulled Justinian’s letter from his pocket to spread it on the counter. “Please read that. I have a question.”

Ryal read the short letter, then looked up inquiringly. “What are the Nephilim?” Efran asked, stuffing the letter back in his pocket. Joshua was asleep on his back by now.

Ryal nodded. “One moment.” He went to the back, then returned with a large, old book. “Giardi is visiting a friend of hers, so I have to do my own fetching.”

He opened the large book, saying, “The ancient race of the Nephilim is first mentioned in the first book of the Holy Canon. Here, it says of them, ‘The Nephilim were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them; the same were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown.’ [Gen. 6:4]

“The implication here is that fallen angels—or some otherworldly beings—copulated with human women to produce this race of supernaturals. They are mentioned again in the report of the twelve spies that Moses sent to spy out the land of Canaan.” Ryal paused to gently turn old pages in the great book. “Here: ‘And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.’ [Num. 13:32–33]

“Finally,” Ryal said, turning pages again, “in this passage of the prophet Ezekiel, he speaks of the people that go down to ‘the Pit,’ to Hades, and says, ‘They lie with the warriors, the Nephilim of old, who descended to Sheol with their weapons of war. They placed their swords beneath their heads and their shields upon their bones, for the terror of the warriors was upon the land of the living.’ [Ezek. 32:27]

“So, if this Mounoussamy is claiming to be Nephilim, then he is claiming supernatural ability as a warrior,” Ryal concluded.

Efran considered this. “Who are their enemies?”

Ryal shook his head. “Whoever they take a dislike to.”

“Interesting,” Efran murmured. “Thank you, Ryal. Tell Giardini we will catch her next time.”

“I will,” Ryal nodded. “Good luck.”

Minka enjoyed Delano's Mild Ale very much at dinner that evening. And Efran ordered two scouts to ride out to Crescent Hollow in the morning.

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Chapter 9

After the scouts had set out for Crescent Hollow that morning (November 9th), Efran shared Justinian's letter and Ryal's explanation of *Nephilim* with Estes, DeWitt, and Commander Wendt. Their consensus was that whoever Mounoussamy claimed to be, he was the financier who had gathered and funded the army that had attacked Venegas, but he was not among them himself.

"I don't understand why, though," Efran mused. "With an army like that, he could have overcome our defenses in a surprise attack, and we're a far richer prey than Venegas. Why didn't he?"

Wendt said, "Because he's after something different than what you think. Wait and see what that is."

"Yes, Commander," Efran assented. "What of the scouts we sent to Eurus on the third?" he asked DeWitt.

"Oh, yes; they returned while you were in Crescent Hollow. The city is surprisingly calm, now that Adele has disappeared. Beyond that, though, they don't have Justinian's contacts to get inside information," DeWitt replied.

Efran received that as vindication of his having given Justinian the opportunity of fact-gathering and the title of Lord Officer to help him along.

When Minka swung in with a mug of hot tea, the men looked up, including Wendt and Joshua on the floor. "I caught you!" she said victoriously.

"Thank you, Minka," Wendt said, reaching toward her for the mug, as he could see the bright aura of her outline.

"You're welcome," she said in satisfaction. After placing it in his hands, she bent to attempt to lift Joshua, then found she had to kneel beside him. But he scrambled away toward his father, and she sighed.

"He lets you hold him at dinner, sometimes," Efran said in an attempt at consolation.

"Sometimes," she murmured. Attaining Efran's knees, Joshua pulled up to a stand. She gasped, "When did he start doing that?"

"Just now," Efran said quickly, irrespective of the exact truth.

"Oh," she said, watching Joshua pat Efran's knee to be picked up. Efran complied.

Koschat stepped in with a salute. "Captain, Commander Lyte requests Commander Wendt at the lower barracks." Before Efran could reply, Koschat glanced at Wendt and said, "Oh, you have your tea, sir. Excellent. I do not wish to fight the Lady Minka."

DeWitt chortled in his throat as Minka turned meaningful eyes to Koschat from her seat on the floor. Wendt stood. "I'll take it down with me to enjoy, Minka."

"Very well," she said aloofly.

"My wife, the warriorress," Efran remarked. Wendt departed with the sentry and his tea.

"We are deadly," she admitted, getting up to kiss him. But she resisted his effort to pull her down to his lap. "I need to go roam a little. I will take bodyguards," she said, forestalling his instruction. He released her reluctantly with a brief nod. Something always happened when Minka stepped out of the fortress.

She went down to the courtyard gates to request a horse and two bodyguards. When the two appeared, leading three horses, Minka turned to smile at them. But she did not know them, and always felt reluctant to ask for names, for appearing forward or flirtatious. She mounted by herself to descend the switchback at a walk, the men on either side of her. Her ribs still hurt with any exertion *and I can't hug myself*, she thought despondently.

With another mild fall day, Minka decided, "I'd like to walk around the lake, if you're agreeable."

"Of course, Lady Minka," the Southerner to her left said. "I am Eustace; this is Allyr."

As the second Southerner nodded to her, she murmured, "So many handsome new men." Glancing again at Allyr, she said, "Wait. I've seen you at dinner. You make Ella laugh."

"As best I can," he admitted, puckering.

Eustace bemoaned, "I can't ever get near her."

Minka glanced at him. "Come to dinner early; bring her a bowl of custard. She loves the pumpkin, but whatever the kitchen has will do."

He gestured in homage to her. "Thank you, Lady Minka."

"Don't help him, the villain," Allyr grunted.

She laughed, "You already have an unfair advantage." He raised his shoulders in acknowledgment.

The courtyard gate sentries were watching as the three of them crossed the new northbound road at a walk to the lake. Despite Symphorien's abrupt appearance out of the water three weeks ago (needing her eggs unstuck), families continued to fish along the shore because perch were plentiful. There were already three groups out here this morning.

Minka dismounted out of reach of the faerie tree at this end—when she was underneath them, the branches liked to reach down and play with her hair.

She sat in the grass close to the shore, looking down at the green water, and her bodyguard sat on either side of her. "It's so nice out here," she breathed, stirring the placid water with her fingertips. The nutmeg scent of the faerie tree blossoms rolled through the air, with the branches occasionally dipping into the water to pluck up a perch and toss it toward the fishermen. They also liked to stay out from under the branches, which sometimes plucked the fish out of their baskets.

Allyr looked down at the water, noting, “Big fish coming up.” Minka and Eustace looked down at the gentle swell, neither particularly alarmed.

But a dark gray body about five feet long from snout to rump burst out of the water to fall on Minka. The men beside her leapt up at once—Eustace reached out to grab the long neck and Allyr drew his knife.

“No!” Minka cried. “Don’t hurt it! Let go!” Eustace complied, but they warily watched the baby Leviathan flounder on the shore. Turning its unsteady head toward Eustace, it raised its little siphons to blow a spurt of water at him that quickly fizzled.

“Oh, you sweet thing. At least one of Symphorien’s eggs have hatched, then,” Minka said. She took the foot-long head in one hand to stroke it between the green eyes and then scratch the top of its head between its wee horns. It accepted that, flicking out a yellowish tongue to taste her arm. It put one scaly gray foot on the skirt of her riding dress to experimentally clutch her knee in its claws.

The groups fishing around the lake looked over in vague interest, but since it wasn’t the big one, they saw no reason to pull up their lines. However, the far-sighted courtyard gate sentries saw a long, scaly body engulfing the Lady Minka, so promptly began ringing the alarm bell. Allyr heard it, raising a hand to signal “all is well,” but Minka saw a greater swell billowing in the water.

“Uh oh. Mama comes looking for her baby,” Minka said, quickly pushing it back into the water. It fell with a *plunk*; there was some rippling, then the swell subsided and the surface calm was restored.

As Minka stood, shaking water from her riding skirt, Efran came running out to the courtyard without Joshua. At the sentry’s gesture, he looked toward the lake where Minka was standing between two bodyguards. About the time he saw that she was apparently in no difficulty, the wall gates bell began clanging, so he looked there instead.

He saw five female figures in armor brush past the wall gatesmen to begin striding down Main despite the faerie trees’ batting at them. There were three in front, two behind, all with long white hair. The one front and center was obviously the leader; though they were all tall—at least Efran’s height—she was the largest. The traffic on Main pulled over to each side at once, and the action did not look voluntary.

“Get me a horse. And archers,” Efran directed, eyes fixed on the figures while a man brought up a saddled horse beside him. Glancing over, Efran took the reins and leapt up into the saddle as the courtyard sentries quickly opened the gates. He rode down the switchback at an unhurried lope and the interlopers below paused, watching him.

He drew up before them in the middle of the road. “I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Who are you and what do you want?”

The woman in the lead bared her white teeth at him. “Lord Efran,” she repeated with an unknown accent, possibly in derision. “We are Kittim and have come to fight.”

Efran paused. “What grudge do you have against us?”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” she laughed, as did her subordinates. “You are nothing. We meet Nephilim here for battle.”

Efran’s stomach dropped, but he clenched his jaw and said, “You will not fight on my lands.”

“But we will, little lord Efran. Stop us,” she invited. Efran glanced back to see archers arrayed on the switchback behind him. Dropping from his saddle, he whistled the signal to fire and fell to the ground. The well-trained horse stood still.

Raising his face at the whiz of air through fletching, Efran saw a score of arrows hit the women, particularly the one in front. The arrows burned to ashes upon contact, as though hitting molten lead. “Silly men,” the leader breathed, bending down to grasp the front of Efran’s work shirt with a burning hand.

He gasped, but a solitary rooftop bell struck one low, reverberating note of warning. This she heeded, and immediately released him. Efran sat up to glance down at his scorched shirt front. Stepping back, she evaluated the fortress, then looked down at him. “You are ruled by one Victoris. I do not acknowledge Him but for today. You will bring us fish.”

She and the other four turned into the nearly completed Goadby’s plant. Getting to his feet, Efran looked up at the archers, then aside at Barr standing at attention in front of his unit of 50 men, waiting for his command. Efran held up a hand to indicate the men stay put, then pointed at Barr, who began walking over to him.

Efran then looked toward Minka with her bodyguard, who were sitting on their horses at the intersection of the east road with Main. Efran pointed them up to the courtyard. When Minka didn’t move, one of her bodyguard slapped her horse’s haunches to start ascending the switchback. Reluctantly, she looked back at her husband as she rode up.

“Captain,” Barr said, saluting.

Efran grimaced slightly, touching the mild burns on his chest. “Send a man up to Estes to tell him these women are Kittim, whatever that is, and they say they have come to fight Nephilim here, on our lands. I’m going to try to find out more. Send another man to Shurtleff to get us a basket of fish, any kind; bring it to me in the front office of Goadby’s here. Tell him to bill the Fortress for it.”

“Captain.” Barr saluted again, turning away to gesture to his men. Inhaling, Efran went into the almost-completed brewery.

He found the women seated in a circle on the floor of one of the oak-paneled storerooms. “Your fish is coming,” he said. “Do you drink Goadby’s?”

The women put their heads together to confer, then the leader turned back to him to say, “This is unknown.”

“Then I’ll get you some,” he said, adding under his breath, “we’re trying to get rid of it” as he went out again. One of Barr’s men, Ellor, was at the door, so Efran told him to bring at least five Goadby’s from Croft’s and bill the Fortress for it.

Another of Barr’s men ran up with a basket of river trout, which Efran took back to the storeroom to set in the middle of the women. They leaned over to help themselves from the basket. As they passed a hand over a fish, Efran smelled it sizzling. Then they stuck a whole fish in their mouths and pulled out the skin and skeleton—and reached into the basket for another. Efran winced.

Ellor came in with a case of Goadby’s which Efran placed in the middle of the women. He removed a bottle, opened it, and handed it to the leader.

She took it to look in the bottle with one eye, then lifted her head to pour a bit into her mouth. Eyeing him, she swished it on her tongue before swallowing. Whereupon she emptied the rest of the bottle down her throat.

The other women helped themselves as Efran and Ellor backed away, watching. The leader looked over her shoulder at them. "You, Lord Efran, sit here. We talk."

Efran came over to sit cross-legged outside their circle. They opened it to include him, and the leader began, "Now you will—"

"Give me your names," Efran said.

"We give you nothing," the leader said.

"It seems you need my permission for whatever you wish to do here. So you must answer my questions to get it," he told her.

The women regarded him, and there was some discussion among them that was unintelligible to him. But he had hit on something pertinent, for the leader said, "I am Aleph. This is Beth, Gimel, Daleth, and Heth." She pointed around the circle of women, who were still drinking the Goadby's.

"Very good. Now tell me who Nephilim is," he told Aleph.

She said, "He is leader of Eurus Council who goes by name of Mounoussamy."

"I see. Why did he attack Venegas?" Efran asked.

"He wished to empty it as our battleground. He failed. So we come to empty your Abbey Lands as our battleground," Aleph said.

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Chapter 10

Efran digested that, then asked, "Why are you battling?"

"It decides who rules the Toledoth," Aleph said.

Efran, feeling himself on the edge of reality, asked, "Where is the Toledoth?"

Aleph studied him for a moment, then said, "You are not able to know."

Efran accepted that, then asked, "Why must you fight here or in Venegas?"

Aleph leaned toward him intently. "These are in line that intersects with Toledoth."

Efran looked away, then back to ask, "So why can't you fight in the empty land between Venegas and the Abbey Lands?"

“We are permitted to use only one fighting technique, which means battle must be in arena. Enclosed,” she said.

“Venegas has no walls. It is not enclosed,” he argued.

“Venegas is observable location,” she said.

Studying her, Efran countered, “Then we can enclose a location between Venegas and the Abbey Lands with numbers and words. The western boundary of your arena will be the east fork of the Passage. The southern boundary will be the Sea—no, two miles north of the Sea. The eastern boundary will be five miles from the nearest building in Venegas. The northern boundary will be seven miles from the coast. That is an area much larger than Venegas. You may battle there as long as there are no repercussions that damage structures or harm living things in our cities.”

Aleph considered this for several minutes. “We will take this to the Bola of Toledoth.”

“Fine. It’s that or nothing,” Efran said, standing. And he walked out, Ellor following.

On the sidewalk outside, he encountered Lemmerz and Geneve. The construction supervisor asked, “What’s going on, Captain? Who’s in there?”

“Some very dangerous ladies. Stay out for now,” Efran told them.

Geneve began, “But, Lord Goadby wants—”

“Whatever he wants will have to wait. I am instructing everyone to stay out of the building until we settle matters with them,” he said. While Lemmerz and Geneve listened, Efran turned to update Barr and have him post guards at the entrance. With a glance at the normal traffic that had recommenced on Main, Efran leapt up on the patient horse to ride up the switchback.

This left Geneve and Lemmerz staring at each other, for two of Lord Goadby’s representatives had just arrived from Crescent Hollow to inspect the progress of construction and especially to see that the changes which Lord Goadby had demanded were being carried out. The representatives were now at Croft’s refreshing themselves with dinner and Goadby’s Best Ale.

So Geneve and Lemmerz had to return to Croft’s to tell the men, who were just now exiting the tavern, that they would be unable to view the interior of the plant at this time.

The two stared at Lemmerz. “Explain to us, if you will, why we are not permitted into Lord Goadby’s own facility under construction,” the senior representative rumbled.

Lemmerz, sweating, told him, “I am very sorry, Bathurst, but there are apparently trespassers that Lord Efran allowed to access the facility who now won’t come out.”

“We shall see about that,” Bathurst uttered. Then he and his companion marched down to the entrance of the plant where two of Barr’s men, both Polonti, stood guard. And Bathurst drew himself up to say, “I represent Lord Goadby and demand that you give me entrance into this facility.”

The two said nothing, barely even glancing at him and his companions. Lemmerz began a feeble suggestion to wait until tomorrow, but Bathurst thought it a better idea to force his way in, upon which he suddenly found

himself supine on the front walk. Assisted by his companion Hinxstone and Lemmerz, Bathurst rose to utter dire threats at the indifferent soldiers, then turned hobbling back to Croft's to get a room for the night.

Efran, meanwhile, went directly into the fortress to take the stairs two at a time to the second floor. In Estes' workroom, Efran found him and DeWitt, as usual, along with Minka waiting at the table and Joshua crawling under it. She lifted her arms and Efran grabbed her up, both asking at the same time: "Who are those strange women?" "What happened at the lake?"

He sat in the chair with her in his lap as Joshua chugged over. "Answer me first," he said.

"Oh!" she exhaled. "One of Symphorien's babies came up out of the water onto the shore! She—or he—was just flopping all over the place, which I'm sure looked like an attack from the courtyard. But she was just looking us over. When I saw Symphorien coming up, I pushed the baby back into the water. That's all."

"I see. Well, we have a situation with Mounoussamy and his enemies that I'm not sure what to do about." As he picked up Joshua on one arm to put him in Minka's lap, Efran recounted his conversation with the leader of the Kittim.

"Toledoth," Estes said. "We need to run that by Ryal."

"Yes, I'm just afraid of what he might tell us. My only consolation is that they apparently have to regard my authority over the Abbey Lands. I just don't know yet whether they or Mounoussamy are the greater threat," Efran said, watching Joshua curl up on Minka.

"I'm expecting a messenger from Venegas, so when he comes, we'll send him back with this information," DeWitt said, and Efran nodded.

They sent Gabriel down to tell Ryal of the situation with the Kittim and Mounoussamy, whom Aleph identified as Nephilim. Gabriel was to ask Ryal: (1) What is Kittim? (2) What is Toledoth?

Gabriel returned with Ryal's message that (1) *Kittim* is a Holy Canonical word that can mean "archenemy." (2) *Toledoth* is a word also from the Holy Canon meaning "generations." What it means to the Kittim is unknown.

That evening at dinner, the back row where Efran and Minka sat was unusually crowded—first, because the men vying for Ella's attention finally figured out they could pull up benches behind her and eat with their plates on their knees. This resulted in some spills, but with the Captain sitting practically in front of them, those responsible knew to clean it all up.

Delano's Mild Ale was an immediate success, especially with the women. But the surprise was the lager, which many found an agreeable change. So Madea had to up their order of both for the following week, and Delano began looking around on the Abbey Lands for a good location to build another brewery.

Tess joined them tonight so that she and Ella could laugh over training mishaps with the horses today. Ella made sure Efran knew she wasn't breaking any horses, but that still left a wide range of possible embarrassments. Having a generous audience made it easy for her to admit mistakes.

Her half-brother Cyneheard had to push his way in between two men across from her to give them all a breathtaking account of his participation in the defense of Venegas three days ago. The remarkable thing was, he had actually been there and fought. True, he had been late to the battle because he had to borrow the miller's

donkey to get there, and once there, he had to penetrate a wall of Polonti ahead of him who were hogging all the enemy to themselves. Nonetheless, he was there, and had a bruised shin to show for it.

DeWitt stopped by their tables to tell Efran, “Surchatain Sewell’s messenger expressed their deep gratitude for our assistance—between casualties and severe injuries, Venegas lost almost a hundred men, so are pretty vulnerable to another attack.”

“Which I’m trying to forestall. Thank you,” Efran said. He smiled at DeWitt’s wife Tera, who looked supremely content holding his arm. “Good man,” Efran murmured as they left the hall.

Alcund and Toby also showed up at their tables, still clutching the gifts Minka had bought for them at the Faire. When the kitchen assistants brought over three apple pies for their tables, hordes more children descended on them, and the pie pans were instantly emptied.

Minka was thrilled to see Wyeth healthy and his wife Cyr happy and adoring. Moments after they had passed their table with quiet greetings, Geneve came up to ask Efran, “Have you seen Melchior today?”

Efran shook his head. “No, and I need to talk to him.”

“I’ll tell him when I see him,” she said, moving off with a troubled face.

Early the following morning, November 10th, Efran rode down to check on their unwanted company. The sentry at the door of the new Goadby’s plant, Tourle, told him that the women had not been out, but had requested more fish and Goadby’s, which the other sentry, Goss, was now procuring. While Efran stood at the door, Goss walked up with a case of Goadby’s on his shoulder and a large bushel of river trout under his arm.

Efran took the Goadby’s off his shoulder to enter the storeroom where the women were waiting, sitting as before. Goss and Efran deposited their breakfast in front of them, which they began raiding at once. Then Efran sent Goss off with the case of empty Goadby’s bottles and the bushel of bones from yesterday.

Efran sat behind the Kittim’s circle to let them eat (so to speak) in peace. Nonetheless, he watched, then abruptly leaned forward. “What—what are you doing? You’re not eating the fish; you’re just—incinerating it.”

Aleph said, “We are instructed to perform your rituals.”

“Why?” he murmured, but as she had no answer for that, he asked, “Did you hear from the Bola?”

She replied, “Bola says your proposal will be accepted. But any who trespass into the arena will die.”

“Then you must put up a boundary so that no one accidentally wanders into it,” Efran said.

Aleph looked up momentarily, then said, “This will be done. But still, there is entry, but no exit until one is destroyed: Nephilim or Kittim. Either he will be Victoris, or we will be Victrix.”

A battle to the death. Efran recalled, “You said that you were permitted only one fighting technique. What is that?”

Aleph paused as if trying to find words that Efran would understand. “Strikes of power,” she finally said.

“Then—why didn’t Mounoussamy use that to clear Venegas? Why go to the trouble of hiring men to do it?” Efran asked.

“He had much of your money, but needed to conserve his energy for battle with us,” she said with a slight sneer.

“I see. When will your battle begin?” Efran asked.

“Tomorrow at the appearing of your sun,” Aleph said.

Efran paused, watching their unnerving imitation of eating breakfast. After a moment he added, “We must be allowed observers who can watch safely outside the boundaries.”

Aleph looked up again. She seemed to be sifting a response, for she eventually said, “Watch as you will; do not cross.”

Neither reassured nor informed, Efran stood to walk out.

First, he rode down to the wall gate sentries to tell them that the Kittim would be leaving some time before sunrise tomorrow, and he wanted to be informed when they did. Then he rode back up to the fortress to tell Estes and DeWitt all this. Estes sent a messenger to Venegas with this information, as well as the boundary lines that Efran had given Aleph.

Then, while Minka was in Law class with Soames and Ella, Efran slung Joshua on his back to go hike down and up the northwestern hillside. He needed the think time.

On the way, he watched diligently for the hole he’d accidentally made, to go far around it. He also began testing the stability of the ground in places that seemed to have few plants. Had Symphorien’s nest building weakened the hill itself?

Efran had watched the switchback shrug back up into perpendicularity and the ground around (and presumably underneath) the fortress reassert itself, but what about the rest of the hill? He didn’t want to plunge into the cavern waters below again, especially with Joshua.

Meanwhile, Lemmerz and Geneve had Goadby’s representatives Bathurst and Hinxstone on their hands again today. Refreshed by breakfast at Croft’s and a reinvigorated sense of mission, Bathurst led the party back to the entrance of the plant under construction. There, Geneve and Lemmerz were discouraged to see two more guards at the door today.

Bathurst, however, noting that one of them was a Southerner, strode up to Tourle to say, “I am Lord Goadby’s representative Bathurst, and I require entry into this building in order to inspect it for my report to him.”

Tourle replied respectfully, “I’m very sorry, sir; the Captain says no one goes in until the Kittim leave.”

“Kittim,” Bathurst repeated. “Who is the Kittim? I will speak with him.”

Tourle shook his head definitively. “I’m sorry, sir; you’d have to ask the Captain about that.”

“Then that we will do. Where is your Captain?” Bathurst demanded.

“Check with the fortress door guards, sir. They always know. Usually,” Tourle said.

Narrowing his eyes at him, Bathurst turned to begin a stately stride toward the switchback. Hinxstone was at his heels; Geneve and Lemmerz followed unhappily.

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Chapter 11

As Bathurst, Hinxstone, Lemmerz and Geneve approached the courtyard gates in near exhaustion from climbing the switchback, Efran, carrying Joshua, was entering the gates twenty feet in front of them from the northwestern hilltop. Lemmerz panted, “Ah. There’s the Captain, Bathurst.”

Grunting in acknowledgment, Bathurst hastened his tottering stride. Of the four of them, Geneve was the least affected by the climb, being in good shape from her army service. The men were uniformly red-faced, panting, and sweating in the mild November sun.

