



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

Book 29

Lord Efran's
Reciprocal Gift

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

On November 19th—the day after Lissa’s cremation—Commander Wendt put Efran at the head of the table in the conference room of Barracks A to recount the final chapter of that whole sorry saga. In attendance besides Wendt and his Second Gabriel were the Notary Ryal, Administrator DeWitt, Steward Estes, Lady Minka, Lady Marguerite, the doctor Coghill, and all the Regiment Captains: Rigdon and Chee (from the hilltop barracks) and Towner and Stites (from the lower barracks). Taking notes were Ryal’s assistant Soames and Captain Rigdon’s scribe Oulton.

First, Efran covered as best as he could remember the contents of the letters from “Uncle Villin”—in reality, Showalter—to Lissa. Leaning back with his arms crossed on his chest, Efran looked up to the ceiling to admit, “I didn’t realize, after her parents dismissed me, how much I hurt her by completely cutting her out. I still think, and know, that that was the right thing to do—since I knew how they felt about me, and that there was no future for us, I didn’t see any reason to pretend to be ‘friends.’ But she told Showalter that I had been ‘brutal.’”

He paused to rest his eyes pensively on his wife. She looked back attentively, and a little sadly. He said, “I really do love your new hair. I don’t have to bend down to see you. Your hair’s just like a—halo that frames your face without hiding it. It was brutal of me to not let you cut it.” It was now short, wispy and almost white from the chemical straightener that the beautician had applied.

She flushed in mild embarrassment, glowing at him all the same. There were patient smiles around the table, but no one pressed him to resume.

“At any rate,” he went on, looking up to the ceiling, “Lissa did nurture a lot of hatred for me, and a growing interest in the Abbey, as that was Showalter’s obsession. He also taught her the art of replication—creating the strawmen—and chastised her for cutting corners on it. She never would take the time to create the spine from poplar, and she tried to substitute animal hair for the troll hair.”

He stopped to think, then said, “They did go on to a romantic relationship, and she lived with him, learning his arts, for the better part of two years. She also developed a strong interest in reanimation—coming back from the dead. He—warned her not to do it and then gave her complete instructions for how. I’m still trying to figure that out. Oh, one of the requirements for reanimation was human blood. So I went to Coghill’s—tell them what you were looking at when I came in,” he told Coghill.

So Coghill told the group about the vandalized blood cultures, and the blood on her fingers. From there, Efran told his silent listeners about their struggle to get her cremated, given Showalter’s warnings to her about dying by fire, and the burnt body parts that came crawling out of the oven.

Efran said, “That’s when I heard Showalter cackling at her from wherever he is now—telling her that, since she didn’t listen to him, she’d gotten immortality for all her little burned bits and pieces. I invoked my title as Lord Sovereign to deny her habitation on the Lands, and—Nakham or someone sent white-hot fire that burned all the rest to fine ash that blew away. Wherever she is, if she still exists at all, it’s not here.”

After a short silence, Wendt asked, “What can you tell us about why she took Joshua?”

Efran tensed momentarily, then nodded. “Part of it was revenge, I’m sure. Another part, I think, was her plan of reanimation. Showalter had failed, so, I suppose she believed anything more was up to her. She had to die with

the least harm possible to her body, and not by her own hand. A bow shot would be ideal, and just walking down Main would confirm that we have archers all up and down the street. I believe she also noticed my habit of checking in with Ryal in the mornings.”

Wendt looked at Gabriel, who said, “There’s more to it than that, Captain. She’s the one who had a man deliver a message to you that Ryal wanted to talk to you at that time, which he hadn’t sent. What’s more, the people who own the horse farm that Tess and Loriot went to view are friends of Lady Cocci, and apparently invited them to visit on those two days—the fifteenth and sixteenth—on Lissa’s request. But they’re not interested in selling, and refused to talk to us when we asked about it. Loriot knew it was a setup, somehow, and didn’t want to go, but Tess wanted to, badly.”

While his listeners absorbed this, Gabriel went on: “Lissa’s planning was—detailed. She had a beautician down from Westford to cut and color her hair in her suite at The Lands’ Best Inn. Then she had an accomplice steal some of Tess’ work clothes and Lady Ella’s work boots. It could have wrecked her plans when Lord Justinian found Thurlow and brought him down, but she and he were pretty well estranged by that time, and he was set on finding new investors for his gabbots, so, didn’t pay any attention to what she was doing.”

After glancing at his notes, Gabriel added, “Oh, yes--the horse she used was her own that she had left in the hilltop stables to ride. And she had an accomplice on the back grounds ready to hand off Joshua to her when she rode by. It was just a coincidence that Enon had him on his shoulders.”

Efran said, “I want those accomplices gone from the Lands.”

Gabriel replied, “We don’t know who they were, Captain. Since no one could identify them, we think they were strawmen.”

Coghill interjected, “We may have found those yesterday, or a few of them. Two more men were found dead of broken necks in the easement along the north wall. Tolliver confirmed they were strawmen. And, there was a tweed flat cap left on them like a calling card.”

“The sprites again,” Wendt murmured.

“Oh!” Efran remembered. “Yes, they came to cheer me on when I was holding the oven door closed.” So he had to describe his gallery of supporters on Coghill’s roof. Then he said, “It was personal for them. I don’t know why.”

There was silence while they all contemplated that, then Captain Towner asked, “What about Lady Cocci?”

DeWitt answered, “She’s a real person, and is genuinely interested in the alliance that we were hoping to establish with the nobles rebuilding Westford. We’re in the process of working out an agreement with her, Lord Colquhoun, and Lord McElfresh for our financial support in the rebuilding in exchange for military and diplomatic support from them.”

Efran noted, “She gave me Lissa’s letters, thinking that they were from me. Cocci never even looked at them.”

“Why would Lissa keep them?” Captain Chee asked, scowling at the inscrutability of women.

Efran looked over to Minka and Marguerite. “Any thoughts?” he asked them.

Minka’s expression went guarded, and Marguerite said, “I could only offer a guess.” The men looked to her

expectantly, and she said, "As a posthumous defense, perhaps. I believe she came to hate Showalter more than you, Efran. You may have been callous in breaking off with her, but you never used her. He did."

Efran looked to the south-facing window. "He taunted her 'immortal debris.' And now I think he was leading her on to do it, just so he could be proved right in telling her she'd fail."

"You heard him speak?" Wendt asked.

"What I believe was him, yes," Efran said.

"Then, where is he? What is he?" Wendt asked.

Efran's eyes looked to the window again. "What he always feared to become, I think—a formless, impotent ghost."

Efran briefly closed his eyes, then looked at Minka. "You were right, again. Joshua was covered all along; that was a test of my obedience, my trust, which I failed in every way but falling in the right direction, and that I did without choosing. But I am learning, Minka; I am learning."

"I know," she whispered, her eyes tearing up because his were wet. Watching her, he wondered, *What's wrong with me, that I have to learn the same things over and over again?* And from long ago, Therese whispered, *I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them.* (2 Pet. 1:12)

"All right," he exhaled, leaning back.

After a few moments of silence, Wendt asked, "Have we covered the main questions?"

Ryal said, "I believe so, Commander, and I've removed the outside ladder to a locked shed."

There was quiet chuckling, and Wendt said, "That's prudent, Lord Ryal. Then we'll dismiss until something further arises."

"God help us, no," DeWitt muttered as they all stood.

When Efran went over to give Minka a hand up from her chair, Marguerite told them, "Wendt has to work, but I'd love for you to stop by the chapel just for a little while."

"Of course, Marguerite," Efran said, knowing that Minka would want to. She nodded with a slight smile.

They exited Barracks A to begin walking up Main. Efran had no qualms about Kraken making a nuisance of himself when he was left up hilltop, because he was becoming firmly attached to Joshua now. The horse and his boy were still working on getting Joshua up on Kraken's bare back without assistance. But that was a secondary concern, what with all the loads of compost that had to be hauled to the garden beds before winter planting. Someone was always available to get Joshua seated on Kraken for that.

As Efran, Minka and Marguerite progressed up the sidewalk on Main, he let Minka walk beside her auntie, holding her hand, while he followed behind them. Their bodyguards Allyr and Doudney followed him. Minka still had her head down in public, aware of the sidelong stares at her short hair. But two days after her new appearance, the looks she received were more evaluative, as the women wondered, *Can I pull that off? Should I even try?* Ella's and Rondi's successful haircuts had underscored that question in many minds.

Hartshough met them at the doors of the chapel. “Ah. Lady Marguerite, Lady Minka, Lord Efran—may I interest you in refreshers?”

With other concerns, Efran looked over Hartshough’s shoulder to ask, “Who’s here?”

At the same time, Minka was asking with a devious face, “What’ve you got, Hartshough?”

“No one at present, Lord Efran. I am experimenting with a melon drink, Lady Minka,” Hartshough said.

“We’ll stay for just a minute,” Efran said, leery of the possibility of other visitors.

And Minka was saying, “Ooooh, I want to try that.”

“Very good, Lord Efran. My pleasure, Lady Minka,” he said, escorting them to the patio table. Minka led Efran while he scanned the hall for visitors whom he hoped to avoid and Marguerite followed with a pursed smile. The bodyguards entered happily, given the allure of Hartshough’s bracers.

Marguerite, Minka and Efran sat at the patio table while the men took seats slightly apart. Still checking over his shoulder warily, Efran asked, “Where is Verlice?”

Marguerite replied, “He’s actually spending a great deal of time at Elvey’s as their stylist. He’s also helping design the new, softer dresses they’re coming out with. Last I heard, Faciane was helping him in that capacity, as well.”

Minka looked cautious. “I get the impression that Lady Cocci doesn’t care for the soft look.”

Marguerite said, “No, she doesn’t, so we’ll see how Elvey accommodates her. She will, if for no other reason than to provide alternatives when the ladies get tired of softness and serenity.”

“Diversify,” Efran acknowledged, still glancing back into the hall as though unexpected guests would appear from under the dining table.

“Oh! I do have something you may be interested in,” Marguerite told Minka. “They’re in the hall. I’ll be right back.” She got up and left, then returned immediately with a small tray which she set on the table. “Since Faciane had been working with Dallarosa, she—Dallarosa, I mean—stopped by with examples of her newest designs for Faciane to copy, if she liked. I don’t think Faciane is still making them, but I thought you might like them.” And she put the tray of a half-dozen dangly earrings in front of Minka.

“I love them all!” Minka cried.

“We’ll pay you for them,” Efran told her.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll have Hartshough pack them up for you,” Marguerite said.

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Chapter 2

At that time, the very Hartshough entered the patio with a tray of tall glasses of something light green with sprigs of mint. He handed them to the three at the table, then served Allyr and Doudney, who raised their glasses to him in appreciation. But they waited for the Captain and ladies to pick up their drinks before they drank their own.

Holding the mint to the side, Minka took an eager sip. Then she turned to gasp, "Hartshough! However did you come up with this?"

Bowing, Hartshough said, "Trial and error, Lady Minka."

"It's amazing. So refreshing!" And she took a long draught.

Marguerite admitted, "You have a special gift with the bracers, Hartshough."

"Thank you, Lady," he said, bowing again. Then everyone looked at Efran.

Not about to be accused of cowardice again, Efran took an evaluative taste. Then he paused, lips tight, eyes sharp, to murmur, "The spice gives it a real kick. It's . . . not ground coriander."

"No, Lord Efran," Hartshough confirmed.

"Nor caraway," Efran said, taking another drink.

"No, Lord Efran," Hartshough repeated.

"Curry?" Efran asked cautiously.

"No, sir," Hartshough replied.

By now Efran was racking his brain. As he was taking another taste, the doorbell rang, so Hartshough was obliged to go answer it. He took the tray of earrings as he left. Moments later, as Efran was still wrestling with the mystery in hand, Hartshough returned to the patio with Verlice following in a cumin-colored suit (brownish yellow).

Noting his mother's guests, Verlice removed his hat to bow to her and Minka. "Good afternoon," he said. "Ah, may I—?"

"Wait," Efran said tensely, deep in concentration. Minka and Marguerite began silently laughing. "Paprika," Efran said, with a touch of desperation.

"Regrettably, no, Lord Efran," Hartshough said.

As Efran was determinedly taking another drink, Verlice began, "Well, if we've got that—"

"I'm thinking," Efran said, irritated, which did arrest Verlice mid-sentence.

At that time, Hartshough was obliged to go to the door again, this time returning with Lord Justinian and Lady Caova. Marguerite greeted her, but Minka gaped at her short haircut and casual dress. While Justinian sat her at

the table with Minka, Marguerite, and Efran, Hartshough asked, "May I interest you in refreshers, Lady Caova? Lord Justinian?"

She shook her head, but Justinian said, "Anything you make, I'll welcome, Hartshough." As the butler bowed and moved off, Justinian asked Verlice, "What's new at Elvey's?"

Verlice began cautiously, "I'd love to tell you—"

"Turmeric," Efran said with finality. When Hartshough appeared with Justinian's glass, Efran repeated, "Turmeric."

"Sadly, no, Lord Efran." Hartshough sounded genuinely grieved to disappoint him.

Taking a sip, Justinian said, "Oh, the cumin is the perfect touch, Hartshough."

As Efran's eyes glazed over, Marguerite laughed, "He's cheating, Efran; he had it last night and found out then what was in it." Efran sat back to drain his glass while eyeing Justinian, so Marguerite asked, "What did you want to tell us, Verlice?"

"Yes," Verlice said, warily regarding the Polonti thinker who was now chewing on the mint sprig. "Elvey has asked me to design an exclusive line for Lady Cocci."

Efran regarded him in quick interest. "Here or in Westford?"

"I'll be taking sketches and preliminary constructions to her at LeVisay," Verlice said.

"Her house in Westford," Efran clarified.

"Yes," Verlice said.

"Good. That's good," Efran murmured, glancing off.

"I'm glad you approve," Verlice said dryly.

Efran looked back at him. "If Lords Baroffio, Lundeen, or Callisto show up, we'll want to hear it right away."

Verlice squinted. "I thought they were dead—at least, Lundeen and Callisto."

"No, they're not," Efran said. "So if you see them, send word back to us at once."

Hartshough then returned with a small velvet bag. "The earrings, Lady Minka."

"Thank you, Hartshough." She draped the satin cord around her wrist. Meanwhile, Lady Caova was studying Minka's hair. She winced slightly at the scrutiny, and Caova asked, "Who did yours?"

"Lady Lovedahl in Westford," Minka said reluctantly.

"Are you happy with it?" Caova asked.

Minka hesitated, so Efran said, "I am."

Minka and Caova both turned to him, one exhaling in gratitude while the other asked, "You don't prefer her hair long?"

"I prefer to see her face," he said, smiling.

Caova looked archly at Justinian. He, studying the interior of his nearly empty glass, murmured, "Thank you, dear brother."

Verlice, peering at Caova, asked, "Didn't I see you on stage at Firmin's in a burlesque routine?"

As she looked at him in surprise and Justinian almost dropped his glass, Efran stood. "We're done here. Thank you for the bracer, Hartshough. It was excellent, as usual."

"You're most welcome, Lord Efran," Hartshough said.

Efran allowed Minka a moment to hug her auntie, then they were out the front doors with their bodyguards. Before ascending the switchback, Efran dismissed them to return to Barracks A. Then he draped an arm around Minka's shoulders to walk her up.

She wrapped one arm around his waist, making sure the velvet bag was secure. Then she murmured, "Thank you, even if you were lying about liking my hair."

He laughed, hugging her shoulders. "No, about this, I'm being honest. It really has forced me to see you differently. I—had you caged in this little box. I'm glad you broke out of it without running away from me for good."

"I just wish everyone else would get over it," she muttered.

"No, no—you've started something new. Let's see how it plays out," he insisted.

The moment they arrived in the fortress foyer, a door guard informed Efran that he was wanted in the second-floor workroom. Nodding, he progressed to the foot of the stairs with her in hand, then asked, "Do you want to go up to the workroom with me or go out back to see the children?"

