



The Stories of

The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea

Book 33

Lord Efran
in Two Parts:
A Tale and a Promise

Robin Hardy

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The paintings were so [controversial](#) that Klimt returned his advance and reclaimed them by force.

I see Librizzi in this painting.

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Part the First: A Tale Told by an Idiot

Chapter 1

Arms flailing, Efran shouted, “Where are you?”

Minka came out of the bedroom to see him glaring at the wall of the receiving room. “Efran?”

“Hello. I’m looking for our—whatever,” he said distractedly, turning back to the wall. “It’s been a month! Today is—what is today?” he broke off to ask her.

“April thirteenth,” she said cautiously. “You’re looking for our . . . ?”

“The gray hair and the spectacles,” he said.

Turning her eyes to the wall, she saw the dim outline of a page taking shape. “There she is.”

“It’s a woman?” he asked quickly, peering. “I can’t see much. How can you tell?”

“The dangly earrings,” she said thoughtfully.

“Oh. I thought those were just—ears,” he said. They both watched as a dim hand came up to cover the face, possibly in amusement. Minka opened her mouth but Efran went on, “Who are you?” There was a brief shake of the gray head—they could not perceive her as she could them. “Are you a recording angel?” he asked. There was a firmer shake of the gray head.

“Well then, are you making up what happens to us?” he demanded. A pair of hands went up in denial.

“Efran, what is wrong with you?” Minka asked.

“Oh, the Picti,” he groaned. “We’ve been doing everything we can to give them the equipment they need and show them how to clean up the rubble to make Nicarber livable, but they’re just—wild. I guess because they’ve been chained up all their lives to do nothing but fight in exhibitions, they don’t know how to build and they don’t want to learn.”

“Are they going hungry?” she asked.

“No, they seem to be fishing and foraging just fine. And they did clear away space to make a shelter of sorts for their trumpets and weapons. But they just—crawl under the wreckage when it rains, and, haven’t a clue how to wear clothes,” he said, vexed.

Then he glanced back to the wall, where the dim outline of a page, the glasses and the gray hair remained. He slowly smiled. “Have you seen me naked?”

Minka stared at him in horror and the page view promptly vanished. “Efran?” she whispered.

“Just checking,” he shrugged. “If it’s a woman, I bet she has.” Minka was sagging in exasperation when he said,

“All right, come up with me to the workroom; see if you can give us any ideas what to do with our Picti.”

“If you behave,” she murmured darkly as they went down the corridor.

“Oh, don’t worry. Estes has seen me naked, and he’s not impressed. I don’t know about DeWitt,” he thought out loud. Minka was beginning to sway when he grabbed her around the waist. “But you have seen me naked and you are impressed,” he added.

“Stop talking about being naked!” she demanded. The women’s matron Gayla, eyes slightly widened, came off the stairs to pass them. With a choked cry, Minka hid on his chest. “You’re embarrassing me,” she grumbled.

“I’m sorry. I’m through talking about being naked,” he said as Routh saluted quickly in the corridor while he passed, head down. Fortunately, Minka was halfway up the stairs and didn’t see.

When Efran arrived in the workroom behind her, they paused as two large women turned toward them. The faerie tree in the center of the table had skinned up considerably in respect. DeWitt said, “Here they are. Captain Efran and Lady Minka, meet Mura and her sister Pewsey of Craghead. They heard about our Picti in Nicarber, and believe they’re related, so that they may be able to get them started working. We’ll pay them a small stipend and see that they get whatever equipment they need, also have someone out to check on them daily.”

It was easy to see a similarity between the Picti and the women, who were tall, broad and fair, with round faces and dark blonde hair. “Oh, that’s excellent,” Efran said. “Yes, however you can help would be wonderful. We want to see them self-sufficient, and they do have a few young children among them that I want to keep an eye on. How many Picti do we have out there now?”

Estes replied, “Overall, more than a hundred. I don’t know how many children, as they tend to hide when our men come calling. A number of them have settled in the woods north of them, as well.”

“I suppose that’s fine, as long as they don’t start ambushing anyone out there,” Efran grunted.

One of the women—Mura?—said, “Do not be concerned, Lord Efran, we shall instruct them.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you,” Efran said.

An hour later, Efran and Minka were among those watching from the courtyard while the two women with an escort of four soldiers and a large wagonload of supplies rumbled up Main and over the old stone bridge to take on the Picti. “God speed, ladies,” Efran muttered. “I was expecting to see oysters and sea bass from Nicarber on our tables by now.”

“So that’s why you wanted to clean up Nicarber,” Minka noted.

He looked confused. “Didn’t I make that clear from the beginning?”

“Yes. I was probably just thinking of shops,” she said.

“Probably,” he agreed dryly. She grinned, patting her flat cap, and he glanced in approval at her curls.

Because the children should be coming out of their morning classes shortly, Minka and Efran went around back to greet them. But the first child they saw was Noah, sitting sullenly on a bench under the walnut tree. Mohr was standing beside the bench.

With a nod at Mohr's salute, Efran approached, questioning, "Noah? What are you doing here?" He had been apprenticed to Wade's Carriages for Hire weeks ago, which profession he had chosen. Minka sat down beside him.

Noah grumbled, "I thought I was supposed to learn to drive a carriage, which would be grand. But all I was doing was mucking stables and grooming horses."

Efran was shaking his head. "Whatever you choose, you have to show that you can do the grunt work first. You've got to pick something else now. If you don't know, we'll set you up in another job. We've got a lot to choose from on the Lands."

Lips flattened, Noah looked aside dully for a little while, then slowly straightened. "I want to be one of those acrobats that performed at the Faire. Yeah, that's what I want to do."

For a moment, Efran just looked at him, then Mohr leaned over to whisper in the Captain's ear. Efran turned, interested. "He is? Yes, go bring him up, please."

"Yes, Captain." Mohr took off at a trot.

Efran turned back to his adopted son. "Mohr just told me that one of those acrobats, Beeby, is here on the Lands. So we're going to bring him up to tell you all about it."

Noah looked at him in wonder. "You'll really let me do it?" Minka worked hard to keep her brows at an indifferent level.

"Maybe," Efran shrugged. "Let's hear what he has to say."

"Yes!" Noah exulted.

About this time, the children emerged from the back door for play time after morning class. Seeing Noah with Efran, most of the boys ran over to talk to him. As they would be apprenticed out when they turned 12, they all wanted to hear everything about it.

Or, most all wanted to hear. Unseen, Isreal paused at the rear of the group while Noah began to tell them about his terrible experience with Wade's. Not entirely understanding, and not really interested, Isreal went over to the archery line to pick up the bow and arrows left for him in the children's area, where the targets were much closer to the firing line than the men's were.

Looking around, Isreal signaled to the observer, Shane, who whistled for the men to hold fire. Then he ran up to ask Isreal, "What d'you need, Chief?"—the archers' nickname for him, because of his shooting prowess.

"Move it back," Isreal said for the umpteenth time, gesturing at the target.

"Again? All right, then." Checking to see that the archers were aware of him, Shane ran out to move Isreal's target back three feet—the distance prescribed for beginning archers to increase their range. When Shane had safely departed the field, the archers resumed firing.

Isreal lifted his bow and shot, then was chagrined to see that the arrow barely hit the target. In determination, he closed his eyes to immerse himself in the flow before lifting the bow and shooting again. The arrow hit closer to

the center. So Isreal kept shooting until he felt comfortable with the new range.

Lowering his bow, he glanced aside in disappointment that there were no other children shooting with him. After Toby, Hassie and Chorro had fairly mastered *aikē* shooting, they seemed to get bored with it.

When Isreal turned away from the line, he saw Efran standing behind him, watching. “Very good, Isreal,” he said with a slight smile. And the boy thought his heart would burst.

“Captain!” a soldier called. Efran and Isreal looked over to Mohr with a man approaching rapidly, for having to limp on a crooked leg with the help of a crutch. Saluting, Mohr said, “Captain, this is Beeby, the acrobat who’s staying at Laborer’s Hall.”

“How do, Cap’n?” Beeby said cheerfully while Efran tried to hide his dismay. The man was lame, underfed, and poorly dressed.

“Hello, Beeby. Ah, one of the children is interested in becoming an acrobat, and would like to hear about it from you,” Efran said carefully.

“Really? Excellent!” Beeby said. “I wouldn’t’ve traded it for anything.”

“Well, come sit on the bench with Lady Minka and tell us about it,” Efran said, directing him to where Minka sat watching. As Beeby ambled over to take his seat beside her with a cordial nod, Efran whistled lightly.

The children came running, and Efran said, “Noah, this is Beeby, who’s going to tell you all about being an acrobat. All of you just sit down in the grass, there.”

A tad apprehensive, they gathered to sit, though Joshua preferred to nestle with Minka on the bench and Isreal continued to stand beside Efran. Looking around brightly at his attentive audience, Beeby said, “You want to hear about the acrobat’s life? Well, I’ll tell you! There’s nothing grander than making an audience gasp and clap for your leaps, and somersaults, and balancing on another man’s hands high in the air!”

“Why aren’t you doing it now?” Toby asked.

Beeby said, “Oh, at the end of my last performance, my catcher’s hands slipped, and I landed wrong.” He pulled up a sagging, frayed cuff to show his left leg skewed at the knee, so that his lower leg sat crosswise to his thigh. The children gasped, but he waved, “Ah, it’s not bad; I can still get around, though my leaping days are over.”

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Chapter 2

Beeby insisted, “I wouldn’t change my choice for the world—it was the grandest, freest life a boy could have. You’re on the road constantly, going from one entertainment to another, so you get to where you can sleep anywhere and eat anything!” he laughed with gaps in his teeth. “You have your performing clothes, and your regular clothes, and you got to keep both of ’em on you at all times, for the beggars and thieves.

“And, sure, there’s lots of folks who’ll watch you gladly and then turn away without puttin’ so much as a copper

in your hat, but what of it? You're free as a bird, not tied down to any place or any woman who thinks to keep you by 'er side with a warm fire at night and a warm stew in your belly. But the next day you're off again, in the rain and the snow, where the inns won't lodge you and the stables are all full up.

"But that's just to give you the chance to rehearse your great lines. For at the end of a long performance, when your legs won't do no more, you hold your audience with what brings tears to their eyes."

He stood from the bench, leaning on his crutch, and raised one bony arm to the sky. His lined face was transported with ecstasy at the attention of an audience again, and he began:

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

He closed his eyes at imaginary applause while the children watched him in horrified pity.

Efran shifted. "Thank you very much, Beeby. Mohr, take him to the dining hall; get him a bite." He paused to whisper something else in Mohr's ear, which the soldier acknowledged.

As Mohr was leading Beeby toward the back door, Elwell called out, "How old are you?"

Beeby turned. "Thirty-five," he said—only five years older than Efran. Then the worn-out acrobat resumed his wretched walk to his one good meal of the week.

Noah looked around with hollow eyes. "Okay, I'll do something else."

"Good," Efran said. "Decide by tomorrow morning. Steward Estes and Administrator DeWitt have lists of all the businesses on the Lands, and they know many of the owners." Noah nodded despondently.

As Efran lifted Joshua from the bench, Minka stood and whispered, "What did you tell Mohr?"

Efran whispered back, "To have DeWitt put Beeby on the roll for the Widow's Fund"—which was to help anyone in need, not just widows.

"That's good," she murmured, now troubled about all the acrobats they'd had at the Faire about seven months ago.

Late the following morning, April 14th, Noah was on his way to Lemmerz's construction office to help him out while Geneve was tending her baby, almost four months old now. And Rawlins was sitting in the outdoor dining area of Firmin's, sipping a cup of tea and eating the accompanying biscuits in tiny bites, to prolong his legitimate

use of the seat. Lilou ignored him, having learned in the past month that, despite his nice suits, he ordered the cheapest food he could and tipped with silvers and coppers.

For, the fact was, Rawlins had attempted a few neat ploys for making money that he had learned in Crescent Hollow which fell flat here. “And Landers are supposed to be rubes,” he murmured, offended. His disguise was wearing thin, for everyone seemed to know that he had his sandy hair dyed black regularly at Imelda’s. The dye they used held up better than that of the Elegance, but since growing a beard was part of his disguise, his black hair looked strange with his red beard.

So he began having his beard died as well, which was not only messy and inconvenient but expensive, and Bickerstaffe’s royals were melting away like butter. Worse, he saw Crescent Hollow carriages arrive frequently, sometimes to cough up people he knew, who were asking around for “Rawlins.” He was still using the name “Scovil,” which was less useful by the day, for that blasted boy Jian knew him by both names, and shared his knowledge.

And—“These women,” he moaned faintly. He looked to his left toward Averne’s where the lovely hostess (Faciane, whom he did not know) was tutoring another lovely woman (Leila, ditto), evidently a new server, on the finer points of service. Then he looked to his right, where two more lovely women he did not know (Vories and Challinor) were preparing the outdoor dining area at Croft’s for the midday rush. (He was unable to perceive the discord here, as Challinor considered herself a hostess in her new rôle, whereas Vories had been led to believe that she was a relief server.)

While Rawlins was mulling over all this, nibbling his biscuit, Folliott was studying him from across the street. Folliott was the son of Reinagle, the ex-Surchatain of Eurus, and ex-husband of Trina. Actually, both men were ex-husbands of Trina, and all three persons were residents of the Lands now. (Trina lived with her father Bowring, who had a good bit of money that he kept carefully hidden from her.)

Reinagle had once possessed unimaginable wealth, now mostly evaporated, having been divided up between the three of them—his ex-wife, his son, and himself. Although he and Folliott were getting a good return from their investment in Plunkett’s rice/crayfish farm, they needed more money to offset the losses from other investments, such as Bujak’s shifting dice games. (They got raided one night and Bujak disappeared along with several hundred royals.)

Seeing an adventurer nearing the end of his rope, Folliott decided that he might be an asset to them. So he crossed Main (at the crosswalk) to approach the solitary diner, who looked up in alarm. Tipping his hat, Folliott said, “How do you do. I’m Folliott, and I couldn’t help but admire the cut of your suit. Is that from The Lands Clothing Shop?”

“Ah, no. It’s from Crescent Hollow,” Rawlins said. He immediately regretted exposing his point of origin, and glanced anxiously at a passing green carriage.

“Ah, Crescent Hollow. Lovely city. Then you’re used to better fare than this,” Folliott said, glancing at the remains of his biscuits. “Come along with me to Averne’s; we’ll pick up an early midday bite to carry away to my house,” Folliott invited him.

“Here on the Lands?” Rawlins asked, standing hesitantly.

“Yes, of course,” Folliott said, dropping a royal on the table, which earned him instant credibility with his mark. “My father Reinagle and I have found many investment opportunities here. You may recognize the name—he used to be Surchatain of Eurus, and barely escaped with his life.”

“Really?” Rawlins said, all agog.

While Follriott was confirming the truth of this, Lilou went over to pick up the royal, watching them walk away together. She cleaned the table thoughtfully, knowing who both men were.

With two hot baked chicken pies, ales, and cream-filled croissants from Averno’s, the men repaired to Follriott’s house in the center of the Lands (east of New North Road). Rawlins watched Follriott unlock his door and show him into a nicely furnished front room. From there, the host took his guest back to a pleasant breakfast nook with a window looking out to a modestly landscaped (but unfenced) yard.

“Here we are,” Follriott said, placing their food and drink on a cozy little table by the window. Sitting eagerly, Rawlins glanced at an incongruous burn spot in the wooden floor. Follriott asked, “What’s your name, again?”—which Rawlins had not told him yet.

Completely blanking out, Rawlins said, “Bickerstaffe.”

“Bickerstaffe?” Follriott repeated while Rawlins goggled at him. “I know a Lord Bickerstaffe in Crescent Hollow, but he’s a portly, older gentleman,” Follriott said dubiously, opening his ale. “Ah. I forgot napkins.” He got up to open the top drawer of an ornate sideboard and bring out embroidered linen napkins for both of them. “Perhaps you’re related to Lord Bickerstaffe?”

“Yes, I’m his nephew. My parents named me in honor of him, but to distinguish us apart, I’m called ‘Bicks.’” Rawlins did not allow this explanation to interfere with his eating.

“That’s sensible, Bicks,” Follriott agreed. “Well, I was wondering if you heard about the treasure hidden around the smoky pools north of Nicarber.”

“Oh, goodness,” Rawlins said, sagging over his pie, which was excellent. “That’s old news. It’s all been cleared out, anyway.”

After a surprised pause, Follriott said, “That’s true, and I asked just to hear your answer”—which was also true. He did not admit that he hadn’t known. “So now that I know you’re not a dupe, let’s cover some better opportunities.”

“Yes? What did you have in mind?” Rawlins asked, sucking up the chicken pie.

“Well, for instance, you may have noticed the young messenger, Jian, running about all over the place. I have it on good authority that he carries quite a bit of gold at times. It would be very easy for a stranger in the Lands to, say, accidentally run into him on a deserted side street and relieve him of his burden,” Follriott said casually.

Rawlins stared at him with his mouth full. Then he swallowed to burst out with a laugh, “Another test! Trying to see how stupid I am! All the soldiers know Jian and anyone who touches him is likely to get the beatdown of their life!”

After another frozen instant, Follriott slapped the table. “Right again! You’re a sharp one, Bicks!”

In between bites, Rawlins exhaled, “Thank you. I certainly hoped that no one that well dressed could suggest something so idiotic.”

“No, indeed,” Folliott said, tentatively beginning on his chicken pie.

They ate silently for a few minutes, then Folliott said, “I think I’d like to hear from you about the opportunities you see in the Lands.”

“Oh, my!” Rawlins said. “The number of lovely women who work all along Main just boggles the mind. They are like firm, luscious bunches of grapes waiting to be popped into one’s mouth.”

Folliott squinted at him in sudden inspiration. “I knew that your appearance was an omen,” he breathed. “Yes, you are so correct, dear Bicks. All that’s needed is a handsome unknown to pluck those grapes.”

Rawlins withered a little. “Yes, I would love to, only, I’m, not *quite* unknown,” he said uncomfortably.

“You will be,” Folliott said, standing. He went to the front door to whistle to a passing messenger and hand him a coin. Then he returned to his new friend and stooge, who was watching in tentative hopefulness. Reseating himself at the table, Folliott said, “All that’s needed is to get rid of that fake black hair and beard.”

Squirming, Rawlins admitted, “I, er, needed a bit of a—fresh appearance, you see.”

“Indeed, and we’ll have a beautician to come assist you,” Folliott told him.

“I’ve been going to Imelda’s,” Rawlins said dismally.

“Imelda is for old ladies,” Folliott sniffed. “We have a fresh new talent coming to see to you, my good Bicks—Laurier, who has a new shop in the east Lands. Before she arrives, let’s talk strategy.”

So for the first time in a week, Rawlins felt hopeful. And less than two hours later, he stepped out of Folliott’s house as Yulon, a dashing gent with a clean face and white-blond hair styled in a rakish cut. But he was wearing the same suit that Rawlins, Bickerstaffe, Scovil, and Bicks had been wearing.

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Chapter 3

At this time, Minka and Rondi were riding their horses down Main toward Firmin’s, hoping to beat the midday rush. They were just coming from The Lands Clothing Shop, where Rondi had been working almost full-time. Today, Minka had come down to help after Law class (which Rondi attended as well). Their bodyguard detail was down to Jehan and Coish, because Minka had sent Serrano on one errand and Suco on another.

As Jehan took the horses around to the stables that Firmin’s and Avere’s shared, Rawlins came sauntering down the sidewalk, appraising the women as potential game. Challinor at Croft’s puckered at him, while Vories turned sultry eyes to him to murmur, “We’re not crowded, yet.”

“Then I had better find a spot quickly, eh?” he returned with a roguish wink. Folliott was lingering out of sight on the far sidewalk to surveil his new tool.

Just to check out other potential targets, Rawlins glanced up Main to see tall, svelte Rondi standing on the

sidewalk laughing. The sight of her transfixed him, with her daring short hair, blonde strands golden in the light, and her graceful hands as she attempted to cover a laugh at something that Minka had said (whom he never saw, as she was seated). As in a dream, Rawlins began walking over to the vision on the sidewalk. He never guessed that she was only 14 years old.

When he drew near, she turned toward him in surprise. He opened his mouth to begin to tell her that he loved her; she was perfection incarnate, and he would die in utter despair if he could not press his lips to hers.

But before he could get two words out, a young but glowering Polonti in uniform got in his face to hiss, “Step back.”

Rawlins raised his clean, manicured hands. “I only wish an introduction to the lady—”

Any bodyguard perceptive enough to read the clues of Rawlins’ suit and haircut would have said, *Oh, excuse me. Certainly, sir.* But Coish grabbed his stylish lapels to toss him into the street. There, Rawlins had to dance lively to evade a wagon and several horses. Lilou, hastening to Lady Minka’s table, recognized the suit at once, and therefore the man in it.

Rondi had quickly sat beside Minka to hiss, “That’s Rawlins!”

“Are you sure?” Minka whispered, peering at him. She looked to Lilou bending over their table with their cups of tea. “Do you know him, Lilou?” she whispered.

With a sardonic smirk, Lilou glanced at the flustered gent straightening his suit jacket and making an obscene gesture to a passing rider. “Yeah, that’s Scovil. He just shaved his face and changed up his hair again.”

Minka gasped to Rondi, “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing, he didn’t have time. But now I’m afraid he knows who I am,” Rondi whispered, glancing at him warily.

Meanwhile, Coish was updating Jehan, who looked out to the street in fury that he hadn’t been on hand for the expulsion. Attended by glares from the bodyguards, Rawlins withdrew. Folliott met him in front of Delano’s to begin prompting him back toward his house. Checking continually over his shoulder, Folliott muttered, “Of all the women you could approach, Lady Rondi is not a suitable target.”

“That’s Lady Rondinelli?” Rawlins gasped.

Folliott studied him a moment. “Yes, and she’s constantly surrounded by bodyguards.”

“I see,” Rawlins whispered, unsteady on his feet. For his brain was now full of new plans, and the fulfillment of all his dreams.

Those dreams took a faerie-tale turn when a green carriage passed in between the lovestruck dandy and his object of desire. Looking out of the window of that carriage was Lord Bickerstaffe. With a gasp, Rawlins leapt for the carriage to wrench open the door and land on the seat next to the lord.

The driver reined up, but Bickerstaffe’s large butler already had a hand on the rogue in the seat opposite him. Slapping his hand away, Rawlins hissed, “I’ve just now made contact with Lady Rondinelli! They’ve had me on a merry chase for weeks now, but I finally got within touching distance!”

Bickerstaffe narrowed his pudgy eyes. “Rawlins? We’ve heard nothing from you for over a month.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you!” Rawlins said through gritted teeth. “They kept stringing me along with promises until I *just now* maneuvered my way to stand directly before her. She looked at me with a look of intense interest, and I returned her gaze,” he narrated breathlessly.

“And what of all the money I sent with you?” Bickerstaffe asked darkly.

“I’ve had to support myself while threading my way through their traps,” Rawlins snapped. “That Lord Efran thought to dispatch me right back to Crescent Hollow as a spy for them, the fool. But I outsmarted them all by changing my appearance and taking a new identity as ‘Yulon.’ And *just now* I caught her at Firmin’s here.” Rawlins broke off to peer out a crack of the window shade to glimpse her riding north.

“Is she still there?” Bickerstaffe asked, leaning over his own large stomach to look.

“No,” Rawlins groaned. No, she wasn’t: she had taken her boxed meal to ride north up Main in the company of four soldiers while Minka was riding back to the fortress with Jehan and Coish to tell Efran. But when Minka was safely in the fortress, her bodyguards rode back down to observe the delayed destination of the green carriage which had swallowed up Rawlins.

Sitting back in that carriage with a grunt, Bickerstaffe uttered the magic words, “What should we do, then?”

With the bearing of an expert, Rawlins said, “You get us a suite at The Lands’ Best Inn; I’ll pay my bill at Croft’s and bring your money”—or, what was left of it. “Then I’ve got to get right back out to track her down again.”

“Very well, I’ll meet you at the inn,” Bickerstaffe grunted. Rawlins slipped out for the carriage to pull away again, followed by Jehan and Coish. When they saw him depart, Jehan reined up, but Coish leaned over to whisper something to the effect of, *We know him now; let’s see who’s in this carriage and where they go.* To this Jehan agreed.

As Rawlins was turning toward Croft’s, someone caught his arm, and he looked back at Folliott, who asked, “Who was that? What’s going on?”

“Oh,” Rawlins leaned back, laughing. “The most amazing thing! That was Lord Bickerstaffe of Crescent Hollow, looking for me. And he carries a hundred times more royals than the busiest messengers. I’m going to be staying in his suite at The Lands’ Best Inn. But first I’ve got to find out where Rondinelli went off to.”

“Just now?” Folliott asked, looking up the street. “She works at The Lands Clothing Shop. Everyone knows that.”

“Really?” Rawlins cried in delight. “Oh, this is perfection. I’ve got to get right out there now, but I’ll report back to you as soon as possible,” he said with a straight face.

“Very well. Good luck,” Folliott said, slightly troubled. His bait seemed to have slipped off the hook to go fishing on his own. But Folliott turned back in the direction of his house while Rawlins entered Croft’s to gather his things from his room and pay his bill. Rawlins was not tempted to skip out without paying when they’d all seen him here with his white hair. Besides which, his plan was complicated enough as it was.

While Rawlins was waiting for his rather expansive bill at Croft’s to be compiled, taking into account what he’d

already paid on it, Minka was up in the second-floor workroom expounding on Rondi's encounter with him at Firmin's: "And he just rushed up to her as though about to fling his arms around her, but Coish got in his face and threw him off the sidewalk into the street," she said breathlessly.

DeWitt asked, "You're sure it was Rawlins?"

"I wasn't, no, because his hair was a very light blond, but Rondi said it was him," Minka affirmed.

In disappointment, DeWitt said, "So he decided to freelance rather than help us."

At the same time, Efran stood. "Where is she?"

Minka exhaled, "She went back to work, Efran; she said they're counting on her. And she had four men with her."

As Efran debated whether four men were enough to prevent his riding down there, Estes asked, "Now, what about this green carriage he jumped into? Who was in it?"

"I don't know," Minka replied.

DeWitt said, "Someone from Crescent Hollow, no doubt."

While they were debating their course of action, Skalbeck appeared at the door to salute. "Captain, Jehan rode up with a quick message; he said a—a Lord Bickerstaffe from Crescent Hollow has just arrived at The Lands' Best Inn."

"Lord Bickerstaffe!" several voices echoed. DeWitt asked, "What did he look like?"

"I don't know, Administrator; Jehan had to ride back down quickly to the Inn. He said they didn't want to lose him," Skalbeck said.

"It must be the real Bickerstaffe this time," Efran said.

DeWitt told Skalbeck, "Go tell the inn's floor master to get up a special early dinner served in the Blue Room for the newly arrived Lord Bickerstaffe and one or two Fortress administrators. Tell them to bill the Fortress for it. If you can find Jehan, let him know."

"Yes, Administrator." With a salute, Skalbeck flew out.

DeWitt stood. "Are you coming, Estes?"

"No, I have too much work to do. You and Efran will have to chase down all the Bickerstaffes," Estes grumbled.

"All right, then," Efran laughed. He asked Minka, "Do you want to come?"

"Don't think you're going to leave me behind," she muttered darkly.

He held his arm out to her with the caution, "I'm afraid you have to watch from the observation room again. I don't want Bickerstaffe eyeing you as an acquisition." She decided not to fight on this point, but lamented, "If only Justinian were here, he'd show us how to work this."

Efran paused at the affront. “You don’t trust me and DeWitt?” Then he asked, “Where is Justinian?”

DeWitt said, “In Westford, being fêted by Lord Baroffio and shown all around the new building sites. We may not see him back on the Lands for a while.”

As the three exited the fortress into the courtyard and over to the new switchback, Efran whistled lightly for Ure and Graeme to accompany them. (Going somewhere with as much traffic as the Inn, it was often quicker to go on foot than to wait for horses or a carriage to be brought around.)

On the way down, Efran gave their bodyguards a synopsis of Crescent Hollow’s latest efforts to kidnap the Lady Rondi. They listened in disbelief, then Graeme posed, “So then, the monkeys have run all the pretty ladies out of Crescent Hollow so that they have to be imported?”

“That’s as good a theory as any,” DeWitt admitted.

“They can’t have ours,” Efran objected, holding Minka’s hand. She cuddled his arm.

Looking down to the chapel, she asked, “How is the Commander’s arm, Efran?”

“Slow to heal,” he said, vexed. “He swears that Marguerite and Coghill are taking good care of him, but he still doesn’t show the range of motion he should have by now. It was a bad cut.”

“Oh,” she murmured in distress.

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Chapter 4

Because Efran, DeWitt, Minka and their bodyguards were taking their time walking down to The Lands’ Best Inn, Rawlins was able to settle up with Croft’s and get his meager possessions over to the inn before they got there. After receiving entrance to the reserved suite, Rawlins dropped his bag to the floor to hand Bickerstaffe his pouch of royals. “There you are!”

Without even opening it, Bickerstaffe gasped, “Is that all that’s left?”

Yes, that was all, given the great number now concealed in a pouch under Rawlins’ coat. Rawlins told him, “Didn’t I explain how I’ve been on the lam, disguising myself while they combed the Lands for me?”

While Bickerstaffe was listening to Rawlins’ excuses, DeWitt was seeing to the setup of his reception. He supervised the entrance of the serving cart with the food and drink into the Blue Room, and Efran took a portion next door to Minka. “All right, here goes,” he murmured, kissing her head.

“Don’t worry; I’m watching,” she said.

“I’ll be good,” he promised, closing the door as he left with Graeme and Ure standing outside.

Looking around the setup in the Blue Room, DeWitt said, “I think we have everything we need here.”

So Efran hailed an attendant to convey an invitation to Lord Bickerstaffe's room, then checked on Minka one last time in the observation room. Minutes later, she looked over to the door quickly as Jehan slipped in. "Did the Captain find them, Lady Minka?"

She looked momentarily confused. "Them who?"

"Rawlins came in and went up to Lord Bickerstaffe's room," Jehan told her.

"Rawlins? Is here too?" she gasped.

"As far as we know," Jehan said.

"Oh, this is going to be interesting." Minka turned to the closest peephole and Jehan went out to find Coish.

At the knock on the door of the suite, Bickerstaffe and Rawlins both jumped. While Rawlins darted into the bedroom to hide, Bickerstaffe opened the door to a hotel attendant, who bowed. "Greetings from the Abbey Fortress, Lord Bickerstaffe. The administrators deeply desire to host you in the Blue Room for an early dinner."

Although unplanned, this was an invitation that Bickerstaffe would not refuse. He did wonder briefly how they knew he was here. "Excellent. Please tell them I'll be right down," he said, placing a royal in the attendant's hand.

"Very good, my lord." The attendant bowed and departed.

Closing the door, Bickerstaffe looked to the bedroom. "Do you want to come, Rawlins?"

Emerging from the inner room, Rawlins said tightly, "Please remember that I am *Yulon*, Lord Bickerstaffe. And, no, thank you, I must attempt to make contact with Rondinelli again." Inwardly, he fumed, *Does he not believe anything I've told him?*

"Excellent," Bickerstaffe said. "When you have her, we will leave at once."

"Of course," Rawlins said, then watched Bickerstaffe depart for his dinner. And Rawlins thought, *Why not? Bringing her to Crescent Hollow would sever her ties here and make me a hero there.* Thinking on this, he left the suite.

At the front door of the inn, he asked the doorman for directions to The Lands Clothing Shop. The doorman directed him, then asked, "Shall I summon a carriage for you, sir?"

"No, no—I shall enjoy the walk. Thank you." Rawlins tipped him, then departed the great doors hatless, so that everyone could see he wasn't Rawlins or Scovil.

Meanwhile, an attendant opened the door of the Blue Room for Bickerstaffe. Two men inside turned, and one approached with his hand out. "Lord Bickerstaffe? Thank you for coming. I am Administrator DeWitt of the Abbey Fortress; this is Lord Efran."

"How do you do." Bickerstaffe bowed slightly in shaking his hand, while noting that both were dressed casually, the lord almost raggedly. Bickerstaffe could hardly conceive meeting dignitaries in clothes more suitable for mucking stables.

But the Polonti came over to offer his brown hand as well, smiling. "I'm very pleased to meet you. We're always eager to entertain visitors from our sister city. Please have a seat."

"Thank you," Bickerstaffe said, turning to the table. *So you think yourself a city now? Bah.*

DeWitt, standing by the serving cart, asked, "Shall I fill your plate, or would you rather serve yourself, Lord Bickerstaffe? That's always my preference."

"No servers?" Bickerstaffe asked, glancing around.

"DeWitt says I'm uncivilized, but I prefer to handle my own plate," Efran said wryly.

"Ale or wine, Lord Bickerstaffe?" DeWitt asked, holding up a bottle of both.

Turning to peer at the labels, Bickerstaffe said, "Ah. The wine is good." He picked up a plate to observe in surprise, "Tenderloin? Oh, my."

DeWitt nodded, smiling, as he opened the bottle for him. Mild ales were already at his and Efran's plates. Minka, sitting on a stool as she watched them through the peephole in the observation room, had a lager on a stool beside her while she ate from the plate on her lap.

The three men sat to give attention to their food for a few minutes, then DeWitt said, "Well, Lord Bickerstaffe, your appearance is most interesting. Just over a month ago, we received a visit from a 'Lord Bickerstaffe' of Crescent Hollow who was not you, and who attempted to make off with our Lady Rondi. Do you happen to know anything about that?" DeWitt looked at him in bemused curiosity as the Lord Efran took a swig from his ale, eyeing the visitor with a disturbing smile.

At this time, the dashing Yulon had entered The Lands Clothing Shop to glance around at the displays. Rondi, about to emerge from the curtained-off back room, saw him at once, recognized him, and stepped back behind the curtain to think. Then she decided that now was a good time to take on that shelf reorganization that Racheal wanted done but nobody wanted to do. So she went to the very back corner of the storeroom to begin unloading random items from an overloaded shelf.

Piniello, a co-owner of the shop, approached the blond man who was looking around vacantly. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I need a new suit," he said plaintively, "but, I don't know anything about styles. I want it to be classic but current, elegant but not fussy. In short, I don't know what I'm looking for."

"Let me show you examples of our most popular styles. We'll start with the jackets." She led him to an array of jackets on display along the entire side wall of the shop.

Rawlins began looking these over, which required that he stand with his back to the whole shop. "This won't do," he said critically. "My eyes are weak, I need to see them in stronger light."

"Very well." She took the first jacket on its stand to the front window of the shop, where he could look it over in bright light. This he did carefully, noting the seam stitching and the coordinated lining. Although he was facing the room with his back to the window, he made sure that no shadow fell on the object under inspection.

Finally, he said, "That one's a possibility. Bring the next over, please."

"Certainly." She took the jacket on its stand back over to the wall while Rawlins' eyes swept the shop.

At this time, Lord Bickerstaffe was huffing to DeWitt and Efran, "Another Lord Bickerstaffe. Produce him at once, if you will." He only now remembered that he had agreed to the dashing young Rawlins' impersonating him here.

"I would love to," DeWitt said. "We have no idea where he is, or even if he's still on the Lands."

Bickerstaffe's puffy eyes darted around the room a moment, then he said, "Describe him."

DeWitt winced. "That's another sticking point. He seems to change his looks frequently."

Bickerstaffe asked guardedly, "Did he—make contact with the Lady Rondinelli?"

"We don't know," DeWitt said softly.

Bickerstaffe quickly finished his plate, then said, "I must investigate this. Thank you for the excellent meal; I shall now go confer with my butler."

When he stood, DeWitt and Efran did, as well. DeWitt said, "We appreciate that, Lord Bickerstaffe. Please apprise us of your findings."

"Naturally," Bickerstaffe said on his way out.

As his ponderous footsteps faded across the inn lobby, DeWitt and Efran looked at each other. "Bullseye," Efran whispered.

With ten sample jackets on display, Rawlins had Piniello running them back and forth to the window over the next hour and a half. Racheal began eyeing him; had the shop been any busier today, she would have found a gracious way to kick him out. But Piniello seemed not to mind, having had her share of picky customers. All this while, Rondi was occupied with the troublesome shelf unit in the back.

Finally, the customer said, "I believe style number four there will work best. Now let's talk about the pants. I don't see any samples up for those."

"The pants have much less variation of style. First, let's get you measured," Piniello said. While she took a parchment, quill and measuring string from behind the counter, Racheal watched him scan the shop. Equipped with the measuring items, Piniello told him, "Back here, please."

He looked to the far back corner of the shop in displeasure. "Way back there?"

"It will only take a moment," she said.

"Very well." He took one last glance around the shop before accompanying her to the corner. Racheal then looked around for who was in the front part of the shop right now, and who was not.

From the inn, Minka desired to go next door to the chapel to see her auntie, so Efran walked her over. When Hartshough opened the door to them, Jehan and Coish came running from the street, saluting. Coish said, “Captain, we followed Rawlins to The Lands Clothing Shop.”

Minka looked quickly at Efran, who raised his chin slightly. “I’ll be back later for a bracer, Hartshough.”

