

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

Book 36

**Lord Efran in
the Apocalypse**

Robin Hardy

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Book 36

Lord Efran in the Apocalypse and Afterword

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Chapter 1

Notary Lord Shaffer sat with quill and parchment at the table in the interview room of his shop in Westford. With the wealth that he would have shortly, he was planning renovations to this office.

But that's not what occupied him right now. At this time, he was writing a letter to Notary Ryal and Lord Efran, jointly. Thanks to the spies he had in the Abbey Lands, he now knew why he had never heard back from Wissowa regarding his last letter, verified as having been delivered May 16th. Today was June 8th. And as of today, he was putting both men on notice of serious charges against them:

"To Notary Lord Ryal and Efran, Lord of the Abbey Lands
"From Notary Lord Shaffer of Westford:

"Greetings. I have been made aware of your attempts to entice, mislead and defraud Lady Wissowa not only of the additional monies due her for Lord Efran's callous and immoral neglect of her and her son Donovan, but also for his illegal maneuvers to gain sole custody of said son, thus depriving the lady of her rights of motherhood. Therefore, I am issuing this formal notice as required by the Law of Roman of your joint trial for corruption, enticement, and falsification of statements made under oath.

"In accordance with the Law, your joint trial will be conducted by Lord Notary Goodenough of Eurus, on loan in accordance with Section 52, 'Emergency Use of Neighboring Notaries.' In order to give you time to prepare in accordance with the Law, the trial will be held here in Westford at the new Rotunda on June 11th of this year. Also in accordance with the Law, you will be provided the evidence against you no later than the 11th.

"Sincerely yours, et cetera, et cetera," Shaffer said, smiling.

Signing with a flourish, he murmured, "This will end old Ryal's career—he can spend the rest of his few years growing vegetables. And while it won't bring Efran down, it's another black mark against him. It won't take too many more to put him out of play as well." After stamping and blotting it, Shaffer wrote out a copy for his files.

Then he sealed the letter and went to his door to look for a messenger. Although he had to wait longer than he wished for one to ride by, he was too vain to be seen walking to the messenger station two blocks over.

Finally, a rider in a green sash turned a corner down the street, and Shaffer held the letter up. The messenger prompted his horse forward to receive it, and Shaffer additionally handed him two royals. "I want delivery verification, and I want it delivered today."

"Yes, sir." The messenger packed the letter in his pouch and turned his horse. Satisfied, Shaffer went back into his shop to tidy up his files. His papers on the Abbey Lands were so nearly bursting out of their folder that he left it on the front counter to go look for a larger folder to hold it all.

While he was rummaging in his storage closet, his doorbell tinkled. In anticipation of Goodenough's early arrival, he left his search to return to his front counter. There, he found that blustering irritant Lord Baroffio looking down on him in superiority. He was so large, he took up half the counter. Smiling tightly, Shaffer said, "Good morning, Lord Baroffio. How may I assist you?"

"By receiving this, Shaffer," Baroffio said, slapping down a folded parchment on the counter.

Frowning, Shaffer picked up the unsealed document to open it, then looked up at him in amazement. “You think to charge me with corruption?” he laughed. “So what did your errand boy Whitgift ever find? And, by the way, he’s at the Abbey Lands now, so is ineligible to initiate anything against me.”

“Oh, I have a resident notary,” Baroffio said. “And a requisition for your files on the Abbey Lands.”

“What?” Shaffer laughed in disbelief. “Who could possibly have authorized this?” And then he saw behind him the little pinched face with a puckered smile.

“This is Notary Pherigo, Shaffer,” Baroffio said. “He’s got the requisition for your files. They will all be returned to you following the trial.”

Placing that requisition delicately before Shaffer’s stunned eyes, Pherigo noted the large script identifying the folder which lay spread out on the counter. “Oh. Thank you for getting it ready for me, Lord Shaffer.”

As he began collecting the overstuffed folder in his weaselly little hands, Shaffer began to protest, “He can’t; he--” Upon Pherigo smirking at him, Shaffer realized that he couldn’t point out the irregularities of his certification without implicating himself. So he protested, “It’s unnecessary for you to take the folder; I’ll be happy to produce whatever you wish to see.”

Pherigo said, “You don’t have time; your trial’s set for June tenth in the Rotunda. Here’s a copy of our evidence to enable you to prepare.” Holding the bulging folder under one arm, he withdrew a folded, slightly rumpled paper from his pocket to lay it before the stunned Shaffer.

When he opened it to see his own letter to Wissowa, his face blanched, and he cried, “You cannot use stolen documents as evidence!”

Pherigo corrected him, “Not stolen, Lord Shaffer, but left on Lord Ryal’s counter by a person he cannot name. Lord Ryal is prepared to swear to this.” His ratlike face scrunched while Baroffio watched in satisfaction. Ryal’s assertion was not a lie: the Law forbade the use of minor children as witnesses in public trials. It would be illegal for Ryal to even mention Donovan in connection with the letter. A child’s testimony could be heard only by a notary in private, who would then act in accordance for the good of the child.

So Shaffer speechlessly watched the blustering idiot Baroffio turn out with the little weasel who carried under his arm all of Shaffer’s correspondence with the Abbey Lands. Before leaving, Pherigo looked back to whisper, smiling, “You never paid me like you promised.” Then he was out the door.

On the morning of June 10th, the Rotunda of Westford (built by Lord Baroffio) began filling up early for the midmorning trial of Lord Shaffer on charges of corruption. The last two days had seen intense activity by both sides in preparation, especially in selecting the jury who would decide the case. To prevent a tie, the number of jurors was set at nine. While Lord Baroffio had recused himself, he had placed on the jury panel Lord Colquhoun, Lord McElfresh, the builder Handslip, and the merchant DeHooges. Shaffer had selected the banker Rensselaer, the tax assessor Arcuri, and the clothier Agostini. The remaining jurors that both Baroffio and Shaffer had agreed on were the import/export magnate Schmithals and the doctor Fontane. The predilections of these last two were unknown.

Since the EurAsian Notary Goodenough had planned to arrive in Westford on the afternoon of June 9th anyway, Shaffer put his emergency use of a neighboring notary in play, conscripting Goodenough for his defense. In that

case, however, the joint trial against Ryal and Efran would have to be postponed. It was uncertain that Shaffer's trial would even be concluded by the 11th, when the other was supposed to begin.

Before the jury was seated in the Rotunda, observers were allowed in on a first-come basis. Protocol stipulated that once all the chairs were taken in the audience, no one else was to be admitted. So the opposing parties-- Shaffer, Goodenough, Baroffio, and Pherigo--watched closely to see who would come, especially from the Abbey Lands.

As the hall rapidly filled, it became apparent that any Landers here were making themselves obscure. There were a number of nicely dressed men, but no red uniforms anywhere. Shaffer, however, kept a sharp eye out for Polonti—specifically, any tall, good-looking Polonti men. While there were a number of Polonti who resided in Westford, they were all of the lower class who were unlikely to waste a workday to watch this trial. So Shaffer's gaze focused on any black head he spotted.

One in particular drew his attention. At first Shaffer was sure it was Efran, being definitely Polonti, tall and solid. But the longer Shaffer looked, the more dubious he became. The man wore a blue serge suit—well-fitted, though not particularly fine. His hair was combed back in the manner of an accountant, and he wore spectacles. All of this could be a dodge, except. . . .

He was following a handsome blond man in a most elegant suit who was talking over his shoulder to him as to a subordinate. When they took their seats on the third row, the blond man continued talking as though giving instructions, and the Polonti took out a small notebook and a wrapped charcoal to begin taking notes. At that point, Shaffer dismissed him to look elsewhere.

Ryal was definitely not here, nor was Steward Estes nor Administrator DeWitt, that Shaffer could see. But--

There was a sudden pause in the seating as Wissowa entered in a relatively modest but eye-catching dress. She swished up a side center aisle with bodyguards on either hand (civilian, not military). Having been alerted by the Notary Ryal that a letter purportedly to her from Shaffer was the lynchpin of this trial, she arrived expecting a front-row seat.

This she received. When her guardians brought her to the center of the front row and ordered three current observers out of their seats, those evicted looked to Notary Pherigo, who nodded. So Wissowa settled into her chair with her bodyguards on either hand. On the third row almost directly behind her, Efran and Connor regarded each other for a moment, then Connor straightened his necktie and said, "Oh, don't forget the soirée Lyra and I are hosting on the seventeenth."

"Yes, sir," Efran murmured, making a note in his little book. They both then looked quickly to the side, where Minka and Marguerite, with four uniformed bodyguards, entered to take their seats in a side section about two rows back from where Efran and Connor were sitting. One bodyguard (Fiacco) sat to Minka's left and another (Hawk) sat to Marguerite's right. The third (Graeme) stood at the side front of the hall in clear view of the ladies, and the fourth (Corwyn) stood behind the last row of seats, also with a view of the women. To not cause unnecessary offense, Wendt had selected four Southerners for this duty.

Justinian and a female companion slipped into the row directly behind Minka and Marguerite. As he took off his hat to sit, he tapped Minka on the shoulder, upon which she and Marguerite turned to begin an animated conversation with him.

When the hall was full, Pherigo stood from his center seat behind a table on the stage to bring the jurors into their box, then introduce the charges against Notary Shaffer for corruption. To his left on the stage sat Shaffer

and Notary Goodenough; to his right were the nine jurors. As Pherigo made his memorized introductory comments, the audience listened idly while scanning for interesting faces. There was no longer any army of Westford to provide crowd control, but Baroffio had a number of beefy laborers stationed around the hall to quell disturbances. Also, he had his own scribes taking notes of the hearing.

Efran barely turned his head to look toward Minka in the other section to his right. She was watching him with a faint smile, and he smiled slightly in return. Then Pherigo was holding a folded letter aloft, saying, “This document is the reason why we’re gathered here today. I shall read it for the jury.” And he read:

“My dear Wissowa: I never heard of such shocking, duplicitous behavior on the part of a notary as what you describe. True, there is a section in the Law on “Custody of Minor Children,” and no, I hadn’t forgotten about it. We can prove that it does not apply here, and will not enable Efran to get Donovan back without paying you a great deal more. The Fortress can easily pay the twelve thousand if they only liquidate some of their Treasury holdings.

“So this is what you must do: Bring a carriage up tomorrow, May sixteenth, and I will have Notary Pherigo ready to go back down to the Lands with you to charge Ryal with corruption and Efran with abandonment of his son for the first ten years of his life. That will certainly get their attention, and rid me of several irritants. I am testing Pherigo now to receive his license. Regardless how he does on his first try, I’ll have him ready by tomorrow.

“In all this, my name will go unmentioned; my hand in the proceedings will be invisible. But by the time I am done, we will be exceedingly wealthy.

“Burn this letter.

“Much love, Your Shaffie”

There was a moment of stark silence, then a burst of hooting, laughing, and shouting. One man stood to challenge Pherigo, “And what makes you qualified to act as judge here?”

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Chapter 2

Pherigo shouted, “Be quiet and I’ll tell you!” The audience actually quieted down, and he turned to the table behind him to pick up a long sheet of paper. Holding it aloft, he said, “When Lord Baroffio saw the letter, he sent me to Notary Lord Commander Ryal of the Abbey Lands, who was notary here in Westford for many years, and had me retake the examination. Here is my test with Lord Ryal’s comments, which say, ‘An excellent effort. Pherigo passes easily.’ It is stamped and dated May twenty-third of this year. Anyone who wishes to see it must line up beside this Abbey man at the front.”

Graeme glanced back at him in displeasure at being made a signpost, especially when the notary extended the examination paper down to him, expecting him to hold it. Graeme silently declined, folding his arms. But the first man who rushed up from the audience took it, and the small mob of interested witnesses gathered around him to see the test and its comments. Graeme, meanwhile, shoved past the group to make sure the Abbey ladies were in his sight at all times.

It required only minutes for the skeptics to be convinced that the judge of this trial was a legitimate notary. Efran and Connor exchanged glances while noting Baroffio's elevated chin. It was a smart move to have the notary re-certified, and the only way he could make use of the evidence presented him.

When everyone had been reseated and the audience quieted, Pherigo turned to Shaffer to ask, "Lord Shaffer, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," Shaffer said indifferently.

Presenting the damning letter to him, Pherigo asked, "Do you deny that you wrote this letter, Lord Shaffer?"

Leaning back and crossing his arms as though bored, Shaffer said, "No, I wrote it. But it's being wildly misconstrued. I had to flatter the lady to keep her engaged in the legal matters."

Slowly, dramatically, Wissowa stood from her front-row seat to place a hand on her hip. "Was your making love to me in my bed part of your flattery, 'Shaffie'?" she asked with caustic sarcasm.

His glance at her was part pitying, part scornful. "I never made love to you."

She gasped, "How dare you?"

"The truth is sometimes daring," he muttered, calmly taking a sip from the water glass at his elbow.

His effort to trigger an hysterical outburst almost worked. Collecting herself, she said, "Notary Pherigo, I request that you summon my former housekeeper Flores to give testimony on this matter." Shaffer's eyes shifted to her warily.

Pherigo said, "That is reasonable, Lady Wissowa. Where shall we find her?"

Wissowa paused, then said, "Let me go check."

As she started to turn out, Pherigo said, "No, Lady Wissowa, we must have official court representatives bring her. Where shall they check first?"

Reseating herself a little reluctantly, she said, "Windry's house, number seventy-one Orchid Row in the Abbey Lands."

Pherigo looked to Baroffio, who had been trying to get his attention. Baroffio gestured to two of his men, saying, "No, she's at my house. I had her brought up just in case."

As they left the Rotunda at a trot, Pherigo said, "Thank you, Lord Baroffio. Now, Lady Wissowa, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Of course," she murmured. "More than most men," she added scathingly. "At least Efran didn't lie about it," she added. Then she turned to scan the hall behind her.

Efran lowered his face, but she spotted him at once two rows behind her. She even recognized Connor, who was idly looking off. Without letting on that she had seen anything of import, she turned back around. Pherigo said, "While we're waiting for the housekeeper, we'll go on to ask--"

“Actually, I don’t blame you,” Wissowa murmured silkily.

Shaffer’s eyes darted to her, and Pherigo turned. “What, Lady Wissowa?”

“In fact,” she went on, toying with a fold of her skirt, “it was rather humiliating for you.” Pherigo froze and Shaffer went white. The hall was deathly still. “And I don’t usually have to console the men in my bed,” she ended, fluffing her hair.

“I was never there,” Shaffer said tightly.

“You might as well hadn’t been,” Wissowa said sadly. A light groan went up around the hall, and Connor had to drop his head almost to his lap to not bark out a laugh. Efran didn’t dare move a muscle.

Eyes downcast, she turned her head just to her shoulder, in his direction. “So,” she wondered, “were all the complaints for money from Efran just your way of getting revenge? And using me to do it?”

Shaffer looked stony, insisting, “They were all justified actions.”

“The first thousand royals, maybe,” she said. “But the rest of it was just another way of using me to satisfy yourself. But they’re all . . . empty gestures.” Some of the men in the audience were shivering, hands clasped in their laps at the public evisceration.

“Are you any better a notary than you are a lover?” she asked in vague interest. “I mean, do you actually help anyone? Do anything for them?”

While Shaffer sat breathing, Pherigo, sweating, said, “Lady Wissowa, I’m going to have to ask you to—withhold further comments so that I may question Lord Shaffer about other matters.”

“You won’t get anything out of him,” she said. Then she turned to pucker at Efran. The audience members between them swiveled to look at him.

With a faint sigh, he removed the too-small glasses from his face. Unable to help himself, he glanced over at Minka. She was staring straight ahead with her determined “I’m not going to laugh” look. Beside her, Marguerite was smiling slightly, eyes downcast. Efran sat back, crossing his arms to listen.

Dabbing at the sweat on his forehead with his sleeve, Pherigo asked, “Lord Shaffer, why did you feel it necessary to continue to demand money from Lord Efran after he paid the first thousand royals to Lady Wissowa?”

Shaffer slid right back into form. “Because of the terrible injustice done. To have impregnated this woman, and then refuse to even tell her his name--”

“Oh, but he did tell me his name,” Wissowa said, and the whole hall—or those who heard it--spun to her like a stock pot knocked over. “He just didn’t remember it, being half asleep. After all, it was an all-nighter.” She merely flicked her eyes back without looking over her shoulder. Efran was motionless, trying to remember if he could have told her. He had no idea.

Half reeling, Pherigo asked, “Then, Lady Wissowa, why—why didn’t you contact him—when--when--?”

“I didn’t think of it,” she shrugged.

Gripping the letter with a trembling hand, Pherigo turned back to Shaffer to reclaim control of the hearing. “Lord Shaffer,” he began in determination, “why would the section in the Law on ‘Custody of Minor Children’ not apply in this case?”

Shaffer was looking off, pondering the answer, when the doors of the Rotunda opened to permit the entrance of Baroffio’s men with Flores between them. As she glanced from the crowded hall to the stage at the front where the jury, Notary Pherigo, and Notary Shaffer were all watching her approach, she began to feel faint. Then she saw Wissowa on the front row, smiling sardonically. This imparted necessary information to her.

The men escorted her up the steps onto the stage where she looked to Pherigo, who asked, “Are you Lady Wissowa’s housekeeper Flores?”

“I was, yes,” she said.

“Flores, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?” he demanded sternly.

“Yes,” she said, mildly affronted by his skeptical tone. But it was only a delayed reaction to Lady Wissowa’s comments

“Very good,” he said in accomplishment. “Now, Flores, what do you know of—of--of Lord Shaffer here, at—at--at--Lady Wissowa’s house, ah, ah, ah--”

Her face clearing, she said, “When Lord Shaffer came to Lady Wissowa’s house, I left. I am not a chaperone.”

Surprised, Pherigo asked, “Oh. Where did you go?”

“That’s none of your business,” she said.

“Oh. Well, what day was that?” he asked.

“I don’t remember,” she said.

Sweating again, Pherigo asked, “Did he come more than once?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Oh. Well. I suppose that confirms the basic fact,” he said. Then he asked Shaffer, “Do you have any questions for Flores?”

“No,” Shaffer said, as usual. He didn’t look at her.

“Well, I suppose. . . .” Pherigo trailed off.

Noting Lord Baroffio at the side front, Flores told him, “I’m missing work. Will you kindly have me taken back to the Abbey Lands?” Baroffio jerked his head at the pair who had escorted her in. They escorted her out again, and the audience turned back to Pherigo.

Getting a grip on himself, he said, “Now, Lord Shaffer, we were on the question of why the section on ‘Custody

of Minor Children' did not apply in this case. Can you explain that, sir?"

Shaffer hesitated long enough for the audience to begin stirring. Then he said, "Because Efran's intent was never to get custody of the child, just to avoid paying damages."

"Lord Shaffer, I don't believe that you can speak as to Lord Efran's intent," Pherigo said in rebuke. He turned to the audience to ask, "Is Lord Efran here?" At this, the whole two front rows of the center section turned around to look at him.

Exhaling in resignation, Efran stood. Connor stood to allow him to pass, as did those to the left of him. As he made his way down the row, one or two men clapped his shoulder or his back in encouragement, or congratulations. He flashed a tight smile at them.

He ascended the steps to the stage and stood beside Pherigo with his hands clasped lightly in front. The notary was gesturing for a chair, which was brought to be placed opposite Shaffer. Efran sat, and Pherigo stood between the adversaries like a wild animal tamer, facing the audience. He said, "Now, then. Lord Efran, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," Efran said. He looked over to Minka, who watched as though anticipating entertainment. He smiled.

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Chapter 3

"Lord Efran, what was your reason for refusing to make the additional payment demanded by Lord Shaffer on Lady Wissowa's behalf?" Pherigo asked, proud of himself for getting all that out coherently.

Glancing off in exasperation, Efran said, "It was a ridiculous demand—ten thousand royals, and then twelve thousand royals, after we had rescued her, as Shaffer had made no provision to assist her with the thousand royals we'd already paid. We brought her, her gold, her furnishings, her housekeeper down from Westford and set her up in her own house with a fiduciary to manage her money. All Shaffer did was try to prevent her leaving Westford."

"And your response to that, Lord Shaffer?" Pherigo asked, turning to him.

Chin raised, Shaffer said, "I made numerous suggestions to the lady as to how to manage her situation, which she declined."

Wissowa erupted in shrieking laughter. "'Go home and enjoy your money,' you said. I tried everything you suggested and was still robbed of almost two hundred royals! And your last suggestion was that I store my royals in your keeping with your niece's husband Schillebeeckx as auditor!"

Pherigo looked quickly back to Shaffer. "Is that true, Lord Shaffer?"

He looked dubious. "I don't remember. If I did mention him, I'm sure it was as an example of the type of help she needed, and not as a recommendation of him in particular." At this evasion, Efran looked to Minka with a half smile.

Pherigo studied his once-mentor for a moment, then said, “Whatever I ask, you’ll have an answer for it, won’t you?” Shaffer eyed him disparagingly.

Here the young notary’s inexperience came fully to light. He stood in the center of the stage, mulling, “I don’t know where to go from here.”

From the side of the hall, Baroffio said, “Ask the jury if they have questions.”

“Yes,” Pherigo said. Turning to the jury box, he asked pensively, “Do you have any questions?” No one spoke, though a few subtly shook their heads. “Then . . . we should take the vote.” He looked back to Baroffio, who nodded.

Almost in a daze, Pherigo went to the table for the prepared ballots, which were merely slips of paper. He took these and a handful of wrapped charcoal sticks to the jury box to begin handing them out. As he did, he mused in a casual, almost dreamy voice. “So, you’re voting on whether to keep Lord Shaffer as notary, whether you . . . consider him trustworthy to—to help those who come to him with needs that, they don’t know what to do with themselves. That is, if you were ignorant, and in trouble, and friendless, would you trust him to tell you what to do? Would you trust him to be . . . honest and, fair with you?”

He paused to see that they all had slips and charcoal. Then he said, “So, if, if you do trust him, would trust him with things you couldn’t handle yourself, you write ‘yes’ on your ballot, and if not, you write ‘no.’ That’s all you write, not your name or anything. Just ‘yes,’ if you find him worthy to help you, or ‘no’ if you don’t. Then fold your slips and give them to me.”

He stepped back from the table to let them mark their ballots. Efran, with his elbow on the arm of the chair, watched them with a finger at his lips. The very rawness and hesitancy of the summation made it one of the most effective he’d ever heard. But Efran doubted they’d convict him. This was *Lord Shaffer*, one of them, and the one who had successfully chased his nearest competitor, the dedicated young upstart Whitgift, out of Westford.

As the jurors held out their slips to Pherigo, he took them one at a time, then counted to make sure he had all nine. He brought them to the table to sit and begin opening them. As he did, he voiced what he saw: “Yes. No. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes.”

There were gasps from those in the audience who had counted either the Yays or the Nays. Pherigo said, “That’s—four Yes’s and five No’s.” He quickly looked to Baroffio, who came striding over.

Mounting the stage, Baroffio said calmly, “Lord Shaffer, you have been found unworthy to continue your duties as Notary of Westford. You will now be escorted to the notary shop to clean out your personal effects, but you must leave all documents related to your work.” Baroffio then pointed to two of his men in the hall, who approached to wait at the bottom of the steps. Goodenough blinked, waking up.

After a moment, Shaffer rose to descend the stage and leave the Rotunda between Baroffio’s men with quiet dignity. The hall came alive, then, with many observers streaming out behind the disgraced notary. Efran stood from his chair, but remained on the stage while his men—all dressed in suits—pushed their way to the front. Minka and Marguerite were forced to wait for the aisles to clear a little.

Efran knelt at the edge of the stage to begin issuing instructions: “Seagrave, you and Mumme go report to Administrator DeWitt and Steward Estes. Hollis and Caswall report to Commander Wendt. Eustace and Doudney, go tell Lord Ryal. And—oh, who of you are hilltop?” Of the hands that were raised, Efran directed,

“Milo and Leneghan, go inform Captains Rigdon and Chee”—the hilltop Captains. The lower Captains Towner and Stites would be informed by Gabriel. “The rest of you wait a moment.” There were four or five of these, discounting civilians who were just interested in what he had to say.

Standing again, Efran looked to Baroffio, who was patting his new notary on the back. “Well done, Pherigo. When Shaffer clears out, you’re to occupy that office.”

“Thank you, Lord Baroffio,” Pherigo said, dazed.

The members of the jury were also filing out, but Lord Colquhoun paused to tell Baroffio, “Well, congratulations—you finally dragged the wolf out of his lair.”

“He did put up a bloody struggle,” Baroffio muttered. He was shaking the hands of those jurors who would let him.

“We’re getting back to work; we’ll let our people know they won’t have any more official hang-ups with construction,” Colquhoun said, and Baroffio waved.

Seeing Minka and Marguerite make their way toward the stage with their bodyguards, Efran briefly gripped Baroffio’s shoulder to tell him, “You saved me and Ryal from having to respond to another round of charges.”

“Are you serious?” Baroffio asked.

“Very. I’ll have Ryal forward the letter to you,” Efran said. Baroffio nodded, turning to someone else, and Efran descended the steps from the stage to engulf Minka. He muttered in her hair, “I’m not sure how helpful it was for you to try to make me laugh. Why did you let her do that, Marguerite?”

She chuckled, “Could you stop her?”

At the same time, Minka pulled away from him, demanding, “What? I wasn’t trying anything! But I did like your glasses.” Seeing them folded in his breast pocket, she took them out to try them on, looking around at Connor, Fiacco, Hawk, and Marguerite, who were all laughing at her. “There’s no difference at all,” she complained.

“It’s just plain glass,” Efran told her. “I couldn’t be stumbling around in glasses that really worked.”

“Oh,” she said in disappointment, taking them off to fold them and put them back in his pocket. “Are you coming back now?” she asked. She rested a hand on his suit coat, liking it still. “I wish you would wear your suit more often.”

As she said that, he was answering her question: “Yes. What? Wear it more? Why?”

“It looks so nice,” she said.

Connor offered, “Lyra and I could use a social secretary for real whenever you’re free, Captain. She likes to entertain.”

Draping an arm around Minka’s shoulders to begin walking her out, Efran glanced darkly at him. Then he considered, “I may do that the next time I need to hide. I don’t have to go to any parties, do I?”

“No, but we’d need the kitchen help,” Connor said.

“That’s good, as long as I can nibble. Auntie always lets her kitchen help nibble,” Efran observed, glancing over to her.

She nodded. “That’s the only humane thing to do.” Agreeing, they all walked out of the Rotunda to see Graeme and Corwyn waiting with their horses.

At this time, Teschner had just ridden back to the Lands from the Rotunda in Westford. As he was approaching the switchback, he glimpsed Delano’s wife Madgwick turning off a side street onto Main. She was carrying her baby Ruth in one arm while lugging a loaded canvas sack on the other. She looked to be coming from The Wash House with clean laundry. Remembering a recent visit with her, he paused.

Looking south on Main, he saw Ley emerge from the notary shop to begin running up the switchback on foot, obviously with a message. Dismounting, Teschner whistled, and Ley turned. Teschner whacked his horse on his haunches, calling, “Take Burrus here!”

The horse bolted toward the switchback for Ley to catch his reins. “You’re a good man!”

Waving, Teschner turned to begin trotting up the sidewalk on Main in pursuit of Madgwick. When he caught up to her, he took the laundry bag off her shoulder. She startled, not recognizing him in a suit, so he said, “Please allow me to carry this for you, Lady Madgwick. I’m Teschner; I was warding Lady Minka when she dropped by to see you a week ago.”

“Oh! Yes, Teschner, I remember you. The title isn’t necessary,” she said, resettling the baby on her arm.

Baby Ruth waved at him, and he smiled. “Permit me to disagree; it was well-earned.” She pooh-poohed him, but he broached, “When Lady Minka and I stopped in to see you, she seemed very—moved at the sight of the baby. I don’t know if you know anything about it, but, she said, ‘Adele,’ and, while I’m not sure I ever heard the name before, I’m trying to remember who that is.”

“Yes, she did say that, didn’t she?” Madgwick said thoughtfully.

“Do you know anything about Adele?” Teschner asked. They kept walking as they talked.

“A little. That was Minka’s older sister who had a baby, then left abruptly,” she said thoughtfully, looking at the happy baby cuddling on her shoulder.

“Her sister,” Teschner breathed in recollection. “Now I remember bits and pieces. . . . So she just—left the Lands?”

“That’s what I recall hearing,” Madgwick said, regarding Ruth’s blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes.

“Do you know where she went?” Teschner asked.

“Not really,” Madgwick said. She almost stopped to watch Ruth blow spit bubbles.

“Huh,” Teschner said. “But Ruth was not her baby.”

“No, that was Joshua,” Madgwick said.

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Chapter 4

By now, Madgwick and Teschner were in front of Delano's Brewery, so she reached for the laundry bag. "Thank you--"

"Let me carry it in for you," Teschner urged.

"That's kind of you," she yielded. They entered around the line of customers that Wystan was attending, then Madgwick directed Teschner to the baby's room. As he set the laundry bag in a corner, she said, again, "Thank you."

"You're most welcome, Lady Madgwick," he said with a bow.

As he turned to leave with a mildly troubled face, Madgwick added, "You know, Minka tells her Auntie Marguerite everything."

He looked at her sharply. "Yes, I . . . seem to remember hearing that." And he turned out again. Emerging onto Main, he watched the Captain's party, including Lady Marguerite, ride south toward the fortress. Seeing the group turn east on Chapel Road, Teschner murmured, "Auntie knows everything. . . ."

While Rawlins was idly watching Main from Firmin's outdoor dining area, his attention was diverted to the gates. Many others also looked, for in the midst of early afternoon traffic, the gatesmen had abruptly closed them to an armed party of six men. Rawlins looked on in fascination as the apparent leader of the group leaned down from his saddle to extend a paper to one of the gatesmen.

He read it, then handed it back to the leader with a word. Turning, he appeared to point directly at Rawlins himself. And with a thrill of dread running down his spine, Rawlins recognized the leader as Strugnell, an undersheriff of Crescent Hollow. After leaving the Lands two months ago injured, considerably poorer, and failing in his mission to retrieve Rondinelli, Lord Bickerstaffe had apparently laid the blame on Rawlins himself.

But the backlog of traffic on both sides of the gates prevented their immediate opening. So Rawlins rose to enter Firmin's and go directly to his room. Packing everything quickly—including Bickerstaffe's royals—in two carpet bags, Rawlins hastened down to the front counter, on which he laid a handful of royals. He told the clerk, "I have a new job that starts immediately, so that should cover my rent. If it doesn't, I'll come back after work to make it up."

"Very good," the clerk said, instantly appraising the amount and finding it sufficient. If it hadn't been, he would have stopped the layabout right there, knowing he'd disappear. Nodding, Rawlins hoisted his bags and made for the back entry under the clerk's amused eye.

Exiting into the carriage yard, Rawlins turned south, to his left. He threaded his way between Wade's Carriages for Hire and Croft's, then crossed a side street to pass behind the rear of Elvey's large complex (mostly empty now). Crossing in front of the complex, he paused to peek around the corner down Main.

There he saw Strugnell's band waiting on their horses in front of Firmin's, looking around. Strugnell and a

deputy were not with them. Covered by the heavy traffic going both ways, Rawlins slipped out from behind Elvey's to cross Main in the southernmost crosswalk. He kept going past the notary's shop to slip behind his fenced backyard. There was an alleyway between that yard and the yard of the chapel, protected by elegant iron fencing. Given the thick hedges inside the fence, Rawlins had to crouch and peer to see what was in the chapel yard.

There was a large black horse lying in the grass—asleep, for all Rawlins could see. Otherwise, he spotted no one watching and no one in the heavily landscaped yard or on the back patio. Rawlins tried the latch of the black iron gate, which opened. He swiftly brought his bags inside to close the gate again. Keeping an eye on both the horse and the back door, Rawlins slipped around the side of the stables to the back.

Here, in the six-foot space between the stables and the back fence, he found a storage shed and some landscaping equipment. The only hedges along this fence were in the corner; the rest was covered by a wood privacy screen. Peering through its latticework, Rawlins could see Minogue's beef outlet (open only when he had fresh cuts to sell, which quickly sold out). To the right of that was the drive leading from the front of The Lands' Best Inn to its stableyard in back.

Turning to the hedges on his left, Rawlins pushed his way through them to the black iron fence. Here, he could see the notary shop to his left, the little park before him, the community well to his right, and part of Minogue's behind that. But in between the notary shop and the well, over the park's short picket fence, he could see a wide swath of Main Street.

Pulling back to look along the inside of the fence, he saw a gap in the hedge plantings at the back corner, which made room for the branches of the last one on each side to grow properly. This left a little cubbyhole just large enough for a man and his bags, protected from view on either side. Absorbing this, Rawlins stepped out of the hedges to retrieve his bags from the back of the stables. These he took to the corner.

Working his way delicately past branches so as not to break any, he finally got himself and his carpet bags into the cubbyhole. There he sat, exhaling in accomplishment, to continue his surveillance of Main.

At that time, Marguerite raised up slightly from her seat at the table, where about 15 guests were seated. Servers conscripted from the army were assisting with the distribution of bracers to all of them. Glancing toward the back grounds, she met Hartshough's eyes as he paused nearby. He nodded slightly; she lowered her eyes, and Hartshough laid the second platter of appetizers on the table.

DeWitt was asking, "Well, Whitgift, what did you think of Pherigo's first trial as a notary?"

The young Lands notary looked a little dazed. "Honestly, Administrator, I think I was more nervous for him than he was. I doubt I could have gone up against Shaffer. And by gum, he pulled it off!" After light applause from those around him, he added, "Of course, he was helped along by Lord Baroffio and the Captain, though it was curious to see him in a suit, and I'm wondering what the purpose of that was. I thought that the Captain had a uniform for formal wear."

Whitgift looked so honestly baffled that Estes explained, "That was his disguise." Whitgift's transparent face then communicated, *Why did he need a disguise?*

Wendt laughed, "It was a good effort, Efran, but--a suit and glasses?" Having suggested that Efran simply accept that he'd be recognized and go in uniform, Wendt could afford a little ribbing here.

Efran leaned back, covering his eyes. "Commander, I would've been invisible if Wissowa hadn't been there."

When Hartshough placed his bracer before him, he said, “Thank you, Hartshough,” before chugging half of it. “It’s excellent. Don’t ask me what’s in it.” Justinian, down the table, glanced at him cagily. He himself knew what was in it, but needed the proper opening to announce it.

Wearing the glasses, Minka said, “Efran needs spectacles that work. He didn’t see all the studied glances from around the hall.”

“What? No,” he protested. Looking at the contradictory grins around him, he said, “Well, that was Connor’s fault. He was dictating to me right up to the start of the trial, and it would’ve looked strange if his secretary was busy checking out everyone around him.” He reached into his suit pocket for the small notebook. Flipping through it, he said, “He and Lyra are hosting a midsummer night costume party on the twenty-second. Everyone here’s invited, with wives or girlfriends.”

There was a round of cheers for Connor, who raised his hands in acknowledgment, adding, “Bring your own ale.” This provoked hissing and boos.

“I can’t stop staring at the hair,” Detler blurted, studying Efran’s head. “How is it still plastered back like that, Captain?”

“Pomade!” Minka cried joyfully. “Which means I can use it whenever I need now!”

“No!” Efran countered. “No one ever needs to kiss my head. Besides--” He put his hands to the helmet of hair in disgust. “Someone get me a bucket of water to wash this out.”

Sympathetically, Marguerite said, “Step out to the backyard, Efran. We’ll ask Eryk to bring you a bucket.”

“Thank you,” Efran grunted, standing to take off the suit coat. Meanwhile, Hartshough was relaying the request to Eryk in the kitchen.

Entertained, the whole table watched as Efran stalked to the backyard, Eryk following with a full bucket. Leaning over to look through the back door, Doudney said, “He just poured the whole bucket over himself. That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Justinian, who had also been watching, turned back to the table to say, “That whole trial was a spectacle. I honestly didn’t believe they could find five men in Westford who would vote to convict Shaffer.”

Earnshaw asked, “Why not, Lord Justinian? He was plainly guilty.”

Justinian glanced at him with a nod. “Very much so, and used his position to grease the palms of other corrupt, influential men.”

DeWitt conceded, “We kept hearing rumors to that effect.”

Estes added, “And some reports that were more substantial than rumors. But, unless it involved us, there was nothing we could do about it.”

At that, a number of men looked to Lord Ryal, sitting around the corner from Wendt at the head of the table. Even recently, Ryal had been a stubborn defender of Shaffer. But Gaul was shaking his head. “That’s not how it used to be. Ten years ago, my pa took a complaint to Shaffer about one of those influential men withholding pay due him. Shaffer got ’im his back-due pay, with interest.”

So Earnshaw asked, "What happened to him, Lord Ryal?"

"I wish I knew," Ryal said heavily. "But he has changed."

Gabriel asked, "And he can't bring you and the Captain to trial, can he?"

"No, he can't. Those charges are voided now," Ryal said.

At the footfalls, they all turned to watch the Captain reenter the hall, dripping. Accepting the towel Hartshough offered, Efran rubbed his head vigorously with it, then gave it back to him before sitting at the table. Glancing at Minka's mildly reproving look, he shook his head over her. She screeched, "Stop! You're getting my glasses wet." She had to take them off to clean them with her napkin.

"Wha---?" he laughed, not the only one to do so. Leaning back, he exhaled, "Why are you wearing those?"

"Just for fun. They make me feel intelligent, like I can see things," she said, putting them back on to look around. "Oh, Martyn, the top button on your suit jacket is coming loose."

"I'll fix that, Minka," he laughed.

Efran groaned, "You *are* intelligent. You don't need them to prove anything." When she merely looked at him over her glasses, he said, "I don't like anything obscuring your eyes."

After thinking about that, she relocated the glasses to the top of her head. "Or your hair," he added. So she hung them by an earhook on the front of her dress, instead. In exasperation, Efran looked off, muttering.

