




The Stories of

*The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea*

Book 16

*Lord Efran and
the Water Giant*

Robin Hardy



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Chapter 1

Late in the evening of January 18th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world, long after everyone else in the fortress had gone to bed, Minka was giving Efran another Christmas present at his request—a full night of lovemaking. However, very early in the morning of the 19th, they had gotten sidetracked talking, which included a great deal of muffled laughter and some tears (on Minka’s part; Efran saw no reason to cry about anything tonight). Early in the proceedings, her small hairless dog Nakam had relocated to the floor to sleep undisturbed.

“Oh,” Minka whispered, wrapped in Efran’s arms. “I got word from Kele yesterday about the faeries in Eurus.”

He raised his face from her neck to laugh, “What are they doing?”

“Nothing much,” she said evasively.

“What a little liar,” he murmured. “Just tell me straight up.”

She insisted, “No, really, there’s nothing malicious. They just like to tease the snooty and self-important, so, whenever a man in an exceedingly tall hat comes close to their tree, they might drop a dragonflower seed on it.”

“On the hat?” he asked. “What’s a dragonflower?”

“Yes; the dragonflower is just a flower that grows quickly, and, looks like a dragon’s head. So, a half hour after the seed has landed on his hat, he’s carrying around something remarkable on his head. Unfortunately, it can’t be uprooted from the hat without destroying it,” she said in mild anxiety.

“I like that; I never wear hats. What else?” Efran asked, snuggling her.

She rearranged herself in his arms, then remembered, “Oh, dear. They *are* feeding the Snodsbury Spunkles, though Kele assured me she’d make them stop at once.”

“What is that?” he asked suspiciously, unsure of her sincerity.

She said, “They’re shy, sweet little things, never bite or steal food, only—they poop little puddles of slime that clings to anything it touches, and gives off a nauseating smell. Few people know that it can only be washed off with fish guts.”

Efran rolled onto his back, laughing, “Make sure to write Justinian to let him know.”

The upshot of it all was that by the time they had to get up to start their day, neither of them had gotten much sleep, and Minka had not napped the day before in preparation. So, groggy but happy, with intermittent snorts (on his part) and chuckling (on hers), they climbed out of bed to get dressed and get breakfast.

Minka ate her cobbler quickly in order to take an impatient Nakam out to evacuate and eat his breakfast of venison trimmings. Then she sat on the bench under the great old walnut tree to watch him scout out the source of interesting smells nearby. After vacantly looking around at the activity on the back grounds, she stretched out on the bench and went to sleep.

One or two people came over to see if she were all right, but since she was clearly sleeping, they left her alone. After chasing a few small creatures, Nakam came back to stand guard under the bench, tongue lolling, while she napped.

Efran, meanwhile, had brought one-year-old Joshua, freshly fed and wrapped, to the second-floor workroom, where Pieta and Koschat were assisting DeWitt. Also, Estes had the tax assessor Geibel up to clarify his responsibilities. Geibel had been so energetic in the execution of his duties that a number of Abbey Lands merchants were due refunds on their taxes. To pay for those refunds, Estes cut half of Geibel's six-man staff. Geibel was not happy.

Efran sat in his customary chair to watch all of this for a little while, blinking. Then he slid from the chair to lie on the floor under the table with Joshua and fall right to sleep. Joshua thought this was great at first, but when Papapa wouldn't wake up to play, Joshua went exploring under the table, patting the feet of everyone standing or sitting around it.

When Papapa slept on, Joshua went exploring around the whole room. Koschat was the only one to notice the small adventurer creeping out the door of the workroom (as the sentry stationed there had departed on an errand). So Koschat went over to pick him up and hold him on one arm while working out calculations on a counting board. That was fine until Joshua evidenced the need of a clean wrap, upon which Koschat gave him to the new sentry with instructions to take him down to the nursery.

Shortly thereafter, Efran woke, looked around, and started up so abruptly that the entire table, anchored by a tree growing through it, rocked. As Efran lurched to his feet holding his head, Koschat, eyes on the counting board, said, "He's in the nursery, Captain."

"Thank you," Efran uttered, letting go of the table to stagger to the door. After reclaiming his indignant son from the nursery downstairs, Efran looked out the back door to see Minka stretched out on the bench, asleep. Quietly laughing, he went over to sit on the bench at her feet, placing Joshua on the ground with Nakam.

A few minutes later, Minka woke. When she sat up to see Efran beside her, she scooted over to lean into him, murmuring, "That was fun."

He laughed, reaching down to remove the grass from Joshua's mouth. "We'll have to do that again when Joshua is old enough to take Nakam out and bring us breakfast in bed."

"I guess so," she said, watching the baby scoot over to a better patch of grass to begin pulling it up.

Mohr approached, saluting. "Captain, Lady Trina and Folliott are waiting in a carriage at the wall gates. Her father Bowring is with them. The guards don't know whether to let them in or not."

Efran muttered under his breath while Minka laughed, then he told Mohr, "Let them in; she knows the way to Elvey's."

"Yes, Captain. Good morning, Lady Minka," Mohr said. She smiled sleepily at him and he trotted off.

"Have you eaten? I'm hungry," Efran told her, checking the midmorning sun.

"I'm not sure," she said, still not quite awake.

Efran suggested, "Then let's go see what the kitchen has."

They rose with their respective babies to go to the dining hall. Efran had told her that it was fine to bring the dog in there as long as he stayed on the floor, so she did. And Dobell brought them plates of venison and rutabaga with parsnips, onion and cheese, with mild ales. Efran put Joshua on his knee to feed him bites of everything. He was suspicious of the rutabaga and rejected the onion outright, but ate enough to make him sleepy.

As they were finishing, one of the door guards, Ellor, came up to salute. "Captain, Reinagle is at the gates."

Efran squinted, asking, "With how many men?"

"Ah, three bodyguards, Captain," Ellor said.

"What does he want?" Efran asked, finishing the ale.

Hesitantly, Ellor said, "He's giving out the impression of wanting to live here, Captain."

"Does he know that his ex-wife and his son just came down?" Efran asked. When Ellor raised his shoulders in ignorance, Efran conceded, "I see I'd better come talk to him." He looked at the wee adventurer asleep on his lap, then told Minka, "I'll put him in the nursery and go on down."

She stood to collect Nakam from his walkabout begging at tables. "Come wake me when you're done," she murmured. He kissed her head and turned out.

Efran collected a horse to ride down the switchback and north on Main to the wall gates. As he rode, he noted the new street lanterns installed along Main with the long-burning wicks. They were not lighted now, but would be tonight, adding another city convenience to the Abbey Lands. Efran exhaled in satisfaction.

As he approached the gates, they were open to allow the entrance of a sad-eyed man driving a small cart pulled by a donkey. It was loaded with squares of peat, with a sign on both sides that read: "PEAT 1 sq. yd. 1 silver." He began driving his cart down the first street off Main, and sold out immediately.

So he drove out again to the stall sheltering the squares he had been drying for weeks near his cutaway bog. He replenished his cart and returned to the Lands with a sign advertising, "PEAT 1 sq. yd. 2 silvers." Again he sold out promptly, left and returned with his squares advertised for 3 silvers. This process he repeated throughout the day. On his last trip, Plunkett was still sad-eyed but hopeful as he stopped at the notary's office to lease a house on a plot in the Abbey Lands.

Meanwhile, Efran had pulled up to the wall gates on the side of the road to talk to Reinagle, who had also pulled off the road with his men, all of them on horseback. They were batting away the inquisitive branches of the faerie trees, which desisted upon Efran's approach. He had made plain that they were not to distract visitors when he was trying to talk to them.

Efran regarded Reinagle's three men, whom he recognized from their earlier visit. Then he turned his attention to the old man, the first Surchatain of Euris in a great long while to be deposed without losing his life as well. "Hello, Reinagle. What can I do for you?" Efran asked.

"I need a safe place to live, Efran," Reinagle said, slightly wheezing. "I have plenty of money."

Efran glanced at the cart behind Reinagle's group, driven by a sullen man who was to make numerous trips in the coming days back and forth from Reinagle's house to his hiding place—not for reward, but from blackmail.

Efran said, “If you’re here to live peaceably, that’s fine. . . . Do you know that Trina, Follriott and Bowring are here now?” It suddenly occurred to Efran that he didn’t know if they were here to live or just shop.

Reinagle grumbled, “I’m not surprised. Traitors. Blackguards. Helped depose me.”

“If you fight with anyone here, I’ll have you thrown out,” Efran said. Reinagle grunted.

At that time, a soldier came up to whisper to Efran, who said, “I’m coming.” Then he told Reinagle. “Wait a moment more.” Turning his horse, he loped back up Main to the notary’s shop. Noting the elegant carriage parked out front, Efran dismounted and entered.

Ryal eyed him from behind his counter while Trina and Follriott turned to him. Trina said, “Hello, Efran. We want one of your best houses. And we’ll need to hire a number of your people.”

“If Ryal approves you, that’s fine. Who of DePew’s crew is available to talk to them?” Efran asked Ryal.

“I’ve sent to ask; they’re looking for his house sales representative Rimbault,” Ryal said. “But I wanted to clear their residency with you.”

Regarding the newcomers again, Efran said, “Reinagle is at the gates wanting to live here as well. I’ve already told him that there will be no contention with anyone on my Lands. Can you peaceably coexist?”

Follriott replied, “Yes, Captain, certainly. He’s not in a position of authority to make trouble for anyone here.”

“True. Very well, but I’ll tell you the same thing I told him: aggressors will be turned off the Lands without recourse,” Efran warned him.

Trina said crisply, “Oh, that won’t be an issue. But we need a place quickly, as I have an order from Elvey’s ready.” Follriott sighed faintly.

Efran backed away with a tight smile. “I am leaving you with Ryal and DePew. You can have whatever you can afford.” Ryal nodded; Trina turned back to him to enunciate what exactly they required.

As Efran opened the door to leave, Challinor burst in, almost colliding with him. Her face took on a smile of seduction. “Hello, Efran,” she purred.

“Challinor,” he said, stepping back to give her room to enter.

Spotting Trina, she rushed past him into the shop. “Trina, darling, it *is* you! I’m so excited. You must see my new designs.”

“Challinor, are you designing for Elvey now?” Trina cried.

“Exclusively,” Challinor confirmed. “You’ll be my star client.” Trina squealed in excitement. “Oh, Efran--” Challinor caught him as he was leaving and murmured, “Your darling Minka would look adorable in Styles by Challinor.”

Efran paused, then carefully replied, “I’ll let her know.” She puckered at him as he went out.

Exhaling, Efran remounted to lope easily back to the gates. Reinagle and his bodyguard tapped their horses

expectantly to meet him. Pulling up, he said, “All right, Reinagle, you can enter. Follriott and Trina are getting a house here. I’ve told them that you will be here as well, and they assure me that they don’t care. If you abide peaceably, you can stay. If you threaten or make trouble for anyone, I’ll toss you out. Do you understand?”

“No need to get huffy, Efran,” Reinagle grunted.

“All right; let them in,” Efran said, turning his horse aside for the gate guards to wave them through. Glancing at the bodyguard, Efran suddenly said, “Stop.”

Everyone did, looking at him. Efran was looking at the bodyguards, who suddenly numbered four. His eyes went from the first, to the second, to the third man, all of whom he recognized. But the fourth, although similar in bearing and appearance--

The first bodyguard said, “Yeah, we don’t know him.”

Reinagle looked back at the fourth man to scowl. “Who are you?”

The man shrugged, “Just a wanderer.”

Studying him, Efran felt the tingle of faerie. So he ordered, “Show yourself.” And the man’s appearance dropped away to expose Alberon, the deposed king of faerie.

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Chapter 2

As Alberon sneered at them all, Efran said, “You’re barred from entering the Lands, Alberon. Why are you trying?”

Alberon tossed back his head of long black hair, snorting, “Do you really think you can keep me out? I have a thousand disguises by which I may enter.”

Efran leaned on the pommel in amusement. “A degraded faerie, stripped of his title for breaking Faerie Law. Yes, you still have a little power to assume disguises, so you may sneak in. But if you do, I will catch you. And when I do, I can kill you. That’s the power your law gives *me*.”

Alberon glared at him a moment, then vanished. No one realized that he had actually transmogrified into a beetle which fell from the saddle and scuttled across the road to a ditch, where he could safely change into a frog and bury himself in the mud to await dusk. Then, he would change into a fast-flying free-tailed bat to fly back to Lord Showalter’s estate Viotto in Crescent Hollow, where he would plan a fool-proof robbery of the Abbey Treasury. (Showalter had not returned from his last attack on the Abbey Fortress. Although Alberon could not discern what had happened or where he was now, he had told Showalter’s staff that the lord had put him in charge until his return.)

In the wake of Alberon’s abrupt departure, Efran nodded at the abandoned horse, instructing, “Take it to the barracks stables.” One of the Abbey soldiers took the reins to lead the horse across the road toward the barracks. With a last glance at Reinagle, his bodyguard, and his cart, Efran turned his horse to walk up Main, having to stop at all three yellow crossings for ladies in dresses.

He glanced to Ryal on the step of his shop, waving him over, so Efran turned aside. Folliott's carriage was gone. "Problem?" Efran asked Ryal.

"I hope not, but thought I had better let you know that Plunkett just leased a small house in the eastern section here," Ryal said.

"Plunkett . . ." Efran mused, trying to remember.

"Hassie's father, who was brought in as a Goulven victim, along with his wife Portia," Ryal reminded him.

"Ohh," Efran said in remembrance, then shook his head. "She can't live here, Ryal. She can't even come on the Lands." He glanced up at Reinagle and his entourage walking their horses down a side street toward DePew's office in the eastern section to see what housing was available right away.

Ryal said thoughtfully, "Portia wasn't with him, and he did not name her on his application. She kept relapsing, you know, and I'm wondering if she did again after they left here."

"But once Wallace treated him, he seemed fine," Efran remembered. That was about five weeks ago.

"Yes, he's clearly no longer infected. He put down 'peat seller' as his occupation; I did notice his doing a brisk business from his cart earlier today. And he paid three months in advance for his lease," Ryal noted.

Efran was thinking back to Portia's insistence on having Hassie back. "He didn't fight us like she did."

"No, he seemed resigned to Hassie's wanting to stay. I couldn't see a reason to turn him down when he's offering a necessary commodity at a good price," Ryal said.

"Right. And if Hassie decides she wants to see him, that's fine; he can't possibly reach her otherwise. That's all good, then. I assume that Trina and Folliott are looking at houses?" Efran asked warily.

"Yes, I believe so," Ryal said, scratching his gray head. He added wryly, "Challinor wants to trade up."

"What? Trade up what?" Efran asked.

"Houses. She wants a better house," Ryal elaborated.

Efran raised his face to laugh. "Whatever she can afford in her new position as designer for Elvey's. Are she and Stites still married?"

"As far as I know," Ryal said.

"Well, they're staying in twenty-two for free, which condition doesn't transfer to a bigger house," Efran noted humorously.

"No, I would expect not, and I doubt that Stites does, either. In fact, I'm not sure he's interested in a bigger house," Ryal said.

"No, all he's interested in is the bedroom and the kitchen," Efran smiled. "Well, then--"

“Oh! One more thing.” Ryal abruptly went back into his shop. Waiting, Efran glanced at the crowd around Elvey’s, and thought he might need to take Minka back to Flodie’s again.

Ryal came out with a slender, bound book. “Here is your copy of the doctor’s treatise on the Goulven crisis. Your corrected copy of the book on Barthelemon and the Destroyer is still with the bookseller Shardlow, as it’s considerably longer to write out.”

“Ah. Excellent. Thank you.” Efran waved at him with the book; Ryal nodded as Efran turned back up the switchback under the faerie trees’ salute.

Entering the fortress, Efran took the book to the library to shelve it himself. Then he stepped back, looking at the rows of books—a hundred, at least, probably more—lined up neatly in no discernible order. “Ohh,” he exhaled. “These need to be arranged by topics, at least. But who . . . ?”

Turning out, he shook his head; he’d have to ask Minka who she thought might do a good job putting the books in order.

He found her on the back grounds, overseeing Joshua and Nakam roughhousing on the grass near the bench under the walnut tree. Approaching, he asked in concern, “Did you carry him out yourself?” Joshua raised his hand, squealing, while Nakam ran over to herd Efran to the bench.

“No, I discovered the most wonderful thing,” she said. He sat attentively to listen. She explained, “If I ask any man to take him wherever I want, he gets picked up and taken there. It’s amazing. It’s revolutionary.”

He had to throw back his head to laugh. “How many times have I told you to do that if I’m not around?”

“Once. Twice, maybe,” she said carelessly. He groaned, but picked up Joshua, who was banging on his knee. Nakam stretched up as well; Efran picked him up with one hand to put him in Minka’s lap.

“Oh,” he remembered. “Trina and Folliott came down to us. Challinor is now designing clothes for Elvey’s, and wants you to wear them.”

Face frozen, she cautiously turned her eyes to see how seriously she was supposed to take this suggestion. Efran did his best to appear indifferent, but she sighed in relief, “You’re smiling. I’m off the hook, free to wear whatever I want. I had better take care of my chickening clothes, however; Elvey’s will not make anything like them again.”

“I’ll take you back down to Flodie’s if you need more clothes,” he offered.

“Oh no,” she said, instantly discerning his true interest in Flodie’s. “Have you finished the *Life of King Alfred* already?” she asked sympathetically.

“Twice,” he said dismally.

“And Ares’ little book?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Even my own book that Therese had me make.”

“Well, for heaven’s sake, we’ve got a whole library--”

He interrupted, “That’s what I need to talk to you about. The books are in no order at all; I have no idea what’s there. Do you know anyone who could put them in some order—by author or subject?”

She gaped at him. “Are you teasing me?”

He looked confused. “What? No. Why? I just want to know--”

“I would love to do that, if you trusted me to,” she said, almost offended.

“If I *trusted* you--?” he began in mild disbelief.

“Yes, they’re so valuable, and mean so much to you, I wasn’t sure if I should touch them without asking,” she said.

He looked stricken. “Did I really give you that impression?”

She searched the grounds around them where they sat. “No. I just came in with it.”

“Well--” he exhaled in exasperation, “I can’t think of anyone better suited to arrange them. And make a list of what’s there?” he suggested.

“I would so love to do that,” she breathed.

“Well, good! Let’s go eat,” he said, standing with Joshua. She was able to carry Nakam in with no trouble at all.

They had a very nice midday meal. Efran had salmon; Minka asked for custard and fruit compotes; Joshua ate bites of everything; Nakam bites of nothing, as he had already been fed and Efran did not want him begging in the dining hall.

When Efran walked her to the library door, she said, “Oh, it’s going to get messy in here. Soames should probably have Ella up to the workroom for Law lessons. Give me today and tomorrow to get started on the books, then I’ll join them the day after.”

“Yes, that’s good; I’ll leave word for them. Joshua and I will ride the Lands for a little while.” With the baby on one arm, he hoisted the great book of the Law of Roman from its stand to carry it out. Nakam, however, stayed to help Minka. But when she looked up at the vast shelves, he curled up in a corner and went to sleep.

First, Minka went to Doane’s cubicle off the foyer for quill and parchment to begin listing out book titles, subjects, and authors. Then she stopped at a supply closet for cleaning rags. Finally, she returned to the library, noting the tall rolling ladder in a corner. She was glad for the light from the high glassed-in windows that enabled her to see comfortably.

So, fortifying herself with a deep breath, she began pulling out books from the shelves she could reach and stacking them in random piles on the floor. Many of them had not been touched in decades, which resulted in a deep layer of dust that made her sneeze nonstop for several minutes.

Wiping her nose on her sleeve, she doggedly continued emptying shelves. As she cleared a shelf in the corner, she glimpsed a small pile of rags that had been behind the books. She reached in to remove it as well, but it stirred and rolled off the shelf onto the floor by itself, causing her to scream softly. Nakam raised a sleepy head; not seeing the problem, he yawned and nestled down again.

Minka dropped to her knees to watch the pile gather itself to stand up. She then saw that it was a little old man, about 15 inches tall, in a very old, wrinkled suit. He collected himself to look around, then asked in a high, crackly voice, “What are you doing?”

“Pulling the books out to list them and clean them and put them back in order,” she gasped. “Who are you?”

“Why, I’m the Librarian,” he said, drawing himself up. “And it’s been so long since anyone paid us any attention—someone came in not long ago to pull some of us out as if to get rid of us, but he finally found the money box, so he put us back. And then someone else ordered all of us in the rotating shelf to open. So arbitrary and disrespectful!” He was trembling at the remembrance. (The “money box”—the wooden replica of a book marked *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* that contained many valuable coins—had been taken up to the second-floor workroom long ago.)

She replied, “The first person was probably Efran, but he adores books, and wants to read you, but he needs to know what’s here. Oh—Efran is Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and I am his wife Minka. Why do you say ‘us’?”

“I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Minka. These books are my charges; they are special to me,” he said passionately.

She cried, “Oh, I understand! Can you help me get them in order?”

He gazed at her in astonishment, suddenly seeming a little younger and stronger. Choked with emotion, he said, “That is my purpose. I am the Librarian.” And he straightened his suit.

“Well, I’m so happy to have your assistance. Let’s start at the top.” She stood to go to the far back corner for the rolling ladder.

But the Librarian shot a hand up, shouting in his thin voice (for Librarians cannot be loud), “You along the top row! Come down now!”

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Chapter 3

Minka turned, instinctively covering her head as the whole top row of books along that wall leapt out of the shelf to fall to the floor in a cloud of dust. They managed to land properly on their backs, for the most part, except for some younger, smaller books that flailed on their front covers or worse, spreadeagled on their pages. Tsking, the Librarian went over to right them.

Marching among them, he pointed to the floor beside him to command, “Sumerian and Egyptian here! *The Maxims of Ptahhotep! Debate between Bird and Fish!*” Minka watched in mild awe as he called out more titles, at which the books named flopped over to throw themselves atop the growing pile. After the first one or two, however, he had to place them on the pile himself. She finally came around to begin listing the books he called out, checking the spelling on the covers or title pages.

As the pile grew, he told her, “Lady Minka, they are not able to leap back up that high; they require your assistance.”

“Oh! Of course,” she said. She put aside the quill to take a paper rag up the ladder to wipe off the remaining dust from the high shelves. Then she wiped off the books themselves and carried them up a few at a time to put them back in place, assuring them, “Yes, now that we know your titles, I’m sure someone will come in to look at you. Yes, I understand how important that is.”

Pile by pile, he continued calling out, “*Torah! Nevi'im! Ketuvim!*” and the ones summoned flopped over to him. Minka was excited to see that, although these books were titled in their original language, they were all translated into the Southern Continental language. Thus Torah’s title page read, “Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, with Notes in the Original Hebrew.”

She murmured in excitement, “Such history, such scholarship.” Unable to quickly copy the Hebrew, she wrote the translated titles on her list. Noting that these books comprised a great part of the Old Testament, she felt sure that the rest of the Holy Canon were here somewhere as well.

With the Librarian’s assistance, she got three whole rows of books along that one wall cleaned, catalogued, and restored to their proper place before Nakam needed to go out. Minka thanked the Librarian, telling him, “My dog needs to run outside for a little while; we’ll return as soon as possible to resume work.”

“We shall await you, Lady Minka,” he replied, bowing, and she admired how much younger and more vigorous he looked. His suit was less wrinkled, and he was now almost two feet tall.

Meanwhile, Efran, with Joshua in his sling, was riding around the fields and animal pens on the eastern Lands. Of the five test wells that had been dug, four appeared reliable, so were equipped with mortared walls and drawing apparatus, while the fifth was boarded up and barricaded, allowing for later inspections. One of the useable wells was the pit that Folliott had used in his scheme to rescue Trina, so the tent that stood over it was left in place.

Efran was satisfied with everything he saw, especially the newborn lambs, kids, and calves, and the fields of wheat, rye and oats being worked, as well as one of sorghum. On his way back to the populated Lands, he stopped by the plot of a leaseholder, Dufton, who had dedicated the entire grounds behind his house to raising ducks and geese. This provided him a nice income from the demands of the fortress kitchen, the butcher Lowry, Croft’s and Firmin’s. He had done so well, in fact, that his brother-in-law was persuaded to take a plot and raise ducks and geese as well.

Before returning to the fortress, Efran and Joshua stopped by the notary shop, in case Ryal needed him for anything. But when Efran entered, he found the shop crowded with prospective plottolders and merchants. So he waved to Giardi, who came out from behind the counter to greet him. “Oh, Efran, he’s getting so big!” she marveled, stroking the baby’s black head. He blinked at her, having barely wakened when his papa had dismounted.

“I know. Minka can’t carry him at all anymore, and he’s good exercise for me,” Efran said a little smugly.

“Giardi, dear,” Ryal said from behind the counter, lifting a form over his head.

She laughed, “I’ll visit with you later. Tell Minka hello.”

“If I can find her,” Efran nodded on his way out.

As he was about to climb back into the saddle with Joshua on his left arm, he heard a female voice calling, “Efran. Efran!” Cautiously, he turned to see Challinor rushing across Main from Elvey’s with a large paper package. “I’m so glad I caught you! Here’s the most delicious dress for darling Minka. I can’t wait to see her in it! It’s the cutest thing I’ve ever designed.”

His jaw hung open in dismay as she thrust the package into his chest. Holding it there with his right hand, he managed to get out, “Ah . . . thank you, Challinor. I will be sure to . . . give it to her.”

“You’ll *love* how she looks in it,” she promised with a pucker, then turned away to wave to someone emerging from Elvey’s covered entrance.

Perturbed, he watched her sashay away, then he looked down at the baby on his left arm and the large package on his right. After a minute of shuffling one with the other, he finally put the package on top of the baby to mount, then rearranged the package to rest between the arm holding Joshua and Efran’s thigh. Then he was able to proceed slowly up the switchback, to the delight of the courtyard sentries.

Unfortunately, halfway up the switchback, the unwieldy package began creeping from its insecure seat so that Efran had to hold it there with his right hand, guiding the horse with his knees. When the horse was mildly startled by Lowry in his cart advancing behind them at a slightly faster speed, the package found liberty from Efran’s grasp, the paper ripping in his hand as it tumbled down. He stopped, looking down at it on the road. Lowry stopped behind him, unwilling to run over it. A cart of medical supplies driven by Milo stopped behind Lowry.

The Polonti gate sentry ran down to salute Efran and grab up the package. “Please advance, Captain,” he said, grinning broadly.

“Thank you, Tiras,” Efran said with a tight smile. The sentry began running up the switchback to the gates before the Captain with an obvious dress from Elvey’s, its bright pink satin protruding from the rip in the paper. Efran then proceeded to the gates, as did Lowry behind him and Milo behind Lowry.

Efran gave up his skittish horse and received the package from Tiras, who saluted again. Then Efran carried it underarm to the nursery, where he relinquished his sleepy son to the caretakers. That accomplished, Efran went back to the library to look in.

Minka turned brightly. “Efran! We got almost this whole wall done today! And there are so many wonderful books you’ll want to read.”

“Excellent,” he grinned, looking at the clean, orderly shelves in appreciation. ““We’?” He saw no one else with her but the small dog at his feet, desiring to be picked up.

“Yes! The--” She turned, then pleaded, “Oh, dear Librarian, please meet Efran. He’ll so appreciate your work.”

Whereupon Efran looked down at a man—small for a human, tall for a faerie—stepping out from behind a stack of books to bow. “You’re—this is--” Efran began awkwardly, looking to Minka.

“Yes, it’s the Abbey Fortress Librarian! He is so knowledgeable and so helpful, whatever you’re looking for,” Minka said earnestly.

Efran smiled down on him. “I am exceedingly glad to meet you; wish I’d known months ago to consult you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said, smiling in some vindication.

To Minka, Efran said, “Can you call it a day? It’s almost time for dinner.”

“Yes,” Minka said. Turning to the Librarian, she asked, “Will you kindly help me again tomorrow? I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“I would be delighted, Lady Minka,” he said graciously, at which the books on the floor began rustling in agitation. Sternly, he told them, “You can sit there for the night; we’ll be back to put you up tomorrow morning. Behave.” And they quieted down.

Minka picked up Nakam, then took Efran’s arm, smiling. For the first time, she noticed the package on his other arm. When she saw the pink protruding from the paper, her face went wary. “What is that?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

He admitted, “Challinor caught me before I could get away.”

She grew frightened. “Is it something I have to wear?”

“No,” he laughed, then shrugged, “but you may want to look at it.”

“What did you promise her?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nothing. It was thrust upon me, and when I dropped it, I strongly considered leaving it there, but one of the earnest new Polonti gave it back to me,” he said in mild disgust.

She laughed. “Well, then, so his efforts will not have been in vain, I’ll look at it. Will you take Nakam out while I change?”

“Yes,” he said, exchanging the package for the dog before parting from his wife. Emerging with Nakam from the corridor onto the back grounds, he let Nakam run around the orchard while one or two people came up to ask him about one thing or another. Efran answered briefly, as he was getting hungry, so he collected the dog to bring him back in. And when he went back to their quarters, he paused in the outer room at the silence. “Minka?”

“Yes,” she said quietly from the bedroom. Nakam underarm, he opened the bedroom door.

And he looked at her standing in the middle of the room beside the bed. Holding a belt of ribbons in one hand as though unsure what to do with it, she looked to be trapped in a rowdy congregation of pink satin shades. Minka seldom wore bright colors because they made her look recently deceased. She also preferred simple clothes; elaborate styles buried her, small as she was. Uncluttered styles also played up her scant assets of a slender figure and expressive (if not beautiful) face. So what she was left with in Challinor’s creation was a mess.

Efran studied her, lost for what to say. Then he offered, “Maybe Ella would like it?”

“Yes,” she said promptly. “I’ll see if I can catch her before dinner.” She had the dress off immediately to put on her work dress.

“I’ll go get Joshua and meet you in the dining hall,” he said just as promptly. He deposited Nakam on the bed and they both departed their quarters.

Minka went down the corridor with a great armload of pinks, stopping at Ella's door to knock. The door was opened by her Polonti maid Sudie, who couldn't see at first who was behind the brilliant mass of fabric. "Yes?"

"Hello, Sudie," Minka said, thrusting down the unruly bundle in front of her face. "I was sent this dress from Elvey's, but—it's not really anything I have the face to wear, and I thought Ella might have more success with it."

"Oh, thank you, Lady Minka. I'll ask her," Sudie said, lifting the burden off her.

"Thank you, Sudie," Minka gasped, turning unsteadily.

Sudie shut the door with her hip and turned as Ella came out of the bedroom. "Sudie, did I hear--" Ella stopped in shock at the sight that confronted her.

"That was Lady Minka. Elvey's sent this dress to her that she can't wear, and she wondered if you'd like it," Sudie said, trying to contain the various layers.

Ella gaped. "I can barely walk in Elvey's; I'd never have the courage to wear that."

"Then do you mind if I give it to my sister? I think she would like it," Sudie said.

"Oh, do. Now, if you like. That would be fine," Ella said, wide-eyed.

"Thank you, Ella. I'll be right back," Sudie said.

Ella assured her, "Don't hurry; I'm going in to dinner now."

"Very good," Sudie said, preceding her down the corridor.

Sudie took the dress up to the women's quarters on the second floor, which she entered as the fortress workers were changing out of their work clothes into their modest dinner attire. The dress that almost buried Sudie caused an immediate sensation. Upon finding her sister Felice, Sudie told her the dress was hers if she wanted it.

Yes, Felice wanted it, thank you. Surrounded by her coworkers—many of them Polonti—who screeched in envy and delight, Felice donned the magnificent dress, which did grace her dark olive skin and smooth black hair. Her sister workers thronged around her to adjust the layers, lower the neckline, and attach the belt with finesse. The finishing touch--pulling the label "Designed by CHALLINOR" to peek out of the deep V in back--was accomplished by the last hand to pat Felice before she swept downstairs.

In her standard linen work/riding dress, Minka slid onto the bench beside Efran in relief, who had Joshua on his left leg. She darted a quick smile across him to Ella, who was wearing a simple but flattering dress of sunset orange—a color that made her skin glow. Efran placed Minka's lager beside her dinner of creamed beef. "Did you unload it?" he whispered.

"I think so," she said hesitantly, looking to Ella.

Quennel, on Ella's left, was talking to her, so she did not receive the query right away. But at a stir across the hall, all four of them looked up as Felice entered in a magnificent dress. She was confident; she was regal; she was enticing. And Polonti men began swarming her.

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Chapter 4

In fact, Felice's dress looked much like the one Adele had worn during her short stay in Venegas, except prettier and better made. Still, it advertised a certain availability which Felice had the panache to wear without looking vulgar. "Who is that?" Minka whispered to Ella, sitting on Efran's other side.

"Sudie's sister Felice," Ella whispered back. With marvelous self-control, Quennel was merely smiling genially and not laughing at all.

"She looks wonderful in it," Minka said in admiration. "I'm envious."

Efran watched in fascination, then looked at the head table and uttered, "Oh ho"--both humorous and warning.

"What?" Minka and Ella followed his eyes to see Challinor stare at her creation modeled by a Polonti washer woman. Casting about the hall, Efran found Challinor's Polonti husband Stites at another table laughing, as he knew where Felice's dress had come from. Beside Challinor sat Trina, wearing something very much like it in blue. She was watching Felice as though taking notes on her styling. Next to her, Folliott was on his second hard ale of the night. And he was also looking at Felice.

Minka hunched down beside Efran. "Am I in trouble?" she whispered.

"No," he laughed. "It's an unqualified success. Challinor has found her market." Minka scrunched into his arm while he fed himself and Joshua, then he put his arm around her.

At that time, Alberon was at Viotto, Showalter's estate in Crescent Hollow, sipping brandy and talking with a faerie conspirator at the Abbey. They were communicating over the miles as only faeries could do, and that not for long. Optat, who had come to the fortress as a good faerie, was sliding into almost-bad due to his unrepentant theft of walnuts and his illegal association with Alberon. But he was careful to cover himself, so had not been found out. Yet.

"Is Showalter dead?" Alberon asked, tight-lipped, and not for the first time.

"He must be. A number of faeries swear he was flung far out to sea," Optat said anxiously.

"By whom?" Alberon asked with the same set to his lips.

Optat almost whined, "They didn't see, but it was something from the fortress, something incredibly powerful."

"All right, he's gone," Alberon said in acceptance. "Now, what else did you learn?"

"They locked up the trigger to the hidden room with a shim. All you have to do is dig it out with a knife," Optat said.

“A shim,” Alberon repeated, glassy-eyed. “That whole disaster was caused by a shim.”

“Yes. Not to worry; I’m watching to see what else is new. The Lady of the fortress has awakened the Librarian, and he’s helping her put the library to rights,” Optat chatted.

“Is that so? Well, that may prove useful. And I have not been idle here, for I’ve been picking up a few of my host’s powers, which knowledge he left just lying about,” Alberon said in satisfaction. Then he realized he mustn’t give away too much. “All right; you’re getting fuzzy and I have a new estate to put to rights,” he said, lightly mocking Minka. “I will check with you again tomorrow night.”

“Yes, Lord Alberon,” Optat said, and Alberon waved him away. But the deposed king of faerie sat thinking for a long time. Finally he shifted and grunted, “It appears that I may need Adele after all. I wonder if she survived that little grass fire I started at her feet.”

At that time, Adele was still confined in the plane tree, as she had been for six days now. Her toes were slightly singed from the fire, which had done little damage in the wet woods. But she was weary, incredibly weary, from the pointlessness of the last few weeks, the last few years. She had finally given up on Efran, as he was so stubbornly attached to Sybil. Adele only wanted rest, peace and quiet *outside* this blasted tree.

“Get me out; get me out,” she pleaded, as she had done unceasingly for days.