“Very good, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, bowing.

As Efran began walking up back roads to the shop with the pair at his heels, Jehan said, “He’s got white hair now, Captain.” Nodding slightly, Efran broke into a trot, and they kept pace with him.

At the chapel, Minka had to wait a few minutes for Marguerite to come down the stairs from the loft. Taking one look at her face, Minka breathed, “What is it? Wendt?”

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Chapter 5

Slightly red-eyed, Marguerite said, “Yes. Wendt’s not doing well, and he won’t let me do a thing.”

“His arm?” Minka asked.

Marguerite nodded. “It still hurts; he can’t move it without pain, but he won’t admit it. All Coghill can recommend is soaking it in warm water, which he’s doing now, but it doesn’t help.”

“He’s upstairs in the washroom?” Minka asked, fingers at her lips.

Marguerite said, “Yes, he’s about to leave for a meeting with the Captains before dinner.”

Minka said, “Make him wait.” She turned to run back out the front door and across the chapel yard to Ryal’s yard.

Entering the notary shop, she glanced around to see it blessedly empty of customers at the moment. “Hello, Minka,” Ryal said.

Practically ignoring his greeting, she came up to the counter. “Ryal, where’s—?” When Giardi came out of the back room, Minka rushed to her. “Giardi, please come to the chapel while the Commander is still there. His arm is hurting him badly. Please see if you can help him.” Giardi had been blessed at birth with the gift of helping, which sometimes manifested itself in strange ways.

Sympathetically, she said, “Once he knows what I’m there for, I don’t think he’ll let me, Minka.”

“Well then, we need an excuse for you being there,” Minka said. “How close do you have to be to him?”

“I have to touch him, his arm,” Giardi said. “Even then, I don’t know how much it will help.”

“We have to give him something to look at, then,” Minka said with a tinge of desperation.

“Here,” Ryal said, taking up a few sheets. “We were discussing how little we know about these recent applicants. Just hand them to the Commander; ask if he’s had any trouble with them or knows anything about them.”

“I love you, Ryal!” Minka said, taking the sheets in one hand and Giardi’s arm in the other to rush her out.

Laughing as she was being pulled along, Giardi said, “Wait, wait, let’s walk. If we catch him on the way out, that’s fine. May I carry the applications?”

“Yes.” Minka handed them to her, only a little abashed.

“Which arm did he hurt?” Giardi asked.

“Oh! His left,” Minka clarified. Resuming a swift but sane walk, she said, “Efran has been so worried and upset. All those years that Wendt was his Commander in Westford, he was never injured this badly, so now Efran feels like it’s his fault, for not covering him.”

“I understand,” Giardi said.

Sure enough, as they were coming up the walk to the chapel front doors, they saw Wendt emerge. Even Minka could discern the tightness in his face. When he paused at their approach, Minka clamped her mouth shut to let Giardi say, “Good afternoon, Commander; I’ll only keep you for a moment. Ryal is concerned that we know so little about these new residents. He wished to hear if you knew anything about them.”

Before he could speak, she presented the applications to him while placing a hand firmly on his left arm. He flinched slightly and his eyes glassed over. He blinked a few times, then said, “I’m due at a meeting with the Captains, so, I’ll pass them around and get their input.”

“That would be welcome, Commander,” Giardi said complacently.

Looking down at Minka’s tense hopefulness, he said, “I’m feeling much better, thank you.” To Giardi, he added, “I’ll have these returned to the shop promptly. Since I’m going that way, let me walk you back.”

He extended his left arm to her, which she took. “Thank you, Commander.” As they went down the sidewalk, Minka ran squealing to the door of the chapel where Marguerite stood watching. Wendt’s eyes flicked back to her.

Efran entered The Lands Clothing Shop to look around deliberately. Having just been measured on the far side of the shop, Rawlins went rigid upon glimpsing him and the two monkeys in red with him. Yes, one of them was the one who’d caused his near collision with a horse, blast him.

With seconds to escape, Rawlins plucked a hat off a display stand and flipped a royal to Piniello. “I’ll be back to finish up on the suit,” he said, walking swiftly around the tall Polonti who had turned to the woman behind the counter.

As Rawlins slipped out the front door, one of the monkeys in red swiveled toward him, catching a glimpse of his bright white hair. Immediately Rawlins broke into a mad dash south across the east Lands to find the beautician Laurier and have her tint his hair brown. Meanwhile, Piniello was left holding one royal in payment for a hat that cost three.

Efran was asking Racheal, “Where is Rondi?”

“In back, I believe,” she said, studying him. “Lord Efran, what is the problem?” But he was already walking toward the curtained back doorway, so she followed, as did Jehan and Coish.

Entering the large storage/workroom filled with rows of shelves, Efran called, “Rondi?”

“Back here!” she replied.

He, Racheal, and the bodyguards followed her voice to the troublesome shelf unit that had been neatly reorganized. “I’m almost done. I found a few items that need to go elsewhere,” Rondi explained.

Staring at the unit, Racheal said, “That must have taken you all day.”

“I was glad to get it done,” Rondi said.

“You saw him, didn’t you?” Efran asked her. She drew a reluctant breath, and he turned to Racheal. “Go see if he’s still here—a strange man, clean-shaven, with white hair.”

“He left shortly after you came in,” Racheal replied. “But he’d been here for hours pretending to look at suits. Now I know what he was looking for.” She and Efran looked back at Rondi.

She exhaled, “Yes, that was Rawlins. But—I don’t want to hide; I want to work. I’ll have as many bodyguards as you say, Efran, but please don’t lock me up like my uncle did.”

Efran looked off, groaning. Then he said, “All right, but it’s almost time for dinner. So, Jehan, Coish, go get us horses to ride back up.” To Racheal, he said, “She’ll be back tomorrow after Law class, as usual. But there will be a number of men with her.”

Racheal smiled. “Thank you, Lord Efran. As you can see, she’s a great help. And the men are quite useful, as well.”

“Don’t run them on errands away from her,” he growled.

“No, I won’t, Lord Efran.” She smiled as though he were a favorite pet pretending to be fierce. He turned to the exit, muttering under his breath.

That evening, a brown-haired Rawlins slipped back into Bickerstaffe’s suite at The Lands’ Best Inn, where they spent hours conferring over a plan. This required money to be laid out to several casual associates of Rawlins, for which he required the lord’s rapidly dwindling purse. Handing it over with a black face, Bickerstaffe told him, “If this doesn’t work, you’re on your own. Just don’t come back to Crescent Hollow without her.”

“How faithless you are, dear Bickerstaffe,” Rawlins yawned. “Here.” He emptied the lord’s purse onto the table. Bickerstaffe looked suspicious, but Rawlins began counting out royals to place in a separate pile. “Here’s the funds for hiring Helper Number One and Helper Number Two. Here’s another bit to get window-washing equipment. And, a bit more for breakfast tomorrow. That leaves all the rest to go back in your carriage.”

To illustrate, Rawlins refilled the purse with the unneeded royals and extended it to Bickerstaffe. “There you are. I’ve bet everything on the success of this plan.”

“Well, then. I’ll be waiting at the appointed place,” Bickerstaffe said, reclaiming his pillaged purse.

“We’ll meet you there,” Rawlins said, raising his ale to him.

The following morning (April 15th) Rondi showed up for work with Minka and four bodyguards: Aceto, Beardall, Dango, and Gaul. Before they even allowed the women to dismount, they entered the shop to search it from front to back. Then they arranged themselves in rotating positions to keep all entrances and exits in view. Rondi sighed to Minka, “I know they’re just trying to protect me, and I’m grateful, truly, but—”

She broke off as Efran entered the front door to look around. Since it was still early, there were no customers yet, and the women were gathered around the front counter just talking before they got to work. Efran walked over to them, blank-faced. Unseen, the bodyguards saluted. Minka turned, inquiring, but he said nothing before picking her up to toss her in the air like a child.

The women gaped. “Efran!” she cried, landing with her hands on his shoulders but her feet a foot off the floor.

“What’d you do?” he asked.

“What?” she said. So he tossed her up in the air again. “Efran!” she cried again, laughing. “Stop! What—?”

“What did you do?” he repeated. “Wendt came into Barracks A this morning throwing stuff around like always, which means you did something. What?”

She was trying to catch her breath, so his hands tightened under her ribcage again. “No! Stop!” she pleaded, laughing. “It wasn’t me; it was Giardi. Put me down.”

He thought about this for a little while, then decided to risk it. “There. You’re down. Talk.”

“Stop making me laugh,” she exhaled. “All I did was ask Giardi to go try to help him, so she took some papers to give to him, and when he took them, she was able to hold his arm. That’s all. It was all her doing.”

He considered this, then leaned down to kiss her forehead. “Thank you.” Then he turned around to walk out.

The women burst into laughter, and the bodyguards took note of the clean and efficient means of extracting information from a reluctant female. Racheal wiped her eyes with a sigh. “Well, I can hardly wait to see what happens next. Let’s get those displays up, ladies.”

But Meena asked, “How would Giardi holding his arm help him?”

So Minka explained to all of them about her gift of helping. “She’s careful about when she uses it, because it won’t work on someone who is unwilling. But someone who doesn’t know what’s going on is fair game.”

“What a wonderful gift,” Rondi murmured. Minka nodded, brows raised. Not even Efran knew how much Giardi’s touch had healed him after the insurrection.

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Chapter 6

So the Lands got to work that morning. There were so many businesses, and so many different types of labor, that they all just worked around each other with a nod or a crisp, “Mornin’.” Cleaners of all types, paid by the Fortress, were ubiquitous along Main, Chapel Road, New North Road, and even the older, most developed residential streets. (There was no “nobles district,” but a few areas considered themselves such, especially the southwestern area where Estes and Kelsey lived.)

One such worker was a new window cleaner, an affable fellow who industriously went from building to building on the New North Road, cleaning their front-facing windows. Although Rimbault and Pastor Benedetti didn’t know who he was or who paid him, they appreciated his work.

He got to the third-to-last block before the easement along the north wall. Skipping Laborers’ Hall (with multiple floors and too many windows) and the little hat shop next to it that seemed to attract soldiers, he began cleaning the windows of The Lands Clothing Shop. After he had done the front windows, he went around to the east side windows, and then the back. As it happened, Follriott’s house was right next door to the shop. So he spotted the window cleaner at work less than 40 feet away. Despite the change in hair color, again, Follriott recognized him, and watched closely.

Along the back wall of the clothing shop, the window cleaner worked slowly and carefully, watching the activity in the back storage room. As he had hoped, Rondi was working back here again. But there was also a great, hulking gorilla in red standing over her. “Let’s see what you do next,” Rawlins whispered. Fingering the lock pick in his pocket, he glanced back over his shoulder at the second street north, where a green carriage sat along the wall.

Follriott, peering out of his window, saw the carriage as well. With its door standing open, it was facing in the direction of the small gates in the north wall. The gates were open for business, but the gatesmen were attentive. Rawlins continued his earnest window washing, keeping his face down.

(Here, an amazing confluence of ignorance and coincidence assisted the kidnapppers. Because the two large building on the northernmost street were unmarked, neither Rawlins nor Bickerstaffe realized they were Barracks D and the armory. But at this time of the morning, both were staffed by only a skeleton crew.)

Shortly, there were loud shouts and curses heard from right outside the front of the clothing shop, where two men were fighting. As Rawlins expected, the gorilla ran toward the front. But Minka, remembering the diversion of a fight that allowed Cennick’s men to grab her, ran past him to the back room where Rondi was.

There, she saw a man open the back door, bent over in pain. He moaned, “Help me.” Rondi began toward him, then stopped abruptly. So he reached out to grab her and drag her out the door.

Minka ran after them to watch him haul her struggling to the second street over, where a green carriage sat with its door open. Rondi’s cries attracted the attention of two people: Windry and Reinagle, who emerged from their houses at the same time to look on, scowling. Windry told him, “Efran’s summoned her for something.”

Shaking his fist, Reinagle shouted at the window washer, “Why can’t you knock?” He then turned to ask Windry in for a drink, but she had already reentered her house, slamming the door.

Meanwhile, Rawlins had thrown Rondi into the carriage and climbed in after her. As it set out with a lurch toward the now-unmanned gates, Minka ran after them.

But she couldn't keep up with the horses. Gasping, "Oh, dear God," she watched them pull away.

Before they reached the gates, there was a sudden jolt. The door flew open, and a heavy man in finery fell out to roll in the road. The driver pulled the horses to a stop, and Rondi jumped out to begin running back. With a cry, Minka ran hard toward her. Meeting her in the middle of the street, Minka pulled her over to Walford's Ready Furniture (next door to Windry's house). The two women walked hand in hand past his shop windows while Foliott watched from his house. Arriving on the sidewalk in front of The Lands Clothing Shop, the women quietly waited for the panicky bodyguards to notice them while other soldiers separated the brawlers and hauled them away.

Almost no one paid any attention to the footman assisting the ruffled, angry nobleman back into his carriage and the window washer being evicted from it. But the armory assistant Nettleship was laughing as the carriage door was slammed shut for the gentleman within to be driven sedately out of the small gates on New North Road. From there, they intersected the north coastal highway to turn west toward Crescent Hollow.

Meanwhile, Foliott arrived on the street with the large, nameless buildings to find his soggy, bleeding bait picking himself up from the dirt. Foliott then guided him to his house to attend his scored cheek.

In front of the clothing shop, Aceto ran up to the women to usher them back inside with a stream of anxious rebuke entirely in the Polonti language. Moments later, Efran arrived on a saddleless horse to scatter the few remaining fight spectators. Falling off the horse, he entered the shop to see not only Aceto, but Beardall, Dango, and Gaul standing placidly with the women who worked there, including Minka and Rondi. This tableau could have been titled, "We're Fine. How Are You?"

Surveying them all, Efran exhaled, "Well. Someone's doing their job. Carry on." Then he went back outside to supervise the combatants' removal to the barracks for gentle questioning and reproof.

Minka and Rondi looked at each other, and Minka said, "We have to tell Efran. But first tell me: *What happened?*" The other women and bodyguards watched silently.

Rondi admitted, "It was Rawlins, posing as a window cleaner. But when the fight started, he came to the door, pretending to be hurt. I went over; he grabbed me and threw me in the carriage where the real Lord Bickerstaffe was waiting. But after getting me inside, they must not have shut the door all the way, so when Bickerstaffe leaned against it, he fell out. I scratched Rawlins' face and jumped out after him." They all looked down at her fingernails.

"So now he's marked," Dango observed.

Gaul, the senior-most of these men, instructed, "Then go see if you find him, Dango." He nodded, running out the front door. Then Gaul said, "I'll go tell the Captain what happened." He was not looking forward to it.

Aceto said, "Allow that I tell him. I am the one who failed."

"No, Aceto," Minka said, heartbroken.

Rondi added, "You didn't fail. He was quick and very lucky."

Not regarding their excuses, Aceto looked only at Gaul, who nodded heavily. "Go on, then." Beardall looked slightly nauseous: this was a joint failure.

So Aceto departed to walk west down side streets to Barracks A. There, he found the Captain on the sidewalk with Caswall, who reported, “Yes, Captain, the two who decided to start fighting in front of the shop are layabouts who have trouble staying employed. Commander Wendt suggested that they be given a last chance digging the new sewers; if they can’t or won’t do that, it’s eviction.”

“Right. Dismissed,” Efran said, glancing at Aceto’s approach. Caswall saluted and returned to his duties.

Aceto saluted Efran. “Captain, I failed my duty and present for punishment.”

“What happened?” Efran asked blandly.

So Aceto related the short sequence of events, ending, “I must die for my failure.”

“Did Dango find him?” Efran asked.

“I do not know, Captain, but I still fail,” Aceto said.

Efran sighed, “Aceto, let me tell you about guarding Southern women. They make it hard. Whether they mean to or not, they’ll kick you in the knees and run off every time”—*or try to make you kiss them, but we won’t go there now*, he thought. “So if I have to punish everyone for failing with them, we’ll have no men left, not even me. Let’s just focus on finding Rawlins and punishing him instead.”

Aceto’s great frame swayed as he thought about this, then he saluted. “Yes, Captain.”

“Dismissed,” Efran said. Watching him walk away, Efran muttered, “Rondi gets to be more like Minka all the time. At least she has Mathurin. But he can’t be her bodyguard; he’d kill someone.”

“Which is what a bodyguard should do,” Wendt said behind him. Efran turned, and the Commander added, “If you’re done with your ruminations, would you like to get in here for our meeting?” He gestured behind him with his left hand.

“Yes, Commander,” Efran said in great relief.

Meanwhile, Dango returned to the clothing shop to report that he could find no trace of the window washer. That was because he was in Folliott’s house, being tended by him. As Folliott pressed a wet washcloth to his cheek, he said, “There, now. They’re shallow scratches that will heal up very quickly.”

Turning to rinse the washcloth in a basin, he added, “Now, Bicks, will you kindly tell me what possessed you to enact the insanity I just witnessed? There are other ways to kidnap a woman”—as he knew, having pulled off an amazingly complex scheme to get Trina away from his father Reinagle.

Rawlins leaned his head back on the chair, murmuring, “They want Rondinelli back in Crescent Hollow so badly, they’ll pay almost anything to get her there.”

Folliott paused. “Why?”

“I don’t know, exactly, but she was better as Regent than the last three Surchatians they’ve had,” Rawlins said. At the same time, he was thinking, *I’ve been going about this the wrong way. You can’t just snatch a woman and make her love you—you have to be what she wants.* Out loud, he said, “She seems to like Polonti, doesn’t she? I

always see her with Polonti. Oh, if only I could change up my whole self, and not just my hair and my clothes!”

Folliott studied him. As bait, Bicks was erratic and unreliable, but this Rondi seemed to be valuable property to someone with a lot of money in Crescent Hollow, and certainly to the Fortress. Therefore, Folliott was willing to risk Bicks’ neck to acquire her. Hesitantly, he said, “I used to have a handy little book of concoctions”—here he cast a regretful glance toward a burned spot in the floor. “It’s gone, but there is another source for such form-changing potions, if you’re interested.”

Rawlins sat up, removing the washcloth from his face. “What? Such a potion really exists?”

“Yes,” Folliott said. “The problem is, it’s not permanent, and it changes only your appearance, not your voice or mannerisms. If you want to convince her that you’re Polonti, you have to train yourself to speak like one and move like one.” There were other problems with such potions that he didn’t elaborate on right now.

Rawlins stared at him. “How do I get it?”

“There’s a little shop just one block over that supplies it. I’ll tell you what you need to say, if you’re sure you want it. But first we must agree on what you do with Rondi when you do lure her away,” Folliott said.

“I’m listening,” Rawlins replied.

“You’ll bring her here, where we’ll give her a nice luncheon with a draught of sleeping potion on the side. When she’s out, you’ll take her to the house of an acquaintance of mine on the far east Lands. From there, we’ll pack her in a comfortable carriage for you to take her to Crescent Hollow. You’ll receive your reward, of which I’ll expect you to send back half for my part in it,” Folliott said.

Rawlins blinked at him. “That sounds most reasonable.”

“Then it’s a deal?” Folliott asked, extending his hand.

“Absolutely.” Rawlins shook his hand in satisfaction, and neither man told the other that there were certain alterations he intended to make to this plan.

Folliott said, “Now then, I’ll tell you just what to say to get the form-changing potion for a Polonti—”

“How much will it cost? Bickerstaffe carried all my money away in his carriage,” Rawlins said.

“Oh, it’s expensive,” Folliott assured him, withdrawing his own pouch to hand him ten royals.

“You’ll get it all back, with interest,” Rawlins promised, scooping the coins into his pocket. “Now, the key words?”

Folliott said, “Yes. Here’s what you say. . . .”

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Chapter 7

A half hour later, Rawlins was taking a shortcut to the Wonders & Illusions shop one block over from Folliott's house. While waiting on the proprietor to finish up with another customer, Rawlins pretended to look around at the games, devices and artwork on display, which he considered frivolous but amusing.

When the customer had departed, the proprietor looked to Rawlins. "May I help you find something?"

"Yes," Rawlins said, stepping to the counter. "I'd like a senet game for a Polonti friend, please."

Studying him, the proprietor asked, "What is your friend's name?"

"Ringwood," Rawlins replied.

"Man or woman?" the proprietor asked.

"Man," Rawlins said.

"Very well," the owner said, reaching under the counter. "Polonti, eh? We don't get many requests for those, so I'm not sure. . . ."

He had to bend down to search in the far recesses of the cabinet under the counter. "Oh, wait, here is one." He straightened with a small box in his hand.

He handed it to Rawlins, who looked to see the faded printing on the box which read, "Polonti, M." The owner said, "That will be five royals."

"Yes. Here." Rawlins dug half of the coins out of his pocket to hand them over.

After studying them, the owner put them away and said, "Now, here are the directions. Listen carefully. Place no fewer than three drops on your tongue and then wait at least a half hour. If the change is not pronounced enough, you may add one more drop, but no more. You may require a change of clothes in a larger size to accommodate the additional bulk." The proprietor regarded his window-washer clothes in mild disdain.

"Bulk? Muscles?" Rawlins said, smiling. They both unconsciously dropped the pretense of the potion being for a friend.

"Yes. A full-grown Polonti male typically has fifteen percent greater muscle mass than the average Southerner," the owner said.

"Well, I'll have to deal with that," Rawlins said, placing the box in his pocket.

"One more thing," the shopkeeper said. "The first application should last one month. But after two weeks, check a mirror daily. If the reversion to your previous appearance becomes noticeable, place one drop on your tongue and wait a half hour. If it's still lacking, place *one more drop* on your tongue but no more until another two weeks has passed, minimum."

"Very well, then. I'm off to pick up some more clothes," Rawlins said with a friendly wave.

The proprietor nodded, watching him leave, then muttered, “I make most of my money off fools.” Afflicted by an attack of conscience, he murmured, “I know, I know—I should have warned him that it can wear off after only a day or two, but, then they don’t want it.”

Before returning to Follriott’s house, Rawlins crossed New North Road to stop by Twombly’s Dry Goods, but the only clothes they had were little girl things (which they seemed to sell a lot of, especially to trolls). So Rawlins went on to Froggatt’s Indispensable Everyday Needs, hoping against hope they’d have cheap men’s clothes. He could hardly go to Racheal’s shop, and couldn’t see borrowing more money from Follriott to go to a tailor.

At Froggatt’s, therefore, he was pleasantly surprised to see shelves of plain white work shirts and dark gray pants (with belts) in various sizes, from boys’ up to large men’s. Strangely, that was all they had in clothing, but it just happened to be what he needed, and it was cheap—one royal for both shirt and pants (with belt!). Rawlins selected the size he thought he’d need, paying happily.

On his way out, he noted a Polonti laborer picking out a set of pants and shirt likewise. With a sense of bonhomie, or even kinship, Rawlins patted him on the shoulder to note, “Good buy.” He indicated his own purchase as proof. The large, rugged Polonti raised his eyes to appraise him—especially the fresh scratches on his cheek. Rawlins sauntered on out, not knowing that he had just congratulated Captain Chee for being able to buy clothes.

When Rawlins arrived back at the house, Follriott was intensely interested to hear of his purchases. Rawlins told him all about it, including the complex instructions, then said, “Now’s the time to try it and see what we’ve done!”

“I can’t wait,” Follriott said honestly, with a preliminary twinge of mild horror.

He watched while Rawlins opened the small box to look at the label on the bottle. “Yes, ‘Polonti, M,’” he read off. Then he dabbed exactly three drops on his tongue. Recapping the bottle, he said, “Now we wait. Oh! I’d best go ahead and change.” So he removed his window-washer clothes to don the oversized pants and shirt. Since the work boots he was wearing were too large anyway (having been stolen), he felt reasonably confident that they’d fit him after the transformation. “And I’ll need a mirror,” he remembered.

“Here, I have a nice large one,” Follriott said helpfully. He went to his bedroom to shortly return with a full-sized rolling mirror like that in Minka and Efran’s quarters (which Efran kept falling over in the dark).

“Excellent,” Rawlins said, positioning it before him. Then he laughed wryly, “I hope the potion makes me fill out this costume. I look like a street sweeper right now.” Subconsciously, he envisioned his new Polonti persona as resembling Efran. Strongly.

“How long does it take? A half hour?” Follriott asked.

“Yes, that’s what the fellow behind the counter said,” Rawlins related. Then he thought it strange that he didn’t even know the man’s name.

“I’ll go ahead and pick up dinner from Averno’s, then,” Follriott said, donning his hat.

“Excellent,” Rawlins said.

As it often happened, Averno’s was already busy with the dinner rush in the late afternoon, so Follriott had to wait

quite a while in line. By the time he had procured two dinners of baked perch, greens, rolls, and pie, twilight was peeking out on the horizon. Taking short cuts through side streets to New North Road, Folliott grumbled, “We need some decent eateries out east here.”

He let himself into his house, calling, “Dinner’s here, Bicks. Do you want to eat in the front room or the nook?”

A figure came from the guest bedroom. “The nook is fine. What do you think?” Bicks’ voice asked.

Folliott paused with a box in each hand. For a moment he couldn’t speak, then said, “It’s . . . just a tad off; do you think?”

For the amalgamation before him was neither Polonti nor Southerner, but a strange combination of both. The hair was straight and black, the eyes brown, the forehead heavy, and the build certainly broader than Rawlins’ had been. But . . . the nose was still Rawlins’, his face was still scratched, and—there was something awkward with the hips. They weren’t level. Then Folliott realized that this was simply the way Rawlins stood, with one hip higher than the other.

Rawlins said, “That’s what I thought as well. So I took one more drop just now. Let’s eat and then see what happens.”

“Very well,” Folliott said, placing the dinners on the table. He no longer cared how much he could make off this tool. The entertainment was already priceless.

They ate quietly, while Folliott tried to be discreet about studying his dinner companion. All he saw happen was that Bicks’ nose grew a little broader, as did his shoulders. There was no fault to be found in his build; that was certainly Polonti. But his face was . . . indecisive, with none of the nuance that Mother Nature displayed in the characteristics of a mixed breed. And although the scratches had faded, they were still visible.

So Folliott said, “The clothing shop’s closed by now, so let’s turn in and see how everything looks in the morning. You may sleep in the second bedroom there; the washroom’s in between them.”

“Very good. Tomorrow, then,” Bicks said in his patently Southern voice. He raised his ale to his conspirator with a rakish smile that looked maniacal on Polonti lips.

Squinting, Folliott murmured, “Yes, tomorrow.”

At that time, with dinner in the fortress concluded, Efran stood in the corridor at his closed door and said, “Minka. Unlock the door.”

“No,” she said from within the room.

He said, “You always want me to explain things to the children. They didn’t believe I could toss you up in the air.”

“You embarrassed me in front of the whole dining hall,” she said.

“You were laughing,” he observed.

“That was before I saw everyone watching,” she said.

“They were laughing,” he said.

“That’s why I was embarrassed,” she said.

Lowering his face, he said, “All right. I apologize. It was insensitive of me to toss you up in the air even though the children enjoyed it and you didn’t expose anything coming down.”

“Are you sure?” she gasped.

“Yes,” he said, when he simply didn’t know.

When she said nothing more, he looked off, then asked, “Well, will you get me a change of clothes so I can wash under the waterfall in the third-floor room?”

Although she said nothing, he detected sounds of movement in the room, so he waited. A few minutes later, she opened the door to extend his clothes to him. Taking them, he saw that she was also holding the luxurious robe that she had found in the wardrobe up there. Careful to not smile, he asked, “Do you want to come?”

She exited the room into the corridor, holding up the key to the third-floor room. Now he was smiling as he draped an arm over her shoulder to walk her up the stairs.

After Law class the following morning (April 16th) Efran personally watched Rondi and Minka depart the courtyard on their way to The Lands Clothing Shop with four bodyguards. All of them knew about the near disaster that had occurred despite four highly competent men on the scene. The only reason there were not more than four today (besides the fact that Racheal would object) was that Mathurin was one of them.

On their way down the new switchback, Minka looked over at Marguerite walking to Ryal’s shop next door to the chapel. This piqued Minka’s curiosity, so she said, “Rondi, I’m going to stop at Ryal’s to see what Auntie needs. I’ll be in a little later.”

“Sure. Tell her hello for me,” Rondi said. Meanwhile, signals flashed around the group of bodyguards. Koschat, the senior-most of this group, nodded to Youshock, who peeled away to follow the lady as she rode west on Chapel Road toward the notary shop while the remainder of them—Koschat, Mathurin, and Seagrave—escorted Rondi up New North Road.

Pulling up to the front of Ryal’s shop, Minka smiled back at Youshock as he drew up beside her, then slipped off to tether his horse. Dismounting herself, Minka said, “I’m sure it’s nothing, and I’ll get you back on duty with Rondi so we don’t miss anything exciting.”

“I’m good, Lady Minka,” he said with his lopsided smile.

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Chapter 8

Minka and Youshock entered the notary shop as Marguerite was saying, “Forgive the interruption, Ryal; I just wanted to know what you’ve heard from Verlice. It’s been a month since he was found liable for his debt to Vories, but, I haven’t heard—anything from him.” She was obviously distressed, second-guessing her efforts to correct or redirect her grown son.

Minka—and Youshock with her—stayed back from the counter to listen without intruding as Ryal said, “Yes, Marguerite. In fact, he paid off his debt of, um, hold on a moment, please.” While she waited, he opened a ledger to run a finger down columns. Giardi looked over with a nod.

Ryal said, “Here it is. He made three payments, the last of which satisfied his total debt of nine royals and fifteen pieces. That was on April twelfth, in fact.”

“He paid it off,” Marguerite repeated in mild wonder. “I haven’t heard from him. Do you know where he is?”

“Not precisely, no. But the job he was given was at The Wash House. I haven’t heard that he went elsewhere, and since he paid up, he has no more obligation to check in with me,” Ryal said.

“I see. Thank you, Ryal,” Marguerite said, conflicted.

As she turned from the counter, Minka said, “Let’s go check The Wash House. Hello, Ryal, Giardi.”

Ryal nodded to her, and Giardi smiled. Marguerite exhaled, “Thank you, dear. With you and Youshock along, I won’t feel so much like a meddling mother.” Minka grinned.

Stepping out, Minka said, “It’s just across the street behind Elvey’s here. Let’s just leave the horses and run over.” Youshock had opened his mouth to offer to carry Lady Marguerite on his horse, but as she and Lady Minka were already practically in the crosswalk, he hastened to catch them.

They did swiftly arrive at The Wash House, and with the number of carts coming and going with laundry, it was actually advantageous for them to arrive on foot. Marguerite led up the steps to the double doors, which Youshock hurried to open for her. In the reception room, she paused at the desk with the attendant, but Minka went on to poke her head in the vast space of the washroom. Youshock stuck with her.

There was an array of washtubs filling the concrete floor space with drying lines in front of open windows. There was even a hand pump which was connected to a line that led directly from the community well. Spigots in the bottom of the washtubs fed into narrow drains in the floor which directed waste water outside to a community garden.

While Minka was gazing in wonder at the efficiency, Marguerite came up beside them. Youshock discreetly pointed: “There, Lady Marguerite, Lady Minka.”

And they looked over to Verlice in the middle of the floor, wearing an apron and a nametag. A group of women were clustered around him, listening, and the three visitors could just barely make out what he was saying: “No, no, no, lovely ladies; never wring or twist the beautiful pieces left to our care. When you *must* remove excess water, fold the garment gently in your hands, like a springtime cloud from which you’re coaxing the rain.”

The women encircling him giggled, and he winked at one. The receptionist came up to ask Marguerite, “Do you

need to speak to our Floor Supervisor?"

The visitors looked quickly at her, and Marguerite asked, "Verlice is your Floor Supervisor?"

"Yes, and as you can see, he's terribly busy. Can it wait till our midday break?" the receptionist asked.

Marguerite uttered a laugh. "Yes, of course. Thank you."

The visitors exited The Wash House to regain Chapel Road. Marguerite threw up her hands. "Why do I worry? It's pointless."

Minka marveled, "People surprise you, don't they? What do you think?" she demanded of Youshock.

He paused, caught off guard. "About him being their Floor Supervisor? I guess anyone who can make washing clothes sound like a romance has earned the job, Lady Minka."

The women laughed. As they crossed Main to Ryal's shop, Marguerite said, "Come on over for a bracer, you two."

"Oh, would I love that," Minka said. "But we have to get back to the Shop; Rondi's only got three bodyguards when she was assigned four."

"Very well, then, later." Marguerite leaned over to kiss Minka's cheek and smile at Youshock, then began walking back to the chapel.

As Youshock and Minka were climbing up on their horses, Ryal leaned out of his door. "Well? Did you find him?"

"Yes! He's Floor Supervisor at The Wash House!" Minka laughed.

Ryal looked dubious, as though suspecting a joke, but the righteous Youshock affirmed, "That is correct, Lord Ryal, and he appears to be earning ovations for it, sir."

Ryal peered at him a moment, then said, "The world is full of wonders." Minka agreed wholeheartedly, and he withdrew back into his shop.

When Minka and Youshock arrived at the clothing shop minutes later, they saw Skevi approaching from her father's shop next door with a box full of black flat caps. Youshock hurried to open the door for her, then held it for Minka to enter.

The three were greeted by the occupants of the shop, all of whom appeared to be congregated around the front counter. Racheal said, "Another delivery! Here, Skevi, just put that on the counter here."

"Yes, Racheal." Before any of the men could relieve her of the box, Skevi had set it down. "And here's the invoice for the Fortress." She handed a sheet to Racheal, who looked at it, nodding.

Glancing around at the men in red, Skevi saw one she knew. "Seagrave," she said in surprise.

He nodded to her, smiling. "You're looking well, Skevi."

“Thanks to you,” she said, blushing slightly. Several people glanced between them, and Seagrave was momentarily tongue-tied. He could not know that her interest in Jian had faded due to his complete indifference to her. Besides, he was younger than she. But she kept remembering Seagrave’s kindness. Then her face changed and she blurted, “I turn sixteen next week!”

Youshock sadly shook his head, muttering, “Another snatched before anyone else had a chance.”

Seagrave hardly knew what to think, but Skevi seemed to expect a response, so he said, “Maybe I’ll drop by to wish you a happy birthday?”

“That would be fine,” she said in accomplishment.

While those two looked at each other, there was some immediate crosstalk among the women. Meena began sorting the hats by size. Rondi asked Minka, “How is Lady Marguerite?”

Drawing a breath, Minka went wide-eyed, clapping a hand to the counter. “Verlice is working. Guess where.”

There was a stunned silence, then laughter. “Give us a clue, Lady Minka!” Mathurin said.

She looked at him cagily. “He’s supervising a bunch of women. Guess where.”

More laughter. Koschat shook his head. “That’s illegal here.”

The room almost fell apart, and several soldiers came in who had seen the box of caps arriving.

At this time, Rawlins the Polonti was lingering over his breakfast frittata while doing some hard thinking. “Now. How best to employ my disguise?”

Studying the half-baked Polonti, Foliott agreed, “That’s a good question. You want to approach the Lady Rondi without exciting her suspicions or those of her bodyguards, all of which will have been aroused after your Uncle Bickerstaffe’s fiasco with the carriage yesterday.”

“Yes, he should have done that quite differently,” Rawlins agreed.

Foliott was silent a moment, fascinated by the refined Hollowan accent issuing from the thick lips of the slightly misshapen Polonti. Foliott exhaled thoughtfully, tapping his fingers on the table. “The only likely place to approach her is the clothing shop. But you probably should not single her out, specifically, but merely enter looking for appropriate clothes.”

“Yes,” Rawlins said thoughtfully.

“In which case, you also need to think of a backstory; that is, who are you? Where have you come from? How and why did you come here?” Foliott posed, picking up his cup of caova.

“Can’t I just have received a knock on the head to have forgotten all that?” Rawlins asked, looking toward the mirror again. “Will I be mistaken for Efran?” He turned his head to study his profile out of the corner of his eye.

Foliott almost spewed his caova. Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he said, “No, your clothes are too new”—and widely recognizable as being from Froggatt’s. “Wait a moment, though,” he said on a sudden idea. “I may have a cover for you. Hold on.” Rising from the table, he went back into his bedroom.

Rawlins stood to scrutinize his entire form in the mirror. “No, really, on first glance, they may take me for Efran.”

Folliott reentered the dining nook carrying a large black coat decorated with red ribbons and gold braid. Rawlins regarded it indecisively. Folliott explained, “This was the coat of the serjeant-at-arms who served my father when he was briefly Surchatain of Eurus. See how this fits you.” Folliott did not explain how the coat came to be in his possession. In fact, when he was planning Trina’s rescue, he had taken it from the dead man’s room. But he wound up not using it.

Rawlins stood to place his arms in the sleeves and allow Folliott to adjust the coat on his shoulders. “It actually fits rather well,” Folliott said. Settling it down, Rawlins looked approvingly at himself in the mirror.