Hartshough's helpers then came around bearing bowls of sausage stew with vegetables, toast and ale, so everyone stopped talking to eat. To Efran's relief, Minka put the glasses beside her plate.

Shortly thereafter, one of the wall gate guards, Suco, entered with a paper which he extended to Efran. "Excuse me, Captain. Undersheriff Strugnell of Crescent Hollow is here with a notice of arrest for Rawlins. He's accused of stealing three hundred forty-six royals from Lord Bickerstaffe. Since he's not at Firmin's, Strugnell is asking to search for him."

"Search for him? Where?" Efran asked, taking the notice.

"He—didn't say, Captain. I think he wants to look everywhere," Suco said.

Handing the notice up to Estes, Efran glanced toward Main. Then he murmured, "They wouldn't happen to be looking for Rondi at the same time, would they?" When Suco hesitated on an answer, Efran clarified, "Never mind; I already know." Then he asked Minka, "Wasn't it Bickerstaffe's carriage that Rawlins dragged her into?"

"Yes," she said through gritted teeth. "And Bickerstaffe himself was waiting in the carriage for her. That money was payment for Rawlins to kidnap her."

Efran said, "So I guess Bickerstaffe lost it gambling on a bad venture."

"Looks like it," Wendt said wryly. DeWitt and Estes merely nodded.

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Chapter 5

As the notice went around the upper table, Efran asked Suco, “How many are with this undersheriff?”

“Five, Captain,” Suco replied.

“Armed?” Efran asked.

“Yes, sir, with swords and cudgels,” Suco said.

Efran’s jaw dropped slightly. “So the Undersheriff of Crescent Hollow thinks to take armed men door-to-door on my Lands looking for his failed operative. No. Escort them out.”

“Yes, Captain.” Suco saluted, then trotted out.

In an indication to assist with the eviction, Wendt nodded toward the doors with, “Gabriel.”

“Yes, Commander,” he said, standing. Upon his sweeping glance around the table, the other soldiers stood. Bowing to the head of the table, Gabriel said, “Please excuse us, Lady Marguerite. We’ll get right back to this excellent meal.”

“Please do,” she said. He and a dozen men walked out, which included a number of Hartshough’s helpers.

After the men had left the chapel, Efran got up as well. Glancing almost apologetically to the head of the table, he said, “I’m just going to watch.”

Wendt nodded, and Efran trotted out. Minka sat still for a moment, then lurched up after him. So the administrators got up, having to go watch out for her. Shortly, only Justinian and Marguerite remained at the table. She rose, patting his shoulder. “Go ahead and eat.”

But before Marguerite left the hall, she whispered something to Hartshough. “Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said. Then he put a covered bowl of stew and a bottle of ale in a basket which he took out to the backyard.

Looking around the empty table, Justinian threw up his hands and departed the front doors.

The traffic on Main Street had come to a halt as Efran, in his blue serge suit (sans jacket) stood in the middle of the street (in a crosswalk) feet spread and hands on his hips. He was watching Suco give the arrest notice back to Strugnell along with the denial of his request.

Strugnell wavered a moment, then spotted Efran. Despite his damp shirt and loose necktie, his stance told Strugnell who he was. So the undersheriff walked over as his men followed at a distance, leading their horses. The Abbey men gathered discreetly behind them. “Captain Efran?” Strugnell asked.

“Yes,” Efran said. Watching through the fence, Rawlins had caught sight of Efran the moment he had stopped traffic on Main. Now the wanted man was clutching the black iron pickets in suspense.

“I am Undersheriff Strugnell of Crescent Hollow, presenting a legal Notice of Arrest for Rawlins. He stole over three hundred royals from Lord Bickerstaffe. Since we know that he’s here, Continental Law gives us the right to search for him.”

Efran glanced away in amusement. “Which part of Continental Law gave Lord Bickerstaffe the right to hire Rawlins to kidnap Lady Rondi—a *minor*--on our Lands? And then drag her to Bickerstaffe’s carriage where he was waiting for her? Quote me the section and paragraph.”

When Strugnell stared at him without replying, Efran asked, “Who’s your Surchatain now?”

“Ah, until a new Surchatain is selected, the Council is ruling as a body,” Strugnell said carefully.

“Who’s the Grand Councilor, then?” Efran asked, barely smiling.

“That’s Grand Councilor Squitieri,” Strugnell said.

Efran laughed, “The one who can’t read!” He sobered to add, “Then you’ll have to tell the illiterate Grand Councilor that it’s not our fault Bickerstaffe wasted his money on an incompetent hire. And no, you may not search for Lady Rondi’s kidnapper before we do. Now get your armed men off my Lands.”

Strugnell straightened at the battering, then looked at the Abbey men filling the street. Gabriel whistled and ordered, “Clear a path!”

The Abbey soldiers separated; carts and riders drew to either side all along Main to the gates that were standing open. Strugnell glanced back at the smiling Captain, then mounted his horse to lead his men at a leisurely walk toward the gates.

“Pick it up, sir!” Gabriel shouted. Coish took up a pebble to flick toward Strugnell’s horse, which startled into a lope. The others matched it, and the six Hollowans soon disappeared over the old stone bridge. When Efran crossed to the sidewalk, normal traffic resumed.

Looking over his men, Efran said, “Our stew’s getting cold, gentlemen.” They joined the observers from the chapel to return to their early dinner.

Taking Minka’s hand to walk with her, Efran asked, “Did you see it all?”

“Yes, of course!” she said happily.

“Without the glasses?” he teased. She looked down to her skirt pocket to lift out the folded glasses partway. He raised his face to the heavens.

Between the fence and the hedge of the chapel yard, Rawlins sat back in contemplation of what he had just seen. Something on the other side of the hedge caught his eye, and he cautiously separated the branches to see a basket on the grass. Rawlins carefully scanned the yard before reaching through the hedge.

Bringing the basket inside his cubbyhole, he uncovered a bowl of stew and a bottle of ale. Warily, he looked over the sliver of lawn beyond the stables. Then he opened the bottle of ale.

The following morning, June 11th, Efran, DeWitt, and the structural engineer Thrupp rode out to the far East Lands to look at the sole remains of The Granary: its large concrete foundation. Thrupp said, “I don’t understand why they went to the trouble of pouring a foundation only to build on it with illusion. That makes no sense.”

“No, it doesn’t,” DeWitt agreed glumly. “Now it’s just an eyesore that no one else wants to build on—it’s far too large for a house, and the wrong dimensions for any other public building that we could put up here.”

“How big is it?” Efran asked.

DeWitt said, “Ten thousand square feet—about the size of the footprint of the main building of The Lands’ Best Inn.” Efran winced.

After a few minutes’ consideration, Thrupp asked, “Don’t you have a waiting list of small shops that want spaces?”

“Yes,” said DeWitt, looking to him.

Efran turned to listen as Thrupp thought out, “Well, if the Captain is willing to give up—or postpone—his harbor, we have a lot of materials on hand that we could use to divide up this foundation into, oh, six spaces. That would make each space a little over sixteen hundred square feet, which is a generous size for a storefront, storage, and living area. We can landscape around it, put stables on one end, and, maybe a little picnic area on the other end, with a pond. Landers are fond of ponds. There’s already a few shops around it that we can integrate into the overall plan. That’s a nice bakery right next to it here. Then the Fortress can lease out the individual units, which is much less risky for new shop owners than building themselves.”

Efran was nodding. “Yes, the harbor will just have to wait. The Picti aren’t interested in it and the trolls are just about finished with their seaside home. What do you think, DeWitt?”

“Sounds good to me. Go ahead and draw up plans, Thrupp,” DeWitt said.

“I’ll do that, Administrator. Thank you, Captain,” Thrupp said. Nodding, Efran turned Kraken back west.

Across the Lands in the chapel backyard, Hartshough was leaning down to speak to the hedges behind the stables. “Good morning, Rawlins. Would you care for breakfast? Lady Marguerite invites you to come eat inside.”

The branches crackled as the disheveled vagabond peered out of his hideaway. “If you’re sure,” he muttered.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite seems to feel certain about that,” Hartshough said. He stepped back for Rawlins to collect himself for emergence.

First, he handed out the basket with the empty bowl and bottle. Then he pushed himself through the now-enlarged opening before pulling out his carpet bags. Shaking leaves and debris out of his clothes, he said, “Lead on, then.”

“This way,” Hartshough said, extending a hand. And he brought their guest in through the kitchen to the hall, where Marguerite sat at one end of the long dining table.

“Hello, Rawlins,” she said. “Have a seat.” She gestured to the place around the corner from her, which was already set with breakfast—ham and eggs, toast with peach compote, and caova.

“Thank you very much,” he said, dropping his bags beside the chair to sit and take advantage of the hospitality offered.

Hartshough asked, “Would you care for anything else, Lady Marguerite?”

“Not right now, thank you, Hartshough,” she said. Bowing, he withdrew with her breakfast dishes.

She allowed Rawlins to eat in peace for a few minutes, which he did earnestly. Then she said, “I suppose you saw the undersheriff from Crescent Hollow yesterday.”

He glanced up warily. “Yes, I did.”

“Were you hired to kidnap Rondi?” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” he admitted grudgingly. “But I thought better of it and decided to leave her alone. By that time, I had spent so much of Bickerstaffe’s money, there was no going back to Crescent Hollow. So I seem to be stuck here.”

“How uncomfortable for you,” she observed.

“Rather.” He took a tentative taste of the caova, then grunted, “A tad sweet.”

“I’ll let Hartshough know,” she said with a straight face. “At any rate, you’ll have a chance to clarify your plans with Efran, to see--”

“Thank you very much for breakfast,” he said, standing. “But if it’s all the same to you, I don’t care to take further directions from the Captain. Please excuse me.” Taking up his bags, he began striding toward the front doors, eyeing the slender trees scattered about the hall.

When he was upon the doors, he stuffed one carpet bag under his arm to reach for the handle. But the doors suddenly opened upon him so that he was face to face with the Captain—or, would have been, were Rawlins the same height he’d been as a Polonti.

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Chapter 6

Efran smiled. “Hello, Rawlins. I see you’re pretty much back to your usual self. The hair’s not quite right, though,” he said critically. “Or maybe I just didn’t see its last form.”

As the Captain walked in, Rawlins cast about for an exit, but there were two monkeys in red beside him and another two that had entered behind him. He hardly saw the Captain’s little wife at his side, but she was studying Rawlins as though he were a new species of insect.

Nodding toward a chair, Efran said, “Come have a seat.” With a sigh of vexation, Rawlins turned back toward the seating area. He dropped his bags beside one of the upholstered chairs, then sat himself to rest his elbows on the arms and steeple his fingers with a pucker of impatience.

Efran glanced at him, smiling, then turned to Marguerite as she approached. “Good morning, Efran,” she said, hugging Minka. “Hartshough’s bringing bracers, but would you like something to eat?”

“No, thank you, we had breakfast before Law class,” he said, sitting on the divan. Minka sat with him. With a pat to her shoulder, Marguerite withdrew to the kitchen. His men Elrod and Heus stood behind the divan while Routh and Skalbeck manned the doors. “So,” Efran said to Rawlins. “I suppose it didn’t work going back to the Council and asking for all their plans.”

“No, in fact,” Rawlins said, sitting up. “They figured out the game at once.”

“And let you come back anyway. Imagine that,” Efran said. “Do you know that Undersheriff Strugnell came calling for you yesterday?”

“So I heard,” Rawlins said. He looked up as Hartshough leaned over to hand him a tall glass with a frothy top. Rawlins took it in mild suspicion.

Receiving her glass, Minka said, “Oh, I think this one is my favorite. Thank you, Hartshough.”

“You are welcome, Lady Minka,” Hartshough said with a bow.

Efran received his with thanks as well, then drank half of it, thinking. Hartshough returned to the kitchen. When Rawlins saw the Captain and his wife both drink, he took a sip of his, imagining that he could discern if it were drugged. Efran looked down at Minka, and she grinned up at him, wiping froth from her lip with the napkin. “I like messy drinks,” she confessed.

“You like everything,” he said. At that time, Eryk came out of the kitchen with a shopping list from Hartshough. Minka and Efran acknowledged him silently as he went on to the front door; Rawlins never saw him.

Glancing back to Rawlins again, Efran was obviously struggling over something. Finally, he shook his head. “I can’t see any way in the world you’d be useful to us.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to let me go,” Rawlins shrugged, taking another sip.

Efran winced. “I can’t do that; you’re a threat to Rondi.”

As a concession, Rawlins sighed, “I’ll leave her alone.”

“Why don’t I find that reassuring?” Efran murmured over his glass. “What was the reason for the Polonti potion?” he asked, still half-disbelieving that had ever happened.

“Oh, that was Follriott’s idea,” Rawlins said, setting the empty glass on the side table. “I told him that I had to get Rondinelli away just to talk to Bickerstaffe, and since he had this coat belonging to his father’s dead bodyguard, he sent me off to get the potion and then dressed me in the coat. It was just to get her sympathy so that Bickerstaffe could explain why they wanted her back.”

“How did Follriott come into it?” Efran asked, confused.

Rawlins shrugged. “I just—met him at Croft’s, and we started talking.”

“Where did you get the potion?” Efran asked.

“Some little shop out there,” Rawlins said, waving east.

Efran looked off, nodding slightly. “Lies, half-truths, misdirection, obfuscation,” he murmured. “How do I put him in a box?” he asked Minka.

She glanced up over her glass, shrugging. “Give him to Hartshough.”

He looked pained. “But I like Hartshough.”

“Everyone needs toys,” she said deviously.

Efran studied her for a moment, then looked over to Rawlins appraisingly. He was sitting back in the chair, legs crossed, trying not to look pleased. “Hartshough is the butler, correct?” he asked, studying his own hand. He had very nice hands.

“Yes,” Efran said. “He may need help with some duties.”

“I’d be delighted to help the chap,” Rawlins said, the very picture of cooperation.

Minka covered her smile with her glass as Efran lifted his face. “Hartshough?”

He came at once from the kitchen, wearing an apron over his butler’s uniform. “Yes, Lord Efran?”

“Hartshough, we have a dilemma as to what to do with Rawlins here. We can’t let him go, but we also can’t let him stay on the Lands unsupervised. Do you think you could keep him busy for us?—without inconveniencing yourself,” Efran asked.

“I shall be delighted to have his assistance with certain tasks, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said with a bow. Behind him, Marguerite came out of the kitchen with a compressed smile.

“If you’re sure, then, we’ll leave him with you,” Efran said, standing. Minka finished her drink in a gulp.

Rawlins, eager helper that he was, stood with his bags. Presenting himself to Hartshough, he exuded cooperation. “Excellent! If you’ll show me where to stow my luggage, I’ll get right to work!”

“I shall, indeed. Follow me, Rawlins.” Hartshough led the sucker into the kitchen.

Marguerite and Minka fell onto each other, giggling and snorting. Efran looked pensive. “All right, I’m a little afraid for him, now. But if he gets to be a problem, Marguerite, let me know.”

“We’ll be fine, Efran; thank you,” she said.

Reaching up to kiss her cheek, Minka murmured, “I can’t wait to hear all about it—and tell Rondi.” Glancing at Efran, Auntie just nodded, patting her hand.

Efran and Minka got their horses, but she paused on Dustbin at the corner of Chapel Road and Main. On Kraken, he looked back to her and she pleaded, “I’ve *got* to go up to The Lands Clothing Shop to tell Rondi.”

“I’m sure you do,” he conceded. “Heus. Elrod,” he nodded to the bodyguards. They saluted him, then accompanied her at a walk up Main.

Efran turned Kraken up the switchback, musing, “As long as she’s occupied up there, this may be a good time to start the boys on some knife skills.”

Up hilltop, he released Kraken, then went by his and Minka’s quarters to pick up two knives from the wardrobe that he had converted to an arms closet. Then he went out the western door to open the large storage closet on that side of the fortress. There, he brought out four more knives and two wooden targets which he took around back. Laying the knives on the ground, he tied the targets to two trees close to the cliffside fence, away from everything.

Coming back out of the trees with his favorite knife, he walked across the grounds until he was within sight of the pond. Whistling lightly, he waved to the children, and they came running right over. “Efran! What are you doing?” Hassie cried, verbalizing what they all wanted to know. Nakam ran over to sniff his leg.

“Who wants to learn how to throw knives?” he asked. Flipping the knife he held, he turned to throw it, hard. The tip sank into a scrub tree which Gerard had been unable to kill. The children contemplated that, then, to Efran’s disappointment, most of them went back to the pond. (After struggling with the bow and arrow, even Toby had little desire to master knife-throwing.)

Disappointed as well, their bodyguards saluted the Captain and went with them. However, Donovan, Isreal, Chorro, and Elwell gathered around him as he retrieved his knife to lead them back to the throwing area.

Efran knelt beside them to pass around the knives he had left here. “All right, it’s a little more complicated than shooting, but it’s a handy skill. What you have to remember is to account for the spin—we’re going to throw the knife spinning, as that’s more accurate than straight throwing. Now, all these knives are handle heavy—that is, the handle is heavier than the blade. That means we hold the blade when we throw. This is how you hold it.”

He demonstrated the grip on the blade, and helped each boy place his fingers correctly, with his thumb along the blunt edge. Then he showed them how to step off the throwing distance in order for the knife to rotate the right amount to hit the target point first. “Like I said, it’s complicated. But if you practice a lot with the same knife, you’ll learn how to throw to hit your target at different distances. If I’m not around and you want to practice, get any one of the men out here to help you. All right, let’s try it.”

For the next hour, the boys copied his every move as they learned to play with knives. All of them only hit the target bluntly—when they did hit it—and Elwell nicked his hand. But Isreal and Donovan both got the point to stick on one throw. When they were done, Efran took up the knives and sent them back to the pond. But he gave Donovan back his flint knife, telling him, “If you draw blood, you lose it again. And I’ll think about whether to give it back to you at all.”

“Can I practice throwing with this one?” Donovan asked, eyes alight.

Efran hesitated, but said, “You can practice throwing with anything. But if I’m not around, get a man to help you. Don’t do it by yourself.”

“All right,” Donovan said, grinning. He stuffed the sheathed knife in his back pocket to run after the others to the pond.

There, he promptly lost the knife in the murky water when he tried to demonstrate spear fishing. The bodyguards

wouldn't go wading for it and the other children thought the loss was justified. "You could have hurt our fish!" Hassie scolded. Even Isreal looked disappointed in him. Donovan sulked.

Shortly, Efran stopped by the pond to see how big and more froglike the remaining tadpoles were. Right away, Calix tattled: "Efran, Donovan tried to spear our fish with his knife, and now it's somewhere down there in the pond!"

Donovan glared at Calix while Efran said seriously, "Oh no," looking over the water.

"Will it hurt us?" Alcmund asked.

Toby looked dubious, but Efran said, "Yes." As the children looked at each other in dread and Donovan scowled, Efran went on: "When the froglets get full-grown into frogs, they'll find the knife and learn how to use it. Then the next time anyone comes to the pond, *fffft!*" He pantomimed a knife throw. "The frogs will take over the whole back grounds, and you'll be digging new ponds everywhere for them."

He surveyed them in dead earnest. The bodyguards were tight-lipped as the children studied him. Donovan grinned and Toby rolled his eyes. But Calix said, "I think you're teasing us, Efran."

"Yes, I am," Efran admitted with his beautiful smile. Hassie landed on him with her fists, so he tossed her up in the air and the rest of the children demanded a turn.

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Chapter 7

Meanwhile, Minka and her bodyguards had arrived at The Lands Clothing Shop. Upon reaching the front counter, she said, "Hello, Sosie. Where is Rondi?"

Sosie looked around, fretting, "She was right over there, but now I don't see—oh, there she is, by the jacket displays."

"Thank you," Minka said, trotting over to the far side of the shop. Heus and Elrod were right with her, pinning every man they passed with a glare. But they were all here looking for clothes.

Minka came up behind Rondi to catch her with a hug. "Oh! Minka," she laughed. "You startled me."

"Hang on for more. Did you know that Rawlins is still here?" Minka asked.

Rondi drooped. "Yes, he's been watching everything from Firmin's for weeks now, usually at the same table. I half wondered when Firmin would kick him out or put a sign on him as a local curiosity."

Minka laughed. "That would be clever, but Efran's afraid he's still after you."

"You can't be serious," Rondi sighed.

Minka insisted, "No, Efran thinks so, but then he--Rawlins--hid in Auntie's bushes when the Undersheriff, ah,

Strugnell came looking for him with a Notice of Arrest yesterday. Did you know about that?"

"No," Rondi said uneasily. Then she looked off, murmuring, "Strugnell. Yes, he was 'The Collector,' the one who always came back with whoever he was sent to arrest. He didn't catch him?"

"No, Efran spanked him and sent him away empty-handed," Minka grinned.

Rondi was not smiling. "Strugnell will be back, Minka. He's famous for not giving up, and he'll take out anyone who gets in his way."

"Good luck to him. Efran gave Rawlins to Hartshough," Minka said, puckering.

"Why? Poor Hartshough!" Rondi quietly exclaimed.

"No, shhh," Minka said. Glancing around, she whispered, "Hartshough can handle him. He's part faerie, part mountain troll." Rondi stared at her and the bodyguards eyed each other.

About the time that Efran had started the boys on knife-throwing lessons, Hartshough had shown Rawlins his bedroom off the kitchen. It was small but comfortable. Hartshough said, "You may go ahead and leave your bags here."

"Delighted," Rawlins muttered, dropping them where he stood. At the obvious clinking of royals, Rawlins darted an alarmed glance at the butler.

Disinterested, Hartshough led out of the room and closed the door behind them both. "Now for your duties, First, you'll polish the crystal," Hartshough said. Pointing, he instructed, "Go ahead and have a seat at the dining table." Then he began loading glassware onto a tray.

Muttering under his breath, Rawlins went out to the hall and threw himself into a chair at the table. Shortly, Hartshough brought a large tray of crystal goblets to place on the table before him.

Hartshough said, "The goblets have been washed, you see, but the water has left them dull and spotted. So we use this special cloth to polish them to a sparkle inside and out."

With gloved hands, he demonstrated the use of the cloth on a goblet while Rawlins watched, yawning. "It's very simple, though you must take care to press the cloth gently alllll the waaay into eeeeach crevice," Hartshough said, drawing out the words as he delicately maneuvered the edge of the cloth into the cuts. "And there you have it!" Hartshough held up the glittering glassware to the sunlight.

Blinking sleepily, Rawlins said, "Lovely."

Hartshough confessed, "This is one of the jobs I find most satisfying. Here are your gloves and the buffing cloth. Let's see you get started on your first piece."

"Right." Rawlins put on the gloves, picked up the cloth, and began rubbing it on the bowl of the next goblet.

"*Lightly*, Rawlins. We don't wish to scratch the crystal with minute particles of dust," Hartshough corrected him.

"My mistake," Rawlins said. He buffed lightly and lovingly as Hartshough had done. The butler stood there until Rawlins had buffed the whole piece, stem and bowl and base, inside and out. Then he held it up for inspection.

After scrutinizing it all the way around without touching it, Hartshough said, “Very good. Place it over here and begin on the next.” Rawlins carefully put the sparkling glass to the side and picked up the next goblet. “Just so. I’ll be in the kitchen working on dinner if you have difficulties,” Hartshough said. And he walked away with the goblet he had buffed.

“Excellent,” Rawlins breathed, watching him vanish beyond the kitchen door. As he rubbed the second glass, he repeatedly scanned the visible hall, with one eye especially on the door to the kitchen. When all was quiet, he began to put the goblet down and rise from his chair.

Movement on the stairway flicked across his peripheral vision, so he sat right down again to righteously buff the crystal in his hand. A man in an expensive suit paused at the table, but Rawlins did not look up from his task. When the man went around the table to enter the kitchen, Rawlins darted a glance after him.

In case Hartshough came out with the man, Rawlins did a righteous job on goblet #2, checking it all the way around as the butler had done. Then he set it apart with the first before picking up the third.

Shortly, the man emerged from the kitchen again, so Rawlins set to industriously buffing. The man stopped by the table to place his hat upon it as he leisurely donned gloves. Taking up his hat, he said, “May I give you a word of advice?”

Startled, Rawlins stopped buffing to eye him. His curly brown hair, carefully cut and styled so as to look completely natural, framed a patrician face and sharp eyes. Rawlins said, “Indeed, I’m most anxious to hear it.”

“Do whatever Hartshough tells you and they’ll eventually let you go. Just do what he says,” he emphasized.

“That’s good to know. Thank you,” Rawlins said. Smiling, the lord put his hat on his head and took up his walking stick to leave by the front doors, manned by soldiers on the outside. Rawlins sat still for a moment to absorb the feeling that he had just been dared to defy the butler, just for fun. “That chap bears watching,” he grunted to himself.

Nonetheless, he dutifully buffed the goblet in hand while continuing his surveillance of the first floor and curving stairway, as far as he could see. When he felt the moment was ripe, he began to stand again. Then he realized: *My bags are in the room off the kitchen. I’ve got to wait till that blasted butler comes out. And—the lady?* Not having seen where she went, he sat again to continue buffing one goblet after another.

He froze as one of the door guards entered the hall with what looked like a sealed letter. Passing Rawlins with a glance, he trotted the letter to the kitchen, then emerged empty-handed to resume his post at the front doors. Shortly, Hartshough came out of the kitchen to begin walking the letter to the back of the house.

Seeing a possible chance to take flight, Rawlins half stood. But then the front doors opened again, so Rawlins swiftly sat to continue buffing. He glanced up to frankly stare at a badly scarred Polonti walking through the hall with two canvas bags stuffed with groceries, apparently, what with the greens spilling over the tops of both. In return, the Polonti glanced at him indifferently on his way to the kitchen.

Half groaning, Rawlins thought, *Am I ever going to get out of here?* Then it occurred to him that this Polonti was only hired laborer—not anyone who should care that Rawlins was carrying bags out of a room off the kitchen. *Blast him; I’ll just walk out around him,* Rawlins decided. So he got up to leave the table.

Before he got to the kitchen, however, he glanced down to see that he was still carrying the cloth and the goblet.

He lifted his gloved hands to vent, “Now that’s dedication.” So he returned to the table to put down the goblet and the buffing cloth.

Or, try to. He put the goblet on the table only to find that he couldn’t let go of it. Likewise for the cloth—when he opened his fingers, it stayed stuck to his hand. So he set the goblet on the table again and held down the base with the hand holding the cloth. Then he tried to remove his hand, only to find that he couldn’t because his fingers were curled around it. The only way to remove it was to break it.

As he brought the goblet up preparatory to smashing it on the edge of the table, he suddenly considered what that would do to his hand. Then he looked over at the five clean goblets sitting off to the side. He hadn’t had any difficulty letting go of those.

Exhaling in vexation, he sat to swipe the cloth over the goblet, then try to put it down. Again, he couldn’t let go of it. Groaning, he worked the cloth over it thoroughly, including the crevices, as he had been instructed to do. Then, holding his breath, he set the goblet with the others and attempted to let go.

He did it! He pulled his hand away! His fingers released, Rawlins shook his cramped hand and began to get up. But then he found that the cloth was still stuck in his right hand. “Eh, that doesn’t matter,” he muttered. “All I have to do is take off the gloves.”

Teeth gritted, he began to work on that. But no matter how he grasped the edge of a glove, it wouldn’t come off. Breathing hard with the effort, he sat to think about that. Determinedly, he picked up the next goblet to buff it thoroughly, setting it down with the others. Having successfully released the goblet, he very carefully held the cloth down to the table with his left hand while raising his right.

It wouldn’t come up. The cloth was stuck, period. “Then I’ll just find a good, sharp knife to cut off the gloves and the cloth,” he grunted, rising.

Except, he couldn’t. Hunched over, he turned in astonishment to see that the heavy dining chair was cemented to his lower back, his buttocks and the back of his thighs. He couldn’t even straighten. Hearing tinkling laughter from somewhere above, he muttered, “This isn’t funny.” But he couldn’t even raise up enough to see who or what was laughing at him.

“Very well, I see how this works,” he said through gritted teeth. Scooting the chair up to the table, he picked up the next goblet and intently buffed it, working rapidly but thoroughly. One by one, he worked his way through the goblets until at last, the tray was cleared. All of them clean and buffed, all released from his grip.

He let go of the buffing cloth and watched it fall lightly to the table. Then he removed one glove and the other, tossing them atop the abandoned cloth. He scooted the chair away from the table, and stood. He even stepped away from the table without hindrance. “Now’s the time,” he said, turning toward the kitchen.

Hartshough approached from the back of the house. “Ah, you’re done. Very good. You may bring the tray with the glasses back to the kitchen, then.”

“Certainly,” Rawlins said grimly, turning back to the table. He carefully replaced the goblets on the tray, then brought it through the open kitchen door to put it on a work table in the middle of the kitchen. The Polonti he had seen was washing greens in a large sink.

Pausing by the table, Hartshough said, “Oh, dear.”

“What?” Rawlins asked, alarmed. In fact, his gut coiled up.

“You handled the glasses with your bare hands, so now I’m afraid you’ll have to buff the fingerprints and smudges off before we can put them away,” Hartshough said.

Rawlins spun to look at the tray. In the bright light from the kitchen window, he regarded smudged fingerprints all over each and every goblet that he had cleaned so carefully in his bondage.

He began trembling. It was imperceptible at first, then his shaking was as a volcano about to erupt. With a cry of fury, Rawlins snatched up a goblet to smash it against the tabletop.

Except—his head got in the way, somehow, so that the leaded glass goblet came thudding down upon the crown of his head again and again while he cried out. Falling to the floor, he had to cover his face with an arm to prevent his nose being broken by the vicious stemware. The Polonti glanced over, mildly perturbed at having to step around him.

“Here now, let us not play,” Hartshough reproved him, replacing the goblet on the tray. Rawlins sat on the floor, dazed, while Hartshough left the kitchen to do something and return.

Lifting Rawlins to a stand, Hartshough said, “There’s nothing for it but to redo them.” Guiding the hollow-eyed man back to the dining table, Hartshough sat him in the chair, restored the gloves and the cloth to him, and pulled the tray of goblets to within reach. “You will need to get those done before dinner. Commander Wendt and Lady Marguerite are having special guests tonight,” Hartshough advised him. Uttering a hollow whine of despair, Rawlins gazed at the insolent glassware.

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Chapter 8

“I don’t want to go,” Efran muttered, Minka on his chest. “I’d rather have dinner with the children.”

Minka replied in a murmur, “We do that every night. Auntie and Wendt are counting on you.”

“Who are these special guests, anyway?” he groaned.

“I don’t know. They’re from Prie Mer,” she said, lifting up. “One is related to a prominent builder there, so DeWitt wants to hear how they managed to rebuild so quickly after the hurricane.”

“Prie Mer, huh?” Efran came fully awake. “I haven’t been out there—haven’t sent anyone there either, since the cleanup. That was in April, fifty-two”—over four years ago, when Efran was still only a Captain of the army of Westford. Over two thousand had died in Prie Mer, and every building within a mile of the coast flattened. This was the same hurricane that had demolished Nicarber.

“Do I have to dress up?” he asked, looking toward his wardrobe.

“Yes, you’re wearing your dress uniform,” she said, rising.

He caught her around the hips. “What are you wearing?” he asked with a smile.

“I’m going to wear the embroidered dress from The Lands Clothing Shop. It’s so beautiful, everyone will be looking at it and not my messy hair,” she announced.

He countered, “You’re welcome to think that, but everyone will be looking at your eyes.” She looked surprised.

Taking a little bit longer than they should to get ready, they were a little late receiving their horses at the courtyard gates. As they mounted, the gatesman Verrin said, “You might have to wait a bit, Captain. There’s a bottleneck down there.”

“Bottleneck?” Efran said, looking down the hill. Sitting on their horses, he and Minka looked from the old switchback to the new, then back again at the old. “What . . . ?” There were so many carts, wagons and riders piled up at the bottom of both switchbacks that no one could move forward or back. The problem was exacerbated by more vehicles approaching south on Main and west on Chapel Road. Abbey men on foot were now at both ends of the blockade, clearing the way for vehicles on the outer edges to turn around.

“There’s no way down!” Efran marveled. “Even if we were able to walk down the hill in between the switchbacks, we can’t even cross Chapel Road until the knot comes undone. Well, let’s just apologize to Auntie tomorrow.” He turned Kraken around in relief.

“Efran!” she said, aggravated. “We just have to wait.”

Muttering under his breath, he turned to study the pileup. He noted, “There’s one problem--that large, ornate carriage parked on Chapel Road. That must have brought Auntie’s guests. Ohh, look—it’s also blocking the drive back to the Inn’s stableyard. No one can get out of there, either! That has never happened before. I think even Noah would know to get the carriage out of traffic before stopping. Amazing.”

They sat waiting, and Kraken started to sway. “Be still. We’re all stuck,” Efran muttered. Kraken snorted back at him. Efran lifted his hand to Hartshough far below, who had come out of the front doors to look. When he withdrew back into the chapel, Efran said, “Let’s see if Hartshough can get our bracers up to us.”

Minka laughed. Of the vehicles stuck below, Efran observed, “Now they’re pulling off the road onto the front grounds of the inn, the chapel, Ryal’s and Elvey’s. Oh, and a couple have even gone up on the hill a little ways. That’s risky.”

After watching the knot untangle bit by bit, Efran said, “All right, they’ve made a path for us.” It was a narrow path, so Efran led Minka down the new switchback to thread through impatient drivers.

Walking Kraken up to the chapel front steps, he dismounted to lift Minka down from her mare. “Now I’m all sweaty,” she grumbled.

“You don’t sweat, you just glisten,” he said, taking her hand and nodding to Eryk as he led the horses around back.

The guards opened the doors with a salute, and they entered to Hartshough’s bow. “Welcome, Lord Efran, Lady Minka.”

Patting his shoulder, Efran said, “I hope you didn’t wait dinner on us.”

“No, the rest of the guests have been served, Lord Efran,” Hartshough replied.

When Efran and Minka entered the hall, their hosts Wendt and Marguerite stood. Wendt nodded at their guests to keep them seated. It was an uncomfortable clash of protocols, but Wendt knew that the latecomers would not take offense, as their guests were enjoying dinner. Smiling, Efran said, “Sorry about that. There’s a wayward carriage in the road--”

“Yes, Captain,” Wendt interrupted, confirming Efran’s suspicions as to the owners of the carriage. “Lady Avia, Lord Vardaman, Lord Woolnough, allow me to introduce Efran and Minka, Lord and Lady Sovereigns of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

Minka made a sweet curtsy and Efran nodded, glancing over the woman and two men. Several of those at table noticed that the woman, Avia, looked sharply at him. At Wendt’s left sat Avia, Estes, Kelsey, Ryal, Tera, and Gabriel. At Marguerite’s right sat Vardaman, DeWitt, Woolnough, and Giardi.

As they all had plates, Youshock, in uniform, brought over two more. “Captain, you’re to sit here by Lady Giardi, and Lady Minka beside you.” Shane was behind him with their goblets of wine.

“Excellent,” Efran said, sitting Minka first. As he sat between her and Giardi, he turned to smile seductively, “Hello, Lady Giardini.” It was his constant game to make her laugh, which she did.

Abruptly, Avia said, “That’s him.” The table looked at her in unison, then to the object of her scrutiny: Efran. She nodded confirmation to Vardaman across from her: “That’s him, the Lord of the Fortress.” Vardaman and Woolnough leaned forward to look down the table at him.

Efran went still, regarding her. She was young, in her 20s, with long, dark hair that she wore in a braid over her shoulder. Her clothes were good, as were those of her companions, but Efran wasn’t looking at them, only her.

Minka studied him in alarm as something happened—there was a blackness rising up to cover him, and she felt him dying inside, thinking, *Again? What is it now? Another child I abandoned without knowing? Another one night for which I must pay? More humiliation? More of my sins exposed to the world? Oh, God, and she is so young!*

As he sat still, Marguerite closed her eyes; Wendt sighed; Estes lowered his head; DeWitt froze. Gabriel looked at her in hatred and Ryal looked at Efran in concern. Giardi had her head down in concentration. Trembling, Minka held his arm, pleading silently, *Don’t, Efran. Don’t succumb. Efran, look at me.*

He blinked, turning his head minutely toward her. Then he barely wet his lips, looking up the table to Avia. He swallowed and whispered, “I don’t believe I know you.”

“What?” she said, leaning toward him.

In a hard voice, Gabriel repeated to her, “He says he doesn’t know you.”

“No, we’ve never met,” she said crisply, leaning back. “But you have something of mine that I want.”

Efran was unable to reply, having to wait for the blackness to subside. But the rest of the table stirred. Vaguely pleasant, DeWitt asked, “What would that be, Lady Avia?”

“The sword of Ares,” she said, raising a brow at him. “He was my great-great-grandfather.”

Eyes around the table looked cautiously to Ryal, who had been page to Ares' adopted son Henry. Ryal, in turn, looked across the table to Giardi, who was the daughter of Henry and Sophie, Ares' daughter. Giardi had actually known Ryal in Westford; he barely remembered her when they met again two years ago, as she was so much younger than he.

Giardi asked Avia, "How do you trace your lineage, dear?"

Avia studied her as though debating the woman's right to ask, then said, "My great-grandmother was Ares' daughter Bonnie. She had a son named Revello, who had a daughter name Briffa, who was my mother."

Ryal asked, "Do you have any records?"

She issued a grating laugh. "After Westford burned to the ground?"

Ryal gestured to Shane, who ran over with a bow. "Yes, Lord Ryal."

"Go ask Soames for the book of *Annotations*," Ryal directed.

"Yes, sir." Shane left the chapel at a run. The Landers watched quietly, the visitors intently. Efran wasn't attending any of this, nor did he eat. Minka was holding his hand under the table with both of hers while he looked off blankly, struggling to force the blackness back down.

After a studious glance at him, Ryal asked Giardi, "What do you remember of Bonnie?"