Can you do the right thing? asked a voiceless whisper. “What?” she said, trying to understand.

Do the right thing, it said again. “Yes, yes,” she groaned. “I will leave Efran alone,” she said, heartbroken.

The whispering presence left, and Adele slumped in a stupor, unable to sleep in this state.

The following morning, January 20th, Alberon dressed carefully, then summoned Showalter’s butler. “Yes, Lord Alberon?” The butler bowed upon appearing.

“Bilhorn,” Alberon said with a mildly troubled air, “I am disturbed by the tardiness of your lord’s return. Therefore, following breakfast, I am going back to look for him. Please have the blue carriage outfitted for me. I have what I believe to be a solid lead on his whereabouts, so you should expect us in a few days.”

“Oh, very good, Lord Alberon. May I have provisions packed for you?” Bilhorn asked.

“Yes, as well as some clothes and accessories for Lady Adele. I believe I know where she is staying,” Alberon said.

“Very good, my lord. Breakfast is being laid out now,” Bilhorn said.

“Excellent,” Alberon smiled.

Also that morning, Minka and the Librarian resumed work in the library, which she found very enjoyable, especially as she did not have to wear anything special to do it. And she was finding a number of historical works that she knew Efran would want to read. In shelving these, she marked them with little tabs of parchment that Efran could see when he came looking. And she was conscientiously keeping up with recording the titles,

authors, and locations of books that she and the Librarian reshelfed.

Her greatest find, however, was an account of the reign of Henry the Great. Opening this book in wonder, she breathed, “I don’t think Ryal even has this. If he did, I’m sure he would have shown it to Efran.”

The Librarian noted, “He had this copy at his shop, and returned it to where it belonged when the Lord of the Abbey Fortress came into his own.”

Minka gazed at him. “That sends chills down my spine.”

“Yes, there is power here, perhaps even greater than that in the hill,” the Librarian said firmly.

“Greater than Nakham?” Minka asked in disbelief. The Librarian merely glanced sideways at her. But she noticed how much taller and stronger he looked today than even yesterday. He was almost her height now; his hair was white—not the white of old age, but of purity, and power. “You are scaring me a little, Librarian.”

He smiled. “We will set aside this book for your lord, and mark its place on the shelf.” The book in his hand swelled slightly, ruffling its pages like a drumbeat, while the other books rustled in envy.

Before the midday meal, Efran came to the library to see if she were ready to take a break. Entering, he caught a glimpse of the man with her and paused to eye him warily. Minka whispered, “This is the Librarian, Efran.”

He looked again as the Librarian inclined his head. He wore dark pants with a quietly gorgeous waistcoat, his shirt sleeves rolled over muscular arms. Efran murmured, “I see I should have made your acquaintance months ago.”

“Allies appear as needed, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

Efran turned his head slightly in consideration of that, but Minka had something to show him. “We found this, Efran.”

He took the book bound in unmarked deerskin, opening it to the title page. This he stared at a moment before looking up to the master of the library again. “I am deeply in your debt.”

“I am repaid,” the Librarian replied.

Efran exhaled, trying to restrain the tears. “I will not cry.” Collecting himself, he asked her, “Are you ready to come eat?”

“Yes. Let me take Nakam out for a bit; he’s been so patient,” she said, moving out with the little dog closely at her heels.

“I will go get Joshua,” Efran said. In departing, both glanced back at the Librarian, who had grown again. He inclined his head to them, turning again to the books on the floor.

When they regathered in the dining hall, Efran ate distractedly, with Joshua on his left leg, Minka at his right side, and the book on Henry the Great open beside his plate. When she spoke to him, he turned to kiss her head fervently without complete cognizance of what she said. He fed Joshua whatever the baby pointed to on Efran’s plate. And when they were done, he released her back to the library while he took Joshua with him up to the workroom.

As he entered with the book and the baby, Estes looked up. "Efran, I've been talking to one of the Preaching Brethren who says he's seen Jesus' burial cloth."

"Right," Efran said.

Sighing, Estes added, "Anyway, DeWitt and I think it's time to take more gold and silver to the moneyer Meineke, but it looks like I'll have to go to the Treasury for the gold. What do you think?"

Efran thought it over carefully, having no idea what Estes had just asked. "Yes," he finally said, as that was obviously the answer Estes was looking for, whom Efran considered more trustworthy than he himself. In Efran's view, Estes needn't ask him permission for anything; he just did it as a courtesy.

Estes, recognizing Efran's distracted state, said, "Good, then I'll do that in the next few days." He intended to give Efran a chance to clear away whatever was consuming him, and then ask him again. Rather than hide the key to the Treasury herself, Minka had given it to Estes.

That resolved, Efran put Joshua under the table and stretched out on the floor with him and the book. Before he started reading, he disposed of everything on the floor that Joshua might be tempted to put in his mouth. That left only the baby's chew toys under the table with them, so while Efran lay on his front reading, Joshua sat beside him to earnestly chew, as he was teething with a vengeance. They remained like this for hours: Efran turning pages and Joshua chewing until he stopped to lay his head on his father's back and go to sleep.

During those same hours, Minka and the Librarian worked with great efficiency to clean, sort, catalogue, and reshelve the books. She chatted; he listened, but the books seemed to fall into their proper places on the shelves with hardly any effort at all.

About that time, a luxurious carriage of Crescent Hollow styling approached the Lands from the north, but turned aside at the rough road that led to a clearing which had a burned-out firepit. Pulling up, the driver climbed down from his seat to ask through the window, "Is this the place, sir?"

Alberon leaned out to glance around. "Yes."

So Lord Showalter's driver opened the carriage door, lowered the steps, and stood back for Alberon to step down. He looked around, noting no severe fire damage, then said, "I'll be right back."

"Yes, m'lord," the driver said, standing by the carriage door.

Alberon walked south thirty paces to a ridge on which stood the only plane tree in the area. Glancing down at the scorch marks on the lower trunk, Alberon shook out his sleeves. "Are you ready to come out, my dear?" There was an answering murmur, to which he replied, "Oh, no, dear. All is forgiven. What? . . . Oh, I've just come from Viotto"--Showalter's estate--"and have brought you some lovely dresses. . . . No, I intend to stop over at the Abbey Lands, then send you back to Viotto tomorrow morning. . . . Goodness, such suspicion! No, I must remain to access the Treasury, then will return loaded with gold. . . . Are you ready, then? Good."

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Chapter 5

Stepping back from the tree, Alberon lifted a hand to recite the spell of release which he had learned from the files in Showalter's study. Then Adele fell out of the tree. Her dress was torn in places, so she covered herself as best she could while he walked her back to the carriage. "Close your eyes, driver," he instructed as they approached. The driver made a show of doing so, leaving his lids open to mere slits.

Adele scrambled into the carriage, slamming the door. The vehicle rocked slightly as she found the necessary garments to change quickly while Alberon waited outside, leaning up against the carriage to study his nails.

With the subsiding of motion, Alberon turned his face to the window to inquire, "Are you presentable, my dear?"

"Yes," came the subdued response from within.

"Good." Alberon opened the door himself, turning to instruct the driver, "South to the Abbey Lands. I will get out and approach the gates. When they're opened, you'll drive myself and the lady directly to Croft's Inn. You'll eat and sleep with the carriage, then first thing tomorrow morning, you'll drive the lady back to Crescent Hollow. I will return separately later."

"Yes, sir," the driver said. Alberon then climbed into the carriage and shut the door. The driver took his seat to guide the horses out of the abandoned clearing to the road going south.

On the way, Alberon told Adele what he expected of her in exchange for her release: "When you arrive at Viotto, you will assume the duties as lady of the house. In a matter of days—a week at the outside—I will return with an obscene amount of gold. If you choose to stay, we can live as the elite of Crescent Hollow. If you choose not to stay, you may go wherever you like."

"What of Showalter?" she asked.

"He is dead," Alberon said.

"Are you sure?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes," he laughed slightly.

Several minutes of silence passed, then she said, "I don't see why you need me at all."

"A beautiful woman is always an asset. We may find opportunities for your talents in Crescent Hollow," he said frankly.

"Can you change my appearance?" she asked.

"Temporarily. Are you afraid of being recognized at the Abbey Lands?" he asked.

Coolly, she said, "Yes."

“Ah. Yes, I’ll give you a new face when we get close to the gates, and a refresher for tomorrow morning before you leave,” he said.

“You can’t do anything more permanent?” she asked in dissatisfaction.

He turned his slitted eyes to her. “Why?”

She fretted, “I know many dupes in Crescent Hollow, and Eurus, in fact, but I’m too widely recognized there. After all, I *was* Surchataine.”

“Ah, of course. But—there is no one you wish to dupe in the Abbey?” he asked with a knowing smile.

“Efran?” she laughed lightly. “No, I’m done with him. I want someone fresh.”

“Lovely,” he laughed sardonically. “I can only give you something temporary now, but when I return to Viotto, I’ll see what I can do.”

She nodded in satisfaction.

Shortly, they approached the Abbey Lands’ wall gates, and Alberon lifted a hand to give himself and her new appearances: his was an honest, bright, happy ginger; hers was a sweet baby-faced brunette.

A wall gate guard said, “Hold it! Stop there. Show yourselves and state your business.”

Alberon bounded out of the carriage to thrust calling cards at the gate guards, idle soldiers, passing pedestrians, and anyone else he could reach. “Good day, gentlemen! I’m Duckstein, seller of the best, most varied, most functional eyeglasses anywhere on the Southern Continent! I’m here for just a day or two, hoping to introduce you to my amazing wares! Why, you’ll find--”

“Excellent. Who’s in your carriage?” the guard asked.

“Why, my lovely wife, Lida. Step out and say hello to the good Abbey Landers, Lida!” Alberon as Duckstein called gaily to her. Adele, with her transformed face, leaned out of the carriage window to wiggle her fingers and simper.

“All right, pass through,” the guard said. Alberon hurried back to the carriage to hop inside again, leaning out the window to press calling cards on everyone passing.

As the driver pulled up to Croft’s, Alberon/Duckstein emerged again to shout cheerfully, “Get you a room, Lida, dear, I’m going to run up to that palace up there on the hilltop to see who all might need quality eyeglasses!” Adele waved him away, and he cheerfully began up the sidewalk, thrusting calling cards at everyone he passed. Then he made the rather taxing climb up the switchback, with many waves and shouts of greeting to the amused courtyard sentries. He carried a small case of sample eyeglasses to show.

Finally gaining the gates, red-faced and winded, he exclaimed, “Good day, gentlemen! I’m Duckstein, seller of quality eyeglasses, and would love to show my selection of sturdy and effective eyewear to your resident physician or whoever would care to see them!”

The young Polonti guard looked to his older partner. “What do you think?”

“Might be useful,” the older admitted, so the young one opened the gates to him. “The door guard will show you to the doctor’s rooms.”

“Thank you, my young friend; your kindness is greatly appreciated,” Alberon said with an engaging smile. And he went up the grand fortress steps in wonder, gawking like a tourist.

He repeated his request to the door guard, who led him up to the doctor’s suite on the second floor and left him there. The doctor’s wife Leese met him, and he exclaimed, “How do you do, lovely doctor? I’m Duckstein, selling--”

Leese had her hands up. “I’m sorry; the doctor is not here now, and I don’t expect him back for an hour or more.”

“Oh.” His face fell. “May I just leave my sample eyeglasses for him to view? Then I’ll drop back by to see if he’s interested in purchasing any.”

“Yes, of course,” she said kindly.

“Thank you, dear lady, thank you,” he said, backing out. (When Leese’s husband the doctor returned some hours later, she showed him the case of sample eyewear. And when the amiable Duckstein never returned for it, Leese kept it for those in the fortress who might find themselves needing spectacles.)

With an affably blank face, Alberon as Duckstein ambled downstairs to the first-floor corridor. There, he looked around, nodding genially to everyone who passed. And when the corridor was completely clear, he went invisible.

In this state, Alberon quietly slipped down the corridor and into the library, which was almost always empty. There, he was unpleasantly surprised to see the Lady Minka with a well-dressed stranger and piles of books on the floor. So Alberon silently withdrew to a corner to see if they would leave any time soon. His invisibility would start wearing off in about six hours.

The Librarian’s dark eyes had lifted upon Alberon’s entrance, and followed him as he went to sit in the corner farthest away from the lady. On viewing him, the Librarian determined that this was the creature that had ordered all books on the revolving shelf to open. In complying, some had suffered permanent creases in their pages. For this, the Librarian was displeased.

Minka, happily rambling for the last ten minutes, finally paused to ask, “What do you think, dear Librarian?”

“Lady, it strikes me that there are books in the hidden library that should be out here, available to view,” he said.

“Oh, you’re so right. I thought the same thing when Ryal first brought them here!” she said.

“Let us look,” he suggested, going over to the pivoting shelf.

“Oh, we have to get the shim out before we can get in,” she worried. “Oh, wait—this is supposed to be a secret. Let me close the door to the corridor first.”

“Yes, Lady,” he agreed. He and Alberon watched her walk over to quietly close the outer door.

“There! Now we have to remove the shim. I don’t have a blade,” she fretted.

“Here, I think I can pull it out.” Sure enough, all the Librarian had to do was place a finger on the tiny wooden piece for it to come right out in his hand. “Now then, let’s look.”

“There’s not much light in that room. Should I get a lantern?” she suggested.

The Librarian shook his white head minutely. “I don’t think it’s necessary, Lady. The daylight through the windows in this room would seem sufficient for me.”

“If you say so,” she said dubiously. The Librarian then pushed the scallop which caused the entire unit to pivot on its center, creating a passageway adequate for those two to enter, plus a third unseen.

In the dim room, the Librarian went directly to a shelf to pick out several volumes. “This, this, this, and certainly this one,” he said while Minka watched.

At this time, Alberon realized that he had been too hasty in entering this room now; he needed to wait until someone came in with the intent to access the Treasury. As he began to slide out again, the Librarian was suddenly standing at the pivoting door, saying, “That’s all we need right now, Lady Minka.”

“Just those?” she asked, coming over in confusion.

“Yes, although we may wish to look again later,” he said.

“All right,” she agreed with a shrug.

The Librarian bowed slightly as she exited, then slipped out in such a way as to block Alberon from leaving, being both taller and broader than the faerie. While the invisible one watched helplessly, the shelf unit was returned to its closed position, and, unknown to him, the shim replaced. This prevented the door being opened again from either room.

This was a setback, but not fatal. Dropping the invisibility as well as the disguise, Alberon created a small light at the end of a finger and went systematically from shelf to shelf, pressing scallops. At length, he found the scallop that opened the door to the winding stairway.

Smiling, he ascended this to the very door of the Treasury. Here, Alberon increased the light off his finger to regard the beauty of the door, and the elegance of the lock in its center. An idea occurred to him: Could he open it without the key? He had appropriated some powerful unlocking spells from Showalter’s study. It was worth a try, at least.

Squinting in the effort of recall, Alberon sifted through each spell he knew, then landed on the most irresistible one of all—the one that Showalter had kept in his own safe. Dousing his light to concentrate all his energy on the spell, he raised a hand to the lock and closed his eyes.

As he began speaking words of power, a violent repulsion surged from the lock to almost knock him off the winding stairway, and he did roll down the top three curves. Clutching an iron baluster to stop his fall, he sat gasping on the hard step a moment. Then he pulled himself up to descend on his feet, silently fulminating. He returned to the hidden library to sit and wait for someone to come with the key.

Late that afternoon, Efran finished the book on Henry. Closing it as he lay prostrate on the floor under the table with Joshua asleep beside him, Efran was almost bursting with respect and the desire to emulate him and his adopted father, Ares. He wanted to talk with Henry, to know his mind on everything, and to—count him as a friend, and mentor, were such a thing possible.

“He was--” Efran opened the book again to look at dates. He murmured almost inaudibly to himself, “He was born in eighty sixty-two, ascended the throne and married Ares’ daughter Sophie in eighty eighty-six, when he was twenty-four—and Ryal was twelve.” Yes, the Abbey Lands’ notary had been Commander Thom’s son and Henry’s page.

“Then Henry was assassinated in eighty-one eighteen, when he was fifty-six. That was only—thirty-seven years ago. Everything fell apart, then. Sophie fled Westford, and one after another murdering usurpers ruled until Lystra fell apart and only Westford remained intact. But surely, surely something remains. What of this Sanctum, where Ares and Nicole lived until the fever struck, and they disappeared? That was—when?” Efran flipped back through the book, looking.

“Efran?” Minka said from the door of the workroom.

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Chapter 6

“Here,” Efran said, closing the book to begin scooting out from under the table.

She bent to look, laughing, “How much did you get read? Oh, there’s Joshua.”

“All of it. Yes, and he needs wraps. Here, hold this.” Efran gave her the book as he scooted out far enough to collect Joshua and his soggy wraps.

When he stood with his son gingerly in his arms, she asked, “Did you learn much?”

“Oh, yes,” he breathed. “Yes, but I have so many questions now, it’s going to take time to even sort them all out.” He looked over at DeWitt. “Where’s Estes?”

“Gone down to dinner, as I will shortly. You were under there for so long, we forgot about you. I’m afraid we may have sent one or two sentries off looking for you,” DeWitt observed, eyeing him over the top of his spectacles.

“Oops,” Efran laughed, adding, “Well, we’re going down as well, after we stop by the nursery.” DeWitt nodded.

On their way downstairs, Efran asked her, “How is the library coming along?”

“Oh my goodness, the Librarian is amazing! The more he and I worked, the more he grew and the more he could do. We’re almost finished. He even brought several books out of the hidden library. But I think all of them need to come out to be read,” she said thoughtfully.

“Good--yes, you’re right,” he said, thinking, *Again, something else in the fortress is being put to use.*

He gave up Joshua to Cordelia in the nursery, then reclaimed the book from Minka as they headed to the dining hall. They sat to receive plates from Dobell with thanks, then Efran opened the book again as he began eating, half listening to Minka tell everyone around her what fun she had with the Librarian sorting books.

Efran was looking at the map in the front of the book. *Ares and Nicole were living at the Sanctum when the fever struck—they sent everyone else away to the Green Hills while they cared for the sick there. But then they . . . disappeared. When Henry came back to the Sanctum looking for them, he couldn’t find them or what had happened to them. They just vanished.*

The Sanctum was . . . what? No, this map can’t be right. The Sanctum couldn’t have been southeast of the Abbey, between it and the Sea. Where was it, then? Probably somewhere northeast of the Abbey Lands. Yes, it couldn’t have been far from the hill. I wonder if I could find anything remaining of it? He decided that he’d ride out tomorrow to look.

As Adele’s carriage was departing the Lands the next morning—January 21st--Efran was riding out to the northeastern Lands just to look. There was so much land here, and he had no reliable idea of the location of the Sanctum, that he spent a fruitless hour looking over acres of meadowgrass while the inhabited Lands were bursting with activity: besides the new plots being apportioned and the new houses continually going up, DePew’s new inn was steadily rising and Lemmerz’s chapel framed. Ryal had scores on a waiting list for plots and houses, and so many new applications for businesses that he required Soames’ help almost full-time.

Minka and the Librarian finished cleaning and reorganizing the library that day. When she suggested bringing more books out of the hidden library, he said, “Yes, Lady Minka, we must certainly do that. However, I would suggest a few days’ observation to see how our reorganization is working before we add to it.”

“Oh, you’re so right. I’m so thrilled to have discovered you. Please, Librarian, stay visible for anyone who comes in. They won’t know to ask for your help unless they see you,” Minka said.

“I will obey, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing. “Now, I believe that Lord Efran expressed interest in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, so I have separated out Book One for him.” And he handed her a thick, leather-bound book that riffled its pages in importance.

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Librarian! Yes, I’ll take it right up to him,” Minka said eagerly. But when she got up to the workroom, Estes told her that he and Joshua were out riding, so she left the book on the worktable for him. Curious at the newcomer, the faerie tree branches poked at its pages, whereupon the cover snapped shut on them.

The battle between the book and the tree got to the point that DeWitt looked up to order, “You two stop that!” and Estes got up to remove the book to Efran’s chair, out of reach of the branches. Meanwhile, Minka had gone downstairs to take Nakam out to play.

During Adele’s return trip to Crescent Hollow, she carried a good hand mirror by which she could evaluate the state of her face, and how long the disguise lasted. Over the hours, she saw a gradual transformation back to her regular appearance until, arriving at Lord Showalter’s estate in the late afternoon, she was fully back to herself.

So she swept in to tell Bilhorn, “Lord Alberon is searching earnestly for Lord Showalter, and may be delayed a week or so. Meanwhile, I have been assigned important research in the lord’s study. You may bring my dinner

there.”

“Yes, Lady Adele,” Bilhorn said, bowing. And for the next five days, Adele conducted intensive research in facial disguises. She spent all the first night ransacking Showalter’s study for his records on this discipline; upon finding them in the early morning hours, she read until noon, at which time she passed out. When she awoke, she continued determinedly reading, mixing potions, and evaluating results by means of only a drop or two. During this time, she seldom left the study, instructing that meals be left outside the study door.

Finally, she hit on what appeared to be a very durable disguise, in that it did not radically transform her features. Her hair was changed to a curly dark strawberry blonde, her eyes to green, and her facial structure to heart-shaped rather than oval. Also, holding her lips in a pucker so transformed their shape and the overall look of her face, she felt confident that not even Minka would know her.

After settling on this look, Adele spent a few more days confirming how long it should last. Showalter’s exhaustive research indicated that, taken in larger doses, it would be durable for a month, at least, without any refreshing. However, Adele also found the recipe for refreshing, each application of which would extend the disguise for another month.

Unwilling to wait a month to see whether the application would actually last that long, Adele mixed up a large batch, part of which she put in a small bottle. Following, she packed a small, worn bag with modest dresses and underwear, a hand mirror, a hand shovel, and the small bottle. Then on the morning of January 26th, she rose from a good night’s rest to put on a simple dress and shawl, then drink an application of the facial disguise. Following, she took up her packed bag, a large jug of the disguise potion, and a wrapped pouch with 50 royals.

Leaving a note for Bilhorn that she was off to seek the missing lords, she walked with her bags to a carriage-for-hire service and engaged an inexpensive carriage to the Abbey Lands. As they set out, she curled up on the skimpy cushion to take a nap.

Meanwhile, Alberon waited for someone to come to the Treasury. Fortunately, still being faerie, he required neither food nor drink. But it was cruelly tedious to wait for long hours, ignorant as to what was transpiring outside the dark, hidden library. Nor could he talk with Optat, as their communication within the fortress would certainly be detected. As he had been banned from the Lands, he could be stripped entirely of his faerie powers should he be found.

As he slumped against a wall in utter boredom, his eyes ranged listlessly around the murky shelves containing dark volumes. He looked up, pausing. Then he raised his finger to shoot a light upward.

Sitting up abruptly, he studied the geometric design on the domed ceiling. “My, my, look at that. There’s something up there. Something . . . powerful.” He strongly desired to see what that was—but it was not the Treasury. Should anyone enter while he was exploring whatever was up there, he would betray himself and lose the opportunity to investigate later.

So he extinguished his light, easing back down again. He murmured, “That will have to wait. But I’ll find out.”

Having extended his search area, Efran rode systematically with Joshua through portions of the meadow northeast of the Lands looking for remains of the Sanctum, though allotting only an hour a day for this endeavor. Upon his return each day, he used an old map to mark off the approximate area he had covered, and decide where to look next. Then he would sit with Joshua in the workroom, or lie under the table to read another chapter

in the first book of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

The Librarian continued refinements in the reorganization of the library, though he did not bring any more books out of the hidden library. Soames resumed Law lessons in the library with Ella and Minka, during which the Librarian stood by to quietly listen. Minka could not long endure his being left out, however, so when they were discussing the Law's requirements for administrators and officers, she turned to the Librarian to say, "I heard that Ares disagreed that the primary attribute of the Commander should be the ability to command, but I don't know why. Do you?"

Bowing to her, the Librarian said, "Because, Lady Minka, Surchatain Ares was aware that Commander Talus, serving under Surchatain Bobadil, used his ability to command to usurp the throne, murdering not only Bobadil, but his brothers and his son, and severely wounding his young grandson Ares."

The other three listened in astonishment, then Ella asked, "Who was Bobadil?"

The Librarian replied, "He was the grandson of Roman the Great, Lady Ella."

This prompted another question from both Soames and Minka, so that the resulting discussion not only enlightened them, it lasted until Efran came to the door looking for Minka. Therefore, all subsequent Law lessons included the Librarian as an active participant.

When Efran returned to the workroom after the midday meal that day—January 26th—Estes again told him, "DeWitt and I agree it's time to take more gold and silver to the moneyer, but I would need to get gold from the Treasury. Is that all right with you?" DeWitt glanced up at the question.

Efran looked at him in bewilderment, then said, "Why do you feel like you have to ask me? You're Steward. You're in charge of the Treasury. Didn't Minka give you the key? You could access it to walk around in a crown with a scepter and I wouldn't care. Don't ever ask me again."

"Thank you, Efran," Estes said, rolling his eyes while DeWitt laughed.

So Estes got the key to the Treasury out of hiding and lit a lantern to take both downstairs to the library. Entering, he was mildly surprised to encounter the dark-suited, white-haired man standing in the corner. The man bowed and said, "I am the Librarian, Steward Estes. May I be of service?"

"Oh, yes, I've heard of you," Estes said, closing the door to the corridor behind him. "I only need to get a little gold for the moneyer from the Treasury." He gestured to the hidden door.

"May I watch your back, Steward?" the Librarian asked.

"Yes, if you think it necessary," Estes said, walking over to the bookcase that served as the door to the hidden inner room. He paused to glance around. "My, it looks clean and alive in here."

"Thank you, Steward. That is the Lady Minka's doing," the Librarian replied.

"Good try, but I heard of your doings," Estes said wryly, setting the lantern down to push a scallop. "Oh, the shim. I forgot. Do you have a skinny blade on you?"

"Permit me to assist, Steward." The Librarian came forward to lightly touch the shim, which fell into his palm. He stepped back again, placing the shim in his pocket to leave both hands free.

“Oh. Thank you.” Picking up the lantern again, Estes pushed open the door to enter the dim inner library.

The Librarian effaced himself against a wall while he watched Alberon, invisible, follow Estes as he opened the door to the winding stairway and begin to climb it with the lantern. Alberon followed him, and the Librarian silently followed Alberon.

At the top of the stairway, Estes glanced at the Librarian a few steps below him. Alberon turned to look, but saw nothing. As Estes pressed the signet to the lock and the door began to open, Alberon grabbed his arm. Estes reacted immediately, dropping the lantern. As it clattered onto the metal step below him, he punched in the area of the face of whoever was behind him. With a muffled cry, Alberon staggered back into the Librarian’s arms.

Estes picked up the still-burning lantern to direct the light behind him. “Who is that?” He saw the Librarian’s folded arms jerking this way and that, but nothing in between them.

“This is the deposed faerie king Alberon, Steward,” the Librarian said. “You may get what you need while I take him down the stairway.”

Estes hesitated, but seeing the Librarian’s hands bounce on something that he was dragging down the winding stairs, Estes stepped into the vault to take a gold bar off a stack of the same. He then came out to let the Treasury door waft shut behind him. He followed with the lantern, which the Librarian apparently did not need, to the bottom of the stairs and into the hidden library.

Emerging through the swiveled bookcase into the main library, Estes watched the Librarian thrust his hands downward and then lift a foot to bounce in the air about six inches off the floor. “He is subdued, Steward,” the Librarian assured him.

“Apparently so,” Estes half-laughed. Opening the door into the corridor, he stepped out to tell someone, “Ask the Captain and Administrator DeWitt to come down here, please.” Then he stepped back to watch the Librarian’s foot jerk around.

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Chapter 7

Efran and DeWitt came down quickly. Closing the door to the corridor behind them, they looked inquiringly to Estes, who nodded to the Librarian. The latecomers then followed the movement of his animated foot, which indicated something invisible underneath it. “Show yourself,” Efran ordered. And Alberon appeared, pinned by the Librarian’s foot on the back of his neck.

Efran looked to Estes, who said, “He was waiting, either in here or the second room, and followed me up to the Treasury. I knocked him back one; your Librarian friend did the rest.”

As Estes was explaining this, Minka entered the library to look. “Alberon!” she said angrily. Then, “Did you catch him, dear Librarian?”

“Minka has a new pet,” Efran explained quietly to Estes and DeWitt.

The Librarian replied to her, “After the Steward disabled him, Lady Minka.”

“I don’t know what to do with him now,” Efran exhaled in disgust.

“Perhaps put him in a book, Lord Efran?” the Librarian suggested.

Efran’s eyebrows shot up. “What? Which book?”

Prospectively looking up to the shelves, the Librarian said, “Book Three of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* may be suitable, Lord Efran.” Whereupon he raised a hand toward that book on a high shelf. It dropped to his hand, and the Librarian instructed, “Open as door to pages one hundred seventy-four and seventy-five.”

The book fell out of his hand to stand upright on the floor, expanding to the height of an open door. Those two pages then merged to become a wide doorway to a scene of ancient battle mayhem, with swords sweeping across bodies, bleeding men shouting, and smoke rising on a body of water in the background. The library spectators heard the thumps and clanging of weapons, smelled the sweat, blood and death, and felt the vibrations from thousands of booted feet hitting the ground. Even some dirt and drops of blood were flung out from the page.

Crying out, Minka fell into Efran. Alberon scooted away on his back. “Is that real?” DeWitt asked the Librarian.

“Yes, but the reality of another realm, Administrator,” the Librarian said.

DeWitt pressed, “Can you actually put him in there?”

“Anyone who walks through the door goes there,” the Librarian answered.

Efran asked, “What happens when I want to read that book?”

“You will experience the words, not the realm, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

“What if I want to experience the realm?” Efran asked pensively, watching the battle before him.

“Efran,” Minka gasped, pale. “No.”

He held her, trying to reassure her: “Just—to watch.”

“You don’t have enough fighting here? So you want to risk your life in a war of another realm?” she cried.

Cradling her, Efran laughed, admitting, “I’m a soldier. I fight. Didn’t you ever read a book that you wanted to jump into?”

She hesitated with a look of vague guilt. He chuckled, gathering her up tighter. “As I thought. But the whole point of fighting is to get back to the one who waits for you. So, tell me what you think we should do. DeWitt? Estes?”

Estes asked the Librarian, “Can he get out? Does he stay on those pages or go through the book? Does he go on to Book Four?”

“The book is merely a doorway to the events described in it. The door is one way, Steward,” the Librarian said.

Efran asked, “Can the door be opened to just watch through it?” Minka looked dark.

The Librarian shook his head in caution, his white hair spreading. “It is dangerous to open a door that you do not intend to pass through, Lord Efran. An open door draws.”

Estes said, “How can that be? How can anyone enter the Past, which cannot be changed?”

“This is not the Past; this is its own realm of the reality that was this particular battle of the Peloponnesian War. It is separate and distinct from anything else that has happened or will happen, Steward Estes,” the Librarian said.

“An eternal replaying of this battle?” Efran asked, trying to understand. While they were talking, surrounded by the sights and sounds of warfare, Alberon was crawling by inches toward the door to the corridor, which Minka had left ajar.

DeWitt asked, “Are the men in battle reliving it over and over?”

The Librarian said, “They are shadows, Administrator. The reality is not in the men, or the time, or the place, but in the force of actions and words which remain forever impressed upon the fabric of the universe.”

“Toss him in,” Efran said.

As Alberon lunged for the door to the corridor, the Librarian lowered his head and extended his hand so that Alberon froze in midstride, airborne but for one foot lightly touching the floor. His face also was frozen in fear, anger, and hatred, his widened eyes fixed on the door of escape.

The Librarian’s aspect changed so that everyone in the room began trembling—his suit darkened to a blackness that seemed to pierce an infinite hole in the air; his white hair flared up around his head like flames composed of every imaginable color. Minka clutched Efran, who covered her with his arms while they watched the master of the books exercise his authority.

The Librarian said to the immobile Alberon: “You who hated, go to a place of hatred; you who fomented discord, go to a place of chaos; you who instilled fear, go to a place of terror; you who caused the innocent to suffer, go to your place of suffering; you who never rested from devising evil, go to a place where evil never rests. For such has been decreed by the will of the Sovereign Lord of the Created Universe, and the word of the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

Then the doorway closed in a ring to encompass the frozen figure; however he chose to move, the door was before him. The Librarian lowered his hand, and Alberon threw himself into the battle. There, everyone watched the deposed faerie king transform into a raging soldier with sword and shield. His face of fear, anger and hatred remained unchanged while he fought the endless enemy.

Watching, Minka remembered her heartbreak, thinking that she would forever be a spider, unable to reach Efran while he forever grieved her. Efran remembered his terror upon seeing her transformed on the dais, thinking that she had chosen eternal unawareness because he had hurt her again. Estes regarded this inhuman creature that had tried to throw him down the winding stair in order to get to the gold. DeWitt despised this treacherous faerie that thought to take Efran’s wife and his place as Lord of the Abbey. And none of them pitied him.

“Close the door,” the Librarian said. As the doorway collapsed into a book again, it emitted a blinding flash of white light that forced all of them to cover their eyes. When they looked again, the book had fallen closed onto the floor. The Librarian assumed his regular appearance to gesture for the book to return to the shelf, which it did. Some dirt, spots of blood and sweat, and the slight odor of acrid smoke remained behind.

In the ensuing quiet, DeWitt asked, “Is Earnshaw reading from the Holy Canon in the keep today?”

“I’ll ask him,” Efran said. They left, Estes with the gold for the moneyer and the key to the Treasury. The Librarian retained the shim in his pocket, seeing no need for it in the doorway now.

At that time, a modest, well-traveled carriage was on the road proceeding south from Westford, where new building projects dotted the blackened remains of the city. A few miles north of the wall gates of the Abbey Lands, however, the passenger directed the driver to turn off at a rough road. He did, pulling hesitantly into a clearing where only a black firepit and collapsed tent remained. “Here, miss?” he asked uneasily.

Adele looked out the window. “Yes. Wait here just a moment. I have to—visit the grave of my father.”

“All right,” he said, watching as she climbed out with a pouch, a large white jug, and a hand shovel.

Adele took her items to the area of her week-long imprisonment. Looking at the tree that had engulfed her upon Showalter’s command, she saw nothing unusual about it except the slightly flattened trunk. She went around it to kneel in the sandy soil, and quickly dug a hole large enough for the pouch and the jug.

She removed a handful of royals from the pouch to a small velvet purse, which she draped around her neck under her dress. Then she placed the large items in the hole, covered them up, brushed off her hands, and hid the shovel in the crook of another tree nearby. Besides the little velvet bag, she also kept a small book of potions that she had lifted from Showalter’s study.

When she returned to the carriage with empty hands, the driver asked, “How’s your father?”

“Fine. He says hello,” she replied, climbing back in. He shook his head, snorting, to turn the horse and carriage around and south on the road again.

A few minutes later, he had drawn up to the closed Abbey Lands wall gates. A guard shouted, “Show yourself!”

Adele demurely stepped out of the carriage to walk up to the gates. Twisting her hands in apparent nervousness, she said, “My father died, and, I’ve come down to see if I can get work here.”

A few of the soldiers noted the faerie trees’ batting at her in contempt, but soft-hearted Detler opened the gates for her. “Good luck,” he said.

“Thank you,” she simpered before climbing back into the carriage, which drove right over to Croft’s. While the driver saw to himself, his carriage, and his horse, Adele got herself a room. Handing her the key, the clerk told her, “You’re lucky; that’s the next-to-last available room we’ve got.”