“Here, now,” Folliott said in the grip of inspiration. “I’m actually remembering him. His name was Twelftree. You actually look a little like him. That’s your name now. You were serjeant-at-arms for—don’t say my father; say, oh, Quilicus. He reigned hardly long enough to matter. Yes. You just now made your way down here from Eurus, through the forests and trolls and whatnot—your clothes were in rags, so you sold some of your medals to get cheap clothes here, but you hung on to your precious coat, emblem of your proud service to your Surchatain,” Folliott finished, deeply moved.

“That’s beautiful,” Rawlins whispered.

“Yes, it is,” Folliott said. “So, you as Twelftree just stagger into the first shop where it looks like there are compassionate people who will help you. That will kill a woman’s resistance every time.”

“Yes,” Rawlins said, looking off. “Serjeant-at-arms Twelftree, proud servant of a long-gone sovereign.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Folliott said, steering him toward the front door by his massive shoulders. “Go march over to The Lands Clothing Shop; I’ll get my hat and walking stick and follow at a distance, just to watch.”

“Yes,” Rawlins said. But before leaving, he had a thought. If he were successful—or whatever happened—he didn’t know when he might be able to return to this house. So while Folliott was in the washroom, Rawlins went back to the room in which he slept. He took up the pouch with its few remaining royals, putting the small bottle in it as well. This he stuffed into the large side pocket of the coat. Then he exited Folliott’s house, walking in a slow, pained but proud stride (his stride actually being pained because the work boots were now a shade too small).

As he progressed to The Lands Clothing Shop next door, one old man who had been monitoring Folliott’s house saw the lumbering man at once. Squinting at the great figure walking slowly away, Reinagle’s eyes filled with tears. “Twelftree,” he whispered. Weak and unsteady, too proud to use a cane, Reinagle stumbled after him.

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Chapter 9

The Lands Clothing Shop was rather busy at this time. Meena was helping a customer who desired alterations to a suit he'd bought elsewhere; Rondi and Minka were straightening up the accessories table; Youshock was watching everyone who came and went from the back room (which back door was locked); Seagrave and Skevi were making small talk while he kept his eyes on whoever approached the accessories table, and a stream of Abbey soldiers were coming in to claim their flat caps, attended by Racheal, Sosie, Mathurin, and Koschat.

This last endeavor was particularly noisy, as the men exhibited the maturity of three-year-olds in trying on caps, taking them off, putting them on each other, or fighting over a particular cap which was just like a hundred others. So almost no one immediately noticed the large man in the decorated black coat standing just inside the doorway. He was drinking in Rondi.

She noticed him, and went still. Minka looked at him, then at her. Rondi whispered, "It's him. I don't know how it could be, but it is."

Minka whispered back, "Stay still. Seagrave is right behind us." Seagrave looked at them, then looked at the stranger.

All at once, the shop went quiet as all eyes went to the semi-Polonti in the serjeant-at-arms coat. After a moment, Koschat came over to look him hard in the face, noting the nonstandard nose and the scratches on his cheek. "Who are you?" Koschat breathed. The stranger was a good three inches taller than he.

The sad-eyed man looked down at him and said, "My name is Twelftree. I was serjeant-at-arms under"—he briefly blanked out, unable to remember the name that Follriott had given him—"a Surchatain of Eurus who is no more."

All of the Abbey men in the shop gathered around him. "You talk like a Hollowan," one said.

"You stand like a *hookama*," another observed, that being a Polonti woman of ill repute.

"Where did you get those scratches?" Mathurin asked through bared teeth. No one noticed someone else entering the shop at this time.

Another Abbey man lifted the edge of the stranger's coat. "Look at the belt! Clothes from Froggatt's!" he laughed.

Maintaining an impassive expression, Rawlins began to sweat. Koschat gestured, "Take him to the Captain."

But behind the artificial Polonti came the strangled cry, "Twelftree! It is you!" Rawlins slowly turned, thinking that Follriott had entered the performance.

The men drew back as Reinagle, almost blinded by tears, came up to pat the beribboned and corded black coat. "Twelftree. The only loyal man I ever had; the only one who protected me with all his heart. I thought you were dead! O good and faithful Twelftree, come back to my house, and I will give you all I have for your service. Come. Come now." So saying, the weeping old man persuaded the great Polonti hybrid out of the shop.

The men stared at each other. Minka looked at Rondi, who raised her brows, subtly shaking her head. "So the three of them are in it together," Minka whispered, meaning Rawlins, Follriott and Reinagle.

“I don’t know how they did it, but that’s him,” Rondi confirmed in a whisper.

Meanwhile, Koschat was instructing Elrod, “Go tell the Captain what all just happened.”

“Yes, sir,” Elrod said, running out.

Folliott had arrived on the sidewalk outside the clothing shop in time to see Rawlins (“Bicks,” as Folliott knew him) enter. Folliott waited, watching tentatively to see if the great hulk would be hauled back out to be taken to Efran, or worse.

But while he was watching, another figure stumbled up to throw open the shop’s door. Recognizing him at once, Folliott grew concerned. As far as he knew, his father was never aware of what had happened to his serjeant-at-arms’ coat—all anyone knew was that Twelftree had been killed by the Goulven hunters. If Reinagle exposed Bicks, Folliott would lose an entertaining tool, but that’s all the likely damage that would come to himself.

So he watched, then caught his breath to see Reinagle coming out of the shop clinging to Bicks, patting the coat lovingly. As they began walking back toward the old man’s house together, Folliott was staring at them so fixedly, he never noticed the Polonti soldier emerging to leap upon a horse and ride down New North Road.

Like a man bewitched, Folliott watched Reinagle and Bicks cross the road to the old man’s house. Abruptly, the horrible realization dawned on Folliott that his father thought this was truly Twelftree come back from the dead—for Reinagle to reward him accordingly. The old man had so few friends that whenever he was deluded into thinking someone an ally, he poured out on him what he valued most—money—until coming to himself and having him put to death (when he was Surchatain, at least).

Irrespective of that certainty for Bicks, by the time that happened, he’d have drained the codger of every last royal he had. “The potion,” Folliott gasped. If he could dispose of it, Bicks might begin reverting quickly enough to alert the old man to the scam before he’d given “Twelftree” everything. So Folliott jammed his hat down on his head and hoisted his walking stick to run the few paces to his house.

Arriving, he had to fumble with his keys for a moment to get the front door unlocked, then he burst into his home as though catching thieves in the act. He ran to the bedroom he had allotted to Bicks—the scoundrel! The blackguard!—before falling on the small bedside table to search it. Then he dropped to his knees to search the window-washer clothes, the floor around them, the bed, the washstand. He also pawed through the satchel of clothes that Bicks had brought over.

Finally, he raised up in illumination. “He took it with him,” Folliott breathed. Standing, he reemerged from his house to slide along its eastern side, then peek around the northeastern corner to the next street over, where Reinagle had his house.

And he saw the pair coming like lovers to their nest, Reinagle clinging and cooing. Folliott watched his father draw his beloved bodyguard to the door, then paw through a set of keys before finding the right one. When the pair entered and the door was shut again, Folliott drew back to wipe his brow and think.

He went around to his front door to toss in his hat and stick, then skulked across the street to Reinagle’s house. Knowing its layout, he slipped along the outside on the east, drawing up to the kitchen window in back. The glass panes were abruptly thrown open, and Folliott froze.

He heard his father say, “There, is that more comfortable? I remember that no matter how warm you got in the

coat, you never removed it, so proud were you to wear it. Are you hungry? Well, then, we'll take care of that. Kustka! KUSTKA! There you are! Here, go get a deluxe beef dinner from Croft's, and their best ale. And pie. A whole pie. Yes, take the whole pouch, just in case. I don't know how much it costs, and I don't care. Hurry! Go!"

Folliott closed his eyes in dismay, listening to his stingy, acrid father brood over his long-lost serjeant-at-arms like a mother hen. Worse, Bicks had quickly learned to reply only in grunts or sighs, as though traumatized by all he had suffered in the many months since the Goulven attack. Folliott continued to listen, his stomach rising, until Kustka returned with the deluxe dinner and mostly empty pouch.

While the servant was unloading all the food on the table, there was a knock on the door. Reinagle waved impatiently to his servant, "Get rid of them!"

"Yes, sir," Kustka sighed. Folliott, still outside at the window, straightened in suspense. No one ever came to see his father.

Shortly, more than one pair of footsteps were heard advancing from the door. Kustka entered the kitchen nook to step aside for Captain Efran to enter, the soldier Hollis at his heels.

(Unknown to the residents or the eavesdropper, a second soldier, Cyneheard, had been sent on a preliminary reconnaissance around the house. Coming to the northeastern corner to see the backside of the intent listener at the window, Cyneheard considered that, then quietly withdrew.)

Reinagle glanced up to scowl at the Captain, "What do you want, Efran? Is a man not entitled to entertain old friends at his own house?"

"Who is your visitor, Reinagle?" Efran asked mildly, studying the seated figure who was holding himself very still.

"This is my serjeant-at-arms Twelftree, who I thought was dead. He just now made it down from Eurus with his hide barely intact!" Reinagle said, trembling with various emotions.

"I see. Stand up, please, Twelftree," Efran said. Reinagle began an indignant protest, but Rawlins slowly stood, his long-suffering eyes fixed hazily on the distance. Efran came over to look him in the face, as did Hollis behind him. The more they looked, the more bewildered they looked. Then Efran asked, "Where are you from?"

Reinagle objected, "I told you! Eurus!"

But Efran was waiting to hear from the aberrant Polonti, who finally said, "Over many months I walk from Eurus. Almost died."

Efran remained blank-faced while Hollis gaped at the awkward commingling of accents and speech patterns, not to mention the lack of any evidence of sustained physical exertion. "Where are you staying?" Efran asked.

"Here! He's staying here! Now go away!" Reinagle insisted, trembling. Rawlins saw no reason to add to that.

Efran ceded the field, for now. "Very well," he said. As he moved away, he looked down at the man's pants from Froggatt's and the workman's boots that, while not clean, showed no evidence of hard wear. Then he saw the telltale bulge in the pocket, and asked idly, "What've you got in the coat pocket, there?"

Behind him, Kustka could look straight down into the gaping pocket to glimpse a money pouch. Rawlins was

dumb, but Reinagle cried, “You’ve no right to ask! Go away, Efran!” Raising his hands, Efran exited via the front door with Hollis following.

They came down the steps to see Cyneheard salute. “Captain, there’s a gent listening at the back window. I didn’t disturb him.”

“Ah. Well dressed?” Efran asked.

“In a good suit, yes, sir, probably from The Lands Clothing Shop or a private tailor. I didn’t get a good look at it or his face,” Cyneheard replied.

Gesturing to their horses, Efran said, “I’m betting that’s Folliott, who’s justifiably concerned about the competition for his father’s money. All right, then, let’s check in at the shop.”

All they had to do to get there, of course, was walk over to the next street. As soon as they tethered their horses outside and opened the shop door, Kraken began working his reins loose from the post. Inside, the bodyguards saluted and Minka rushed up to land on Efran. She whispered, “Did you hear about him? Rondi swears it’s Rawlins.”

“Yes, I just saw him at Reinagle’s,” Efran said, glancing around. Besides the bodyguards and the men wanting caps, there were two customers in the shop. A third had just entered behind them.

When Rondi came up beside Minka, he asked her, “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing to me specifically. He just announced that his name was Twelftree and he was serjeant-at-arms for a Surchatain who was no longer alive,” she said in whisper. “Koschat told him to be taken to you, but then Reinagle came in just weeping over him. I don’t think it was an act.”

“All right, we need to get somewhere to talk,” he said.

“Firmin’s,” Minka grinned.

He nodded, then looked to Racheal at her counter. “Can we bring you something from Firmin’s?”

“Thank you, Captain, but we get meals in,” she replied, smiling.

“Well then, fall in,” he instructed his men, Minka, Rondi, and their men, and they departed in an attempt to beat the midday rush.

About that time, just one street south of The Lands Clothing Shop, an elderly man entered Wonders & Illusions. The proprietor at the counter glanced over, then paused. The old man came to the counter to say, “Good afternoon. I am Pastor Benedetti of the East Lands Chapel right next to you here. I would like to invite you to our services, which are held every Dominica. I live in the back of the chapel, so if you have needs at any time, feel free to come to me.”

The shop owner stared at him tensely for a moment, then Benedetti asked, “What is your name, son?”

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Chapter 10

Almost reluctantly, the proprietor swallowed and said, “My name is Melvon.”

“May I pray for you?” Benedetti asked.

“Not right now,” Melvon said.

“Very well. Come over any time,” Benedetti said. He turned and left the shop.

Struggling over something, Melvon stood looking at the empty doorway for a while. Then he knelt to begin cleaning out the cabinets under his counter. With an air of disgusted resignation, he took everything out and threw it all away.

When Efran’s group invaded Firmin’s outdoor dining area, Lilou came bounding over. “Efran! We have chicken fritters deep frying! It’s Firmin’s secret recipe.”

“That’s excellent, Lilou. Better bring all you have to start with,” he said, glancing over the number of men taking seats around them. “And mild ale, of course. Oh, and fresh fruit for the ladies, whatever you have,” he added.

“Yes, Efran,” she said, turning. Before taking his seat, he paused to raise a hand to Ionadi sitting under the back canopy to roll utensils in napkins—both of which he tried to encourage his men to use, especially the new Polonti. Ionadi waved back at him.

He turned to sit in the chair that Minka was patting. She and Rondi were sitting together on the side of the table facing the street. Mathurin was sitting around the corner to Rondi’s left, while Efran was now around the corner to Minka’s right. This allowed them all an unimpeded view of the street, which was sometimes necessary and often entertaining. The rest of the men settled at tables around them.

As Lilou and a busboy began handing out bottles of ale, Efran leaned toward Rondi. In a low voice, he said, “Minka tells me that you’re convinced your visitor today was Rawlins. Tell me why.”

“I wish I could,” she began. “There was just something about the way he spoke, and the way he looked at me. His eyes. And—his nose. Does that make sense?” she laughed weakly.

“In a way, yes, because I talked to him too—as much as Reinagle would let me,” he said, leaning back to receive his ale.

“I don’t understand how that’s even possible, though,” Rondi said, glancing at Mathurin. He looked at her complacently.

“It’s not only possible, Minka and I have seen it done with potions,” Efran said. Brows elevated, Minka nodded as Rondi and Mathurin looked quickly at her. Efran added, “We’ve also seen how unstable they are, both in unexpected results and how quickly they wear off.”

Minka agreed. “Not only that, but I can’t imagine why anyone would try to fool Reinagle, of all people. He’s doddering, but not stupid. And he’s very suspicious. As soon as he sees something off, his brain will chip away at it until it all falls apart. And then—” She rolled her eyes in dread at the implications.

“Unless it was accidental,” Efran said, lifting his face in thought. “If Rawlins intended to fool Reinagle, he would have gone to Reinagle. But he went to the shop, again.”

“With his face scratched, still,” Mathurin said, turning up his ale.

The other three reacted in immediate recognition. “That’s right!” Minka said while Rondi nodded firmly.

Efran asked her, “What did he say again?”

Rondi scrunched her eyebrows to think. “He entered like an actor on stage, and looked right at me. That was the first clue I had that it was him. With all the people in the shop, and prettier ones [here she glanced at Minka] he looked straight at me and said his name was Twelftree; he’d been a serjeant-at-arms under a Surchatain who was dead—”

“Hold it,” Mathurin said, putting down his bottle to lean forward. “There was something more. . . . He said, ‘I was serjeant-at-arms under—’ and then he stopped. He paused as though he didn’t have a name at hand.”

“That’s right,” Minka breathed. “And he threw out, ‘under a Surchatain who is no more.’ He didn’t want to say a name.”

“Or couldn’t remember what name he was supposed to say,” Efran said thoughtfully, watching Folliott idly stroll up the opposite sidewalk. Turning his head toward Cyneheard several tables behind them, Efran whistled lightly. When Cyneheard (and everyone else) looked over, Efran jerked his head slightly toward Folliott across the street, then raised his eyebrows in query to Cyneheard. He craned his neck to see, and his face cleared as he nodded in confirmation.

“So, there’s another player,” Efran said, turning back around. Then he told them about Cyneheard’s finding a man eavesdropping on Reinagle and his serjeant-at-arms. “That man he just identified as Folliott.”

While the other three pondered this, Efran asked, “How did Reinagle happen to come into the shop? Did he recognize Rawlins?”

Mathurin looked suddenly thunderstruck. “No, Captain, but *the coat*. He came in with his eyes fixed on the coat. I never even saw him look Rawlins in the face. Did you?” he asked Rondi, then Minka.

Rondi shook her head and Minka said, “Rawlins must have been about the right size, for the coat to fit. And if the original Twelftree had dark hair. . . . Reinagle’s eyes are weak, anyway. That’s why he squints all the time. He should be wearing spectacles.”

Rondi spread her hands in sudden illumination. “Suppose Folliott had the coat!”

The other three stared at her. “Then everything fits,” Efran said. “Except . . . *why?*”

“Money, Captain,” Mathurin said, taking another swig. And Lilou ran up with their chicken fritters and sliced pears.

That evening, Rawlins, fully fed, lay in a bed that was as cozy and comfortable as Reinagle could make it, after having his servant haul in Reinagle’s very own mattress for his beloved serjeant-at-arms. Despite that, Rawlins felt as though he were lying in a bed of nettles.

His situation was unstable, untenable, and highly precarious. He could imagine just how quickly the old man's fondness would turn to outrage the minute he began to perceive something askew. That could be precipitated by anything, but especially by a slip on Rawlins' part—something he said, or didn't say, some memory he couldn't call up, some jarring accent in his voice. But the moment of doom would most likely come when the potion wore off just enough for Reinagle to look at him and say, "You're not Twelftree." That would spell the end of him. But so would acting prematurely. He needed a plan.

Rawlins lay awake for hours until a glimmer appeared in the fringes of his thought. Taking hold of this hope, he spun it out until he had enough of a plan to rest easy for a while.

Also that evening, Minka lay so quietly in Efran's arms that he thought she'd gone to sleep. He had reached over to extinguish the bedside candle when she murmured, "Isreal's looking so much better. And he's shooting so well, the men come over to watch him. I think the other children stopped practicing because they didn't want to be compared with him."

"Which means I'd better pick up my practice," he observed.

She chuckled, snuggling into him. Then she said, "Oh, and Noah quit at Lemmerz's."

He raised up. "What? Why? It's only been two or three days!"

"He says it's all just paperwork or sweeping," she said, scrunching back under his arm. He groaned, but she said, "Don't worry; he'll find something he likes."

When he was silent, she raised up a little. "You don't think so?"

"No, I do," he said, shifting. "I was just thinking about Justinian, when he was married to Adele. I took him off mucking stables—which he wouldn't do anyway—and sent him out to gather information for us."

"Which was brilliant," she said.

"Yes, he found his calling," he admitted. "I just hope it doesn't take as long with Noah."

She laughed in sympathy, stretching up to kiss his neck. So he rolled over to her again.

Folliott, alone in his house, lay in bed grinding his teeth for most of the night. Finally, toward sunrise, he sat up. "What a simple solution," he murmured. "I'll carry that out at once."

Unfortunately, Folliott slept late the following morning—April 17th. However, Rawlins was up early to implement the beginnings of his own plan. He rose to neatly clean his room, then went to the kitchen where Kustka was sullenly preparing breakfast for his master. With the tray of ham and eggs prepared according to very specific directions, he lifted it to almost drop it again at the appearance of the lumbering Polonti. "You startled me!" Kustka blurted.

"I must work," Rawlins told him. "Give me work for Surchatain."

"Yeah, well, he's not Surchatain anymore, and peevish about it, so you'd best call him 'Master.' Also, he slept badly on the old mattress last night, so watch yourself," Kustka warned him. Though disgruntled at the

appearance of the new old favorite, Kustka was not bright enough to see how he might use the situation to his own benefit.

“Give me tray,” Rawlins said, holding out his beefy hands. Kustka did, and Rawlins almost dropped it right away, unaccustomed to large hands.

Kustka gasped, “Let me take it!” Of course, if the brute dropped it, Kustka would be blamed.

“I’ve got it,” Rawlins said, irritated. Kustka glanced at the sudden discrepancy in his voice, but watched the oaf carry the tray to Reinagle’s bedroom. Then Kustka had to hop forward to open the door for him.

Sitting up in bed, Reinagle was trying to get comfortable on the old mattress (which was Kustka’s, in fact, who was now sleeping on a pallet). When Reinagle looked up to see his beloved protector with his breakfast tray, his face softened. Rawlins set the tray carefully on the bedside table and said, “Master must sleep on his mattress. It is no good for me; I am used to the hard ground.”

Reinagle looked relieved and newly in love. “If you say so, Twelftree. Just take the tray back to the nook; we’ll eat in there.”

Wincing, Rawlins delicately picked up the tray again to carry it, glassware shuddering, back to the table. Reinagle followed, bellowing, “Kustka! Change the mattresses back!”

“Yes, Master.” Having grown beyond exasperation, Kustka was only glad to get his bed back.

As Kustka lugged the old mattress out of his master’s bedroom, Reinagle sat at the table to ask his beloved, “Have you eaten, Twelftree?”

“I need but little,” Rawlins said, picking up the heel of a barley loaf to nibble.

“Don’t be absurd; Kustka will fix your breakfast when he’s done. KUSTKA! Fix Twelftree’s breakfast when you’re done!”

The muffled reply “Yes, Master” came from behind the walking mattress.

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Chapter 11

Meanwhile, Rawlins told Reinagle, “I must work.”

“‘Work’? What do you mean?” Reinagle asked, slightly anxious.

“If you need no protection, then I must work for you,” Rawlins said, trying to sound protector-ish.

“There’s nothing that needs doing,” Reinagle said while Kustka was struggling to work the Master’s mattress out through the door of Rawlins’ room. Having accomplished that, he lugged it toward the Master’s room.

“Then I will clean.” Rawlins picked up the water pitcher from the table. Its handle being unexpectedly small, the pitcher slipped out of his large hand to crash into pieces on the floor.

While he stood staring down at it, Reinagle said hastily, “Don’t worry over that. Sit down. Kustka! Come clean this up!”

“Yes, Master,” Kustka said, now momentarily trapped between the thick mattress and the doorway of Reinagle’s bedroom.

“I must work,” Rawlins repeated.

Reinagle looked at him sharply. “Can you make a henhouse? I’ve always wanted to keep chickens.” He issued a small giggle. At the unprecedented sound, Kustka’s head swiveled over from behind the mattress.

At this time, Trina was sitting at Averno’s having a late breakfast with Midgley, one of the flat-cap makers. While Trina endeavored to act friendly, she was most interested in getting the latest updates from Midgley about the women’s clothing she was seeing at The Lands Clothing Shop, particularly the dresses produced by Windry. With just a description, Trina had been able to turn out nice knockoffs at a lower price.

Midgley told her, “Oh, yes, that Windry has just gone off on a whirl! Her new thing is straw hats with interchangeable bands or bows. These hats are crazy, with these big brims that you can leave down, or fold up on one side or both sides. And the bands are made from the same fabrics as the dresses! It’s just wild. They’re so cute. And, for girls who don’t want large brims, she has hats with smaller brims that can still use her fabric bands.

“Oh, look—there goes Minka riding with her little friend that works at the clothing shop. See, Minka’s wearing the hat with the smaller brim turned up on one side. That looks better than the men’s flat caps she was wearing. Yes, the fabric rosette hides the pin that holds the brim against the crown. That does look cute with the dress and her curls, doesn’t it? I wish my hair would curl.

“Oh! Here comes Efran on that wild black horse! Her friend is looking back but Minka hasn’t heard him. She needs to shut up once in a while. Oh! He’s grabbed her off the saddle to kiss her! Can you believe—Oh, NO. She’s lost the hat! There it goes! Oh, how can he laugh at her like that? Isn’t he adorable when he laughs? Oh! One of the soldiers has run out onto Main to grab up her hat! He’s about to get hit! Oh! He’s run over to give Efran her hat. And—he’s just squashed it onto her head! Oh, I’m dying. Isn’t that ridiculous?” Midgley laughed. Glassy-eyed, Trina agreed.

Sitting back, Midgley wound up, “Well, that’s all I know. Oh, except, everybody says that this serjeant-at-arms that used to serve Reinagle that just showed up yesterday is a fake out to fleece him.”

“What?” Trina blinked.

Following three minutes of Midgley’s exposition on the appearance of the fraud, Trina jumped up to run down shortcuts to Folliott’s house.

Meanwhile, upon Reinagle’s confession of his desire to keep chickens, the brave Polonti impostor said, “Yes, I can build a chicken house. But I need money.”

“That’s no problem.” Reinagle waved lightly. “The pouches are in my wardrobe. Each has fifty royals. Take what you need.”

Rawlins got to his feet with, “Yes, Master.” Kustka watched from under Reinagle’s mattress, open-mouthed, as Rawlins lumbered toward him. He picked up the mattress, dropped it on the bed frame, then waved the servant out. So Kustka went to get the broom and dustpan to clean up the broken pitcher.

Meanwhile, Rawlins opened Reinagle’s wardrobe to gape at the number of pouches, bags, and boxes that practically filled it. He quickly removed his coat to place one pouch strap over each shoulder. Then he replaced his coat and returned to the kitchen nook. “Before I get money, I will go look for the best ground for the chicken house, Master.”

“Yes, yes,” Reinagle said happily.

So Rawlins went out to the backyard to see that it was all in clear view of the windows. So he walked around to the west side of the house, which was within view of New North Road and many other houses and businesses. Not only that, but he himself was unknowingly in view of Trina, who had skidded to a stop on her way to Folliot’s house. Instead, she watched the great lumpy Polonti impostor look around.

When he began to cross the front yard to look at the east side of Reinagle’s house, Trina followed. She quickly hid behind a wagon of construction tools and materials that had been sitting on the edge of the road for weeks while its owner waited for lumber. This was next door to Folliot’s house on the east.

Anxious to see what the fraud was doing now, Trina knelt to look under the cart, and froze to see his legs walking toward her. Too frightened to move, she could only watch. The legs stopped on the other side of the wagon, and he withdrew something from it to walk away again.

Cautiously leaning over, she looked past the wagon to see that he was carrying a shovel to the east side of Reinagle’s house. After surveying the area and seeing no one, he began to dig a shallow hole. Then she watched him remove his coat to dislodge two heavy pouches from his shoulders and drop them into the hole. These he recovered with dirt and sod. Then he dropped the shovel and went to the back of the house to reenter the rear door.

Trina sprang up from her hiding place to bang on Folliot’s front door. It took several minutes of urgent beating for him to appear, grumpy and disheveled. “Trina? What in heaven’s name—?”

“Come quickly!” she said, grabbing the sleeve of his lounging robe to pull him off his front steps and around the corner of his house.

Meanwhile, Rawlins had entered the kitchen to find Reinagle finishing his breakfast and Kustka washing dishes. “There you are! Kustka, get his breakfast,” Reinagle ordered.

Rawlins said, “Later, Master. I have found good spot for chicken house, and must get money for wood now.”

“Yes, yes—and then you must eat,” Reinagle insisted.

“Yes, Master.” Rawlins returned to Reinagle’s bedroom to open the wardrobe. Keeping an eye on the bedroom door, he slipped off his coat again to hoist two more pouch straps over his shoulders. He replaced his coat, then took up a small purse with five or six royals.

This he took out to show Reinagle: “I will take this money to get wood for chicken house.”

“Will that be enough?” Reinagle asked doubtfully.

“I will see,” the stalwart Polonti said.

“Then you’ll come eat?” Reinagle asked like an anxious mother.

“Yes, then I eat.” Rawlins turned out the back door again. Keeping an eye on Reinagle, Kustka began quietly eating the breakfast of ham and eggs he had prepared for the new pet.

With two more pouches to be buried, Rawlins hurried across the back of the house toward the east side. Rounding the corner, he jumped in surprise to see Trina and Follriott, with the shovel, standing over the newly uncovered pouches. They all stared at each other, then Follriott said, “Share with us, and we’ll keep quiet.” He lifted out the pouches, shaking off the dirt. Then Trina blew Rawlins a kiss before walking away with Follriott and the gold.

Rawlins stood dumbfounded a moment, then took in his surroundings again. Follriott and the woman were gone, and no one else was in view, so he dug another hole along the wall a few feet down from the first. He dropped the second two pouches into this hole, carefully replacing the sod. He refilled the first hole and restored the grass over that, then stepped back to examine his work. It was such a thorough job that he could not tell where either hole was, exactly.

“No matter; I know about where it is,” Rawlins muttered. Returning the shovel to the wagon at the side of the road, he went around the back of the house again. There, he glanced aside at a lean-to—barely a roof on posts—in which Kustka was slaughtering a piglet, evidently for the midday meal. Preoccupied, Rawlins returned to the dining nook to see Reinagle with quill, ink and paper at the table.

Sitting across from him, Rawlins said, “I will eat now.”

All giggly and happy, Reinagle said, “Yes, Kustka will be back in shortly, but it takes time for the piglet to roast.” He was drawing squares and rectangles on the paper. Also, he was wearing spectacles. “See now, I’m sketching out plans for a coop. Won’t it be grand? I’ve always wanted chickens, and now I have you to help me. I’ve had no one to help me. Did you get wood already?” he asked, glancing up. He paused to look at Rawlins through his glasses.

“No, I—dropped the pouch,” Rawlins said tentatively, noticing his empty hands. *Did I bury it?* He looked back at Reinagle apologetically, but the old man was no longer giggling and chatting. He was studying his serjeant-at-arms.

Hazily voicing his thoughts, Reinagle said, “You . . . don’t look anything like Twelftree.”

“I was injured much,” Rawlins said in his imagined Polonti voice.

“But the coat is his,” Reinagle said, scrutinizing it as well. Gradually apprehending that something was very wrong, he squinted, thinking out loud, “I think I will go talk to Follriott.” He stood in something like a trance. The dropped quill dribbled splotches of ink on his coop plans. Staring at them, Rawlins thought how much the drops looked like blood.

Admirably, he did not panic, only watched Reinagle leave by the front door. Then Rawlins rose from the table to go to Reinagle’s room and ransack it for a traveling bag, into which he stuffed a few of Reinagle’s clothes, as well as a polished silver mirror (which Reinagle obviously kept for its value, not its function). All of the good suits that Rawlins had were now sitting in Follriott’s house.

Taking all this out the back door, Rawlins brushed past Kustka, who was entering with the piglet ready to roast. Rawlins hurried around the east side of the house to locate the new hiding place and dig out both pouches—and the small bag—with his hands. These he also stuffed into the traveling bag. Then he returned to the backyard, moaning, “I’ve got to get rid of this blasted coat.”

As he dropped it off his shoulders, he noticed that the clothes he’d bought at Froggatt’s were sagging on him. Kicking away the coat, he suddenly looked over at the lean-to where Kustka had slaughtered the piglet. Rawlins dropped the bag to go look on the table inside the lean-to, and found everything he needed.

Taking the butcher knife, he went over to lift the coat, placing one foot on the hem to hold it taut. Then he slashed it deeply in the back before dropping it to the grass in the middle of the yard. He replaced the knife on the table in the lean-to and picked up the small bucket of blood from the piglet. This he took over to the coat, which he held by the collar to splash it strategically with the blood, taking care not to get any on himself. Then he tossed the coat down.

He returned the empty bucket to the shed and took up the traveling bag to walk away—forgetting all about Bickerstaffe’s pouch with a few royals and the potion in the pocket of Twelftree’s coat. Kustka watched all of this from the kitchen window.

Responding to a knock on his front door, Folliott opened it to his father standing outside. For a moment they just looked at each other, then Folliott said, “Would you like to come in?”

Reinagle entered to stand blankly as before. “What’s wrong?” Folliott asked, rapidly cataloging what his father may or may not know about Folliott’s recent activities. Reinagle had evidently not seen Trina leave a few minutes ago.

“It’s not Twelftree,” Reinagle said pensively.

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Chapter 12

“Who is not Twelftree?” Folliott asked, noting the spectacles that his father seldom wore for fear of looking old or feeble.

“The man I followed from here to the clothing shop. He had on Twelftree’s coat, but it’s not him,” Reinagle said. His eyes turned suspiciously on his son. “Didn’t you have the coat?”

“He stole it!” Folliott burst out. “I met a fellow yesterday who said he remembered your reign in Eurus. Since he was so complimentary of you, I invited him over to show him a few mementoes I had from then, including the coat of your serjeant-at-arms. While he was looking at it, I had to take a message at the door, and when I returned, he was gone! And so was the coat!”

Now Reinagle began trembling with outrage. “Who was it? What was his name?” he demanded.

“He gave me the name ‘Bicks,’” Follriott shrugged. “Personable fellow, as all criminals are. I’m afraid that I’m so gullible, I never suspected a thing.”

With a cry, Reinagle turned out the door to begin a tottering run back to his house. Follriott followed in curiosity (and possible self-preservation). They both landed in Reinagle’s kitchen, where Kustka was building up a fire in the oven to the right temperature for roasting the piglet.

“Where is he?” Reinagle shouted.

“Who, Master?” Kustka asked, intent on getting the oven temperature right.

“The man who claimed to be Twelftree!” Reinagle cried.

“Oh. He ran outside, Master,” Kustka said.

So Reinagle and Follriott ran out of the back door to look. Spotting the coat in the grass at once (because he was still wearing his glasses), Reinagle picked it up and spread it by the shoulders. “He’s ruined it!” he cried.

Follriott assumed a straight face to ask, “Do you suppose he’s wounded?”

Reinagle barked, “It’s the clumsiest dodge I’ve ever seen! KUSTKA!” he roared, his voice cracking.

Kustka stuck his head out of the back door. “Yes, Master?”

“Did you see this?” Reinagle cried, shaking the coat.

“No, Master. I’ve been trying to get the fire going for the piglet,” Kustka said.

“Bah!” Reinagle threw the coat back to the grass.

Follriott said lightly, “Well, at least he wasn’t here long enough to rob you or anything.”

Reinagle’s eyes narrowed, and he suddenly began stalking back to the house. Follriott followed.

Going straight to the wardrobe in his bedroom, Reinagle flung it open to peer at the pouches, bags and boxes within. Follriott monitored this evaluation closely.

“Eh, apparently not,” Reinagle said.

With a broad smile, Follriott patted his shoulder. “Well, congratulations on getting rid of an impostor with no damage done but to an old coat!”

Reinagle sighed sadly. “He made me miss Twelftree, though.”

“Then let me bring over a bottle of good wine, and we’ll toast good Twelftree,” Follriott offered.

His father nodded acceptance, but said, “I’ll come pick the wine.”

After a moment’s resistance, Follriott laughed, “Why not? You’ve earned it.” And they two left to go to the next street over.

Kustka watched long enough to make sure that they were really gone, then he ran out back to lift the soiled, slashed coat. Avoiding the still-wet blood, he reached into one side pocket and then the other, from which he extracted a mostly flat pouch. But it still held a few royals and something else that he didn't stop to examine right then. He swiftly took the pouch to his little cubicle with a mattressed pallet and hid it under a floorboard.

At this time, with only a mildly inquiring glance from the clerk, Rawlins had secured a room at Firmin's (Croft's was cheaper, but out of the question, as Rawlins had already stayed there). After prepaying a week's rent, he requested and paid for a meal and ale to be brought to his room. Lugging the heavy traveling bag to the second floor, he unlocked his door and went in.

Then he looked down at his hands, which were more or less his hands, and reached up to feel the stubble on his face. This was new; he was fairly sure that he hadn't had facial hair after drinking the potion.

The potion. He slapped his hands to his pockets, feeling nothing—except that his pants suddenly fell down. Reaching back to lock the door, he thought out, "I can't be reverting already; it's only the second day."

With uncertain urgency, he dug in the travel bag for the silvered mirror. Holding it up, he saw mostly his own face, only a little wider than usual. And the hair was still dark, but that was because he'd had the white hair tinted brown. Hadn't he? Now he couldn't remember; everything had happened so quickly.

Abruptly, he remembered the Lady Rondinelli, who had instigated all of this. Thinking about her, he was violently startled by the knock on the door. He hoisted his pants and opened the door to find it was only his meal being delivered.

Rawlins accepted the trencher and ale to set them on the table. Then he sat thinking: what should he do now? Did he care to try anymore to get her? Bickerstaffe had gone back to Crescent Hollow, so that route was cut off. Was there another?

Deep in thought, he began slowly eating.

At this time, the owner of the wagon with the construction tools came over to check on his property, and noted at once the misplaced and dirty shovel. So he began looking through the rest of his tools to see what else was missing. But since he had made no inventory of the wagon to begin with, he couldn't be sure what he had lost. So he began imagining all kinds of things that had been stolen.

Looking down the road, he saw a man in Abbey red beside the Laborers' Hall at the intersection of New North Road and this road, Titchmarsh (named after the owner/operator of Laborers' Hall, who paid a great deal for the privilege, which monies would be used to have it paved). So the owner of the wagon began running toward him, shouting.

As the soldier, Stourt, looked over, the man cried, "I've been robbed of tools from my wagon up the road there!"

"All right, then, I'll come have a look. What's your name?" Stourt asked, walking up the road to meet him.

"Cowlshaw. I'm waiting on lumber to build a house on that plot there. I've got the papers from Administrator DeWitt," he said breathlessly.

"All right," Stourt said.