She drew a long breath, looking up to the stained-glass transom windows over the front doors. "Not much, I'm afraid. She and Ben had had no children before the Border Wars broke out in eighty-ninety. She and my mother were twenty then. Ben was killed," she said, sorrowful all over again. "After that, Father ordered her taken under guard to the Green Hills. He wanted my mother and me to go as well—I was three years old—but she wouldn't leave him."

She paused to cast a glowing glance on Minka, whose eyes watered. Efran was focused on Giardi now, listening. When Minka felt him relax, she began eating, because she didn't want to hurt Hartshough's feelings.

Giardi looked into the distance, then shook her head. "I don't remember hearing anything of Aunt Bonnie after that."

"Who were you to my great-grandmother?" Avia demanded—arrogantly, to the ears of those listening.

Efran lowered his gaze on her but DeWitt said cheerfully, "Allow me to expand on the introductions that were made earlier. "Lady Commander Giardi—or Giardini, as Captain Efran prefers to call her, which is her full name—is the daughter of Henry the Great and Sophie, Surchatain Ares' daughter. The gentleman across from her, Notary Lord Commander Ryal, was Henry's page, and is Lady Giardi's husband."

The three from Prie Mer looked between Ares' granddaughter and Henry's page as if undecided how much of this they should believe. Shane returned at a run to hand the tall, slender book of *Annotations* to Ryal, who said, "Thank you." Shane bowed and stepped back.

There was utter quiet around the long table as Ryal turned pages in the *Annotations*. Then he shook his head. "There is the entry for May first, eighty-seventy, for the births of Ares' and Nicole's twin daughters Sophie and

Bonnie. There is the entry for Bonnie's wedding to Captain Ben on September fifteenth, eighty-eighty six. I see no more entries for her."

He continued turning pages until arriving at the end of the book, which he closed thoughtfully. Then he said, "Lady Avia, unless you have more proof, Lord Efran cannot be compelled to give up the sword to you."

She chewed on this a moment, then directed her attention to Efran. "How did you get the sword?"

Efran regarded her without answering, or any thought of answering. His only thought was, *I'd never sleep with you. You're not attractive to me in the least.*

Minka suddenly leaned forward, bringing up her napkin as she choked on a mouthful. With watering eyes, she patted her chest. "Excuse me," she said, half laughing. Efran was regarding her docilely, but Marguerite had her lips clamped shut as well.

Ryal asked, "Are you all right, Minka?"

"Yes, Ryal. Don't mind me," she said, blushing.

"Very well," Ryal said. "Lady Avia, permit me to answer that question. Henry gave me the sword approximately . . . sixty years ago. He told me what it was, and that it was to belong to the next Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I kept it until I became notary of Westford. At that time, in the company of old Father Widdicombe, I visited the fortress, which had been abandoned for years. As I doubted in my heart that its appointed lord would come in my lifetime, I made the tag identifying the sword and hid it for safekeeping."

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Chapter 9

Ryal continued, "Then it was in May, eighty-one fifty-three, that I watched a Polonti soldier ride back and forth from Westford to the road leading south, to the Abbey Fortress, with children, just a few at a time. There was a possible lord, I realized, but he needed a lady.

"So late in the evening of May twenty-first, I saw her arrive at the Porterhouse Inn with two Eurussian soldiers. She was exhausted but triumphant, and came to my shop early the next morning to ask about the white fortress on the hill. And I realized then—I cannot tell you the joy it gave me to see that the Abbey would become a living thing again, to house children, to provide for families, to grow and prosper," Ryal finished, eyes wet.

The whole table sat in silence; Minka had tears streaming down her face. "You have been a guiding angel to us, Ryal," she whispered.

"Every day on the Lands is one I never thought I'd see, Minka," he said. Efran studied him, then looked down at his neglected plate. He picked up his fork to begin eating.

Stirring, DeWitt said, "Now that the sword has been put out of play, what else can we do for you, Lady Avia?" He was a little curt, both because the visitors had almost nothing to say about the rebuilding of Prie Mer, and her opening to the Lord Sovereign was—provoking, to say the least.

She looked to Vardaman, who eyed her to communicate something. She shrugged in reluctance, so he said, “We want to rebuild Nicarber.”

Any offense on his part was perhaps justified as the table erupted in laughter. Even Efran had to duck his head to finish chewing. Swallowing, he asked Vardaman, “Where have you been these last few years? Had you come any time up to four months ago, we would have greeted you warmly and given you assistance. But now you’re too late.” He made no attempt to soften the news.

Vardaman bristled, “We stopped by Nicarber on our way here. There’s nothing there but savages in huts who fish from bark canoes.”

Efran studied him. “Yes, that’s their ancestral homeland which we’ll defend their right to keep. Why aren’t you rebuilding Prie Mer?”

Vardaman hesitated, but answered, “It’s mostly rebuilt; its harbor fully functional so that the price of land anywhere near it is exorbitant. We want to develop in a fresh area.”

With a gesture, Efran passed over the possibility, having already dismissed it. “How are you three related?” he asked instead. Vardaman was at least twenty years older than Avia and the other man who had not yet spoken.

They paused at the unexpected question. Vardaman said, “Lady Avia is my wife; Woolnough is my brother.”

Efran asked, “If you came about Nicarber, then what’s this nonsense about the sword of Ares?”

Vardaman said, “It’s not nonsense. From our research on the Abbey, we discovered that the sword was here, and Avia genuinely felt she had first claim to it.” She glanced darkly at him—Vardaman.

Efran shrugged, as both their objectives were now futile. Brightening, he said, “We’ve got a lot of nice shops on the Lands you might want to visit.”

Light laughter went around the table. Having finished his dinner, Efran was stirring restlessly. Minka put her napkin beside her plate. He said, “That was excellent. And Hartshough--”

He was interrupted by a crash from the kitchen. Wendt and Marguerite glanced toward it cautiously, but Efran added, “--did all that despite Rawlins’ help. Anyway. . . .” Standing from the table, he paused to look at those around it: Gabriel, a leader of the loyal Forty; Wendt, Efran’s father and Commander from Westford; Estes, his pillar and his first appointment at the Abbey; DeWitt, the mortar that held the Abbey together; Ryal and Giardi, the conscience and the soul of the Abbey.

“This would still be nothing but empty meadowland without you all,” Efran murmured. Turning to Minka, the heart of the Abbey, he regarded her glittering eyes, then took her hand to lead her out. The streets and switchbacks were more or less clear; the overlarge carriage appropriately housed in the Inn’s stableyard.

After they had left, the table was quiet a moment, then Estes told Vardaman, “Kelsey and I will be happy to take you on a walking tour.”

Glancing at his companions, Vardaman said, “I suppose we’ll do that, then.”

Vardaman's party left the Lands the following day, June 12th. That morning, Efran sat on the floor at Minka's knees in the corner of the dining hall for Law class. He glanced around at the number of men here to listen to Soames explain what the Law demanded and why. That also was a major factor in the Abbey's success—that they had the Law, and followed it as best they could.

He remembered that day in the palace of Westford when he scrambled up to the second-floor library through cracking corridors to retrieve what books he could, including the Law and the Holy Canon. Then he had discovered by accident that there was a dry hiding place for the books in the well by the henhouse. By accident? No, he knew at the time that he was led to it, as he was shown the window leading out of the infirmary into the rain, and his salvation.

Following Law class, he reluctantly let Minka go down to see Auntie, then she had to ride up to The Lands Clothing Shop to tell Rondi, Racheal, Sosie, and Meena how Hartshough was keeping Rawlins busy. "Mostly, he has to wash dishes like a barmaid. Or like I did when I ran away to the Porterhouse Inn! That was so stupid," Minka castigated herself. That was about seven months ago.

"I was here then, but I never understood why you ran away. Why did you?" Rondi asked in deep distress.

Minka studied her for a moment. "I don't remember," she confessed to their pained laughter. "I think I thought that Efran was mad at me. But then he apologized so nicely, I knew that he wasn't."

Sosie asked, "What did he apologize for?"

Again Minka looked tentative. "You know, I was never really clear on that," she admitted. They laughed again.

Racheal said, "Never mind, then. How does Hartshough keep Rawlins there? Is he chained or what?" she asked ironically.

Minka was slowly shaking her head. "Hartshough doesn't have to do anything but assign him tasks. As long as there's something he's supposed to do that he hasn't done, he *can't leave*. And he can't figure out why."

"Ooooooh," the ladies said, Sosie adding, "I think I know what that feels like."

Meanwhile, Efran was teaching Isreal, Donovan, Elwell and Chorro how to adjust their hold on the knife and their throwing to make it spin so as to stick in the target regardless of the distance. When they wanted to know why that was important, he had to tell them about his last-ditch effort to save himself and Neale from being dragged underground. That involved his throwing the knife from a distance he couldn't change to hit the magician hiding in a tree. With that, the boys sat right down, demanding to hear more.

When Joshua, 2 1/2, came over wanting to play with a knife, Efran dismissed them from lessons for the day. So Joshua took his father to the pond to show him a huge toe biter just under the surface of the water. Toby scooped it out with a perforated cup so that the nearest boy wearing shoes—in this case, Calix--could stomp on it. Thus they were attempting to make the pond a little more toe-friendly.

About this time, Madgwick was taking baby Ruth (about 15 months old) for a walk in her stroller. Pausing at the intersection of Main and Chapel Road, Madgwick decided to stop by the chapel. As she approached the guards at the door (whom she didn't know personally), she said, "I am Madgwick; I was hoping to talk to Marguerite, if she's available--"

The doors were promptly opened so that one of the guards could escort her in, lifting the stroller. He set it down

in the seating area to say, "Please have a seat, Lady Madgwick, and I'll see if she's here."

"Oh—well, thank you," she said, flustered. She positioned the stroller in front of the divan and sat.

The guard trotted off to stop by the kitchen and speak to someone. In another minute he returned to the seating area with a tall glass. "Hartshough's gone off to find her, Lady Madgwick; meanwhile, he asks that you refresh yourself with a blackberry bracer."

"Oh! How nice," she said, accepting the glass. The guard returned to the front door as she sipped. "Oh, that's delicious," she murmured. She glanced down at the baby asleep in the stroller.

Shortly, Marguerite appeared from the back of the house. "Madgwick, so good to see you!" While Madgwick was trying to get up from the comfortable divan, Marguerite leaned down to kiss her cheek. "How are you? Oh, my, Ruth is so tranquil, she reminds me of a lotus blossom."

"Doesn't she? She hardly ever cries at all," Madgwick said.

Marguerite sat in the chair closest to her side of the divan. "I'm sure that Minka is pleased."

"Yes, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you about that," Madgwick said. "When she last came to see us, oh, a little over a week ago, she became—very emotional when she saw her, especially when Ruth called her by name! She clapped and said, 'Ninka'! I was so surprised; that's the first word I've heard her say. It surprised Minka, too. She burst into tears and said something like, 'Oh, Adele, I'm so glad to see you happy.' Marguerite, who . . . is Adele?"

Marguerite studied her, then said, "Did you ever see Minka's older sister? Blonde, blue-eyed, very lovely . . .?"

Madgwick look off, thinking. "Not long before Efran summoned us to take charge of Ruth, there was a young woman who came into the shop trying to buy ales with false coins. She tried to disguise her blonde hair with lambswool and a scarf. She left without buying anything, but there seemed to be a hue and cry after her. . . ." She looked down at the baby, then back to Marguerite. "What . . .?"

"This was before I came here," Marguerite began tentatively, "but some very powerful ladies called the Kittim visited the Lands, and their leader was one Aleph. Well, she was indebted to Efran and Minka because of her help with Leviathan." At Madgwick's blank look, Marguerite said, "I see I'd better back up a bit."

So Marguerite told Madgwick about Minka's unsticking Leviathan's eggs, who was then obligated to her. And when a baby Leviathan accidentally knocked Minka into the arena where the Kittim were battling Nephilim, Mother Leviathan also entered to retrieve her baby. And when Nephilim thought to take a shot at *her*; she ended the battle right then. So Aleph was then obligated to Minka, and when her sister became such a problem that they didn't know what to do with her, she was . . . reborn.

Both women regarded the sleeping baby. "'You must be born again,'" Madgwick whispered. "I just never imagined that it would happen to anyone body and soul."

"This is the kind of place where things happen," Marguerite said quietly. And the baby stirred, waking.

None of the Landers knew that when Vardaman's party left that morning, they did not head directly back to Prie Mer. Instead, they stopped at the intersection leading into the main road of Nicarber, clean of debris but lined with a dozen thatched huts.

Looking out the carriage window, Vardaman grunted, “This is such a perfect location. The huts would be simple to tear down, and there’s only a handful of ignorant savages here, no soldiers. They couldn’t stand up to anyone with weapons. So by the time we started construction, we could just tell anyone who dropped by from the Lands that the savages all ran off.”

Woolnough objected, “That could go wrong a dozen ways. Let’s just check other areas along the coast.”

“You’ve always been a coward; happy to let me take all the risks,” Vardaman muttered. He stood from his seat to open the storage bin beneath it, pulling out a knife and a longsword.

Exiting the carriage to strap them on, he asked Woolnough tightly, “Are you coming with me, or do you want to stay in the carriage with Avia?”

She glanced coldly at Vardaman, then looked away. While he had sat silent at dinner last night, she had said everything he had told her to say. Not only did it gain them nothing, but it made her look a fool. And she was still stinging over the look on Lord Efran’s face when she said, “*That’s him*”--as if she had slapped him. Though Vardaman disparaged the Polonti as uneducated and ill-mannered, that man was neither. But Vardaman had heard about the sword of Ares. Thinking that the Abbey couldn’t have any provenance on it, he had her make up one so they could get it to sell.

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Chapter 10

By now, Woolnough was climbing out of the carriage as well. “Can we just try talking to them, first?”

“Sure, Coward,” Vardaman said. Raising his face to the driver and footman, he said, “Pull this carriage into the trees along the road.”

“Yes, sir,” the driver said dully. But when he attempted to do so, he found not nearly enough room for the oversized vehicle. So he just drove on down the dirt road a little ways, and stopped there. They would have blocked traffic coming either way, but there was none. Avia lay down on the seat to go to sleep.

Unarmed, Woolnough followed a pace behind Vardaman as he strolled down the center of the road, looking from one side to the other. “The Lord of the Abbey Lands is an idiot,” Vardaman muttered. But then, all Polonti were stupid. Once Vardaman himself had Nicarber in hand and producing, he would start thinking about acquiring the Lands. He’d need help for that, though. Polonti might be stupid, but they were deadly.

Vardaman paused to watch a savage in a loincloth run up the road with a basket of fish on his shoulder. Ignoring the two who were gaping at him, the native took the basket into one of the huts. Then a woman’s voice behind them said, “Hello there, where is the cart?”

Vardaman and Woolnough both turned to watch a substantial, broad-faced woman approach. “You have more grains for us? We make bread. Where is your cart?” she asked.

When neither man replied right away, she looked at their suits. Mildly questioning now, she asked, “Are you not from the Abbey Lands? Where, then?”

“Nowhere,” Vardaman said, reaching under his suit coat. “We’re going to stay right here.” And he brandished his knife.

Not knowing that he was just posturing, the woman unleashed a piercing scream so that half-dressed savages with spears began pouring out of the huts nearby, as well as from both ends of the dirt road. The feathers of one well-aimed spear brushed Woolnough’s ear as it flew by.

He turned to run blindly past the huts into the grass, scrub brush, and random trees only to be overtaken by Vardaman, who was faster. They thrashed their way westward, leaping over stumps and broken earth until the natural slope of the land directed them to the hard-packed sand along the coast.

Here they ran like the stallions they were, until Woolnough dropped to his knees, breathing heavily. About ten feet in front of him, Vardaman stopped as well. And they both raised their eyes to the magnificent structure about 200 feet inland.

It appeared to be a large dwelling set on pillars with a metal roof. There were straight, broad steps leading up to double doors. About 60 feet in front of it stood a triangular brace from which a large pot hung suspended over a fire. A skinny man in brightly colored clothes was tending the fire, his back to them. He had wiry hair and large hands and feet.

After taking note of him and the house, the intruders turned to look over the glorious Sea. “Oh, yes,” breathed Vardaman. “That’s perfect. All it needs is a breakwater, which is simple to build. Well, Woolnough, I have to admit that you were right about moving down the coast.”

But Woolnough had turned to peer at the man tending the cooking fire. “He doesn’t look quite right. He looks—different, in fact. You know, we heard about the trolls out this way. And, who else is in that house? Let’s just talk to him, find out what property is available out here.”

Vardaman laughed. “And invite him to take advantage of us?” He looked down to see that his knife was gone, but his sword remained sheathed at his waist. Drawing it, Vardaman said, “Still, cowards can be right twice in one day. I’ll go on over to ask questions, but make sure that he knows I’m able to defend myself.” With his sword swinging, Vardaman began walking toward the outdoor chef.

“But, wait a minute . . . you’re. . .” Woolnough faltered, unnerved by Vardaman’s aggressive approach to the stranger. Suddenly fearful, Woolnough squatted to begin working his way back toward the cover of dune grass and sedges.

“Hello, there, my good man,” Vardaman said, his sword blade resting by the blunt edge on his shoulder. “Say,--”

His mouth was open on the next word when the man turned around. Then Vardaman was gaping at a bulbous red nose and small black eyes. “Ah, bakeout?” it said between large teeth.

Panicking, Vardaman swept the sword off his shoulder to flail with it, but the creature caught his wrist. Vardaman screamed in pain, looking down at the claws embedded in his arm.

“Manbake?” the thing proposed, picking up the dropped sword.

From his hiding place in the dunes, Woolnough watched, trembling, as the troll used Vardaman’s sword on him. Then it called, “Manbake! Da!” And other trolls, large and small, came running out of the house.

White-faced and trembling, Woolnough crawled landward north amid the dunes until he reached sufficient cover of brush to stand and run. He ran steadily until encountering the road, then instinctively turned east to run until the carriage came within view. Clambering inside, he cried up to the driver, “Go! Go! Go!” Immediately the carriage bounded forward, west.

Thrown to the floor, Avia braced herself between the seats. “What? Woolnough, what—oh!” Struggling up to the seat, she stared at his blanched face. “Woolnough? Where’s Uncle Vardaman?” Woolnough was, in fact, *her* brother.

“At a manbake,” he gasped. She shrank down on the seat, unwilling to ask more.

While Minka was at The Lands Clothing Shop, Efran left the children at the pond under their guardians’ watch while he took Kraken to ride out to the East Lands. His first thought was to check on Whitgift. Sure enough, upon arriving at the Last Road Notary Shop, Efran looked at the line out the door in concern. So he dismounted to look in the front window. Whitgift was plainly busy, and his helper Colpe at work, but Efran saw nothing amiss. And there was one of Tourse’s enforcers at the door, just to see that everyone remained civil. Efran did not know him, and he evidently did not recognize the Captain, either, so they left each other alone.

Riding west again, Efran realized that he had forgotten to take bodyguards along—not that he felt he needed them, but they were useful as messengers. Regardless, he wanted to check in with Commander Wendt at Barracks A, since he didn’t have a chance last night. Efran had expected to talk to him after dinner, but—that hadn’t worked out.

When he passed the barricade on Chapel Road, he paused at the congested traffic, again. It was almost to the point of blocking the switchbacks again. So as soon as he was able to turn Kraken onto Main, he dismounted to let him play in the water trough behind the community well. From there, Efran proceeded on foot up the east sidewalk on Main. It was also crowded.

Wissowa suddenly blocked his path. “Efran, I’ve been thinking, and I think I should be able to see Donovan more often. So I want you to send him down to my house at least twice—or rather, three times a week. There are lots of things that we can do together, and I want to hear from him what he’s doing at the fortress up there. I have the right to know, as I *am* his mother.”

Barely acknowledging her, Efran allowed the press of the crowd to separate them. Wiping his lip, he continued northward. All of a sudden, Arbaiza was in front of him, stopping him with both hands on his chest while people continued to brush past him from behind. “Efran, I want you to make Lemmerz use Bozzelli’s plans for the performance hall of the new inn. Without use of the chapel, I simply don’t have an adequate venue for my voice. I would think that, given our relationship, you owe me that, especially after leaving mud all over my sheets because you wouldn’t take off your boots.” With brows lifted to indicate how very much she meant it, she finally allowed him to move on.

Breathing, Efran changed destinations. He left the sidewalk to pass between Delano’s and Lowry’s, landing on a side street to work his way east until he crossed New North Road (with no crosswalks yet). From there, he headed north to Laborers’ Hall, turning east down this street. At this point, he was almost running.

He turned into The Lands Clothing Shop and stopped to look around, blinking sweat out of his eyes. Hearing, “Efran?” he turned toward her voice. “Efran, what’s wrong?” Feeling her hands on his arms, he tried to focus on her. Instead, he dropped in a dead faint, taking her with him.

Before he was fully awake, he heard himself say, “It’s too crowded. The Lands are getting too crowded.” Then he opened his eyes a crack to see a fuzzy Minka leaning over him. He turned his head to see what he was lying on, but then the blackness crept over him again.

When he opened his eyes a second time, he turned his head toward Minka talking with two soldiers. All three of them were watching him. With great effort, he pushed past the blackness to sit up. Minka was beside him, holding his arm. Nyarko and Krall were leaning over him. Krall said, “Captain, we’ve got Kraken here. Can you ride?”

“Yes. Give me just a minute,” he said. His eyes kept trying to close, and he kept forcing them open. He felt his feet on the floor, then pushed himself up. Minka was tightly pressed to his left side while Nyarko hovered at his right. While Krall ran to open the front door, Efran concentrated all his mental power on staying upright.

They emerged into the bright morning where Kraken and three other horses waited. Efran determinedly walked toward the black blob that turned his head toward him. Reaching the saddle, Efran just held onto it a moment, concentrating on lifting his foot to the stirrup, which he seemed unable to do.

Kraken then went down on his front knees. By extreme effort, Efran was able to get his left foot in the stirrup and swing his right leg over, leaning heavily on Kraken’s neck. Sitting almost upright, he said, “I can ride.”

Minka, Krall and Nyarko then mounted their horses. While Minka pulled the dun mare close to Kraken, Krall pulled ahead of them to lead at a walk. Nyarko followed close behind.

Krall took them south on New North Road, which was less crowded than Main. All that long way, Efran was fighting to stay awake and upright. He found that looking around could precipitate blacking out, so he kept his eyes on Kraken’s mane. Minka was riding so close on his left that their legs kept bumping. He tried to look over to smile at her, but it almost made him lose his balance. She shot a hand toward him and he kept his eyes on Kraken’s ears, which seemed to help most.

Something on the side of the road made him look up, however. Standing inert behind others on the road was a figure dressed entirely in dark gray—a robe, hood, and cloth covering the face, all dark gray so that no features were discernible underneath it. In fact, the face was completely smooth. Efran looked quickly ahead again. Strangely, the sight woke him somewhat, at least for a little while.

Past the intersection with Chapel Road, New North Road terminated at the entrance to the new switchback. Here, Efran had to concentrate on keeping his balance ascending and rounding the bends on each end. Arriving in the courtyard, he had to get his bearings before attempting to dismount.

Finally, with Nyarko, Krall and Minka waiting beside Kraken, Efran swung his right foot back to hit the ground. Then he had to hang for a moment until he could pull his left foot out of the stirrup. No one interfered with this, and when he turned around, only Minka presumed to take his arm to get him up the steps into the fortress.

With her help, he made it back to their quarters to lie down while Finn went up to find the doctor. Presently, Wallace came down with Estes to look in on him. Sitting in the chair by the bed that Minka provided, Wallace looked him over before asking, “How do you feel, Efran?”

“Better, lying down. But upright, I keep passing out,” he said.

“When did this start?” Wallace asked.

“This morning, coming up Main. It was so crowded, and people kept trying to talk to me. I started feeling like I was suffocating,” Efran muttered.

Minka looked cautious, knowing that it had actually begun last night when Avia abruptly singled him out. So she asked, “Who stopped you to talk, Efran?”

Looking back at her, he said, “Ah, Wissowa, first. She seems to think she’s going to have Donovan down three days a week to inflict mothering on him. And then Arbaiza, who wants me to make Lemmerz work Bozzelli’s performance hall into the new inn for her to sing in. That’s when I took off onto the side streets.”

Minka’s eyes flicked up to Estes, who barely nodded: two strident ex-lovers making demands on him. Efran’s deep and ongoing repentance for his early promiscuity didn’t preclude long-lasting consequences.

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Chapter 11

Wallace appeared to catch the gist of this, as well. Rising, he said, “I believe this is short term, Efran, possibly cumulative effects from the trauma you’ve endured over the last few years. It was just a little over a week ago that you were almost swallowed by Leviathan. Sooner or later, all that’s going to have some effect on you. But if anything changes, let me know.” This last instruction was directed to Minka, who nodded.

Wallace left, but Estes lingered by the bed a moment. “DeWitt’s out conferring with the Commander, Lemmerz, and some of the business owners on ways to better control traffic. We can’t widen Main, but we still have wiggle room on Chapel Road and New North Road. We’re going to make sure that nothing blocks the switchbacks again.”

Efran groaned, half-laughing, “Can you imagine us a year ago, or even six months ago, worrying about congested roads?”

“No,” Estes said flatly. “This is just another result of our phenomenal growth, Efran. DeWitt stopped new building just in time. He’ll find a solution to the crowding.” Efran nodded, closing his eyes, and Estes patted Minka’s shoulder on the way out.

Kicking off her boots, Minka crawled into bed beside Efran. “You need a nap.”

“You have to undress,” he grinned.

“No, too many people need you during the day. We’re just going to rest,” she said.

He grumbled, but minutes after she had snuggled into his side, he was out.

A few hours’ rest did help, because Efran was easily able to walk into the dining hall with Minka for dinner. As he sat with Joshua on his leg to await their plates, the children came running up to him in great excitement. Calix said, “Efran! The crayfish had babies! And there are little baby crayfish swimming all over! And so we want to make the pond bigger. Tourjee said it can be done, but we have to have your permission, and we have to do all the work ourselves. Can we make the pond bigger, Efran?”

Accepting his plate and Joshua's bowl from a kitchen worker, Efran laughed, "Yes. You get Tourjee to mark it out and show you what to do; you do all the digging and haul the back dirt to wherever he tells you. You clean up your shovels every time you use them and put them away. Then you'll have room for your crayfish." Theoretically.

The children cheered, even the girls. Of course, Hassie could wield a tool as well as almost any boy, at this stage. While the children got their plates and sat at a nearby table to plan the pond expansion, Isreal sat beside Efran. Donovan wedged himself between him and Minka. Fork in hand, Joshua looked over to Donovan right next to him to say, "Hiya."

"Hiya, Joshua," Donovan said, patting his leg. He looked up when another kitchen worker handed plates to him, Isreal, and Minka. But Donovan didn't start eating right away. Upon some thought, he told Efran, "You hold Joshua at dinner most of the time, but I don't see you hold Calo."

At this skirting of dangerous ground, Efran glanced at Minka, who returned a placid look. Then he said, "Calo's not mine, Donovan, so I had to be careful not to let him get too attached to me. He's been adopted into a family headed by a good man who will be his father from now on."

Everyone around them was eating by now, but Donovan was still thinking. He looked at Isreal and the other boys and asked, "Who of us here are yours, then?"

There was a tiny bit of the blackness creeping up, but Efran swatted it down; he would not be incapacitated by innocent questions from his son. Efran answered, "You, Isreal, Joshua, Toby, Noah, Pia, Ivy. Most of the rest of the children will be adopted into families on the Lands. I'm just kind of a placeholder."

Donovan accepted this, and began eating. The adults around them—Ella, Quennel, Rondi (mostly adult), Mathurin, Youshock, Tiras, Serrano—began talking quietly about something or other that had happened that day.

A few minutes later, Donovan put down his fork again. "You were really happy when my hair started coming in black under the white, because then I looked just like you. You and me are Polonti. So are Isreal and Joshua. But, Toby and Ivy don't look like us; they're not any part Polonti that I can see. How can they be yours?" There was a slight lull around them at the acuity of the question.

"Minka and I adopted them, Donovan, to make them legally ours, even though I'm not their natural father," Efran said. He rested the fork on his plate, anticipating the next question.

Donovan said, "Yes, you told me that you're my natural father. How does that--?" He broke off to look down between Efran's legs, then turned to look at Minka's skirts. She pressed her lips together at Efran while the other grownups were looking at something far across the hall or trying to jam their fists into their mouths.

Donovan then raised up to look at Ella's protruding belly. "You're going to have a baby."

"Yes," she said. "And after dinner, Papa will explain to you how that happens."

"Papa'?" Donovan asked.

"Yes, Efran is my papa," she said.

Donovan and Isreal looked quickly to Efran. Donovan observed, "You didn't mention Lady Ella."

Jaw working, Efran said, “That’s because she’s Quennel’s bundle of joy now.” Those at the table around them fell apart in laughter. And as Ella had promised, after dinner Efran took all the boys to another room to explain how babies are made.

The following day, June 13th, Efran and Minka met their bodyguards Jehan and Coish in the courtyard to take Isreal, Donovan and Potton out for another excursion. (Efran had extended the offer to the other children, but they were committed as a body to work on enlarging the pond for the baby crayfish.)

Efran warned the three boys, “You’ll get bored when I can’t produce something exciting for you. But I’ll let you decide where you want to go today. Personally, I just want to stay away from crowds.”

The boys looked at each other hesitantly, then Potton said, “If it’s all the same to you, sir, I’d like to go back to the coast.”

“Yes!” Donovan cried, and Isreal looked quickly at Efran in agreement.

“You’re not hoping for another fish bake, are you?” Efran asked, and all three boys grinned at him. “All right, then. Potton can ride on his own; how about you, Isreal?”

“I can ride by myself, Papa,” Isreal affirmed, but Donovan looked wary.

So Efran said, “Donovan can ride with me.”

With that decided, their horses were soon brought to the courtyard. With Donovan behind Efran on Kraken, the seven of them rode patiently single file up Main through the bustle. Then they departed the wall gates and the madding crowds to head for the sandy beaches of the Sea.

In order to get to the beach at all, they had to stop in Nicarber first, anyway. As the group rode down the main road, Efran looked in the distance at a number of Picti at work on what looked to be a jetty. “Well, better late than never,” he muttered.

His group was startled by several Picti running up to them brandishing spears. Jehan and Coish hedged Minka between them, but Efran scowled, “What are you doing? Put those down. Where are Mura and Pewsey?”

“That is Captain Efran,” one of the Picti told the others. So they lowered their spears and bowed.

A broad woman strode up in her flowing shift. “There, now, it’s all right. Get back to work,” she told them, and they bowed to her before departing.

Courteously, Efran lowered Donovan to the ground so that he could dismount himself. “Ah, Pewsey?” he asked.

“Mura, Captain Efran. The men were much disturbed by the man who came yesterday waving his blade around,” she said, offended.

“Who? Who was it?” Efran asked.

“We don’t know him; he was wearing fine clothes, and with a younger man. He talked of building a harbor here,” she said.

Glancing at Minka, he asked, "Would that be one Vardaman, by any chance?"

"We never knew his name before our men chased them away," she said. "But we need more grain."

"All right. Will you remind me to tell DeWitt?" he asked Minka. Still on her horse, she nodded, smiling.

"Well, then. Shall we go up the beach a ways?" he asked the boys.

"Yes! Get me back up!" Donovan said, reaching up to Kraken's high back.

"No more ale," Efran grunted. He remounted to pull Donovan up behind him. Then they all rode down to the beach. Waving to the Picti at work on their jetty, they turned their horses west to lazily lope through the sea spray. It was a beautiful, golden afternoon, with the sunlight splintering on the waves and making the white sand glitter.

Passing a mass of sea buckthorn, white pine and poplar to their right, they arrived at a tripod with a pot hanging from it, but the wood beneath it was dead and black. There was no one on the beach, nor any activity around the grand house. All was silent.

In mild concern, Efran called, "Krug? Sheuf? Hello? Are you all right?"

In a few minutes, Krug came to the door. Instead of his bright beach clothes, he was wearing a vaguely familiar suit jacket of a very fine make. But his face was pale and expression doleful. Even the red of his nose was subdued. "Ah. Da Effin. No bake. Bad meat," he groaned, holding his stomach.

"Bad meat? Are you sick?" Efran asked. Minka looked worried.

"All good later," Krug said with a listless wave, then he shut the door again.

Undecided, the Landers sat on their horses, then Donovan asked, "Can't we still just run around the beach?"

"If you like," Efran said, dismounting.

The boys liked, so they stripped off their shoes and socks to run on the wet sand, chase the waves, and pick up little treasures left behind by the outgoing tide. Isreal knelt to start building a sand castle. When Donovan ran up threatening to demolish it, Efran whistled and called, "Are you ready to leave?" Donovan turned abruptly to begin splashing in the waves instead.

Efran walked Minka with an arm around her shoulders, inhaling the scent of seaweed and the salty, mineral smell of the air. He took in the comforting vastness of the Sea and the sky, Minka beside him and the chortling boys kicking up the sand.

Kraken pawed at the water, but because it was no good to drink, he came over to snuffle Efran's hair instead. When he tried to snuffle Minka as well, Efran pushed him away. She laid her head on his shoulder while he breathed in the tranquility, the quiet, the solitude. "A hut on the beach looks pretty good right now," he murmured.

Meanwhile, Potton was investigating some strange lumps he found among the dune grass. Straightening abruptly, he called, "Captain!" Donovan, much closer to him than Efran was, ran over to have a look first. He

startled, then began screaming. He ran toward Efran screaming while Isreal jumped up to stand by Potton and look down. Jehan and Coish reached it, then, and quickly looked back at the Captain.

Trotting over, Efran parked Minka about ten feet away from the mound. Leaving Donovan with her, he walked over to look down at the grisly find. “Well, I’m glad it made them sick,” he muttered. “Mount up; we’re done here.”

They quietly departed at once.

When the subdued group returned to the Lands, they had to walk the horses single file again to negotiate the crowds. In the lead, Efran, with Donovan, glanced back frequently at Minka behind him, then Isreal, Potton, Jehan, and Coish. He disliked this crowding intensely, but could only trust DeWitt to figure out what to do. Efran had not noticed Gabriel beside the wall gates with Stuart, Dango, and a large ledger.

Going south toward the fortress, Efran glanced frequently from one side to the other—then he stilled. There it was again, on the sidewalk between Croft’s and Firmin’s—that dark gray, hooded shape that had no face. No one passing seemed to bump it, and as Efran rode by, it kept its blank face toward him without appearing to move.

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Chapter 12

Having seen many strange manifestations here, Efran refused to let this rattle him. He thrust down the growing tension from the throng to glance back at Minka again. She smiled warmly at him, and he contemplated how this bothered her not at all. Nor did anyone else appear distraught. Some people *liked* the bustle. Justinian was probably comfortable in this, as long as his suit remained unspotted.

Drawing near the switchback, however, Efran had to stop because no one in front of him was moving. In disbelief, he stared at the bottleneck on the switchback, *again*. Looking over to the east, he saw the new switchback crammed full, as well. Now, instead of being blocked from going down from the fortress, he and his party couldn’t go up. “I’d still prefer that hut on the beach,” Efran muttered.

After surveying the situation, Efran looked back at his group. They had managed to remain in line, though the horses were beginning to snort and bump each other. Efran whistled lightly to them in a signal to follow, then he turned Kraken’s head to weave a course across Main between horses, carts, wagons, and carriages.

This required a great deal of maneuvering and nerve, plus a little force. But once Kraken caught the command, he responded by pushing, thrusting, and nipping where necessary to open a path. So Efran gave him his head, glancing back frequently to make sure everyone clear down to Coish was still in line, following in his wake.

Some other riders and drivers responded irritably, and one man took a riding crop to Kraken. Efran grabbed it, broke it in two, then handed it back to him. Sitting behind him, Donovan shouted, “This is Captain Efran, stupid! Let us by!” With such clues as Donovan provided, Efran was recognized, so that others did their best to make way for him.

He departed Main to cut across Ryal’s corner lot, now trampled to mud. Here, he stopped again to make sure that everyone was with him. Then came the necessity of crossing Chapel Road.

Efran chose a point halfway between the two switchbacks, to the west of the fortress storage building just off the road, then Kraken nosed his way onto Chapel Road in between horses and around carts. Informed by Donovan's gleeful scolding, those stuck in the jam did what they could to make way for the Captain to get across.

When he had made it to the base of the fortress hill south of the road, he drew Kraken beside the storage building to wait for Minka, Isreal, Potton, Jehan and Coish to arrive. Others stuck on the road grudgingly made way for them as well, as they were all watching to see what the Captain would do. In the vicinity of the road, where he and Donovan waited on Kraken, the rocks had been cleared away. But the riders were still cut off from the entrance to either switchback. And between the switchbacks was the steep, uneven, rocky, and brushy hillside.

With everyone collected around him, Efran murmured, "I'm going to let you down for a minute," reaching for Donovan behind him. Confused but unquestioning, Donovan allowed himself to be lowered to the ground by an arm. Efran dismounted, then lifted Donovan to the saddle.

Looking over the group, Efran said, "Potton, you, Jehan, and Coish dismount and line up behind me. Minka, you and Isreal stay on your horses." The three young men did as instructed, then Efran turned to begin walking up the hillside in between the clogged switchbacks. As he walked, he swept the path before him with a foot to clear it of small briars and rocks. If even little rocks got caught deep in a hoof, they could make a horse lame. Carrying Donovan, Kraken walked at Efran's back without being led.

Potton, Jehan and Coish followed with their horses, likewise clearing the path that Efran forged. So by the time Minka and Isreal rode over the same trail, it was free of hindrances, though steep and uneven. When Efran came to boulders, large briars, or impassable depressions, he cast about for the shortest route around them, then led that way. Twice he had to kick aside adders. But he was used to all this, having frequently walked up and down this hillside when he needed to think. The only difference now was in leading a line of riders.

It was slow going, but at least they were moving. A line of riders, even a few walkers, fell in behind Isreal from Chapel Road. Minka waved to the courtyard gate guards, who were watching, and to Estes and DeWitt, who were also watching from the second-floor balcony.