She smiled shyly at him, then took her scant belongings to this lucky room where she pulled out the small hand mirror to check her face. Finding it quite solidly the green-eyed strawberry blonde, she pondered a name for herself. “Liza,” she murmured. “Perfect.” Then she walked around the Lands for a little while, quietly amazed at the development. She noted in particular Imelda’s Beauty Potions and the great expansion of Elvey’s.

From there, she went to the tavern to get dinner. It was already crowded with Lands' residents and visitors. Seeing her scan the crowded dining room with her plate and ale, a soldier at a table against the wall stood. "Need a seat, miss?" he asked, smiling.

She looked over. The soldier asking was a nice-looking Southerner. Also at his table but not standing was a Polonti soldier who merely glanced up at her. A third chair at the table was empty. So, smiling shyly, she carried her dinner over to where the Southerner was pulling out the chair for her. "I'm Verrin; this is Elrod. What's your name?"

"Liza," she said as he scooted her up to the table.

"Hello, Liza. Have you got family in the Lands?" Verrin asked in a friendly manner while Elrod continued to eat.

"No." She shook her head, demurely taking up her fork. "My father died, so I've come down to see if I can get work here."

At her back, one table over, Loriot slowly lifted his eyes. He recognized her at once, not just from her voice, but from her internal readings, with which he was thoroughly familiar. But Tess, across from him, was talking excitedly about the new horses in the repaired and expanded hilltop stables. So Loriot blocked out his ex-wife and their brief, bitter marriage to listen to the girl who was with him.

Verrin was telling Adele, "Oh, there's any number of places you can start at tomorrow, but the best place to work by far is at the fortress. Have you got a place to stay tonight?"

"Yes, I got the next-to-last available room," she said proudly, as a rather simple girl. Elrod's eyes flicked up in mild contempt. Verrin did not notice, being focused on her physical charms, but Elrod had some experience with the acts Southern girls put on—that is, *moekolohe*.

Verrin replied to her, "Oh, Good. Then first thing tomorrow, come up to the gates and I'll take you to the women's matron. She'll find a good spot for you."

"Really? Oh, that's so nice of you," Adele said, her green eyes wide.

"Not really. I'm in the hilltop barracks," Verrin admitted with a smile. She ducked her head shyly to eat.

Hearing enough, Elrod took up his empty dish and bottle. "Don't forget inspection tomorrow," he muttered. Verrin nodded, then turned to ask Liza something else.

Early the following morning of January 27th, as promised, Verrin was at the gates watching when Adele began walking up the switchback toward the fortress. Again, the faerie trees at the bottom of the switchback poked her spitefully, which she endured with little cries of dismay. The courtyard gate guards noticed, so rather thoroughly grilled her when she desired entrance. Only Verrin's indignant defense of her persuaded them to let her in.

She carried her modest canvas bag with several changes of underclothes, a few simple dresses, an extra pair of shoes, a hairbrush, and, most critically, her good hand mirror and the little bottle of disguise potion. Only a few drops were required for refreshing her appearance, so this bottle should last her a good couple of months before she needed to go back to the campsite to refill it. Finally, she also carried the little book of secret potions and the small bag of royals.

Verrin took her up to the women's matron's office on the second floor—coincidentally, directly across the corridor from Estes' and DeWitt's workroom. A pleasant-looking woman turned from a desk as Verrin entered with Adele. He said, "Matron Gayla, this is Liza. Her father died, so she came down here looking for work."

"Oh, we're glad to have you, Liza," the matron said. "Have a seat. You may go," she nodded to Verrin.

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Chapter 8

Before leaving Matron Gayla's office, Verrin told Adele, "I'll meet you in the dining hall for dinner." She nodded with vacant eagerness.

The matron smiled at Adele to ask, "Do you read and write, Liza?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," she said quickly.

"Do you have a husband or children?" the matron asked.

"No, ma'am," Adele said.

"Is it possible that you're pregnant?" Gayla asked.

"Oh, no, Matron," Adele said in wide-eyed horror.

Smiling again, the woman placed a paper in front of her, saying, "Here are our expectations for women workers. Please read it and sign your name to it."

Nodding, Adele pretended to carefully study the sheet. It simply said that there would be no fighting, stealing, drunkenness, nor trysts with men on the fortress grounds, and any of these activities were likely to get her fired. Adele took the quill pen and carefully signed her pretend name.

"Now," the matron said, withdrawing the sheet, "we have openings for floor cleaners, garderobe duty, nursery duty, and kitchen help. Garderobe and nursery duty pay the highest, then kitchen help, then floor cleaners. Which would you like to try? You have to be trained on garderobe cleaning and nursery duty before you can work them, but you're paid for your training." (Garderobes were stalls for evacuation on every floor--and in some bedrooms—the shafts of which were sunk to the cavern waters below the fortress.)

Adele, personally, wanted to do none of these jobs, but had to quickly decide which was most likely to put her in the notice of the right person. Thoughtfully, she said, "I don't know how things are done here, so I maybe should start with the simplest thing until I learn. I guess that would be floor cleaner."

"Why, that's very wise, Liza. Your pay is five pieces a week, which you'll receive every seventh day that you work. It's not much because you eat and sleep here in the fortress. Bring your bag and I'll show you the women's room first." Gayla rose from her chair and Adele stood to follow.

As they left the small office, they saw Efran at the door of the workroom receiving a report from one of the

soldiers. Efran had Joshua on his arm as he listened, nodding once or twice. When Gayla passed, he flashed her a smile of acknowledgment, which she returned with a nod. Although Adele pinned him with a sultry, green-eyed gaze, he did not look at her. She was peeved at first, until realizing that she should be glad he didn't recognize her.

Gayla turned into a large room filled with beds and small shelves. "This is the women's quarters; you'll have bed number twelve there. Erase the twelve and write your name on the slate. You may safely leave your belongings in the shelves next to it."

Adele couldn't resist asking, "Who was that tall man with the baby?"

"Oh, that is Lord Efran. He is a very gracious man, but please don't try to flirt with him or get his attention. He won't tolerate it. If you do it more than once, you may find yourself dismissed from the fortress," Gayla warned.

Inwardly Adele gloated, *Yes, I've slept with that "very gracious man," and that baby is my son.* Out loud, she said, "Oh, I'd never do that." She stuffed her small bag onto the upper shelf beside her bed, and the matron waited while she erased the "12" and wrote "Liza" on the slate with chalk.

That done, Adele glanced toward the corridor. "Oh, is that someone wanting to speak to you?"

The matron turned; seeing no one, she went to the door to check the corridor. While she was thus occupied, Adele withdrew the little bag of royals and the small book from the sash of her dress to shove both under the mattress.

Matron Gayla returned to say, "They must have gone on. Well, what you're wearing is fine to work in, but we have additional work dresses in this closet." Gayla went over to open a door next to the exit. "Here. You'll need to tie your hair back," she added, handing Adele a slightly soiled, dowdy ribbon.

Reluctantly, Adele pulled her hair back, as she was enjoying the curling mass, which did look a little like Sybil's. But Sybil never wore hers tied back like this. When Adele had her hair secured, the matron took her up to the third floor. "Your work supplies are in this closet," she said, opening another narrow door. "Now, the cleaning supervisor should be—oh, there she is. Onfroi!" Gayla called.

A large, sour-faced Polonti woman turned. "Onfroi, you have a new worker! This is Liza; she's going to start out as a cleaner. Liza, Onfroi is a wonderful supervisor; you'll learn quickly and meet many new friends." With that encouragement, the women's matron walked off and Onfroi looked nearly despairingly at her new charge.

"You work in that?" Onfroi asked in disapproval.

"What? The dress?" Adele asked, glancing down. "The matron said it should be all right."

Groaning, Onfroi took her back to the work closet, where she pulled out a large apron. "Wear that." Adele put it on unwillingly, as it was ugly. Then Onfroi pulled out a straw broom. "Sweep every corridor. Stop and stand at wall if anyone comes while you are sweeping," she instructed. Someone else called her at that time, so she left Adele standing by the closet.

"Ugh," Adele grunted, taking the broom down to the second floor to begin sweeping at the end of the corridor nearest the workroom. When she got to the door, she glanced in, but Efran wasn't there. So she went down to the first floor. Because there were more people going up and down these corridors, Adele spent a great deal of time standing against the wall, waiting for them to pass. Almost no one looked at her.

Finally, she got off the wall and began lackadaisically moving the broom beside her from one place to another. One or two guards passed, glancing at her. She stopped for them, but didn't stand against the wall. Then she resumed her chore with a sigh of boredom.

Shortly, a very young Polonti in uniform came up, pausing to look her in the face. "What are you doing?" he asked in a low voice, smiling. He was no taller than she.

Jaw jutting slightly at his impertinence, she said, "I'm sweeping."

He pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. After a moment, he asked, "What do you do with what you sweep?"

"What?" she asked irritably.

He raised his shoulders. "You have no dustpan. What do you do with dirt you sweep?"

"A dustpan," she said in illumination.

He laughed quietly, "Closet on third floor."

"I knew that," she huffed, going to the stairs while he turned away in muffled laughter.

On the third floor, Adele went back to the supply closet for a dustpan. As she came down the corridor again, she paused to watch another cleaner sweeping out an empty room. Observing her technique, Adele murmured, "Ohhh. *That's* how it's done."

The woman glanced at her once or twice, until Adele's prolonged scrutiny irritated her enough so that she stopped to place a hand on her hip. "Yes?"

Adele shrugged, "Good enough." Her pride wouldn't allow her to admit that she was watching her to learn how to sweep, but she had no clue how deeply her insolent reply cut. She went back down to the first floor to sweep competently.

While Adele was thus engaged, Minka came skipping in the back door with Nakam trotting beside her. She was happy after having a nice, though short, conversation with Tess about how well Cloud was doing—Tess could actually ride her bareback now for a half hour at a time. Adele, her back to her incoming sister, didn't see her right away. As Minka approached, she slowed at the familiarity of the form in front of her.

Adele turned around to look at her, and Minka stopped in full shock. Nakam started barking at the stranger, so Minka picked him up, but raised her eyes again to study the new floor cleaner. Adele stood back against the wall as instructed, waiting with pursed lips. Without speaking, Minka came closer to look at her hair, her eyes, her face. Adele didn't dare say anything, for the potion did nothing to change her voice.

Finally, Minka went around her to ascend the stairs, thinking. Adele watched her go, also thinking. *Drat. If she tells Efran, and he suspects it's me, then it's all over.*

Minka emerged onto the second floor, still thinking. She had no doubt at all that it was her sister she had just seen—Adele had merely changed her hair and her eyes, somehow. So, she must have found a way to get out of the tree. Did that mean her heart had changed?—that she came out because she was ready?

Whether or not that was the case, Minka had learned something from seeing Alberon's final chapter unfold. Sometimes it was best to simply watch and wait. So she decided to say nothing to Efran, but let Adele's latest scheme proceed. If anything happened so that it became necessary to speak, Minka would, but—for now, she'd let Adele carry on, and see what came of it. Untroubled, Minka went into the workroom.

Efran was not there; he was riding in the northeastern meadows with Joshua, searching for any remnant of the Sanctum. But, like the previous six days, he found nothing. So, as his allotted hour drew to a close, he turned the horse back toward the Abbey wall gates.

When he kicked to a lope, the horse stumbled over something so abruptly that Efran, with Joshua on his arm, was almost pitched out of the saddle. The horse regained his footing, though agitated, and Efran drew him gently to a stop. First, Efran anxiously checked Joshua for any signs of strain to his neck, but the baby looked down at the ground, babbling authoritatively.

So Efran dismounted with his son on his arm to look. Hidden in the grass was a stretch of raised concrete about two feet wide and extending for many feet lengthwise. Walking along it, Efran suddenly realized that he had literally stumbled on what must be the foundation footings of the Sanctum. "It's here. It is here," he murmured in disbelief.

Looking around, he saw that it was close to where he had originally thought—perhaps a mile north and a few miles east of the Abbey walls. But he didn't have the time or the equipment to do anything further today; he'd have to mark it and come back. Efran glanced about, exhaling in frustration. He had so little expectation of finding what he was looking for that he hadn't brought anything to mark the area.

Experimentally, he began walking inside the footings. As he had hoped, he encountered rotted--and burned--lengths of wood. "It had been burned down," he noted. Still holding Joshua on his left arm, he reached down with his right to attempt to pull up some of the wood. And he did get a three-foot fragment raised, the end of which remained buried.

He shook his head. "Not enough to see for any distance." Sighing, he set Joshua down on the grass to pull off his dingy white work shirt and tie it securely to the jagged upright piece. "That'll do," he murmured, picking up Joshua again to remount. As he loped away, he glanced back frequently to see that the flag was visible, and to fix the area in his mind.

Approaching the wall gates, he looked back a last time to see that the white spot was still visible from here. As he rode past the gates, one of the guards, Routh, noted his lack of shirt and asked, "Problem, Captain?"

"No, but I found it. I found the footings of the Sanctum. I had to leave my shirt as a marker. Can you see it?" he pointed to the northeast, and a dozen heads turned.

"Yes, Captain!" "Yep, there it is." "What d'you plan to do, Captain?" various voices said.

"Tomorrow, if possible, I'm going to clean it out and see what's left. Ask around for off-duty volunteers for me," Efran said. They agreed, congratulating him on his find. And he rode on up Main with Joshua to the switchback. Women came out of shops to watch the Lord of the Abbey ride shirtless, which he ignored.

At the courtyard gates, he had to repeat the same information, and ask for volunteers tomorrow to help him. "Also, equipment—we'll need scythes, shovels, measuring rods, and a portable quill set. I'll see if Estes has one he can lend me," Efran thought out, dismounting. Joshua was almost asleep on his arm.

“We’ll get everything together but the quill set, Captain,” Pleyel said.

“Good. Thank you,” Efran said, trotting up the steps to the doors as the sentries saluted.

Preoccupied with his find, Efran didn’t notice anyone around him as he gave his sleepy son to the nursery attendant. Turning back up the corridor toward his quarters, however, he stopped at the sight of the girl on her knees with a dustpan. While he was riveted in place, she raised her face to him with parted lips and sultry green eyes.

Efran lowered his eyes and walked around her to his quarters. He made sure to lock the door before using his garderobe and riffling through his wardrobe for a fresh work shirt. He pulled it on, stalking out to the corridor to trot up the stairs without looking at anyone around him. In the workroom, he threw himself into his chair to smile tentatively at Minka, sitting at the table with a book from the library. “What are you reading?” he asked.

“A book that the Librarian recommended on St. Francis of Assisi. It’s amazing,” she sighed. Then she looked at his vaguely troubled expression. “What is it?”

“I found the foundation of the Sanctum--” he began.

“Oh, Efran, that’s wonderful!” she said as Estes and DeWitt looked up.

“--and Adele,” he added.

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Chapter 9

Estes and DeWitt put down their quills at the same time, looking at Efran. He, watching Minka’s muted reaction, said, “You already saw her.”

She nodded slowly. “In the lower corridor, pretending to sweep.”

“So she got out of the tree somehow,” Efran said, and she raised her brows.

“How could she just walk into the fortress like that?” DeWitt fairly exploded.

“She’s disguised herself a little bit,” Efran said uncertainly, looking to Minka. “Her hair is different, and her eyes are a little different, so she just must have—presented herself as a villager looking for work.”

“What does she want?” Estes asked.

“Efran,” Minka said, and the one named winced.

“But this is insane,” DeWitt observed. “How does she expect to get to you by posing as a fortress worker when she’s banned from the fortress?”

Estes asked, "Does she intend you harm?"

"Yes," Efran said.

"No," Minka said. "She wants to have you again, as she told me repeatedly."

Efran slumped in his chair, looking up at the faerie tree branches spreading over the ceiling. Turning his head toward her, he asked, "Well? What do I do?"

Minka, also contemplating the faerie tree, said, "Play along."

He sat up warily. "How so?"

"She's not Adele," Minka observed. "She's a village girl here to work. So, why trouble the waters? Let her work. If she exposes herself as Adele, any soldier will put her out of the Lands. No, she's committed to playing a rôle, so, I think we should just let her play it through to the end . . . as Alberon did."

The three men silently considered that. DeWitt finally said, "Minka, that's sheer cunning."

"Brutal, really," Estes agreed.

Efran mused, "And a load off me, because all I have to do is treat her like all the other women workers--"

"Who are invisible," DeWitt said, adding, "Because if you notice one, you have to notice them all." Estes nodded grimly.

Breathing sweet relief, Efran suddenly looked at her. "Why are you reading over there? Come here." He patted his leg, and she came over to settle on his lap with her book. Nakam demanded lap space as well, so she leaned over to pick him up.

Dinner at the fortress was its usual cordial affair, for the cordial. For the conniving, it was somewhat turbulent—only somewhat, because it was only Adele's first day. Nonetheless, Verrin met her at the tables where the fortress workforce usually gathered for dinner. Seeing the attractive new woman, other men drifted over to sit with her or chat while standing.

The other women noticed this, and resented it. Adele could have eased the resentment among her sister workers by being generous, but this attribute was unknown to her. So she simpered, eating coyly, expressing wide-eyed unfamiliarity with the ale and the men's teasing comments. The Polonti men ignored her; none of them was willing to annoy their Southern brothers-in-arms by flirting with a Southerner when attractive women were so scarce. Allyr, a Southerner who had suffered directly from warding Adele, avoided this new girl without knowing why.

Sudie's sister Felice was one of the women at these tables, seated across from Adele and down five places. Felice watched her in amusement, secure enough in herself to be neither resentful nor envious. She was also one of the most experienced workers on staff, competent and willing to work in any area, wherever she was needed. Because of this, she earned as much as the women's matron Gayla.

Facing the back of the hall, Adele couldn't resist glancing repeatedly at the crowded back tables where Efran sat

with Joshua on his lap, Minka and Ella on either side of him, and numerous children and soldiers sitting all down the row of benches or hovering behind them. He looked content, nuzzling Minka, talking to Ella and Quennel, or turning to listen to others who approached.

Adele's glances were noted; one woman laughed, "Oh, she's after the Captain." To Adele's alarm, that provoked great amusement at her table, and several of those around her looked over laughingly to the Captain's table. Their interest was so pronounced that Quennel and Ella glanced up at them. Efran fed Joshua a bite from his plate, then bent his head to whisper in Minka's ear. She nodded, smiling. But then Ella leaned across him to ask Minka a question, which she answered at length. Since they were talking directly over Efran's plate, he couldn't eat until they had finished. But he didn't mind.

At the woman's insinuation that "Liza" was after the Captain, Adele said blankly, "What? The Captain?" This elicited jeers from her sisters.

Verrin shook his head at her, cautioning, "He's not to be had; that cute girl tight at his side is his wife, the Lady Minka."

Stung by the flattering description of her sister, Adele protested carelessly, "Oh, I'm sure. I'd be silly to go after Efran."

Verrin's honest face registered dismay; the rest of the men either drifted away or turned to talk to the other girls. And Adele's work sisters smiled daggers at her stupid mistake. Among the fortress residents, the handsome Polonti was "the Captain" or "Lord Efran"; no one presumed to call him by his bare name. A few of the sharper women began to wonder who this new girl was. One of them slipped away early to go up to the women's quarters and search the bag in the shelf next to the bed marked "Liza."

Ella got up to come over to their table to say hello to her maid Sudie, which pleased her greatly, in that she was able to introduce Efran's daughter to all her friends. Ella greeted them kindly, asking about this or that, while casually studying the newcomer. Adele turned around to see her, then turned away quickly with her mouth shut. Ella had heard her speak before, too.

After a pleasant visit with Sudie and her friends, Ella returned to the back table nodding in confirmation. And when she and Sudie were getting ready for bed that evening, Ella had something very interesting to tell her. "Don't tell anyone," she insisted, "but, the new worker is Minka's sister Adele." Sudie gazed at her in shock.

Following dinner, as everyone dispersed (and Verrin melted away without a word) Adele went up with the girls to retrieve her bag from her shelf and, with them, attend her toilet in the women's bathing room on the first floor. Then all 19 of them went up to their room together to climb into their individual beds.

While they were settling in, the woman whom Adele had watched sweeping said, "Oh, Liza, tomorrow you'll be responsible for cleaning the women's bathing room. All newcomers get a chance to do it on their first day."

Adele glanced swiftly at her bed slate, which read, "Jaylen" then said, "Sure! I'll be happy to." While the other girls smirked, Adele looked around for the most sympathetic face in the room.

Felice rolled her eyes at this stupid initiation, then said, "Candles out, ladies." All the women put out the lights by their beds; only the day candle remained burning.

The following morning, January 28th, Efran took Joshua and about 30 volunteers with equipment to look over

the remains of the Sanctum; Minka and Nakam went to the library for Law class with Ella, Soames and the Librarian; and Adele, lingering behind the other women, stopped one particular girl, Maryton. "Where are you working today?" Adele asked her.

"I'm in the kitchen," Maryton replied cautiously.

"Good," Adele said, then turned away. A little confused, Maryton left the room.

Alone in the women's room, Adele first took out her little bottle and her mirror. She put just a drop of the potion on her tongue and studied her reflection in the mirror. Yes, all was well; she was still Liza.

Putting those away, she took the pouch out from under her mattress and removed a coin from it to her pocket. Then, using a tin fork purloined from the dining hall, she poked around in the flooring under her bed for a loose board. Finding one, she lifted it to examine the ceiling of the room below. As it proved stable, she put the pouch with her little book of secret potions on top of it and replaced the board, settling it perfectly. Then she put the fork back in the small shelf by her bed.

From there, Adele went down to the kitchen to look for Maryton, and found her washing dishes. Adele came up as if to help her and began rinsing plates. "No, those haven't been washed yet," Maryton whispered.

"Can you do a good job cleaning the women's bathing room?" Adele whispered, glancing around.

"Why?" Maryton asked warily.

"Because--" Adele took the royal out of her pocket to show to Maryton--"I'll give you this if you clean it for me today."

Maryton eyed her. "Give it to me now."

Adele slipped it into the girl's pocket, reminding her, "Do a good job." Maryton nodded.

Adele left, and Maryton quickly washed the remainder of the dishes, dried them, and put them away. She went to one of the kitchen assistants to tell her, "I'm done with the dishes."

"Good, then go get our clean towels from the laundresses," the woman said.

Maryton nodded, turning out of the kitchen. On her way to the back grounds, she paused at the nursery door to look in. Felice glanced over from the baby whose wraps she was changing, and Maryton beckoned. Felice quickly finished up, put the baby in her crib, and washed her hands. Drying them, she came over to Maryton with eyebrows raised in a question.

Maryton showed her the royal, whispering, "The new girl Liza gave this to me to clean the women's bathing room for her."

Felice regarded it in sharp interest, but said, "Then go do it."

Maryton smiled, returning the royal to her pocket. She ran out to the laundry shed on the east grounds for the kitchen towels, ran them back to the kitchen, then ran to the women's bathing room to clean it in a practiced whirlwind.

When it was thoroughly clean, she ran the wet, dirty rags and towels out to the laundry shed and picked up clean towels and cloths to restock the bathing room. Then she reloaded the cabinets with scented soaps, oils and candles. Finally, she shook out the bath mats outside, replacing them properly by the tubs. She paused to make sure everything was correct, then ran up to the second-floor workroom to knock hesitantly on the open door.

Estes looked up to say, “Yes, come in.” DeWitt was preoccupied with his numbers.

“Yes, Steward, my name is Maryton. I’d like to send this down to my mother Blandy, please; she’s working at Lord Schmolck’s shop.” And she handed him the royal.

He took it in surprise and DeWitt glanced over. Estes said, “Of course we’ll have it sent down to her for you, Maryton, but—how did you get this?”

Maryton confessed, “The new girl Liza gave it to me to clean the women’s bathing room for her.”

“Oh, I see,” Estes said in illumination. He whistled sharply.

The sentry stepped in, saluting. “Steward?”

“Yes, Pleyel. Take this down to Blandy at Lord Schmolck’s shop; tell her that her daughter Maryton earned it doing special work.” He gave the royal to the sentry, who took it to run out. “And don’t run down the stairs!” Estes called.

“Yes, Steward!” Pleyel’s barely audible voice came floating back.

“Thank you kindly, Steward,” Maryton said, curtsying to him and DeWitt, who smiled at her.

“Good for you. Carry on, dear,” DeWitt said, and she turned out happily.

DeWitt and Estes regarded each other for a moment. “I wonder how much ‘Liza’ has,” Estes murmured.

“And how long she can keep it,” DeWitt added. Estes silently agreed and they both returned to work.

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Chapter 10

Adele, who had been unobtrusively watching while Maryton cleaned and restocked the bathing room, saw when she had finished. Looking in the room herself to see it spotless, Adele turned back into the corridor to call over the first worker she recognized. “Is this good enough?” she asked, standing at the door of the women’s bathing room.

The woman looked in skeptically, then her jaw dropped. While she went in to check the cabinets, Adele spotted a second worker coming down the corridor, and waylaid her with, “Well, that wasn’t so difficult. I hope I did a good job.” The second woman also looked with astonishment into the bathing room.

Smirking, Adele took up her broom to pretend to sweep.

At that time, Efran, carrying Joshua on his shoulders, was walking the perimeter of the Sanctum foundation with Connor. Efran's dirty shirt that had served as a marker was now tucked by a corner into his belt to take back. The men had cut the grass and were now digging carefully in or around likely-looking indentations in the soil. "Well, Captain, what this looks like is the foundation for the church in the Sanctum, and not the Sanctum itself," Connor remarked.

"Which was larger," Efran said in agreement.

"Yes, sir. According to the map in the last book of the Latter Annals, the whole Sanctum included the leprosarium, the travelers' court, the monk's quarters, the kitchen, the master's quarters, and so on. But the foundation for those areas doesn't show up here," Connor said as they walked.

"It might have been merely wood," Efran said.

"Apparently, Captain," Connor said. They both turned as a couple of men who were digging called to them. Joshua waved and babbled back at them.

Efran and Connor walked over to see what they had found. Martyn said, "Captain, this is the curved end of the apse, where the altar would have been. This carved stone was either on it or under it." (After the Captain had bought him out of slavery, Martyn was permitted to call him "Efran," but chose not to around the other men.) And they all looked down at what appeared to be a granite rectangle of three feet by two feet. On it were carved two lines; the first read, "Ares † Nicole" and the second, "Veritas Lux Mea."

"That's Latin. Who knows Latin?" Efran asked. The men uniformly shook their heads, and he murmured, "I'll ask the Librarian."

They found nothing else of note that morning, except for the fact that the church had been unquestionably burned down—probably due to the fever that was raging at the time, the men believed. Efran thought out, "In the middle of Henry's reign, the fever spread from Westford to the Sanctum some time in eighty-one oh two, and everyone was carted out to the Green Hills around eighty-one oh three. Only Ares and Nicole stayed to care for the sick and dying, because she wouldn't leave without him. It was a year later that Henry went back to look for them, and found . . . nothing. No sign of what had happened to either of them." The men listened quietly, without speculating.

Before leaving, the men hammered two large red flags into the ground to mark the footings. Efran wanted to take the commemorative stone back to the fortress, but to his surprise, his men balked—not at the difficulty of it, but on principle. Stephanos said, "It's a stone of remembrance, Captain; their bones may be underneath it. We should leave it be."

Efran argued, "It will just get buried again. Then what good is it?"

"Someone may go looking for it, and find it, Captain--if we leave it here," Stephanos said.

Grudgingly, Efran complied. Upon returning, he handed Joshua over to a soldier. But because the question of what had happened to Ares and Nicole consumed him, he rode back down to the notary shop.

As he entered, Giardi came out from the back room smiling, as usual; Ryal followed with a questioning look. "I'll only be a moment," Efran said distractedly. "Ryal, we found the foundation of the chapel that anchored the Sanctum."

“Oh, yes?” Ryal said in appreciation.

“Yes, and I—read in the book on Henry that when everyone was evacuated from the Sanctum to the Green Hills because of the fever, Ares and Nicole stayed behind to care for the sick. Henry went back a year later, and couldn’t find them. Do you remember that?”

Ryal said, “Yes, though I was no longer in Westford at that time; I was on duty at the border with Scylla. But I received letters from Henry, who told me of his return to the Sanctum to look for his adoptive father and mother. He found no one, nothing. He went back repeatedly to search, but found no clue as to whether they had died, been killed, or merely gone away. They were never seen in the Green Hills, Westford, Prie Mer—anywhere again. It tore him up to not know.”

“I understand that. All right, thank you, Ryal. Giardini.” Efran smiled at her, but it was a sad smile, and she smiled sympathetically in return.

Efran then rode up to the courtyard, where he gave up his horse. Taking the notes Connor had made on their findings, he went into the fortress hoping that the Librarian could find an answer for him.

At that time, Jaylen stopped by the women’s bathing room to see it immaculate, and knew at once that Liza had not been the one to clean it. How she had persuaded someone else to do it, Jaylen didn’t know. But she knew what to do about *that*.

Finding Liza sweeping the short first-floor corridor that opened on the west grounds, Jaylen told her, “You did a wonderful job on the bathing room. Your next job is to clean the first-floor garderobe.” Adele merely looked at her without replying, so Jaylen smirked at her and walked away.

Adele went straight to the kitchen to find Maryton washing mounds of curly kale and asparagus for tonight’s dinner. Sitting beside her, Adele glanced around and whispered, “I’ll pay you another royal to clean the first-floor garderobe.”

“What? The first-floor garderobe? I can’t; I’m not trained to do that. You can’t clean garderobes until you’re taught to do it right,” Maryton whispered back.

“Ohhhh,” Adele said, seeing the game at hand: Jaylen was trying to trick her into getting in trouble. “Who is the top woman worker? The one who called lights out last night?”

“Felice,” Maryton whispered.

“Where is she right now?” Adele asked.

“In the nursery,” Maryton whispered.

At this moment, Milo was handing Joshua over the nursery half-door with an apologetic, “He needs wraps, Felice.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” she said, smiling.

“Thank you,” he said, turning back down the corridor. Seeing the Captain enter the library, Milo brushed past the new floor cleaner to stand by the door and wait.

Upon Efran's entrance, the Librarian turned from rearranging books. "Librarian . . ." Efran began, hardly knowing where to start.

"Yes, Lord Efran."

"I very much appreciated the book on Henry's reign; it answered many questions. But now I have more. We've just come from walking over the remains of the Sanctum—at least, the chapel that anchored it. We found a stone that was engraved with, 'Veritas Lux Mea.' Can you tell me what that means?"

"It is Latin for 'The truth is my light,' Lord Efran," he replied.

"Of course. Also, the Sanctum was evacuated due to the fever sometime in eighty-one oh three, as far as I can tell. Ares and Nicole did not leave when everyone else did, so Henry went back the following year to look for them, and—couldn't find them nor what had become of them. Do you know?"

The Librarian paused, then said, "I regret that this information is not contained in any book, Lord Efran."

"Oh," Efran groaned. "The question of what happened to them dogged Henry for the rest of his life. I'm afraid I won't be able to let go of it, either."

"That is distressing, Lord Efran," the Librarian said.

"Don't let it trouble you; you've already done more than I could imagine," Efran said.

"You honor me, sir," the Librarian said, and Efran turned away.

Seeing the Captain momentarily free, Milo stepped into the library to tell him, "I dropped off Joshua in the nursery for wraps, Captain." Efran nodded, and another man came in to address the Captain about something else.

While that conversation was taking place in the library, Adele looked into the nursery to see Felice changing a baby's wraps. "May I talk to you, Felice?" she said, opening the half door to let herself in.

Felice glanced over her shoulder as she dropped the dirty wraps into a bucket, along with a cleaning rag. Reaching for a bowl of tallow, she asked, "What is it?"

"I cleaned the women's bathing room, and now Jaylen tells me I have to clean the first-floor garderobe. Will you please show me where that is?" Adele asked innocently.

"Oh!" Felice exhaled in irritation. "No, Matron Gayla sets garderobe and nursery duty. You can't do either without her say-so, and she assigns your trainer."

"Oh. Then I don't have to clean the garderobe?" Adele asked, blinking.

"No, you don't do either without the matron's order," Felice repeated tersely. She put the baby in a bassinet on the floor to finish his bottle in record time. Then she said, "Go do your regular duty." Someone called Felice from the next room, so she stepped back there.

Adele looked down at the black head at her feet, then watched the baby climb out of the bassinet to pull up on

the massive faerie-tree roots that formed low hammocks and hoops for climbing. Belatedly, she realized that this was Efran's son—and hers. So she bent to pick him up. “My word, what a chunky boy you turned out to be. How old are you now? How long ago was that?” As he was heavy, and he wanted down, he started slipping from her arms.

Shortly, Efran came to the door. When he saw her holding his son—and barely at that--his face turned to stone. She looked at him with a bright, innocent smile, and he uttered, “Give me that child.”

Felice came back out as Adele went to hand him over. Taking him, Efran said, “Don't ever touch him again.”

Adele made a pouty face. In near shock, Felice said, “I told you to go do your regular duties.”

Efran stepped back, opening the half door as Adele made a flippant curtsy and walked out. Then he told Felice, “I don't want her anywhere near my son.”

“It will never happen again, Lord Efran,” she said.

“Thank you,” he exhaled, turning away with Joshua.

Felice closed her eyes to contain her anger, then looked aside, pondering. “He's never objected to any of the girls here. But . . . he acts as though he knows her.” And then she knew she needed to put a casual question to her sister Sudie, whom Lady Ella told everything.

Following Law class, Minka had taken Nakam out to watch Ella and Tess work with the horses. (He rarely stayed right at her feet, preferring to scout the woods nearby. But he always came when she called.) Again, Minka watched Tess take Cloud through her paces. Today, she rode the mare bareback, but with a bridle, and for a little bit longer. Cloud cooperated, knowing the rewards of scratching and apples to follow. And Tess glanced frequently at Minka's happy, excited face.

So when Tess was done with Cloud for the day, she walked the horse over to receive pats and praise from their appreciative audience. “Oh, Tess, you're doing so wonderfully with her! She's like a different animal,” Minka marveled.

“Thank you,” Tess said. “Everyone told me to stop trying so hard with her, but it took Loriot to make me listen, dam' him.”

Minka grinned. “Isn't he adorable?”

Tess gaped at her in laughing surprise. “Do you really think so? Your man is so beautiful.”

“Oh, they all have their own charm. Loriot was hurt so badly by my sister, it's wonderful to see him coming out of that defensive shell,” Minka said.

“Is he? I don't see it,” Tess said anxiously.

“Just scritch his neck and feed him apples; you will,” Minka said to Tess' laughter.

After a moment of silence, Tess said uneasily, “I owe you an apology for being so rude to you.”

“You're making it up to me. It's so much fun to watch you work,” Minka said, industriously scritchng Cloud,

who lifted her head high for Minka's fingers.

"It's fun to watch myself do things differently," Tess quietly admitted.

At the call, "Lady Minka!" they both looked over to the iron fence where one of Pia's Polonti stood on the other side, holding Nakam with a mouthful of pheasant.

Minka cried, "Drop, Nakam!" as she ran over to the fence. He agreeably opened his jaws, and the bird flew off. "Oh! Thank you," she said, taking him from the boy's hands through the balusters. He grinned, bowing, then ran back to his duty.

At this time, Adele was loitering with her broom at the door to the western grounds, where no one was likely to bother her. This enterprise was not working out as she had hoped; she didn't want to waste time or money squabbling with cleaning women, and Efran seemed indifferent to her new appearance. So she had to think of something else.

Seeing Lorient approach the stables to be warmly greeted by Tess, Adele curled her lip and turned inside to industriously sweep the corridor for the next several hours, thinking.

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Chapter 11

When Adele finally got tired of sweeping and went back up to the women's room to freshen up for dinner, she found her hand mirror and her little bottle gone. This was irritating, but not fatal. While the room was empty, she did quickly pry up the board to retrieve her small bag of royals and the little book, tying both in her waist sash. Then she went downstairs to pause near the principals' rooms in the lower corridor. (Efran rejected any designation of royalty other than "lord," as was in his charter.)

