

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

Book 34

Lord Efran's
Thousand Royals

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

“So, once again, we’re putting a stop to all new development,” DeWitt said. He and Estes were in the second-floor workroom addressing Efran, Wendt, Ryal, Tourse, Lemmerz, and Ruesegger, the construction supervisor of new projects on the East Lands. (Rimbault was now consumed with the management of many properties built by himself and DePew, especially The Lands’ Best Inn.) Viglian and Redpath were taking notes.

(Redpath was Captain Rigdon’s new scribe, needed because his previous scribe Oulton had been drafted as a notary, and was now manning the new East Lands Notary shop. Redpath, a Southerner, was a recruit who gained quick acceptance into the Abbey Lands army not only for his language skills, but for his fighting ability, especially hand-to-hand. This skill he had acquired growing up with a lisp. He learned to fight, then learned to correct his lisp by reading out loud.)

Upon Administrator DeWitt’s announcement, Ruesegger sat back, almost wailing, “You’ve plenty of room in the east, and we have a waiting list of clients who want homes or businesses built!”

“Which is why we’re halting it now, before we get to the point of having to burn down unauthorized buildings again,” DeWitt said. This last fracas, under Wolverson (now deceased), was about five months ago, today being April 27th of the year 8156. DeWitt continued, “But the more immediate reason is that we’re outstripping our infrastructure—sewers, wells, water lines, roads. We must get all that in place before new buildings obstruct them.”

“Not to mention overwhelming your notaries,” Efran muttered. Ryal glanced at him in confirmation.

“Quite so,” DeWitt acknowledged. That was relevant because the most recent impetus to this action was Efran’s brush with the owners of The Granary, which building was erected entirely by dark magic for the purpose of illegal gain. Ryal had pointed out that the influx of new residents hampered the Lands’ notaries from weeding out such undesirables.

“What do I tell my clients who have put down deposits?” Ruesegger asked.

DeWitt replied, “You may have to refund some of those. But we are allowing construction to the north of the Lands, specifically, north of the coastal highway that runs east-west beyond the old stone bridge. As far as we’re concerned, all that land is up for grabs. And residents there are not required to register with our notaries or pay taxes. *However--*”

DeWitt leaned over to hand Ruesegger a printed page of caveats. “Here are the conditions that the Fortress has placed on settlers in that area. We cannot guaranty their safety, nor will we patrol or investigate complaints. But if we become aware of criminal activity, we will address it however Commander Wendt sees fit. Settlers may come to our notaries for legal services, or to our doctors for treatment, but our people are not required to travel outside the Lands to accommodate the settlers.

“For your protection, we urge you to give your clients a copy of these stipulations, have them sign it, and then return it to our notary. That way, if we have to enforce any of these conditions with them, you will have proof that they were warned. Otherwise, if they complain to us that they didn’t know all this, we may find you liable for having misled them. That may prove expensive to you,” DeWitt finished.

Ruesegger took the sheet contemplatively. "What about Lemmerz?" he asked, nodding to his competitor.

Lemmerz shook his head. "I have all I can handle for now, until my right-hand man comes back from maternity leave." There was some chuckling in response. No one at the table felt the need to explain to Ruesegger that Lemmerz was receiving preferential treatment for new projects, as he had demonstrated his competence and honesty from the very beginning of the Lands. He was building the as-yet-unnamed new inn in the East Lands south of Cavern Lake.

Toying with the sheet, Ruesegger asked, "What about east of the Lands?"

"East of the east branch of the Passage?" Efran asked in alarm.

"Yes, why can't we build out there? There's nothing out that way between here and Venegas," Ruesegger said.

Efran was shaking his head. "The last five miles of the Lands to the east branch is wolf territory, marked by the red flags"--that kept disappearing. "We can't guaranty any stranger's safety in that area, except traveling on the Coastal Highway South." Canis, leader of the wolf pack, had promised Efran this. Ruesegger looked off, sighing, as that would kill anyone's interest in building east of the Lands.

When that meeting broke up, the fortress administrators returned to their normal duties. As Estes did at least once a week, he opened his folder of adoptions to show Efran and DeWitt which children had been adopted out from Abbey care to families on the Lands below. In the three years of the Abbey's existence, the number of successful adoptions now topped 350.

While the men were in their meeting with the builders, Minka had been wandering the fortress grounds as though looking for someone to play with. (Efran had been making noises about how much time she spent at The Lands Clothing Shop helping Rondi, so after Law class today, she decided to wait for him.) The children were in class, which she wouldn't dare interrupt. Efran could send them wooden walking sticks or even barge into class and be welcomed, but Minka was too intimidated by their highly competent tutor.

So she walked around the west side of the fortress, taking care to not disturb anyone in their work. The men drilling or practicing archery seemed to not notice her, as she preferred. She passed by the horse training pens where Ella and Tess were laughing at the new man trying to train the new two-year-old foal. Since the women were reveling in their pregnancies—the first for both—Minka decided not to horn in on their happiness. Besides, Cloud was gone, and Minka didn't know if she could ever give her heart to another horse.

She progressed to the stables, where she found Squirt grooming one dispirited animal. "Hello, Squirt. Would you saddle a horse for me, please?" Whatever Efran was doing, she was always permitted to go down to Auntie's—the chapel was right here, and any of the guards would tell him where she was.

"Sure, Lady Minka," he said. "How about Dustbin here? He's very gentle, and gets lonely because he's not fast or beautiful."

"I understand that!" she laughed. "Yes, I'll take Dustbin."

"All right, then. If you'll hold his head, I'll bring over his gear," Squirt said.

"Thank you." She took the reins to stroke Dustbin's face, and he nosed her hand in gratitude.

As Squirt ran to the tack room, he shouted, "Bodyguards for Lady Minka!"

She was startled by hasty footsteps running into the stables. Then she heard a man nearby groan, "Oh, babysitting duty. Find me a place to hide." She was too short for him to see her over the stable partition, and he obviously thought she was waiting at the courtyard gates.

Another man who had entered with him answered, "Truth. If she'd just be quiet, it wouldn't be so bad, but she talks and talks and *talks*."

"Ugh, the prattle is relentless. And dunking herself in the lake to get attention! Allyr still has the scars. Who was it joking that we should get hazard pay for warding her?" the first asked.

"Everyone? But if you mention it to her, she's liable to insist you get it, so there's that," the second allowed.

"Wait—here comes Squirt. Come quick to the armory."

"Right." And they hustled out of the stables without seeing her. She was glad for that, for she vaguely knew one of them, the first one who spoke. His name was Dihle.

Lugging in a saddle, Squirt didn't notice their leaving. She held Dustbin's head while Squirt threw the saddle over a rail. "You don't object to flowers on your saddle pad, do you, Lady Minka?" he asked, showing her the brightly colored blanket. "I can't even turn this over; it's got flowers on both sides!" he vented.

"As long as Dustbin doesn't mind, I'm happy with that," she said with a tremor in her laughter.

"That's good of you, Lady Minka," he exhaled.

When he had Dustbin geared up, she said, "Help me up, please; I'm just going to—take him around back." She couldn't imagine going anywhere now, but she didn't want him to have to unsaddle Dustbin again.

"Oh? All right." He boosted her up, and she turned Dustbin's head to take him around the side of the fortress at a walk. The men who had run to the stables at Squirt's call saw her go around back, upon which they returned to their other duties. Except, Pleyel, newly off duty, began saddling a horse just in case she needed a bodyguard after all. Lady Minka sometimes changed her mind.

Squirt watched her for a moment, then resumed his work while keeping an eye out for her. Like Pleyel, he was sure she intended to go somewhere, but she often seemed reluctant about taking the bodyguards that the Captain insisted on.

Unnoticed, Minka rode clear across the back grounds to the east side of the fortress. Arriving at a plan, she turned north again to exit the grocer's gate and begin down the new switchback. This would lead her close enough to the chapel, where she didn't need bodyguards anyway.

But Squirt caught sight of her exiting the grocer's gate and ran to the courtyard gatesmen, Willis and Clough, to demand, "Why did you let Lady Minka ride out without a bodyguard?"

They blinked at him, then turned to see her alone on the new switchback. Willis protested, "She didn't ask for bodyguards!"

Clough groaned, "She doesn't always ask." He debated what to do, dreading the thought of the alarm bell. But

they watched her exit the switchback to the chapel. Exhaling in relief, Clough said, "Then she already told the Captain where she was going. Sometimes he'll let her go to the chapel without bodyguards." Willis nodded.

Squirt, dissatisfied, returned to the stables to begin saddling another horse. Departing the stables with his own mount, Pleyel asked him, "Has Lady Minka left, then?"

Glancing up, Squirt said, "To the chapel. Hang on a moment for your partner."

"Good," Pleyel agreed. Skalbeck approached, then, to present himself for bodyguard duty. So Squirt let him get that horse saddled.

Meanwhile, Minka rode up to the front doors of the chapel and dismounted. Since no one was there to take Dustbin, she left him to graze on the front lawn. Climbing the steps, she paused in surprise that the door guards watched her impassively without moving to open the doors. "I'd like to visit Auntie," she said carefully.

One guard said, "Pardon, Lady Minka, but Hartshough said they'd be working with the Shoard girls and were not to have visitors."

"Oh, I see," she said, knowing that Hartshough never intended to include her in that category. But without a compelling reason to enter unannounced, she could not bring herself to demand it. So she sighed, "I'll stop by later."

The guards—two more whom she knew—nodded complacently and then left her to struggle to get back up on Dustbin by herself. But she managed, and turned his head to walk him west on Chapel Road toward Main.

That was it for Clough at the courtyard gates. He turned to shout, "Bodyguards for Lady Minka! NOW!"

Conveniently, Pleyel and Skalbeck presented themselves at the gates. "Is she at the chapel?" Pleyel asked, looking.

"No, she just turned up Main. There," Clough said, pointing. The traffic on Main was particularly crowded at this time, so that Pleyel and Skalbeck had to scan riders for a moment.

"I see her," Skalbeck said, prodding his horse through the gates. Pleyel joined him to lope down the switchback.

As Clough watched tensely for them to catch her, Willis said, "There, everything worked out fine." But Clough saw her bodyguards get hung up behind slow wagons on the switchback.

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Chapter 2

Meanwhile, Minka passed Elvey's, where Ghislain paused to eye her old riding dress with contempt. Then Minka passed Croft's, where Vories glanced at her and whispered to Challinor. Without even looking, Challinor waved in dismissal. At this time of the morning, there was only a handful of diners in the outdoor dining areas. So Minka passed Firmin's without a glimpse of Lilou or Ionadi. But at Averne's, Leila turned her gorgeous red-gold head to look at Minka riding by, and opened her luscious lips in laughter. By now, Pleyel and Skalbeck were desperately threading their way through heavy traffic.

Minka turned Dustbin down a side street to begin walking east (which caused her trailing bodyguards to lose sight of her). She was not offended by any of this, only thinking. In ten days, she would turn nineteen. But in many ways, she still acted like a child. Despite her immaturity, everyone treated her with respect because of their regard for Efran. But it was time she grew up.

She rode aimlessly for another half hour while considering how to do this. Her bodyguards, having apprehended that she had turned off Main somewhere—probably to the east—were riding up and down side streets in search of her. Minka, seeing how close it was to noon, turned Dustbin back south so that she could get ready for the midday meal.

When she crossed an intersection going south, her bodyguards spotted her. Catching up with her in great relief, Pleyel called, “Ho, Lady Minka! Wait up for us!”

She barely glanced at them. “I’m on my way back.”

“Well then, we’ll tag along, if you don’t mind,” Pleyel said amiably as he and Skalbeck drew up on either side of her. She almost smiled at him—Pleyel had been on a few adventures with her, such as finding Adele as Standing Goddess in the bell tower, and most recently, entering The Granary with her. But then she lowered her face to say not another word for the slow ride back.

By the time the bodyguards caught up to their ward, Efran had been freed from the meeting, so went off to look for her. He did not find her on the back grounds, or in their quarters, or in the library. Here, he paused to ask the Librarian, “Has Minka been by?”

“I have not seen her since Law class, Lord Efran,” the Librarian replied.

“All right, no problem,” he exhaled, glancing to Nibor at work in her corner behind the partition. He went on up the corridor, then stopped at the front doors to ask Ellor, “Did Minka leave?”

“Not that I saw, Captain. But I just got here,” Ellor said.

Expelling a breath, Efran went out to the courtyard to glance around. “Did Minka leave?” he asked the gate guards. Neither answered while Efran was looking from one switchback to the other, then scanning Main. He noted the chapel door guards opening them to Wendt as he arrived. But the last that the gate guards had seen, Minka’s tardy bodyguards had been chasing her on Main. Neither Clough nor Willis knew how to tell the Captain that.

Efran, finally aware that he had not received an answer, looked between them again. “Did. Minka. Leave,” he repeated.

Clough blurted, “She went down to the chapel, Captain.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so?” Efran asked, turning to whistle. Clough and Willis stared at each other, sick.

Kraken trotted up, bareback but bridled. Efran grabbed his mane to jump up on his back. The guards got the gates open for him to ride out, loping easily down the switchback. Then Clough and Willis watched him advance up the walk to the chapel doors.

The door guards MacCaa and Bennard had them open by the time the Captain swung down from his horse. He

trotted into the foyer to see Wendt, Marguerite and Hartshough turn to him. Advancing amiably, he saluted Wendt, who nodded. Then Efran asked, "How are the little girls doing?"

Marguerite replied, "Very well, Efran, though it's taking a long time for them to learn that they are *little girls*. Give us another week before you and Minka visit them."

"All right. Where is she?" he asked, looking toward the back patio.

Three faces studied him. Marguerite replied, "Minka's not here, Efran. Were you expecting her?"

Efran stared at her, expelling, "She's not--" Then he turned on his heel to stride back to the front doors. Opening them, he looked between the wary guards to ask, "Did Minka come here?"

When neither answered at once, Efran laughed, "Why is everyone having to think so hard about simple questions? DID MINKA COME HERE?" The three in the foyer approached the door, also desiring to know.

MacCaa screwed up his courage to say, "We had been given instructions to turn away visitors, Captain."

Eyes glassing over, Efran whispered, "Lady Minka is not a visitor."

Hartshough intervened, "Pardon, Lord Efran, this misunderstanding is my fault. Those are indeed the instructions I gave, while failing to clarify Lady Minka's relationship to Lady Marguerite."

Efran barely regarded Hartshough's effort to rescue the men, then asked them, "Who was with her?" When neither man answered at once, Efran lowered his head to begin spreading dangerously.

Sweating, MacCaa answered, "I did not see anyone with her, Captain."

Jaw working, Efran asked, "Was she on foot or horseback?"

"Horseback, Captain," MacCaa replied.

"Where did she go?" Efran asked.

"Up Main, Captain," MacCaa said.

"By herself?" Efran whispered.

"As far as I could see, Captain," MacCaa said like a dead man.

Efran went over to leap up on Kraken and begin riding west on Chapel Road, whistling. As men ran up to him, he gave instructions to search for the lady. Then he disappeared up Main.

Wendt told the door guards, "I'm going to spare you whatever punishment the Captain's got in mind. You have your choice of latrine duty or expulsion from the army."

"I'll take latrine duty, Commander," MacCaa said dully.

Bennard, with a history of said punishment, muttered, "I'm finished. I'd never get out of latrine duty."

Wendt nodded. "Go report to your Captains. Whoever's at the gates up there, send them down to me"--to receive *their* punishment.

"Yes, Commander," MacCaa said, saluting. Bennard saluted, thinking that their one consolation of this wretched day would be informing Clough and Willis of the Commander's summons.

But as MacCaa and Bennard started up the walk, they all saw Minka ride by with her guardians, going west on Chapel Road to intercept the new switchback. The three turned up it, never looking toward the chapel. So Wendt called MacCaa and Bennard back to send them up Main and get out the word, especially to the Captain, that the Lady had returned to the fortress *with her bodyguards*.

Watching from above, Clough exhaled in deep relief to see the three ascending. Willis said, "See? I told you everything was all right." Clough contemplated what punishment he might receive for beating his partner's face in, and had almost decided it was worth it. But then they had to open the gates for the lady's party.

Minka slid off Dustbin by herself before anyone could help her. As Squirt ran up for the horses, she patted Dustbin's nose, telling Squirt, "He did everything I asked."

"Very good, Lady Minka," he said, taking the reins. Without pausing to thank her bodyguards as she normally did, she went in to quickly wash up for the midday meal, thinking that Efran was probably already in the dining hall. But on second thought, she took the time to change clothes and fix her hair.

She chose one of Marguerite's cast-offs, a sweet rose-colored dress that was rather matronly and old-fashioned, which she decided was perfect. Windry's clothes were pretty and stylish, but just too gaudy for Minka's comfort. Then she sat before her mirror to smooth her hair with water (no pomade!) and fasten it back with two clips to get the curls out of her face. The short, curly hair did make her look younger than she was.

Then she hurried to the hall to find that she was one of the first ones there. So she sat to wait with her hands folded and her head down. *No more prattling*, she reminded herself.

Wardly came over, then paused. "Lady Minka?" he asked dubiously.

"Yes, Wardly," she said, lifting her head. "I'll just wait for Efran to get here."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, withdrawing.

She continued to sit quietly while the hall gradually filled around her. Ella and Tess came in laughing about something, then they broke off upon seeing her from the back. "Is that Grandma?" Tess asked.

Ella was leaning down to look. "Minka! It is you. Are you all right?"

Now Minka was concerned that she was overdoing the maturation. If Ella discerned that something was wrong, Efran would never be fooled. "Are the clips too much?" she asked, on the verge of taking one out. "There's no pomade," she reassured her stepdaughter.

"Pomade is fine for grandmothers," Tess said. Ella drew up with a rebuke, but Tess said, "What? She's going to be a grandmother." So Ella took Tess by the arm to lead her far enough away to talk seriously to her. Meanwhile, men who came in to pause at the small, slumped figure on the back bench flew out again to inform the Captain that the lady was here--*after* checking her face.

As the hall began filling, Ella returned to sit beside Minka. Then she looked down abstractedly at her enlarging midriff. "I wonder how long I'll be able to sit at the benches," she muttered. She was about four months' along.

"How are you feeling?" Minka asked.

"Fine. Good, really," Ella insisted.

Efran was then looming behind them, so they scooted apart to make room for him. He sat, evaluating Minka. "No pomade," she said quickly. "It was just so—messy. Are the clips too much?" she asked, a hand on one.

He moistened his lips deliberately, then glanced up to nod to Wardly. Turning back to evaluate the dress and her apprehensive eyes, he asked, "What happened?"

"When?" she asked blankly. He paused, assessing her again. When men began filling the table around them, she sank into stillness.

The midday meal was different from dinner, as men stopped by quickly to eat and then return to duty. Rondi ate at the shop; Minka and Efran didn't always eat here, either. When he did, he was constantly interrupted by men with questions for which they needed answers quickly.

So Efran had no chance to talk to Minka before she stood abruptly. "I'm done. I need to go—talk to Auntie."

Seeing that she had hardly touched her plate, he grasped her hand before she could get away. "You'll take bodyguards?" His fingers were tight; his face anxious.

"Yes. I promise," she said.

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Chapter 3

So Efran released Minka's hand, then watched her practically run out of the hall. Turning back around, he murmured to no one in particular, "I want to know who upset her." The men around him looked warily at each other.

Before leaving, Minka had to stop by her and Efran's quarters to change into something she could ride in. Before reaching for the dress she'd just left on the floor, she paused. First, she put that dress into the laundry basket, then searched in her wardrobe for another that was newer, not so ragged.

After getting into that dress, she appraised herself in the mirror. She removed the clips, which looked stupid, and used one to gather some of the hair out of her eyes. Then she put on her new white boots with the snakeskin heels and rehung the grandmotherly dress in her wardrobe.

Despondent, she went out to the courtyard to tell the gate guards, "I'm going to Auntie's and I need bodyguards."

Willis sprang up, almost saluting, and Clough said, "Thank you, Lady Minka!" Then he shouted authoritatively, "Bodyguards for Lady Minka!" She almost wilted at his gratitude.

But when Squirt paused nearby, she requested, "Saddle Dustbin for me again, please."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said with a private smile. And she felt a little better, to give some attention to the plodding, ugly horse. Then she looked down at the chapel doors far below, thinking, *If they won't let me in, I'll just sit on the steps to wait.*

Minutes later, she turned as two bodyguards approached with three horses. She smiled to see Dustbin prick his ears toward her in recognition. Then she looked at Tiras, who was leading him. Tiras smiled at her. He was Polonti, and all the Polonti liked her. Efran believed that she was still their Moiwahine.

Then Minka looked at the other man, and her blood ran cold. He regarded her respectfully, except for his vaguely sardonic smile. Staring at him, she wondered, *How did he get approved for bodyguard duty?* It used to be a coveted honor to be her guardian for an outing, and some of the men still considered it so. But now. . . .

She had never refused any of them, had she? She had her preferences, but she was always careful to not hurt anyone's feelings by rejecting him. Is that what led to this condescension toward her?

While she was thinking through all this, the men in the courtyard were glancing around in confusion, searching for what was wrong. Tiras turned evaluative eyes to the object of her attention, Dihle. He began to look a little uncomfortable.

"I don't want you," she told him. Turning to look out the gates, she generally instructed, "Get Tiras another partner to guard me."

The men looked thunderstruck, then Clough said, "Right away, Lady Minka. Do you have a preference?"

"No, but I'll let you know if he's unacceptable," she said, eyes on the switchback. This was a stark warning to the next man chosen, whoever he might be.

"Yes, Lady Minka," Clough said, then instructed, "Put 'im to mucking stalls and bring someone competent, for pity's sake."

Dihle was hustled away while lightning glances went around the men in the courtyard. Ellor was watching from the open doors.

A few minutes later, Dihle's replacement strode into the courtyard unescorted. While she stood facing the switchback, he took his place beside Tiras. Folding his hands before him respectfully, he asked, "May I serve you, Lady Minka?"

She turned her large blue eyes on Connor, who waited with an admirably blank face. Tiras, smiling, looked from him to her. Connor's status as a close associate of the Captain's was well known. She grinned, "I'd love to have your company, Connor. You don't mind my prattle."

"No, indeed, Lady Minka, it's a privilege to hear your prattle," he said, his dimples appearing.

She swung to Dustbin. "We're going down to Auntie's. Help me up," she instructed Willis, who ran over to hoist her to the saddle. The chosen bodyguards mounted their horses.

As the three started down the switchback at a walk, Tiras asked, "What is 'prattle,' and will you tell us some, Lady Minka?"

"Oh, hang on, you can't avoid it," she laughed. And she told them about overhearing Dihle and another man in the stables this morning. (Dihle, knowing he was finished, walked away before ever reporting back to Captain Rigdon.)

The bodyguards listened in fascination up to the very doors of the chapel, which were flung open to the party by Lund and Salk. While Minka ran inside with Tiras following, Connor paused to tell Lund, "Take our horses around back to Eryk."

"Yes sir," Lund replied, motioning to Salk, who leapt forward to collect the reins. Then Connor followed Minka and Tiras inside.

She was greeting Auntie and Hartshough effusively, with hugs and warm prattle: "Oh, I feel as though it's been ages since I've seen you, when I know it's only been days, but how are the little Shoard girls doing?"

"Resting, eating, and getting their bearings," Marguerite said, hugging her in return. "Their infection was very bad. Hartshough feels that another few months without treatment would have killed them."

"Oh, no," Minka breathed. "It was such a Godsend for the ladies from Craghead to have found them. And when there's anything we don't know, you and Hartshough are there to tell us."

"Have the men who were bitten or scratched shown any symptoms?" Marguerite asked. "Headaches? Dizziness? Unexplained aggression?"

"Yes, Efran," a voice said behind Minka.

Turning, she cried, "Justinian! You're back!" And she hugged him as well.

While accepting her embrace, he glanced warily at her bodyguards, then toward the front doors. "Yes, as of early this morning, dearest Minka. Had I stayed any longer in Westford, Lord Baroffio would have put me to work sawing logs. Where is the Gargoyle?"

"Oh. I left him in the dining hall," Minka said as though having misplaced him.

"Excellent," Justinian said. "Then we'll enjoy Hartshough's bracers in peace for at least three minutes." Leaning over to kiss Marguerite's cheek, he said, "We arrived so early, dear, I didn't want to wake you."

"'We'?" Marguerite asked.

Tiras and Connor were the first whose eyes flicked to the curving stairway. Justinian turned as well, smiling. "Ah. The lady has awakened."

Everyone on the ground floor watched as a woman descended the stairs gracefully. She had luminous golden-white hair that fell past her shoulders in crimped ringlets. Minka, discerning the light touch of pomade to control the frizz, determined to start using it again.

With heavy-lidded green eyes, the woman gained the ground floor to survey the motionless group. Although she

was certainly beautiful, a close-up view disclosed fine lines and wrinkles, and the telltale crinkly skin in her cleavage. She was somewhere between 35 and 40 years old. Staring at her, Minka was suddenly nauseous—the lady was just Efran's type.

Justinian extended an arm affectionately to her, and she came over to curl her right arm around his waist, placing her left hand on his chest. "Everyone, please meet my fiancée Lady Wissowa. She has never met Efran," he said in satisfaction.

"No, and he sounds delightful," she said in a lilting voice.

"Well, I'm sure you'll meet him soon," Justinian said. "This is his wife, Lady Minka."

"Oh, he must be very young," she purred. Her voice was like soft velvet. Minka, having gone cold all over, did not respond.

Justinian corrected Wissowa, "He's older than I am, dear heart"--by two years. "Here is Minka's auntie, the Lady Marguerite, formerly of Eurus."

"Oh, I've heard of you. I'm so delighted to finally meet you," Wissowa said, extending a limp hand.

"How do you do?" Marguerite said formally, accepting her hand.

"And her indispensable butler, Hartshough," Justinian ended.

Hartshough bowed to her, and she nodded to him, adding, "What a delightful residence." Her eyes swept over the hall. "The indoor trees are such a unique touch." They were in full leaf, spreading as to almost fill the large hall. "We shall not burden you long, by the way. We've put down a large deposit with the builder Ruesegger to have our own house built by the lake," Wissowa ended.

"You may certainly stay as long as you need to," Marguerite said. "Justinian is an essential member of our family."

"Oh, how sweet," she said. There was a moment of silence in the thick atmosphere. Minka was listening to her heart beating in her ears.

The front doors opened, and they heard Efran make a comment to Lund about Connor running off with his wife. Lund laughed, and Efran's swift steps were heard approaching. He emerged through the trees, his eyes landing on Minka, first. As she was turning hesitantly toward him, he scanned the rest of the group.

When he and Wissowa locked eyes, he stopped as though having been shot, and she drew a quick breath. Justinian looked at her in alarm. "You've not met Efran, Wissowa. . . . Have you?"

"So you're Efran," she breathed, her face suddenly glowing. His was a cadaverous gray. "Oh, that night in the cabin, when the thunderstorm hit, and your horse lost its footing in the mud," she reminisced, eyes closed, a hand at her chest. "You were trying to shelter on that tiny, rickety porch, and I made you come in. He didn't want to," she laughed to Marguerite. He had lowered his face, looking aside.

In her warm, breathy voice, Wissowa continued, "It was late November, and he was blue-lipped and shivering in the rain. And it was dark, so dark that he couldn't keep to the road. So I brought him in, and stripped his dripping clothes off him, and laid him in my bed. My husband was in the other bedroom!" she laughed again. "He snored

so loudly when he was sleeping off the drink, it rattled the wall at the head of the bed! But that's how we knew just where he was all that night."

She looked at Efran again with misty eyes. By now, he had raised his face to take the blows head on. But she was lost in dreamy remembrance. "The fire burned down twice, and he had to get up twice to put on more wood. But by the time the sun rose, the rain had stopped and his clothes were dry. I begged him to come to me again in town, in Westford, and he said, 'I can't make you any promises.'"

By now, Justinian was looking as sick as Efran. Then she sighed, "But I've always remembered that night . . . especially when Donovan was born."

Justinian's head sprang up at the revelation. Efran's voice cracked when he asked, "Who is--Donovan?"

"Your son," she said easily, as if relief. "You don't think I got any children by Schoeps, do you? But you can have him now. No one else wants him."

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Chapter 4

"No one wants him? Why?" Efran asked.

"You'll see," she smiled. "Who's going to send the carriage for him? I'll give you directions," she said, glancing around.

Marguerite said, "Hartshough--"

But Connor stepped forward. "Captain, let me go check it out."

"With me," Tiras said. "We always go in pairs. Tell us where, Lady Wissowa."

She looked at Efran, who nodded slightly. She said, "The house Underhay, in the nobles district of Westford." As they started toward the back door, she added, "Take money."

"Hartshough--" Marguerite began.

"No," Efran contradicted her. "Go up hilltop; tell DeWitt and Estes and get a pouch."

"Yes, Captain," Connor said. Tiras saluted, and they ran to the back door.

"So you're a captain now," Wissowa observed. "That was what you wanted most." After further reflection, she said, "I didn't notice that was a uniform until you got dressed again in the morning light."

The hall was deathly quiet while she stretched luxuriously. She leaned on Justinian's shoulder to tickle his chin. "At least I'll have a young, handsome lord for a husband. Have I missed the midday meal, Justin? I'm feeling a bit peckish." He was working his jaw in a manner disturbingly similar to Efran's.

Marguerite said, "Have a seat here at the dining table. Hartshough will have something for you right away."

"Oh, thank you," Wissowa said, sweeping to the table. Drawing a breath, Justinian followed.

Efran looked to Minka, hesitantly extending his hand. She took it, and he led her to sit at the table on the back patio. Now that she knew he wasn't interested in the woman, Minka was fine. She had learned long ago not to punish him for his past. He continually suffered because of it—as today proved, again.

Marguerite leaned unsteadily on Hartshough, so he guided her to the kitchen. There, he told her, "Never fear, Marguerite. This is a long overdue homecoming. It will be well."

"Quite right, dear man. Now, how can I help you?" she asked.

"I shall need the cakes from cold storage, if you will," he replied, tying on his favorite apron.

"Coming right up," she said, bending to open a door in the floor.

He paused over the counter. "Or, would it be wrong to give Justinian and our guest the salmon cakes I had prepared for Lord Efran and Lady Minka?" he asked in butlerish vexation.

Marguerite paused. "Didn't Minka say she had left him in the dining hall? So haven't they both eaten?"

"I believe you are correct, Lady Marguerite," he said, taking the plates she brought out of cold storage.

He delivered these to the couple waiting at the dining table where their silver utensils already sat. Wissowa picked up her fork to inquisitively poke the cake while Hartshough asked, "Would you care for chilled mineral water, ale or lager, Lady Wissowa?" He already knew that Justinian preferred mild ale with the midday meal.

"Wine," she said around a mouthful.

Justinian looked cautious. "Isn't it rather early for wine, dearest?"

"Not for me," she said, directing a heavy-lidded glance at him. "Wine is fine at any time," she murmured, then started tittering at the rhyme. Justinian slouched back in his chair. *I should kill Efran for despoiling every woman in sight and then marrying the only one who wouldn't sleep with him . . . if that weren't my own goal.*

He watched Hartshough bring a bottle from which he filled her crystal goblet. Then he left the bottle on the table to return to the kitchen. Without looking up, Wissowa drained the glass and refilled it herself. Justinian closed his eyes, then began eating as well.

On the silent back patio, Efran was gazing sightlessly over the lush landscaping. *Underhay. In Westford. I never heard of it, so it must be a new house. Where did she take him during the Goulven crisis and the fires that destroyed Westford? Or did she have him with her at all then?*

While all this was going through his mind, Minka looked toward the stables. "Oh, poor Dustbin. He looks lonely," she said, getting up. Efran's eyes shot to her as she walked over to the neglected horse. Wiping his mouth, Efran got up to follow.

She opened the stall door to find that that Dustbin had been unsaddled, so all she had to do was unbuckle his bridle and convince him that he was permitted on the lush green grass right outside the stall. He took her word

for it, ambling out nose down. While she stroked his withers and his slightly swayed back, Efran watched, hanging on the open stall door. He needed to hear her voice, but he didn't know what to say to elicit the words he wanted.

She glanced at him sidewise. "It's all about the children, isn't it?" He could find no reply to that, given that he was the negligent father who had unknowingly abandoned his own child. Reading him, she said, "It makes no difference how they were conceived—Joshua is dear to us, as is Isreal, and Toby, and all the other unwantedes we have now."

Efran looked up, thinking. "He'll be—around ten years old. I'll have to ask her when he was born. And we don't know—what--what is wrong with him."

"Why does it matter?" she asked. "Haven't we learned that there are no irredeemable children?"

He hung his head, knowing that she was talking about the Shoard girls, and possibly Isreal. "I--" He could hardly think what to say when it was all he could do to keep his composure.

"Efran, can't you see how perfect the timing is?" she laughed. He squinted at her, uncomprehending. She went on, "What could you have done about him ten years ago, or five years ago, when you were a soldier with no home but the army? And when we received the bequest of the one place that would have room for him, we also had Adele, pregnant—not to mention all the attacks—Loizeaux, the Goulven, the snobbles, and Lues. But now that you've got us past those, we have both the time and the place for him."

He absently watched Dustbin lower himself to roll in the grass, snorting in pleasure. But then Kraken appeared outside the chapel yard fence, jealously ramming it with his chest. Efran went over to open the gate, muttering, "That's what you get for running off to play in the water trough." Kraken fluttered his lips at him, then nosed Dustbin aside to roll in that particular spot.

Watching him, Efran murmured, "His name is . . . ?" Drawing a blank, he looked at her.

After thinking a moment, she said, "Donovan."

"A foreign name. Of course. She's--" He broke off at the absurdity of his making any comment about her character. He hung his head.

After a little while, he said, "I think . . . I should go ask her a few things."

"Oh, I guess so," she said, giving Dustbin a farewell pat. Then she paused. "Do you want me to come?"

"Yes, please," he said tightly. So she took a moment to scratch between Dustbin's ears, then turned toward the patio, following Efran. Kraken bared his teeth in warning at Dustbin, whose ears were pricked toward her.

He hefted himself up to follow her clear to the door. Kraken lifted his head to snort at him. When Dustbin tried to squeeze through the door behind her, she laughed, turning to push him away. However, he didn't seem to know how to back up. Efran glanced over, then reached out to shove him back and close the door in his face. He continued to stand with his nose pressed against the glass as though waiting to be let in.

Efran and Minka returned to the dining area where Justinian, having finished his plate, was watching Wissowa finish the bottle. Sitting warily at practically the other end of the table, Efran broached, "I'd like to know when Donovan was born."

“When?” she asked, scowling as though he’d demanded historical minutia off the top of her head. “Oh, give me a clue,” she pouted, flopping back to study her empty goblet.

Efran and Justinian both studied her, then, as the possibility reared its head that she had selected him at random to be the father of this child. Efran was certainly willing to take him regardless, but it would mean a great deal to him to know that he had not been that exceedingly callous, after all.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Efran leaned back to look up at the entwined faerie tree branches covering the ceiling. “Late November, ten or eleven years ago. . . . If I was riding alone outside of Westford, it had to have been a trivial errand. But in any case, I would’ve had a partner. . . .” He shook his head in bemused thought, then asked, “Where was the cabin?”

“At Schoeps’ favorite little fishing hole,” she murmured, eyes closed. Then she said, “August. He was born in August. How could I forget that? It was broiling hot; I almost passed out for the heat.” Several people at the table or in the kitchen counted back nine months from August to arrive at November.

“A fishing hole,” Efran said. “How far is it from Westford?”

“About a half hour walking. The roads are too bad for a cart, especially when it rains,” she murmured, wetting her finger to pick up crumbs from her plate.

Efran was shaking his head, laughing. “A fishing hole a half hour’s walk from Westford, which has got the Passage on the west and Willowring Lake on the east. There’s no--” He broke off, remembering something. “The bait stand,” he whispered. “I left the live bait in the saddlebag all night long, where they all got out or died, so I had to buy more the next morning to get it back to Westford for Captain Gores’ birthday.”

Justinian asked, “Your captain liked fishing?”

“No, they were decorations for his birthday cake,” Efran said pensively. Glancing at the shocked faces around him, he clarified, “It wasn’t the cake we ate. It was made of wood with a flour paste for icing.” He exhaled, “I remember that. I got back barely in time to stop the search party from going to look for me. And everyone noticed that my clothes were dry.”

He mulled that over, then got up. “It’s going to take Connor and Tiras a while yet. I’ve got to get back up to the fortress.” He glanced at Minka as she stood, then he looked over to Marguerite and Hartshough, standing near the kitchen. “Send them up hilltop when they get back, please.”

“Of course, Efran,” Marguerite said, and there was something luminous in her eyes.

“We’ll get our own horses,” he added, taking Minka’s hand—which was good, as Eryk was out running errands for Hartshough. On leaving the hall, Minka glanced back to Justinian. He didn’t see her for regarding his fiancée in weary disappointment. Everyone but Wissowa knew that the marriage was off.

But as Efran and Minka passed through the kitchen on their way to the back door, they saw Dustbin still waiting with his nose against the thoroughly smeared glass. Efran noted, “Minka has a new pet.” But since Dustbin was unable to grasp the concept of backing up so they could get out to him, they wound up going out the front door and around the long way to the backyard. Efran saddled Dustbin for her, but since Kraken had come down here saddleless, that’s how Efran rode him up.

Arriving hilltop, they found it was less than an hour till dinner, and still no sign of Connor or Tiras. So while Minka freshened up in their quarters, Efran dragged himself up to the second floor to update Estes and DeWitt.

Finding them alone in the workroom, he shut the door and paused. They put down their quills, and DeWitt asked, "Did they find him, Efran?"