In less than an hour—before the deadlock on either switchback had been cleared—Efran had made it up to the landing path outside the fence, where he crossed over to the main gates. The guards Tourle and Skalbeck patted him on the back and helped Donovan down in the courtyard. Efran lifted Minka down himself while Tourle assisted Isreal down. Donovan grabbed his hand. "I can't wait to tell the others what we found!" Isreal grinned, and they two ran up the fortress steps to take the straightest route to the back grounds.

After dismissing Jehan, Coish, and Potton, Efran took Minka's hand to lead her inside. Potton was pleased to report to Captain Chee, who stopped what he was doing to listen. Then he told him, "Find Captain Rigdon's scribe Redpath and have him write that up, then go back down on foot; see if you can get that report to Commander Wendt."

"Yes, sir." Potton saluted, thrilled to his bones. Meanwhile, there was a steady stream of foot traffic and riders up and down the hillside path that Efran had forged. Chapel Road was also being cleared, as soldiers were redirecting much of the traffic to New North Road.

Arriving in the second-floor workroom with Minka in hand, Efran sat her at the table before flopping into his customary seat at the head. Just waiting to hear something, he looked over to his administrators. While Estes smiled at Minka, DeWitt laid down his quill to begin, "All right, Efran, we actually have a plan that we think will help the congestion. First, since so many of the new businesses and residents are locating in the East Lands,

we're redirecting incoming and outgoing traffic to the northeastern and far eastern gates.

"Each day, when traffic *begins* to get heavy on Main, we'll close the Main gates to all incoming traffic except messengers and Fortress business. Anyone else who wants in will have to go around to the other gates. We'll have rotating Gate Supervisors among the men who will wear special insigne that magically authorizes them to shut the gates," DeWitt said to Efran's laughter.

DeWitt continued, "Surprisingly enough, the main cause of the problem appears to be the settlements we allowed around the main road north of the Lands."

Efran sat up abruptly. "The settlements--! I forgot about those."

"As did we all," DeWitt said wryly. "But we've sent word to them that they'll have to start going around to the other gates. I don't think it's an insurmountable problem; we just have to convince people to take a different route than what they're used to. That will be easy enough when that area eclipses Main."

"What?" Efran asked blankly, but Estes was nodding.

DeWitt said, "The new industries out there around Choules' group are a huge draw. For one, we have an importer of ebony, ivory, and precious stones who's teamed up with Whately for an exposition. Her name's Isolde."

"An importer. When we don't have any ports?" Efran muttered.

DeWitt almost chuckled. "It's all coming overland from the ports of Endelion east of Venegas." This was news to Efran. DeWitt continued, "From those same ports we're also getting bronze, linen, wheat, olives, figs, honey, oil, white wool, wrought iron, wine, even livestock. We're becoming famous as a destination."

After Efran had a few minutes to absorb this, Estes said, "I think I told you that Calo got adopted out, didn't I?"

"Yes," Efran said.

"Well, Jera, Acy and Pim have all three gone to another couple. Jera had gotten very attached to Acy and her little brother, and the couple's only child has grown and left home, so they were lonely. Also, they wanted help with their papaya trees. They grow fruit for the fortress and merchants which is snapped up—it's delicious but too cold north of the Lands to be grown there," Estes explained.

"Huh," Efran said, feeling a little heartache at losing three at once. "Oh, the papaya! Yes, they are good." He went silent, thinking about that.

When Minka cleared her throat at him, he looked at her blankly, then said, "Oh. Yes. I forgot." She briefly closed her eyes, and he added, "I doubt we'll be going to any more of the trolls' bake outs." DeWitt looked up from his ledger, and Efran told them what they had found.

Estes and DeWitt listened in mild horror but, little surprise. Estes said, "Krug and his friends may be domesticated, to some degree, but there's still a fundamental difference between people and trolls."

Thinking about that, Efran asked Minka, "Were you shocked? You seemed to accept them as people."

Minka shrugged indifferently. "People can be cannibals. I think Krug would look at it as not being wasteful. I wonder what made them sick?"

“Krug told us,” Efran said. As they looked questioning, he quoted, “‘Bad meat.’ That had to have been Vardaman.” He suddenly rebuked DeWitt, “Stop inviting every visitor in a fancy carriage to dinner.”

“I’m not *entirely* to blame,” DeWitt exhaled. “I just took Vardaman at his word that he knew something about the process of Prie Mer’s rebuilding. But that bit about the sword of Ares’--!” He broke off to squint at Estes.

Leaning back, Estes said, “Yes, and Avia’s first comment was really strange--‘that’s him’--as though she were identifying you personally as having wronged her.” Efran was losing color again when Estes added, “I knew that it wasn’t possible, not with you, Efran. She was too young.”

“Thank you,” Efran muttered, and DeWitt conceded that.

With all that concluded, Efran and Minka went out to the back grounds. Here, they sat on the east-facing bench to watch the children struggle to dig the hard-packed hilltop dirt. Nakam ran among them offering encouragement, then decided to supervise from a shady spot. When they plopped down in the shade as well, tired and discouraged, Minka went back inside. Shortly, she returned with two kitchen helpers who carried pitchers of cool water and blackberry juice, along with dried apple rings and flatbread.

While the children were replenishing themselves, Efran went over to pick up a shovel. Taking this to the marked perimeter of the proposed enlargement, he jammed the blade deep into the chalk line, bringing up a whole stacked shovelful of clay and dirt. This he dumped outside the line.

Growing encouraged, the children watched as he went all down the perimeter to loosen the hard ground and make great big holes from which they could dig out dirt along the sides. Then he dropped the shovel to return to the bench, accepting the cup that Minka held out. As he drank, one new boy (about five years old and very thin) looked at him with eyes of awe. “Are you God?” he whispered.

“No!” laughed Efran. “I’m just grown up. You’ll get there.”

“That’s Efran. He always helps us,” Hassie said. She got up to run over to the newly dug area. Picking up her hand shovel, she began loading a bucket with the back dirt to take to the designated dump site. Most of the children then returned to their self-appointed task with new enthusiasm.

But the new boy stayed by the bench at Efran’s leg, still staring at him in wonder. Efran asked, “What’s your name?”

He blinked. “It’s Treece, I think.”

Alcmund wiped his mouth with his sleeve and said, “He doesn’t have any family at all. He didn’t even know his name, so Matron Dorey gave him a name.” He told Treece, “Efran is father to all of us.” Then Alcmund ran off to help with the removal of the back dirt.

In unabated awe, Treece looked back at the big man. So Efran put him on his knee. Jealous, Joshua toddled over, but accepted Mama’s lap. Still, he kept an eye on the new kid. Treece laid his head on Efran’s chest to say, “No one wants me.”

Efran closed his lips against the sudden lump in his throat, then said, “There are a lot of families on the Lands who will probably want you to live with them. But if you don’t find anyone you like, you can stay here. I will be here for you.”

Treece patted Efran's chest, then closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Efran leaned his head back to not drop tears on the boy, and whispered, "It never goes away: being the kid no one wanted." With Joshua on her lap, she cuddled his other arm, and he added, "I can't even start vaguely wanting to leave without being slapped down and shut up."

"We're planted here. We can't be uprooted without dying," she murmured.

"Thank you for sharing my bondage," he chuckled, twining his fingers in hers, though they were so much smaller.

She lifted up, thinking. "Yes, I've ridden off a few times, and came right back. My roots never stretched very far." His chest expanding, Efran looked over to the children engaged in dirt disposal.

The next day, June 14th, Efran braved the crowds to ride out just to see how Jera, Acy and Pim were doing, if he could. Estes had good people assigned to do that, and Efran didn't want to encroach on their territory, but, he had to constantly fight feelings of--ownership of their orphans, for lack of a better word.

DeWitt's plan appeared to be already working, somewhat—Chapel Road and Main were crowded but traffic was moving. So Efran rode out to the East Lands plot which number Estes had given him—102. Or was that 120? He couldn't remember. So he began looking.

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Chapter 13

Very soon Efran found that when Estes said "the East Lands," he meant the far Eastern Lands, marked by the barricade at its east boundary. As Efran was looking in the vicinity of both house numbers, he spotted a nice house with a large lot that was filled with rows of trees about six feet tall. Clusters of green and orange bulbs grew on the upper trunks. Among these trees, Efran saw children that he recognized right away. A man among the trees was filling baskets halfway with the orange bulbs. These baskets Jera and Acy were carrying to the covered patio at the back of the house. Even where Efran sat, he could see a woman happily receive them. At her feet, Pim sat eating something in satisfaction.

"They're fine," Efran sighed. "They're together, helping their new parents and getting what they need. That's where they should be, in a home, not in a fortress. We're just short-term guardians." Although it still disturbed him to let any of them go, he tried not to interfere in Estes' handling of the adoptions.

Turning Kraken back to the west, Efran looked up quickly, catching sight of the gray figure again. It was standing at the corner of the side street ahead. Deciding that it was time to check out this--this signpost, Efran prompted Kraken toward it—or him. But a passing wagon blocked Efran's view for an instant, and when he looked again, it was gone. "So it's not time yet. But the time will come," he murmured.

Turning west, he went down side streets to emerge on Main between Delano's and Lowry's. The street was busy, but not even as crowded as it had been yesterday. And the gates were open for exiting traffic only. Except--

Efran was watching when a man in a short-arm tunic and sandals came rushing through the partly open gates. He fixed directly on Efran to shout, “The form of this world is passing away! Do you hear me? *The form of this world is passing away!*”

Since Efran was the one who seemed to draw the rebuke, or warning, he dismounted to approach the new signpost. “I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Are you trying to tell me something?”

Having gotten his attention, the stranger said, “The Apocalypse is nigh. Watch the sky for the stars taking flight. The destruction of everything will come from them. I have told you.”

As the man turned away, Efran asked, “What is your name?”

Looking back, he said, “I am Messenger.” Then he walked out of the gates. Efran and the gatesmen Gaul and Stephanos watched him progress northward until he was enveloped by the traffic over the old stone bridge. Most people within earshot never saw or heard him. Those who did hear glanced at him derisively. But Marguerite, coming out of Barracks A, heard the message and the authority with which it had been delivered.

Turning to wave another cart out, Gaul grunted, “He’s mad, Captain.”

“Maybe,” Efran said. He glanced upward, then turned to remount and ride home.

Madgwick, having just stepped out of Delano’s, was also close enough to hear the Messenger. Thus she was preoccupied as she made the rounds with her marketing basket from Lowry’s to Shurtleff’s to Firmin’s and Croft’s before completing the circuit back home. After unloading her groceries in the kitchen, she quietly went back to Ruth’s room to check on her.

Ruth was asleep in her crib, so Madgwick dismissed her helper with pay, then sat quietly to open her large book of Scriptures again. “The Apocalypse,” she murmured. “But that means, ‘uncovering,’ ‘revelation.’ This man clearly meant it as utter destruction.”

She flipped through the Book, looking for what passages she could find about the end of the world. In short order, she had located:

“The Day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. . . . That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.” [2 Pet. 3:10, 12]

“Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke; the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.” [Isa. 51:6]

“See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it.” [Isa. 24:1]

There were more, but she didn’t know how relevant they were. In fact, she didn’t know that these were relevant. Had the Lands, or the Southern Continent, or the Earth really passed the point of no return? So, as she did about everything, Madgwick began to pray.

A little while later, Teschner was advancing up the chapel steps. After he had asked Madgwick about Adele, and she had implied that Lady Marguerite knew something, Teschner had to think about how to approach her. So he told the man at the door, “Lady Madgwick invited me to come talk to Lady Marguerite.”

“Here you go, then,” Mathurin said, opening the door. He left Teschner in the foyer while he trotted to the kitchen.

Momentarily, he emerged with Marguerite behind him. While Mathurin resumed his post outside the door, she looked questioningly at the soldier who was bowing to her, and she said, “Teschner. Madgwick sent you?”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite. I had asked her about something that happened when I was warding Lady Minka, and she visited Madgwick with her baby Ruth. The Lady Minka called her ‘Adele,’ so, Lady Madgwick, ah, hinted that you knew something about that,” he said, disjointed.

“Ah,” she said in illumination. “Here, let’s sit on the divan for just a moment.”

“Thank you,” he said, sitting. So she sat beside him to tell him everything that she knew.

She ended, “You must understand that I didn’t see this myself; I only had a secondhand account of what happened. And, honestly, I don’t know what to think. As I understand it, the baby does look very much like Minka’s sister. And—Adele hasn’t been found anywhere else. But it would take something far more powerful than anything I have ever seen.”

Looking off, Teschner said, “I’ve seen such a power, Lady Marguerite—both a great evil, which still could not do anything so beneficial, and a Power that was able to subdue that great evil, and save the Captain from throwing himself into the Sea.” She stared at him, and he told her about the Water Giant.

Over the next several days, life in the Lands went on as usual. A few people had heard about the prophecy of destruction, but no one believed it, so it was promptly forgotten.

In conjunction with the soldiers who most often worked the wall gates, DeWitt refined their traffic-control plan. This resulted in such an easing of congestion that widening roads became unnecessary. However, the construction and paving of new roads were still a priority. At this point, the only building under construction was Lemmerz’ Lakeside Inn in the East Central Lands, so residents and visitors were easily able to find alternate routes to their destinations.

Residents appreciated the cessation of noise and obstruction from large-scale projects. And as they were free to build as they wished on their own properties, everyone was generally happy.

Tourse’s Enforcement Unit was a major factor in maintaining the peace, in that they controlled the number of mischief-makers and vagabonds. Commander Wendt had impressed upon Tourse the necessity of courtesy in their dealings with the residents, so that the Unit became famous for their kindly attention to complaining housewives and miscreants, even as the latter were tossed out of the gates.

Begging was not allowed anywhere on the Lands. With their burgeoning population, that had become a problem. So DeWitt hired a new assistant, Farebrother, to deal with these cases according to DeWitt’s specific instructions.

First, the beggars were to work, instead. In exchange for other considerations, the Fortress made agreements with a number of producers on the Lands, including Croft, Pelagatti, The Lands Clothing Shop, The Lands’ Best Inn, Delano, Filipowicz (the flax grower), Popplewell (the potter), Eavenson (the leather worker), and others for the handicapped to do simple, repetitive tasks for fair wages. Even the blind were able to learn this kind of work,

and the vast majority were eager to earn their own way while living in Laborers' Hall.

Those who had no family on the Lands but were too sick or infirm to work were lodged in St. Benedict's Hall, built and staffed by the Fortress for the care of such. (Those sick or infirm who *did* have families on the Lands were usually unaware that Farebrother paid a visit to those families to inform them of their obligation under Roman's Law. Some of those grudgingly took their relatives in, while others preferred to pay the Fortress for their care at St. Benedict's. This was allowed.)

The homeless who preferred to beg or live off the Fortress rather than work were evicted from the Lands. Unfortunately, this included the disabled acrobat Beeby, once he was stripped of his Fortress allowance. After being a star, he refused to do menial work. So he and the other privileged beggars naturally went up the road to the northern settlements to try out their panhandling (which was tolerated even less there).

Once or twice, Efran had to be reminded of the new provisions so that he wouldn't continue to promise Fortress support to every hardship case he encountered. However, Pastor Benedetti of the East Lands Chapel continued to receive Fortress benefits because the administrators viewed his work as profitable. Further, the Widow's Fund was folded into the financing of St. Benedict's Hall.

So, under DeWitt's and Estes' able administration, and the work of their staff, life in the Lands was humming along, healthy and productive. Efran resumed riding over the Lands, especially the new areas, so that he could spot problems early on. Sometimes he took Minka or the boys with him on these rides, but with them, he tried to stay in known areas. He did not enjoy surprises as much as the boys did—even grisly ones.

Following Law class on the morning of June 21st (a week after the prophecy, which no one remembered), he and Minka were riding back west from a visit to new features of the East Lands. She was marveling, "That whole area around The Granary is becoming kind of a permanent faire! Isn't it funny that they kept the name 'The Granary' for that block of shops? I almost didn't know whether to laugh or be scared."

"Nothing scares you," he muttered, shaking his head. "Even when you should be scared, you're just—thoughtful."

"Oh, no," she argued. "Every time you ride out, I experience some awful fear. You can't imagine what I felt when DeWitt told me that a Leviathan had swallowed you."

"What about the guaranty?" he asked, smiling.

"That was given to me just a moment later. I had to face only a moment of—of terror, and blackness, and the end of the world before God gave me that—inexpressible comfort," she murmured, reliving it all. He smiled over at her and she looked up to the blue sky, piercing in its clarity.

Then she frowned quizzically. "Look at that."

"What?" he asked, glancing around.

"The star," she said. "I've never seen a star in midday before."

"A star? Where?" he asked, searching.

She pointed. "There, high in the northwest. You can barely see it."

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Chapter 14

Looking at the tiny bright dot in the ocean of blue, Efran felt his stomach drop right down to hit the saddle. What was the warning? What had he said?

“The Apocalypse is nigh. Watch the sky for the stars taking flight. The destruction of everything will come from them. I have told you .” Lowering his eyes, Efran saw the figure in gray right in front of them in the middle of the road, directly underneath the pinprick of light. Kraken suddenly snorted and the dun mare carrying Minka half-reared.

Efran shot a hand over to her as she grabbed the pommel, then the mare steadied herself to proceed. Looking ahead, Efran saw that the figure was gone. For now.

He said nothing to Minka yet of the Messenger. In fact, he didn’t really believe it. There was surely another explanation. He tended to get morbid, sometimes, when there was no reason. The Lands were thriving as never before. Besides, that pinprick of a star was by itself and stationary.

When they started forward again, she said, “It’s moving!”

“What is?” he asked, looking ahead.

“The star! Oh, maybe it’s a comet, like the one we saw Christmas before last,” she said. They both watched the pinprick cross the sky until vanishing. “Oh, well, it’s gone,” she said. He thought, *Of course it is, and I’m creating problems out of my own head.*

As they approached Main, they saw a dapper figure on the street corner ahead. With great good humor and gestures, he was talking to a couple standing with him on the corner. “That almost looks like Verlice, especially the suit,” Minka murmured.

“I thought you said he was working at The Wash House as a supervisor,” Efran noted, looking.

“He was. Yes, I think that’s Verlice,” she said.

Observing a handshake which looked rather like the confirmation of a business deal, Efran muttered, “Let’s stop and say hello.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked almost in protest.

“Nothing. Yet,” he groused.

“You’re so suspicious,” she accused him. He glanced at her sidewise, as it was a trait needing no justification. She laughed, and the three on the corner looked over.

When Efran and Minka pulled their horses to a stop on the road beside the group, Verlice said, “And here’s Captain Efran and his lovely wife Minka. Shouldn’t you be off fighting dragons, Efran?”

“Not today. Who is this?” he asked cordially.

Verlice said, “Newcomers to the Lands. May I present Lord Inkpen and Lady Tangye.” Inkpen tipped his hat to him and Tangye laughed flirtatiously over a nearly bare shoulder.

“Hello,” Efran said with more curiosity than warmth. “Where are you titled?” He had an antipathy to newcomers trying to import their titles into the Lands.

The couple looked back to Verlice in expectation and he paused before saying genially, “Oh, goodness, all over the Southern Continent. They’re building a vacation home here.” By the rush of words, Efran got the fleeting impression that *Verlice himself* had bestowed titles on them. Which was impossible. Surely.

“Really? Where are they building?” Efran asked. His surprise was genuine, for he had been at the meeting less than two months ago in which DeWitt had halted all new building construction, whether homes or commercial.

Verlice raised his hands as though holding a globe and said, “Er, here in the Lands, Efran?” The couple laughed gaily at his joke.

Consumed with curiosity, Minka said, “Don’t you look splendid, Verlice! But I thought you were working at The--”

“Just as an experiment, dear Minka, but a wonderful stepping stone. I’m the new housing representative for Ruesegger,” Verlice said.

“Where are they building? What plot number?” Efran asked.

“Two hundred, I believe. Isn’t that it?” he queried of Inkpen. “Two hundred,” Verlice said definitively before Inkpen could answer. “Now that we have satisfied the inquisitors, shall we repair to Shelmerdine’s for a light repast?”

“Excellent idea, Lord Verlice,” Inkpen said. With amused glances back at Efran and Minka, the threesome headed north. Sagging in reluctance at having to follow up, Efran jerked his head over his shoulder as he turned Kraken. Minka followed.

Arriving at the most recent area of construction, that in the Far Eastern Lands, Efran went from plot to plot, looking for numbers. All of these houses and shops were either finished or nearly so, as none should have been begun after DeWitt’s announcement of April 27th. Efran was reading off, “One hundred ten, one hundred eleven, twelve. . . . None of these could go as high as two hundred, and there’s no new development elsewhere.”

Minka barely raised her shoulders and he added, “I’ll have to check that with DeWitt.”

“After you do that, come out to the back grounds. The children may need more help with their digging,” Minka said.

He groan-laughed. “I’m glad for the exercise, but--”

“If you can dig on the new switchback when no one wanted you to, you can help the children with their pond,” she pronounced.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said submissively. Minka shook her windblown curls in victory, and he sighed at the sight.

As they rode west again at a leisurely walk, Efran looked toward the chapel, now accessible from Chapel Road, on which traffic flowed freely. “Do you want to stop and see Auntie?” he asked.

Her face went grim. “Not until Rawlins is gone,” she said through her teeth.

He looked at her in pleased surprise. Minka tried to be generous toward everyone, so this churlishness at the mention of Rawlins was refreshing. “Do you want to go make him leave?” he baited with a smile. “I bet you can.”

She glanced aside at her despoiled sanctuary. “If it comes to that,” she muttered.

Suddenly remembering, he began, “Wait! Weren’t you the one who suggested that Hartshough--”

“Shut up. I’m going up to see the children.” She prompted the dun mare to lope toward the old switchback. But as the mare saw no reason for speed, she could only trot. Laughing, Efran followed.

In the chapel, Rawlins sat at the worktable in the otherwise unoccupied kitchen. He was staring off into space, his face slack, his eyes glazed, his chin sporting random tufts of hair and his body odorous. It had been—how many months, how many years, had he been pulling maid duty in this hellish place? He did not know; Time had become an abstraction unrelated to his life or his situation. (It had been ten days, in fact.)

Looking down with vacant eyes at the array of silverware in front of him, he picked up one spoon. Holding it up to the light, he regarded the intricate pattern of the stem and the cute little knob on the end. The bowl was so perfectly formed that his face was reflected on the back with a nice, even distortion. In admiration, he licked the bowl front and back before replacing the spoon on the table in front of him. One by one, he picked up each of the remaining spoons to lick them thoroughly and set them back down.

Presently, Hartshough entered the kitchen. “Ah! How are you coming along with the silver, Rawlins?”

Casting an affectionate eye over the rows, he said, “The spoons are done.”

“Excellent,” Hartshough said. “I have a grocery order ready at Averno’s, but I cannot leave right now, and Eryk is running another errand for me. So if you will clean up and dress, I should like to send you to pick up my order.”

Rawlins raised suddenly lucid eyes. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I need the groceries more than the silver right now. Here is the money; I shall be upstairs airing out the guest bedroom.” Hartshough laid two royals beside Rawlins’ elbow while he watched like a crow seeing a helpless baby bird land before him.

After Hartshough had left the kitchen, Rawlins sat listening to his retreating footsteps. Then he lurched up to run back into his room to grab up some decent clothes and his toiletries. These he took to the upstairs washroom, where he rapidly executed his transformation into a civilized human being. Returning to his room downstairs, he stuffed his clothes and all his meager possessions into the two carpet bags—one containing royals, as well.

Bags in hand, he stopped by the kitchen table to put Hartshough’s royals in his jacket pocket. Then with a cautious glance around the empty chapel hall, he slipped out of the back door. Quietly closing it behind him, he

rapidly crossed the yard to stuff the carpet bags into his original hiding place between the hedge and the iron fence.

Emerging from the hedge, he brushed leaves and twigs from his jacket. Then he exited the back fence gate to cross the grounds between the notary's shop, Minogue's, and the community well to arrive on Main. Crossing to the west sidewalk and walking briskly north, he breathed to himself, "This is so easy. All I have to do is--"

He stopped, then, his blood running cold upon seeing a green-sashed rider pass through the wall gates. This was not simply a messenger; Rawlins recognized him at once as Undersheriff Strugnell's right-hand man Scowcroft. They were still after him, blast them.

He recognized Scowcroft because of his burly build and red beard. But there is no reason that Scowcroft should recognize him, especially as his hair had not yet lightened up from the dark brown of his Polonti transformation. So if Rawlins acquitted himself well. . . .

Affecting an indifferent air, Rawlins walked purposefully right past Scowcroft to turn into Averde's and present himself at the back counter. "I'm here to pick up the order for Hartshough," he said, laying out the two royals from his pocket.

"Very good," the girl behind the counter said, taking the royals. She reached over for a canvas bag stuffed full of greens, fruit, and vegetables to hand him. He took the bag to turn away, but she said, "Wait for your change, please." He turned back to her attentively, and she placed six silver pieces in his hand.

"Thank you," he said with a dignified bow, and she smiled at his imitation of Hartshough.

Placing the silvers in his pocket, he emerged from Averde's with the grocery bag right under Scowcroft's beard as he was scanning the seating areas all along Main. Then two other riders wearing green messenger sashes pulled up for Scowcroft to murmur instructions to them. As one of them looked down at Rawlins, he unhurriedly crossed at the nearest crosswalk, pausing to nod at a passing matron. With pounding heart, he took the shortcut back to the gate in the chapel fence.

After letting himself in, he began to hurry. He ran to the back corner to thrust himself through the hedge and retrieve his bags in one hand. With the grocery order on the other arm, he strode quickly to the back door of the kitchen and somehow got it open.

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Chapter 15

Setting the bag of groceries on the counter, Rawlins ran to throw his bags back into his room. Then he returned to the kitchen to take off his suit jacket and hang it on the back of the chair at the work table. Remembering the change, he retrieved the silvers from his pocket to place them beside the bag. Then he sat at the table, trembling, to pick up the polishing cloth and get to work on those spoons.

Hartshough entered the kitchen. Seeing the groceries, he said, "Ah. Very good. Did you have any difficulties?"

"No," Rawlins squeaked. And he polished the silver as though his life depended on it.

As Efran and Minka were ascending the switchback, he paused to glance down Main Street just to confirm that it was reasonably clear. He caught sight of the three green-sashed messengers at once, and paused. Their behavior was strange for messengers.

First, they were meandering, looking around. Wherever messengers came from, they were duty-bound to get their letters delivered immediately, and did not linger except if they were hailed to pick up letters. Failure to deliver in a timely manner carried severe penalties, even death. These three showed no urgency at all. But they were nonetheless intent on finding something . . . or someone.

That was another anomaly: messengers seldom went out in groups, only singly or in pairs, if they were delivering important messages in unfamiliar or hazardous areas. Efran squinted to see the three come together and confer. No, these weren't messengers. But appropriating the messenger's green sash for other purposes was also harshly punished, as messengers were given latitude that other travelers did not enjoy.

Efran looked back up to Minka, who was waiting for him at the top of the switchback. "Go on in; I'll be right up," he said. She nodded, turning the mare inside the gates. Efran turned Kraken to lope easily down the switchback.

Emerging through the faerie trees (which had learned to leave Kraken alone), Efran headed for the dominant messenger, a large man with a red beard. His appearance alone cast doubt on the validity of his green sash. Since messengers spent so much time in the saddle, they tended to be lean men who could ride for long hours comfortably. Fat men couldn't.

Perceiving that they had drawn his attention, the three separated. But again, none of them appeared to have any particular destination in mind. Drawing up before Red Beard, Efran said, "I am Captain Efran. Show me your letters. And you two, stop where you are," he directed the two who had begun to depart.

They both looked to Red Beard as to a superior. He told Efran, "Our letters are confidential."

"I'm not asking to see the content of the letters, just who they're addressed to," Efran said. Shifting his bulk in reluctance, Red Beard drew a letter from his jacket pocket—not a pouch. Messengers everywhere carried pouches, if not for deliveries, then for receipts.

Taking the letter he held out, Efran looked at the name. "'Commander Wendt.' I will take you to him. Is this your only letter?"

"Yes," Red Beard grunted.

"Who are you carrying letters for?" Efran asked the other two.

"We are bodyguards," one answered.

"Where are you from?" Efran asked. He should have been able to tell from their accent, but they took care to speak in truncated grunts. When none of the three "messengers" replied, Efran said, "You won't leave until you answer all of our questions."

"Crescent Hollow," said Red Beard.

Efran laughed, "City of a Thousand Surprises. Commander Wendt is in Barracks A, to the right of the gates up

ahead. Turn around and ride at a walk," he instructed. The three did.

Seeing Beardall up the street, Efran whistled lightly, beckoning. Beardall rode up with a salute, and Efran told him, "Ride ahead to see if the Commander is in his office. We have three Hollowans carrying one message for him." He held out the letter.

"Yes, Captain," Beardall said, taking it. Reining around, he surveyed the three with an ironic smile, then rode easily through traffic toward Barracks A.

At this point, Ayling rode up with a query from the gatesmen: Was there a problem? Green sashes were always allowed in anywhere without question, hence the penalties for impostors. Efran told Ayling, "We're going to find out, but the gatesmen are not at fault. They're to continue to give messengers unquestioned entry."

"Yes, Captain," Ayling said, turning his horse. His pitying glance toward the three was also unsettling--for them, anyway.

Having ushered his guests to the entrance of Barracks A, Efran instructed, "Dismount," doing so himself.

Gabriel was standing at the open door with an expression of genial interest. "The Commander is waiting in the conference room, gentlemen. Straight through that door." As the three entered heavily, Gabriel told Efran, "Commander Wendt would appreciate your attending as well, if you're free, Captain."

"I happen to be free," Efran replied with a vague smile.

As they filed into the conference room, they saw Wendt seated at the head of the table with the open letter in hand. "Have a seat, gentleman," he said, glancing up. When the Hollowans and Efran had sat, Viglian took his place at the foot of the table to prepare for taking notes.

Wendt lowered the letter to eye the three and their green sashes. "Who was carrying this letter?" he asked.

"I was," said Red Beard.

"What letters are you two carrying?" Wendt asked the other two.

"They are my bodyguards," the massive Red Beard replied.

"So they're not carrying any letters?" Wendt asked.

"Not specifically," Red Beard said.

Wendt shifted. "It's illegal under Continental Law for anyone who is not a carrier to wear the green sash." When Red Beard did not reply, Wendt asked, "What is your name?"

"I am Undersheriff Strugnell's Deputy Scowcroft," he said.

"Why did it require Captain Efran to get this letter from your hand to mine, Scowcroft?" Wendt asked.

"We were looking for the criminal Rawlins," Scowcroft admitted.

"Messengers don't look for anything but their delivery destinations," Wendt said, tossing the letter to Efran.

Reading the short missive, Efran snorted. “Grand Councilor Squitieri, who can’t read, had his butler write to tell you that they’re really mad at Rawlins and want him back right now.”

“So I see,” Wendt said gravely. “Normally, I like to cooperate with ruling bodies who want us to give them back their criminals, especially when we don’t particularly want to keep them ourselves. But this subterfuge between friends has hurt my feelings. So, I think we’ll keep him for a while, if he’s still here. I’m not even sure he is,” Wendt said plaintively, looking to Efran.

Efran was laughing. Wendt, who lived with his wife Marguerite at the chapel, would know whether Rawlins was still there or not.

“So,” Wendt said, “although Undersheriff Strugnell’s Deputy Scowcroft technically broke the Law by donning a green sash when he is not, in fact, a messenger, he did carry a message to me which was eventually delivered. Therefore, I will allow Scowcroft to return to Grand Councilor Squitieri with the verbal message that, if we can find Rawlins, we will keep him in order to punish him according to our own whims.

“But as for your companions,” Wendt continued, casting a disappointed glance at the other two, “they are neither messengers nor carriers, but busybodies misappropriating green sashes. So we’ll take them off your hands.” Glancing up to Beardall, he instructed, “See that Scowcroft’s horse is watered and send him off.”

“Yes, Commander.” Beardall saluted, then told Scowcroft, “If you’ll accompany me, sir.”

As Red Beard was rising heavily, Wendt assured him, “It’s not as bad a ride from here to Crescent Hollow as it used to be. There’s been so much traffic recently between us that some enterprisers have set up rest stops. Surely you noticed them on your way here.”

Red Beard grunted in reply, and Beardall led him out. Then Wendt folded his hands to look at the other two. “I think,” he said, “the best place for you right now is Venegas. I understand that they need field workers. Take them,” he nodded to Ayling.

“Yes, Commander. This way, gentlemen,” Ayling said. The two rose apprehensively.

When they had been taken, Efran rose as well. “Excuse me, Commander. I’ve been conscripted to dig.”

Wendt laughed, “I’m hearing about the pond, Efran. Good job.”

“Thank you, sir,” Efran said, smiling. He left to interrupt his horse’s hogging the trough with his water play.

Riding down Main toward the switchback, Efran quickly looked toward west Chapel Road, where the hydra, Jonguitud, had descended from his fishing hole in the treacherous northwestern hillside to stand beside the road. This is what he did when he wanted to talk to someone. Not only was he there, but he was exuding his three kings skin, which Efran hadn’t seen for months. Jonguitud usually didn’t have to do anything to entice company over.

Riding toward him, Efran also noticed that his winged baby, Busi, was nowhere in sight. About four months ago, his mother Gevorgyan had come for the two-headed girl, Svizzi, to take her back to the mother’s old stomping grounds. But Busi had been here then.

Pulling up before him, Efran said, “Jonguitud! Are you wanting company?”

Underneath the three kings disguise, his far-right head made the jaws clack to say, “Need talkity talk. No more Busi.”

“Busi’s gone? What happened?” Efran asked in tentative alarm. Jonguitud and his remaining offspring ate the flesh-eating snobbles in the caverns, and were they to stop eating them, the snobbles would explode out of the caverns into the fortress again.

“Gone home with Gevorgyan,” Jonguitud said, his kings costume drooping (partly because it wasn’t dry yet).

“She took him, too? Why?” Efran asked, outraged.

“Burning rocks coming,” Jonguitud said, tossing a limp king’s arm toward the sky.

Efran’s internal organs seized up, but he refused to think about a theoretical prophecy when a nearer annihilation by snobbles was at hand. “You sit there and dry, Jonguitud. I’ll get the children down here,” he promised grimly.

“Good job,” the hydra said, swinging an arm up to salute. It got stuck on a still-tacky head.

Turning Kraken, Efran saw Koschat riding up the switchback. Efran whistled shrilly, gesturing to him, and Koschat whipped his horse around to ride over. Pulling up beside him, he saluted. “Captain?”

“Koschat, Jonguitud is lonely and he needs to talk to the children. I want you to get all the men you need to bring all the children down here *right now*,” Efran said quietly.

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Chapter 16

“Yes, Captain,” Koschat said, turning his horse to lope up the switchback. The courtyard gate guards were watching in high interest.

While waiting for the ones who could most easily talk with the hydra, Efran wiped his mouth to attempt to take up the slack. “So, Jonguitud, are you finding good eating in the caverns?”

“Meh.” One king’s hand waved a “so-so.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Efran asked uneasily.

“Eels get away,” Jonguitud said.

“Get away? How?” Efran asked.

To illustrate, one of the king’s heads opened its mouth wide, under which the hydra opened the corresponding mouth. Out of it slithered a large shocking eel which fell down in the road to begin undulating away, emitting flashes. In surprise, Kraken leapt up on all fours and then came down snorting and pawing with such animosity that the eel was soon flattened across a square yard of paved road. Meanwhile, Efran just held on.

Hearing childish shrieks from above, Efran looked to the top of the switchback, where a stream of men carried laughing, waving, chortling children in their arms. Seeing that they were coming down on foot, Efran groaned at the time it would take for them to get down here, but he was wrong.

Men began hopping down over the retaining wall from the highest level of the switchback to the level below it. They then turned to receive the children handed down to them while another group of men scaled down the retaining wall to the next level. The men with children then passed them down to those men. Going directly down in this manner was labor-intensive but quick and safe.

Efran watched Joshua, Treece, Ivy, and Hassie handed down like this (along with another little one whom Efran did not know) while Toby, Donovan, Isreal, Almund, Chorro, and Elwell insisted on climbing down themselves (with assistance). When the fastest boys—Donovan and Toby—had made it clear down to the road, Efran dismounted, grinning, to watch them race toward the hydra. Chorro and Elwell were close behind, with the rest of the children coming quickly.

Jonguitud waved all three heads and most of the associated hands in welcome as the children clustered around him, all talking at once: “Why are you all dressed up, Jonguitud?” “Always dress to talk.” “No, you don’t, you liar, you just come out in your black hide!” “Today for fun.” “We’re glad to see you!”

Elwell tried to shake a flimsy, sticky hand, which stuck to his hand so that he couldn’t let go. Whobrey pulled so hard on the skin arm that it broke off from the body, which left the arm sticking to Whobrey’s hands as well as Elwell’s. So Efran sent up to the fortress kitchen for oil.

Meanwhile, the other children were talking nonstop—Efran caught snatches of talk about snobbles and eels and--“Where is Busi, Jonguitud?” Hassie cried.

“Gone home,” he drooped.

“But *this* is home, Jonguitud! Make him and Svizzi come back!” she pleaded.

“Will see,” was all he would promise.

After another few minutes, Minka came riding down on Dustbin with the oil, which freed up Whobrey and several children. By this time, the hydra’s skin had dried sufficiently for the taller boys to pet him, stroke him, and shake his hand. Seeing Donovan reach up to try to open the center king’s mouth—with rows of sharp teeth behind it--Efran said, “That’s all for now.”

Jonguitud then bent over to shake off his skin and scamper up the hill to dive back into his fishing hole. Whooping, Donovan and Chorro tried to put on the discarded skin.