Minka paused, conflicted. "I want to see the children, but—I'm scared, but, I have to learn to walk out with my head raised, don't I?"

"When you're ready," Efran said.

"All right, I'm going out," she said, taking a breath.

"Good." He kissed her head. "And you don't need pomade!"

"No, that wouldn't help at all," she conceded. So he went on up the stairs while she headed down the corridor.

Exiting onto the grounds, she looked out to see Joshua on Kraken's bare back. The almost-two-year-old was holding onto the hauling traces while a soldier walked them from the new garden area back to the compost pile. The other children saw her, and waved. While many of them were busy in their own small plots, ten-year-old Hassie ran over with Jera (8 years old) and Acy (7).

Hassie's curly hair was already short, but she showed off Jera and Acy with pride. Hassie crowed, "They loved our hair, so let Toby cuts theirs!"

"It's so cute!" Minka cried, falling to her knees to hug them. They hugged her tightly in return. While Acy was gratified to look like the older girls, Jera was still uncomfortable about cutting off what few curls she had. Noah's eight-year-old sister Ivy glanced at them in unconcern, having kept her long hair. At the moment, she was surreptitiously picking Hassie's chrysanthemums.

"We're the brave girls," Hassie told Minka smugly.

"Sometimes," Minka laughed.

Upstairs, Efran entered the workroom to sit at his usual chair and put his feet up on the table. He regarded the faerie tree growing up from the center of the table and down through the floor. Although it was getting fat again, Efran sighed in relief. Its dying at every little problem irritated him.

DeWitt laid down his quill and leaned back as Estes said, "For the severity of that last attack, you handled it well, Efran, despite your outburst at Minka. Are we done with Showalter, then?"

Efran groan-laughed, spreading his hands in frustration. "As far as I know. The role of the sprites still interests me, but, that's something else I don't understand. Is—that what you wanted to talk about?"

"No," DeWitt said. "Gabriel just sent up word that Thurlow claims to have received a visitor from Eurus, and Wendt wants him brought up here. So, we're killing time until he shows up"—which was DeWitt's ironic way of saying they weren't going to let Thurlow interfere with their work.

Efran glanced off. "Justinian brought Thurlow down from Eurus—when?"

"That was the eleventh, a little over a week ago," DeWitt said.

"And they were in the middle of a civil war then," Efran said.

"Correct," DeWitt said.

"Did this visitor stop in Westford?" Efran asked.

"We don't know," DeWitt said.

So Efran leaned his head back on the chair rail and closed his eyes. He appeared to be relaxing, but inwardly he was thinking, *Lord God, what is this? What is brewing in Eurus that will spill over on us?*

Some minutes later, Hollis came to the door to salute. "Captain, Steward, Administrator—Thurlow is here with his visitor Beekman." He then stepped aside for Thurlow, smiling and triumphant, to enter with a weary man in rumpled tradesman clothes. Efran removed his feet from the table to sit up.

"Good news, gentlemen!" Thurlow said. "The working class and nobility of Eurus have agreed on a plan to restore order, and that is the wholesale production of gabbots!"

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Chapter 3

The Fortress administrators stared at their guests, then DeWitt said, “Yes, we’d like to hear all about this, so please have a seat.” As Thurlow and Beekman drew out chairs, DeWitt ordered the tree, “Skinny up.” The visitors startled as the tree hefted itself upwards to reduce its girth by almost half.

“I am DeWitt, this is Steward Estes and Captain Efran at the head of the table, there. Now, Beekman? Tell us what you know, please.”

Before he could speak, Efran looked to Hollis at the door. “Bring them up plates and ales, please.”

But Thurlow said, “Oh, we’ve been fed at Firmin’s, Captain. I’m anxious for you to hear the news.”

“All right, then, stay,” Efran nodded to Hollis, who resumed his position at the door. “Yes, Beekman?” Efran added.

“Ah, yes sir,” Beekman said, glancing over all of them. “We’ve had a good bit of fighting over the last couple of weeks, and so then the nobles that were left in the palace—ah, particularly the lords Hammersnark and Fagle-Stickel, met with the labor leaders Ufford and Gatlin. And, they worked out terms of peace.”

DeWitt said, “We’d like to see those terms.”

“I don’t have anything in writing, sir,” Beekman said. “The main thing that came down was that the nobles will pay for the production of, ah, gabbots—as many gabbots as can be produced, and, everyone else can concentrate on their own preferred work.”

“We want to see these gabbots,” Efran said.

Agreeable but reserved, Thurlow said, “Ah, we don’t have any in production yet, but I do have a prototype under glass for you to have a peek at, so, if you’ll come—”

Efran looked at Hollis again. “Take him to get his prototype and bring it back up.”

“Yes, Captain.” Hollis came to stand over Thurlow’s chair.

The inventor looked hesitant. “Oh. Well, what I meant by letting you have a peek, is, that you come down—”

“Go get it,” Efran said blankly. Reluctantly, Thurlow stood for Hollis to nudge him out. Then Efran looked back at Beekman. “What are these gabbots and why are they so important?”

Beekman glanced back at the departing Thurlow, then said, “They’re just—mechanical creatures, sir, that can carry things and pull things. Somewhat. If the load’s not heavy. ”

DeWitt leaned forward. “That sounds like the toys Froggatt’s sells. How heavy a load can they carry or pull?”

Beekman looked uncomfortable. “I don’t rightly know. I think it depends on how large a gabbot you’ve got.”

Estes asked, "How large is the standard gabbot?"

"About—eighteen inches, maybe two feet long," Beekman said. He was growing more uncomfortable by the moment.

DeWitt asked, "How are they powered?"

"By some mechanism inside it, sir. I don't know the science," Beekman admitted.

"What is your relationship to Thurlow?" DeWitt asked.

"Just a friend. I helped him gather the metals for the trial models," Beekman said.

Estes asked, "What metals?"

"Ah, tin, mostly. Steel. Some bits of antimony, and some other metals I don't know," Beekman said. He was noticeably sweating.

"Antimony . . . ?" Efran peered at DeWitt.

"Isn't that a laxative?" DeWitt asked.

"Or makeup," Estes said.

"Not on Minka," Efran said grimly.

"Yes, sir, I don't really know much about them. Thurlow's the inventor," Beekman said.

"Who helped him?" Efran asked, lowering his chin.

"Me. Just me. I'm his—paid assistant." Beekman peered at him as though gauging his credulity.

"All right." Efran glanced at his administrators, who had nothing more to ask of the assistant who knew nothing. So they went back to work while Efran leaned his head back and closed his eyes again. Beekman sat looking at the tree. Tentatively, he reached out to touch the trunk, which pushed back so that he jumped. Thereafter, he kept his hands to himself. Estes and DeWitt hardly looked up.

It was about a half hour later that Efran opened his eyes and said, "They're taking a long time to get this prototype."

DeWitt asked, "Where did Thurlow say he was staying?"

"Firmin's," Efran said, getting up.

He had gone to the door with the intent of summoning a man, but Hollis appeared, saluting. He stepped into the room to say, "Pardon the delay, Captain, but, Thurlow was not right anxious to bring up his prototype. So I had to get help."

While he moved aside, Beekman attempted to hide behind the faerie tree. Thurlow, carrying what appeared to be

an armload of sticks, was pushed into the room from behind. Except, the sticks were moving. Thurlow glanced around with a frozen grin as Leneghan and Lambdin entered behind him—obviously, having encouraged him to bring his prototype up to the workroom as instructed.

“Here it is, gentlemen,” he said, glassy-eyed and pale. “One of the first gabbots off the line. Of hardy and versatile make.” The device looked like a long stick with an array of smaller sticks along both sides. It crawled off his arm onto the table.

DeWitt leaned forward to peer at it. “You made this?” he queried in disbelief.

“Looks all natural, doesn’t it?” Thurlow smiled with gaping mouth.

Efran was shaking his head. “How can it carry or transport anything? Even if it were made of steel, it’s too small and flimsy.” Beekman had stepped away from the table to allow unimpeded scrutiny of the gabbot. Now, checking continually to see that all eyes remained focused on the table, he slid quietly behind the large soldiers to vanish out the door.

Estes was leaning over the gabbot as it felt its way along the tabletop. “It’s got a head, and eyes, and antennae. I’ve never seen the like, but, this is a living creature.”

“It does look incredibly real, doesn’t it? We’re very proud of the verisimilitude,” Thurlow said with the same wide-eyed, frozen smile.

Efran walked over to put a hand on the back of Thurlow’s neck. After feeling for a moment, Efran shook his head. “He’s real, unless someone mastered the poplar spines for the strawmen.”

DeWitt sat back down. “So, this is a scam, isn’t it?”

Thurlow gaped at him, then sat on the table. “Here it is,” he said intently. “I had to produce something, anything, to convince the nobles that I was worth keeping alive. So, I ran across this on my way to interview with them at the palace, and—just plucked it up to see how I could sell it.”

“In Eurus?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” Thurlow said.

Efran was laughing, “But what about the counterfeit gabbots there?”

“Here’s the thing,” Thurlow said seriously, and everyone in the room started laughing. No one noticed the live gabbot swaying up the faerie tree into its branches. “No, see, I had to convince Baroffio that I had a real, ongoing, profitable operation, so, I . . . got creative, and . . .”

Seeing him stuck in his embellishment, DeWitt asked, “You brought this down from Eurus without even knowing what it is?”

“They’re all over up there,” Thurlow said thoughtfully.

Efran protested, “But—Justinian’s the one who brought you back, and he said he only saw them from a distance.”

“Actually,” Thurlow began, concentrating, “I found this one had hitchhiked on the back of the carriage all the way down.”

By the time they noticed that the gabbot had disappeared, they were startled by the tree’s sudden thrashing. Then they watched as parts of the gabbot began flying out of the branches—first the legs, then the head, then bits and pieces of the body. Finally, something that looked like its abdomen was ejected in flames. Efran quickly ran over to stomp out the little fires. Disturbingly, they reminded him of Lissa’s remains.

“So, your gabbot prototype, which is a living thing, eats foliage,” Estes observed.

They all looked hard at Thurlow, who said, “Imagine that.”

DeWitt sat back, sighing. “Hollis, Lambdin, Leneghan—now that you’ve seen a ‘gabbot,’ and we know they’re a menace to vegetation, go put out the word for any walking bunches of sticks to be destroyed. Take the pieces of this one to show around.”

“Yes, sir,” Lambdin said as Leneghan carefully gathered up the parts of the gabbot, which he shared with the other two men.

DeWitt added, “Thurlow, you have a week to get an honest job or means of support. Lady Cocci is still at their home in Westford, if you’re interested. And, don’t bring any more ‘gabbots’ down here.”

As Thurlow appeared thoughtful, Efran suddenly looked around. “Where’s your assistant? Beekman?”

Thurlow glanced over his shoulder, shrugging, “Eh, I just met him today. He agreed to back me up for a little coin.”

The administrators stared at him, then DeWitt said, “Thurlow, you have three days to get yourself a job with a living wage before we cart you up to Westford and drop you on Lady Cocci’s doorstep.”

“Two days,” Efran said. “Hurry.”

The administrators were unaware that Thurlow left the fortress to hitch a ride with Delano’s son Wystan up to Westford that day. The administrators also put out queries for Beekman, but no one could locate him.

When the girls with short hair—Hassie, Jera, and Acy—went back over to work (or play) in their garden plots, Minka looked around with a sigh. Joshua was riding Kraken as he hauled compost back and forth again, with one man always walking beside them. The soldiers were bitterly shaken by the ease with which Lissa had taken the boy, and were not to be caught off guard again.

Nor was Minka about to take him off the back grounds. She was grateful, truly, to be back in the warm, safe, and abundant Lands, but she still felt at loose ends and was sick of everyone staring at her hair. The only thing she knew to do was to go see Auntie—if she didn’t have a houseful of company.

So, to avoid eyes, Minka went around the eastern side of the fortress to arrive at the courtyard. She told the gate guard, Eustace, “I need bodyguards to go down to Auntie’s.”

“Yes, Lady Minka.” Eustace turned to gesture, whistling.

After a moment, Jehan and Coish were the first to arrive in the courtyard. Coish asked, “Do you need a horse, Lady Minka?”

“No, I’m just going down to Auntie’s,” she said.

So they came right alongside her. “What are we waiting for?” Jehan asked as she hesitated.

Trying to smile, she told Eustace, “Please send up to Efran that I’m at the chapel with two bodyguards.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said. She nodded, wishing that they all wouldn’t sound so pleased when she did what she was supposed to do. She and her bodyguards walked down the new switchback, as the old one was crowded. And because she didn’t chatter at them, Jehan and Coish said nothing. So they crossed Chapel Road to ring the doorbell in silence. The men standing guard at the door nodded silently to her, as well.

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Chapter 4

Hartshough answered the door, of course. “Ah! Greetings, Lady Minka. Shall you and your young men have bracers?”

She laughed lightly. “Are you enjoying your fame, Hartshough? You know we won’t turn you down.”

“Excellent. Lady Marguerite is on the patio, and I believe she has a surprise for you,” he said smugly (for him).

“Really?” she asked, interested. He smiled in the inscrutable manner of the long-time butler.

As Hartshough led them to the kitchen and Minka progressed to the patio with her bodyguards, she glimpsed Marguerite sitting at the table—with newly short hair. Her son Verlice, standing at her chair with his back to the newcomers, was saying, “Honestly, Mother, I don’t care what Minka does, but I’m outraged that you would make yourself look like a lady of the evening!”

Minka was almost knocked senseless by the imputation. She never dreamed—Lady Lovedahl never said a word of warning—that short hair was associated with *that*. Minka turned to run blindly back out the front doors, surprising not only her own bodyguards, but the men stationed at the door.

She cut behind the new inn, running across New North Road to arrive at the western shore of Cavern Lake. Jehan and Coish were right with her. Bypassing the pier, she continued to run to the northern edge of the lake, where she had met delightful friends that didn’t bite (usually). Here, she fell down in the grass to cry quietly. Jehan and Coish sat on either side of her, not presuming to offer comfort.

After a few minutes, she raised up, then leaned over to look at her reflection in the placid water. And there were those hateful white skimpy wisps that told the world Lord Efran’s wife made herself look like a prostitute out of spite. With a cry of anger, she dunked her whole head in the water.

Coish immediately pulled her back by her ribcage while Jehan took off his uniform jacket to use it as a towel on her face and hair. A shadow fell across them, and the boys looked up as Lady Marguerite prepared to sit beside

the angry, wet girl. Jehan made room for her, and she took his jacket to begin drying the plastered-down white hair. Minka couldn't bring herself to raise her face.

Stroking her hair gently with the red linen jacket, Marguerite said softly, "I love Verlice. He's my son. But he sometimes says the most ridiculous things." Minka shook her head, too despondent to reply.

"Did you not see my hair?" Marguerite asked with a glimmer of humor.

Minka whispered, "No one would dare think that of you. But I have been nothing but an embarrassment—" She stopped before naming the one she embarrassed.

At this time, Efran drew Kraken to a stop at the bottom of the new switchback. In the courtyard, he had seen Minka arrive at the lake to dunk her head, and had whistled for a horse. Since Joshua had been taken in for a change of wraps, Kraken had responded, still wearing the hauling traces.

Now Efran was watching Minka with her auntie and bodyguards on the lake shore. While he wanted to be the one to comfort her, he realized that she was probably getting the perspective she needed from Marguerite. So, reluctantly, he nudged Kraken back up to the courtyard. There, he slid off and whacked the horse's rump in permission to return to his boy on the back grounds.

Efran paced the courtyard for a little while, keeping an eye on the group around Minka, until finally turning in response to a query from DeWitt. Patting Eustace's shoulder, Efran told him, "I'll be up in the workroom."

"Yes, Captain," Eustace said, looking back down to the lake. With steely self-discipline, Efran went back upstairs.