Adele listened at the door of Ella's room for a short time (which used to be Adele's room, when she was carrying Efran's child). Not hearing anything, she cautiously opened the door and looked in. The maid was not here, so Adele went swiftly to the bedchamber to look for a hand mirror. There was only a small one, which she took to hide in her sash as she exited the suite and closed the door.

Turning, she almost ran into Ella's maid Sudie. In surprise, Sudie asked, "What were you doing in there?"

"Oh, hello. I was looking for Lady Ella. Lady Minka was asking for her," Adele said in her simpleton's voice.

"She's out there with her now," Sudie said darkly.

"Good! She got the message. Excuse me," Adele said properly, taking her leave.

By dinner time, Ella had noticed her hand mirror was gone, so Minka gave her the one she used (rarely). Felice had talked with Sudie and discovered who "Liza" really was, but kept it to herself, and Efran had been brooding on behalf of Henry all day. Efran understood the need to know, particularly about a father.

When Efran had discovered as a young boy that women had babies only with the help of a man who then

became the baby's "father," he went on a quest to find his own father. His mother was not helpful, brushing off his questions, so he went around the village asking every likely man if he was that person. It got him into a lot of trouble—most of the men he asked merely laughed; some leered, and others ignored him. But his mother gave him the beating of his life, so he stopped asking.

But he never stopped looking for a father, and formed tentative attachments to every officer he served under at Westford, until Commander Wendt filled the rôle as perfectly as any mortal could. That's why Efran believed that his stealing Wendt from Clonmel about five months ago, blinded and about to be tortured, was ordained by God.

Every man Efran had ever known told him to stop crying; Wendt merely said, "Oh, Efran's crying again"--as though it were a simple necessity. Even after he was blinded, he knew when Efran was crying, regardless how quiet he tried to be. Coincidentally, Efran had cried very little in these last five months. So, yes—Efran wanted badly to know what had happened to Ares and Nicole.

Almost no one sat with Adele for her second dinner at the fortress except Maryton, who told her, "I've asked the matron to train on nursery duty, so I can do that for you whenever you're asked to. But I still don't think I want to train on garderobes, even though it pays the most. Hosmer has practically gotten rich off them; he's got his own house now."

Adele wasn't listening for studying Trina and Challinor at one of the front tables. Adele hadn't seen them last night, as she had been sitting with her back to the front of the hall. But again tonight, they both wore exquisite originals that none of the other women could match (except Felice. But having worn that amazing dress last night, she wouldn't wear it again until a very special occasion.)

Pensively, Adele had to admit it was a tactical error to change up her face only to get on as a servant in the fortress. With all the new developments on the Lands, the fortress was no longer the only opportunity for advancement, nor was Efran the only desirable man. He was certainly not the wealthiest. So Adele determined that a change of course was due.

That was only confirmed when Felice approached her table with a skeptical face. "Liza, Matron Gayla heard that you wanted to train on garderobe cleaning, so you'll start that with Hosmer tomorrow morning."

"Oh, thank you," Adele said, wide-eyed, and Maryton looked admiring. Felice nodded dubiously and walked off.

Exhausted, and with her decision made, Adele went to up to bed early, falling asleep even before Felice came in to order candles snuffed. But many of the other girls were gathered around Jaylen's bed while she showed off a little bottle. "What is it?" "What does it do?" they asked quietly, watching for Felice—or for "Liza" to look over.

"A beauty potion, probably. I've seen some like it at Imelda's," Jaylen said. She removed the cork to sniff it, then daub a tiny bit on her finger. "It just looks like water. Don't smell anything either," she said, evaluating.

"I dare you to try it," another girl said.

A second girl cried, "Oh, no, don't! You don't know that she drinks it; she may use it on her feet!"

A third said, "No, I saw her take a sip from it yesterday morning."

Looking around at their wide eyes, Jaylen put the bottle to her lips and drank. They all watched breathlessly, but nothing happened, at least right away. Then Jaylen shrugged, "If it's a beauty potion, there's nothing more that

can be done with me!”

They all laughed and Felice came in. “All right, girls; each to your own bed and lights out.” They scattered as directed and the room went dark but for the day candle.

That night, Efran dreamed. He didn’t usually dream, or didn’t remember it when he did. But this night, he dreamt that he was wrapping up bodies, people who had just died—and carting them a great distance to dump them over the cliffs to the Sea. It was the Sea, for sure, but Efran did not see the Abbey fortress—only the well-worn trail of a handcart’s wheels that went back and forth from the room of death to the cliffs.

It was unquestionably in the midst of the meadowlands—where, exactly, he didn’t know. But he wasn’t looking around; he was only coming back to find that another sufferer had died while he was gone.

It was a heartbreaking, but necessary duty. Some of these he knew, though he couldn’t recall their names while he was dreaming, and some were only children. That was the worst, as three of them would fit in the cart. And the continual trekking back and forth, certainly a distance of miles, utterly wore him down. At last, the only ones left were him and her, his love, Minka.

He saw her in bed, sweating with a rampant fever. Her cheeks were flushed; her face was hot, yet she shivered intermittently. He tried to get her to wake up to drink, knowing how crucial that was with a fever, but she only choked on the water. She thrashed in her discomfort, and opened bleary eyes to try to speak to him. But her words were so slurred, he couldn’t understand her.

At last she went still, alarmingly still; the color drained from her face and her hands went cold. “Lady,” he whispered, trembling, “stay with me; stay with me, darling; don’t leave me. . . .” He laid his head on her chest, feeling nothing, hearing nothing, and with a groan of utter despair, rose to get the binding cloths in the corner with which he had been wrapping the dead.

He wrapped her up, hardly able to see what he was doing, and carried her in his arms, stumbling down the miles-long path to the cliffs of the Sea. Finally, standing on the edge, he found he couldn’t let her go; his arms wouldn’t release his treasure.

When he pressed his lips to her forehead and felt it as a stone in winter, he finally knew that she was gone, leaving only this shell. Wracked, he opened his arms to give her up to the Sea. Seeing her drop, he shuddered, “I can’t live without her—I can’t—dear God in heaven--”

Standing on the edge of the cliffs, he raised his face to the clouds in anguish—and saw her. She was beautiful, glowing, grinning down at him as she did when she had something special to show him. And she was not alone; there was Another at her side, looking down at him as well.

Efran raised his arms with a cry of desire, and felt a seizing pain in his chest—the worst pain he had ever experienced. He stood in agony for a moment, then he was falling, and he knew no more.

He awoke with a start, his face and pillow wet. He rolled over to Minka beside him to feel her face and her arms—she was warm but not hot, nor sweating, nor thrashing. She murmured sleepily, “Later,” and snuggled back down in his side. He fell back on the pillow to breathe, and listen to her breathe. And now he knew what had happened to Ares and Nicole.

The following morning, January 29th, Adele rose while it was still dark and collected her things from her

cubicle. She left the large women's room quietly to go downstairs and ask for an early breakfast, "as I have garderobe training today," she said brightly. In sympathy, Dobell gave her a hearty breakfast and even a bag with bread and cheese for her midday meal.

She then went out to the courtyard as sunrise was just beginning to show itself on the eastern horizon. The sleepy courtyard sentries opened the gates for her, and she walked down the switchback and down Main, its street lamps still burning brightly. At the wall gates, she told the guards, "I just found out last night that my father is very ill, so I must go to him. But I'll be back later today."

One of the men asked in concern, "Do you need an escort, miss?"

"Oh, no, thank you; he's in a small house just a few miles up the road. I just want to make sure you'll let me back in when I return," she said anxiously.

"Of course, miss." They opened the gates, so she began walking the northbound road to the abandoned campsite.

Efran woke just to hold Minka for a few minutes. When she began stirring, and Nakam climbed up on her to stretch and yawn, he said, "I won't be riding today; I'll be up in the workroom reading."

She mumbled assent, and he climbed out of bed to dress, then took up a book from the small table. Before even going in for breakfast, he stopped by the library.

The Librarian turned to him to bow. He was even larger than Efran now, with his suit splendidly dark and his hair vibrantly white. He had put up four lanterns around the library to make it light and inviting before the sunlight entered its windows. Regarding him, Efran said, "Thank you for showing me what happened to them."

"You are welcome, Lord Efran," the Librarian said, which confirmed Efran's suspicions that he was responsible for the dream.

Handing the Librarian the book in his hand, Efran said, "I finished the first book of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It was most interesting, but--I want to learn more about Lystra's history."

The Librarian turned to a shelf behind him to pull out an old book which he handed over. "You may be interested in this one, which documents Commander Talus' usurpation of Surchatain Bobadil, and the ensuing events."

"Excellent," Efran breathed, taking the volume with care. Studying him, Efran asked, "Why are we just now receiving your help?"

"In the years of silence, I withered from lack of use, and was awakened only when the Lady Minka entered to focus on the books," the Librarian said.

"I see. Minka, of course," Efran muttered. "Well, I am grateful to have your assistance."

"And I am glad to be of use, Lord Efran."

Book in hand, Efran stopped by the nursery to find that Joshua was still asleep. "When he's ready, bring him up to the workroom, please," he told the attendant, Cordelia.

"Certainly, Lord Efran," she replied.

Glancing warily around the room, he asked, “Liza isn’t here, is she?”

“Who? No, sir,” she said, confused.

“Ah. Good.” Then he went into the kitchen to get breakfast to take up to the workroom, because there is nothing better than eating over an open book.

When Minka had dressed, attended Nakam’s needs, and gotten breakfast for herself, she paused in dissatisfaction. Then she asked for and received a nice mug and a bag of dried mint from the kitchen. As she went out to the front courtyard, Nakam followed her. She paused to warn him, “If you come, you have to stay right with me.” He made all kinds of promises to her, as boys do. So she asked the gate guards for her favorite mare, Rose, to take her down to the barracks.

Shortly, young Telo walked Rose into the courtyard and held her bridle while she mounted. “I will attend you, Lady Minka.”

She glanced up. “Oh, Telo, I’m only going to the barracks. You don’t need to--”

“Please, Moiwahine, please let me attend you,” he whispered. The gate guards looked on, smiling. “I do not need a horse; I will walk beside you. And I can find Commander Wendt for you,” he urged.

“How did you know I was going down to see the Commander?” she demanded.

“You carry the mug and the tea; who else could it be for?” he asked.

“All right; I’d love to have your company. But I may need you to hold the little boy if he runs off,” she said with a glance at Nakam’s wagging tail.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Telo said, and proudly walked down the switchback alongside Rose as Minka chatted to him.

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Chapter 12

About that time, the girls in the women’s room were getting ready for another work day, conversing sleepily. Jaylen started to get up herself, then remembered the beauty potion. She reached for the little hand mirror in her shelf to check her reflection—and began screaming.

Other girls flocked around her. “What is it?” “Why, it’s Liza!” “No, it’s not, it’s--”

“It’s me, Jaylen!” she screamed. But the reflection in the mirror showed a heart-shaped face, green eyes, and unruly masses of dark strawberry-blonde hair. The transformation of her features was less successful than Adele’s, who had been a beauty to start with, which Jaylen was not.

Felice ran in at the screaming, and the girls clustered around her in excitement, all telling her all at once their

understanding of what had happened. She silenced them with authority, demanding, “Where is Liza?”

Everyone looked to her bed. It and her little shelves were empty. Felice said grimly, “Jaylen, come with me. Bring the bottle and the mirror. The rest of you go to breakfast and your assignments.” They went as ordered; a sobbing Jaylen was taken to the Matron Gayla. Then Gayla and Felice took the girl across the corridor to the workroom.

When the three appeared at the door of the workroom, the men looked up. Joshua looked out from under the table at the girl in the middle, who was crying. Matron Gayla said, “Lord Efran, Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt, forgive the interruption. We’ve had a—most unusual situation develop with the new girl Liza--”

“I’m not her!” Jaylen cried.

“Be quiet, dear, and tell them what you did,” Gayla said in some contradiction. But since Jaylen’s outpouring was nearly incomprehensible, Felice filled in with what she had gleaned from the other girls.

The men listened attentively. Efran held out his hand for the bottle and the mirror, which the matron gave him. Then he asked, “Where is Liza?”

Felice replied, “She appears to have left the fortress, Lord Efran.”

“I see,” he said. “Well, if she shows up again, which I doubt, have her brought up here. Meanwhile, as you were.”

“Yes, sir,” the matron said, turning out with the despondent Jaylen and the thoughtful Felice.

Efran told the sentry at the door, Coxe, “Ask Lady Minka to come up here, please.”

“Pardon, Captain, but she’s down at the barracks seeing that Commander Wendt has his tea,” Coxe replied knowledgeably.

The three men laughed, and Efran said, “Very good. Ask her to come up when she returns.”

“Yes, sir.” Coxe saluted and went out to relay the message to the door guards.

Meanwhile, after a long, tiring walk, Adele arrived at the abandoned campsite. Going straight to the plane tree, she found the little hand shovel lying beside the empty hole in which she had left her pouch of royals and the jug of face-changing potion. Observing all this in mild displeasure, she muttered, “So the carriage driver couldn’t resist having a peek while I consoled my poor, sick father. Well. I hope he drinks it.”

Smirking, she left to begin walking back to the Lands, deep in consideration of her options. (Adele would have been entertained to know that the carriage driver, expecting the jug to contain alcohol, took a generous swig, and was disappointed to find it tasteless. His subsequent punishment for theft could have filled another book. However, it is only mentioned in *Lord Efran and the Villalobos*.)

In the barracks kitchen, Minka brewed a nice, hot mug of tea, then asked Telo to help her find the Commander. He said, “Yes, Lady Minka. Please let me walk you to the front of Barracks One, and I will find him and bring him to you there.”

“That would be lovely. Thank you, Telo,” she said in satisfaction. He, in as great satisfaction, walked Moiwahine

to the front of the barracks, which opened on Main. Then he ran off to look for the Commander with Nakam at his heels.

While she was waiting, Captains Barr and Melchior came out to talk with her, which thrilled her, as it enabled her to tell them all about Adele's latest scheme. They listened in amazed disbelief until Telo returned bearing the Commander at a brisk walk. "Lady Minka, the Commander Wendt," Telo announced.

She turned with the mug to exclaim, "Oh, Commander, you--" And she broke off in shock at the steaming mug of tea in his hand which he had been attempting to drink when Telo had apprehended him.

"Oh, Minka, did you bring me tea?" Wendt laughed.

Barr said, "Yes, Commander."

Melchior added, "She doesn't trust us to get you a decent cup of tea down here, Commander." Both were amused, but they also spoke as a courtesy, to make the blind Commander aware of their presence.

"Good, then I'll have some drinking company," Wendt said, taking a sip. Minka laughed, happily drinking her cup in between snatches of narrative on Adele's exploits. A second hearing did no harm to Barr and Melchior, as it enabled them to ask questions that they were too surprised to think of earlier.

As Minka was talking, she suddenly fell silent, eyes on Main. The men subtly turned to see Adele/Liza walking down the street on the opposite side. "Something just happened," Wendt observed at her silence.

"Yes, Commander," Melchior replied while Minka was still watching Adele. "The Lady's sister is going down Main, apparently having just entered the gates. Did you know that she had stepped out, Minka?"

"No," she said, then gasped lightly. "She's not going up the switchback; she's turned to Elvey's. Oh, that must mean she finally spotted Trina and Challinor." Then she had to explain to all of them why that was significant. Nakam finally trotted up at this time, satisfied with whatever he had been doing.

"Oh, I'd better go tell Efran. I don't know whether he even knows she left, but he'll want to know she's back. He was very upset to find her holding Joshua in the nursery yesterday," she said grimly.

Wendt asked, "Are you sure she knew who Joshua was?"

Minka looked at him. "No. Oh, Commander, I miss walking with you on the back grounds. It's not fair that Efran has to be the only one to listen to me." She hugged him while the other men laughed.

"I miss you too, Minka. The men are boring," Wendt said, and they sadly agreed.

"No, they're not." Minka hugged Barr, who hugged her gently in return, then she hugged Melchior. Pulling away, she said in mild alarm, "I hope it won't upset Geneve that I hugged you."

"I won't tell her," Melchior said, deploying his Efranesque smile, and she laughed in appreciation.

Barr, meanwhile, was shaking his head at Telo, "Don't expect hugs."

"No, sir! Moiwahine already hugged me," Telo said, pulling down the front of his uniform jacket to show the ghastly purple scar. He took the Commander's hand so that he could feel it. "Moiwahine's hug healed me."

“That was a bad one,” Wendt said, his fingers gently probing the length and depth of the scar.

Barr said, “I’m sorry that you can’t feel the scar on my foot, Commander.”

“Or my headaches, which are gone,” Melchior added.

Minka lowered her face, scowling. “Efran explained to you how that was the power of the hill. That was Nakham. I had very little to do with it.”

No one argued; they merely smiled at her. “All right. Nakam?” she called, looking around. The little dog returned from his wandering and Telo picked him up while she mounted Rose.

“Thank you for the company, Minka,” Wendt smiled.

“You’re welcome,” she said, eyes watering. She wanted to tell them how much she loved them because of what they meant to Efran, but didn’t trust herself to do it without hugging them again. Telo gave her Nakam and she held him on her lap while she walked Rose toward the switchback, Telo at her side. And the men returned to their duties.

Had Barr and Melchior waited thirty seconds longer, they would have seen Reinagle advancing on Minka from up Main. “You, girl! Hey you, Minka!” he was shouting. His three large bodyguards followed close enough to assist if needed, but not so close as to appear threatening. They knew who she was.

Minka pulled up Rose in astonishment while Nakam barked at him from her lap. Teeth bared, Telo placed himself between her and the oncoming Reinagle to shout, “Stop there, you disrespectful bag of bones!” The courtyard gate guards, both Polonti, were watching in lively interest. While itching to help Telo, they were unwilling to steal his glory in guarding Moiwahine.

Scowling at the equally glowering youngster, Reinagle did stop. “I need a bigger house! There’s not enough room for me and my men!”

Frowning, Minka shook her head slightly. “I don’t know anything about that. You have to talk to the builder or whoever sold you the house.”

“You tell Efran,” he instructed.

She laughed, “That’s not his job, either.”

Reinagle hesitated, lip curled, but Telo took Rose’s bridle to continue leading her to the switchback, glancing darkly at the ex-Surchatain and his men. The faerie trees leaned far over to block sight of her from the men, and Reinagle turned away in disgust. The courtyard guards nodded smugly at each other; it only took one young Polonti to make three (and a half) large Eurusians back off.

Meanwhile, Adele had sashayed into the reception area where Elvey’s dresser Ianna sat at a welcome table. No one else was in the room right now, so Adele flipped a royal to her. Ianna caught it, looking questioningly at (what appeared to be) a cleaning woman as she sat on the edge of the table. “If you get me good sketch paper and a nice sharp charcoal, I’ll give you some sketches for Elvey that will earn you a lot more than that.”

Ianna dubiously regarded her work dress and messy hair, but got up and left the room, returning shortly with the

requested supplies. Adele then sat at the table beside her to begin sketching. And she drew from memory four of Ennemond's fabulous dresses that she had seen in Crescent Hollow just a few weeks ago. With an eye for detail, she reproduced the little touches that set them off, and indicated the various colors that went into each. And she did them with remarkable speed—it took her less than an hour to get all four of them finished—though she needed her charcoal sharpened several times.

While attending other customers (who ignored Adele, given how she was dressed), Ianna took each sketch as it was done to look at it. All were signed, "Livy." When Adele had tossed off the third one, Ianna took them to a back room. And in a few minutes, Elvey herself came out.

Adele's eyes flicked up at her. Elvey would normally have recognized her, having been such a troublesome customer. But the potion was still effective, and Elvey stared at the unlikely designer. Then she came over to look at the fourth sketch that Adele was just now completing. With a flick of the charcoal, Adele signed it, "Livy." Then she tossed it over to Lady Elvey and sat back.

"Livy?" Elvey asked, studying her.

"Yes," said Adele. "My father just died, and his brother's family moved into our little house in the woods a couple of miles from here. They threw me out with nothing. So I came down here. But I have dreams of beautiful dresses. The designs just come to me. I see them clearly, but, I've never had papers to be able to draw them. Since I've always wanted to work for a dressmaker, I thought I would come see if you like the clothes that I see in my dreams."

"They're amazing," Elvey said. "They look like the work of someone with many years of experience and eyes for fresh ideas. Yes, Livy, I'll pay you for your designs and give you final authority over the finished product."

"That would be lovely. I'm starving," Adele said.

"Here, I'll get Firmin's to send us an early dinner while we talk over terms," Elvey said.

"Thank you so much," Adele purred.

As Adele, Elvey, and two of her top associates ate, they all looked at the sketches and worked out terms of payment with great cordiality. Since "Livy" was homeless, Elvey gave her living quarters in this building, and Adele promptly asked for a bath and a beautician. Elvey was mildly surprised that a rural girl would even know that such a thing as a beautician existed, so Adele explained, "My father brought me down here once or twice to sell his—wood. And I would stand at Imelda's shop, looking in the window with longing."

Accepting that explanation sympathetically, Elvey had a tub brought to Adele's assigned quarters and a beautician from Imelda's imported. While she bathed, Adele asked for a trim and a change of hair color. "I'm so tired of this mousy brown," she said honestly, regarding her reflection in a large hand mirror.

"We can make it a lovely golden blonde," the beautician, Bowrie, suggested.

"Um, I don't think so. I would love to make it black," Adele countered. "And smoothed with scented oil."

"Yes, we can do that. I'll have the shop send us a sage dye," Bowrie agreed. And the remainder of that day saw another, even more thorough, transformation of Adele.

When Minka met up with Efran for dinner at the fortress, she fully intended to tell him that she had seen Adele

walking into Elvey's. But they had such a good time talking and laughing with Ella, Quennel, the children, and others who stopped by to say hello—including Tess!--that Minka simply forgot. And when Efran held her in bed that evening, thoughts of Adele were far, far out of the picture.

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Chapter 13

When Adele rose late from a satisfying sleep the following day—January 30th--she was offered a dress by Challinor to wear. "This does go well with your new hair," Ianna said encouragingly.

With a sad, disappointed air, Adele regarded the dress, then said, "May I have just a selection of pieces?"

"Well, yes, if you prefer," Ianna said, withdrawing the dress.

And from a vast assortment of articles of clothing, Adele selected a long skirt, a low-cut blouse, a shoulder scarf, a hip shawl, boots, and a tastefully coordinated necklace. In this ensemble, she swept out to Croft's for a bite, then just walked around Main to be seen and admired. It was exhilarating to be noticed as Livy by Efran's men who had once despised her as Adele. More than one of them casually flirted, asking her name, gauging her marital status. And she successfully disguised her voice with the faint lilt of a Hollowan accent.

While Adele was testing out her new disguise in the Lands, Elvey murmured to Ianna, "You know, we need to get Minka back here; her simplicity is such a draw for other women who are not comfortable wearing Challinor's dresses. Let's send up a messenger to the fortress asking her to come down to look at these sketches. We can offer to alter any of the designs to suit her. What do you think?"

"Oh, yes," Ianna said. "Minka wearing any of these would be such a coup for Livy, and a boost for us. Challinor's dresses are gorgeous, of course, but . . . they haven't sold all that well. We had to mark down the price," she ended reluctantly.

Elvey groaned, "Oh, no. And the materials cost so much. Well, let's put a hold on her other designs, and I'll send a messenger up to Minka right away." Ianna nodded eagerly.

At that time, Minka and Nakam were on the back grounds watching the children. A traveling flutist had taught them a simple circle dance, so now almost all of them--Toby, Noah, Ivy, Almund, Beischel, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, and Jera—were performing it to his music. At the end of the dance, they all clapped for themselves. Toby asked, "What kind of music is that? I've never heard anything like it."

"That's leprechaun dance music, son," the flutist said.

"Leprechaun dance music! What is a leprechaun?" Toby asked.

"A special kind of faerie who dances when he finds gold," the flutist said. "Try it again; see if hidden gold appears!" He put his lips to his flute to began playing again, so they dragged Minka into their circle, just to increase their chances of finding gold. Then other passing workers dropped their bundles or tools to join in.

When Efran came out looking for her, he was rushed by small bodies into the circle. Good-naturedly, he

absorbed the steps, then the flutist played for a large circle of 22, including the lord of the fortress. They executed an imperfect but happy dance, the rooftop bells providing accompaniment that rather startled the musician.

When they were done, they all applauded themselves and the flutist, to whom Efran gave a royal and sent to be fed in the kitchen. ("It *did* produce gold," the children marveled.) Then the messenger from Elvey's approached to bow, inviting Minka to come view their newest designs. She, still happy from dancing, hugged Efran. "Come with me!" she pleaded.

"To view dresses?" he asked, pained, then said, "I would love to see you wearing whatever you pick out."

"All right," she said. Pressing his lips to her forehead, he remembered when he did that as her guardian, knowing that he might pay for it with his life. He hadn't cared; it was worth it.

When she turned to leave with the messenger, a soldier stopped Efran for a word, so he nodded to her before turning to listen. She caught up Nakam. "I have to put him up," she explained to the messenger.

But Toby urged, "Leave him out here to play with us, Minka. I'll watch him."

She smiled warmly at him. "Thank you, Toby; that's very sweet of you. I will." And she released the happy dog to run with the children.

As she went up the back corridor toward the foyer, she remarked to the messenger, "This is unusual. The new designs must be something special." She had grown wary, thinking they must be more from Challinor's fervid brain.

"Oh, they are, Lady Minka. They're the work of a fresh new designer who just came on yesterday. Her name is Livy," he said.

"Oh?" she said, instantly suspicious. Although she had mentioned it to no one, she hadn't forgotten seeing Adele go in Elvey's yesterday. So she thought about what to do should she see her.

As the messenger assisted Minka into Elvey's special carriage for exalted customers, she glanced back at the two Polonti, Tiras and Koschat, mounted and waiting behind it. Climbing into the carriage behind her, the messenger waved dismissively at them: "She doesn't need you. Good day."

The courtyard gate guards grinned at his assumption that they would regard anything he said, and Minka's Polonti bodyguard rode out behind the carriage as it descended the switchback. The messenger looked back at them once or twice, displeased. While Elvey was careful to not offend the Polonti, seeing that Lord Efran was one, her surrogates had definite ideas about their presence in her establishment. Minka, seeing all this, smiled.

As the carriage pulled up to Elvey's covered entrance, Tiras and Koschat dismounted behind it. Koschat told the doormen, "Leave our horses here." Reluctantly, they did so. And when Minka was escorted into the shop, her Polonti followed close behind.

Ianna met her effusively. "Oh, thank you for coming, Lady Minka! I'm so excited about what you're going to see. You may wait here," she naively told the Polonti, who barely glanced at her. And when Minka was swept through the doorway to an inner workroom, they followed right behind.

Meanwhile, "Livy" had returned from her tour in time for Elvey to only tell her, "We have a special guest

coming to view your designs.”

“Excellent,” Adele said, then the door opened to Minka.

Adele turned and froze; Minka glanced at her, then looked away as though not recognizing her. But of course she did, and that before Adele had ever turned. The ensemble itself advertised its wearer as Adele, and though the hair was dark, almost black, its style was also one favored by Minka’s older sister. This interaction took only a moment, during which time Elvey herself told the Polonti, “You may step out and guard the door.”

This was unacceptable to them for no other reason than the existence of a second door which opened into this room. So they did not move and Minka raised her eyes to Elvey to say, “They’re my pets. I want them here.”

Elvey issued a short, surprised laugh, but didn’t dare object. So she merely said, “Well, Minka dear, this is our fabulous new designer Livy. Livy, Lady Minka is Lord Efran’s wife, and Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

“How lovely,” Adele whispered in her most Hollowan voice. Again, Minka merely glanced at her to smile as they all sat.

Elvey was spreading three of Adele’s purloined designs on the table before them, saying, “We think any or all of these simple, elegant designs would look fabulous on you, dear Minka. And you know there are special occasions when you want to dress up as Efran’s wife.” Ianna leaned forward to watch in nervous excitement, but Adele sat stone still.

“True,” Minka admitted, looking over the sketches. Her sister’s handwriting was evident in her signature, but the style of the drawings told Minka nothing. As she had never known her sister to design anything original other than schemes, she vaguely wondered where she had found these. Nonetheless, she was quiet, as was everyone else, while she looked them over. Adele was quietly sweating; if Minka liked them enough to start asking her questions, she would recognize her.

Against Minka’s expectations, the more she looked, the more interested she became, especially in one design: it was the simplest, with little ornamentation except for a bow on the right front hip which opened the outer skirt to show a layer of petticoat, or some contrasting fabric, underneath. “I like this,” Minka said, raising it. “I like the simple sleeves that cover the wrists, but you need to raise the neckline a little—I’m not that bold, and don’t have much cleavage to show. But—in a soft green, with a coordinating fabric at the slit. . . . Oh, and if you lined the neck with the coordinating fabric, you wouldn’t need to raise it.”

Elvey immediately pulled out her swatch book to show Minka samples of suitable fabrics, and Minka picked out several she wanted to see. While Ianna was sent to retrieve the bolts desired, Elvey leaned over the sketch to note other possible alterations to suit Minka, plus accessories. Adele sat stiffly quiet during this discussion.

Shortly, Ianna and another associate, Ghislain, entered laden with bolts of fine fabrics. They all spent the next half hour debating which to use until unanimously settling on the fabrics Minka chose. Then Ghislain brought out a measuring string to measure her. At this point, her pets did have to step out the door because Minka was obliged to remove her dress.

As Minka redressed and discussions concluded, she told Elvey, “I didn’t bring any money today, but I’ll send a man down with a deposit.”

“Thank you, dear; I’m so excited. Aren’t you, Livy? This is quite a coup!” Elvey exclaimed.

Adele paled as everyone turned to her. Then Minka looked her in the eye and said, “Well done, Livy.”

Meeting her eyes, Adele knew that she had been recognized. But for some unfathomable reason, Minka was playing along. “Thank you, Lady Minka,” Adele said in her regular voice.

Minka smiled, arching one brow ever so slightly, and went out, saying, “Come, my pets.” Her Polonti guards followed immediately.

Elvey’s carriage returned Minka to the fortress courtyard. As the messenger assisted her down the carriage steps, she nodded to him before turning to her bodyguard, who were dismounting. They bowed to her and she said, “Thank you for your service,” adding in a whisper, “but don’t tell anyone who that was.”

“Who was who, Lady Minka? I don’t know; do you?” Koschat asked Tiras.

“No, I have no idea, Lady Minka,” Tiras protested, shaking his head in ignorance, brow furrowed.

“Polonti are such bad liars,” she murmured, and they grinned at her.

At that time, Efran emerged from the open front doors. “There you are! You were gone so long,” he complained, descending the steps. Her bodyguards saluted, and he nodded to them.

“I’m having a new dress made,” she informed him. At his look of surprise, she added in a whisper, “And I know a secret.”

“Tell me,” he smiled, catching her around the waist.

“You can’t tell *anyone*,” she said, eyeing him seriously.

“Oh, this is interesting,” he said, glancing back at his grinning men as he walked her up the steps with a hand at her back.

“Oh, I need money,” she said, remembering. Leaning into Doane’s cubicle, she said, “Hello, Doane. Can you send a man down to Elvey’s with five royals? It’s for a new dress.”

“Certainly, Lady Minka,” he said, smiling.

“Thank you,” she grinned back at him.

“Now, tell me,” Efran said, pulling her back to him.

Looking around the crowded foyer in dissatisfaction, she pulled him into their quarters. After shutting the door pointedly behind them, she whispered, “I found Adele.”

“Oh ho,” he said warily.

“She’s disguised herself again with black hair, and calls herself ‘Livy,’” Minka went on.

“As opposed to ‘Liza,’” he noted.

“Yes. And she’s working at Elvey’s as a dress designer. I just arranged to have one of her dresses made for me,” Minka told him.

He looked confused. “Did she know you spotted her?”

“Yes, by the end of the session,” she said.

He still looked confused. “Did you tell Elvey who she is?”

“No, and I’m not going to. I don’t want you to tell anyone, either,” she said firmly.

His mouth dropped open slightly. “And the reason for that is . . . ?”

Minka hesitated, looking for words. “I think she may be actually trying to make a fresh start, and may have found something she’s good at. The designs were wonderful, no question, and with alterations, something I could wear on special occasions. So, if that’s what she’s really trying to do, I’m not going to trip her up.”

He smiled down at her, slightly shaking his head. “My Minka, ever the optimist.” She raised her shoulders as a confession of guilt, and he gathered her up.

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Chapter 14

After a stressful day, Felice took off early that afternoon just to get out of the fortress and away from the demands of her workers. Jaylen’s face was continuing to evolve in unexpected ways, which caused her to burst out in tears whenever anyone jumped at seeing her. And if Felice ever caught Liza—that is, Adele--there would be a reckoning.

So she pushed her way into Croft’s, crowded already, and ordered a mild ale. As she waited at the bar for her drink, she acknowledged several friends who greeted her with a word or friendly pat on the shoulder.

There was one man standing forlornly in line for an early dinner who saw her, and recognized her. He, not being forward, struggled with himself (and his conscience) for a little while, then finally departed the line to approach her.

Felice looked up in mild surprise as a nice-looking Southerner came to stand at the bar beside her and say, “Hello. Ah, my name is Folliott. I’ve seen you a couple times in the fortress, and just thought—maybe I can buy you an early dinner?”

She appraised him for a moment, then smiled. “Why not? I hear the trout is fresh.”

He smiled in pleased relief. “Trout. Yes, trout is good. If you’ll claim us a table, I’ll get us a couple of plates.”

“All right, Folliott. What do you want to drink?” she asked.

He glanced down at what she was holding. “The mild Delano’s is good.”

“I’ll get you one, then,” she said, nodding to the barkeeper for another.

“Great,” he said, standing there smiling until she went to the dining area to claim a table. Coming to himself, he rushed back to the line for plates of trout and fresh vegetables.

These he brought to the table that Felice had claimed in the middle of the main dining room. Yes, she was preening a little, to be seen having dinner with a handsome—and obviously self-sufficient—Southerner. Yes, Felice was tired of scraping by, and especially tired of living with her fortress job around the clock every day. So she and Folliott talked, mildly flirting, but mostly just enjoying the cordial company of someone new.

Testing, she asked with a faintly sardonic smile, “So will your wife expect you to eat with her tonight?”

He laughed, “Oh, that’s no problem.” He didn’t mean to camouflage the fact that he was married; he was simply thinking that Trina never expected him to eat with her.

Meanwhile, the Polonti men seated around the room were sullenly watching a Southerner make a play for one of the most desirable Polonti women in the Lands—after that Southern captain snagged Tisi, no less. But none of them was as disturbed as Koschat, walking in with a plate to see her seated thus. He had been earnestly courting her for some time, and justifiably considered himself in the lead for a commitment from her.

She saw him sit abruptly at a small table by himself to eat angrily, and she looked away in remorse. She liked Koschat; he deserved better.

So she stood and said, “Well, thank you for the dinner. I’d better get back to the fortress now.” Folliott stood as well, dismayed to see her walk out. Koschat lurched up from an unfinished dinner to follow her.

He caught her on the sidewalk outside. Taking her arm (with minimal force) to turn her around to him, he breathed, “What is this? Why do you spit on me, eating and flirting with a married Southerner?” (This opening, and the rest of the hissed conversation that followed, were in their native language.)

Felice sighed. “He offered to buy me dinner, so I took him up on it. I didn’t know he was married.”

“Yes, he’s married to his father’s ex-wife,” he growled.

“Oh,” she winced.