The young Polonti gate guards left the gate open for them after the Captain had entered. The guards were smiling, though not at the struggling party. For Efran was tossing the baby a short way up in the air and catching him again, to his squealing delight.

Then as Minka came trotting down the fortress steps, Efran said, “Listen to this.” She stopped before him, grinning, as Efran held Joshua face to face and said, “Pa . . . pa.”

Joshua put his little hands on his head and pressed his lips together in mimicry. “Pa—”

“Captain Efran, I require a word with you,” Bathurst fairly exploded in his need to breathe.

“Shh,” Efran said as Minka’s large blue eyes took in Bathurst at a glance. “Pa . . . pa,” Efran repeated for his son.

Bathurst was breathing heavily at his side, but Lemmerz was watching Joshua in delight while Hinxstone and Geneve stood by. The black-haired baby threw back his head in imitation of his father and said, “Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa.”

“Oh, Efran! That’s wonderful!” Minka cried, falling on his dusty, sweaty shirt.

“I know,” Efran laughed, bouncing Joshua as he turned his attention to the red-faced man in Crescent Hollow finery. “What can I do for you?”

“Captain Efran,” panted Bathurst, “I and my associate require entrance to Lord Goadby’s plant for inspection.”

“It will be available to you tomorrow morning,” Efran replied, turning back to Minka’s adoring eyes.

“I must insist on being allowed in today,” Bathurst rumbled.

“Are you prepared to die for Lord Goadby’s inspection?” Efran asked, looking at his son. “Pa . . . pa.”

In the sudden silence, Joshua said, “Pa . . . pa.”

“Wait one day and you’ll be alive to give Lord Goadby his report,” Efran said mildly, smiling at his son.

Lemmerz said, “That’s a fine idea, Captain. Bathurst, let’s go down and look at the modified plans over an ale or two.”

Bathurst weaved in indecision; Efran said, “Excellent. Carry on.”

Placing his free arm around his wife’s shoulders, Efran turned with the baby toward the fortress steps. Geneve, Lemmerz and Hinxstone were already descending the switchback, so Bathurst followed, groaning.

The following morning, November 11th, Efran was up before daybreak in order to see that the Kittim left. Courtyard lanterns were blazing in the pre-dawn, as were companion lanterns at the wall gates. Main was lit by torches every twenty feet, with additional torches at the main double doorway of the new Goadby’s plant. Efran wanted to make sure the Kittim saw the way out.

Efran, Lyte, Barr, Melchior and Stephanos sat on horses at the bottom of the switchback to watch. Shortly, the doors of the new plant opened, and large female figures appeared on the steps to descend to the street. Aleph looked back at Efran, who lifted his chin. Then the five began walking in formation up the middle of Main toward the gates—Aleph at the point, Beth and Gimel slightly behind to her left and right, and Daleth and Heth slightly behind them at the left and right. Efran’s group of five followed at a respectful distance.

The wall guards had the gates wide open when Aleph was yet forty feet away, so the Kittim passed through as the eastern sky began to brighten. The faerie tree branches held their limbs and leaves high out of reach. The women turned right, toward the sunrise, and continued their march. The men followed.

As the sky brightened in a red-orange glow, the women progressed east down the dirt path just outside the wall, crossing the new north road. The men passed the same point a few minutes later. Barr said, “Captain, we prefer that you let us lead, in case we enter the arena without seeing it.”

Efran opened his mouth once or twice in argument, then condescended to drop back a foot or so behind Barr’s and Melchior’s horses. A minute later, Barr said again, “Captain—”

“Don’t push it,” Efran said, mildly irritated, and Barr did not.

The women maintained their brisk pace over the miles between the Abbey hill and the east Passage. The light brightened to early morning, so that the men had to shield their eyes from the blaze of the sun directly before them. Then the shallow, lazy east branch of the Passage came into view, marking the eastern boundary of the Abbey Lands and the western edge of the battle arena.

Following the Kittim, the men continued to ride at a silent walk for several minutes, then Melchior said, “I see the boundary.” The others squinted ahead.

“I don’t. Describe it,” Efran said.

Melchior replied, “It is about six feet from the east bank of the Passage. Faint orange lines woven in the shape of a great dome.”

“I see it now,” Efran said, as Lyte was affirming sight of it. The orange lines were trembling as if alive, and more

thickly woven on the ground than in the sky. From this point, they faded to invisibility in the east, given the size of the arena.

The men stopped on the west bank of the narrow strip of water while the women waded easily through it. Then they passed through the oscillating orange lines to spread out. Aleph raised her hand in a signal, and lightning flashed inside the dome.

This startled the riders' horses, so the men backed up about forty feet. But they could still plainly see the bolts thrown from the women's hands, and the returning bolts from a point of origin beyond their sight.

For the next hour, the men watched what they could see while messengers went back and forth from them to the fortress. Since the Kittim were on this edge of a roughly rectangular arena, Mounoussamy must be on the far eastern edge, close to Venegas. Without riding around the arena, which Efran would permit no one to do, it still appeared that Aleph had arranged conditions for the battle according to Efran's stipulations. And he respected her for that.

In the course of observation, Efran noticed that Mounoussamy's strikes appeared to be thicker, longer, and more focused than those of the Kittim. The strikes looked like lightning, except willfully directed, energized by the inner strength of the being who produced them. Aside from Efran's intense interest in who won, the battle itself was somewhat boring. That was apparently due to the fact that the combatants were restricted to one fighting technique: throwing bolts.

Then he saw a bolt hit one of the Kittim directly, incinerating her. The rest of the Kittim combined their energy to form one great bolt, which one of them shot toward the origin of the fatal strike.

But a far bolt came up to meet it, and then travel backward down the energy trail to strike the woman who had sent it off. The observers watched her light up like a flare, then collapse in a pile of ashes.

"The Kittim are losing," Barr observed to Efran.

Efran unhappily agreed. "They are weakening. He grows stronger, if anything."

"To have such a power on the throne of Eurus will not be good for us," Barr noted. Efran shook his head dismally.

Melchior walked his horse over to them. "Captain, others at the fortress are asking to come watch."

Efran hesitated in reluctance, but they might need to see firsthand the power that will be opposing them from Eurus. "All right, but they all must stay at least ten paces behind us."

"Captain." Melchior saluted. Then he returned to inform the messenger, who rode back to the Abbey Lands with the word.

Unknown to Efran, Minka was one of those wanting to come watch. It had not occurred to him that she would care to see a death match between supernaturals. But because he was out here, Minka was among the first group of twenty-five that left the populated Lands to head east.

However, most of the group left in a lope, anxious to get there. Because of her cracked rib, Minka was still constrained to a walk, so Martyn rode with her. They stopped at the cavern lake to water their horses, and Minka knelt at the water's edge to wash a random bit of mud off her hands. Martyn stood beside her, casting a cautious

eye over the lake, but it was still. They remounted to continue walking east. And a small dragon head poked out of the water to watch them ride away.

As the group of twenty-odd approached the east fork of the Passage, Efran turned to hold up his hand, and the officers with him directed the group where to stand, ordering them to stay there. Efran watched momentarily just to see that the rowdy young men were behaving, then turned back to the spectacle.

The Kittim, down to three, had begun a new tactic of bouncing the light between them until it balled up in a mass of energy. Then Aleph held it, waiting for Mounoussamy's next strike to show his location; when it did, she hurled the ball in a terrific burst of power. And when it landed, it spread over a far greater area than their usual strikes.

The watchers held their breath at the silence. Had Kittim done it? But the orange barricade did not waver. Then a great blast sped toward the remaining three Kittim, and caught one a glancing blow which knocked her down. Before she could rise, another burst followed on the same trajectory to annihilate her. This left two Kittim standing.

Efran turned his head, hearing something foreign behind him. Looking back at the sightseers from the fortress, his stomach dropped to see Minka working her way to the front of the group. He did not want her here. That she was with Martyn did not reassure him; he *did not want* her here. But she stopped well back with the group, and raised her face to smile at him.

He returned his attention to the battle, but was still distracted by an alien sound. Barr, beside him, turned his head as if listening as well, and looked back to the west. Efran looked. Melchior looked.

There was an erratically flying form approaching, screeching plaintively. "What . . . ?" muttered Barr.

Martyn turned to look, and nudged Minka. The horses around her scattered as the baby Leviathan dropped down toward Minka on her horse. This baby was over five feet long from snout to rump, and easily 200 pounds. It attempted to land on the horse's rump, digging sharp baby claws into it. The terrified horse bolted to gallop wildly past Barr and Efran into the east Passage. Efran cried, "Jump, Minka! Jump off!"

Somehow, she managed to extract her feet from the stirrups and fall from the saddle seconds before her horse plunged through the barrier. As she was lifting up just feet from the orange lines, the baby Leviathan crash-landed into her. Its impact rolled them both through the barrier.

The men were transfixed in horror as the panicky horse, still running east, was consumed by a fiery blast from the other end of the arena. So Mounoussamy was immediately aware of the incursion. The two remaining Kittim, Aleph and Gimel, looked back in displeasure at the interlopers.

Minka sat up, stroking the baby's head to calm it, then turned to push against the orange lines, which were hard as stone to her. She looked through them at Efran on the other side. A blast landed near her, showering her and the baby with dirt, so it began screeching again. Minka hushed it, scratching it between its horns. Aleph and Gimel separated widely around them, blasting constantly to distract Mounoussamy from their presence. So even though Efran's people had broken his own rules, the Kittim were protecting them.

Efran dismounted to begin wading through the shallow east Passage. Barr immediately joined him, but Efran stopped to say, "I order you to remain, Captain Barr. The Lands will need you." Barr stopped dead in the water, and Efran continued walking.

Men behind him threw themselves from their horses. Efran turned again to shout, “No one follows me! That is my command!” He emerged from the water to walk through the orange barrier and kneel before his wife, shielding her with his body. She gasped and clutched him by the neck. The baby head-butted his hand, demanding a head-scratching. Efran complied, and its yellow tongue explored the taste of his arm.

Exploratory blasts came from the other end of the battle field as Mounoussamy searched for the foolish trespassers. The baby opened its jaws in raucous screeching again. Efran wrapped his arms around his wife; she turned to bury her face in his neck. He whispered, “I will love you forever.”

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Chapter 12

Aleph and Gimel drew farther away from the humans sprawled on the ground against the barrier. The remaining Kittim were working up another great ball of fire between them. This one, however, was to be guided to its target in a special, sacrificial manner: once it was of sufficient girth, Gimel climbed into it. Aleph glowed with power as she raised the manned missile high and flung it mightily.

The watchers waited, and the resultant explosion sent tremors through the ground under them. Afterward, all was silent.

And then a bolt came so quickly, Aleph barely managed to evade it. Its quickness was a sign of decreasing distance: Nephilim was moving in for the kill. Efran turned back to tighten his hold on his wife.

Melchior stepped through the orange barrier to stand in front of them. Efran swiveled to him as Melchior looked down to remark, “Actually, Captain, I technically outrank you—” having been a lieutenant under Master Crowe. Then he turned back to face the unseen enemy.

Barr entered the arena to stand beside Melchior. Glancing back at Efran, he said, “No disrespect intended, Captain, but I follow the higher command.” Efran looked irritated, as no one outranked him on the Lands.

Martyn plunged through the orange. “I am Minka’s guardian, Efran. This is my duty.”

Following, a rush of men poured into the arena to shield the Captain and his wife—and the yellow-gray baby thing. Minka looked over Efran’s arms in pride and dismay to see Cyneheard among them, standing tall. “This is what it’s all about,” he said, looking around.

Aleph drew far away from them to shoot her bolts in a last, desperate stand. Mounoussamy began dropping little teasing bursts in the midst of the pathetic humans, to make them dance and scatter. Aleph intercepted these as she could, but the fact of her weakening was evident.

The little Leviathan sat up to screech and wave its head on its long, unsteady neck. The bright morning sky darkened, and the men looked up at Mother Leviathan, descending with claws outstretched for her baby. Efran fell aside with Minka, covering her as the great claws grabbed up the little one to ascend again.

But now Symphorien was trapped in the arena, as well. She crashed into the barrier, whipping at it with her great tail that had shattered the hillside. But the barrier was of unnatural make and would not be breached.

Nephilim then set his sights on her, and loosed a great bolt which caught her full in her golden belly, barely missing her baby. Symphorien's head wheeled about, roaring so that the men below covered their ears, scattering from under her death fall. But she remained aloft to focus her green eyes on the ancient manlike being that pulsed with power on the ground below.

Opening her massive jaws, she spewed a flood of fire from her belly that appeared to have incorporated some of the force of the bolt that had struck her. Rather than injure her, it had been absorbed into her armor and wrapped with the fire from inside her. And this she directed down on the Nephilim with the force of a meteor crashing to Earth.

Two seconds into her firebomb, the orange lines began wavering; after four seconds, they had disappeared altogether. But Symphorien's wrath was not fully expended until the square yard of ground on which Mounoussamy stood received twenty seconds of blast, boring a narrow hole 100 yards into the surface of the earth.

Then her fire vanished; with smoking snout, she lifted her baby high above the ground to fly her back to her nest in the cavern waters.

A voice said, "Kittim has prevailed. Ascend to your Toledoth."

They all watched breathlessly as Aleph began to fade in a glow. She looked back at Efran to utter, "I acknowledge your Ruler as Victoris." She vanished, leaving a normal landscape in a mild November morning—with the exception of several piles of ash and one deep, smoking hole in the ground.

The men looked around, stunned, and began stumbling back over the Passage to whistle for the long-bolted horses.

Efran lifted Minka to a sit as she clung to his neck. "How badly are you hurt?" he whispered.

"Not much," she said, feeling her ribs.

"You are lying again," he observed, picking her up.

He paused as Melchior stopped beside him to salute. They studied each other for a moment, and Efran asked, "Whose command do you follow?"

"Yours, Captain, as a courtesy," Melchior said. "Except when you are wrong."

Efran scowled; seeing Minka's humorous eyes uplifted to him, he pressed his face into her hair. Then he tossed back at Melchior, "Carry on."

"Thank you, Captain." Unseen by Efran, Melchior turned his Efranesque smile upon her. She laughed, holding her ribs with one hand. Efran looked back at him quickly to see only his blank, craggy face. But Minka smiled at him over Efran's shoulder. If he wasn't grateful, she was.

About a half hour after Efran and his men had ridden out to follow the Kittim, Geneve and Lemmerz accompanied Bathurst and Hinxstone to the Goadby's plant. There, they were all encouraged to see no obstacle to their entrance, so they went in.

Hinxstone carried a slate and sharpened piece of chalk to make notes for their report to Lord Goadby. They paused in the reception area, completely finished. Bathurst noted numerous deficiencies in this room which were, in Lemmerz' unvoiced opinion, trivial matters of finishing or simply of taste. He sighed repeatedly, "Yes, I see. Of course, that needs attention. I don't know how that slipped by us."

Geneve, feeling slight tremors, whispered to Lemmerz, "Excuse me for a moment." She went back out to the street to look east and see bright flashes in the sky, as well as faint *booms*. She continued to watch from the sidewalk as a group of men, mostly soldiers, left on horseback. Minka and Martyn were riding down the switchback at a walk. Perturbed, Geneve returned to the building.

Inside, she found Bathurst in speechless indignation at the state of the storerooms. "Cedar," he whispered as if the word were too sacred to be shouted. "These rooms were to be reclad in *cedar*."

"Yes, Bathurst," Lemmerz said hopelessly. "We're trying to find suppliers now. But for the quantity required, it's going to take some time. Also, Lord Goadby is, er . . . overrun on his budget, and . . . deficit in the amounts owed for materials and labor."

Bathurst stared at him as though he had declared himself an atheist. "Your presumption is duly noted," he breathed. "And the completion of this structure thrown into doubt by your sloppiness and neglect."

"We're doing the best we can, sir," Lemmerz said as if viewing his own demise.

"Lord Goadby is not impressed," Bathurst uttered.

Geneve, watching, suddenly knew she never wanted to marry Goadby nor work for him. Even if this Bathurst were wrong about what Goadby said or wanted, he was still a man whom Goadby paid to be his voice. Geneve abruptly turned, pausing over a large basket of fish bones and a case of empty Goadby bottles. Then she walked out.

She stood on the sidewalk again, breathing in fresh air away from the gasbag in the most expensive building constructed on the Abbey Lands to date. As she looked at the tivolì stone that adorned the façade, a great black shadow passed overhead. Traffic on Main paused as everyone watched Symphorien wing rapidly east. Since she didn't pause over the Lands, they all resumed their errands once she was well away.

Geneve watched her diminish in the distance and then dive. Still hearing faint booming from the east, Geneve began to wonder strongly what was happening. Whatever it was, it was probably more relevant to the Abbey Lands than what was happening here—because it was now clear to her that Goadby had lost interest in this project and was looking for a reason to drop it.

She had begun to turn back inside when the echoes of a loud roar startled her. Moments later, she felt tremors through her feet. Peering at the horizon, she was almost sure she saw flames. She watched for a while longer, but saw nothing further. So she went back inside.

There she found Bathurst critiquing the corridors, which Lemmerz explained needed one more coat of paint. They went on to the milling room and grain storage, the layout of which baffled Bathurst. At this point, Lemmerz came somewhat alive: "This was built on the plan that Lord Goadby authorized, sir."

"Are you *sure*?" Bathurst rumbled.

"Yes," Lemmerz said. "I was there when he viewed the plans."

Bathurst harrumphed. Lemmerz, not a stupid man, eyed him thoughtfully. Lemmerz was awakening to the possibility that this was all performance art.

The tour finished, they exited to the sidewalk. There, they looked down Main where Efran was carrying Minka in front of him on his horse, riding at a walk toward the switchback. Scores of mounted men followed, with messengers going back and forth to the fortress. Minka was awake, holding his neck and periodically laughing, or so it seemed. But Geneve and Lemmerz both ran toward them.

As Efran reined up, Geneve gasped, "Is Minka hurt?"

"No," Minka said quickly while Efran said, "Yes."

She lay her head back on his shoulder, grinning. "He just likes to carry me."

He looked down at her to reply, "She likes to pretend she's tougher than she is."

He had prompted the horse to start again when Bathurst blocked his path. "Lord Efran, I require a word with you, sir."

"Again?" Efran laughed.

"Sir, his wife is injured," Lemmerz objected.

Unheeding, Bathurst said, "I have grave concerns about your workers' ability to finish this project to Lord Goadby's satisfaction."

Efran glanced at Lemmerz. "Does Goadby want changes?"

"A few," Bathurst admitted. Hinxstone held up his slate, covered front and back with notations.

Regarding the slate and Lemmerz's dead eyes, Efran asked, "What happens if we don't make all the changes Goadby wants?"

"Then I fear he will abandon the project," Bathurst said in a voice of doom.

"Get that in writing," Efran told Lemmerz. "Get his signature on a parchment that says Goadby will disown the plant if we don't make these changes, and bring that to me."

Lemmerz' eyebrows knotted, but he said, "Yes, Lord Efran. Bathurst, come have a drink or two." As they all started toward Croft's, Lemmerz paused. "Lady Minka, I hope you heal quickly."

"I'm fine, Lemmerz. Thank you," she said, smiling.

He smiled in return. "Good," he said, his eyes resting contemplatively on the Captain, who knew something.

Geneve stopped to look up at Melchior, mounted behind Efran, and he looked down at her. This was the first she had seen of him since they had returned from Crescent Hollow four days ago. She wanted so much to apologize to him that she stepped toward his horse.

But Efran had resumed riding with Minka, hoisting her to nuzzle her cheek. So Melchior, and all the men with him, followed on their horses, flowing around Geneve as though she were a rock in the riverbed. Soon, they had all passed, and she turned to accompany Lemmerz to Croft's.

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Chapter 13

After carrying Minka up the fortress steps, Efran paused with her in the first-floor corridor of the fortress. "I'm going to take you up for Wallace to look at you," he said.

"No," she objected, fingers under his collar. "You're going to lay me in bed and go get Joshua."

He hesitated, but finding her plan more to his liking than his own, did what she said: he laid her in their bed and went to get Joshua.

Shortly, he returned empty-handed. "He's still asleep," he said, troubled. "But Nesse promised to send someone to knock on our door when he awakes."

"Good." She patted the bed beside her, and he obediently lay down.

"Aren't you relieved that the Kittim woman won?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so," he said, snuggling her. "Does that hurt?"

"No. But she thinks Symphorien is our ruler, doesn't she?" Minka asked. He looked at her dubiously, and she explained, "She said she acknowledged your ruler as victorious after Symphorien burned Mounoussamy to fine ash."

Efran squinted in thought. "No, I believe she said she acknowledged our ruler as *victoris*. She used the word earlier in a masculine sense."

Minka looked interested. "God?" she whispered.

"I hope so," he said. Then he leaned over to kiss her, and she responded. Abruptly, he lay back, groaning, "Whenever I let you out of the fortress, *things happen to you*."

She raised herself on her elbow, laughing. "But it was ordained. Can't you see? The Kittim weren't able to defeat the Nephilim; Symphorien was needed for that. But little Levie was needed to draw her."

"Levie? Why does it follow you?" he demanded.

"I gave her a head scratching!" she laughed. "But I think she was in the first egg that I unstuck. I think she recognizes me, and that I helped her."

"Oh." He thought about that, then leaned over her again to kiss her. Again he flopped onto his back. "I don't want to hurt you," he said through gritted teeth, covering his eyes.

"I'll tell you if you are hurting me," she murmured, reaching across his chest.

He uncovered his eyes. "Do you *promise*?" he said, sounding exactly like the 12-year-old in the faerie tree.

"Yes," she said, stretching herself over him.

He hoisted her up—then there was a knock on the outer door. "Joshua is awake, Lord Efran," Nesse called.

"He'll be there in a moment!" Minka called back, and he engulfed her.

Not too much later, Efran went to the nursery to look in on his son, who was listlessly lying on the floor having his wraps changed. "Good timing," Efran congratulated himself, while Joshua looked up to kick eagerly.

The nursery helper lifted him to hand him over to his father. "Oh, he's getting heavy!" she said.

"Thank you," Efran agreed, taking him back down the corridor. He paused when he spotted Lemmerz entering with something in his hand.

Efran met him in the foyer. "Do you have something for me?"

"Yes, Lord Efran." Lemmerz handed him the paper. "As you asked, Bathurst signed this statement as Lord Goadby's official representative. It says that since the Abbey Lands cannot complete the required changes in the time frame that Goadby wants, he will relinquish his claim to the building if we repay him the money he's spent building it."

Efran opened his mouth but Lemmerz continued, "Of course, I pointed out to Bathurst that Goadby owes for labor and materials, and when what he owes was subtracted from what he has already paid, we found that you can buy this building from him for forty-six [royals and] twelve [silver pieces]. We made a copy of the final agreement that he's taking back to Goadby."

"Excellent," Efran laughed. "Take this up to Estes and tell him that; ask him to see if Delano is interested in a practically finished brewery in the heart of the Abbey Lands."

"Ah," Lemmerz said in comprehension. "Yes, the Westford brewer of ale *and* lager."

"Yes, he talked of moving his operations down here," Efran said.

Lemmerz sighed, "Then I should have no more nightmares about cedar."

Smiling, Efran turned away. "Oh," he remembered, turning back with Joshua, who enjoyed the spinning. "One of the conditions of nobility is that they live or have a business in the Abbey Lands. Goadby will have neither. And he hasn't contributed to the Widow's Fund, which is also a requirement. Tell Estes that once this agreement goes through, Goadby is to be stripped of his title."

"Mortal once more," Lemmerz murmured, turning down the corridor to the stairs.

"As he always was. As we all are," Efran said, heading back to his quarters with his son. He paused at the door, glancing toward the unseen keep and the inscription on the wall, which included: *Men of low estate are but a breath; men of high estate are a delusion.* "I must remember that," he whispered.

Dinner that evening was a celebration of Aleph's victory and Mounoussamy's frying. The men who were privileged to see it all from within the arena were pleased to give their respective views over and over.

Minka, glancing up at Ella's older brother standing nearby, said, "I was most proud of Cyneheard."

He looked at her in surprise, and the others looked from her to him. She said, "He's just joined the army, but went into the arena unafraid."

"Ignorance," he blurted. "I've never been remotely in danger. But I was honored to be there today."