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Chapter 5

"I don't know if Connor and Tiras have found him; they're not back yet," Efran said. "His mother implied that there's something wrong with him." It suddenly occurred to him that it was a mercy she was not among Polonti when he was born, because Polonti abandoned defective newborns.

Estes asked, "He's in Westford?"

"Yes, in her house Underhay in the nobles' district. Or so she said," Efran replied.

"How old is he?" DeWitt asked.

"About ten," Efran said. "She didn't remember his exact birthday, and I . . . never knew." The self-condemnation came boiling up again.

Estes said, "Just another gift for the Abbey, Efran. He's coming to the right place." DeWitt nodded, brows raised, and Efran opened the door to go downstairs to the dining hall.

Connor and Tiras did not appear until halfway through dinner. When Efran turned on the bench to see Connor at the door gesturing discreetly, he almost upended his plate and ale in getting up to go talk to him.

He and Tiras were alone. Connor said, "We didn't find him, Captain. He's not at the house and hasn't stayed there for a long time. But we got a description of him and several likely locations, so we're taking more men up tomorrow to search for him."

Upon absorbing that, Efran asked, "What does he look like?"

Tiras looked guardedly at Connor, who balked. "Since we don't know how accurate the description is that we were given, I'd rather not say, Captain. But there are several other people we're going to talk to first thing tomorrow, so that when we do come back, you'll see him for yourself."

Efran nodded, knowing that further questions were pointless. "Thank you. Dismissed."

When he returned to the table, Ella demanded, "What's the big secret? Minka hasn't said two words all through dinner."

Efran said with a shrug, "We have a new child coming to the Abbey. But he appears to be one of those street urchins, and my men are having trouble finding him."

“Here, Captain? In the Lands?” Mathurin asked in concern.

“No, in Westford,” Efran said.

Ella fumed, “Oh, it just tears my heart out how people can be so unfeeling as to bring children into the world and dump them in the street!”

“Oh, I know,” Rondi said. “I wish they would just bring them to us.”

“And before they get hardened,” Mathurin added. “I was about seven when Memaw and Papaw took me in, and that barely in time before I decided I hated everyone.”

“At seven?” Rondi cried.

“Oh, yes,” Mathurin said. “You’d be surprised how quickly a child can come to think that since no one wants him, he doesn’t want anyone else, either. The need becomes a festering wound--‘Why shouldn’t I steal to get what I need? No one gives it to me. Why shouldn’t I hurt you before you can hurt me? What difference does it make if I die? No one cares.’”

Rondi said, “Stop, Mathurin; you’re making Minka cry!”

He looked in horror at Minka across the table, but she wiped her eyes and said, “No, it’s all right. With enough love, any child will come around. You’ll see.”

“Sure,” Mathurin said. “And the Captain’s gifted with ’em.” Rondi nodded firmly and Efran looked off.

That night, Minka held him tightly. He also heard her talking in her sleep, which was new. As hard as he listened, he couldn’t really understand what she was saying; it was all a murmur. But he did catch: “You’ll see. No, you’ll see.”

The following morning, April 28th, Efran was watching from the front courtyard as Connor and Tiras rode out, saluting, with ten men. With the intelligence they had gathered yesterday, Efran was confident they would find Donovan. Despite the rebuilding in Westford, there were still not that many places to hide—especially when there was a reward offered.

While he was anxious to begin righting this abysmal wrong, at the same time he dreaded coming face to face with the innocent product of his carelessness. What was he thinking? He hadn’t asked her name, nor told her his. At nineteen, he well knew how babies were made; what did he think was likely to come of a full night of it? He vaguely remembered thinking, *I need to leave now*. But it was still raining; the night was still dark; he’d just get lost again. He did remember rolling over at one point to go to sleep. Minutes later, her hands were on him again.

And in the morning-- “I can’t make you any promises?” Efran laughed. “After practically guarantying that you’d left her pregnant? What did you think, that her alcoholic husband would believe the Polonti baby she birthed was his?” he railed at his 19-year-old self. At the same time-- “I don’t know what to do with him. I don’t know how to ever make it up to him. And if he’s as old as ten--”

He then remembered that he, fatherless himself, hadn’t come to Westford until he was 14. Even that late, the father he found in Wendt provided the example and the stability he needed to save his life.

With Minka on the back grounds waiting for the children to get out of class, and Earnshaw practicing archery, Efran went to the empty keep. He stood before the ten-foot-tall crucifix to look at the crown of thorns that had been pounded down on His head. "How many of those blows were from me?" Efran asked. "And whatever can I do about it now? You have to show me what to do."

A man passed by the door behind him, then stepped back to say, "Excuse me, Captain." Efran looked over his shoulder and Mumme added, "Lady Minka wished you to know that the children are out now."

"Yes, I'm coming." Efran walked out of the keep, accompanying Mumme to exit via the western door rather than the lower corridor. The western door led directly to the stables and pens, and beyond that, the woods.

Stepping out, Efran caught sight of the new building not far from the woods beyond the fence. Men were milling around it, correcting small oversights and cleaning up. As he was studying it, one of the men waved him and Mumme over. Efran passed through the gate to have a look at the structure. "Oh, this is the new barracks DeWitt was talking about—that we needed cells hilltop," he remembered.

Mumme replied, "Yes, Captain. It only has four cells, but they each have a built-in bed, latrine, and window. Sometimes we have men that have got to be confined, but we don't have anywhere to put them in the fortress and we don't want to put them in the barracks cells below."

"Yes, I can see that," Efran said, then winced. *It won't come to that, would it?--Putting the boy here? No, surely not.* At any rate, Thrupp was there to give him and Mumme a walkthrough, which was impressive.

"Did you design this?" Efran asked Thrupp, the Fortress' structural engineer. They were looking up at the twelve-foot ceiling and the windows in each cell, whose shutters opened outward. The openings were covered with iron mesh attached by screws on the outside.

"Yes, I designed it according to Administrator DeWitt's specifications," Thrupp replied.

"Nice job," Efran murmured. *DeWitt thinks of everything.*

"Thank you, Captain," Thrupp acknowledged.

Meanwhile, Rawlins was sitting at Firmin's, still. Since he did order something, anything, when prompted, he was not chased off. The servers grumbled about him at first, but even Lilou began to feel sorry for him. So they just brought him whatever he paid for, and let him be.

Late in the morning, Rawlins was still sitting and thinking. He had claimed a semi-permanent spot here days ago to contemplate why he was having such extraordinarily bad luck with women. When that question appeared unanswerable, his thoughts began collecting around whatever he saw pass on Main Street in front of him.

Over the past hour or so, those same fickle thoughts had begun congregating around what to order for the midday meal. Honestly? He was getting a little tired of cheese balls. But then he caught sight of something so extraordinary, he sat up to stare at it.

A number of passersby were staring as well at the group of riders surrounding one small figure on a horse. Although the men were not in uniform, they were identifiable by numerous observers as belonging to the army. The small figure in the midst of them was not holding the reins of his mount, which was being led by the blond man in front. No, the small person was unable to hold anything, as his (her? No, the clothes indicated a boy's) hands were tied together. Also, his entire head was loosely covered with a canvas bag.

This remarkable procession continued down Main to the old switchback, which it climbed to enter the courtyard and progress to the western side of the fortress.

Efran had just reentered the gate to the back grounds. Seeing him, the children came running over. He smiled at their approach, then his head jerked quickly to the left, where a group of men on horseback had appeared around the corner of the fortress. Seeing the child in the midst of them tied and covered, Efran winced, glancing apprehensively at the children collecting around him. This was *not* the introduction to Donovan he had wanted for them. But he saw no way to redirect the men before the children saw--

Which they did. Upon sight of the men grouped around the child with his head covered, the children stopped in their tracks to see what they would do. Face frozen in dismay, Minka was among them. Nakam ran up barking, so she picked him up. Telo darted over to pick up Joshua (almost 28 months old), who had been trotting over to greet the soldiers.

Efran waited until the foremost riders, led by Connor, stopped and dismounted to salute. "Captain, we've brought Donovan. He . . . attempted to direct his horse elsewhere, and when that failed, tried to jump, so we had to restrain him. And, we found it necessary to cover his head, as you'll see why." Efran felt sick to his stomach.

While Connor was explaining all this, Tiras had lifted the boy down from the saddle to set him on his feet. He did not untie his hands directly, but did pull away the sack. The children crowded around to look, and Efran gestured the bodyguards to keep them back a pace. The boy had the bearing of a dangerous animal as he glanced from face to face around him, almost all children. They quietly gasped.

First, he was clearly Polonti in every aspect—the brown skin and eyes, the sturdy build, the thick lips and broad, flat nose--except for his hair. While straight, it was a golden white in color, totally incongruous with everything below it. The sight was so jarring, Efran had no doubt that a Polonti elder witnessing his birth would have thrown him by his heels over the nearest cliff.

Moreover, anyone who looked directly in his face saw the subtle but startling replication of his father's features. He looked just like Efran, down to the crinkling of the eyes. But there was no smile. And his hands were still tied, though he was working them as he assessed all the new enemies around him.

Efran knelt before him, and the wary brown eyes snapped to him. "Hello, Donovan. My name is Efran. I just found out yesterday that I'm your father."

Contempt filled the boy's face. "Give 'im a medal," he snarked while everyone heard a prepubescent Efran's voice and tone.

Efran began, "It's all right to be angry--"

"But you're going to make it up to me," Donovan grinned, and the twisted resemblance to Efran's beautiful smile made some observers gasp. "And I'm going to make your life hell," he ended in a promise.

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Chapter 6

Noting Donovan's skinny frame, Efran stood. "Before you get to work on that, I'm going to give you dinner." Patting Connor's shoulder, he said, "I want to hear where you found him, but for now, take him to the small dining room; ask Loghry to bring an early dinner for him, me and Minka there. Get him two bodyguards who've already eaten their midday meal."

"Yes, Captain," Connor said. Without touching the boy, he instructed, "Turn left toward the door in that white fortress. We're going through that door and through the foyer to the next door you run into. Move now." Glancing around astutely, taking everything in, Donovan complied with his hands still tied. Connor and Tiras walked with him while the rest of the men saluted. At the Captain's acknowledging nod, they took their horses back to the stables.

One of the men, Hawk, held up the empty pouch that had carried negotiating funds. "It's all gone, Captain."

Efran nodded wryly. "Take it up to DeWitt and give him the report."

"Yes, Captain." Hawk turned to trot to the western door, as well.

Inhaling, Efran turned to the group of wide-eyed children behind him. He went down on one knee and they gathered around him. "I apologize that I'll be neglecting you over the next few weeks. But I hope to come out at least once a day to give you an update on Donovan--"

"Is he really yours, Efran?" Hassie breathed.

"I'm afraid so, and it was my fault for not knowing. So I have to work with him for a little while. But I'm not forgetting you—you all had to deal with hard things before you came to us, and I'm grateful that you trusted us without fighting us." He looked at Isreal as he said this.

Efran went on, "You all deserve my complete attention, even when I'm spread around. When I feel that Donovan's ready to join you in class and at play, I know that he'll find the acceptance he needs."

"Is he Polonti, Efran? He looks Polonti, except for the hair," Chorro said dubiously.

"Yes, he is, mostly. He got the hair from his mother," Efran replied.

"Who is she?" Elwell asked.

"She doesn't live in the Lands," Efran said, then paused. But she did, or she would. How would that complicate matters? "Anyway, thank you for helping me." He looked at the always-reliable Toby, who nodded.

Calix said, "But you have to come look at the tadpoles in the pond, Efran!"

Efran stood. "I will—today, I hope. But what happens when your work in class is wrong? Does Mistress Hazeldene say, 'Oh, go ahead and play. You can correct this later'?"

The children groaned, slouching. Efran laughed, "No, I didn't think so. Well, I've done some really important work very badly, so I have to do some makeup work before I can come see the tadpoles."

“We understand, Efran,” Toby said, patting him. The other children agreed to be patient and supportive, then ran off with Nakam to see what was trying to eat the tadpoles now.

Minka drew up to take Efran’s hand. “Thank you for including me in dinner.”

He exhaled, “Until he throws it at you. Then you have to leave.” She laughed, then winced: he wasn’t kidding.

While Efran and Minka were going in to an early dinner with their newest son, Justinian was sitting down with Wissowa on the divan in the chapel. Having received confirmation that her son had been safely delivered to the fortress, he had his own news to share with her.

Marguerite and Hartshough were behind the closed door of the kitchen, shamelessly eavesdropping. (As has been explained many times, the acoustics of the hall carried sound all throughout the chapel, practically. The resonance provided by the faerie trees probably amplified that as well.)

With realistic tears in his eyes, Justinian took her hands. “My dear Wiwohsah--”

“What?” she said.

The dismay that crossed his face vanished in an instant, and he coughed violently. “Pardon. Frog in my throat,” he croaked. “Dearest *Wissowa*,” he began again, “I must tell you how shocked and grieved I was to hear of your seduction of my dear friend Efran--”

“What?” she said again, only in a low, gritty voice, her sultry eyes acutely aware.

“--and your recitation of the details in such lascivious enjoyment before all of us, including his sweet, innocent wife and the butler--”

“What are you getting at?” she asked, teeth bared.

“I cannot in good conscience proceed with our nuptials,” he said, deeply ashamed on her behalf.

“Oh, really,” she sneered.

“Please keep the ring as a token parting gift,” Justinian said, adding, “I’ve asked the maid to collect your belongings from my suite, which you’ll find--” Eryk, carrying her bags down the curved stairway, glanced up in panic at the imminent identification of himself as the maid. So he tossed her two carpet bags to the bottom of the stairs and scrambled back up to the loft. “--At the bottom of the stairs,” Justinian finished.

She looked toward the curved stairway to see one bag drunkenly lolling on the last step and the other finishing the trip to the floor. Standing, Justinian went to the doors to open them and gesture to someone outside. Shortly, a footman entered, and Justinian pointed to the bags. “Those two go with the lady to Underhay in the new nobles’ district of Westford.”

He then withdrew several royals from his pocket to hand to the footman, who said, “Very good, my lord.” Pocketing the royals, he went over to retrieve the bags and take them out front, where the hired carriage was evidently waiting.

Seeing the handwriting on the wall, Wissowa stood to walk to the foyer, eyeing him through slitted lids. “You’ll be hearing from me,” she promised before swishing out.

“Thank you, my dear. I do hope we’ll remain friends,” Justinian said, waving her off with air kisses.

He shut the front doors again to hear muffled laughter from behind the kitchen door. “Whatever it costs, it will have been worth it,” he said in Efran’s voice, upon which someone made a great deal of noise falling on the other side of the door.

But as the hired carriage rolled out of the Lands with a seething female, she suddenly realized: “Efran admitted to being the father. And he seems to be an important man in the Abbey Lands.” She sat back, smiling. “We’ll kill two birds with this stone.”

In the small dining room of the fortress, Efran directed that Donovan be seated on the long side of the table facing the door, and his hands untied. While Elowen was carrying out these orders, Efran sat Minka opposite Donovan, with her back to the door, and one seat to his left. Then he told the boy, “This is your new mother, Minka. You can’t imagine how much she’ll help you.”

She tried to smile as the boy turned blank eyes to her, but the rope burns on his wrists filled her with dismay. She couldn’t imagine how that would be necessary with a child. Meanwhile, Efran turned to receive the cart from Loghry and begin unloading it. The second guard, Krall, stood at the door. Donovan studied them and his surroundings alertly. Although there was an east-facing window high in the wall of this room, the late afternoon light made little ingress through it or through the foyer. Therefore, a candelabra sat between him and Efran, slightly to Efran’s left.

Elowen resumed his place at the door while Efran set Minka’s dinner before her of crab salad, flatbread, and blackberry cobbler. He told her, “Before you ask, yes, that’s crab from Nicarber. I don’t think we’ve ever had crab at the fortress, so Loghry bribed Shurtleff’s son Jastrow for their recipe. Madea wants to know how you like it.”

“I love it!” she said, picking up her fork.

“You’re supposed to taste it, first,” he laughed, setting her lager before her. He glanced over to Donovan, who was watching intently. Then Efran removed a second plate of crab salad and flatbread to put before him. The boy glanced around as though checking for a trap, again sizing up the two soldiers standing on either side of the open door. Then he picked up his fork to take a bite.

He sat up and shoved his plate away. “It tastes like crap.”

Sitting directly across from him, Efran said, “Oh, then I’ll eat it.” Before Donovan could react, Efran took his plate to begin eating off it. The boy, left with nothing, watched them eat.

Hearing his stomach growl, Minka turned to eye Efran. He relented, telling Donovan, “There’s another serving on the cart. You want to see if that one’s better?”

The boy barely nodded, so Efran reached back for the remaining plate to put it in front of him. “Oh. Your drink,” he noted, placing a cup beside the plate. “And the flatbread.” He put the plate with six large pieces of bread in the middle of the table.

For a little while, they all ate quietly. Donovan scooped up large forkfuls, then ran a piece of flatbread around his plate to get up all the creamy sauce. “This is amazing,” Minka said. “I understand now why you were so anxious to get them fishing in Nicarber.”

“Oh, this is just a sample. We have to get more crab traps made,” Efran said. Seeing his son stare vacantly at his clean plate, Efran asked, “Are you ready for cobbler?” Donovan blinked at him, uncomprehending. So Efran leaned back to the cart again to lift off a bowl of blackberry cobbler and set it before him.

Donovan bent with his face almost in the bowl to eat the cobbler. And Efran had flashbacks to his first few meals with Sister Therese. It was plain, simple fare, but ambrosia to a starving boy. When she had given him a bowl of porridge with blackberries, he looked at her in awe to ask, “*Will you marry me?*” She had replied, “*I already have a Husband, but He wants you to be His very own son.*”

Efran’s eyes teared up remembering this. Watching him, Minka guessed what was going through his mind—the same mist came over him whenever he talked about Sister Therese. Minka was vaguely aware that when he had arrived in Eledith as a ten-year-old, he knew only the Polonti language. Sister Therese had taught him to speak, read and write in the Southern Continental language before her death about three years later.

Donovan sat up with the scoured bowl in front of him and blackberry stains around his mouth. Then he picked up the cup to sniff it, frowning, “What is this?”

“Milk,” Efran replied.

Donovan put it down. “Give me ale.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Efran said, leaning back with an arm across the back of Minka’s chair. She had no objection to cold milk with hot cobbler.

Looking at him, Donovan picked up the cup to fling the milk in Minka’s face. When Efran lurched up, the boy used his forearms to push everything in front of him—the dishes, utensils, goblets, food, candelabra—off the other side of the table onto his new father.

With the room now plunged into semi-darkness, Donovan dropped underneath the table to watch when the bodyguards’ legs, illumined by the foyer light, left the doorway. Seeing a clear path, he scrambled out from under the table toward the door.

Krall, who was closer than he thought, scooped him up. As Donovan, mouth open, thrashed toward the guard’s arm, Krall whispered, “If you bite me, I’ll break you in two.” Considering that, the boy went still.

After lifting Minka to confirm that she was unhurt (having received only a milk bath), Efran replaced the candelabra on the table with two candles still burning. Seeing his son dangling from Krall’s arm, he instructed, “Put him in one of the new cells up here hilltop. Make sure there’s bedding and a cot in it.”

“Yes, Captain,” Krall said, hauling the child out underarm.

Efran told Elowen, “Send Connor or Tiras to me on the back grounds.” Saluting, Elowen departed.

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Chapter 7

Efran brushed remnants of crab salad and cobbler from his clothes, then turned to Minka, who was ruefully wiping milk from her face. He said, "I'd love to help you clean up, but I'm going out back to look at tadpoles. Then I'm spending the night in a cell. So I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"All right," she smiled, adding, "I'll check on the children at dinner." After kissing her, he licked up the milk from a nearby cheek. "Efran!" she cried, laughing, so he went over to the other cheek.

He escorted her to their quarters, where he changed into a fresh shirt and kissed her again. Leaving her to change, he went down the lower corridor to the back grounds in the early twilight. Then he crossed to the pond on the far eastern edge of the hilltop. Arriving, he was joyfully met by rampaging children. "Here, Efran!" "Look at all the tadpoles, all skimming through the water!" "What are these lizards that are eating them?"

Efran leaned down to look at the water in the waning golden light. He laughed, "Those are newts. That's all right; there's so many tadpoles, they'd crowd each other out if they didn't get thinned a little."

"But the birds eat them, too!" Calix protested.

"You don't want the birds to starve, do you?" Efran asked.

"No," Calix sulked.

"Don't worry; Mother Nature balances everything out," Efran said.

The dinner bell rang for everyone to wash up and come in. "Are you coming to dinner, Efran?" Toby asked.

"Not tonight, I'm afraid. But Minka will be there. She'll tell me everything tomorrow." He hugged Toby, Isreal, and Joshua, but the rest of the children were running to the well with their bodyguards. Efran looked over at Tiras striding toward him.

Saluting, Tiras said, "Connor went home to his wife, Captain. I haven't got a wife." He looked despondent.

Efran said, "Give me the short version, and I'll release you to go hunting at Croft's."

"Thank you, sir. Well, yesterday, when we finally got to Underhay, we found only a housekeeper there. But she gave us a lot of good information. The lady's husband, a tobacconist, died four or five years ago, but we're not sure that he ever saw the boy. He was shipped off to an aunt right after birth, who took care of him for a few years. But then the trail gets muddy, with the Goulven and the fires destroying Westford about a year and a half ago. The rebuilding didn't start in earnest until last fall, so, during all that time, the boy was bounced around to anyone who would take him, it seems," Tiras related.

Efran nodded glumly. Tiras went on, "His mother didn't want him; since he was so clearly Polonti, she couldn't pass him off as her husband's. But that strange white hair would certainly have made him a--a *kipakui* to other Polonti who might have taken him in."

"An undesirable. Right," Efran said. "How did you find him today?"

"The money pouch. Just trying to find Underhay, Connor had to lay out royals everywhere. Turns out it's just on

the edge of the nobles' district, not actually in it. Anyhow, yesterday the housekeeper told us to leave ten royals with her, then come back today. When we did, she asked for another ten royals, but Connor had only eight left, which he gave her, then she told us to wait inside the back door of the kitchen. She said he always came around once a day, at least, for her to give him something to eat. But she needed more money because what she fed him came out of her household monies. The boy's mother wouldn't give her anything for him," Tiras related.

Efran nodded. Tiras continued, "About an hour later, he shows up. But he sees right away that something's not right, so off he goes. He'd 'a' gotten away from us for sure if Connor hadn't put the rest of the men here or there around the grounds. Ley caught him, and he fought like a wild animal until we got his hands tied. Then we covered his head, for it being so visible, and, brought him back."

Efran was silent a moment, then cleared his throat and said, "Very good. Go on to Croft's, and good luck."

"Thank you, Captain," Tiras laughed. Saluting, he departed across the deserted grounds.

Efran vacantly watched the sun descend into the Sea, and he barely shook his head. "If I can't take care of my own son, the bequest means nothing and my lordship is a joke. But Minka's right; now I have that opportunity. I've just made it really hard for everybody involved."

Pensively, he walked over the grounds to let himself out of the gate, arriving at the new cell barracks. Evrard, Lwoff's assistant with the armory, was standing guard at the door. Since the barracks' use tonight was unanticipated, there was no one else with him and no lanterns at the entrance. He saluted, "Captain."

"At ease. Have we got Donovan in there?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain," Evrard said.

"All right. I'm going to be spending the night with him, so, we'll need a man on duty inside here all night long," Efran said.

"Ah, yes, Captain," Evrard began hesitantly.

Opening the door to go in, Efran looked back at him. "Is that a problem?"

"No, Captain. I—we--just didn't know. I'm off duty, so I'll run over to one of the barracks here to get a replacement," Evrard said.

"Yes, go ahead and do that," Efran said. Rather than leave right away, however, Evrard followed him in. There was one lantern burning outside the first cell. Efran drew up to the bars to look in on Donovan, sitting in the far corner of the bed against the wall. The boy raised blank eyes to him.

Pausing with the Captain at the cell, Evrard asked hesitantly, "You're—staying in here with him, Captain?"

"Yes," Efran said. "It's stuffy in here. Can you open that window?" He nodded toward the one inside the cell.

Evrard unlocked the cell door to open it, then looked back. "Yes, Captain, but I have to go around outside."

"All right, do that," Efran said. He entered the cell to sit on the cot. Looking over to Donovan, he said, "I'm going to spend the night here with you." The boy did not react but for a slight narrowing of his eyes.

Evrard took the lantern off its hook just outside the cell. The hook was mounted about six feet up a vertical bar at the front left corner of the cell, to clearly illumine the space for someone within. When Evrard walked out with the lantern, the light diminished until the barracks was left in darkness. "I hope you're not afraid of the dark," Efran said quietly. "I was, at your age." Donovan said nothing. So Efran just listened to his breathing, which was shallow but regular.

Moments later, the shutters were opened, letting in fresh evening air through the iron mesh and faint light from the lantern on the ground. "How's that, Captain?"

"That's good. Go get our night guard," Efran said.

"Yes, sir." As the lantern began swinging away, Efran said, "Evrard."

"Yes, Captain?" The lantern paused.

"Bring us back the light, please," Efran said.

"Oh! Yes, Captain." So Evrard reentered the barracks to rehang the lantern right outside the cell. "We should have thought to leave two here." There were no other lanterns nor torches in the barracks.

"The night guard will bring one," Efran said, leaning his head back to look at Donovan. Then Efran raised up at the concentration in his face. He was thinking, which his father found unsettling.

Before leaving, Evrard paused to close the cell door, unlocked with the keys in the lock. Efran hardly noticed, as he was studying Donovan. Then Evrard went on out. When he opened the door, the rush of air caused the shutters to bang shut again. Efran and Donovan both startled, and the lantern flickered. Then Efran got up to push a finger through the mesh screen, which did get the shutters open a little.

Meanwhile, Evrard was feeling his way up the path through the woods to the barracks. He didn't want to be a baby about having the lantern, but, the woods out here were very dark at night, and it was difficult to keep to the path without a light. Walking slowly, with his head down, he was just able to discern the path, though he had to get down on his hands and knees a few times to feel around.

He was halfway up the path when he stopped with a groan: "I should've gone into the fortress! Most of the men are in there having dinner right now." But since he'd come this far, he pushed ahead to the barracks.

In the cell, Efran and Donovan were both sitting quietly. While trying to think of what to say to him, Efran was still distracted by the look of concentration on the boy's face, as though he were listening. Then Donovan looked over to Efran, and got up off the bed. Efran watched him.

Deliberately, Donovan went over to the cell door, and put his hands on the bars. When he looked back at his father, Efran said with a slight smile, "I'll catch you."

Then Donovan put his hand through the bars to turn the key in the lock and toss it away from the cell. Efran's smile faded. Turning to face him, Donovan leaned back against the cell bars. He took two steps sideways. When Efran realized where he was going, he lunged off the cot. But he was not in time to stop Donovan from reaching up through the bars to dislodge the lantern from the hook and throw it against the far wall.

It broke, spilling oil which burst into flame. As the wood of the wall and the floor began smoking, Efran whistled shrilly. He paused to listen, but heard no one coming. With the burgeoning fire's demand for air, the shutters

slammed shut again. Donovan sat back on the bed with a faint smile of accomplishment.

As smoke began filling the barracks, Efran stood at the cell door to breathe, “God of heaven and God of earth. . . .” He looked up at the crossbar over the top of the cell door. Leaping up to grab this, Efran brought up his feet to slam his booted heels into the lock. It held firm. The fire was spreading across the wall and floor while the smoke grew denser.

Unable to draw his feet back far enough to get the necessary momentum, Efran backed up to the window to run at the door and leap up to kick the lock. It dented, but still held. Coughing, Donovan lay down on the bed. Coughing himself, Efran backed up again, running with all his strength to leap up with one more kick. The door crashed open against the bars.

Efran swung back to pick up Donovan and carry him out through the blazing corridor. Fortunately, the outer door was not locked. Bringing him out with the billowing smoke, Efran looked over to the courtyard, where the alarm bell was ringing. He paused to put Donovan down, who jumped up to begin running into the woods. Efran took off after him.

Efran almost had a hand on him twice, but the deeper they got into the woods, and the farther from the blaze, the darker their surroundings became. Then Donovan cried out, falling, and Efran fell over him.

The alarm bell drew scores of men with water buckets and shovels from the stables, the western door of the fortress, and the back grounds. Covering their faces with cloths to fight the fire inside the cell barracks, the men had it extinguished quickly. Then they staggered back out to call for lights to search for the Captain and his son. Minka had already told everyone that Efran had brought him out here for the night; now, she was leaning on the fence with anxious eyes, watching for him. DeWitt was beside her, holding her shoulders with one arm. Men had thrown open all the shutters to look in the cells from the outside.

Evrard, having finally arrived with a volunteer night guard, ran among the searchers, demanding, “Where is the Captain? And the boy?”

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Chapter 8

“We’re looking! What happened?” Arne shouted back.

“I left them here as he instructed to go get a night guard! How did it catch on fire?” Evrard cried.

Cyneheard staggered out of the barracks. He uncovered his face to gasp, “No one’s inside.”

Some men called for others to go look, but Dango emerged behind him. Leaning over with his hands on his knees to breathe, he was shaking his head. “No one,” he coughed out.

There followed a few minutes of bewildered silence. The Captain had not brought the boy into the fortress or the back grounds. Then Minka cried out, throwing open the gate to run toward the woods. Three or four men, including DeWitt, tracked her. He turned to tell those behind him, “It’s Efran.”

He was walking out of the woods, alone. Minka jumped him, and he caught her. "I'm all right. It's all right," he breathed.

Men with lanterns collected around them as DeWitt asked, "Where is Donovan, Efran?"

Efran looked up at him, smiling in resignation with a wet, grimy face. "Pia's Polonti have him. She told me to go back inside."

Shortly, everyone went back inside, and Minka took Efran up to the third-floor room with the waterfall.

The following morning, April 29th, Efran sat in the workroom with Minka, Estes, DeWitt, Thrupp, Soames and Gabriel to tell them exactly what had happened. He covered dinner with Donovan, which resulted in Efran's decision to sleep in the new cell barracks with him.

He told them about watching Donovan sit in the cell to visibly think about how to wreak disaster, and then calmly carry it out. "I knew we were in trouble when he stopped talking to me," he added. "I just didn't realize how far he meant to take it."

Thrupp grimly asked, "What in the structure contributed to the problem, Captain?"

Efran leaned back, shaking his head. "Ah, for housing warped ten-year-olds, the lanterns should not be within reach of the cells."

"We will change that on the rebuild," Thrupp said.

"The window was nice," Efran admitted.

After a quiet moment, DeWitt murmured, "Pia's Polonti." He looked at Estes, who smiled.

"That's probably the best thing that could happen with him," Estes said. "What he needs even more than a father right now, Efran, is community—a group of people who accept him and value him. And the blond hair won't disturb them in the least. You know the legend of *kilana*—the one who earns white hair through great tests. Pia's Polonti will teach him to accept his hair as a mark of struggle rather than the stigma of a half-breed. And they'll show him how to make his actions reflect his new identity."

At that, the tears started down Efran's face. "Which was necessary because of my utter failure to be a decent man. And I don't know how to make up for that now."

His hearers glanced at each other, and a cautionary look came over Estes' face. Minka asked, "What are you thinking, Estes?"

Efran looked at Estes, who winced. "Well, Efran, let me ask you this: When you were ten, what would have meant more to you: your guilt-ridden biological father showing up to try to make himself feel better about you, or a group of disinterested young men of your own race who accept you into their clan, no questions asked?"

The group at the table chuckled, and Efran dried up at once. "Thank you for that perspective, Estes," he muttered.

They looked to the doorway, then, where Corwyn entered, saluting, to present a folded document to Efran.

“Captain, Lord Ryal just received this from the notary Shaffer in Westford, and asked that it be delivered to you.”

“Oh? Ohhh,” Efran said, opening the document around the broken seal. He began reading out loud: ““To Lord Efran of the Abbey Lands, From Lord Shaffer, Notary of Westford--” He broke off to look at the outside of the letter. “Yes, it’s addressed to Ryal.” Then he continued reading: ““Dear Sir: Lady Wissowa of Westford--” He had to stop again for the eruption of groans and laughter to subside.

Then he resumed: ““Lady Wissowa of Westford has informed me that you admit paternity of her son Donovan. Therefore, in compensation to her for the expense and inconvenience of providing for him thus far, she is bringing suit against you in the amount of--one thousand royals.””

Efran quickly looked around the table. They were uniformly silent until DeWitt cried, “Is that *all*? A thousand royals? Are you sure, Efran? Read it again.”

“Yes, DeWitt; that’s what it says: a thousand royals,” Efran laughed, tossing the parchment to him.

DeWitt adjusted his glasses to read it for himself, then said, “That’s perfect. What an unbelievable break.”

Gabriel said, “If she’s back in Westford, does that mean her marriage to Justinian is off?”

Efran snorted, “Oh, I’m sure. The minute we recognized each other, he crossed her right off.”

DeWitt said, “Then he’ll be receiving a copy of this letter for breach of promise.”

“Probably,” Efran admitted.

Soames said, “You know, if we work it right, we can block her suing him.”

The others looked quickly at him. Efran asked, “How?”

“Do they still follow Roman’s Law?” Soames asked, looking around.

DeWitt said, “Oh, yes, Lord Baroffio made that a point of honor.”

Soames started chuckling. “Then all we need to do is present a carefully worded receipt for her to sign upon handing over her thousand royals. It has to say that this payment satisfies *all demands* on her behalf from the Abbey Lands. That includes *residents* of the Lands, one of whom is Lord Justinian, without argument.”

Gabriel observed, “But to have the force of law, she’d have to sign it in front of a notary, wouldn’t she? And that would be enough to make her suspicious.”

“Yes, but, listen,” Soames said, irrepressibly laughing. The others smiled while waiting for him to shut up and talk. “You send the notary with the delivery of the royals to witness it and get her signature--”

DeWitt threw up his hands. “The minute she sees Lord Ryal, she’ll smell the Abbey rats.”

“No, *listen*,” Soames said, grinning. “With the stipend that *you* offered, Administrator, we have several new notaries who look like messenger boys. Send, oh, Catchpole. Yes, he just passed his exam last week, and is helping Oulton in the East Lands Notary Shop. He’s twenty-two, but looks fifteen. Give me quill and paper to

write up exactly what your receipt needs to say. Send him with a portable quill set and his Abbey notary stamp, and you're done with her. Even Shaffer couldn't break it if he tried."

Estes rose to get quill, ink and parchment from the cabinet to place before him. As Soames started writing, he looked up to ask, "When do you want me to date this?"

Efran said, "Today, April twenty-ninth. And—I want to make sure that she can't get Donovan back."

"Oh, yes," Soames said, writing.

DeWitt asked Estes, who was still at the cabinet, "Do we need to get more from the Treasury?"

"No, we've got enough on hand; I'll just have to empty the other cabinets, as well," Estes said, pulling out pouches. He looked up to ask Gabriel, "Would you get us ten men in uniform assembled up here to deliver this? Oh, and send someone to the East Lands shop to pull Catchpole. Make sure he brings his stamp."

"Yes, Steward," Gabriel said, rising to leave.

"Here you are. This should cover it," Soames said, handing the sheet to DeWitt.

"Just this? It's barely four lines," DeWitt murmured. Efran extended his hand for it, and DeWitt gave it to him.

Soames replied, "The best legal documents are the shortest. There's nothing for her or Shaffer to hang an objection on. Catchpole just has to see her receive the money and sign for it. Then he signs the receipt, stamps it, and returns it to you."

"Excellent," DeWitt breathed.

Efran told Soames, "I like the way you mention Donovan staying at the fortress as an afterthought."

Grinning, Soames said, "We want her to overlook that. But when she signs the receipt, she's consenting to that, as well."

"Good," Efran murmured, then added uncomfortably, "Still, it's a lot of money. I'm very grateful for your willingness to--"

"Shut up, Efran," DeWitt said, rising to look for a parchment pouch. "You still have that portable quill set?" he asked Estes.

"Yes, down here," Estes said. Then he glanced back to assure Efran, "You can continue your self-flagellation when we get this back."

"Thank you," Efran said dully. He looked at Minka, who grinned at him.

A half-hour later, a contingent of Abbey soldiers, plus a notary, set out with loaded pouches for Westford. Rawlins, at his usual table at Firmin's, sat upright to goggle at the uniformed soldiers on hardy horses riding down the switchback. As they passed, he noted the money pouches carried by armed men led by Gabriel, Second in Command of the whole Abbey army. "What is that about?" he murmured intently.

At that time, Ryal had delivered another notice from Notary Shaffer of Westford to Lord Justinian. (Although

both were addressed to their intended recipients on the inside, the outside of the letters bore Ryal's name as recipient. This was to insure that he was aware of both actions.)

When Hartshough knocked on his door to hand it to him, Justinian knew what it was. "Thank you, Hartshough," he murmured, then closed the door and sat at his desk to open the document with the broken seal. Perusing it quietly, he murmured, "Breach of promise . . . defamation . . . emotional injury . . . recompense of *one thousand royals*."

Dropping the document to the desk, he leaned back to cover his eyes. "I knew the minute that I mispronounced her name, I was a dead man. A thousand royals," he marveled, picking up the parchment again, just checking to see if there were any chance that he had misread it.

"I'm ruined. I'm dead," he announced to himself.

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Chapter 9

Justinian then allowed, "Oh, yes, Marguerite has the money, and if she knew about this, she'd demand to pay it for me. Which I will *never* allow her to do." He held his head on one hand, staring at the script.

"What to do, what to do," he murmured, shaking his head. "I could arrange to pay it out over time, which should only take me . . . several hundred years. Or I could just ride north until I got to some place where no one recognized me. That would be troll territory in the Fastnesses."

Sighing, he continued to look at the document of doom. Then his brow creased. "You know, I asked her--'Do you know Efran? Polonti soldier in the army of Westford? Many Westfordian women do know him—handsome, charming man who will have you naked before you even know what is happening.'"