At the lake, Marguerite said, "You haven't even told me whether you like my hair or not." She was admirably not smiling.

Exhaling, Minka looked at her. "You can't be anything but beautiful. You could shave your head and Wendt wouldn't say a word."

"Oh, would he not?" Marguerite said in surprise.

"Don't try to tell me that he was angry you cut it," Minka said, wiping her eyes with a damp sleeve.

"No, because he knew why I did," Marguerite said. "Minka, can't you see how good it's been for Efran?"

Minka looked skeptical. "He *says* he's glad, but. . . ."

"Men like Efran are so transparent. When he's angry, it shows *all over him*. Believe what he tells you; that alone is more important to him than anything you do with your hair," Marguerite said.

Minka leaned into her. "It shocked us both that he didn't recognize me with different hair."

"That's why you needed to cut it," Marguerite said.

"To—baffle him on purpose?" Minka asked in dissatisfaction, lifting up.

"No," laughed Marguerite. "Your hair dominated you; it overwhelmed everything else about you. That's not its

place! It needed to be subdued so the rest of you could shine, as well.”

“He said something along those lines,” Minka murmured, thinking.

“Yes, and the dinner bell’s about to ring. He’ll be anxious to see you, but it won’t help at all for you to come to the table dripping,” Marguerite mildly chastised her as she stood.

“Oh, you’re right. Thank you, Auntie.” Minka got up to hug her, then murmured, “I had better be careful, or I expect Joshua will ride down next”—for she had glimpsed horses coming down the new switchback. So she began walking rapidly with her head down. Jehan and Coish bowed to Marguerite before trotting after their charge. Jehan swiftly redonned his damp, wrinkled jacket.

But Martyn, astride one horse and leading another, met Minka on Chapel Road. She stopped in surprise. “Do I need a ride up?”

He grimaced. “Ah, yes, Minka. Everyone in the courtyard panicked when they saw you go into the water head first.”

Offended, Coish said, “We were right there to pull her out!”

“Yes, but she’s all wet now,” Martyn observed. “The Captain will have questions.”

Laughing painfully, she climbed up onto the dun mare. Then she looked back at her friends to say, “Thank you.”

“Go on, Lady Minka,” Jehan said, waving. Pausing to smile at the sorry state of his jacket, she did turn to ride up the new switchback with Martyn.

In her quarters, she cleaned up her face and hands, then was surprised to find her hair already dry. So she changed into a nice dress, and put in a pair of Dallarosa’s earrings. She paused to study her reflection, tentatively smiling at herself. Yes, the new hair made her look very different. She looked less like a child and more like—a girl who hacked her hair off to get attention.

Groaning, Minka fluffed it a little, then tried brushing it. Neither helped, so she just mussed it good and hard. Then she peered in the mirror to see it looking just as it should—indifferent and casual. Lady Lovedahl had given her a cut that was not meant to be styled.

Thinking on that, she came out of her quarters and went down the corridor to see Efran standing at the door of the dining hall. When he saw her coming, he relaxed. He caught her around the waist to tell her, “I recognized you right away.”

She laughed at him, and his eyes grew wet. “It’s nice to see your whole face smile.”

“Why shouldn’t my whole face smile, when you love me, mistakes and all?” she declared. So he had to kiss her right there in the doorway, making a whole line of people wait to get in.

In bed that evening, Efran lay beside her to admit, “I saw you at the lake with Marguerite.”

“Did you see me dunk my head?” she murmured.

Prevaricating only slightly, he asked, "You dunked your head in the water?"

She paused. "Why do you think that?"

He lay back, groaning. "Anyway, it looked to me that Marguerite was doing a better job helping you than I would."

"She cut her hair for me," she said, snuggling into his side.

He looked down at her. "I couldn't see that from the switchback."

She nodded. "And Verlice didn't like it. He thought it made her look like a—woman of ill repute."

He laughed outright. "Count on Verlice to say the right thing every time."

"Do you think it makes me look cheap?" she asked uneasily.

He gathered her up. "No. It makes you look free."

She crawled over him to kiss him hard, which he enjoyed.

The following morning, November 20th, Soames went to the workroom early to find DeWitt just settling in. Soames said, "Administrator, I'm about to present this Addendum to our Law class, but I really felt you should see it first."

"Oh, yes?" DeWitt said, taking the sheet that Soames held out to him. He read the three short paragraphs, then laughed. "That's excellent, Soames. I'm going to suggest that Efran sit in on your class this morning."

"Yes, thank you, Administrator," Soames said, and took the sheet back with satisfaction.

That morning, Efran had dressed and left their quarters before Minka could bring herself to get out of bed. She finally forced herself up to embrace her mistake by wearing pants today. She offset that, however, with another pair of Dallarosa's dangly earrings.

In the outer room, she found that Efran had left her a breakfast of apples and fresh twisty rolls, for which she thanked him in her heart. Marguerite was right, and Efran was doing all he could to make his apology sincere and binding on himself. She ate his offering of breakfast.

Not knowing exactly the time, she went to the library to find Soames just arriving for Law class. "Ah! Good to see you early, Lady Minka."

The Librarian bowed to her, and she said, "Just trying to make up for being late so often." She was distracted watching the Librarian go behind the partition to put a fresh lantern and breakfast of kitchen garbage on Nibor's small table. Watching her lift up, stretching, Minka murmured, "Doesn't she ever get out?"

"Occasionally, Lady Minka, but she is more comfortable staying hidden. She doesn't like people staring at her," the Librarian said.

"Oh, I know that feeling," Minka murmured, and Nibor's silhouette turned toward her.

By that time, the library was filling up with soldiers, and Ella entered with Rondi. They were both laughing about something as they plopped down at the table. “Did you hear?” Ella exulted to Minka. “Almost all of Elvey’s models have cut their hair. The only important holdout has been Leila, who’s too proud of her hair to cut it. She doesn’t realize how much gray she has.”

“Oh,” Minka murmured. She remembered Efran’s telling her how, almost ten years ago, he had been enslaved by her gorgeous red-gold hair, and how he had almost killed himself when she wouldn’t leave her husband for him. Minka had even talked with 20-year-old Efran at the faerie tree, and had seen his pain at Leila’s callous treatment. Suddenly, Minka wondered if that’s how Lissa felt, although it had been her parents and not Efran who had caused their breakup.

Soames began, “Thank you for coming on time, everyone.” He almost managed to not look at Minka as he said this, and she lowered her red face. He continued, “Today we’re looking at a very interesting addition to—” Efran appeared at the door of the library.

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Chapter 5

The soldiers on the floor leapt to their feet, and Efran gestured them to sit. “I’m here for class. Please continue, Soames.” The soldiers and the young women began shuffling to make room for him somewhere, but he came over to sit on the floor at Minka’s knees, his back to her. She laid a hand on his shoulder near his neck, and he reached up to cover her hand lightly without looking over to her. His face was lowered.

Seeing his hair fall over the back of his collar, she had to smile. His hair was now longer than hers, Ella’s, or Rondi’s. But because Routh or someone kept it trimmed out of his eyes, he didn’t complain. But oh, his shirts were getting ragged; he destroyed so many and never thought to buy more.

Soames cleared his throat. “Thank you, Captain.” In nervous excitement, he resumed, “It’s appropriate that you are here today, because we are looking at the lines of authority in the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Surprisingly, this is not in the charter which was granted to you, but in the Law of Roman itself, as an Addendum.”

Efran looked up in surprise. “An Addendum to the Law? I read all the addenda after you found the Prohibition of Show Trials, but—I don’t recall anything specific to the Abbey.”

Eyes alight, Soames said, “It was an Addendum to the Law added by Surchatain Roman himself. And it appears to have been one of the pages cut out by Talus and hidden during his reign. When Ares and young Henry found the pages, this must have been among them, but, being an Addendum, was not restored to the Book of the Law as the other pages were. It was loosely inserted into the back of the *Annotations* to the Annals and the Latter Annals, which I found only a few days ago. Lord Ryal asserts that it is genuine.”

Efran stared at him, and Minka forgot all about her hair. Efran stuttered, “So—it—affects us, today?”

“Yes, very much so,” Soames said.

“What does it say?” Efran whispered.

“I shall read it now from the copy that I made yesterday. It is brief,” Soames said. Holding up the sheet, he read, “‘An Addendum to the Law of Roman.’ He interrupted himself to say, “‘This is undated, but it must have been written shortly after the Law itself had been completed, which was sometime between the years seventy-nine thirty and seventy-nine thirty-five.’” He nodded at DeWitt and Estes, who had come to stand in the doorway and listen, mostly unseen.

Soames then held up the paper again to read, “‘Having perceived how the charter of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea may allow for the illegal deposal of the Lord Sovereign by his enemies, I, Surchatain Roman of Lystra, hereby include this Addendum to stipulate that any accusation against the Lord Sovereign which would nullify his charter must be endorsed by the Lady Sovereign. If she declines to endorse the accusation, he shall be held guiltless under the Law. A Lord Sovereign who has no female counterpart shall be judged by a jury of ten leading residents of the Abbey Lands according to the Law as written.

“For the Lady Sovereign who is accused of a crime which would nullify her charter, she must be found guilty by a unanimous vote of a jury comprised of ten leading residents under the charter.

“Therefore, for a virtuous Lord Sovereign who chooses a Lady Sovereign wisely, and for a virtuous Lady Sovereign, the stability of the Abbey leadership shall be secure. However, at any time the Lady Sovereign may be asked to declare her judgment as to the worth of the Lord Sovereign to lead, and her word shall prevail for his retention or deposal, unless she is found guilty of a crime as stipulated above.”

Soames looked out over his stunned audience. He said, “The first implication is that there is nothing more to fear from anyone trumping up charges against the Captain just to bring the Abbey down. The second is that the Lady Sovereign essentially has veto power over the rule of the Lord Sovereign.” And everyone looked at Minka.

Doane looked perplexed. “Am I understanding this right?—that the Lady Sovereign has the privilege of a trial when accused, but the Lord who’s accused has to rely on her word alone?”

Soames said, “Not exactly. Other parts of the Law allow for a trial by jury for anyone accused of a serious crime. Here, the assumption appears to be that the charges which the lord faces are rigged against him. But the lord’s endorsement of a charge is not required for the lady because she could be accused by her lord in order to get her out of the way for him to select a more compliant lady.”

“Then a lady could accuse her lord in order to get him out of the way,” another man observed.

“Which is why Roman says to choose wisely. But if she does accuse her lord, she sets herself up for judgment by a jury of ten, because a false accusation is a serious crime. In these conditions, power can only rest for any length of time upon the Lord or Lady Sovereign who is virtuous,” Soames said.

A man in the back said, “But then she can just wink away anything he chooses to do.” It spoke well of Efran, Minka, Soames, and the Abbey leadership as a whole that the men felt free to air these questions in class.

Soames replied, “Then again, she has to face a jury. For such an action as you suggest, it would not be that hard to get a unanimous vote of guilty.”

Captain Rigdon, one of those sitting on the floor, asked, “Does that also mean that at any time, anyone might ask Lady Minka if the Captain is worthy to be lord, and, if she says no, then he’s finished?”

“That’s my understanding, yes,” Soames said.

“How can that be?” another man blurted.

“Look at this way,” Soames said. “Who’s the first person who’ll see the Lord Sovereign blurring the truth, taking advantage of someone weaker, or exerting power over areas not in his domain?”

“What’s to prevent the Lady Sovereign becoming a tyrant?” another man asked.

“Ten virtuous citizens who vote to convict her of crimes of tyranny, of which the Law spells out many,” Soames observed.

There was another, deeper silence, then Efran turned at Minka’s knees to look up at her. “Am I worthy?” he asked point-blank.

She looked down at him to sweep his hair lightly off his forehead. “So, so worthy,” she whispered. “And anyone who asks again will get the same answer, never fear.”

“Even if I hurt you again?” he asked tightly.

“But you apologize so beautifully,” she smiled, which provoked some tense laughter. “Yes, Efran, even if you hurt me again, because I never saw anyone try so hard to do the right thing.” He had to prop up a knee to put his head in one hand, then. Ella and Rondi watched quietly.

After another minute of silence, DeWitt asked Soames, “What did Ryal think about this? You said he’s seen it, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Administrator,” Soames replied. “And all I explained just now were his conclusions. He also felt that the scales were weighted in the Lady’s favor because of her physical limitations in comparison to the Lord’s; that is, she cannot fight like he can.”

Estes said, “So, basically, Minka can defend Efran from any more legal harassment while he defends her with the weight of the Law behind him.”

Soames considered that, then said, “Yes, Steward, I think that is the most accurate view of our case. At any rate, Lord Ryal will have a copy of this Addendum posted in his window.” At this, Minka lifted up slightly.

Soames glanced around at the silence, then said, “If there are no more questions, you’re dismissed. I need to get this copy back down to Ryal.”

“Does he have the original?” DeWitt asked.

“Yes, Administrator, firmly attached in the Addenda section of his copy of the Law. I’m making copies for your book of the Law and Shardlow’s, as well. I can’t believe it’s been in the back of the *Annotations* for—however many years it’s been!” Soames said. “And we’re continually forgetting to bring the *Annotations* back up here.”

“You might as well leave it at Ryal’s, so we’ll know where to find it,” Efran said, standing to take Minka’s hand.

The men began hesitantly leaving around them, and Ella hugged Minka. “This is so exciting. You’re the best defender Father could have,” she breathed, and Minka grinned. Rondi was looking on with bright, wondering eyes.

As Ella and Rondi left, Minka told Soames, "I'm going down to Ryal's now. Do you want me to take that copy?"

"Thank you, Lady Minka, but I have to go down anyway to finish all the copying," he said with faint exasperation.

"Then we'll walk down together," she said. She looked up at her husband. "Do you want to come?"

He glanced off, then hazarded, "Yes? Whatever you want. Do you want me to come?"

"Yes," she said, taking his arm.

As they entered the foyer, a woman's voice said, "There he is! Lord Efran!" He stopped abruptly, Minka at his side. But Soames veered away to continue to the door.

Frozen, Efran watched Lady Neanne bustle up to him with a young woman by her side. Efran had kissed Neanne jokingly, and did not wish to do it again to her or anyone else other than Minka. But Neanne was gushing, "Lord Efran, this is my niece Gwynne, who wants to start her own clothing design shop here, and she's made this beautiful shirt for you which she hopes you'll enjoy." Neanne then shook out a man's short-sleeve shirt in a black and white floral design.

While Efran stared blankly at Neanne, the plump young woman beside her gazed at him with stars in her eyes. Reaching over to begin unbuttoning the stained, frayed shirt he was wearing, Minka said, "Oh, that looks wonderful! Look at the detailing, Efran! And such a fresh, original pattern! He'll wear it gratefully, Gwynne!"

While the women watched, pleased (and the rest of the foyer watched, amused) Minka stripped off his old shirt to drop it to the floor and dress him in the new one. (Fortunately, he was wearing an undershirt.) He half turned his blank face to Minka while Neanne began fussily buttoning the shirt with many pats and adjustments. Minka exclaimed, "Look how well it fits!"

"She just had to guess his measurements, but she has a good eye for it," Neanne said in satisfaction.

"Isn't that lovely? Thank you, Gwynne. We have to get down to Ryal's now," Minka said, pulling him along as she fluttered her fingers at them. Neanne blew a kiss and Gwynne clasped her hands.

The courtyard gate guards saluted him with frozen faces as he and Minka began down the old switchback. By the second level, he remembered where they were going and why, then looked down to take her hand.

They entered the notary shop as Ryal and Giardi were cleaning up from their last influx of customers. Glancing up, Ryal said, "Hello. I hear that Soames has acquainted you with the latest Addendum to the Law."

"Yes, Ryal, and I need your seal on a sworn statement," Minka said placidly.