Following, Minka had to use practically the whole bottle of oil to get it off again. Efran then coated his hands with what oil remained to pick up the skin, carry it up to the hole, and throw it in after the hydra. All in all, it was a highly successful visit.

The men then transferred or assisted the children the fast way up the switchback levels to return them to the back grounds. Minka and Efran followed on their horses, winded and laughing. “That’s why the Abbey needs an army,” he exhaled. “To babysit the children.”

She laughed, “You go rest up; I’ll see them back to the pond.”

“Thank you.” In leaning over to kiss her, he fell off Kraken. While Kraken stood looking down at him, he just climbed back on to follow her up.

From the hilltop courtyard, Efran went on up to the second-floor workroom. He landed in his customary chair, leaning back but not elevating his feet at this point. He waited quietly while DeWitt received a report from Farebrother about the indigent and beggar population. Again, DeWitt’s policies seemed to be effective: while the Lands took care of the truly needy, and the families were compelled to care for their own, word had gotten out that Captain Efran was hostile to able-bodied beggars.

So they spread out elsewhere: most went back to Westford, as that was the most prosperous, but many tried the villages scattered around the area close to the Lands. When they were repulsed by various means from those, a few hardy vagabonds set out for Venegas. Here, they were welcomed, fed, and put in chains to work cotton fields. Neither Wendt nor Efran did anything about it at this time, as no kidnapping was involved.

When Farebrother had finished his report and departed with further instructions from DeWitt, Efran told him, “Verlice has a new job.”

Estes glanced up from his ledger with a snort. DeWitt, hands full of papers, said, “I appreciate the information, Efran. Why do I care?”

“He’s handling new clients for Ruesegger,” Efran said. Then he explained about meeting the couple who had purportedly put down a deposit for a new home in the East Lands.

Looking to Tomer at the door, DeWitt said, “Get Ruesegger up here.”

“Yes, Administrator,” Tomer said with a salute, and disappeared.

Efran rose from his chair, explaining, “I have to go dig now.”

“Do that, Efran,” DeWitt said while Estes laughed again.

Turning out, Efran muttered, “There’s my new job, then. When I’m not being swallowed by Leviathans, I’m a ditch digger.”

When he appeared on the back grounds, he was mildly startled by the reception—the children rushed him, all talking at once, so he had to calm them to understand them, especially with Nakam barking. “Everyone, be quiet. Toby, you tell me about it.”

“Efran, Tourjee thinks the pond is ready to fill, but he wants you to look at it,” Toby said breathlessly.

“Then I’ll do that,” Efran agreed. With Toby pulling on one hand and Hassie hauling on the other, Efran was guided to the pond to look down on the extension.

He studied their work in admiration. “You’ve got it nice and deep here—that looks almost four feet. Keep the little ones away,” he added, glancing up at the bodyguards Salk and Skalbeck. They saluted. Looking down again, he asked, “How did you get it so smooth?”

Hassie said authoritatively, “Tourjee showed us how to smooth it out with mud and then let it dry overnight. That’s so it doesn’t all fall down at once when we start filling it with water.”

“I see,” Efran said, noting the narrow isthmus that separated the newly dug portion from the pond proper. Once the extension was filled, the isthmus would be dug out, if it didn’t crumble on its own.

“Can we fill it now, Efran?” Elwell asked eagerly. “We have buckets ready.”

Efran looked over at three partially filled buckets that the children stood over proudly. Knowing that it would take a hundred of those to fill the extension, he told Salk and Skalbeck, “Get you at least five men and all the buckets you can find to haul over well water.”

“Yes, sir!” They saluted and turned with a wave toward a few other men. The children sat happily to watch the soldiers begin filling the new part of the pond. Efran sat on the east-facing bench to watch. Joshua and Treece came over to sit on his legs.

With so many men hauling buckets, the pond filled quickly. The children screeched as the dam collapsed and water flowed from the old part of the pond to the new. Seeing the water level rise to splash over the edges, Efran told Skalbeck, “That’s enough for now.” The men dumped in their remaining buckets and returned the extras to storage.

Meanwhile, the children gathered at the edge to watch the infusion of life into the new part. “Here come the froglets!” Calix announced, followed by the chorus: “And the minnows!” “There’s the baby crayfish!” “Oh! They’re being eaten!” “Efran, the froglets are eating the baby crayfish!” Birds were also darting around the pond, landing right at the edge to have a look at the available fishing. Although the children shooed them away, they came right back. Even Nakam couldn’t clear them out.

“Here,” Efran laughed, lifting Joshua and Treece so that he could stand. He set them down again to roll up his sleeves, then went to the old part of the pond to pull up a handful of reeds with roots. These he stuffed into the mud at the far edge of the addition. After transferring a few more clumps, he stepped back and shook water from his arms. “That will give them someplace to hide.”

The children circled the pond in delight, pointing out this or that to each other. Tourjee even came over with a few of his helpers to look, including Cyr, who had her ten-month-old baby Isla in a sling on her back. The red-headed baby laughed, pointing to the plops in the water.

Stepping back to watch all this, smiling, Efran glanced up to the western sky. His smile faded when he saw it again—the bright pinprick in the blue. He knew it wasn’t the same object because he and Minka had seen that one sail across the sky. Eyes on this one, he saw that it was also moving, only, downward. While he watched, it appeared to plummet down to Earth somewhere.

Efran kept watching the sky until the children recalled his attention to the pond.

Bright and early the following morning, June 22nd, the architect Bozzelli accosted Lemmerz at the work site of the new inn, Lakeside Inn (which was not exactly on the lake. But it did have a nice pond close by.) The architect thrust a folder full of building plans on him. “Lemmerz, you *must use* these plans for the construction of the performance hall in this inn. I designed this especially for the diva Arbaiza, and having a suitable hall for her to perform in will draw music aficionados from across the Southern Continent. *We will be famous*, Lemmerz, if you will not be an ass and *just do what I say!*”

Lemmerz sighed, sagging. “Bozzelli, look behind me. The whole first floor is finished. I can’t alter anything

now. The most I could do is hang diffusers or reflectors--”

“Yes. Both,” Bozzelli said intently, gripping his arm.

Wincing, Lemmerz pulled his arm free. “You’ll have to pay for it.”

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Bozzelli went limp at the impossible demand. He groaned, “I can’t do that. But--” His face changed. “Will you hang diffusers around the hall if I provide the wood?”

Lemmerz thought about that, then shrugged. “Why not? Yes, we’ll hang diffusers with whatever wood you provide. Have you specifications here?” He began thumbing through the folder.

In restrained excitement, Bozzelli grabbed the folder back to riffle through the papers, then withdraw one so violently as to shed other papers around his feet. “Here. Here are the specifications for diffusers.”

Taking the paper from his trembling hand, Lemmerz looked it over. “Sure, that looks simple enough. You get the wood stacked out front here cut to length, and we’ll get it up. But you’ve got to get it to us quickly, Bozzelli.”

“Yes,” Bozzelli said, eyes narrowing intently. “Yes, I know just the wood to use.” He turned to hasten away with imperious strides, dropping papers right and left from his folder. Sighing, Lemmerz tucked the specifications for diffusers into his shirt pocket.

Bozzelli next appeared at the front desk of the Laborers’ Hall. He told the woman at the desk, “I need—four men. Four strong men to cut down a tree. You have tools to rent here, don’t you?”

“Yes. You need four saws?” she asked.

“No, a two-man felling saw. But—two more men for the—afterwork,” Bozzelli said, thinking rapidly.

“Very well. Choose the saw you need from the tool room to my left here, and I’ll send up a summons for four strong men. You’ll have to negotiate their pay with them,” she warned.

“Yes,” he said, wiping the sweat off his brow with his kerchief. “This will be perfect,” he declared. While the woman called over a passing laborer, Bozzelli went to the room indicated to peer into its recesses. After rummaging therein for a few minutes, he returned to the front desk with a large two-man saw. “This,” he said, presenting it to her.

“Place it right down there.” She indicated the floor, but he leaned it against her desk so that it lay bowed over the desktop with its handles extending over each side. Unperturbed, she continued, “It rents for fifteen [silver] pieces for the day. If you don’t get it back by the end of the workday today, it will be another fifteen pieces. Oh, your workmen are on their way down,” she added, glancing up.

“Yes.” After counting out precisely 15 pieces behind the saw, Bozzelli stood by to watch the men lumber down

the stairs into the lobby. “Oh, good. Very good. Yes, you come with me. Yes, all four of you. One, two, three, four. Good. This way. You carry this,” he told one man, gesturing to the saw. He took the handle, but a second man was needed to take up the other handle, located on the far end of six feet of toothed steel. The men looked at each other dubiously, but followed him out.

Taking short cuts down side streets, Bozzelli led them to the east end of Cavern Lake, which was not far at all. They drew up to the faerie tree at that end, whose twin was at the west end of the lake. (The singing tree which had been installed less than a year ago on the southern edge of the lake had been disassembled and removed by unknown hands at some unknown time.) Bozzelli instructed, “Cut this down and take it to the new inn there.” The men looked south to the Lakeside Inn under construction, also not far.

The man at the front of the group of four said, “That’s a big job. That’ll be two royals apiece for each of us. Up front.”

“Oh dear, oh dear,” Bozzelli fretted, pulling out his pouch. “That’s a great deal of money,” he grouched while thinking, *Oh, but worth it, to hear the divine Arbaiza sing under faerie wood!*

After the men had been paid, two of them hefted the saw and put it to the base of the tree. As they began sawing with powerful strokes, faint, buzzing shrieks could be heard. The men had to bat away what they assumed were bees around their heads, but they kept sawing, for failure to do an assigned job meant that they had to return their pay.

Quickly, for its size, the tree came crashing down upon the lake shore. The sawyers tossed the saw onto its branches and the four men each took a lower branch in hand to begin dragging it trunk first toward the new inn.

In Efran and Minka’s bedroom, he was holding her very close while she was whispering, “No, not now. We have to get to Law class, which means we have to get dressed first--”

“So we’ll be late. You’re late all the time,” he smiled, his lips ranging over her face.

A shrill, panicky voice intruded: “Minka! Oh, dear, Minka you must help us!”

Minka quickly looked to the side. “Kele?” This was the Queene of Abbey Lands faerie. “What’s wrong? Efran, wait--”

“No,” he said.

“Oh, Minka, that evil Bozzelli has cut down one of our beautiful tree homes, one of the first on the Lands that you let us plant!” Kele cried.

“Efran, wait. This is a real emergency,” Minka said, pushing him away.

“I have emergencies all the time. I’m in a constant state of emergency,” he argued.

But she was listening to Kele cry, “Dear Minka, that tree was home to hundreds of faeries! Whatever can we do?” Poor Queene Kele’s tears had soaked her summer dress of rose petals, and her fluffy white hair hung loose for sorrow.

Lifting up, Efran said, “Plant it again wherever Bozzelli puts it. And punish him for taking it.”

Kele gasped, “Oh, Lord Efran! Do we really have your permission to do that?”

“Yes, but—don’t kill him or cripple him. Just—embarrass him,” Efran hedged.

“Oh, thank you, dear Efran! You have always been friend to faerie!” She showered him and Minka with love drops, then vanished.

Sitting up to reach for his clothes, Efran grumbled, “We can go to Law class now.”

“Thank you for helping her,” Minka said, turning to kiss his cheek.

“It’s no good now,” he said sullenly.

A few minutes later, they walked into the dining hall as Soames was making introductory comments about today’s lesson. Minka said, “Excuse us. We were interrupted.” Efran stopped abruptly and the men began contorting themselves to not laugh.

Looking around in genuine puzzlement, she sat facing outward on her usual bench so that Efran could sit at her knees. “What’s so funny? Oh, good morning, dear Librarian. Why are they laughing?”

Bowing to her, he said, “I believe the culprit is a double entendre, Lady Minka.” As usual, he was correct and pleasant.

She said, “What? No, there’s nothing naughty. I only meant that Kele came at a bad time.” Which was highly evident.

Head lowered, Efran said, “Please proceed, Soames.”

“Yes, Captain,” Soames said. And a few minutes later, he remembered what he had been talking about.

Bozzelli’s workmen dragged the felled faerie tree to rest behind Lakeside Inn, close to the northern entrance. “Now,” he said, “you have to cut it into planks.”

The men laughed uproariously at this. Patting his shoulder, the leader told him, “You need a bucking saw for that, friend. And a larger pouch. But we’ll take this saw back for you.” With cordial waves, the four departed with the saw back to Laborer’s Hall.

“Oh, dear, the difficulties of working with asses. A larger pouch,” Bozzelli muttered, scratching an ear. It was itching, for some reason. “Well, I might as well go get it. I’m committed, now.” He began walking back to his house.

Alerted by his workmen, Lemmerz came out of the partially finished building to stare at the tree lying on the grounds. Looking around, he shouted, “Bozzelli!” When there was no answer, he waved in dismissal and returned to his work.

Many glitters and sparks began flickering around the felled tree as faeries were summoned from all parts of the Lands to assist in the tree’s restoration. Several groups congregated almost invisibly around the trunk and the new planting site. While one group worked in the soil, digging, loosening and enriching it, another group worked on the severed base of the tree, pulling, drawing, singing, and coaxing new roots to emerge.

Kele hovered above each group, infusing their efforts with power loaned from faerie friends near and far. Within minutes, she judged the tree to have grown sufficient roots for planting. At her summons, the broad-backed faeries came to bend under the branches and lift them upon their shoulders. Then they straightened their backs to cause the tree to rise to the vertical, at which point the blind roots cast about for the hole that was to be their home.

Finding it, they plunged deep down, enabling the broad-backed faeries to set the trunk upright and not tilt too far in any direction. As the tree settled down in its new place, worker faeries filled in the displaced soil. Then water faeries came with their flagons to drench the roots with highly enriched water from Cavern Lake. And the newly restored tree began spreading its limbs and leaves—green on top and copper on the bottom—to the sun again. This created a nice large shade over the back verandah of Lakeside Inn. Then the faeries under Queene Kele transferred their efforts to drawing new growth from the severed base of the original tree. This was an easier task.

Long before Bozzelli reached his house in the west Lands, he was exhausted and fretful. For one thing, his head seemed heavy, for another, everyone he passed stared at him. To one such rude person, he quipped, “Haven’t you ever seen a man with great ideas before?”

“Not so large, no,” the man replied, passing.

To another man, Bozzelli shouted, “Well? What do *you* think?”

“You need a very tall hat,” he offered.

“I’m surrounded by small-minded asses,” Bozzelli muttered. Shaking his head, he felt something—wave.

Coming across Windry, the highly original dressmaker, Bozzelli was stopped dead by her hand on his chest. Looking intently at his head, she said, “A bold statement. But what does it mean? And how can I translate that to my designs? No, I’m up in the clouds right now. Yours will have to wait.” She waved at him dismissively, then progressed homeward with a canvas satchel on her shoulder.

Arriving home in the East Central district, she opened her front door to call, “Flores? Come look at these and tell me what you think.”

An older woman came hurrying from a back bedroom. “Oh, Windry! Are these your new fabrics?”

“Yes, a few of them. Well?” On the large rectangular work table, she laid out six colorful designs of sky, clouds, stars, mists and heavy rain.

“Oh, they’re beautiful,” Flores whispered. “Just looking at them makes me feel as though I’m walking on air. But this one--” She pointed to the last one on the row. “This one makes me queasy.”

“I don’t know where that came from,” Windry said, spreading it out. “I just saw it in my mind and had to include it. I don’t know that I can make anything of it, but I’m going to keep it.” It depicted a fiery celestial body plunging through the sky.

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Chapter 18

Vexed and headachy, Bozzelli finally arrived home. Rubbing his neck, he went to his kitchen to pour himself a stiff drink. “When did people become so rude? The Lands has gotten so common with all the newcomers. Oh, I don’t know that even Arbaiza is worth all these headaches. Yes, she is, so I’ve just got to find a way to get that tree cut up into planks in time for Lemmerz to get them hung in the performance hall. Dash it all, he’s got men on the grounds who do that kind of thing all the time! Why can’t he have it done? Oh, the vexation of having to work around asses to promote the arts!”

He downed his drink and closed his eyes to receive its soothing ministrations. “Now. To get more money. How much more will it take to get planks hewn? I don’t know, so I’d better take at least ten or twelve.”

From the kitchen, he went to his bedroom to open the top drawer of his chest. Above this hung a very fine mirror that reflected without distortion. As he pulled out another pouch from the drawer, he glanced into the mirror and stopped dead. For several moments he just stared at himself. Then he reached up to feel a furry donkey ear that rose above his head from where his regular ear should have been. There was another just like it on the other side of his head.

After regarding them for a minute, he said, “That’s not funny. Do you hear me? It’s not nice or anything. Don’t be an ass.”

About that time, Marguerite had bypassed the line to the counter in Delano’s to knock on the back door. She heard Madgwick say, “Come in.”

Marguerite opened the door to smile down at her on the floor with baby Ruth. The child laughed and waved to her, as she did for everyone. Madgwick said, “Hello, Marguerite. Have a seat.” When Marguerite sat on the floor beside her, Madgwick said, “Oh, dear—I meant in the chair!”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather sit here,” Marguerite said.

“Wherever you like,” Madgwick said helplessly.

“Thank you. I like letting down,” Marguerite said. She paused to toy with the baby’s fingers, then broached, “Teschner did come to see me as you advised. So I told him what I knew—what Minka told me—about Adele’s rebirth. He didn’t seem all that surprised.”

Madgwick said, “I hope you don’t object that I nudged him to you. I was never told, which is understandable. They wanted the baby to have a clean start. But I had hints, and wasn’t sure of what I knew. But I knew that Minka confided in you, and that you would know something to set Teschner’s mind at ease.”

Marguerite waved. “Yes, that’s fine. I want people to know the truth, if they’re open to it. But, this . . . message about the Apocalypse. I don’t know if you heard the Messenger. . . .”

“Yes, I chanced to hear him,” Madgwick said.

“What do you think? Is it true?” Marguerite asked.

“I don’t know,” Madgwick said. “It could be. The only way to know is—if it happens.”

“Is there anything in there about it?” Marguerite asked, nodding to her book of Scriptures.

“A little, yes. But it’s impossible to know if what it refers to will happen today or a thousand years from now,” Madgwick said.

“So, there’s no way to prepare?” Marguerite asked.

“That’s the point of all uncertainty,” Madgwick said. “We have to be prepared for death at any time. Everyone will have an Apocalypse in their own life, when it comes to an end. We have no guaranty of the number of days that are assigned to us.”

“Oh, but the little ones,” Marguerite said, closing her eyes.

Madgwick said softly, “As for them, Jesus said, ‘Their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father.’ So their state should not worry us as much as our own.”

“That is good to know,” Marguerite said. “Only . . . I know that Efran’s desire has always been for the Abbey to continue past his time, to endure for the care of children. Unless this Apocalypse ends all life on earth, there will still be children who need care.”

“Now *that* is a concern,” Madgwick agreed.

The following morning—June 23rd—after Soames had dismissed Law class, Minka kissed Efran and asked, “You don’t mind if I ride up to The Lands Clothing Shop to help Rondi a little, do you?”

“Will you be back for the midday meal?” he asked.

“Yes, of course, long before then,” she insisted.

“Take two men,” he grouched, so she kissed him again before skipping out.

Efran then saw Ley standing by. He saluted and said, “Captain, Wissowa requests to talk to you and Donovan. She is waiting in the small dining room, but Donovan wished to wait for you.”

“Isn’t he in class?” Efran asked with a preliminary scowl.

“Yes, Captain,” Ley said.

“There’s no reason to take him out of class to talk to her. She can come when he’s free. But I’ll explain that to her,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir,” Ley said, standing aside.

Muttering under his breath, Efran turned into the foyer, then into the small dining room where Wissowa was seated at the table. Ale in hand, she looked at him in displeasure, asking, “Where is Donovan?”

“In class, and I’m not taking him out just to talk to you. If you want to see him, you have to come in the afternoons,” Efran said.

She rolled her eyes at him, but he was unmoved. So she said, “I want to start seeing Donovan on a regular basis.”

He shrugged. “We’ll ask him about that when he’s free.”

“I thought you were responsible for setting his schedule,” she said.

“About important things,” he said, glancing out the open door into the foyer.

“Is it not important for him to see me?” she asked tightly.

“That’s what we have to ask him. But I’m not taking him out of class to do that. You can come back this afternoon,” he said.

Standing, she said, “I’ll do that, then.” And she walked out.

Efran continued to stand there for a moment. Then, curious, he crossed the foyer and stepped out of the front doors to see if she were descending on horseback or on foot.

When he didn’t see her, he went to the gates to look down the switchback, and saw a blue carriage descending. Nodding to it, he asked the gatesman, Mohr, “Is Wissowa in that?”

“Yes, Captain. I believe it’s one of Wade’s,” he replied.

“Of course,” Efran said. Looking across the patchwork of the Lands from the east to the west, he idly raised his eyes from the western horizon, and saw it. Another one. Another object—a star? A comet?—coursing across the sky. That couldn’t be what the messenger was referring to, could it? Before a deluge of unanswerable questions overwhelmed him, Efran shut down that line of thinking and turned back inside.

As he was walking down the lower corridor toward the back door, he saw the gray figure again, this time in the middle of the corridor. After hesitating, Efran took two steps toward it, and it did not disappear. So he said, “I get the message. I’m going to die.”

Then he resumed his stride to the back door, and the figure vanished. He did not see it again after that. But Efran paused, thinking, *Why did it appear here? Because I’m not going to be the only one dying?*

Shucking off the questions again, he walked the back grounds, which seemed nearly lifeless without the children. He looked down in the pond, teeming with life that ate each other, then he turned to look over the east Lands—anywhere but the west. He tried not to think of all the times that God had delivered them from certain death. This seemed different, somehow, as if it were Death sent from heaven.

He was still reading *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*. Having started it almost three weeks ago, he found that he had to take it in a little at a time in order to absorb it all. But now there was an almost unbearable irony in it—how could anyone be happy facing what appeared to be a judgmental death?—not just of himself, but of everyone he loved and everything he had tried to build.

“Stop,” he told himself. “This is pointless torture; you don’t know anything. So just stop.”

Shortly, the children came rushing out. Before heading to their obvious destination—the pond—they paused to

greet him, and he greeted them all in return. Then he told Donovan, “Your mother should be up here shortly. She wants to talk to you about spending regular time with her.”

Exasperated, Donovan started throwing himself around. “Do I have any choice in it?”

“Just talk to her. Be grown-up about it, or she’ll think I turned you against her, and there’ll be no end to it,” Efran told him. Donovan looked sick at the thought, but understood.

They went in to the small dining room to wait, and Efran let him have a snack of flatbread and hickory nuts (with water, no ale). A few minutes later, Wissowa was escorted in. She looked surprised to see them already there. Efran stood, lightly kicking the leg of Donovan’s chair until he stood. “Have a seat, Wissowa. Or, there are nuts and bread on the sideboard, if you want any,” Efran said.

She looked mildly contemptuous, only sitting beside Donovan, who plopped back down to his seat. Efran sat across the table from them. There was a moment of silence, in which this meeting began to make Efran think of Windry’s efforts to get Calix to come back home.

Wissowa asked, “Are you happy here, Donovan?”

He looked surprised, but said, “Yes.”

“I thought you would miss your friends from Westford,” Wissowa said.

Donovan looked momentarily confused until he realized that she must be talking about the gang, which had mostly comprised her housekeeper’s sons. “Potton is here,” Donovan said, as though it would be meaningful when he was sure she knew neither “Potton” nor “Hare.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she bluffed, and he waited. Then she told Efran, “I want to speak to him privately.”

Efran was hesitating when Donovan said, “It’s all right, Papa. I’ll talk to her.” Accepting that, Efran got up to walk out. Wissowa quickly closed the door after him.

Then she sat and exhaled, “Donovan, I realized how much I’ve neglected you, and I’m very sorry for that. I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to give you the attention you deserve. What can I do to make it up to you?”

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Chapter 19

Donovan thought about that for a minute, then said, “Nothing.”

Wissowa looked momentarily stricken, asking, “What has Efran told you about me?”

He thought about *that*, then said, “Nothing.”

Growing flustered, she said, “Well, will you give me a chance? What would you like from me?”

He looked as though he were thinking very hard, then shrugged helplessly. “Nothing.”

“That’s not fair!” she blurted softly. “Why can’t you give me a chance?”

His face screwing up, he said, “I thought this was about what you could do for me, and not what I had to do for you.”

She looked taken aback, then asked, “Do you really not care for your own mother?”

He winced a little with the effort of thought, then said, “No, I don’t care.”

“How can you say that?” she cried softly.

“Am I supposed to lie about it?” he asked. “I guess I’ve outgrown you. I probably needed you when I was a baby, or a little kid, but I don’t remember you from then. Now, Granny Moule was something. She was sharp, and funny, and I think she cared about me. I cried when she died,” he recalled. “Oh, well,” he shrugged.

She stared at him, and he asked, “Are we done here?”--sounding very much like Efran.

Choking on a cry, she got up to throw open the door and run out of the foyer to the courtyard. Donovan watched blankly until Efran came back in to sit beside him. It seemed unnecessary for Efran to tell him that he had heard every word.

Donovan studied him for a minute before asking, “Did I do wrong?”

“Telling the truth is never wrong,” Efran said.

“It upset her pretty bad,” Donovan said.

“She’ll have to figure out what to do about that on her own,” Efran said.

Donovan broke into a grin. “Can we go out riding somewhere? You, me, Isreal, Potton and some soldiers? Maybe to Nicarber?”

“We’ll go somewhere, but I think we’ll skip Nicarber today. Let me go check in with my administrators, then I’ll come out to the back grounds for you,” Efran said.

“That’s good,” Donovan said, getting up to head down the corridor.

Efran got up to watch him go, then went on down to the stairwell. Turning off on the second floor, he suddenly paused. Raising his eyes, he wondered, *How long has it been since I was up to the rooftop?* Why this should be important, he didn’t know. But instead of going to the workroom, he turned to the long set of stairs which led up to the crenelation encircling the fortress.

Emerging onto the crenelation walkway, he went down this a little ways, looking out over the breathtaking panorama of land, sea, and sky. Then he looked at the narrow door to his right, which led up only. Trotting up these musty stairs, he came to the door which opened to the bell tower, centered in a circular space about forty feet in diameter.

He exited the stairs into this space to look at the mighty tree whose crown shielded the whole fortress. Because the space was relatively small, the sinewy trunk kept itself to a narrow diameter of probably no more than twenty inches.

So much had happened under this tree—Efran remembered finally finding Minka here, after he had humiliated her in front of the men. He remembered the raw fear of checking to see whether it was really she, when Alberon had tried to trick him with her image in the bell tower.

The bell tower. Stepping over roots that extended from the tree to drape themselves over the walls, Efran came to the bell tower right behind it. Down in the fortress and even across the Lands, they heard the bells rung by faeries now and then. But here. . . .

Efran opened the door to step into the slate tower, which was small, only ten feet across. He glanced at the steps leading up to the wooden platforms, bells and apparatus. He looked at the walls, remembering vividly how Alberon had put Adele here as his Standing Goddess. Then, after he had lost his memory, he found here the stairs that led down for him to talk to des Collines--Nonesuch and Asmuch.

Stepping out again, he looked to the top of the 20-foot tower, remembering the Graetrix that had landed there, and the Croly, who had tried to be human. Efran remembered his own anguish shooting down one after another of the flesh-eating birds while not knowing where the Croly had taken Minka. It was Weber's son Tarrant who had finally found her in Awfyn's hut, which became the children's play hut, which became the trolls' home, which now stood vacant among other vacant huts across the Passage.

Walking back to the door that led down to the crenelation, Efran paused to lay a hand on the grilled openings which filled the cisterns below with rainwater for the waterfalls in the third-floor rooms. The third-floor rooms. . . .

Deeply thoughtful, Efran entered the narrow stairway leading down to the crenelation, and then took the stairs down to the third floor. Here, he walked the corridor leading to the anteroom of the identical pair of suites with the waterfalls. Lieutenant Wyeth and his wife Cyr, with their baby, now occupied one suite; the other was reserved for Efran and Minka's use. But they were not originally so. That door to the anteroom had once been the first door leading to the Destroyer. And he clearly remembered unlocking the doors. . . .

Before him lay another short stretch of corridor, and a third door. These he saw in the same white light, though this door was even farther from the third-floor windows. But as he advanced, he saw his feet as dark shadows against the floor.

When he looked up at the door, he stopped in midstride. It was a huge, ancient door, with carved panels and traces of paint. At first he could see no way to unlock it, until he spotted the lock just below a rusty iron ring on the left.

Now his heart began thumping, knowing that there was something awful, in the old sense, behind that door. With a shaking hand, Efran brought up the third key and fit it to the lock. This time when he turned it, there was no need to pull on anything. A waft of cold air blew the door fully open, and Efran stood back out of the way--

He shook himself out of the grip of that remembrance, so powerful that he was reliving it in the present moment. So he retreated to the stairs to descend to the first floor. He started up the corridor toward the foyer, then abruptly stopped at the door of the cold storage room on his left.

Opening this door, he glanced around at the filled shelves, then went to open the closet with the trap door. There

was only the small chest blocking the door in the floor. He lifted the chest out, then knelt to discover a gouge in the slate surrounding the trap door. This enabled him to lift it with only a finger to look down through the screen at the bright water below.

He remembered, before Leviathan came to reclaim her nursery, how Minka had found the ladder leading down to the ledge below, where he had talked to the great fish Swimmer and the octopus Heye. She had taken him off the ledge for a short tour of the bioluminescent lights in the caverns and below the water. His heart drummed at the remembrance.

Then Showalter had planted the snobbles here, which continued to be a potential threat. So Efran let the trap door down again, replaced the small chest, closed the closet door, and left the cold storage room to walk back up the corridor. “Why am I wallowing in memories all the sudden, as though I’m leaving?” he breathed, wiping sweat from his upper lip. “This is--”

He found himself turning into the library, then. He looked over the shelves of rare and precious volumes, Nibor at work in her corner, and the sword of Ares on its stand. Then he saw the Librarian bowing at the open door to the hidden library. Efran walked in. He looked up at the underside of the draw down--the circular shelves of extremely rare books hidden in the attic. It had given them the means to free the Librarian after De’Ath had imprisoned him in a book.

Lowering his eyes, Efran looked to the rotating bookshelf which opened to the winding stairs leading to the Treasury. But he did not go in that door, for Sir Nomus was standing beside the open door to the Firmament. Efran stepped into a night pavilion filled with brightly lit spaces. Walking on nothing, he looked down at stars filling the blackness of space for millions of miles beneath him and around him in all directions. To his left and right were portals which opened onto moving pictures. This was the Hall of Memories.

He paused before a portal on his left that caused his heart to thump: ever since the bloody battle against the trolls at Wirrin Valley in which the Red Regiment had lost half of their number as well as their leader, Captain Gores, the survivors had burned to meet them again. These trolls were the Villalobos—a particularly brutal breed of maneaters who killed for lust. In rescuing Escarra, the unwilling Surchatain of Eurus, Efran and the other survivors had the opportunity to draw the Villalobos into a trap south of Eurus.

Efran’s men dispatched four of the trolls easily enough, but their leader Wikt had come prepared with his own trap: a ring of fire enclosing Efran with Wikt. In this portal, Efran watched it play out all over again. He saw his men gathered around the ring, shouting. By design, they could see and hear over the fire as the great troll spread his black lips in a grin. “*And this is Efran, from Wirrin Valley. These hands are your Captain’s.*” He fondled the second pair of shriveled hands fastened in a chain of gold draped across his broad chest.

The men cried out in anger beyond the flames. Efran did not look at the ghastly tokens; he would not allow himself to be provoked. This battle was ordained. *Lord God, you brought me here for this. Show me what to do; show me how.* In the portal, Efran saw his prayer spread around him as an invisible shield.

The troll said, “*So your men will know, I am Wikt, who killed your captain. And I will kill you.*” Efran saw himself thinking that all Wikt had to do was push him into the flames. Not only would Efran turn to stone because of the troll’s touch, but he would be baked alive in his shell.

So Efran watched himself evade Wikt’s swipes, sometimes by a hair, as sweat dripped down his head. The fire was hot, and getting hotter. But Efran still didn’t know how to defeat him. Time and again, all he could do was dodge Wikt’s hands as the ring closed in tighter on them both. Watching himself now, Efran remembered his growing desperation. *What do I do? How can I defeat him when I can barely save my own skin?*

At precisely the right moment, when Wikt was at height of his careless gloating, Nakham stood beside Efran in the ring to show him what he was to do. Watching in the Firmament, Efran recognized that moment for the enlightenment that crossed his face in the fire.

In the ring, Efran wrapped his arms around himself and plowed into Wikt's chest straight on as hard as he could. The impact sent them both into the ring of fire. While Efran turned to stone as he fell, Wikt landed under him, trapped. There he was ignited. Since part of Efran's stone head and shoulder had landed outside the ring, his men were able to pull him completely free of it and break him out of his shell. But Wikt--his wiry head, his tunic, his battle tokens—was all aflame.

There he died, and the ring of fire died out.

Momentarily overwhelmed by the remembrance, Efran looked down at his feet again to see the Sun at one edge of the stars and the Moon on the other, awaiting their entrances like actors in the stage wings. He took another step on the Firmament, then looked to his right.

He saw himself helpless, being manipulated in Leviathan's mouth, struggling to keep conscious and his face above the saliva. Beyond that, however, was a small yellow flower in the meadowgrass that had been imbued with mighty streams of power. That power encompassed not only Minka and the Landers keeping anxious watch with her, but the great beast that was in the process of swallowing Efran. The result, of course, was Efran's pulling the bone out of his throat and being vomited out of his mouth with it.

In the here and now, he walked a few steps farther on the Firmament, looking up at the waters streaming over his head from one curved edge of the domed universe to the other. Following the curve of the dome downward, he saw great flaming balls streak through the black space between the stars below his feet, and far beneath, he saw a tiny blue sphere dotted with spots of white cotton. It and the other planets were orbiting the sun in elegant ellipses. Among them he saw a meteor stream orbiting as well.

Only half aware, Efran left the Firmament to stand before the door of the keep off the foyer. Entering, he turned to place a hand on the engraved Psalm: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. . . ." How many times had those words lifted him from the pit of self-destruction?--too many to count or even fully recognize.

Turning, he looked to the ten-foot-tall crucifix depicting the Sufferer. This event, the climax of history, filled every realm with unimaginable, inexpressible consequences that could only have been conceived by a limitless Mind and all-pervasive Love. Efran fell to his knees before the Reality behind the depiction. Hardly able to breathe, he raised up—and saw a door behind the crucifix.

This brought him fully alert. "A door?" he muttered. "Why have I never seen a door there? How many doors are there in this place?" So he got right up to go behind the sculpture and look at the door.

It was just a plain wooden door, matching the wood of the back wall of the keep. There was nothing remarkable about it at all. "It's a storage closet," he deduced. Nonetheless, he reached out to pull the door open.

He did not know what he was looking at. First, it was vast. It was neither empty nor dark, but there was nothing recognizable to him. It was alive. It was intelligent. It was aware of him and his confused scrutiny, and, mildly entertained. Perceiving that he had stumbled upon something far greater than himself, he gently closed the door again.

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Chapter 20

Turning delicately away as though trespassing, Efran then realized: the door was unlocked. Resisting the temptation to go back and look through it again, he exited the keep into the foyer. He stood there for a minute to try to understand what he might have learned from this involuntary tour. But he only remembered that he had promised the boys an outing. So he went out to the courtyard to ask for Kraken and another horse, and bodyguards. Then he sent Henris to ask the children, Who wanted to go riding around with the Captain? Finally, he sent Lund for Potton.

Shortly, Lund returned to inform him that Potton was on duty, and was this urgent? Smiling, Efran said, "That's Captain Chee asking, and he thinks that Potton is getting too many special favors for a recruit." Lund declined to speculate, so Efran said, "No, we won't interfere with his duty." Saluting, Lund departed.

Henris then exited the fortress with Donovan, Isreal and a small figure. Efran glanced over, then looked again as Donovan brought Treece to him. "He says he wants to go," Donovan said, not remembering his name.

Efran looked down on him in surprise. Kneeling, he asked, "Treece? Do you want to ride on one of these big horses?"

Treece pointed to Efran's chest, and Donovan unnecessarily translated, "He wants to go with you."

Efran smiled. "We'll do that, then." Standing, he looked at the horses and men that had appeared at his summons. "All right, we have Pleyel and Heus here, so Isreal, let's get you up on Trud here with Donovan."

"Yes, Papa," Isreal said, coming over. Efran boosted him to the saddle, then lifted Donovan behind him. Mounting Kraken himself, he waited for Pleyel to lift Treece to him.

Efran sat the boy in front of himself on the saddle, then looked around at his party. "We're set, then. Let's go." The gate guards saluted as the party exited the gates to the switchback. They were ambling down it when they heard a screeching at the gates, and they all looked back.

There was Joshua, hanging on the gates and crying. Donovan protested, "I didn't know he wanted to go! I didn't see him." Efran thought it likely that Joshua decided he wanted to go when he saw Treece leaving with Donovan. Joshua was 2 1/2.

"Back up," Efran said, jerking his head as he turned Kraken around. They walked the horses back up the switchback to reenter the gates. Joshua stopped crying. "Here, help Treece down," Efran told Nee, who reached up to bring him off the saddle and set him on the ground. Treece started crying.

"Hush, now," Efran said, dismounting. He knelt before both little boys to say, "Joshua, I'm glad to take you along. But you can't ride with me; Treece was out here first, and I already gave him a seat with me. So--" Standing, he picked Joshua up to walk over to the mounted bodyguards. "You can ride with Pleyel here, or Heus here. Which do you want to ride with?"

Joshua looked at them both. While Pleyel had the presence of mind to smile at him, Heus did not know of any

circumstance in which smiling was advantageous. (Both were Polonti, but Pleyel had much longer experience in the Lands.) Joshua pointed to Pleyel. Efran handed him up to him, and Pleyel set him on his leg. Efran then remounted for Treece to be brought up as before, only with Kraken attempting to snuffle his hair. Once everyone was settled, they set off down the switchback again.