Ella smiled at him and Efran glanced up to remark, "Well said." He seemed to have deliberately forgotten how angry he had been with the men who disregarded his command.

Estes stopped behind Efran with Kelsey and their five-month-old son Malan to tell him, "Bathurst and Hinxstone left for Crescent Hollow this afternoon. When we get Goadby's final approval of the agreement, we'll contact Delano."

"Very good," Efran replied. Joshua, in his lap, was looking back at Malan; Minka had stood to talk to Kelsey and caress Malan's black head.

The following morning, November 12th, Minka was in the courtyard early to request two horses and Martyn. She told the sentry, "You may tell Efran we'll be out at the lake."

"Should you be, Lady Minka?" The fatherly Ellor asked in concern.

"Yes, Papa," she said, smiling.

But it was Stites who came around with the horses. Bowing to her, he said, "Martyn is on other duty, Lady Minka, so I told them I was your second choice. If I am wrong, you may rebuke me and send for another."

"Oh, Stites, don't be silly," she said. "You're very entertaining. All I require is that you not tell me no." She lifted her foot to mount the small mare.

He hopped on his own horse gravely. "Now I am afraid," said the battle-hardened Polonti warrior.

She laughed at him, as he desired, and they descended the switchback at a walk. "I can't trot or lope," she warned him.

"But I noticed yesterday that out-of-control galloping is permitted," he said.

She laughed again, with a hand on her rib. "That was fun."

"Where have I heard that before?" he wondered.

She shook her curls. "I refuse to laugh any more in case I want to gallop."

He looked at her quickly. "Now I *am* afraid."

When they arrived at the north shore of the lake—a location she preferred—Minka tossed Stites her reins. “Let them graze over there, so that they won’t spook.”

“We hope,” he muttered in true Polonti pessimism. She sat on the shore and dipped a hand in the water to stir it.

When the horses were contentedly grazing twenty yards away, he came to stand behind her and look around. The few early fishermen moved to the point of the lake farthest away from her. “What are you wanting to do, Lady?” he asked warily.

“Just sit,” she said, looking at the water.

“For no reason,” he observed, watching the water with her.

In a few minutes, there was a swell in the water, and a black-gray body flopped up on the shore practically in her lap, so that Stites had to restrain the urge to draw his knife. Minka reached out to scratch the scaly head between the six-inch horns. Stites winced as the jaws gaped in pleasure, revealing sharp teeth. With a grunt, it tilted its head into her hand for maximum coverage.

Both Minka and Stites glanced over at the rider reining up behind them. He dismounted to release his horse to graze with the other two. Then he came over to her, breathing, “I can’t turn my back on you.”

Stites saluted. “Captain.”

Efran was eyeing him in possible displeasure when Minka chortled, “Don’t be angry; he’s been a perfect beast. He won’t even let me gallop.”

Efran looked up to the heavens in affliction, then they all looked at the great swell rising in the water. Both men reached for Minka, but she bent down in resistance. “No! Let me sit.” Stites backed off; Efran stood with his leg braced against her.

Symphorien’s great head, twelve feet long from snout to horns, broke the surface to rest on the water like a crocodile’s. And there it stayed, her brazier-like green eyes fixed on them as the water poured down either side. Baby Levie bleated, reasserting her right to Minka’s lap. Then Symphorien pushed her snout several feet onto the shore on the other side of Minka, who turned to stroke her plated nose. This Leviathan accepted, tilting her head to accommodate the human hand. The men watched with shallow breathing.

When one of the fisherman across the lake called out a warning, Symphorien withdrew and submerged, taking her baby with her. Her guardians relaxed, Stites gesturing, “She’s made a pet of it.” Efran looked nauseous.

Geneve stood at the door of the Goadby’s plant, waiting for Lemmerz to arrive. Having seen Efran ride down the switchback, she looked around for Melchior. After a while, she saw him walking out of Barracks #2. So she went over to meet him.

He paused as she drew up to him. “You haven’t been to your house in almost a week,” she said, worried. He glanced away without replying, so she exhaled, “I need to apologize. I behaved very badly in Crescent Hollow. I’m not going to work for Goadby nor marry him. I—”

Melchior’s brow wrinkled. “Did he think you would?” She paused, not knowing how to answer that. “Do you want to be free?” he asked her gently.

Geneve looked away in sudden confusion. “I don’t—no! I’m trying to get you to come back home. Where are you sleeping? In the barracks? Why?”

“Pardon me, Lieutenant,” a Polonti at Melchior’s back said, and he turned. “Commander Lyte requests your presence at Barracks Three.”

Melchior turned back to bow to her, then walked off with the Polonti soldier. Geneve exhaled in frustration.

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Chapter 14

Late that afternoon (still November 12th), Minka received a letter from Justinian. Since it was delivered to her hand, she opened it to read before taking it to Efran upstairs. To her surprise, two letters were enclosed in the packet: one was from someone in Crescent Hollow to Marguerite, and the other was from Justinian. Minka read his first, which went:

“To my scrumptious éclair:

“I have never done this before, and will never do it again. However, after your visit to Crescent Hollow, our dear Auntie Marguerite received the enclosed letter from Surchataine Gaea. We read it with such amazement that I personally concluded the only thing to be done was to forward it to you. As this is a breach of courtesy so appalling, so unforgivable, I must state that our divine Lady M had nothing whatsoever to do with it, the heinous act being mine alone. You’re welcome.

“My second bit of news may not be news to you at all, as I have the tingling sensation that your Gargoyle has something to do with it. Nevertheless, our latest and most illustrious Grand Councilor, Mounoussamy, disappeared two days ago and has not been seen since. He told his fellow Councilors that he was going to receive the rulership of his home country and would return empowered to rule Eurus as a servant state of his own land. As this did not sound encouraging to many of us, we have been waiting for his return in trepidation, given that he seemed the sort of fellow to accomplish whatever it was he set out to do.

“SO, if you have any information on the whereabouts of GC Mounoussamy—tall gentleman, commanding presence, slight lisp—please do share it with

“Your Own Justinian”

Minka read this over twice, then opened Surchataine Gaea’s letter to Marguerite with no qualms of conscience at all. It went:

“To my dear friend Lady Marguerite of Eurus:

“Well! We have just endured the most unimaginable social situation one could possibly imagine. I know you

disapprove of gossip, but I must share this with you; it is all too absurd. This tribe of Polonti from some unimaginable locale known as the Arbor Lands has just visited us in a pathetic effort to get our own Lord Goadby to build another brewery there. He is extremely contemptuous of their aspirations to acquire him, and laughed greatly among our ladies over their little women.

“The child purported to be married to the chief of the tribe (who styles himself a lord) outraged everyone by donning PANTS—yes, you read that right—a garment separated at the legs. Moreover, she flitted around in them all over our Faire with a group of MEN. It was highly outrageous, as our men can attest who followed her all day long.

“Oh, and did our Lord Goadby tease the pathetic woman who thought to ‘fit in’ by dressing herself in Ennemond’s fashions of LAST FALL. Oh, how we laughed to hear Ennemond describe dumping them on her at a premium price. I’m afraid our naughty Goadby led her on just a tic to get somewhat intimate with her as a—how shall we say—bought woman.

“Oh, and I must describe for you this Polonti ‘lord’ who presumed to sit his child wife at our dining table. He is tall and certainly muscled—watching him breathe is a sight in itself, to see the chest under that virgin linen rise and fall, rise and fall. And those lips! are almost feminine in their shape; before speaking, he will sometimes wet them, which may give you heart palpitations to see. He turns these beautifully shaped eyes to you, and you almost know that he is undressing you with his eyes when he looks down at the floor and refuses to look at you again. It’s almost obscene.

“Well, I could go on about what a spectacle he made of himself with poor Lady Tudi, who thought she was to have been seated by him at dinner before finding that this ridiculous child was instead! And wherever she stole that gorgeous jeweled headband she wore at dinner, I cannot imagine.

“Well, I could go on about how pathetic and certainly inadequate they were for company or even conversation, yet stupid Auber fell into the little vixen’s blue eyes and simply laughed at everything she said. It was horribly humiliating, and he deeply apologized the following morning, and certainly did not kiss her goodbye, no matter what you might have heard.

“At any rate, that is the end of them. All of my crowd says we’ll do no business with them at all.

“With the greatest love,

“‘Giddy’ Gaea”

“Oh, dear,” Minka murmured, laughing despite her shock. “‘Virgin linen.’ Yes, I like that. I’ll use it sometime. But Efran must see these right away.”

As she had been standing in the foyer to read the letters, she began to turn down the corridor. Then she heard, “Minka,” and looked over her shoulder at Geneve approaching. “Minka, do you know what’s wrong with Melchior?”

The question did not even register with Minka, who looked anxiously at her to ask, “You’re not thinking of marrying Goadby, are you?”

Startled by the question, Geneve affected an air to say, “Well, I don’t know.”

“Oh, don’t. Please don’t even consider it,” Minka said earnestly.

“Why not?” Geneve demanded.

So Minka handed her both letters. Frowning, Geneve read Justinian’s letter, handing it back as she began reading Gaea’s letter. Minka watched her jaw drop and her face drain as she read, then she handed the second letter back and turned out of the fortress without a word. Wincing, Minka wondered if she’d just made a huge mistake with that. Nonetheless, she took the letters up to the second floor.

In the workroom, she found Estes poring over his ledgers, DeWitt covering budget items with his assistant Pieta, and Efran on the floor under the table with Joshua. He looked up at her to say, “We’re fine. No problem. Nothing in his mouth that shouldn’t be there.”

“Good,” Minka said, handing him the letters.

Efran crawled out from under the table, wiping a hand on his pants, then sat and patted his leg. Unwilling to sit on his lap while he read those incendiary lines, she said, “Let me keep an eye on Joshua while you read.”

“For a little while,” he said. As Estes, DeWitt and Pieta looked over, he began reading Justinian’s letter aloud, but got immediately hung up on “scrumptious éclair.”

“Read!” DeWitt ordered. So Efran managed to get through the entire letter without further incident.

“Huh,” he exhaled, then lifted Marguerite’s letter. As he read, Minka shrank from those awful words about Geneve in Efran’s voice, but he was not laughing. He paused to ask DeWitt, “How else can we punish him?”

“We can’t possibly do anything worse than he’s doing to himself,” DeWitt said.

Efran acknowledged that with raised brows, then went on to describe himself breathing. He snorted so as to have to wipe his nose with the back of his hand, and DeWitt remarked, “Maybe Gaea needs to see *that*.” Joshua was watching him from under the table in fascination.

Containing himself, Efran went on to read “fell into the little vixen’s blue eyes,” drawing it out for emphasis. She turned those eyes away in disavowal. Then he demanded, “Did Auber kiss you goodbye?”

“No,” she said quickly.

He returned to the letter, but her quick denial aroused his suspicions. So he put the letter down again to ask, “Did he kiss you at all?”

Assuming an air of offended innocence, she merely said, “Keep reading.”

Eyeing her, he finished the letter, then said, “We brought a bundle of letters back from those businesses that weren’t going to have anything to do with us. Where did I put those?”

“Oh, they’re over here,” Estes said, turning to withdraw the unopened bundle from a shelf behind him. “I’m sorry; we had so much crop up, I forgot all about them.”

“That’s all right; we’ll have a look at them,” Efran said, “if I can escape the little vixen’s blue eyes.”

“While I watch the virgin linen rise and fall,” she murmured back at him.

“For heaven’s sake, take that to your bedroom,” DeWitt ordered, glancing in embarrassment at Pieta.

Everyone laughed at that, especially Pieta. So Tomer, the young sentry who appeared at the door, had to wait a minute for them to quiet down. Saluting, he said, “Captain, your presence is requested at Barracks Three below.”

Efran stood, reaching for the sling. “On my way. Go ask for a horse for me and the small mare for the lady”—

“Rose,” Minka interjected, so that Efran and Tomer both looked at her. “I’m tired of calling her ‘the small mare.’ She’s now ‘Rose.’”

“Yes, Lady. Captain,” Tomer said, turning to run.

“Don’t run down the stairs!” Efran shouted after him.

“Yes, Captain!” Tomer shouted from far down the stairs.

“Oh. Do you mind coming?” Efran thought to ask her.

“I’m very glad to,” she said.

“Good.” Draping the sling over his shoulder, he looked under the table. “Are you coming, Joshua?” The baby put his head down to chug over on all fours with authority. Efran picked him up, laying him horizontally in the sling. Joshua tried to crawl up his shirt, but Efran said, “No, we’re riding.” So Joshua lay back down in the sling.

After they had left the room, DeWitt said, “That’s rather amazing, the way the baby seems to understand him.”

Estes said, “Efran’s been taking him everywhere since Minka cracked her rib.” They considered that, then returned to the work in front of them.

Below, Efran and Minka were ambling down the switchback on their horses, he with Joshua comfortably looking up at him from the sling. From there, they departed to ride down Main, stopping at all three crosswalks for pedestrians. On far north Main, he and she passed Barracks #1 and #2 to arrive at #3, almost finished. Efran adjusted the sling for Joshua to sit upright on his chest before dismounting, but Minka wouldn’t wait for him to help her dismount. Despite her cracked rib, she could get up and down on Rose easily, which is why she liked riding her.

Melchior met them at the door. “Captain,” he said, saluting, which Efran regarded skeptically. “Lady Minka.” Melchior bowed to her and she smiled. “Captain, we have made changes in this barracks suggested by the men which need your approval.”

“Fine,” Efran said indifferently, so Melchior began walking them through the nearly completed structure, pointing out what they had changed. Like the armories, the barracks had glassed-in windows so that little additional light was needed inside them during the day. Efran saw no problem with the changes the men wanted.

At the same time that Gerard, the building engineer, asked Efran to come look at the second floor of Barracks #4 across the new north road from #3, a sentry ran up to Melchior with a bundle, which he took over to stash in a cubicle beside a cot. Efran and Joshua left with Gerard.

Minka regarded Melchior in heartache. “You’re not sleeping here, are you?” she whispered. He glanced at her to barely shrug. “Oh, dear.” She looked away in such distress that his brows drew down.

“Minka? What is the problem?” he whispered back.

“Oh, Melchior, Geneve needs you,” she pleaded.

He exhaled, then reluctantly nodded, and she reached over to squeeze his fingers in gratitude.

When Minka, Efran and Joshua returned to the fortress, she sat down to write a long letter to Justinian and dear Auntie Marguerite, telling them about the battle between Nephilim and Kittim, and the fact that Mounoussamy was now a pile of ash at the bottom of a very deep hole. She intended to return Gaea’s letter to Marguerite with this one, but forgot about it before sealing it up. So she just resolved to send it along later.

After a long day helping Lemmerz dismantle the labyrinth of obligations to various suppliers for Goadby’s building, Geneve stopped by Croft’s to get some dinner, only to discover a long line of people waiting to do just that. So she decided to just have the bread and cheese left at the house, and walked by herself all that long way home.

Although twilight was approaching, she did not notice the lantern light inside the house. But she was irritated at herself for apparently forgetting to lock the door. Entering, she smelled stew warming over a fire, and went into the kitchen to see Melchior nibbling cheese. He looked over to say, “I hope you are okay with drinking Goadby’s; they were all sold out of Delano’s by the time I got there.”

She stood speechless a moment, then threw herself on him with sobs and kisses.

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Chapter 15

Three days later—November 15th—the Abbey messengers returned from Crescent Hollow with Goadby’s signature on the documents authorizing the Fortress’ buyback of his building. With that, Estes summoned Delano, who was thrilled to acquire an elegant, nearly completed brewery for his burgeoning Abbey Lands business. He was to make small monthly payments for ownership of the building along with his lease payments.

Delano walked the structure with DeWitt, Pieta, Lemmerz and Geneve to discuss what alterations would be required at this point. Pleased with everything he saw—including the large community well practically at their doorstep—Delano was reluctant to incur further costs and delays with alterations to accommodate his lager.

Finally stopping in the front office of the brewery, he said, “You know, the best thing might be to continue to brew the lager in Westford and move the ale processing here. Then we wouldn’t need to change a thing in this building. Besides, Westford gets much colder than your Abbey Lands, and we need that to brew the lager.”

DeWitt asked, “Would that give you greater capacity for brewing more of both?”

“Yes, in fact,” Delano said. “Is that a factor here?”

“Our people are excessively thirsty,” DeWitt replied in mild disapproval, which made Delano grin.

As they exited the building, Delano glanced over the line of tivolli stone in the façade. “That’s a strange ornamentation. Fussy, for a brewery. Well, we won’t touch it for now, but I may have it painted over later.” Lemmerz and Geneve looked at each other with quiet, pained laughter.

Upon the departure of her associates, Geneve walked over to Croft’s to wait in line for Melchior, as they had agreed to meet here for the midday meal. And here is where the messengers returning from Crescent Hollow found her, to deliver another letter that they had brought. In great curiosity, Geneve opened it, finding it to be from the (soon to be unentitled) Lord Goadby. He had written:

“My dearest Geneve,

“Having the warmest remembrance of your short stay here, I find that I simply cannot concentrate on anything without your lovely, engaging presence at my side. Therefore, I must beg that you satisfy my desires and consent to be my wife. I shall send a carriage for you immediately.

“In great hopes,

“Lord Goadby”

Forgetful of the people also in line around her, Geneve screeched in amusement. She looked up to see Melchior striding toward her, his brows mildly arched in curiosity. As he drew to her side in line, she thrust the letter at him. He read it, then looked at her blankly. She said, “I was inclined to just ignore this. But since you’re the one I wronged, I’ll answer however you want me to.”

Smiling slightly, he crumpled the letter, and she jumped on him to kiss him. The people around them smiled. The large Polonti Lorient looked on with the faintest of drawn breaths. Tess, standing just in front of him, turned to eye him.

Lorient looked down at her to utter, “You’re no match for me, girl.”

“I’ve broken larger beasts than you,” she murmured, and he blinked.

With Goadby’s signature in hand, and confirmation of arrangements with Delano, Estes finalized the break with a letter notifying Goadby of revocation of his title of nobility in the Abbey Lands with his failure to meet the requirements of (1) tenancy or business occupation in the Abbey Lands, and (2) contribution to the Widow’s Fund. On behalf of Geneve, Estes spontaneously added, “In addition, your vile disparagement of an Abbey Lands woman who has worked tirelessly in support of your project would alone disqualify you from membership in our noble class.”

With that, Estes sealed the letter and put it aside for delivery to Crescent Hollow on the morrow. After a moment’s thought, he checked the status of the moneyer Meineke and the reseller Schmolck, whose shop no longer shifted. Both had been entitled after their move to the Abbey Lands, and Estes found that not only were they doing very good business, but the contributions of both to the Widow’s Fund were adequate for their incomes. So he closed those books and went on to other matters.

Meanwhile, the letter from Surchataine Gaea to Lady Marguerite disappeared. Justinian's letter had been put in the correspondence file, but not Gaea's. No one particularly missed it until it was suggested that the letter be returned to Marguerite. When no one could find it, they let the question drop until the letter should turn up again.

Two days later, on November 17th, Goadby himself arrived in the Abbey Lands in late afternoon, two companions traveling with him on horseback. Riding down Main, he paused in astonishment at all the new development since he had last been here months ago. He stared at the crosswalks, the well, the expansion of Croft's, and especially at the sign going up over the tivoli-adorned building: "DELANO'S MILD ALE."

"Hiya! Move on, there!" a voice called behind him, and he looked around to see that he and his companions were blocking carts both ways because their drivers were too courteous to push them aside.

Goadby prompted his horse ahead to the switchback, which they mounted to the gates. These remained closed to him while the young Polonti sentries looked out languidly, waiting for a reason to open them to unannounced, disheveled riders who were possibly armed.

"I'm Lord Goadby, here to see Efran!" he said indignantly.

The shorter sentry snorted; the slightly older sentry rebuked him, opening the gates. "You'll have to check with the door guards," he warned Goadby. "Sir," he added almost sardonically.

The men dismounted to begin trudging across the courtyard while Squirt, the stableboy, came over. Seeing the state of the horses, he shot a dark look at the men and began leading the weary animals around to the stables.

"Ope. There he is," the younger gate guard said, pointing. The older guard and all three men turned to look at the northwestern hillside, which the Captain was scaling with a burden on his back.

"YO! EFRAN!" Goadby began shouting and waving his arms.

The younger guard flinched and chastised, "He's coming, can't you see? Hold it in till he gets here."

Efran glanced up, then straightened to peer. He might have been laughing as he continued climbing, glancing back from time to time at the small head protruding over his shoulder.

Goadby began pacing impatiently. "Why the deuce is he climbing the hill instead of using the switchback right here?"

The gate guards smirked; the younger opened his mouth, but the elder warned him, "Shut up, or you'll find yourself on latrine duty." So the boy closed his lips tightly.

Not too much later, Efran attained the hilltop to walk over to the opened gates. "Good form, Cap'n!" the older guard said in admiration, oblivious to the offense of complimenting a superior officer.

Efran glanced up, smiling. "Thank you, Mathurin," he said, slightly out of breath. "How are you, Telo?" he asked the younger with a glance at his chest.

The boy unbuttoned his shirt far enough to expose a wicked purple scar, which he enjoyed showing off. "All good, no bleeding nor pain, Cap'n!"

“Excellent,” Efran said, hauling Joshua out of the sling over his shoulder.

“Lemme hold ’im for a minute, Cap’n,” the boy said, reaching out.

“When you’re off duty, Telo. Come see us in the dining hall,” Efran said, while the older boy grimaced at the younger. Goadby was having difficulty containing himself during this friendly interchange.

At last Efran turned to him, bouncing Joshua on his arm. The baby put his head on his father’s shoulder sleepily. “Hello, Goadby,” Efran said, suppressing a smile.

“Efran,” Goadby exhaled, having trouble locating a starting point. Efran waited, and Goadby said, “I must see Geneve.”

Efran glanced down the switchback. “Lemmerz will be able to find her for you.” With that, he began to move toward the fortress steps.

Goadby stopped him to plead, “What is this nonsense about my ‘vile disparagement’ of her?”

Efran winced. “I’m not addressing that at all, Goadby. Good luck.” He moved another two paces toward the doors, glancing meaningfully toward Squirt, who ran off.

“But what did I say?” Goadby cried.

“You have to talk to Geneve,” Efran repeated. He looked at Goadby’s silent companions. They were dressed as nobles, but Efran had not been introduced to them in Crescent Hollow. So they were probably a bodyguard.

“What is this Delano doing here?” Goadby asked indignantly.

“Selling ale,” Efran said, looking back at him.

“Why is your customary order late?” Goadby demanded.

Efran exhaled. “Goadby, you changed the taste so a lot of people don’t like it anymore. You raised the price so our kitchen can’t afford it anymore.” He shrugged, taking another step toward the doors.

“We can roll everything back,” Goadby said.

Efran shook his head. “That horse has bolted and is halfway across the meadow.”

“Well, I must talk to Geneve,” Goadby insisted.

Efran nodded toward the switchback. “You know where Lemmerz’ office is.” Joshua was now asleep on his shoulder.

Goadby looked down at the burgeoning Abbey Lands, then turned to survey the fortress. “Is she here?”

“No,” Efran said. “Goodbye.”

The two young sentries grew tensely watchful; this was the signal that they might have to expel the men by

force. But Goadby was standing his ground, his men right with him. There was silence as everyone was waiting for someone else to move. The gates remained open.

Squirt led three horses, ready to ride, into the courtyard, and Efran squinted down the switchback. “Isn’t that her? Outside Croft’s?”

All of them turned to look. Goadby jumped on his horse, so his bodyguard did the same, and the three rode out.

As the boys swung the gates shut, Efran said, “Lock them.” This they did, and he said, “Don’t be afraid to ring the alarm bell if you need to.”

“Captain.” They saluted him, and he finally took the baby up the steps into the fortress.

Goadby and his men came off the switchback onto Main, where Geneve was briskly walking toward the new Delano’s with some papers in hand. Veering off the road behind her, Goadby left his horse to his bodyguard and ran to catch up to her. “Geneve!”

Startled, she turned. Catching her by the shoulders, he poured forth, “Geneve, did you get my message? What is this ‘vile disparagement’? You mustn’t bother that I’m not opening a plant here after all, but I want you to be my wife.” A Polonti soldier nearby took off running for Barracks #3, where Melchior was on duty today.