He looked surprised, and Efran's face lost some color. But Giardi, assessing her, smiled slightly. Ryal said, "Then come to the back room. Do you want Efran to come, as well?"

She looked up at him while he looked back, expressionless. "Yes," she said.

Soames was already at the table, recopying the Addendum. This was to be posted in the window. He asked her, "Do you wish me to take down a statement, Lady Minka?"

“No, it needs to be in my own hand,” she said, so he gave her a spare quill and paper. Efran limply dropped into a chair beside her.

Ryal said, “Then let’s put you under oath. Lady Minka, do you swear on your soul to write only the truth in this statement?”

“I do so swear,” she said.

“Minka can’t lie even when she tries,” Efran observed vacantly.

She glanced at him reproachfully, but took the paper to begin writing. “I’m going to make the letters large, since it will be for public view. I want you to post this in your window with the Addendum, Ryal.” He nodded, waiting.

Efran faked nonchalance while Minka wrote out a paragraph. Then she said, “I think this covers it. Let me blot it before you read it aloud, please, Ryal.” Soames handed her the blotting paper, which she applied while the men looked on.

She handed the sheet to Ryal, and Soames stopped working to listen. Giardi came to the door to hear as well. Ryal read, “I, Minka, Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, wish to publicly state the fact that my husband Efran is the worthiest man one could ever find to be the Lands’ Lord Sovereign. I have asked Lord Ryal to post this notice in his window from now till forever to be your constant reassurance that you are protected by the best there is.”

Efran closed his eyes, dropping his head. Ryal added, “‘Sworn before me this day, the twentieth of November in the year eighty-one fifty-five from the creation of the world.’ If you will sign here, Minka, I will sign and stamp it.” This she did, taking the quill to sign her name. She did not add elaborate curlicues so it would be recognizable as her own signature.

While Ryal affixed his official seal and signature, Efran sat breathing, not even raising his face. Minka murmured, “Love bade me welcome.” He looked up with slightly red, questioning eyes, and she said, “You could have punished me a thousand ways for running off and cutting my hair. Instead, you got down on your knees to me.”

He tried several times to come up with a reply, then just shook his head. He lifted his shirt tail in mild bemusement, but said nothing, and no one commented on it.

Soames finished writing out the Addendum, then Ryal gummed both documents on the inside of his window so that they were readable from the street. Efran looked toward the window where the two documents hung side by side. Then, frowning, he opened the door.

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Chapter 6

No one else needed to step out to see a small boy atop a large black horse with two soldiers at his sides. Minka came out after Efran to laugh, "Joshua, what are you doing?" He was holding on to part of the hauling traces that had been left on Kraken for the ride down.

"Wide!" he cried, grinning.

Coish said, "Didn't you say you expected to see Joshua ride down, Lady Minka?"

"That's what I heard," Jehan affirmed.

Efran looked at her and she said, "I did. I did almost certainly say that I expected to see him do that. That's true, Efran."

He let down, laughing. "All right, let's—go to Firmin's."

"Yes, Captain," Coish said as Jehan saluted.

Efran took Coish's place to put a hand on Joshua's leg for the walk across the street and down a few shopfronts to Firmin's. Here, he took Joshua on his arm so that Kraken could be led to the stables where there was hay and water.

They found a couple of good tables at the front streetside, as the midday meal rush had not yet begun. But then they had to look around for their server. A couple of other patrons were waiting for service, as well. Lilou had not appeared. The tables were not set with flatware.

Minka craned her neck to look toward the back. There, she saw Ionadi by herself again, attempting to lift a tray with water glasses. Efran was scanning the outdoor dining area. "Where's Lilou?" he asked.

"She's not here," Minka said. "Oh, Efran! Ionadi dropped the water pitcher."

He gestured to Jehan and Coish. "Go help her." They sprang up to trot to her side, and were soon running flatware and waters to the patrons waiting.

"What has happened to Lilou?" Minka fretted.

At this moment, Lilou was sitting in her mother Windry's house at a new table with nicely turned chairs (bought from Walford's Ready Furniture right next door!) Windry bustled to the table from the kitchen with a platter of slightly flattened, moderately burned cheese balls. "There!" she said proudly. "I'll get better at them as we go on. But I know how you love them."

Actually, Lilou had eaten so many that she was sick of them by now. But to not hurt her mother's feelings, she took a handful to put on her plate. "What did you want to talk to me about?" she asked warily. "I'm missing work."

Windry exhaled. "I want you to come back home."

Grimly chewing on a hard cheese ball, Lilou asked, "What am I supposed to do here all day long?"

“Oh, you can still work,” Windry said quickly. “I just want you to come home at night.”

Lilou glanced involuntarily at the road that ran out front. “It’s dark out here at night.”

“Oh, I’ll get a lantern for the front. That’s next on my list. And three houses on this road are lit already!” Windry said in accomplishment. “That crotchety old man next to me has two that shine in my bedroom window at night,” she muttered. That was Reinagle.

“I don’t like sleeping alone in my room,” Lilou said in a low voice.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m going to get Calix to come back, too,” Windry said confidently.

Lilou’s brows drew down. “He’s happy at the Abbey, Mum.”

“He won’t have any choice but to come home,” Windry said.

“Why not?” Lilou asked.

“Because the Abbey will have to stop taking in children,” Windry said airily.

“What? Why?” Lilou asked.

“Because . . .” Windry began. Before answering that question, she backtracked to fill in: “I’ve been talking to a man—a friend—who knows a lot about the Law. We’re not sleeping together, although I think he wants to. But, at any rate, he’s been to the Abbey to watch several trials, and he told me that a serious charge proven against the Lord of the Abbey—Efran—will make him lose his charter. And, they can’t take in children without their charter. So, I’m filing a complaint against Efran for—impropriety.”

“What?” Lilou squinted. “You’re going to hurt Efran?”

Windry’s brows arched. “I don’t want to. But if he’s going to take my children forcefully, then I will forcefully reply.” Lilou stared at her in dismay.

“But let’s not talk about that,” Windry said, assuming a cheerful tone. “Of course you can still work, and you can keep most, or some, of what you make, because of course it’s proper for you to contribute to the household, although—I’m working again, and making good money! Have you seen the pretty new dresses the women are wearing? Those are mine! I made those. And, when I get Calix back, he can work, too—at Firmin’s, I suppose. Since you like it, he will too, I’m sure. And, since we all three will be making money, we won’t need a man. I won’t need a husband. We’ll support ourselves. And Calix can sleep in your room. I’ll put his bed in there, so you’ll have company. I may have visitors from time to time, but, that won’t be any problem, either. I can put a lock on your door, if it will make you feel better. How’s that?” Windry asked brightly.

When Lilou didn’t reply right away, Windry glanced at her still-full plate. “Oh! I forgot! I got apple juice to go with the cheese balls! Wait right here.” She got up to go to the kitchen for one of the new glasses she had bought. These were not clay cups, they were real glass—expensive, to be sure, but just the beginning of the new life she and her children would have.

She filled a glass half full of the juice, then lifted it to the light to admire the combined sparkle of the juice and the glass. With a happy sigh, she returned to the table in the gathering room. “Here, now, isn’t that—” She

stopped dead to see Lilou's chair empty. She was gone. The cheese balls were still there.

At Firmin's, Efran was keeping an eye on his boys, who were efficiently running orders and cleaning tables. Joshua, on his knee, was happily digging into his own cup of custard. Meanwhile, Efran listened as Minka asked Ionadi, "Where is Lilou?"

Standing by their table, Ionadi said, "Eh, her mother sent her an urgent message, so she went to talk to her. I'm afraid Windry wants her to come home."

"She can't make her, can she?" Minka asked Efran. He silently shook his head. So Minka said, "Don't worry, Ionadi; Ryal ruled that she can stay with you here."

"I have to tell you," Ionadi exhaled, "I was surprised at how quickly I lost strength in my hands. I've always been proud of the fact that I could carry my own weight, but, it's been such a shock to find out how weak I've become. Firmin wouldn't keep me on if Lilou didn't do most of my work along with her own."

Still looking out to the street, Efran said, "We will take care of you, Ionadi," and Minka earnestly nodded. He had promised her this when taking her from Shirreff's cattle farm a year ago, and wasn't about to forget it.

They all looked over as Lilou rushed up. "Oh! I'm back. Have you got—? Oh, make your men sit, Efran, I'll take the orders." She then rushed to Jehan to take the platter from him. He pointed to the table where it was due.

Efran and Minka glanced smilingly at Ionadi, who exhaled, "She's a good girl, almost my own."

"So it seems," Efran said. Minka was watching Jehan and Coish continue to clean tables until Lilou could get caught up.

Then he noted Windry stalking up the sidewalk on the other side of the street. As she passed, she directed a blazing glance at Efran, then continued to Ryal's, stomping up the steps to enter. Efran gently exhaled.

At Ryal's counter, he and Giardi paused their filing as Windry drew up to announce, "I wish to file charges of rape against Efran." Soames looked up from the table in the back room, the door of which stood open.

Dryly, Ryal said, "I suggest you read the notices posted in the window, first." Several people were grouped around them outside, doing just that.

"I don't care what your notices say. Your job is to take down my complaint," she said firmly.

Giardi noted, "He and Minka are at Firmin's."

Windry merely glanced at her, but Ryal turned. "Soames? Would you please escort Windry to Firmin's?"

"Yes, Lord Ryal." Soames bounded up a little too eagerly for the gravity of the situation, but led Windry out with all courtesy. "This way, please." Not liking this protocol, she nonetheless exited with him.

Efran was watching when Soames escorted her across the street (in a crosswalk) toward them. As they two stopped before his table, Efran looked aside, but Minka and her boys looked up. Lilou, seeing her mother, rushed up unnoticed behind the bodyguard. There was a brief silence as Windry watched Soames, expecting him to make the announcement. But he told her, "You're to tell Lord Efran and Lady Minka of your accusation."

This was new and daunting, that she had to say it herself, to his face, in public. But with custody of her children in the balance, Windry rose to the challenge. Efran finally looked over as she informed him, “I am bringing charges against you for rape.” Efran said nothing, but Lilou stared at her in shock.

Minka said, “I reject your accusation.”

Windry hardly heard her, barely noting the girl with thin white hair. But Soames said, “That’s it, then,” and began walking off.

Deeply confused, and not liking the derisive, sardonic smiles of the soldiers—while never seeing Lilou—Windry hesitated at the choices before her, finally deciding to run after the escaping rabbit, Soames. She caught up with him to demand, “I want to file the complaint.”

“You can’t,” he said, turning. “The Lady Sovereign has denied your accusation.” As she stared at him, he said slowly, “Read the notices in the window. Then if you have questions, we’ll answer them.” And he walked off again. She stood staring after him, then woodenly went over to join the cluster of people at the notary’s window, reading.

Efran watched her before turning his eyes to Minka. Raising her brows, she said, “I like the new rule.”

Almost helpless, he removed the empty custard cup from Joshua’s grip, as he was threatening to throw it. Then Efran whispered, “The timing. . . .”

“Right,” Minka replied in a whisper.

But Lilou, behind them, was fighting back tears of anger. “She’s going to try to make me come home and give her my money. What can I do?”

Minka’s eyes went back to Efran. “Should I tell her?” she whispered. Efran’s face was blank, so she turned to Lilou. “You can go to Ryal to ask him for Emancipation.”

“What’s that?” Lilou asked. Efran sat up in sudden recognition.

Minka began, “You’re twelve—”

“Almost thirteen,” Lilou interjected.

“Almost thirteen, and making a living wage. So you go to Ryal and tell him you want to be emancipated from your mother, so that she can’t make you do anything,” Minka said.

“Emancipated,” Lilou said, to remember the word. “I can’t go now; we’re almost into the midday rush. But I’ll go later.” Minka nodded, and Lilou ran over to a couple who had just sat at an outdoor table.

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Chapter 7

Watching Windry walk stiffly away from the notary shop, Efran asked, "Can we go now?"

"Yes," Minka said. "I want to hide on the back grounds for a little while."

"I'll join you," he muttered.

With Joshua on Efran's arm, they stood to leave while Jehan and Coish went to retrieve Kraken from the stables. Almost no one noticed the haggard man in a brown robe approach, but his attire identified him as a member of the Preaching Brethren—men dedicated to itinerant preaching of the Word. Lilou ran up to seat him, but paused as he turned toward the Abbey Lord.

He seized on Efran with, "Sir, I would speak to you." Efran looked over; Minka and Lilou watched as the preacher said, "Sir, I see your tottering and slips, which are fearful. You must be anchored upon Christ! False underwater, not seen, in the ground of an enlightened conscience is dangerous; so is often failing and sinning against light. O how fearfully are thousands beguiled with false hide grown over old sins, as if the soul were cured and healed!

"I see nature mighty, lofty, heady and strong in you, and it requires more for you to be mortified and dead to the world than another common man. Be humbled, walk softly; down, down, for God's sake, my worthy brother, with your topsail. Stoop, stoop; it is a low entry to go in at heaven's gates. There is infinite justice in the party you have to do with; it is His nature not to acquit the guilty and the sinner. The law of God will not remit one copper of the sinner. God forgets not both the Surety and the sinner, and every man must pay, either in his own person—the Lord save you from that payment!—or in His Surety, Christ."

Stricken, Minka and Lilou looked to Efran. With a pained laugh, he said, "Thank you, Brother; that comforts me for the corrective blows I continue to receive from His hand." Reaching around Joshua, he drew out a fistful of royals to extend to Lilou. "Give him a plate and ale, Lilou."

"Yes, Efran," she whispered. The bodyguards brought Kraken for the Captain to lift Joshua and Minka to his back. While the group of them walked away, Lilou brought out a whole tray full of food for the weary preacher. He nodded, glancing to the Captain's departing party.

Then Lilou placed two royals beside his tray. "When you're done, get you a room to rest," she whispered.

He looked up to her. "May you be blessed."

"I am," she said, then turned to another table with customers waiting.

Arriving on the hilltop, Joshua's parents dismissed their bodyguard to their duties, then walked the boy and his horse around back to do more hauling for the ever-burgeoning kitchen gardens. In fact, Tourjee had been a little put out by the disappearance of his hauling crew, and asked nicely if the lord would kindly give him notice before yanking them away. Although it had not been Efran's doing, he humbly apologized for the inconvenience and promised future cooperation.

He and Minka checked on the children's progress with their winter gardens, and found them happily working for about ten minutes out of the hour. But since their play wasn't obstructing anyone else, and Efran wanted Minka's company in the bedroom, he left their correction to Tourjee.

An hour later, Minka was lying sleepily on Efran's chest while he softly brushed back her wisps. "You're playing with my hair," she murmured.

He laughed, "Trying to get used to it. I'm sorry I hurt you, very sorry, but—all that led to—to finding so much that's new about you."

"Then I'm glad you. . . ." She lifted up with a quizzical frown. "How did you hurt me? It wasn't about my hair, was it?"

"You don't remember?" he almost gasped.

She squinted, trying to recall. "I . . . don't think so. What did you do?"

He raised up, laughing. "You forgive me so thoroughly that you forget all about it and think that *I'm* going to remind you?"

"You don't have to get all huffy about it," she said testily, so that he fell onto her, hooting.

Once the midday rush had thinned out, Lilou took Ionadi with her to the notary to ask for Emancipation from her mother. After taking sworn statements from both of them, Ryal granted her Emancipation, and Soames took the notice to Windry's house that afternoon.

However, when she didn't respond to his knock, he left it jammed in the crack of the door. So she did not receive it right away.

But the following morning, November 21st, Windry was at Ryal's door the moment he opened his shop. She stormed in, waving the crumpled parchment. "What is this? What is this nonsense you left in my door?"

"Good morning, Windry," Ryal said. "Step in the back here, and I'll tell you. Giardi, dear, do you mind—?" He nodded toward the leaseholder who had hesitantly followed Windry in.

"Not at all. What can I do for you?" Giardi asked the man. He presented his lease, desiring to acquire the vacant plot next door.