He answered himself in falsetto, "'Oh, no, I don't know any of the soldiers. But he sounds delightful.' Having heard that, I should have tipped my hat and said good-bye. But--oh my. No wonder Efran couldn't make himself get out of her bed." He continued to sit, shaking his head at the futility of it all.

Then he looked up to the ceiling to say, "Pardon the intrusion, Lord God. I know we haven't talked much since the last time I was looking Death in the face, and asked for Your mercy. I do acknowledge that You delivered me via quite a spectacular rescue in the person of my aggravating brother who stole the only girl I ever loved. But enough about her. This is about the newest bonfire at my feet. I don't see any way out of this, dear God, except to go groveling on my knees to the Lady Marguerite, which—no. I just can't. I'll just be a (gulp) pauper to the end of my days."

He paused to finger the letter, muttering, "cheap parchment," then looked up again. "If, by some miracle, You could conceive a way to deliver me from this—this apocalypse, I would be ever so grateful as to—to—to (another gulp) bind myself to chastity until I find a decent woman not named Minka to marry. But of course, the situation is impossible. I am utterly guilty. I did promise, and then reneged on that promise, going so far as to call her Wissowa. I mean, Wiwohsah." His brows gathered in confusion as he asked himself, "Which is it?"

"Never mind that," he chided himself. "The point is, Sovereign Lord of the Universe, if You could find any way

to deliver me, I will truly reform my habits just as Efran has reformed his, even though I don't have Minka to help me, because any man who slept around on her doesn't deserve to live."

Once again he had to bring himself back to the point. Giving up, he said, "At any rate, thank You for Your consideration. Amen."

At this time, Gabriel was leading his delivery men plus notary to the door of Underhay in Westford. They had no trouble finding it, as one of the men he had conscripted for this errand, Tourle, had also accompanied Tiras and Connor on their assignment to recover the boy yesterday.

Dismounting at the door, Gabriel knocked, then stepped back with a pleasant expression over his decorated uniform (as all the men were dressed). The housekeeper who opened the door looked at him, then all of them, in mounting terror.

He bowed to her, and the men behind him dismounted with their heavy pouches. Gabriel said, "Pardon, madam. I am Commander Wendt's Second in Command Gabriel of the Abbey Lands Army, here to deliver to Lady Wissowa the thousand royals she has required of Captain Efran. Is she in, please?"

"Yes," she said in shock, opening the door. "Come in."

"Thank you, madam," Gabriel said, entering. Neighbors were watching discreetly from behind window curtains. The men filed in behind him with their pouches while Catchpole, with the receipt and the notary stamp, stood beside Gabriel. The Second himself carried the portable quill set. He instructed the men, "Arrange the pouches in four lines here, open." Each of the ten men carried two pouches of fifty royals each. Another two men remained outside with the horses.

The housekeeper stood back, dazed, while the men proceeded to fill the floor of the front room with gold (mostly. Royals throughout the Southern Continent were minted with a gold and silver alloy called electrum. The Lands had their own moneyer, Meineke.)

Having heard voices at the front door, Wissowa swept in. "What in heaven's name--" She broke off at the sight before her.

Gabriel bowed to her. "Lady Wissowa, Captain Efran sends his regards with the recompense you require. I am charged with requesting that you satisfy yourself that there are one thousand royals here, and sign the receipt so that Captain Efran may know we have discharged our duty."

Catchpole, beside him, was studiously attending the arrangement and opening of pouches. Despite his youth, he looked to be a competent accountant, with spectacles and everything.

Gazing at the gold surrounding her, Wissowa began laughing. Gabriel was unfolding the portable quill set with the receipt on the writing board. He waited until the appropriate moment—when the twenty pouches had been fully deployed and she was still giddy—then presented her with the quill, dipped. "If you will sign here, Lady Wissowa, we will be on our way."

Laughing, she took the quill to sign exuberantly, making no effort to read the short text. Gabriel held the desk for Catchpole to sign and stamp it while Wissowa twirled in the midst of her new wealth. The men began filing out; the notary covered the receipt with blotting paper before carefully stowing it in his pouch. Then he also departed.

The last man in the room, Gabriel, closed the portable quill set as the lady and her housekeeper danced joyfully

among the spilled gold. He bowed with, "Thank you for your time, Lady Wissowa." She laughingly waved him out, and he departed, smiling.

When they were all gone, Wissowa looked around, windless from dancing. "Here, Flores—help me get these to my room."

"Yes, milady," Flores said, and they began dragging pouch after pouch to the lady's bedroom.

They were hindered in their endeavor, however, by the number of friends and neighbors who knocked on her door, asking about the procession of men. Wissowa was a popular lady, with many friends and a modest estate from her late husband, so she had to tell them *something*.

At first, she had Flores tell them (through the narrowly opened door) that they were gifts from her fiancé, Lord Justinian. But as it would soon become apparent that that had fallen through, she had Flores say that they were gifts from the Abbey Fortress. Then she changed the giver to Captain Efran. After one rejected suitor asked through the door, "Does that have anything to do with the white-haired Polonti kid we see running around here?" Flores shouted indignantly that they couldn't answer any more questions right now.

After relocating pouch #13 to the lady's bedroom, Flores, red-faced, panted, "We should've got some of those strong men to help us before they left."

"That's just as well, dear; we need the exercise. There will be more," Wissowa said, lifting glittering eyes.

When they had all the pouches moved, Wissowa and Flores left the room so that the lady could lock the door. "There, now! I've got to go tell Shaffer of our success. Don't let *anyone* into the house while I'm gone," Wissowa commanded.

"Oh, no indeed, lady!" Flores said in genteel horror, and the lady skipped out. Before returning to the kitchen, Flores stopped by her bedroom to hide three royals in a purse under a floorboard. She was underpaid as it was, and the lady would never miss them.

Wissowa ran almost the entire distance to Shaffer's new shop. She fell in the door, laughing, to land on the front counter. Shaffer emerged from the back room with a questioning smile. "Yes, Lady Wissowa?"

"It worked!" she said, jubilant. "Efran just had delivered a thousand royals to me! It all filled the front room!"

"Really? That was very quick. Show me what you signed for it," he said, his brow clouding.

"Just a receipt for the money," she said, waving. "Did you get off the demand to Justinian?"

"Yes. Show me your copy of the receipt. You shouldn't have signed anything without my seeing it first," he said a trifle brusquely.

"He didn't give me one. Why should you see it? And why should I need a receipt when I have the money?" she countered.

"Oh, well, true enough." He ceded the point as a lost cause. "My fee, if you will remember, is ten royals—a tiny percentage of what you recovered."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Was it ten? I seem to remember it was five."

He paused, then said, "That was in the event of a partial payment, but I will accept five as a down payment."

"Very well, I'll get it. And then we'll see what Justinian coughs up." She swirled out in victory over all the men.

On the way back to her house, she slowed to a walk, exhausted from the excitement. Then she began to think. "Shaffer said that the Abbey Fortress would pay Efran's penalty, since he works for them. While it's one thing for them to pay me a thousand royals, does Justinian have that kind of money? Probably not, since he doesn't even have his own house. But Lady Marguerite does, and, her butler was rude to me, insinuating that I was a loose woman for wanting wine with the midday meal. And that shopkeeper, asking me not to unfold the menswear! He was just mad that I was laughing at it. Yes, I've only just begun to get satisfaction from the rubes."

She paused, thinking further. "Justinian will probably ask for a refund from Ruesegger of our house deposit. Aren't I due half of that? I'll ask Shaffer." And she continued homeward, tabulating. She did not return to Shaffer with any money.

Shortly thereafter, Efran and Minka showed up at the chapel, winded and laughing. Their bodyguards held their horses while Minka hugged Hartshough, and Efran patted his shoulder. "Bring us your best bracers, Hartshough. We're celebrating."

"Excellent, Lord Efran. I shall be delighted. To what do we owe the festivity?" Hartshough asked. Marguerite came in from the back patio with a smiling question in her face.

"DeWitt authorized a thousand royals to get rid of Wiwohsah," Efran said, grinning.

Three people studied him. Then Marguerite asked, "Do you mean 'Wissowa'?"

He looked confused. "Yes. Isn't that what I said?"

Glancing at Hartshough, Marguerite murmured, "So she demanded a thousand royals of you, as well. Oh, dear."

"Yes. Why?" Efran asked. "Did she send a demand to Justinian?"

"Yes, Hartshough took it up to him a few hours ago. He hasn't been down since," Marguerite said.

"Go get him," Efran grinned at Hartshough. "He'll want a bracer, too. The fact is, through the combined genius of DeWitt and Soames, he's off the hook as well."

"Without paying her anything?" Marguerite asked.

"Yes. Bring him down and I'll explain it to him," Efran said.

"Oh, I'll tell him!" Minka said, starting up the stairs.

"No, no," Efran laughed, catching her by the arm. "Let Hartshough be his delivering angel; you wait down here with me." She pouted, but he coaxed her to the seating area where Marguerite was already perched on a chair.

An instant after Hartshough's ascension, Justinian was rapidly descending the stairs, his normally elegant appearance in disarray.

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Chapter 10

Drawing up to the seating area, Justinian seized on Efran. “Hartshough’s babbling something about a thousand royals which strikes one as an engaging topic.” His jaunty demeanor was somewhat nullified by his own babbling.

“Yes, sit down,” Efran said, next to Minka on the divan. She patted the seat beside her, but Justinian veered to the second armchair.

Folding his hands attentively, he said, “I’m listening.”

“So, Wissowa dunned you for a thousand royals as well,” Efran noted. Justinian’s face registered nausea in confirmation. “Ignore it. You’re covered,” Efran said.

“How?” Justinian squeaked.

So Efran explained to him and Marguerite the wording of the receipt which Gabriel and Catchpole had just returned, signed and stamped, to the fortress. “And if there were any doubt, Soames covered it with Ryal, who confirmed that it was binding under Roman’s Law. With the thousand that we paid her, she can’t sue anyone in the Lands for anything up to today,” Efran said.

Justinian leaned back in his chair to breathe. “I never expected . . .” he began, then asked, “Does she know this? Does Shaffer?”

Efran raised his brows. “Probably not.”

“Then if I ignore it, Shaffer will still pursue me. I’d prefer not deal with the aggravation,” Justinian said pensively.

Efran nodded. “Go ask Ryal.”

Justinian stood as Hartshough brought a tray of tall glasses to the seating area. Grasping one, Justinian threw his head back to chug it, then replaced the glass on the tray. “Excellent, Hartshough. It contains alcohol and other things I love. Excuse me.” With a pat to Hartshough’s shoulder, he lurched toward the front doors. The bodyguards Whobrey and Leneghan opened them for him, and steadied him going down the steps.

Those remaining in the seating area took up their drinks. As soon as Efran had tasted it, Marguerite asked, “What of the boy, Efran?” (Not that she was attempting to forestall an analysis of the drink, she really wanted to know about him.)

Holding his glass, Efran sighed, “Oh, yes.” Then he told her and Hartshough about dinner and their aborted stay in the cell barracks before Pia’s Polonti caught Donovan in the woods. “I know he’ll be in good hands, and, learn a lot from them, but I . . . I really wanted to be his father,” he said, downcast.

Marguerite said, “Well, surely this isn’t permanent; surely they’re just—getting him ready for you.”

"Maybe. But I hardly ever see her, or them," Efran said.

Minka offered, "Give them a week or so to work with him, and then just go in the woods and ask if they'll bring him to you for a visit."

He studied her, then said, "Yes, I don't see why I can't try that."

While they thought about that, the bodyguards opened the doors for Justinian to enter in a victory march. Holding a scrap of parchment aloft, he announced, "The erudite and beneficent Lord Ryal has written down for me the exact wording I need to reply to the villainous Lord Shaffer."

Marguerite laughed, "How exciting! Do read it for us."

Justinian cleared his throat and shook out the scrap piece of paper. "To the evil, corrupt notary Lord Shaffer from the bewildered and maligned Lord Justinian--"

"Ryal didn't write that," Efran observed.

"The reading requires a touch of drama which will be excised from the final draft. No more comments from the peanut gallery, please," Justinian fumed, then continued, "Dear Sir: Regarding the notice of Lady Wissowa's legal action that I have received from you, please be advised that any monies she would otherwise receive from me have been nullified by her acceptance of the conditions of her receipt of one thousand royals from the Abbey Fortress. Please address any questions you may have to Administrator DeWitt.' Sincerely yours, et cetera."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Marguerite breathed.

Efran said, "Before you send it, check with DeWitt as to whether Shaffer should come ask him or someone else, like Kraken, about it."

Justinian's eyes flicked up. "You want me to ask DeWitt? Way up there on the hill?"

Efran turned to summon, "Whobrey." When he stepped up, saluting, Efran told him, "Take Justinian's note to Administrator DeWitt; ask him whether it should mention him or not."

"Yes, Captain," Whobrey said, taking the parchment from Justinian's outstretched hand to trot out the front doors.

Leaning back, Efran said, "Let's have another round of those blackberry bracers, Hartshough."

"My pleasure, Lord Efran," Hartshough said.

"With gin and lemon," Justinian slipped in.

"And just a drop of sparkling water," Efran murmured.

"You are both correct, as usual," Hartshough said, returning to the kitchen to make another batch.

By the time Hartshough emerged from the kitchen with a tray of refilled glasses, Whobrey had returned with a parchment pouch. Handing this down to Efran on the divan, he said, "Captain, Administrator DeWitt says that

Lord Justinian need do nothing, and sends this copy of the letter he just dispatched to Notary Shaffer. The administrator asks that you kindly return this to him for their files.”

“Yes, I certainly will,” Efran said. “Dismissed.” Whobery saluted and returned to the doors with Leneghan (where they could still hear everything).

As Efran withdrew two papers from the pouch, Marguerite put her glass down. “Is that a copy of the receipt she signed?”

“Yes, that’s here as well,” Efran said. Upon the clamour to hear it, he said, “Settle down, everyone. First, here’s a copy of the letter he just sent off: ‘To Lord Notary Shaffer of Westford, from Administrator DeWitt of the Abbey Lands. Dear Sir: Having been notified of your client Lady Wissowa’s demands on our Lord Justinian for one thousand royals due to breach of promise, et cetera [here he had to pause for the laughter] I regret to inform you that she has negated that demand by the conditions of the receipt for payment which she signed. For your elucidation, attached is a copy of those conditions. If you wish to see the original receipt with her signature and that of our notary, you must visit us at the Abbey Fortress. Wishing you continued health and prosperity, DeWitt.’”

There were murmurs of admiration from his hearers, and the bodyguards glanced at each other, grinning. Justinian asked, “That closing remark couldn’t be in reference to his blank stuttering at Minka’s hearing, could it?”

“Knowing DeWitt, certainly,” Efran said. “I try not to cross him.”

The others laughed as he brought up the second sheet to read. “Be quiet. ‘I, Lady Wissowa of Westford, acknowledge the receipt of one thousand royals in payment for my legal grievance against Captain Efran regarding his paternity of my son Donovan. I affirm that this payment satisfies all demands I have on the Abbey Lands, and that Donovan may permanently reside there.’ And that’s it,” Efran finished.

He folded the copied documents back into the pouch which he began to put in his pocket. But Minka took it to drape over her shoulder instead. He nodded; she’d get it back to DeWitt sooner than he would.

Justinian murmured, “It says, ‘all demands on the Abbey Lands,’ but doesn’t mention me.”

Efran told him, “Soames said that ‘the Abbey Lands’ encompasses its residents, of which you are one. So, if she wanted to sue Minka for being smarter, younger, and prettier, she couldn’t do that either.”

Smiling glances were directed to Minka, then Justinian looked up to the leafy ceiling, where curious faeries looked down on him. “So, once again, I am delivered,” he whispered. Then he told the others, “I asked God to help me with this, like I asked Him to save me in the Incineration Room,” he said quietly, looking to Efran. “Only this time, I promised that I would live chastely until marriage.” His unfocused eyes ranged around the room.

No one dared comment, but he looked at Efran again to ask, “What happens if I break that promise?”

“Oh, He won’t take it personally. You just may find yourself unable to perform,” Efran told him.

Justinian stiffened, then said, “No problem. From here on out, I’m a new man.”

“I’m proud of you, Justinian,” Minka said firmly, and he withered.

At that time, the notary Shaffer was opening the packet he had just received from DeWitt of the Lands. Perusing the letter, he gritted his teeth, then laid that aside to look at the enclosure. Reading this caused steam to rise from his head, and he uttered, "Stupid, stupid woman! She'll get not another copper from them. Blast them and blast DeWitt! And of course, she hasn't even brought the five royals she owes me, blast her. I'll never get anything from her now."

He started to crumple the parchment in fury, then paused as a thought occurred to him. "Unless he sent this to her as well, she doesn't know what she's done. If she doesn't, I may be able to use this to take down that upstart notary of Baroffio's. But I have to find out. . . ."

He stood at the counter to think for several long minutes. As though awaking, he took up the letter and receipt copy to file them in a bulging folder marked, "Abbey Lands." Then he put on his best jacket with the gilt edging and its matching hat. Taking up the requisite walking stick, he stepped out of his shop to lock the door.

As he began down the street, he paused. He really should arrive at her house in a carriage, but he wasn't sure she would notice. And, funds were getting low.

So he walked leisurely, as though taking exercise, tipping his hat to ladies he passed. He arrived at Underhay only slightly winded, and tapped lightly on the door with the brass knob of his stick.

Wissowa's housekeeper cracked open the door suspiciously. "Yes?"

"How do you do, Madam. I am Lord Notary Shaffer, here to see Lady Wissowa, if you will." He bowed slightly to her, tipping his hat for good measure.

But she said, "One moment," and shut the door in his face. He rose up, glassy-eyed, imagining the giggling going on behind her neighbors' curtains.

The door opened again partly for the lady herself to appear at the crack. "Yes, Shaffer?"

He bowed to her as well, blast her. "Yes, Lady Wissowa. I am anxious to know if you've heard anything more from the Abbey Fortress."

"Regarding my letter to Justinian? No, not in the few minutes since I was at your shop," she said uneasily.

"Oh. Now I am wondering if they are choosing to ignore your legitimate demands on him," Shaffer said in concern.

"Well, what should we do?" she asked, opening the door an inch wider.

"We may be required to follow up that letter with firmer action," he stated.

"Yes, do that," she ordered.

"First, I require the ten royals you owe me for securing the thousand royals on your behalf," he said.

"Five," she objected.

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Chapter 11

Shaffer said tightly, "Again, dear lady, that was for a partial payment from the Fortress; we agreed on ten when you obtained full payment of your demands. If you wish to come back to my shop to see the agreement we signed, I shall be happy to show it to you," he said, sternness creeping into his voice.

Eyes narrowing at his tone, she said, "Wait here," almost slamming the door. She stalked back to her bedroom while Flores' son Stanwix was hurrying away from the back door with a pocket full of royals. His mottled-brown hooded cloak partially covered his white hair. Wissowa unlocked her bedroom door to enter, then shortly reemerged without relocking it.

She opened the front door again to Shaffer still on her doorstep. "Here." She opened her hand in front of him before he was aware, so that a few royals spilled over the sides of his hands before he could catch them.

He bent to pick up the two that had landed elsewhere, then looked at the whole number. "There's only eight here," he said, studying her.

"You must have dropped some. But show me your letter to the Fortress, and I'll give you more," she said coolly.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," he said icily.

"Perhaps you didn't know that Westford has another notary now," she said archly.

He lowered his head as in defeat. "I understand that he's quite competent, and I cannot prevent your going to him."

"Then goodbye," she said silkily, closing the door. Shaffer descended the steps to walk away with a satisfied smile. The new notary was about to get dragged underwater by the dead weight of a stingy client.

Wissowa returned to her bedroom to put a handful of royals in a little purse, which she carried with her as she set out for the shop of the new notary, Whitgift.

She didn't know anything about him, but he was a small-town country boy, raised on hard work and close-knit relations. Despite long hours working with his father and brothers in the fields, after dinner they were all sat down by his mother. Opening the family Bible, she taught them how to read and how to live. And whenever the Westford notary came through their town to perform needed services, he told the children about the strange cases he'd had to deal with over his career. That set young Whitgift's course in life: he would be a notary.

At this time, that young man was sitting in the back room of his small shop, looking out the window at his horse, Podro. He looked away again with a sigh, hardly able to bear the thought of selling him. But unless he got something in the way of new business at once, he had no choice. Rent was due in a week; he had nothing left to eat but a slightly moldy half loaf of bread.

When Whitgift had come to Westford in late February, newly licensed in Roman's Law, he had two possessions to his name: an actual copy of the Law and his horse. The village he had grown up in, Gerdts, had taken up a collection to support his new endeavor. Thus he had arrived in Westford with the wealth of 6 royals, 15 silvers, and 8 coppers in his bag, plus a few almost new suits, to set up shop.

With the sporadic absence of the other notary, and building permits in demand, he had a hopeful start. Then in early March—almost two months ago—Lord Baroffio had come to him to file charges of corruption against the other notary, Shaffer.

That had almost finished Whitgift's career. He had tracked down every complaint Lord Baroffio could articulate; while he found a few questionable deals and more than a few half-truths, there was nothing that justified censure. Lord Baroffio was not pleased with this outcome.

Moreover, when word got out that the new notary was investigating his senior competitor *Lord Shaffer*, Whitgift's business evaporated. Because he could find no basis for the charges, Lord Baroffio didn't pay him. Lord Shaffer became his staunch enemy.

Hearing the doorbell tinkle, Whitgift quickly rose to go to the front counter. There, he found a woman with white hair and sultry eyes evaluating him. Clearing his throat, he said, "Welcome. I'm Notary Whitgift; how can I help you?"

"I am Lady Wissowa," she announced. "Captain Efran of the Abbey Lands has just now paid me one thousand royals in acknowledgment of his paternity of my son. I have an action pending against Lord Justinian of the Lands, who has not responded. I need you to apply the force of law to make him pay up."

For a moment, Whitgift could only gape. "One thousand royals," he whispered.

"Yes, I received that from Captain Efran this morning," she said.

"Captain Efran? *The* Captain Efran of the Abbey Lands?" he gasped. Leaning intently on the counter, he told her, "He killed a one-eyed giant with a *tree stake*. And he destroyed a Polonti master who could control you with his *mind*. And he killed all of these giant birds that ate *horses*. And he--"

"Yes, yes, and I've filed a similar action against Lord Justinian of the Abbey Lands, which he should have received today, but hasn't responded to," she fretted.

"Lord Justinian also fathered your son?" he asked blankly.

"No, that thousand royals is for breach of promise," she said crisply.

"Another thousand," he murmured. Then, coming partially awake, he said, "You filed the action. Who did you file with?"

Notary Shaffer," she admitted. "He got me the thousand royals from Efran, but refuses to follow up with Justinian."

Absorbing that, Whitgift said, "And you received that thousand from Captain Efran today?"

"Yes," she said primly.

"And what did you sign upon receiving it?" he asked.

"A receipt, of course," she said.

“May I see it, please?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t have that; they left the money and took the receipt back with them,” she explained.

“What did it say?” he asked warily.

She shrugged. “It was just a receipt for the money.”

Sweat broke out on his forehead. “And . . . the demand to Lord Justinian was sent at the same time as the demand to Captain Efran?”

“Probably. I don’t know. You’ll have to ask Shaffer,” she said.

Breathing, he just looked at her for a moment, which irritated her. “Well? Get to work!”

“I have to investigate this, and I require a retainer of—three royals, nonrefundable,” he said boldly.

Making a face, she muttered, “All you notaries are all alike: you all demand money.” Nonetheless, she pulled out her little bag to extract three royals and place them on the counter. Then she turned to the door.

Scooping up the royals, he asked, “Where can I reach you, Lady Wissowa?”

Over her shoulder, she said, “Underhay, in the nobles’ district. For now,” she considered.

“I’ll have a preliminary report for you tomorrow,” he promised.

“You’d better,” she murmured on her way out. And she arrived at Underhay moments after Flores’ son Gooch departed the back door with a pocketful of royals.

Whitgift stared at the three royals in his hand. His first thought was to go get an early dinner. But—the afternoon was waning, and he had promised her a report by tomorrow. But of course he couldn’t go to Shaffer; he’d have to go to the source of the issue, to the Abbey Lands, and talk to the legendary Captain Efran about his paternity payment to a floozy.

Teeth chattering, Whitgift shoved the royals into his otherwise empty payment box under the counter. Then he locked the front door and turned over the “CLOSED” sign with a shaking hand. He went out back to stroke Podro’s neck. “I may not have to sell you after all, if I survive. Captain Efran keeps dragons for pets,” he told him, and Podro nosed his hand.

Whitgift fastened his rope bridle on him. Having no saddle, he climbed up on his bare back and turned the horse out of the overgrown yard, making sure to close the rickety gate after him. Then he turned a corner to the main road south and clucked Podro to a lazy lope.

It was a short ride. While he was yet miles off, Whitgift glimpsed the white fortress overshadowed with green on the hilltop. Crossing the old stone bridge in the midst of other traffic, he regarded the red-uniformed soldiers in their jaunty black caps at the stone walls’ iron gates, which stood open. Almost obscuring them, however, was a pair of trees unlike any he’d ever seen.

Their deep green leaves appeared to have copper-colored undersides. And when he drew near on Podro, the closest tree leaned over as though investigating him. Whitgift pulled back on the rope reins in alarm, but a

branch swooped over to nudge him along. And then he squinted at the fluttering green and copper atop the fortress. Was that--? Nah, couldn't be.

He glanced down at the wide paved street as he entered the Lands at a walk. The gate guards observed him, but made no move to hinder him as he rode south, looking at the shops and eateries along both sides of the street. He saw matrons with their shopping baskets and ladies in brightly colored dresses, green-sashed messengers hurrying down the sidewalks and darting across the street—at crossings!--to be shouted at by merchants driving their carts. One man sitting alone on the dining patio of an eatery scrutinized Whitgift as he passed. Whitgift waved to him.

Then at the end of Main, past the cross street, there was a switchback snaking up the hill to the gates of the fortress. Swallowing, Whitgift directed Podro through another pair of guardian trees up this paved roadway.

At the summit, the guards had the gates open for him. He dismounted in a daze while the two regarded him, waiting. "Yes," he said, wiping his mouth. "I am Westford Notary Whitgift; a—a Lady Wissowa came to me today asking help with her claims against, ah, Captain Efran and Lord Justinian, and, if it's possible, I would appreciate talking to Captain Efran about this." He looked around at the activity in the courtyard while the gate guards exchanged lightning glances.

One said, "Come with me, please. Here, Squirt will take your horse."

The guard whistled, and Whitgift watched the stable boy (who was 14 by now) run up to take Podro's rope. "Give him water, please," Whitgift said.

Squirt glanced back with the assurance, "Aye, he'll be well cared for."

"I see. Thank you." Nonetheless, Whitgift paused to watch his horse being led to the stables. Then he turned to follow the gate guard up broad steps to the massive, iron-banded fortress doors. While he was staring at everything like a country bumpkin, the gate guard was whispering to the door guard.

"Really?" the man said, interested. "Notary Whitgift? Follow me, please."

"Yes." Heart thumping, Whitgift wiped his mouth and followed the new red-clad soldier down a corridor to a stairway in the stone wall. Catching mingled aromas from the nearby dining hall, Whitgift moaned faintly, and the red guard glanced over.

On the second floor, the guard led to the left, then stopped at a door to salute. "Administrator DeWitt, this is Westford Notary Whitgift, who was approached by a Lady Wissowa for help with her actions against Captain Efran and Lord Justinian."

"Really? Show him in," another voice answered. As the soldier brought Whitgift forward, he was momentarily paralyzed at the sight of yet another great tree growing up through the center of a conference table. Its leafy branches seemed to pierce the ceiling of the room, and its roots the floor beneath the table. Meanwhile, the other voice gave the soldier directions, then said, "Notary Whitgift?"

Jerking his attention to the man with glasses and dark blond hair combed back, Whitgift said, "Yes. Excuse me. And you are--?"

"Administrator DeWitt," he said. The man working beside him, a Polonti, looked over without speaking. It was the administrator who said, "Have a seat; we'll have a plate brought up. Oh, Ellor—get Efran up here."

“Yes, Administrator.” The man in red saluted upon departing.

Whitgift froze over the chair indicated. “A plate. I—didn’t bring any money.”

DeWitt said, “We’re delighted to host you, Whitgift. This is the Steward Estes.”

The Polonti glanced up to nod, and Whitgift said, “How do you do.”

“Very well, thank you. We’re most interested in what you have to tell us about Lady Wissowa,” Estes said, turning a page in his ledger.

Whitgift groaned, “She came to my shop--”

“Wait,” DeWitt said as another man in red brought in a plate with utensils, cloth napkin, and ale. These he placed before the visitor as DeWitt continued, “Hold the report until Efran gets here.”

“Yes, sir,” Whitgift said. He sat to place the napkin on his lap and begin eating roasted lamb with artichokes and mushrooms in a creamy garlic sauce.

He had cleaned the plate and drunk half the ale when a tall, casually dressed Polonti entered, glancing at him with a half smile. Entering with him was a young girl with curly brown hair and large, transfixing blue eyes. As DeWitt was making introductions (which included the words “Captain Efran and Lady Minka”), Whitgift lurched up to bow to her. And the Polonti.

With a delighted smile, she demanded, “Are you from Guerry?”

“No, Lady, Gerdts. But they’re practically the same,” Whitgift asserted.

She grinned up at the Polonti, who laughed, “Minka has another new pet.”

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Chapter 12

Efran ordered, “Sit, Whitgift. I see you’ve eaten. So tell us about your encounter with Lady Wissowa.” The Captain sat Lady Minka in a chair and then sat next to her, leaning back to listen. She took a pouch strap off her shoulder to hand to DeWitt.

Whitgift sat back down. *I’m here at the Abbey Fortress conversing with Captain Efran and his wife as though we’re old chums*, he thought. But he managed to say, “It was very brief, I’m afraid, and what I know is sketchy. She said she’d made a formal complaint to my colleague, Notary Shaffer, about your—your--” Everyone smiled as he grew red, but he managed to continue, “your paternity of her son. She said she got the thousand royals Shaffer demanded on her behalf, but hadn’t heard anything from this Lord Justinian, whom she had likewise sued.”

There was a brief burst of laughter, and he complained, “Obviously, what little information I got is--dubious, but

the upshot is, she wants a similar amount from Lord Justinian, and, since apparently Shaffer won't do any more for her, she came to me."

The Captain nodded to DeWitt. "Show him the letters. Justinian's original is in there as well."

"Ah. Excellent." DeWitt opened the pouch Minka had just given him. After flipping through the sheets, he stood to withdraw a folder from the shelves behind him and open it. "Let's give these to you in order. First, here is the demand letter we received regarding Efran's paternity of her son. This next paper is a copy of the receipt we received from her after we delivered her thousand royals on that claim. Next is the demand letter from Shaffer on her behalf to Lord Justinian. Finally, this a copy of my reply to Shaffer regarding her demand to Justinian."

Whitgift took the sheets one at a time, placing them in order in front of him. Then he bowed his head to begin reading intently. His composure held through the first document, but as he read the receipt, his jaw dropped and he spread his hands in disbelief. "Did she not read it? She signed away any future actions!"

The Abbey administrators smiled at his immediate apprehension of her problem, but Whitgift had picked up the third. "He didn't know, either. Of course he wouldn't—when I asked her for a copy of what she had signed on receiving the money, she brushed me off. So—" He stopped dead to read DeWitt's reply to Shaffer regarding her claim on Justinian. Whitgift's immersion in the drama was entertaining just to watch.

Looking to DeWitt again, Whitgift breathed, "So you had to inform Notary Shaffer of the terms that his own client had bypassed him to accept. That's . . . brutal. No wonder he wouldn't do anything more for her. And she *still* doesn't know what she signed!" he marveled. The others smiled at him.

Standing, he said, "Well, thank you for your time. And dinner. It was excellent. Now I have to return her retainer and explain that it's hopeless." Stacking the letters and handing them back to DeWitt, Whitgift couldn't help venting, "I was kind of counting on the work, frankly. Ever since Lord Baroffio filed corruption charges against Lord Shaffer that I couldn't prove, I've been blacklisted. So, I don't know. . . ."

Aware that he was talking too much, he turned to the door. Minka raised her brows at Efran, who nodded to DeWitt, who said, "Wait a minute, Whitgift. Sit back down."

Reluctantly, the young notary did. Estes raised up from his ledger to say, "It would be beneficial to us to have a source of information in Westford. Lord Baroffio is an ally, but, not a reliable source."

Acknowledging that, Whitgift said, "I appreciate the gesture, but, like I said, I'm mostly on the outs."

Estes asked, "Aren't Shaffer's public records posted, like, publicly? If they're not, that's a definite lapse of duty."

"Yes, he does post them publicly for anyone to read," Whitgift admitted.

"We want those," DeWitt said. "We have men up there all the time, but they're not tolerated around Shaffer's notice board. If you could run that information down to us, say, twice a week—more frequently for big news—we'll pay you a retainer."

Whitgift looked from face to face. "Are you serious?"

Efran nodded. "Our notary Lord Ryal used to have great respect for Shaffer, but, he's consistently ruled against us on some big issues. We want to know why."

Whitgift almost got teary-eyed. “You have Ryal down here. He was such an inspiration to me. Before we got our own notary, he used to make a circuit though Gerdts and Guerry and Craghead to take care of our needs and talk to us boys about the Law. Why else would a kid from Gerdts want to be a notary?” he laughed.

Efran stood. “We’ll go down and say hello to him.”

DeWitt said, “Wait.” He got up to withdraw a small pouch from the cabinet and extend it to Whitgift. “We’re putting you on retainer at ten royals a week to bring us your news from Westford.”

Whitgift stammered, “That’s—I--”

Efran said, “Take it. The information’s worth far more than that to us. And . . . I don’t want you dependent on Wissowa for so much as a copper.”

“Thank you,” Whitgift said, accepting the pouch.

Minka drew up beside Efran. “I’m coming down with you to see Ryal and Giardi.”

Whitgift looked over, questioning, and Efran said, “Watch. I can make her laugh.”

While DeWitt and Estes got back to work, Efran, Minka and Whitgift went down to the courtyard for their horses. Whitgift was in a daze, looking over the Lands from the courtyard. “What a view,” he whispered.

Efran said, “Look to the east as far as you can. Do you see the east branch of the Passage?”

Searching, Whitgift said, “No.”

“That’s right. And that’s the eastern border of the Lands,” Efran said, smiling.

Whitgift drew in a long breath, then said, “I knew there was a settlement down here, but I never imagined to see something like this.”

“It’s been not quite three years since Minka and I got the bequest of the Abbey—from Ryal,” Efran noted. “There was nothing out here then, nothing but meadowgrass and wolves.”

Whitgift looked startled. “Are there still wolves?”

“In the easternmost Lands, yes,” Efran said. “Don’t ride out there without me.”

Whitgift studied him in wonder at the offer, then they turned as Squirt brought their horses. “Dustbin!” Minka greeted him, being her next-to-newest pet. He was almost trotting to her.

“Podro, old man, you’ve been brushed!” Whitgift said.

Handing him a drawstring bag, Squirt said, “Aye, chum, and there’s you some grooming tools. Just old ones,” he added with a glance at the Captain. Efran was inattentive, hoisting Minka up on Dustbin.

But Whitgift was looking at the leather bridle on Podro. “I . . . wait, I can pay you for the bridle,” he said, digging in his pocket for the small pouch.

"It's old," Squirt said dismissively. "But, bein' a city and all, we have laws against rope bridles," he added judgmentally.

Astride Kraken, Efran glanced back. "C'mon, I don't want you to get lost on the way to Ryal's."

"Yes, Captain," Whitgift said, launching himself up onto Podro's back. He draped the drawstring of the bag over his shoulder.

The notary shop was right at the bottom of the switchback, of course, past those strangely moving trees. When the three dismounted to enter the shop, Efran whispered, "Watch." Minka rolled her eyes, but Whitgift had spotted his inspiration behind the counter. Ryal glanced at them, then his gaze settled on the young man.

"Hello, Giardini," Efran said silkily. "We've brought someone to meet you."

"Have you?" she laughed and Efran nudged him.

But Ryal was peering at him. "You almost look familiar."

"Hello, Lord Ryal. I'm Whitgift, from Gerdts, and I'm also the new notary in Westford," he spilled out.

"Gerdts. Yes," Ryal said. "And your father was trying to get you a copy of Roman's Law in good condition."

"He did that, sir—he and half the village," Whitgift said.

"That's excellent. Are you enjoying the work?" Ryal asked, and Whitgift's expressive face went blank.

Ryal looked at Efran in alarm, who said, "Yes, he is. His newest client is Lady Wissowa."

Almost before Ryal could digest that, actual customers walked in the door. Then he nodded, "I'd like to hear more about it soon, Whitgift."

"Thank you, sir," Whitgift whispered.

They stepped out of the shop to see the afternoon melting into early twilight. The Captain shook Whitgift's hand and the blue-eyed girl patted his arm, then they two went up the switchback to have dinner in the fortress with the children.

Climbing up on Podro, Whitgift listened to the rooftop bells chime vespers. "This has been the most amazing day of my life," he murmured. Podro nodded agreement, and they headed home through the swishing trees.

Whitgift started early the following day, April 30th, having a lot to do. First, he went shopping for food for himself and good oats for his friend. He also paid his rent for the next month early. Back at his shop, he reinforced both stalls in Podro's rickety stable and scythed the overgrown back yard. He loaded the wheelbarrow with cuttings to store in the second stall next to the stack of burlap sacks. He filled Podro's trough with grass, as well. Then he finished up by lugging fresh water from the corner well for Podro and himself.