“Why won’t you marry me? Why am I not good enough for you?” he demanded. “I would be faithful to you; already am.”

“You’re a wonderful man, Koschat, but . . . I’m so tired of living in my job. I want a house. And even combining our pay would not be enough,” she admitted. (What she had in mind, obviously, was to buy a house, not simply lease one.)

He considered that. “If I earned enough for a house, would you marry me?”

She looked startled. “Yes. But—can you?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m going to see to that right now.” He turned to run up Main to the switchback, the faerie trees

pulling their branches out of his way. The courtyard Polonti guards threw open the gates so that he could run straight through into the fortress and up the stairs to Estes' workroom.

As he arrived at the door with heaving chest, Efran, Estes and DeWitt looked up in alarm. Even Joshua peered at him from under the table. "Captain," Koschat said, saluting. "Request to be put on hazard duty."

Efran squinted at him. "You want hazard duty? Why?"

"I need the pay, Captain," he said baldly. "Felice won't marry me unless I make enough for us to have a house."

Efran gazed at him, then braced his elbows on the table to put his face in his hands. A moment later he looked over to Estes with tears in his eyes. "How could I do this? The men, you forty, who came to lay down your lives when Loizeaux's thousands attacked me—how could I now pay these men servants' wages?"

With a sigh, Estes laid down his quill. "Everything's happened so fast, Efran, we're still catching up."

"So pay them a bonus," DeWitt suggested. "Forty men; give them forty royals each as hazard duty pay—excluding me. I'm well compensated."

"I am also," Estes said, standing. He went to the money cabinet to begin going through pouches. Then he walked over to hand two pouches to Koschat. "One is for you; give the other to Doane; tell him it's overdue hazard pay."

"Thank you, Steward—Administrator—Captain!" Koschat said, saluting. The compensation was very generous, and certainly enough to buy a small but decent house.

Wiping his face, Efran said, "You and Felice take the rest of the day off to go to Ryal's for a marriage license and DePew's for a house. You're dismissed."

"Yes, Captain!" Koschat turned to run out.

"And don't run down the stairs," Efran groaned, but Koschat was long gone.

Efran whistled, and the young Polonti sentry Enon stepped in. "Captain?" He saluted, having heard everything that had just transpired.

"Yes, we need up here Arne, and Connor, Stephanos, Goss, Shane--"

"The Forty?" Enon said in excitement.

"Yes, get them up here, please," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain, and I will not run down the stairs!" he said.

"Thank you," Efran said, still wiping away tears.

One by one, the men came up to receive their overdue hazard pay with astonishment. DeWitt recorded the names of the men as they appeared in order to make an official notation of their heroism for the Fortress records.

Meanwhile, Koschat slapped Doane's pouch on his desk in the cubicle off the foyer. As Doane looked up, startled, Koschat said, "Hazard pay for the Forty!"

Doane looked confused. “Us forty? When Loizeaux attacked and just the Captain was here with the children?”--about 19 months ago.

“Yes! Our hazard pay!” Koschat laughed, turning to sprint out the front doors.

And word spread through the fortress, the grounds, and the barracks that the Forty were receiving past-due hazard pay. But Koschat was skillfully descending the switchback at a sideways run, which prevented his sprawling flat. He glanced down the levels to see several fortress workers ascending for evening duty, and he noted in satisfaction that Felice was one of them.

Presently, one looked up and made some evident remark about “crazy Koschat,” for Felice’s sleek black head came up. She watched his descent dubiously, especially when he didn’t slow down on approaching them.

Her companions scattered when he grabbed her. “The Captain said you’re to take the rest of the day off!”

“What? Why? What have you got there?” she demanded as her coworkers watched.

“House money,” he said, opening the pouch to show her.

“Koschat!” she cried. And everyone from the courtyard on down to Main watched them embrace on the switchback, then begin hurrying down it.

In the fortress, the quiet heroes continued to receive their due. When Arne presented himself at the workroom door, he looked slightly quizzical. “Captain?”

“Yes, Arne. Your belated hazard pay for coming to support me against Loizeaux,” Efran said, extending a pouch to him.

Frowning, Arne looked in the pouch, then laid it down on the table. “Eh. No thanks, Captain.”

Efran blinked at him, blurting, “What?” Estes and DeWitt studied Arne in concern.

Arne shrugged. “Don’t need it, Cap’n. Got all I want here—duty, good food, a place to sleep, people to watch over. What do I need with royals? Though I thank yer all the same.”

DeWitt asked, “Arne, what about family? Relations?”

“Got none that I know of, Administrator. Been in the army since my childhood; it’s been the only family I can remember,” Arne said.

Efran hung his head, crying again. “I will respect your wishes, but if you have needs, you must come tell us.”

“Thankee, Captain. Will that be all?” Arne asked, lips slightly puckered.

“Yes. You’re dismissed,” Efran whispered, and Arne left, whistling, “You’re My Puddin’ Pie.”

Efran sighed to DeWitt and Estes, “I don’t deserve these men.”

“You helped shape them, Efran,” DeWitt observed.

“Shut up,” Efran said, gazing up at the faerie tree as two more men entered, saluting.

A few days later—on February 2nd--Elvey delivered Minka’s new dress to her. As it was in the late afternoon, shortly before dinner, Minka hesitantly tried it on. She was suddenly fearful of appearing ridiculous or pretentious. But standing before her mirror, turning this way and that, she cautiously admitted that she rather liked it. It was neither flamboyant nor eye-catching, just—quietly pretty in a soft, flattering shade of green with a subdued floral inset and the same floral trim at the (modest) neckline. She almost felt pretty wearing it. Yes, she liked it.

She fixed her hair, then, as she had neglected to do recently—wetting it down to tame the curls and fastening it back in a clip, leaving enough curls around her face to satisfy Efran. Then she stood back to study the whole effect, and decided that it made her look a little older than seventeen.

So, leaving Nakam confined to the bedroom, she went to the dining hall to wait for Efran. This delayed him. As he was used to having to find her and bring her into the hall for dinner, it never occurred to him that she might beat him there. When he finally arrived with Joshua, saying, “There you are!” she stood for him to see her new dress.

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Chapter 15

Predictably, however, Efran didn’t look at her dress at all. Seeing only her face and the satisfactory curls around it, he kissed her head and sat to raise his chin to Dobell. But Ella, entering right behind him, saw Minka before she could sit, and said, “Oh, how cute!”

She took Minka’s hands to turn her around, questioning her on every detail of the dress’ origin. Efran glanced back, perceiving only that the two most important women in his life were happy about something. Bored, Quennel waited for Ella to get over Minka’s dress and come sit beside him.

Given Ella’s questions, Minka had to tell her about the wonderful new designer who had just walked into Elvey’s to produce sketches like this. So Ella decided to go down tomorrow to look at them herself. When she asked Minka to go with her, however, she refused, at least for the first viewing. “You let me sway you too much; I want you to decide what you like, then if you want my input on details, I’ll be happy to give it,” Minka insisted.

Still, fearing that Ella would recognize “Livy,” Minka took her away from the bench a few feet to whisper in her ear about who she would see and why Minka wanted to keep it quiet. Ella listened intently, then promised not to recognize her.

While this conversation was ensuing, a number of women entered to hear snatches about “Livy,” “new designer,” or “Elvey’s,” and see Minka’s dress. Estes’ wife Kelsey and DeWitt’s wife Tera stopped to compliment Minka on their way up to their tables; Challinor, Trina, and others looked on from afar.

At this time, the staff at Elvey’s were celebrating the word they’d already gotten about Minka’s wearing the new

dress to dinner and the favorable attention she was receiving in it. So Elvey put a fresh stack of sketching paper and full quill set in front of Adele to order, "We need to see more from you, Livy!" The others agreed, and Adele smiled, feeling sick.

Nonetheless, she took up the paper and ink. "I must go contemplate in private," she said. This they encouraged, so she took the materials back to her room to sit and stare at the walls. Then she pensively took up a quill and began sketching.

Back at the fortress, Follriott was eating dully beside Trina, who didn't look at him or speak to him. Her inattention was not from anger; he just seemed invisible to her. Her father Bowring was sitting at Follriott's other side, but she didn't pay any attention to him, either. Follriott noted that Challinor's husband wasn't even sitting with her; he was at a table of Polonti soldiers.

Follriott looked around for Felice, but didn't see her. He was also peeved that the Fortress was charging him and Trina for their meals, as neither of them lived or worked in the fortress. They could afford it, for now, but Trina continued to spend unholy sums on clothes and other trivialities, so that Follriott's substantial reserves were being eaten away without replenishment.

To further blacken his mood, he saw his father Reinagle enter with his three large Eurussian bodyguards. The hum of conversation faded momentarily. Almost all the Polonti in the hall glanced at them, including Efran (who had also noticed Bowring, and the fact that he looked thin and unwell). DeWitt wielded his quill to note premium dinner charges for all the recent Eurussians (except Challinor, as long as she was married to Stites). As Reinagle sat at one partially filled table, its occupants scooted far down to make room for him and his bodyguard, who had approached the servers to get plates and drinks. But they settled down to eat without a declaration of war or overt hostility, so the fortress residents ignored them.

Others who lived or worked on the Lands but wanted to eat in the fortress were allowed to, as long as (1) there was room in the hall, and (2) they paid for their meals. The price was five silver pieces, quite reasonable for the excellent food and drink provided. They paid a kitchen worker at the door, who gave them a wooden disk with a number on it, to indicate the servings desired. These disks were then given to the servers, who filled the plates and handed over the drinks.

DeWitt had instituted the pay system when he saw how many Landers wished to eat in the fortress dining hall, and the kitchen was the greatest single expense in the fortress. Non-fortress residents or visitors who simply bypassed DeWitt's meal-pay system (as Reinagle did) were sent bills. Those who ignored the bills were not given plates in the dining hall again. That happened to a very small minority--the dining hall was the setting for so much entertainment and intrigue, and the cost for superior meals so little, that no one wanted to miss out.

One of those residents dining in the fortress was Plunkett, Hassie's father. Almost no one recognized him from when he and his wife Portia had come here as Goulven patients about six weeks ago. But he was doing very well selling peat, which had enabled him to lease a plot and a small house. In fact, he now had a list of repeat customers whom he faithfully supplied on a schedule.

He had begun coming to the fortress for dinner just to catch a glimpse of Hassie. But he never tried to speak to her or get her attention; he just liked to see that she was happy and well cared for. She had apparently not seen him, or not recognized him, yet. Minka had, however, and watched him for a while, but when she saw that he caused no trouble, she let him be.

The children, the prized wards of the Fortress, had run of the hall, as usual, to greet Efran, Minka, Estes, or whomever they liked. Many of the soldiers were favorites, as duty rules were lax enough to permit them to play

with the small tyrants. Only the archers, slingers and sparring groups were required to practice as scheduled, but their trainers allotted playtime in their schedule as well, because it was important to the Captain that the children be comfortable around the soldiers. God help any man who was stupid enough to be curt or rude to them.

Finally, many of the Forty, suddenly possessing (what was to them) great wealth, had no concept of saving for tomorrow, as no soldier counted on tomorrow. So they spread their royals among friends or the needy; a few gave it all to the Widow's Fund. The result was a genuine sense of happy gratitude among the diners tonight; the rooftop bells played sweet, low melodies and the faeries tossed love drops so carelessly around the hall that more than one hardened veteran had to hide his sudden, inexplicable tears.

After Law class the next morning, February 3rd, Ella, having been excused from horse training, was getting ready to go to Elvey's when Minka received a message from them. Specifically, it was from the new designer Livy, who requested a private conference with her.

Minka decided to go, but told Efran about it. He was ambivalent, to say the least. His solution for everything regarding her was bodyguards, and as she was going with Ella, who also required bodyguards, they had four men accompanying them: Martyn, Tourse, Mohr, and Eymor. When they set out from the courtyard on horseback, Tourse said, "I am equipped as commanded, Lady Minka."

She looked over as he let go of the reins to put on a slightly battered demon mask. The men grinned; Ella looked startled, then laughed. Minka sighed, "Tourse, what a nuisance you are to do what I say. You have to take it off when we get there."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said crisply, aiming it at startled passersby.

When they arrived at Elvey's, the ladies were greeted effusively; the bodyguards tolerated. While Ella was taken to the workroom, Minka asked to be shown to Livy's room. Tourse (unmasked) and Eymor accompanied her to stand outside Livy's door when Minka was let in.

There, Minka looked at her hollow-eyed sister, sitting at a small table with a score of wadded-up sheets on the floor. "Sit down," Adele said without disguise. Minka sat in a second chair at the table and waited.

"They want more sketches," Adele said. "And, I can't produce anything on my own. I have no idea what to do."

Minka leaned down to pick up one wadded-up paper. "Where did you get the idea for the first sketches?"

"I copied Ennemond's dresses—the designer in Crescent Hollow," Adele said dully.

"That's rich," Minka laughed lightly, picking up another sketch, and another, to open them up. She was silent a moment, then said, "These aren't bad at all—they just want some special touches. This one, now—showing the bare arms is very daring. How about a drape to offset that? It can go down the back, or maybe even over one arm." Minka picked up the quill to add a few lines.

"A drape," Adele said, leaning over the wrinkled sheet.

"Make it detachable," Minka murmured. "And this one is lovely, but if it needs a little something extra, how about slits in the sleeves? With a removable lining in a contrasting fabric? But the sleeves need to be larger to leave room for the fabric underneath."

“Slits,” Adele said, concentrating.

They went over a few more designs; Minka suggested an irregular hemline on one, and coordinating accessories on others—hats, shoes, gloves, or bags. She proposed pant sets with blouses, embroidered vests, and boots. Absorbing it all, Adele made new sketches incorporating Minka’s ideas.

Finally, Minka stood. “I have to go check on Ella now; I made her come down here.”

“You’ve been very helpful,” Adele said, staring down at the sketches.

“I want you to succeed in this, Livy. I think you can,” Minka said. Adele closed her eyes and Minka went out. Tourse snatched off his mask while Eymor grimaced to not laugh. “Who have you been terrifying?” she asked Tourse suspiciously.

“No one who didn’t need it, Lady Minka,” Tourse said crisply, sniffing in emphasis.

Minka patted his arm. “Let’s go check on Ella, then.”

When she and her bodyguard entered the workroom, Ella looked up in excitement. “Oh, Minka, help me!”

Minka sat, grinning, as Ella shoved her selections toward her. “This is lovely,” Minka said of one. “Your father will require the neckline to be raised.”

Ella laughed self-consciously, and they went on to fabrics.

A half-hour later, the two women left Elvey’s, both having placed orders. (When Ella wore her new dress to dinner a week later, Minka fawned over her so much that everyone was forced to look. Ella blushed at the attention, but ordered more dresses over the coming weeks.)

Folliott, across the street, despondently watched Minka and Ella leave Elvey’s talking happily. *There are other women here*, he thought. *Why should I be stuck supporting someone who doesn’t care that I exist?*

Tourse put on his demon mask and looked straight at him, both of them remembering each other from the Crescent Hollow faire. Folliott turned away to find himself directly in front of the notary shop. He stood staring into the shop while Ryal, inside, watched him curiously through the front window. Then Folliott, deciding his course, went in. Some minutes later he came back out with a lease on a new house on another plot. However, he had accidentally left the petition for divorce on the counter.

When Folliott returned to the house he shared with Trina and her father Bowring, he found Trina gone but Bowring sitting in the unadorned front room, looking out the window. This did not surprise him; Trina spent all her time at Elvey’s or shopping elsewhere and Bowring was too weak to get around without help. So Folliott went back to the bedroom to gather his possessions and all his money. This, a considerable amount, he divided into two equal portions which he put in two leather satchels. Then he took everything to the sitting room.

Pausing before Bowring, he put one leather satchel on the table—but then discovered that he had left the petition of divorce at the notary’s. No matter; they’d probably send it to her. So he said, “I’ve got to go figure out how to make a living here, and I don’t expect Trina to sit and wait for me to do that. Here’s half of all the money I’ve got—my father’s got far more, but I don’t know how to pry any out of him. Anyway, if I were you, I’d hide that satchel before she gets back.”

While Bowring sat blinking, Follriott took up his bags and walked out. With effort, Bowring got up to do as he had suggested—that is, hide the satchel of money. Then, after further thought, he retrieved his cane to limp out of the house. He limped down the street to the new northbound road, which he took south to the east-west road. Arriving at Main, he painfully climbed the steps to enter the notary shop.

Ryal came to the counter. Studying him, Ryal asked, “You are Trina’s father Bowring, are you not?”

“Yes,” he said. “And I wish to prosecute another resident of your Lands, Reinagle, for kidnapping, torture, imprisonment, and theft.”

“I see,” Ryal said. “Please step into the back room here and sit so that I may take a formal complaint.” Nodding, Bowring shuffled to the back while Ryal asked Soames to sit with them and take notes.

An hour later, Ryal enlisted two Abbey sentries to search for Trina and bring her to the notary shop to give testimony against Reinagle. She came unwillingly at first, as she had been taken from a great sale at Whately the jeweler’s shop. But when she understood what she was required for, she flew into Ryal’s shop with vehement enthusiasm for the complaint.

Follriott was also summoned, but no one could find him, so Ryal decided that they had enough information from Bowring and his daughter to issue a summons for Reinagle to answer. Therefore, Ryal sent a young Polonti, his messenger boy Javier, to Reinagle’s door to demand his immediate presence in the notary’s shop to answer a slew of serious charges.

Javier was not only young, but new, and one of the smaller boys in duty—hence his use as a messenger and not a guard. Had Ryal remembered Reinagle’s bodyguard, he might have sent someone older and bulkier, but the point of the army was that one soldier represented all of them, and any that was threatened would be defended by all. And Javier, excited to be given this important responsibility, was determined to prove himself.

With the address of the defendant, Javier leapt down the steps of the notary’s shop toward his destination—just one house to the west of Elvey’s. As Ryal’s shop was close to the switchback, the courtyard gate guards saw Javier leave and tracked him. Arriving at the target house, still in view of the courtyard sentries, Javier pounded on the door with authority.

It was opened by one of the bodyguard—not the leader—who was irritated over his meager portion at the midday meal. He looked down at the Polonti rat pup, who raised his insolent face to bawl, “Your master Reinagle is summoned immediately--” The man couldn’t abide it; his fist shot out to shut the pup up.

But the boy saw it coming and fell aside to kick him in the knee. The man grunted in pain, falling forward to land partially on top of him. To the courtyard guards above, this sequence looked as though the bodyguard had hit the boy, knocking him down, and now had him pinned on the ground. So they began ringing the alarm bell. Shortly, men began pouring out of the gates down the switchback.

The quick-tempered bodyguard scrambled up, realizing that he might have made a mistake. So he chose to compound it by running inside, then slamming and locking the door.

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Chapter 16

The first Abbey soldiers who arrived at Reinagle's house pounded on the door while others checked the boy who had just picked himself up. He was laughing, "I am all right! Did you hear his knee crack?"

The men at the door had stopped pounding to call for a battering ram when Reinagle opened it indignantly. "What is the meaning--?"

That's all he got out before Stephanos gathered the front of his shirt in his fist and dragged him out of the house. "Is this who you wanted?" he asked young Javier, who was straightening his uniform jacket.

"Yes, sir! He's summoned to the notary's shop," Javier said.

"Lead on, then, scout," Stephanos nodded, and Javier proudly led the troops with the summoned to Ryal's doorstep, where Javier opened the door and stepped aside for Stephanos to bring Reinagle in.

Giardi, manning the front counter, nodded to the interview room. "He's wanted back there."

As Stephanos thrust Reinagle into Ryal's back room, the ex-Surchatain sputtered, "How dare you! You--" He broke off, seeing Bowring and Trina sitting at a table with the notary.

"Sit down, Reinagle," Ryal said. "What happened?" he asked Stephanos.

"His bodyguard took a swing at your messenger, Lord Ryal, who deflected it and brought the man down," Stephanos said while Javier looked complacent, just another soldier who did his job.

Turning back to Reinagle, Ryal said, "Unfortunately, you are responsible for the actions of your bodyguard, and this is an offense that Lord Efran takes personally." Reinagle squinted at him in ignorance, but Ryal went on, "Nonetheless, that is not our concern at the moment. Bowring and his daughter Trina have made some serious accusations against you which I must ask you about. So, Reinagle, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"What?" Reinagle said. "All that happened in Eurus; it's got nothing to do with this place."

"That is irrelevant, sir; what is relevant is that all of you are residents here," Ryal said. "Again, do you swear--"

That's all he got out before they heard the outer door open, and Efran's voice, to which young Javier replied, "I am all right, Captain! His man tried to hit me, but I kicked him in the knee and he fell down!" Efran murmured something laudatory in reply, then he appeared at the door of the back room, glassy eyes fixed on Reinagle.

Ryal said, "You may deal with the bodyguard, Lord Efran, but for now we are addressing serious charges that Bowring and his daughter Trina have made against Reinagle." He paused as Efran drew away, instructing Stephanos to take Javier to Reinagle's house to identify the man and evict him.

While Stephanos and Javier departed, Efran stepped back to the doorway. "May I observe?"

"Yes, of course," Ryal said, gesturing to a chair, but Efran stood back against the wall. Soames rearranged his writing equipment on the table, readying his quill in subdued excitement.

Ryal once again put the oath to Reinagle, who sputtered an indignant affirmative. As Ryal began a question about his ascension to the throne of Eurus, the outer door opened again, and they heard Minka's voice: "Efran? Ryal?"

Efran turned, but Ryal said, "Back here, Lady Minka." She entered to take them all in at a glance, and Ryal said, "Please be seated," nodding to the one vacant chair in the crowded back room. She immediately sat to watch, flicking her large blue eyes to Efran, who smiled pensively at her.

Ryal then embarked on an inquisition of Reinagle's dealings that lasted almost two hours. Efran had to step out several times to answer questions from his soldiers or administrators, and Giardi had to return to the counter to conduct notary business for other residents, but for most of the session, both of them stood at the door to listen. Minka's attention never wavered from the proceedings, nor did she speak. What they heard was a startling tale of intrigue as Reinagle exploited every opportunity to appropriate wealth, Bowring's daughter as wife, and the contended throne of Eurus.

At last Ryal's questions ceased and he sat back as Soames continued bent over parchments to scrawl rapidly, his face and hands smeared with ink. Ryal remained silent a few minutes more for him to catch up on his notes. When Soames finally stopped, dipped his quill, and looked up attentively, Ryal said, "I've seldom encountered personally such an egregious betrayal of principle and insult to friends. So I find, Reinagle, that you are liable for damages to be paid to Bowring and his daughter Trina. First, I will instruct that your bodyguard who attempted to assault my messenger be immediately banished from the Abbey Lands."

Everyone looked to Efran, who nodded slightly. "That's in progress."

Accepting that, Ryal resumed, "Further, to satisfy the complaints of the plaintiffs, I instruct that three-quarters of your wealth be divided between Bowring and Trina."

Reinagle opened his mouth in a faint howl of distress, but Ryal went on, "I leave you one-quarter in consideration of your age and lack of income. On pain of expulsion, you or your bodyguard must divulge the location of all of your wealth, and submit to an accounting by the person of Lord Efran's choice. Who would that be?" Ryal inquired, looking up to Efran again.

"DeWitt," he said, smiling—the merciless, unfeeling, unerring, and righteous accountant, formerly Commander's Aide.

Ryal nodded. "Please send a messenger to Administrator DeWitt to ask his attention to this matter as soon as is feasible."

Efran turned with a word to Seagrave behind him, who promptly ran out. Ryal then told Bowring, "You and your daughter may return to your house; please remain available for someone to apprise you of the monies due you."

"Certainly. Thank you, Lord Ryal, I thank you, and you, Efran," Bowring said, lifting moist eyes to the Captain in the doorway. Trina looked at him adoringly. Efran smiled faintly at Ryal in satisfaction.

With Trina's help, Bowring stood. The men crowding the shop made way for them to leave. Then Ryal told Reinagle, "You will be escorted back to your house to bring out your monies." The old man staggered up, pale and weaving. Fennig came forward to take his arm in assistance, and two other men accompanied them to Reinagle's house. (Incidentally, when all follow-up was concluded from this hearing, Reinagle sold this house and bought another one in the east Lands.)

The remaining witnesses were silent, then Minka looked up pensively to Efran. He raised his brows at her, so she asked Ryal, “What about the other Eurussians he wronged? What happens if they hear he is here, and come down to press suit against him?”

“Without residency in the Lands?” Ryal asked, and she nodded. Dubiously, he looked up to Efran. “I don’t really know, offhand. Do you know what the Law has to say about this?” Efran raised his shoulders in confession of ignorance, so Ryal turned to Soames. “I’ll have to ask you to research that.”

“Certainly, Lord Ryal. There are a few provisions in the Law that may apply,” Soames said, still making notations from the hearing.

Efran then came over to sit beside Minka, and she leaned into him. Not much later, Stephanos returned with Javier, both saluting Efran. Stephanos said, “Captain, the bodyguard who came after Javier was identified as one Hengst; he’s been kicked out of the Lands. The leader is a man named Lambdin, and he’s asked to speak to you.” Efran sat up, remembering him, and nodded slightly.

Stephanos waved to someone behind him, who opened Ryal’s door with the tinkling bell. A man dressed as a mercenary came to the door of the back room to salute Efran. “Captain, thank you for hearing me. My name is Lambdin; I’m chief of the idiots guarding Reinagle. If you’ve not been informed, Hengst is the one who thought to hit your messenger, and I’ve seen him escorted out of the gates. I showed your men the hiding places that I know of for the money in Reinagle’s house. He also left some with a woman on your Lands named Gayheart.”

Efran looked quickly at Ryal. “Can we seize monies from an associate of his?”

Ryal looked questioningly to Soames, who said, “I believe that’s a definite ‘no,’ Captain, unless she’s proved to engage in illegal activities herself.”

“Ah. All right. Go on,” Efran told Lambdin.

“Yes, sir. To give you some background, I was a captain in the Eurussian army under Blairgowrie and Quilicus; when Reinagle came to power, I decided to retire. But then he told me he had my son, and if I refused to serve him, I would not see him again. I’ve learned where Reinagle is keeping him. If you permit, Captain, I’d like to go get him, and come back to serve you,” Lambdin said.

Minka said nothing, though her lips flushed red. Efran looked at Stephanos standing just behind Lambdin. “Take him to Captain Barr; tell him to give him four men to go to Eurus, find his son, and bring him back. Take money. Tell them to stop at Featherstone while they’re there and brief Justinian.”

“Yes, Captain,” Stephanos saluted.

Lambdin, eyes red, also saluted. “Thank you, Captain.” Efran nodded, and they went out.

Across the street at Elvey’s, Adele as Livy was showing her new designs to Elvey, Ianna, Ghislain, and another dresser named Regie. Adele sat frozen in fear as the women silently studied the four sketches that she had produced. Finally, Regie burst out, “Oh, I love this one!”--the dress with the pierced sleeves and the lining showing through. “Can you imagine what that will look like with white silk underneath a deep rose velvet?”

“Regal,” Elvey said. “And in fact, it could disguise fat or flabby arms.”

“My favorite is the asymmetrical hemline,” Ianna said. “That can be rendered in so many ways.”

“Sketch out your renderings,” Elvey told her.

Ghislain picked up another sketch. “Now the drape. . . . I can’t decide whether it should be slender or full, down the back or across the arm,” she said, almost vexed.

“We’ll just make samples of each to look at,” Elvey mused. Adele was beginning to relax by now. Elvey turned to her. “Well, Livy, another successful showing! Take a few days off, rest yourself, then we’ll drag you back to look at samples in several fabrics. Maybe Lady Minka too, do you think? She does have an eye for fabrics, doesn’t she?”

“Yes,” Adele said, not trusting herself to say more.

“Well, then. I’ll have our accountant Dierksheide bring you your pay, then you can just wander around the Lands and get to know your new home. Won’t that be nice?” Elvey said as Ianna and Regie were arguing over details of one design.

“Yes. Thank you,” Adele said blankly. Somehow, she located a couch with rolled arms to sit out of the way and wonder what was happening to her.

Elvey left, then returned minutes later with a serious-looking man in glasses who handed Adele a silver lockbox with a key, as well as a written sheet showing payment for services rendered. He gave Adele the box and paper with a short bow, then went out. While Ghislain moderated the discussion between Regie and Ianna, Adele opened the box to see rows of royals. According to the paper, there were forty royals here—five royals for each design accepted, eight of them.

Adele stood, swaying, to take the heavy box to her room, remove a few royals to her little velvet bag, lock the box and put the key around her neck. Then, as Elvey had suggested, she went walking.

She looked at the elegant street lanterns along Main, the construction of the new chapel and DePew’s inn going up, the rows of new barracks, the strange trees that waved at her with green and copper leaves, and all the new plots and houses. How had Efran done this? Wasn’t it but a year and a half ago that she had led an army through grassland to take that white fortress on the hill?—which attack had failed so spectacularly that Eurus never really recovered, especially after Loizeaux tried again about five months later.

She walked around looking at all the shops selling everything that Westford had once sold—pottery, jewelry, candles, glassware, textiles, house furnishings, and on and on. A man driving a cart full of peat squares passed, tipping his hat to her as if she belonged here.

Did she belong here? She had just earned forty royals in a few days almost honestly, with a little help from Ennemond and Minka. *She said I could succeed. She said she wanted to see me do it.*

Faint, and unable to think any more, Adele went back to the food area off Main. She sat in Firmin’s comfortable open-air tea room for an early dinner. Eating crayfish and rice that she had bought for herself, she contemplated a very pleasant garden and pond off the tea pavilion, abutting Main. So she idly watched people ride down the street or walk up the sidewalks. It was nice, to not be constantly on the take anymore. It was nice to pay her own way.

“Hello. May I join you?” a male voice said.

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Chapter 17

Adele raised her eyes to a nice-looking man whom she was unsure whether she knew or not. “If you like.”

“Thank you.” He drew up a chair. “I’m Follriott, a refugee from Eurus,” he said with wry humor. “I thought I saw you outside Elvey’s. Shopping?”

“Actually, no. I’m designing a new line of clothes for her,” Adele said, hardly believing it.

His face opened in amazement. “That’s wonderful! You will have so much business from my ex-wife alone, you won’t believe it.”

“And your ex-wife is . . . ?” she asked.

“Trina, also from Eurus. And also Reinagle’s ex-wife. Do you know who he is?” Follriott asked.

“No,” she lied.

“My father, and the ex-Surchatain of Eurus,” he said with a snort. “Now that I’ve told you my name and everyone else’s, what’s yours?”

Before she could answer, a man ran up to the pavilion railing beside their table. “Follriott! Did you hear?” he shouted.

“Hear what?” Follriott asked.

“Trina and her father brought suit against Reinagle for what he did in Eurus and won *three-quarters* of his wealth! They’re bringing bags of royals out of his house in carts there’s so much of it!” the man cried.

“What?” Follriott shouted, standing so abruptly that he knocked over his chair. Without a backward glance at Adele, he leapt over the pavilion railing to run to the notary’s shop. He blasted through the tinkling door, startling Giardi. “Have you given it to her?” he gasped.

“Excuse me?” she said.

He said between breaths, “Trina--the divorce I filed for—Follriott. Have you given her my petition for divorce?”

With a brief shake of her head, Giardi began going through a stack of forms on the counter. “No, here it is. You may give it to her yourself, if you wish.” She handed him a paper. He took it to violently rip it up. “Yes—I mean, no--I’m canceling my request for divorce. Thank you.”

He then blew out of the notary’s shop to run down a side street toward the house he had shared with Bowring and Trina. About two houses down from it, he stopped to catch his breath—and saw two Abbey soldiers at the door as though standing guard. Advancing, he asked, “What is this?”

The two looked at him, and one asked, "Who are you?"

"Folliott. I live here. I'm Trina's husband," he said, disregarding the fact that he had moved out just today.

"I'll walk you in," the soldier said. He opened the door as two more soldiers turned around to look at Folliott. The first soldier walked him to the table where Bowring sat with another man who had dark blonde hair combed back and spectacles. Both of them looked up at Folliott, and the soldier with him asked, "Bowring, do you know him?"

Bowring said, "Yes, that's Trina's husband Folliott."

"All right," the soldier said, and walked off to leave Folliott standing by the table.

He sat quickly to ask Bowring, "What's going on?"

Bowring opened his mouth, but another soldier came in to salute the blond man in glasses. "Administrator, the Captain gave Lambdin leave to go to Eurus to get his son. Barr gave him four men to go with him, and they decided to leave today, as merchants coming down from Eurus said it was cold but clear."

"Ah. Good," DeWitt said, returning to the columns of numbers in front of him.

"AND," the soldier said, compelling DeWitt to look up again, "the third bodyguard, Bowbrick, just moved in with Gayheart, Reinagle's lady friend that he supposedly gave some money."

DeWitt barked out a laugh. "If the second bodyguard, Hengst, was kicked out, then that leaves Reinagle all by himself."

"Yes, sir, that appears to be the case," the man said.

"Good. Dismissed," DeWitt said.

Folliott hardly heard any of this, as he was staring at piles of royals that practically filled the room. "I had no idea the old man had so much," he whispered.

"Most of it was mine. Mine and Webbe's," Bowring said heavily.

DeWitt glanced at him, remembering that Bowring had begged Efran to buy the gold ewer for a thousand royals because he was destitute. But that may have been because Reinagle had robbed him.

At that time, another soldier ran into the room. "Folliott?" he said generally.

"Here." Folliott said, raising his hand. The soldier hopped over to place a folded document in his palm. Wondering, Folliott opened it up to see . . . a petition of divorce from Trina.

He groaned, covering his face with a hand. Bowring looked over, and Folliott said, "She's ditching me." He tossed the petition over to Bowring, who looked at it and nodded. After a moment, Folliott said, "Can I . . . have back the royals I gave you?"

Bowring eyed him, then said, "It's under my bed."

“Thank you,” Folliott grunted, getting up. He went to Bowring’s room to collect the satchel. Passing the bedroom he himself shared with Trina, Folliott paused to gawk at the number of royals in all kinds of carriers spread around this room. After glancing at the men occupying the front room with Bowring, Folliott quickly closed two bags of royals sitting on the floor. He opened the window which looked over the unkempt backyard and dropped the bags to rest unseen in the high grass. Quietly closing the window again, he took up his satchel to walk conspicuously out the front door with it.

He dropped it off in his own house, then returned to Bowring’s backyard for the bags obscured in the grass. No one paid the slightest attention to him as he picked them up and transported them to his house, as well.

As the day waned, Koschat and his bride Felice were busy moving personal possessions and newly bought furnishings into their new house in the eastern section of the Lands. Up in the fortress, Jaylen was getting used to her new appearance; after a week, it seemed to have stabilized. At least she didn’t see any more surprises when she looked in the little mirror. So she calmed down and left the new girls, and all of their things, strictly alone.

In the early twilight, Efran walked the back grounds with Minka beside him, Joshua on his shoulders, and Nakam at their feet. He was reviewing the day’s events in satisfaction when a soldier came over to salute. “Cap’n.”

“Teschner. Yes, what is it?” Efran asked, immediately alert. This man was one of the Forty, having served under Efran in the Red Regiment. He was a native of Prie Mer, and had lived by the Sea all his life until coming to Westford to join the army.

“If you would, sir, leave the boy with the lady, and come over to look at the Sea with me.” Teschner gestured to the ladder placed over the seven-foot black iron fence. The Leviathan’s nest-building in the south face of the hill had caused such extensive landslides that the stretch of ground atop the cliff beyond the fence was reduced from thirty feet to five, or even three feet in some places. Here, there was about four feet of ground.