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Chapter 16

Geneve regarded Goadby momentarily, then said, “Let go of me.” He did, waiting attentively. After pausing to collect herself, she said, “I apologize for misleading you. I cannot marry you because I am already married. My husband and I had a misunderstanding which we have since cleared up.”

She waited a moment, but he merely blinked as if not understanding the language. So she moved to go around him, and he caught her arm to say, “I don’t care about that. My business is falling apart. I need you.”

Geneve expelled a short laugh of disbelief. “Do you really expect anything at all from me after telling your friends what we did that last night?—my playing the part of a ‘bought woman’?” She emphasized the last two words.

He looked green and sick. “‘Bought woman.’ Ha ha, no, no—it wasn’t like that. I was—perhaps a little drunk. The new ale is a tic stronger than the old. Ha, ha. No, I was making a joke about—about—”

“My clothes? And how Ennemond foisted last year’s fashions on me at a premium price?” she asked. “How foolish I was to try to make myself look acceptable to you ‘Hollowans.’ Minka had it right all along—to wear what she liked.” There may have been one or two people lingering on the street or sidewalk in order to listen.

“Your clothes,” he repeatedly blankly. “You looked—very nice,” he stammered.

“I tried. But by the time I got back home, I found they weren’t very well made. I’ve given most of them to

charity, as the clothes Elvey makes are so much better quality,” she said. A group of people now overtly listening were solidly in her corner.

“Geneve, I don’t know anything about all that. I just want you to marry me,” he said, sweating.

“Are you not listening? I’m married already. I like my husband very much. I’m not divorcing him. Goodbye,” she said, turning away. Melchior was now in sight, walking toward them with a look of agreeable Polonti lightheartedness at the prospect of administering a beatdown.

“Geneve!” Goadby grabbed her arm.

“Let go of me!” she said, struggling. No longer in the mindset of a soldier, she forgot all about the finger squeeze. She was a woman in a dress.

Poor Melchior. Before he could reach them, a group of bystanders seized Goadby, wrenching him away from her. His bodyguard jumped into action, which meant that Lowry had to leap out of his cart and Shurtleff abandon his shop in order to be part of a collective action in evicting them.

Goadby and his men were rushed up Main to be tossed out of the open gates, the faerie trees flogging them along. Their horses, innocent in this matter, were swept out with numerous slaps on the flanks, causing them to bolt up the northbound road. Melchior was left almost despairingly alone, but at least Geneve was there to comfort him.

Late that afternoon, five days after Minka had written Justinian about the battle between Nephilim and Kittim, she received a reply from him:

“My incomparable, delightful Minka!

“Were I not already marginally acquainted with the strange goings-on in the Abbey Lands, I would have suspected you of teasing me with tall tales. But you must be correct, because as Mounoussamy has not made himself known anywhere, he is presumed dead and effectively deposed.

“The new Grand Councilor of the Council of Eurus, and presumed frontrunner in the Surchatain Sweepstakes, is one Quilicus, who is a rarity for possessing no supernatural ability nor fantastic wealth. He is merely crafty, cunning and fearless in working his will among lesser men. In some ways, he reminds me of your Gargoyle, in that he is quick to take advantage of openings and exploit weaknesses by saying the right thing at the right moment. In under three minutes, he will convince you that your path to greatness lies in doing what he happens to want you to do. So perhaps there is some supernatural ability there, after all. I am unable to penetrate the source of his brilliance.

“Oh! Do you happen to know where Surchataine Gaea’s letter to Marguerite is at the moment? I have heard rumors from Crescent Hollow that it is now circulating in that city. That can’t be true, can it? I am both appalled and eager to hear if the rumors are true. Am also most assuredly

“Your Own Justinian”

“Oh, no. The letter,” she breathed. “What has happened to it?” She ran this letter upstairs to Efran in the

workroom. Shoving it into his chest, she demanded, “What did you do with Gaea’s letter to Marguerite?”

Efran considered the question in mild concern, turning his vacant gaze to Estes. Estes squinted in the direction of DeWitt. DeWitt peered down at the baby under the table to mutter, “I’m hoping that Joshua ate it.”

“I don’t think so,” Minka said, nodding to the crumpled letter in Efran’s hands. “Justinian says it’s circulating around Crescent Hollow.” Face slackening, Efran looked down to read.

Cyr appeared at the door, looking around shyly. Minka gasped, “Wyeth?”

Reading her lips, Cyr replied, “He is good” in her thick voice, sweeping four fingers away from her lips. “Pumpkins,” she said, flicking her left fist with her right forefinger.

“They’re harvesting pumpkins!” Minka apprehended. She ran forward to catch Cyr by the arm, then let go to brush her right hand out from under her left palm. Cyr laughed, nodding, and they ran off.

“Don’t run down the stairs!” Efran shouted, perturbed. “Where is that letter?” he breathed to Estes and DeWitt.

“Didn’t you send scouts to Crescent Hollow?” DeWitt asked.

“Yes, a week ago. They should be returning soon,” Efran said with a touch of dread.

The midday crush at Croft’s got to be so chronic that Croft paved over his front yard and part of the side yard as an open-air dining space, encompassed by a low picket fence. Due to the mildness of the climate, it was feasible year-round, and soon became the favored eating area, especially on sunny fall days like today.

Loriot and two of his associates were eating at a table against the low fence when Ella and Tess were shown to a nearby table. Ella sat with her sausage biscuits and tea (as Efran had not approved Delano’s at Croft’s, either) while Tess placed her Delano’s and baked trout on the table.

The three soldiers promptly stood to bow to Ella; embarrassed, she murmured, “Thank you, please sit.” Some patrons looked on idly, not knowing who she was. As the men sat again, Tess eyed Loriot, who ignored her.

The men talked idly about barracks renovations while Tess cast occasional glances at the imperturbable Polonti. Ella shook her head at her and Tess shrugged. Attempting to redirect Tess’ attention, Ella asked, “Why do you think Cloud is being so difficult?”—referring to the new white mare.

“Oh, that’s just an independent mindset. Some girls won’t be ridden by just anyone,” Tess said, glancing at Loriot. He looked off blankly, chewing, while Ella closed her eyes in embarrassment.

She hardly trusted herself to say anything after that. Loriot leaned over his plate with his napkin to catch a drip. Tess, smiling vaguely, stirred her trout in its juices and asked, “Oh! Did you see the beautiful new stallion that Jasque brought in? He is positively rippled. But he’s so proud and disdainful. Stays by the fence all the time; won’t socialize. He even eats delicately. Doesn’t want to stain that massive chest.”

Ella covered her eyes with a hand; one of the men with Loriot grimaced to avoid smiling. A pair of men at a nearby table glanced over at Tess. Loriot picked up his bottle of Delano’s to drink. Looking at him, Tess observed, “He has a majestic arching neck.” Loriot choked slightly; the other man at his table turned to study something across the street. Ella glared at her, and Tess clarified, “The stallion. I believe his name is. . . .”

Several conversations were suspended and Ella stared at her in mortification. “Lariat. The rope you use to lasso a wild animal, you know,” Tess continued. Ella put her face in her hands while the men at Lorient’s table suspended eating to smile down at their plates.

Lorient stood, upon which his companions snapped up the remaining food on their plates. Pausing by Tess on his way out, Lorient observed, “It takes great skill to use one, else the animal will turn and trample you.” She threw back her head, grinning, as he and his men walked out.

“What did that accomplish?” Ella hissed at Tess.

“Got him to respond,” Tess said in satisfaction.

In answer to a question from one of his men, Lorient said, “No, no. I know the type—they claim to be pregnant to make you marry them, then you find yourself chained to a shrew. Now, I have work to do on Number Twenty-two. Dango, go tell Captain Barr where I will be.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he said, turning to trot off.

“Again?” the other man asked. “What is your interest in this abandoned house?”

“You will see,” Lorient said, smiling.

“Then may I come help you work on it?” he asked.

“You won’t be living in it, Tiras,” Lorient warned him.

“So? I’ve finished my duty for the day and have nothing else to do,” he said, so Lorient nodded.

The scouts that Efran had sent to Crescent Hollow, Connor and Shane, returned that afternoon. They were sent directly up to the second-floor workroom in their soiled, second-hand Crescent Hollow clothes to report. “Sit,” Efran instructed the two tired but suspiciously grinning men. They sat at the table, briefly regarding the ever-widening faerie tree. Shane leaned down to pick up Joshua, then said, “Uh oh. He needs a fresh nappie, Cap’n.”

Efran whistled, and the sentry, Mohr, stepped into the room. “Captain?” he queried, saluting.

“Joshua, I’m afraid,” Efran said unapologetically, indicating his son. It was a task familiar to sentries to take the baby to the nursery to be changed.

Shane lifted him by the midsection and Mohr took him in the same way. “Right away, Captain.”

“Please don’t run down the stairs,” Efran said, taking a wrinkled paper that Connor held out to him.

“No, sir,” Mohr said, whisking away the laughing baby.

“What?” Efran gasped, staring at the paper. “What is—?”

Estes and DeWitt looked over while Connor and Shane started laughing. “Sorry, Captain,” Connor said, wiping his face. “We’re exhausted and it really was hilarious.”

DeWitt grabbed the paper from Efran while he turned to the scouts with a mute demand for an explanation.

“Here it is,” Shane began. “As soon as we arrived in Crescent Hollow, we ran across these copies of a letter that the Surchataine Gaea supposedly sent to a noble friend in Eurus. We never saw the original, only copies that had been made of it and, as you can see, contained many marginal notes. People who read it added their observations or whatnot until a new copy had to be made.”

Connor added, “There’s no telling how many of these are circulating—scores, at least. The Surchataine is in hiding; the dressmaker Ennemond has temporarily closed his shop and fled the city. Goadby is nowhere to be found. We have no idea how close the copies are to the original letter or how it found its way to the Crescent Hollow public. But the city is in an uproar.”

Since DeWitt was holding the letter, he’s the one who read it (with marginal glosses in curly brackets):

“To my dear friend Lady {never you mind}

“We have just endured the most unimaginable social situation one could imagine. {wait a bit} I know you disapprove of gossip, but I must share this with you. {you’ll never do it again} This tribe of Polonti from some locale known as the Arbor Lands {been there, have you?} has just visited us in a pathetic effort to get our own Lord Goadby {he’s not lord here} to build another brewery there {because his first is falling down}. He is extremely contemptuous of their aspirations to acquire him, and laughed greatly among our ladies over their little women. {he got very drunk on his own ale}’—I’m skipping the personally derogatory comments,” DeWitt said, annoyed.

“The child purported to be married to the chief of the tribe (who styles himself a lord) {more a lord than you are a lady} outraged everyone by donning PANTS—yes, you read that right—a garment separated at the legs. {you gave your pants away becos your too fat to wear them} Moreover, she flitted around in them all over our Faire with a group of MEN. It was highly outrageous, as our men can attest who followed her all day long. {her men had to keep your men away from her}

“Oh, and did our Lord Goadby tease the pathetic woman who thought to “fit in” by dressing herself in Ennemond’s fashions of LAST FALL {which are the same as Eurus 2 years ago}. Oh, how we laughed to hear Ennemond describe dumping them on her at a premium price. {a cheat as well} I’m afraid our naughty Goadby led her on just a tic to get somewhat intimate with her as a—how shall we say—bought woman {I saw you with Goadby doing the same}.”

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Chapter 17

DeWitt continued reading the copy of Surchataine Gaea’s letter to Marguerite (with comments added by various readers in curly brackets):

“Oh, and I must describe for you this Polonti “lord” who presumed to sit his child wife at our dining table. He is tall and certainly muscled; watching him breathe is a sight in itself, to see the chest under that virgin linen rise and fall, rise and fall—” DeWitt broke off here to say, “I’m not reading this whole paragraph with the comments which *are* obscene.”

He resumed with, “Well, I could go on about what a spectacle he made of himself with poor Lady Tudi, {not like what I saw Tudi do with Auber} who thought she was to have been seated by him at dinner before finding that this ridiculous child was instead! And wherever she stole that gorgeous jeweled headband she wore at dinner, I cannot imagine. {envy is a sin}

“Well, I could go on about how pathetic and certainly inadequate they were for company or even conversation {unlike your sparkling wit} yet stupid Auber fell into the little vixen’s blue eyes {she was beautiful} and simply laughed at everything she said. It was horribly humiliating {stand by} and he deeply apologized the following morning {as he does every morning} and certainly did not kiss her goodbye, no matter what you might have heard. {he tried to kiss her but she ran away laughing}

“At any rate, that is the end of them. All of my crowd says we’ll do no business with them at all. {your crowd is smaller than you think}’ And she signs it ‘Giddy’ Gaea,” DeWitt sighed, waving the paper. Mohr returned with Joshua, clean and dry, and Efran held out his arms for him.

Estes said, “Someone came into this room, found the letter that we had left out, and sent it to someone in Crescent Hollow.”

Efran said, “You’re going to have to start locking this room whenever you leave it. Are you missing anything else? Any money?”

“No, the money is always locked up,” Estes said. “It just depresses me to know there is a thief here.”

“Who considers it more of a prank, I imagine,” Efran said. Joshua asked to get down again, and Efran let him.

Estes asked, “Should you warn Justinian that the letter has been made public?”

“He knows,” Efran said, wincing. “At least they took Marguerite’s name off it.”

DeWitt said, “From what I know of Gaea, she would have written the same thing to a number of others.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful,” Efran said in relief. To Shane and Connor, he said, “All right, you’ve done your part. Go eat and rest, and don’t. . . .” He thought about it a moment, then sighed, “Never mind. Dismissed.”

Restraining their laughter, the two saluted and left.

Since there was nothing more that they knew to do about The Letter, the administrators locked it in the cabinet with other correspondence, sternly reminded each other to put sensitive papers away, and went about other business.

The following day, November 18th, the men were attending the constant stream of Abbey concerns when DeWitt handed Efran the latest report from Venegas. “They are slowly recovering. Sewell asks permission to keep on a number of our men who stopped by to help them.”

“Yes, of course,” Efran said, “whoever you permit. You need to get Joles to check on—”

DeWitt and Estes looked at him heavily, and Efran braced his head on one hand. “I forgot,” he whispered.

DeWitt exhaled, “Gabriel will make an excellent replacement.” Efran nodded, swallowing.

At that time, Lorient, having informed Barr that he was taking a day off, and where he would be if needed, took a horse to ride leisurely up and down Main, keeping an eye on the wall gates. A mild tumult at the gates attracted his attention, and he turned to watch the faerie trees bat indignantly at a woman in mourning dress on horseback attempting to enter. The wall gatesmen questioned the woman, conferred with each other, and decided to send a messenger up to the courtyard. Lorient smiled.

Like Melchior, Lorient had been one of Master Crowe’s lieutenants. And like Melchior, Lorient had acquired some of Crowe’s special talents. While Melchior was gifted in persuasion and sensitivity in Polonti matters, Lorient was prescient about some things. Sometimes he had dreams. And in one of these dreams, he had seen this woman riding up to the gates on this day, and subsequent events related to her.

Shortly, one of the courtyard gate sentries, Jehan, stopped at the door of the second-floor workroom to salute. “Captain, there is a woman at the wall gates who wants entry but won’t give her name or business. She is in all black, her face covered, and the trees will not let her pass.”

“Ohhh.” The three men in the room leaned back, echoing each other’s groans, then Efran stood with Joshua.

“Good luck,” DeWitt said with rare sympathy, and Estes shook his head in wonder.

Exiting with Jehan, Efran said, “I must take Joshua back to the nursery first.” The baby screwed up his face as if understanding. “I’ll come get you again as soon as I can,” Efran promised him.

Downstairs, he handed over his son to the attendant in the nursery, then turned toward the front doors. Jehan, at his side, was burning with curiosity but knew better than to ask. Glancing at him, Efran said, “My wife’s sister. A plague in the form of a beautiful woman.”

“Ohhh,” Jehan said, echoing the men’s groan.

The wall gates messenger, Coish, was waiting in the courtyard on his horse, along with another mount that the stableboy had brought out, knowing the Captain. “Thank you, Squirt,” Efran said, taking the reins.

“Cap’n,” the boy acknowledged smugly, pausing to watch him descend the switchback with Coish.

A glance at the woman on horseback outside the gates confirmed Efran’s gut knowledge. *God of heaven, I have no clue what to do with such a persistent, destructive force*, he admitted despondently.

As he and Coish were riding up Main toward the gates, Lorient turned his horse into their path. “Captain, I request permission to take charge of the woman waiting to enter.”

Efran abruptly pulled up on the reins in dismay. “Denied. Lorient, you are too valuable. The woman has been married and widowed several times over, but she—”

He lowered his voice to a hiss, drawing his horse to Lorient’s side. “She is my wife’s sister, and the mother of my son. She is—a—a—human sinkhole. She has beat down my wife, attempted to abort my son, and destroyed numerous men in the process. Talk to Bennard, or Hassler, or Justinian, or Wyeth, who barely escaped having her as a servant. The rest of the men she has known—Mouris, Graduliere, Blairgowrie—are dead, and I have banished her from the Abbey Lands.”

“Yes, Captain, I am aware of this,” Lorient said. “Request permission to take her in hand.”

“Lorient,” Efran groaned. “Where would you put her? She may *not* enter the fortress grounds or run loose on the Lands.”

“Number Twenty-Two, the abandoned house,” Lorient said.

Efran laughed humorlessly. “She lived there once; knows its hiding places and escape routes well.”

“But I have been working on the house, Captain,” Lorient said with a dry smile.

Chest rising and falling in anxiety, Efran studied him. Meanwhile, the gate guards, the woman, and a few passersby watched the mid-road debate in curiosity. Coish was listening in fascination.

Efran lifted his face to the sky in despair and hope. “Can you contain her without destroying yourself? *Do you promise?*” the 12-year-old surfaced to hiss.

“Yes, Captain,” Lorient said.

“We shall see. Come,” Efran said, turning the reins with a mild kick. Lorient and Coish followed.

Arriving at the gates, Efran pulled his horse to the right side of the road, where Adele was waiting on her horse outside the gates. Lorient and Coish were right behind him. The faerie tree on that side bent its trunk a little so that the opposing parties had clear sight of each other over the gate hinges.

“Unveil yourself, Adele,” Efran said.

She lifted a hand to strip away the black hat and veil, uncovering her blond hair and face, slender and clean of makeup. She had lost all the weight and regained much of her beauty after carrying Joshua, but Efran noted that she did not look the same. At 22, her face was already hard beyond her years, her eyes sardonic with the hint of bags underneath.

“What do you want?” he asked her tightly.

“The Council of Eurus has placed a bounty on my head,” she began. This Efran immediately doubted because Justinian would have known of it, and told him. “I escaped with only my life, and have nowhere else to go.”

Efran turned to Lorient to say, “The last man who was told that she lies took her in anyway. He is now dead.”

Lorient smiled. “Some men are too confident to adequately prepare for battle, Captain.”

Efran turned back to her. “Adele, this is Lieutenant Lorient. If you wish to enter, you will be put in his keeping. If you refuse, you will not be granted entry. State your choice.”

“I seem to have none,” she sighed. Meanwhile, traffic was flowing through the open gates to Efran’s left.

“State your choice, or I will leave you where you sit,” Efran said.

“I will accept being under the lieutenant,” she said languidly, lips parted.

Efran turned to Loriot with a bitter smile. Loriot replied, “*Moekolohe* never worked on me, Captain.”

Efran inhaled, looking to the side almost in despair. Then he faced forward to utter, “Let her pass.”

The gate sentries stood aside, watching her tap her horse lightly back onto the road. She passed through the gates, drawing alongside the stonelike Polonti to lower her chin at him, raising her eyes.

“As you will,” Efran said tightly to Loriot, who nodded. Then Efran turned up Main to ride toward the switchback.

Loriot told Adele, “We will stable the horses.” She arched her brows indifferently, but rode with him across the new northbound road and past Cavern Lake to the new stables. Along the way, she glanced around at the paved roads, the large new Delano’s building, the amount of traffic, the new businesses, buildings and plots.

At the stables, Loriot dismounted, so she did, too. He loosely tied off his horse’s reins, telling her, “Do what I do.” Then he flipped up the stirrup to begin unfastening the cinch. She hesitated over whether to play ignorant, but decided to save that for later.

So she unstrapped the saddle, letting it fall from her hands to the ground. “It’s too heavy for me,” she said pitifully.

“Children can handle a saddle that size,” he noted. “Here is the tack room. Set it on this rail.” He swung his saddle onto the rail while the blanket went on another behind it.

She groaned, arching her back. “I’m so tired; I don’t think I can.”

“We will go eat at Croft’s once the horses are stabled,” he said. “They have venison, trout and rabbit on their midday table now.”

She eyed him, wavering, then hefted the saddle to bring it to the rack in the tack room.

When the horses were groomed and stabled with hay, Loriot and Adele silently walked to Croft’s. As it was past the midday crush and before the dinner rush, they were able to get a table in the coveted outdoor dining area. It had largely emptied of the midday crowd; Ella and Tess were rising from their table, about to leave. But when Tess saw Loriot enter with this unknown beauty in widow’s weeds, she sank back to her seat.

Loriot set his plate and lager on the table before turning to bow to Ella. Adele shot a lightning glance at her, perceiving immediately who she was. Ella said to Loriot, “Thank you, but it’s unnecessary to bow. I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“As you wish,” Loriot said, inclining his head. He sat to begin eating; Adele sat with her plate as well. But she placed her napkin on her lap with a special EurAsian flourish guaranteed to make Ella look at her.

When Ella did, her face drained. Adele said smoothly, “Why, hello, Ellacombe. I didn’t know—”

Loriot interrupted her: “You do not speak to anyone without permission.” Adele’s widened eyes shot to his face. Tess barked out a laugh.

Ella said, “Tess, our time is up. Jasque will be looking for us.”

“I’m almost done,” Tess said, delicately dawdling with the remains on her plate.

“Fine,” Ella said, turning to walk out.

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Chapter 18

Except for Joshua’s flailing a piece of scrap parchment, the second-floor workroom of the fortress was subdued following Efran’s announcement of what he had done with Adele. DeWitt, Estes, and Minka studied him, each weighing the possible outcomes, while Commander Wendt mused, “Loriot. One of Crowe’s former men—the big one. He’s made himself answerable to Captain Barr, now. Very interesting man, deeply perceptive.” Commander Lyte frequently brought Wendt down to the new barracks for advice on all aspects of army organization, so Wendt had gotten to know some of the men very well.

“That’s good to hear,” Efran said. “I only talked with him about Shanko—Argh! I forgot to write his mother. But he—Loriot—had an answer to every objection I had about Adele. Oh—Number Twenty-Two, that had been Colfox’s and then Wyeth and Peri’s? He’s been renovating it with an eye to putting it to use.”

“Is that where he’ll keep her?” Minka asked quietly.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Is he marrying her?” she asked.

Efran replied, “I don’t know and I don’t care. I made it plain she has to be contained. And if he can’t do it, I’m evicting her again.” There was another silence, then he asked Minka, “Would you write Justinian? He needs to know about this.”

“And about the copies of Gaea’s letter going around,” DeWitt added. Efran winced, nodding.

“Yes,” Minka said, sitting at the table, and DeWitt pushed the writing implements toward her.

At Croft’s, Loriot and Adele ate quietly while Tess pretended to sip from an empty bottle of Delano’s. There were only four other people in the outdoor dining area at this time. “May I speak?” Adele asked in a near whisper.

“To me, yes,” Loriot said.

“The apple cobbler looked delicious. I would appreciate a bowl,” she said.

“I will get one for you. Would you like more ale?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” she said.

With a nod, he rose to go inside, upon which Tess and Adele locked eyes. “So you’re his new servant,” Tess said with a sardonic smile.

“Don’t be silly. You don’t know much about Polonti customs, do you?” Adele said silkily.

Tess chortled in her throat. “You’re not a lover, that’s for sure.”

“Not yet, but neither are you,” Adele breathed. “And I’m the one who’ll be living with him.”

As Lorient returned with two bowls of cobbler, Tess rose to walk out, brushing his arm. He paused to let her pass, then resumed his walk to set the bowls on the table.