All that done, he cleaned up and put on his best hand-me-down suit. Then he got three royals out of his money box, closed and locked the shop, and walked to the nobles' district to ask around for Underhay. Finally, he was standing on the front porch to knock on the door.

The housekeeper answered with a highly dubious mien. "We're not buying anything."

"No, ma'am, I'm Notary Whitgift; Lady Wissowa came to see me yesterday, and I promised a report to her today," he said.

"Oh," she said, her face clearing. "Come sit and I'll inform her that you're here."

"Thank you," he said, stepping in. He did sit on a small settee in the front room, with an occasional table beside it.

A few minutes later, the lady entered, sleepy and irritable. He bolted up from the settee as she muttered, "You. The new notary. What is it?"

"Yes, Lady Wiwohsah--" He paused at the realization that something wasn't right. She squinted hard and he said, "Excuse me. Lady Wissowa. Yes. I'm returning your retainer." Here, he stopped to dig the three royals out of his pocket and hand them to her.

Her squint deepened to a confused pout, and he explained, "I did investigate, and discovered that I cannot help you with your claim on Lord Justinian." As she was winding up to deliver something disagreeable, he went on quickly, "However, Notary Shaffer can tell you what the problem is."

She looked off with curled lip. "He won't talk to me."

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Chapter 13

Whitgift shook his head. "If you paid the notary's fee, he has to talk to you. He has to either give you all the information he has, or return your fee. And I can testify under oath that he does have the information you want," Whitgift said.

Her face slackened in possible guilt. "But I—do have to pay what he asks."

"If that's what you agreed to, yes. He can't extort the money out of you by demanding more than you agreed to pay, but—you know, that's only reasonable, to pay him if you want the results of his work," he pointed out.

"I see," she said, glancing aside. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Good luck," he said, and left to return to his shop walking on air.

Wissowa stood contemplatively holding the royals to her chest, then returned to her bedroom to get dressed. Emerging with a sleek little purse full of royals, she said, "I'm going to see Notary Shaffer, Flores. Don't let *anyone* into the house."

"No, indeed, Lady Wissowa," Flores said. She watched out the front window to see her mistress walk down the street and turn the corner. Then Flores hastened to the back door to give a handful of royals to her son Weddell. He stuck them in his pocket and departed.

The bell tinkled over the notary's door as Lady Wissowa entered. Notary Shaffer emerged from the back room, then drew up in mild surprise to see her. Approaching the counter, she opened her little purse to dump a small pile of royals under his nose.

He looked at her quickly, and she said, "It was wrong of me to withhold the money that is due you—for heaven's sake, I have plenty. So I'm adding a small bonus for the aggravation."

Distinctly surprised, he swept the money into his lock box under the counter. "Thank you," he said. "Now, is there . . . something else you wished?"

"Yes. I want to know what happened with my claim on Justinian. The new notary knows, but he wouldn't tell me; he told me to ask you. But he said I had to pay you for the work you'd already done," she confessed.

Shaffer paused, surprised for the second time in as many minutes. "Very well, then. You have the right to know." Turning to his shelves, he withdrew a bulging folder, and then took a sheet from this folder to lay before her. "Here is the letter I received from Administrator DeWitt of the Abbey Fortress in response to our claim on Lord Justinian."

She bent to read the letter intently, then rose up in outrage. "What? What is this-- 'she has negated that demand by the conditions of the receipt for payment which she signed'? That's absurd! I did no such thing! There were no 'conditions' listed. That's ridiculous."

Brow arched, Shaffer opened the folder again for another sheet which he laid before her. "Here is a copy of the receipt which he enclosed with that letter."

She took it up to glance at it, then said, "Yes. You see? It's very short. I saw that. There's nothing listed as a condition."

"Read this line, please," he said quietly, pointing.

She lifted the paper to read out loud, "'I affirm that this payment satisfies all demands I have on the Abbey Lands.' Yes, on the *Lands*, not on Justinian. That's *different*."

With a sigh, he replaced both sheets in the folder, and restored that to its place on the shelf. "That's why you hire a notary to review these things for you. According to the Law, all legal residents of a city or entity are comprised in it, and when you released 'the Abbey Lands' from any further obligation, that encompassed Every Single Resident."

She stared at him. "I didn't know that."

He almost said, *That's why you should have let me read it before you signed*. But he saw how his failure to tell her that beforehand might imply a tiny bit of negligence on his part. So he observed, "DeWitt has been very clever here, to overwhelm you with the money so that you wouldn't think to ask what that one line meant."

"He certainly has been," she muttered. "How do we answer that?"

He was shaking his head. "Honestly, I don't know--"

"I'll take Donovan back," she said coldly.

Drawing a deep breath, he withdrew the folder from the shelf, and the paper from the folder, to point out another line to her. "Read that, please."

She picked up the paper as though it were a whip and snapped, "'Donovan may permanently reside there.'" Slapping down the paper, she countered, "It says '*may*,' not '*must*.' I *may* decide to just go get him."

With another tired shake of his head, he said, "That's not the way words work. *May* denotes your permission for him to 'permanently reside there.' You can't revoke that unless you can prove abuse or criminal behavior."

"This whole thing is criminal!" she cried.

"As your notary, may I give you advice for which you've already paid me?" he asked tiredly. She nodded uncertainly. "You are a thousand royals richer than you were yesterday. Go home and enjoy it," he said.

Looking around vaguely, she said, "I suppose I will, then." She turned to trudge out while Shaffer replaced the paper in the folder and the folder on the shelf.

Arriving home, Wissowa entered her bedroom to sit on the floor and look at the mass of wealth around her. She murmured, "This is a little more complicated than I thought it would be."

Her housekeeper came to the door. "Are you ready for a midday bite, Lady Wissowa?"

"In a little while," she sighed. As the housekeeper turned away, Wissowa's eye lit on a pouch near the door, and she sat up. "Flores."

The housekeeper returned to the doorway. "Yes, Lady Wissowa?"

"What is that?" Wissowa asked, pointing.

"Pardon, Lady?" Flores asked, scanning the pouches.

"That pouch is almost empty," Wissowa said.

"Oh." Flores stared at the drooping pouch. "Well, my lady has been taking a bit from it here and there--"

"No. This is one I've been taking money from." She pointed to another pouch that was a little diminished. "Flores," she whispered. "You've been with me for years. Why . . . ?"

Flores was frozen, speechless. Then they heard a quiet knock on the back door, which was between this room and the kitchen. "Ma? Ma!" a hoarse voice whispered.

Wissowa leaned over to look out the window to see one of Flores' sons on the back steps. She turned her eyes to the housekeeper, who ran out of the bedroom.

Her ear to the window, Wissowa heard: "Ma, Gooch took my share--"

"Hush! Go! Go away!" Flores ordered.

"That's not fair!" he said, kicking at the door before stalking off.

With a pale, pasty face, she returned to her mistress' bedroom. "I'm sorry, Lady Wissowa, but, they were in such desperate straits--"

"You didn't even ask me," Wissowa whispered. Flores had nothing to say to that, so Wissowa turned around to the roomful of gold. "Goodbye."

The housekeeper collected her possessions and left.

On the western grounds of the fortress, Efran was leaning on the black iron fence, looking toward the woods. He might have pretended to be watching the clean-up around the partially burned cell barracks, but his eyes kept scanning the trees.

Minka came over to lean on his arm. He looked down to her. "It's . . . been two days. Is it too soon to go see if . . . he'll . . . ?"

Considering that, she reached over to open the gate. "I'll wait here."

Taking a deep breath, he kissed her head. Then he walked out, bypassing the barracks clean-up to head for the woods. A few men paused in the work to watch him disappear into the shade of the trees. Minka sighed, leaning on the fence to wait.

He went about thirty paces into the woods, then stopped to look around. "Pia?" he called quietly. Hearing a rustle in the leaves of a nearby oak, Efran quickly looked up, but could see nothing. "Pia?" he called again, a little louder.

With no response but the flitting of the upper leaves in the wind, Efran turned the way he had come, then stopped at the gurgling croak of a raven which was clearly simulated. He looked up to see the white head over a brown body that almost blended into the bark behind him. Donovan, still wearing the tattered clothes he had arrived in, looked down at him from ten feet over his head.

After a few moments of silence, Efran asked, "Will you come down to just talk for a minute?"

"Maybe later," Donovan said from his superior height.

Neither said anything more for a few minutes while Efran scanned the trees and the ground. Although he didn't see Pia or her Polonti guardians, he knew they were close by. Donovan remained above, lazily watching him. Efran looked up to ask, "Is it later now?"

Grinning, Donovan stood on the branch and jumped. Efran scrambled to get underneath him. But the boy had leapt horizontally to another branch. Landing surefooted, he reached for a brown hand that was extended to him, then disappeared into the foliage. Efran watched the twigs above shiver.

He waited a while longer, but the rustling above had ceased; they had gone elsewhere. Turning to walk back to the grounds, Efran considered, "Well, at least he didn't try to kill either of us."

Minka opened the gate for him, and he said, "They're teaching him to climb. We spoke a little, but, he wasn't ready to come down to me." He looked away, shaking his head again over the situation of his own making.

"He talked to you?" she asked, her face brightening.

“Yes, a little,” Efran said. That was a step forward, he realized.

“Good. Let’s go see if the children are out yet,” she said, taking his hand in both of hers. So they walked across the grounds to see them streaming out of the back door.

Wissowa sat in the midst of her gold, listening to the quiet house. Outside, she could hear faint sounds of life: dogs barking, wheels passing, the occasional call of one neighbor to another. Then someone passed close behind her partly open window, and she startled violently.

She got up to close and lock the window, drawing the curtains together to shut out the light. Then she stood in the dim room, staring at the dull gold spilling all over the floor. “I’ve got to get this hidden,” she murmured, and began dragging a pouch to her built-in wardrobe.

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Chapter 14

First, Wissowa had to clear shoes and boxes off the closet floor, which made room for six pouches jammed tight together. With great effort, she was able to shove another six on top of those, but her clothes and the built-in shelving disallowed any more. Panting, she sat on the floor beside the remaining eight pouches, which she began shoving underneath her bed.

There was a loud knocking on her front door which almost gave her heart failure. She sat frozen over her gold until the knocking was repeated, louder. Trembling, she got to her feet to leave the room, closing the door behind her. Pausing to compose herself, she languidly opened the front door to see two slovenly men who regarded her as though she were a steak dinner.

While she glanced from one to the other, the first said, “Hiya. I’m Baeck, this here’s Neiryneck. We’re all-purpose handymen, in case you happen to need help with anything.” Neiryneck was looking over her shoulder into the front room.

“Wait here. I’m going to have my bodyguards come have a look at you,” she said, closing the door. Listening to them scurry away, she locked the door and leaned against it, panting, “I’ve got to get help. But, I don’t know--”

She returned to her room to close and lock the door behind her before getting six pouches moved under her bed. The remaining two (rather, one and a half), she dragged into the attached washroom. Then she sat at her vanity with the good silver mirror to think.

Coming to a decision, she rose to take up her small purse, which she reloaded with royals. Then she went to the back door to crack it just enough to look out. There were a few people who seemed to be loitering nearby, along with her neighbor’s dog who usually roamed free. “I don’t even have a dog--”

She stopped at a thought, then went to the kitchen where her chicken and blackberries that Flores had prepared still sat. Taking the plate to the back door, she knelt with it, calling, “Repo! C’m here, boy!” The boxer’s ears stood up and he trotted over.

Drawing back inside her bedroom, she held the plate within range of his nose until setting it on the floor. While he ate, she shut her bedroom door and locked the back door. Then she practically ran to Shaffer's shop.

When she entered to stand at the counter, he came out of the back room, regarding her in genuine concern. "Lady Wissowa?"

"I need bodyguards," she gasped, emptying her little purse on the counter. Shaffer hastily bent to pick up one royal that had landed on the floor. "You know people. Get me two, today, immediately," she instructed.

"Well, I'll check around," he said.

"I'll wait." She turned to sit at one of the chairs along the wall, crossing her legs and folding her hands on her empty purse in composure. She knew a lot of people herself, but, strangely, no one that she would entrust with this request.

"Is there anyone at your house now?" he asked cautiously.

"Just a dog. And the longer I have to wait, the madder he's going to be when I finally let him out," she observed.

At that time, Plunkett and Noah were taking the cart up the switchback to the fortress with buckets of crayfish. It had been exactly one week since Noah had begun apprenticing with him. Plunkett had the boy drive the cart while he walked alongside, huffing, "I'm getting too fat for Ludy t'have t'haul me up with the crayfish, so it's nice t'have someone lighter drive."

"It's very easy," Noah said, the picture of confidence. "All she needs is a gentle touch to know what to do," he added, repeating Plunkett's instructions verbatim.

"That's quite true," Plunkett confirmed. "She very reliable, is Ludy."

"She sure is," Noah confirmed his confirmation.

At the top of the switchback, they went over to the kitchen gate, which Plunkett opened. Then Noah guided Ludy to the back kitchen door on the east side of the fortress. Plunkett knocked his special tattoo, and Loghry opened the door to stick his head out. "Oh, good!" he said. He called over his shoulder, "Crayfish delivery!" Cheers were heard behind him. Crayfish were easy to prepare and highly in demand. Plus, Plunkett's were delivered live.

Noah climbed down from the driver's seat to help Loghry carry in the buckets while Plunkett stood back in satisfaction. Loghry said, "Oh, good haul today! This will feed the first fifty that come clamoring for 'em."

"Well, it's easier with help," Plunkett said in satisfaction. "This here's my apprentice Noah, Loghry."

Loghry paused to look the boy in the face. "Noah! I didn't know you were apprenticing with Plunkett. Good for you!"

"Thanks," Noah said. "It's hard work, but I'm getting muscles for it." He raised his damp sleeve to flex his bicep.

Loghry, muscular himself, laughed, "There you go! Wait a moment; let me weigh 'em; get your pay and your buckets back."

"Thankee," Plunkett said while Noah scratched Ludy's poll.

Minutes later, Loghry returned with a stack of empty buckets on one hand and Plunkett's pay in the other. While Noah put the buckets in the cart bed, Loghry counted out Plunkett's coins into his hands. Noah came over quickly to look, gasping, "You got over *four royals* for that load!" To be precise, he got four royals and twelve silvers.

"Yep," Plunkett said in satisfaction, pocketing his pay. Loghry saluted with two fingers as he withdrew into the kitchen, closing the door.

"Everyone will be out of class by now. Let's go around back," Noah suggested, hopping into the driver's seat.

Plunkett's face clouded. "If it's all right with the Captain."

"What? Of course it's all right; he'll want to see how well I'm doing," Noah said, clucking at Ludy. So Plunkett followed as Noah guided the cart around the southeastern corner of the fortress, past Renée's crosses encompassed with roses. They had almost got clear of the easternmost garden before they were spotted by the children. Then they came running over, crying, "Noah's back!" "He's got a cart!" "He's driving!" "Noah, what are you doing?"

Smiling, Efran and Minka came over to watch as Noah pulled Ludy to a stop, and the children clustered around to pet her. He said loftily, "I'm apprenticing with Plunkett, and he just sold a batch of crayfish to the kitchen for *four royals*." Noah was so accustomed to the wealth of the Abbey that silvers didn't merit a mention.

The children gasped in wonder, and Efran grinned. "Congratulations, Plunkett." To Minka, he whispered, "Get me to the dining hall early tonight." She chortled.

"Thankee, sir. It's easier now that I have help," Plunkett said.

"What do you do, Noah?" Toby asked, so Noah climbed down from the cart to tell them all about making sure that the rice field stayed wet, and driving up to the cutting bog to make sure that the peat they loaded was dry, and feeding Ludy and making sure that her feet were good. "I pick out 'er hooves every day," he boasted, "and she steps happy when I'm done with 'er."

"And you get to drive?" Elwell asked, stroking her neck.

"Yep," Noah confirmed. The adults smiled at how much he sounded like Plunkett. "Now, if we're going up the switchback, or hauling a heavy load, Plunkett will walk, because he doesn't want to strain 'er."

Hassie was attending all this closely, because Plunkett was her father. Abruptly, she asked, "Is Portia with you?"--her mother.

The children went still, and Plunkett looked at her sadly. "No, Hassie. She has died."

Noah told her, "It's just me and him."

She held her nose to tell him, muffled, "You stink."

Noah shrugged, "I don't have many clothes, and not much time to wash 'em."

"We'll pull out the wash bucket when we get back, Noah," Plunkett said.

Minka said, "Wait a moment; I'll get you more clothes. You hardly took anything." And she turned to hurry to the back door.

A little embarrassed, Noah said, "Well, we didn't know we were coming back here. I just wanted Efran to know I'm doing well. Aren't I, Plunkett?"

"He's a right good worker, Lord Efran," Plunkett said. Hassie turned deliberately to go back to her flower beds, followed by Jera and Acy.

"I'm glad to hear it," Efran said, bending to pick up Joshua, who wanted to pet Ludy as well.

Watching Hassie flounce away, Toby whispered, "She's jealous." Noah grinned in accomplishment.

Meanwhile, Isreal was leaning into the cart to pick up a stray crayfish, who waved its claws at him. Fortunately, he was holding it with two fingers just behind its chelipeds. Noah said, "Bring it to the pond, Isreal!" So all the rest of the children ran with Noah and Isreal to watch the insertion of the new resident into the pond. Even Jera and Acy defected from Hassie to watch.

Minka came out of the back door with a large sack of clothing which she deposited into the cart bed. "Thankee, Lady Minka," Plunkett said.

She patted him. "I'm so glad it's working out, Plunkett—for both of you."

"Yes. Yes, it is," he said, glancing transparently toward the front courtyard.

Efran whistled before having to call, "Noah."

He looked over, then ran back to climb into the driver's seat. Plunkett climbed up beside him, and Noah expertly turned Ludy's head to begin walking her back toward the eastern side of the fortress. Holding Joshua, Efran called, "Come see us again at your next delivery."

Joshua said, "Bye," opening and closing his fingers.

Noah waved over his head, and Plunkett turned to raise his cap. When they had disappeared around the corner, the children dispersed. But Calix paused to say, "That looks like fun. Can I apprentice with him, too, Efran?" He would turn twelve later this year.

"I don't see why not, if Plunkett has enough work for you both," Efran said. Calix nodded thoughtfully, then returned to the pond to see how the new crayfish was acclimating.

About this time, Shaffer had just introduced Lady Wissowa to the joiner Amspoker. He was a large man, with thick arms and heavy features. Standing over parchment on the counter, Shaffer was explaining, "Now, Amspoker, the lady has just lost her housekeeper of many years--"

"Five or six years. I'm not that old," she said defensively.

"Pardon," Shaffer acknowledged with a slight bow. "Nonetheless, until the lady can procure domestic help, she

is alone in her house, and desires protection. Lady Wissowa, Amspoker is a reliable worker, as his supervisor has attested to me, but has completed the work for which he was hired. While he is waiting on further work orders, he wishes to remain employed in some capacity. Now, our first task is to delineate his responsibilities. Lady Wissowa, please state exactly the duties you wish him to perform.” Shaffer dipped a quill preparatory to taking notes.

Shaffer and Amspoker both looked at her, waiting. She said carefully, “I want him to protect my house.”

“I see. As I understand it, you do not require protection when you leave the house. Is that correct, Lady Wissowa?” Shaffer asked.

“Yes, that is correct. I especially want him at my house when I am gone,” she said.

“You got valuables in your house?” Amspoker asked.

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Chapter 15

Shaffer flashed a cautionary look at Wissowa. After a moment’s thought, she replied, “I have mementoes of my grandmother, who was especially kind to me. This was the famous Lady . . . Tuddenham, who brought audiences across the Southern Continent to their knees with her exalted voice--”

“Eh?” Amspoker uttered, lost.

“She was a famous singer,” Wissowa said. “Surchatains, Councilors and heads of state across the Continent bestowed gifts on her for her remarkable beauty and talent. But her only son, my father, died in fiery collision of--horses, so, all of her awards and gifts and beautiful dresses were left to me,” she related, her eyes brimming with tears.

Shaffer and Amspoker both stared at her, and the latter asked, “What happened to *her*?”

“Oh. She got old and died,” Wissowa tossed off.

Composing himself, Shaffer cleared his throat and said, “So, I gather that rumors have been circulating that these mementoes of your beloved grandmother are so valuable that attempts have been made to break into your house. Is that correct, Lady Wissowa?”

“Yes, mostly. Am I under oath?” she asked.

Blankly, Shaffer said, “Not precisely, I’m just assuming that you’ll be as truthful as possible so that Amspoker will clearly understand his duties.”

“Then that will do,” she said complacently.

“So, where in the house are these valuables kept?” Amspoker asked.

"In my bedroom, for now, until I build a bigger house," she said pensively.

"All right. Am I to sleep in your house?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Where?" he asked, glancing at her cleavage.

"In my housekeeper's room, who just left. She'd been with me for years," she added, still hurt.

Writing, Shaffer said, "So, Amspoker's primary duty will be to protect your house day and night, particularly your bedroom, whether you are at home or running errands."

"That is correct," she said.

Amspoker's heavy features contorted themselves into a question: "Can I leave the house *at all*?"

"No," she said woodenly.

Now the creases in his face indicated pain. "That seems hard. I don't think I can do that."

"He has a point, Lady Wissowa," Shaffer said smoothly. "Suppose you were to give him, say, a three-hour leave between ten and one by the sundial each day?"

"All right," she said grumpily. Then she looked up in alarm. "But then anyone watching the house would know that he leaves at the same time every day to stay gone for hours. That would give them plenty of time to break down the door and steal my go--randmother's dresses."

As the two men studied her, Shaffer stirred and said, "Then let's simply shift the time of leave to eleven to two the next day, and noon to three the day after, and so on. Won't that work?"

"I suppose so," she grumbled.

Regarding her, Amspoker said, "I want five royals a day."

She looked startled, then sank, nodding. "Very well."

"To be paid each day," he stated.

"At the end of the day's shift," she corrected dully.

"Sure, I can do that," he said, then added, "Wait. About meals."

"What about meals?" she asked, uncomprehending.

"I need three meals a day, all with meat, cheese or eggs," he stated.

After thinking through this, she said, "Ohhh, I need a housekeeper, first. Find me a housekeeper," she told Shaffer.

Before he could reply, Amspoker said, "My wife'll do that."

Wissowa asked dubiously, "She'll work as a live-in housekeeper?"

"Sure," he said complacently. "For another five royals a day."

She looked at him for a long time, then sighed, "Very well. As long as she does the shopping, as well." She thought glumly, *This money is costing me a lot of money.*

"Yeeees," he said doubtfully.

She and Shaffer both looked at him. Shaffer asked, "What's wrong with that? All housekeepers go to market; that's part of their job description."

"Sure. But she can do it quicker if she's got a helper to watch the children," Amspoker allowed.

"Children," Wissowa whispered.

"Yep. Three-year-old, eleven-month-old and one just newborn," he said complacently.

"In my—no," she said, closing her eyes. "No. Get me another housekeeper," she told Shaffer desperately.

"Yes, though it will take me a few days," Shaffer said.

"Do that, then. Come, Amspoker. I'll—go to market, and you'll stay at my house," she said.

"Sure," he agreed. Eyes glazed, she turned out of the shop with him following.

Arriving home, she unlocked the front door to let them both in, then froze at the fierce barking. "I forgot!" she whispered.

"That you have a dog locked up?" he asked.

"Wait here." She flew through the house to her bedroom. Hearing whining and scratching, she unlocked the back door to open it wide, then pushed her bedroom door open for a streak to emerge, taking a sharp turn toward the daylight.

After she saw him satisfactorily scamper off, she closed the back door and entered her bedroom to look at the poop and pee-stained bedcovers, the chewed-up shoes, and the remains of blackberries scattered around the room. She closed her eyes, exhaling.

Amspoker approached her door. "Lady Wissowa? You all right?"

She emerged into the corridor, sighing, "Yes. Go—fix yourself something to eat in the kitchen. I'll go to market tomorrow."

"Sure. You want anything?" he asked on his way to the kitchen.

"Whatever you fix," she said, waving.

"I'm a good cook. I've had to learn; my wife's too lazy to do it," he told her. She muttered something uncomplimentary as she turned back into her bedroom to address the chaos.

An hour and a half later, she had her room mostly cleaned up. Washing her hands in the washroom, she paused, sniffing. Then she went to the kitchen to look at a set table and something on the grill that smelled wonderful. "What are you cooking?" she asked.

"Short loin," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "Don't know where you got it, but these are great cuts. Sit down; they're just about ready. Ah, there's some green beans in the pot there, too, if you're particular about side dishes. Oh, and these market rolls baked up just real pretty." He showed her a pan of lightly browned bread.

"I'm famished," she admitted, dropping to the table.

"Let me get the wine uncorked," he said, picking up the bottle. This he did, pouring her a full glass. Then he served her plate before sitting down himself.

As he promised, dinner was excellent. And the more she drank, the more she laughed, without noticing that he hardly drank at all. After finishing the bottle, she staggered to bed.

Late in the night, she awoke as a sudden weight spread upon her, and she reached up to feel a man's broad shoulders. "Efran," she whispered. "I've missed you so. Where have you been?"

"I'm here now," a voice said in her neck. Her eyes cracked open and he said, "Oh, wait. I gotta unload a dump. Stay right there." He got up to feel his way to the washroom, frequently stumping his toes and cursing.

He opened the washroom door, and she sat up at the dim light (as she always kept a candle burning in there). She watched a silhouette that was definitely not Efran's crouching over the pot, grunting. "Ohhhh, yeah, that's so much better. Yeah. Hey, you got a butt sponge in here? Never mind, this'll work. Oh, that's nice. Ow! Say, what're these pouches? Are these your grandmother's dresses?"

With a scream, she lurched up to attack him where he sat. He fell onto the washroom floor, upsetting the pot, and she applied her fingernails so fiercely to whatever flesh she found that he was driven naked out of the washroom and down the corridor to the front door. He couldn't get it open, so she had to reach around him to unlock it and shove him out. Then she slammed the door and relocked it.

Falling on the front walk, he protested, "Hey, now, 's just a misunderstanding. Gimme my clothes! And my pay!" He rose to his knees, pleading under a nearly full moon.

Staggering back down the corridor, she found the trail of his clothes from Flores' bedroom to hers. She gathered them up to take them to the front window, which she opened to shove them out. Then she went back to her bedroom. Veering away from the washroom, she opened her wardrobe to grab a handful of royals. These she ran to the same window to fling at him as he was dressing. "Ow!" he vented, but scrambled to pick them all up.

She slammed the window shut and relocked it, then went around the house with a candle making sure that all windows and doors were shut and locked. Then she lay down in her bed to wait for morning.

When May 1st finally dawned, Shaffer arrived at his shop, considerably surprised to find her waiting on his doorstep. Eyeing her haggard face, he let her in. "Lady Wissowa. May I get you some caova?"

“No,” she said, draping herself across his counter. “Shaffer, help me. It’s not going to work with Amspoker or anyone. I need a safe place to put this money. It can’t stay at my house.”

“Here, try the caova anyway,” he said, filling a cup and pushing it toward her. She picked it up and chugged it.

Then her eyes went wide; she shuddered, dropping the cup, and bolted upright. “Yes, I feel that. Thank you,” she said, gazing around.

“Very good,” he laughed lightly. Then he sighed, evaluating her, and said, “I may have a solution for you.”

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Chapter 16

She reached over to grip Shaffer’s sleeve. “Tell me,” she whispered intently.

“I have a vault here. If you will have your money transported here, I will keep it for a small fee. And I will have it audited once a month by the accountant Schillebeeckx here in Westford. You may have access to it at any time, and may remove it whenever you choose,” he said.

She slowly lifted up. “Yes,” she whispered, eyes glazed.

Smiling benevolently, he said, “Go home and rest. Think about it today, then if you still feel that it’s the right thing to do, come back tomorrow and I will help you arrange for its transport.”

“Yes,” she said.

Gently, he escorted her to the door, which he opened for her. “Go straight home and rest,” he instructed.

“Yes,” she said.

As she started walking away, however, she looked down a side street. Her feet followed her eyes, and she went down that street to turn another corner and stand at the door of Notary Whitgift’s shop. She just stood there, however, until the young notary opened the door. “Lady Wissowa? Are you all right?”

“I need you to tell me something,” she said.

“Come in,” he urged her, waving. He brought her to the back room, where he sat her at the table with grape juice and butter rolls.

She ate and drank, then began, “I went to Shaffer as you suggested, and he showed me the letters he had received from the Fortress about my claim from Justinian. He told me just what you did, and said I should just go home and enjoy the money.”

Whitgift smiled. “That’s good to hear, Lady Wissowa.”

“Oh, but wait. There’s more.” Then she told him about finding out that her housekeeper had been stealing from

her, and going back to Shaffer to find a bodyguard for her, and how *that* worked out. She said, "I just now went back to him, telling him that I can't keep the money at my house, and he suggested that I leave it with him in his vault, for a small fee, and that the Westford accountant Schillebeeckx would audit it monthly."

At that, his face dropped, and she asked, "What do you think?"

He swallowed. "I . . . think that it's a good idea for you to put the money elsewhere, under audit. But, ah, Schillebeeckx is married to Lord Shaffer's niece. It is unethical for him to suggest his relative as accountant," he finished with difficulty.

Her face drained white. "What do I do? Can you keep the money for me?"

"No, oh, no—I've got no place to put it safely. But . . . if you like, I can go back to the Abbey fortress and ask Administrator DeWitt if they would do that, with similar terms as to what Shaffer offered you," he said.

"Oh, would you?" she asked, tears streaming down her face. "Oh, yes, please do."

"All right, I'll leave this morning," he said, standing. "C'mon, let me walk you home."

"Yes. Thank you," she said, shuddering. And he kept an arm around her clear to her door, where he watched her unlock it, go in, and relock it behind her. He turned away, exhaling a great breath.

Then he closed his shop, put Podro in his new bridle, and turned his head south.

When he arrived at the gates of the Abbey Lands, he was swished through by one of the great trees, and the guards waved as though recognizing him. Walking south down the busy Main Street, he stopped Podro at the crossings for the ladies to flounce by in their amazing dresses.

Coming to the switchback, he looked across at Notary Ryal's shop. Repressing the urge to drop in and chat with him, Whitgift set himself to take care of his obligation first—and he was glad not to require money from her to do it.

When he arrived hilltop, the gates were opened to him without question. He told one guard, "I'm Westford Notary Whitgift, and, I'd appreciate another interview with Administrator DeWitt, if that's possible."

The man nodded to the open fortress doors: "Tell Eustace at the door there; he'll see if the administrator is available."

"Thank you." Glancing aside as the stableboy took Podro to water, Whitgift mounted the broad steps to the massive doors, where he repeated his request.

The door guard Eustace said, "Wait a moment there in the receiving room and help yourself to refreshments while I check with the Administrator." Nodding, Whitgift went over to the small room indicated off the foyer. He remained standing to eat dried venison strips while studying a wall map of the southern coastal area.

Shortly, Eustace returned. "Administrator DeWitt says come on up; he's sent someone for the Captain."

"Thank you," Whitgift said again, following him down the corridor and up the stairs to the workroom.

The two working at the large table looked up at his entrance. The Steward nodded to him, turning a page in his

ledger, and DeWitt said, "I see you're taking the job seriously, Whitgift. Have a seat. Efran will be up shortly."

"Yes, sir," Whitgift said, sitting across the table from him. He jumped slightly as the tree in the middle of the table adjusted itself to one side. "I appreciate your taking the time to see me again when I was just here day before yesterday, but . . . Lady Wissowa is having a lot of trouble dealing with your response to her claim."

Entering to sit at the head of the table, Efran said, "That we denied her claim on Justinian?" He sat in amusement, leaning back to rest one ankle on the opposite knee.

"No sir, that you paid it," Whitgift said. He proceeded to give them a summary of her difficulties over the last two days, ending, "So Lord Shaffer offered to keep her money in his vault for a small fee, and have it audited once a month by the accountant Schillebeeckx. But, while I was investigating Lord Baroffio's charges of corruption against him—Lord Shaffer—I discovered that Schillebeeckx is married to Shaffer's niece Juniper. At the time, there had been no question of impropriety in the the relationship. But I had to tell Lady Wissowa that it was unethical of him to suggest it. So she asked if you would keep the money under similar terms. She's genuinely fearful of having it in her house any longer."

The administrators looked at each other. Rubbing his neck, DeWitt said, "I should have foreseen this—I just assumed that she'd have help with it."

Whitgift shook his head slowly. "As I told you, she released her housekeeper for theft, and, apparently has no one else in her life that she trusts."

DeWitt drew a sheet to him and dipped his quill. "What do you think, Estes? Efran?"

Estes said, "We might as well, to prevent a murder."

They all looked at Efran, who was working his jaw. "She'll be moving down here then, won't she?"

They looked at Whitgift, who said, "I don't know, Captain; I get the impression that she's deeply involved in the social scene of Westford—which is how she met your Lord Justinian."

Scratching out lines on paper, DeWitt said sarcastically, "He'd be absolutely thrilled with her moving down here."

Efran said, "I don't even want her seeing Donovan."

"I'm giving you full custody of him," DeWitt said, writing. After a few more minutes of adding conditions, he signed the sheet and lifted up.

Tossing the sheet to Whitgift, DeWitt said, "Here are our terms, which are standard in the industry, as far as the financials go: her holdings will be audited on arrival by our accountant Ploense, who will be fiduciary for her. Regarding her son, I'm assigning full custody to Efran, as you heard. If she's agreeable to those terms, she'll sign it; you'll notarize it. Then when you bring it back to us, we'll send men up to retrieve the monies and transport them down here." As DeWitt was talking, Estes got up to find blotting paper and a document pouch in the cabinet.

Scanning the terms, Whitgift said, "You're liable to have a grateful, weepy woman on your hands, Administrator." Efran closed his eyes in dread.

Whitgift looked up to accept the blotting paper and pouch from the Steward, then added, "If she wants to haggle over the agreement, I'm going to let her come down herself to do it." He covered the paper with the blotting sheet and carefully rolled up the bundle to put it in the pouch.

Leaning back, DeWitt said, "You know, we have a critical need of notaries here in the Lands. Were you to come down, we'd put you to work immediately." Whitgift looked at him quickly.

"And Ryal's here," Efran murmured, toying with a stray faerie-tree leaf in front of him. Whitgift turned, watching the leaf indignantly scamper back up the tree.

At this time, Marguerite was leading Minka quietly to the back patio, where two little girls were drawing pictures on the patio stones. They were wearing play clothes, with their hair clean and dressed. The dark-haired girl, Pember, was around six, slighter older than her playmate, Aune, who had light blonde hair.

They used compressed sticks of colored chalk to make their art—there were wobbly faces with big toothy smiles and no noses, flowers on crooked stalks, and birds with great wings. Minka watched, grinning, until Pember looked up with serious eyes to ask, "Do you want to draw?"

"Yes," Minka said, sitting with them. She told Aune, "I love your flowers. They look happy."

"They don't hurt anymore," Aune said. Glancing up at Auntie, who had slipped into a patio chair, Minka leaned over for a stick of red chalk.

Hartshough came up with Efran behind them, who looked on without speaking. Pember glanced at him in disapproval. "There's not room for you."

"Can I just watch?" he asked, sitting beside Marguerite.

She gave silent, grudging approval, but warned, "Keep your big feet away."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, drawing his feet back under the chair. Pember complacently returned to her crested bird, while Aune added smiling faces to her flowers.

Hartshough placed three bright-pink bracers on the table, at which Efran glanced up in silent appreciation. After taking a sip, he said quietly, "Wissowa's afraid of being robbed, so DeWitt's offered to let her move her money down here."

Drawing, Minka murmured, "She's probably sorry you sent it to begin with."

"That's the sense I get. But we may have talked Whitgift into coming down," he said. She turned her eyes to him with a sly, satisfied smile. Efran told Marguerite, "Minka wants all her pets close by." Auntie almost choked on her bracer, laughing.

The girls worked on their art silently, then Aune stopped to watch Minka. "What are you drawing?" she asked.

"Efran's feet," Minka said aloofly. He looked at her over his glass, and Pember stopped what she was doing to watch the drawing in progress. Minka went on, "He has such cute toes. They look like little men, soldiers, all lined up, following the Captain. That's the big toe, you see."

Pember abandoned her art to lean over the work in creation. "They need eyes," she observed.

“You’re right,” Minka said, sitting back on her heels. Scanning the chalk box, she selected the black stick to dot two little eyes on each toe.

“They’re skinny men,” Aune observed.

“Because Efran has beautiful toes. They’re not all gnarly,” Minka said.

The little girls swung to look at Efran’s booted feet, and his eyes widened in alarm. Pember said, “Show us your toes.”

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Chapter 17

Efran winced. “Oh, no, no. They smell—very bad.”

Hartshough materialized over his shoulder with a large pan of water. “Perhaps this will help, Lord Efran—rose water with just a touch of salts, for comfort.” With that, he placed the pan in front of Efran’s chair legs. Aghast at this betrayal, Efran gazed at him.

But the little girls waited steadfastly while Minka eyed Efran sidewise, so he stripped off his boots and socks, then rolled up his pants legs to place his large feet in the pan. Immediately he leaned back, sighing, “Oh, that’s nice.”

“It will take only a few minutes to be effective,” Hartshough said, placing a towel beside the pan. Efran had his head back and eyes closed.

Meanwhile, Minka continued her portrait. Pember squinted at it, asking, “What are the black circles on their heads?”

“Flat caps. You’ll see all the men wearing them,” Minka said.

“What’s the red?” Aune asked.

“Their uniforms. Efran’s got his sword on, here,” Minka said, pointing out a short black stroke.

Turning back to him, Pember ordered, “That’s enough time. Show us your toes.”

Reluctantly, he sat up, grunting, “They don’t look anything like that.” But the girls maintained silence while he extracted his feet to place them on the towel Hartshough had provided.