As they approached the wagon, he asked Cowlshaw, "Do you know what's missing?"

"No, but look! The shovel's been used!" Cowlshaw said, picking it up. Since it had been used and returned, Stourt began looking around. So Cowlshaw did, too.

They saw the disordered sod up against the wall of the house on the next street at once. Stourt began walking over while Cowlshaw ran. They both looked down at the shallow, hastily dug holes from which something had been removed. Looking toward the back of the house, Stourt walked to the corner, where he looked at an unfenced, unkempt yard.

"There! What is that?" Cowlshaw said, pointing to a lump in the middle of the yard. Stourt walked over to pick up the slashed, bloodied coat by the shoulders. "Someone's been murdered," Cowlshaw breathed.

"Eh, perhaps," Stourt said, dropping it again. "I'm going to leave it here and go report to the Captain. You keep watch to see that no one disturbs it."

"Yes, sir," Cowlshaw said. Kustka was watching from the kitchen window, trembling.

While Stourt began trotting down Titchmarsh to retrieve his horse from Laborers' Hall and ride to the fortress, Cowlshaw abandoned the coat to keep watch over his wagon, instead. That left Kustka sweating at the window. His master and his son were drinking amiably in the front room, but the wretched servant was imagining what would happen when they discovered the pouch missing from the coat pocket.

Kustka remembered all too vividly the punishment that descended upon him after he'd taken a couple of pouches from his master and son. Kustka hadn't spent any of it, and told them where he'd hidden it, but his master had thought to starve him after that. Also, Kustka had stopped eating onions raw. Regardless, he never wanted to relive that experience again.

So he ran back to his room to pry up the floorboard and bring out the pouch that he'd taken from the coat pocket. Watching for the man or the soldier, he skulked out to the yard to shove the slender pouch back into the pocket. Then he ran back into the kitchen. Cowlshaw, beside his wagon, was watching the road intently for the return of the soldier with the Captain.

That soldier was now on his way up to the second-floor workroom of the fortress, where the children's tutor Mistress Hazeldene was reporting, "Lord Efran, Noah has decided to apprentice with the farrier Sbarbaro, who has agreed to take him."

Efran groaned, "I can't see him doing that for long."

"Shall I intervene, Lord Efran?" she asked.

"No, let him try it," Efran said.

"Very well." She left to relay the go-ahead. So Noah was taken to the farrier's hot, gritty stall, and quit that day.

Stourt, who had passed Mistress Hazeldene in the corridor, entered the workroom to salute. "Captain, the resident Cowlshaw, who's waiting on lumber to build a house on Titchmarsh, complained that he had some tools stolen, and his shovel had been used. When we saw holes up against the house on the next street, I went around back to find an old military coat that had been cut and bloodied. I left it there with Cowlshaw and came to inform you."

Efran leaned back, laughing, “An old military coat, eh?” He told DeWitt and Estes, “That’s Reinagle’s house; I was out there yesterday talking to him and his serjeant-at-arms ‘Twelftree.’ Looks like he’s gotten skittish and taken leave.”

DeWitt asked, “Is that the one that Rondi suspects to be Rawlins?”

“Yes, I think so. I’ll go see.” Standing, he told Stourt, “You come along.”

“Yes, sir,” Stourt replied.

“Good luck,” DeWitt said. Estes glanced up from his ledger to nod, and Efran left shaking his head.

Shortly, he and Stourt were riding out to the east Lands. As they approached the empty field with the wagon beside it, Cowlshaw ran up to them. “Are you Captain Efran? I just now checked; the coat’s still there. But I don’t know what all’s missing from my wagon.”

“Well, we’ll go check on the coat, first,” Efran said, dismounting. He couldn’t see any room in the wagon for much to have been taken. “We’ll leave our horses with you here.”

“Yes, Captain; that’s fine,” Cowlshaw said in evident disappointment.

Efran and Stourt crossed the road and went around the corner of Reinagle’s house. “There, Captain,” Stourt said, pointing to the black lump in the yard.

Efran went over to lift it up. “Yes, that’s what ‘Twelftree’ was wearing.” He turned it by the shoulders to check it inside and out. “Interesting,” he murmured. “All the blood’s on the outside. No knife?” he asked, looking around on the grass.

“Not here, sir,” Stourt said, then they both looked toward the lean-to.

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Chapter 13

Before checking out the lean-to, Efran reached into one pocket of the coat, then the other, and pulled out the pouch. “Oh ho,” he murmured, holding it up for Stourt to view.

“What’s that crest stamped in the leather?” Stourt asked.

Dropping the coat to the grass to open the pouch, Efran said, “It’s got to be Hollowan. We’ll find out.” He scooped out six royals and a small bottle. Stourt leaned over to look as Efran held the bottle up. “‘Polonti. M,’” he read off the faded label. “Huh.”

“A good half of it’s gone,” Stourt observed.

“Yes, and whoever made it doesn’t want credit for it,” Efran said, checking the bottom of the bottle. “Here.” He

gave the royals to Stourt while stuffing the pouch with the bottle in his back pocket. "Give those to Cowlshaw as compensation for his missing tools; tell him he might better take the wagon home until he gets his lumber. I'm going in to talk to Reinagle." He nodded toward the back door.

"Yes, Captain." Stourt ran the handful of royals to Cowlshaw before the Captain could get in the house without him. Cowlshaw received the money in surprise, but Stourt was already running back to the yard. So Cowlshaw went off to get horses, intending to take the wagon back to his brother-in-law's house in the western section.

The Captain was not at the back door, however; he was in the lean-to, looking over the table. "Knife," he observed, holding it up to Stourt's view. "And it's been wiped clean."

Pointing, Stourt said, "But there's a black thread caught on it."

"So there is," Efran said, squinting at the thread caught in the handle.

"Whew." Stourt turned at something else that was teeming with flies. "Empty blood bucket," he noted.

"Yes, you wouldn't expect our brave Polonti serjeant-at-arms to lose any of his own blood. But I guaranty that the original Twelftree was not Polonti," Efran said thoughtfully.

"No sir, not in Eurus," Stourt agreed.

"Well then, let's see what the ex-Surchatain has to say for his serjeant-at-arms," Efran proposed.

"Yes, Captain."

Efran detoured to the yard to retrieve the coat, then they stepped to the back door, at which Efran knocked. A whey-faced Kustka opened the door to them and drew back. Glancing around, Efran asked, "Where's Reinagle?"

"In the front room with his son, Lord Efran," Kustka said.

"That's good, then." The Captain and Stourt progressed to the front room, in which Reinagle and Folliott were sitting at a table with barely a quarter bottle of wine left between them. Reinagle was issuing a high-pitched giggle while Folliott was snorting into his sleeve.

"Excuse me," Efran said, looking from one to the other. "Are you missing someone, Reinagle?"

The old man turned bleary eyes to him, then straightened his skewed glasses. "Efran. What do you want now? Go away."

With a twisted smile of mocking pity, Folliott said in a slurred voice, "He's looking for your Twerftree, Fadder."

Reinagle looked up to the corner of the room with cloudy, watering eyes. "Alas, dear Twelftree, taking one blow after another meant for me. They were coming at him from all sides, but he stood his ground before me, pushing me into the hidden room to make my escape while they hacked him down. Oh, Twelftree! You should have lived instead of me; you were the better man." Reinagle put his face in one hand.

Efran paused, genuinely moved. "He sounds like a faithful guardian. But what happened to the man who was wearing his coat? Who was he?" Efran laid the garment over an empty chair.

Taking the coat onto his lap, Reinagle began stroking it like a son who had died. Follriott said, “Bicks! Bicks!”—sounding like a parrot taught a new word.

“‘Bicks’?” Efran asked carefully.

“Bicks! Yes. That’s the name he gave me. He got a potion to change his appearance, because she likes Polonti,” Follriott said sleepily.

“‘She’? Who?” Efran asked.

“You know,” Follriott said, laying his head down on the table. Reinagle was hunched over the coat in sorrow.

“I probably do. We’ll see ourselves out,” Efran said. He and Stourt left by the front door to retrieve their horses and ride off.

In a little while, Reinagle raised up. “Kustka. KUSTKA.”

He came running. “Yes, Master.”

Reinagle extended the wavering coat in his direction. “Make a funeral pyre for Twelftree. Make it blaze to the heavens.”

“Yes, Master.” Kustka took the coat, bowing, then made such a large bonfire in the backyard that it spread to the surrounding yards. The neighbors—Walford and his salespeople, Delano’s order taker, Pelagatti and his cap makers, the soldiers Nettleship, Quoid, Ayling, and the whole first floor of Laborers’ Hall—got it contained only with the shoveling of much dirt with whatever tools they could get their hands on. So when Cowlshaw finally returned with horses hours later, he found his brother-in-law’s wagon half burned and mostly empty.

Thanks to Reinagle’s neighbors’ efforts, his house was untouched.

That afternoon, Efran took the pouch up to the workroom to see if Estes or DeWitt could identify it. They couldn’t, so DeWitt suggested he take it down to Ryal. Efran did, and the notary opened a large book of crests to find that the pouch belonged to Lord Bickerstaffe of Crescent Hollow.

“Of course,” Efran muttered. Declaring himself off-duty for the rest of the day, he returned hilltop. There, he lay on a bench with his head in Minka’s lap and watched the children run amok over the back grounds.

Midmorning of the following day, April 18th, Estes summoned Efran to the workroom to alert him that two new children had just arrived at the Abbey fortress. And they were special cases. Estes told him, “Mura and Pewsey have spent the last four days in Nicarber trying—among other things—to catch two little girls of the Picti who are especially wild. They appear to have no parents, no one looking out for them. Mura doesn’t know how they’ve survived. And with the demolition and construction that’s now going on, it’s dangerous for them to run around loose.

“Right now, Bethune and her cousin Derrida have the girls in the women’s bathing room, getting them cleaned up. There’s Aune, who’s about five, and Pember, around six. They’ve been fed, by the way, and they’re going to be brought out to the back grounds when they’re dressed and ready. The immediate problem is that the children’s matron Dorey has met them, and says they’ll need special attendants and quarters—they can’t possibly be put in with the other girls as they are now. And of course, Bethune and Derrida have their own work to do,” Estes said.

“So, you don’t have attendants for them yet?” Efran asked.

“We’re looking,” Estes said. “We’ve put out an emergency call and are offering premium pay.”

“I’d better go out to the back grounds to greet them, then,” Efran said.

“Good luck,” Estes said. “They’re biters, Efran.”

“Oh,” he said. Skeptical that little girls could be that much trouble, Efran proceeded downstairs. Then he remembered Martyn telling them about the trolls sending their little girls into battle. They were very effective against Southerners, who balked at killing any children, even trolls. And while they hesitated, the little girls killed them.

Thinking on this, Efran was stopped in the corridor by Tomer, who told him, “Captain, Noah requests to apprentice with Tallmadge the printer, who has accepted him.”

“Tallmadge? Why, I wonder,” Efran mused.

“I believe Noah saw his fancy new printing press, Captain,” Tomer said.

“Yes, that’s fine,” Efran said with a pat to his shoulder. So Tomer progressed to the courtyard to pass along word. Efran only hoped that Noah stayed with this job, because the business owner was allowed to keep the first six months’ apprentice fee if Noah proved unacceptable or unwilling to stay. And he was racking up the costs.

Efran went on to the back grounds to look around. Still in class, the Abbey children weren’t out here yet. Tourjee and his gardening crew were working, as usual. Garrett had a crew out pruning and checking the peach and apple trees, which were setting fruit. Marlett and his helpers were tending the coops. The fight instructors Nyland and Wyeth had their men drilling, and Quennel had the archers at practice.

Far over in the northwest section, Tess and Ella were working with the horses (although Tess, pregnant, was no longer breaking them. Ella, also pregnant, never was). Aldwin and his helper were also tending the dairy cows over there somewhere, though they and most of the stables were not visible from where Efran was standing.

Various workers were traversing the grounds on their errands—hauling water and firewood to the kitchen, taking out waste to toss over the cliffs or bury in the compost pile. There were no lingerers, no one whose task was unclear. It was a scene of productive order which was played out every day in the fortress and on the hilltop.

There was a sudden minor explosion from the back door. Efran turned to look as two children came streaking out the door, scrambling past the steps. They spent a few minutes pawing and tearing at the clothes that had been bound on them with sashes pulled tight. Unable to tear them off immediately, they looked around.

The slightly taller one with short dark hair—Pember?—pointed with a screech toward the gardens. The smaller one with a crown of angelic blonde hair, Aune, began running toward the nearest section, that with the squash, melons and pumpkins. (These were barely past the seedling stage, with no fruit yet.)

Falling among the neat rows, Aune began ripping plants out of the ground to shred them with her teeth and hands. Of course, Tourjee came right over to begin, “Hey, now, girl, let’s not—” But then she turned on him with teeth and fingernails.

At his cries, the other garden workers hurried over, whom Pember lit upon in rage. Running toward them, Efran whistled a summons. He successfully pulled Aune off Tourjee, so she turned to scratch his arms viciously. Getting her backside against his chest, he pinned her arms to her sides. She then drew a knee up to kick backwards into his groin. He crumpled.

By now, the orchard workers and sparring groups had joined the melee while two garden workers helped Tourjee into the fortress up to the doctor's quarters. But the trained fighters discovered that they had no means of containing the destructive little demons without incurring serious injury to themselves. Anyone who got close received fingers to the eyes, teeth latched onto flesh, or kicking feet. And regardless of what was done in warfare, injuring a child at the fortress for *any* reason was strictly forbidden.

Still on his knees, Efran looked over as Pember broke free to begin demolishing the next garden section of onions, beets, and lettuce. Two men approached to grab her arms, one on each side, holding them out so that she couldn't reach their hands with her teeth. This was a successful restraint until she lifted her face to scream in pain. They had no choice but to let her go. She redoubled her destruction of the garden.

Efran managed to stand with his hands on his knees, wondering how on earth Bethune and Derrida had been able to bathe and dress them, or how they had been transported here at all. (He did not know that the girls had been brought here while deeply asleep, and only began coming around after they were bathed and fed.) "God of heaven," he breathed, "how can we fulfill our purpose with these children? Are they unsalvageable? What can we do?"

Then he looked quickly toward the back door, where the Abbey children were emerging after morning classes. With them were Minka and Joshua. "No," Efran gasped, now upright. "Stay back!" he called, waving them urgently back to the door.

They paused in dismay, looking in bewilderment at the small vandals wreaking destruction. Enraged, Hassie came to the front of the group to demand, "What are you doing?"

Pember and Aune swiveled toward her. Seeing all the children, the new girls spread their lips over bloody teeth in delight, then began rushing toward them with fingers clawed. Several men sprang forward with the obvious intent to protect the Abbey children at any cost. Efran could only watch in silent distress.

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Chapter 14

Suddenly Isreal was standing in front of Hassie to bellow at the little savages. Though no one understood him, he spoke with power and authority.

Pember and Aune paused, assessing him. Taking another step toward them, he motioned to the ground with another order. They sat.

Then he looked toward Efran to say, "Hartshough, Papa. Hartshough!"

The girls took advantage of this distraction to begin scrambling toward him on all fours, but he wheeled back to

harangue them again, violently directing them down. They withdrew to sit, watching him warily. By this time, men were already riding out of the courtyard gates to fetch Hartshough.

While everyone on the back grounds—and a number at the back door and windows—watched tensely, Isreal kept the girls immobilized with words he remembered from—somewhere. Listening, Efran caught intonations from Hartshough's conversation with Isreal when they had first met. At that time, Isreal had recognized him as part mountain troll, kin to those who had rescued him as a foundling.

But as Pember and Aune listened to him, they sat up watchfully, murmuring to each other. This made the spectators uneasy, for it appeared that he was drawing on everything he could remember, getting some of it right and some of it wrong, repeating himself when he could think of nothing else. Evidently, the girls were cognizant enough to realize that his power was limited. With crafty smiles, they began creeping toward him, baring their teeth.

Right before they jumped him, Hartshough came out of the back door. Only a few people noticed him; Isreal's back was to him and the girls never saw him. But Minka and the children parted for him gratefully, pointing to the confrontation about twenty feet away, where the soldiers had thrust themselves in front of Isreal to protect him. So Hartshough began walking toward them.

As he advanced, he began to change. Those who had never seen his true appearance watched in silent trembling. He grew taller, broader, and lumpier as his butler's suit melted into a flowing robe. Then everyone who had watched the mountain trolls harvest the frozen walking sticks recognized him.

When the girls sprang on the soldiers, Hartshough breathed words of command. It was not so much a voice as it was the opening of a realm which encompassed his hearers—a realm of cold vastness, echoing darkness, rock and water which covered the unseen.

Isreal quickly turned to him; the soldiers fell back, and the girls fell down. Laying a hand on Isreal's shoulder, Hartshough as Toogood stood over Pember and Aune speaking words while they hunched at his feet. When they went limp, he resumed his butler's appearance. Isreal hugged him and everyone else converged on them.

Hartshough bowed to Efran. "Thank you for summoning me, Lord Efran, which I presume that this brave young man alerted you to do." The children around Isreal patted him, shook him or hugged him while he grinned awkwardly. Hartshough continued, "Our first task, if you allow, is to transport these children down to the chapel where Lady Marguerite is waiting to receive them."

Efran had looked over to whistle, but Connor and Shane were bringing their horses over on foot. Connor asked Hartshough, "Can we carry them horseback, sir?" The girls looked to be safely unconscious.

"Yes, if Lord Efran permits," Hartshough said.

"Take them," Efran said.

Connor and Shane mounted their horses so that other men could hand the limp bodies up to them. With each sleeping child secured by an arm, the men loped easily around the east side of the fortress to take the kitchen gate to the new switchback.

A general exhalation of relief wafted through the back grounds, then everyone looked to Hartshough again. Efran asked, "Are these the savages that I filled Nicarber with?" Minka was staring at the crusted bloody scratches all up his arms.

“Not exactly, Lord Efran,” Hartshough began. “These children are not Picti, they are Shoard, which is a cave-dwelling race similar to mountain trolls, except they interbreed so frequently with Southerners that they have become indistinguishable as a separate race. But Shoard are careless about what they eat, and there are many species of cave life, especially in the water, which contain parasites that affect the brain.” His hearers looked uneasily at each other.

Hartshough continued, “I do not know how these children attached themselves to the Picti, nor whether they ate the harmful creatures themselves, or were born to parents who ate them. But my mountain troll kin have developed a regimen which should clear them up. Lady Marguerite will house them while they are being treated.”

“They’ll destroy the chapel,” Efran said, depressed.

“No, Lord Efran, they shall be contained. My kin have had considerable experience with the affliction,” Hartshough said.

Minka said, “Thank you, Hartshough; we’re tremendously grateful for your help. But—what about the men who were injured by the girls? Are they in danger from the parasites?”

Hartshough paused long enough to make most of the men queasy. “It is unlikely, but possible, Lady Minka. So we shall prepare treatment for everyone who received wounds to the skin. How many would there be?” he asked, looking over the group.

Efran glanced back at them, and said, “Ah, most of us standing here, I’m afraid. But now I’m wondering—how in the world did Bethune and Derrida get their names out of them?”

Hartshough said, “‘Aune’ and ‘Pember’ are not their actual names, Lord Efran, but names that Mura gave them when they were trying to catch them.”

“I see,” Efran breathed. “But, Hartshough—how were you able to put them to sleep like that? And what was it that Isreal learned?” The children patted Isreal again, and Hassie squeezed his hand. He turned red and leaned on Efran.

“Well, Lord Efran, because mountain trolls do not fight, as you may know, we have developed other methods to contain adversaries or intruders. You may think of them as . . . lullabies,” Hartshough replied.

This made everyone laugh. Calix said, “It sounded more like orders!”

“Yes, that is the lullaby which some hearers require,” Hartshough said placidly.

“So is that what you heard?” Efran asked Isreal, who nodded, grinning. “How did you know it would work on them?” Efran asked him again.

“I didn’t know; only that it work on me. So I try it,” Isreal said.

Toby declared, “You’re just like Efran, Isreal.” The other children declared that this was so, and Isreal drank in the confirmation of his father’s smile.

That afternoon, Rawlins was sitting in the mostly deserted outdoor dining area of Croft’s, nursing his third ale.

The servers allowed him to sit because (1) he paid for everything as he ordered it and (2) this was the dead hour between the midday rush lingerers and the early dinner crowd. Although two very attractive women had been waiting on him here, he hardly looked at them. He was trying to figure out what had gone wrong and what to do about it now.

“I follow half-brained impulses,” he said to himself. “I need to learn to make a plan and stick to it. Who is this Folliot, and why should I bother about him? He’s not helping me.” He put a hand to his pocket before remembering that he’d left Bickerstaffe’s pouch with the royals and the potion in the pocket of the coat. Fortunately, he had two of Reinagle’s pouches.

“And then I decorated the coat with evidence of my murder,” he said in satisfaction, taking another swig. Even if it didn’t convince anyone, he felt confident that his newish appearance—along with changing from the blasted Froggatt’s clothes into Reinagle’s—would help disguise him.

Abruptly taking the mirror out of his pocket, he studied his face again. Strange that it seemed to keep evolving, somehow. It was its regular shape, but his eyes were brown and his nose broad. “I look like a half-breed,” he observed distantly. “The potion was a stupid idea—it started reverting the day after I took it, then began bouncing back and forth.”

And Lady Rondinelli? Rawlins sighed, looking aside. In all the plotting and subterfuge surrounding her, he never imagined that he might lose his heart to her. And everything he did to try to get her back to Crescent Hollow only pushed her away.

Vories began to pass by his table at that time, wondering if he’d ever get up so that she could set it for someone who would order a meal. But he looked over to her and asked, “What would you want a man to do to show you that he was in love with you?”

Of course, he was trying to glean a woman’s viewpoint to apply it to Rondinelli. But of course, she was thinking that he asked because he was in love with her—after all, she was widely considered to be a very attractive woman herself. So she paused to assess him.

His clothes were good, for what he wore, having no jacket. That was excusable, however, for the day was warm. And he was rather slouched in his chair, kind of like Efran when he was relaxing. In fact, the more she studied him, the more she thought he looked a little like Efran. So she said, “I would have to know that he would do anything to make me happy.”

He sat up. “And what is it that would make you happy? Sit, please. Do you want anything?” he asked, looking around for a server. That was her, of course.

She sat. “No, thank you, I don’t need anything. What could a man do to make me happy?” She thought about that in context of her relationship with Efran. They had been lovers, but he always slipped away when she wanted him to stay. She could never get enough of him—not just his lovemaking, but his smile, his banter, his cheerful indifference to things that everyone else lost their minds about. She did regret complaining about him to his Commander, but, by that time, she could already feel his attention fading, withdrawing, as though . . . he hadn’t yet found the one he was looking for.

“I want to know that I’m the one he’s always wanted, that I’m the one he’s been looking for. I want to hear him say, ‘It’s you that I’ve needed all this time.’” Her eyes misted as she looked into the past for a future that was not to be.

“That’s beautiful,” Rawlins whispered. “Thank you very much.” He stood to put a royal in her hand, then walked away. She started to throw it at his back, then changed her mind to put it in her pocket.

Rawlins walked without knowing where he was going, then looked up to find himself standing in front of The Lands Clothing Shop. So he entered.

From the corner of his eye, he saw her arranging merchandise on a center table. There was a red uniform standing near her, and two more uniforms looked over as he walked in. All this he saw in his peripheral view like furniture or trees. They were just part of the scenery around the goddess.

Eyes downcast, he went to the center table to look at the shirts and accessories offered upon it. “I need clothes,” he muttered mostly to himself, “but I don’t think that’s what she’s looking for.”

Recognizing him, Rondi paused without raising her eyes. Allyr, the soldier next to her, snorted, “We’d be walking around in our underwear if it weren’t for the ladies.”

Rawlins grunted in acknowledgment and Teschner came over to appraise him. His clothes were good, though wrinkled and lacking the jacket. He was either negligent about shaving or in the process of growing out a beard, but there was no evidence of scratches on his face. And he hadn’t even looked at Rondi. So Teschner’s eyes went to the next man who entered.

Looking to Allyr, Rawlins asked, “What do they want?”

“The ladies?” Allyr asked, and Rawlins nodded. “Besides all your time and your money, I’ve no idea.” Rondi glanced at him, laughing in mock offense, so Allyr added, “Present company excepted, naturally.”

Rawlins looked at her to ask, “What do *you* want?”

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Chapter 15

Rondi inhaled, then met his gaze. “In a man?” she asked. Rawlins barely nodded, lost in the sparkling clarity of her eyes. She said, “I want the one I’ve already got my heart set on. You need to look for a woman who has an open heart.”

Teschner, frowning, turned at what sounded like a personal reply. And then he knew who the man was. But Teschner waited to hear what he would say.

Rawlins took the blow silently, then murmured, “That’s good counsel.” The empty shell that was left of him turned to walk out.

Teschner’s eyes followed him until the door closed on his leaving. Then he asked her, “That was him, wasn’t it?” She raised her brows and Allyr looked between them in alarm.

At dinner in the fortress that evening, the men who had been on the back grounds that afternoon met to compare their battle injuries after having been treated by Wallace and Leese. Laughing and groaning over the

unprecedented experience, they looked to see the Captain gingerly taking his seat on the back bench next to Minka. For tonight, he let Quennel hold Joshua on his lap, but Isreal darted to claim the space between his father and mother. Minka hugged him tightly with one arm.

Holding his bandaged arm aloft, Mumme said, “Well, Captain, how about commendations for all?” This proposal was met with resounding cheers.

Raising his chin at Wardly, Efran said, “For what? None of you slackers could contain a couple of little girls having a bad day. The only one who deserves it is Isreal, and probably Bethune and Derrida.”

The men groaned; Isreal grinned up at him. But Minka said, “Hartshough?”

“Oh, yes, we’d’ve been dead without him,” Efran grunted—which rather negated his previous comments.

But she meant the actual Hartshough, who had appeared at the door of the dining hall with a large basket on his arm. “Yes, Lady Minka. Lord Efran, I have medicines to counteract any possible parasitic infection, so those of your men who were injured this afternoon need to come receive a bottle.” So saying, he placed a four-ounce stoppered bottle before Efran. Hartshough added, “This is not an application for the skin, but to be taken by mouth.”

Picking it up with immediate suspicion, Efran took out the cork stopper to sniff the milky white substance that filled half of it. “What’s in it?” he asked, grimacing slightly.

“I do not know, Lord Efran; the treatment was prepared by my clan the Guppenbergers, who are experienced with such matters,” Hartshough said. The men gathered around him to take the small bottles. But they all waited for the Captain to drink his first.

He looked increasingly dubious, tilting the bottle to watch the viscous liquid slowly progress to the opening. Abruptly, he put it down to demand, “Where is Mattias? I haven’t seen him since we dropped him off at Featheringham. Hasn’t he come to the Lands yet?” This was the wounded Hollowan boy who didn’t want the undertaker to bury him. Efran had left him at Featheringham to recuperate about seven weeks ago.

There was laughter at the obvious dodge, and Captain Rigdon said, “He’s still at Featheringham, Captain, because Commander Barr made him Chief Utility Officer. His donkey Qui is wearing a yeoman’s badge.”

“Oh.” Efran regarded the bottle in resignation as his men looked on, grinning. Everyone knew how particular the Captain was about what he put in his mouth. Taking a breath, he upended the bottle to chug it, which was the fastest way to get down something nasty.

Except, it wouldn’t chug. It was too thick. Indifferent to Efran’s impatience, it made its way leisurely down to the mouth of the bottle to pause maddeningly at the very precipice over the waiting throat. Then it dropped in a unified glob right at the epiglottis, where it then had to decide which part of the blob would lead the way down the esophagus.

Efran sat up, gagging, then made several concerted efforts to swallow, the last of which was more or less successful. He coughed to clear his throat, then looked with watering eyes at Minka, who was watching guardedly. “Very good, Hartshough,” he gasped. “There’s, ah, beeswax, obviously, with a touch of honey, and, ah—”

Since he was stuck there, the men began eyeing their own bottles. But Youshock, across from Minka, uncorked

his bottle and shook it upside down vigorously until it evacuated the blob, which landed with a splat on the flatbread on his plate. Then he took up his knife to spread the medicine evenly over the flatbread and eat it contemplatively. The men scattered to their places to do likewise. Efran nodded at Youshock, who raised his flatbread as a toast and said, "Thank you for the warning, Cap'n."

"You're welcome," Efran grunted, tossing the empty bottle in Hartshough's basket.

The following morning, April 19th, the injured men more or less attempted to resume their duties, though they were all in varying degrees of pain. But then 18 men were surprised by commendations handed out by their captains (mostly Rigdon and Chee, the hilltop captains). Along with the commendations for bravery and restraint was a bonus of 10 royals for each injured man.

When they questioned being singled out for "restraint," Captain Rigdon said, "That should be obvious. It was paramount that the girls not be hurt, especially when it was discovered that they were not at fault."

Minka, of course, reveled in the fact that her newest pet, Youshock, had now received his second commendation. Efran noted, "And still no cheese on the horizon."

"There was probably some in the antidote," she speculated. Efran started swaying.

That morning, Rawlins had his breakfast brought to his room, then checked his face in the small mirror. The brown eyes and broad nose were still there, but he couldn't tell whether the shape of his face had returned to oval or was still squarish. His beard was growing out unevenly, though, with bare patches here and there, so he shaved it off.

Making sure that he had some money in his pocket, he went wandering through the Lands with his heart cut out. He looked in shop windows without the least desire to acquire anything he saw. He noted with mild interest the bright new saddle blankets that many of the horses were sporting (though the Abbey men consistently flipped them wrong side up). As he walked, he saw several ladies' horses completely decked out with rein covers, brow bands, and fly hats (little hats that fit over one or both of the horse's ears to protect them from flies). He didn't perceive the significance of this, but Elvey's was being reborn. Even Humblecut had been rehired, so he stopped drinking.

Rawlins started walking east on a side road. When he realized that he was unconsciously heading toward The Lands Clothing Shop, he made himself turn in the opposite direction to walk west, instead.

This part of the Lands, between Main Street and the river, appeared to have been the first area built up, as the streets were almost all paved. There were mostly houses, but the shops that had survived had the comfortable air of old-timers. He saw a sprawling plant nursery, a pottery barn, a spice shop, a chandler, a woolens shop, a soapmaker's shop, a shop of fine porcelain, and another of hunting gear.

He hazily walked past all these while the Passage roared close by. Then he came to within twenty feet of its banks, looking to the tannery on his left and the mill on his right. Both were in operation, though he had to approach closer to the tannery to see the hides. He was confused to not smell the noxious odors that usually accompanied this type of business.

Looking north along the Passage, he saw a tree in the distance whose leaves seemed to sparkle. *Come here*, it whispered, waving. *Come look*.

So he headed north past nice houses with mature landscaping until he came to the lot on which the tree stood. And he regarded its green and silver leaves in wonder—they were green on top and silver underneath. They seemed to be gesturing to the side, and Rawlins looked over at a secondhand shop, Flodie’s Oddities and Articles of Worth.

He glanced around to see that he was standing on the northernmost street on the western Lands—past it was an easement against the 8-foot-tall stone wall. Looking at the shop again, he mused, *I need clothes, but I don’t want to show my face in The Lands Clothing Shop again, nor do I want to go to a tailor.* Besides the issue of money, he didn’t want a commitment; he just wanted clothes. So he went over and opened the door.

Walking in, he glanced at two young ladies at the counter, very pleased with their purchases. “You won’t find dresses of this quality anywhere on the Lands,” one declared.

“Oh, I know,” the other said. “Windry makes clever things, but they’re all of wool, which is ridiculous to try to wear here, or the cottons in those silly prints that come from Venegas. Now *this* is just timeless.” She held up a subtly shimmering dress of rose before giving it to the proprietress to put in a canvas bag for her.

“Yes, that’s beautiful, and I’m really angry that you spotted it before I did,” the first said, teasing.

“We’ll just have to come back. This Lady Marguerite seems to donate things weekly, whoever she is,” the second said, holding up a calling card.

“Here is your change, and thank you,” the shop owner said.

“Bye, Flodie,” the first said as they both waved goodbye.

She nodded them out, then looked to the sad-eyed man who was standing by. “May I help you?” she asked.

He shrugged in embarrassment. “I don’t suppose you have any men’s clothes.”

“In the back corner,” she said, nodding. “There is a changing stall with a mirror back there, if you need to try anything on.”

“Thank you,” he said, relieved that it was hidden away.

He went to the back corner with little hope of finding anything in this very old shop. How long had it been standing here? He could hardly imagine this little shop sitting in the wilderness by the river before the Abbey Lands had been founded. How long ago was that? He paused to think. Efran couldn’t have received the charter more than three or four years ago, and this shop was certainly older than that.

Shaking his head at the mystery, he began to look around the racks and shelves. Presently, he was astonished to find a number of very nice pieces that would fit him. He took a few into the changing stall and stared at himself in the mirror. His dark brown hair hung straight, without its usual curl. He had regained his old nose, but his eyes were still brown. Nonetheless, everything he tried on fit. And a hat, even! It was gray, to complement anything.

There were even nice shoes that he could wear! He kicked off the ridiculous boots that he couldn’t even remember where they came from, and took all of his selections to the counter in his socks. On the way, he dropped the unnoticed calling card of the donor: “Justinian, Lord Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.” As Rawlins piled everything before Flodie, she nodded to a shelf at his left. “We have a special on men’s socks and undergarments,” she said.

Glancing up from his pockets, which he was searching, he blindly grabbed handfuls of the items to put them with his other selections on the counter. Of course they'd fit him—everything here did.

As she was tabulating his purchases, he was scrounging in his pockets. "I probably don't have enough on me to pay you, so if you'll put them aside here, I'll run back to Firmin's for more money."

"She said, "That will be three [royals] and five [silver pieces]." Meanwhile, he was staring at the four royals that he had taken from his pocket.

Then he looked over at the shelf again, at a delicate pottery loving cup engraved with verse. He picked it up to read, "I am bound in your beauty, I am wishing you to see—" engraved in two lines. Turning the cup over, he read the next two lines: "How I hope that you love me. I am faithful; can you be?"

Placing that with his pile of clothes all bagged up, he asked, "How much is this?"

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Chapter 16

"The loving cup is expensive, I'm afraid," Flodie said regretfully. "Ten pieces." Which would give him change of fifteen pieces for the entire lot.

Placing the four royals in her hand, he said, "Keep the change." After digging out the shoes to put on his feet, he walked out laden with bags, the tall hat in its own box with carrying string. Flodie put the discarded boots on a shelf in the men's section for resale.

Arriving back at Firmin's, the first thing Rawlins did was to visit the men's bathing room with a fresh new change of clothes. He paid the attendant for rent of a stall, towels and soap, then got to work on himself. Changing into his new old clothes, he stopped at the mirror in the common room to admire himself. The only thing that peeved him was that his face continued to shift in minor ways, especially around his eyes and nose. Well, there was nothing to be done about that now.

Returning to his room, he dropped Reinagle's clothes on the floor to be washed later. Then he picked up the loving cup with its heartfelt lines. "This will do it," he said in steely resolve. "I'm not giving her up without a fight. No woman can resist gifts, especially one that speaks from the heart as this does. I'm going to march this right up to The Lands Clothing Shop, put it in her hands, and tell her that it expresses all I need to say."

With the cup in hand and pockets full of royals, he left to resume the battle for Rondinelli's affection.

However, the moment he set foot on the sidewalk, his stomach started growling. When had he eaten last? Breakfast? "Oh, I can't go into the shop with my stomach talking." Seeing that Firmin's dining area was already filling up (an hour before dinner normally commenced), he looked next door to Croft's, which still had vacant tables. So he went over there.

Sitting in the outdoor dining area, he placed the cup and his hat on the table. Then he looked over at the same

lady approaching that he had talked to earlier. She placed a goblet of water on his table. "Hello, again," she said tentatively.

Not realizing that she was a server, he said, "Oh, excuse me. Is this your table?"

"Yes, and you're welcome to sit there," she began.

"Thank you! My name is Rawlins," he said, spilling his real name without a thought. "What's yours?"

"Vories," she said. "What would you like to eat?"

"What's good?" he asked with an engaging smile. Because he finally felt hopeful about Rondinelli, he was happy again, and wanted to spread happiness.

She smiled back. "The beef stew is actually fresh today."

"Then that's what I'll have, with a mild ale. Will you join me?" he asked.

She blushed. "I can't now; maybe later. Thank you."

"All right, then," he said amiably.

"I'll get your stew and ale," she said.

"Thank you; that's good of you," he said, clueless. In his defense, she wore a nice dress, with nothing to indicate that she was a server. But she turned toward the kitchen with a sudden thumping of her heart.

Rawlins sat amiably, breathing in the crisp afternoon. The mid-April sun was warm, but there was just enough coolness in the air to prevent men in vested suits from suffering. He looked to the street to see Efran approaching the hill at an easy lope on his black horse. At once, Rawlins identified with his hazy smile as he looked forward to dinner with children and friends, and dessert with Minka afterward.