Main Street was crowded, but not unreasonably so. As Efran began to lead down Chapel Road, he heard a whistle, then the call, "Captain!" He and the rest of his party looked up Main, where Elowen, one of the gatesmen, was running straight down Main toward him. With Treece on his leg, Efran turned Kraken to meet him.

"Captain," Elowen panted, saluting. "A large group from the settlements north are at the gates, wanting in. According to Administrator DeWitt's instructions, we told them to go around to the northeastern gates, but they say it's too far when they live right up the main road here. The Commander's in the East Lands at the moment."

Efran looked down Main at the gates, where the angry, impatient settlers were waiting. "I'll come talk to them," Efran said.

"Yes sir." Elowen turned to run back to the gates while Efran and his crew followed at a walk. Here, he was glad to have the children with him so that he would not be reacting rashly to angry demands. The settlers could settle down and wait as well. On the way, he noted ironically that the faerie trees at the gates had had enough of getting their branches hacked; upon any confrontation, they drew their limbs up out of danger.

Drawing up to the gates, Efran glimpsed bare feet among the horses' hooves of those waiting. He opened his mouth only to be forestalled by a red-faced man on horseback directly across from him. The man was shouting about what an outrage it was when Efran said, "Shut up." The man continued to bellow, and Treece turned to press his face into Efran's chest. So Efran said, "If you make Treece cry, I'll send you off and listen to someone else."

The man paused mid-bellow. Given the silence, Efran continued, "I am Captain Efran. Anyone on foot may enter. Anyone on horseback or driving a vehicle has to go around to the northeastern gates. It's not that far; you'll get there. And anyone who breaks through against orders is banned from the Lands." Nodding to the gatesmen, he instructed, "Open the gates narrowly."

They did. A few pedestrians pushed their way past horses to get through, but Efran saw more stuck behind riders who were stubbornly blocking the road. So he ordered, "You turn these horses around and get out of the way for those on foot." Reluctantly, they conceded to draw back.

Lowry, in his cart behind them, waved a hand. "May I enter, Captain?"

"Of course, Lowry; let him through," he instructed Elowen and Eustace. "Any other Lands residents back there? You come in," Efran said.

"Thankee, Cap'n." Firmin's driver Stukeley drove his cart in behind Lowry. Efran nodded to them, then watched the settlement children enter shyly with their baskets. Seeing their ill-fitting clothes and dirty faces, he felt like grabbing them all up and taking them hilltop. But he thought he might better check with Estes before doing that.

However, he told the gatesmen, "Separate out those on foot when they approach the gates; tell Gabriel I want riders standing by to enforce our rules of entry."

"Yes, Captain." They saluted, and most of the remaining riders and cart drivers turned east onto the dirt path just

outside the wall and south of the old stone bridge. A few, however, went over the bridge to gain the paved coastal highway to lope to the northeastern gate, beating the crowd.

Efran turned Kraken back to his group. Glancing at the western sky, he relaxed, seeing nothing unusual. So he began, “Let’s go--” Then he saw *another one* to the northwest. Neither a pinprick, nor a small dot, it was a large glowing dot in the sky, coming this way. “Let’s go east,” Efran said. The dot sailed by them and disappeared.

To Efran’s relief (and the boys’ disappointment), nothing unusual happened on this outing, except—when they were riding around Cavern Lake looking at all the new construction, Efran paused Kraken beside the faerie tree on the eastern shore. It was smaller, all of a sudden, barely a quarter of the height of the companion tree on the western shore. And, it looked as though it were growing from a stump.

Mulling that over, he turned to see the fully grown faerie tree right behind Lemmerz’ new inn. There seemed to be a great deal of faerie activity around both trees. Able to make no sense of all that, Efran put it aside. He completely forgot about Kele’s inopportune visit, being distracted at the time.

At the bakery near The Granary, they all dismounted. While most of their party sat at a large table under latticed arbors, Efran and Treece bought pastries and cold milk for all the boys (including the bodyguards). These they ate and drank under the arbors, already covered with vines. Looking up at the light filtered through the leaves, Efran thought, *Minka would so enjoy this. Why isn’t she here with us?* When he remembered why, he told the boys, “Finish up. We have to kidnap someone.”

They were all for the idea even without knowing whom they were to kidnap. When one of them inevitably asked, Efran said, “You’ll see. Donovan, you and Isreal take all the dishes back to the bakery and we’ll go get her. It’s not far.”

“You’re after Mama,” Donovan observed, sweeping up dishes almost before the people using them were done.

“Aren’t I always?” Efran posed.

They mounted up as before, Treece clapping in satisfaction. Efran looked over to Joshua. He was babbling authoritatively to Pleyel, who was trying hard to understand him.

They rode at an easy walk back through the gate of the inner wall toward the East Central Lands, that between this wall and New North Road. It was staggering to remember that this wall had originally been the outermost eastern wall that he and Barr had helped build. And Cavern Lake had grown from a hole Efran made in the roof of the cavern in which he was trapped, in which he thought he was going to die.

We always think we’re going to die but we never do, he thought. But that must change sometime. All stories had to end.

When the group pulled up to The Lands Clothing Shop, Efran noted Dustbin tethered to the water trough, and he had to laugh. It was good that they were forced to keep to a walk with Treece and Joshua, because Dustbin could hardly go faster than a trot. Glancing over his group, Efran said, “Heus, help Donovan and Isreal down. Boys, you go in and get the Lady Minka. Help her up on Dustbin here.”

“Yes! We’re kidnapers!” Donovan said, falling off the horse before Heus could get there. Isreal was almost dragged down as well, but held on to the pommel in order to land upright.

Once both boys got their feet under them, they ran into the shop like the Polonti savages they were (or wanted to

be). Joshua screeched, pointing in his desire to go with them. Efran bent to see Treece's face, which wore a hazy smile. Almost immediately, Isreal and Donovan reappeared with Minka between them, protesting with laughter, "Wait! I have to get the dress Windry made for me."

The boys paused, looking reluctantly to their father. Efran heartlessly shook his head. "We don't have time."

Whooping, the boys half-carried her over to Dustbin, and so effectively boosted her to the saddle that she almost went over the other side. Efran winced, but she righted herself, demanding, "Why don't we have time? Thank you, Isreal, Donovan." They patted her leg in accomplishment and ran back to their own horse, where Heus was waiting to help them up.

"We have to walk all the way back to the fortress for the midday meal, and by the time we get there, everything will be cold," Efran said.

"The midday meal is usually cold leftovers," she observed, searching for the stirrups, which were a little long.

"Don't argue with your kidnappers," he said, turning Kraken.

On the walk back, she chatted to all her kidnappers, especially Joshua and Treece, who were riding on either side of her. Joshua babbled back to her a little condescendingly, as all men talk to women, but Treece just laid his head on Efran's arm to watch her. Then the boy's chest expanded in a happy sigh, and he closed his eyes.

A javelin thrust pierced Efran's heart. *God of heaven, I beg You, don't let the children die!* Then his brain shut down so that he rode the rest of the way back seeing nothing, hearing nothing beyond Minka and the boys.

Sitting at the back table of the dining hall with her and all the children revived him, as did the cold ham and peaches. (So she was right occasionally. What of it?) Toby, Almund, Elwell and Calix crowded around him to tell him all the latest about the pond, all talking at once. One or more of them said, "Efran! A huge bird landed at the pond that Tourjee said was a heron! And it ate some fish and froglets and little crayfish and then flew off, and came back with a *baby* heron, and the mama showed the baby how to fish in the pond with their long beaks, and we don't know how many of everything they ate!"

Minka tried to look sympathetic, but Efran was laughing outright. "A heron is a very valuable bird. Not only is it beautiful, but they eat snakes and toe-biters and fish that eat other fish. Besides, if they didn't eat some of the crayfish and froglets, they'd die of starvation, so you'd lose them anyway. Isn't it worth keeping the herons and *some* of the frogs and crayfish alive?" After some grumbling, the children had to admit that it was worth it. Also, they were very proud that their pond had drawn something so magnificent as a heron AND her baby.

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Chapter 21

Following the meal, Efran went up to the second-floor workroom to tell DeWitt and Estes about the minor hubbub at the front gates this morning. DeWitt said dryly, "Yes, that's part of our ongoing educational program as to how outsiders relate to us."

"Outsiders," Efran mulled over the word. "That seems a little—harsh, doesn't it? Exclusionary." Of course, he was thinking about the children in this regard.

Estes was shaking his head over his ledger as DeWitt said, “They all got in, didn’t they? I assume they all conducted the business—the *legitimate* business—that they wanted to do here. The question is, do they do it on their terms, or on ours?”

“You’re right,” Efran admitted. “But I saw—Estes, some of the children that came in from those settlements didn’t look very well cared for.”

Estes glanced up. “I’m sure they’re not, not by Abbey standards, at any rate. Very few of the children outside the Lands receive the kind of attention that ours do. Much as we’d like, however, we can’t go kidnap them. Even taking them out of abusive situations—what *we* consider abusive—is questionable, if they don’t live on the Lands.”

Efran grunted in reluctant agreement, then said, “Oh! Did you get Ruesegger straightened out, DeWitt?” He looked up, questioning, and Efran added, “About Verlice taking deposits on new houses?”

“Oh, yes,” DeWitt said, leaning back. “I asked him about that, and he claimed to know nothing about it. So either he or Verlice is lying.”

“Either way, that couple is going to be disappointed,” Efran said. “And Verlice appears to be titling everyone who visits, including himself.” His hearers snorted, and Efran picked up the little book on *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life When Facing Total Annihilation*—written by a woman, of course.

He had just settled down to make himself read when Hollis came to the door, saluting. “Captain, Lord Ryal requests that you step down to his shop when you have a moment.”

Tossing the book down in relief, Efran stood. “Tell him I’m on my way.”

“Yes, Captain.” Hollis had disappeared off the stairway by the time Efran got to it.

In the courtyard, he whistled for Kraken, then watched as he trotted up without his saddle. Before jumping up on his back, Efran paused to stroke the black neck. “I’ll miss you,” he whispered.

Kraken contradicted him. *You are my human. I will go with you.* Closing his eyes, Efran nodded. He was calm because he didn’t really believe anything was going to happen. Stars crossing the sky during daylight, so what? He swung up on Kraken’s back to ride down to Ryal’s shop.

Entering, Efran paused at the comfort of the little bell, feeling that he would cling to that sound as the assurance of Ryal’s presence when the Other Thing was bearing down on them all. As Giardi and Ryal were both helping customers, he nodded toward the back room. “Have a seat, Efran; I’ll be there directly.”

“Yes, Ryal,” he murmured. He went over to sit at the table, fingering the ink stains that had marked the turning points in his life, and that of the Abbey. Gazing out the back window, he blocked out any thoughts of next week, or even tomorrow. Nothing existed but this present moment.

Presently, Ryal came to sit at the table with him. “Efran,” he began, troubled, “we’re hearing a lot of rumors about the stars, apparently, that are visible in the daylight. I’m having trouble seeing any myself. Someone said that a prophet came to the gates with a warning about it. Do you know anything of this?”

“A little. I heard him ranting, so I told him who I was. And he said, ah, ‘The Apocalypse is nigh. Watch the sky

for the stars taking flight. The destruction of everything will come from them.’ And he said his name was Messenger. That’s all I know,” Efran replied.

“Well, I . . .” Ryal left off, looking highly conflicted. He kept glancing out to the front counter where Giardi was attending a customer.

Efran looked back over his shoulder to see the customer leave. Ryal said, “Giardi, will you step back here a moment?”

She came to the door silently, and Efran’s brows drew down at her manner. Something was wrong. Perturbed, Ryal said, “Sit, please, Giardi.” She did, then watched him, waiting. Efran looked between them in growing confusion. Those two may have had private disagreements, but Efran never saw any apparent discord like this.

So he blurted, “If Ryal’s being an ass, tell me, Giardini.” That made her laugh.

A little peevisly, Ryal said, “I’ve been wrong before. But—tell her what you told me, Efran.”

He glanced off. “What? About the messenger?”

“Yes,” Ryal said.

So Efran repeated for Giardi’s benefit the message they had heard. She listened impassively. Efran looked between them, and Ryal exhaled, “Now please tell him what you told me, Giardi.”

She looked at Efran and said, “It will not happen.”

Efran looked blank, then said, “You mean—we won’t be destroyed?”

“No, we won’t. The star will just disappear,” she said.

“Like they’ve all done so far?” Efran asked. “I’ve seen about three that crossed the sky; none that was coming straight at us. Is there another that *will* come at us?”

“That seems to be what the prophecy indicates,” Ryal said.

“I don’t know how it will *not* happen. But I am certain that we will not be destroyed,” she said.

Efran looked at Ryal. “She’s not usually wrong about things. In fact, I can’t remember a time she’s ever been wrong.”

“I know,” Ryal exhaled. “I want to believe her with all my heart. But the stars keep coming. And we have the Messenger’s word.”

She said, “We don’t know him; we don’t know his record of prophecies, and he has no more proof than I have.”

“There are the shooting stars,” he pointed out.

“They are not proof of anything. They are whatever we make them out to be,” she said stubbornly.

“I hope and pray that you are right,” Ryal said. “But I fear raising false hopes.”

“Then you don’t believe me,” she said.

“Not as much as I want to, no,” he said miserably.

A minute passed silently, then Efran stood. “All right.” Patting Ryal’s shoulder, he said, “I choose to believe Giardini.” She flashed her old smile at him, and he walked out.

Leaping up on Kraken again, he turned him toward the switchback and thought, *Do I really believe her? Of course I want to. But don’t I always believe the worst?*

He struggled with that clear up to the courtyard, where he slipped off Kraken and slapped his haunches to send him around back. Then he ran up the steps into the fortress, and from there, up to the workroom. Entering, he stopped by the table and picked up the little book again. What was the Christian’s secret of a happy life? He probably had to read the whole short book to find out, but, was it believing the best? Or believing the best of God when the worst happened?

Glancing up to see his administrators watching him, Efran said, “Did I tell you the prophecy about the shooting stars?”

“We heard it from the gate guards,” DeWitt said.

“Giardini says it won’t happen,” Efran said.

Estes clarified, “That we won’t all be burned alive?”

“Yes. She says nothing will happen, that it will just disappear,” Efran said. Hearing that, the other two went back to work. Efran said, “You don’t believe her.”

“I do,” Estes said.

But DeWitt winced. “When was the last time any major threat just disappeared?”

“She seemed really, really sure,” Efran murmured.

Estes said, “I don’t see any threat yet. And when one shows up, if it disappears, we’ll know she was right.” He turned a page in his ledger, dipping his quill.

Highly conflicted, Efran went downstairs and out to the back grounds. There, he saw Minka on the east-facing bench with Treece beside her and most of the other children around the pond. She was pointing out to Treece something about it. Walking out to her, Efran slipped onto the bench beside Treece. “Hello. Can I join you?” Efran asked them both.

Treece looked up hazily. He was seeing Efran’s head haloed by the bright light behind him. Although his features were in darkness, Treece felt his smile.

Minka said, “The pond is so sweet! The herons came and went—I guess it’s not big enough for them to stick around—but now other, smaller birds are poking around the water to see what they find. Tourjee sent down to Dix’s Plant Shop to ask for a few water plants. The children are talking about enlarging the pond *again*, it’s just so much fun to see what comes to the water.”

Efran listened to her with a pounding heart. Now he understood Ryal's point of view—Efran couldn't say a word to her about the star, what it might do or might not do. He couldn't bear to disturb that happy tranquility in the moment. If she got really scared, then yes, he'd say anything to calm her, whether it was something he believed or not. But, who was he to do that, when God sent her a rock-solid guaranty in a yellow flower? *Can any of you add a single hour to your life by worrying?* “No. Where did that come from?” Efran murmured. [Matt. 6:27]

“Dix's,” Minka clarified. “Or they will, when they get here. Calix, don't push anyone in,” she admonished sweetly, and Efran quickly looked over to the pond.

Early the next morning, June 24th, Efran opened his eyes at the quiet knocking on the receiving-room door to the corridor. Lifting up, he gently extracted himself from Minka, still asleep, and worked his way off the bed until he could stand. Pausing in the murky darkness of the receiving room, he pulled on his pants over his breeches, then opened the door to Connor standing outside. “Come to the courtyard, please, Captain,” he whispered.

Emerging into the corridor, Efran quietly closed the door behind him before crossing the foyer lit by lanterns. He nodded at the saluting door guards, though he couldn't see their faces for the shadows. They opened the doors into the courtyard, also lit by lanterns. As Efran came down the steps, the gatesmen pointed to the northwest. When Efran looked, his gut constricted at the sight of one after another, a steady stream of stars across the sky. Some appeared to make it to the other side of the world; some appeared to land on it somewhere.

Doudney said, “We finally figured out that there's a whole batch of 'em crossing that we don't see during the day, and some of 'em head a lot closer to us than we've seen.”

As Efran absorbed this, Connor said, “I have some personal news that I had been waiting to share, Captain.” Efran looked at him quickly, and he said, “Lyra's pregnant.” His tears shone in the darkness.

Gripping his shoulder, Efran said, “Go talk to Giardini. She says it won't happen.” Connor's face cleared, and Efran turned back into the fortress.

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Chapter 22

Efran went down the corridor to the Library, which was constantly lit with lanterns in the event of nighttime visitors. As he entered, he glimpsed the Librarian in the corner, bowing. His white hair floated around his head like an aura. “How may I serve you, Lord Efran?”

“Librarian,” Efran whispered, wiping his mouth. “Have you seen the—the stars that are crossing the sky . . . ?”

“I have only glimpsed them through the windows here. But from description, I gather that the observed objects are rocks—some large, most very small, that orbit the sun as the Earth does,” the Librarian replied.

“Does that mean they are coming toward us?” Efran asked.

“That we see them at all means that they are close, Lord Efran.”

“Could one hit us?” Efran asked.

“It is possible, Lord Efran, but unlikely,” the Librarian said.

“I see,” Efran said, though he didn’t. “Thank you, Librarian.”

“You are most welcome, Lord Efran.”

That morning Bozzelli had an urgent need, and that was: to do something with these ears.

He stood in his boudoir in front of the fine silver mirror to regard his reflection in a mixture of outrage and disbelief. After a good night’s rest, he had been sure that these—protrusions would disappear as readily as they had appeared, but, no. His normal ears, elegant and flat, had been covered with what looked to be the ears of a donkey.

Turning his head, he studied his left ear minutely. The base of the donkey ear appeared to engulf his regular ear before extending about four inches above his head to end in pointed tufts. He could hear quite well with them, which had not been advantageous when he was attempting to reach home after being disfigured this way.

That was the day before yesterday. He could not bring himself to get out of bed until this morning, but now he was impelled by the necessity of resuming life, which meant regaining his normal debonair appearance. As he studied himself in despair, he thought, *Maybe I could just cut them off.*

So he went to his spa to find his sharp hair shears, which he took with him to stand before the large, ornate mirror again. Touching his ears and feeling the sensation all along their ridiculous length, he began to have doubts about the feasibility of just cutting them. So, as a test, he took the edge of his left ear and just nipped a tiny little--

“ARRRGHHH!” he screamed, clutching the bleeding ear. “EEEEYAAAHH!” he brayed in agony, then clapped both hands over his mouth. “No. Cutting them won’t work,” he breathed between his fingers. Before anything else, he staggered off to dampen a clean wash cloth with alcohol (gin, of which he took a large swig). This he applied tenderly to the wound, which stung a bit, but assured him that his nursing skills were effective.

After recuperating for a few minutes in his favorite chair with another dose or two of gin, Bozzelli looked over to the mirror, which was faithfully reflecting his terrible plight. “I must get help,” he gasped. “Who—who . . . ? Wait.” He sat up.

“There’s that woman with the . . . Theatrical Dress and Costume Shop. Yes. She intimated, when I met her, that she had ‘special skills’ that were taboo in the Lands. What was her name?”

Rising from his chair, he staggered over to his ornate secretary to begin pawing through the top drawer, which contained probably 50 or 60 calling cards. Desperate to find the name, he began searching more efficiently by seizing a card and looking at it. If it did not name of the owner of the Theatrical Dress and Costume Shop, he tossed it aside. Soon, a flurry of cards were landing on the floor.

Finally, with approximately ten cards left in the drawer, he hit upon the correct one, cradling it in his sweating hand. “‘Lady Duchesne, Proprietress of the Theatrical Dress and Costume Shop,’” he read in satisfaction. (Unsurprisingly, she was not legitimately titled in the Lands.) “She’s way over in the Far East Lands. So I have

to get myself out there somehow. [He lived in the Western Section.] How . . . how in the world . . . ? Costume Shop,” he read off the card again. “I can. . . .”

Dropping the card, he went to his double-wide built-in wardrobe to open his accessories compartment. From this, he pulled out a mannequin head adorned with a wig of long, sleek black hair.

He had never told anyone that, maybe a year or two ago, when he was fretting over some minor hair loss, he caught sight of Efran in his long-hair phase, and, the sight of his hair dazzled him. Therefore, he had paid an outrageous sum to have a wig made of genuine Polonti hair. It was truly beautiful, as he admired it even now. But, when he had put it on his own head, it just—didn’t--quite--work. It made him look like an . . . elderly workhorse. So he had put it up until he should decide what to do with it. Now he had a use for it.

Setting it on his dresser, he stripped to bathe and shave, which was a terrible nuisance around his new appendages. Then he dressed in one of his best suits. “Match *this*, Lord Justinian,” he sniffed, regarding the fine figure he cut in the mirror. He grew faint at the sight of the ears, but proceeded to implement his disguise.

First, he lightly fitted the wig over his head until he could determine by feel where to cut. With it still on his head, and working very carefully with his sharp shears, he cut two slits in the base. Then he delicately worked the base over his long ears via the slits until the cap rested properly in place. He regarded his reflection in satisfaction: the long hair covered the awkwardly furred bottoms of the donkey ears, while--

Removing his tall hat from his wardrobe, he placed that over the standing ears atop the wig and, voilà! That would suffice for now. Catching a side view of himself in the mirror as he turned, he winced—there was that workhorse. But, there was nothing else to be done until he got to Lady Duchesne’s. First, he loaded up his pockets with royals. In case all that weren’t enough, he hung a pouch of royals on the belt under his coat. Then he took up his walking stick and departed, heavily laden from top to bottom.

Fortunately, his house was on a side street that suffered little traffic at this time of the morning, so he was able to hasten on foot across Main and New North Road to the street where Lady Duchesne resided. He did have to pass within view of the new inn construction, and scowled bitterly to see that instead of hewing the faerie tree into planks, that villain Lemmerz had planted it behind his inn. “It won’t stay alive without roots, you--” He had started to say *ass*, but choked it back, given what was underneath his wig and hat right now.

Nonetheless, he pressed on to his destination, and was soon pulling on the bell of of the lady’s shop. As it would not open for hours yet, Bozzelli’s ring was answered by the lady’s large and stonelike butler. “Lady Duchesne’s Theatrical Dress and Costume Shop is not open,” he said in a cavernous voice.

Nervously, Bozzelli reached into a pocket and withdrew five royals to lay into the massive palm before him. “I am Bozzelli, in earnest need of the lady’s assistance this morning.”

With a brief bow, the butler said, “Enter and I will inquire with Lady Duchesne.”

“Thank you,” Bozzelli said, faint with relief at getting off the street. Following the butler, he passed through the shop to enter her living quarters.

“Wait here,” the butler said, pointing to the floor, and Bozzelli collapsed into an upholstered armchair.

Shortly, the lady herself appeared in a filmy robe over her *négligée*. “Bozzelli?” she asked in grave doubt.

“Yes, Lady Duchesne,” he said, standing. “I am desperately in need of your help.”

“Other than guidance in choosing wigs, how can I help you?” she asked with a light sneer. She was one of those women who grow bitter as they age and lose their beauty. And although she was very skilled with potions, nothing was the same as being 22 again.

“Here is the issue, my dear,” he said, removing his hat and then removing his wig.

She stared at his ears in fascination, finally reaching out a hand to stroke one. He giggled. “That tickles.”

“They’re real,” she breathed. “Who did this to you?”

“I don’t know,” he choked out. “It happened after I had men cut down one of those trees around Cavern Lake.” His face cleared, and he said intently, “The resonance of that wood is the most miraculous thing I have ever heard. The sounds are—beautiful, unworldly. I wanted it for diffusers in the performance hall of the new inn. But it was wicked of me to cut it down without asking permission. I shouldn’t have done it. And I’m sorry,” he wept.

“You cut down one of the faerie trees?” she asked, eyes glimmering.

“Yes,” he said dolefully. “It was Too Great a Temptation, and I wish now I hadn’t done it.”

“Oh, you are a naughty boy,” she said, thinking. “But of course I can help you.”

“You can? You can change my ears back?” he gasped.

“Of course,” Duchesne smiled, going to her vanity for a porcelain jar. She opened the jar in front of her mirror, continuing, “The Abbey Lands faeries are so silly—they think their powers are something special. They don’t know anything of real power; they just use smoke and mirrors, illusion and misdirection.” So saying, she dabbed a bit of vanishing cream to a stubborn wrinkle. It faded.

“But you have the power to change my ears back to what they were?” he pleaded.

“Naturally,” she said.

“How much will it cost?” he asked, bracing for the answer.

She looked at him in the mirror. “How much do you have on you?”

“Besides the five royals I gave your butler, I have--” He plunged a shaking hand into one pocket and then the other to remove fistfuls of royals which he laid on her vanity. Then he unstrapped his money pouch to lay that on it as well. “That’s all I have,” he exhaled as a confessional.

“You missed one,” she murmured, turning back to her mirror.

Frantically, he searched his pockets again to find one royal that had been hiding. “Here,” he said, laying it on the pile of his offering with a trembling hand.

“It’s really not enough, but, since you’re suffering so, I’ll accept it,” she conceded magnanimously.

“Thank you, thank you,” he said, grabbing her hand to kiss it.

“Ugh. Stop it,” she ordered. He did, stepping back to nervously crush his hat brim. She said, “So this is what we’ll do. Let me mix up a little potion for you. Wait here and I’ll be right back.”

“Yes,” he said, sitting like the chastened dog that he was. Smiling, she exited to mix up her potion while Bozzelli sat miserably sweating.

About a half-hour later she returned with a silver goblet. “Drink this. It should be effective immediately.”

“Thank you. Thank you,” he said, but his hand shook so much that he could hardly get the brim to his lips. She watched with a tender smile. The potion was only a common mask which would cover his unsightly appendages for about six hours before fading. Then he would have no choice but to come to her again and again to receive perennially fading relief time after time. She loved her work. It was so satisfying.

He drank the potion, burped, and then stared at his pasty reflection and bedraggled ears in her mirror. Within seconds, he saw the horrible ears begin shriveling, then they dropped away from his head like dried husks. Staring at his restored reflection, he felt his head and his own beautiful, flat ears in joy. “It worked! Thank you! Thank you!” he cried, grabbing her shoulders to kiss her.

Normally, she would have sternly repelled such an affront. But she was looking down thoughtfully at the desiccated remnants of his donkey ears on the floor. While he leapt out of her shop, singing to the morning, she picked up one bit of dried skin and fur. “How did I do that?” she murmured. “The masking spell never produced byproducts before. Interesting. I must be better than I thought.”

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Chapter 23

Dropping the dried donkey ear, Duchesne winced mildly. “I’m going to have to get a new skin-tightening formula. This one itches.” Placing a hand to her jaw, she felt something foreign and fuzzy, like a caterpillar. Attempting to sweep it away, she only encountered more fuzz. So she turned to her mirror to see two long, lush donkey ears rising past her luxurious black curls. And the ears were functional: she heard tinkling faerie laughter.

Throughout that day, one or more of the streaming rocks remained visible in the sky, crossing from one horizon to the other on a vaguely west-northwest to east-southeast plane. The stream was so continuous that queries began pouring into the fortress: What was it? Was it natural? Was it dangerous? Would it go away? Should they take precautions? And, did this have anything to do with the lunatic who was prophesying destruction of the Abbey Lands?

So DeWitt wrote out this statement: “To All Landers: The stream of celestial objects that we’re all seeing is apparently a natural feature of the void around us. While it looks alarming, a knowledgeable source tells us that it is unlikely to cause us any harm. And we give absolutely no credence to unknown ‘messengers’ pronouncing judgment on us. Despite the presence of some of us sinners on the Lands, our God is a gracious Father who does not destroy the innocent along with the wicked. Regardless, prayer is appropriate in any circumstance, especially uncertainty. [Signed] Captain Efran, Steward Estes, and Administrator DeWitt of The Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea”

DeWitt had this notice copied and posted all over the Lands—on Ryal’s window, on barracks doors, on

community news boards, and on every shop window whose proprietor would allow it.

Meanwhile, Efran had sat again with *The Christian's Secret in Facing Annihilation* (as he had named it). Right now, he was reading:

“The expressions ‘kingdom of God’ and ‘kingdom of Heaven’ are used in Scripture concerning the divine life in the soul. They mean simply the place or condition where God rules, and where His will is done. It is an interior kingdom, not an exterior one. Its thrones are not outward thrones of human pomp and glory, but inward thrones of dominion and supremacy over the things of time and sense. Its kings are not clothed in royal robes of purple and fine linen, but with the interior garments of purity and truth. And its reign is not in outward show, but in inward power. . . . It is not a matter of place at all, but one of condition.

“This kingdom is to break in pieces and consume all other kingdoms by right of the law by which the inward always rules the outward. If there is peace within, no outward turmoil can affect the soul.”

At that, Efran closed the book and bowed his head.

Late that afternoon, Justinian was walking his new sweetheart down the street to her lodging. He had high hopes for her, as she was deeply infatuated with him after only a week or so. And, no, he had no intention of proposing marriage to her; he just wanted a little . . . closeness.

Yes, there was that hasty promise he had made to God about chastity in exchange for extrication from a debt of 1,000 royals, but, he could let that slide just for tonight. Just this once. God wouldn't mind. And Justinian had *needs*. God would understand.

The girl on his arm, Tedder, stopped at one shop window. “Oh, look! Here's an announcement from the Fortress about those scary shooting stars in the sky. Here, let me read it to you.”

He began, “That's not necessary--” but she began reading the whole thing. She followed each line with a finger as she laboriously read all the big words like “celestial,” “knowledgeable,” “credence,” “gracious,” “uncertainty,” and “prayer” until Justinian was swaying on his feet.

“Oh, that's a good idea to pray about it. Why don't we pray?” she suggested. While people passed by, smiling, she bowed her head to earnestly pray for deliverance from this bad thing. One or two passersby murmured, “amen,” and another patted Justinian's shoulder. With the blows of those smiles and endorsements, Justinian felt himself trapped in a gladiator's arena surrounded by his own prayers that wielded swords, maces and chains against him.

When she was done, she said, “There! Now, do you want to come up for a little while?”

“No, sweet Tedder, I'll just see you off here.” He kissed her forehead. “Have a good night.”

“Thank you, Justinian. You're so sweet.” She kissed him primly on the cheek and turned into the nicely decorated Abbey Lands Ladies' Lodging House.

Justinian turned reeling down the street toward New North Road. “Merciful, merciless God, to see that I keep my promises,” he muttered. But he found his way directly to the chapel that night.

The following morning, the 25th, dawned to a continuous, unnerving stream of bright rocks flying directly over

the Lands. Many of them passed in flames, though none came close to hitting anything below. Since it was impossible to judge distances, the stream seemed both terrifyingly close and reassuringly far away.

Remarkably, some Landers hardly noticed. The residents who lined up in Whitgift's Last Road Notary Shop asked him anxiously about the fiery stream in the sky as they presented their lease payments or requests for plot assignments. Whitgift shrugged, "Sorry, I'm not one for noticing the weather. I've seen strange phenomena from time to time, but by the time I get my work done and look up, it's passed." So they nodded to each other and spread the word: my, life in the Lands was interesting, wasn't it?

Windry and her helpers were consumed with new designs, new dresses, and broad-brimmed hats that she advertised as, "Sturdy Protection for Delicate Skin in the Fiercest Conditions." She sold so many as to have a backlog of orders, compelling her to hire more help. As a touch of insouciance, Flores added cheerful embroidered flowers to the crowns.

The Lands doctor Coghill, his wife Delio and his assistant Tolliver were besieged for advice about the stream. Would any of those fiery rocks fall on them? How long would the stream last? Were any dangerous creatures riding on it?--dragons or Leviathans? What about the smoke they produced?

Impatiently, Coghill answered all questions: "What has it done to you? Where are your burns or bruises? I see no harm from it; come to me when it affects you." The new Far East Lands doctor Poythress and his apprentice Soppitt, already overwhelmed with mundane crises, took the same line.

Wissowa went to parties in the evening and to Averde's during the day. However, with that crazy cascade of rocks in the sky, the outdoor dining areas became suddenly empty and the party invitations dwindled. So she sat home and drank.

Because of the sudden evaporation of customers in their outdoor eating areas, Croft's, Firmin's and Averde's were forced to lay off some of their staff. Thus, Challinor, Vories, Leila, and Faciane were let go. Challinor had her husband Captain Stites to lean on, who was glad that she needed him again. Vories' ex-husband Gladden had also been laid off by Firmin's, so he and she reunited to start a new business reselling discarded canopies and umbrellas under the stark sign: PROTECT YOURSELF. They made a nice profit.

Leila, having been rebuffed by Efran, started her own business of selling personal favors. She also did well, financially. Faciane, having nowhere else to go, went to her ex-mother-in-law at the chapel. Marguerite accepted her warmly and gave her a room upstairs. It was a little awkward at first with Justinian still in residence, but they settled down as merely old friends. No one here knew where Verlice was or what he was doing.

Reluctantly, Firmin let Lilou and Ionadi go. There was some outrage in certain quarters about that—particularly in the army--as Firmin personally had reserves to take care of both of them. Nonetheless, the two packed up their few possessions and set out for the hilltop. Ionadi, old and bent, could hardly walk. Lilou was carrying both their bags and supporting her at the same time.

Seeing them, Seagrave, on duty at the chapel doors, appropriated the horse that had been left out front grazing. He told his partner on watch, Martyn, "Cover for me." Martyn nodded. Seagrave mounted to ride over to the pair as they were coming to the switchback. They stopped at his approach, assuming that he was on his way up to the fortress. The faerie trees were waving their branches in welcome.

Dismounting beside them, Seagrave said, "Hello. May I give you a ride?" Then he lifted a surprised Ionadi to the saddle. After relieving Lilou of her burdens, Seagrave placed her behind the saddle.

“Thank you, Seagrave,” Lilou said, hugging Ionadi in excitement. They both knew many of the soldiers.

Taking their bags on one shoulder and the reins in his other hand, Seagrave said, “Excuse me, I believe you’ve mistaken me for someone else. My name is—Oostendorp,” he hazarded. As they both laughed at him, trying to repeat his new name, he began leading the horse up the switchback.

Lilou thought to explain, “Firmin let us go because no one comes to eat anymore, and Efran had always said, said that--”

“Yes, Miss, I think he knows you’re on the way,” Seagrave said, glancing to the courtyard above. Ionadi and Lilou looked up to where Efran was standing at the open gates. He lifted a hand to them, and they waved back joyfully—Lilou with broad sweeps of her hand and Ionadi with her crooked fingers. When they were almost to the gates, Minka came out to join him, telling him something which he acknowledged.

Leading the horse into the courtyard, Seagrave stood by while Efran lifted the riders down. Then Seagrave saluted. “Pardon, Captain, I must return to duty.”

“Dismissed,” Efran said with a glimmer of approval at his desertion. Seagrave remounted and turned the horse down the switchback at a lope. Despite his desire to be with his new wife Skevi at this time, he had duty. As it was, he discovered later that she and her father Pelagatti were on their way to the fortress, where they were apparently having a watch party.

At the same time, Lilou was trying to explain to Efran what had happened so that they were coming to him for shelter. He tried to listen for a little while, then waved. “Your room is being made ready; someone will take you to it when they get it set up. For now, you want to go out back and see the new pond?”

“Yes,” Lilou laughed. “Is Calix still here?”

“Yes, he is,” Minka said, taking Ionadi on her arm to help her up the steps to the broad fortress doors. “And he’ll be so excited to see you. Come on now, I’ll show you.” Knowing the way, Lilou ran ahead down the corridor while Minka brought Ionadi along. A soldier brought in their bags to deliver to their room.

Efran paused in the courtyard to look at the flow of flaming rocks above. “So you made at least one good thing happen,” he murmured to the Apocalypse. Then he went out back to watch Calix happily receive his sister and take her straight to the pond. Minka sat with Ionadi on the bench facing it to chat with her.

The stream of rocks flowed over Westford, as well. Communications dried up between it and the Lands, as unnerved messengers declined to stray from shelter. So Wendt sent Neale and Mumme to see if they could find Baroffio.

Within a few hours, they returned to tell the Commander that Baroffio’s construction workers, predominantly poor and superstitious, were so alarmed by the signs in the sky that they refused to work. His entreaties and threats changed their minds about nothing, so he withdrew to his house to draw up more plans for construction, check on his field labor (who continued to work because they liked to eat) and play the harpsichord. No one knew that Baroffio could play the harpsichord, but he was almost good at it.

Wendt received a query from Commander Barr at Featheringham: What was all this in the sky? Wendt told him that it was a passing phenomenon, and to ignore it. They did, and work at Featheringham continued as usual.

In the Lands army, the unprecedented cosmic event created a strange division between the hilltop barracks and

those below. There was no disruption of communications, only, in facing unknown threats, the soldiers naturally banded with those closest to them. Efran, also, found himself hovering on the hilltop like an eagle protecting its nest. By one tactic or another, he managed to keep Minka from riding down as well—just for a little while, just until they could see what happened.