Following the meal, Lorient walked Adele to her new home just three doors west of Croft’s. The closer they got, the more she began to suspect—yes, there it was: Number 22. She tried not to look pleased, only interested. “I’m surprised you were able to find a house in this section. It’s getting very crowded,” she threw out, then saw that it was rather a fact.

“Yes, I was glad to get it.” He unlocked the door to show her in. She glanced around, finding it clean and furnished. “This will be your room,” he said, opening the door to the same room that she had occupied as Wyeth and Peri’s servant—how long ago? About four months. It seemed a lifetime ago.

She glanced around at the washstand, wardrobe, shuttered window, and—pallet. She groaned, “I can’t possibly sleep on that block of wood.”

“Oh, but it has a new mattress and pillow,” he said, pulling aside the thin but decorative blanket.

“It’s not enough for my aching back,” she groaned, thrusting out her chest. She closed her eyes to let a low moan escape her parted lips.

When there was no movement nearby, she opened her eyes to see him waiting attentively. “If you like, you can earn a better mattress.”

“Earn it?” she asked, an eyebrow lifting. “And how shall I do that?” she breathed, coming close to stroke his hard chest.

“By doing chores,” he said, producing a long sheet of parchment out of thin air.

“Chores,” she repeated blankly.

“Yes, as listed here. Some of these which involve going outside will have to wait until I am home. But many of them can be done right here,” he said brightly (for a Polonti).

She took the list in slightly shaking hands. “Clean . . . empty . . . wipe . . . throw out . . . turn . . . scrape. . .” She looked up at him with glazed eyes. “Surely you are not serious.”

“You don’t have to do them. But it may get tedious, or—boring, that’s the word—boring for you while I am gone during the day,” he said.

“Oh, that’s no problem. I’ll just go shopping, or for a walk—”

“No,” he said. “The Captain instructed that you do not leave by yourself,” he said.

Her eyes roamed the small room while she attempted to make sense of this statement. “Are you telling me—that I cannot leave this house while you are gone?”

“Yes,” he said, happy to have reached an understanding with her.

She squinted at him. “Do you know that I was just Surchataine of Eurus?”

“Yes, and I understand that several people are now dead,” he said regretfully (again, for a Polonti).

She expelled a derisive laugh. “No. I don’t accept that rule at all. Sorry!” she sneered, tossing the list away.

“You don’t have to accept anything you don’t want. But, these are the rules under which I can have you here. If you do not accept these rules, then you must leave,” he said.

She considered that. “By ‘leave’ you mean, that I must find somewhere else to live,” she posed.

“Yes. Somewhere outside the Abbey Lands,” he confirmed.

Her eyes widened slightly as she looked around. “Can’t I find another place to live on the Abbey Lands? There are—”

“No,” he said.

“But, I have—”

“You stay with me, or you leave the Lands. The Captain was firm about that,” he said.

“Ohhh,” she groaned, then her eyes fell on the shuttered window. “Wellll, all right.” He looked like the kind of man who slept very soundly at night.

“Good!” he said happily (for a . . . Polonti). “Now, you must change clothes. There are many dresses that should fit you in the wardrobe.”

“Many?” she asked skeptically. Opening the wardrobe, she looked in to find the selections Minka had made for her when she was staying with Ryal. “Five,” she said. “Five is not ‘many.’”

“Oh,” he said, his craggy face falling. “Well, if you wish more—”

He picked up the list of chores from the floor, and she said, “I get it! Very well, go away, and I’ll change.” She pulled a dress at random out of the wardrobe.

As he stepped out and closed the door, she shed the heavy, uncomfortable widow’s frock and pulled on the dowdy, shapeless dress. “Oh, this is actually very nice,” she said at the door before tiptoeing over to the window. She opened the shutters, then stared at the window frame in shock. It had been closed up to a mere twelve inches across, if that. Impossible to get through. She shook the edge, finding it solidly dovetailed in, and gritted her teeth in frustration. Then she made herself relax. There were other exits—or means to exit.

At that time, Minka had obtained two bodyguards, both Polonti—Krall and Chilcott—and had ridden down to the north shore of the lake. Minka, distracted, had greeted them somewhat distantly when they bowed to her. Krall,

an old-timer who had served under Captain Efran in Westford, accepted that with equanimity, but young Chilcott was anxious to be recognized.

So by the time they got down to the lake and dismounted, the young man blurted, “Do you remember me, Lady Minka? I am Chilcott.”

As she turned to him, Krall glared at him, uttering, “Shut your mouth, boy.”

“Chilcott,” she whispered. “Chilcott!” she said, wrapping her arms around him, which he accepted joyfully. He was the one she had prevented throwing himself off the cliff after her trial. “How are you? Oh, you look good. Krall, I’m sorry; I’ve been thinking about Symphorien and her baby. But I appreciate your service so much,” she said, reaching out for his hand.

“You needn’t mind us at all, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing.

“Yes, I must. Efran doesn’t take you for granted, so I have no call to,” she said.

“What did you wish to do, Lady?” Krall asked. Under his flinty eye, Chilcott removed his arm from around her shoulders and led the horses to graze about thirty feet away.

Minka turned to sit on the shoreline, drawing a hand through the water. The fishermen around the lake were packing up and leaving for the day. She said, “It’s been almost a week since I’ve seen baby Levie. I just want to know how she’s doing.” Her bodyguards contemplated this quietly, knowing nothing about baby Levie.

She looked over the placid green water, murmuring, “There were three eggs. I hope they all hatched all right.” She watched the water for a while, then looked around, troubled. Chilcott and Krall were more intently scanning the shoreline.

There was a sudden wash of water over Minka’s skirts, and baby Levie hopped up beside her, one foot on her leg. Although thirty pounds heavier than a week ago, the baby still demanded a head scratching. Minka’s bodyguards lurched forward, but she tossed back to them, “It’s all right! She won’t hurt me.”

Then a second, slightly smaller body rose up to place a clawed foot on Minka’s skirted leg. Krall drew his knife. Minka was protesting, “No, don’t—” when the second baby latched its jaws onto her sleeve to pull her into the water.

With a cry, Chilcott dove in after her while Krall threw himself down to reach into the water. While his hand found nothing solid, the turbulence of the water subsided. After a moment, Chilcott surfaced, gasping, “I can’t find her!” Then he dove again.

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Chapter 19

Krall stood, seeing all life at an end. As his glazed eyes watched, a tremendous wash drenched him, and a great dark form deposited a soggy figure onto solid ground about five feet from the shore. Minka sat up, gasping. The armored thing with huge green eyes submerged again, and Chilcott was thrown out with a little less care. He landed a few feet behind her, flailing up. “Lady Minka—!”

“I’m all right,” she said, breathing.

Krall bent to pick her up and take her toward the horses, which had bolted a short distance at the disturbance. “No, Krall, please—let me down; let me dry off just a minute,” she said. He complied, and Chilcott threw himself beside her as she sat on the grass.

In a dead voice, Krall said, “We must tell the Captain what happened.”

“Of course,” Minka said, “but I’m not walking into the fortress dripping wet. The cleaners work hard enough as it is.” The three of them were pretty much equally wet. Cautiously, Minka looked up toward the distant courtyard. The alarm bell was silent, so she held her breath in hope that her most recent misadventure had gone unnoticed.

“Lady M-minka, w-what . . . ?” Chilcott’s teeth were chattering.

“Two of Symphorien’s babies just wanted me to play in the water with them. She got me out. And you,” she said, smiling as she brushed wet hair out of her face. “I’ve been petting the larger baby on the shore. This is the first time I’ve seen the second.” To hide her shivering, she continued to sit, shaking out her sleeves (one torn).

“Symphorien,” Chilcott repeated blankly.

“The Leviathan. Who accidentally collapsed the fortress digging out her nest in the hillside,” Minka said. “She is our friend.” Her bodyguards stared at her, then Krall collapsed to sit beside her.

After several minutes, Minka stood, and they leapt up. “I’m going to walk around a little bit to dry off. Then you will let me tell Efran what happened. I don’t want to see either of you punished for what I did. So I can tell him about it without getting you in trouble.”

“But we d-deserve to be p-punished,” Chilcott said.

She scowled at him. “Are you contravening my word?”

“No!” he cried.

“Then let me judge whether you should be punished or not,” she said, shaking her skirts out forcefully. She took another long look at the courtyard to see only complacent gate guards and regular activity.

She sighed in relief, “Come, let’s walk the horses.” Krall and Chilcott spread out to retrieve them.

“Well, I think the house is very nice,” Adele blatantly lied. “But when can we go have dinner?”

Loriot hesitated, looking toward the kitchen. “I have not stocked it, waiting for you. So we will go to market to pick out what you like.”

She shrugged agreeably. “That’s rather a good idea.”

So he took up a large market basket and they headed out to the food district of the Abbey Lands, clustered around Main. Lowry the butcher’s shop was here, as well as Shurtleff’s fish market, Averno’s bakery, and Firmin’s fruit, nuts and vegetables, along with smaller specialty shops that sold jerky, compotes, dried fruits and candies. Loriot bought freely in this district.

He and Adele also stopped at the new Delano’s to pick up a case of ale. Adele was gratified that Loriot spent so much—almost four royals—on all this food and drink. Then with the overflowing basket in one hand and the case of Delano’s on his other shoulder, he carried it all back to the house while she primly carried the rest of the money, three royals, in her little velvet bag. Adele had not particularly noticed that he bought nothing that required complicated preparation.

“Now,” she said, sweeping into the small house as Loriot carried in the bounty behind her. “Shall we go to Croft’s for dinner?”

He grinned at her. “No, we eat of what we have bought and put the rest where it goes. Care for an ale?”

After an hour’s walk, Minka felt sufficiently dried off to return to the fortress with her exhausted bodyguard. As she left them with warm thanks at the courtyard gates, a sentry ran up to her. “There you are, Lady Minka! The Captain has been asking after you.”

She said, “Please tell him that I’ve been with two bodyguards on an outing. I need to change, then will be up to the workroom.”

“Yes, Lady.” He bowed, then ran up the steps, anxious to be the one to deliver happy news to the Captain.

Minka went calmly to the quarters she shared with Efran to put her damp clothes in the laundry basket and pull out a fresh dress, undergarments, and dry shoes. She smoothed down her hair just a bit, then proceeded upstairs with little trepidation. At this stage, she was fairly experienced in shading reports so as not to unduly alarm her overprotective husband.

As she went down the corridor, she saw him standing in the doorway of the workroom, waiting. “There you are! You’ve been gone so long. What have you been doing?”

“Walking. Having fun,” she said lightly. Looking past him into the workroom, she asked, “Where’s Joshua?”

“Sleeping,” he said, studying her with his evaluative look. “What happened?”

“Nothing much,” she shrugged.

His look turned wary. “You’re wearing your devious face.”

She laughed. “Why? Aren’t I fine?” She was wearing long sleeves so he would not see the scratches on her arm from baby Levie #2 pulling her underwater.

“What happened?” he asked again, taking her hands, looking her over.

“A second baby came up to see me,” she said happily.

“At the lake,” he said tightly. “And?”

“It accidentally pulled me into the water,” she said calmly.

His face went slack. “Into the water. Where were your bodyguard?”

“Ah,” she hesitated, and he tensed. “One was on the shore, and one was in the water with me. But there was no cause for alarm, because Symphorien fished me right out back onto land.”

“Symphorien,” he breathed.

“Yes, and she brought up the man from the water, too!” she said brightly.

“Why couldn’t he swim out?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know; I was busy shaking water out of my clothes. But he was fine.”

“Who were your bodyguard?” he asked crisply.

“Two Polonti. There are so many new ones, I don’t know their names,” she said airily.

“You don’t know the names of the men who were with you?” he asked suspiciously. She raised her shoulders, tilting her head without actually shaking it. “You’re lying. You always ask their names, and if you don’t, they tell you anyway.”

“Don’t be silly,” she grinned, cuddling up to him.

“You’re not getting off with *moekolohe*. The lake has become too dangerous for you, even with bodyguards,” he said, not angry, but adamant.

She raised her large blue eyes to him, just a tad stubborn. “You’re going to prohibit me from that beautiful lake you created?” He raised his face at the unfair accusation. She went on, “But since I know about the second baby, I will stay farther back from the shore so they can’t pull me in again.”

“Ten feet back,” he said.

“Five,” she countered.

“Don’t go to the lake without me,” he said, leaning down to press his head to hers.

“As long as you make yourself available to go,” she said.

He gathered her shoulders to him. “You enjoy tormenting me with your adventures.”

“No!” she said, genuinely shocked. “Can I help it that there are baby Leviathans that want to be played with?”

He half-groaned, half-laughed. “Symphorien fished you out?”

“Yes!” she laughed. “She brought me up on her nose and put me down on the shore. But she just flipped poor Ch—” He looked immediately alert and she said, “Cheeks. Or maybe it was Chester. No, Cheney.”

He laughed, wrapping her up in his arms. “What a little liar you are.”

“How dare you!” she pulled away, laughing. “It’s almost entirely the unmitigated truth.”

“Come to dinner,” he groaned.

As they were heading down the corridor toward the stairs, Ella appeared off the stairway, looking tentative. Efran stopped. “Ella? What happened?”

“Nothing much,” she said.

“Women!” Efran vented at the ceiling. “*What happened?*”

“My goodness, Father, calm down,” Ella said while Minka was trying very hard to keep a straight face. “It truly was nothing, but I wanted to tell you about it before we got into the crowded dining hall.”

She paused, and Efran said with gritted teeth, “I’m listening.”

Ella glanced hesitantly at Minka, then said, “While Tess and I were at Croft’s, this man that she—is interested in came in with that awful woman, Adele. She recognized me, and started to speak to me, but he told her that she couldn’t speak to anyone without permission. So she stopped with this look of shock. It was time for us to get back to work, but Tess wanted to stay and watch them, so I left without her. That’s all, really, I just—was unpleasantly surprised to see her.”

Efran said, “Yes, she showed up at the gate and Loriot volunteered to take her. But she won’t be allowed on the Lands without him, and not in the fortress at all. So she should be nothing that he and your bodyguard can’t handle. Who were you with?”

She hesitated with a guilty look, and his eyes glazed slightly. “Ella? Who were your bodyguard?”

“I . . . didn’t have anyone with me but Tess,” she said.

“Why not?” he asked quietly. She shrugged, so he said, “If you won’t take bodyguards, I won’t let you out.”

“I know. I will, from now on, especially if she gets out,” Ella said penitently.

“Good,” he breathed. “Now we go eat.” He turned with a hand at each girl’s back, and they warily looked at each other across his chest.

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Chapter 20

That evening, Lorient went around the small house extinguishing lights except for a candle in Adele's room, one in his, and the day candle (with the hour lines). He paused before her open door to say, "I will be going into work tomorrow, so you will be here with your list of chores. Good night." And he turned to his bedroom.

"Wait," she said, a little anxiously. "I have to sleep by myself? And then stay by myself all day tomorrow? Isn't that cruel?" she pleaded.

"There is no one else here but me," he observed.

"Can't I sleep with you?" she breathed, coming close to him.

"If you like," he said dubiously. "The bed is not large and I take up a lot of room."

"I don't mind. You'll keep me warm," she murmured as she stroked his muscled arm.

"Very well. Bring your candle in case you change your mind," he said.

She did not, but swept after him into his sparse bedroom. He also had a pallet with a skimpy mattress. She tentatively sat on it while he began taking off his clothes. In her lightweight linen dress, she lay back, smiling, with her arms above her head.

He took off his work boots and socks, his uniform jacket and shirt, and then his pants. Wearing his breeches, he sat on the pallet and snuffed the candle. The only light left burning was the day candle on the chest, well out of drafts. Exhaling in tiredness, he lay on his back and closed his eyes.

Adele waited a few minutes, but when he didn't do anything, she reached down to begin stroking him. "No, no," he said, tapping her hand away.

She sat up in shock to peer down at him. His eyes were closed, his breathing settling into the rhythm of sleep. So Adele got up to disrobe entirely. Then she laid her body on his. This was infallible: when she had done this to Efran almost two years ago, he fell helplessly onto her. So now—

Lorient grunted, lifting her off him to lay her beside him. "If you want to sleep here, be still. I have much work to do tomorrow to make up for taking off today," he said.

She lay there in disbelief. The man was not human. So she pressed against him to drape an arm and a leg over him. He rolled on his side away from her. This left her awkwardly clinging to his back side.

While she lay there trying to think of what to do, she accidentally fell asleep.

In the morning (of November 19th), Adele barely woke as Lorient was getting dressed. "Good morning. You will have fun today. I have filled your wash tub and put a few more things on your list so you will not get bored," he said cheerfully (for a . . .).

"Um hmm," she murmured. "I sure will. . . ." She drifted off again as he went out, locking the door behind him. He swiveled two tabs in place, then put a sign on the front door that read, "DANGER Quarantine."

And then he walked to work.

Adele awoke again an hour later. She stretched on the bed, yawning, then decided she was hungry. So she got up without bothering to dress and went into the kitchen to eat her fill from their marketing trip yesterday. Then she found a very nice garderobe that had not been in the house previously, and used it. She bathed in the wash tub and put on a slightly better dress than the one she had worn yesterday. She paused to note that the widow's weeds had disappeared.

She found some grooming implements that she had not noticed yesterday: a brush, comb, tooth rag, even a few hair ornaments. "How sweet," she murmured. "Cheap, but I'll find better." So she arranged her hair in front of a barely adequate silver mirror, put on shoes, took up the little velvet bag with three royals, and went to the front door to unlock it.

It would not open. The door handle was clearly unlocked, but the door wouldn't budge. She pushed, shoved, kicked and cursed at it, but it was unmoving. Yesterday, she had failed to notice the small pivoting tabs at the top and bottom of the door which could only be positioned from the outside.

"Ugh!" Abandoning the front door, she went to the back door, which she found to be as uncooperative as the one in front. So she paused to think.

There was a large window in the little sitting room at the front of the house that was covered with only glass. So she went to the kitchen to take up the iron fireplace shovel. This she took to the sitting room, laying it against the wall while she opened the shutters—and found a wire screen bolted to the window frame on the outside. She could destroy the glass, but not get out.

Breathing deeply in anger, Adele went to Lorient's bedroom. This also had a nice window, but no glass. She flung open the shutters to see the same wire screen covering this window, also screwed into the wood on the outside. "AIYAAAAH!" she screamed, banging at the screen with the fireplace shovel. This, of course, was futile.

Swaying in anger, she paused to listen. Someone on the street had called to someone else, and they were talking. So she rushed to the front window to see one resident passing by outside. She banged on the glass with her palms, shouting, "Help me! Help! I'm a prisoner here!"

The man turned to look at her, then saw the sign on the front door. He shook his head, raising a hand of dismissal as he kept walking, and she shouted profanities at his diminishing back. Then she plopped into a chair to consider the feasibility of burning the house down.

Minka felt that she might better stay on the fortress grounds today, to give Efran a respite from worrying about her. So she was attentive to Soames' lesson on the Law of Roman, which lessons she attended daily (mostly) with Ella. This lesson was on contractual disputes, particularly, the valid reasons for breaking a contract.

One of these reasons was a failure to understand what the contract entailed. Even though participants were required to swear that they understood what they were agreeing to, it sometimes happened that the wording was so obtuse, a signee might legitimately claim they thought they were agreeing to one thing when the offeror said differently. In this case, as in many others, the area notary would decide whether the contract should stand or not. The interesting thing about this (in Minka's opinion) was that the Law emphasized that if there was *any doubt* about the clarity of the wording, the contract was nullified. This helped keep contracts transparent and fair.

Following Law class, Soames was kind enough to tutor Minka on sign language, so that she could better

communicate with Wyeth's deaf wife Cyr. (Ella sometimes stayed for these lessons as well, but usually had to get right out to the stables for her lessons in training horses.)

Today, Minka asked Soames, "How do I sign, 'you look cute today'?"

He winced. "I'm not sure about that. Can we cover a more common expression, like, 'How are you?'"

"We did that, already," Minka said, turning the backs of her fingers up together and then pointing with her index finger. "Do you know, 'you look nice'?"

Soames opened his mouth, then said, "Wait. Yes. Point with your index finger, 'you.' Make a 'V' with your first two fingers; put the middle finger at the corner of your eye, and then move your hand out: 'look.' Then put your hand out flat, palm up, slide your other palm outward over it: 'nice.'"

"Oh, that's easy," Minka said, practicing it. Then she got up. "All right, I'm going to tell Cyr she looks nice while it's fresh on my mind."

"Make sure she does, or she might think you're mocking her," Soames said anxiously.

"Oh, she always does. She's a lovely girl," Minka said on her way out.

Swinging down the back corridor, she practiced the simple hand signs. Then she stepped out onto the back grounds, looking to see where Cyr might be working today. It seemed that all the ripe pumpkins had been harvested, for now.

As Minka went farther out on the grounds to look around, there appeared a shimmer in the air in front of her. She stopped, staring, as a tall woman with white hair took shape in front of her. She wore armor and a crown, and she blazed with light. Minka started trembling as the woman looked at her.

It was the Kittim, Aleph. She spoke in a liquid voice much like Alberon, the king of faerie, as she said, "You are the one who summoned Leviathan to aid me in my battle against Nephilim."

"No," gasped Minka. "It was—an accident. Her baby came flying after me—and knocked me through the barrier. Symphorien came for her baby." Fear made her breath come in gasps.

Aleph said, "The baby Leviathan followed you."

"Yes," Minka said. "I pet her. She likes me to scratch her head." She glanced around to see that everyone else was frozen in their work, as though time had stopped. Birds on the wing were paused in midair; cascading water suspended in motion.

"Then you were still the human agent of my victory," Aleph said.

Minka began trembling again, not knowing how to answer. "No, not really. You kept us alive while Symphorien was on the way. But it was God who ordained it all to happen as it did, for our good. You will not oppress us as Mounoussamy would."

"Your God is Victoris, the Ruler of your fortress and lands," Aleph said.

"Yes," Minka said. "But more: He is Ruler of the world, only they do not all acknowledge Him. We do."

Aleph's eyes swept the fortress, the hill, and beyond. "I am still required to reward you for your service to me. What shall I do for you?"

"I don't know; I don't know," Minka said desperately. "You must ask Efran; he is the one who helped you, not me."

"This will be done," Aleph said. And she vanished.

When time resumed around Minka, with people working and water flowing, she wavered on her feet, then fell in a dead faint.

Minka came to consciousness slowly, hearing voices before she could move. Efran's voice said, "What happened?"

Tourjee said, "We don't know, Captain. She came out of the fortress and just fell down."

Efran: "She fell off the steps?"

Another man: "No, Cap'n, she came out, and then stopped and fell down from a stand."

She could move her head, then. "Minka? Minka, can you hear me?" Efran asked.

"Yes," she heard herself saying. "Yes, give me a minute."

"Thank God," he breathed, gathering her up to sit. "Back off a little; give her room to breathe." And she heard feet shuffling.

She opened her eyes slightly when he pressed her head to his chest. "I'm all right. It was just a shock," she murmured, glancing at all the legs around her.

"What was?" he asked, his teeth chattering a little.

She inhaled, trying to sit up. "Aleph."

"Aleph? You saw her?" he asked.

"Yes." She breathed for a minute, blinking to clear her vision. "She . . . came to reward me for summoning Symphorien to help her. I had to explain that I didn't do that. I told her that you're the one who helped her. So, she is going to reward you."

"How?" he asked in a bare whisper.

"I don't know. But, she asked me what I wanted her to do for me, so, that is what she may ask you," she said. Minka sank back down on his chest, then opened her eyes again. "Efran, she acknowledged God as Victoris, as Ruler of this fortress."

"Good," he said. "That's good."

He was helping her stand up when she focused on Cyr bringing a bushel of late greens to the back door. “Oh!” Minka said, remembering.

She pushed away from him, and he let her go over to Cyr to sign something to her. Cyr laughed, then moved her basket to one arm to touch her chin with her fingers, but Minka hugged her before she could finish the sign.

Minka returned to Efran while Cyr carried her basket in, smiling. “That’s what I came out to do,” Minka sighed.

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Chapter 21

Late that afternoon, when Lorient returned to Number 22, he paused on the front step to listen at the door. Hearing nothing, he pivoted the tabs away from the top and bottom of the door, then opened it (as it was already unlocked). He walked into a quiet house, and looked around.