So as Giardi took out the ledger, Ryal sat Windry at the small table. He brought over the book of Roman's Law and opened it up to the section on Emancipation. This he placed before her with, "Here is what it means." As Windry bent over the book to read, Giardi stepped to the door of the back room with a question about plot assignments.

Ryal answered that question, bringing out the form that the customer would need to lease the adjoining plot. Then he returned to the back room to sit at the table with Windry. "Do you understand it?" he asked.

"No, I can't imagine how such a thing could be allowed, for a little girl to be legally allowed to not mind her mother anymore!" Windry vented.

"Is she twelve years old?" he asked. Without a birth certificate, he felt he had sufficient proof when Ionadi testified that she had been with Firmin when he had asked Windry Lilou's age.

“Yes, but that’s not old enough to be on her own!” Windry protested.

“No, it’s not, in most cases. However, Lilou has practically an ideal situation at Firmin’s. She not only has bed and board, but she is learning to read and do numbers. Plus, the other staff look out for her.” Ryal was careful not to mention Ionadi specifically.

“But her mother needs her!” Windry said, aggrieved.

“Why?” Ryal asked quietly.

“Because—” she began, then stopped. Changing course, she demanded, “Who told her about this?”

“I don’t know, but that’s irrelevant. It’s the Law, and it applies to her directly,” Ryal said.

“Well, I don’t permit it.” Windry tore the parchment across and sat back.

Ryal sighed, “I’m sorry, but it is not in your power to change. The Abbey Lands are constrained by charter to obey Roman’s Law. If you create enough trouble over it, you could find yourself banished from the Lands.”

She smiled, then. “Yes, let Efran come try to banish me.”

“Lord Efran would have nothing to do with it. That falls within Steward Estes’ purview, and even he won’t be on hand. He’d send soldiers to escort you out of the gates, and more soldiers would prevent your reentry,” Ryal said sadly. “Please, Windry, for the sake of your children, accept the situation and win them back over with love.”

She looked at him as reality slowly seeped into the fantasy life she had created from vapor. She got up and left his shop to progress hazily up the sidewalk. *Well, at least I have the dress orders waiting*, she thought. To comfort herself, she looked at the women she passed, seeking out her own dresses. And what she saw introduced another hard blast of reality.

Her dresses—or even the style of her dresses—were nowhere to be seen. In the five days since her styles had taken the Lands by storm, she had dallied about, failing to stay on top of the crest, and now found that the tide had passed her by.

The dresses she saw were altered through several generations from her original design—they were still soft, but more ornamented. They were still flowing, but with more flourishes. Plus, there was the introduction of hats banded with fabric matching that of the dress. Windry’s dresses hadn’t incorporated hats at all.

Worse, Windry had spent the bulk of her earnings on luxury touches for her house, and unless she got to work quickly designing and producing something new again, she’d be back to sponging off Lilou for rent. So she returned home in deep thought, eyes darting to every dress she saw along the way.

For dinner that evening, Minka picked out a simple but pretty dress that had been languishing in her wardrobe for some time. She wasn’t even sure where it came from or why she never wore it. Trying it on, she remembered that her hair had gotten tangled up in the standing collar, which annoyed her. But that was no longer a problem, and another pair of Dallarosa’s earrings softened the look.

Studying herself in the mirror, for the first time since her transformation, she felt—presentable. She almost liked

it. And she liked not having to continually fight with her hair. She left her and Efran's quarters to go down to the dining hall, where she saw him standing at the door again.

When he saw her, he came over to take her hands. Then he exhaled, "Huh," with a look of pain.

"What? You don't like it?" she asked in disappointment.

"No, you look lovely. I just feel like—like a father watching his little girl grow up. No, that's wrong," he winced. "I mean—"

"I understand," she said, taking his arm. "I'm afraid I may want to keep my hair short."

"Whatever you want," he said deeply and sincerely. "*Whatever.*"

They turned into the dining hall to sit at the back bench. First, Ella had to admire her earrings, so Minka got to promote Dallarosa's work again. Then she discovered that Rondi just had her ears pierced, as well, so they three were talking earrings and hair around the men while Efran reclaimed Joshua from Quennel's knee.

There was so much crosstalk and laughter that Minka didn't hear or see the man who stopped behind Mathurin, directly across from her, to say, "Heya, Lady Minka, is the lord there worthy to rule?" When she didn't respond, he said it again, louder, adding, "I hear I have the right to ask."

Efran's jaw went rigid, but he knew he couldn't say a word, especially since it wasn't a man in uniform. However, the young soldier sitting next to Mathurin sprang up from the bench to get in the man's face with, "I don't know who you think you are to accost the lady at dinner but you don't have the right to ask her *anything*, especially to make a joke about something so serious as the Law. If you really wanted to know the answer to the question you just belched up, you could trot your fat butt down the switchback to the notary's office to read what he's got plastered up on his window; otherwise, I suggest you take yourself back over to the idiots' table, wherever that is, and leave her alone."

He was a Southerner with a strong rural accent, not a large kid, but he kept his face right up at the man's chin until he shrugged and walked away. There was suppressed laughter around the back tables, and as the young man took his seat again, Mathurin patted him on the back. But Minka, her blue eyes wide, breathed almost in awe, "Who are you?"

Efran lowered his smiling face; the young man glanced at him and said, "Youshock, Lady Minka. I'm, er, new here."

Minka gazed on him in delight, so Efran had to tell him, "You're her new pet."

"Thank you, sir," Youshock said with a lopsided grin.

"No, now, Efran, that was a most effective defense. Where are you from?" Minka demanded of her new pet.

"Guerry, Lady Minka. Come to the Lands, hoping to make my family proud in the Abbey army," he said with complete transparency.

Efran glanced at him as he fed Joshua a bite of beans, which he accepted. Then he asked, "Who's your Captain?"

"Captain Chee, hilltop here, sir," Youshock said.

Efran looked over to Chee at his table, then said, "Tell Captain Chee to put you on the lady's bodyguard duty roster."

Emotion passed over the young man's face. "That's a great honor; thank you, sir."

Efran leaned toward him to say, "I want you to entertain her enough to keep her out of the lake."

There was a stillness around the table. The young man turned his head dubiously to say, "I'll do my mightiest, Captain Efran, but if I fail, I'll fish 'er right back out."

The table around them dissolved in laughter while Minka looked pained and Efran nodded.

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Chapter 8

The following day, November 22nd, scouts in Westford reported to Commander Wendt, who forwarded the report to Efran, that Lord Baroffio had been spotted en route to his estate LeVisay. It was unknown whether Lundeen or Callisto were with him.

After taking this report to his administrators, Efran decided to go see for himself, and if possible, talk to Baroffio. DeWitt needed to know if their prospective agreement with Lady Cocci and Lords Colquhoun and McElfresh was sufficient, or if they would need to include Baroffio. Also, as far as anyone knew, Cocci considered herself a widow.

So, after checking in with Minka (who was surprised by the development but not really), Efran took with him Connor and Hawk, all three of them wearing civilian jackets and hats, as they knew late November was cold in Westford. Efran had also thought to alert Tourjee that he was taking Kraken, so the undergardener would need to use Gaunter to haul. Joshua was hesitant about the change at first, but decided to accept it. A ride was a ride.

Arriving in Westford—only a half hour's ride from the Lands—the three were pleased to find that it was not terribly cold, only with heavy clouds hanging low in the sky. On their way to (what once had been) the nobles' district, Efran looked aside at the small lake where the palace of Westford used to stand. It still filled him with awe to remember his appointment as Minka's guardian, and the creaking, cracking stonework that forced him to seek refuge in the Abbey with her and Toby on Bastard.

Topping the crest to look down into the nobles' district, the three Landers were momentarily struck silent. Then Hawk said, "Can you believe it? How have they managed to do all this rebuilding since Westford burned to the ground? That was only—when?"

"Almost exactly a year ago," Efran murmured. "It just seems like weeks." At least a dozen estates were in the later stages of construction, and half of those looked fully complete. This did not include the businesses that were also being rebuilt, such as the new Porterhouse Inn. It appeared to be fully finished.

"All right—LeVisay? Connor, haven't you been there?" Efran asked.

“Yes, Captain. Down this way,” Connor said, leading down the wide, paved street. He abruptly drew up the reins. “Is that—?”

Hawk interjected, “—a walking bunch of sticks? Yes, isn’t that a gabbot, Captain?”

“Yes,” Efran said, “And there’s another.”

“That’s not good, so close to the Lands,” Connor muttered.

Efran said, “Well, we’re forewarned, then. Take us on to LeVisay, Connor.”

“Yes, sir,” Connor said.

The house Connor directed them to was certainly elegant, though not large. Connor explained, “The nobles build houses just big enough for a temporary residence while also building a larger estate nearby. Then they sell the first to pay for the second, and on and on until they’re satisfied or run out of money.” Hawk and Efran laughed.

Arriving at one such beginner house, Connor said, “This is LeVisay.”

The three dismounted to tie off their horses in front, although Efran just dropped Kraken’s reins through the ring. He muttered, “If you go exploring, you better show up when I come out looking for you.” Kraken snorted, nodding.

They mounted broad steps to a pair of double doors that were equipped with large brass knockers. Efran lifted one to bang it hard four or five times, until the ring fell out of its base. They stared down at it for a moment, then Efran picked it up to reinsert the prongs into the holder. He had barely dropped his hand when the door was opened by a maid who peered at them suspiciously. “Whatever you’re selling, we don’t want it,” she informed them.

Efran crinkled his eyes at her. “We’re not selling anything. I am Lord Efran of the Abbey Lands, and would greatly appreciate an interview with Lord Baroffio, if he’s in.”

She murmured, “Oh. Well.” He smiled on her so that she put a hand to her hair. “You may come in to wait a moment while I inquire.”

She opened the door to allow their entry into the foyer. “Thank you,” Efran said softly, and she lowered her head to swish away.

“I’m working on that technique,” Hawk muttered, hand over his mouth.

Connor shook his head. “You have to be born with it.”

Shortly, she returned to say, “You may interview with Lord Baroffio in his study. This way.” She turned in a swirl to show a bit of petticoat lace. The men followed her out of the foyer to a closed door partway down the main corridor.

She paused to knock, and they heard Baroffio call, “Enter!”

As she opened the door for them, she murmured to Efran, “I’m off at six.”

“Oh.” He froze momentarily at the open door until Connor nudged him from behind. So Efran nodded to her with a weak smile and walked into the lord’s study.

Baroffio looked up from his chair behind a walnut desk, and the three visitors studied him in the instant before he spoke. He appeared to be identical to the Baroffio they had known. “Well, Efran, it is you! Didn’t you have something to do with the Abbey of—the Abbey of the Sea? Wait, that’s not right. Ha, ha! Oh, of course, you were the one to snag it. Now, how did you do that? Anyway, I asked my wife, um, my wife, I asked her, ‘Now, don’t you feel stupid for discouraging Lissa from marrying you?’ She threw the most childish tantrums, you know, and now I haven’t a clue where she’s gone to. Now, was that my wife or my, you know—Lissa? I don’t know! But, my, Crescent Hollow has been overrun with monkeys! Surchatain Borny?—whoever—has offered a thousand—a hundred royals per head, but I don’t know that he’s got enough money to pay out for all of their heads. Ha ha! One of the grooms swears he saw a few of ’em scabbling away from the carriage when we got back yesterday—Yesterday?—but I sincerely doubt they’d have the brains to hitch a ride on a carriage, ha ha!

“Oh, now, where is my head? Sit down here, Efran, you and your boys,” Baroffio urged. Efran took the chair directly opposite him while Connor and Hawk sat in chairs to the side. Baroffio continued, “Now I don’t know what in heaven’s name Cocci—is that her name?—is doing with this Everly’s there in the Lands, but she seemed put out to see me yesterday, what? And I wondered what I’d forgotten—yesterday? Why was I in Crescent Hollow? But as long as she gives me my bourbon allowance, I suppose we’ll make do, ha ha! But Thurlow came in to borrow money—I don’t know how much he took,” Baroffio muttered, opening a desk drawer to briefly inspect it. “I don’t know how much there was to start with, but it’s all gone now! And then he left again. I asked him where Lissa was, and he said he didn’t know. Well, I don’t know either!

“But I’m doing all the talking. What are you doing now, Efran?” Baroffio sat back attentively.

Efran said warily, “Just—trying to keep order in the Lands—”

“Yes, I can imagine, way out there in the—the Sea, or wherever. I’ll have to take the time to get down there. It’s not as far as Crescent Hollow, is it? I don’t know what Lissa wanted from there. Isn’t she the one who told me to get out there?” Baroffio asked thoughtfully.

Efran suddenly stood to put a hand at the back of Baroffio’s neck. Then Efran sat back down, raising his brows to his men to communicate, *Well, he’s real*. But he took advantage of Baroffio’s surprise to ask, “Are you having difficulties with the gabbots, sir?”

“The what?” Baroffio asked blankly. He felt the back of his neck to ask, “Did I have one on me?”

“Ah, no sir, I meant, Thurlow’s invention that he brought down from Eurus. The—sticks that walk?” Efran said with the uncomfortable feeling that he sounded just like Baroffio.

“Um hmm. Um hmm,” Baroffio said, earnestly nodding. “I have no idea what Thurlow is doing. Oh, but where is my head? Here, Lissa left these for you.” He opened his top desk drawer to scrounge in it as Efran exchanged cautious glances with his men.

“Here we are!” Baroffio said in victory, lifting out a small box. “She remembered how much you liked the macaroons, so made a special batch for you. See the lid there?” He extended the box to Efran. His men leaned forward to read the inscription with him: *To Efran. Will you remember me? Lissa*.

Almost despondently, Efran opened the box. In it were three small wrapped cookies, obviously the remnant of a larger batch. Efran raised his eyes to Baroffio, who laughed, “Oh, my, where is my head? I tasted one or two, and

it looks like I almost cleaned them out, didn't I? Well, there, help yourself to the rest!"

Replacing the lid, Efran said, "Thank you, but I never really liked them."

He handed the box back to Baroffio, who said, "Oh, then, you don't mind, do you?" He opened the box to unwrap another and pop it in his mouth. "Cocci didn't want any, either. She said she didn't want to get fat. Ha ha! Imagine that." He ate another, then Efran leaned over to take the box from him and drop it into the waste basket right under his eyes. Baroffio laughed, "Well then, I suppose that's all, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Efran said. Glancing back at his men, he stood. They did likewise. Then he leaned over the desk to extend his hand. "It's good to see you, sir."

"Yes, Efran, you as well." Baroffio shook his hand vigorously, then reached over to shake the hands of his men. Leaning back in his chair, Baroffio said, "I'll be sure to tell Lissa that you stopped by."

"Thank you, sir," Efran said quietly, then opened the door to leave the study with Connor and Hawk on his heels.

As the maid appeared in the foyer, Efran paused. "Lord Baroffio seemed tired. He may want to lie down."

"I'll take care of him," she said, cutting her eyes up at him. Efran nodded, then he and his men walked out.

They found all three of their horses lolling in the grass in front of the house. While Kraken got up and shook himself, Efran asked, "Did you untie them or just show them how to do it?" Kraken fluttered his lips at him. Efran flipped the stirrup out of the way to check the tightness of the cinch while Connor and Hawk coaxed their horses up.

Hawk was raising a foot to mount when he startled. "Captain—!"

Efran and Connor turned to see a monkey running by with a large, stick-like creature in hand that was futilely waving its appendages. The monkey paused to screech at them over its catch, then stuck it in his mouth to scamper up the trunk of a nearby tree and disappear.

The three men studied each other. Connor observed, "So, if you're overrun with the gabbots, you can get monkeys which will eat the gabbots—"

"—but then you're left with the monkeys," Hawk finished.

Efran exhaled, "Whatever. We're done here." And they mounted to ride south again.