Minka looked alarmed as Efran set Joshua at her feet and went over to climb the ladder, Teschner following. Joshua powered after them on hands and knees, and Minka followed as he tried to climb the ladder behind the men, but could do no more than pull himself up. Nakam, likewise, put his front paws on the lowest rung to bark warnings at them.

“Careful, sir, it’s not very stable here,” Teschner said, leaning down to look over the cliff edge. “The waves, sir.”

Efran looked down at the Sea buffeting the cliff below. He watched for a minute, then shook his head. “What are you seeing that worries you?”

“The dominant wave, sir. I’ve been watching it build over the last couple of days. It keeps getting higher. See, on either side--” Teschner pointed to the east and the west--“there’s hardly any waves at all, certainly nothing that creeps up on the land. But here, at the hill, the wave is rising. It’s about—ten feet higher up the cliffs than before.”

Efran studied the wave that seemed to be straining upward. “What’s causing it?”

Teschner winced indecisively. “Could be a small earthquake underwater close by or something really big halfway around the world. It’s just unusual to see a large wave confined to one area like this.”

“You mean, to the hillside,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir,” Teschner said.

Efran frowned down at the wave again, still not seeing what Teschner saw. “All right. Keep an eye on it for me. Let me know what you see.”

“Cap’n.” Teschner saluted, and Efran turned to climb the ladder back over to the fortress grounds, Teschner behind him.

Three days later, on February 6th, Lambdin returned from Eurus with his son, accompanied by the four men Captain Barr had sent with them: Caswall, Connor, Earnshaw, and Routh (given how despised Polonti were in Eurus, Barr had not risked sending any). Efran had the exhausted men brought up to the small dining room for an early dinner of venison steaks and garden vegetables.

Lambdin introduced his son to Efran: “Captain, my boy Henris. He’s fifteen. To Reinagle’s credit, he had him at University. He was doing right well when I took him away.”

Efran smiled at the lanky youngster. “Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Henris. I’m sure you’ll find a place with us.” The boy gaped at him, having never encountered a Polonti like him before, all lordly and polished while dressed like a laborer.

Connor handed Justinian’s sealed letter to Efran, and was about to speak when Captain Towner appeared at the doorway. “Excuse the interruption, Captain, but I wished to inform you that Cyneheard here has won a barracks-wide competition at javelin throwing, and I owe him a royal.” Ella’s half brother, 18, had desired to join the army when he had arrived about three and a half months ago.

“Really?” Efran said, pleased. Henris’ head swiveled toward the javelin champion. Efran found a royal in his pocket to hand over. “Well done, Cyneheard.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Cyneheard accepted it and saluted crisply.

Henris blurted, “I remember seeing you at University.”

“That’s correct,” Cyneheard replied loftily. “But my sister being Captain Efran’s daughter, I decided my place was here.”

Henris blinked at him, then asked his father, “Are you serving here as well?”

“If the Captain accepts me,” Lambdin said.

Efran was opening his mouth when Henris said, “I want to serve, too.” He looked back at Cyneheard in admiration.

The men smiled; Efran said, “We’ll see if Commander Lyte will put you in Captain Towner’s unit. Meanwhile, all of you sit and eat.”

“Thank you, Captain; I’ve got to finish my duty first,” Cyneheard said.

And Henris was pleading to the air, “Someone take me to the Commander to get placed.”

His father said, "I had better go with you."

Towner offered, "I'll take them down and get them situated, Captain."

"Very good," Efran said. He waved his men down to eat, which they did without argument.

With Towner, Cyneheard, Lambdin and Henris having left, Efran began opening the letter from Justinian. Nodding to the sentry at the door, he said, "Bring Lady Minka, please."

"Captain," he saluted, departing at a run. Efran had started to tell him not to run down the stairs when he remembered that they were already downstairs.

Waiting on Minka to read Justinian's letter, Efran asked the men, "Did you see anything interesting?"

"I didn't," Connor said in mild disgust, glancing at the other men. They were occupied with an excellent Abbey dinner, as usual. "It started snowing just as we were leaving, so no one was out doing anything."

"Justinian will find that troubling," Efran predicted.

Connor suddenly snorted onto the back of his hand, and Efran looked at him in surprise. "Have you ever heard him mimic your voice, Captain? It's amazing."

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The other men chortled as well; Efran just rolled his eyes. Minka arrived then, with the sentry carrying Joshua while Nakam trotted at their heels. The baby reached out for his father, who took him in arm. The dog went to sit at Routh's feet, having judged him to be the softest touch here. From under the table, Nakam stared up at him soundlessly, so Routh did drop him a bite.

Minka greeted them, smiling, then asked in alarm, "Where is Reinagle's man? And his son?" So Efran had to tell her about Cyneheard's javelin victory, which delighted her.

Then he waved the letter. "From Justinian." She promptly sat to listen. "'To my bird of paradise,'" he began, casting wounded eyes at her. She shook her head to remind him, *He does that just to vex you.*

Efran continued to read, "'Your men have told me the most amazing tales of Trina's clothes and Bowring winning three-quarters of Reinagle's wealth—how much did that turn out to be?'"

"How much, Captain?" Connor asked, grinning. He was one of the few who could pump Efran for such sensitive information.

Glancing around the table, Efran leaned over to shut the door. "DeWitt and his team counted about ten thousand royals, so Bowring and Trina got about seventy-five hundred between them."

The men whistled in astonishment; Minka gasped. Efran studied her. “Does that alarm you?”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed. “I can’t imagine them or anyone—except you, DeWitt, and Estes—having that much money without destroying themselves.”

Efran shrugged. “I hope they spend it all on the Lands, then.”

He continued reading Justinian’s letter, which contained nothing remarkable, only his marveling at the relative peace they were enjoying under Grand Councilor Vanidestine (who was the de facto Ruler, as Surchatain Webbe was busy waging war against creatures of his own imagination). ““Contrary to most of his predecessors, Vanidestine apparently has no interest in attacking the Abbey for its Treasury. Although if they ever discover how balmy your Lands are in the dead of winter, they may invade to settle,”” Efran read. The men snorted.

Upon finishing the short letter, Efran sent the men to rest while he, Minka, Joshua and Nakam wandered out to the back grounds. Ella and Tess immediately called Minka over to see the new breakthrough with Cloud: Tess was able to ride her saddled. This thrilled the children, wanting a turn, but she told them they’d have to let Cloud get to know them first, one at a time. While Minka was at the training pens, Efran looked to the back fence. Teschner was standing outside it on the cliff edge, looking out to the Sea.

Efran, holding Joshua, went to the fence without attempting to climb over. “What do you see?” he asked Teschner.

The man glanced back at him, then pointed. “You see the swell on the horizon, Captain?”

Efran looked way out. “Yes.”

“From that point, it will take about seven hours for it to hit here—they’ve been coming very regular like that. And each time they hit, they reach a little farther up the cliffs,” Teschner said.

“How close to the top do they come now?” Efran asked.

Teschner looked down. “About twenty, twenty-five feet. It’s hard to judge until it hits.”

“I see,” Efran said.

The following day, February 7th, the Lands began to witness the effect of sudden wealth on Trina. A large sign went up over her and Bowring’s house that advertised, “Designs by Challinor and Trina.” And she hired the prettiest girls she could find to simply walk up and down Main, and on the main east road, wearing their dresses. After Minka’s snub of Challinor’s dress, they did not approach her for this. Trina sniffed, “She’s not even that pretty.”

This advertising strategy resulted in a great flux of customers from Elvey’s to Trina’s. And in one of those weird cosmic coincidences, Surchatain Sewell of Venegas had been rather missing Adele, whom he had mistakenly embraced as a lady of pleasure from Efran. Also, for some time Sewell had been negotiating terms with a producer of fine cotton cloth whose farm was just south of Guialme’s logging operation. The sticking point was, unless Sewell purchased a great quantity of cloth, the man wanted far more than Sewell was willing to pay.

But if Efran had a stable of beauties like Adele for himself or his officers, wouldn’t these ladies need fine

clothes? So Sewell laid out three hundred royals to buy several thousand bolts of undyed cloth. A few of his top advisors almost staged a coup over that foolhardy expenditure. But then that same cotton farmer helped the Venegasans set up dyeing facilities in the old Barnby's Beer building, and tutored his most capable people in dyeing and stamping these bolts in a rainbow of beautiful colors and whimsical patterns.

The upshot was, the day after Trina had set up shop and realized she needed far more fabrics than she had on hand—and didn't want to buy them from her competitor—Sewell's salesmen drove a large cart down Main loaded with bolts. Seeing Trina's sign, the driver stopped to send one man to her door and another man to Elvey's.

What happened next put Venegas on the map as *the* Lands' supplier for finished cotton cloth. Trina, Challinor, Ianna, and Ghislain fought over the bolts, driving up the price so that Ianna had to rush back to Elvey to secure permission to spend more. Meanwhile, Trina bought all the rest on the cart. But Sewell's representatives comforted Elvey's representatives with the fact that more was available in Venegas. Elvey then sent Regie back in a cart with him to pluck the best of what dyed goods remained, as well as some undyed bolts (that had been marked up considerably).

Sewell's finished fabric production went into round-the-clock operation which emptied their supplier's warehouse of undyed bolts, causing the farmer to hire more labor for his fields and processing plant. And the women of the Abbey Lands—supported by new Lands' businesses--began walking around in some of the most amazing fashions ever worn or conceived, so that visitors came from Prie Mer, Eurus, Crescent Hollow, and even small neighboring villages to gawk, laugh, take notes, buy, or all of the above.

All of this took months to fully play out, of course. The immediate effect during those few days in February was the sudden wealth pouring into Venegas, which Sewell's stewards managed ably and honestly. What also occurred was the whiplash of numerous male necks at the riot of color on every sidewalk in the Lands. And Follriott began drinking heavily.

Efran did not notice any of this because each day, he was going out at Teschner's summons to view the great wave's progress up the cliffs. Teschner crafted a measuring rod from a long, thin board that he marked off in increments of feet. Today (February 8th) as the wave approached, Teschner gingerly leaned over with the rod pressed against the face of the cliff while Efran held on to his belt. The wave, when it hit, knocked the rod out of his hand, but not before he saw how far up the water had reached.

As Efran pulled him up trembling, he said, "About eighteen feet, Captain."

"It's creeping up," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain," Teschner said.

Watching the wave break apart on the rock and fall away, Efran murmured, "And there's no way to know how far up it will go, or for how long."

"That's correct, Captain," Teschner said, shaking water out of his hair and clothes.

Efran looked up to the brilliant blue sky. *God of heaven. . . .*

At that time, Minka, Ella, and several of the children—Toby, Alcmund, Hassie, and Jera—were watching in breathless hope while Tess rode Cloud at a walk around the pen without a saddle. Tess was torn; she knew how badly they wanted to ride, and she wanted to be vindicated in her work. But it would be disastrous to move too

quickly now, and see one of the children injured for her impatience.

While she fretted over what to do, she glanced up to see Loriot at one end of the pen, watching. She smiled at him without even knowing it, and his face was almost—what? *Encouraging* was too strong a word, but maybe *understanding* or *permissive* would do.

Glancing back at the children, she said, “Toby, come over here.”

They squealed while Toby walked over calmly to stand beside Tess. She instructed, “Scratch her under her chin; you know how.” He nodded, reaching under Cloud’s chin to scritch just right, making her stretch her head way up for his hand. Even Minka squealed a tiny bit in anticipation.

“Swing your leg over; hold on to her neck, not the reins,” Tess said quietly. She took up the scritch while Toby concentrated on getting up over Cloud’s bare back.

He made it over to sit up, stroking Cloud’s neck, which she accepted. Then Tess began walking her around the pen, taking care to not get too close to the excited children, and Minka, watching.

Toby made three full laps in fine form on Cloud’s back, then Tess stopped her to let him slide off again. As a reward for them both, she gave Toby the apple to feed Cloud, which secured him in her good graces. Then Tess let all the children come into the pen to pet the mare and praise her. This they did for a few minutes. Before they could spook her with their squealing, Tess took her back to the stables. Meanwhile, Ella resumed work with her colt. The children clustered around Toby, the man of the hour, then they all ran back to the grounds.

While Tess was grooming Cloud, a shadow blocked the light into the stables, and she looked back at Loriot leaning on the wide door frame. She grinned at him. “If you say, ‘I told you so,’ I’ll find something to throw at you.”

He shook his head. “You already said it for me.”

She exhaled, blinking. “I’ve never been so happy,” she whispered. Wide-eyed, she asked, “Did you see Minka cheering for me?”

“For you and the mare. Minka wants to ride it, too,” Loriot observed.

“Killjoy,” she muttered, still smiling.

“I’ll meet you at Croft’s when you’re done, then,” he said, turning away.

“Are you off?” she asked quickly.

“Yes,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Well, if you help me with the hay, then I’ll be off, too!” she said indignantly, and he almost smiled.

When Minka wandered back to the grounds, she saw Efran with Joshua, just looking out over the Sea. She went over to nestle into his side, and he draped his free arm around her shoulders. “What are you looking for?” she murmured. He raised an inquiring brow down at her.

“You keep coming out here to look. What is it?” she asked.

“Probably nothing. And I don’t want to alarm you for no reason,” he returned.

She looked out over the vast, now-tranquil water. Then she said, “I’ll wait a day or two for you to tell me, but that’s all.” He nodded.

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Chapter 19

The following day, February 9th, Adele went out walking in the Lands again. She took a satchel with a lightweight board, pages of parchment, and pieces of sharpened charcoal wrapped on the ends to keep her fingers clean. In the late morning—not a busy time for Croft’s—she sat in their outdoor dining area with a lager to sketch.

She drew the men working on the chapel, which appeared to be going up rapidly. Watching the graceful, flowing motions of the faerie tree branches, she put that into a skirt—yes, something fairly weighty and very wide, circular, to flow freely. Looking at her sketch, she thought, *Minka would like that*. Then she wondered, *When did I decide to start calling her “Minka”?* Adele considered the boots of one man who paused near her. Without looking up to see who it was, she decided, *When she kept quiet about me*.

Adele continued to sketch, and the man went on. But now she was drawing a man looking aside. He had a sharp jawline and a muscular neck, full lips, and a habitual frown of concentration. The black hair tended to be long, because it grew quickly and he never had time to get it cut. It gave him a somewhat sinister look, until something made him smile, and then he looked so like an angel--

She crumpled the parchment to stuff it into the satchel. *I can’t do that. I can’t let myself think of him, because then I’ll ruin everything*. She lowered her face to draw flowing lines again . . . waves. Pounding, powerful, glorious waves. . . .

Efran had climbed over the fence again, and now he and Teschner lay flat on the edge of the cliff as the great wave approached. There were two other men with them today—Lwoff and Seagrave, who had both noticed the rising swells. They were watching on hands and knees, in position to grab either of the other two should the cliff become unstable under them.

All four of them were drenched by the spray as the wave crashed into the rock face. Lwoff grabbed Teschner’s belt when he reached far down the cliff side. They all pulled away as the water subsided, taking more topsoil with it so as to render the slope of the cliff dangerous. “Come back over, all of you,” Efran said, spitting seawater.

He did not ask, so Teschner told him, “Ten feet or less to the top, Captain.”

“Eight,” murmured Lwoff. Efran looked back at the Sea, shivering.

As they climbed over the ladder one by one, Seagrave said, “We need to be thinking about how to evacuate, Captain.”

Efran nodded reluctantly. “Ask Captains Towner and Rigdon to confer over a plan for the men and the gear up here. Alert Greves for the stables and Marlett for the fowl. Lwoff, get whatever help you may need for the armory. Just—in case.” Both men saluted and sprinted away; Teschner went to his duty.

Efran went in the back door, bypassing the nursery door on which his son was pounding, bawling, “Papapapa!” But Efran continued up the corridor to turn into the keep and stand before the ten-foot-tall crucifix, where he looked up intently to the window. His lips moved as he shivered and dripped, but his words were mostly incoherent.

“Captain?” Earnshaw entered, as it was almost time for his Scripture readings.

Efran walked over to take him by the elbow. “We need special prayer without alarming the men.”

He whispered to him for a minute more, and Earnshaw’s face grew grave. “Count on it, Captain.”

Efran patted his shoulder, then went to his quarters to change into dry clothes. From there, he got his son out of the nursery, pausing to dry the child’s teary face with Efran’s own sleeve. Then he took him to the workroom to tell DeWitt and Estes, “We need to think about something that may need to be done quickly.” And he closed the door behind him.

In bed that evening, Minka had to lay herself across Efran to get his attention. He responded, but evidently not to her satisfaction, for she sat up against the headboard. Crossing her arms, she observed, “It’s time to talk to me before I start thinking you’re in love with another woman.”

He laughed despite himself. “How could I be, when I can’t ever get enough of you?”

“Not good enough,” she said critically of his effort to reassure her.

His laugh this time was mostly a groan. But he sat up to hold her. “For—about a week now, we’ve seen large waves rising against the face of the cliff. They’re at the point of coming over. We may have to evacuate the fortress very soon.”

She studied him, then said, “Thank God there are places below to go. Will the waves flood the Lands?”

He considered that. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it before. Estes says he wants you and the children to come to his and Kelsey’s house. He says they have plenty of room.”

“All right,” she said as if accepting a dinner invitation.

“Now let me see what I can do to satisfy you,” he smiled, gathering her up, and she grinned.

Efran did not like the look of the Sea the next morning (February 10th), so there began the quiet movement of arms, animals, stores, records, and money down the switchback. Messengers from the fortress spread word through the Lands. Deliveries that normally came to the fortress were rerouted to buildings below, and DePew’s associate Rimbault opened several new, unoccupied homes for the nursery and the wards of the Abbey. Residents who had relatives working in the fortress or on the grounds opened their homes to take in people and supplies.

Then mid-morning, Teschner, grave, came to Efran. Teschner did not have to say anything to get him to the

fence, and they did not have to climb the ladder to see what was coming.

It was a monster wave, easily discernible on the horizon at ten times the height of anything that had come before. Workers and soldiers came to the fence to look in stunned silence. “How long do we have?” Efran whispered.

“Five, six hours,” Teschner said.

Efran turned to the frozen faces around them. “You will quietly get the rest of the staff out first, then we will see to the stores.”

“Yes, sir.” “Yes, Captain,” they replied, and moved off as instructed.

He went inside to look in the nursery, finding it empty and stripped. Men were going down the corridor to close all doors securely and stuff bags of sand at their thresholds. Efran stepped to the door of the library to look in at the shelves full of precious volumes that they could not get moved down.

The Librarian suddenly appeared in the midst of the room, standing beside Ares’ sword as if ready to take it up. He was large, seven feet tall, at least, spreading in his black suit. His white hair fanned out from his head like pure flames, and his eyes were intensely dark as he said, “Stand, Lord Efran.”

“Yes,” Efran said without comprehension. “I just hope that--”

“You need only stand,” he repeated firmly.

Efran was staring at him as Coxe came up with sandbags. “Let’s get this door secured, Captain.”

“Yes.” Efran stood back to let him close the door and shove the bags tightly at the base.

Efran then turned to see Minka come up to him. As she opened her mouth, he said, “I want you to go down now.”

“You come too, then,” she said.

“Not until everything is done,” he said. She began to argue, but he said, “Coxe, please take Lady Minka down to the Lands.”

“Yes, sir,” Coxe said, saluting. “If you will accompany me, Lady.”

Momentarily resisting, she looked up at Efran, but his gaze was unyielding. So she lowered her eyes to turn up the corridor with the soldier.

While the exodus from the fortress progressed, Adele was showing her most recent sketches to Elvey, Ianna, and Ghislain. These designs were the first that Adele had produced entirely on her own. The women looked carefully at them, but she could sense their disinterest immediately. Elvey sighed and said, “They’re good, Livy, with clean and classical lines. But I think we need something more—showy to compete with Trina. A lot of our most reliable customers have gone over to her.”

Adele’s immediate thought was that the way to compete was to offer a clear alternative when those customers got tired of looking like fruit baskets. But she was quiet while Elvey continued, “We’ll pass on these for now, but you should keep working.” Adele nodded as Ghislain and Ianna turned to someone else’s sketch of a dress with a

collar that stood straight up six inches at the back of the head.

Contemplatively, Adele took her sketching bag to Croft's outdoor dining area again. She found drawing to be a wonderful medium of thought. Glancing idly at the number of carts progressing down the switchback, she wondered how she was to support herself now. She was not fearful, as she had not been expecting long-term employment as a designer for Elvey's. But she also knew that when the appearance-changing potion wore off—whenever that happened—she would be evicted unless she found an iron-clad reason to stay.

Folliott walked up to her again, maybe a little unsteadily. He had dark circles under his eyes and several days' growth of beard. "I still don't know your name," he said.

"Livvy," she said. "I've been designing for Elvey's, but I'm afraid they want someone who creates clothes that look like Trina's."

He laughed ruefully. "Ah, yes, the woman of the hour, the richest person in the Lands."

Adele shrugged mildly, returning to her sketch. "Well, I suppose I'd better produce something she'd like."

"Why?" Folliott snorted.

"I need to make a living," she said as a matter of fact.

"If that's why, then just marry me," Folliott said. "I don't have as much as Trina does, but I've got a pretty fair store myself, until I drink it all," he added, a shadow crossing his face.

She glanced up at him again. "There's a thirty-day waiting period to marry after a divorce."

"Oh." He looked downcast.

"But I'll move in with you," she offered, "if you'll stop drinking. Then when the thirty days are up, and we still like each other, we can get married." She was fairly sure the potion would remain effective for another month.

He gazed at her. "That's a splendid idea. Let me help you get your things."

So, with Folliott's help, she gathered her modest possessions, including the clothes Elvey had given her and her own sample dresses. On a thought, she went to the designers' room to steal the sheets with Minka's and Ella's measurements. All these things they took across Main and past the new northbound road to a new development north of the lake. Folliott led up the steps to unlock the door of a small, bare house.

As she unloaded her possessions in the bedroom, she looked at the pallet he had been sleeping on. He admitted, "I need a good bed."

"Yes, you do, but not much else," she said cheerfully. At that, he looked up in hope. "Show me your money and we'll go get the few things we need," she instructed.

Quickly, he opened the door to a spare room where he uncovered piles of royals. "That's good," she said in surprise. Without counting, she judged there to be about four hundred royals—a fraction of what Bowring and Trina had. However, at the rate Trina was spending them, hers wouldn't last long unless her clothes sold well, and kept selling.

“So,” Adele said, “after you bathe and shave, we’ll go shopping.” Folliott eagerly cleaned himself up, and they went first to Walford’s Ready Furniture to get the pieces for a bed and a comfortable mattress with pillows.

As the hours progressed, Efran, Estes, DeWitt, Lieutenants Wyeth and Nyland, and Captains Rigdon and Towner supervised the conveying of people and goods down the switchback. Commander Lyte, his Second Cutch and Aide Gabriel, and the Captains Barr, Melchior, and Neale saw all the fortress evacuees sent to various places in the Lands, with the cooperation of Lord DePew and other ranked individuals. Fortunately, the moneyer Meineke had long before moved his operation down to a secure site on the Lands, so nothing need be done with his valuable equipment.

Meanwhile, Efran kept watch on the incoming tsunami. He clearly remembered the devastation wreaked by the hurricane that hit Prie Mer and Nicarber three years ago, and he prayed earnestly for God to spare them that. He couldn’t bear to think of what would happen to the fortress—yes, Nakham’s uplifting the hill and fortress after Symphorien’s wrecking them was phenomenal, awe-inspiring, but, Efran could not conceive what restoration was possible were it all washed away.

Stop, he told himself on his way to the back fence. *Stop conjecturing. Take care of what needs to be done now to get ready for when it hits.*

But he found that it wasn’t even necessary to go as far as the back fence to see the wave coming.

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Chapter 20

While Efran stood on the grounds to watch the tsunami roll toward them in fury, his eyes narrowed. Strange that it looked almost like a bearded man, a giant, charging head down. His massive shoulders formed the bulk of the wave, with the rest of his body, from the chest down, underwater. *Why must I make everything personal?* he mused.

“Captain.” Nyland came to his side to salute. “The fortress residents and the supplies are down in the Lands, as are all the animals and most of the men. The Administrator DeWitt requests your presence down there with them.”

“Yes, I am coming. Get everyone else down now,” Efran said. Nyland saluted to walk off briskly.

Efran looked back to the water, wondering, *The Librarian said, “Stand.” Do I need to stay?*

He went through the eerie, empty fortress, which reminded him strongly of his first night here with Minka and Toby. From the front courtyard, he looked down at the last of the men and equipment rolling off the end of the switchback. DeWitt and Estes, standing on Main, watched Efran look down, then turn around to ascend the steps and reenter the fortress.

“Dammit,” DeWitt said under his breath.

Estes was shaking his head. “Didn’t we know all along that he’d think to meet it?”

DeWitt turned away, aggravated and grieved—only to see Minka behind him. “He hasn’t come down, has he?” she whispered, pale.

“Come here, Minka. Watch with us,” Estes said. She went over to stand between them, looking up to the fortress on the hilltop.

Efran returned to the back fence. The wave seemed to be accelerating, and was now no more than a half mile from the cliff. Efran watched as it drew closer. He was not familiar with the Sea as someone like Teschner was, but this—this was not the movement of water powered by the force of the earth or the wind. This was . . . something entirely different. The conviction settled on him, *Yes, this is something I need to engage. I’m to take a stand here.*

As the wave gained the cliff, it reared up for Efran to see a massive head with tangled white hair and brawny green mounds for shoulders. There was a face, somewhat; the knotted beard was white, and the eyes merely deep, dark recesses in the water.

A green, twiny fist the size of half the hill shot up toward the sky for dark clouds to twist themselves around it. With a fierce crackle and blaze, lightning shot down from the fist to strike the iron railing in front of Efran. He fell back, covering his head as his hair stood on end. Then he looked up to see a great gap opened in the fence, which smoked along the edges of melted iron.

The fortress evacuees below saw the lightning and heard its explosive strike. Some cried out; Minka, choking on fear, turned to DeWitt. He put an arm around her while Estes laid a hand on her shoulder.

Efran staggered up to stand at the new opening in the fence—there was nothing now between him and the Sea. The great wave spread for hundreds of feet in front of him along the cliff. And it looked down on him with a roar that shook the trees of the orchard behind him. It was close enough for Efran to see that the tangled white masses of his hair and beard were human skeletons that moved as though they were still alive. And somewhere on his head was a laughing, cackling presence. All that Efran saw distinctly of it was a lashing tail.

Shadowy forms began rising up along the front of the giant green wave. Unconsciously, Efran stepped through the gaping hole of the fence, whose broken railings hissed with steam as droplets hit them. He peered at the forms of men that emerged from the wave to stand in the air before him.

The first, with the shaft of an arrow protruding from his chest, said in an echoing, distant voice, “I was a Westfordian forced to deliver supplies to the Qarqarians. When you attacked, I had nowhere to hide, and you killed me.”

Efran shook his head. “I am sorry, but I could not know. War is unforgiving.”

His form dispersed as water back into the wave, and that of a young Polonti took his place with an arrow in his side. “I was trying to escape, and you killed one of your own.”

Again with a brief shake of his head, Efran said, “Polonti are ready to die at any time. I went into every battle expecting to die.”

That boy also disappeared back into the wave, which seemed to be suspended over the cliff, ready to crash down on Efran and inundate the hilltop at any second. But then twenty or more forms rose up from the water. These had gaping holes in their bodies, some with broken heads, or arms and hands missing. One in front said, “We

were innocent beggars that you slaughtered like animals when you and your men came riding oh so righteously to defend Nicarber.”

That was fun. That was fun. That was fun. The shades behind him repeated one after another Efran’s own comment about the killing that he had done there.

Efran did look away as he said, “We had no time to sit down for a council and determine who was attacking the villagers. I . . . do regret being flippant, but, I didn’t mean that killing you was fun.” He shrugged, uncomfortable but not distressed. They sank back into the water.

The wave giant grew higher; the clouds above him darker. The fortress evacuees watched the darkening of the sky in alarm while the Lands’ residents hurried home to put on cloaks in which to run their errands. A number of soldiers, including Barr, Wyeth, and Melchior, decided that this was not a natural phenomenon, but something that must be fought. So they and twenty behind them began riding toward the switchback.

But the faerie trees whipped down to block the entrance of the switchback with their crowns, startling the horses so that they reared or fell back. Then those dark clouds began pouring rain. As the frustrated riders returned from their effort to support the Captain, someone ran up to toss a cloak over Minka. Hardly aware, she gazed up at the hilltop in wordless prayer.

Pelted by the rain, Efran peered through the darkness at the greenish, muted light coming from inside the wave like weak torchlight in fog. The next shape that arose from the skeletons decorating the head of the water giant was one that Efran recognized immediately. The huge shade of a man with wild hair roared, “You broke oath with me! You are false, a traitor to your race!”

“You tried to kill me, Awfyn! I begged you to leave. You are the one who attacked me, and still I grieved killing you!” Efran cried.

“Traitor,” Awfyn hissed as his form also melted away.

Efran was feeling the effects of this judgmental proceeding. He had never let mistakes in the heat of battle bother him before, but now he saw times he should have been more aware.

The next two forms that came up together caused him to freeze in fear. “I never killed children,” he protested, as the forms were a boy and a girl, gaunt, dirty, clutching each other.

The boy said, “You killed our father and our older brother. We had no one left to take care of us. We died on the street, and were swept out with the trash.”

Given Efran’s love of children, and his own son, this accusation pierced him. He lowered his head in grief. “I never knew. I am sorry; I am sorry.” His tears fell into the boiling cauldron of water inches below the edge of the cliff at his feet.

While he wept, another form materialized closer to him than any of the others. When Efran looked up, his heart almost stopped. Before him stood Pindar with a gaping slash in his throat, blood covering the entire front of his uniform jacket. Pindar’s shadow said softly, “You condemned Geneve for killing Clonmel, but you didn’t have to kill me, either. I would have let you take her without a fight. You never even gave me the chance to save my own life. You ambushed me and slit my throat—your superior officer and your best friend.”

With the heavy rain pelting him, and the raging wind, the tumultuous sea, and the roiling water one step away,

Efran shattered inside. It was true; that charge was *true*. “Pindar,” Efran gasped. “I killed you in anger. An officer, and my friend. Oh, Pindar—I am sorry; I am sorry,” Efran cried.

You are guilty, hundreds of muted voices said from the wave.

“Yes, I am guilty. I killed my best friend in anger,” Efran sobbed.

Then you must come to us, the voices said. *You are guilty*. Pindar moved back and Efran looked down at the water beneath him, promising him peace if he would fall down to receive the judgment of his guilt. Efran’s head lowered and his whole body drooped toward the green void below.

“Efran. Efran,” a voice at his side whispered. That quiet whisper somehow cut through the other voices, the wind, the rain, and the waves. Turning his head, Efran realized that he had been hearing that whisper the whole time he had been listening to the accusations.

Squinting through the rain, he saw Nakham standing beside him, his funny hat flattened by the water. Regarding him, Nakham said, “Stand, Efran.”

“But, I am guilty, Nakham. I am guilty,” Efran said, trembling.

Nakham threw back his head to look above as lightning crossed the sky in a mighty blast from the east to the west. Efran did not hear the Polonti on the Lands below cry in joy, “Ino!” But the light from that strike seemed to linger in the dark sky. As Nakham was looking up, Efran looked up to see emblazoned in white light the words: ***There is THEREFORE***

He stared in bewilderment at those three words that filled the blackness above. “There is therefore—what?” Efran murmured. “What does that--” He blankly watched the lightning dissipate. The sky went dark again. The water giant, the shivering skeletons, the roiling waves all seemed to be suspended, muted, held back while Efran struggled to understand.

Another mighty crash of lightning made the air shiver, filling even more of the sky. Efran gaped up at the shimmering words, ***Now NO CONDEMNATION***

He held his breath as something stirred in his memory—something powerful beyond words, beyond comprehension. As the lightning faded once more, Efran breathed out, “There is therefore . . . now no condemnation--”

And the third strike left golden words so large that he had to lean back to take them in: ***For those who are in CHRIST JESUS***. The shadow of a broken tree, the Roman method of execution by torture, stood behind that almost unbearable brightness.

The words that filled his sight also flooded his soul and his will. He gathered himself to stand upright, not looking down at death below him. Instead, he looked across the void at his slain friend to say, “I am guilty. But I am forgiven. Rest in peace, Pindar.”

Pindar’s shade melted into the water; the accusing voices faded in the surrounding din as well. Then Efran looked up at the water giant. “Go back to where you came from.”

The giant began sinking down, its head and shoulders losing structure. The skeletons became foam on the crests of the subsiding waves, and the sea dropped sixty feet from the height of its turmoil. The dark clouds dissipated

so that the late afternoon sun shone with a glorious golden light. And across the sky spread the largest, most beautiful rainbow Efran had ever seen.

He looked at Nakham, still standing beside him, both of them drenched. Nakham removed his hat with a look of irritation to squeeze a gallon of water from it.

“What was that thing, that—water giant?” Efran asked him.

Nakham squinted in distaste. “I’m afraid you’ve drawn the attention of the bad ones, Efran. But now you know what to do.” As Efran still looked baffled, Nakham added, “You stand, Efran. Stand on what you know to be true.”

Efran exhaled in acknowledgment, “I am forgiven. But—Pindar--”

“Eh, that wasn’t Pindar, nor the vagrants, nor the children. Come, Efran, don’t you recognize playacting when you see it?” Nakham asked, pursing his lips.

“The point was--to make me lie down and die,” Efran said.

“Yup. Don’t listen. Stand upright,” Nakham said.

“If only I could remember that,” Efran whispered.

The observers below the hill saw the succession of lightning strikes, then the sudden calm and cessation of rain. As the clouds lifted, the rooftop bells began to toll in joy. When Barr and his men leaped up on their horses again, Minka ran after them, crying, pleading. So Barr stopped to pull her up behind his saddle as Estes pushed her up from below.

She gripped Barr tightly while he led the men to lope up the switchback, and the trees did not interfere. Arriving at the open courtyard gates, they saw the Captain emerge from the fortress doors, dripping wet but smiling in composure. Seeing Minka fall from Barr’s horse, Efran shook his head, going over to lift her so she could cry on him.

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Chapter 21

Holding Minka in one arm, Efran gestured down at Estes and DeWitt to come up. So the fortress residents, exhausted from the hasty evacuation, had to turn around to haul everything back up again. A few of them were complaining. But the soldiers were united in the effort, especially as it was getting close to dinner time. So the supplies of food and drink were the first to be restored, some via carts, but much of it carried by men running up and down the switchback.

The occupants of the nursery and children’s quarters were returned just as rapidly. Efran barely had time to change into dry clothes before Martyn began up the switchback with Joshua. The baby, recognizing the ascent, settled down to watch the courtyard gates with his fist in his mouth. And when Papa exited through them with extended arms, Joshua fell on him much as Minka had done, except that he went to sleep.

Because everyone was anxious to get back to their places in the fortress, there were a few minor collisions and altercations on the crowded switchback. Efran complained to DeWitt, “I know that having one access up the hillside is an important defensive measure, but, with so many people here--”

“We can dig a second switchback east of it,” DeWitt said. Efran nodded.

There was so much to be done before nightfall that Efran forgot about the gaping hole in the fence until he and Minka--with Joshua passed out on his shoulder—went out to the back grounds to look around. Many residents, meanwhile, had come out to look at the Sea lolling in gentle waves. Most did not see, but Teschner checked to find the water level back down to forty feet below the cliffs, where it should be.

Seeing the children run amok in the early twilight, Efran gasped, “The fence! There’s--” But when he peered through the trees, he saw that someone had constructed a temporary wooden barrier over the gap, and he relaxed. (In the days following, Gerard had the ironmonger even out the opening and make a gate which was kept locked, with Greves, Lwoff and his assistant Evrard keeping the keys.)