The little girls leaned over to study them. Minka asserted, “He can make them march.”

“March!” Pember ordered. So Efran wiggled his toes. “The one on the end is too slow,” Pember observed, then began wiggling it herself at a faster pace.

Efran drew in a sudden breath, and all three girls eyed him. "What's wrong?" Pember demanded.

"Nothing," he said, stone-faced. But Aune, with an impish look, reached over to his other little toe to exercise it. Efran emitted a high whine through his nose.

Aune cried, "He's ticklish!" Whereupon the girls fell on his feet to work them vigorously while he grimaced, holding his breath. They laughed over his unsuccessful contortions to remove his feet from their hands while the pan sloshed a little water from being inadvertently kicked.

"All right! All right! I give!" he said, reaching forward to lift each girl on an arm, leaning back with them. They snuggled into him to let the laughs run down. Then they contently lay there, patting his shirt or toying with its buttons.

Marguerite, Hartshough and Minka quietly watched, and she murmured, "He's just a big tabby." He looked up at her, remembering that comment from their first days in the fortress. She and Efran didn't find out until later that the Shoard girls hadn't let anyone but Marguerite touch them before then.

At this time, Justinian came out onto the patio, dressed in his usual elegance. As he looked around in mild inquiry, Minka purred, "Oh, Justinian's feet are like a dancer's."

A ballet of coordinated movement followed: Efran stood, setting the girls on their feet. They, in turn, ran over to grab Justinian's hands and compel him to sit in the chair that Efran had vacated. While Pember stripped off the new victim's left shoe and sock, Aune disposed of those on his right foot. Plopping his feet into the water (without bothering to roll up his pants legs), they sat back to regard his stricken face.

"You're not ticklish, are you?" Pember asked deviously.

Efran was scrambling after his own boots and socks while Minka kissed Marguerite and patted Hartshough. With his footwear underarm, Efran grabbed Minka's hand to run her to the front doors. Justinian was leaning over to scrutinize the water, demanding, "Efran's feet weren't in this, were they?"

Efran was grumbling to Minka, "When did you see Justinian's feet?"

She grinned, "When you took me up to see him asleep after you kidnapped him."

"Yikes. Forget that," he muttered, and she laughed at him.

Around this time, Whitgift arrived back at his shop to put Podro in his stall with hay and water. Despite feeling pressed to hurry, Whitgift took the time to brush him down and check his hooves. Then he caught up the pouch to walk rapidly to Underhay.

Knocking on the door, he called, "Lady Wissowa? It's Whitgift." He heard running footsteps, then the lock being turned. The door opened just far enough for her to reach out and draw him inside, scraping his shoulder on the door frame and his face on the door edge.

Once he was in, she locked the door again. "When I got back to my room, I found some of the pouches open and robbed," she hissed, gripping his arm. "They just broke the lock on the back door!"

"All right, here," he said, taking the pouch strap off his shoulder. "You've got quill and ink, don't you?"

“Yes,” she said, watching as though it were a miracle-working relic that he was removing from the pouch. “Is that it? Are they going to take my money to hold?”

He began, “Yes, if you agree to the terms--” but she had scuttled off to her bedroom.

Immediately, Wissowa returned with her writing set. “Put it down on the table here, so I can sign it,” she said.

Whitgift pleaded, “Lady Wissowa, you got in trouble the first time by signing without reading--”

“Any terms are better than my dying over this gold,” she said.

Whitgift began, “Yes, but, you must understand that you’re giving Captain Efran custody of your son, and he doesn’t want you to--”

“Good, it’s about time he took responsibility for him,” she snapped, spreading the paper on the table to sign hastily. “Are they coming now?” she asked.

“I have to return this before he sends the men,” he said, carefully rolling the document in blotting paper before tucking it back into the pouch.

She had gone pale. “Whoever broke in will come back as soon as you’re gone.”

He inhaled deeply, then went to the kitchen to look out over her overgrown backyard. She followed, seeing his eyes grow thoughtful. He asked, “Have you got a scythe and a wheelbarrow?”

She looked blankly at him. “I pay Sheepy to cut the grass.”

“Have you got burlap sacks?” he asked.

“Yes, in the pantry,” she said.

“Start packing your gold in the burlap—not the pouches, just the gold. I’m going to look at your door, here,” he said.

She nodded, going quickly to the pantry. He went to her back door to examine it from the inside and out. Yes, someone had just kicked it in. Casting about for something to block the door, he regarded a set of wooden shelves in a decorative iron frame. He quickly unloaded the dishes and knickknacks to carry the shelving to the end of the corridor, where he laid it on its side at the door. Lengthwise, it was a tight fit in the corridor, so he had to kick it to make it rest snugly against the door.

He returned to the kitchen to find her on her knees emptying out bags of dry rice, beans, and lentils. “Oh, those are good. Save all that,” he said, and she looked down in confusion. But he went on, “I’ve blocked up your back door. Come let me out the front so I can go to my shop, but I’ll be right back.”

She nodded shakily, and he helped her up so that she could let him out and relock the door behind him. He took the document pouch.

On the way back to his shop, he was thinking hard. After he let himself in, first thing, he signed, stamped and dated DeWitt’s terms. This sheet he re-covered with the blotting paper and replaced in the pouch. Then he changed out of his suit into work clothes. He wore the same boots with each.

Going out back, he patted Podro's nose while he looked over to the second stall. "Yes!" he said. He thought he'd remembered the previous tenant leaving a stack of burlap feed bags, and there they were.

He loaded these into the wheelbarrow with the scythe and rolled it out of the back gate. All this he took to Wissowa's unfenced backyard, leaving it in between the door and a small storage shed. He returned to the front door to knock, calling softly, "It's Whitgift."

The door was rapidly unlocked, and relocked behind him as he entered. "Let's see what you've got in the sacks," he said. She took him to the back bedroom, where she had four burlap sacks stuffed full of obvious coins. He studied these, then went out to find the back door blocked by his efforts. So he went out the front to retrieve his stack of bags from the wheelbarrow.

Bringing these into her bedroom, he transferred much of the gold from one overstuffed bag to a feed sack. Then he said, "Bring the beans and rice you emptied out."

"Oh," she said, getting up. While Whitgift began unloading gold into the other feed sacks, she brought a bucket of mixed rice and dry beans. He scooped up handfuls to add to his sack, then patted it down. And it looked like a bag of feed.

"Now, we need to sew this closed. Go get your darning needle and thread," he said.

She squinted slightly. "Flores would have taken those. They were hers."

He rolled his eyes. "Well then, wait here." He left through the front door to trot to his shop. Soon he returned, panting, with his own darning kit of needle, thread and small scissors. Sitting with her on the floor, he folded over the top edge of the bag of mixed grain and gold, then sewed it closed. And when he was done, it looked like a regular feed sack. He and she then loaded up the remainder of the bags they had, 11 of them, with all the rest of the gold and varying amounts of mixed grain.

As he patted down the last stuffed bag, he looked around to ask, "Is that all the gold?"

"Yes," she said.

"How many empty pouches do you have there?" he asked.

She counted. "Seventeen."

"Weren't there originally twenty?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "If I don't get this down to your DeWitt today, I won't have any left."

"We're working on it," he said.

First, he sewed all the rest of the bags closed, for a total of 12. Then he went out and scythed the whole backyard. He brought the wheelbarrow to rest next to the storage shed, where it was mostly hidden from view of the neighbors.

Then he assessed her small bedroom window. Rejecting that as a passageway, he went around the house to enter the front door, pick up two bags of grain and gold to rest on his shoulder, then walk them out front and around to

the back of the house. By the time he returned for another two bags, he found her dragging them to the front door. So he was able to get the 12 of them around back fairly quickly.

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Chapter 18

Whitgift loaded the wheelbarrow full of grass cuttings, on top of which he placed two bags of feed to weight the grass down. This load he wheeled to the backyard of his shop, dumping it in the empty stall. He took the time to stack the bags in one corner and pile the grass cuttings in the other. Then he patted Podro before taking the empty wheelbarrow back to Wissowa's house.

Whitgift repeated this trip four more times, then told her, "I'm about to take the last two bags over, then I'll come back for you. You need to pack just your most essential belongings. You're going to stay at my shop with Podro while I take a carriage to the Lands."

She almost lost her composure at the hope of an actual rescue, but said, "Yes. Thank you." He left with the last two bags, the grass cuttings, and the scythe piled into the wheelbarrow while she ransacked her house.

Upon returning, he knocked quietly at the front door. She let him in quickly, showing him two full carpet bags sitting by the door. "I'm taking only the things I can't live without," she whispered.

"We all have those things, and mine weighs a lot more than yours, even with the gold," he said wryly. She looked astonished, and he added, "Podro's at least a thousand pounds."

"Oh!" she laughed, which he was glad to see.

But upon taking a quick glance through her house, he was not happy to see all the empty Abbey pouches scattered amid the remains of her bedroom. "We can't leave these pouches lying around. Have you got any place to hide them in the house?" he asked.

"Yes, under the floor here," she said. Turning out of the room, she returned from the kitchen with a meat knife, then knelt to pry up a floorboard. It revealed a small empty space between the foundation beams.

"Good," he said, swiftly dropping all the pouches into the hole before replacing the floorboard. Then he stepped back to observe, "It's the board right next to your headboard on the left."

"Yes," she said.

"That's good, then." Picking up her bags, he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," she sighed, closing her eyes.

He walked her out the front door and waited while she locked it. Then they two strolled down the street and up the next one until arriving at his shop. Glancing down the street, he decided to take her around to the back door, which was a less conspicuous entrance.

He brought her through the gate into the newly scythed yard, then set down her bags beside the stable. Stroking Podro's nose, he nodded toward the second stall. "There they are."

She looked into the next stall to see piles of grass and feed bags neatly arranged. "I can't believe it," she whispered.

"It will do as a hiding place for a few hours," he said, taking up her carpet bags. He mounted the back steps, then transferred one bag to rest under his arm while he opened the door leading into a short, narrow corridor between two rooms. One was his interview room, the other his sleeping/wash room. There was no kitchen; his food cabinet and stove were in the interview room. At the head of the short corridor was the front of the shop.

Bringing her into the interview room, he said, "I'm going to clean up and take a few of your royals to rent a carriage. The shop is closed; stay back here."

"Gladly," she breathed, thinking about all her friends, not a one of whom she could count on to help her now.

When he had bathed and redressed in a suit, he came out from the bedroom carrying the cloth bag he had brought from Gerdt's with all his clothes. Then he went to the front counter to bring out a battered satchel, in which he loaded his portable quill set, his notary stamp and parchments, the slender file of his notary actions from his few months here, and the document pouch containing today's paper.

Wissowa watched him pack all that in the satchel, then reach up to bring down a great old book from a high shelf. With all this in hand or underarm, he began out the back door. She gasped, "You're taking everything you own."

He looked at her in surprise. "All that I can't carry on Podro. You don't imagine I'm leaving him, do you?"

"No," she gasped in a laugh.

"Buck up, Lady Wissowa; we're almost there. Podro will guard your gold," he assured her. Then he exited the back door. After stopping to pat Podro and give him last-minute instructions, he left by the gate, and locked it behind him. Wissowa sat to wait.

Whitgift had no difficulty hiring a carriage to take him to the Abbey Lands, but he had to pay up front—three royals. Although the charge was excessive for a half-hour trip, he paid without a murmur and carried his own belongings into the carriage with him. Then he sat back for the ride, thinking.

With the signed and notarized document, he had no worries that DeWitt would be good as his word. But, it was already midafternoon, and he knew that she mustn't stay at the shop overnight; someone will have seen him wheelbarrowing loads back and forth from her house. He must convince DeWitt to send his men for the money right away, or none of it would be left.

Honestly, however, he was not as concerned about her money as he was his horse. Anyone who found the money would take him as well.

When the carriage arrived at the gates of the Lands, one of the gatesmen climbed up on top to look in the storage area behind the driver's seat while the other looked in the window. "What's your business?"

"I'm Westford Notary Whitgift, here to see Administrator DeWitt," he said nervously. He didn't want the driver and footman to overhear too much.

“What’re you carrying?” the gatesman asked, seeing Whitgift’s luggage.

“My clothes and notary supplies,” he said in a low voice. “The administrator has offered me work,” he said in almost a whisper, glancing upward to the driver.

“Ah,” the gatesman said in comprehension.

The second gatesman dropped down to say, “Carriage is clean.”

“Right-o,” the first said, and they opened the gates.

After they had passed through, the driver called down to his passenger, “Where to?”

Whitgift deliberated only a moment. “Up to the fortress, please.” He’d rather they not know his destination, but he couldn’t see taking the time to rent a room right now.

So the carriage rolled up the switchback to the open gates. When it pulled to a stop, Whitgift bounded out by himself, taking up his satchel, his bag, and his book. The courtyard gate guards watched him, and he turned to one to murmur, “Notary Whitgift to see Administrator DeWitt, please. *It’s urgent.*”

“All righty, then,” the guard said, gesturing to the open fortress doors.

But Whitgift paused to tell the driver, “Wait just a moment, please.” As incentive, he dropped his drawstring bag to dig in his pocket for another two royals, which he handed up.

“Yes, sir,” the driver said, eyeing him.

Dammit, they all know about the gold. How many of them know where it is? Whitgift thought, collecting his belongings to run up the steps with them.

He deposited everything but his satchel into the small receiving room, then looked back at the door guard to plead, “Please tell me that Administrator DeWitt is available.”

“You’re the Westford notary,” the guard said.

“Yes, and we don’t have much time,” Whitgift said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“C’mon up,” the guard said, and Whitgift outpaced him up the stairs and down the corridor to the workroom.

Entering with an inadvertent slide, Whitgift landed at the table to plop his satchel upon it, glancing around at DeWitt, the Steward, and Captain Efran watching him. There was a Polonti in uniform standing over worksheets at the table, watching as well, but Whitgift didn’t have time for introductions.

“Our situation has become urgent,” he said, withdrawing the signed and notarized sheet to shove toward DeWitt. “Lady Wissowa has already been threatened and robbed once; I managed to get her and what gold she has left to my shop in Westford, but unless your men get up there quickly, I don’t expect to find it there, and I don’t know how she will be.”

DeWitt looked over the document, then nodded to the Captain, “Everything looks in order.”

Efran stood, asking Whitgift, “She’ll need a carriage, won’t she?”

Whitgift glanced up to nod. “She’s in no shape to ride, and, I’ll need that or a horse going up, but I hope to goodness Podro is there for me to ride back.”

Efran lifted his chin in acknowledgment, then walked out. Whitgift paused, patting his satchel nervously. “I left my Book of the Law downstairs.”

DeWitt said, “We’ll get your things together and transport them to your new shop here. Go on down to the courtyard to ride out with them.”

Whitgift stared at him a moment. “Thank you, sir,” he whispered, then lit out of the room.

Estes called out after him, “Don’t run down the stairs.”

The acknowledgment, “Yes, sir--I mean, no, sir,” came faintly back to them. Koschat laughed.

From the courtyard, Whitgift watched the carriage he’d hired in Westford exit the wall gates far down Main to disappear over the old stone bridge. One of the gate guards asked, “Didn’t you pay him to wait?”

“Yes, but I knew he wouldn’t. He guessed right away that I have Lady Wissowa and her gold at my shop, and he’s gone to tell everyone else,” Whitgift groaned.

“No fear,” the guard said, looking over his shoulder toward the stables.

Whitgift looked in the same direction, and saw Captain Efran trotting out of the stables on his great black horse. Other riders were gathering behind him, and he paused to speak to someone who handed him a sheathed sword on a belt, which he strapped around his waist. Then he leaned down for a bow and quiver, both of which he draped over his shoulder.

More mounted men began massing around him. He gestured someone forward, then pointed to Whitgift in the courtyard. The stableboy he’d seen, Squirt, leapt up on a horse to begin loping him to the courtyard. The gate guard pulled Whitgift out of the way as Squirt reined up right on top of them. Dropping out of the saddle, he said, “Cap’n wants to you to take Munck here. He’s lively, so hang on.”

Whitgift jammed his boot into the stirrup to catapult himself into the saddle. Munck half-bucked, so Whitgift patted him. “Sorry, I’m excited. I know you are, too.”

With two dozen men and more behind him, the Captain rode up to Whitgift. “The carriage will follow, but we’re not waiting on it. I need you to ride beside me to direct us to your shop.”

Gawking, Whitgift said, “Yes, Captain!” With a nod, Efran led down the switchback. With a lurch, Munck followed, and the men streamed out behind them. As they passed Firmin’s, Rawlins stood to gape at the troops behind the Captain and the joyful country bumpkin in a hand-me-down suit.

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Chapter 19

The wall gates were thrown open to the rescue party before they were halfway up Main. Past the old stone bridge, the Captain's horse broke into a gallop. Piqued, Munck poured out the power, and Whitgift felt as though he were riding the wind. So he gave the horse its head to follow the Captain.

Before long, they bore down on the hired carriage returning to Westford. The men following the Captain instinctively thinned their ranks preparatory to riding around it. Kraken veered to the left, which allowed Munck to advance on the right. They, and the horsemen behind them, passed at such speeds that the carriage horses balked and reared. The driver was still trying to get them under control when the Landers had disappeared up the road.

"They won't beat us there with word of our coming," Whitgift breathed, then muttered, "I gave him two royals to wait, dammit." But it didn't matter, and he knew it.

They slowed as they entered the outskirts of Westford, and Efran looked back at Whitgift. "Down this way and up the next street!" he shouted, pointing. The Captain raised a finger to gesture ahead, and the riders followed. Late afternoon was melting away.

"There!" Whitgift shouted. "There's someone trying to break in my front door!"

With the oncoming stampede, the man leapt off the front steps to begin running. A few men whipped their bows off their shoulders, but Whitgift roared, "NO! You shoot anyone, we'll be detained, legally!"

"Hold your fire," Efran tossed back, irritated. Meanwhile, Whitgift had dropped off Munck to run up the steps and open his broken door.

"Lady Wissowa!" he called. "I'm back with the Captain and his men."

She staggered out, gasping, "There's someone in your backyard."

Thinking of Podro and not the royals, he flew past her out the back door. Having apparently just arrived, two men were scanning the small yard. One was pointing to the stables. Whitgift shouted, "Get out! There's nothing here!" Startled, they turned to him; seeing him all alone, one smiled and drew his knife.

"If you think to throw it, aim well," Efran said with his bow nocked and anchored. He was sitting on Kraken just outside the gate, men collecting behind him. More men were emerging from the shop behind Whitgift. The man with the knife resheathed it and held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. Then they two walked calmly to the other side of the yard to climb the fence and disappear.

Whitgift came off the back stairs to run to the stables. Podro was there to greet him, and the twelve feed bags appeared undisturbed. Going over to unlock the gate, he told Efran, "There in the second stall. Those twelve bags are all she's got left."

Efran rode Kraken over to have a look in the stable. "All right," he said, then whistled over his shoulder. A number of men entered the yard, and Efran instructed, "Stephanos, you and Lambdin pass these feed bags around, one to a rider."

"Aye, Captain," Stephanos said, opening the door to the second stall. Podro shied at the sudden activity around

him, but Whitgift patted him, watching in gratification as his plan unfolded as desired.

While the men began taking out the feed bags and strapping them behind the saddles of the chosen carriers, several men whistled or called, "Captain!"

Efran rode Kraken out of the backyard to trot around to the front. Whitgift ran after him.

The Abbey men paused in the distribution of feed bags to watch upwards of a hundred men approach behind Shaffer. Stopping about thirty feet from Efran, Shaffer folded his hands and said, "An armed invasion of a residential area is against the Law, Captain Efran. And whatever your men are taking from this residence belongs to the owner of the property, not the tenant." He cast the barest disparaging glance to Whitgift in his ill-fitting suit.

Returning his gaze, Efran did not speak, because he didn't know how to answer. Admitting that they were unloading royals from a rental property would only embroil them in a legal quandary while the remainder of Wissowa's money was siphoned off. Whitgift appeared similarly dumbstruck, as he was mentally searching for an argument from the Law to counter these assertions.

Hardly anyone noticed Wissowa emerging from the front door to hear this declaration of war. But from the top of the steps, she whispered, "How dare you." Efran and Whitgift looked over to her. Shaffer merely glanced at her, as he wished to keep the Abbey Lord pinned where he was.

But she was just getting warmed up. "How dare you?" she cried, guarantying that they'd all look. "For three days now, I've come to you for help, a prisoner in my own home while thieves circled it day and night! 'Oh, go home and enjoy your money,' you said, while strangers tried the locks on my doors and windows!

"I begged you and *paid you*, to give me bodyguards, and so you sent me home with a construction worker who tried to rape me! All these men behind you here, who are only looking to rob me—where were *they* when I was all alone, and needed help?" she cried. Men on the fringes of the crowd began slinking away.

She continued, "The only one—the *only one* of all of you who came to my aid was the new notary who was about to starve for the lack of business, but wouldn't charge me because I was *your* client! If he hadn't helped me, I'd have nothing left today! My house is almost destroyed for the break-ins, and I feared for my life at the shadows around it every night! And even when I *begged* you to hold the money for me so I wouldn't lose any more of it, you agreed as long as your niece's husband Schillebeeckx would be the auditor!"

Now the Westfordians were casting glances at Shaffer. He looked uncomfortable, as it is impossible to win an argument with an hysterical woman. Besides, he didn't know that she knew of his relationship to Schillebeeckx. Whitgift probably told her, blast him.

Drawing herself up, she said, "I sent to the Abbey Lands for help, and they came with weapons because I feared for my life. And this mob you brought just proves my fears were justified!" she spat, and more men began peeling away from him.

"Well," she said in a low, contemptuous voice, "I am a free woman, not bound to your little kingdom, *Lord* Shaffer. These armed men are my bodyguards to convey me and what little money I have left to the Abbey Lands. Are you entitled to stop me?" she demanded, descending the steps.

He actually flinched a little. "Of course you're free to go, Lady Wissowa."

At this time, the carriage from the Abbey Lands drew up, its driver scanning the opposing groups warily. The footman hopped down to open the door. She noted, "And here's my ride. Will one of you handsome men go get my bags in the back room?" she asked sweetly. Efran gestured to Cyneheard, who sprinted up the steps into the notary shop.

Lifting her bedraggled skirts, she headed for the carriage, then paused upon catching sight of her former lover. "Oh, hello, Efran," she purred up at him, fluffing her hair. "Isn't it nice that I'll be close by? And I know your name now." As the footman assisted her into the carriage, Efran swayed in the saddle, on the verge of passing out.

But he was able to turn Kraken aside for Cyneheard to load her bags into the carriage and shut the door. Efran wet his lips and looked around to say, "Stephanos, get the rest of the feed bags distributed. Connor, you're in charge of her escort to the Lands, including those who have the bags. Take her up to DeWitt."

"Yes, Captain," he said, saluting. While the remainder of Wissowa's gold was being loaded onto horses, Whitgift woke up to go get Podro. By the time he brought him around front in his new leather bridle, the street had cleared. Even Shaffer had vanished.

Whitgift stopped beside the Captain, who was talking to two other men. They four, and their horses, were the only ones left in the street. Turning to look down at him, the Captain asked, "Have you got everything of yours out, Whitgift?"

"All but the food I just bought," he murmured.

"Go pack it up; we'll wait. But hurry," Efran said, still rattled by his latest brush with Wissowa.

"Yes, Captain." Whitgift ran into his abandoned shop, then into the back, to gather up all the parcels he had brought home yesterday. These he stuffed into a canvas bag, along with a few random pieces of kitchenware. On his way back out front, he paused at the counter, remembering his payment box. When he lifted it out, he was surprised at the weight. Opening it, he discovered at least twenty royals. Even though he hadn't asked Lady Wissowa for payment, apparently she decided to render it anyway. So he stuffed that into his bag as well.

Bringing this out front, he found the three men waiting on their horses. He paused beside Podro in remembering, "The horse I rode up on!--ah, Munck--"

One of the men said, "He was loaded up with a feed bag—a real one, I understand, of oats."

"Yes, that's for Podro," Whitgift said, patting his friend before jumping up on his back.

"It'll be returned to you. Let's go," the Captain said. "Oh, Whitgift, this is Routh and Youshock. Whitgift's from Gerdts; decided to become a notary because of Ryal's visits to their village."

Youshock grinned at him. "I'm from Guerry myself; it was Lady Marguerite's Hartshough and his need of cheeses that got me to the Lands."

"Explain that," Whitgift demanded. So for the whole ride down, the Captain did not lead as fast as he intended because Youshock was narrating and his listeners were laughing.

When they arrived back at the fortress hill, Efran dismissed his men and told Whitgift, "Go on up to the workroom; I believe DeWitt already has your post assigned. I'm going to hide," he finished in a whisper.

Whitgift trotted up the stairs, chuckling. He felt himself the only man safe from Lady Wissowa's attacks and affections, both.

He found the workroom a cauldron of activity, what with sorting out her situation. But the administrator spotted the new notary, and gestured him over. "All right, Whitgift, your station will be the Last Road Notary Shop just north of the new barracks out there. It turns out to not be on the Last Road, but we assigned the name before we realized that. Anyway, all your supplies and personal effects have been taken there. Verrin? Yes, escort Whitgift to his shop, please. And help him get set up."

"Yes, Administrator." Verrin saluted.

Whitgift tried to tell him how appreciative he was of the opportunity, but there were three other people talking to him at the same time, so DeWitt could only nod.

Whitgift went downstairs with Verrin, who asked, "Have you got your horse here? It's quite a ways."

"Yes, he should still be in the courtyard," Whitgift said, clutching his bag of food, utensils, and money box.

"That's good, then," Verrin said.

Stepping into the courtyard, Whitgift gazed at twilight spreading from the west. *I'm in the Abbey Lands with Captain Efran and Notary Ryal*, he told himself, but himself thought he was lying. Verrin said, "We might want to get a move on."

"Oh. Yes." Whitgift jumped up on Podro's back with his bag, and Verrin directed him down the new switchback, then east on Chapel Road past the gates of the last wall. They turned down a dirt road beside the new barracks. Behind it sat a newly built structure with a sign that read, "Last Road Notary Shop." There was even a large fenced yard at the rear with a two-stall stable and a one-horse cart. (The Fortress was working hard to attract new notaries, most of whom had to occasionally travel.)

Verrin had the keys to unlock the front door, and Whitgift walked in as if dreaming. His satchel, book of the Law, and bag of supplies were here, and when he went around back to stable Podro, he found the bag of oats and several buckets of water in one stall. Thus Whitgift got his pal situated for the night, then returned to the shop.

With twilight deepening, Verrin helped get him a fire started in the oven from which to light lanterns. Then residents, seeing the shop lit up, began forming a line at the door. And Whitgift had the surreal experience of starting his new job in the Lands at night.

The following morning, May 2nd, Whitgift simply picked up where he had left off—it was all easy work, merely registering new residents on the East Lands and taking payments. He didn't even have to know anything about the Lands, for on the wall was a large map of the land divisions and current occupants, with spaces to add more.

Once he had taken care of the early customers, however, he closed the shop and took Podro out to buy some necessities. Whitgift bought a scythe for the yard, more food, tack for the cart, a few housewares and bedding—all of which he bought on the East Lands, without even having to cross New North Road to the West Lands.

I will, though, he thought, returning to his shop with his bounty. *I have to go back that way to thank the Captain, and tell Lord Ryal where I am.*

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Chapter 20

That morning, Wissowa was having a less felicitous start to her Lands' residency. After having slept poorly in her luxury suite at The Lands' Best Inn, she found herself unable to order a carriage to get up to the fortress at the top of the hill. The doorman apologized profusely: "It's the carriage services, Lady, that are reluctant to take customers merely up and down the hill unless the Fortress orders it."

"Why is that?" she asked, trying to focus on him in the early midmorning.

"For what a customer will pay for such a short trip, it's not worth the effort to ready the carriage," the doorman said sadly. "One would think they'd have a greater spirit of public service, but no—they'll only do that for the Fortress because of the volume of business they provide."

"I'll pay them five royals," she said, used to doling out that much at a time by now.

"I'm afraid they'll want to see it, first," he said, meaning, *he* wanted to see it first. He couldn't afford to get on the services' wrong side by making promises which he couldn't fulfill.

"It's all *up there*," she said, pointing to the hilltop.

He regarded her distress before catching sight of a cart advancing to the switchback from Main. "Ho! Ho there! Wait a moment! We have a lady in need of a ride," he called, waving frantically, and the driver stopped.

The doorman took the lady's hand and placed another at her back to compel her toward the cart. "That's Firmin's driver Stukeley; he'll carry you up."

Finding herself propelled to the vehicle, she was helpless as the doorman picked up her foot to place it on the wheel hub while the gap-toothed driver leaned over to pull on her hand. She was then sitting amidst bushels of vegetables as the driver tipped his hat to her and began chatting about the weather. Meanwhile, the cart began up the switchback between tree branches that tried to investigate her hair and chest. She slapped them away.

Rolling up the switchback levels, she told herself, *I've endured worse these last few days. I'll survive.*

"You must be the boy's mother, eh?" Stukeley said.

"What?" she blinked.

"The new boy, with the white hair. He's campin' out in those woods hilltop. I hear the men talkin' 'bout how the Captain's tryin' to get 'im to come out," the driver informed her.

"Oh," she said, rattling along with the vegetables.

About this time, Efran was sitting in the workroom with his feet on the table, regarding the faerie tree and wondering how he'd survive Wissowa's presence on the Lands, or ideally, avoid her. He looked to the doorway as Henris entered, saluting. "Captain, the tutor Mistress Hazeldene says that Isreal hasn't shown up for class."

DeWitt and Estes looked up in concern, and Efran slowly lowered his feet to the floor. Standing, he asked, “Is she in the classroom?”

“Yes, Captain, with all the other children,” Henris replied.

So Efran went out to trot down the stairway followed by Henris, turning off in the lower corridor toward the classroom. Both of them narrowly missed Wissowa, who was being escorted up the corridor toward the stairs.

At the door of the classroom, Efran looked in to see that no, Isreal wasn't here. The children and the tutor were attentive as he asked them, “Is Isreal still in your quarters? Is he sick?” Several of the boys shook their heads, and he exhaled in dismay. “Well—did anyone see him this morning?”

Alcund said reluctantly, “I saw him going out through the gate toward the woods.”

“This morning?” Efran asked, and the boy nodded. “All right, carry on.” Efran patted the door frame as he turned out.

Following him onto the back grounds, Henris asked, “May I attend you, Captain?”

Efran hesitated. He didn't want to spook Isreal, regardless of why he came out here. “Yes, but—stay behind me about twenty paces.”

“Yes, sir,” Henris acknowledged.

They came to the gate, where Efran glanced aside at the repairs underway on the cell barracks. He opened the gate to stride toward the woods with Henris precisely twenty paces behind. Lieutenant Wyeth, leading one of the sparring groups, paused to note the Captain's entry into the trees. As he obviously had a man with him, Wyeth let him pass, but—he and some of the other soldiers were noting the number of men in the woods who were not of the army, nor the Fortress.

Entering the dimness of the trees, Efran paused to look and listen, scanning the grounds and occasionally the canopy above. He walked on for a little while, then began quietly calling, “Isreal? Isreal.”

The undergrowth at his right parted for two figures to emerge: Isreal and Donovan. Efran looked between them, his throat constricted. Donovan took a step forward, demanding, “What do you want of me?”

Efran swallowed and replied, “I want you to have what I never had. I never knew my father, and I spent most of my early years looking for one. By the mercy of God, I found a father in Commander Wendt, who protected me and taught me. But I don't want you to have to look; I want to be the father I'm supposed to be to you.”

While Isreal watched complacently, Donovan narrowed his eyes. “Why do you care?”

Barely able to restrain the tears, Efran looked off to compose himself. Then he looked back to say, “Because I've been there! I know what you're going through and I know what you need. Pia's Polonti are good men, but none of them are your natural father. I am!”

For a moment, Donovan looked taken aback. Then he turned to plunge into the brush again. When the other boy started to follow, Efran gasped, “Isreal!”

He hesitated, looking after Donovan, then turned to walk back to Efran. "I will stay," he said. "Efran has Isreal."

Efran grabbed him up to shake him and carry him away on his arm. They caught up to Henris, who was blinking back tears himself, having come a bit closer than twenty paces. Efran clapped him on the shoulder, then hefted Isreal to ask, "What—did you go in the woods to find him?"

Holding Efran's neck, Isreal said, "Yes. He watches us from the trees sometimes. I went to see if he would come out, but, not yet."

"Thank you for going. Thank you for coming back with me," Efran exhaled.

"You are my father," Isreal said.

"Yes, and I didn't have to conceive you to be your father. Wendt taught me that," Efran groaned, still shaken.

"We wait for Donovan, then," Isreal said, and Efran glanced at such wisdom from a child.

When Efran and Henris returned Isreal to the classroom, the children surged up from their seats to hear what had happened. Efran unconsciously patted the tutor's shoulder in telling them, "Isreal just went to check on Donovan. It's all right. Carry on." After dismissing Henris, Efran went to look for Minka so he could tell her all about it.

Upstairs in the busy workroom, Wissowa was finishing off a Fortress breakfast that had been brought to her by Finn, who was now conferring with the Administrator. Glancing at the faerie tree, she vented, "Why do you have so many trees growing inside? At least cut it down off the table!"

Finn looked at her, then the tree, and exclaimed, "By golly, we never thought of that!" Administrator DeWitt waved him off on his errand, so he departed with a straight face. Abbey soldiers didn't normally smart off to visitors—nor would Abbey administrators allow it—but everyone knew all about Wissowa by now.

Taking him for another rube, Wissowa snorted as she shoved the plate aside. "Now then, I need at least a hundred royals and a man to carry them. I've got to find a place to live and furnishings," she announced.

Estes glanced at her in amusement as DeWitt was sending off the last messenger with his task. Vaguely aware that she had spoken, DeWitt said, "Excuse me?" He was preoccupied with the papers in front of him, one of which he separated out. Then he reached over to put a quill and inkwell at her elbow.

She leaned back to enlarge on her request: "I need two hundred royals, a pair of men, and transportation around the Lands to find suitable housing."

"Yes, I know you're anxious to get settled," DeWitt said, placing two papers before her. "So the first thing we're going to do is send a team of men to your house in Westford to bring back everything that's still there and useable. Read those carefully, please, but wait to sign them until Soames gets here. Those are identical copies of your permission for us to clean out your house."

She paused. "I'd rather get new things."

"It's certainly at your discretion to sell or donate what you don't want. But we're not doing anything else until we retrieve all of your belongings," he said pleasantly. "Oh, here's Soames. Thank you for coming so quickly. We need Wissowa's signature notarized on both sheets."

“Yes, Administrator,” Soames said, retrieving his stamp from his pocket.

“*Lady Wissowa*,” she grumbled, signing the papers and tossing them to him.

No one said anything while Soames signed and stamped both copies, then applied the blotter to them. DeWitt took one to place in a folder at his elbow while Estes got up for a document pouch to hand Soames. Glancing up, DeWitt said, “Ah. Thank you, Estes. Soames, on your way down, give that to Kaas in the courtyard, who’s leading the retrieval team. Tell him to show it to anyone who asks, but not give it up. They should be taking a large wagon; tell him to bring *everything* that’s not entirely ruined.”

Repocketing his stamp, Soames said, “Yes, Administrator. Good luck, *Wissowa*,” he said. He carefully rolled up the authorization to stow it in the pouch.

“*Lady Wissowa*,” she said through gritted teeth. With a glance, Soames conveyed to DeWitt the responsibility for ‘splaining things to her, then departed with the document pouch.

DeWitt told Telo at the door, “Ask *Ploense* to step down with his file on *Wissowa*.”

“Yes, Administrator.” Telo saluted and took off.

“You’re being exceedingly rude,” she sniffed to DeWitt.

He smiled, unperturbed. “Regrettably, you’re not yet titled here. While we’re waiting on our retrieval team to bring back your household goods, we’ll have our accountant *Ploense* cover what you’ll have available for your immediate needs.”

She contemplated that for a moment. “What I’ll have. . . . I’ll have what I ask for. It’s my money.”

“Yes, but as your fiduciary, *Ploense* determines what you’re allowed to spend,” DeWitt said.

“What I’m allowed—my *fiduciary*? What are you talking about?” she sputtered.

Making notations in his ledger, Estes flashed an amused glance at DeWitt. He, in turn, sighed, “I was afraid of that.” Placing a sheet before her, DeWitt said, “In giving permission for us to hold your money, you agreed to have *Ploense* act as your fiduciary. It’s in our best interest to not allow you to squander your reserves, and so become dependent on us to support you.”

Scowling, she studied the document, then a slumped man in spectacles and wrinkled shirtsleeves appeared at the door with the young soldier. Telo saluted, “*Ploense* as required, Administrator.”

“Thank you, Telo. Forgive the interruption, *Ploense*; we’ll have you back at work right away. I’d like for you to meet your beneficiary, *Wissowa*,” DeWitt said.

Where he stood, *Ploense* said to him directly and her obliquely, “Yes. I have finished the count and recount of the recovered money, which amounts to eight hundred twenty-seven royals, Administrator. But. It is not possible to fully ascertain her initial requirements until recovery of her existing possessions is complete. However. I have worked up an estimate of costs independent of recovered assets; that is, what the beneficiary will require immediately for food and lodging. Here also are estimates of allowable expenditures following the recovery.”

He handed a sheet covered with numbers to DeWitt, who took it, nodding, then Ploense said, "And. To insure accuracy of my projections, please allow me to inventory the recovered goods as they are stored."

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Chapter 21

"Yes, they should be bringing Wissowa's belongings to the hillside storage building right off Chapel Road," DeWitt told the accountant, looking over the sheet.