When they got back to the Lands, Connor and Hawk returned to their duties (Hawk detouring to report to the Commander) while Efran unsaddled and groomed Kraken before releasing him to the back grounds. Then Efran went up to the workroom.

DeWitt, Estes and Koschat looked up as he entered to drop into his chair. Tossing his cap onto the table, Efran began tentatively, "Did you ever feel that . . . the worst disappointments of your life were actually your saving grace?"

DeWitt took off his glasses to clean them on his shirt. "This must be about Lissa."

Efran sat up to tell him, "Your talks with Cocci, Colquhoun and McElfresh can go right ahead. Baroffio won't

know or care.” Then he told them about his visit with him, and the macaroons. He finished, “Baroffio was so much more alert and coherent as a strawman.”

DeWitt said heavily, “Well, that’s unfortunate, but good, in a way, because they’re coming up here shortly to finalize our agreement.”

“And Thurlow left Westford?” Estes asked Efran.

“Apparently,” Efran said. “Oh, and, the monkeys eat the gabbots. They—the monkeys—have overrun Crescent Hollow and hopped a carriage to Westford. Which apparently is overrun with gabbots, as well. But the rebuilding is amazing.”

He paused for his listeners to absorb that, then asked, “Where is Minka?”

DeWitt said, “She took a few of her pets down to the chapel.”

Efran stood. “That’s where you’ll find me, then.” And he left them to their work to trot downstairs, carefully.

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Chapter 9

In the courtyard, Efran was walking over to the new switchback when he heard familiar hoofbeats. He turned as Kraken came up to nudge him. “Oh. Is Joshua riding Gaunter to haul compost?” Kraken’s head drooped, and Efran said, “All right, you can come down to Auntie’s with me.” Grasping Kraken’s mane, Efran swung up onto his back, and Kraken began down the switchback at a sedate lope.

Arriving at the chapel, Efran sent his horse around to the back with Mohr, then walked on in before Hartshough could get to the door. Efran found Minka and her auntie on the back patio, of course, where her bodyguards Youshock and Finn bolted up to salute. “At ease,” Efran told them, surveying his wife and auntie, who both looked breathless. Marguerite’s hair was indeed short, curling around her ears. It didn’t detract from her looks at all, in his opinion.

“Oh, Efran, have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the chair across from her. “Your men have been entertaining us. I haven’t laughed so hard since Hartshough tried to tell troll jokes.”

“Troll jokes?” Efran asked dubiously as he sat, looking over to his wife. She was still chuckling. He added, “All I want to hear is that you stayed out of the lake. You’re not wet, at least.”

She started laughing again, looking over to her pets. Youshock said heavily, “I tried to get ’er over there so I could demonstrate skill in keeping ’er out of the water, sir, but she wouldn’t cooperate.”

“And there you have my wife,” Efran said almost proudly.

Hartshough appeared from the kitchen. “Ah! Lord Efran. Would you care for—”

“Just bring it, Hartshough. I will eat or drink it and tell you what’s in it,” he promised rashly.

“Very good, Lord Efran,” he said, turning back into the kitchen.

Newly dressed, Justinian emerged from the kitchen onto the patio to eye Efran. “I thought I heard your voice,” he said in Efran’s voice. Finn fought down the laughter while Youshock stared at Justinian in amazement.

Unfazed, Efran said, “Tell me about the gabbots you saw in Eurus when you picked up Thurlow.”

“The gabbots,” Justinian murmured, concentrating. “I only got a glimpse. I seem to remember clunky devices that rolled around on feet which they retracted to roll around some more. Why? Did he show you one?”

Efran studied him for a minute. “Did he show you any stick-like creatures that he claimed to create?”

“Oh, the walking sticks? Those are insects. I believe God already created those,” Justinian said, concentrating on his sleeves.

Efran absorbed that, then said, “Did one hitchhike on your carriage when you brought Thurlow back to the Lands?”

“It’s likely, as they roamed in herds up there. But I didn’t see a hitchhiker,” Justinian said. “So, are there some down here?”

“Not presently, but there will be, as they’re all over Westford, apparently. But so are the monkeys, who eat them. So, we’ll be seeing those again, as well,” Efran said.

“Sounds exciting,” Justinian said vacantly.

Hartshough entered with a large tray. “Ah. Lord Justinian. I hope that you will stay for just one moment to try my new hors d’oeuvre recipe.”

“For you, Hartshough, I will walk over hot coals in my best silk socks,” Justinian pronounced.

Efran noted, “I believe he just wants an opinion on his hors d’oeuvres without the screaming.”

“We can do it either way,” Justinian said, sitting with Marguerite, Minka, and Efran at the patio table.

So Hartshough unloaded small plates onto which he placed three hors d’oeuvres each. Then he put glasses with chilled mineral water beside each plate. (Finn and Youshock were served on a small table between them.) And he stood back to await their opinions.

Youshock said, “Mister Hartshough, these are the fanciest figs I have ever seen in my life.” He ate one whole, shaking his head in admiration.

Marguerite said, “Oh, the pomegranates are a delightful touch.”

Minka said, “UMMMMMMM!”

Efran said, “The Brie binds it all together beautifully, Hartshough.”

Justinian said, “It would, were it Brie. But it’s Camembert.”

Efran raised alert eyes. “You can tell it’s Brie because of the savory, buttery flavor with subtle notes of fruit and mushrooms.”

Justinian pursed his lips in consideration. “Dear brother, the pronounced earthy notes of mushroom, truffle and a touch of wet hay are hallmarks of Camembert.” Discerning the nuances of the cheese among the other flavors required acute skill, of course.

Everyone looked at Hartshough. “Which cheese is it, Hartshough?” Minka asked.

Head hanging, poor Hartshough said, “I beg to decline to answer, Lady Minka.”

A chorus of objections rose. Marguerite said, “Dear man, we’re all adults here. No one will get his feelings hurt for being wrong. You may safely tell us.”

He sighed, “It is Paglietta, Lady Marguerite.”

Justinian raised his hands. “Oh, of course—I should have discerned the pungent, slightly fruity flavor.”

“Yes, the sweetness is a dead giveaway,” Efran conceded.

Youshock said, “Well, I have been educated today. I thought for sure that with that slight scent of the cellar and that mild fruity taste with the intense nutty aftertaste that it was Reblochon. I appreciate the opportunity to learn more about my cheeses.”

There was a sudden, deep silence. Hartshough went very still, then reached into his pocket for a receipt. He cleared his throat and said, “Please excuse me. I am in error. I had intended to buy the Paglietta, but the cheesemonger was out, and substituted for it . . . Reblochon.”

Those at the table fell apart, and Finn fiercely shook Youshock by the shoulder.

When they had somewhat recovered, Minka cried, “Youshock, how did you know?”

Looking abashed, he said, “Pardon, Lady Minka, my uncle is a cheesemaker in Guerry; sold to Westford for many years. I helped him with the process and delivered for him. But the Goulven and the fire were a terrible test of his faith; he despaired until he discovered your Lands, so I delivered for him here, and admired the presentation and conduct of your men. When the orders got to such that the shops were sending their own drivers for his cheeses, I asked my parents for permission to see if I might find a place in your army, and they gave it.”

“Do you have brothers or sisters?” Minka asked.

With a face of woe, he said, “I have five sisters, Lady Minka, and I must tell you that after the deprivations of my life, the company of your men has been a mercy to me,” he said.

As the laughter subsided, Finn urged him, “Bring your sisters here.” The men on the Lands outnumbered the women by about four to one.

At the same time, Minka demanded of Efran, “He needs a commendation.”

“For knowing cheese?” Efran cried.

“For his superior attitude,” she sniffed.

“Then he’ll earn one righteously,” Efran laughed.

Glancing sharply at the young soldier, Justinian observed, “Then, this is one of your uncle’s cheeses.”

“It’s possible, Lord Justinian,” Youshock replied with a confirming smile.

The party broke up with groans and pats on the back for Hartshough and Youshock. Justinian said, “Since I can’t go anywhere else, I’m up to Westford to look around.”

“Good. Good,” Efran said thoughtfully. Justinian would catch whatever he himself had missed this morning.

As they exited, Eryk brought around the dun mare for Minka along with her escorts’ horses. Efran kissed her head, brushing back her wisps, to tell her, “Go on up with your men; I need to talk to the Commander.”

“All right.” She smiled up at him, warmly happy, and he almost didn’t let her go. But he stood back to watch them ride up the old switchback. Marguerite paused on her doorstep to watch them as well. Then she looked over to Efran.

Turning, he saw the carriages outside Elvey’s. Colquhoun and McElfresh were standing beside one carriage, talking with Cocci after she had debarked from another. Efran could almost hear her assure them that she would be right up to the fortress after checking in with Lady Elvey. When the men got back into their carriage to head for the switchback, Efran made the decision to walk Kraken on over to Cocci.

As he approached, she glanced at him. “Yes, Efran?”

“Hello, Lady Cocci. I thought to tell you that . . . I just came from visiting with Baroffio,” he said.

She gestured dismissively. “He’s impaired, so I have control of the accounts. I am fully empowered to make any contracts with the Lands.”

“I realize that,” he said. “Ah, Lissa had apparently left some macaroons that he had been eating—”

She laughed hoarsely. “For which you should be grateful. There’s no telling what she put in those! But who can blame her? I told her that you didn’t want to marry her after all.”

Efran looked at her, sick to his stomach. “You—you told her I wanted to break up with her?”

“Yes, it seemed the fastest way to make her move on,” she said complacently. “Oh, there you are.” She turned as Elvey came out in a rush to greet her.

Efran looked away to stroke Kraken’s nose. *Then all that hatred, and plotting—the strawmen and taking Joshua—her obsession with power—was all because her mother lied to her. Then Showalter used her, and lied to her—*

Suddenly Marguerite was at his elbow. “Oh, Efran! I should have realized—I’m so sorry that I didn’t see it in time to warn you—” As he was staring helplessly at her, she drew him away from Cocci’s carriage, beside which Cocci and Elvey were talking. Then she whispered, “Efran, Cocci is a dark altior. She doesn’t hide it at all. But that means that Lissa was, too, only she cloaked it very well.”

He was now squinting at her. He knew that altiors—which Marguerite and Minka were both—were the highest class of faerie, akin to humans. But—“Dark altiors?” he murmured.

“Yes, Efran,” she said. In a low voice, she went on, “Dark altiors are very rare—almost unknown. They have no souls, Efran. Conscience is unknown to them. It would have been—disastrous for you to marry Lissa.”

“Oh,” he exhaled.

She looked back to the chapel, where one of Wendt’s men ascended to her doors, obviously with a message. Lightly gripping his arm, she said, “Everything works for good, Efran.” Then she hurried back to her house as Hartshough came to the door, pointing, and the messenger looked around.

Sightlessly, Efran began down Main, Kraken at his shoulder. Then he realized, *Showalter saw it—that’s what he meant by her “special status.”*

He looked up suddenly at a walking stick—actually, three of them—progressing toward him, weaving in their weird way. Horses shied away from them; drivers went around them, and still they came like the vanguard of an invading army. However, he noted that they were not as large as the one Thurlow had brought up to the workroom.

Efran regarded them in dismay, wondering, *How many are down here now?* Kraken stretched out his nose toward the creatures, then sprang back as a little man in a tweed suit appeared over the leading stick. He whacked it on the head with a large mallet and somehow set it on fire. The other two he dispatched in a similar manner, then swept off his flat cap to Efran and disappeared. Three small flaming piles of sticks remained in the street. Horses and drivers circumvented these as well.

“All right.” Efran stood rooted where he was for a moment. Kraken nudged him from behind, so he continued down Main with the vague idea that he was going somewhere.

He looked up as a rider reined to a stop in front of him. Chilcott said, “Captain, Commander Wendt requests your presence in Barracks A.” (Soldiers delivering messages were instructed as to very specific wording.)

“Yes, I’m coming,” Efran said. Since he was only three doors down from the barracks, he continued walking Kraken. Chilcott turned to ride back with the message.

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Chapter 10

Efran released Kraken at the water trough in front of the barracks, then went in with a hazy glance around. Viglian said, “Back in the conference room, Captain.”

“Yes,” Efran said, entering the partly open door.

Wendt was sitting at the head of the long table, as usual, with five or six men sitting around it. They turned at his entry, and Wendt said, “Thank you for coming, Captain. Have a seat.”

The chair at his right hand was vacant, so Efran took that one. Wendt said, “We were apprised of the Addendum that Lord Ryal found a few days ago, which astonished everyone until we all realized how much sense it made. So, once again, you proved your worth—this time by kidnapping Sybil and bringing her here. If I haven’t congratulated you for that, I am now,” he said wryly. Efran nodded; it was true.

“However, Surchatain Sewell has sent us an urgent message from Vychan—Venegas’ logging camp,” Wendt said. “Here are his messengers, so I’ll let them tell you.”

Efran looked down the table at two weary Polonti who were just now pushing away their empty plates. They still had ales in hand, and one took a drink before reciting his message: “Captain Efran, greetings from Surchatain Sewell. You know how important Vychan is to us and to you, to supply wood for all of the building in Venegas, and the Abbey Lands, and Westford. But now our trees are under attack by these creatures that look like twigs—”

Efran groaned, leaning back to cover his eyes. “They’ve made it to your forests?”

“Hundreds, thousands of them,” the messenger said, going off script. “Overnight, it seems. They feed on the leaves, stripping a great tree of every leaf in just one day—then they all swarm to the next, and the next, leaving them all bare. We have hundreds of men, women and children going through the forest, killing these twigs by the handfuls. But it makes no difference; there are too many. If they kill all our trees, we die as well. And there will be no more wood for anyone to build.”

Efran crossed his arms over his chest, staring up at the ceiling. “The monkeys eat them. But enough monkeys to eat all that many would become a scourge themselves. Five little men in tweed are not enough to kill that many, either, and burn them”—he paused to sit up. “Why would they set them on fire after killing them?”

Wendt looked to Captain Towner, who said, “I would assume to kill the eggs, Captain.”

“Of course,” Efran exhaled, looking aside. “And if they’re in Westford, which they are, then they’re also in the woods west of the Passage. Killing all those trees would not only wipe out the lumber harvest, but destroy the homes of the game animals that we live on. From there, the sticks would progress up to the hilltop woods and invade our orchards and gardens.”

He mulled this over for a moment, then stood. “All right. I’m going to get information, then we’ll do—something. Tell Sewell we’ll do something.”

The messengers smiled grimly, standing to salute. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Hold your thanks until we get it done,” he said. Before leaving, he abruptly stopped to salute. “Permission to be dismissed, Commander.”

“You’re dismissed,” Wendt said, half-smiling.

Efran went out to throw himself up on Kraken’s back, aborting his play in the water trough. “We’re going to Ryal’s,” he said, turning Kraken’s head.

Kraken loped up Main, dodging pedestrians in the crosswalks (which action Efran frowned on, but made an exception for today). Before they got to the notary shop, however, Efran fell off to snatch up a spindly walker weaving up the street. This one was only about a foot long, including its appendages stretched out in front. Without bothering to remount, Efran ran his catch up the sidewalk into Ryal’s shop.

Giardi was waiting on a customer, and they both looked at Efran as he set his trophy on the counter, legs and antennae waving. “Where is a notary when you need one?” he asked petulantly.

Ryal emerged from the back room to see the large insect feeling around his counter. “Yes, Efran?” he asked.

“I need you to help me find out everything there is to know about these,” Efran said. Before saying more in front of a helpless civilian, Efran nodded to the back room. “Come back here, if you have a moment. If you don’t, you’ll want to make one.” He carried the bundle of sticks to the back room while Ryal followed, shutting the door.

Placing the insect on the back table, Efran told him about the message they had just received from Sewell, as well as what Efran and his men had seen in Westford today. “We have to figure out how to kill them en masse, all of them, without harming the trees, structures or people.”

“I’ll get Soames to help me research it,” Ryal said grimly, surveying the harmless-looking walker.