Although Rawlins was horseless at the moment, he could envision himself coming home to the clear-eyed blonde girl waiting for him. The clothes he was wearing, and the gift he would be carrying, were sure to break down her resistance.

As Vories placed his stew and ale on the table, he looked up at her with such joy that she smiled warmly back. "You're a lovely lady," he said impetuously. "Do you have a husband at home?"

"No," she said quickly, which was only half-true. Since coming here to live about nine months ago, she and her husband Gladden had separated, but never divorced. He was now a highly regarded sommelier at Firmin's, and she was . . . waiting tables.

"Be careful, then. Someone will snatch you up," Rawlins said, looking at her sideways over his ale. She caught her breath, for he reminded her of Efran, then.

The tables around him began filling up, so she didn't have a chance to speak to him again. But every time she looked at him, she saw him in cheerful contemplation. And she began wondering, *What is he thinking? He's got something planned. What?*

In a little while he stood, glancing around for a server who had never thought to appear this whole time. Nonetheless, with the joy of accomplishment before him, he dropped two royals on the table and picked up the nice tall hat to place on his head. Since it had obscured his view of the loving cup for the last hour, he forgot it when he walked off.

When Vories emerged from the kitchen with plates for her newest customers, her heart sank to see Rawlins gone. But there was something left on his table. After delivering the dinners, she went over, first, to pick up the payment with huge tip he had left, then to pick up the loving cup. Eyes moist, she read its inscription front and back.

At the first available moment, she ran across the street to the notary shop to swear out a divorce from Gladden. And she showed the cup to her good friend Challinor, describing it as a gift from her new beau Rawlins.

On Rawlins' way to the clothing shop, he suddenly stopped midstride to look at his empty hands. The loving cup! He had forgotten it. So he ran back to Croft's, zeroing in on the table he had left. But it was empty.

Huffing with the exertion, he said, "Then I dropped it along the way somewhere." Looking back over the path he had just taken, he told himself, "Someone picked it up from the road, blast them! What to do now, when the cup was such a big part of my plan, besides the clothes?"

Thinking on this wore him out. Already exhausted from the lows and highs and further lows of the day, he returned to his room at Firmin's.

At the fortress, dinner was well underway. There was much talking and laughing at the back tables, where Efran sat with Minka, Joshua, Isreal, Ella, Quennel, Rondi, Mathurin, Youshock, Toby, Hassie, Alcmund, and numerous other soldiers and children. First thing, Efran sent Serrano down to the chapel to get a report on the Shoard girls.

Serrano returned to tell him, "Captain, Hartshough says they are resting quietly. The treatment appears to be taking hold, and since they're kept in a quiet room, they're just resting and eating."

Minka looked troubled. "Is there nothing for them to do, or even look at?"

Serrano replied, "Lady Minka, the butler says they must be careful to not, ah, 'overstimulate' the girls. But when I stopped by, the harpist Arenivas was playing outside their door, which was very nice."

"Oh, that's good," Minka sighed.

At any rate, the men were in high spirits because of the commendations for their efforts, and the Abbey children were all agog to see their injuries. So the men showed them their teeth marks, scabs and bruises. But they had to cover them up again when the girls started crying.

Allyr stopped behind Rondi to tell Efran, "By the way, Rawlins came to the shop again yesterday."

"What?" Efran gasped, and Mathurin turned quickly to Rondi. Challinor, who worked with Vories, was waiting at the door of the dining hall for her husband, Captain Stites. When she heard the name "Rawlins," she began paying attention to the conversation in front of her.

They were all looking at Rondi, so she laid down her fork, sighing, "Yes, he came in, but he didn't try anything. He's given up. I think it was just to say goodbye."

Efran glanced off in mild exasperation at female obtuseness, then corrected her, “Men don’t say goodbye; they just leave. If he tried to tell you goodbye, it was just to see what he should try next.”

The men affirmed this with laughter, but Rondi explained, “No, he couldn’t. Allyr and Teschner were both standing right there with us.”

“Was he wearing the serjeant-at-arms coat again?” Nyarko asked.

Rondi shook her head, and Efran said, “That’s been destroyed. What did he look like?” he asked Allyr behind her.

Allyr said, “That’s the strange thing—none of us recognized him. He looked nothing like he did in the coat. I’d swear he was smaller.”

Efran turned his eyes away, thinking, *Then the potion’s wearing off*. But he told Rondi, “I want you to be safe but comfortable. What do you want us to do?”

“Nothing more,” she said firmly. “I appreciate the men keeping watch, but I am not afraid.”

Minka smiled at her, and Efran eyed Mathurin as if to say, *There it is, then*. He looked dissatisfied but accepting.

Wishing to take the focus off herself, Rondi looked down the table to ask, “What do you hear from Guerry, Youshock?” This was his hometown.

He froze with his fork suspended in midair. That only guaranteed that more people went silent, waiting. He asked, “Do I have to answer that, Captain?”

Efran laughed, “What? Yes.”

Reluctantly, Youshock put his fork down. “Eneide’s going around telling everyone that you made up that song to get out of admitting that you pledged faithfulness to her, Captain.”

“The tavern song?” Efran asked.

“Yes sir, the last line that you put in the letter— ‘I am faithful; can you be?’” Youshock quoted.

Efran swung to Minka, who was smiling deviously. He said, “You remembered it before I did.”

“I remembered it the first time I saw the letter, especially since you had started the name with an ‘M,’” she said.

“I wasn’t even sure you heard when I sang it in the henhouse,” he recalled.

“Not only did I hear it, that’s when I knew that you would marry me,” she said.

“I didn’t know anything,” he said with a helpless shake of his head. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Why spoil the surprise?” she asked with a lift of her shoulders.

Their hearers laughed, and Gaul prodded, “Sing it, Captain.” Only one of the Forty could make such a demand.

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Chapter 17

Still looking at Minka, Efran sang (not entirely on key), “I am bound in your beauty; I am wishing you to see How I hope that you love me. I am faithful; can you be?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He bent his forehead to hers and Hassie sighed, “That’s so romantic.”

Efran rose up. “What? No, you’re not supposed to know anything about romance yet.”

“I’ll have you know that I’ll be eleven in May,” Hassie said archly. Efran groaned and everyone laughed again. But Challinor was alarmed. Having seen the loving cup that Vories had clutched in great excitement, and heard her repeat everything that her new beau Rawlins told her, Challinor was deeply concerned. When her husband finally arrived to escort her to their table, she was still troubled.

In fact, she was brooding over what to do, if anything. Yes, Vories could be petty and competitive at times, but she was sweetly naïve, especially about men. Challinor could not see how she herself could sit by and do nothing while Vories got played by a man on the take.

Deeply concentrating on this, Challinor watched Stites gesture in frustration as he talked about something involving the men, and their—hats? Their hair? She was thinking, *Rawlins had been staying at Croft’s, but he checked out. Isn’t he at Firmin’s now? I’ll look into that. Tomorrow’s my day off. So that’s the day we’ll do this.*

“So that’s what I’m thinking,” Stites ended. Then he looked at her searchingly. “And it’s . . . really nice that you sit and listen so quietly. Sometimes I’m not sure that you even hear me, or care, but tonight—”

“Of course I care,” she purred at him.

Tonight, Efran wasn’t the only man who almost carried his wife to bed.

The following morning, April 20th, Challinor dressed carefully and went to Firmin’s. It wasn’t late in the morning, but it wasn’t early, either. So just to make sure her target was here, she went to the desk clerk to tell him, “I have an appointment with Rawlins this morning, but I’m afraid I missed him. Is he still in his room?”

The clerk looked back at the pegboard where the room keys were kept. “Room Eight. Yep, he’s still there.”

“Good, then. I’ll just wait outside. Thank you,” she puckered, and had walked out before he could ask her name.

Challinor got a table in the outdoor dining area well away from the street, partially under the canopy which shaded the service area where an old lady sat rolling utensils in napkins. Challinor made herself comfortable with a view of the street while protecting her own face with a large hat. (She grudgingly admitted that Windry’s designs were . . . well, serviceable.)

A young girl came up to place a goblet of water on her table. “What would you like, miss?” she asked. (Lilou had quickly learned that ladies, no matter how old, preferred to be addressed as “miss” rather than “ma’am” or “madam” any day. In fact, Lilou had lost out on a few tips before learning this.)

Challinor murmured, “Clever girl,” but still preened slightly as she said, “Mint tea with honey, a cream croissant, and fresh peaches.”

“Oh, I’m sorry; peaches aren’t ripe yet. But we do have strawberries,” Lilou said.

“That’s good. Bring those,” Challinor instructed.

“Yes, miss,” Lilou said, hastening to get her order. By the way the woman was dressed, Lilou could tell that she was the kind who tipped royally when she was pleased and left nothing when she wasn’t. So Lilou made sure to bring her the hottest tea, the freshest croissant, and the biggest strawberries they had.

Upon leaving that table, Lilou spotted Efran riding by on Kraken, so she ran to him, urgently waving. He pulled up beside the outdoor dining area. “Hello, Lilou—”

“Efran! Our prime beef cuts from Minogue have finished aging! They’re in the underground cooler now, but if you come for the midday meal, we can have them on the fire for you!” she relayed in an urgent whisper. A few years ago, when Firmin had opened his shop as Firmin’s Fruits and Vegetables, he didn’t realize how much the men craved meat. When he apprehended this, he began adding meat dishes to his eatery’s menu. But since Croft had more experience in preparing meats, especially beef, Firmin added a beef expert to his staff, the results of which brought men in droves.

Accordingly, Efran promised Lilou, “I’ll bring the men, then.” Nodding, she hurried off. Still on Kraken, Efran raised his eyes to Challinor sitting in the back, trying to hide behind her large, floppy hat. But he knew that was her, and he remembered glimpsing her behind the tables last night when they were talking about Rondi and Rawlins. And, he was fairly sure that Rawlins was here now. Thinking, Efran turned Kraken’s head to ride off again, to her great relief.

Minutes later, a serious young scholar with glasses and a large book approached to scrutinize the available seating in the outdoor area of Firmin’s. He rejected the tables toward the front as being too close to the noisy street. He also rejected those anywhere on the north side, near the pond. Those always filled up quickly, to the detriment of anyone attempting serious study nearby.

Looking toward the back, he shied away from the distraction of an alluring woman sitting all alone. But as her table was among the few that afforded the most privacy, he sat at one with a buffering table between himself and her. He opened his book and bent over it intently.

Coming out to wait on him, Lilou almost paused, recognizing him. But since he was out of uniform and she knew he didn’t wear glasses, she advanced to say, “What would you like to eat or drink, sir?”

He blinked at her through his glasses with rural intensity. “I have an examination tomorrow on which my whole life depends, as I have aspirations to leadership, so I will require cool water with a twist of lemon, and fresh-baked bread, no seeds, and just the tiniest dab of cold butter. Will two silvers cover that?” He reached into a frayed pocket.

“Yes, sir,” she said, when of course they wouldn’t, not with butter and lemon.

He slipped two royals into her hand—one of which was worth 30 silver pieces. Then he ordered, “Go now. Go go go!”

She turned to run to the kitchen with a straight face, in case the woman was watching. Quickly, Lilou brought the earnest young man his required nourishment, which he accepted with finicky gestures to indicate where she should put it all. Then he moved it all several times until he had the various items precisely where he needed and no closer. Watching, Challinor quietly laughed.

At that time, Rawlins was dressed to the hilt, studying his reflection in the tall mirror (for which he had paid extra to rent). “I don’t have the loving cup, but I have the words on my heart, and much nicer clothes on my body. My nose is spreading again. And my eyes are still brown. I wish they would go back to blue. Nonetheless, here’s where we’re at. And now, I shall progress to The Lands Clothing Shop to argue my case with the Lady Rondinelli.”

With this pep talk, he departed his room. As he was passing the front desk to hand over his key, the clerk said, “Rawlins? Yes, the lady’s waiting for you in the outdoor dining area.”

Rawlins gaped at him, thunderstruck. “She’s here? Now? Here?” he gasped.

“Yes, sir, right outside,” the clerk nodded.

“Thank you,” Rawlins whispered, turning away in a state of exaltation. What could have induced Rondinelli to come here to him? “It’s a sign. A miracle,” he whispered on his way out.

When he emerged through the doorway, hat in hand, his eyes searched the outdoor dining area intently. But all he saw immediately was a student hunched over his book and a middle-aged woman—“Here, Rawlins.” The voice came from under the middle-aged woman’s large hat.

He looked down at her. “Yes?”

“I’m the one who asked to speak with you,” she said. “Sit.”

After one last hopeful, searching glance over the dining area, he did sit, blinking. “And . . . what . . . ?”

“I’m Challinor. I work at Croft’s. With Vories,” she said. As a precaution, she glanced over to the student. He had his hands over his ears so that he could concentrate on his book. So she relaxed a little.

“Oh, yes, Vories. Lovely lady. She brought my order when the server never showed. You should talk to Croft about that,” he said, gently reproving.

She paused before deciding to let that slide. “Well, she found the loving cup you left on your table.”

“So that’s what happened!” he said, clapping a hand to the table. The student covered his ears tighter. Rawlins went on, “I meant to give that to a young lady, but accidentally left it behind. What a dunderhead,” he said humorously, expecting sympathy.

With effort, Challinor let that pass, as well. “Vories is under the impression that you left it for her.”

“Oh no,” he said, shaking his head firmly. “She’s very nice-looking, but too old for me.”

She drew a breath, and he inadvertently glanced at her chest. She said, “Then we have a problem. She thinks you are in love with her.”

“Oh, no, no,” he laughed. “I was just trying to be pleasant. You see, I bought the loving cup to give to a special girl I’m trying to woo. So I would greatly appreciate its return—”

“Lady Rondi is not interested in you,” Challinor said clearly, so that he could absorb the meaning of each and every word, all of them together. He stilled, and she went on, “Because she’s underage, Lord Efran has made himself her protector, and you have made yourself odious to him by attempting to force yourself on her. If you show up at The Lands Clothing Shop one more time, you will encounter a number of men who wish to curry his favor by killing you.”

Pale, he said nothing. She continued, “But that’s only your second problem. Your first problem, again, is that you have carelessly and stupidly made my dear friend Vories think that you are in love with her. So here’s what we’re going to do about both problems: you will woo Vories instead. You will pursue her as your heart’s desire. But you may not sleep with her until you are married. And you cannot marry her for a month, as she just applied for a divorce from her husband yesterday. So for the next thirty days, Vories is your new obsession.” With that pronouncement, Challinor leaned back to sip her tea.

Regaining some color, Rawlins thought about that. “Well, that would be—certainly a pleasant use of one’s time, and, I certainly want to make amends for misleading her. That being the case, I feel that it would be—inappropriate to lead her on with expectations of—”

“Oh, there’s one thing I forgot,” Challinor added smoothly. “If you don’t woo Vories according to my expectations—which are that you make her feel like the most desirable woman you have ever met—I will tell my husband that you attempted to make love to me.”

Rawlins’ eyes enlarged until white was visible all around the brown irises. “B-b-but that’s not true. I mean—of course, you are a very attractive woman yourself, so that—but—that would not be right to insinuate—because I haven’t—”

“No, you haven’t, but I can make him believe you have, because some people think that I am still beautiful, for my age. One of those people is my husband. Do you know him?” she asked silkily.

Rawlins shook his head so that it looked like it might fall off. She parted her lips to tell him, “He’s Captain Stites.”

Rawlins began, “Of—of—of—”

“The Abbey Lands Army. That’s correct. He’s one of those big, mean Polonti who crush heads for fun,” she whispered. “Polonti are insanely jealous, you know. After you’ve aggravated Lord Efran by pursuing his underage ward, how easy do think it would be for my husband to take you apart for molesting me?”

Under his pallor, he looked green. “You wouldn’t,” he protested weakly.

“On the contrary, I would enjoy it so much. I don’t get the chance to play with men the way I used to. But as long as you make Vories the object of your desire, I will keep my mouth shut. But if you make her cry—”

Rawlins lurched up from his chair. “I understand. Excuse me. I think I’ll go—visit with her for a little while.” He

gripped the chair to steady his weak knees, then got his feet moving to take him next door to Croft's.

Smiling, Challinor leaned over the back of her chair toward the student. "Did you get all that?" she asked.

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Chapter 18

Turning toward Challinor and taking off his glasses, Youshock grinned, "Yes, ma'am."

She stood to toss a royal on her table. "Good. Be sure to tell Efran."

Lilou, seeing the two talking, rushed up to Youshock. "Tell Efran that the steaks are on the fire! They'll be ready in just a minute!"

"He'll be right here," Youshock assured her, then told Challinor, "You're welcome to stay and tell him yourself, Lady Challinor."

"No, I prefer being talked about," she said with a wink. Then she walked away, skirts swinging.

Youshock took his book and his spectacles directly to Barracks A. Within minutes, men poured out of it to start filling the outdoor dining area of Firmin's. Lilou came dancing out with waters and ale. Even Ionadi came out to greet the men with utensils wrapped in napkins. Firmin himself emerged to oversee the invasion. Commander Wendt met him with a pouch of royals, which Firmin took to pump his hand warmly.

Shortly, Efran appeared from the barracks with Youshock, now dressed in Abbey red and talking rapidly between gasps of laughter. The men already at Firmin's bellowed at him to come tell them, so Efran hastened him over, but sent another man, Elowen, back to the barracks. He quickly returned with a puzzled Captain Stites.

When the cooks at Firmin's began coming out with great platters of ribeye and tenderloin drowned in butter and grilled to perfection, the party was almost complete. The only man who couldn't eat yet was Youshock, who had to relay the whole hilarious extortion scheme word for word. But his mates saved his plate for him.

As the platters emptied, Firmin's servers brought out baskets of bread, fresh greens, and still more ale. It was a great success overall, for civilian diners who couldn't get a table at Firmin's went next door to Croft's on one side and Averde's on the other.

Unfortunately, that was when Rawlins had been commanded to begin his siege of Vories. He grabbed a prime table for four, shooing away contenders for the seats. Then he watched her emerge from Croft's main dining area to begin taking orders in her section. "Vories!" he cried, standing and waving. She and those at the table she was serving looked quickly at him.

"Vories! Dearest! Did you get the loving cup?" he cried, pinching his fingers in hope.

"Yes, thank you," she said before turning back to her customers.

"I left it for you, you know!" Rawlins insisted.

“Thank you. Later,” she said over her shoulder.

“Come sit with me,” he pleaded.

“Not now,” she said through gritted teeth.

One man at her table shouted to him, “Put a cap on it!”

So Rawlins had to sit and watch her run food and drink to all the tables around him. But every time she passed, he leaned toward her with a desperate, grimacing smile. She began avoiding him, which meant longer routes to the tables she was trying to serve.

After she had taken care of the first wave of diners, she finally came over to him. He leapt up from a slouch to implore, “Sit with me, dearest Vories. Don’t bother about all them!”

“What’s wrong with you? I have to earn a living,” she said crossly.

Digging in his pockets for royals, he said, “No. I’ll help. Ah, here. Is this enough for now?” He held up a handful.

Her eyes widened at the public insinuation that she was for hire. “Are you—? Put that away!” she hissed.

“All right. I’ll just leave it on the table. You got the cup that way,” he said, spreading out the pile so that it wasn’t so conspicuous.

She suddenly asked, “Are you related to Verlice? You’re very like him.”

“Who? No. Come away with me; I’ll crown you with jold and guewels. Gold and jewels,” he corrected himself, sweating.

“Later,” she muttered, returning to a table whose diners were hailing her.

Meanwhile, on the east Lands, Reinagle had hired a pair of competent, honest men to build him a henhouse. Since the supply of lumber was still inadequate for the demand on the Lands, the pair took a wagon to Nicarber to load up the best of the wreckage, which was quite enough for a nice large coop.

As they were unloading the wood, the neighbor who had been waiting a long time for lumber, Cowlshaw, came over to stare and ask questions. After hearing the answers, he ran off to borrow his brother-in-law’s singed wagon again. Soon, construction was started on his house, as well, though slower, for the wood had to be sanded and split. By then, he had been able to locate most of his missing tools.

In fact, when the Lands’ residents heard that there was wood to be had for free in Nicarber, they cleaned out the rest of the wreckage in less than a day. This was good in several respects: first, it got the Picti working to prepare the sites for construction, as DeWitt had already authorized lumber from Eviron which was on the way. Second, clearing away the rubble made possible the beginnings of harbor construction that Efran so wanted to see.

Also, observers at Nicarber reported that the removal of the Shoard girls greatly enhanced the ability of the Picti to work. No one could figure out how the girls managed to survive retaliatory attacks, except that they were small and adept at hiding when they needed to.

At this time, a group of playground trolls, having heard snatches of talk about the rebuilding of Nicarber, made the easy trek to the coast to have a look for themselves. Arriving on the main road, Krug, Irtz, Urpèd, Schuchard, and Sheuf paused to scan the activity.

As they had the benefit of considerable construction experience themselves, and wore good Southern clothing (purchased with royals from aqueduct digging and the sale of fish to Shurtleff), they rather condescendingly critiqued the efforts of the inexperienced Picti: “Nah, dey all bonkers,” Irtz sniffed.

“No good style,” Schuchard opined.

“We do better dan dem,” Krug agreed. As it was certainly a nice coastal area, they began looking around for a good location.

Removing themselves a safe distance from the Picti activity, the trolls marked out a nice large plot about 200 feet inland from the intertidal area. While Krug and Urpèd began marking the places to sink the pilings, Irtz, Schuchard, and Sheuf ran back to their village to bring a cartload of construction tools. After amiably helping themselves to the materials that the Fortress had provided, they got to work.

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Part the Second: Efran’s Promise

Chapter 19

In the afternoon of the following day, April 21st, two weary visitors—a young man and an even younger woman—entered the notary shop. Seeing the line of customers to the counter, they took chairs along the wall to wait. Giardi kept glancing over to them as she filled out the receipt for a resident’s lease payment.

The young woman made a request of the man, who put his hand in his pocket to pull out a few coins and shake his head. She leaned her head back against the wall, closing her eyes, and lifted one foot to begin massaging it. There was a hole in the sole of her shoe, and the state of their clothes indicated long wear.

She murmured something else to him, and he reached into an elderly, overstuffed carpet bag to pull out a piece of flatbread for her. She began eating it slowly. To the next customer, Giardi said, “Excuse me just a moment; I’ll be right with you.” Ryal, working on a complicated form with another customer, glanced up as Giardi left the counter to speak to Soames in the back room. He replied, and she returned to her waiting customer.

Shortly, Soames emerged from the back room carrying a small table. This he placed in front of the couple sitting against the wall. They stared at him as he retreated to the back room to bring out a pitcher of water and two cups. When he put these on the table, the woman gasped, “Oh, thank you!”

Soames nodded as the man began pouring water into the cups. Disappearing into the back room again, Soames reemerged with two pieces of cherry pie and utensils. Placing these plates on the table as well, he murmured, “Compliments of the notary in apology for your having to wait.” They stared open-mouthed at him, then the woman looked straight at Giardi, who smiled back gently. The couple promptly ate their pie.

When all those in line had finally taken care of their business and left, the pair came to the counter. First, the woman said, “Thank you for the refreshments; we wish to pay you.”

Ryal said, “Let’s see how we can help you, first. I see you’re travelers; what do you need?”

The woman began, “Well, um, my name is Juhl; this is my cousin Cuneo. We’re looking for my mother, Librizzi. We’re from Westford; we met a man there, a Lord Justinian, who told us to check with you, as she may be down here in the Abbey Lands. She’s probably with her new husband, but I don’t know his name. Can you tell me if she’s here?”

“To visit or to stay?” Ryal asked, reaching for a ledger.

Juhl glanced away, then said, “We think that she came here to live.”

“Let’s look, then.” Ryal opened his ledger. “Can you tell me about when she and her husband came?”

She seemed stricken for a moment, then said, “Some time in the last . . . fifteen years?”

“Oh,” Ryal said, looking down helplessly at his bulging ledger. It only covered the last six months of the (almost) three years since the Abbey Lands had been established.

Taking the ledger, Giardi said, “‘Librizzi’ is a rather unusual name. You’re good about remembering names, Ryal. Let’s work backwards. Where have we had the most leases recently?” She began turning pages slowly from those listing new residents as of today, then yesterday, then the day before. Soames came to the door of the back room with a pensive look.

Ryal replied, “On the east Lands, certainly; especially around Cavern Lake. But—this ledger doesn’t show locations.” He turned to the shelves behind him to withdraw a large book of plats. He took out one sheet which he unfolded on the counter before the couple. “Here is the master plat of the development in the east Lands. Do you happen to know if your mother and her husband were opening a business?”

Juhl looked at him helplessly, but Soames said from the door of the back room, “Yes.”

They all turned to him, and he came to the counter in deep concentration. “‘Librizzi.’ Yes, she came in with her husband—a month ago, perhaps?”

Juhl gasped, staring at him in disbelieving hope. He furrowed his brow deeply in the effort of recall. “But I can’t . . . remember. . . .”

“Well, that gives us a starting point,” Giardi said, retaking command of the ledger. “Let’s go back to, say, March first, and run through the new plot assignments from that day on.”

Juhl stared at the number of entries for just one day. “You’ll never find it,” she said in despair.

Ryal said dryly, “Oh, she might. Giardi has a way of finding things.” She glanced back at him with a humorous lift of her brows. The fact was, Giardi—the daughter of Henry the Great and his wife Sophie, the daughter of Surchatain Ares—had been blessed at birth with the gift of helping.

Four people were utterly silent as she began searching the listing of new residents. Another customer entered at

that time, whom Soames attended. Ryal was helping Giardi scan for one name among the many.

It took so long that Juhl went back to the chair against the wall to sit, faint with exhaustion and hope. Soames dispatched the customer and stood behind Ryal and Giardi to scan listings with them.

Suddenly three voices cried out, “There!” “Librizzi! There she is!” “That’s her!”

With a cry, Juhl staggered over to the counter where Ryal pulled out the plat again. “Here,” he said. “On March twenty-fourth, Librizzi and her husband Maldonado selected plot one hundred twenty-four in the east Lands on which to build their farm supply and storage building, The Granary.”

Juhl and Cuneo studied the plat intently as Ryal said, “It’s quite a ways. Go east on Chapel Road here, past the gates that are standing open to the last road before the wooden pillars—” Juhl was already running out.

Following her, Cuneo said, “We’ll be back for the bag! Thank you! Thank you!”

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Chapter 20

As it was late in the afternoon, on the edges of twilight, Soames said, “Well, a successful ending to the day. I’m up to the fortress for dinner. Aren’t they still delivering dinner to you?”

“Yes,” Ryal said.

But Giardi added, “If you will, ask the kitchen to send us down four dinners tonight.”

“He did say they’d be back, didn’t he?” Soames said, looking at the carpet bag. “Right then, will do.”

He departed, flipping the sign on the notary’s door to “Closed.” Ryal looked at Giardi and murmured, “You did it again.”

“I have a feeling there’s more to their story,” she murmured.

An hour later, after Ryal and Giardi had just sat down to their dinner from the fortress, they were startled by a loud banging on the door. Followed by Giardi, Ryal went to open the door to Juhl, who threw herself on Giardi so forcefully as to almost knock her over. Cuneo followed her in miserably, shaking his head.

Juhl was crying, “We found her. We found her, and she wouldn’t even talk to me! After all these years, she wouldn’t even talk to me, but made us leave.” She could say no more for bitterly weeping.

Quietly, Giardi said, “Perhaps this is something that Lord Efran should know about.” Ryal turned thoughtful eyes to her.

Juhl gradually stilled. “Lord Efran?”

“Yes, Efran is Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,” Giardi said.

Juhl raised up with contemplative, swollen eyes. “Is he Polonti?”

“Yes, he is,” Ryal answered.

“Had he been in the army of Westford?” Juhl asked.

“Yes,” Ryal said. “Do you know him?”

Juhl looked suddenly composed. “Yes.”

“Well, then,” Ryal said, glancing at Giardi. She was smiling again, eyebrows elevated. He continued, “Our dinner’s here. So, eat and stay the night, and then tomorrow you can go up to the fortress to see Efran.”

Cuneo said, “It’s a strange coincidence to find your mother here on his Lands, isn’t it, Juhl?”

“No,” she said, looking off in a daze. “Because he made a promise to me.”

The following day, April 22nd, everything on the Lands was calm and beautiful. Although Minka was not yet allowed to visit the chapel, her auntie told her that the Shoard girls, Aune and Pember, were showing definite improvement—they were quiet, eating well, tentatively curious over everything in the yard and the toys that Marguerite kept on hand for Joshua. But neither she nor Hartshough felt that they were ready to be returned to the Abbey.

The Picti were apparently learning to wear clothes and work, especially when they understood that Nicarber was to be their own home. And the first proper structure that they cooperatively built was a sturdy warehouse for their ancestral treasures and weapons.

The construction of the harbor continued, though not as fast as Efran wanted. When he started making noises about going out there to work himself, DeWitt assigned more men to the project. And, mostly unseen, the trolls were building a magnificent coastal vacation home for their troop.

Rawlins continued to dog Vories with such earnest, desperate attention that she just as earnestly avoided him. When she complained about him to Challinor, she released him from his obligation to woo her. Thereafter, he sat flabbergasted at Firmin’s for days. He didn’t drink; he just sat. When prompted to order or leave, he had cheese balls.

Then on the 22nd, Efran, Estes, DeWitt and Pieta were in the workroom as usual. Three of them were working; Efran had his feet up on the long table, idly watching the faeries in the great tree pinch each other in spats over prime spots. Ellor came to the door to salute, “Captain, a young lady, Juhl, and her cousin Cuneo have come requesting an interview. She asks that you remember the promise you made her.”

DeWitt and Estes groaned, throwing down their quills. They and Pieta looked at Efran, who was staring at Ellor. But Efran said nothing until finally asking, “Where is she?”

“In the small dining room, Captain,” Ellor said. Whereupon Efran pushed himself up from the chair to exit the workroom. A heartbeat later, everyone else followed (except Pieta, who felt that it was none of her business).

Efran went straight to the small dining room off the foyer to look in. There was a young woman seated at the end

of the table near the sideboard. A man standing at it put down an ale that he had just picked up, and the three studied each other.

The two were clean, but their clothes were rather old and worn. They also had the look of persistent hunger, which Efran recognized at once. But he did not address that at this time.

He came in to sit at the other end of the dining table, propping one ankle on the opposite knee. The woman, pale, composed, with large, dark eyes, looked at him fixedly in return. Estes and DeWitt entered unobtrusively to sit at one side of the table between the opposing parties.

After barely glancing at the man behind her, Efran said, "I never slept with you. I don't remember you at all. What did I supposedly promise you?"

At this brusque opening, the man, Cuneo, clenched his jaw. But the woman, Juhl, said placidly, "To find my mother."

Efran's eyes widened slightly, and he silently repeated the words. Then he asked, "When did I promise this?"

"In the year eighty-one forty-one," she said. Mostly unseen, Minka had come to the open door to watch.

Efran looked bewildered, then. "In eighty-one forty-one. Fifteen years ago. I was fifteen. I, uh, apologize, but at fifteen I was not the most reliable tool in the shed."

Undeterred, she said, "I was eight. You were with a unit of soldiers. You had just come across our village Stuteville that had been raided and burned. My cousin and I came out of hiding, and told you and your men that the raiders had killed my father and taken my mother. Cuneo himself was an orphan by then. You promised that you would find her."

Glancing at his administrators, who looked sympathetic, Efran placed both feet on the floor and leaned forward with open hands. "I'm very sorry. But after fifteen years—"

"She's here in the Abbey Lands," Juhl said.

Efran drew up in surprise at this revelation, then asked, "What's her name?"

"Librizzi," Juhl said.

"Well then, Estes should be able to find her in his book," Efran said. "Do you know about when she came here?"

Juhl said, "We've been to try to see her. She and her new husband own The Granary in the east Lands. She wouldn't talk to us."

Efran regarded her for a moment, then asked, "Why would she talk to me, then?"

"She will talk to the Lord of the Abbey Lands," Juhl said, raising her chin stubbornly.

Efran leaned back, then regarded her cousin behind her. Still silent, he had a patient, somewhat weary air. Looking back at her, Efran asked, "Where are you staying?"

For the first time, she looked confused. She turned to Cuneo, who replied, "We've . . . spent years tracking her

down this far, Lord Efran. Your notary just happened to find her name in his book of leases. We don't have any money left."

Efran looked to DeWitt. "Get them something to eat, then put them up at The Lands' Best Inn." DeWitt nodded. Efran stood, saying, "I'll go see if she'll talk to me, then."

As Cuneo helped Juhl from her chair, she looked up at Efran with grateful adoration. Seeing that, he said, "Now I remember you. And I remember how you got me to promise that."

She lowered her face with a smile of vindication. Rising, DeWitt told her, "You and Cuneo wait here; we'll have you served a meal and then taken to the inn. Meanwhile, help yourself to the sideboard, there." It was constantly stocked with ale, lager, flatbread, nuts, jerky, or other such refreshments.

"Thank you," Cuneo said, turning to it at once. With a deep sigh, Juhl did, too.

As the administrators left the small dining room, they saw Minka standing outside. Efran asked her, "Want to come help me keep a fifteen-year-old promise?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," she said.

"The Granary," he said pensively, turning to DeWitt.

He replied, "Yes, from what I've heard, it's a large building, fairly new, but already full. They rent storage space in the back of the building and farming tools in the front. The best way to get there is to take Chapel Road East and turn on the last road before the barricade, which is named Last Road. You'll ride right into it."

"That's quite a ways out," Efran murmured. "I hadn't imagined having to ask directions to a place on the Lands. But we'll go see if I can help her."

"Thank God it wasn't someone you slept with," Estes muttered.

"I knew it wasn't," Efran said, offended. "But if we're talking about that, I've been talking to Challinor."

DeWitt laughed, "Oh, about Rawlins?" However, seeing the two old friends with their hackles up, DeWitt turned Estes down the corridor toward the stairs. "Let us know what happens," DeWitt said over his shoulder to Efran.

"Right," Efran agreed, guiding—not pushing—Minka out the front doors to the courtyard while DeWitt paused to give directions to Ellor regarding their guests.

After requesting horses and two bodyguards, Efran leaned back on the courtyard fence to wait, Minka beside him. He glanced at her once, then again, and observed, "You're not only wearing pants, they look like denim—not lady pants."

"Yes," she said proudly. "These are what Ella and Tess wear to work in."

Looking on down to her feet, he said, "New boots? They're . . . white."

"With snakeskin covered heels," she pointed out. "Oh! And the turquoise bangle I bought at Venegas." She extended her arm for him to admire that as well. He looked conflicted for a minute, but as he was always telling her to spend more, he couldn't see anything to complain about.

Shortly, they were riding with Pleyel and Suco east on Chapel Road. As the barricade came into view, Efran said, “I can’t believe we built that a year ago, almost exactly. That barricade will stay up when everything else on the Lands crumbles.”

“But for the fortress,” Minka whispered, looking back.

“I hope so. I pray so,” he said.

“Here’s the Last Road, Cap’n,” Pleyel said, gesturing to the left.

“Sounds a little ominous, doesn’t it?” Efran said. There was a smattering of houses and shops this far out, and the large building of The Granary clearly at the end of the road. They turned to lope toward it.

As they pulled up to the open barn-like doors in front, Efran dismounted and said, “Suco, stay here; Pleyel, you come in.” The men acknowledged this, but Kraken started trying to follow his human inside. Efran pushed him back. “Wait here. We’ll be right out. We’re just going to talk to someone.”

Minka, meanwhile, was feeling emanations of power from—faerie? Something else of another realm? It was almost a year ago that she and Efran had discovered that she was faerie, as was her great-grandmother Marguerite. Since then, Minka had worked hard to keep her faerie nature contained, as its unpredictability disturbed Efran greatly. In fact, once or twice she had almost lost herself in the faerie realm, which made him almost lose his mind.

But occasionally, her faerie nature broke out on its own. This was usually because something antagonistic had sprung up—not to her, specifically, but to the Lands. The Abbey Fortress and Lands, having been supernaturally ordained in its purpose to care for abandoned children, sometimes drew supernatural entities either as allies or enemies. So on entering The Granary with Efran and Pleyel, Minka was watchful.

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Chapter 21

Efran, Minka, and Pleyel walked into a front shop of sorts, with a counter to one side, behind which were racks of farming tools, sacks of feed or grain, and the accessories—hats, gloves, boots and aprons—that were necessary to growing food. As Minka surveyed these, she heard a door slamming and locking behind them. She spun to look at the barn doors, which were still wide open.

Suco, outside with the horses, heard the same slamming and locking. Bewildered, he stared through the open doorway at the other three of his party, and Kraken tried again to follow them in. He snorted angrily upon being blocked by an invisible barrier. Attempting to push forward himself, Suco found the same wall. He looked at Minka in alarm, but she raised a hand for him to wait.

She turned back to look at the couple behind the counter along the side wall. They were a middle-aged man and woman with pleasant faces, wearing good rural clothing. Efran was saying, “Hello, I’m Captain Efran; this is my wife Lady Minka. I—hadn’t seen The Granary yet, so just thought to come look. Are you the owners?”