Ploense said, "Further. I have sent a letter to the Notary Shaffer authorizing him a ten-percent commission for the sale of Wissowa's house. Will that be all for the moment, Administrator?"

"Yes, thank you," DeWitt said, and the wrinkled man turned out in great relief.

Wissowa's face had gone blank in shock. "Eight hundred twenty-seven royals. Almost two hundred stolen," she whispered. She was not accounting for what she had spent, however.

DeWitt said heavily, "Yes, you're very fortunate to have had Whitgift's help to get you out when he did. But I will place blame on Shaffer for not advising you to have some plan upon receipt of the money, some place to store it safely." Glancing at Estes, he asked, "Do you wonder why he didn't advise her on that?"

Lifting up to stretch, Estes said, "It's possible he didn't believe we'd pay it."

"Ahh," DeWitt said in illumination. "So, he made the demand as a prelude to a grievance."

"Seems likely. He's always looking for the upper hand." Estes got up to pour himself a cup of water from the pitcher on the sideboard. This cup he took with him to look out the window, which gave a spectacular view of the eastern Lands.

Wissowa looked over to the sheet DeWitt had just received. "What's he allowing me to spend, then?" In reply, he handed the sheet to her, which she studied without comprehension for a few minutes. Then she gasped, "Four royals and ten silvers for food? *A day?*"

"As he said, that's just an estimate. You won't starve," DeWitt said reassuringly.

Tossing the sheet aside, she sat back wearily. "How long will it take them to bring back all my things?"

DeWitt considered that. "Best give them a couple of hours." He had a lot of other work in front of him right now.

"Well, then," she said, straightening. "I'll just see Donovan while I'm waiting. At least that will be more convenient here than at home—I hardly ever saw him; he'd just come to the back door to get something to eat from Flores, my housekeeper. I miss her. Anyway, summon him."

DeWitt and Estes communicated silently for a moment, then DeWitt put down his quill again. "Wissowa, in your agreement for us to hold your money, you gave sole custody of Donovan to Efran."

“So?” she shrugged. “It’s about time for him to take responsibility for him—I’ve had him for *ten years*.”

“I’m sure,” DeWitt said, tapping his quill. “So, enjoy your time off from motherhood. Efran won’t let you see Donovan yet.”

“What? That’s ridiculous; I’m his mother,” she bristled.

“As Donovan’s sole custodian, Efran’s decided that it’s not safe for you to see him. He’s quite wild,” DeWitt told her.

While she was thinking about that, Efran swung into the room, unaware of her presence. The instant he saw her, he swung right back out. She glanced back hazily at the movement, but saw no one. Then she grumbled, “There’s no need for you to insinuate that I was a bad mother. If Efran wants alone time with him for a while, that’s fine.”

“Good,” DeWitt said, turning his attention to the work before him. And Estes went to the door to quietly send a pair of scouts to Westford. (Before evening, they had returned with the information he wanted.)

The administrators worked while she sat in silence for a while, then Minka entered to sit casually at the table. Estes and DeWitt nodded to her, knowing that Efran had sent her in an attempt to dislodge Wissowa from the workroom. Minka asked her, “How are you? Are you getting everything you need?”

Wissowa barely glanced at her. Then, waving at her dirty dishes, she said, “Oh—you can take that back to the kitchen now.”

Estes repressed a smile at her assumption that Minka was kitchen help. DeWitt covered his face with one hand, then said, “Wissowa, this is Lady Minka.”

“We met a few days ago at Marguerite’s,” Minka reminded her.

“Oh,” Wissowa said, oblivious. Glancing at Minka’s work/riding dress, she said, “Oh, yes--you’re related to Lady Marguerite”--which would explain Minka’s title.

“Yes, she’s my great—relative,” Minka said, aborting the true statement that her “Auntie” was her great-grandmother, which no one believed.

Wissowa nodded complacently, eyes roaming the walls, undecorated but for the cluttered shelving. Minka posed, “Would you like to walk around the grounds, see the gardens?”

“No, I have to wait here for my things to get here,” Wissowa said, folding her hands.

DeWitt told her, “Not at all; we’ll send to you at once when they arrive. It won’t be for hours yet.”

Minka stood. “Come, it’s much nicer than sitting in this stuffy room. Everything’s blooming now.”

Wissowa exhaled, “Why not.” Then she stood for Minka to precede her to the stairway.

DeWitt nodded to Telo at the door. “If you can find Efran, tell him it’s safe to come up now.”

“Yes, Administrator.” Telo saluted, taking him literally and seriously.

Minka took Wissowa down the lower corridor and out the back door to the grounds. Coming off the steps, they paused to look around at the activity—mostly, the gardening crews at work. Asparagus, broccoli, onions, peas, early potatoes, and kale were being harvested now, along with some romaine and cauliflower.

Minka gestured to the long rows of blackberry canes. “I thought it was too early for blackberries, but they’ve just burst out. There were so many last year, the kitchen made blackberry wine. It’s wonderful!”

“Um hmm,” Wissowa said vacantly. Looking over the apple and peach orchards, she said, “Justinian broke off our engagement.”

Minka paused. “He’s—just not ready to get married again. He’s had so many disappointments,--”

“He’s been married before?” Wissowa asked.

“Briefly, I believe,” Minka said reluctantly.

“I don’t remember him telling me about that,” Wissowa said.

“Well, there are many men on the Lands, far more than there are women, so you’re sure to find someone just as nice,” Minka offered.

“Why would you think I’m interested?” Wissowa asked idly.

Minka shrugged, “I don’t know that you are, but there are going to be a lot of men interested in you.”

“I see,” Wissowa said. “I require someone of rank.”

“Rank . . .” Minka murmured.

“Yes, someone titled and wealthy,” Wissowa clarified. “I believe I’ll have a look at your registers.”

“Registers . . .” Minka murmured.

“Yes, I want to see the list of all your nobles, their occupations and net worth,” Wissowa explained.

Minka said dubiously, “Oh. DeWitt may have something along those lines, but--”

“Of course. The administrator,” Wissowa said. She turned to reenter the fortress and climb the stairs to the workroom. Minka followed apprehensively.

As Wissowa bustled into the workroom, Efran slowly sat up in his chair at the head of the table. Minka sidled in after her. Apparently not even seeing her one-time lover, Wissowa told DeWitt, “I want to see your registers.”

“Of what?” DeWitt asked, pleasantly interested.

“Of your nobility. Their titles, net worth, et cetera,” she said. Still seemingly unaware of Efran, she sat one chair down from him. He glanced up to Minka, who raised her shoulders helplessly.

“A ledger listing all of our nobility?” DeWitt repeated thoughtfully, looking to Estes, who shook his head. “I

don't believe we have them organized in that fashion," DeWitt told her.

"Oh, well, that's just primitive. Hello, Efran," she said offhandedly. Stone-faced, he regarded her. Minka started to sit at the other end of the table, but he stood to pull out the chair next to him, between him and Wissowa, so Minka came over to sit there.

Wissowa was saying, "Well, then, what have you got? Tax rolls? That shows income, doesn't it? I'll have a look at those."

"No," Efran said.

She laughingly replied, "I'm talking to the Administrator of this Fortress, Captain."

Before they could spar further, DeWitt interposed, "I'm afraid that the Captain is right, Wissowa; those records are confidential, for administrative use only. You'll have to get to know our nobles in the cumbersome, old-fashioned way: meeting them face to face. Speaking of which--" He looked over at Telo to ask, "Who's out there in the corridor?"

"Ah--" Telo stepped out to look up and down the corridor, then drew back into the room to say, "Mumme, Nyarko, and Ori, Administrator."

"Ori. Call him in," DeWitt instructed.

So Telo stepped back out to point and gesture, and the rugged veteran entered to salute the table. "Ori reporting as summoned."

He looked at Efran, but DeWitt said, "Ori, this is Wissowa from Westford. She's waiting for a wagonload of her home furnishings to arrive, so in the meantime, I want you to take her down to Croft's. Have you got--? Oh, thank you, Estes." DeWitt stood to hand Ori a small pouch of royals that Estes had retrieved from the cabinet.

DeWitt continued, "Tell the gatesmen where she'll be, so that they can notify her when her furnishings arrive."

"Yes, Administrator. Ma'am?" Ori said.

Wissowa was fine with all that, until that last fatal word, whereupon she stopped to glare at him. Mildly panicking, he glanced off to amend, "Pardon, Miss? Lady?"

"Hmph!" she said, sweeping out around him. Raising his hands helplessly, he followed.

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Chapter 22

After a moment of stark silence in the workroom, Minka said, "Ori should get hazard pay."

There was some appreciative chuckling, but Efran's head was lowered in anger. "All that—reminiscing at Marguerite's, that—explicit recital of our one night together—was just to embarrass me, and Minka—for what? To make herself appear desirable? She had no feelings for me then or now."

Stewing, he looked around the table, but Minka said, "You've already ruined her life with a thousand royals. What more do you want?"

He sat back, staring at her. Estes shrugged in agreement and went back to work. But DeWitt said, "Efran, don't . . . let on to her that you're anything more than a Captain."

"I know," Efran grunted.

The men assigned to retrieve goods from Wissowa's house didn't return until almost dinner time. But Ploense was on the lookout for them, so they unloaded their wagon in the Fortress storage building under his eye and quill, leaving the key with him.

Kaas reported to DeWitt at dinner, "The house had been pretty well ransacked by the time we arrived, sir. Even after we got there, her neighbors were going back and forth carrying things away. Yeah, we—discouraged that, and no one bothered us. There was one man who said he was from the notary, asked us what we were about. I showed 'im the letter but wouldn't let 'im take it, so he went off and that's all we heard. Funny that not him nor anyone from the notary's stopped the looting of her house. Oh, we did find about a dozen Abbey pouches that the money had been delivered in, so we brought those back here."

"Good work, Kaas. Did Ploense find you? DeWitt asked. Sitting next to him, his wife Tera waited patiently to talk to her own husband.

"Yes, sir. He said he'd have an updated list on her, ah, 'allowable expenditures' for you tomorrow. He was disappointed that we weren't able to recover any more than we did," Kaas said.

"Well, it was a good effort. Go eat," DeWitt said, smiling at Tera. Kaas saluted and turned away. DeWitt nodded to Estes at the next table over, who raised his chin to Efran at the back of the dining hall. No one attempted to contact Wissowa at that time, as she had just been escorted to her room at The Lands' Best Inn to sleep off her reception at Croft's.

An hour after dinner, Minka was lying across Efran's chest, almost asleep, when he murmured, "You haven't gotten mad at me or anything."

Barely opening her eyes, she said, "We've been through all that."

He got angry all over again thinking about Wissowa's performance in the chapel hall. "She had to humiliate me in front of you all, springing this little surprise that I have a son I didn't know about."

She raised up. "Forget for a while that he's your son. He's another rescue for the Abbey, and if you had to endure a little humiliation to get him just as a needy child, wasn't it worth it?"

"Yes," he admitted. But he was still hurt: "He's too angry to talk to me much."

"So we wait," she said, snuggling back down on him.

That's what Isreal said, he thought--Isreal, raised by mountain trolls who lived in dark, wet caverns and spoke mind to mind.

The following day, May 3rd, Efran took Minka touring the East Lands just to get away from Wissowa. First thing, they stopped by the Last Road Notary Shop to see how Whitgift was getting on. To their surprise, they found that they could hardly get in the shop for the line out of the door.

Squeezing into the front room, Efran called, "Whitgift! How are you doing?" He couldn't even see him over all the heads.

"Hanging on, Captain!" he called back.

"What do you need?" Efran asked.

"Another notary? Or at least someone to run errands," Whitgift said. By that time, Efran had pushed his way to the counter to see that he was certainly taxed, but not panicking. In fact, after weeks of drought in Westford, he looked eager to prove himself in the flood. And although the customers were crowding each other, they weren't unruly.

"All right, hang on," Efran said, pushing his way out again. Minka had wisely not attempted to enter the shop.

He helped her back up on Dustbin, then leapt up on Kraken. Turning his head, he said, "We've got to find temporary help for our newest notary."

"I see," she said, faintly worried.

As they rode away, looking, Efran said, "Ah," and drew up on the reins, whistling shrilly. Minka looked over at two men in dusky blue uniforms riding toward the summons. They were members of Tourse's Enforcement Unit, which was responsible for patrolling the East Lands.

They drew up, saluting. "Yes, Captain?" one said.

Efran squinted. "Arturo?" This was one of Verlice's sons.

"That's me, Captain. My partner today is Colpe," Arturo said happily.

"Excellent," Efran said. "Colpe, I'm drafting you to assist our new notary. Arturo, you're to ride back to tell Administrator Tourse where your partner is, and then ride up hilltop to tell Administrator DeWitt that he needs to hire an assistant for Whitgift right away, whether he's got any notary experience or not."

Pointing to the large building right behind them, Arturo said, "Yes, sir—Administrator Tourse's office is here in the new barracks, but he's at Barracks A conferring with Commander Wendt right now."

"Excellent," Efran said, looking. "Ask him to keep an eye out for what Whitgift may need here."

"I'll inform him, Captain," Arturo said. He rode west while Colpe turned into the backyard of the notary shop to stable his horse.

Efran had paused to look down the Last Road at the empty foundation of The Granary. "I hope someone builds on that soon," he muttered.

"It does feel creepy, doesn't it?" she murmured. "But there's a new shop right next to it," she observed, turning her great blue eyes to him.

"I happen to have brought a pouch," he smiled. So they walked their horses over to investigate the shop, which turned out to be a bakery. They sat at the patio to eat cream-filled croissants and drink cool blackberry juice, then continued their tour. When Minka bemoaned her inability to hit all the new shops, Efran promised to escort her on a comprehensive shopping trip tomorrow.

At this time, Ploense was taking Wissowa in a carriage to look at her recovered possessions and suitable housing on the Lands. After a tense, drama-filled hour, he returned her to The Lands' Best Inn and fled to the fortress himself.

Arriving in the workroom pale and unsteady, the traumatized accountant accepted the Steward's offer of a chair and an ale. After taking a long swig, Ploense patted his face with his kerchief to begin, "Yes, Administrator. Steward. The summary of our difficulties is that the lady does not want any of her possessions that the men were able to recover, and, does not want any housing within a reasonable price range for her reserves. So. Her first desire is to return to Westford, which is impossible. Her second preference is to remain at The Lands' Best Inn, by which she would exhaust her entire reserves within six months. So. I am unable to satisfy her while remaining true to my responsibilities as fiduciary. Therefore, I request to resign." Estes had suspended his ledger work to listen.

Placating, DeWitt said, "No, now, Ploense, we'll handle the woman; you handle the numbers. Now that we know what the situation is, we'll find a way to set her up in a self-sustaining manner. Speaking of which—do we have any idea how she supported herself in Westford?"

Ploense replied, "Well. My understanding, Administrator, is that after the death of her husband approximately six years ago, she had been living off his bequest, which she supplemented by the gifts from various men she knew. Yes. Frankly, her situation had deteriorated to the point that she required an immediate infusion of cash or security, upon which she acquired the promise of Lord Justinian to marry her. Then. Upon unexpectedly meeting Lord Efran, she revised her agenda so as to make him her new security. But. Realizing that he was disinclined to accommodate that action, she pursued the cash payment instead." Distilling the chaos into concrete words seemed to calm him.

DeWitt finished, "Which turned out to be not enough to sustain her in the style to which she was accustomed. Very well, Ploense; you've done your duty. Please give me your revised estimates as to what she can afford as far as housing, and then go rest up."

"Thank you, Administrator. This sheet should provide all the information you require," Ploense said, laying before him a smeared and wrinkled sheet crammed with numbers.

"You don't need this?" DeWitt asked, picking it up to scan it.

"No, Administrator, it's all in here," Ploense said, tapping his head.

"I see. Thank you, Ploense. You're dismissed," DeWitt said. The accountant stood to bow in gratitude, then drag himself out.

Shaking his head, DeWitt told the door sentry Pleyel, "Get Kaas back up here."

"Yes, Administrator." Pleyel saluted and darted away.

DeWitt turned to Estes to ask, "What do you think?"

“As to the way forward, I have no idea. But I do know the first step: there’s someone we need to bring down from Westford,” Estes said.

“Oh? Who?” DeWitt asked.

“Wissowa’s housekeeper,” Estes said. “After Wissowa came down without her, and said that she missed her, I sent scouts back up to Westford to find her. She’s occupying a vacant house, apparently with her sons.”

“Ah,” DeWitt said. So he summoned Arne to enlist three men of his choice and take a cart to Westford to acquire the party in question.

Accordingly, Arne tapped Beardall, Leneghan, and Lambdin—all three big men. But as it was a woman they were to bring, Arne’s instincts told him that a cart wouldn’t be sufficient for all her things. So he arranged instead for an Abbey wagon pulled by two draft horses. By the time he had made those arrangements, it was midafternoon. So Arne delayed their departure until the following morning, and the men cleared it with their captains.

While Arne was seeing to all that, Kaas had appeared in the workroom in response to DeWitt’s summons. “Yes, Administrator?”

DeWitt said, “We just got word from Ploense that Wissowa doesn’t want anything that was brought from her house. Is any of it worth selling?”

Kaas hedged, “From a secondhand shop like Flodie’s, sure. But not for us--the cost of storing it all would eat up anything you made off it.”

DeWitt gestured. “Get the help you need to take it all to Flodie’s—as a donation,” he clarified.

“Yes, Administrator. Steward.” Kaas saluted and turned out.

All this while, Wissowa’s housekeeper Flores had not been idle. When she had observed her mistress evacuating her house in Westford on May 1st, Flores had her sons remove all the best furnishings and accessories to the vacant house where they were temporarily residing. The following day, her sons had been able to tell her that the lady had been escorted down to the Abbey Lands. So Flores began immediately trying to get a message to her there, but they didn’t know where she was in the Lands, and Flores had no means of getting there herself.

Then on May 4th—which morning Efran and Minka set out on the comprehensive shopping trip he had promised her--Flores finally arranged to dispatch one of her sons in the butcher’s empty cart back to the Lands with her message. But then Arne appeared at her door to inform her that her mistress needed her. And he’d brought a wagon.

Since he had three helpers riding alongside the wagon (Beardall, Lambdin and Leneghan), Flores decided to go ahead and let her three sons ride down in the butcher’s cart, as they wished. That would allow them to scout the Lands while avoiding introductions to the soldiers. Flores’ sons, Southerners, all wore close-fitting felt caps that covered their white hair.

Unaware of her sons or their departure, Arne and his three men got all the furniture and household items loaded quickly. Before noon, they were approaching the Lands with a wagonload of goods and a deliriously happy woman in the driver’s seat beside Arne, who had listened to her chat gaily to him all the way.

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Chapter 23

Arne guided the wagon beside Croft's to seat himself and Flores in the outdoor dining area for a bite. Beardall and Leneghan joined them, but Arne sent Lambdin up to the workroom to report their success and ask for further instructions.

DeWitt promptly handed him Ploense's sheet of Wissowa's allowable expenses. "Tell him to take that to Rimbault's office—they're just north of Cavern Lake. See if they've got a house to lease or buy within those limits. Send a messenger to us with the amount due, and we'll send him back to Rimbault with the money. Then you four can move the housekeeper in, and we'll find someone to tell Wissowa where she's going to live."

"Yes, Administrator," Lambdin said, taking the sheet in satisfaction.

While Arne and Flores were sitting at Croft's, she was looking around in delight at everything. She remarked, "That's a lovely building next to us. What is it?"

Arne replied, "That there's Elvey's. She used to make dresses; now she's making all these fancy saddle blankets and whatnot."

"Oh, what a shame," she said, drooping. "I do very fine embroidery, but if they're making saddle blankets, she won't require that."

"Have you seen our saddle blankets?" he cried, his broad face screwing up in extreme pain.

When Lambdin returned with the sheet and instructions from the Administrator, Arne sent Leneghan to Rimbault's with the sheet. Shortly, Leneghan returned with word from Rimbault's office that just such a house was newly available in the western section here, the owners having traded up to a larger house.

So Arne walked Flores over to the house, which was only a few blocks from Croft's. Upon her being transported with delight by it, Arne sent Beardall up to the workroom for the money to purchase it, which cost was within Wissowa's budget. Beardall took the payment to Rimbault's to buy the house in Wissowa's name, and was given a receipt, a set of keys, and the deed to the house.

When Beardall returned to Arne with these items, the whole group of them took the wagon to the house to unload everything according to Flores' directions.

So when all was done but for minor cleaning and rearranging, Arne dismissed his helpers and drove the wagon back up hilltop. Handing the receipt and the deed to DeWitt in the workroom, Arne reported, "It's a right nice little house behind the jeweler just off Main, Administrator. The housekeeper and the lady's furniture are all in, all but the lady herself."

"Excellent, Arne," DeWitt said. Estes nodded confirmation as DeWitt stood to carefully count out royals into a pouch. Handing this to Arne, he said, "This is the lady's spending allowance for today. Go to The Lands' Best Inn and tell them she's vacating her room. They'll owe us a refund, but you needn't worry about that now. Escort

her out; give her the pouch and tell her you have a surprise for her. Then you may leave her with her housekeeper and call it a job well done."

"Thank you, Administrator," Arne said smugly.

After Arne had left, Estes murmured, "What are you going to tell Efran?"--about Wissowa buying a house on the Lands.

DeWitt smiled slightly. "That Arne found her a great place within her budget." Estes mutely nodded.

At the front desk of the inn, Arne closed out Wissowa's residency as instructed. Informed of her room number, he went up to the third floor to find it and knock. It took a few minutes, but she finally opened the door, looking sick and hungover. "What do you want?" she muttered.

He brushed his way into the room. "Administrator DeWitt has a surprise for yer," he said. Glancing around, he began picking up articles of clothing off the floor to stuff them into a nearby bag.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Get all yer belongings together; yer done staying here." He began sweeping the room like a harvester, gathering up clothing, shoes, underwear, and even trash into any bag that looked like hers.

"Stop it! I'm not going anywhere!" she shouted.

"Not even to the house yer just bought? It's not half bad, to my own way o' thinking," Arne said, going into the bedroom to check for articles there.

She paused at the doorway, catching her breath. "DeWitt bought me a house?"

"No, yer bought it. And yer got a friend waitin' there," Arne said, scanning. Seeing nothing else loose, he crammed what handfuls he had into the second bag. As she had not replied, he asked, puzzled, "Ain't yer even a little bit curious t' see it?"

"Let me get my shoes," she said. They both looked around the clean floor, then at the two stuffed bags he held.

Soon enough, she had shoes on her feet, and she and Arne were out the front doors of the inn, heading west. She kept up with him by half running. "Why can't we take a carriage?" she panted.

"It's too close for that," he asserted. He carried both stuffed carpet bags without effort.

"Who is it who's there?" she asked.

"You'll see," he said, enjoying the suspense.

Monitored by Rawlins way over at Firmin's, they crossed the street behind Croft's, then headed two blocks up to her house. This had been one of the earliest sections developed, and the houses and yards, while not large, had the superior air of precedence, along with surprisingly mature trees (which had sprung back to life after the walking-stick invasion and the snow).

Arne turned up a walkway toward a front door atop a porch, and she pressed ahead to look. He drew up to the

door, with "#35" painted prettily on the jamb, and knocked. Wissowa held her breath.

Flores opened the door and stepped back, a look of tentative anticipation in her face. Wissowa just stared at her for a moment, then fell on her with a cry to hug her hard. "Oh, Flores! I'm so sorry! I should never--"

"Hush, now. I've made some tea. Would you like some?" Flores asked.

Wissowa stepped back to look around in a daze. "This is all my . . . good furniture."

"Yes," Flores said primly. "When my sons saw your house being looted, they ran in to grab the best of your things and store them in my house, till we knew where you were."

"Oh, Flores." Wissowa hugged her again, so Arne laid her pouch on the table, stepped out and closed the door in satisfaction.

When the two women went to the kitchen to sit at Wissowa's good oak table, Flores brought out Wissowa's porcelain to tell her quietly, "Also, they saw who took your jewelry and your silver. They stole most of it back for you." There were a few details and clarifications that Flores left out here.

Wissowa bestowed on her a look of love. "You're a good friend, Flores."

"Of course I am," Flores said, patting her hand. "Oh! My son Gooch asked whatever happened to Donovan?"

"He's here, camping in those woods at the top of the hill, so I heard," Wissowa said.

"I see. More tea, dear?" Flores asked.

"Yes." Wissowa extended her porcelain cup. Unseen, Weddell slipped out of the house to where his brothers were waiting nearby.

Hours later, in midafternoon, Efran and Minka returned hilltop laden with bags, and also an empty pouch. Grimly determined, she took all the bags away from him. "I have to sort these out, what goes to whom." She had stockpiled a great deal of brown paper in their room, useful for many things, including wrapping. But after having bought so many little trinkets and treasures, she had no idea how to farm them out to her desired recipients.

"Can't I help?" he asked, pressing his lips to her forehead, then her face.

"No, you'll get in the way." All business, she turned into their quarters. When one bag got stuck in the doorway behind her, he gently pushed it on through and closed the door after her. She took the bags into their bedroom to dump their contents in a great pile on the bed. This she regarded in dismay. How . . . ? Then she raised her eyes at an amazing idea. Her birthday was coming soon. . . .

Grinning to himself, Efran looked off, only for his smile to fade again. He reentered the foyer to cross to the western door. Exiting onto the grounds, he paused to scan the woods. Had he given Donovan enough time, or was he pressing too hard? It was only two days ago that he had found Isreal in the woods with him.

No, Efran was sure he'd only be antagonizing him to try again so soon. But—he went out anyway. He crossed the grounds, glancing at the sparring groups to his left and the training pens and stables to his right. But he went straight to the gate to open it and walk to the woods.

A few of the men caught sight of him. Lieutenant Wyeth told the other fight instructor, Lieutenant Nyland, "Someone should be with him. The Captain should not go alone anywhere off the grounds, especially into the woods." He had not forgotten the reports of new unknowns there.

Nyland agreed, beckoning to a man on the sparring line. "Ure, follow the Captain."

Looking, Ure asked, "Where, sir?"

"Just past the oak with the broken limb. Move," Wyeth said.

"Yes, sir." Ure took off running.

Meanwhile, Efran had stopped about where he had seen Donovan the first time. He walked a little farther, scanning the trees above and the undergrowth below. Catching sight of a flash of white about 25 feet to his right, he headed in that direction. "Donovan?"

When he broke through the trees, four people turned to him. Three of them wore hooded cloaks of mottled brown. In their quick turning, their hoods shifted to reveal white hair. The shortest one of the four, wearing no cloak, looked back at him quickly. It was Donovan.

Two of those with him looked to be in their teens, the last, the leader, was a grown man in his mid-twenties. The man and one of the teens were Southerners; the other was Polonti. But they all had white hair, and they had obviously come to retrieve this member of their group.

While they all stood staring at each other, the three trespassers drew knives from under their cloaks. The leader said, "Stay there, old man, and you won't get hurt."

At this, Efran's gaze shifted to Donovan, who looked apprehensive. Efran, unarmed, stripped off his shirt over his head. If they had known why he did that, they would have killed him right then. But thinking him cowed, they turned away with Donovan's arm in the grip of the leader. Behind them, Efran wrapped his shirt around his left forearm. When he began running toward them, they wheeled around. Donovan, having seen him do that before, fell to the ground.

Leaping, Efran kicked the leader in the chest, who fell writhing on his back. The other two lunged at him, and he dropped, feeling for the knife in the leader's hand. When he couldn't find it at once, Efran swung his left foot in an arc to sweep the legs out from under the one on his left. At the same time, he raised his left arm to block the knife swipe by the other. Efran took a cut through the layers of shirt, but got in a good punch to the other's stomach. The Polonti teen fell vomiting, dropping his knife.

Efran swept it up to face the last one. The teen had scrambled to his feet to hoist Donovan up and press the knife against his throat. With his left arm binding Donovan in front of him, he whispered, "Back off, or I'll kill him." Efran took a step back. "Drop the knife," the young man ordered. Efran dropped it.

Eyes fixed on the dangerous old man, the younger one began backing away, still holding the knife to Donovan's throat. He protested in a gurgle, but the teen hissed, "Shut up or I'll kill you, too" as he continued to step backward.

But neither he nor Donovan saw Ure behind them, waiting. When the teen came within range, Ure reached out to jerk the white head backward. At the loud crack, his hold on Donovan went limp, and both of them fell.

Efran issued a piercing whistle as he darted forward to pick up his son, assessing the cut on his throat. In moments, Abbey men were surging through the trees around them. While Efran lifted Donovan's chin, the boy was staring at his father's bleeding forearm. Glancing at the two white heads who were slowly rising, Efran said, "Take them to Wallace, then they're to be locked up and guarded." The young man who had held Donovan at knifepoint lay unmoving on the ground.

As the soldiers lifted the two wounded, several others came over to look at Efran's arm. But he gasped, "Pia! Where is Pia? Who is guarding her? Spread out and search," he ordered, still holding Donovan.

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Chapter 24

While the men began breaking up into search parties, Pia and her Polonti emerged through the trees. Efran gaped at them. "Pia?" It was unnecessary to ask if she were all right; they all regarded him calmly. He stuttered, "Did-- did you see them take Donovan?"

"Yes, Efran. We did not see the knives," she said, troubled.

Efran began to tremble as he looked at her bodyguards. "You . . . *let them take him?*"

The foremost Polonti bowed to him and said, "He wished to go with them, Lord Efran."

Efran stared at him, and the rest of the Polonti. They were not in uniform, nor even regular clothes. They wore coarse woven breeches and beaded necklaces, plus cuffs of animal hides on their upper arms, all in the style of ancient Polonti. Efran put Donovan down to get in the face of the one in front. "What is your name?" he breathed.

"Unnik, Lord Efran," he said. He would have bowed again, but Efran was too close.

"Where are you from?" Efran demanded.

"Polontis, Lord--"

"No. I am not your lord. I am your Captain. Why are you not in uniform?" Efran demanded. More Abbey men had come up to listen, including Captain Rigdon.

"I am not of the army, Captain Efran," Unnik said.

"Then who brought you up to my hill?" Efran asked, seething.

Unnik paused, probably nervous, although he didn't show it. "Polonti come from all over to serve Pia."

There was a tense silence as Efran regarded him. Then he looked down at his Polonti wild child. "Pia, are you their leader?"

She frowned. “No, Efran.”

“Who is their leader, then?” he asked.

“You are, Efran,” she said.

He smiled bitterly. “No, I’m not. Because my word is—and has always been—that *no child* is taken from the fortress except by word of the administrators or Lord Ryal. That is the Law; that is our purpose, to protect children.” Glaring at the Polonti standing around her, he hissed, “If you’re so ignorant of our purpose, you have no right to guard Pia, or set foot on this hill.” He looked down at Donovan to make sure he was close by. The boy was staring at him.

In the deep silence, Efran stopped trembling as he took a second look at the young men behind Pia. “There are no women among you, only men attending my little girl. No, we’re not doing this anymore. We don’t have two camps up here; we are one body. We are Landers. But I’m too angry to think right now.” The cut on his arm was dripping past the soaked shirt to splatter his pants and boots.

Milo came up with ointment and gauze. “Captain, you’re free to take off anybody’s head you want as long as I can bandage your arm, because that’s *my* job.”

Exhaling, Efran shucked off his tattered, bloody arm protection. He held out his arm as Milo cleaned it, then began wrapping it tightly. But Efran was insensible to anything but the near disaster that had happened right up here on the hill. “You need stitches, Captain,” Milo said.

“I’ll get to Wallace in a minute,” Efran said impatiently. Glancing around at the silent onlookers, he asked, “How many Polonti are up here who are not in the army and know nothing of the Law? Pia?”

“I don’t know how many, Efran. There has never been a problem,” she said.

“Well, there is now,” he said. Spotting an officer, he said, “Captain Rigdon, where is Captain Chee?”

“On an errand for Commander Wendt, sir,” Rigdon replied.

“All right. Thank you, Milo,” Efran said, glancing at his wrapped arm. “How is Donovan?”

Milo had lifted the boy’s chin to dab his neck with the cleanser, at which Donovan recoiled. Straightening, Milo said, “Just a scratch, Captain.”

“Very good,” Efran said, wiping his mouth. “Captain Rigdon, deploy your men to take every non-army Polonti here down to the cells in Barracks C—since we don’t have room in the new cell barracks up here.” Squinting at the new cells, he added, “They look all finished. Are they repaired?”

Several of the men nodded, and one said, “All good to go, Captain.”

“Good.” Looking down at his wild child, he said, “Pia, you’re to stay inside the fortress for the time being, until I know that all the Polonti who don’t belong here are gone.”

She drooped, but did not argue. He added, “Nee, Mohr, take her to matron Dorey; explain our dilemma out here.”

“Yes, Captain,” Nee said. Those two—a Polonti and a Southerner—came to either side of Pia to escort her toward the fortress. Head hanging, she complied. Out of class now, the children had been straining to see the activity at the edge of the woods, but their guardians prohibited their going out of the gate. So they accompanied Pia in to the children’s matron, then returned to their play.

After watching Pia enter the western door, Efran turned back to see Minka standing behind Donovan with a hand on his shoulder, both of them looking to him. Exhaling, he went over to brush her curls out of her eyes. His arm was throbbing now. “I’m going to let Leese stitch me up. Will you please just stay with Donovan on the back grounds here?”

“Yes, Efran,” she whispered.

He bent to look Donovan in the eye, who gazed back at him. Not knowing what more to say, Efran lifted to exhale, “Carry on.” The soldiers saluted as they began corralling the unresisting natives toward the courtyard. When Efran went into the western door to trot up to Wallace’s quarters, the rest of the men dispersed. Lieutenants Wyeth and Nyland gestured their sparring groups to return to their lines.

Standing near the training pens on the northwestern hilltop, Minka and Donovan watched the natives, about 20 of them, walk between lines of soldiers to the switchback. From where she and he stood, they could only catch intermittent glances of their descent, particularly at the westernmost bends.

As the soldiers and trespassers emerged through the faerie trees at the bottom of the switchback and began up the sidewalk in single file, Rawlins monitored their progress from where he sat. But when these half-dressed savages passed right in front of him, Rawlins lurched up to shout, “What’s going on?”

One of the soldiers looked over to laugh, “We’re cleaning up the hill, Your Worship.” Sceptically, Rawlins settled back down.

Minka watched Donovan look around vacantly. The children were in view across the grounds, but he showed no interest in them. Instead, he looked idly toward the training pens, so Minka began walking that way. “It’s fun to watch the foals being trained. Have you learned to ride?” She knew that this was not the time to ask him about what had just happened.

Glancing at her, he shook his head minimally. So she said, “Oh, you’ll learn right quick. It’s in your blood.” Donovan drew up to the railing to ostensibly watch a foal learn to follow a lead. But what he saw was the body of the teen with a broken neck being taken away, covered with his cloak. Donovan began shivering.

At this time, the monarch of the back grounds perceived someone new standing with his human’s main auxiliary human. So Kraken trotted over to investigate. At the nudge on her shoulder, Minka turned, laughing, “Donovan, meet Kraken. This is your father’s horse.”

Donovan pressed his back against the railing as the great black nose lowered to snuffle his hair, which made Kraken sneeze all over him. Then the nose descended to snuffle his shirt. The boy hunched down, but Kraken persevered, discerning distinct residual traces of his human on this one. Then the horse swung his side to him, pinning him against the railing. “He wants you to get on his back,” Minka said, grinning. Naturally, Kraken had on neither saddle nor bridle.

“What?” Donovan gasped.

“Climb up on the railing and get on,” she instructed. Since he could do nothing else, he did that. Immediately, he

gripped with his knees and twined his hands in Kraken's mane. "Relax and find your balance first," she said.

So he let down a little, feeling the broad back underneath him, and where he should sit to align with it. Kraken turned to begin a lazy lope toward the back grounds, Minka running behind them. Donovan tensed at first, but something about the rhythm resonated up his spine into a deep part of his brain where hundreds of years of training resided, unknown to his conscious self.

Donovan relaxed, flowing with the movement, and Kraken lengthened his stride until arriving before the forward-facing bench under the walnut tree. There, he slowed to a smooth stop. The children ran up to cluster around him with congratulations: "Wow, that was some nice riding, there!" "Are you Efran's son?" "He must be; he rides just like him." "Come down and talk to us." That last command was from Hassie.

Minka arrived, winded, to plop onto the bench. "Was that fun, Donovan?" she asked, patting the bench next to her.

Seeing Isreal among the children, Donovan shakily slid down from the great height, and Kraken shook himself, dropping to his knees to roll in the dirt. Donovan looked down at a small, smooth dog who had the mane, tail and feathering of a horse. He stretched up on the boy's leg for a petting.

As Donovan scratched the dog's ears, Calix said, "That's Nakam. Come see the tadpoles in the pond! They're getting so big! But the birds eat them, and so do the dragonfly nymphs!" Donovan stared at him, then joined the children in a mad dash to the pond. Breathlessly laughing, Minka got up to pursue him again.

In Wallace's quarters, Efran was draining an ale while Leese held his left arm still and Wallace stitched it. "Fortunately, it's a superficial swipe; doesn't appear to have caused significant nerve damage," he muttered.

DeWitt and Estes were watching from the doorway. "Thank God," Estes murmured. Although all of them had seen the healing that Efran had experienced in the past, none of them took for granted that it would always be so.

Stitching, Wallace added, "The one who had his chest kicked in has died. The white of their hair was from a lime wash, apparently." Efran took another swig.

DeWitt asked Efran, "They were from Westford?"

"Must have been," Efran said. "His mother's housekeeper told Connor and Tiras that Donovan came around once a day to get something to eat, and that's where they caught him."

"We should alert Baroffio," DeWitt said.

"Yes, only, let's see if we can find out where they're hiding," Efran said. He watched while Leese bandaged his arm, then asked DeWitt, "Where's the survivor?"

He replied, "In the new cell barracks up here."