“Thank you. Get Giardi to pray. Ask her to ask Madgwick to pray. I’m going up hilltop,” Efran said.

“I’ll let you know what we find out—if anything,” Ryal said dubiously.

Patting his back, Efran went out to leap on Kraken and prompt him to lope up the switchback. In the courtyard, Efran slipped off and whacked him on the haunches to send him to the back grounds. Meanwhile, Efran ran up the steps into the foyer to go directly into the keep.

Fortunately, Earnshaw was not reading to the men from the Holy Canon right now, so Efran had the keep to himself. He paused to calm down, then knelt before the ten-foot-tall sculpture depicting the Crucified. But he did not pray to it; it was a reminder, not a totem. He looked to the window above it, which let in the light that illuminated the Scripture engraved behind him: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. . . .”

“God of heaven, God of our deliverance, over and over again, I look to You now to help us, deliver us from these creatures that threaten the lives and the livelihoods of all of us. Lord God, You have a reason for allowing them to appear here, but despite all the evils that have threatened us, You have always delivered us. Please, now, please send us help, send us something—”

Someone entered behind him, and he stopped, half-turning. Earnshaw said, “Captain! Excuse me. We’ll postpone the reading till you’re done, sir.”

“No, I’m done,” Efran said, rising. “Just pray for us to get rid of the walking sticks, Earnshaw.”

“Walking sticks . . .” he repeated tentatively.

“Large insects that kill trees very quickly, and they appear to be spreading,” Efran said.

Earnshaw’s face went slack. “Yes, Captain,” he whispered. Men began filing into the keep around them, and Earnshaw went to the front, where the Holy Canon sat in its stand.

Efran patted the men attempting to salute him as he crossed the foyer and bounded up the stairs to the little-used courtyard balcony. It was small, with hardly room enough for five or six people standing or a table for four. But

it gave a long view, and there was no one else here right now.

“God of heaven,” he exhaled. “I’ve done all I know to be obedient; if there’s more I lack, show me, please. But please, send us something. . . .” He thought back to the eagles and the badgers that had eaten the adders that Showalter had conjured up, and Gevorgyan’s cries that had shattered hundreds of trolls on their feet, then the masses of carrion crows that had consumed them. God could send something like that now.

So Efran looked out over the forests beyond the Lands, and looked up to the clouds, waiting, watching. . . . But nothing appeared.

With that disappointment, Efran had to think a minute. It wasn’t up to him to dictate how or when God acted. Having made the request, Efran had to do whatever he could until he was given light. Even when a problem was Nothing, it sometimes had to be dealt with before being dismissed. How much more would Efran have to deal with Something that was a real problem now, before God stepped in at the time of His choosing.

“All right,” he said. “Then give me wisdom what to do while I’m waiting.” He stood watching until he noticed that inquiries after the Captain were being made below. So he descended the stairs to almost run into young MacCaa in the foyer.

“Captain!” He saluted in surprise. “Administrator DeWitt requests your presence upstairs, sir.”

“I am coming.” Efran went down the corridor and up the stairs to the workroom, still thinking.

He arrived to see Estes and DeWitt sitting around the north end of the table with Colquhoun, McElfresh, and Cocci. “Here I am,” Efran said, sitting beside Estes.

DeWitt said, “Thank you, Efran. We’re about to sign this agreement with the nobles, but we want you to look at it first.” He laid three tightly written sheets before him.

Efran started to wave. “I don’t know how I could—” Then he was abruptly reminded of his recent assertion that he had done *all he knew* to be obedient, and thus mitigate the coming disaster. Had he? Efran bent over the pages to begin reading carefully.

Along the bottom of the second page, he raised up slightly, but kept reading. When he finished, he checked back over a few paragraphs, then sat up to stack the pages together. “It all looks good, except for the line here in Paragraph Eight, that says the Abbey will, ah—” He paused to find the place, then read, ““pay as needed to mitigate natural or catastrophic disasters that affect the economic well-being of Westford.””

He paused as the others looked at him, then he said, “No. Strike that provision. Or if it must stand, insert a limiting amount which I will approve.”

The Westfordians regarded him tensely, then McElfresh said, “I don’t see the problem. There hasn’t been any natural or catastrophic disaster since the palace sank into the caverns beneath it, and no one has needed to pay to rectify that.”

Efran looked at him. “The Goulven crisis? The fires that followed?”

Cocci said, “That’s in the past. Another crisis like the Goulven is inconceivable.”

Efran only glanced at her. “Put a limiting amount or strike it.”

DeWitt, who had been studying that particular provision, exhaled, “I have to agree with the Captain, especially as any ‘natural or catastrophic disaster’ that affects Westford will almost certainly affect the Abbey Lands as well.”

“I second that,” Estes said.

Colquhoun said, “Well, then, say, an upper limit of—five thousand royals.”

DeWitt quietly choked, but Efran said, “Two hundred.”

The Westfordians stirred in moderate outrage. “Two hundred royals? We’re still rebuilding!” McElfresh protested.

“Yes, I’ve seen it. Two hundred royals or nothing,” Efran said.

Cocci pointed out, “You need this agreement as much as we do.”

Efran turned to regard the woman with no conscience. “No, we don’t. And I’m about to drop the upper limit to one hundred royals.”

DeWitt dipped his quill to cross out the words “as needed” and insert, “up to two hundred royals” on the first copy, then on the second. Then he looked up to ask Efran, “Are you comfortable with the rest of it?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

So DeWitt signed both copies before passing the quill, ink, and parchments for Estes and Efran to sign. Then he placed the documents before his visitors. They looked at each other, and Cocci stood. “I’m going to think about this.”

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Chapter 11

Tired and somewhat reluctant, Colquhoun and McElfresh also stood without signing the agreement. Colquhoun sighed, “We’ll be in touch.”

“Very well.” DeWitt turned to Cudmore at the door. “Escort our visitors out, and order their carriages made ready.”

Cudmore saluted. “Yes, Administrator. Follow me, please.” The Westfordians left without another word.

The Abbey administrators remained at the table. DeWitt grumbled, “I don’t know how I missed that, but, you’re absolutely right, Efran.” Since DeWitt never missed anything, Efran wondered if Cocci had cloaked it.

Estes agreed. “I didn’t even see it. And to say that anything like the Goulven crisis is inconceivable is just willful blindness. We don’t know what may happen.”

Efran leaned over his arms on the table. “Oh, I have an inkling. We’re about to encounter the worst natural disaster any of us will have ever seen.” And he told them about the invasion of the walking sticks. He ended, “I’ve asked Ryal to research them for us, then tomorrow I’m taking a group out to Vychan.”

“I’m glad you’re on top of this, Efran,” DeWitt said. Estes nodded; Efran inhaled doubtfully.

Following that sober awakening, Efran went down to the back grounds to look for Minka. She saw him at once, and came over to throw herself onto him. “Oh, Efran, we’ve been having so much fun! Joshua is riding Gaunter as well as he rides Kraken, and he has a new trick of turning his head and saying, ‘Awright.’ He looks and sounds so much like you, everyone is dying,” she laughed.

Smiling, Efran glanced up at Joshua on Gaunter near the apple trees, but looked back down at Minka. Smoothing her wisps back from her face, he suddenly knew that because Minka was happy, everything would be all right. It didn’t make sense, but there it was. So he said, “Sewell wants me to come out and have a look at his logging camp Vychan, so, I’ll be taking a group to leave early in the morning. I want to see what he has to show me and still get back by tomorrow night.”

“All right,” she said, then doubled over, laughing again. “Oh. It’s so funny. Anyway, I’m glad you’ll be coming back quickly to us.”

“As fast as I can. And it will be all right. I promise,” he said. She hugged him as tightly as she could.

Before sunrise the following morning (November 23rd) Efran gathered Krall, Mumme, Martyn, Goss and Stephanos to ride with him to Vychan. While a straight path northeast was slightly shorter, it was quicker to take the coastal highway east from the Lands to Venegas and then the logging road north to Vychan. Because the logging area was almost as far north as Westford, the men dressed for the cold, wearing heavy hooded cloaks.

Less than four hours later, after having made only one stop to eat and rest the horses, they arrived at the southern outskirts of the logging. And they pulled up to stare at an acre of skeleton trees.

The pine trees were undamaged, as the sticks apparently did not care for the needles. But the oak trees, the staple of building timber across the Continent, were completely bare. Silently, the men rode through a vast graveyard of seventy-year-old, hundred-year-old oaks, standing tall and leafless. “What’s that noise?” Mumme asked.

“It’s ahead of us,” Efran nodded, prompting Kraken forward. Shortly, they came upon the next group of trees whose crowns were completely covered with moving brown sticks—thousands of them on each tree. The loud drone the men heard was their mandibles at work. They covered most of the trees within the men’s sight—at least twenty or thirty.

Silently, the Landers rode through the carnage, their horses’ hooves crushing the sticks that had fallen to the ground for lack of space on whichever tree was above. These were crawling off to find the next available tree. Efran noted that these insects were smaller—perhaps eight inches from the tip of the front legs to the back of the abdomen, instead of a foot or eighteen inches. But given the number, the size was irrelevant to the destruction they wreaked.

The men looked over to see four Polonti in dark blue Venegasan uniforms riding to meet them. Efran called, “I am Captain Efran. We heard from Surchatain Sewell yesterday, but I never imagined. . . .” He trailed off for the lack of words.

The leading rider answered, "Yes, Captain. I am head logger Aiello. When the *luku* [destroyers] reach the ravine three miles north, we will set fire to them. We only hope that is far enough away to not spread to Venegas. There is nothing more we can do."

"I understand," Efran said. "I have nothing to offer now, but, we are looking."

"Yes, Captain. *Koa!*"—fight on, fight to the death. With that, Aiello and his men rode away.

The Landers looked at each other helplessly. Having seen what they needed to see, they turned south again.

Efran and his party reached the Lands in the late afternoon. He dismissed his men, sending Krall to report to the Commander while Martyn went up hilltop to report to Estes and DeWitt. Then Efran turned Kraken back over the old stone bridge to ride west over the Passage. With dread roiling his stomach, he had to see what ingress the sticks had made into the woods here. There were more pines, but a great many oaks, hickories, maples and beeches as well.

Once over the Passage, Efran diverted into the woods. Here, he dismounted to look up, scanning the trees. He was both encouraged and frightened to see nothing of the sticks—encouraged because they hadn't overwhelmed the woods yet, but frightened for what he might see of them.

As he walked, he heard a rustling, and turned to see Krug approaching. "Ah! Dis Effin!"

"Krug! Hello. Have you seen—seen—" Efran was momentarily distracted by something different about Krug. Then he realized that it was his clothes. Krug was wearing real clothes—pants and shirt—and not troll rags. "You're—nice. Good," Efran said, gesturing over his own clothes.

"Ya! Like dis?" Krug said, modeling his new attire.

"Yes. But—sticks? That walk and eat leaves?" Efran asked. Hearing something above, he looked up into the tree next to him. "There!" he said, pointing. Three or four walking sticks were clustered together, eating.

"Ah," Krug said, then turned to call toward their village—what had been the children's playground.

Shortly, another troll, also dressed well, came running up with something in his hands. "Is it—Irtz?" Efran hazarded.

"Sheuf," he corrected. As Efran winced at the miscall, Sheuf waved, "Dis okay."

"Okay," Efran half laughed, then looked as Sheuf spread out what he had in his hands.

It was a net—one of the nets that the strawmen had used to try to trap the trolls. But they had repaired it, somehow, and equipped it with long cords on each corner. Krug pointed Sheuf to the group of sticks in the tree above them, then Krug wrapped the ends of two cords around his hands while Sheuf took the other two.

Standing under the tree, they looked up to gauge the distance to the sticks above. Krug gave a count, and they tossed the net up over their heads. As it landed on the sticks, Krug and Sheuf pulled on the cords to bring them down through the branches. Kraken shied back to watch over Efran's shoulder.

Sheuf called, "Kobza!" as he and Krug took the net with the wriggling sticks, each about 10 inches long, to the

bank of the Passage. Still holding two of the cords, Sheuf jumped to a large rock about five feet from the bank where Krug stood with his cords. Then they cooperatively lowered the net into this narrow channel of the river.

“You’re drowning them,” Efran murmured—upon which they would be swept out to Sea. Urpèd’s boy Kobza then came running up with a basket. After allowing the net to remain in the water for a few minutes, Sheuf jumped back from the rock onto the bank. Then he and Krug cooperatively pulled the net out. It held several large, wriggling salmon.

Krug and Sheuf emptied the salmon into the basket which Kobza carried over the new bridge toward the Lands. Krug told Efran, “Da Shurtleff.”

“The fishmonger!” Efran cried. “You drown the walking sticks, net the salmon, and then sell your catch to Shurtleff!”—after eating their fill, no doubt.

“Da,” Krug said, pleased. With or without the walking sticks, they were able to net plenty to eat and sell, both.

Efran exhaled, leaning on his knees in relief. He rose to clap Krug on the shoulder. “You’re smarter than some people I know.”

“Da,” Krug agreed complacently.

Shaking his head, Efran remounted. “All right, then. Carry on.” As he rode toward the new bridge, Krug and Sheuf waved to him, and he waved back.

Turning south over the old stone bridge to the Lands, Efran mused, “Well, that’s a good stopgap measure, but it won’t stop an infestation like that at Vychan. Still, that’s—interesting.”

In the twilight, Efran rode through the wall gates to stop at Barracks A. Wendt had gone home, so Efran told the night-duty guards Graeme and Lund about the trolls’ walking-stick elimination/fish-catching venture. Graeme predicted, “By the next generation, the trolls will be living in the Lands’ nobles district.”

“We don’t have a nobles district,” Efran scowled.

“Wait for the trolls to build one,” Graeme predicted. Lund laughed and Efran groaned.

He arrived up hilltop in great relief to hear the dinner bell ring. Squirt took Kraken around to the stables while Efran trotted up the fortress steps and turned into his quarters to wash up for dinner.

When he appeared at the door of the dining hall, Ella turned on the bench. “There he is!”

On Quennel’s leg next to her, Joshua looked over to his father in complacent approval: “Awright.” Half the tables on the back row laughed, but he was busy with a bowl of custard right now.

Minka got up from the bench to encircle Efran’s waist before he could sit. “You’re back,” she breathed, head on his chest, and he kissed her white head. “What did you see in Vychan?” she asked.

Before answering, Efran coaxed her to sit back down, but Quoid stopped before him to salute. “Captain, Administrator DeWitt asks if you’ll step up to his table for just a moment. He promises not to keep you from your dinner.”

“Yes,” Efran said, glancing up to the head tables, where DeWitt lifted his chin. “I’ll be right back; go ahead and have Wardly bring my plate and ale,” Efran told Minka.

She nodded, but Joshua said, “Awright,” from Quennel’s knee.

Amid more laughter and groans, Efran considered, “I have to get some new stock phrases, don’t I?”

“Probably,” she murmured cautiously. He walked on up to DeWitt’s table.

Nodding to Estes nearby, Efran leaned over the table to hear DeWitt murmur, “You’ll want to talk to Justinian—he says the invasion of walking sticks in Westford is close to critical. They’re dealing with it for now by various means, but it’s going to erupt shortly.”

“I’m not surprised. Why did Cocci and her boys think we wouldn’t know about it?” Efran wondered.

“I don’t know, but their sleight of hand almost worked,” DeWitt said in disgust.

“Almost,” Efran emphasized. Noting Tera next to DeWitt with their baby Tica, he said, “Hello, Tera. You look nice. How old is your baby?”

“About three and a half months now, thank you,” she said shyly, pressing against DeWitt’s arm.

“She’s very pretty,” Efran said. He idly scanned the whitewashed wall behind them, telling DeWitt, “I’ll see if I can catch Justinian after dinner, then. Oh—I went over to the woods west of the Passage; saw a few walking sticks in those trees.” DeWitt looked alarmed, but Efran went on, “The trolls are netting them to drown them in the river and catch salmon on the uptake.” DeWitt eyed him and Efran added, “You just have to go watch them do it.” As DeWitt nodded, Efran went back to his table, where Minka waited with his plate and ale.