It appeared as though a herd of wild horses had rampaged through the house. In the front room, the glass in the window was broken; the walls were deeply scarred; broken plates and cups littered the floor. In the kitchen, compote jars were smashed; fresh fruit and vegetables trampled; knives broken in the walls. Fireplace ashes were scattered all over everything.

In Adele’s bedroom, the mattress, pillow, and blanket were slashed, as were all the dresses in the wardrobe. The silver mirror had been battered by a meat mallet, which lay on the partly destroyed pallet. Jars of soap and lotion lay shattered at the bottom of the wall. The wash room was flooded by the water that had run out of the tub which had split on a seam after a battering. Towels, wash cloths, soap, clean laundry were all trampled on the wet, dirty floor.

And in Lorient’s bedroom, he looked in at Adele, on her fifth or sixth ale, lounging naked on his destroyed pallet. All of his clothes were strewn about the room, slashed. The candles were broken; and his extra pair of shoes were poked full of holes.

He turned to Adele, who said, “I got bored,” as she turned up a bottle of ale.

Nodding, Lorient went back out the front door, which he relocked, replacing the tabs. Then he walked to the barracks to sleep there tonight.

Efran lay in bed, holding his wife. “Stop shaking,” she whispered.

“If anything else happens to you, I think I’m going to crack,” he said. “Your ribs, and the orange barricade . . . being dragged underwater, Aleph—and now Adele coming back. I’m afraid, the way things are going, she’s going to find a way to get to you again.”

“Not if Lorient has her in hand,” she murmured, her head on his chest. “Rising and falling, rising and falling,” she said from her viewpoint. “Where is that virgin linen?”

He laughed a little. “You’re trying to distract me.”

“Used to be, I didn’t have to try,” she said, crawling on top of him. With a gasp, he gathered her up.

In the morning (the 20th), as Efran was getting dressed while Minka lingered in bed, he leaned over her to smooth her hair. “Will you not leave the fortress without me today?” he asked. “I have only a few things I need to do, then I’ll be available to go wherever you want. Will you just—wait for me?”

“Don’t worry; I won’t go farther than the back grounds. I’m all worn out. Mostly because of last night.” She smiled at him deviously.

“I wish that were all,” he said, kissing her head. Then he moved down to her lips, and she responded warmly. “Wait,” he whispered.

She lay back on the pillow. “Don’t be long.”

“There’s nothing I have to do today,” he assured her on the way out.

First thing, however, he wanted to see how Lorient had managed with Adele on their first full day together. So he collected a horse in the courtyard and rode down to Main. He had intended to turn on the plot road toward Number 22 when he spotted Lorient walking up Main from one of the barracks.

Efran dismounted to wait for him. “Lorient! How goes it?”

“I will show you,” Lorient said, gesturing up the road. So Efran turned to walk with him, leading the horse.

Lorient began, “I have dreams, sometimes, that show me what is going to happen. They come every now and then, without my asking or even thinking about them. Weeks ago, I had a dream that on November eighteenth, a beautiful woman in widow’s weeds would come on horseback to the gates to be let in. I would take charge of her, and . . . she would cling to me with great gratitude, and love me with great passion.

“Well, this is the first time that one of those dreams has been so wrong,” Lorient laughed ruefully.

“Of course—Adele, the destroyer of dreams,” Efran sighed. “What happened?”

“I will show you,” Lorient repeated.

They walked up the street to Number 22, where Lorient rotated the door tabs out of the way while Efran picked up the “DANGER Quarantine” sign. “True,” he laughed quietly, setting it aside. Lorient unlocked the door, opening it, and Efran stepped inside.

He looked around the front room, snorting at the pointless destruction. But Lorient said, “Oh, just wait,” leading him down the short corridor to the kitchen, twice the disaster, and Adele’s destroyed room.

“This couldn’t be more plainly her doing if she had signed her name,” Efran said, shaking his head.

Both men came to the door of the bedroom where Adele still lay naked on the ripped mattress, on which she had urinated. “Oh, hello,” she said, sitting up to stretch luxuriously. “I’m so glad you’re both here to keep me company today. What happened to the Goadby’s? I hate this Delano’s, and I’m ALL OUT!” She flung the empty

bottle at them, so that they both ducked. And she leaned back against the wall, laughing.

Efran muttered, “Adele, I wish you would learn to appreciate someone who tries so hard to help you.”

Aleph’s voice said, *This is granted*. Efran’s head jerked up, but he did not see her anywhere. However, he heard the bells sounding. They were tolling an urgent warning.

Adele heard it, narrowing her eyes as she listened. “What is that? Bells?” she murmured. Efran, heart thumping, realized that this was a warning to her; the bells were ringing for *her*. Lorient heard them, looking back toward the fortress, questioning but receiving no enlightenment.

There was the briefest moment, time pausing on the edge of a razor, given to Adele for—something. It was a last-chance opportunity to do—something. Raising her head in exasperation, she shouted, “Shut up!” The bells were immediately silenced, with no reverberations. There was nothing but heavy silence in the room.

“Stop it,” Adele muttered, sitting up. “What . . . where are you? Where did you go?” She was blinking furiously. “Stop playing tricks with the shutters! Open them back up!” she cried, rubbing her eyes.

Lorient sucked in a breath as she screamed, “Stop it! Stop! I can’t—I can’t—” She opened her eyes wide, turning toward them. “I can’t see! I can’t see anything! It’s all dark!” The men were shocked into perfect stillness at the sight of her once beautiful blue eyes, now as white and sightless as Commander Wendt’s. “Help me!” she screamed.

Lorient knelt to put his arms around her, and she clung to him, shivering. “Lorient, is that you?” she gasped.

“Yes, Adele,” he said.

“Yes, that’s your voice. Help me, please. I’m—I’m so sorry about my—temper tantrum. Once I get my sight back, I’ll clean everything up. . . . I’ll get it back, won’t I?” she pleaded.

Lorient turned his head. “Captain, I apologize for asking, but, she has nothing to wear here. If you can find her something—”

“Minka to the rescue,” Efran said shakily, turning out. “Don’t go away.”

“Lorient, don’t leave me!” Adele cried. “Help me! I’m naked! Oh, I’m so ashamed,” she sobbed into his shirt.

“I’m here,” Lorient said gently. “The Captain has gone to get Minka to help.”

“Thank you,” she said, clutching him.

Efran caught his horse out front with shaking hands, and almost missed the saddle leaping up. He turned the horse’s head to gain the switchback and lope up. As he dismounted in the courtyard, he told the gate sentry, “Save this horse for me, and, bring out two more.”

“Captain,” he saluted, studying his face before the Captain turned to leap over the steps leading to the front door.

In his quarters, he came upon Minka as she was just pulling on her boots. He grabbed her up with one boot halfway on. “Efran! What happened?” she cried.

"I'll tell you. But first, I need—a dress, and underclothes, and shoes. And, is there a spare room anywhere?"

"Yes, one on the third floor. Is this about Adele? Is she all right?" Minka asked.

"Mostly," he said cautiously. "First, clothes, please. Something she can ride in."

"Yes." She took him up to her storage room on the third floor, where she stuffed a small bag with the required items. "Efran, can I come with you?"

"I'll need you, but wait in the courtyard," he said, then kissed her fiercely before running down the stairs.

"Don't run down the stairs," she sighed. She followed more carefully to the first floor and out to the courtyard.

There, she saw him descending the switchback on one horse while leading two others. "What's going on?" the gate sentry, Ellor, asked her.

"I don't know yet," she said, watching.

They saw Efran depart the switchback to trot to Number 22, where he left the horses out front while he ran inside. Several minutes later, he came back out with Loriot and Adele. Minka, Ellor, and Detler stood at the open gates to watch. Adele was clinging to Loriot as he lifted her to the saddle of one horse, then he jumped onto the saddle of another, taking her reins. Efran, mounted, was watching.

Then they three returned to the switchback at a walk. Adele was clutching the pommel, her head down. She looked like she might be crying.

When they reached the courtyard, Efran and Loriot dismounted, then Loriot turned to help Adele down. She landed on unsteady feet, eyes shut tight. Efran was giving instructions about the horses while Minka drew up to her sister, whispering, "Adele?"

"Sybil! Is that you?" Adele cried, opening her eyes, and Minka almost fainted.

"Come." Efran took her arm to steady her while Loriot turned Adele toward the fortress steps.

"Step up," Loriot told her. She did, and he said, "Step up three more times." Behind them, Minka clutched Efran's arm as she watched her sister blindly stumble up the steps, leaning on Loriot.

He took Adele through the foyer, down the corridor to the stairs, where he coaxed her up one step at a time, Efran and Minka following. Then Loriot turned her into the doctor's quarters, where he told Leese, Wallace's wife, "We need to see him, please."

"I see," she said faintly, staring at Adele. Leese quickly rose from the desk at which she sat and turned to the inner room.

"Where are we?" Adele gasped.

"In the doctor's quarters," Loriot said.

"Oh, good. He can get my sight back," she sighed. Minka turned to Efran, clutching him, and he held her.

Wallace came to the doorway of the inner room. “Come in,” he said gravely, studying her. Adele’s head was down as Lorient navigated her through the doorway.

“Sit,” Wallace said, patting a raised bed. Lorient lifted Adele to sit on it while Leese, Efran, and Minka watched from the doorway. “Look at me, please,” Wallace said softly to the patient. So Adele lifted her eyes to him. Leese staggered back.

“I can’t see you,” Adele said. “I need to get my sight back.”

Wallace turned to Lorient and Efran to ask, “How did this happen?”

Lorient looked back at Efran, who cleared his throat to say, “We don’t know. It happened in front of us, but I don’t know how. I believe . . . that Aleph did it.”

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Chapter 22

“Aleph?” Wallace said.

“The—Kittim who won the battle with the Nephilim,” Efran explained weakly.

“How did she do this?” Wallace asked, gesturing at Adele.

“I don’t know,” Efran repeated. “I did not see her. She is a supernatural.”

Wallace looked at Lorient. “Did you see this?”

Lorient said, “I saw it happen. I did not see the Kittim.”

Wallace turned back, exhaling in observation, “Her eyes look just like Wendt’s, but her eyelids are not damaged, nor is her face.”

“Wendt?” Adele gasped. “The—man with white eyes? That Father had—” She could not utter the remaining words: *blinded with acid*. And after Wendt had been blinded in much agony, she and her father had sold him to Surchatain Clonmel of Venegas for 50 royals.

“Am I blind forever?” she cried, clutching Lorient. Unlike Wendt, she retained the ability to produce tears.

Wallace replied, “Barring a miracle, yes.” While she sat in deep shock, he turned to rummage in a drawer. “Here.” He brought out a pair of glasses which he put on her face. “Those will have to do until I can get a smaller pair for you.”

She put a hand up to feel them. “Dark glasses. So that people won’t stare at my blank eyes.”

“To preserve you some dignity,” Wallace said gravely.

She began shaking uncontrollably. “I don’t—I can’t—how can I—I—”

“I will take care of you,” Lorient said.

She clutched him, crying, “Why, when I was so hateful to you?”

He shrugged. “Give me something to do in my off hours.”

She laughed, feeling his chest, moving her hand up to his face and his lips. Then she reached up to kiss him passionately. Though mildly embarrassed, he allowed it. Minka, pouring silent tears, had her head on Efran’s chest. He held her with both arms.

“Good luck,” Wallace said, turning away.

Lorient looked at Efran to ask, “Where can she wait?”

Efran replied, “Bring her to the workroom for now.”

Lifting her down from the examining bed, Lorient took her arm to guide her out behind Efran and Minka. They went down the corridor to the workroom, where DeWitt, Estes, and Commander Wendt looked up. Lorient seated her at the table beside Wendt as DeWitt uttered, “What in heaven’s name . . . ?”

Lorient turned to Efran. “Captain, if you will explain matters to them, I will go make arrangements. Is there a room Adele and I can stay in until I get Twenty-Two cleaned up?”

Efran turned questioningly to Minka, and she said, “Yes, on the north end of the third floor, the room with the sign on the door. I will get the key for you.”

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” he said.

Efran said, “Tell Barr I asked him to lend you a dozen men to take care of Twenty-Two. Spring for a case of Delano’s for them.” He took a handful of royals from his pocket to give Lorient.

“Thank you, Captain,” Lorient said.

As he and Minka began to turn out, Adele cried, “Lorient! Don’t leave me!”

“I will return quickly, Adele. There is company right beside you,” he said, then left with Minka.

Adele turned marginally to both sides. “Who is there?” she asked breathlessly.

“Wendt, Adele,” he said quietly.

The others in the room watched the two sightless people turn toward each other. “I am blind now like you,” she said.

“I am sorry,” he replied. While he knew that ultimately it would be a blessing to her, he would not ignore the trauma of the loss.

After a moment, DeWitt said, “Efran?” They looked at him, waiting.

“Yes,” Efran exhaled, collecting himself. “Yesterday, Aleph—the Kittim who defeated Mounoussamy—showed up on the back grounds in front of Minka, and told her that she was going to reward her for her help in summoning Symphorien to the arena. . . .” And he began telling them all the subsequent events as he understood them.

Meanwhile, Minka had found the key to the unoccupied room. Before giving it to Loriot, however, she told him, “It’s mostly stocked, except for the specific things Adele will need. Let me supply them, then I’ll leave the key in the lock. It’s the room on the left past the anteroom. Wyeth and Cyr are in the right-hand room.”

“Thank you, Minka,” he said with a short bow.

“Don’t bow,” she said, patting his arm. “You are the hero here.” He shook his head, at which she replied, “Shut up,” before turning to her mission. She heard him laugh as she walked away.

In her reliable third-floor clothing room, Minka found dresses, lingerie, nightwear, a robe, a cloak, shoes and decorative touches like scarves and necklaces—all things that Adele had roundly disdained when she could see them. These Minka took up to the empty third-floor room to put in the wardrobe and chest. Then she looked around for deficiencies, but having stocked this room earlier, found none. So she went back to the second floor as Ella was coming up the stairs from the first floor.

“Minka, Soames would like to know if you’re coming to Law class today,” Ella said. “He’s finishing up some work for Ryal, so I told him I’d ask you.”

“Probably not. Ella, Adele is here,” Minka said, and Ella’s eyes widened in alarm. “Let me tell you what has happened.” And she gave her stepdaughter the short version of Adele’s new circumstances.

Ella listened in horrified astonishment, so that Minka finally said, “Here, I’ll show you. She’s waiting for Loriot in the workroom, but you needn’t speak to her if you don’t want to.”

So Ella followed her to the door of the workroom, where they both looked in. Efran turned; Estes and DeWitt looked up. As Ella stared at Adele in her dark glasses and dowdy dress, Minka told Efran, “The vacant third-floor suite is all ready for them. Loriot will be back up as quickly as possible.”

“Good. Thank you,” Efran said as they watched Ella stare at Adele. Ella covered her mouth, glanced around vaguely, then walked over to her. Adele started like a frightened animal. “Aunt Adele, it’s Ella. I’m—so sorry to hear what has happened to you.”

“Thank you,” Adele said stiffly. Ella, gulping, turned and fled. Efran nodded at her for making the effort.

At Barracks #1 below, Loriot explained Adele’s new condition to Captain Barr, and relayed Efran’s request for help at 22, to which Barr agreed even before Loriot could give him the royals for ale. So Loriot just put them on the desk. Barr gestured to his scribe, Numan, “See who wants to do an hour of easy work for an ale.”

As Numan saluted and ran off, Loriot winced. “They may feel misled when they see the condition of the house, Captain.”

“Is there blood?” Barr asked.

“No,” Loriot said.

“Then it’s easy. Take the day off,” Barr told him.

“Thank you, Captain.” Lorient saluted.

Lorient returned to the second-floor workroom to salute Efran. “Captain Barr has agreed to put men on the house, Captain. Now, if you permit, I will take Adele to the notary to get married.”

“Yes, Lorient, do that,” Efran said. Spotting a loose royal on the table, he picked that up to give to him.

“Thank you, Captain, but— isn’t his fee five pieces for a marriage license?” Lorient asked, which was one-sixth of what Efran had just given him.

“It’s a point of pride to overpay him,” Efran said. “Adele? Are you willing—?”

“Yes,” she said, awkwardly standing from her chair. Minka moved it away from her.

Lorient went over to take Adele’s arm. “Then let’s go,” he said.

He walked her down the fortress steps, then led her out to the switchback. “We’re going to walk down. Just hold my arm. Your feet will remember what to do.”

As they walked, she said, “There are . . . five bends?” She recalled numerous times descending, and pictured in her mind the width of the dirt road, the stones along its edges, and the sharp curves at each end. (Efran wanted to pave it, so DeWitt was working on a schedule to do it in sections, at night.)

“Yes, there are five bends on the right going down, four on the left,” he said. “You’re doing fine.”

“I feel as though I’ve died and entered a different life,” she said.

“That is a good description,” he said.

She said no more until they got to the bottom, then she said, “Ryal’s is the first building on the right.”

“Yes, after we cross the eastbound road. Hold up,” he said, as a cart rattled past.

Then they were climbing the steps to enter Ryal’s shop. She paused at the tinkling of the entry bell. “I can picture it all in my mind,” she said, remembering.

“Good,” he said. Drawing up to the counter as Ryal watched with quizzical brows, Lorient said, “Hello, Lord Ryal. Adele has suffered a terrible accident, and is blind. We have come to get married.”

“I’m very sorry, Adele,” Ryal said, studying her. “But you are very fortunate to have found a friend in this man. Giardi, the ledger, please,” he added, turning. She nodded in concern, handing it to him.

Since both parties were obviously of age and free to marry, it took only minutes for him to record the information in his marriage ledger. “If you will wait, I will draw up a certificate for you,” Ryal said.

“I will come back later to pick it up,” Lorient said, placing the royal on the counter.

“Let me give you change,” Ryal said quickly.

“Thank you.” Lorient accepted the 25 silver pieces. “Thank you, Lord Ryal. Lady Giardi,” he said, bowing.

Ryal nodded and Giardi said, “Best wishes to you both.”

As Lorient took Adele out, Ryal murmured, “We will find out from Efran what happened.” Giardi nodded.

Outside on the sidewalk, Lorient said, “You must be hungry.”

“Yes,” Adele whispered. It was close to 24 hours since she had last eaten.

“I see that the greengrocer Firmin has opened for eat-in meals, but Croft’s is right here. Which do you prefer?” he asked.

“People will stare at me,” she said.

He shrugged. “If they do today, they will ignore you tomorrow.”

“Let’s go to Croft’s, then,” Adele said, gripping Lorient’s arm.

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Chapter 23

On the way to Croft’s, Adele said, “I just remember—day before yesterday, eating at Croft’s. Sitting and eating and talking as though my life would go on forever.”

“Your life is going on, just by a different road,” he reminded her.

They entered Croft’s, where Lorient paid for a bowl of venison stew, flatbread, and ale for both of them. He carried their food on a board to the outdoor dining area, placing it on the table to seat her. “Is this the same spot where we sat the other day?” she asked.

“Close,” he said, glancing around as he unloaded their food from the board. He placed her bowl in front of her, putting her hand on the rim with the spoon. The bread plate went very close to it, and the bottle of ale, which he opened, went by her left hand.

“Who is sitting around us?” she asked.

He glanced around. “Only a few that I don’t know. It’s too early for the midday crowd.”

“Good,” she breathed, letting down. They began to eat.

After a few minutes, she asked, “How much have I spilled?”

“Almost nothing,” he said, almost truthfully.

When they were just about done, the outdoor dining area began to fill up. Adele raised her face at a girl's loud voice, which both of them recognized. Lorient was bent over the last of his stew. The girl spotted them at once, veering to a table near them to sit, along with two men. Ella was not with them.

Tess chatted about this or that, casting side glances at Lorient and Adele, especially her plain dress and dark glasses. The true explanation for the slightly oversized glasses never crossed her mind. "My, the sun is fierce today," Tess noted. "It would be nice to have a sun hat, or a parasol—" Lorient looked at her to slowly shake his head.

Tess studied him while the stablehand across from her said something in an attempt to get her attention. But she was oblivious to him for trying to make sense of Lorient's action. Was he trying to tell her to be quiet? She watched Adele put her fingers on the mouth of the bottle before lifting it to drink. And while she must be aware that Tess was sitting right here, she never looked over. Perhaps she was waiting for Lorient to leave again.

Adele finished eating while Lorient sat waiting. Her fingers found the bread plate, and she put the last piece to her mouth as Lorient scooted back his chair. Tess took the opportunity to say, "A dark pair of glasses would be lovely on such a bright—"

As she was speaking, Adele removed the glasses and turned her face to Tess, wide-eyed. "AYAIH!" Tess screamed more in surprise than fear, standing so abruptly as to knock over her chair. Adele replaced her glasses while Lorient stood between the two women to take Adele's arm. As they passed the other table, Tess attempted to sit again, but since her chair was overturned behind her, she sprawled rudely on the floor, to the laughter of other patrons.

Lorient patted Adele's arm, murmuring, "Well done." She smiled slightly, holding on to him.

After Efran had finished his recounting of Adele's blinding, the workroom was silent. Then DeWitt said, "I will remember to search my heart whenever I hear the bells."

The others nodded; Efran was clutching Minka, his right arm encompassing her shoulders while his left held her elbow. She turned her beautiful, clear blue eyes up at him and said, "I want to see the baby Leviathan."

"I do too, Minka," Commander Wendt said, drawing all their eyes.

She looked back at Efran to say, "The Commander wants to see them, too."

Efran's face paled, but he was a man of his word, and a resourceful one. "Then you will," he said. "Commander?" he said, turning, but Minka already had him by the hand.

"He's coming with me," she said authoritatively.

At that moment, the nursery matron, Nesse, appeared at the door with Joshua on her arm and a loose sling on her shoulder. As they all looked at her, she said, "Pardon, Captain, but he's been banging on the door and crying. If this is not a good time, I will take him back down." The baby looked at his father with red eyes, flushed cheeks, and a fist at his mouth.

Efran, his face set in resolve, went over to take the child, who reached out to him. Nesse added, "He's been fed; is wearing double wraps with a waterproof lining."

“Thank you, Nesse. I appreciate it,” Efran said. She nodded, leaving.

Efran draped the sling over his shoulder with one hand while holding Joshua on his other arm. He slipped the baby into it, then moved it to his back. Turning, he said, “Minka, will you see that the top of the sling is supporting his head?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, coming forward to spread the upper edge of the sling along the baby’s head. He looked over his father’s shoulder contentedly.

Efran paused at the door with his party to look at DeWitt and Estes. “Do *you* want to come see the baby Leviathans?” he asked.

DeWitt winced while Estes said, “Thank you, Efran; another time. Someone has to man the fortress.”

“As you wish,” Efran exhaled. He paused, thinking of Ella, but knew she had stable duty. So he turned out of the room, his victorious wife and the smiling Commander following him.

In the courtyard, Efran told Minka and Wendt, “It’s going to take a few minutes to get our transport ready. You might want to sit on the steps to wait.” So they did, as the sides of the broad, rounded steps gave them room to sit without impeding anyone going in or out of the fortress doors. The early afternoon was sunny and pleasantly cool. And in response to autumn, the faerie trees everywhere were sporting red, yellow and orange leaves—sometimes changing colors like a woman who can’t decide what to wear.

Efran went over to talk to the gate sentries who added their input, waving here or over there. Then he came back to bend down to Minka. “Do you want to take a food basket? Make an excursion of it?”

“Yes!” she said, standing. “Commander, do you want to come with me to the kitchen or wait here?”

“I’ll wait, Minka, thank you,” he said. So she ran up the fortress steps to disappear within.

In a little while, three sturdy horses, saddled and bridled, were led into the courtyard. Then a one-horse, open carriage was brought around by a stablehand guiding a placid draft horse. As Minka emerged from the fortress with two food baskets, three large men appeared from the west side of the fortress: Arne, Stephanos, and Conte. Meanwhile, a kitchen assistant brought out a half-case of Delano’s ale (12, with a few lagers) to put in the carriage.