Cut off from Minka, however, Marguerite suffered. She completely understood Efran's desire to keep Minka hilltop, and would never force the issue. At the same time, Marguerite's place was on the Lands with her husband. She was not free, yet, to go up hilltop herself to see Minka and the children. So she waited, watching the sky.

Despite the division in the army, the threat from the heavens had the salutary effect of drawing others to the hilltop besides Lilou, Ionadi, Skevi, and Pelagatti. Weber and Keenie brought their son Tarrant up, then Plunkett and Noah appeared around the southeastern corner of the fortress driving an empty cart. Noah sprang from the driver's seat to be welcomed by his old friends while Plunkett unharnessed Ludy to graze. Hassie, watching him thoughtfully, decided to walk over and say hello. Before she was halfway to him, she was running, and he caught her up to hug her.

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Chapter 24

Rawlins, taking a dust cloth all up and down the balusters of the curving stairway to the loft, kept glancing out the transom window over the broad chapel doors. He could see a portion of the celestial flow through it, and the terror it inspired in him was unrelenting. He felt that the only way he could deal with it was to meet it on the hilltop (which seemed to be a common, though counterintuitive, reaction). He couldn't abide the thought of being crushed unknowingly under a pile of stones and wood. But he was trapped here.

Hartshough emerged from the kitchen wiping his hands on a dish cloth. "We're all caught up on the housework, Rawlins. Why don't you take a break?" Then he returned to the kitchen.

"Take a break," Rawlins repeated. "Take a break. Does that mean I can leave?" Looking at the hand holding the cloth, he opened it to see the cloth waft to the tread below. Then Rawlins gingerly descended the stairs and walked toward the front doors, expecting to be knocked off his feet at any moment.

But he made it out the doors, where the guards glanced complacently at him. Rawlins took one cautious step after another down the front walk until he had arrived at the sidewalk of Chapel Road unimpeded. He stood still for a moment, then lit out for the old switchback in a desperate run.

Watching him go, Marguerite whispered, "Tell Minka that I miss her, and I'll see her soon."

Sweating, Rawlins continued up the switchback around carts and horses until he finally staggered through the gates, panting and wild-eyed. One gatesman turned him to the left. "Go around the east side here to the back grounds."

"Yes," Rawlins gasped, turning to follow the curve of the black iron fence around the northeastern side of the fortress. He avoided looking down through it, so he wouldn't see how high up he was.

Arriving on the back grounds, he skittered around the burial crosses to make his way past the gardens and pond into the midst of the gathering, between the orchards and the fortress. Spotting Minka, he wove toward her. When she and Efran looked over quickly, Rawlins gasped, “Auntie says hello. She misses you and will see you soon.”

“Thank you,” Minka whispered.

Efran watched him turn to find his way to a serving cart. Taking up an ale, Rawlins took a swig to eye the stream of rocks above. “I’m here now. Do your worst,” he challenged.

The Lands Clothing Shop closed early for Rondi’s bodyguards to bring her home. When she arrived on the back grounds, Rawlins didn’t see her, but Minka engulfed her. And since Youshock was up here, his sister Sierra was up here, too, but that was mostly because her husband Captain Chee was hilltop (as was Captain Rigdon).

In the brewery on Main below, Delano went to the back to look in on his wife Madgwick with their baby Ruth. “Wystan’s just come from the fortress with an order for more ale and lager. I’m about to load the cart now. Do you want to come with Ruth?”

“Yes, I think I do. Give me a moment to get her changed,” she said.

“Good, then. I’ll get the order loaded,” he said, turning away.

In a house on the East Central Lands, Tambling was fuming to her adopted grandfather Escarra, “My parents have been gone so long, looking for those awnings they were going to buy. They didn’t want to tell me why they needed them, but I know they’re because of the rocks. But I’m tired of sitting here waiting.” Her little white dog Felix didn’t seem to mind, content on her lap.

Escarra said thoughtfully, “I saw the harpist Arenivas going up hilltop, where they’re having a party. Would you like to see your friends up there?”

Right away, she stood with Felix. “Yes! It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Toby and Noah.”

“Let’s go, then,” he said. So they left the house to begin walking. Upon reaching Chapel Road, they turned to the new switchback to start the long hike up.

Behind them was a whistle, and they looked to see a soldier, Doane, driving an empty cart toward the hill. “Hop in; let me give you a ride!”

They gladly went back to his cart. “Thank you!” Escarra said, helping Tambling and Felix over the side of the cart before climbing in himself.

“We don’t want to miss the watch party,” Doane said, clucking to the horse again.

“No, we don’t,” Escarra said, trembling. In fact, he was looking forward to it in a way that made him ashamed, though he could not help how he felt.

It had been eight months since his son Ashe had died a hero’s death. Having come to strongly believe that Ashe and his mother were with God, Escarra longed to be with them, and Him. In these past eight months, Escarra had done all that he knew to be productive, and helpful, but . . . he was tired; his body was failing. He only wanted to go to the people he loved.

But it was wicked, wicked to wish for a death that would kill many more people. Closing his eyes as the cart rattled up the switchback, Escarra prayed, *God, will You take me and save all the others?* Then he looked back at Delano and Madgwick in a cart behind them. He lifted a hand to wave, and they waved back.

When they reached the hilltop, Doane pulled the cart to a stop, directing Escarra and Tambling, “Go around the east side here for the party.”

“Yes.” Escarra climbed out and helped Tambling down. She and Felix ran around the corner of the fortress, eager to see her friends again. Following her, Escarra glanced back where Delano had pulled his cart through the grocers’ gate to the back kitchen door. Wystan began carrying cases inside as Delano helped Madgwick down with the baby.

Escarra walked over to meet her. “Hello, Madgwick. Shall we sit together to watch fire fall from heaven?”

“Whether it does or doesn’t, I’ll be happy for your company,” she laughed easily. Yawning on her shoulder, Ruth looked at him sleepily.

As they went around the side of the fortress, he asked, “You’re not afraid?” He paused to contemplate the row of gravestones commemorating “Renée of Westford.”

“No, oh no,” she said. “Our God is good; He answers prayer.” And Escarra felt almost lighthearted.

Bowring, sitting on a bench at the corner of Chapel Road and New North Road, was watching when Doane invited Escarra and his granddaughter to ride in his cart up the switchback. Then Delano and Madgwick followed with a cart full of ale. Another party rode up in a carriage. There must be a reason that all these people were going up hilltop. And Bowring looked to the stream of fire above.

When the carriage began descending the switchback again, Bowring sat up. As it approached Chapel Road, he stood from his bench to wave, leaning heavily on his cane. The driver pulled right up beside him, and Bowring asked, “Are you free?”

“Yes, sir, where can I take you?” the driver asked.

“I want to go up hilltop there, but I want to stop to pick up my daughter, first,” Bowring said. He reached into his pocket to extend two royals up to him.

Leaning down to take the royals, the driver said, “Yes, sir. Footman Twells is coming right down to assist you in, sir.”

“Thank you,” Bowring said. He waited while Twells extended the steps and opened the door to help him to his seat. Bowring gave him Folliott’s house number--61--and they were off. The fact was, until recently, Trina had been living with her father. But now she appeared to be living elsewhere, and he was almost certain it was with her former husband, Folliott. (His father Reinagle was also a former husband of hers, but never mind that.)

So the driver pulled up to #61 for Twells to climb down and knock on the door. It was answered, and Bowring watched out the carriage window as the invitation to ride up hilltop was issued to the young man at the door. He called to someone behind him, and shortly Folliott and Trina were trotting down the front walk to the carriage.

They had been reluctantly entertaining a guest, as often happened—the same guest, in fact—and Reinagle,

without his glasses but with his cane, came hobbling out of the door behind them. Twells assisted the young lady and gentleman into the carriage, then, for courtesy's sake, brought over the old gent as well--who had been Bowring's persecutor in Eurus. He sat beside Bowring, grunting, "What's all this?"

Trina said gaily, "They're having some kind of watch party at the fortress! Isn't it a fun way of getting blotted out?"

"Oh my dear, you're so morbid," Follriott said with a teasing peck on her cheek.

Reinagle cried, "Why are we going up closer to the sky, then?"

"We can stop to let you out, Father," Follriott offered.

Reinagle only grunted, "There had better be food." Bowring looked wearily out the window, wondering if he could ever escape his tormentor.

But they were delivered safely hilltop and allowed into the gates. Pointing, one of the gatesmen said, "Guests are requested to go around the east side of the fortress to the back grounds."

"Oh, we can do that. Let us help you, Father," Trina said. So she took Bowring's cane and his left arm while Follriott supported him on the right, and they began walking around the fortress, admiring the view of the East Lands. But the stream of stars dominated the sky everywhere.

Reinagle followed grumbling and not quite so fast. Without his glasses, he also made a terrible error in navigation. When the grocer's gate appeared before him, open, he went through it to continue going around the east side of the fortress. However, going out of the gate also put him outside of the 7-foot-tall black iron fence that ran all around the perimeter of the fortress grounds. Although he faithfully followed the fence on his right, he could never find his way into the grounds. The path had abruptly disappeared, as well, so that he was stumbling over rocks and loose dirt.

Worse, no one noticed—not Bowring, nor Trina nor Follriott, nor any one of the hundreds out here now. The far east side of the back grounds, beyond Renée's crosses and roses, was seldom used anyway, and even those who entered after him didn't see him; everyone's focus was on the western skies.

So Reinagle shouted hoarsely and banged his cane feebly on the fence to no avail. He did everything to get in except retrace his steps to the grocer's gate.

Meanwhile, Connor brought Lyra to the back grounds for company until he should finish his shift. Seeing her, Minka ordered her over to the bench right away to introduce her to Ionadi. When Lyra confessed that she was pregnant, Minka received the news with all joy, having no expectation of anything interfering with that.

Ella and Sudie came out from the fortress, then, so Minka made them sit on the bench so that Ella could tell Lyra everything that she could expect during pregnancy. When Loriot and Tess appeared on the grounds from the area of the stables, Almund spotted her and alerted Ella. So Ella sent Sudie to bring her over to them, as Tess was heavily, miserably pregnant. Loriot made several trips into the fortress to bring out padded chairs for the ladies to sit comfortably and talk.

On one of those trips into the fortress, Loriot was spotted by Tomer, who asked, "Why are so many people on the back grounds?"

Loriot told him, “Watching for the fire to fall.” Looking out the back door himself, Tomer saw Captain Efran in the midst of the party.

Unsure whether the administrators knew what was going on right behind them, Tomer ran upstairs to tell them, “Steward, Administrator, the Captain has a party going on the back grounds to watch the sky.”

They two looked at each other, then put down their quills and left the workroom, locking the door. DeWitt went down the corridor to get Tera and their baby Tica (not quite a year old). On their way out, he stopped by the kitchen to ask that finger foods and drinks be brought out back. Madea graciously consented, although she and her crew were way ahead of him here.

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Chapter 25

Estes sent Tomer and Detler to go get Kelsey and her children Malan (2 years old as of yesterday) and Broгна (who shared Tica’s birthday of August 7th of last year). Hearing that they were going to a yard party on the hilltop, Kelsey’s sister Chloe decided that a stream of flaming rocks in the sky shouldn’t interfere with her going, as well.

More people arrived from below, including Ryal, Giardi, and Soames. Ryal just decided to lock up the shop and watch while nothing happened. He told her firmly, “I believe you now, Giardi, and I repent for my skepticism.” She smiled warmly at him, hugging his arm. She knew that he wanted to be supportive despite his nagging doubts. He even brought a blanket and a picnic basket, as the watch party for the Apocalypse had already assumed a celebratory air.

Martyn and Hadewidis were here celebrating their marriage, as she had turned 16 in May. (Martyn was 17.) So Efran and Minka went right over to congratulate them. Martyn told Efran, “I never forgot what you told me, to submit to the young one who demands to marry me.”

Minka looked quickly at Efran as he paused, then said with his beautiful smile, “Good! I wish for you a long and happy marriage.” Hadewidis smiled shyly, laying her head on Martyn’s shoulder.

As Efran and Minka turned away again, she whispered, “When did you tell him that? What did you say?”

“I have no idea,” he murmured, glancing over the growing crowd. It should be noted here that neither Efran nor anyone organized the watch party; it was just natural to come to the fortress in a crisis. And the back grounds provided a spectacular view of land, sky and sea.

Bethune, Howe, and their children Erastus, Cleo, and Nini were here, as was Bethune’s cousin Derrida and sister-in-law Pieta (whose husband was somewhere around, as well). Erastus and Cleo were thrilled to see the new pond extension, and he and Noah discovered that there was still at least one toe-biter in it. Nakam plunged heroically into the pond after it.

Melchior and Geneve brought their baby Dagnall to visit; Barrueta and her daughter Colletta came just to see who was here. Bullara was here, since he worked here, but when he saw Barrueta, he ran back inside the fortress to hide until it was all over. Lady Neanne was here as well, wearing her Member badge. Her niece Gwynne was

crushed that Lord Efran wasn't wearing the shirt that she had made. The language tutor Dolivo was here, as were Elvey, Lemmerz, Lowry, Schmolck, Shardlow the bookseller (Soames' father), Kane the miller and his son Chuk, Meineke the moneyer and his daughter Jewel, and Whately the jeweler. They were all eating, drinking, and mingling with old friends. Humblecut, without any friends on the hilltop that he knew of, came for the food, and was greeted warmly by Loghry.

The mood of the Lands below was not so happy. In fact, unresolved doubts about the prophecy began to affect weaker minds, and there was a rash of suicides. Firmin was one of the first to take his own life. The infection spread to the army. With weapons on hand and the knowledge as to their use, soldiers in the lower barracks began killing themselves. When Efran heard of this, he called his hilltop soldiers together for a little chat.

He had them gather on the western edge of the archery range, far from the pond and trees where the ladies, children, and guests were mingling. Not all of the hilltop soldiers came, as Efran excused any who desired to attend their duties. They'd get the word.

Standing before those gathered, Efran said, "I'll make this short. We're here to protect the weak. That's the whole reason for our existence. That takes courage; sometimes, it takes all the courage you've got. If I have any soldier here who takes the coward's way out by killing himself, I'm going to hang his body on the barracks with the sign 'COWARD' on it. You're dismissed." Having been plagued by that evil himself, Efran merely told them what he considered would have exorcised it right away.

Severely rattled, the men dispersed to their tasks. Up to the very end, none of them were even tempted to take that route. Also, most of those who were off-duty stayed on the back grounds anyway. This is where the children were, and if rocks started falling the wrong way, these soldiers wanted to be in between them and the children.

And, of course, many of the Lands' faeries had collected here on the hilltop. None of them really knew whether the fall of a rock from heaven would destroy them as well, but should all their people perish, the faeries would be left without purpose even if they remained.

Therefore, Queene Kele allowed those who could assume human form to walk among the guests gathered on the hilltop, murmuring greetings and encouragement. Sirs Ditson and Nutbin, however, remained in their own form to play with the children around the pond, who found nothing alarming about a little man in a suit and top hat and a squirrel in a vest and a monocle. Besides which, they could do amazing tricks.

Over the next hour, the shower of rocks altered slightly. Minka noticed something awry when she emerged from the back corridor with yet another kitchen helper and a cart of drinks. She let Nevares roll the cart over to the pond while she stopped beside Efran, who was standing mid-grounds watching the shower. Treece was asleep on his shoulder. "What is it?" she asked.

"The smell," he murmured. "There's the odor of rotten eggs I hadn't noticed before. And there seems to be more smoke and gas."

Then, in one of those moments when Time slows to a crawl, they saw something massive and flaming drop from the flow of rocks to begin streaking straight down toward them. Immediately, there was a strong gust on the hilltop, a displacement of hot air preceding the missile. The groupings on the back grounds went silent, watching. Reinagle, seeing the blurry, fiery mass aimed straight at him, screamed and turned to run. And there was no fence to stop his leaping over the hilltop cliffs.

There could only be seconds between the moment that those on the Lands perceived the fireball dropping and when it would hit the hilltop. The instant Isreal saw it, he snatched up Joshua, then he and Donovan began

running toward Efran, who dropped to a knee with an arm extended to them. Treece, still asleep, remained undisturbed on his shoulder.

The children at the pond stopped their play to look up. Toby gathered them all together, and they held hands, closing their eyes.

Connor turned to Lyra to cover her with his arms, and she laid her head on his chest. Estes and DeWitt knelt over their wives and little ones to shield them with their bodies.

Finally spotting Rondi with her eyes to the heavens and Mathurin's arm around her, Rawlins thought, *If I had been a better man, I would be the one standing beside her right now.*

Soldiers all over the grounds turned to face the Apocalypse, hands behind their backs. But the Polonti thrust their fists to the sky, crying "Koa!"

Ryal reached over to grasp Giardi's hand, who was watching the fireball placidly.

And many others stood immobilized by fear, some thinking, *This is what it's like to die.* But Minka was looking to the side, watching the outline of a page take shape before her.

It was their gray hair and spectacles, related somehow to their story. Minka saw more clearly than ever that it was an old woman whose fingers were moving rapidly. "What are you doing?" Minka murmured. "Are you playing something? A harpsichord?"

That couldn't really be it, because her attitude was deadly serious. Looking further, Minka saw words and numbers at the bottom of the page that she didn't understand: `divert divert impact 43.7102N 7.2620E divert to`

"You're trying to save us, aren't you?" Minka whispered. In her peripheral vision, she saw the sudden tumult on the grounds, people crying out and children running to Efran. He was kneeling with one child on his shoulder, holding his other arm out to them, while casting an anxious glance back at her, now out of his reach.

As the smoke, odors and wind increased, the gray-haired woman sat back and lowered her hands in finality. She had done all she could do. "Thank you for trying," Minka whispered. The woman lifted her hand in a gesture of farewell, and Minka raised her hand in return. "I'm glad you'll miss us," she said. "That's sweet."

In the next instant, the hilltop wind suddenly died. The heat and odors began dissipating. Even the stream of rocks played out until the sky was clear. Ino appeared as light, fluffy clouds and a cool, fresh wind that blew away the remnants of smoke and fumes.

People on the hilltop began looking at each other, stunned. "What happened?" "It's gone." "How could it--?" "Where did it go?" "I don't understand." The fortress rooftop bells began ringing in exultation. Soldiers ran to the courtyard gates to ring the alarm bell in the victory cadence, which was repeated from the main gates below.

Madgwick turned to Escarra, who had fallen off the bench. Kneeling, she turned him over to find his heart stopped. He had died with his face alight in joy.

Ryal looked at Giardi, both still seated on the picnic blanket. He said gravely, "I will never doubt you again, and it appears I have a little more time to prove it." She smiled. Red-faced, Soames was returning after having taken shelter behind a corner of the fortress.

Amid the jubilant cries that filled the back grounds, Treece woke up. Efran hugged him, Joshua, Donovan, and Isreal in one boisterous bundle, then turned to Minka. But she was still looking at the page. It had changed, as well.

There was now such a bright light behind the old woman that she was rendered a black form. She looked slightly over her shoulder, and a mighty gust of wind roared from behind her in a soundless explosion. The force of it was such that the tiny amount which escaped the page pushed Minka back a step, and she gasped. The brightness obliterated the woman and the page disappeared, except for a few ashes that gave off a slight smell of sulfur as they drifted to the ground at Minka's feet.

"Minka." Efran was at her side. "Did you see that? It was coming toward us, coming, and, it just vanished! Minka?" He was laughing and crying at the same time. She bent to pick up an ash that disintegrated in her fingers.

"Minka!" He grabbed her to toss her into the air. "Minka, we're alive!" he cried, catching her to his chest.

"I know!" she laughed, tears in her eyes. "Stop, Efran, you're embarrassing me!" Everyone around them was laughing and all the children ran up to be tossed, even Tambling.

The celebrations on the hilltop above and the Lands below lasted long into the night, because everyone wanted to revel in the beauty of a clear night sky with a full moon and far-off, twinkling stars.

This, the final chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea, concludes on June 25th of the year 8156 from the creation of the world. As Nibor was found dead behind her partition in the library, there are no more written stories. Any further record of the Abbey is only to be found preserved by the Atticitian Sir Nomus in the Firmament's Hall of Memories.

The only note the author left for this chapter was that borrowed from the previous chapter: *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* was written by [Hannah Whitall Smith](#).

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Afterword to the Chapters of The Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea

"Mythology . . . is closely associated with the very origin of all speech and literature. In the dawn of language, said [Owen] Barfield, speakers did not make a distinction between the 'literal' and the 'metaphorical,' but used words in what might be called a 'mythological' manner. For example, nowadays when we translate the Latin *spiritus* [or the Hebrew *ruach*] we have to render it either as 'spirit' or as 'breath' or as 'wind' depending on the context. But early users of language would not have made any such distinction between these meanings. To them a word like *spiritus* meant something like 'spirit-breath-wind.' When the wind blew, it was not merely 'like' someone breathing: it was the breath of a god. And when an early speaker talked about his soul as *spiritus* he did not merely mean that it was 'like' a breath: it was to him just that, the breath of life. Mythological stories were simply the same thing in narrative form." (1)

Scripture is full of such blurred terms, as in:

“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” (Gen. 2:7)

“But you [God] blew with your breath, and the sea covered [the pursuing Egyptians].” (Ex. 15:10)

“The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at the rebuke of the Lord, at the blast of breath from his nostrils.” (2 Sam. 22:16)

“But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding.” (Job 32:8)

“The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound but do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit [*pneuma*].” (John 3:8)

“[Jesus] breathed on [His disciples] and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:22)

“Barfield had shown him [C.S. Lewis] the crucial role that mythology had played in the history of language and literature. But [Lewis] still did not believe in the myths that delighted him. Beautiful and moving though such stories might be, they were (he said) . . . ‘lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver.’

“No, said Tolkien. *They are not lies.*

“You look at trees, he said, and call them ‘trees,’ and probably you do not think twice about the word. You call a star a ‘star,’ and think nothing more of it. But you must remember that these words, ‘tree,’ ‘star,’ were (in their original forms) names given to these objects by people with very different views from yours. To you, a tree is simply a vegetable organism, and a star simply a ball of inanimate matter moving along a mathematical course. But the first men to talk of ‘trees’ and ‘stars’ saw things very differently. To them, the world was alive with mythological beings. They saw the stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to the eternal music. They saw the sky as a jewelled tent, and the earth as the womb whence all living things have come.” (2)

Again, anthropomorphic terms describing aspects of the universe are all through Scripture:

“Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it;
Shout, O depths of the earth;
Break forth into singing, O mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it!” (Isa. 44:23)

“From the womb of the morning like dew your youth will come to you.” (Ps. 110:3)

“When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:7)

“Praise Him, sun and moon,
praise Him, all you shining stars.
Praise Him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens.” (Ps. 148:3-4)

And of, course, the well which the Israelites sang to in order to get water (which is referenced in *Lord Efran in the Tide of Time*):

“Spring up, O well! Sing to it!
The well which the princes dug,
Which the nobles of the people delved,
With the scepter and with their staves.” (Num. 21:17-18)

Both stylistic devices are used in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-14). First, God instructs him to preach to the (dead, dry, inanimate) bones: “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” Both times, “breath” here is the Hebrew word *ruach*, which can also mean “spirit” or “wind.”

Ezekiel then says, “So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.” Again, all instances of “breath” are *ruach*.

While Old Testament prophets may have simply been speaking to their contemporaries in terms they could understand, the use of mythological language in the Bible can cause confusion among moderns. This is especially true in the similarity of the early chapters of Genesis to pagan myths.

Kyle Dillon has an excellent discussion of this issue, from which I’ll quote only a short bit that dovetails with my point: “Myths ‘work on us’ by rooting our human longings and experiences in a grand, cosmic story. We might say that myths are told with the goal of ‘worldview formation’—that is, they seek to make sense of the world around us by giving an account of its ultimate causes and purposes. In this regard, Genesis is much like the ancient pagan myths. But Genesis is different in that it attempts to ‘set the record straight’ by telling how it all really happened. Yahweh is the creator, not Marduk; the world comes from God’s powerful word, not from a primordial chaos; humans are dignified bearers of God’s image, not just workhorses for the junior gods. If Genesis parallels its pagan counterparts, it does so as a point-by-point refutation, directing its audience to the worship of the one true God.” (3)

Related to this is the long tradition of “dying god” pagan myths, many of which bear obvious similarities to Jesus’ death and resurrection. C.S. Lewis recounts: “I had not long finished *The Everlasting Man* when something far more alarming happened to me [when he was trying to retain his atheism]. Early in 1926 the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew sat in my room on the other side of the fire and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. ‘Rum thing,’ he went on. ‘All that stuff of Frazer’s about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once.’” (4)

The point of all this is, I believe that mythological language or descriptions were carried over into Scripture by divinely inspired writers to communicate fundamental concepts that are beyond our understanding. Moreover, since this language was used so pervasively in Scripture, there *must be something to it*. Tolkien was right about the underlying truth of primitive concepts. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.” (5)

As mythology’s evocative word pictures help our finite minds perceive something of the eternal glory and joy of

God, mythological language can be considered a tool, a perspective of allowing the supernatural into our perceptions of how God works. But to reflect God authentically, that perspective must be grounded in Scripture. This is how I approached my history of the Abbey Lands.

G.K. Chesterton (with an assist from the pseudonymous Windmillfighter) provides a premise for this. In an excellent commentary on Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, Windmillfighter says (with quotations from the book in italics):

“Christianity does not just give man the victory but also a reason to fight – a story. None of the other man-made views have ever done this. Not only that but the war between the myths and the philosophers [which] raged on either side could not be satisfied until the church [came into being]. . . .

“There is such a thing as a human story; and there is such a thing as the divine story which is also a human story; but there is no such thing as a Hegelian story or a Monist story or a relativist story or a determinist story; for every story, yes, even a penny dreadful or a cheap novelette [ahem], has something in it that belongs to our universe and not theirs. Every short story does truly begin with creation and end with a last judgment. And that is the reason why the myths and the philosophers were at war until Christ came. . . .

“[I]n every age and country outside Christendom there has been a feud forever between the philosopher and the priest. It is easy enough to say that the philosopher is generally the more rational; it is easier still to forget that the priest is always the more popular. For the priest told the people stories; and the philosopher did not understand the philosophy of stories. It came into the world with the story of Christ.” [pp. 246-47]

“Not only was the world given hope by Christ but it also was resurrected by Him. People without purposes are dead, people without a story have no purpose – we now have both.

“To sum up: the sanity of the world was restored and the soul of man offered salvation by something which did indeed satisfy the two warring tendencies of the past; which had never been satisfied in full and most certainly never satisfied together. It met the mythological search for romance by being a story and the philosophical search for truth by being a true story.” [p. 248] (6)

In light of all the above, I can only present the Abbey stories as Scripturally based mythopoeia, and an expression of the Crucified's work in my life.

1. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 44. [back to text](#)
2. Ibid, 46. [back to text](#)
3. Kyle Dillon, 2016, “Is Genesis a Myth? Part 1: [Genesis and Pagans](#).” For a fuller understanding of his argument, read the whole thing, as well as “Part 2: [Genesis and Science](#).” [back to text](#)
4. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 223-24. G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, first published in 1925, is such a brilliant work about Christ throughout history that numerous editions are widely available almost a hundred years later. “Frazer” is Sir James George Frazer, whose study on comparative religions, *The Golden Bough*, documents how a dying and reviving king or god is (or was) a central element of many religions. Lewis explains how Christ is the reality behind the pervasive myths of the Corn King in Chapter 9, “The Grand Miracle” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1978). [back to text](#)

5. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5, ll. 187-88 [back to text](#)

6. Journeys of a Windmill Fighter: *The Everlasting Man*—Part 2, Chapter 5: [The Escape from Paganism](#). My page numbers for the quotations are from the edition published by Ignatius Press in 1993 and 2008. “Penny dreadfuls were cheap popular serial literature produced during the 19th century in the United Kingdom.” ([Wikipedia](#)) [back to text](#)

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in the Apocalypse* (Book 36)
and *Afterword*

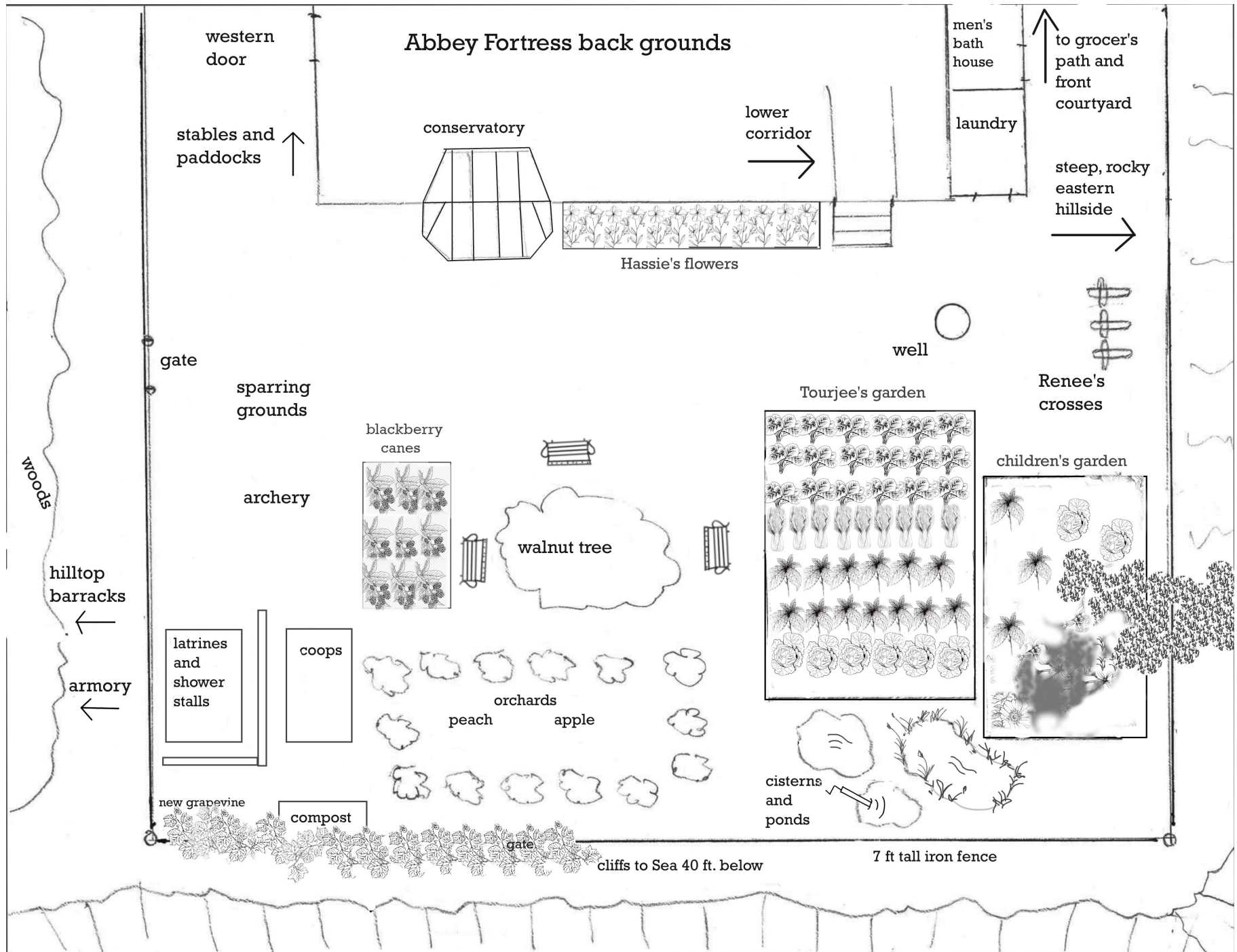
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Adele—ah DELL	Erastus—eh RAS tis
aficionado—ah feh shah NAY doh	Escarra—ess CARE ah
Agostini—a gus TEE nee	Estes—ESS tis
Alberon—AL ber on	Eurus--YOUR us
apocalypse—ah PAH kah lips	Eurusian--your uh SEE un
Arbaiza—are BAZE ah	Eustace—YOUS tis
Arcuri—ar CURE ee	Faciane—fah see ANN
Arenivas—air en EEV us	Fiacco—fee AH koh
Ares—AIR eez	fiduciary—feh DOO shee eh ree
Atticitian—at eh SISH un	Filipowicz—FEH leh poh veech
Averne—ah VURN	Flores—FLOR es
Avia—A vee ah	Folliott—FOH lee uht
Awfyn—AWE fin	Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g's)
Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh	Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah	Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
Beardall—BARE duhl	Gores—GORE ez
Beeby—BEE bee	Graeme—GRAY em
Benedetti—ben eh DET ee	Graetrix—GRAY trix
Bethune—beh THUNE	Hadewidis—hay DWEH dis
boudoir—boo DWAAR	Hartshough—HART soh
Bowring—BOWE ring	Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Heye—HAY yuh
Brogna--BRONE ya	Ino—EE no
Bullara—bu LAR ah	insigne—en SIN yeh
Busi—busy	insouciance—uhn SUE see uhns (indifference)
Calix—KAY lix	Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
Calo—KAY low	Isolde—ah ZOWL deh
caova—kay OH vah (coffee)	Jehan—JAY han
Challinor—CHAL en or	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Chloe—KLO ee	Justinian--jus TIN ee un
Colquhoun—CALL kwan	Kele—kay lay
Croly, the—CRO lee	Kelsey—KELL see
Cyr—sear	<i>koa</i> —KOH ah (fight to the death)
De' Ath—dyath	Koschat—KOS chat
DeHooges—deh HOOGS	Kraken—KRAY ken
Delano—deh LAN oh	Leila—LYE la
Delio—DEE lee oh	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Derrida—deh REED ah	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
des Collines—day CALL en ez	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
diva—DEE vah	Ley—lay
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Lilou—LEE loo
Dolivo—doh LEEV oh	Loghry—LOW gree
(double) entendre—ahn taun druh	Lowry—LAHW ree
Duchesne—doo SHANE	Lyra—LEER ah
Eavenson—EV en sun	Madea—mah DAY ah
Efran—EFF run	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Elowen—EL oh win	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Elvey—ELL vee	McElfresh—mac EL frish
Endelion—en DELL ee un	Meineke—MINE eh kee

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in the Apocalypse* (Book 36)
and *Afterword*

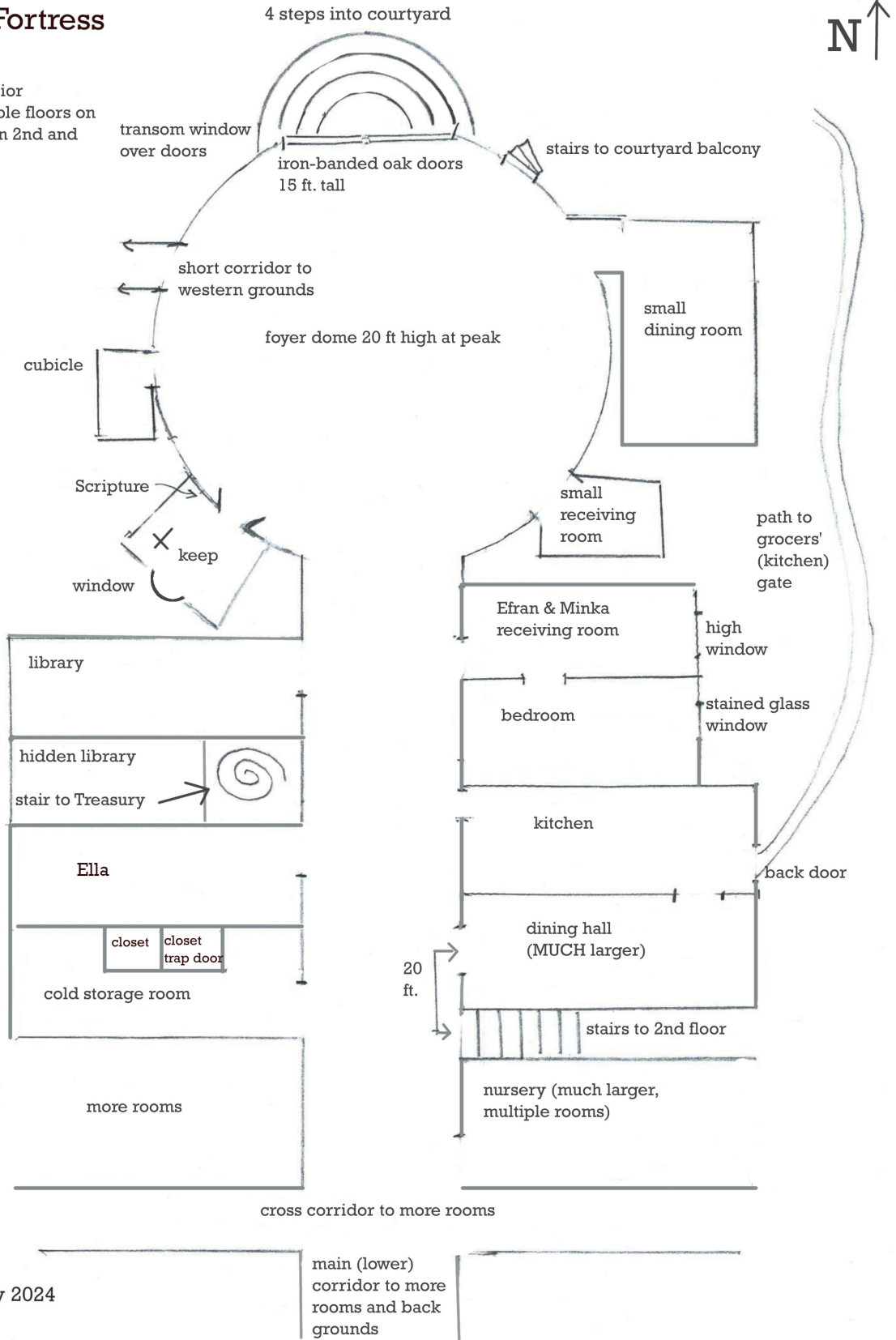
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Melchior—MEL key or	Svizzi—SVEH zee
Milo—ME low	Tangye—TAN jee
Minka—MINK ah	Tera—TEE rah
Minogue—men OGE (hard g)	Teschner—TESH nur
Moule--mool	Tica—TEE kah
Mumme—mum	Tiras—TEER us
mythopoeia—MITH uh pee ah	Tomer—TOH mur
négligée—neh GLIH zhay	Tourjee—TUR jee
Nephilim—neh FILL em	Trina—TREE nah
Nevars—neh VAIR ez	Venegas--VEN eh gus
Nibor—NEE bor	Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
Nicarber—neh CAR bur	Verlice—ver LEESE
Nini—NEE nee	Verrin—VAIR en
Nomus—NO mis	Viglian—VIG lee en
Nyarko—nuh YAR koh	Villalobos—VILL eh low bos
Oostendorp—OO sten dorp	Vories—VORE eez
Pelagatti—pell ah GOT ee	Weber—WE bur
Pherigo—FEAR eh go	Whately—WOT lee
Picti—PICK tee	Whobery—WAH bry
Pieta—pie ATE ah	Windry—WIN dree
Pleyel—PLAY el	Wirrin—WEER en
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)	Wissowa—weh SOW ah
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)	Woolnough—WOOL no
Popplewell—PAH pul well	Wystan—WIS tan
Poythress—POY tress	
Prie Mer—pre MARE	
primordial—pry MOR dee uhl	
Reinagle—REN ah gull	
Renée—ren AY	
Rensselaer—ren seh LAIR	
Revello—reh VEL oh	
Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee	
Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)	
Ruesegger—RU sig er	
Schillebeeckx—SKIL uh bakes	
Schmithals—SCHMIT uhls	
Scowcroft—SKO krawft	
Serrano—suh RAHN oh	
Shelmerdine—SHEL mur deen	
Skevi—SKEH vee	
soirée—SWAH ray	
Sosie—SO see	
Squitieri—squeh tee AIR ee	
Stephanos—steh FAHN os	
Stites—stights	
Suco—SUE coh	
Surchatain—SUR cha tan	
Surchataine—sur cha TANE	
surveillance—sur VAY luhns	