Listening, Minka looked past the counter into the heart of the large building. There was a broad center walkway into the interior, where the doors to individual storage units descended along the right and the left. While she studied this layout, she noted Efran's bland opening, which probably meant that he had picked up on something irregular, as well.

The man said, "Yes, I am Maldonado, and this is my wife Librizzi. Would you like to come see a unit? We have a few more available."

Looking back, Efran's eyes went from Pleyel to Minka, then to Librizzi and the front doors. "Yes, why not?" Efran said, turning to walk with Maldonado down the long, empty corridor.

Minka and Pleyel immediately received the message: he was to accompany her and take Juhl's mother out.

Outside, Suco had gone around to the right to look down the long east side of the building. There, he saw a man in a long black coat, carrying a sack over his shoulder. He was striding toward the building as though about to enter an exterior door. This he did without breaking his stride, so the door must have been standing open. But from where Suco stood, he couldn't see it.

If they were rolling doors, he might not see anything from the front. So he began running down the length of The Granary looking for what kind of doors they might be. And he grew increasingly baffled to see no doors. By the time he got halfway down the length of the structure, he had seen no kind of door at all—just long exterior wood planks.

Alarmed, he ran back to the front to look into the shop which he could not enter. When Minka looked over to him, he pointed to the back, then urgently waved his hands flat to tell her, *Don't go back there.*

She turned to see Efran and the owner on their way down the corridor. Efran asked, "May I not look at any of these units we're passing?"

"No, those are in use," Maldonado said.

Then Minka told Librizzi, "Your daughter is at the fortress. She wants to see you."

After a moment of surprise, Librizzi said, "I cannot leave. And now, neither can you."

"How did Juhl and Cuneo leave?" Minka asked.

Gathering herself, the woman replied, "Maldonado allowed it because I begged him. I will not be able to do the same for you."

Minka raised her face to say, "Lord God, what do I do?" And it occurred to her that instructions would come through a channel that was already available to her. So she said, "Auntie, we're stuck behind an invisible door. How can we get out?"

She was silent, listening, while Pleyel and Librizzi watched her from the inside and Suco from the outside. Minka put her hand to the invisible door, then felt along the side. "Here somewhere? Wait, I found it." She attempted to turn an unseen handle, then said, "It's locked. . . . To the side? All right." She moved her hand to turn something small counterclockwise. Then she found the handle again to press down and push on something heavy.

Suco caught the invisible edge of the door before it could hit him in the face. Then he reached through the open door for Minka. But she told him, "Pleyel and I are staying here. After you take Librizzi to her daughter, you may bring back all the men you like."

He paused in dismay, but said, "Yes, Lady Minka." Then he reached in again to take the astonished woman by the hand and haul her out to lift her onto Minka's horse. Wide-eyed, she looked back at Minka and Pleyel, but Suco was kicking his horse to a furious lope. As her horse followed, she turned with a gasp to hold on.

Kraken tried to enter the building again, but Minka patted his nose. "You have to keep watch for him out here." He withdrew, head hanging, and she closed the invisible door. But she told Pleyel, "We won't lock it."

Then they looked to the far end of the corridor, where Maldonado was opening the door to a storage unit. "Here you are, Captain Efran."

Glancing back at Minka and Pleyel still at the other end, Efran frowned, but looked into the open unit. There, he saw bags and boxes of gold, jewelry, fine clothes, silverware—all hastily dumped in together. Looking quickly back at Maldonado, Efran asked, "What is this?"

"Your new life, Captain Efran. Oh, you'll still have most of your old life; you'll just spend a few hours each day working for me. And you'll be well compensated," Maldonado said. Stepping back, he closed the door, and Efran felt himself sucked away from him.

Seeing Efran enter the unit alone, Pleyel and Minka looked at each other, and she said, "We'll wait."

They had not long to wait, for immediately upon closing the door on the unit with Efran inside, Maldonado began walking back up the corridor. Pleyel looked uneasily at Minka, who turned devious eyes to him. So he drew a deep breath, waiting.

Entering the shopfront from the corridor, the owner began to say something to Minka, then he saw that someone was missing. Eyes sweeping the store, he looked behind the counter, then rounded on Minka. "Where is Librizzi?"

Shrugging, she looked around, as well. Then she asked, "Where is Efran?"

His eyes narrowed in amusement. "You think to challenge me, little faerie?"

She replied, "As Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I'll ask again: what did you do with Efran?"

Efran found himself stumbling over rough terrain in the dark at a run. He was wearing a long black coat. Underneath this, he was armed with a dagger on his right hip and a sword on his left. There were several other men running with him, panting. "Stop," Efran said.

"We can't," another breathed. "We keep running until we find a target."

"For what?" Efran asked, barely catching himself from stumbling.

"Spoils," another man grunted. For they were all dressed and armed as brigands.

"Stop," Efran repeated.

“We can’t, dam’ you! Who are you?” another cried.

“I’m Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Lands, and I say *stop*,” Efran ordered. The group of them abruptly halted on a ribbon of road which shone silver in the moonlight. Breathing heavily, they looked at each other and him.

“Now,” Efran said, straightening. “We talk. Who are you?”

They were silent at first, then one said, “We’re just Lands residents that came to look at The Granary. Then all at once we find ourselves robbers. The master sends us out for bounty, and we can’t come back until we bring spoil, for stolen goods is all that will open the door to return. Then he lets us go home, but the next day we’re pulled back again. We can’t get out of it.”

Efran peered at a dark cluster of habitations down the road. “Where are we?”

“Who knows?” another groaned. “We never know the names of the towns we hit. In each place, we’re drawn to the overlord’s house, or that of the richest man, where all the treasures are kept—and guarded. Spicq got nicked last night.” Another man, presumably Spicq, patted his upper arm. “Vos we left for dead,” the first continued.

“We’ve got to get going,” another man said urgently.

Efran himself felt the pressure rising from the constriction of the coat. He began, “No—” But they were off again, and he with them.

After Minka had invoked her title, Maldonado stood staring at her. She repeated, “What did you do with Efran?”

“He’s . . . out,” Maldonado said.

“Wake him up,” she said.

“I can’t until he finishes his dream,” he said.

She looked to the side to ask, “Auntie, what do you know about this?”

“It is a powerful Binding Spell,” Marguerite told her. *“Now that Efran has been drawn in, it’s up to him to find the way out.”*

“What about Maldonado?” Minka asked, glancing at him contemptuously. He was placid, not hearing Marguerite.

“He’s finished. He’ll not escape the consequences of bringing dark magic into the Lands.”

“Thank you, Auntie.” Minka hopped up to sit on the counter. “We wait,” she repeated coolly. Maldonado evaluated her.

As Efran ran, he was struggling to get out, “As—L-L-Lord S-S—” But he couldn’t. He was too far from the Lands, and the coat was binding him tightly. So he raised his eyes to plead, *God of heaven and God of earth—*

Finding himself being drawn to a stop, he breathed in relief, then roared to the others, “STOP!” One by one, they did, looking back at him in exhaustion and fear. First thing, he stripped off the coat and drew the dagger to begin slashing it. “Rip up the blasted coats!” he ordered.

The six men looked at each other, and one said, "I'd rather not. It's chilly out here."

Another said, "Yes, as long as we're here, we might as well take care of business."

Seething, Efran looked around at them. "You're residents on my Lands, going out to rob at night? I promise that you won't be either much longer."

"Yeah, I've done enough of this, come to think of it," another man said. One by one, they began taking off their coats. A few men laid them by at first. But when the discarded coats began creeping back to their victims, Efran went over to slash them deeply.

One man, still in his coat, turned to begin trotting up the road again. Efran said, "You stop and take off that coat or I'll cut it up while you're wearing it." The man stopped, then. After making various efforts to take off the coat, he raised his hands helplessly.

Another man who had finished slicing up his own coat came over to begin working his blade under the button threads to pop off the buttons. Then he gripped the edge to slip his knife under and cut through the coat from the inside out. Still, having gotten comfortable on the wearer, each piece clung to him until his rescuer could work them off bit by bit. Even then, the pieces on the ground flapped over to try to climb up his boots and cling to his legs. The other men, freed of their coats, brought their daggers over to pin the pieces into the dirt road.

Watching, Efran sheathed his knife, but dropped the unwieldy sword to the ground. He had no intention of using it here. When the others were all finally rid of the coats, the six men stood awkwardly while Efran peered at them in the monochromatic darkness. "Now, give me your names."

They looked at each other in reluctance, then one said, "My name is Rufford, sir. I'm a new leaseholder on the Lands; just went to The Granary to see if I could store my harvested cotton there until I can get the bolls cleaned and processed."

Another said, "Yes, sir, I'm Bloxham; me and Stoldt here come together to The Granary to rent a space for our combined rye harvests. And we're robbing people on the side. We can't figure it out." The other three men—Nuttal, Spicq, and Fawzi—said much the same thing. They had all fallen into the same trap.

They glanced at each other furtively, none eager to tell this stern Polonti that they might have been willing to go along with it because they were allowed to keep a portion of each night's work for themselves.

Efran stood with his hands on his hips, then looked up at the sky. As far as he could tell, it was around midnight. But it was late morning when he and Minka had come out to The Granary. So he called, "Sir Nomus! Are you there?"

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Chapter 22

“Yes, Lord Efran,” the Atticitian replied without appearing.

Efran exhaled in relief. “Thank you, Sir Nomus. So, where am I? Is this another realm?”

“No, Lord Efran, you are in your own realm, but the Binding Spell to which you were attached drew you out of synchrony,” Sir Nomus said.

“Synchrony,” Efran repeated. “What—what is that?”

“Your existence, Lord Efran,” Nomus replied.

Efran took a moment to absorb this. “Am I not existing now?”

“Only in a temporary state of extreme tension, Lord Efran. This state cannot be maintained. The Binding Spell by which you were bound must be unbound,” Nomus said.

Looking at the men with him, Efran asked, “Then how have these men survived out of synchrony for—how long—weeks now?” A few of the men nodded.

Nomus replied, “The unbinding was done for them each time they returned to The Granary with their stolen goods. But there remained a hook in them, so to speak, to draw them back to be bound again. However, your entry into the common Binding Spell has warped it without properly breaking it. Thus, you and they are thrown into disharmony. You cannot remain there; your bodies can only function in synchrony,” Sir Nomus said.

“How . . . do we break the Binding Spell?” Efran asked.

“That option is not open to you at this time,” Nomus said.

“Then, how do we get back?” Efran asked.

“Under the Binding Spell, you must bring back stolen goods to the Binder to receive unbinding for the day,” Nomus repeated.

“Give me another way,” Efran said tightly.

Nomus hesitated. “Yes, I see that I must, as your coats were your means of return. Let me speak with Nakham, Lord Efran. He may give us guidance.”

“Thank you,” Efran grunted. This was unusual in that, as far as he knew, Sir Nomus never had to consult anyone for answers. But Nakham would have them. With that settled, Efran looked at the dark landscape again. “Do any of you know where we are?”

“No, we never know,” said Rufford. He had been the first one besides Efran to get out of his coat, and had helped Fawzi remove his when he couldn’t. “We’re just dropped down somewhere; we run to the place we’re drawn to rob, then when we start running back with the goods, we’re whisked back again to The Granary.”

“Like puppets on strings, or monkeys trained to steal,” Nuttal said bitterly.

“Well, you’re done with that,” Efran said. Looking up, he found clouds obstructing the stars he needed to guide himself. “All right, this appears to be the Main Road. I’m going to start walking—this way. We’ll either come across Westford, one of the villages, or the Lands. We may be north of Westford, headed north, in which case we’ll be walking for a long time until I know where we are.”

As he began walking, the other six hurried to keep pace with him. He turned to ask Rufford, “Is it always dark when you’re sent out?”

“Yes, sir. No point in trying to rob anyone during the day,” Rufford said.

“Right,” Efran agreed. That made sense, but he was still greatly disturbed by the time difference. If they hadn’t crossed realms, then the only explanation for going from midday to midnight was the rapid crossing of a great distance. But he was unaware of all the properties of a Binding Spell.

As they walked, the road began inclining upward. This was also disconcerting; he didn’t know anywhere along the Main Road where the ground rose like this except the Fortress hill. Then Efran considered that they were now going at a right angle to the direction they had been running. With the increased elevation, the air began getting colder, as well.

After they had passed several forks of the road that snaked away to the right and left, it became narrower and steeper. Now they were climbing in earnest. Panting, Efran paused to look at the nighttime lights of a town down and away to their left. Huffing as well, Rufford said, “That must have been our destination to rob.”

“Do you recognize it?” Efran asked.

Rufford shook his head. Stoldt said, “We never do. The chap that killed Vos spoke a language we never heard.”

“Really?” Efran winced, and he thought, *Nicarber all over again. We must have jumped realms.*

They continued climbing for another hour, then the road petered out completely on a rocky hilltop. With nothing but sky before them, Efran scrambled forward to look down on a coastline he didn’t recognize, with islands dotting the expanse of water to the horizon. Bloxham, coming up beside him, breathed, “We must be on the other side of the world!”

“Looks like it,” Efran said, gazing over the dark water. As though blinking awake, he said, “All right, it’s c-cold up here. Back down.”

Tired but obedient, the men turned back to begin sliding down the steep, rocky road.

Minka and Maldonado remained in a silent standoff. Casually, he went over to stand at the invisible door as though looking out. While there, he reached out to brush his fingers against the barrier. So that was still in place. Pleyel watched him perform this experiment, then turn and ask her, “How did you get her out?”

“Go wake Efran,” she replied.

Maldonado started to laugh, then the three of them looked quickly at the far end of The Granary. There was a flicker, a pulse that passed over the whole end of the building, as though it were a large picture flapping in a momentary gust of wind. Pleyel came over to the counter. “Lady Minka, I consider it my duty to get you out of this building one way or another.”

She slid down off the counter, then looked darkly at Maldonado. He disclaimed, “He’s not back there.” Pleyel reached around him to open the invisible door for Minka to pass through. After a moment of surprise, Maldonado followed him.

Outside, the three of them watched the building waver silently again. “Efran,” she whispered.

Having reached the bottom of the hill, Efran and his sorry band sat to rest. They didn’t particularly notice that the lights of the town they had seen from the hilltop were also visible from here. As he was searching for a way out, he was also praying to be shown the way.

Suddenly, there was an array of bright lights around them. The men sprang up to look at the quivering lights, about six feet tall and two feet wide. They were spaced about four feet apart. While they each seemed rooted in place, they were all vibrating like lyre strings. But they were not vibrating the same—the vibrations of some were higher and faster than the others, producing not only different sounds, but different feelings. In fact, no two were alike.

Efran heard Nomus say, “Lord Efran, here are possible pathways back for you and the men here, all of whom can hear me. Each of these passages is different, and leads to different outcomes. So each of you must listen carefully to the sounds you hear from each passage; the one that speaks to you is the one that you must take home—”

“How?” Nuttal cried. “How do we ride on lights?”

Nomus replied, “You leap into them; the vibrations will carry you to their source. But you can only take one, and you must choose quickly, as they will quickly fade.”

The men were standing now, looking from one pulsing light to another. Efran could make no sense of any of them at first; the sounds seemed less coherent as words than rhythms beating on his chest. All of the men were staring so fixedly at the shimmering columns that none of them noticed the shadowy figures with torches collecting in the town nearby.

Spicq suddenly cried out and ran to a vibrating column before him. He vanished into it, and it slowly disappeared. “What did he hear?” Stoldt gasped.

No one knew, but Efran wheeled upon glimpsing lights behind them. He whistled a warning as the town’s defenders attacked. His band of brigands scattered, leaving him alone to fight off the defenders. One townsman whom Efran threw to the ground rolled into a column, which absorbed him and began to fade.

Noting that, Efran kicked another in the gut and punched a third in the face. When two more came at him with their swords drawn, he grabbed up a dropped torch to swing it at them, making them jump back. It never occurred to him to draw his knife on men who were protecting their families from a legitimate threat. All the while, he was glancing frantically at the fading strings. Rufford stabbed a townsman before leaping into one set of strings, and the injured man fell in after him.

The rest of the defenders drew back, crying, “*die Hexerei!*” They retreated a safe distance to watch. By now, all of Efran’s companions had left in one light or another, so that there were only three choices remaining, and they were dimming rapidly. Efran swiveled from one to the next, discerning nothing, and unwilling to leap into the unknown without a clue.

Trembling as another set of vibrations faded away, he gasped, “Show me!” And from the one on the left, he heard the anxious whisper, “*Efran? Efran?*” He dove into that one just as it faded.

Pleyel and Maldonado looked over as Suco and Captain Stites led at least 50 men at a run toward The Granary. Minka was aware of their arrival, but could not take her eyes off the building.

Front to back, it was flickering like a campfire in the wind. And at the very back, it began to fade as the last embers of that fire died away. Bit by bit, it just . . . went out.

Suco and Captain Stites were at her side, then. Stites asked, “Lady Minka, where is the Captain?”

She looked vaguely in his direction to whisper, “I don’t know.” He was near; she could feel his presence, but, he was not here.

Then she looked at Maldonado, who was surveying the sky above The Granary. “Perhaps that was a mistake,” he said thoughtfully. No one replied for staring at him. His own appearance was flickering.

“It really looked foolproof,” he continued. “It’s a simple spell—I hook the subjects by allowing them to keep part of their haul when releasing them to their daily lives. That keeps them coming back. It seemed to achieve the ideal balance to maintain operations. I’d been refining the procedure for a great while, but, I see that I erred allowing this Polonti in. They’re unreliable, you know,” he told them. All the while, he was flickering, growing dimmer.

“But then,” he lectured, raising an incomplete forefinger, “it only takes one wild card to throw the whole delicate apparatus out of balance. I should have made inquiries as to who that last acquisition was before I added him to the mix. But as he looked strong and healthy, I didn’t bother. This I regret,” he said regretfully.

He was barely visible as he thought out, “Next time I’ll make sure to vet my operators. Yes, and then I will. . . .” Then he was gone.

And Minka heard Efran say, “*Put no confidence in extortion; set no vain hopes on robbery. If riches increase, set not your heart on them.*” This was part of the Scripture engraved on the wall of the keep.

She closed her eyes for the pain, as he sounded so close. And then he said, “*Wait. Maybe I should start with, ‘Men of low estate are but a breath; men of high estate are a delusion. In the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.’ Yes, that works better.*”

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Chapter 23

Hearing the Captain’s voice, the men around Minka swiveled, and she turned to see Efran—in a way.

Like Maldonado, he was flickering, only, in the midst of vibrating lights. “Efran,” she whispered. “Come out of there.”

She reached into the lights and then pulled back with a gasp. Smiling wryly, he said, *"I can't. I've been trying. I can't get out."* She gazed in disbelieving horror at his calm smile. *"But I will love you forever, still."*

"No!" She fell to the ground, crying, "Auntie! Nakham! Oh Lord God, no, no."

Pleyel sat down beside her and the men gathered around, searching. Too weak to stand, she just looked up at the faint outline of her husband behind the wall of light. After walking a circuit around the Captain, Mohr said, "There's nothing behind at all. I waved my hand in the air, and when I tried to walk through it, I just came out around it."

"Rope!" Captain Stites called.

This was quickly brought as more men arrived to assess the situation. Stites made a loop in the rope to toss it into the midst of the vibrations. Efran caught it to put the loop over his head and under his arms. Gripping the rope above the knot, he nodded. And a string of men began pulling on the other end.

They brought him to the very edge of the vibrations, and pain crossed his face. When they pulled harder, he lifted his head in agony, calling, *"Stop!"* When they did, he slid down out of the rope, landing weakly on his knees. They pulled the rope out empty. After a few minutes, Efran stood, tears rolling down his face. The men stood in silence, unwilling to give up but having no idea how to proceed.

They parted for Marguerite and Madgwick to come up. Behind them came Delano, Wendt, Estes, DeWitt, and many other friends from the Lands. Minka scrambled up to run to her auntie, crying. Marguerite patted her back. "Hush, dear. We're looking." Immediately Minka went silent, drawing back in perfect confidence to wait.

After studying the vibrations for a moment, Madgwick said, "There's no door. He couldn't have gotten in without the door."

Sir Nomus appeared before them to say peevishly, "He waited too long to enter. I told you to move fast," he chided Efran.

Efran smiled down at him. *"Unfortunately, some nearby townspeople thought we had come to rob them. I don't know where they got that idea."*

"Where are the other men, Efran?" Madgwick asked.

He shook his head. *"I don't know. They all got out before me."* He appeared to be fading a little. Seeing that, Minka closed her eyes in anguished prayer.

Martyn demanded, "Without a door, how could we throw the rope to him, then?"

"Because inanimate objects have little or no vibration!" Nomus exclaimed as if it were self-evident. The men stared down at him and each other; Connor threw up his hands in distress.

But Madgwick lifted her hands, looking up. "You who ride above the heights, whose work of creation made the morning stars sing for joy, who bring forth the constellations in their seasons and ordain the laws of the heavens—O eternal God, have mercy on us, and on the orphans whose lives depend on the lord you appointed—"

Efran suddenly stretched out a hand. *"Something opened, but I can't reach it. I'm slipping away,"* he said, looking behind him.

“Throw him the rope,” Madgwick said. The men quickly did this, and after the second try, he caught it to drape it under his arms again. They began pulling him forward, and when he got to the door, he slipped his arm though. Minka gasped in hope to see it clearly past the vibrations.

But he raised his face, wincing. “*Stop! It won’t open any farther. I can’t get through.*”

“Oh, well, there’s the problem,” Madgwick said, as though salt were required. “You need the emotional connection on the other end.”

On hearing that, Minka stepped up to take hold of the rope along with the men, and Madgwick said, “There now, it’s mostly open.” But it wasn’t enough for him to get through. “Give her the rope; she must be dominant,” Madgwick added.

So the men let go of the rope, and Efran began falling away, pulling Minka face down across the ground toward the opening. “*Let go!*” he shouted. His voice was dimming as well.

“No!” she cried. As Minka was being drawn through the doorway, men darted over to grab hold of the rope again. They pulled her back out, and pulled Efran up from what appeared to be the ground giving way.

But again, when he got to the door, he could only get an arm through. And there seemed to be no place for him to stand, as though the ground were crumbling under him. Obscuring mists gathered around him. Not only was he slowly falling, he was growing fainter, as the vibrations themselves were fading.

“We still need the emotional connection,” Madgwick said. Holding the rope that was still draped under Efran’s arms, the men gazed around, lost. Minka sat on her knees weeping as he receded into the mists. He looked at her with a wordless goodbye.

But Kraken ambled up to the vibrations to look down at his human. Efran, barely visible, looked up at him. While the men held stubbornly onto the rope, Estes took it from the last man on the line to loop it around Kraken’s neck, knotting it securely. Then he patted his withers. “Haul him out.” A few men kept a tentative hold on the rope while Kraken, shaking his head to get the rope settled, began backing.

It took him three steps to drag Efran out. The vibrations vanished. He shakily pushed up on solid ground to take the rope off. The men gathered around him, and Hawk fell on his knees to touch him. He was solid; he was whole. That done, Nomus disappeared again as though vindicated.

Laughing and crying, Efran rolled over onto his back while Kraken snuffled him. “I’ll take your snot today,” he said, reaching up to stroke his nose. Minka crawled over to cuddle him, and the men lifted them both.

Breathing, he held her on an arm. “Thank you, Estes,” he said. “I apologize for the comment about Challinor.”

“I was testy, as well,” Estes admitted, patting his shoulder.

Then Efran turned to embrace Madgwick. “DeWitt, why aren’t she and Delano titled?”

“An oversight,” DeWitt said. “How about ‘Lord and Lady Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands’?”

“That works,” Efran said. Then the men converged on them in grateful, exuberant relief, and there was a lot of talking for a while as Efran and Minka had to give their perspectives on what had happened at The Granary.

He said, "I knew there was something wrong when we were walking down that long corridor—" He broke off, staring at the foundation of The Granary. That was all that was left, except for piles of. . . Efran directed, "Jehan, you and Coish, Hawk and Fellowes go see what all that is."

As they saluted and took off, Efran added, "I believe some of that has got to be the spoil that my fellow brigands took in their raids."

Captain Towner asked, "Were they raiding the villages around here, Captain?"

"No, Maldonado sent us far away, obviously so we wouldn't be recognized. We walked to the coast while I was trying to figure out where we were—it was like nothing I'd ever ever seen, with islands. And the townspeople who attacked us spoke another language," Efran said.

Captain Chee said, "But the men who were with you were from the Lands. Who were they?" His voice was hard.

Rufford, Bloxham, Nuttal, Stoldt, Spicq, Fawzi. "I don't remember," Efran said. When he looked up to see Wendt regarding him, Efran dropped his eyes. He believed that Maldonado's hand was probably too heavy for them to resist, and the coats too tight. "We don't kill our wounded," he murmured. Wendt minutely nodded.

The four he had sent off to look at the remains of The Granary returned with their arms full. Jehan, Coish, and Hawk were carrying the treasures that Efran had glimpsed, and Fellowes had a large sack of grain. He said, "This is from what would've been their storefront, evidently. What all the others are carrying is from the other end."

"The haul that they brought back each night," Efran said.

"Which they got to keep part of," Minka added. He looked at her quickly and she said, "Maldonado told us that's how he kept them coming back day after day."

"Oh," he said. Turning to Wendt, he added, "Commander, I'm going to let you decide what to do with all that."

He asked, "There's no hope of determining where it all came from?"

"I don't see how," Efran said. So after conferring with DeWitt and Estes, Wendt ordered the storefront supplies be brought to the new barracks off Chapel Road that housed Tourse's Enforcement Unit. From there, the supplies would be parceled out to residents who had need of them. The stolen valuables would be put in a secure room at the fortress until a determination was made as to their proper use.

Looking to the afternoon sun, Efran sighed, "I feel like I've had a full day and night. When's dinner?"

"Let's go see how ready the kitchen is for marauders," DeWitt suggested. A few men on horseback spurred ahead to alert them.

Efran climbed up on Kraken, then gestured down for Minka. Stephanos lifted her up to sit behind his saddle. Laying her head on his back, she wrapped her arms tightly around his waist with a deep sigh. He turned his head to murmur, "That was scary."

"Don't get me started," she muttered. With a light laugh, he nudged Kraken to an easy lope.

But then he had to pull back on the reins. Minka lifted up to look over his shoulder. With the spectators along the side of the road stood Juhl and Cuneo with her mother, Librizzi. Trotting over to them, Efran leaned down to ask her, "How are you?"

"Free," she said, studying him. "I don't know how you did it, but I am ever grateful." Then she looked toward the empty foundation where The Granary used to stand.

She started to ask a question, but Efran said, "I keep my promises, though it may take me a little while." He glanced wryly at her daughter, who looked dazed for joy. Even Cuneo was smiling.

Librizzi voiced her question, then: "Where is Maldonado?"

"I have no idea," Efran said. No one else enlarged on that. Turning toward the hill, he added, "Come on up for dinner, and we'll figure out where to get you settled on the Lands—" as though Maldonado were irrelevant.

Efran raised up to whistle, then called, "Ure! Can you get them a carriage from the inn, here? Yes, to take them up hilltop. Good."

Looking back down to the three, he said, "That soldier is going to bring you a carriage, then they'll show you to the dining hall." Sleepy with relief, Minka just held on to him.

Juhl said, "We took Mother by the notary shop, and they were very glad to see her. The notary wants you to stop by."

"We'll do that now, then see you up hilltop," Efran said, spurring Kraken west again. His men followed while the three visitors waited on the road for their carriage.

Efran pulled up to Ryal's shop, then reached back to let Minka down on one arm. When he dismounted, he paused before Kraken to stroke his face. "Next to Minka, you're my best friend."

You are my human, Kraken replied.

"May it ever be," Efran said. Turning to grip Minka's hand again, he led up the steps into Ryal's shop.

Glancing up at their entrance, Ryal said, "Good to see you, Efran, Minka. Giardi is in the back room with a couple of visitors. Let me assist this lady, and I will come on back."

"More visitors?" Efran asked warily, glancing at the one customer at the counter. Then he opened the door into the back room.

Giardi and Soames were sitting at the table with two strange men who had plates and ales in front of them. At Efran's entrance, they stood in alarm, and one said, "*Du warst einer von ihnen!*"

It took him a moment to place them, then Efran said, "Ohhh. I know you, as well."

Ryal entered the back room, then. "I see you're acquainted," he said dryly. "A few of your men stopped by to give us a very confused account of Landers going out to rob at night and your being trapped in a column of light. Soames, please step out, or at least stand by the door in case another customer comes in."

"Yes, Lord Ryal," Soames said, standing. "Thank you for not making me leave."

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Chapter 24

Minka smiled at Soames in understanding, but Efran told Ryal, “These are two of the town’s defenders who attacked us, with good reason, thinking we were going to rob them. They fell into the vibrations with some other of the men, but—I thought one was dead, or at least wounded.”

“Giardi has been very busy today, too,” Ryal said. She smiled, and one of the men looked at her while he put a hand to his abdomen, which was fine. His shirt was ripped and still faintly bloodstained.

Efran groaned, “We have to get them back where they belong. They’re innocent in all this. And—” He looked off at a sudden thought, then ran out the front door to whistle. He spoke to someone outside, then returned to the back room, breathing deeply in thought. “Sir Nomus. Sir Nomus? We need your help again, please.”

Without appearing, Nomus said, “Lord Efran, I am terribly busy right now—”

“I know you are, and we appreciate deeply the work you do in the Hall of Memories. It’s been lifesaving to us more than once, and an inspiration as well,” Efran said quickly. “But, Sir Nomus, because of Maldonado’s scheme, we have two men here, two townspeople from the place the vibrations appeared. They fell in by accident, and, we must get them back. They have families at home—wives and children, mothers and fathers, who need them and grieve for them. Please, Sir Nomus, we need the vibrations again to return them to their home village.”

There was a brief silence, then Nomus said, “This is highly irregular, Lord Efran.”

“Yes, Sir Nomus, and I apologize, but if it’s at all possible, it’s the right thing to do. Their lives were disrupted by an evil scheme run from the Lands, and, as Lord of the Abbey Lands, it’s my responsibility to do all in my power to make it right,” Efran said, wincing.

“Very well, Lord Efran,” Nomus sighed. “I shall deploy more vibrations—”

“Can you send the men directly to their location, so they don’t have to choose one, Sir Nomus? I don’t know how to make them understand that they have to do that,” Efran said, glancing at Minka. She was watching wide-eyed.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Nomus grunted. “See that they are ready—”

“Can you wait just a minute, for us to get their stolen goods back to them, please, Sir Nomus?” Efran asked, grimacing at Minka. She was silently laughing with tears in her eyes. He briefly wondered why Sir Nomus couldn’t have just sent all the Landers back home instead of their having to choose from what they heard in the vibrations. Efran didn’t know, and Nomus would never admit that it was the first time he’d ever attempted to create vibrations for human transport.

Upon the jangling of the doorbell, Connor and Tourle entered with large canvas sacks packed full. The Captain’s instructions had reached them before they’d even gotten the stolen treasures up the switchback.

Efran leapt forward to take the sacks and set them on the floor of the back room. Then he pushed aside the table

to pull the visitors forward. “Oh! Excuse me, Giardi. Are you all right? Good. Sir Nomus? We’re ready in here!” Efran was shoving the sacks onto the townsmen, who could hardly hold it all.

“Are you *sure*, Lord Efran?” Nomus asked, almost at the end of his rope. (Leprechauns are high-strung by nature.)

“Yes! Thank you! Fire away! In front of them here, if you will,” Efran said, positioning the men to face out from the table toward the other side of the small room. “Don’t drop anything,” Efran cautioned, replacing a gold box that had fallen from one of the bags.

Two bright vibrations appeared so suddenly that everyone startled. Then Efran urged them, “Jump! This is it! Go! Go home!” But they stared unmoving between him and the pulsing columns.

From the doorway, Soames said, “*Heim!*” They looked at him in comprehension, then gripped their sacks and leapt. Immediately they vanished, as did the vibrations.

In the stillness that followed, a long string of pearls rolled out from the corner. Efran picked it up to place it around Giardi’s neck with a kiss on her head. “Thank you, Giardini. Ryal. Soames,” he exhaled. On his way back to the door, he tripped over something else that had fallen from a sack. It rolled under the table while Connor caught him by an arm, and Efran clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s go eat.”

Minka turned to Soames in admiration. “What does *heim* mean?”

“If I understood their language correctly, Lady Minka, it means ‘home,’” he replied.

She grinned at him, and Efran said, “Yes, we’re on our way, if there’s any ham left.”

After they had left, Giardi leaned under the table to bring up an engraved silver cup. “Look at that,” she murmured.

“What is it?” Ryal asked, as he and Soames leaned over her.

Holding it to the light, she said, “It’s a scene that shows a man stepping through a wavy door. . . . He’s carrying a bag of something that makes the people in front of him reach out to him. And then the words—I can’t read that. Can you, Soames?”

Squinting at the lettering, he read uncertainly, “‘*Er bringt Schätze nach Hause.*’ I don’t know what it means, but I can guess.” Giardi and Ryal glanced at each other, nodding.

Accompanied by an increasing number of soldiers, Efran and Minka rode Kraken up the old switchback to the fortress courtyard. Efran let her down, then dismounted himself just to hold her a minute. Expelling a tired sigh, he took her hand to lead her up the steps. Following them, Seagrave asked, “What was it like, Captain? What did you see beyond the vibrations?”

Efran paused in the corridor leading to the dining hall. “The . . . chaos of unbounded nothingness. There were no forms, nothing definite. Nothing held together. I felt myself—breaking up into that nothingness. It’s not a place people were meant to be.” He looked down at Minka, who was trembling a little.

Toby and several other children came running up. “Efran! Noah’s back,” Toby told him.

“From where?” Efran asked blankly, having just come back himself.

Toby replied, “Tallmadge the printer sent him back. He said he was very sorry, but Noah just wanted to play with the printing press, and Tallmadge doesn’t believe in beating apprentices, though he said he might change his mind.”

“Ohhh,” Efran groaned. “Well, we’ll—”

Calix demanded, “We heard that you were trapped in a break in the air, Efran! Tell us about it!” Other children rushed up to him, but Isreal had sat beside Minka on their bench in the very back of the dining hall. Juhl, Cuneo, and Librizzi were sitting across from them, having just received their plates and drinks from Wardly.

Seeing them, Efran began, “Break in the—ah, let me visit with our guests, Calix, but, almost any soldier can tell you what happened. Cudmore was there; he’ll tell you all about it.” Efran nodded to the unwary soldier who had just entered the dining hall.

Cudmore was then mobbed by an excited group of children making demands, so he sat to oblige them with a stirring tale of drama and hair-breadth rescue, as long as they brought him a plate and kept refilling it. And an ale.

Efran slid onto the bench beside Minka, taking Joshua onto his lap (as Quennel and Ella weren’t here yet). Juhl leaned forward to peer at him. “Yes, now I recognize you. I wasn’t sure at first, because you’re so much bigger now. But yes, I see it in your face. Is this not a wonder, to see you again fifteen years after your promise, and then you keep it?”

“Yes, I need to be more careful about making promises,” Efran said, raising his chin at Wardly. To Librizzi, he said, “I’m afraid The Granary is gone, but we’ll give you whatever help you need getting settled in the Lands.”

“What about Maldonado?” she asked warily.

“He’s . . . gone as well. Was he a magician, or a warlock? Where did he get his power?” Efran asked.

Librizzi lowered her eyes. They were large and dark, like her daughter’s. “From my father,” she admitted. Juhl and Cuneo glanced at her, then at each other.

Efran raised up for Wardly to place his plate of ham and sweet potatoes before him. Minka and Isreal got their plates as well, and Joshua his bowl and small fork. He dug in right away, appreciating sweet potatoes. Efran didn’t begin eating at once. Reluctantly, he asked, “Do you practice magic?”

“I could at one time, but Maldonado overshadowed me quickly,” she said, thinking.

“Don’t,” he advised. “Dark magic is not allowed on the Lands, and it can’t be hidden for long. We’ll find out, and bad things will happen.” Juhl and Cuneo were looking at her mother apprehensively.

“Oh, no; I’ve seen what a trap it is,” Librizzi said.

“Then let’s get you set up in another situation. What can you do? What do you want to do?” Efran asked.

“Just rest for a while,” she sighed.

Efran hesitated, unwilling to promise support, but Cuneo said, "I can work; I'll do whatever is available."

"Me, too," Juhl said, so Efran nodded.

Someone came over to speak to him, then—in fact, the whole time he was trying to eat, people were coming up to talk to him about his strange experience. He somehow managed to foist them off onto another soldier who had been there. Then he somehow managed to eat with Minka leaning into him on one side and Isreal on the other.

Finally, he pulled himself off the bench to stand, nodding at their visitors. Minka was practically asleep on her feet. He handed Joshua over to a nursery attendant, then patted Isreal on the head. But Isreal pulled on his shirt, so Efran leaned down to hear him whisper, "You came back so Isreal has Efran."

"Yes," Efran said, smiling with tears of exhaustion in his eyes. "Yes." And Isreal was satisfied.