When all was ready, Efran waved to Minka, who led the Commander to the carriage for him to climb in, then she sat herself. Efran dropped his shoulder to bring Joshua over it, and out of the sling. “You will ride down with Mama,” he instructed, placing him on her lap. This he accepted, as he could look around at everything from there. Efran, Arne, and Stephanos mounted the horses to start down the switchback with Conte driving the carriage behind them.

When they drew near the notary office, Efran put up a hand to stop, then trotted back to Minka. “Do you want to ask Ryal and Giardi if they’d like to come?”

“Yes,” she said instantly, placing Joshua on Wendt’s lap before hopping down from the carriage. She flew up the steps into the notary office, and emerged only moments later with Giardi in tow.

“Oh my goodness,” Giardi laughed as she climbed into the carriage. “I’ve never been commanded to come on an

outing, but I believe that's just what happened. Ryal is coming," she told Efran, who nodded. "Oh, how much he's grown!" she cried, seeing Joshua. "May I hold him?"

"If the Commander allows," Minka said, settling into the seat beside her.

"I will abide by the Council's decision," Wendt said.

So Minka picked up the baby from his lap to put him on Giardi's. "Hello, sweetheart!" she cried, bouncing him, and he decided he was fine with that, as his father was right in view.

Ryal then came out to lock the door and stick on it a hastily lettered sign that read "Back Soon." Ascending the steps into the carriage, he said, "Am I correct that we're dining outdoors with baby Leviathans?"

"Yes. Mind your fingers," Efran advised, gesturing forward, and the party resumed their leisurely trot to the lake.

At this time, a dozen men were exploring the ruins that had been Number Twenty-Two. In silent awe, they went from room to room to marvel at what a bored, vindictive woman could do with a few kitchen utensils and six or eight hours. "Get Captain Barr in here to see this. We need a cabinet full of Delano's to tackle this," one man said.

Another replied, "He said he didn't care; if we couldn't clean up after one aggravated woman, we should get out of the army and arrange flowers instead."

"I'll never get married," another vowed.

"It was Lady Minka's sister that did this, that Lorient thought to take in hand," another said, laughing.

A fifth added, "Dango saw them at Croft's just a little while ago. She's blind."

"What?"

"You're jesting. How could she do this blind?"

"Maybe she did it because she went blind."

With much discussion, the men hauled in several large trash crates and went to work. Fortunately, they found much that could be patched, repaired or salvaged, so that in the end, there wasn't as much destroyed as there first appeared to be.

Also about that time, Lorient brought Adele up the switchback and two flights of stairs to the newly stocked suite on the third floor. He guided her through the two rooms, describing the sitting room with its table and chairs, and the bedroom with the wardrobe, garderobe, shower stall, and bed.

She felt in the wardrobe to see what was there. "I see that Minka has provided the dresses," she noted, feeling cotton and linen, no silk or satin.

"I can buy you better ones," he proposed before considering what they might cost.

“What difference would it make to be finely dressed but have the eyes of a ghost?” she murmured. “Oh, scarves! Are they pretty?”

He looked, frowning. “They have flowers in bright colors.”

She laughed, “What Minka likes.” Closing the wardrobe, she said, “Show me the bed.”

“Here.” He led her over to sit on it.

“Oh, it’s a real bed! With a mattress! And feather pillows!” she sighed, pressing one to her face. “I’m so glad I destroyed your house.”

He laughed, “Then if you like this place, please don’t destroy it.”

She kicked off her shoes and began unbuttoning her dress, then paused. “Perhaps you should get a scarf from the wardrobe.”

“Why?” he asked, concentrating on undressing rapidly.

“To cover my eyes, so you won’t see them when I have to take off the glasses,” she said, stilling.

Finished with his undressing, he leaned over to remove the dark glasses. “It doesn’t bother me,” he said softly. Then he began unbuttoning her dress where she had left off. “But I won’t be looking at your eyes.”

“I’m glad I saw your face when I could,” she whispered.

“I’m not a handsome man,” he said. He was the typically craggy-faced Polonti, and more than twice her age.

“But it’s the one face I might be able to remember. Everyone else’s is . . . slipping away,” she said, tensing at the unreality of it.

“I will be here to remind you,” he said, placing her fingers on his features.

She grabbed him around the neck to kiss him, and the next hour was straight out of his dream.

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Chapter 24

Seeing the Lady Minka’s carriage and bodyguard on horses approach the north shore, the few fishermen at the lake decided they’d caught enough for the day, and began packing up to leave. Conte guided the carriage to the spot Minka indicated, a safe distance from both the lake and the faerie trees. “The trees can’t resist playing with anyone underneath them,” she said, “especially if there’s food involved.”

She took one large blanket from the carriage to spread in an ideal spot while Efran, Arne and Stephanos released the horses to graze. Conte brought out the baskets of food to place on the blanket, then had to make a second trip for the half case of ale.

As Ryal, Giardi, and Wendt made themselves comfortable on the blanket with Joshua, Minka told them, “I’m going to see if Symphorien will let me pet her babies again. When I was last here, day before yesterday, two of the babies and Symphorien came up to be petted. But the second baby accidentally dragged me into the water, and that upset Efran when I told him about it. So—” She gestured to the four large men looking over the water.

“Oh, do be careful!” Giardi said.

“I’ll be fine. Thank you for your help with Joshua,” Minka said. They waved her away, then began looking through the baskets.

She went over to the edge of the lake where the men stood. Efran sighed, “Come sit back a ways.”

“Let me stir up the water. That’s how she knew I was here,” Minka said.

He grimaced, standing close to her as she knelt and played in the water a little bit. Then she stood to back up about five feet from the water and sit. Efran stood right next to her while Arne, Conte and Stephanos spread themselves between her and the water.

They waited a few minutes, until Efran dared to hope that the babies had seen enough of her. He was looking back at Joshua on the blanket twenty feet away when the water rose up and the big baby flopped out on shore. It had to propel itself another few feet to fall on Minka’s skirts, and she happily accepted its wet feet with sharp claws. She cooed at it and petted it, scratching between its foot-long horns while it cawed happily, baring its pointy teeth in pleasure. The men gaped at it, but Efran was watching the water ripple.

A second baby flopped up, pawing at Minka’s boot with its wee 6-inch claws. But the bigger, older baby turned to snap at it, warning it away. As the littlest one raised a plaintive cry, Stephanos knelt to begin scratching its head, only about a foot long. It turned to him in adoration, curling around his knees and rubbing the underside of its jaw on his pants.

There was another disturbance which faded, then billowed again to reveal another, even smaller head. But it disappeared under water once more. Minka, busy scratching the oldest’s ears, said, “Oh, there’s the third one! They all hatched! But it can’t get up on the shore.”

Arne leaned over the water, looking. Then at the next upheaval, he reached out and hauled up the smallest baby dragon, no more than a hundred pounds. He put it down right next to the water line and began scratching its relatively soft, scaly head. The baby mewed like a kitten, batting his knee with a paw.

Efran watched all this in some discomfort, waiting for the appearance of a mother who might be displeased with all these humans playing with her babies. (Lwoff was watching from a distance in amusement. Since he was supposed to be on duty at the hilltop armory right now, he didn’t make himself known.)

Shortly, Mother came up. As Efran was surveying this dragon nursery doubtfully, Symphorien rose in a swell that drenched them all. The babies dug their claws into the clothing of their respective humans so as not to be washed back into the lake with the outflow. Efran was rising from the deluge when a great scaly foot pinned him down. Breathing hard, he looked aside at the claw next to his head, the size of a carriage wheel, digging down into the earth.

Minka was saying something which he couldn’t take in at the moment. But then the great head, twelve feet long, rose out of the water to lie on the shore. The claws closed around Efran, lifting him in their grip, raising him to her head.

And there she put him. On her head. The claws deposited him practically between her eyes. He rose to his hands and knees on the hard pointy plates, looking around. It was about fifteen feet to the ground from here—too far to safely jump. Carefully, he stood, turning to begin walking down the length of her snout.

But then the claws closed around him again to plop him farther up on her head between her horns. He stood again, leaning his hand on one great horn. Minka's voice reached him: "She wants you to do something, Efran. What do you see that looks wrong?"

"I'll look," he gasped, and did. The horns looked fine; the scales intact. As he was looking, she shook her head slightly, so that he had to throw his arms around one horn to keep from falling. Then the ear next to him twitched, so he bent to look at it. Seeing a small rivulet of water flowing out of it, he leaned over farther to look inside it.

And there he saw a mass of seaweed and debris, so he reached in to begin pulling it out. This was apparently what she wanted, for she tilted her head so that he fell off. But when he stood again, her ear was directly over him, enabling him to stand up inside her ear canal to pull out the blockage.

When he could reach no more, he backed down to wriggle out, so she lifted her head. He climbed back up, telling her, "Turn your ear up so I can look down it in the light." They were all astonished when she did.

After peering down in her ear, he got up again and said, "I don't see any more. Let's check your other ear."

She waited for him to cross her head and scale down the other side, then she leaned her left ear down over him. He stood in it to brush out a little seaweed and a few dead crabs, then crawled out from under it and said, "This side isn't as bad. Does that feel better?" He rubbed her snout, but she slipped it under him to flip him up to the top of her head, where he grabbed a horn to keep from falling off again.

Minka said, "They like to be scratched between the horns."

"Cleaning the ears wasn't enough?" he grunted, but sat beside the wiry tuft between her horns to scratch it vigorously with both hands. They watched her stretch her forelegs in pleasure, spreading her great claws like a cat. Ryal and Giardi quickly picked up Joshua and the blanket to move them farther away; Wendt followed with the baskets. The half-case of ale remained imperiled beside the scaly front feet, but Symphorien was not interested in it.

Conte walked over between Symphorien's massive forelegs to look her over. "You're a beastie, girl." Her great green eyes looked down on him, approximately the size of a rat to a human in proportion to her, and her bright yellow tongue flicked out to sample him. "Cut it out," he said mildly, batting it away.

Observing a trickle of blood from the base of one claw, he went over to push up on the foot, which she turned for him, and he extracted several large fish bones—about the length of his arm—from the cuticle. He inspected the other claws, finding nothing else. But he observed, "There's lightning in her feet; I can feel it." When the others looked at him, they saw his black hair standing out from his head all over, rather like a porcupine's quills.

After scratching her tuft thoroughly, Efran said, "May I get down and eat now?" She tilted her head so that he rolled off the spiky plates again.

Groaning slightly, he got up to lift the biggest baby off Minka and dump it into the water. "That's all for today," he announced. Stephanos and Arne dropped their hatchlings into the lake as well. With her babies safely

underwater, Symphorien backed into the lake, creating only a gentle wash over them this time. Arne retreated to the food baskets while Stephanos retrieved the half case of ale.

Efran pulled Minka to a stand, and they regarded each other, thoroughly wet, muddy and disheveled. “Are you satisfied?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m just glad to see that they all hatched safely,” she said.

“I hope we’re not doing this every week,” he said, shaking out his filthy, scratched hands.

She shrugged. “I don’t know; Symphorien seems very fond of you.”

“She likes Conte more,” he said as they joined the others.

Settling down near the blanket with an ale and a handful of meat pastries, Conte said, “Well, she didn’t eat me.”

“That’s because I warned her that Polonti blood is bitter,” Efran said, and Conte nodded. Stephanos and Arne, also trying not to drip on the blanket, were accepting whatever Giardi handed them from the baskets. Enthralled, Joshua was watching all of them.

Efran muttered, “I need an ale, or five.”

Ryal handed him a bottle which he opened to pour some of the contents over both his and Minka’s hands. “I don’t know what all I pulled out of her ear, but it stank to high heaven,” he said.

He drank the rest of the bottle, and Ryal handed him another while Giardi scrounged around in the baskets. “Oh, dear, all that’s left is the sausage,” she said.

“That’s good,” Efran said, extending his hand, which she filled.

Ryal said, “I’d like to hear what happened to Adele. I have her and Loriot’s marriage certificate ready.”

“We’ll pick it up for them; they’re staying in the fortress for now,” Efran said. “Well. Day before yesterday, when she showed up at the gates, Loriot asked to be put in charge of her,” he began. In between bites, he told them the whole story.

Not long after he had concluded the retelling, and they had eaten and drunk everything, they packed up to leave. Being one of the few who were dry, Giardi was pleased to carry Joshua, asleep, for most of the ride back.

They dropped Ryal and Giardi off at their shop, and he asked them to wait while he ran in for the marriage certificate. Shortly, he brought it out to hand it to Minka, who had Joshua on her almost-dry lap. “Thank you, Ryal. I’ll be happy to give it to them.”

“As I am, and relieved for everyone,” Ryal said. “And thank you for the outing. It was memorable.”

Efran, on the lead horse, looked back to laugh.

As the horses and carriage started up the switchback, the faerie trees leaned over to tap the horses lightly on their flanks, just for fun. Reining in his startled horse, Efran groused, “Do I need to have a talk with the tree faeries?” The branches stood upright in a pretense of horror.

Back in the fortress, Minka took Joshua to the nursery while Efran ordered a tub filled in their outer room. When the men were done filling it, he remembered to lock the door as he and Minka undressed and slipped into the clean water together.

She bathed first, washing her hair in relief, while he mostly supervised. When he was clean, and they were somewhat dry, they lay in bed just to rest for a little while.

He held her, kissing the top of her damp head while she played with his hair, as usual. “It’s getting long again,” she observed.

“It’s always getting long. Can I have Detler shave it down to spikes again?” he asked.

“No,” she said, brushing it out of his eyes. “But I’ll get Routh to cut it for you. He doesn’t butcher it.”

“The ingrate,” he said, and she raised up, confused. He laughed, holding her close. Rather than explain, he muttered, “I wish I knew what Justinian is doing—”

“Shh!” she warned, but not quickly enough.

The faeries Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin appeared on the footboard, the first in an autumnal gold suit and top hat, the second in a plaid vest which accommodated his tail, and a monocle on his furry face. Ditson said, “We’re so happy to hear your request, finally, Lord Efran! Goodness, were we affronted when the Kittim woman intervened on your last request—”

“No offense meant!” Nutbin cried into the air. “Nonetheless, it was a crushing disappointment that the new Ruler of the Toledoth stepped all over us when you expressed your wish about the naughty woman. Were we not crushed, Ditson?”

“Indeed we were, good Nutbin, as I was explaining to the lord here. However, since we have arrived first to address your current wish, we are perfectly delighted to assist you. Now, as to what your ambassador and information source Lord Justinian is up to—” Ditson pulled a large scroll from an inner jacket pocket, which he shook to unroll over the footboard down to the floor. Courteously, he held the scroll up for his partner to read.

Adjusting his monocle, Nutbin looked over to read from the scroll: “On the afternoon of August the twelfth, after awakening, Lord Justinian—”

“My good Nutbin, skip ahead! Skip ahead!” Ditson cried, furiously flipping down the scroll to almost the end.

“Are we that far along?” Nutbin cried.

“Yes, amazingly, Time continues to roll right over us as we stand still. It is a mighty river, Nutbin, that I would fain hold back for our human friends, yet as one of your own has lamented, Lord Efran:

““You stranger, long before your glance can light
Upon these words, time will have washed away
The moment when I first took pen to write,
With all my road before me.”” [Canto I *Dymer* CSLewis]

“Thus we must proceed to the latest entry on Lord Justinian,” Ditson said, tears of emotion clouding his eyes.

So Nutbin read: “November twentieth, in the early morning, Justinian is pacing his room at Lady Marguerite’s Featherstone’—a wonderful place, Ditson, so accommodating of guests.”

“I agree completely, Nutbin, but Lord Efran knows this, so please let us do read on,” Ditson urged.

Nutbin agreed, “You are so right, again, Ditson. So—” Focusing on the end of the scroll again, he resumed: ““Having been up all the night in worrisome thought, Lord Justinian sits at his desk this morning to take up quill, which he dips in ink, to begin writing:

“““My most adorable blue-eyed vixen:

“““I have received your letter of the 18th, and while I appreciate your lamenting the carelessness which led to the inadvertent spread of the Letter, that concerns me less than the reappearance of your sister on your home grounds. This Lorient must have the brute strength of a gorilla, the cunning of a weasel, and the farsightedness of an eagle to contain the malevolent force within—”

““Hearing a knock at his door, Lord Justinian leaves off writing the letter to receive one from the hand of the butler, which he opens and reads. Upon digesting the information within, he stuffs the letter into his waistcoat pocket and grabs his coat, hat, and silver-topped cane to rush out the door.’

“And that is the latest observation we have noted, Lord Efran,” Nutbin ended.

Ditson said, “We are enormously gratified to be able to serve you again, Lord Efran and Reine Minka, and do wish to hear from you very soon with another request.” He doffed his hat, bowing, and the pair of them disappeared.

Efran and Minka blinked at the footboard, then each other. He said, “Well. We should get a letter by tonight, so let’s not worry over it.” Forgetting about her rib, he rolled over onto her, and she didn’t complain because it didn’t hurt at all.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on November 20th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Battle of Kittim vs Nephilim*
(Book 12)

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Adele—ah DELL	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
<i>aike</i> —AY kay (shooting by instinct)	Koschat—KOS chat
Alberon—AL ber on	Leila—LYE la
Allyr—AL er	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
<i>apele</i> —a pul AYE (apricot)	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
Arne—arn	Levie—LEH vee
Auber—aw BER	Lietes—lie EE teez
Averne—ah VURN	Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Bache—botch	Lowry—LAHW ree
Balfager—BALL feh ger (hard g)	Madea—mah DAY ah
Bennard—beh NARD	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Bleibtreu—BLEB tru	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Canaan—KA nan	Melchior—MEL key or
Clonmel—KLON mell	Milo—ME low
clothier—KLOW the ur	Minka—MINK ah
Conte—cahnt	<i>moekolohe</i> —moh ee koh LO ee
Corona—kor OH nah	<i>moiwahine</i> —mo wa HEE nee (queen)
courtier—KOR tee uhr	Monsell—mon SELL
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Mounoussamy—mawn AH sam ee
Cyr—sear	Mouris—MORE iss
de rigueur—de RIG ur (essential, required)	Nephilim—neh FILL em
Delano—deh LAN oh	Nesse—ness
digestif—die JES tuhf	Nicarber—neh CAR bur
Dobell—DOH bull	Nicarbran—neh CAR brun
Eadgifu—ee YAD gif oo	Peri—PARE ee
Efran—EFF run	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Ellacombe—ELL eh cohM	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Elvey—ELL vee	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Ennemonde—EN eh mund	prescient—PRES ee uhnt (having foreknowledge)
Estes—ESS tis	Quilicus—QUIL eh cus
Eurus—YOUR us	Reinagle—REN ah gull
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Reine—rayn
Eustace—YOUS tis	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Eviron—ee VIRE un	sanguine—SANG wen (positive, accepting)
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Sheol—SHE ohl (the abode of the dead)
Gaea—GAY uh	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
garderobe—GAR de robe	Stites—stights
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Goadby—GOAD bee	Sybil—SEH bull
Goss—gahs	Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Graduliere—gra DUE lee air	Telo—TEE low
Greves—greevs	Tera—TEE rah
Guillalme—gill ALM	Tiras—TEER us
Hades—HAY deez	tivoli—TIV uh lee
hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz	Toledoth—TOLL eh doth
Jasque—JAS kee	Tomer—TOH mur
Jehan—JAY han	Trinkenschuh—TRINK en shoo

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Battle of Kittim vs Nephilim*
(Book 12)