Madea’s hardy kitchen crew threw a smorgasbord on long tables in the dining hall for residents and laborers to help themselves between runs, and DeWitt forwent charging guests for tonight. With Efran, Minka, Joshua and Ella sitting at the back tables as usual, the fortress administrators and numerous others gathered at those tables to hear him describe what had happened in the hour following the evacuation.

He told Minka, in particular, “I hadn’t intended to stay, but when I passed by the library, the Librarian told me to stand. I didn’t understand what he was saying until I went back to look at the wave, and saw that it was not a wave at all, but an attack. It was something I had to face down.” And he described the subsequent appearance of the shades, and the words in the lightning.

As he was describing all this, they glanced over at Trina and Challinor entering in such flamboyant dresses that even Efran paused. DeWitt made a mental note of their dinner charges. Folllott was not with them.

Given the motivation of the fortress residents, their return was achieved much faster than their evacuation, although everything was not put exactly as it had been. That was a task for the morrow. But by the the time evening fell, all were where they needed to be, and grateful for it.

Joshua went down in his familiar floor bassinet without a struggle while Minka and Efran collapsed on their bed. Tight in his side, Minka murmured, “Nakham, and the Librarian, and Ino were all there to help you.”

His heavy lids cracked open. “Um hmm, and I didn’t know it, until I finally heard Nakham. . . .”

Her hand twisted in his shirt. “They were there all along.” This he barely acknowledged, being mostly asleep.

Hours later, he startled awake, hearing the roar of the Sea again. After a moment of blind panic, he realized it was just blowback, in his mind alone, from this afternoon. So he lay still to experience the attack and the redemption from the perspective of having come through it. And when it was done, it was done, and he could close his eyes to sleep again.

Everyone made an early start the following morning, February 11th. First, the supplies that had been brought back to the fortress had to be returned to their proper places. So as long as that was being done, DeWitt had all of it inventoried. Being thorough, he just wanted to make sure their records were correct.

Adele also had Folliott up early, after a pleasant evening and a good night's rest. She assisted him in grooming and dressing to her satisfaction, then she packed him a tidy number of royals. Before sending him off to Wade's Carriages for Hire, she told him, "I need fabrics to begin producing clothes to compete with Trina, so I want you to go look at what Venegas has on hand this morning. I want pastels and patterns, but also neutrals—white, black, gray and brown. Do you understand, darling?"

"I think so," he said unsteadily. "But won't they bring a cart again today?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "Even if they do, I want to get the best of what they have before they come. And I don't want to be bidding against Trina or Challinor for it, do I?"

"Yes," he said. "I mean, no. I understand."

"Good. Now you trot along to Wade's and bring me back some good stuff," she instructed, puckering. So he left with resolve.

After seeing his hired carriage roll off to the east, Adele got to work. First, she used a table knife to raise a board in the little washroom and hide fifty of Folliott's royals in a pouch underneath, along with her little book of secret potions. Then she wrapped another thirty royals in a burlap sack and placed that into a basket with another small hand shovel. These two items she covered with a large folded square of cloth in a cheerful pattern.

Priming before a silver mirror, she found her new appearance holding up well. So she put on a casual, Minka-style dress and walked demurely to the wall gates. Here, she showed the gate guards her pretty fabric, saying, "I'm Elvey's new designer Livy. I promised the children a picnic blanket for their hut."

"Very good, Livy," said one smiling guard, who opened the gate for her. She wiggled her fingers at him and the faerie trees left her alone. Then she conspicuously walked north over the old stone bridge and west down the paved road to cross the new bridge spanning the Passage.

In the woods out of sight of anyone in the Lands, she approached the gates to the play area cautiously. As she had hoped, no children were here at the moment. First thing, she took out her shovel. She had started to dig a hole at the base of a tree, but the roots made it impossible. So she walked around the hut, looking for a good spot. She considered the lean-to shed against the back wall, but rejected it as too obvious.

On the side of the hut, midway between the front and back doors, she knelt to dig a sufficiently deep hole for the bundle of royals. After firmly pressing the bundle into the hole, she covered it up and carefully restored the detritus to disguise the disturbance.

Then she opened the front door to toss the fabric square inside the hut. She also left the basket by the door, but put the shovel in a pocket of her dress. After brushing dirt from her hands and knees, she primly walked back to wave demurely at the friendly gate guard who let her in again.

Returning to Folliott's house, she picked up another pouch of thirty royals, which she wrapped with a bland square of cotton. Unfortunately, she forgot that this cloth had been wrapped around the order of roasted pork which she and Folliott had eaten last night.

Emerging with her bundle, Adele began walking east along the easement inside the walls. As she went, she surreptitiously evaluated her surroundings for good hiding places. Shortly, she paused, then turned back to the west—there was just too much construction in the east section, too many people coming and going.

Walking west, once she got past the houses, all that remained up to the Passage was a deserted-looking little shop. So, after glancing all around, Adele dug a quick hole at the base of the Lands' wall. Dropping the pouch into it, she backfilled the hole, made it indistinguishable from the surrounding dirt, and carefully noted nearby features that would guide her when she returned to it.

That done, she came back to Follriott's house to clean her hands and consider her next move. Tentatively, she packed her sketching bag with two of her designs and ten fabric samples from Elvey's. Bag in hand, she left Follriott's house to begin walking to the switchback, and from there, up to the fortress courtyard.

At the closed gates, she told the guards, "I'm Livy, a designer with Elvey's. I'd like see Lady Minka, please." Her voice quivered slightly as she made the request, but the guards opened the gates amiably for her.

At the fortress door, she made the same request, and the door guard said, "Have a seat in the small dining room there, miss, and I'll see if I can find her for you."

"Thank you," she said. She went into the empty room to sit at the oval table, remembering the contentious meeting here five months ago when she had come with Cholmondeley to try to blackmail Efran. "That was unwise," she murmured. He was still mad about that.

The sentry returned with Minka, who paused upon seeing her sister at the table. Noting the sketches and fabrics she was withdrawing from the bag, Minka said, "Hello, Livy. What can I do for you?" Nakam was with her, sniffing Adele's lower legs intently, as the barest hint of pork hovered around her.

"Thank you for seeing me, Lady Minka," Adele replied. She nudged the dog away from her leg without looking down. The sentry nodded and withdrew as Minka sat at the table beside her. "I've done a few more sketches, and, was just hoping that you might like to try another dress or two of mine."

"Let's have a look," Minka said with a faint smile. So Adele spread out the sketches and samples on the table.

Minka looked over all of them carefully while Adele sat silent. The longer Minka looked, the less hopeful Adele was that she liked any of it. But then she picked up one sketch of a dress with a form-fitting bodice that ended in a V front and back, with a full, lightweight skirt underneath. "I like this," Minka pronounced. "Maybe in a soft, neutral color with embroidery along the front and bottom edges of the bodice. What do you think?"

"That you're a mind reader," Adele said. "The only question is the sleeves--"

Efran, holding Joshua, stopped at the door to say, "There you are. We're--" He halted abruptly on catching sight of Adele from the back. She did not move, being afraid to turn around.

Minka looked up. "Do you know Elvey's new designer Livy, Efran? She's showing me some lovely sketches. Is it all right if I order another dress?" Nakam looked up from her feet, but since she didn't get up, he put his head back down and closed his eyes.

"Of course," Efran said quickly. "When you're done, we'll be out back." He was tense, keeping his eyes strictly off Adele.

"I'll only be a moment," Minka said, smiling warmly.

Minimally reassured, he withdrew, but a moment later a sentry came to stand inconspicuously outside the door.

“What about the sleeves?” Minka asked lightly, returning to the sketch.

“We could make them either one with the bodice or of the same fabric as the skirt,” Adele said, pulling the samples toward her.

“Oh, dear, you would vex me with options,” Minka murmured. “I’m so tempted to match them to the skirt, but I’d rather have embroidery on the edges. So let’s make them one with the bodice.”

They worked out the style and breadth of the embroidery she wanted, then Minka picked several possible color choices-- “whichever you think looks best,” she told Adele.

Adele said, “Any of those would look beautiful on you.”

Rising, Minka said, “Let me get you a few royals as--”

“That’s not necessary,” Adele said quickly. “You’re not under obligation.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Minka said, studying her.

“Give us a week, with the embroidery,” Adele said as she stood to gather her materials back into the bag.

With a nod, Minka walked her to the doors to see her out. She told the guard, Ellor, “Livy will be back up in a few days with a dress for me to look at.” In other words, she was to be allowed in without question.

“Very good, Lady Minka,” he smiled down at her.

Descending the switchback on foot, Adele breathed out in satisfaction. Regardless how many clients Trina had, Minka outweighed them all. *She really does want me to do this*, Adele thought.

When Minka emerged onto the back grounds with Nakam running alongside, Efran was waiting for her. She stretched up to kiss him, and he observed, “She’s got a scam in there somewhere.” Joshua, in the sling on his back, puckered at her.

“She’s not scamming me,” Minka insisted. “She’s already done lovely work for me and Ella. And if she’s working, she has no reason to scam. Right?”

“You’re hopeless,” he muttered, pulling her to him with one arm.

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Chapter 22

Efran walked Minka through the orchards to the back fence to look at the Sea again, just to see if it really were going to stay down off the cliff today—and they weren’t the only ones checking. No one tried to move the barricade over the demolished fence, but some did lean over to look. The Sea was back down to its previous

level and did not appear to be climbing again.

Although Fortress life had quickly settled back into normalcy, Efran was quietly grappling with yesterday's experience. Had he really been so close to throwing himself down to die? Yes—the pressure from the deception was overwhelming. No—Nakham was beside him the whole time. Still, Efran was disturbed by how real and coercive the lie had seemed to be. Yet for all that, he was whole, and . . . unshaken.

"Efran." Looking back over his shoulder at the summons, Efran was surprised to see DeWitt approaching. He hardly ever left his worktable during the day unless there were an emergency.

"What is it?" Efran asked in concern.

"I don't know what to make of this," DeWitt said. "Hello, Minka."

She smiled at him, a little worried. "If you're confused about something, we're in trouble."

DeWitt laughed, "I hope not. But I'm leaving it to your Polonti husband to deal with."

"Deal with what?" Efran asked, brows down. DeWitt refused to discipline Polonti for anything, so when one of them transgressed, he passed it on to Efran or Estes.

"It's so trivial in a way, which makes it that much more bewildering," DeWitt mused. When Efran started swaying in impatience, DeWitt said, "All of our inventory checks came back satisfactory, except in the kitchen. Young Enon has been carting down large amounts of greens once every few days. It wouldn't be a problem except the kitchen is running low on garden greens for meals, and--"

"Enon," Efran said. "Who received the Meritorious Cross for the snobbles." He sounded offended.

"Yes, which tells me there's a reason. We need to know what it is so that we can address it in such a way that our people still get what they need for meals," DeWitt said, irrefutable as always.

"I'll go talk to him. Where's he taking it all?" Efran asked.

"Apparently, to his mother's house—it's tucked in the northwestern corner near Flodie's," DeWitt said.

Efran said sourly, "If his mother's feeding people, I'll let her."

"On just greens?" DeWitt laughed. "Go ask our young hero what he needs it all for."

"Then I'd better take Moiwahine," Efran said, looking down at her.

"Of course you will," she said sweetly, and he shook his head.

With Joshua in a sling on Efran and Nakam in a messenger pouch on Minka, they rode leisurely down the switchback and up Main. Efran noted the progress of construction on the chapel close to Main, and DePew's inn. His project was a little farther back from the main east-west road, because of all the space the inn required.

Suddenly Kele appeared right in front of Efran on the horse's poll between his ears. "Lord Efran, may I have a word with you?" she cried.

He glanced in mild alarm at Minka, whose eyes widened. They both reined to a stop next to the sidewalk, and he said, “Yes, of course, Kele. What’s wrong?”

“Lord Efran, surely your construction people have ample wood to not go cutting down our trees!” she said, almost weeping.

“Your trees? The faerie trees? Who’s cutting them down for construction?” Efran asked, bewildered.

“The architect of the chapel has cut great limbs for use on it, depriving many faeries of their homes,” she wept.

“That’s—what? Oh, no. Which tree?” Efran asked.

“The one on the far end of Cavern Lake,” Kele sniffled.

Efran and Minka both peered in that direction, but couldn’t discern much from this distance. He said, “There’s Lemmerz. I’ll talk to him, Kele.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” she said, and vanished.

Efran and Minka rode over to the area of construction near the new north road. He raised a hand to Lemmerz, who saw him and walked over. “We’re pleased with the progress on the chapel, Captain. What do you think?”

“It looks good, Lemmerz, but, the faeries are very unhappy about your use of their trees,” Efran said.

Lemmerz groaned, “Oh, Bozzelli, the architect, got it into his head that the faerie tree wood has superior acoustic properties, so cut some to install in the ceiling of the great hall, there. Well, our laborers had fits with it, and refused to cut any more. But, yes, there’s some in the ceiling of the hall that’s there to stay, I’m afraid.”

Efran looked over to the chapel ceiling rafters, but couldn’t see how any part of it differed from another. “Then they’re not cutting any more of it?”

“No, Captain, they’re not,” Lemmerz said.

“All right. Carry on,” Efran said, turning the horse’s head. “Kele? They’re done cutting. They won’t take any more.”

He and Minka heard her say, “Thank you, Lord Efran,” and that was it, though Joshua murmured something in his sling.

During this conversation, Minka noted Folliott emerging from a hired carriage in front of a house on a side street, and Adele coming out to help him unload bolts of fabric to take inside. Minka thought about this for a little while, then looked up as Efran turned his horse back toward the main street.

Following him, she glanced back to the chapel. “That would be a nice place for Ella and Quennel to get married,” she murmured. Efran glanced at her, and she added, “Don’t you think that would be lovely?” She stroked Nakam, who was getting restless in the pouch.

“A chapel wedding?” Efran muttered. “When you last said something about it to Ella, she didn’t look much excited.”

“No? Maybe not,” she sighed. She wasn’t quite ready to ask herself if that was something she would have wanted.

When they were close to Flodie’s, Efran walked his horse up to a small house and dismounted, holding Joshua in his left arm. They left their horses loosely tethered at a post, then went up to the door.

Efran knocked, and in moments it was opened by a young Polonti woman in work clothes. Looking between Efran and Minka wide-eyed, she gasped, “You are Captain Efran.”

“Yes. Hello. This is my wife Minka,” he said, trying to sound friendly.

With a bare glance at Minka, she asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Not really,” he said dismissively. “But I would like to see Enon, if he’s here.”

“Yes, sir.” She stepped back, bowing her head.

“What is your name?” he asked as they entered.

“Dallarosa, Captain,” she said.

He paused, then asked, “Are you . . . Enon’s sister?”

“I am his mother, Captain,” she said.

Both Efran and Minka looked shocked. He recovered to ask, “May we see him, please?”

“Yes.” She strode to the back door to open it, calling, “Enon!”

He came running to the door, then stopped dead to see Efran. “Captain.” He saluted, looking a little green.

Efran told Dallarosa, “Thank you,” before stepping out into the yard, Minka with him. Nakam was wriggling in the pouch, trying to get down, but she wouldn’t let him.

Enon stood before Efran with his head hanging. “Why do you act like you’re in trouble, Enon?”

“You would not come here to shake my hand, Captain,” the boy said dismally.

“Just—tell me why you need all the greens,” Efran said, faintly humorous. Joshua twisted to look down at him.

At that time, Nakam finally squirmed out of the pouch to fall at Minka’s feet and then run to a part of the yard behind a stockade. “Nakam!” she called in irritation, running after him. Heaving a sigh, Enon gestured to follow her, so Efran did.

Coming around the stockade, they saw a pen with something white in it. Drawing closer, Minka said, “Oh!” at a white deer, a roe, that raised her head to regard them curiously, chewing on a nice bunch of chard. Minka drew softly closer, then said, “Oh!” again, with, “There’s a baby! Two of them! There are two little fawns!”

Enon exhaled. “I found her some days ago in the woods across the Passage. I don’t know where she came from, but there was something chasing her—a hunter or an animal, I don’t know. She was so weak that she could not

even rise up, and I saw white and brown beside her, and it was a fawn—two of them, newborn. So I picked them up to bring them here, and she followed. I built the pen so she could feed in peace, and feed her fawns, but the grass here is not good, not—whole enough. And she was very weak. So I brought better greens from the kitchen, and she got stronger so she could feed her babies, and—did I take too much? I told the kitchen what it was for and they gave it to me,” he spilled out in anxious narration.

Minka had entered the pen to love on the fawns. “Oh, Efran! This one is spotted brown, like they all are, but this one has a white face! Have you ever seen anything like this? Oh, Enon, you did fine,” she insisted. Nakam sniffed the fawns excitedly, who were hardly larger than he was. Then he took up his position as their guardian. The doe watched without concern.

Efran laughed lightly. “Moiwahine has spoken,” he said, which caused Enon to smile in relief. Efran added, “We need to take them up hilltop; they’ll be safe in Pia’s woods, and she’ll make sure the mother gets enough to eat.”

“Yes,” Enon exhaled happily.

Efran instructed, “Run to Main; tell the first man you see that we need a cart to transport a rare doe and her fawns to the hill.”

“Yes, Captain.” Enon was off like a shot.

While Minka loved on the deer family, Efran went back inside with Joshua, intending to tell his mother what they were about to do. He found her sitting at a table with some intricate beadwork in her hands. Efran watched her rapidly twine and knot beaded strands of fine cord. He looked at finished bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and collars lined up on the table.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Tatting, Captain,” she replied, glancing up.

“You—make these to sell?” Efran asked.

She smiled. “Yes, Captain.”

He picked up a finished collar of blue and gold beads with splashes of white. “That’s very pretty.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Her eyes flicked up.

Holding the collar, he remembered the “rich” women of his village wearing collars like this, only not so finely made. Shifting Joshua in his sling around to his back, Efran reached into his pocket. He found three royals, so he put them on her table.

She started. “Oh, no, Captain—too much--” But he had put the collar in his pocket and walked away.

Before long, a one-horse cart driven by Arne arrived at Dallarosa’s house. Minka, attended by Nakam, carried the white-faced fawn into the cart while Enon brought the other, and the doe followed. Minka desired to ride with the deer family, so Enon rode her mare up the switchback to supervise their relocation to Pia’s woods. Efran and Joshua followed on his horse.

Seeing how deep in the woods they were brought, Efran grew concerned, especially when he saw a stone wall

with an iron fence atop it. “What’s inside that fence?” he asked Krall, who was attending Pia today.

Krall shook his head. “Just the ruins of what had been a cottage, probably the gamekeeper at one time. There’s also a cistern back here, but it’s shallow.”

“All right,” Efran said, turning as the cart approached with the new residents.

Pia, the *aina* child who had a special connection to animals, received the family joyfully, and promised Enon that they would be protected and fed. He was very happy, especially not to get in trouble over his taking kitchen stores.

While Minka was watching the deer family acclimate to their new home, Efran took the beaded collar to their quarters. He was anxious to give it to her, but the timing didn’t seem right, somehow. So he put it in his wardrobe to wait for the appropriate moment.

That afternoon, after Loriot finished his duty for the day, he arrived at the stables to find Tess grooming Cloud. Turning upon his entrance, she said, “Oh, you should have been here an hour ago! I had her prancing with me in the saddle!”

“That’s good. I’m very glad,” he said. But his face was tight and he arched his back a little.

She studied him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly.

She scowled at him. “I know every line on your face, and there are a dozen new ones today.”

He almost laughed. “I keep telling you I’m old.”

“You haven’t aged that much in a few days.” The curry comb was motionless in her hand while she analyzed him. “You’re in pain.”

“Just a little,” he admitted. “Is she still having trouble with her back left foot?” he asked, looking at the mare’s hooves.

“Don’t change the subject. Why are you hurting?” she demanded.

He muttered, “Eh, sleeping on too-small cots.”

“Sleep up here with me.” It was not so much a command as a strong suggestion.

He dryly observed, “Whatever you’re sleeping on sure won’t be big enough for me.”

She scoffed, “Idiot. There’s a storeroom full of good big bedding in the fortress that they’re trying to clear out.”

He squinted at her. “How true is that?”

“True enough! Come help me drag a mattress out here.” That was an order.

Loriot balked, “I don’t like to. . . .”

Interpreting his hesitation at once, she said, “Then marry me.” At his continued reluctance, she demanded, “Why don’t you want to be happy?”

He said darkly, “That’s not a natural Polonti state.”

She laughed, “Then we’ll train you to it!” And he conceded to go down to the notary’s shop with her.

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Chapter 23

Three days later—February 14th--Adele delivered a package to the fortress for Minka with a note that if she did not like it, she was to return it to the attention of Livy at Elvey’s with a refusal or instructions for alterations. If she chose to keep it, she was to pay Elvey’s whatever she thought it was worth. (In this manner, Adele hoped to reinvigorate her working relationship with Elvey’s.)

Somewhat anxiously, Minka took the package to the quarters she shared with Efran. He wasn’t there at the time.

Opening it, she was immediately disappointed. Minka had asked for embroidery along the front, and there was some. But in Adele’s haste to get it done, the embroidery was simple and light—not the elaborate job Minka was hoping for. Nonetheless, she shed her work dress to try on the new one.

It had a scoop neck that made buttons or fastenings unnecessary, and it fit her to perfection. She went to the standing mirror in the outer room to scrutinize it on her. The fit was flattering, the hang of the full, flowing skirt beautiful. The bodice ended in a point in the front and back, creating a heart-shaped effect where it met the skirt. The color was a light silver-gray for the bodice and a blue-gray for the skirt. With the muted color and the flow, it evoked serenity. The more Minka looked at it, the more she liked it. The embroidery detail became irrelevant.

At that time, Efran entered. She turned to him, smiling. “Livy’s new dress. What do you think?” She fluffed the skirt, turning in a circle.

He stood regarding her open-mouthed, and she cocked her head. “What’s wrong with it?” she asked.

He blurted, “You can’t wear that.”

“What? Why not?” she asked.

“It’s. . . .” He couldn’t say it.

She protested, “How is it indecent? It doesn’t show anything!”

“It points—there’s a point pointing to your—your—in front *and* back,” he stammered.

“What?” she laughed, turning to look in the mirror again. “That’s absurd! Is that what you really see?”

“I’m a man. It’s the kind of thing a man sees,” he said helplessly.

She studied him, then said, "I can't believe that. I think you just don't want me to look nice. You want me to keep wearing childish clothes. But I'm not a child, and I don't want to look like one anymore." She looked hurt and defiant.

"No, that's not it," he groaned, wiping the sweat off his lip. "It's—I don't want other men looking at you."

"You don't trust me," she said coolly.

"No! It's the jealousy again," he said miserably. "I'm trying to protect you in the wrong way again."

"Oh, Efran." She came over, reaching up to lace her arms around his neck. "I want to look nice *for you*. I don't care what anyone else thinks; I want you to not be ashamed of me."

He closed his eyes to take her up. "Never. It is very pretty on you," he choked out.

She added, "I promise I won't wear makeup or style my hair to make me look like those women who cheat on their husbands." He half-laughed, half-whined, and she turned back to the mirror in scrutiny. "The bodice really does need a little something more, though."

Efran blinked, then went back to the bedroom. Shortly, he came out again with the beaded collar. Staring at it, she gasped, "Where did you get that?"

"Dallarosa makes them," he said.

"Enon's mother?" she asked, and he nodded. She turned her back to him, lifting her hair. "Put it on me." So he draped it around her neck to tie the ends in back, then stepped away to watch as she looked in the mirror. "That's perfect!" she cried.

He smiled. "You are beautiful. I will beat anyone who looks at you."

"Efran!" she laughed. "Is it time to go in for dinner? Let me fix my hair." At his look of dismay, she assured him, "Just water."

He watched mistrustfully while she smoothed her hair with a little water from the washbasin, then found a silver clip to hold it back. "How's that?" she asked.

He nodded, adding anxiously, "Don't do anything else."

She leaned on him, laughing. "Thank you for the beautiful necklace. I promise I won't dress up every night, but tonight is special."

"Why?" he asked, comforted.

"Adele isn't scamming. She did a good job," Minka said. He reluctantly acknowledged that.

Before going in to dinner, Minka gave Ellor a small pouch of eight royals and requested, "Please take that down to Elvey's; tell her I love Livy's new dress."

"Right away, Minka," the fatherly Ellor said, and turned to whistle to one of the Polonti boys.

When Minka walked into the dining hall with a certain air of triumph, Ella and Quennel both looked back at her. Gasping, Ella got up from the bench to take her hands and look closely at her dress. “Minka, that’s adorable! Who did that?” Heads turned toward the back of the hall.

“Livy at Elvey’s,” Minka said casually. “She did it very quickly, too, in just three days.”

“Oh, I can’t stand it. Will you be angry if I ask her to make one like it for me?” Ella asked, turning her around.

“Not at all! But you’ll want something in rose, or even peach,” Minka said.

“Did she do the necklace, too?” Ella asked, fingering the tatting.

“No, that was Enon’s mother—the boy who won the Meritorious Cross for the snobbles. What’s her name again?” Minka asked Efran, who had sat to receive his plate.

“Dallarosa. She’s at forty-three in the western section, near Flodie’s,” Efran said.

“That’s right,” Minka said smugly.

A young Polonti stopped beside her with a bow. “Lady Minka, Lady Kelsey requests you come up to her table.”

“Oh. Of course,” Minka said lightly. Efran glanced up at her, but with great self-discipline did not watch her skip happily to the front of the hall so that everyone, women and men, could admire her new dress with the points. That was the point of Kelsey asking her up, of course: to allow her to be seen by everyone.

And everyone saw her, though Trina and Challinor, in their vivid ensembles with the high standing collars, disdained to look.

When Minka reached the head tables, Kelsey demanded to know the maker of the dress and the necklace, so Minka had the opportunity to promote both “Livy” and Dallarosa again, which she enjoyed. Then Tera came over from her chair beside DeWitt, desiring to know the same thing. Minka talked happily for only a few minutes, then walked sedately back to her seat beside Efran, looking at no one but him on the way. So he was satisfied, and she was deeply content.

The next day, Elvey was inundated with demands for dresses from Livy similar to the one that Lady Minka had modeled the previous evening. So Elvey had to send out messengers to find the new designer and put her back to work. Adele brought with her the bolts of fabrics from Venegas—but forgot where she had put Minka’s and Ella’s measurements.

Meanwhile, Soames delivered the new, corrected copy of Ryal’s book on Barthelemon to the fortress library and sat to wait for his students in Law class. Unfortunately, both Minka and Ella forgot, given Ella’s desire to beat the rush to Elvey’s. They did arrive later, however, to find Soames and the Librarian deep in discussion of the day’s topic.

And a line formed at Dallarosa’s front door. She sold out of her stock of finished tatting jewelry, then took orders from eight more women. She also made arrangements to teach three others who wanted to learn the art.

That morning, Serrano was making his rounds along the easement when he spotted a stray dog digging and

chewing at something in the ground at the wall. Serrano chased him away, then removed the torn fabric that had been wrapped around a pouch. This he opened, and when he saw what was inside, he carried it directly to Captain Barr.

Barr looked at the gold in the pouch, listening to the man's account of where he had found it. Then he observed, "There's a thief on the Lands. Well. I'll keep it here until someone comes looking for it. Good work, Serrano."

"Thank you, sir." Serrano saluted and went out to continue his rounds.

That afternoon, when the children had finished their lessons and were escorted down to the hut, some played in their play area, some worked in their garden, and some debated adding another room to the hut. "How do we do that, when we've already got the shed?" Beischel asked. He, Chorro, and Alcmund were standing outside the hut while Toby went around the curved side with a measuring string from the front door to the back (the lean-to shed being on the other side of the back door).

Straightening, Toby said, "Thirty-five feet. We'll get one of Gerard's assistants to help us. We have to draw out plans."

"Do you suppose there are any other deer in the woods here?" Chorro asked.

"We should look," Beischel said.

"You have to get one of the guards to go with you," Toby told them.

Chorro and Beischel ran to make that request of Caswall, who was standing at the gate of the fence. He agreed, and as they set out, Alcmund watched. Then he told Toby, "I'll be right back." Toby nodded, and Alcmund ran off to join the deer hunters.

Toby continued to study the problematic curved wall of the hut. As he walked along it, his foot sank six inches, and he looked down at a newly dug hole. It took no effort at all to dig out the loose dirt, then he pulled a heavy burlap bag out. Opening it, he saw many shiny gold coins.

Toby considered this for a long while, wondering if there could be leprechauns in these woods. In case there were, he took the bag inside the hut and hid it in a large pot under the table.

After hours of play, the children were brought back to Main to head toward the switchback and home. They passed Plunkett, who was finishing his rounds for the day. Watching the children pass, he saw Hassie excitedly talking to Toby, which gladdened her father. When they were out of sight, he stopped by Croft's to pick up a very nice dinner of rabbit pie and ale, then let himself into his own quiet house.

He reheated his dinner over a low-burning peat fire, then sat comfortably in front of the fire to ruminate on the advice which that nice fellow Knapp had given him about starting his own crayfish/rice farm. Oh, no, Knapp said, he wouldn't mind the competition at all; in fact, it would help him as he couldn't meet the demand from the fortress, Croft's, Firmin's, and families on the plots. He was anxious to have help in the trade!

Settling back in his nicely cushioned chair, Plunkett sighed in contentment. My, how peaceful and comfortable it was here on the Lands. And if he was alert, he even got a glimpse of Hassie now and then.

Koschat passed Plunkett's house on his way to the new home he shared with his new wife, Felice. He was bringing dinner from Firmin's, as he'd gotten to Croft's too late to beat the dinner rush. But he noted that the

fishmonger Shurtleff was about to open his own dining area, which was certain to be crowded from day one. Shurtleff himself was a curmudgeon, but his fish were fresh and he knew how to cook them.

When Koschat arrived at his door, Felice met him in a new dress which he liked very much, so their dinner cooled while he expressed his admiration for her taste. As they reheated their dinner over the fire, he listened patiently to her grouse about the silly cleaning girls she supervised, especially Jaylen, who wanted Liza's little bottle back for whenever Jaylen's appearance started reverting back to her own.

Across in the western section, Geneve and Melchior were just returning early from the fortress dining hall, electing to bring dinner home rather than eat there. "I couldn't abide looking at those garish dresses another minute," Geneve vented. "What does Stites think about Challinor dressing like that?"

"He doesn't care. It's her own money," he said placidly.

"Well, the fashion wars are about to kill me," she uttered as Melchior placed their pots of stew and bottles of ale on the table.

"Minka looked nice last night. I didn't see her tonight," Melchior offered. Geneve looked at him darkly, so he turned his brilliant Efranesque smile upon her. She collapsed in laughter, and they settled down to eat amiably.

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Chapter 24

Up on the hilltop, Cyneheard was completing a tour of the grounds, the armory and the barracks for an awed Henris, as the former university man was being constantly congratulated on his prowess with the javelin. "I'm going to work on the sling, next," Cyneheard said, squinting in determination.

"The sling," Henris repeated. "What's that?"

"Oh, we'll get Conte to show you tomorrow. He could put a hole in your head with it from forty feet away," Cyneheard observed.

"Wow," Henris breathed. "Are all Polonti killers?"

"Yes," Cyneheard said. "We are. They adopted me. And if you're eager to learn, they'll adopt you, too. What color are your eyes? Blue? No problem; just squint. Let's get in to dinner now."

"Yes, sir," Henris said.

At that time, Quennel and Ella were slowly making their way to the dining hall. "Are you ever going to give me an answer? Or just keep me hanging?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, of course I'll marry you," she said. "It's just—I'm having so much fun, I don't want to mess anything up."

"Nothing will change, except that I'll be beside you at night. You can keep Sudie and everything. Just let me be

with you,” he breathed in her ear.

“All right. I think Minka wants a real wedding in the chapel when it’s finished,” she said.

“Minka’s not the one getting married, and we have a chapel here in the fortress,” he grumbled. “Besides, Efran’s on my side; he wants us married.”

“Yes,” she agreed, and he kissed her in relief.

Across the grounds, in the stablehands’ quarters, Tess and Loriot were just now rising from bed to get ready for dinner. “We’ll go back to eating at Croft’s whenever you like, but, it’s so convenient to eat in the fortress,” she chatted. “And it doesn’t cost anything. As it is, I’m spending most of my pay at Croft’s.”

Pulling on his shirt, he glanced over at her. “You just want to display your trophy kill.”

“How awful you are!” she laughed, throwing her arms around his neck high above her. “Yes. But I promise I’ll be discreet. I won’t make you hold my hand or order you around or anything.”

He eyed her ruefully. “You can’t be discreet. It’s just not in you.”

“Not when I’m this happy,” she said. He did smile then, and bent to kiss her.

Below in a house on the Lands, Folliott was snoring on the first comfortable bed he’d slept on in weeks. Adele, beside him, was lying on her back, wide-eyed in the darkness. She was replaying over and over Elvey’s telling her what Minka had paid for the dress, and how adorable she looked in it, and how she told everyone that “Livvy at Elvey’s” made it, and that Ella was coming in to make fabric selections for a similar dress soon, probably tomorrow.

Is it possible? Adele thought. *Can I possibly make this work?* Yes, as long as she had Minka’s support, no one would touch her when the potion wore off, not even Efran. How strangely ironic that her little sister would come in to such power—and be willing to use it on her behalf. *I will do this. I’m tired of wandering, of scraping by. I will make it work.* But how?

As she lay there thinking, a lightning bolt of inspiration struck her. “Those two fabulous beaded gowns that Elvey’s had made for the EurAsian ladies who never picked them up—all I have to do is cut them down to fit Minka and Ella. . . . But we’ll need a special occasion to show them off. . . . Yessss.” And she forgot all about the royals she had buried around the Lands.

Reinagle, for his part, sat in his dark house by himself, thinking, *I will get the money back. I will get it all back. And they’ll be sorry; yes, they will.*

In the fortress library, the Librarian had a job on his hands, for the books were rowdy tonight. Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* were battling so badly that even St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* could not calm them down. It took the Librarian’s reading *Nursery Rhymes for Children* to restore peace.

When calm finally prevailed, the Librarian sighed, “If the people knew what wealth was here, they would never lust after gold again. But Lord Efran is aware, so there is hope.”

In Pia’s woods on the hilltop, the faeries were celebrating the arrival of the white doe and her fawns, for white

deer are harbingers of blessing. So Queene Kele led the celebration of singing, dancing, and playing on minute instruments around the bed of the sleepy fawns and their mother while rooftop bells rang “Midwinter March.”

The faeries themselves were dressed in their finest, although everyone agreed that Sir Ditson’s winter ensemble of white suit, white top hat, deep green waistcoat, and ash walking stick with a silver knob was the grandest. Sir Nutbin, however, surprised everyone by trading out his usual plaid vest for one of red sequins, with a red monocle to match.

Many acorn cupfuls of elderberry wine were drunk, as apricots and dewberries, with purple grapes, green figs, mulberries, and toasted oat wafers drowned in honey, all without number, were consumed. Optat even earned Nutbin’s forgiveness by showing up laden with great bags of walnuts.

The celebration gave rise to so many dancing lights so late into the night that Pia’s Polonti finally came around to respectfully ask that they wind up their celebration, for it was confusing the owls in their hunting. The faeries acquiesced, agreeing to reconvene the next day.

Walking the fortress grounds, Nakham looked up at Ino, disguised as drifting feathery clouds tonight. “Good work, all in all, don’t you think, Ino?” he asked. She replied with a light breeze of affirmation. Looking out to the broad, calm Sea, he said, “Yes, all is well and all shall be well, and all will see His glory.”