Somehow, Efran and Minka made it back to their quarters to fall into bed. In the instant before they fell asleep, they were startled upright by the appearance of bright, humming vibrations. Stupefied, they watched as the vibrations parted to make a window in the air. They looked into a daylit room with wooden walls, crowded with people of all ages who were celebrating. In the midst of them were two men whom Efran and Minka both recognized.

The men suddenly looked up as though they could see them as well, and one said, "*Ja, das ist er!*" They lifted silver cups in greeting, and a roomful of shining faces turned as gold, silver, necklaces, and other treasures were raised in acknowledgment.

The window vanished; Efran and Minka stared at each other, then collapsed back onto their pillows. Before falling asleep, Efran murmured, "Thank you, Sir Nomus."

"You're welcome, Lord Efran," he huffed.

The following morning, April 23rd, Efran was somewhat awakened by a light tapping on the corridor door. Minka, eyes shut tight, never stirred. So he carefully pulled his appendages out from around her, wondering how he had managed to wrap her up so thoroughly while sound asleep.

Gaining the floor, he went to the outer door to open it and peer out, trying to focus. Clough's voice said, "Good morning, Captain. You're wanted in the workroom, whenever you're available."

"Yes. Let me, ah, get on fresh clothes, then I'll be right up," Efran said, closing his eyes again.

"Yes, sir." Clough departed; Efran shut the door and stripped to sponge bathe in the washbasin. As he was scrounging for fresh clothes in his chest, Minka appeared in the bedroom doorway. Bracing herself with a hand on each jamb, she inquired with closed eyes, "Whaddryuhdoin?"

Looking up, he dropped his clothes and came over to gather her up. "Your hair's a mess," he grinned, pressing her to him with one hand while he fondled her curls with the other.

"Then bring me some pomade on your way back," she said, pulling away.

"Don't threaten a man who almost got blotted out," he said, going back for his clothes on the floor. It was so unreal, he almost believed it never happened.

She woke up, then. “Let me get dressed, and I’ll come with you.”

“Thank you,” he said, pulling up his breeches.

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Chapter 25

When Efran and Minka arrived at the second-floor workroom, they found breakfast waiting for them. “Oh, you’re good men, DeWitt, Estes,” Efran breathed, pulling Minka to the sideboard before him.

“What do you want?” she asked, picking up a plate.

“For you to help yourself, then I’ll have all the rest,” he said. She rolled her eyes, still sleepy, and he looked back to his administrators. “We’re here, mostly.”

“Yes, I see,” DeWitt said. “You want to try some of that caova?”

“No, just shock me awake. What is it?” Efran asked tentatively.

“Just reports from here and there,” DeWitt said. “Lady Marguerite says that the Shoard girls have made good progress in the five days that they’ve been at the chapel. She wants to give them more time, however, to get acclimated to the Lands. Somehow, they do know the language, mostly. Marguerite and Hartshough have taken them out to the lake, and walking up Main, but they get nervous around too many people.” Estes looked up from his paperwork to nod.

“Which describes most of Main Street,” Efran said, sitting with his plate. Looking over to Minka’s plate, he said, “Eggs. The eggs are good. Don’t you want ham?”

“No, thank you,” she said drowsily.

“Because pigs have eyes? You can hardly see the eyes for all the fat—the wonderful, luscious fat,” he elaborated.

“Because I saw the piglets,” she corrected him.

Efran grunted and set to work on his ham. DeWitt added, “You need to get out to Nicarber soon, to see the progress there. Almost all of the wreckage has been cleared away, and the Picti have started building and net fishing—with guidance in both, of course. It’s encouraging.” He looked up at the entrance of a sentry.

Hollis saluted. “Captain, Steward, Administrator—Juhl and Cuneo are in the receiving room off the foyer requesting to speak with the Captain for a moment.”

Efran sat up, closing his eyes. Then he turned his head to say, “Bring them up here for breakfast. Is there any left? Yes, enough. Bring them up here.”

“Yes, Captain.” Hollis saluted again upon departing.

Shortly, the pair entered, looking as haggard as Efran felt. He gestured to the sideboard. “Plates and cups there; help yourself. I understand there’s caova, as well.”

“Thank you,” Cuneo said. Juhl had sat like a rag doll at the far end of the long table. He asked her, “What do you want?” It was a casual question that covered a deep well of concern.

“Anything,” she whispered. He set a plate and cup before her, which she barely acknowledged. He sat with his plate next to her.

She and he focused on eating an excellent breakfast for a few minutes. Then she looked up with dull eyes encircled by dark rings. “Fifteen years. I’ve been hoping and searching for most of my life. And she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

Minka looked over, pained. Efran exhaled, “Where is she?”

Juhl shook her head, but Cuneo said flatly, “She’s getting ready to leave the inn. She wants compensation for the grain and supplies they had for sale, and the money they had in the store—said that all amounts to about a hundred royals.” Eyes downcast, he toyed with his fork as he relayed this information.

Efran looked at DeWitt and Estes, who had nothing to offer, then asked Juhl, “Is she practicing magic?”

“She says she’s not, but, I don’t know,” Juhl said.

Efran looked at Minka. “Can you or Auntie sense that?”

Minka inhaled. “I can’t, but I’m very much out of practice. Auntie? Can you tell if Juhl’s mother Librizzi is practicing magic? I think she’s at the inn. . . . All right, thank you.” Glancing at Efran, she looked at Juhl to tell her, “Auntie says that she’s full of power, but she hasn’t used it since yesterday.”

Efran looked quickly at her. “What did she do with it yesterday?”

Minka looked up to the ceiling. “Auntie, what . . . ? Oh, all right.” She told Efran, “She doesn’t know, only that Librizzi had used it then.”

Efran studied her a moment, then asked, “Can she divest herself of the power completely? Or can we?”

Minka looked up again. “Auntie? Did you. . . ?” She stopped to listen. Cuneo poured himself a cup of caova from the sideboard before offering a cup to Juhl, who shook her head. Then Minka said, “Auntie says that she has to have a very strong desire to strip herself of the power, and even then it can’t always be done. But, yes, as Lord of the Abbey Lands, you have the power to divest her yourself as long as she’s here because she’s not supposed to have it in the first place.”

Efran studied Juhl a moment, then looked to his administrators. “Should I?” he asked.

DeWitt said, “Absolutely.”

Eyes on his ledger, Estes said, “After what you’ve been through, we’re justified to do more than that.” He glanced up pointedly.

Efran laid down his fork. “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I divest Librizzi of her power to enact magic.”

A moment later, they heard Nomus say, “This will be done, Lord Efran.”

Efran paused at his use of the future tense, but only glanced at Minka to say, “Thank you, Sir Nomus.”

“You are welcome, Lord Efran,” he said almost cheerfully. At that moment, Nakham appeared at the chapel to talk to Marguerite in person.

Looking to their visitors, Efran asked Minka, “Does Juhl have power? Cuneo?”

Cuneo barked out a laugh; Juhl merely looked lost, and Minka said, “No.”

Still regarding the pair, Efran asked, “Why don’t you go ahead and get married?”

Juhl’s face registered disapproval. “Cuneo is my cousin.”

“No, he’s not,” Efran snorted, glancing away.

Reddening, Cuneo glanced in her direction to mutter, “I told you that so you’d let me come with you. I don’t even know who my parents were.”

She scowled, “Why would you want to marry me?”

Gesturing in frustration, he said, “I want you to be happy right where you are, without having to run after anyone else or prove yourself. I want to have a life that doesn’t depend on finding someone who never cared.”

She looked at him to smile faintly, then drooped. “I wasted all those years.”

“No,” Efran said. “It’s worth it to find out the truth. But now you have to follow up on it. We’ll help you get started. DeWitt, where can we put them?”

“Actually, twenty-two is furnished and available, again,” DeWitt said, getting up for a key in a cabinet. While he was standing there, he also took out a pouch of royals. “This will get you started. And practically any business on the Lands needs help.” He extended the key and the pouch to Cuneo, who took them, shocked.

Fingers curled at her lips, Minka said, “And I can take you to Flodie’s for clothes. They’re very inexpensive and you’ll love them.”

Juhl looked interested. “Really?”

As Minka was nodding emphatically, Efran said, “Go down to Ryal’s and get married, first. You know where it is.”

Cuddling his arm, Minka asked, “Can I get them a cart down to Ryal’s so we can go straight to Flodie’s from there? Then I can show them where twenty-two is.”

Smiling, he said grudgingly, “Take two men, besides the driver.”

She hugged his neck, then jumped up, squealing. Cuneo got up to lift Juhl by the hand and say, “Thank you, sir. Thank you, Administrator.”

They nodded at him, and Juhl regarded the tree growing from the middle of the table that spread its branches up through the ceiling and its roots clear down to the caverns below the fortress. Faeries peeked out to blow kisses to her and sprinkle gold dust in her dark hair, which made it glimmer. Hazily, she murmured, “Then—it’s all right to be happy.”

“It’s way past time,” Cuneo expelled. She looked down, nodding, and squeezed his hand.

As the three started out, Efran turned in his chair. “Juhl.” She turned back inquiringly, without fear. He said, “If you hear from your mother, I want to know right away.”

She acquiesced while Cuneo said darkly, “Count on it, sir.”

With that satisfactory resolution, the administrators got back to work while Efran finished breakfast. He put his and Minka’s (unfinished) plate on the sideboard, then thought to go see how Tourjee—and the gardens—were doing after being mauled by the Shoard girls five days ago.

Stepping out of the lower corridor onto the back grounds, he saw Tourjee working as usual, apparently unhindered by the scabs on his arms. He didn’t appear to be in pain, either. Looking over the rest of the grounds, Efran saw Noah lounging in the grass beside the pond, watching the frogs and dragonflies. Sighing in exasperation, Efran went over to kneel beside him. None of the other children were out of class yet.

“Noah.” The boy looked over lazily. “Noah, you need to find a place to apprentice.”

The boy groaned, “It’s all hard work, Efran.”

“Yes, that’s the point,” Efran half-laughed. “But here’s the other point: if you don’t find a place today, I’ll assign you a place, and there won’t be any quitting from it.” What he meant, actually, was that he would have DeWitt or Estes find a good place for him, and Efran himself would take the blame.

Noah sat up, wailing, “I need more time!”

“If you were looking harder, I’d give you more time. But now I’m going to give you some help, instead.” Standing, Efran looked back to whistle to a soldier. Loseby came running over to salute. “Yes, Captain?”

“Loseby, Noah needs to find a place to apprentice today. So, take him down to start on Main and go from there,” Efran instructed.

“Yes, Captain,” Loseby said, although he and Noah had similar expressions of dismay. “C’mon, Noah; let’s get this done,” he said in theoretical encouragement.

“All right,” Noah grumbled, hefting himself up. He walked with the soldier around the fortress to the courtyard and down the switchback to Main.

As they stood at the intersection of Chapel Road and Main, they looked all around. “I’ve tried most of these already,” Noah sighed.

“Let’s walk on up,” Loseby offered.

So they began walking, looking at all the possibilities. “How about Minogue’s? He has the best beef on the Lands,” Loseby said in admiration.

“And he’s got three sons and a nephew helping him. He doesn’t need me,” Noah said dully.

“Delano’s?” Loseby suggested.

“I can’t work there; not old enough to drink,” Noah said resentfully.

“Look at all the eateries over here.” Loseby swept his hand to the west side of Main. “They need a lot of help.”

“I don’t want to work with girls,” Noah scowled.

“Coghill the doctor could probably use an apprentice,” Loseby said, pointing up the street.

“People go in there who are *bleeding*,” Noah shuddered. So the pair continued their search.

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Chapter 26

Noah and his helper Loseby passed by the notary shop, where Minka and her bodyguards Kaas and Doudney were standing by as witnesses while Cuneo and Juhl signed Ryal’s book of marriages. Arne, sitting in the wagon outside, watched Loseby and Noah walk up Main on their quest.

When the deed was done and Cuneo finally got to kiss the girl he’d been lusting after for the last fifteen years, Minka put a royal on the counter. This Ryal and Cuneo both rejected; the latter returned it to her to put down a royal of his own (from the pouch DeWitt had given him) and Minka laughed, “Be that way! I’ll just spend it at Flodie’s on you! Come on!”

Minka rushed out to the wagon, then squealed in excitement to see that Marguerite had joined them. Juhl, however, paused in the notary’s shop to study her new husband. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?” she whispered.

He shook his head helplessly. “What good would it have done? I wasn’t the one you wanted.”

“Then why was I so stupid for so long?” she groaned.

“We all have our dreams,” he shrugged. “I’m just glad you woke up to walk into mine.”

Minka opened the door from the outside. “We’re about to drive off without you.”

“No, we’re coming!” Juhl laughed. As they piled into the wagon and Arne clucked to the draft horse, Librizzi came hurrying up the sidewalk, having run all the way from The Lands’ Best Inn. Breathing heavily, she paused at the corner of Chapel Road and Main to watch the wagon and bodyguards progress up the street. Then she compressed her lips and nodded.

Over in the eastern section, Seagrave had just entered Pelagatti's shop, which was currently a madhouse. While most of the men in the Abbey army had their black flat caps by now, those who didn't were vocal in their impatience. So the temporary employees of the shop were working overtime to get them finished.

Sidestepping bodies that darted hither and yon, Seagrave laid a somewhat wrapped paper package on the counter in front of Skevi, who was writing out an invoice. She paused to look up. Seagrave began, "Sorry I missed your birthday, but, your cap wasn't ready yet." She had turned 16 two days ago, on April 21st.

She laughed, "Don't tell me that's a flat cap!"

Glancing aside innocently, he said, "Should I lie, then? Open it."

As she ripped the paper packaging, she was laughing and crying at the same time. "If I see another flat cap, I'll—" She broke off to lift out a flat cap of bright pink. The bustle around her paused for everyone to look.

"That's so I can find you in a crowd," Seagrave said.

She lifted her large eyes to him, then put it on. "It fits perfectly," she marveled. "How did you do that?"

"I had help," he said, glancing to her father nearby. He was watching with a silly smile.

"Oh, you!" She ran over to kiss her father and hug him tightly. Then she got embarrassed. "I get off at six of the candle," she murmured to Seagrave.

"Then, if it's all right with you and your father, I'll stop by to walk you to one of the new eateries out here," Seagrave said.

"Shelmerdine's is just right across the street. I'll meet you there," she said quickly.

"I'll look for you," he said, glancing at the hat.

She laughed, then said, "Oh! Thank you, by the way."

"You're welcome." He began backing out in embarrassment at all the grinning faces. Skevi patted her cap and returned to the invoice.

By late afternoon, Loseby and Noah, both exhausted, had gone south on Main again to cross New North Road and look at possibilities in the east Lands, where so many new businesses were springing up. The two looked at the shuttered Elvey's outlet which hadn't even been finished, then Loseby said, "Wait right here; I'll check to see if they're taking apprentices at the new inn under construction."

"Right," Noah muttered. While Loseby ran to the new construction site, Noah looked around despondently. He saw a man wading through a flooded field behind a house. As he walked, he periodically bent over to pluck something out of the water and drop it in the bucket he was carrying.

Curious, Noah went over to watch. The man looked up. "How do yuh do?"

"What are you doing?" Noah asked.

"Well, I'm harvesting crayfish from my rice field, as I do every few weeks or so, because they're in such

demand at the fortress and the eateries. And with the new eateries here, I can hardly keep up. The fella from Shelmerdine's stops by almost every day to see what I've got for them," the man said.

"Why the rice?" Noah demanded.

"Well, to eat!" the man laughed. "The rice plants shelter the crayfish, which eat the bugs that eat the plants. A month ago I drained and harvested the rice and replanted this plot, which the crayfish take no notice of; they just burrow down in the mud until I reflood the plot, and then we start all over again!"

Looking around, Noah saw the side yard with the cart and the donkey contentedly grazing. "Wait! You're the peat seller!"

"That's right, the name's Plunkett. What's your name?" he asked, splashing over with his bucket.

"Noah. Where do you get the peat?" he demanded.

"Oh, I have a cutting bog a few miles north of the Lands," Plunkett said.

"What's a cutting bog?" Noah asked.

"That's just the right place with the right amount of water where the peat is naturally made. I cut the squares and then leave 'em in my drying stall up there for a few weeks until they're good for burning. Properly dried peat makes a much nicer, cleaner fire than wood," Plunkett said.

"You do all that?" Noah asked.

"Sure, it's fun. But some days I'd like to have help. Would you like to help me?" Plunkett asked.

"Yes!" Noah cried. As Loseby came up, Noah grabbed his sleeve. "I want to apprentice with Plunkett!"

Loseby looked at the flooded plot in bewilderment. "Plunkett? Doing . . . what?"

"Farming rice and crayfish! Cutting peat!" Noah said.

Loseby asked Plunkett, "Do you take apprentices, sir?"

"I . . . can't pay much," Plunkett said.

"No sir, the Fortress pays you for an apprenticeship. But the Captain has to approve it," Loseby explained.

"Oh well, sure, then!" Plunkett said.

"Yay!" Noah said. "Let's go tell Efran!"

As he started running back west, Plunkett raised a hand to wave. "Nice boy. That would be nice, to have an apprentice. That would be special." Thinking on that, he returned to his crayfish harvest.

Less than a half-hour later, a very winded soldier and boy stumbled up the fortress stairs to the second-floor workroom. As Noah burst in, Efran looked over from his chair, then slowly pulled his feet down from the table and sat up. "Did you find something?"

“Yes!” Noah cried, bracing himself on the arm of the chair. DeWitt and Estes suspended their work to watch. Noah continued, panting, “I want to—raise crayfish and—grow rice and—cut peat at the—the cutting bog.”

The administrators exchanged glances and Efran said, “With . . . ?”

Loseby said, “His name is Plunkett, sir.”

“Plunkett!” Efran said, glancing back to Estes and DeWitt. “Hassie’s father.” He asked Noah, “Did he say anything about Hassie?”

“Hassie?” Noah scowled, having missed the reference. “No, she can apprentice with somebody else! I found him first!”

Efran leaned forward in his chair. “Are you sure, Noah?”

“YES. He harvests crayfish and rice and rides in his cart to his cutting bog and he’s going to show me how to do all that,” Noah explained. “He provides food for the fortress and peat for people to burn that’s cleaner than wood. Why can’t I learn to do all that?” he pleaded.

Efran laughed lightly. “All right, if that’s what you want, you’ll start tomorrow. DeWitt will send payment for the apprenticeship with your bodyguard.”

Noah’s face dropped. “You’re not going to send a bodyguard with me to work are you?” he asked in a dead voice.

Efran sighed, then said, “No, only to see that you get there safely with your payment.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Noah cried, jumping in circles and pumping his fists in the air.

Efran shot a look to his administrators, then said, “Very good, Noah. Go wash up; it’s almost time for dinner. Well done, Loseby.”

“Thank you, sir.” Loseby saluted. Noah hugged him around the waist and then shot out of the workroom.

“Don’t run down the stairs!” Efran shouted. Loseby darted out to catch him.

Leaning his head back on the chair rail, Efran sighed, “At least it’s not an acrobat.” DeWitt snorted.

At Flodie’s, Minka had piled a great deal of merchandise on the counter, mostly ladies’ clothes, while Kaas and Doudney kept a complacent eye on the proceedings. Juhl was laughing in protest, “I don’t know if we have enough to pay for all this!” Flodie was tabulating the items, folding them neatly to pack into bags.

“Oh, it’s very cheap,” Minka said, brushing her off. “Besides, it’s our wedding gift to you.”

Cuneo brought over a much smaller pile of men’s clothes. “Most of the things are too fancy for me; I can’t work in them,” he said wryly. “Whoever this Lord Justinian is, he’s a very wealthy man.”

Juhl paused, recognizing the name, but Minka laughed, “Oh, if they fit you at all, grab a few of his suits! He’s admired all over the Southern Continent!”

“I guess I will, then,” he said self-consciously.

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Chapter 27

Marguerite, meanwhile, was in another section of Flodie’s examining a large display of various housewares. There were kitchen utensils, cookware, decorative items, and an ornate mirror. She eyed that in particular, then glanced around to see that no one was watching. Turning back to lay a hand on the mirror, she watched its surface gloss over and clear again.

She waited a few minutes, then turned to call, “Juhl? I don’t know what’s stocked at twenty-two, but there’s a very fine pottery set here that’s almost complete.”

“Oh, she’ll need that!” Minka insisted, dragging Juhl over by the hand. They passed a woman looking at other wares without even seeing her. Cuneo had returned to the men’s clothing in the back of the store to try on a few fancy suits.

Picking up a cup, Juhl said, “Oh, that is beautiful. But let me pay for it—I feel you’ve done enough for us already.”

“Yes, isn’t she meddlesome? She and her lord, who thinks he has the power of the Almighty in his little domain,” said a smooth, ironic voice.

Marguerite, Juhl, and Minka turned to look at the woman they had just passed. Replacing a flask on the shelf of housewares, she smiled sardonically. Without moving, the bodyguards Kaas and Doudney watched her.

“Mother?” Juhl said in disbelief.

“Yes, I apologize for the misunderstanding, dear. You’ll come with me after all,” Librizzi said. She turned to lean back against the shelf, crossing her arms.

Minka drew up to Juhl protectively. “No she won’t, and you can’t make her. Your power is gone.”

“Oh, really,” Librizzi said flatly. “Let’s see.” She raised a hand to the mirror and said, “Show me Lord Efran.”

Everyone standing around—Minka, Doudney, Kaas, Juhl, and Marguerite—watched the mirror cloud over. Then there appeared the worn soles of two boots, one atop the other as though their wearer had his ankles crossed. Librizzi snarked, “Get your feet down off the table, stupid.”

The boots uncrossed and fell out of sight, then the mirror showed Efran leaning forward to look directly at them with a half-smile. “Hello, all. Are you having fun? Interesting outline,” he observed, his eyes following the curvature of the frame. “That must be a mirror at Flodie’s. Yes, one or two have cropped up there.” He glanced up to say, “DeWitt, Estes—can you see this? Come have a look.”

There was the sound of chair feet scraping across a wooden floor, then the administrators passed behind Efran’s chair to look over his shoulders. “Oh, an enchanted mirror. How original,” Estes said, then went back to his seat to resume work.

DeWitt leaned forward. “Minka? Are you at Flodie’s?”

“Yes,” she said from slightly behind Librizzi, who filled the center of the mirror. Minka continued, “Juhl and Cuneo got married, and we’re finding some wonderful things for them, but Librizzi says she still has power.”

Efran cocked his head thoughtfully. “Sir Nomus isn’t usually wrong. Who are the men with you?”

“Doudney and Kaas,” Minka said. “They’re right here.”

“Can you take her down, gentlemen?” Efran asked.

“No sir, we can’t move,” Kaas said. DeWitt was still watching over Efran’s shoulder.

Efran said, “All right, she can still do that. What do you want, Librizzi?”

“You destroyed our shop and sent Maldonado into Chaos,” she began. Librizzi did not appear to notice Cuneo approaching with several suits in his hands. He dropped them to watch.

“Did I do that?” Efran looked off dubiously.

“No,” Marguerite said, studying Librizzi. “I believe what happened with both the building and the man was the withdrawal of the power that kept them suspended in an unstable state.”

Librizzi sarcastically noted, “Is Lord Efran not responsible for what his peons do?”

Minka asked her, “Then why didn’t you stop the peons from taking you?”

“To show you what I can do,” Librizzi said, reaching out to her.

Efran said, “Stop”—and Librizzi found that she could not touch Minka.

“Very well,” Librizzi said, turning back to the mirror. “I see that I shall have to deal with the lord, first. This mirror is indeed enchanted, not just as a window, but as an exit into Chaos. As you sent Maldonado there, so I send you.” Librizzi raised her hand, and the mirror began vibrating.

Juhl said, “Stop, Mother, please. I’ll go with you.”

“No!” Cuneo said, running up. Librizzi flicked a hand at him, and he dropped to the floor. Juhl fell on her knees beside him.

Librizzi said, “Yes, you’ll come with me, after I dispatch this troublesome man.”

As she began to say words, Efran said, “I feel I’d better warn you. . . .”

But then he began fading. Minka went cold all over, and started shaking. *No, she mouthed silently. No, no, Efran, not again. Take me into Chaos with you, then.*

But Marguerite held her arm, whispering, “Shh. Watch.” Cuneo sat up, blinking. Juhl held him, then they both looked up at the mirror, which was changing again.

Everyone looked at the mists in the mirror, from which a voice said, *The time for warnings has passed; you received many which you tossed behind you.* Minka recognized it as Nakham's voice.

There was a succession of scenes that passed quickly across the mirror. Despite their brevity, they were clear and comprehensible: Librizzi as a young girl being tutored in the dark arts by a woman of her village, Librizzi testing out spells on the other children, Librizzi marrying her husband and cheating on him, Librizzi speaking sharply to her daughter, Librizzi watching her husband's murder and fleeing with the murderer, leaving behind a baffled, brokenhearted child. In each scene was a bright presence whispering to her, *This is not the right way; turn, turn here.* In each case, Librizzi shouldered the presence aside.

About a hundred such scenes flashed across the mirror in the space of a minute. Then Nakham said, *Your allotted time has ended. As you have chosen, so shall it be.* He vanished, and the mirror cleared so that everyone standing around saw only themselves in it. Then it cracked so loudly that they jumped.

Wide-eyed, they looked at each other, then at Librizzi. Thoughtfully, she said, "Well, that's an interesting perspective. I don't think that's a very charitable way of looking at my life; it doesn't really take into account all of the stress I had to deal with." As she said this, her face flickered.

"No, I don't think that's accurate at all, or fair," she said, flickering from her head down to her shoulders. "My mother sent me away to that horrible boarding school, so what else could I do? Everyone was so mean to me."

Her whole body was flickering now, growing fainter. "In fact, I'm glad you came for me, Juhl; you can help me be a better person. We'll get a little house all to ourselves, and I'll learn to do something creative, like, paint. Yes, I've always wanted to learn to paint. You can keep house; I will paint, and we'll go from there. Won't that work? Yes, I think that's what we should do. . . ." And then she was gone, just like Maldonado.

Everyone stood stone still, then Minka felt an arm slide around her, and she looked up at Efran. He was breathing heavily from a hasty ride with five men behind him. Minka buried herself in him and Verrin went over to pat Kaas' shoulder, who nodded.

Efran noted, "I don't see Librizzi here, only a cracked mirror."

Marguerite said, "She followed Maldonado into Chaos. But there is one more thing, Juhl, if you're agreeable." The dazed young woman blinked at her, and Marguerite said, "You need a new name. 'Juhl' just doesn't fit you; it's—flat and muddy. I've been asked to present you with the name of 'Joie,' J-O-I-E, [pronounced *joy*] which rings truer. Do you want 'Joie'?"

"Joie. Yes. I like that very much," she said, trembling.

Cuneo hugged her. "We have to go back to the notary's shop, to change it in his book."

Minka said, "First, we've got to take all your things to twenty-two so I can give you the key. It's very nice; they got it all cleaned up from the last tenant who left, which was—" She stopped blankly, then looked up at Efran in abject fear. "Am I meddling, on top of everything else? I know I talk too much—"

"No, no," he laughed, holding her, and there was a background chorus of "No!" "Not at all." "We appreciate it very much."

Joie told her, "No, we're very grateful, and it's absolutely the right thing to go by the house, first, so that we can

put away all these beautiful things that you helped us find, and other people talk a lot, too, don't they? But it doesn't matter, because they're such nice words."

"All right," Minka said, looking determined to believe the best here. Then she looked back to Auntie. "Who asked you to give Joie her new name?"

"Nakham," Marguerite replied, smiling. "He also told me about the mirror, which wouldn't have worked here anyway. I only had to confirm that it was harmless. Efran, your command as Lord Sovereign to strip her powers was heeded, only, the Sovereign Lord had another way of revealing it done."

"I've been overruled before, which is fine," he wryly conceded.

Taking a deep breath, Minka said, "Now. Since you brought so many men, we need all these things taken out to the wagon. Oh, Cuneo, those are nice suits all over the floor. Have you paid for them yet? Well, add those to our total, Flodie. Yes, I've got that here." She took her pouch over to the counter to open it.

When Efran finally got her out of the shop, he draped an arm around her shoulders to tell her, "Noah found a place he wants to apprentice. Do you want to know where?"

"Yes!" she said.

He lifted her into the cart. "With Plunkett."

"Plunkett? Hassie's father? Who—sells peat and raises crayfish?" she asked.

"That's the one," Efran confirmed, climbing up on Kraken to turn his head and walk next to the wagon.

As they all set out toward Number Twenty-two in the western section, Minka said, "That makes perfect sense. Noah loves the pond." Efran raised his face in comprehension.

That evening, the Fortress hosted a wedding dinner for Joie and Cuneo. It was just like dinner every night, except that there were newlyweds to be thoroughly embarrassed by an unending stream of congratulations. Also, the kitchen made a special little cake for the couple to enjoy between themselves.

Ella's baby bump was showing, after Quennel had announced to the whole hall that she was pregnant about six weeks ago. As traumatized as Efran had been when he first envisioned becoming a grandfather at 30 or 31, he found that he was fine with the idea now. None of it was his fault, and babies were always welcome.

Minka was telling everyone at their table about Librizzi fading into Chaos after threatening Efran with it, and he smiled to himself. Sometimes he was glad she liked to talk, so that he didn't have to. He looked at Joie listening as though she hadn't seen it all herself, and Cuneo sitting in satisfaction with the desire of his heart. With all this, Efran thought, *Another happy ending. How does it always work out like that?*

And Therese whispered, "*In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*" [Ps. 16:11]

"I know, Therese. I know," he admitted, again. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow—there was only joy ahead.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on April 23rd of the year 8156 from the creation of the world.

NECESSARY NOTES FROM YOUR FRIEND THE AUTHOR:

The excerpt in Chapter 1 is from *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, Act V, Scene 5.

“When you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” [Isa. 30:21](#)

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in Two Parts: A Tale and A Promise* (Book 33)

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| | |
|---|--|
| Aceto—ah SEE tow | Jian—JEE un |
| Adele—ah DELL | Justinian--jus TIN ee un |
| <i>aike</i> —AY kay | Kaas—kahs |
| Allyr—AL er | Kelsey—KELL see |
| Arenivas—air en EEV us | Koschat—KOS chat |
| Ares—AIR eez | Kraken—KRAY ken |
| Arne—arn | Laurier—LOR ee ay |
| Atticitian—at eh SISH un | Leila—LYE la |
| Aune—awn | Lemmerz—leh MERZ |
| Averne—ah VURN | Librizzi—leh BRIZ ee |
| Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh | Lilou—LEE loo |
| Beardall—BARE duhl | Loseby—LOWS bee |
| Beeby—BEE bee | Maldonado—mal don AH doh |
| Benedetti—ben eh DET ee | Marguerite—mar ger EET |
| Bethune—beh THUNE | Mathurin—mah THUR in |
| bonhomie—BAHN uh mee (easygoing friendship) | Mattias—mah TIE us |
| Bowring—BOWE ring | melee—MAY lay |
| Calix—KAY lix | Minka—MINK ah |
| caova—kay OH vah (coffee) | Minogue—men OGE (hard g) |
| Cennick—SIN ick (cynic) | Mumme—mum |
| Challinor—CHAL en or | Nicarber—neh CAR bur |
| Clough—chloh | Nomus—NO mis |
| croissant—kruh SAANT | Nyarko—nuh YAR koh |
| Cuneo—CUE nee oh | Pelagatti—pell ah GOT ee |
| Cyneheard—SIGN herd | Picti—PICK tee |
| Delano—deh LAN oh | Pieta—pie ATE ah |
| Derrida—deh REED ah | Piniello—pen YEH low |
| Dominica—dah MIN ee ka (the Lord's day) | piqued—peeked |
| Efran—EFF run | Pleyel—PLAY el |
| Elowen—EL oh win | Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language) |
| Elvey—ELL vee | Polontis—puh LON tis (the region) |
| Eneide—eh NEED | Quilicus—QUIL eh cus |
| Estes—ESS tis | Reinagle—REN ah gull |
| Eurus—YOUR us | Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee |
| Eurusian—your uh SEE un | Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>) |
| Eviron—ee VIRE un | Sbarbaro—suh BAR bah ro |
| Faciane—fah see ANN | Schuchard—SCHUK chur ared ARE dlup |
| fête—fate | Serrano—suh RAHN oh |
| Flodie—FLOW dee | Shelmerdine—SHEL mur deen |
| Folliott—FOH lee uht | Shoard—showrd |
| Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g) | Skevi—SKEH vee |
| Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g) | sommelier—soh muh LEE eh |
| Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g) | Sosie—SO see |
| Graeme—GRAY em | Stephanos—steh FAHN os |
| Guerry—GEHR ee | stipend—STY pend (a salary or allowance) |
| Hartshough—HART soh | Stites—stights |
| <i>hookama</i> —HOO kah mah (prostitute) | Suco—SUE coh |
| Imelda—eh MEL dah | Surchatain—SUR cha tan |
| Ionadi—ee YON ah dee | Surchataine—sur cha TANE |
| Jehan—JAY han | Teschner—TESH nur |

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in Two Parts: A Tale and A Promise* (Book 33)

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Tomer—TOH mur

Tourjee—TUR jee

Trina—TREE nah

ubiquitous—yoo BIH kwit us (everywhere)

Ure—YOUR ay

Venegas—VEN eh gus

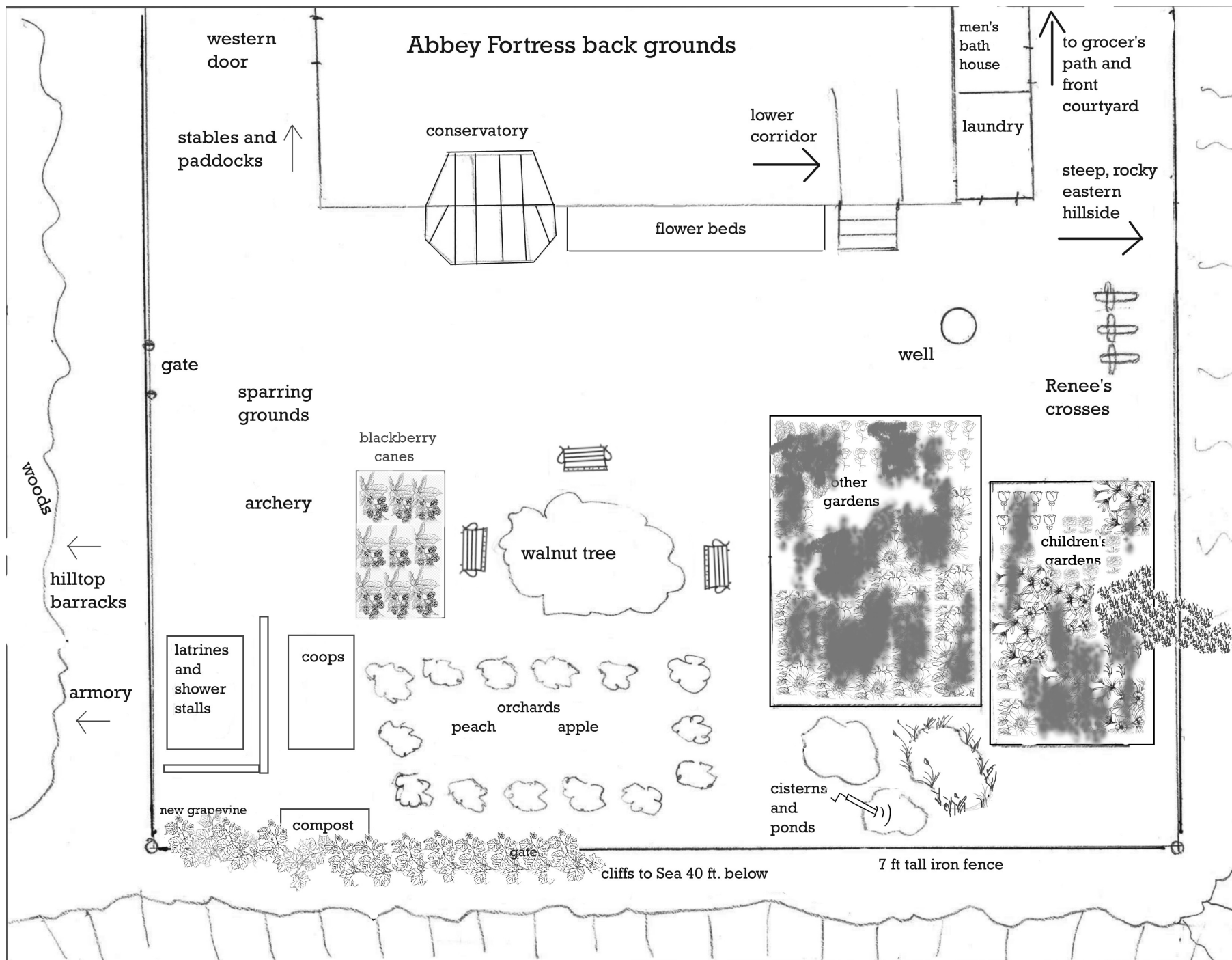
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un