Efran looked interested. "That's a good place for him. I may go see if he'll talk to me."

"Hope that works. You know, if all three of them had lime-washed hair, then Donovan's may be, too," DeWitt observed.

Efran had never looked closely at Donovan's hair. Shaking his head, he began, "His mother said. . . ." Then he

paused. What had she said? He thought out loud, "Tiras told me that Wissowa's husband wouldn't want him because he was obviously not the father, but . . . I don't remember. . . . Yes, I'm going to talk to that boy."

DeWitt asked, "Efran, rather than fight them, why didn't you just invoke your title as Lord Sovereign?"

Efran looked at him in surprise. "I forgot," he blurted. There was some pained laughter, and he added, "There was no time to think, only to act."

Estes nodded, glancing at DeWitt. For Polonti, in a crisis, the impulse to fight overrode everything else.

While the administrators returned to their workroom, Efran went to his quarters for a fresh shirt. Pulling that on, he glanced at the litter of Minka's purchases that she had scattered everywhere when she ran out. He smiled vaguely on his way to the cell barracks, and nodded to the guards Tomer and Elrod. They opened the door for him to enter the corridor that ran along the front of all four cells. A third guard, Fellowes, was assigned to the interior. Since this duty was particularly tedious, the three guards rotated frequently.

Fellowes saluted Efran, who gestured to the cell second from the front that was occupied by a wary adolescent Polonti with white hair. He was sitting on the bed. "Open it up for me; I'm going to chat with our visitor," Efran said amiably.

"Yes, Captain." While Fellowes unlocked the cell door, Efran noted that the lantern hooks had indeed been relocated to the wall across from the cells.

Entering the door that Fellowes held open, Efran glanced around to request, "Chair." Fellowes brought over the one from the corridor to place it in the small space. Leaving the door open, he stepped back into the corridor.

Sitting, Efran appraised the boy who had slashed his arm. He looked younger than Efran had first thought. "Hello. I'm Captain Efran. What's your name?" The boy declined to answer, glancing off with a sick look.

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Chapter 25

Since the interior of the barracks was dim, Efran said, "You've got a nice window here." He looked over to tell Fellowes, "Ask Tomer to open the window, please." Fellowes saluted, striding out. Shortly, fresh air and golden afternoon light flooded the cell. "Yes, that's nice." And Efran turned back to study the boy. "Yes, you've got black roots under that white hair."

The boy continued silent, so Efran said, "I hope your stomach's feeling better. I hit you pretty hard." Attempting nonchalance, the boy leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. Efran added, "I should tell you that your two companions are dead." The boy opened his eyes again without looking over.

"That may be what happens to you, as well," Efran said. The boy's breathing deepened. Leaning forward, Efran continued, "Here are our options with you: Number One: we let you go. This is not going to happen. We're not going to let you return to your tribe with any information about us. Number Two: we keep you locked up indefinitely. This is unlikely. We don't keep prisoners in the Lands. Number Three: we kill you. If nothing else works out, that's a possibility. Number Four: you join our army."

The boy turned his eyes to him. Efran said, "We have a lot of good men that we captured when their armies attacked us. For you to have come with your superior on this job indicates that your band thinks highly of you. In case you haven't noticed, we have Polonti in high positions here, as well."

Efran sat back to regard him, but the boy turned his face away. "Well, just think about it," Efran said, slapping his thighs to stand. "You have twenty-four hours to decide."

Efran brought the chair out into the corridor, murmuring something to Fellowes, who said, "Yes, Captain." Then Efran departed to give instructions to the next soldier he encountered.

From there, Efran ambled around the southwestern corner of the fortress. In the distance, he saw the white head among the children at the pond, and he paused in surprise. "Minka's good," he murmured in admiration. Walking on over, he stopped beside her to slide his right arm around her waist. "How did you do that?--get him playing with the children?"

"They did that, they and Kraken," she said, shaking her head.

He glanced toward the back door of the fortress. "Do you think he's ready for the dining hall?" Dinner was imminent.

"No," she said promptly. "Not unless he goes in with them."

Minutes later, a kitchen helper came out to ring the dinner bell by the back door. Screeching, the children ran to the well to wash their hands and faces. Dirkes helped Calo and Joshua wash up, then they toddled after the group as well. (Calo was three years old; Joshua was 28 months.)

With the sudden dispersal of his new playmates, Donovan stood still. Efran told Minka, "Go on in; I'll be right there." She nodded, following the children in through the back door. Efran walked over to Donovan, who watched in near terror as he approached. "Let's wash up," Efran said, jerking his head toward the well.

Efran raised the bucket; Donovan washed, then they walked across the now-abandoned grounds to the western fence.

Opening the gate, Efran took him to the new cell barracks, again. Fellowes and Tomer saluted, and Efran said, "Donovan goes in the last cell"--so that there would be an empty cell between him and the other prisoner. "He and other boy can talk, if they want. I'm having his dinner brought out." The boy already here would be receiving dinner as a matter of course. To Donovan, Efran said, "I'll be back in a little while." The boy looked ahead blankly as Tomer took him inside.

Then Efran went in to have a relaxing, cheerful dinner, despite having to answer a lot of questions. Also, he told Minka what he was about to do. Although she was not happy about it, she understood. Besides, she had a lot of work to do herself.

Efran stopped by their quarters to use the garderobe, then went out in the deepening twilight to the cell barracks. The night guards Ayling and Krall saluted, and Efran paused to tell them that he would be sleeping here tonight. Krall said, "As you wish, Cap'n; Cudmore's in there now."

"Very good. But did they bring a cot for me?" Efran asked.

“Yes, sir, it’s there,” Ayling said. So Efran went on in.

Four lanterns were lit along the wall opposite the cells. Efran paused in front of their first prisoner, who looked up in wary surprise. Seeing that he had eaten everything on his dinner tray, Efran said, “That’s good.” Then he progressed to the last cell, where Donovan froze, having eaten about half his tray.

Cudmore unlocked the cell door for the Captain to enter. Down the row, the first boy stood to see what he would do. But Efran said, “Ah! They brought my cot.” Sitting on it, he leaned over to unlace his boots and remove them and his socks. “Feel free to finish your dinner. I’ve eaten.” He lifted his feet to spread out on the cot, bunching the thin pillow under his head. He laid his throbbing arm across his stomach, and his chest expanded in a yawn. “I’ve had a full day. You have, too.” He turned his head to look at his son.

“What are you doing?” Donovan asked in a whisper. “Why are you here?”

“This is what I was trying to do six days ago—keep you company your first night here,” Efran said. He looked off, reminiscing. “When I was about your age, I left my village in Polontis to walk to Eledith. It took me—I don’t even know—weeks? I was starving, and someone took me to Sister Therese’s order. They gave me bread and water and put me in a dark room by myself. I’d never been so afraid in all my life, even when I was trying to sleep at night in the wilderness, listening to the wolves howl. I didn’t know that it was the beginning of my salvation; I only thought that I had made it all that way just to die.

“Then Sister Therese came in with a candle, and lay down on a cot next to me, so that I could reach over and touch her. From that moment on, I knew I’d be all right, and I was, because I did everything she told me to. But that started only after she came to me with a light to lie down beside me, to keep me from being afraid,” he said.

Looking at his bandaged arm, Donovan lowered his mussed, greasy white head to cry. Efran sat up to say joyfully, “Black roots! You do have black hair!”

Tears streaming down his face, Donovan asked, “Why does that matter to you?”

“Because then you look just like me,” Efran grinned. When Donovan started sobbing again, Efran said, “Finish your dinner.” So the boy sat up, sniffing, to eat everything on his plate. That done, he scrambled over to lie down on Efran’s cot.

Of course, there wasn’t room for both of them, and Efran was tired. So he got up to drag the cot close to the built-in bed. Then he put Donovan on the cot and lay down in the bed himself (which still wasn’t as comfortable as his bed in the fortress and didn’t have Minka in it). Flat on his back, Efran passed out.

He woke hours later, cramped for some reason. Shifting as best he could, he found Donovan asleep on his right shoulder and Minka curled up on his left. He raised his head to see Krall smiling wryly at him in the lantern light. “Our first night in the fortress all over again,” he breathed, then went back to sleep.

In the morning, Efran’s rising woke both of his bedmates. “All right,” he grunted, shuffling off bodies so he could go over to gather up his socks and boots. “We’re going in for breakfast. Donovan, after you eat, you can sit in this cell by yourself, or go to class with the other children. Since it’s your first day, the tutor won’t require much of you.”

Donovan started trembling. “I don’t—read.”

“Neither did Isreal, when he started going to class here. He didn’t even speak our language—he was raised by mountain trolls. But now he reads and writes, both. All my children are smart,” Efran said. Minka smiled at Donovan sleepily.

As they climbed out of bed and began up the corridor, the other boy lurched up to grab the bars. “Can I come?” he asked shakily, having heard everything.

Efran paused. “How old are you?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“What’s your name?” Efran asked.

“Potton,” he said as though he were already unacceptable.

“All right, Potton,” Efran said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I think you’re too old for the children’s class, so I’m going to get you a mentor from the army. Wait here; I’ll get someone for you as soon as I can.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, sinking back to his bed. He looked at Donovan, who returned a contemplative gaze.

On their way to the dining hall, Minka murmured, “If Donovan’s going to class, he needs a bath and fresh clothes, Efran.” What Donovan had on was mostly unidentifiable rags.

“Oh. I bet I do, too,” Efran murmured, glancing down at the boy.

After a quick breakfast, Efran showed Donovan how to clean his mouth and teeth (which Efran did religiously), then took him up to the third-floor room with the waterfall for them both to bathe. The water gushing down from the perforated panel fascinated the boy, so that he continued pulling on the chain until the cistern above was empty.

By that time, Minka had brought a change of clothes for both of them, and shoes and socks for Donovan. He dressed himself willingly, finding the white shirt and dark gray pants acceptably similar to what Efran (and the other boys) wore. But he balked at the shoes and socks. “I don’t need shoes,” he insisted.

Tying his own boots, Efran grunted, “When Kraken comes over and misjudges where your feet are, you sure will. Put them on.” He did, but Minka had to help him tie the laces. Then she had to pat Efran’s stitches dry and inspect them. When she proposed new bandages, he graciously declined.

So she went down to their quarters while Efran took Donovan to the children’s classroom. The moment they two walked in the door, the children sprang up to welcome him with variations of, “Donovan’s come to class!” He looked around in surprise, and almost smiled.

Efran told Mistress Hazeldene, “This is our newest child Donovan. He doesn’t read or write at all, so--”

“No worries, Lord Efran. He’ll soon do both,” she said, smiling at the boy warmly. He looked tentative, but Hassie pulled him down to a chair next to her. He looked over his shoulder for a hopeful rescue by Isreal.

“Thank you,” Efran told the tutor, then clapped Donovan’s back. “Good luck.” The new kid was baffled and slightly intimidated watching Hassie prattle. Efran paused to note Pia unhappily sitting against the wall. As long as she was so reluctant, going to class wouldn’t help her much. That was something else he had to fix.

Turning out to the lower corridor, Efran caught a sentry, Serrano, to tell him, “Take the boy in the cell barracks up here to Captain Chee for mentoring—his name is Potton, and he needs training in everything from the ground up.”

“Yes, Captain.” Serrano saluted and took off at a trot. Contemplatively, Efran went up to the workroom.

DeWitt was receiving a report from Kitchen Administrator Goyne, so Efran sat quietly in his chair at the head of the table, put his feet up, and covered his eyes. When Goyne finally departed with DeWitt’s congratulations on his work, Efran twined his fingers at the back of his head to regard the faerie tree branches spreading across the ceiling. “Someone tell me what to do with the Polonti cluttering up our cells in Barracks C. How many are there?”

He looked from DeWitt to Estes in query. The latter replied, “At least twenty, the last I heard.”

Efran began venting, “What do we do with twenty stupid, backward--”

Estes said, “No, they’re not stupid, just . . . out of place,” he murmured. Sitting up, he whistled.

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Chapter 26

Jehan appeared at the workroom door, saluting. “Yes, Steward?”

“Find Conte; bring him up here,” Estes directed.

“Yes, sir.” Jehan darted out, summoning his partner Coish, and their rapid footfalls reverberated in the corridor.

“Don’t run down the stairs,” Efran said dully, unheard.

Minutes later, Jehan and Coish arrived with Conte, who saluted. “You summoned me, Steward?”

Estes said, “Yes, Conte. I don’t know if you’ve heard about our dilemma with the Polonti guarding Pia on the hilltop, here.”

“Only bits that made no sense, Steward,” Conte replied.

So Estes recounted for him what had happened yesterday, when they, and Pia, allowed Donovan’s former gang members to take him away, which the Captain prevented only by getting knifed himself. Estes finished, “Captain Efran rightly prohibited their continuing to ward Pia when they have no understanding of our Law. But now we don’t know what to do with them. They have been useful to us in the past, especially making war drums, snowshoes, slings, or other ancient Polonti tools. But this latest incident. . . .” Estes trailed off with a futile gesture.

“I understand, Steward, and I may have an idea for that. I am requesting the day off to see to it,” Conte said.

“Yes, by all means,” Estes said. Conte saluted again to depart. Jehan and Coish, also Polonti, followed him in curiosity.

“Good man,” Efran murmured.

DeWitt agreed, recalling, “I believe he was in Westford’s army before I was. He also never lost sight of his Polonti heritage. Never apologized for it, either. He paved the way for many other Polonti in Westford.”

Estes concurred. He and DeWitt returned to their work while Efran stared up at the ceiling.

About that time, Minka entered. Efran exhaled, “There you are.” He sat up and pulled out the chair next to him. Jehan and Coish, having pumped Conte for his idea, returned to the door of the workroom just in case the Captain took the Lady somewhere.

Efran had begun to tell her about Conte’s possible help when Serrano came to the door, saluting. “Captain, I delivered the boy Potton to Captain Chee, who said he’ll get a group of volunteers to mentor him. But he told the boy that first he had to tell us everything about this band of theirs with the cloaks and white hair—who they are, where they meet, everything.

“Potton said there were only five of them, including Donovan, and no one knew the others’ names, because the leader assigned them all an animal name. He was ‘Eagle,’ Potton was ‘Hare,’ the boy that Ure killed was ‘Stag,’ Donovan was ‘Rat,’ and the fifth member was ‘Badger.’ They met at different places, but, Eagle and Stag were brothers. And they stole a lot from Donovan’s mother’s house, because she was rich,” Serrano said. Efran sat up.

“Ah, the lime wash on the hair,” Serrano continued. “Potton was a little unsure how that started; he just remembered that Eagle did Rat’s hair first. And they all kind of liked how shocking it was, so, they all did their hair the same, and stole the hats and cloaks to cover it when they needed to. Ah, as far as getting Donovan back, Potton doesn’t know how Eagle found out where he was, but, yesterday around noon he gathered all of them—Stag, Hare, and Badger—to start climbing up the northwestern hillside here. Badger fell through a weak spot in the hill into the cavern waters below, so, they kept going without him, only more carefully.

“By the way, I had heard yesterday about the courtyard guards shouting at someone walking down the northwestern hillside—down, not up—and that was early afternoon,” Serrano said.

Efran said, “Jongitud fished him out, just like he did me.”

Serrano said, “That must be the case, Captain. He got away, so, no one knew what he was doing there. Ah, Potton said that they had to get Rat back so he wouldn’t tell us about them, but Potton said they all knew Eagle intended to kill him. For some reason, they didn’t need him to get them into his mother’s house.” Efran lifted his chin.

“So, that’s all I can remember. Potton spilled his guts right thoroughly,” Serrano said.

Efran looked over to DeWitt. “Who did you get to bring Wissowa’s housekeeper down?”

“Arne,” DeWitt said. “He chose three helpers, and they picked up the housekeeper and practically all of Wissowa’s furnishings; bought her a house with her allowable funds here in the western section.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, turning back to Serrano. “Get Arne up here.”

“Yes, sir.” Serrano saluted and left.

Estes asked, “What are you thinking, Efran?”

Still quiet, Minka watched Efran narrow his eyes in contemplation. “I just want to know more about the housekeeper.”

So when Arne arrived, saluting, Efran asked: “You picked up Wissowa’s housekeeper from Westford yesterday?”

“Sure did, Cap’n,” Arne replied.

“DeWitt was just singing your praises about that,” Efran observed. Arne nodded complacently, and Efran asked, “What’s her name?”

“Flores, Cap’n,” Arne said.

“Has she got a family?” Efran said.

“Her husband’s deceased, Cap’n, but she has three sons: Stanwix, Gooch, and Weddell, from oldest to youngest,” Arne said.

The others laughed, and Efran observed, “She told you all about them, did she? How old are they?”

Arne’s broad face creased. “Now that I’m not sure on, Cap’n. All are grown, though.”

“What do they do?” Efran asked.

“For a living? That also was not discussed, Cap’n,” Arne said.

“Oh ho,” DeWitt breathed.

Efran shot a confirming look at him, then said, “Thank you, Arne. What’s the house number?”

“Number thirty-five, couple of blocks north of Croft’s, Cap’n,” Arne said.

Efran said, “Very good. Dismissed.” Arne saluted with a cocky smile and went out.

Standing, Efran held out his hand to Minka. “Would you like to pay a social call on Wissowa, see her new house?”

“I’d love to,” she agreed. Serrano had to stay at his post at the door, but Jehan flew down the stairs before they had even left the workroom.

On their way through the foyer, Efran stopped to get a few royals from Doane’s cubicle, so Minka had to exult over how well he was walking after his devastating injury. When Efran finally got her to the courtyard, they looked over to see Squirt bringing Dustbin to the gates, preceded by Kraken. He would suffer neither to be saddled nor led. Behind him, Jehan and Coish were leading their own animals.

As Squirt delivered Dustbin, he bent with his fingers laced beside him. “Pletcher foot here, Lady Minka, and I’ll boost you up. No mounting block.”

She did as instructed, and he raised her so that she easily swung her right leg over the saddle. "That was fun! Thank you, Squirt!"

"You're welcome, Lady Minka," he said, stepping back.

Meanwhile, Coish was saluting Efran. "Permission to accompany you, Captain."

"I guess you'd better," Efran said. He took a step preparatory to bounding up on Kraken's bare back, and they four headed down the switchback.

Within minutes, they were pulling up to Number 35. Efran slid off Kraken to lift Minka down, then told the boys, "Jehan, you stay out front with our horses. Coish, you find a way to get near the back door."

"Yes, Captain," Coish said, grinning. Jehan saluted, trying not to resent that Coish was given the preferable placement, being slightly older and bigger.

Efran and Minka mounted the steps and he raised the brass knocker a few times. The door was opened by the housekeeper, who looked at them kindly but dubiously, given Efran's constant attire of work clothes. At least they were clean today. He said, "Hello. I'm Captain Efran; this is Lady Minka. May we come in?"

Upon this command, she could hardly do anything but step back and say, "Of course. Let me summon Lady Wissowa."

"Yes, we'd love to see Wissowa," he said blandly. She showed them to a settee in the front room before going to the back of the house, but this did not suit Efran. He wanted a broader view. So he led Minka to the small gathering room off the kitchen, where he glimpsed a sliver of Coish by the back door. Appraising the furniture and accessories, Minka decided that Wissowa had done very well for herself since the death of her husband.

They turned as the lady herself appeared from a short corridor. "Efran!" she said in undisguised delight before catching sight of his companion. "And—your wife," she added mechanically. "Please have a seat, both of you. Flores, bring us the punch."

"Yes, milady," Flores said primly, bustling into the kitchen. Disliking the intimate seating in the gathering room, Efran sat at the table in the nook. Minka sat in the chair next to him.

Wissowa paused, then took the third seat at the table. She opened her mouth but Efran said, "Minka and I just wanted to see how you like your new house. The furniture is nice. I hope you had help moving it in."

Wissowa said, "Um, well, it was all here when I got here. Flores?"

"Yes, milady." The housekeeper returned with porcelain cups on a silver tray. "Here's a lovely fruit punch," she announced, handing out the cups to her mistress and the guests. "The cool storage bin under the floor of the kitchen keeps everything wonderfully cool," she effused.

"Very good," Efran said.

"Oh, the punch is wonderful," Minka said quickly. Amused, Efran glanced at her fake smile: nothing compared to Hartshough's concoctions.

After a token sip, Efran told the housekeeper, "I was asking Wissowa how you managed to get all this furniture in so quickly. Arne's men didn't move all this, did they?"

Wissowa looked at her housekeeper, who said, "Yes, mostly. They were very efficient. Of course, my sons helped rearrange things," she couldn't resist adding.

"I'd like to meet your sons. We have so many new businesses that are vying for competent help," Efran said.

"Well, my two oldest aren't here right now, but Weddell is," Flores said.

"Call him," Efran said, smiling.

"Oh. Well. If you insist," Flores said, disoriented. Wissowa was looking back and forth between them in bafflement.

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Chapter 27

Flores went down the short corridor to the washroom, evidently. She tried the handle, then knocked on the door. "Weddell. Weddell!" she called quietly. There was some kind of response, to which she replied, "The Captain from the fortress is here, looking for help for businesses. He wants to meet you."

There was another reply. She answered, "It will only take a moment. Come out now just to say hello." The next reply was louder and more negative. She hissed, "That won't do! Don't embarrass Lady Wissowa!"

At that, the door was flung open and he stalked out to the gathering room. Three people at the table and one behind him stared at his head, which had been unevenly sheared so closely that his scalp was nicked in places. Flores came out of the corridor around him, her round face screwed up with the question, "Why . . . ?"

But he was staring at the Captain, still seated, smiling. Fingers at his lips, Efran said, "You missed a spot, Badger."

Weddell remained frozen a moment, then leapt to the back door and flung it open. Coish caught him, wrestling him to the ground. Abbey men who saw this from the street came running toward them.

Shortly, Coish had Weddell's arms pinned behind his back to thrust him into the gathering room. Standing, Efran said, "Take him up hilltop." Coish turned him out the back door again, where numerous men in red uniforms were waiting to assist.

As Minka and Wissowa stood, the latter asked in tight anger, "What is the meaning of this, Efran?"

Regarding her, he said, "He may be able to identify his brothers for us." Flores swayed on her feet, and Efran told her, "Thank you for the punch." Taking Minka's hand, he led her out front.

A lot happened over the next few days. Weddell did identify the bodies of his brothers, and basically confirmed

everything Potton had told Captain Chee. Because he himself had done nothing illegal that could be proven, Efran released him to his mother.

Regarding Pia's Polonti, Conte suggested that they be allowed to make authentic Polonti weapons, clothing, adornments, instruments and such to be sold in their own shop on the Lands. There were enough people of means (such as Estes and DeWitt) willing to underwrite such an endeavor, and even more people who were willing to teach them communication and accounting skills. With all that support, Efran had no choice but to approve it.

Pia was allowed back out to her beloved woods under the guardianship of at least two Abbey soldiers. But: she had to attend class with the children two days a week. In exchange, one of their classroom days would be spent in the woods learning the wild arts from her and two of her Polonti friends. At least three soldiers and the children's tutor would accompany them on these field trips. But from now on, Pia was to sleep in the girls' room in the fortress at night. Efran was adamant about this, and would not relent. So she did.

Whitgift enjoyed great success at the Last Road Notary Shop with Colpe's continued help, who decided to take advantage of the stipend to study for a license himself. Whitgift especially enjoyed marrying young couples, one of which was Seagrave and Skevi. But their story will have to be enlarged on later.

Wissowa soon discovered that Ploense's budget for her was actually reasonable, now that she had most of her things back. Not only that, he found a few investments for her funds that paid a nice return so that she didn't entirely drain her reserves. Also, she had plenty of time to immerse herself in the Lands' social scene, to the endless affliction of Lord Justinian. This was a far more satisfying revenge than the extraction of another thousand royals would be. Also, she was making definite progress seducing Bozzelli, an architect with considerable influence in the Lands—more than "Captain" Efran, certainly. And Bozzelli lived practically next door to her.

Flores was a much quieter woman than before, grieving her sons. Surprisingly, Wissowa sat with her for hours, sometimes, just holding her hand. And Flores still had Weddell. He, in turn, diligently applied himself to learning how to make books with Tallmadge the printer, who gladly paid for his help. At night, Weddell often thought about the strange creature in the caverns under the hill that had flipped him up out of the water, saving his life. He was unsure whether it had actually happened, and never told anyone about it. But still, he was alive, and his brothers were not.

As Minka's 19th birthday approached, she kept very quiet about it. She didn't want to be the center of attention, and she wanted even less for Efran to agonize over what to get her. He apparently forgot all about it, which was understandable, given everything that had happened in the days leading up to it.

Also, she had prepared her own preemptive attack on her birthday: She was going to give presents.

Shortly before dinner on May 7th, Efran met her at the door of their quarters, where she was lugging out a large canvas sack full of something. "What is this?" he laughed, taking it to carry for her.

"Remember when we went shopping the same day you saw Donovan being taken?" she asked.

"Yes, you wouldn't let me see what you'd bought," he said, stopping to take a peek into the sack on their way to the dining hall.

"Don't bother; they're wrapped," she said, pulling the drawstring tight again. "These are gifts for the men who listen to me prattle."

“Gifts?” he said, stopping dead in the corridor. “Today is—the seventh! May seventh! You’re nineteen today!”

The scene flashed through her mind of his entering the dining hall to tell everyone that it was her birthday, and how everyone would look at her to apologize for forgetting and wish her a happy birthday anyway--“Yes. Let’s just pretend that you didn’t remember until after dinner, when we get in bed. All right?” she asked anxiously. “I don’t want it to distract from my gifts to the men.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Ella and Rondi and the children will be really mad about missing your birthday.”

“No they won’t,” she grimaced. “I promise. Keep quiet. All right?” she pleaded.

“If you insist,” he sighed, then brought her to the door of the dining hall.

The moment she appeared, there was a tremendous upheaval throughout the hall as almost everyone stood up to shout, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY MINKA!” Their applause made the stone walls shudder, and the kitchen crew came out with a procession of different kinds of cakes that they distributed all over the hall. The children ran from table to table to see which kind they wanted after dinner, and everyone laughed at poor Minka gazing at them all in dismay.

Donovan, his head newly shaved to black spikes, sat with Isreal on the back bench, grinning at her.

She turned to Efran in shock. He shrugged, “I can’t help that other people remember what I forget.”

With a cry, she fell on him to beat his chest. Holding her on one arm, he raised a hand to shout, “Thank you all! That was great! But Minka has something for *you*.”

The hall quieted down as Efran took the large sack to give it to Toby, instructing, “You and Alcmund—all right, and Calix—and Hassie—that’s enough now—take this to the center table.”

As Toby took the sack to lug it to the center table, Efran called, “You all in the middle table, just—spread apart a little for the sack. That’s good. Empty it out there, Toby.” When he did, most of the hall stood or craned their necks to see many small wrapped packages. Calix picked up one to shake it beside his ear.

Efran directed, “No, Calix, those are for the men. Minka wants the presents to go to any of the men who listen to her prattle. So, if you’re one of those men who like her prattle, stand up.”

There was a frozen moment, then Tiras lurched up. “Lady Minka told us great prattle!”

“Toby,” Efran said, nodding. So Toby picked up a package to begin walking it toward him. But since there was a mass of feet sticking out everywhere between him and Tiras, Toby reared back and threw it. Tiras caught it to sit and begin opening it.

Before he even got it open, Connor stood. “I’m a Preferred Listener to the Lady’s prattle.” Minka grinned at him from Efran’s side, and Calix seized the nearest box to throw it to him. It didn’t quite make it, so Gaul had to fish it out of his plate and toss it the rest of the way.

Meanwhile, Tiras was laughing, “A walking stick!” And someone nearby showed him how to make it walk down an incline.

Men all over the hall stood, waving their arms and proclaiming themselves lovers of prattle. So the dispatchers of the gifts filled the air with them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hassie proved to have the strongest, most accurate arm. The pile of packages quickly disappeared.

As the men got them open, they raised them for display. Most were toys, trinkets or doodads that men and children find fascinating. But a few were valuable—small tools and even jewelry. Amid the clamor of men shouting thanks to Lady Minka, Seagrave came to their table in the back of the hall.

Efran and Minka had sat with the children, and were trying to eat, when Seagrave saluted behind him. “Captain. Lady Minka,” he said so uncertainly that his voice almost cracked.

Efran said, “Seagrave? What is it?” Minka looked over.

Seagrave knelt behind their bench to hold out a pearl necklace. In a whisper, he said, “This was in my package. Lady Minka, I cannot accept this. These are Lingha pearls, very valuable.” Although he spoke softly, a number of heads swiveled to look.

Efran stared at the necklace, then at Minka. She glanced at it, telling Seagrave, “That’s our wedding gift to you and Skevi.”

There was a profound silence at their table, then Seagrave raised up. “I—I thank you, Lady Minka, Captain.”

“Congratulations,” Efran said, and Seagrave walked off in a daze. After seeing that he was gone, Efran asked her, “How much did you spend on that?”

She shook her head. “He’s mistaken. You know how much I had and how much I bought—nothing cost more than five or six [silver] pieces.”

Teschner, across from Quennel, leaned forward to say quietly, “It’s more likely that the merchant didn’t know what he had. They sure looked like Lingha pearls to me.” One of the Forty, Teschner had lived all his life on the Sea before joining the army of Westford.

Everyone looked at Minka again with the unspoken question, *Then, how did you get their wedding present to him?*

Glancing around cautiously, she whispered, “I asked God to send the gifts to the right men.” And they looked over at Tomer dancing with his genuine Polonti rattle.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on May 7th of the year 8156 from the creation of the world.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran's Thousand Royals* (Book 34)

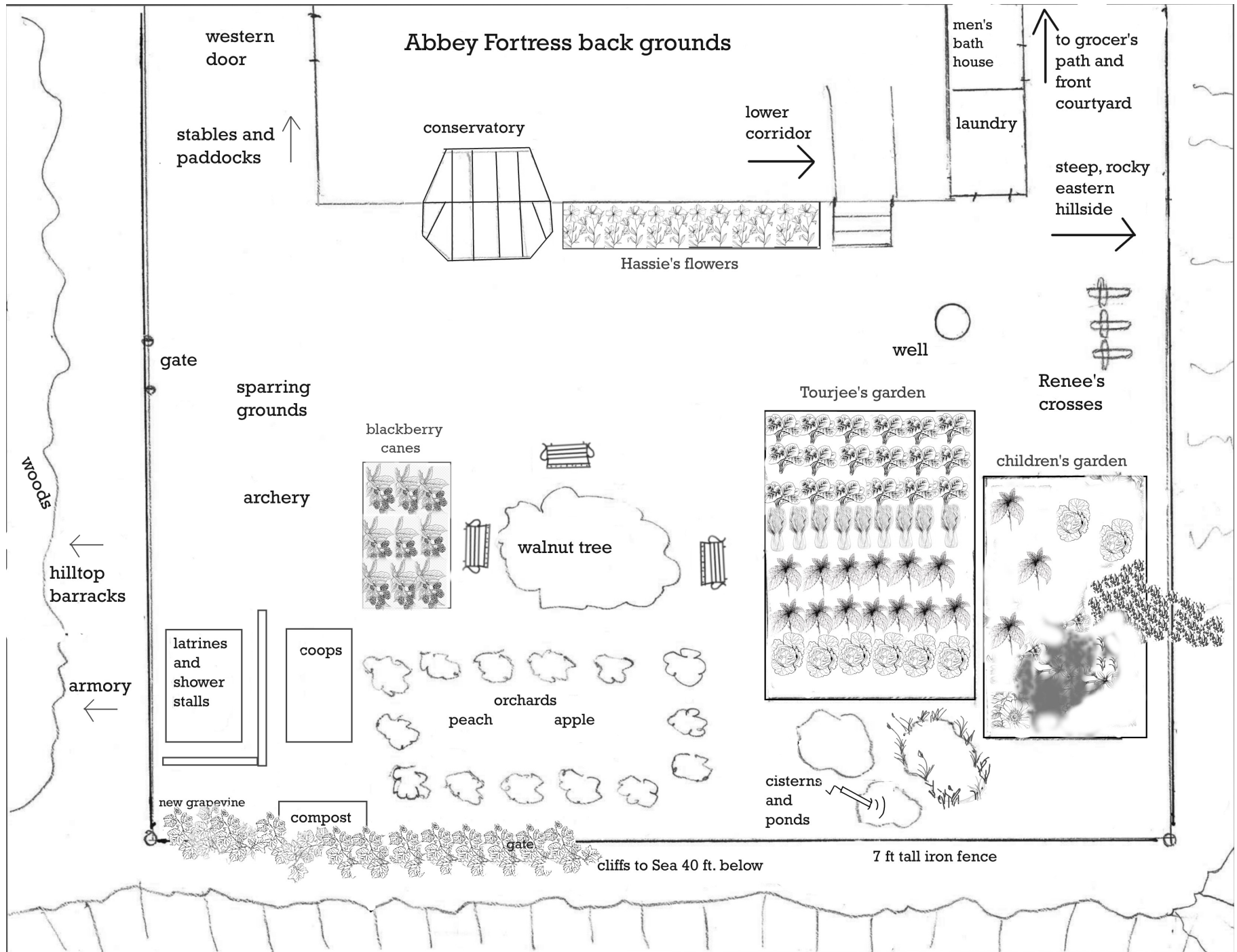
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Adele—ah DELL	lascivious—leh SIV ee uhs (lewd)
Allyr—AL er	Leila—LYE la
ambrosia—am BROH zhuh (food of the gods)	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Arne—arn	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Aune—awn	Ley--lay
Averne—ah VURN	Lilou—LEE loo
Baeck—bake	Loghry—LOW gree
Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh	Loizeaux--lwah ZOH
Beardall—BARE duhl	Lues—LOO es
beneficent—beh NEH fuh sent (generous, kindly)	MacCaa—mak KAY
Bennard—beh NARD	Madea—mah DAY ah
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Calix—KAY lix	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Calo—KAY low	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Canis—CANE iss	mien—meen (facial expression)
caova—kay OH vah (coffee)	Milo—ME low
Challinor—CHAL en or	Minka—MINK ah
Clough—chloh	minutia—men OO she uh (a small detail)
Conte—cahnt	moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee (queen)
croissant—kruh SAANT	Mumme--mum
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Neiryneck---NAIR ehn ick
Dihle—deal	Nibor—NEE bor
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Nicarber—neh CAR bur
Efran—EFF run	Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Ori—OR ee
Elowen—EL oh win	Pia—PEE ah
Elvey—ELL vee	Pleyel—PLAY el
erudite—EH ruh dite (scholarly)	Ploense—plonse
Estes—ESS tis	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Eurus--YOUR us	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Eurusian--your uh SEE un	Portia—POOR sha
Eustace—YOUS tis	Renée—ren AY
felicitous—feh LIH seh tuhs (happy)	Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
fiduciary—feh DOO shee eh ree	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Flodie—FLOW dee	Ruesegger—RU sig er
Flores—FLOR es	Schillebeeckx—SKIL uh bakes
Ghislain—gis LANE (hard g)	Schoeps—sherps
Gores—GORE ez	Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)	Shoard—showrd
Goyne—goyn (hard g)	Skevi—SKEH vee
Hartshough—HART soh	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Ionadi—ee YON ah dee	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Jehan—JAY han	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd	Telo—TEE low
Justinian--jus TIN ee un	Tera—TEE rah
Kaas--kahs	Teschner—TESH nur
<i>kilana</i> —keh LAH nah (white hair)	Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
<i>kipakui</i> —keh pah KOO wee (an outcast, undesirable)	Tiras—TEER us
Koschat—KOS chat	Tomer—TOH mur
Kraken—KRAY ken	trough--troff

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran's Thousand Royals* (Book 34)

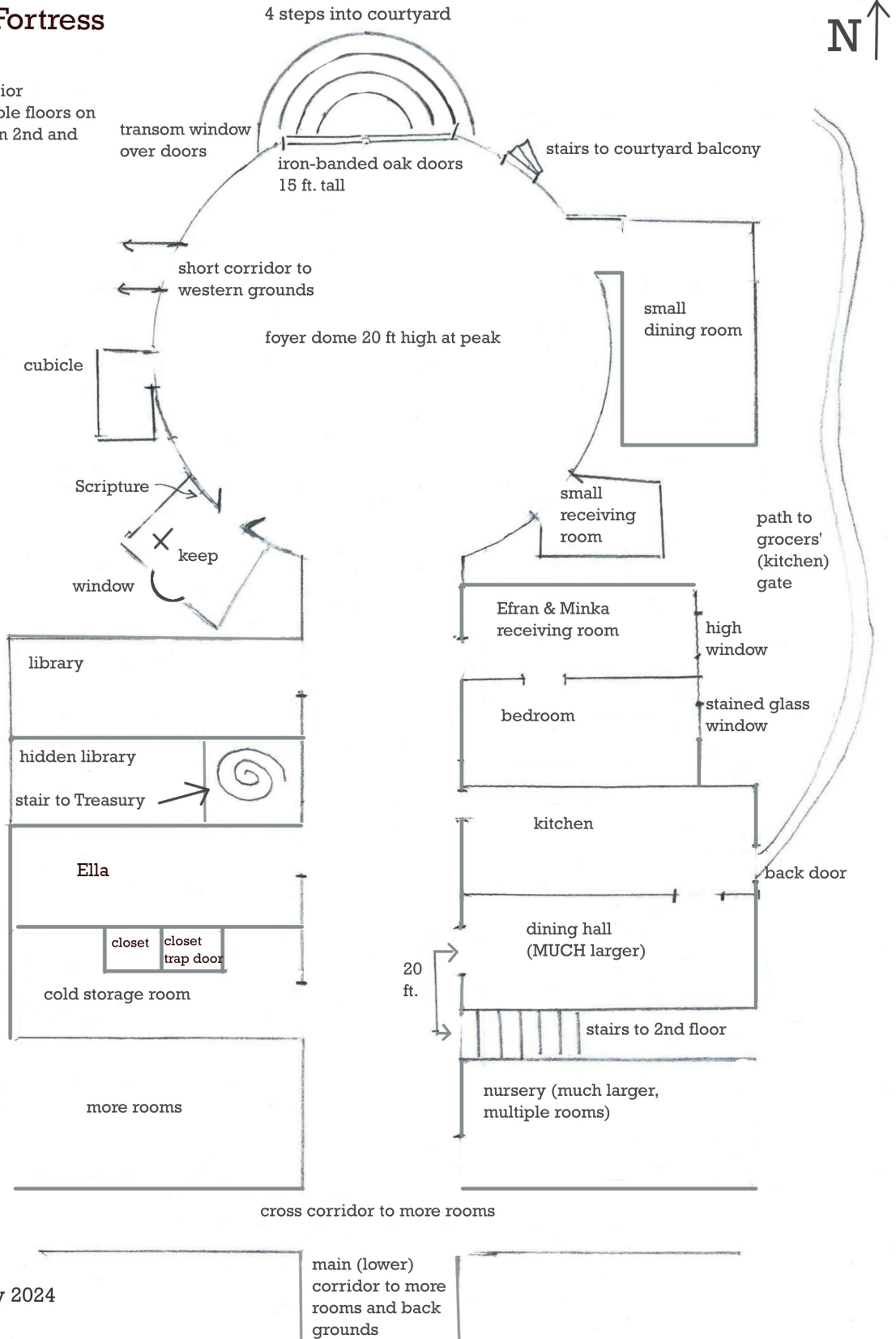
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Tuddenham—TUD num
Unnik—OO nick
Ure—YOUR ay
Venegas--VEN eh gus
Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Vories—VORE eez
Weddell—WED el
Whobery—WAH bry
Wissowa—weh SOW ah
Wiwohsah—weh WOH sah