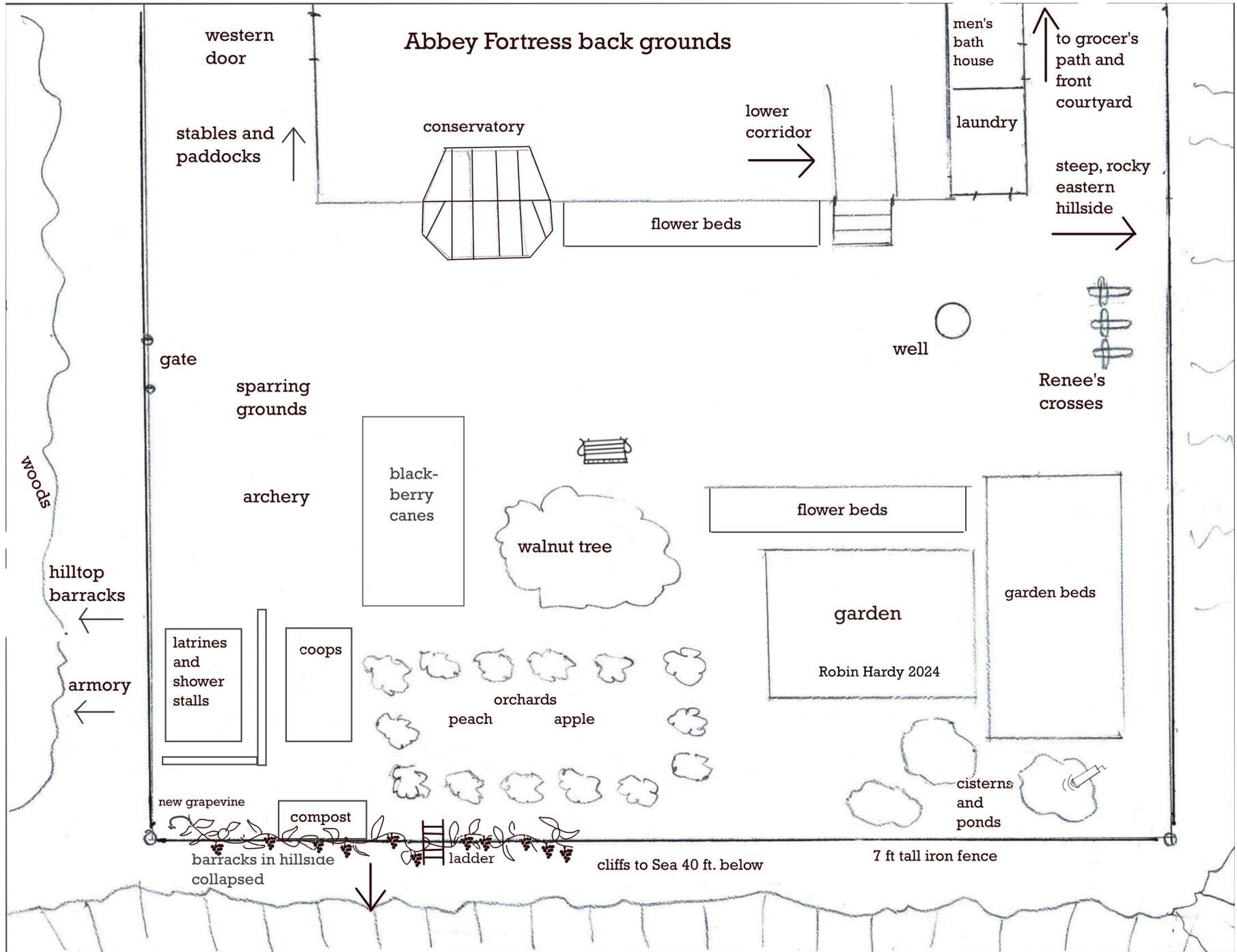
© Robin Hardy 2024

Venegas—VEN eh gus

Venegasan—ven eh GAS un

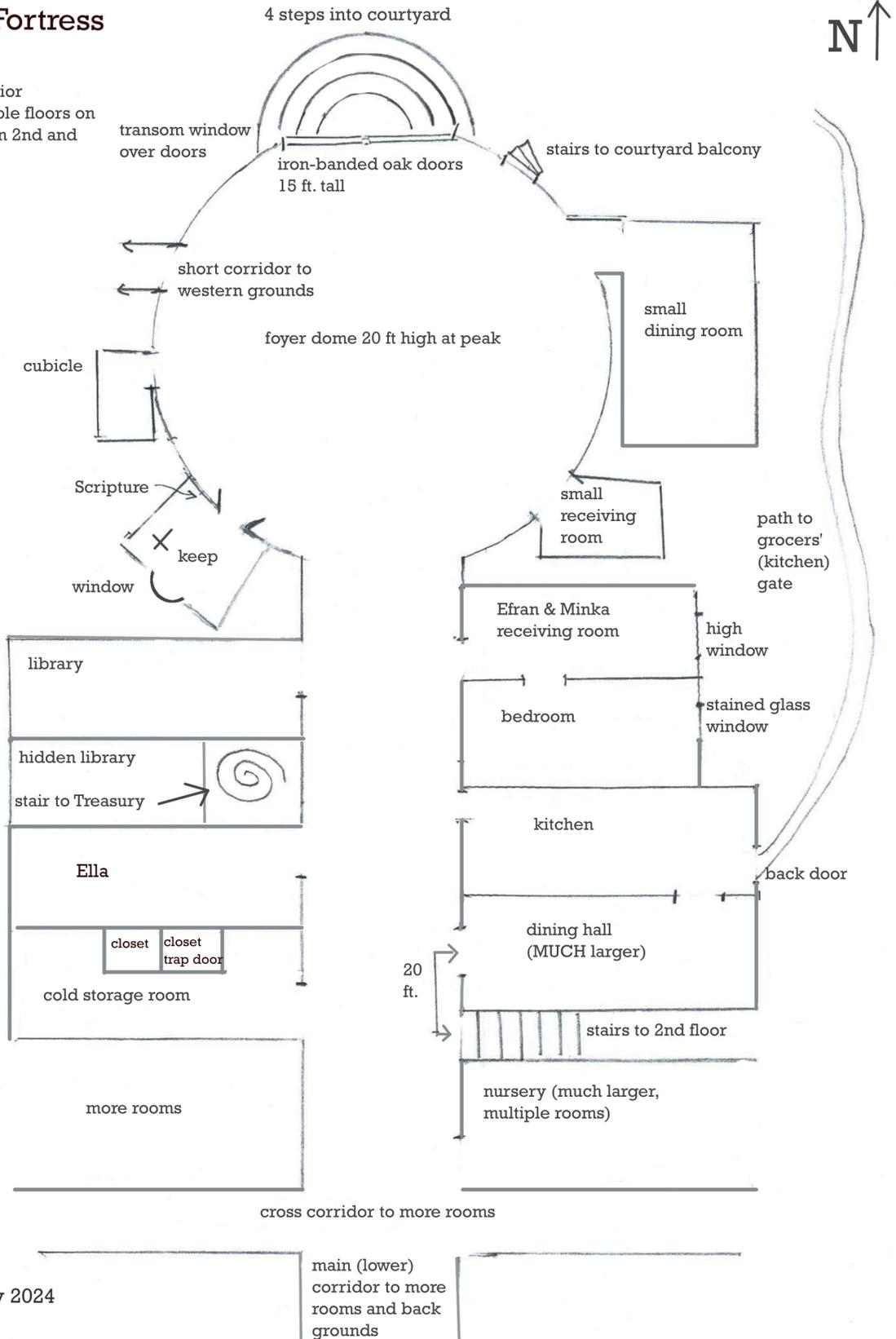
Victoris—vic TOR iss

Weber—WE bur



Abbey Fortress Interior

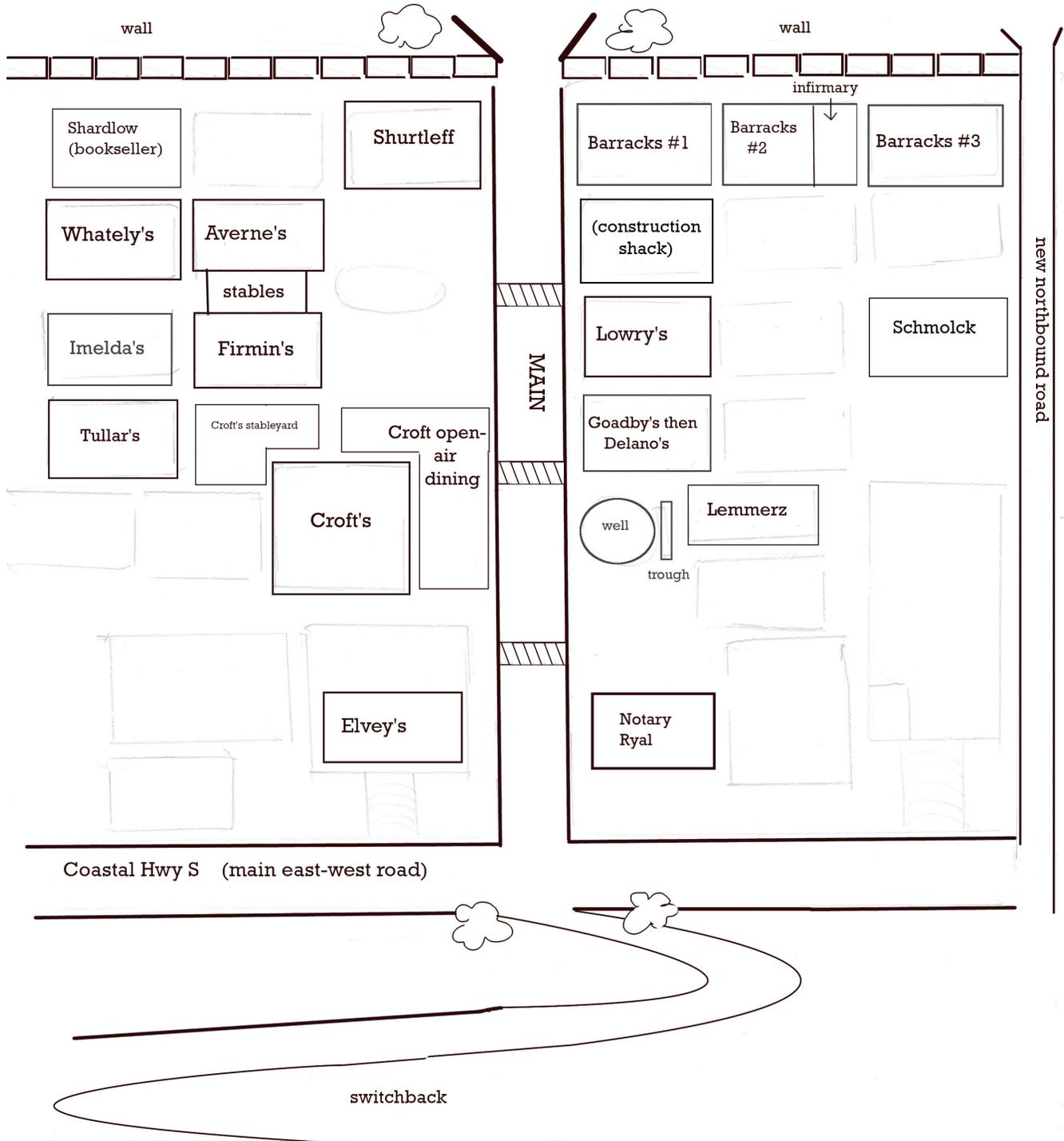
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



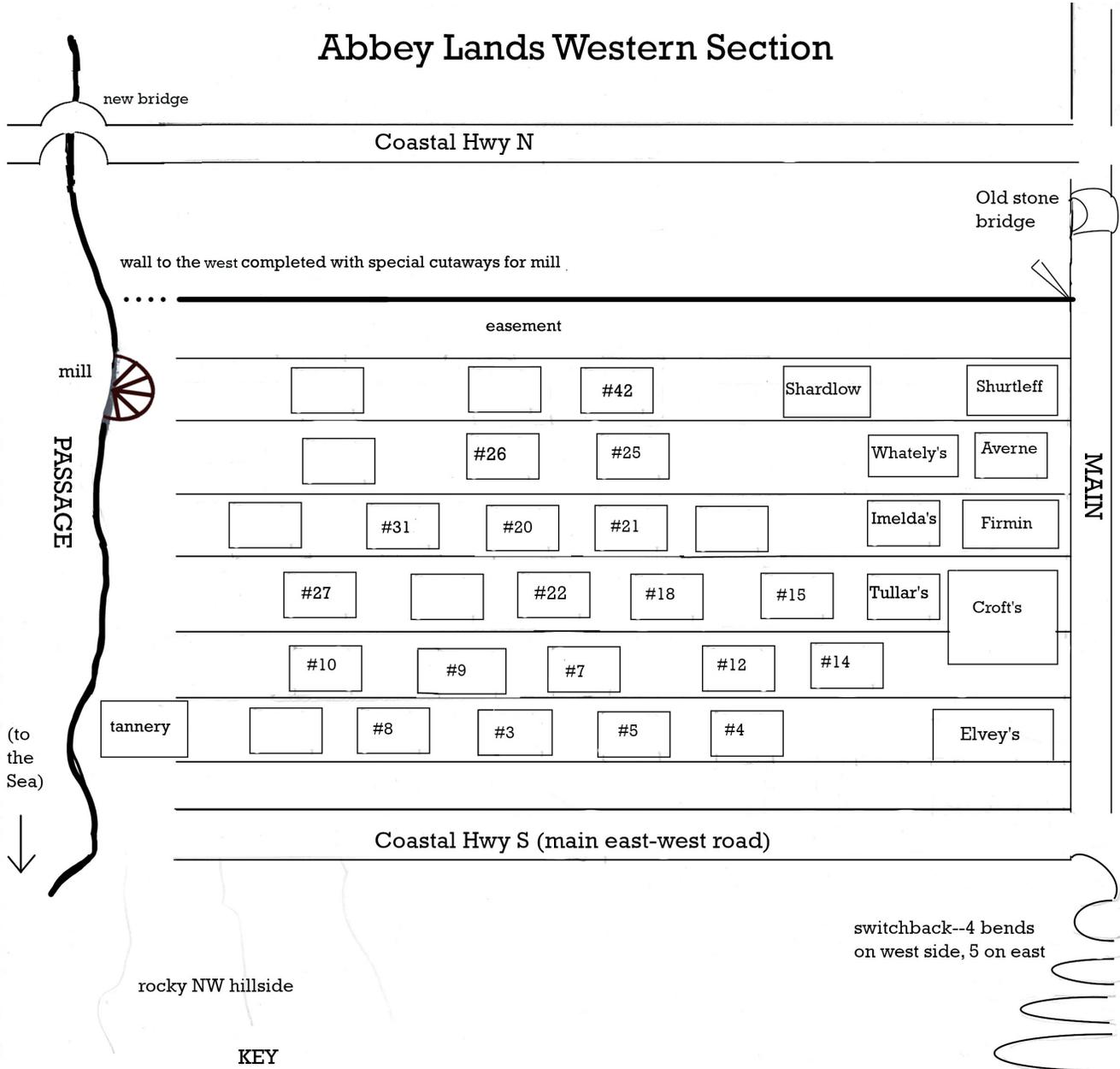
NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024

Abbey Lands Main Road



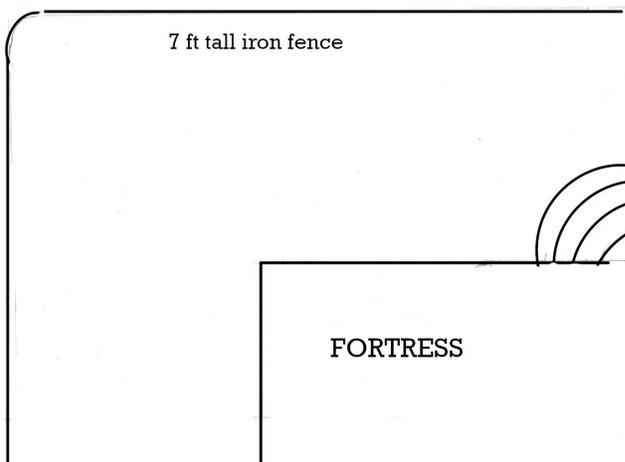
Abbey Lands Western Section



KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Lorient & Adele, briefly
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening

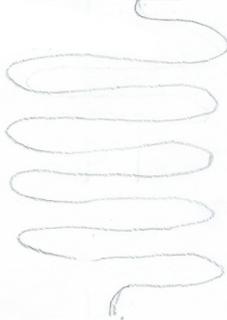
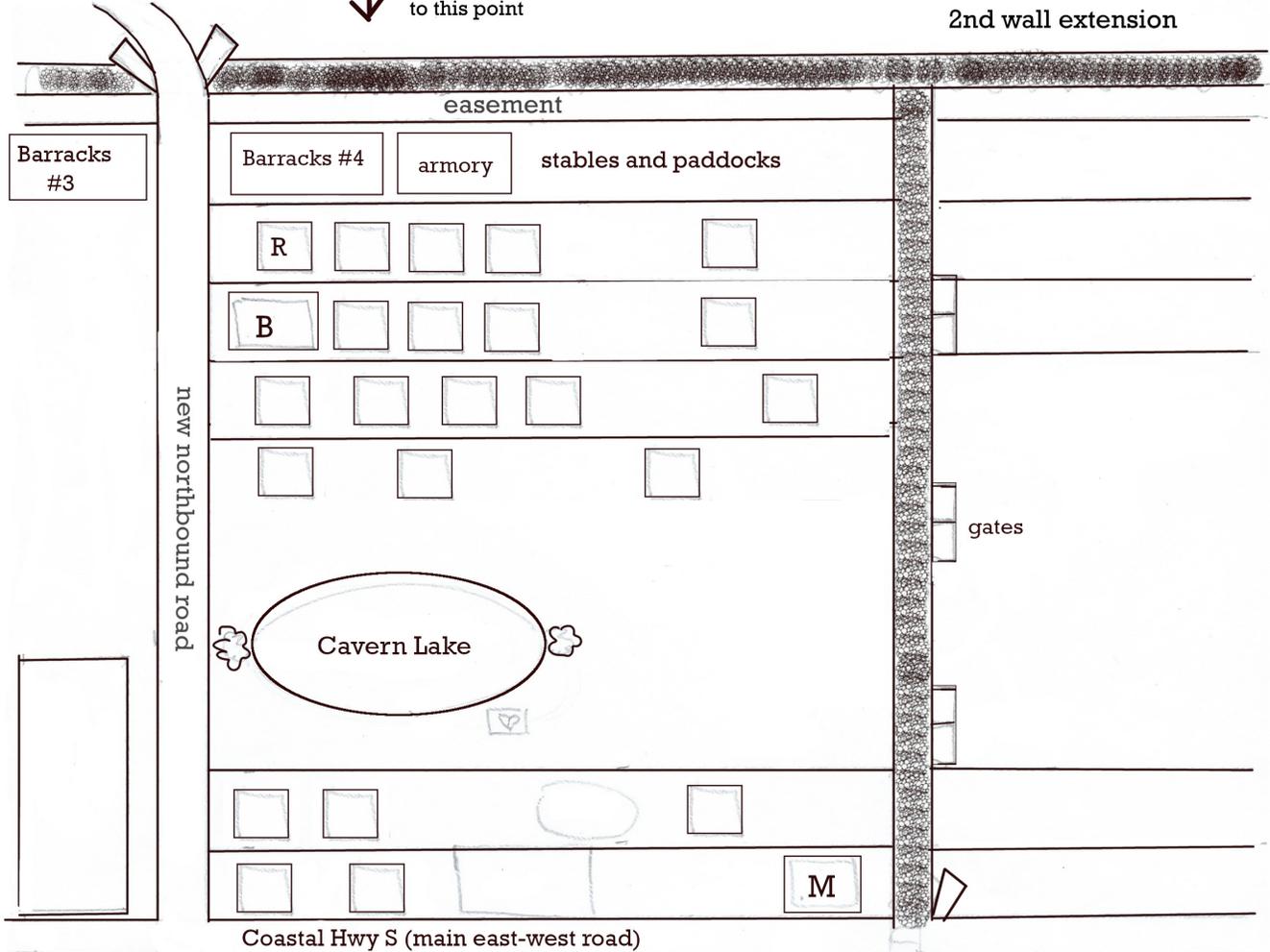
woods



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

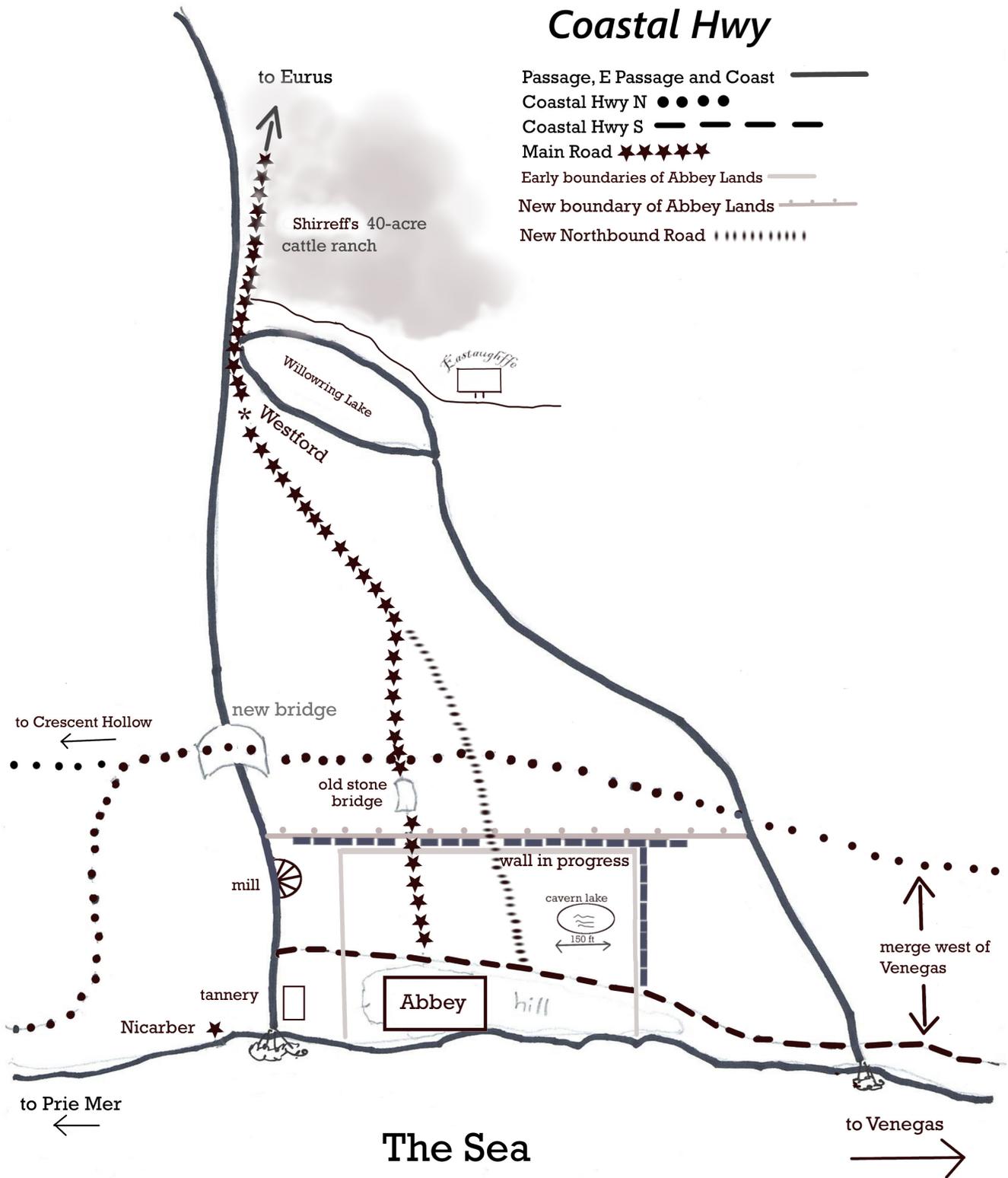
↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

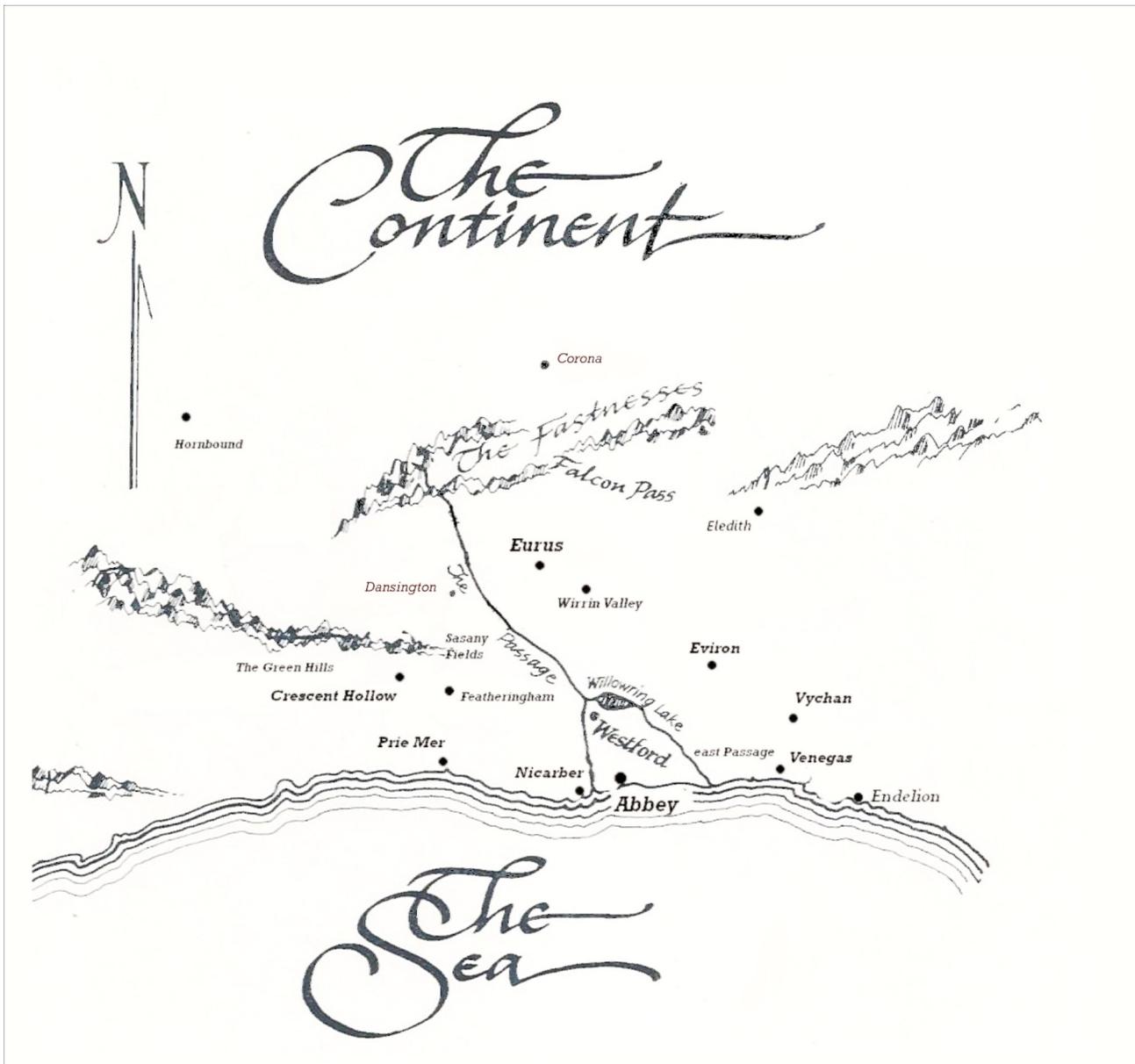


- A
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- R - Delano's office

Coastal Hwy

- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |





Efran Meets Aleph (Book 12:
*Lord Efran and the Battle of Kittim
vs Nephilim*)

See the Notes--Robin Hardy



This one was fun. I started out with this [amazing photo](#)¹ of a wilderness road in Virginia (which trees unfortunately don't match the Abbey Lands) then put our [model](#) for Aleph² (below) in [this](#) authentic suit of armor.³ Aleph's arms came from [this](#) model,⁴ and I acquired Aleph's hair [here](#).⁵ Efran was pretty much an afterthought, but I did eventually find [this hunk](#).⁶ As you can see from his photo (also below), I had to airbrush out the tattoo—most of it, anyway—but at least Efran's hair covered the sunglasses.



Robin Hardy
May 3, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [ForestWander](#) on Wikimedia Commons
2. Photographed by [Rulo Davila](#) on Pexels
3. It's Pikeman's armor, circa 1620-30, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, via Wikimedia Commons.
4. Photographed by [Mart Production](#) on Pexels
5. On Wallpapers.com
6. Photographed by [Raša St](#) on Pexels