Verlice—ver LEESE

Verrin—VAIR en

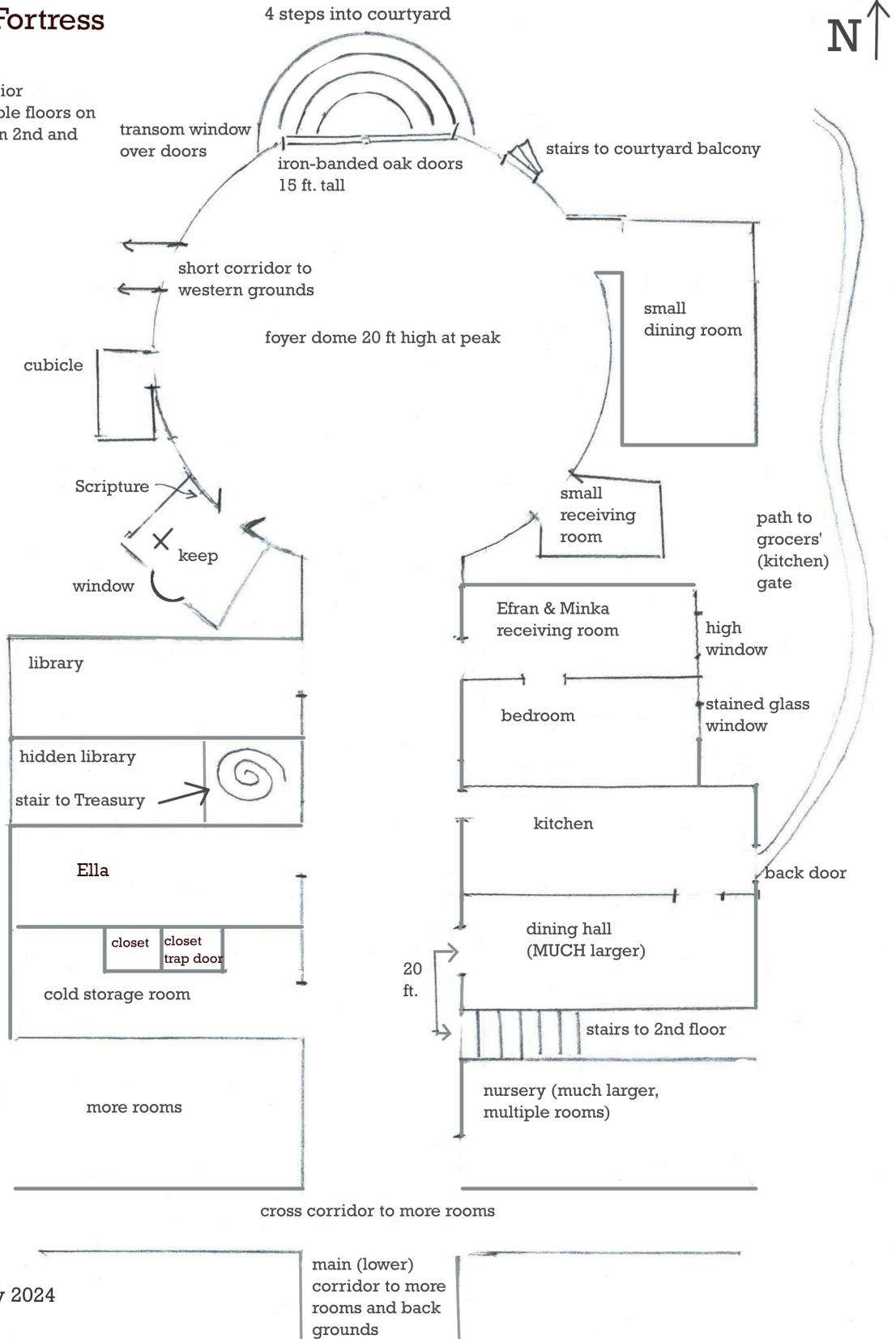
Vories—VORE eez

Windry—WIN dree



Abbey Fortress Interior

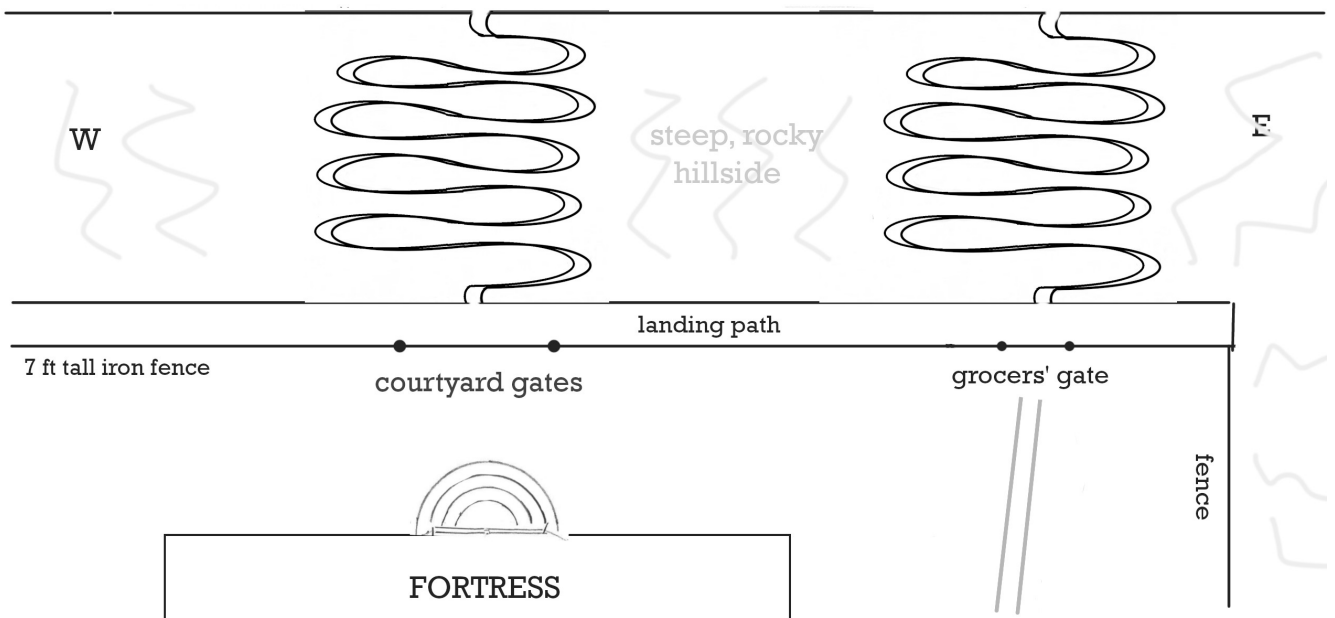
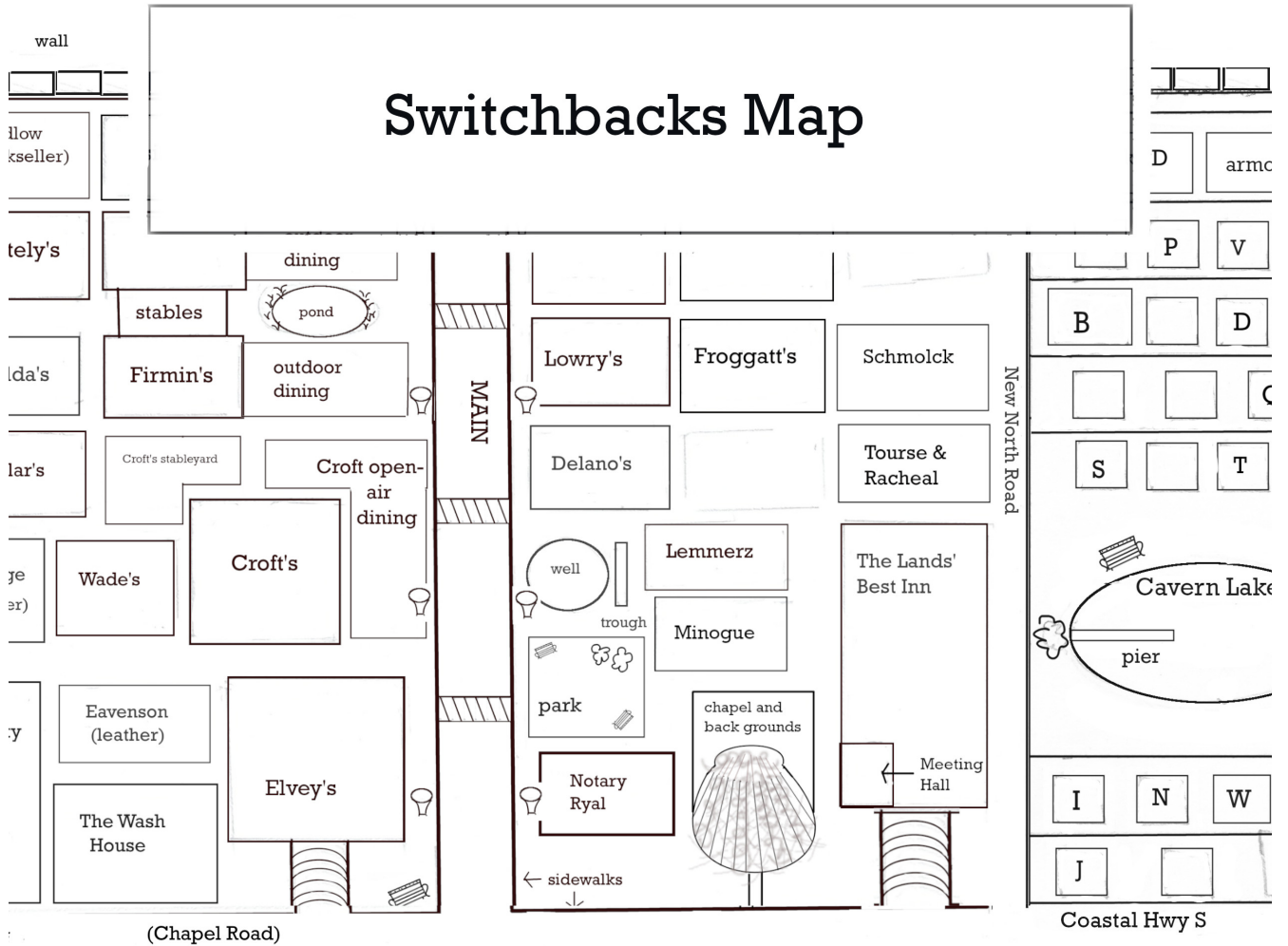
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

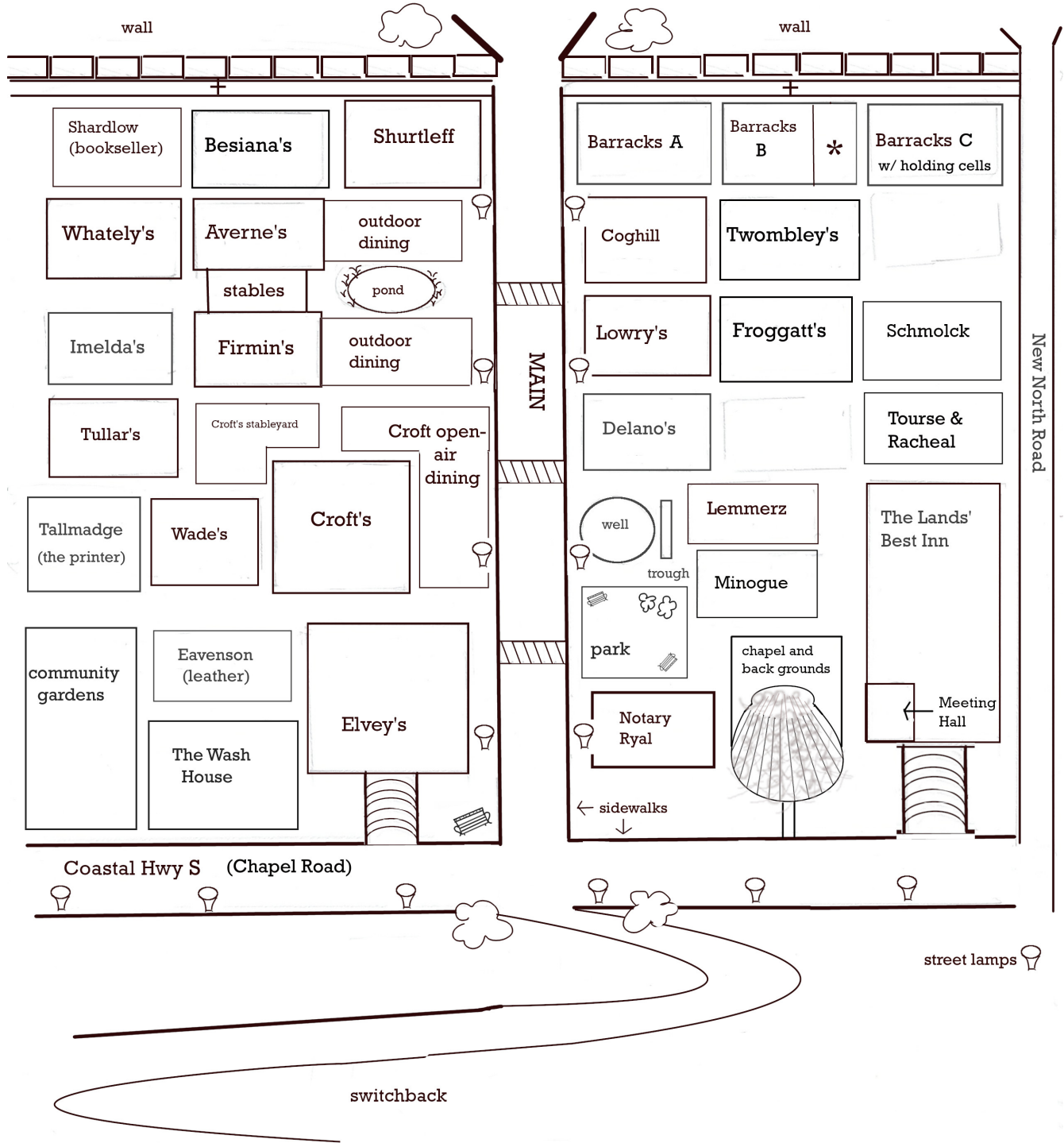
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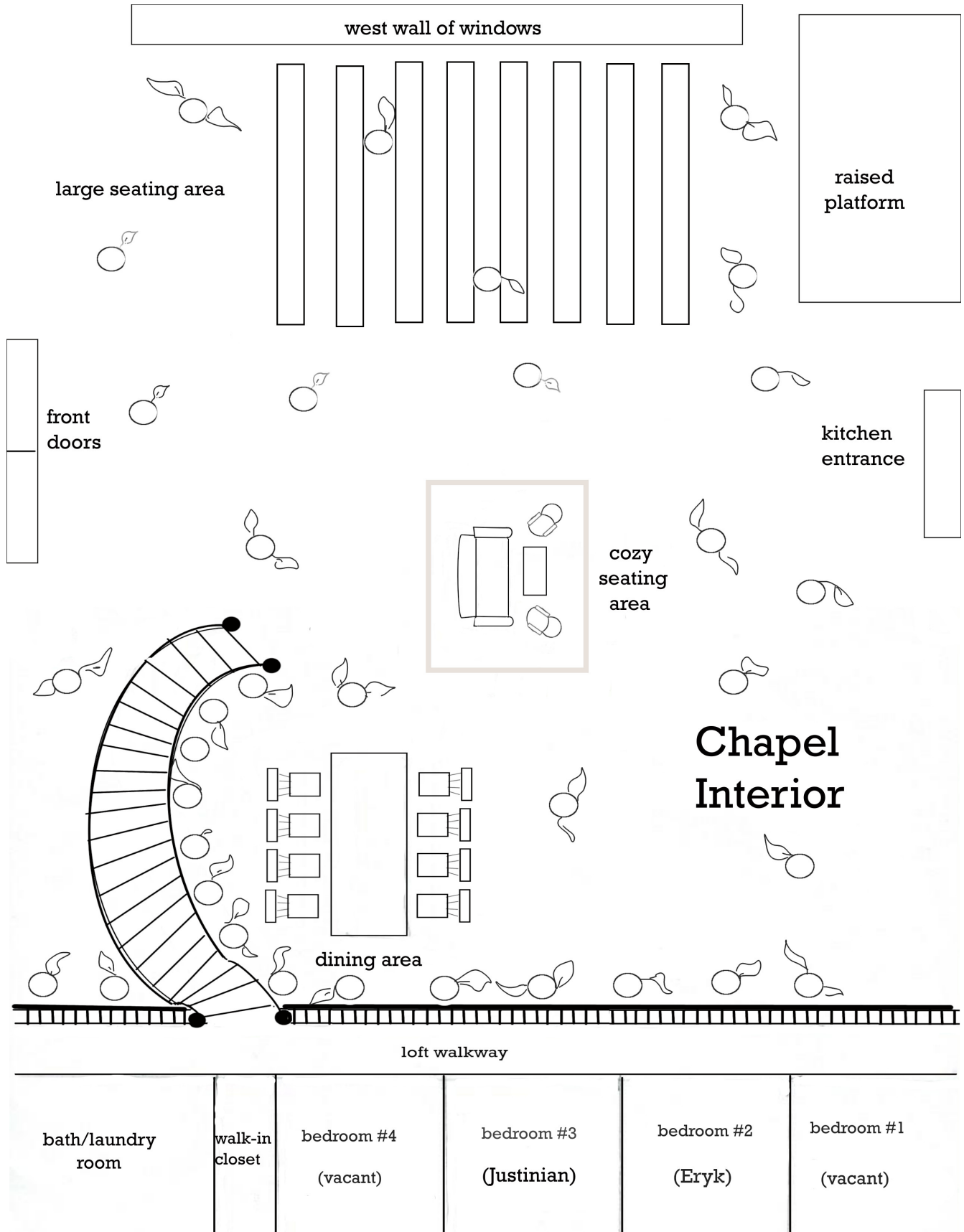
main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds



Abbey Lands Main Road

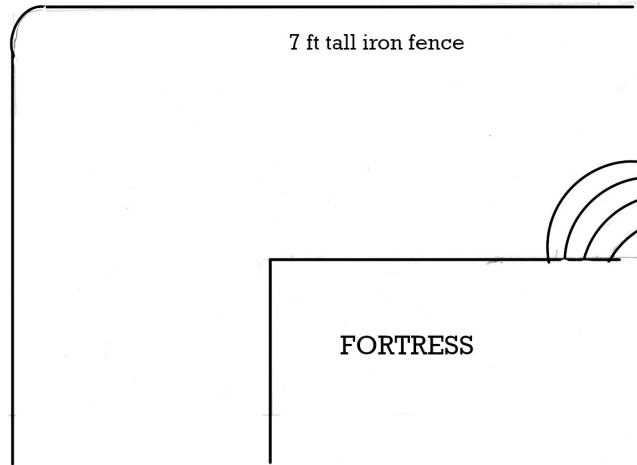
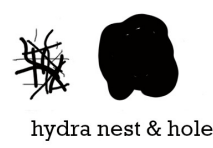
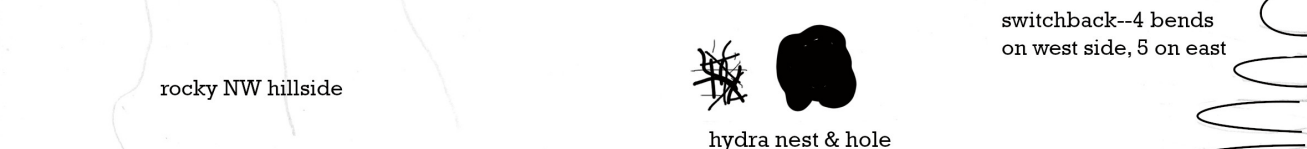
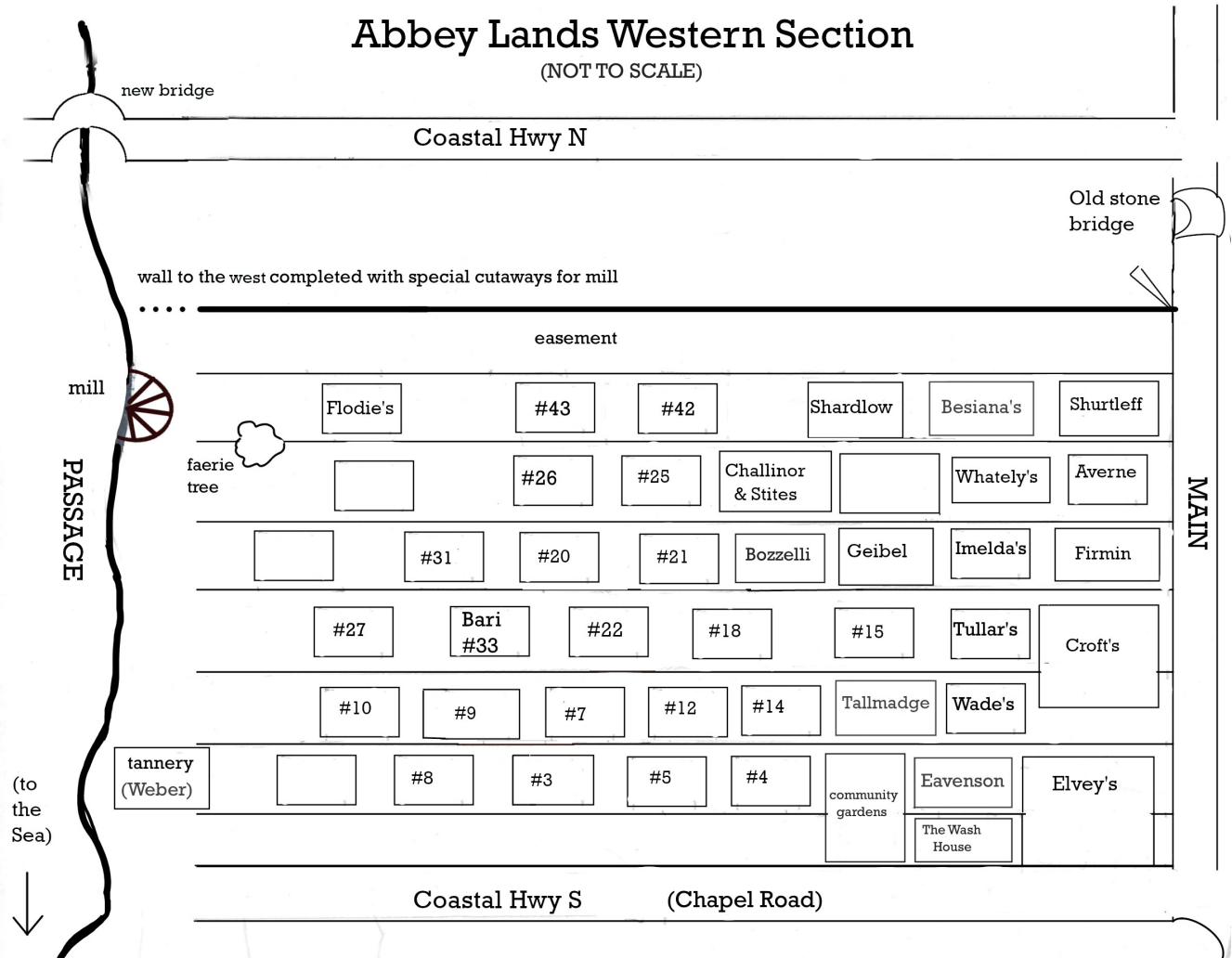
- * infirmary and mess kitchen
- + easements





Abbey Lands Western Section

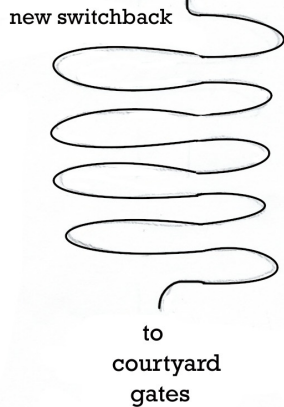
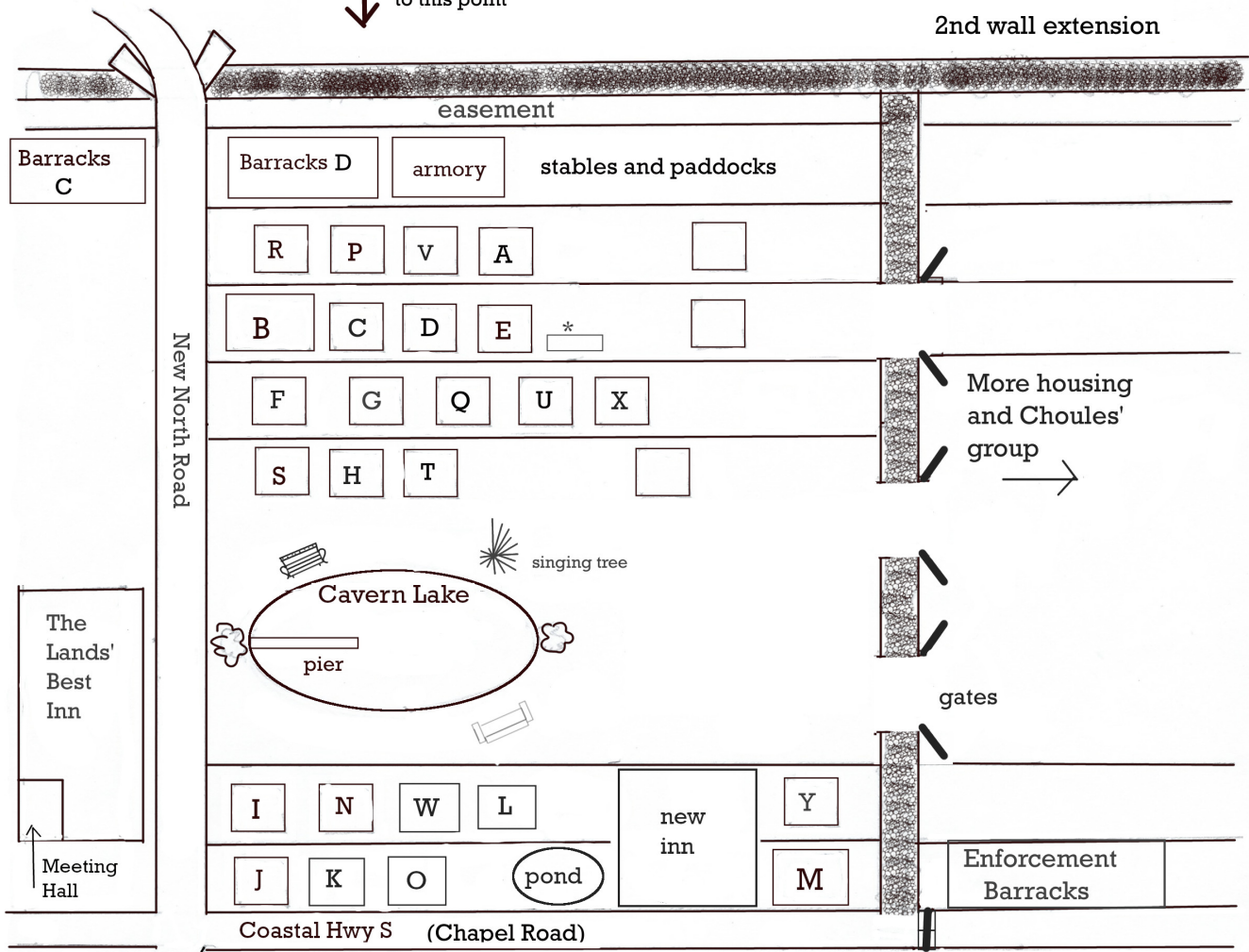
(NOT TO SCALE)



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

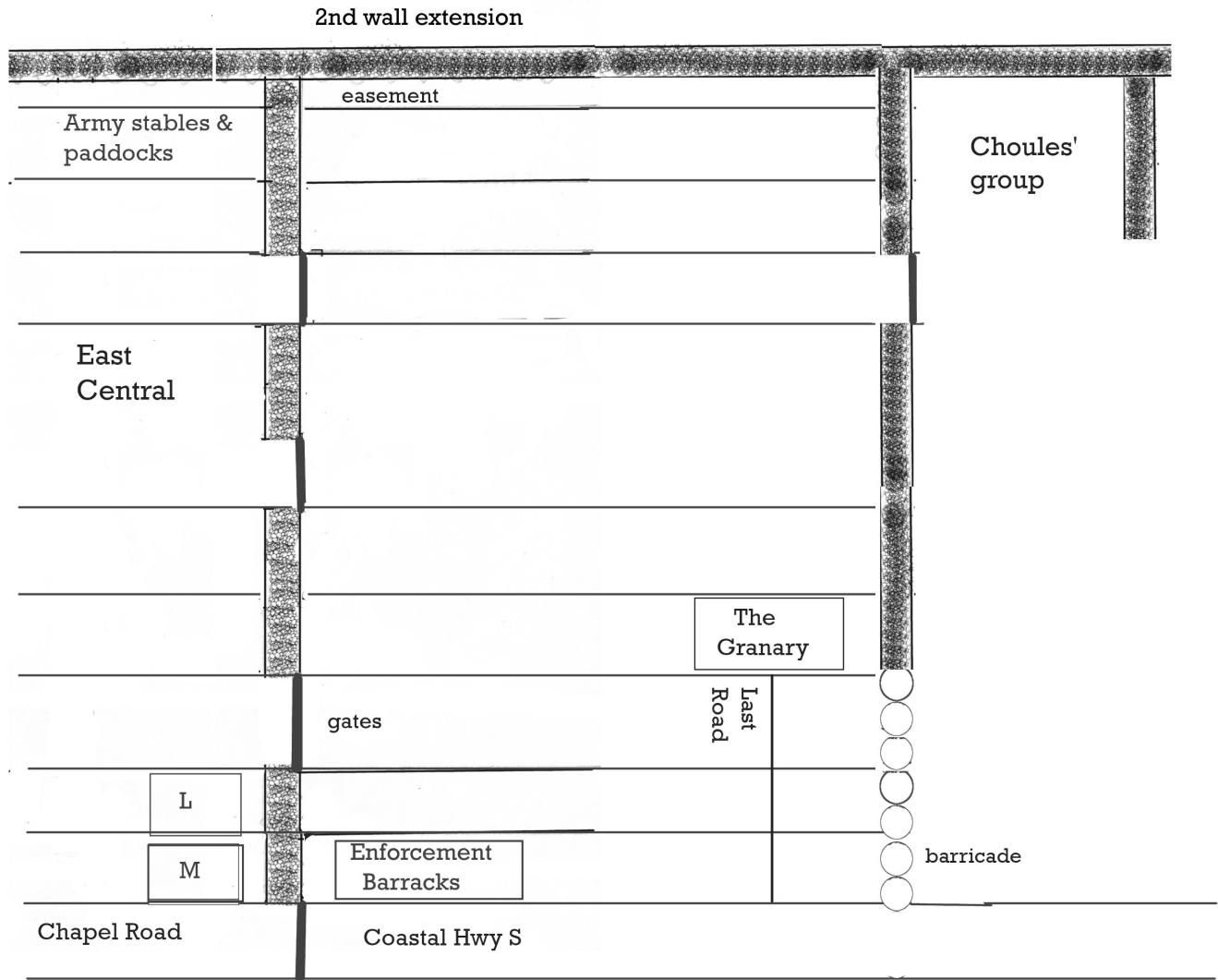


- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F - East Lands Chapel
- G - Shelmerdine's
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring & Trina
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
 - U - Chetwode Woodworking
 - V - Windry (#71 Orchid Row)
 - W - Barrueta & Colletta
 - X - Old World Spices
 - Y - Laurier's Beauty Salon
- * - wagon w/construction tools

barricade →

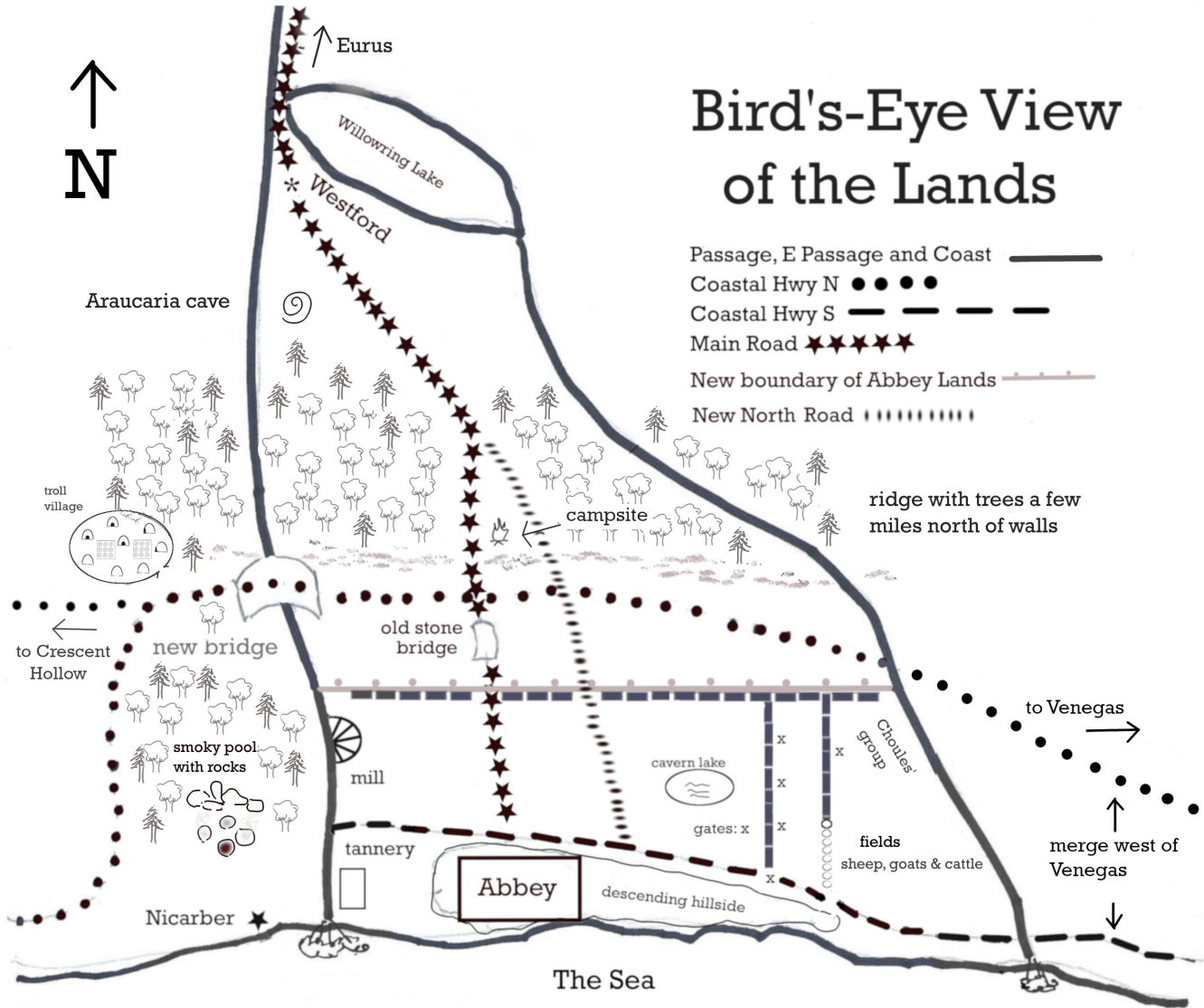
Far East Abbey Lands



M - Meineke
L - Laurier

steep, rocky hillside north and east





NOT TO SCALE

The End of the Granary (Book 33:
*Lord Efran in Two Parts:
A Tale and a Promise*)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Right up front, I'll acknowledge two discrepancies between the illustration and the story. First, The Granary was a one-story building that had disappeared by the time Efran appeared in the vibrations. But this [photo](#)¹ was perfect otherwise, so that's what you see here. Likewise, Estes doesn't have a beard, but [this guy](#)² resembles him so much, I decided to ignore the facial hair.

Speaking of hair, I used [this](#)³ young man to stand in for Efran in the vibrations. The glass wall he's leaning on gave me fits (in making him appear to punch through the vibrations) so I just cut his arm off. Good thing you can't see that. I also had to borrow pants and shoes for Efran from [this](#)⁴ guy, which you also can hardly see. And the vibrations came from [here](#)⁵.

I borrowed Minka's face from the woman who's having a nervous breakdown [here](#)⁶, and Minka's body (wearing gorgeous white boots) from the woman [here](#)⁷. (In fact, I went back to the story to add a short description of this outfit, because it's kind of unusual for Minka.) Her hair came from Png Egg [here](#).

That's [DeWitt](#)⁸ standing beside [Kraken](#)⁹, of course. I don't know which [soldier](#) that is who's sitting back there grieving the Captain (on PickPik), but they'll all cheer up pretty quickly.

Robin Hardy
June 21, 2024

PS. I'm claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Paul Volkmer](#) on Pexels
2. Photographed by [Hamid Tajik](#) on Pexels
3. Photographed by [Marcelo Chagas](#) on Pexels
4. Photographed by [竟傲 汤](#) on Pexels
5. Created by [Thi Minh](#) on Pngtree
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