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



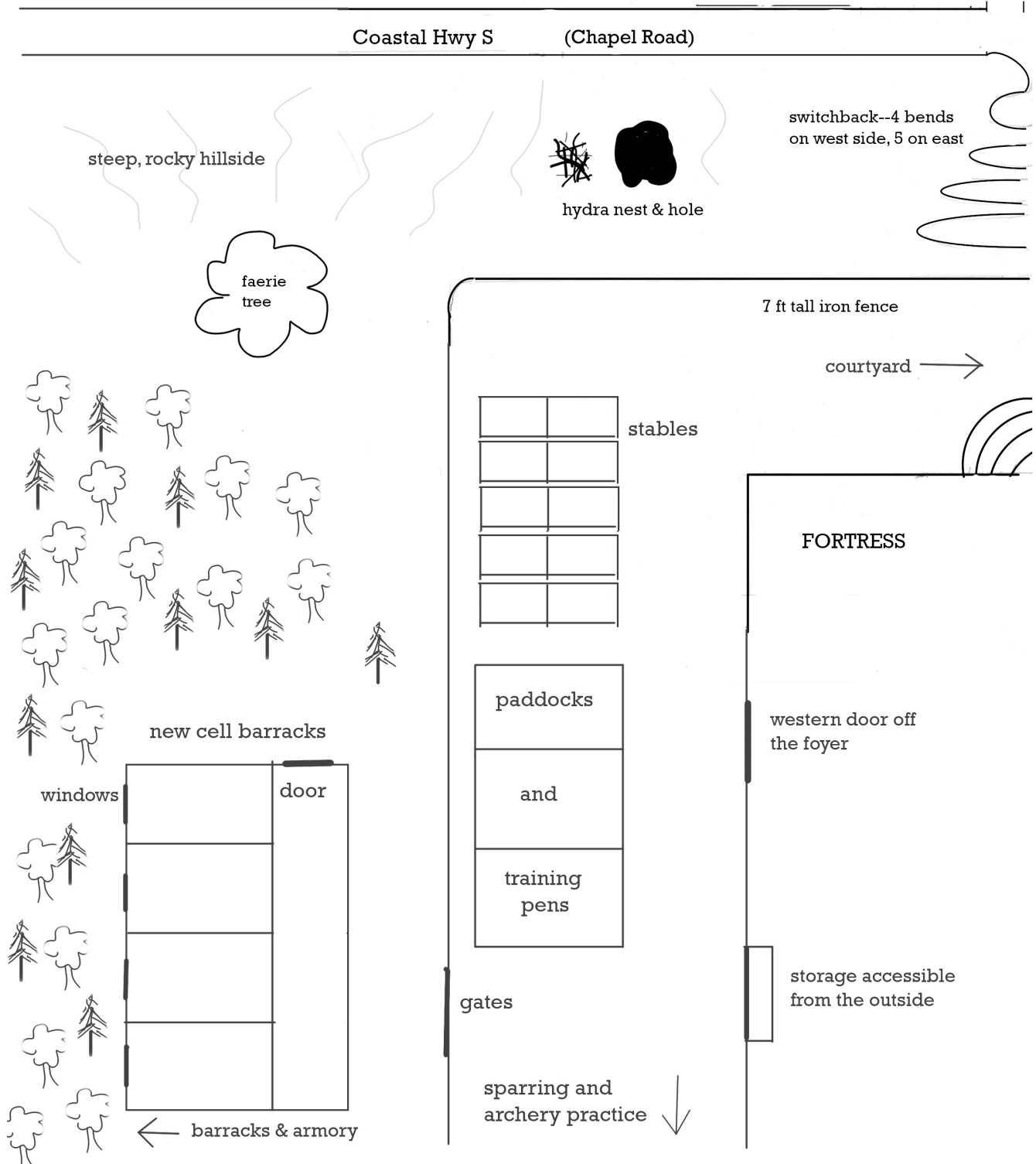
NOT TO SCALE

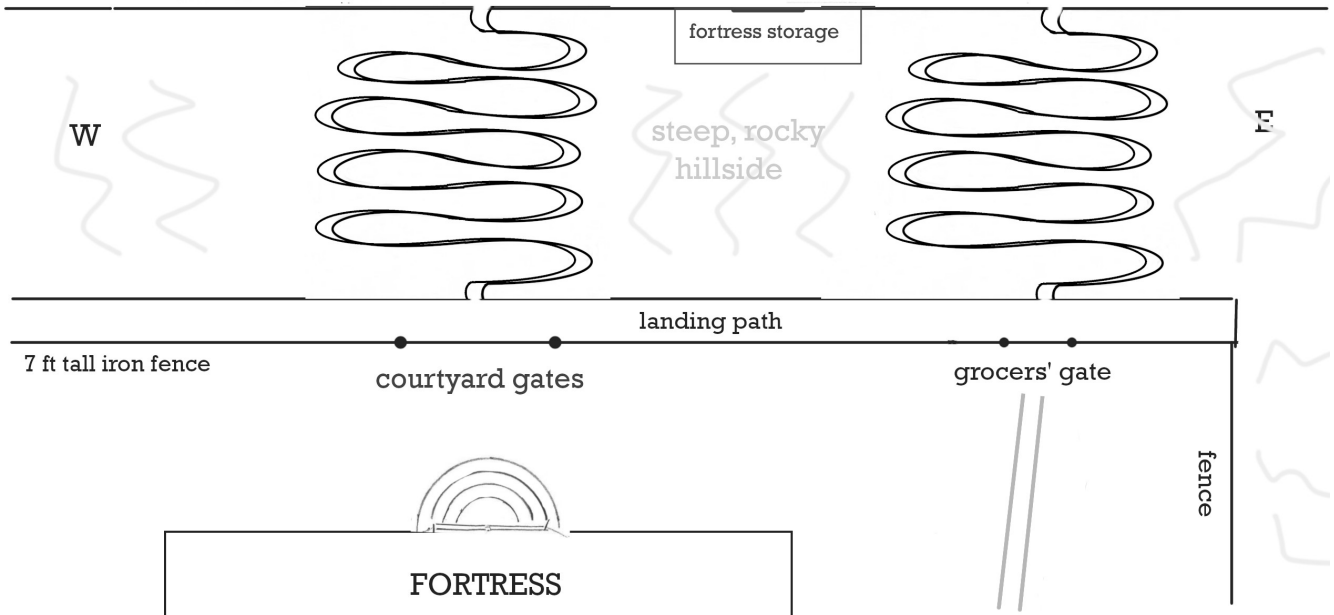
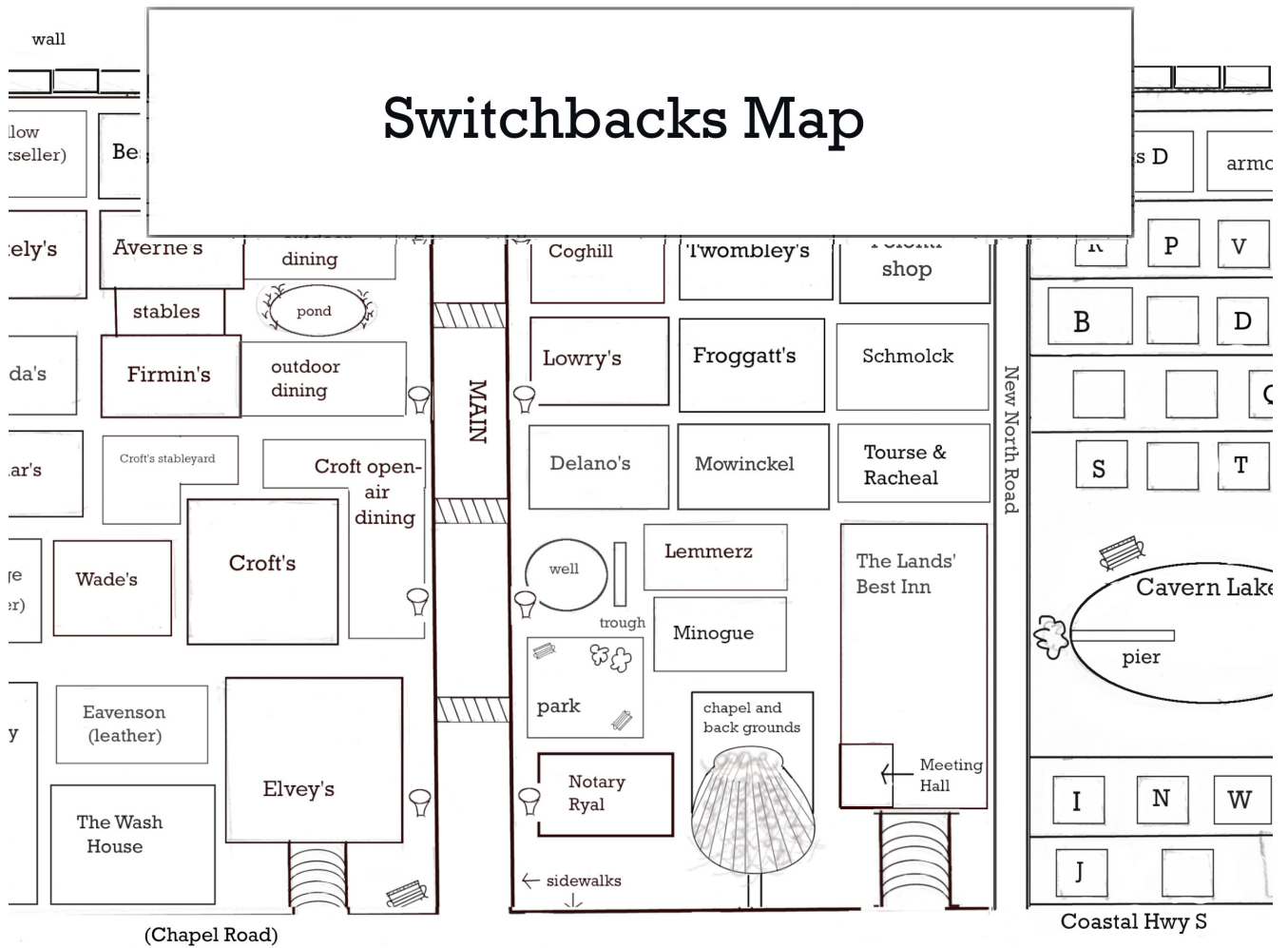
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main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Hilltop Northwestern Grounds

(NOT TO SCALE)

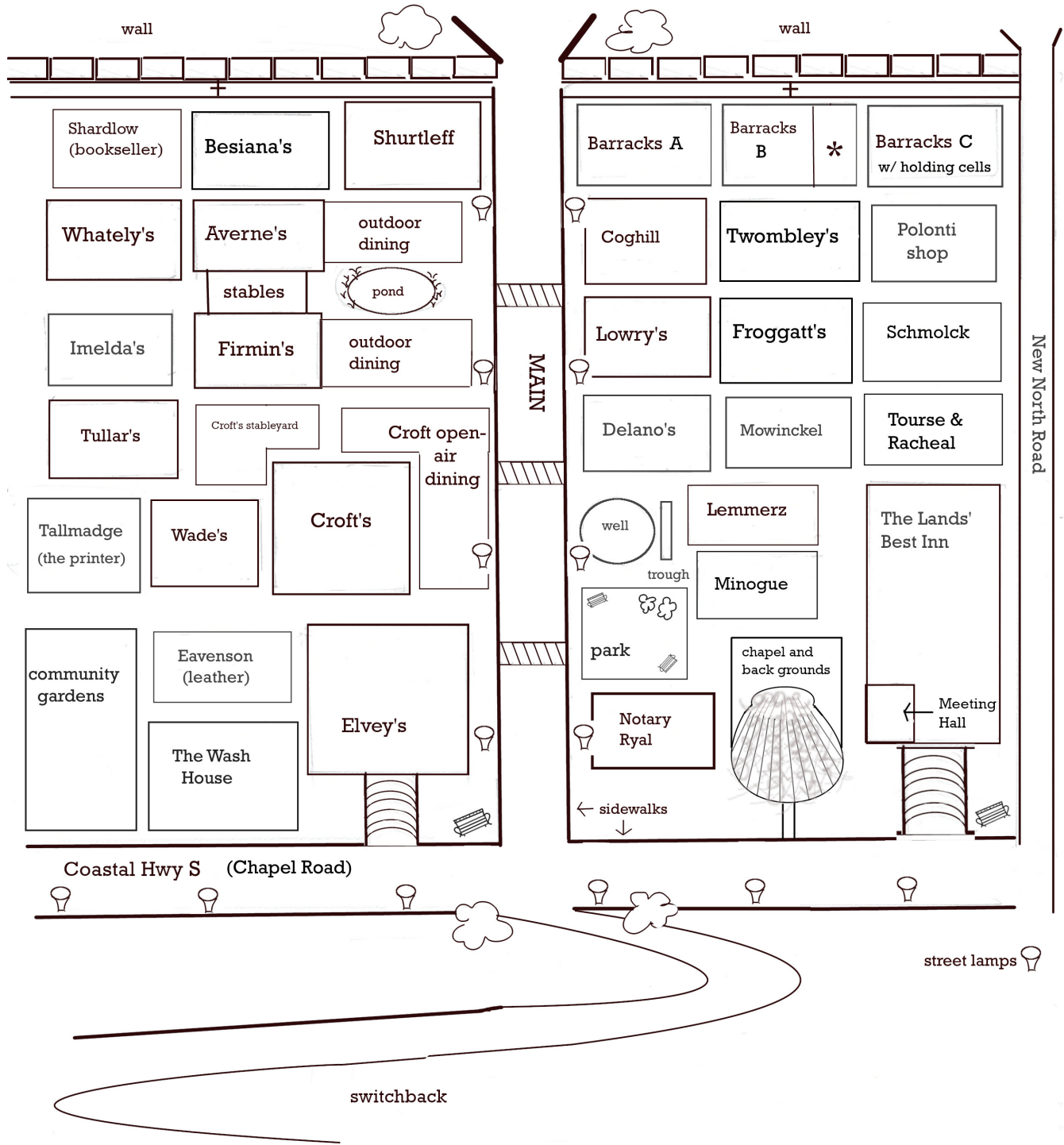


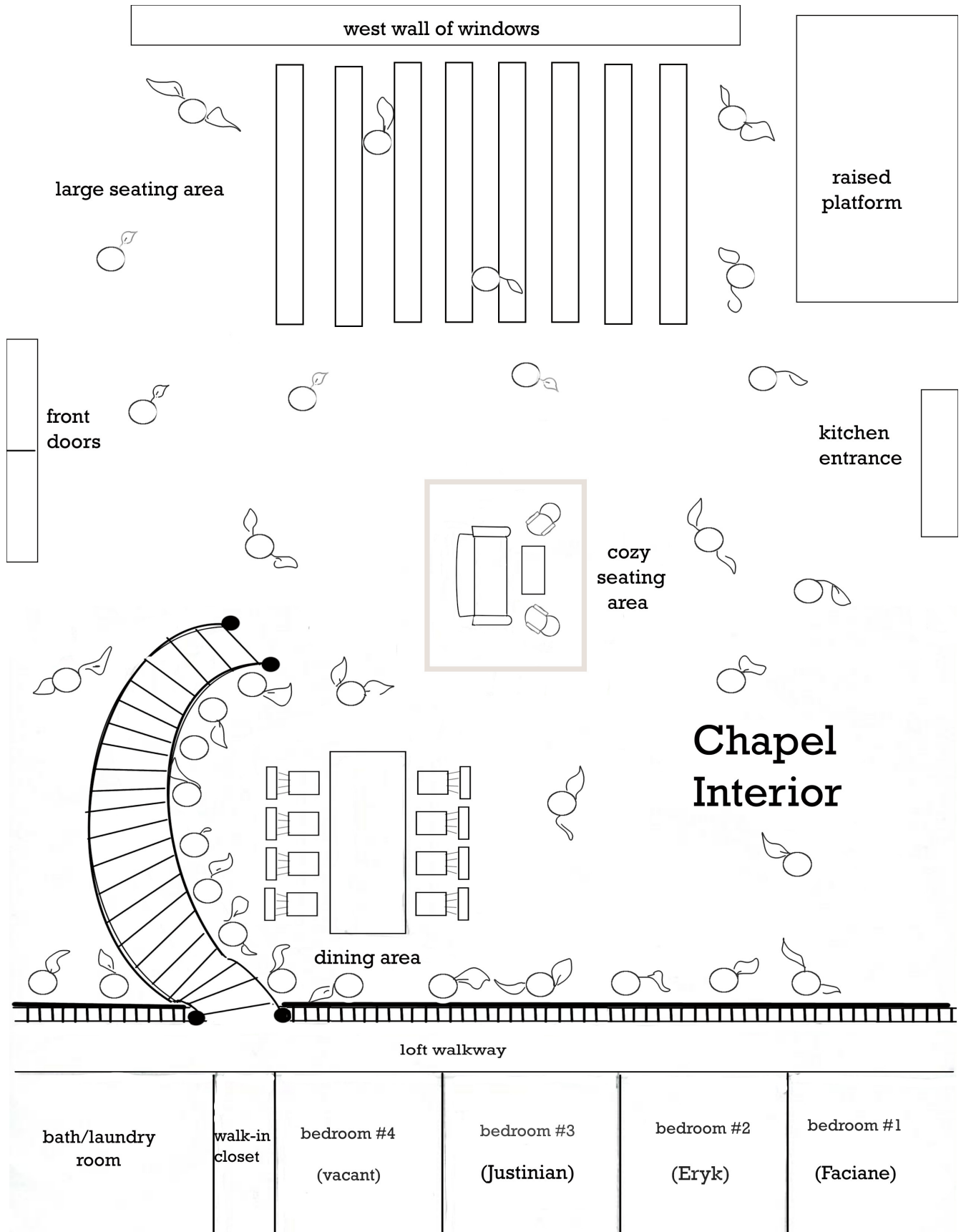


Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements





large seating area

west wall of windows

raised platform

front doors

kitchen entrance

cozy seating area

Chapel Interior

dining area

loft walkway

bath/laundry room

walk-in closet

bedroom #4
(vacant)

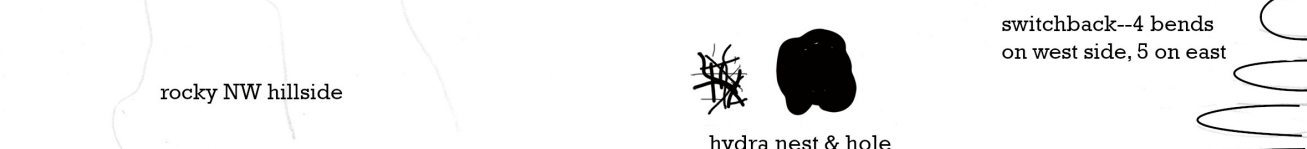
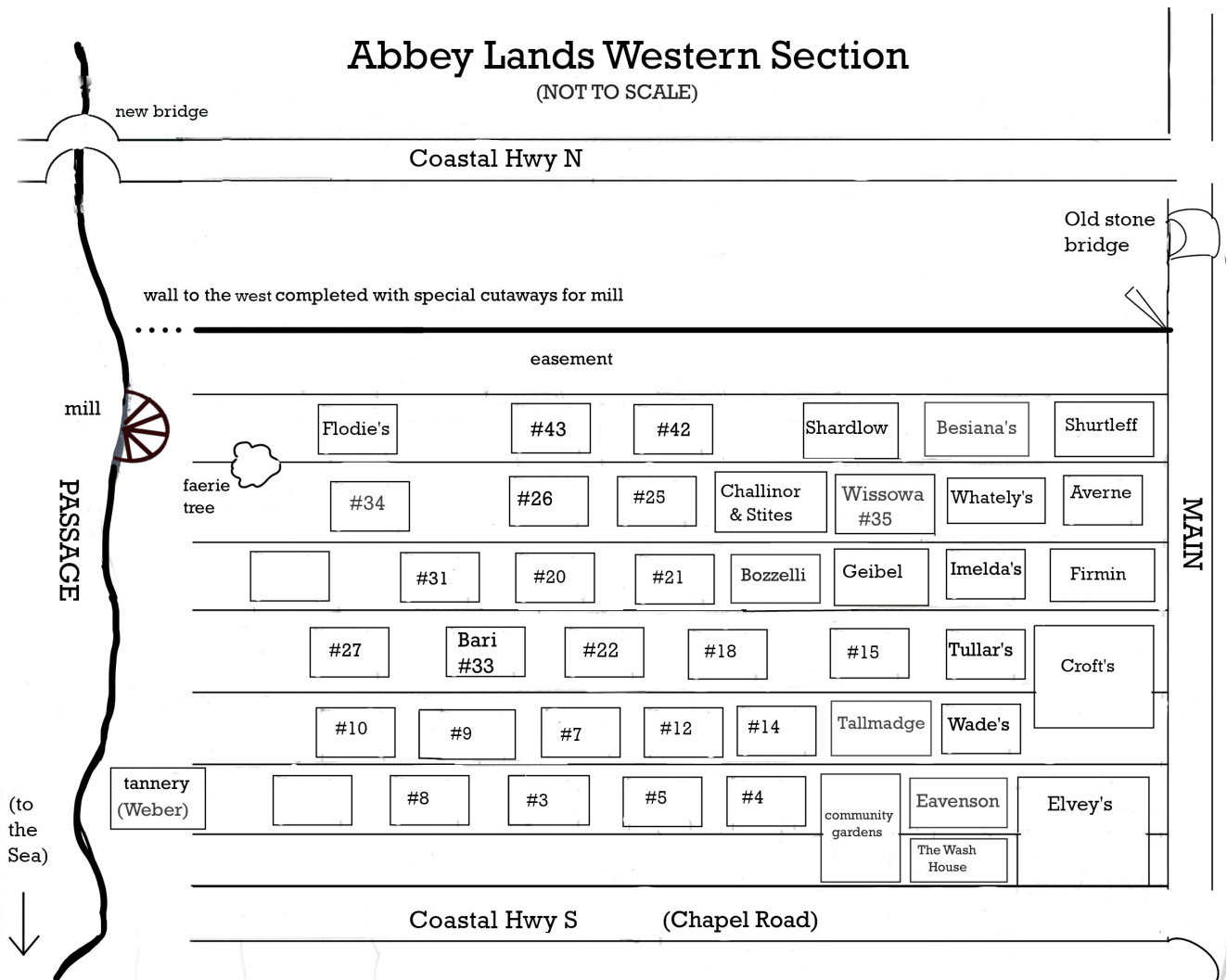
bedroom #3
(Justinian)

bedroom #2
(Eryk)

bedroom #1
(Faciane)

Abbey Lands Western Section

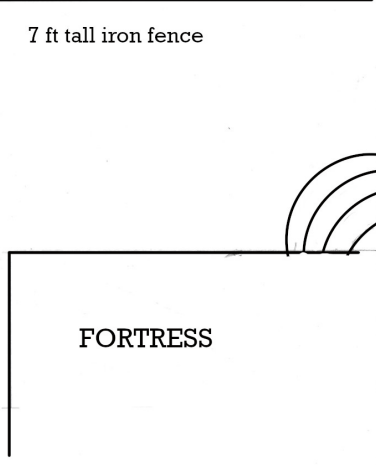
(NOT TO SCALE)



KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Joie & Cuneo
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 34 - Popplewell (potter)

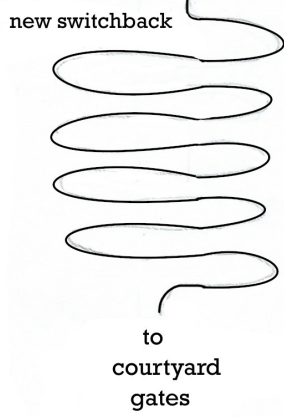
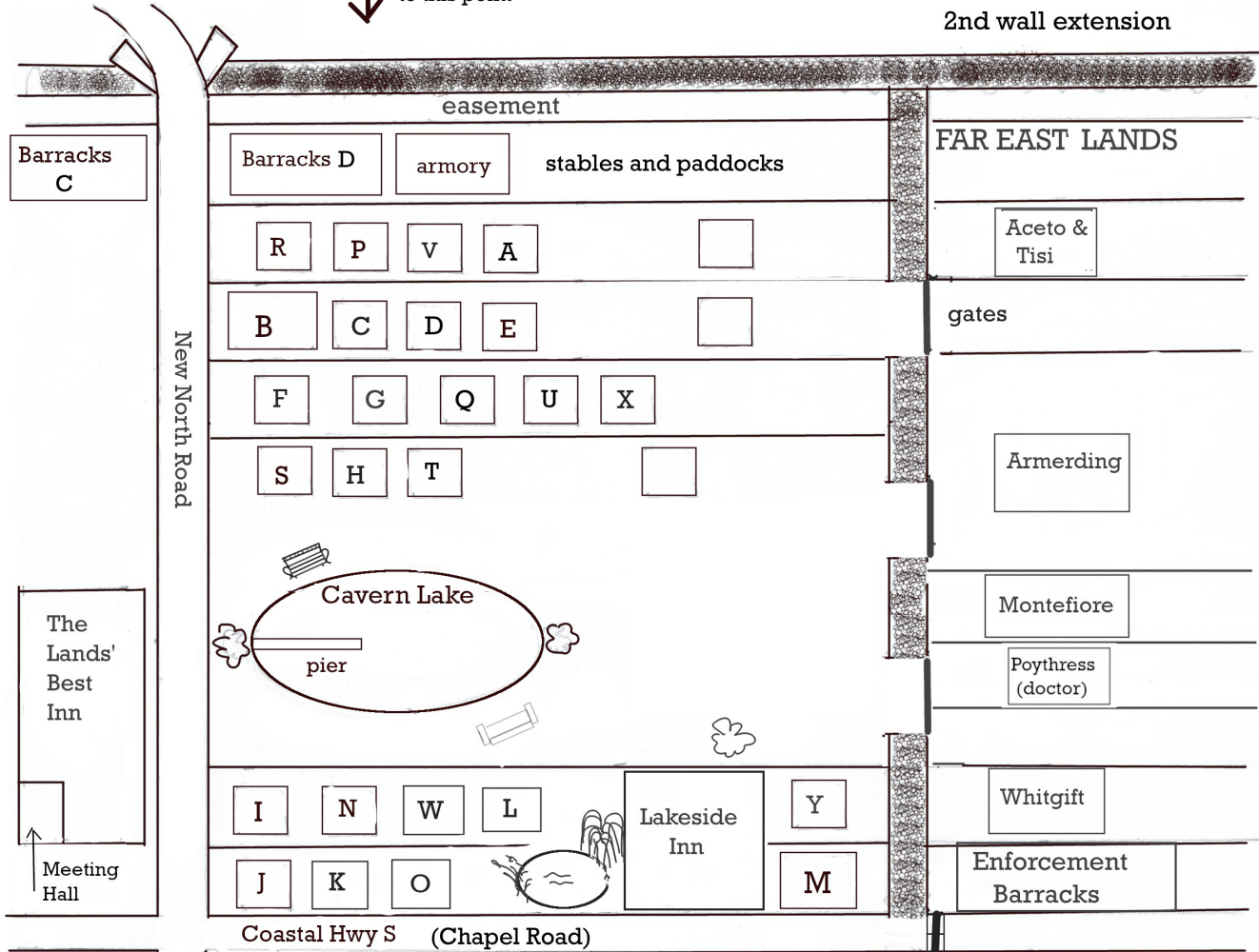
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

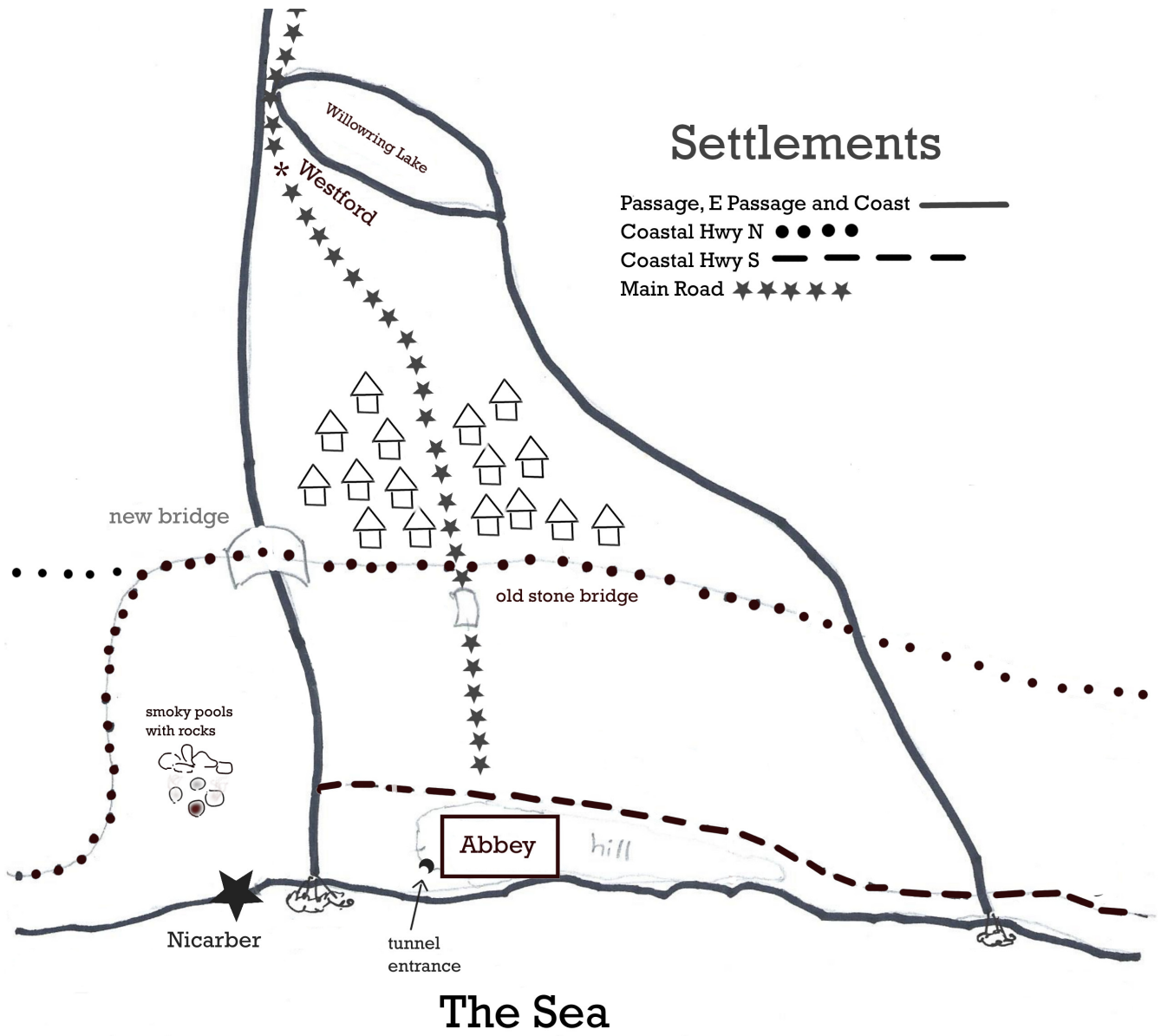


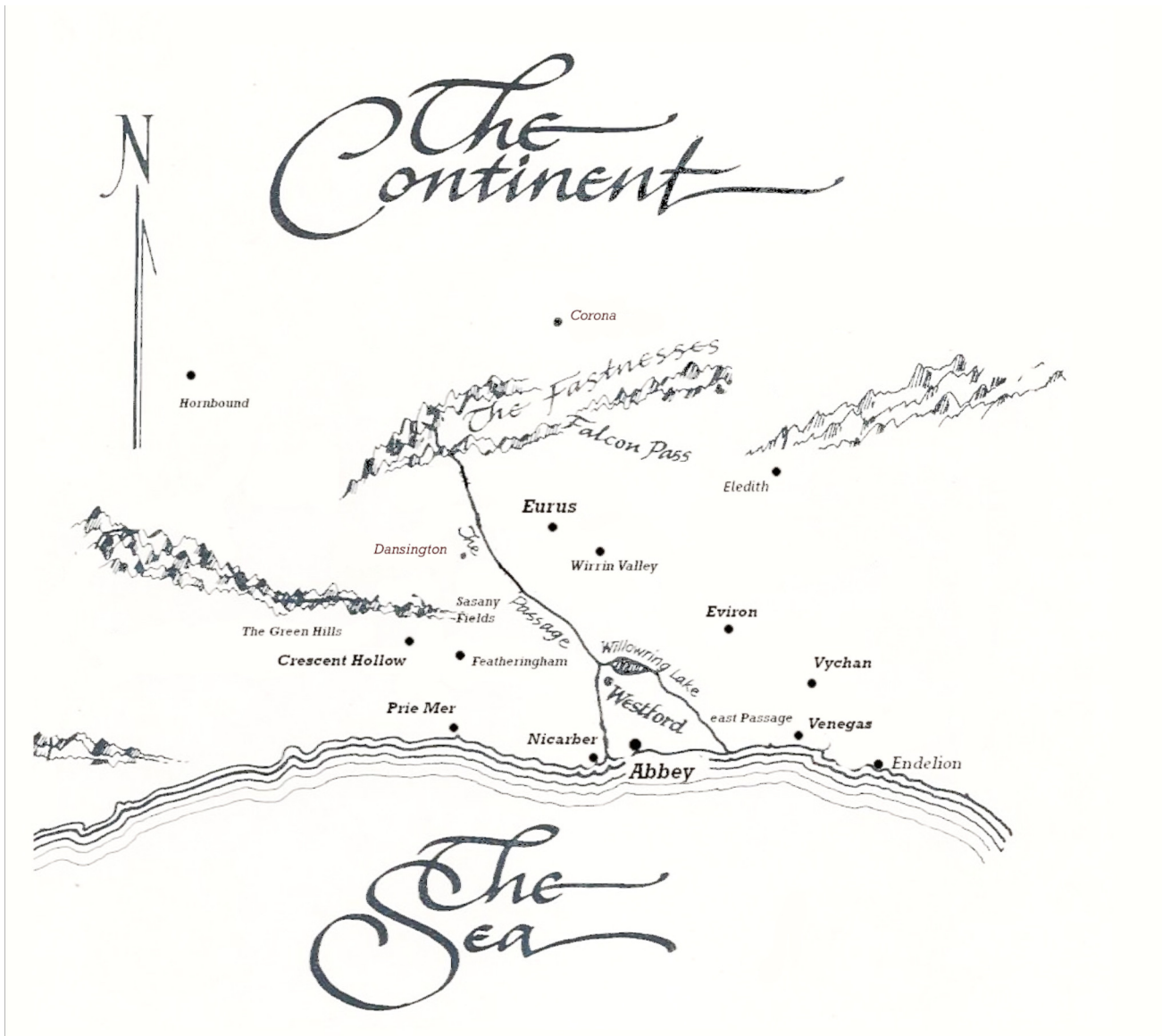
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Folliot's house (#61)
- F - East Lands Chapel
- G - Shelmerdine's
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - East Lands Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring
- 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

barricade →

Settlements







The End (Book 36:
Lord Efran in the Apocalypse)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

Well, here we are. I honestly could have written more, but all stories have to end. The background is another of my photographs of the trees across the street from the high school. The [ball of fire](#)¹ was one of the greatest finds ever, and the panicky mob was supplied by Google's [ImageFX](#) in response to the prompt, "a group of people running for their lives." Although there are a few quirks in the details, I was genuinely surprised by the rendering. I love the guy in front, who's really getting into it. Below are two more results of the prompt, which are acceptable. But I didn't have room for them.



[Efran](#)² is trying to get to Minka while he has [Treece](#) on his shoulder. I found Minka [here](#), and her hair came from [Wallpapers.com](#). The gray hair and spectacles is a selfie that was posterized and then inverted.

Robin Hardy
June 27, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. Created by [geralt](#) on Pixabay
2. Photographed by [Cathy B.](#) on Pexels