Minka lay quietly in Efran’s arms, almost asleep. He kissed her head, murmuring, “Everyone at dinner was disappointed that you weren’t wearing another new dress tonight.”

“But you were relieved,” she said sleepily.

“No,” he said, “I’m glad you got it, and wore it. You earned it.”

She raised her eyes to him. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes,” he said, turning his head to look down at her.

She lifted up to look at his cushy lips. “Good, because I’m going back to Elvey’s tomorrow with Ella.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on February 15th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

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By the way, the Shroud of Turin is not a fake. See [here](#) and [here](#).

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Water Giant*
(Book 16)

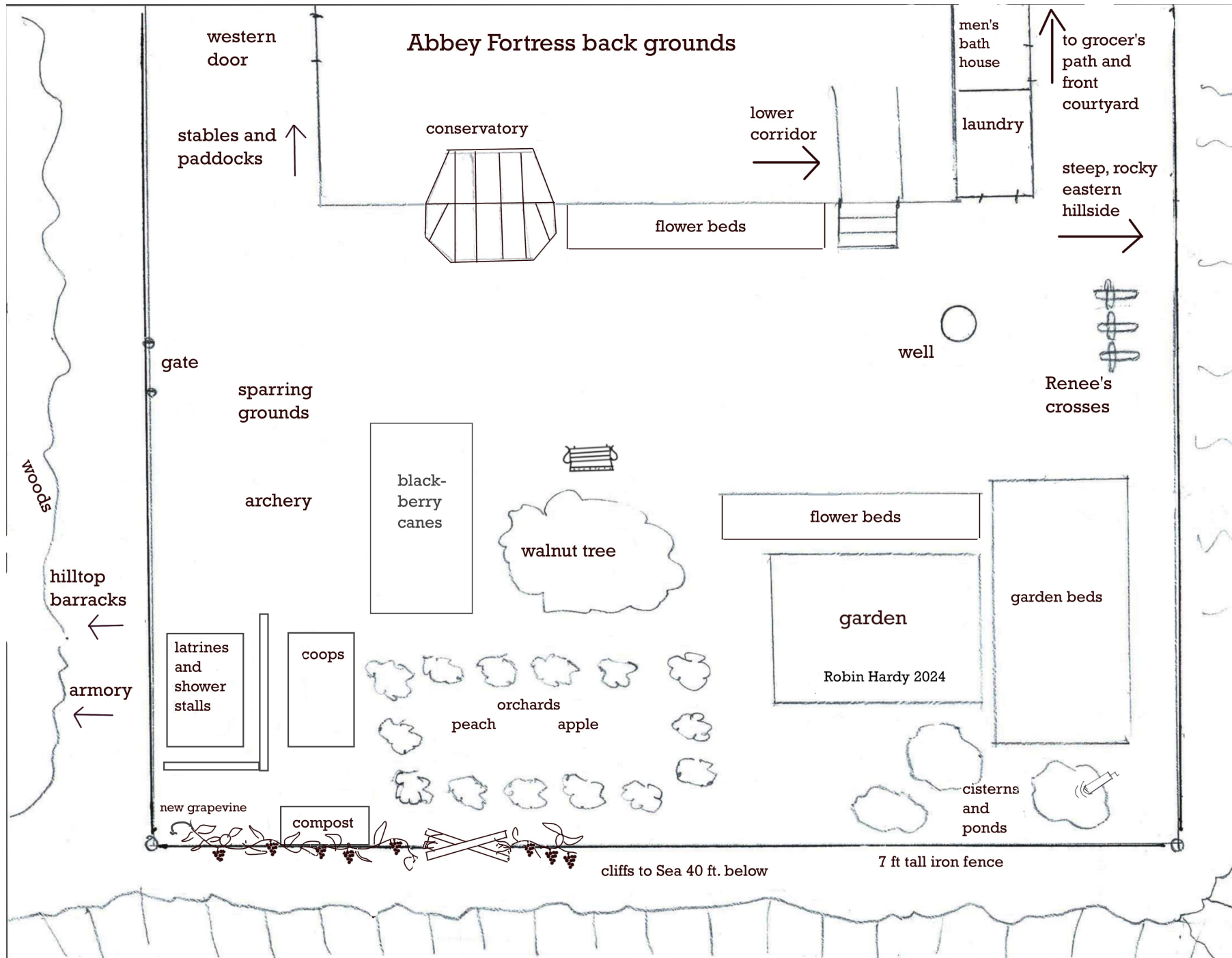
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Adele—ah DELL	Justinian--jus TIN ee un
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	Kele—kay lay
Alberon—AL ber on	Kelsey—KELL see
Allyr—AL er	Ketuvim—KEH tu vem
Aquinas—uh KWY nuhs	Koschat—KOS chat
Ares—AIR eez	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Arne--arn	leprosarium—lep roh SAIR ee uhm
Assisi—ah SEE see	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
Awfyn—AWE fin	Lida—LIE duh
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon	Livy—LI vee (<i>i</i> as in <i>lift</i>)
Beischel—BESH ull	Loizeaux--lwah ZOH
Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree	Lowry—LAHW ree
Bowrie—rhymes with <i>dowry</i>	Lystra—LIS tra
Bowring—BOWE ring	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Melchior—MEL key or
Challinor—CHAL en or	meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
Cholmondeley—chall MON deh lay	Milo—ME low
Clonmel—KLON mell	Minka—MINK ah
Conte--cahnt	<i>moekolohe</i> —moh ee koh LO ee
Cordelia—cor DEEL yah	<i>moiwahine</i> —mo wa HEE nee (queen)
coup—koo	Nevi'im—nev EEM
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Nicarber—neh CAR bur
Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa	Onfroi—ON froy
Dierksheide—DEARK shide (long <i>i</i>)	Peloponnesian—pell uh puh NEE zhuhn
Doane—rhymes with <i>loan</i>	Pentateuch—PEN tah tuck
Dobell—DOH bull	Pia—PEE ah
Duckstein—DUK stine	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Efran—EFF run	Pindar—PIN dhur
Elvey—ELL vee	Pleyel—PLAY el
Ennemonde—EN eh mund	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Enon—EE nun	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Estes—ESS tis	Portia—POOR sha
Eurus--YOUR us	Prie Mer—pre MARE
Eurusian--your uh SEE un	Ptahhotep—TAH ho tep
Eymor—EE more	Qarqar—KAR kar; Qarqarian—kar KAR ee an
Felice—feh LEESE	Quilicus—QUIL eh cus
Flodie—FLOW dee	Regie—REH jee
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Reinagle—REN ah gull
garderobe—GAR de robe	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Geibel—GUY bull	Scylla—SILL ah
Ghislain—gis LANE (hard <i>g</i>)	Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard <i>g</i>)	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard <i>g</i>)	Stites--stights
Goss--gahs	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Goulven—GOHL vin (hard <i>g</i>)	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Greves--greevs	Sybil—SEH bull
Guillalme—gill ALM	Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Ianna—ee AN ah	Telo—TEE low
Javier—JAY vee er	Tera—TEE rah

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Water Giant*
(Book 16)

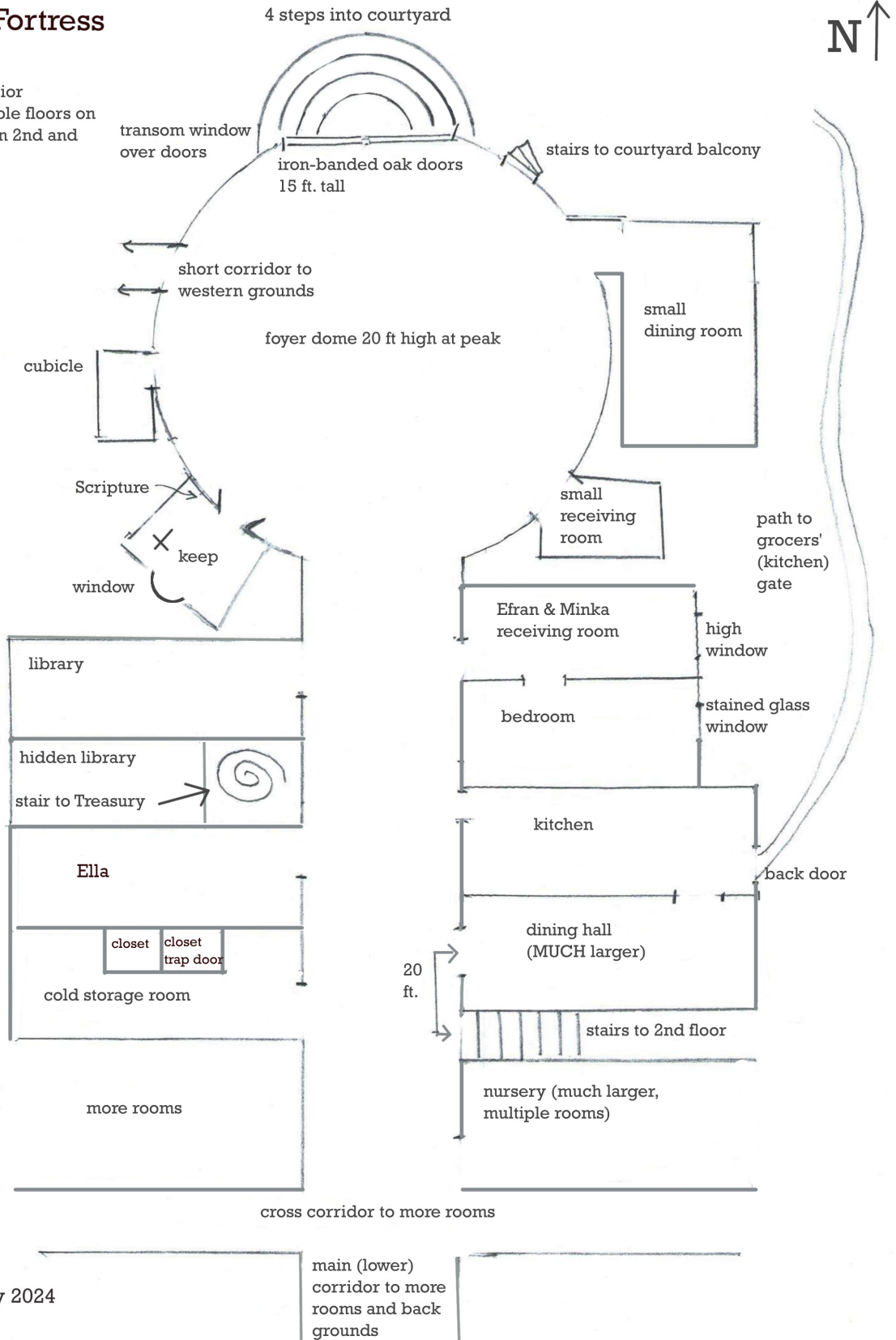
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Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tiras—TEER us
Tomer—TOH mur
Trina—TREE nah
tsunami—soo NAH me
Vanidestine—van eh DES teen
Venegas--VEN eh gus
Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
Verrin—VAIR en
Villalobos—VILL eh low bos
Viotto—vee OH toh
Webbe—web
Whately—WOT lee



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



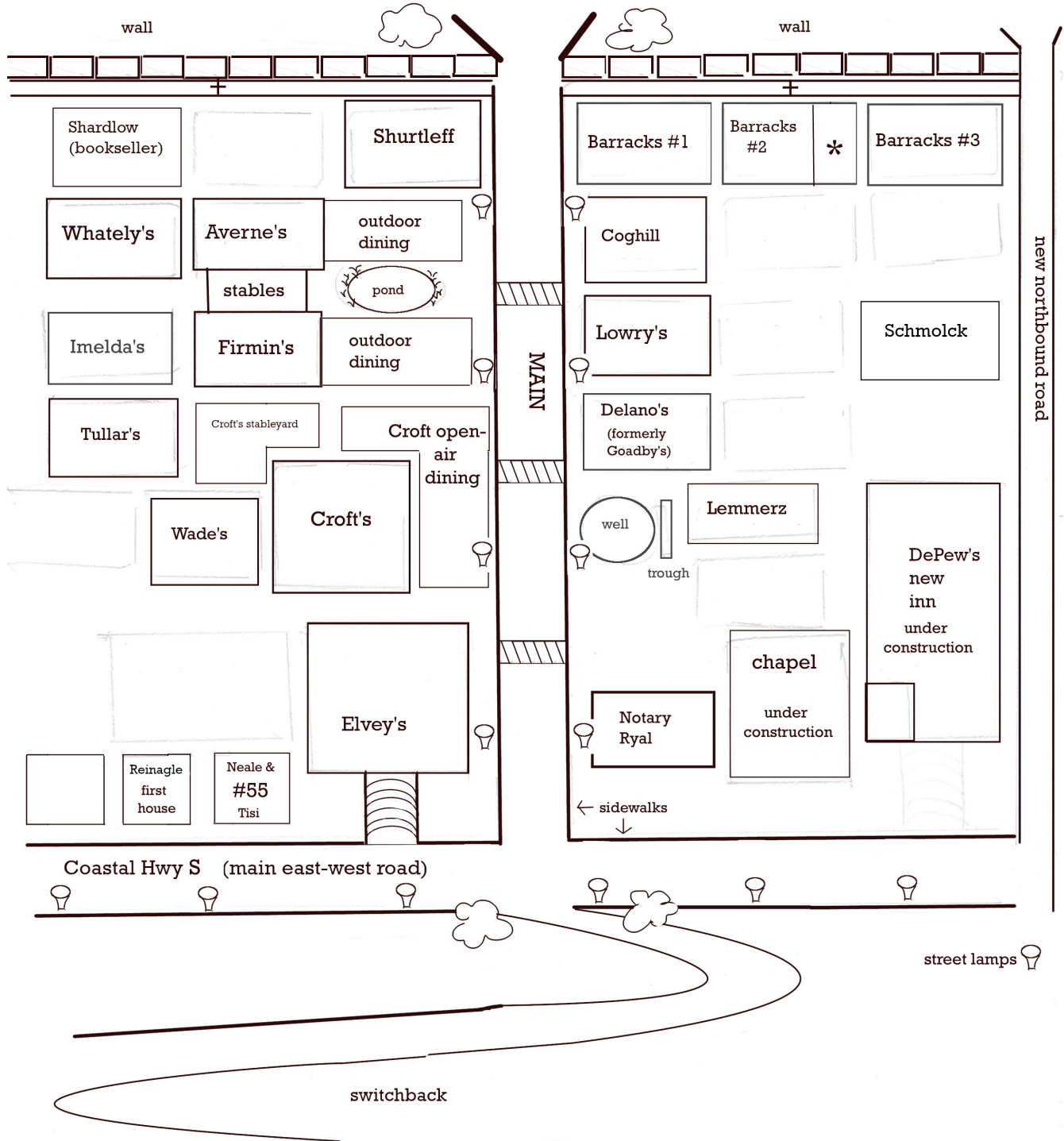
NOT TO SCALE

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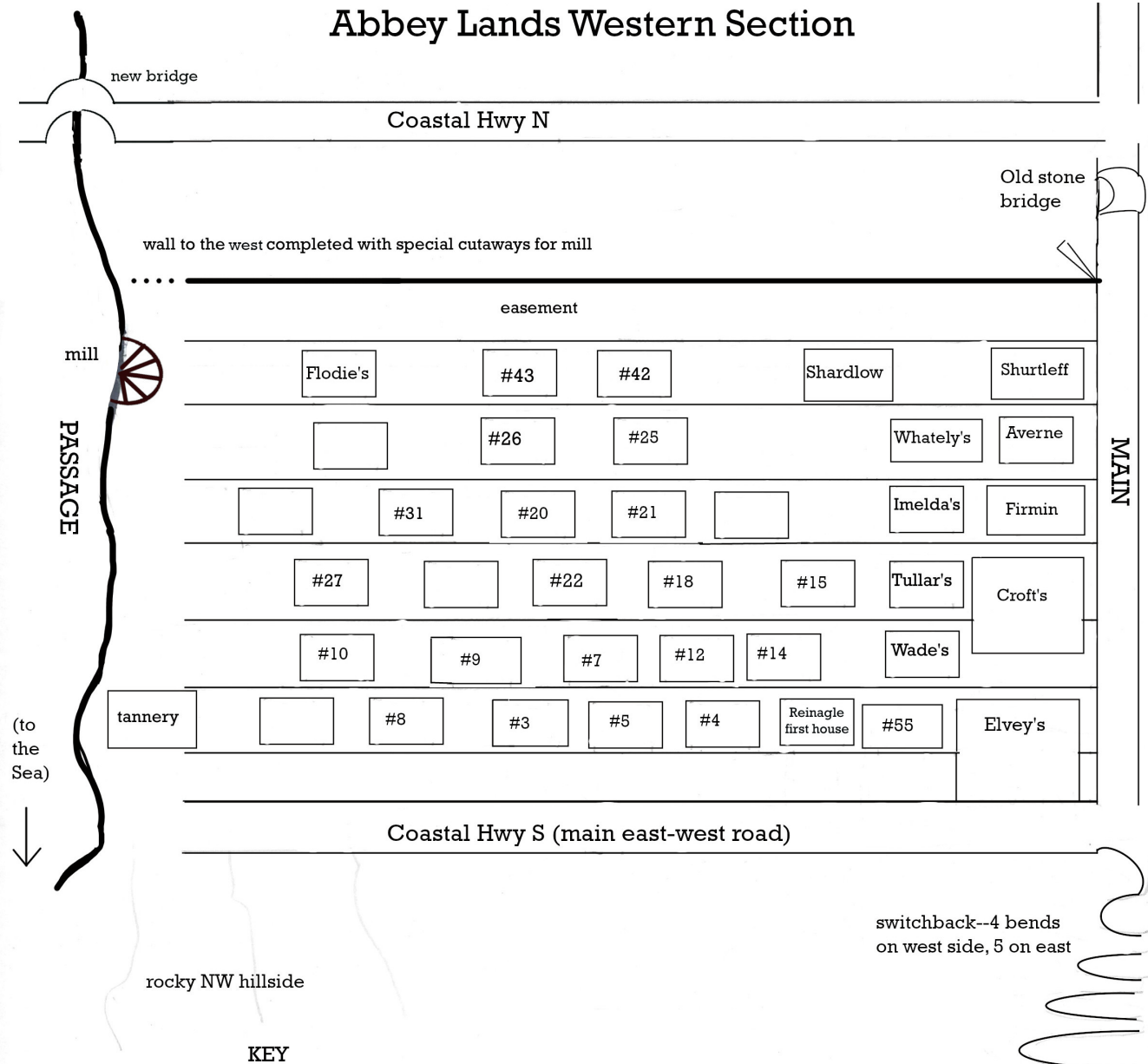
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements

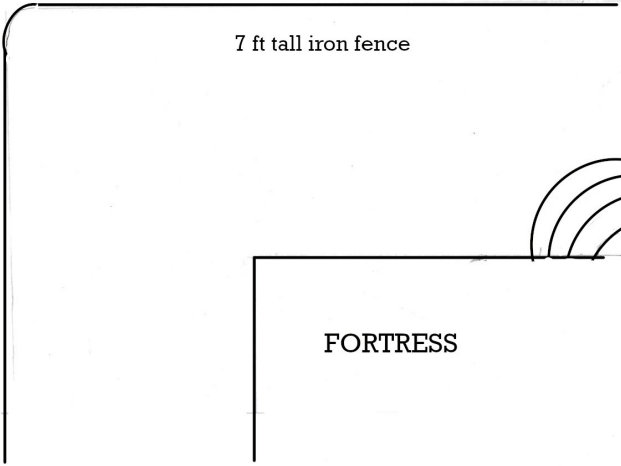


Abbey Lands Western Section



KEY

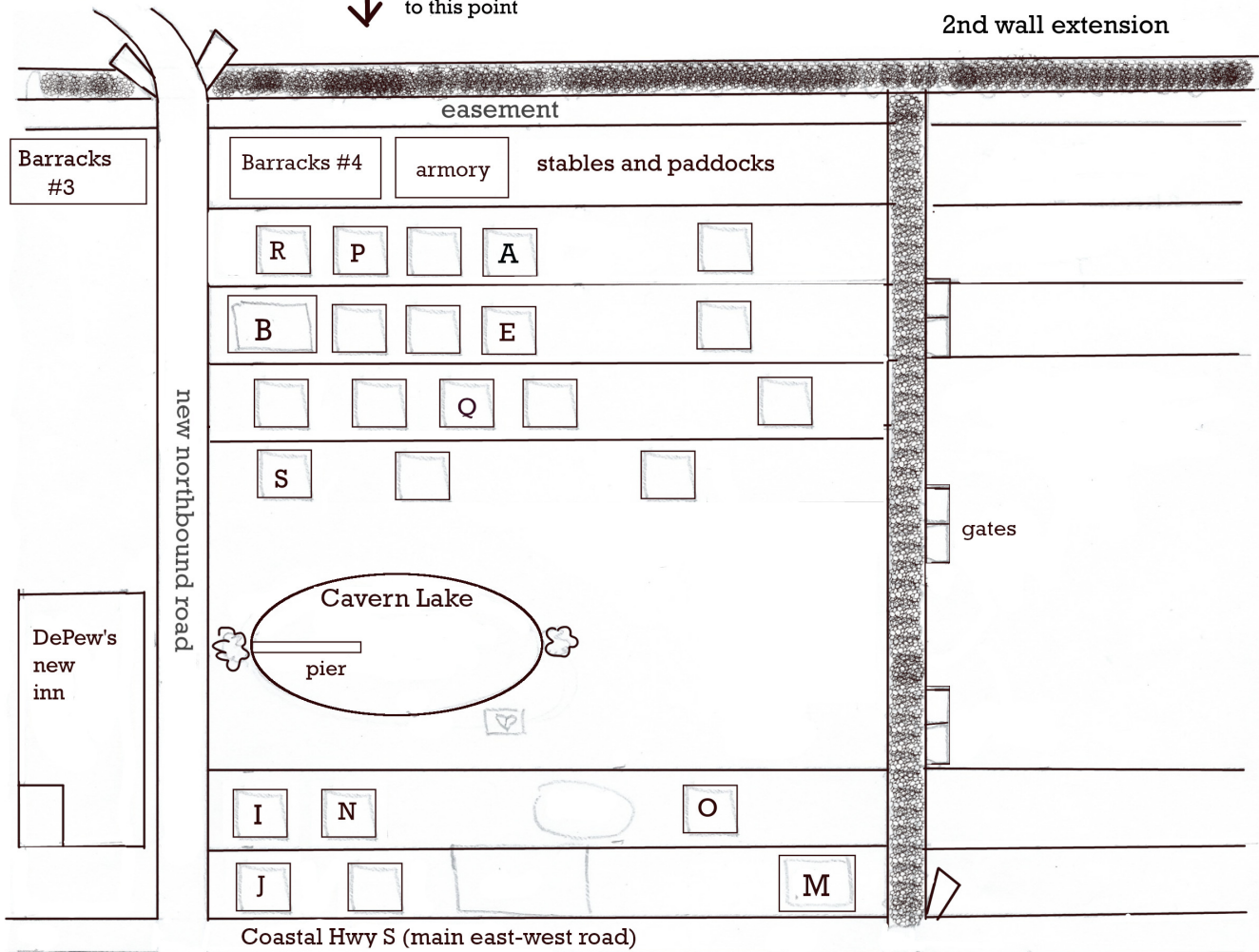
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Challinor & Stites
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

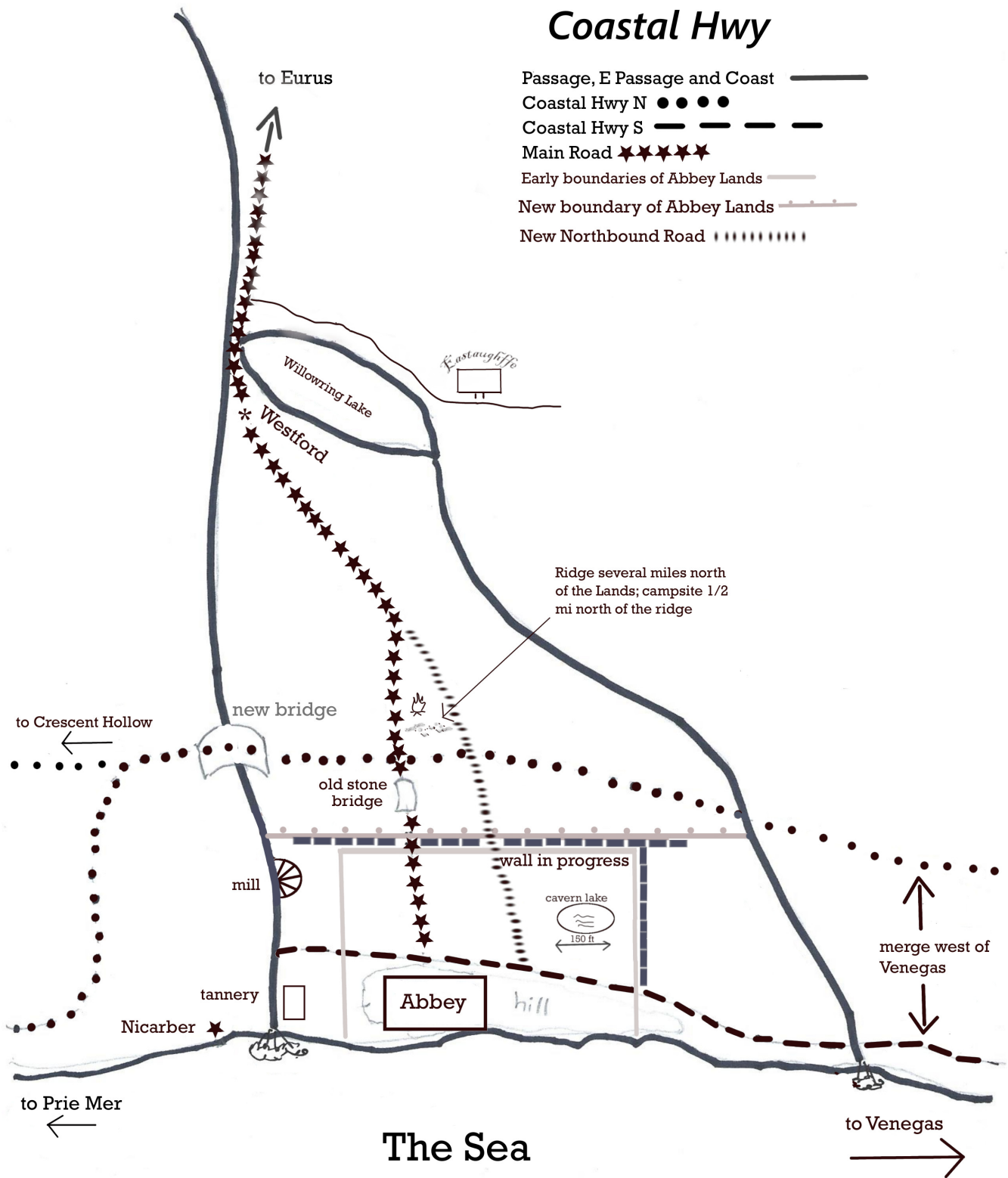


- A - Reinagle's house
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D
- E - Foliott's house
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's house
- R - Delano's office
- S - DePew's housing office

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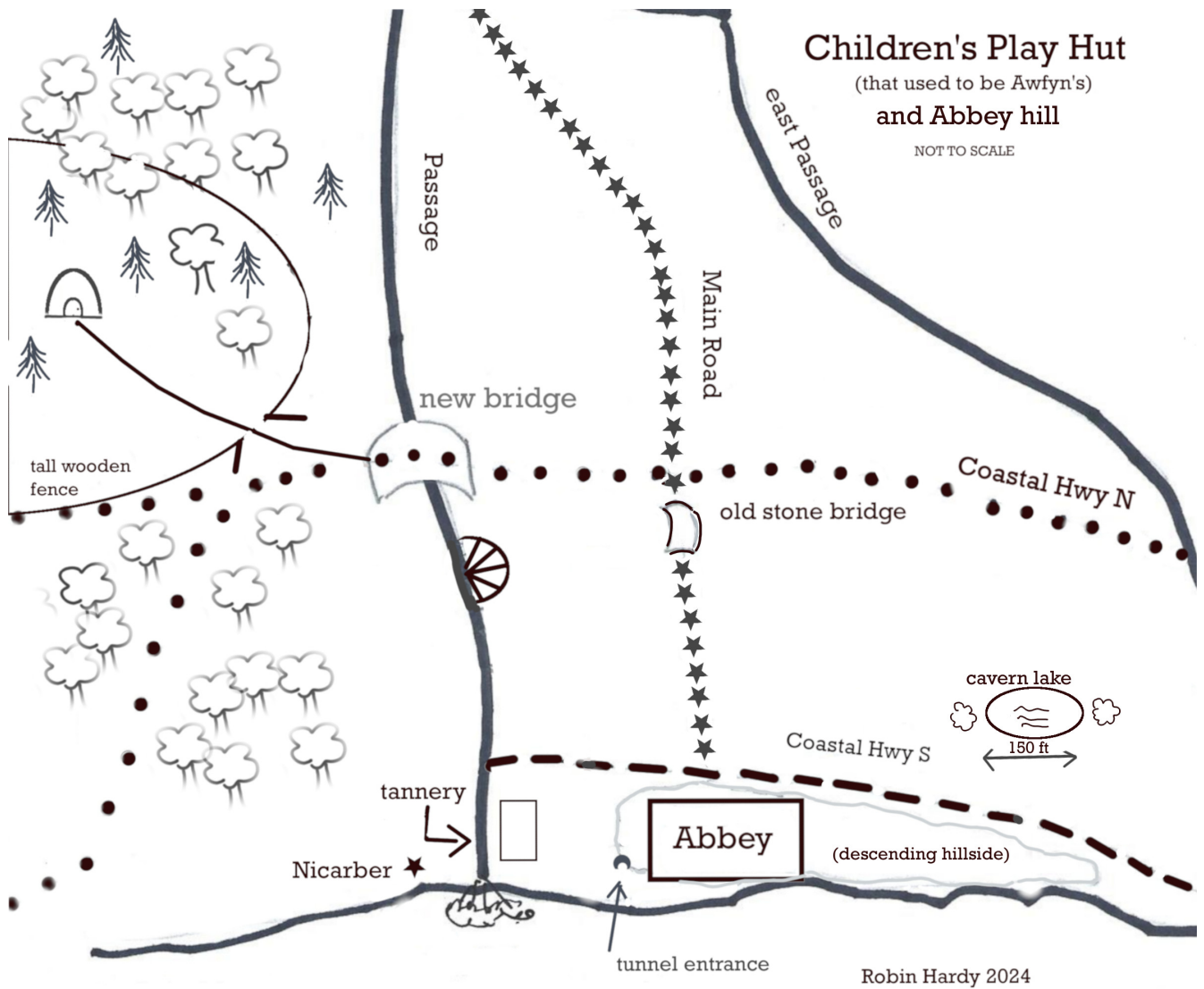
Coastal Hwy

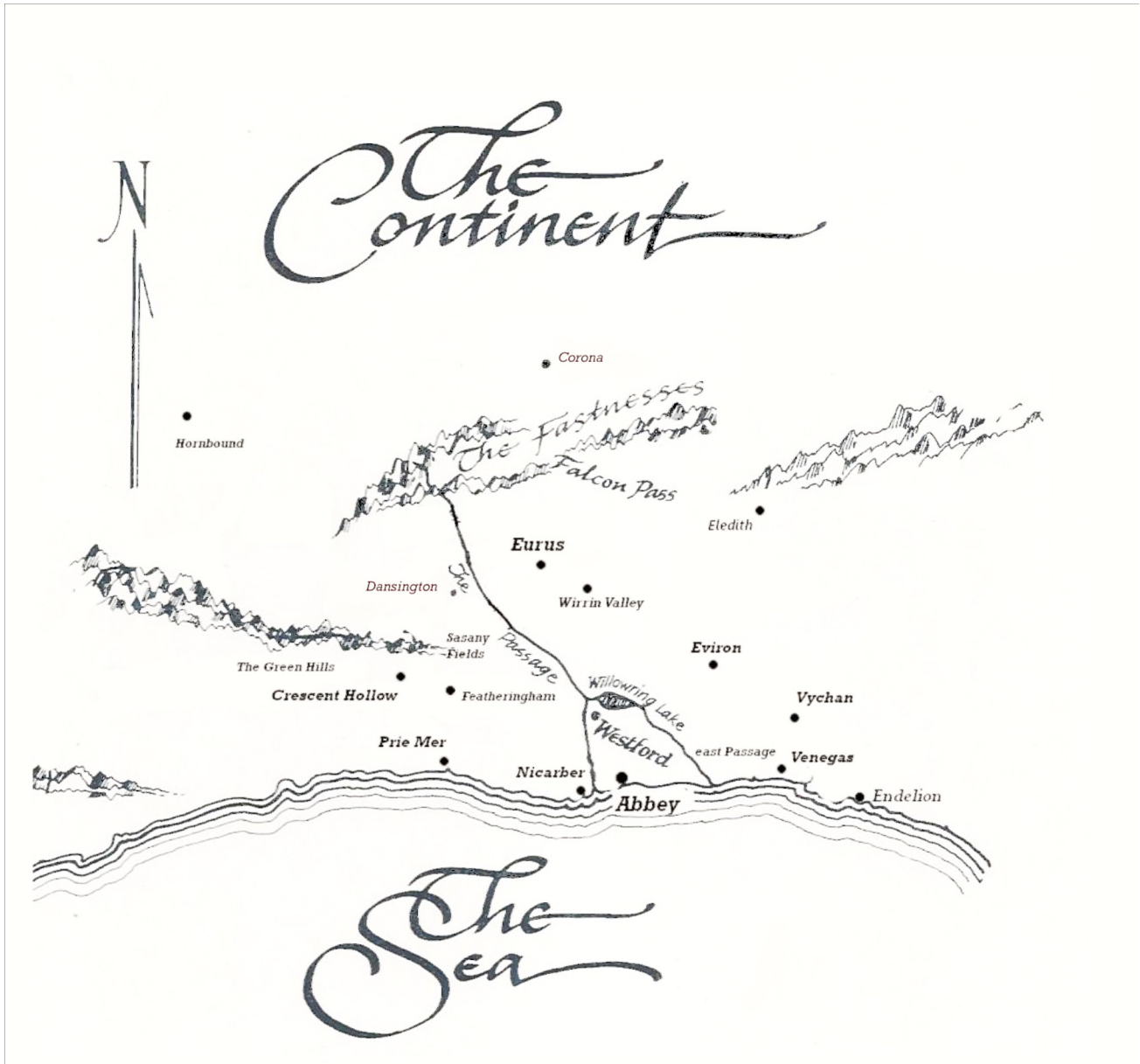
- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |



NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024







The Water Giant (Book 16:
Lord Efran and the Water Giant)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

I knew I needed to show you the Water Giant, but couldn't imagine how to pull it together until I saw [this](#) amazing photo—and there it is.¹ I didn't do anything to it except darken his left eye a little and decorate his beard with [skeletons](#).² Don't overlook the one standing on the giant's right arm to talk to Efran. I'm pretty sure that's Pindar.

But the crowning touch is the gorgeous photo of the cliffs of [Moher Liscannor Ireland](#).³ So I threw in a few [trees](#)⁴ and a fence and called it a day. What more do you need?



Robin Hardy
May 11, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. On Pixabay, but no photographer credited
2. From rawpixel. That they're isolated on a transparent background makes them very easy to use.
3. Photographed by [Giuseppe Milo](#) on Wikimedia Commons. This is the second time I've used a photograph of those cliffs (by a different photographer). The first time was for *Efran Meets Leviathan* (Book 11).
4. Isolated tree silhouettes, also on rawpixel