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors

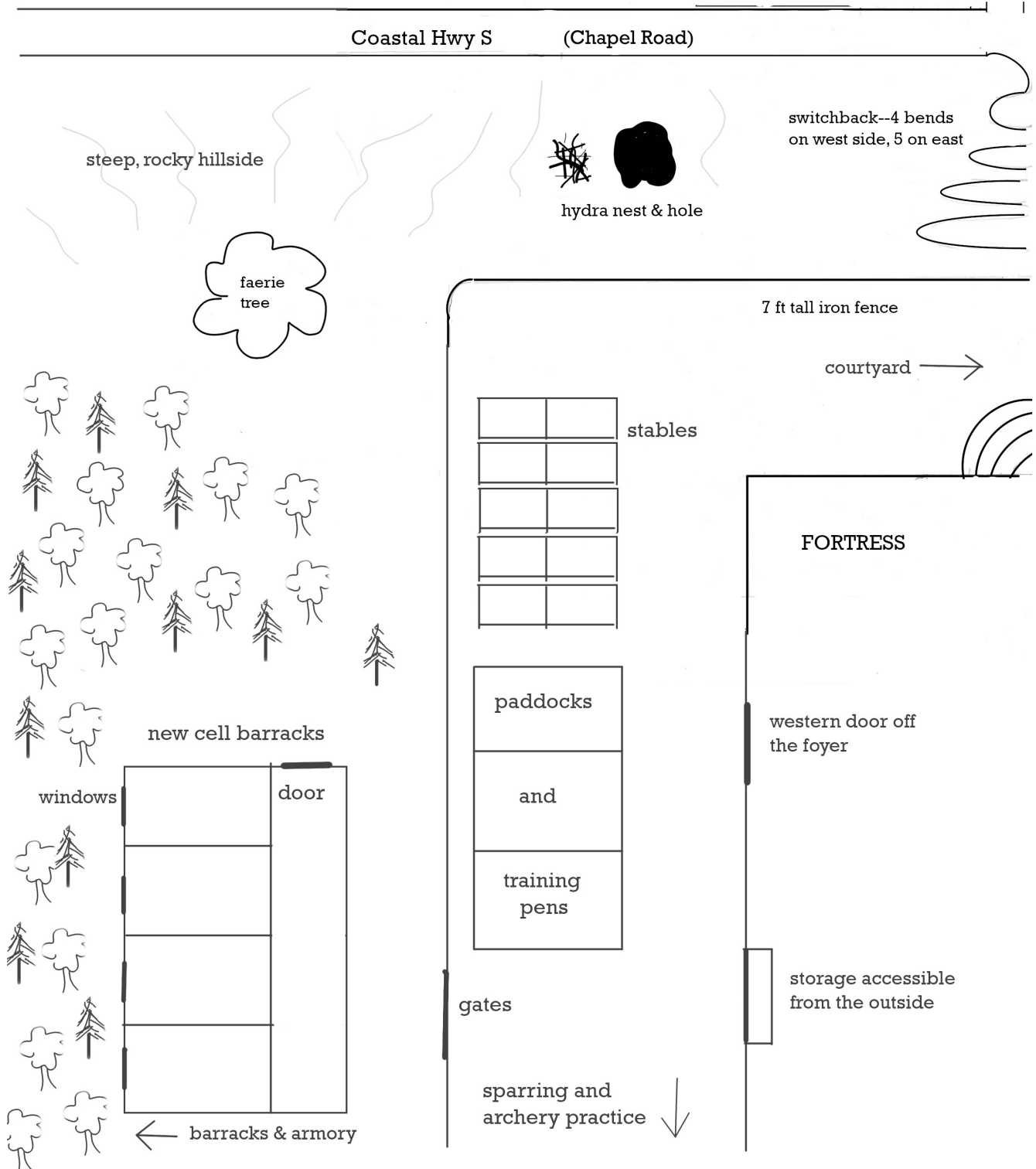


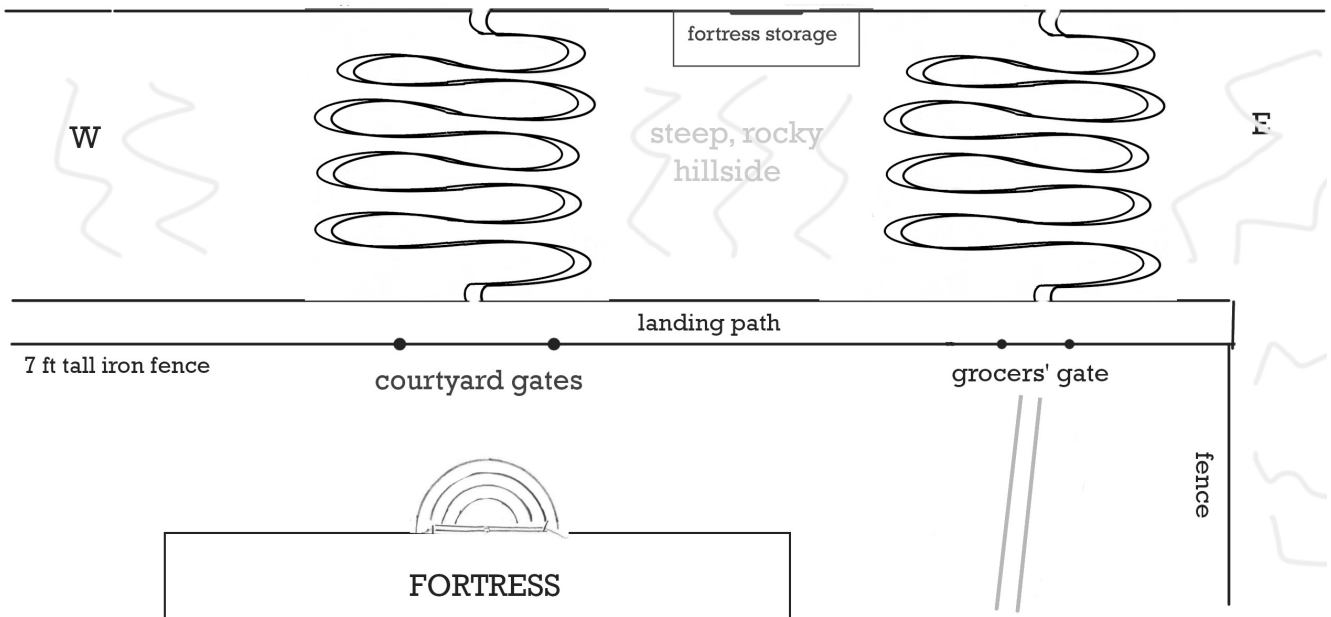
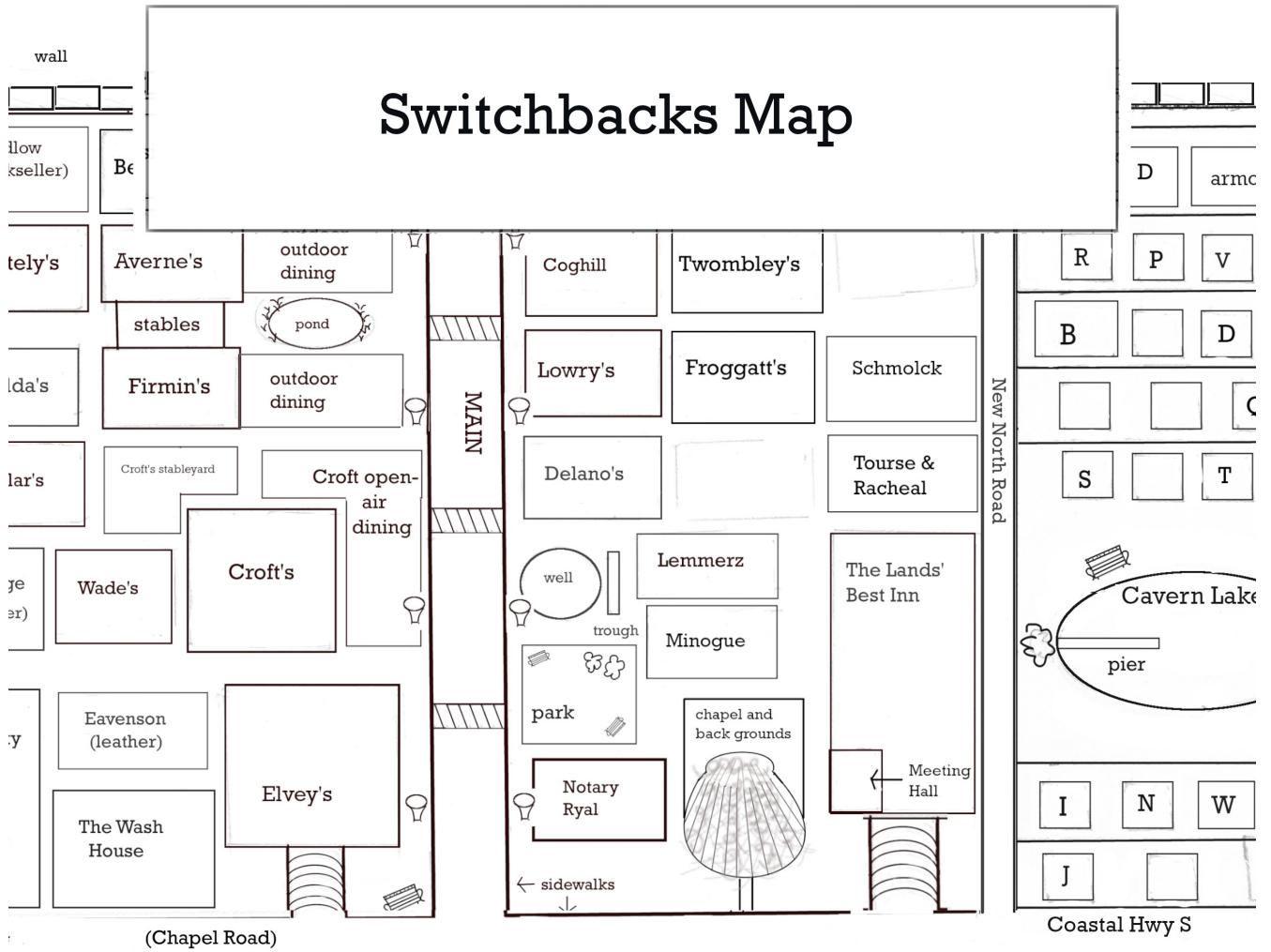
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Abbey Hilltop Northwestern Grounds

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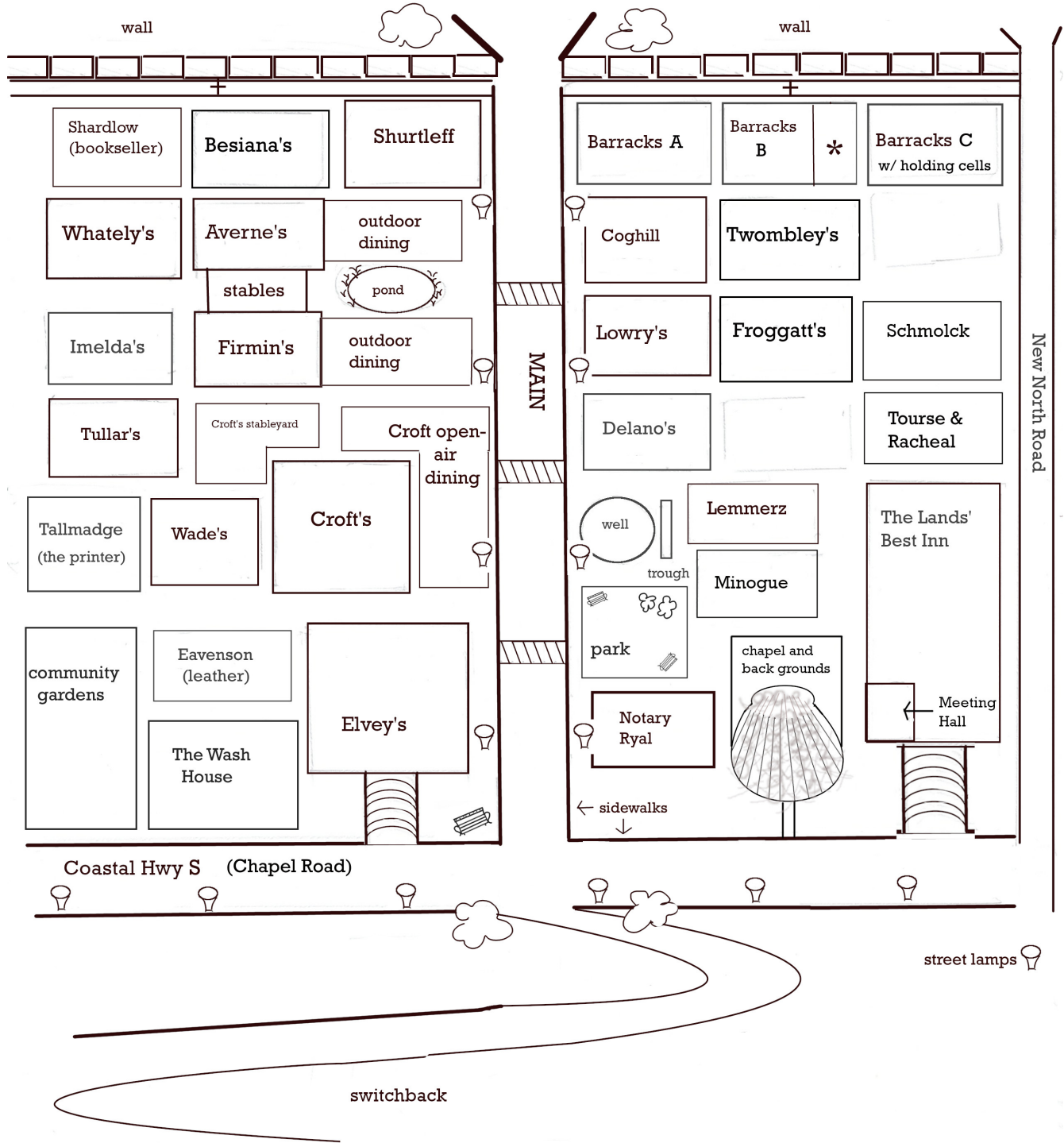




Abbey Lands Main Road

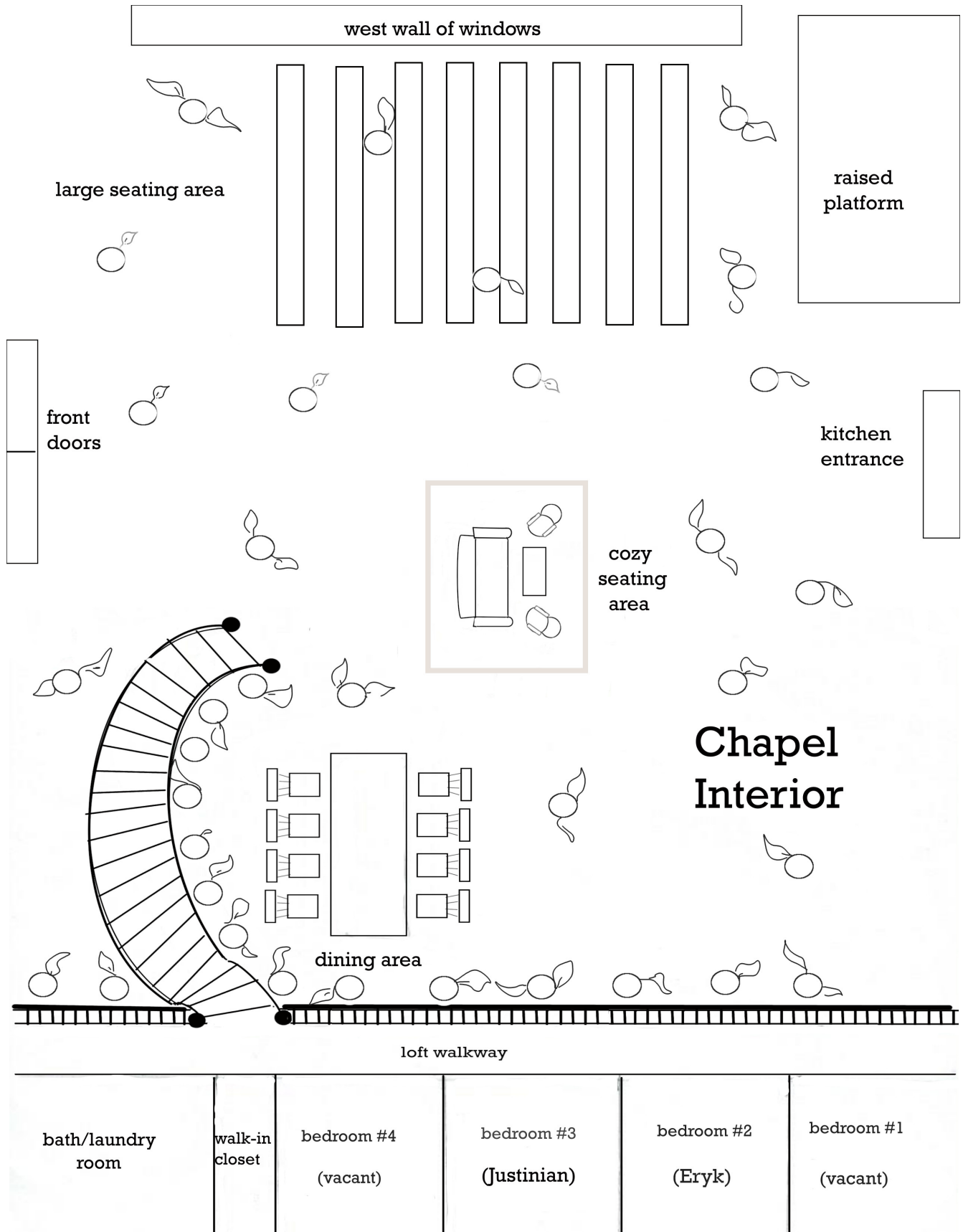
* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



Map 6 Chapel Interior

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large seating area

west wall of windows

raised platform

front doors

kitchen entrance

cozy seating area

Chapel Interior

dining area

loft walkway

bath/laundry room

walk-in closet

bedroom #4
(vacant)

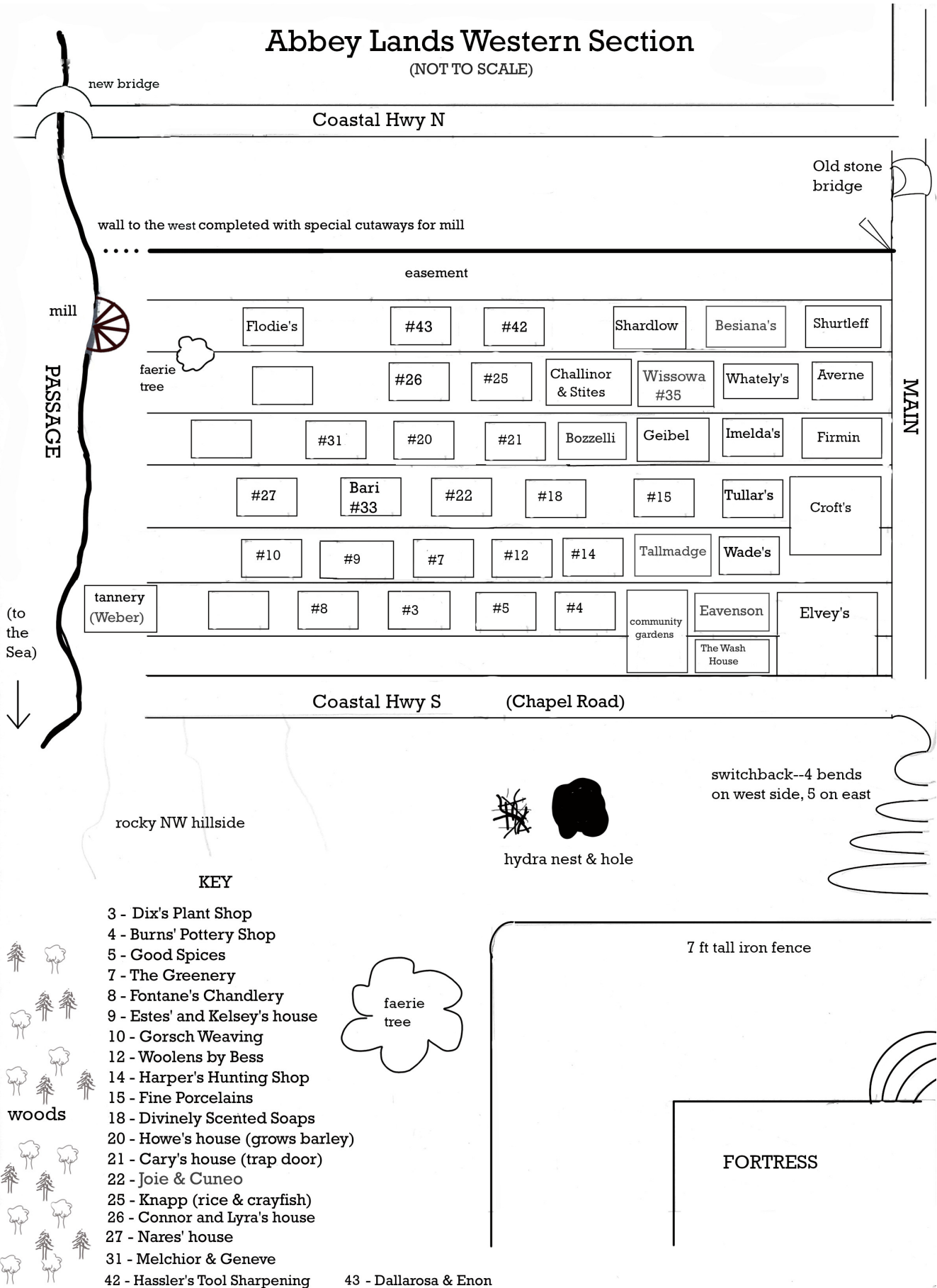
bedroom #3
(Justinian)

bedroom #2
(Eryk)

bedroom #1
(vacant)

Abbey Lands Western Section

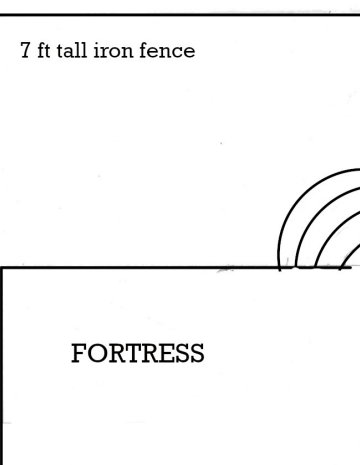
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- KEY**
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
 - 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
 - 5 - Good Spices
 - 7 - The Greenery
 - 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
 - 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
 - 10 - Gorsch Weaving
 - 12 - Woolens by Bess
 - 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
 - 15 - Fine Porcelains
 - 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
 - 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
 - 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
 - 22 - Joie & Cuneo
 - 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
 - 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
 - 27 - Nares' house
 - 31 - Melchior & Geneve
 - 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
 - 43 - Dallarosa & Enon

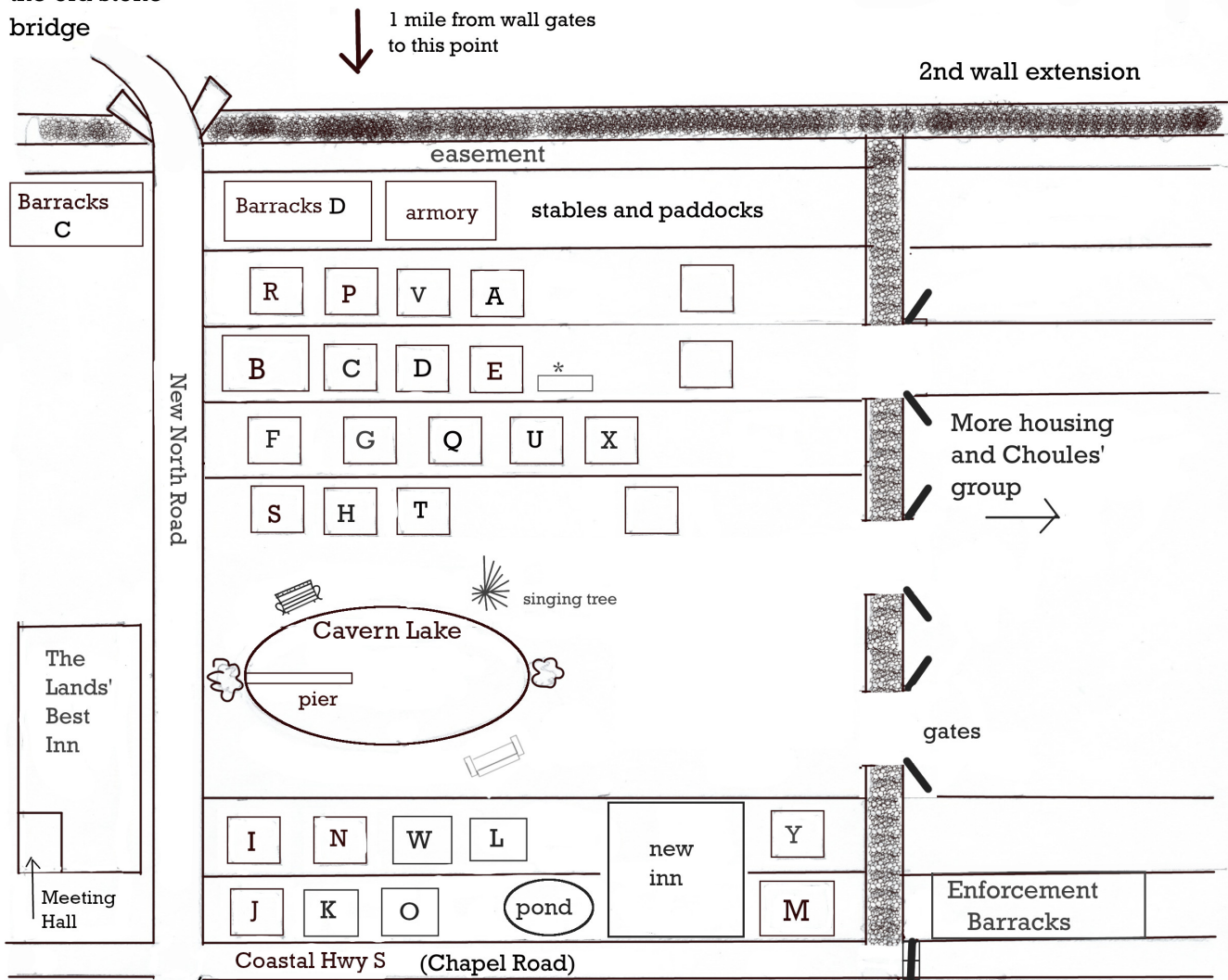


hydra nest & hole



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands



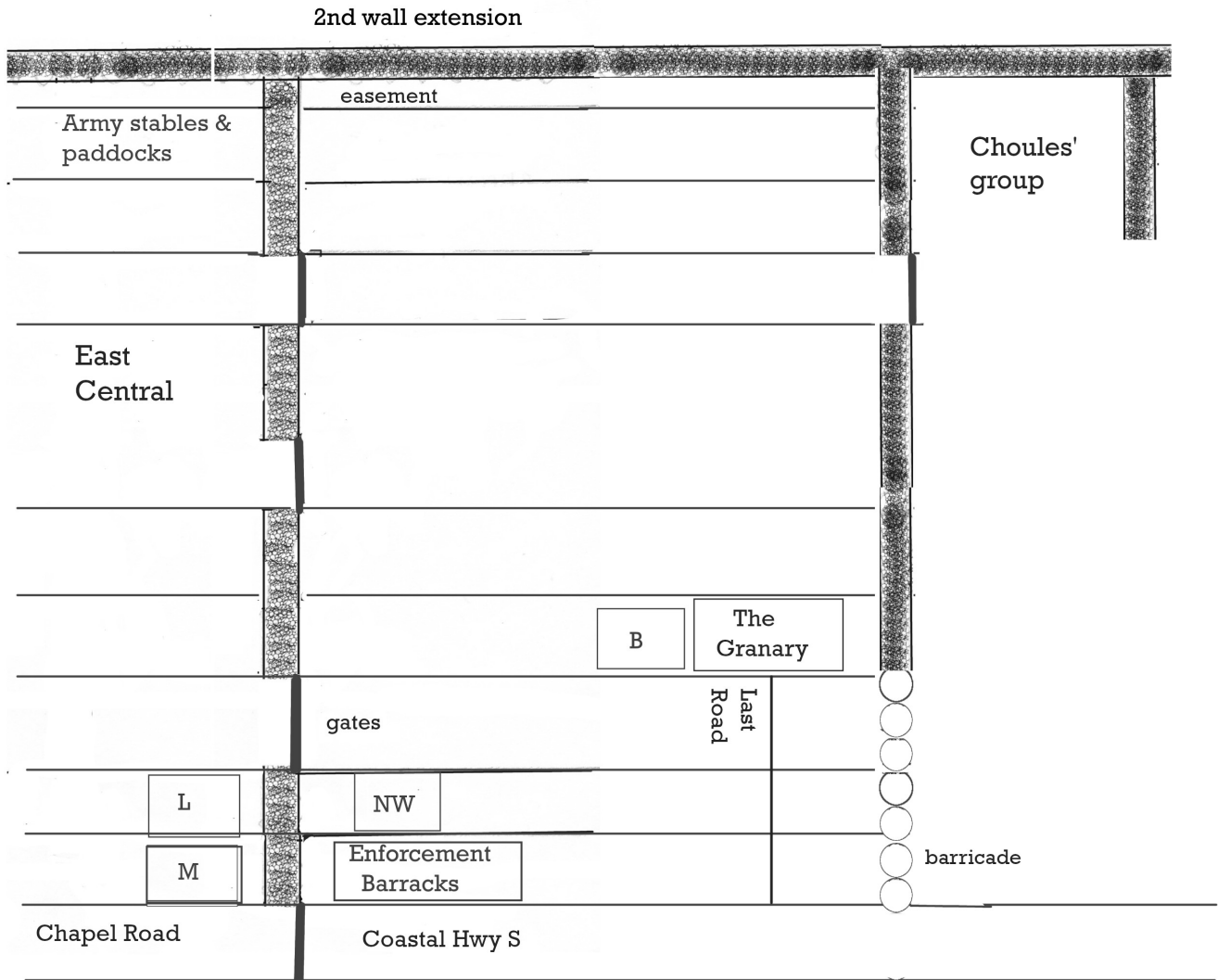
new switchback
to courtyard gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F - East Lands Chapel
- G - Shelmerdine's
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - East Lands Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring & Trina
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry (#71 Orchid Row)
- W - Barrueta & Colletta
- X - Old World Spices
- Y - Laurier's Beauty Salon

* - wagon w/construction tools

Far East Abbey Lands

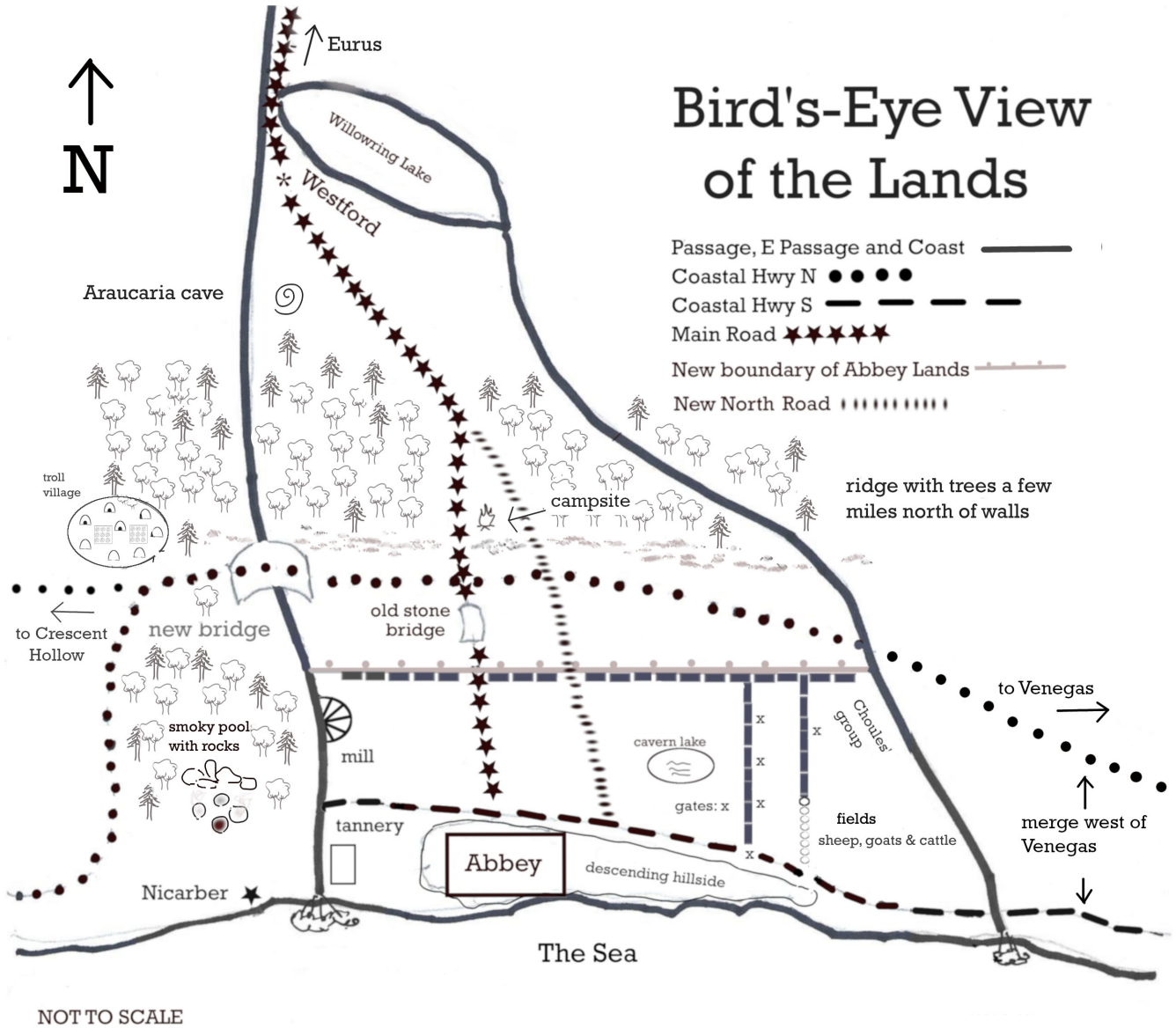


M - Meineke
 L - Laurier

NW - The Last Road Notary Shop (Whitgift)
 B - The Last Road Bakery

steep, rocky hillside north and east





Why do you care (Book 34:
Lord Efran's Thousand Royals)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



This did not go exactly as I intended. The background was easy—it's another photo I took at the grounds across the street from our local high school. Then I got [Donovan](#)¹ and [Isreal](#)² placed and cleaned up pretty quickly (with an assist from [this](#) young man³).

But then I spent the next eight hours trying to find a model for Efran who was (1) standing, facing to the side, (2) not smiling at the camera, (3) dressed in street wear, (4) without facial hair, tattoos, or sunglasses. I finally gave up and called on my [go-to guy](#).⁴ He's wearing a crystal on the cord around his neck, which I've left alone in previous illustrations. But since he's so prominent here, I gave him this Celtic [cross](#)⁵ to wear instead. And since the proprietor of the shop was kind enough to post a high-resolution photo, I'm reproducing it here to show the detail.



Robin Hardy
June 23, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Mad Roodgoli](#) on flickr.
2. Photographed by [berffilm](#) on Pexels.
3. Photographed by [Joseph Okon](#) on Pexels.
4. Photographed by [Leonardo Hidalgo](#) on Pexels.
5. From [claddaghriings.com](#)