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Chapter 12

While Efran sat down to an excellent pot roast, he sent Skalbeck to the chapel to see if Justinian would be available to talk to him tonight. Skalbeck returned to tell him that Lord Justinian was out for the evening, so Efran sent him down again to tell Marguerite that he, Minka and Joshua would be by to see them tomorrow.

When he crawled into bed with Minka that evening, she asked in a whisper, “Is it bad? The walking sticks?”

“In Vychan? Yes,” he admitted. “They’re going to have to burn down some acreage to get them under control.” He lifted up. “But you’ll be pleased to hear what our playground trolls are doing.”

“What?” she asked, grinning at him through her angel hair.

He told her, and she was delighted, of course.

It was midmorning of the following day, November 24th, by the time Efran, Minka and Joshua got down to the

chapel. Jehan and Coish accompanied them. Upon arriving, the visitors were obliged to cordially wait for Hartshough to gently waken Lord Justinian. This did not seriously inconvenience anyone, as Marguerite had found some clever wooden toys at Froggatt's.

She sat on the floor in the hall to show them to Joshua while his parents sat on the divan with the hot, sweet drinks Hartshough had forced on them before going upstairs to rouse the sleeping lord. Jehan and Coish, also armed with drinks, sat on the floor on either side of the divan. Minka picked up her cup with a guarded look at her husband. "I don't want any more competitions as to who gets the ingredients right," she warned him, sipping her drink.

"Not to worry; cinnamon's not a mystery to anyone," he murmured back at her.

From the stairway, Hartshough said, "That is correct, Lord Efran." Marguerite laughed while Efran slumped at Hartshough's acute hearing.

Eventually, Justinian found his way downstairs in a silk robe, eyes closed, to sit on the divan beside Minka. Efran was on her other side. While Hartshough was preparing the lord's late breakfast, Minka said, "Good morning, Justinian."

"Good morning, dear Minka," he said. "I like your new scented soap. Your husband should try it. His smells like sweat."

"Now, Justinian, it's my fault for waking you so early. Efran wanted to wait, but I was anxious to hear what's happening in Westford," she said.

Still half asleep, he muttered, "Dearest Minka, you can't lie even when you try." She looked peeved but Efran almost spewed his cinnamon drink at hearing his own words in Justinian's voice.

Nonetheless, he waited patiently for Justinian to wake up, meanwhile watching Marguerite and Joshua play with the wooden toys. One was a clever painted figure of a woman that had a sturdy cord running from the top of her hat, through her body, and out the bottom of her skirt. Holding the top of the cord and pulling on the end caused her arms and legs to fly out in vigorous exercise. Joshua enjoyed this so much that he threw it, screaming, across the room.

Then Justinian did open his eyes to eat the ham, eggs and baked apples that Hartshough brought him. "Westford," he exhaled, sitting back with his hot tea. "They are dealing with a moderate infestation. It wouldn't be bad, except they ignored the bugs for so long. Then, worse, they tried to market them. There was one idiot who attempted to sell them as pets."

Minka looked about to take umbrage but Efran asked, "Thurlow?"

"I don't know," Justinian said.

"He brought one down here, calling it a 'gabbot,' and tried to tell us that it was a mechanical device of his own making that could haul things," Efran told him.

Justinian squinted. "That's—original and bold. What did you do with it?"

"The faerie tree dismembered it and incinerated its eggs," Efran said.

“Ah. There’s the rub,” Justinian said, sitting up. “They are incredibly proficient breeders, capable of laying thousands of eggs, from what I hear. And killing the bugs does not necessarily kill the eggs.”

“Right. What is Westford doing to contain them, then?” Efran asked.

“From what I saw, they’re catching them and throwing them into the lake where the palace used to be. And that works, as long as they don’t crawl out, which they sometimes do. Otherwise, they crush them or cut them up, which, again, kills the one but not the eggs,” Justinian noted.

“Our playground trolls are using nets to snag them out of the trees and drag them in the Passage. That brings up a net full of salmon which they sell to Shurtleff. The insects are washed out to Sea,” Efran related.

“That’s brilliant,” Justinian said, and Minka nodded in vindication. “Do the fish eat them?” he asked.

“Probably not; they’re too big,” Efran said. “The eagles, crows and hawks would, if they spotted them.”

“Which might require more walking sticks than you want on the Lands,” Justinian said.

“Right,” Efran dully agreed.

There was a silence, then Minka asked, “What can we do, Auntie?”—as faeries, she obviously meant.

Marguerite looked dubious, shaking her head. “Manipulating natural creatures is risky, and I don’t think I’d trust a faerie who would try it. The balance of nature must be regarded; that is, the solution must be natural, like the one your trolls have found.”

They were silent, thinking about this, when Hartshough came out of the kitchen, head hanging. They looked at him in some surprise, as he had nothing in his hands to offer them. While Joshua chewed on a wooden soldier, Marguerite asked, “What is it, Hartshough?”

“The walking sticks are a delicacy among mountain trolls, Lady Marguerite,” he said dolefully.

“Your kin?” Efran asked, sitting up.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough admitted.

They all looked at each other. Efran asked, “Can you get them to come down here?”

“I do not know, Lord Efran. They—we—are reclusive, because of our appearance. Nor do I wish to subject them to attacks or revulsion,” he said.

“Will you tell them about it?” Efran asked. “It may mean our survival, and we can warn our people to leave them alone, that they are here to help us.”

“I will inquire, Lord Efran,” Hartshough yielded.

Minka got up to put her arms around him. “You are the dearest man, next to my husband.”

Justinian pulled his silk robe around himself pettishly. Without looking at him, she added, “Even though Justinian did prevent Efran from killing the wolf hunters.”

“And he killed Calkin,” Efran admitted.

“No, no—those were your men who did that,” Justinian protested.

“And the sheep brains,” Efran said. He told Justinian, “You did find the sheep brains that enabled us to kill off the Graetrix.”

“If only there were sheep brains for the walking sticks,” Justinian grumbled.

“That reminds me,” Efran said, standing. “I asked Ryal to research them day before yesterday. I’ll go check to see if he’s found anything. Don’t go away,” he told her fondly. She glowed at him. Jehan and Coish sprang up to accompany him. He glanced at them, nodding permission.

Flanked by his men, Efran turned to walk toward the front doors, and Justinian slid slightly toward Minka on the divan. Efran stopped, turning slowly, so Justinian slid back to his previous position. Satisfied, Efran walked on out. Justinian rolled his eyes and Efran smiled, hearing her laughter as he passed through the doors.

He, Jehan and Coish cut across the yards of the chapel and Ryal’s shop next door, then bounded up the steps to enter. He found Ryal and Giardi both waiting on customers. Ryal looked up to jerk his head toward the back room. “Go have a seat, Efran. I’ll come back in just a moment to show you what we found. It’s not much,” he warned. Efran accepted that to sit at the back-room table and wait for him. Jehan and Coish stood at the wall.

On the table in front of him was the walking stick Efran had brought in, only without its head. When he turned the stiff creature over, he saw a slit in its abdomen. Separating this gently, he looked in at clusters of what looked like tiny brown jugs. “The eggs,” he murmured.

Ryal came in at that time to sit across from him. “Are these the eggs?” Efran asked, lifting the abdomen. His bodyguards moved in to look, and he opened the slit for them to see.

“Yes,” Ryal said. “An adult female can produce up to a thousand eggs in her maturity, which spans only months. Moreover, they don’t mate to reproduce; males are almost unknown. They just lay eggs. You see how small the eggs are, and how much they look like seeds.”

“Yes, they do,” Efran murmured.

“Be careful not to carry any eggs away on you. The only way to kill them is to burn, boil, or . . . freeze them,” Ryal said. Efran eyed him warily.

“That’s correct,” Ryal said, as though Efran had spoken his fears. “Any eggs left in Eurur or Westford over the winter would most likely die. Here, they would most likely survive.”

Efran sat back, drawing a long breath. “What do we do, then?” he whispered. Raising his eyes, he pleaded, “Lord God, what do we do?”

After a moment, Ryal said, “That’s all I can tell you, for now. We’re still researching it, but, you can take that away”--indicating the dead insect. “I advise you to burn it.”

“Yes, thank you, Ryal,” Efran said, gingerly standing with the creature, closing up its abdomen so that no eggs dropped out.

From there, he and his men walked down to Coghill's. He stopped at the door long enough for Coish to open it. The three of them paused at the front desk, where Coghill's wife Delio uncertainly regarded them and the fragmented creature. "What can I do for you, Lord Efran?" she asked, grimacing.

"Wellllll," Efran began.

Coghill's apprentice Tolliver came out of a back room. "Lord Efran! Coghill's out on a call right now. Can I help you?"

"Yes, Tolliver. We'd like to borrow your crematorium," Efran said. "Can you get it fired up for us, please?"

Looking at the creature in Efran's hands, Tolliver asked, "Just for that one?"

Efran winced. "I'm afraid it won't be the only one."

"Well, then. I . . . suppose I'd better. Come out back," Tolliver said, turning.

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Chapter 13

While Tolliver loaded wood in the crematorium, Efran sent Jehan and Coish on a series of errands. First, they were to spread the word among all the men to locate all pieces of the walking sticks, dead or alive, and bring them to Coghill's backyard for burning. They were also to warn all Landers to bring any they found to Coghill's as well. They were also to collect enough money from Barracks A for several gallons of oil for the crematorium, which was to be replenished as needed. And he told them to ask Gabriel to work up a duty roster for a pair of men to supervise the oven day and night.

That day, the invasion began.

First, the wall gate guards noticed the suddenly bare trees beyond the ridge several miles north of the Lands. Those trees were mostly deciduous, and did lose their leaves after the occasional freeze which happened that far south. But there had been no freeze yet this fall.

Then, the sticks began coming over the walls—all along the northern wall. They did not bother with the road, nor did the spikes impede them. They crawled easily up and over the rough stone and mortar. Soldiers were yanked off other duties to catch them and bring them to the oven.

Soon, Coghill's oven was overwhelmed, so the men built bonfires in the barracks yard. Soon, there was not enough safe space for more bonfires, so the men asked if they could drown them in Cavern Lake. Gabriel consulted with Ryal, who said, yes, if the insects were secured in cloth bags that were weighted, they could be safely disposed of that way.

So the men did that, until they ran out of cloth bags, tightly woven burlap bags, any kind of bags that could be tied, any kind of cloth that could be secured, and boxes.

All Landers were alerted to the emergency, and to the necessity of burning, boiling, or drowning the sticks in the Passage, to kill the eggs as well. But as the day wore on, the flood over the walls increased until soldiers and residents stood helplessly watching the tide overflow the Lands.

The sight was mesmerizing—sticks crawling over sticks crawling over other sticks, falling, tumbling, creeping over the walls, over fences, around ponds, under animals, until landing on something green and alive. In seconds it was neither, and the dense, clicking mass rolled on.

Efran thrashed through the stream of sticks to reach Delano's. There, he found Madgwick and Delano watching the carnage from their doorstep. Efran gasped, "Madgwick, what—what—?"

"All I can tell you is to pray, Efran. That's all I know," she said, her face soft with compassion. It was not an empty platitude; they had as much as anyone to lose if their barley and hops fields south of Westford were destroyed. While Delano could still get the door open, they went inside their shop. Turning away, Efran lost his footing to fall into the dense mass on the street, as the sidewalks were long buried.

He made his way to the switchback, then to the courtyard. It was clear because the hill had not yet been overrun. From there, he ran into the fortress and up to the courtyard balcony to look. At the sight, he bent almost double, gripping the balcony handrail. Trees, gardens, shrubs, plantings, and fields all over the Lands were stripped before his eyes. Focusing on a wall of billowing white smoke in the northeast, Efran realized that Sewell had indeed set Vychan on fire—thus driving the remaining insects south, to the Lands.

With tears pouring down his face, Efran pleaded of God, "*Why?* What have I done, that You withdraw Your protection from us? How are we to feed our animals, our people, our children? God of heaven, why have You turned Your back on us like this? How can I make it right? What can I do?"

Seeing Minka run out into the courtyard below, looking for him, Efran wiped his face and came down from the balcony to take her in his arms. And from there they just watched the ravaging of the Lands.

The rumble from a hundred thousand mandibles was so loud, people below were covering their ears. Main Street was obscured under layers of creeping sticks, and everything green vanished. The only growing things unaffected were the faerie trees. But they were relatively few and far between, little islands of color in the undulating mass of brown.

People closed themselves in their homes or shops to wait out the deluge, to see when it might abate. As night fell, no one could get to the street lamps to light them, and windows in which lights burned were obscured by the rising tide, so the darkness was deep. A few shops or eateries—Firmin's, Croft's, Averno's, The Lands' Best Inn—defiantly lit their door lanterns, as did Hartshough at the chapel. But as the invasion progressed and the lanterns ran out of oil, no one but Hartshough came out to refill them, so the darkness was nearly complete. But the horrible crunching, exponentially magnified, sounded on.

Madea and her kitchen crew put out what they had on hand, but few hilltop residents showed up. Their distress overwhelmed any desire to eat. The Abbey children were fed in their classroom and sent right to bed, as were the babies and toddlers, including Joshua. But Efran stayed in the courtyard to watch. And since he was there, Minka stayed as well.

Late in the evening, when she passed out on his arm, he carried her inside to lay her in bed and cover her up. Then he went back out.

Estes met him in the foyer. "Kelsey brought Malan, Brogna, and her sister up from our house a few hours ago—"

I've put them in a spare room on the second floor. I'm glad they got here when they did; no one can get out of their houses now."

"I'm sure," Efran said. "Go on up to them; I'm going to watch a while longer." With a pat on Efran's shoulder, Estes headed for the stairs. And Efran turned back to look over the now-invisible wasteland below him.

The night deepened, but the rumbling went on. Smoke and fire were still visible in the northeast. There were no guards at the Lands' wall gates below; no one could get to his post over the brown river. But Efran stayed at the courtyard gates to witness the devastation of his charter, his hope, his life.

Whether they were scheduled or not, men came out on duty with the Captain—right now Javier, Enon, Elrod, Tourle, Suco, Pleyel, Doudney and more were standing around him, watching what they could not see. Efran didn't know why he was here; there was no point in it but self-torture. But it was like sitting at the deathbed of someone you loved deeply, someone you could not bear to leave alone.

He dozed off leaning on the gates' thorny wreath of roses. It was certainly too uncomfortable to sleep on, but he knew he was dreaming when Therese put a consoling hand on his head and whispered, *Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.* [Ps. 30:5]

"Now you're mocking me," he said, raising up. He was shivering and didn't know why until he realized that he was cold. He looked over to the east to see the bare lightening of predawn of November 25th, then he looked down on the Lands.

He still couldn't see anything, but he also didn't hear anything. The droning had stopped. And he was still cold. It was *cold* out here.

Shivering hard, he looked over in the lantern light. Shane, in a hooded cloak, came up with one for him. Efran draped it around himself as he murmured, "Why is it so cold?"

"I don't know, Captain, but the clouds are low and heavy," Shane whispered.

With the gradual lightening of the sky, Efran looked up to the laden clouds, and the haziness beneath them. Then he looked down again on the Lands. "What's all that down there?"

More men came to the courtyard gates to look down. "It's all white—bright white," Pleyel murmured. "Everywhere. It's all white. What happened to the sticks?"

Doudney jerked his face up to the sky. "It's snowing! On the Lands! That's *snow* covering everything down there!"

"No, that's impossible," Efran told him. But the higher the sun rose behind the dense cloud cover, the plainer became the view: the Lands had experienced its first snowfall in memory. And it was big and broad, not simply a dusting.

Efran looked from one side of the Lands to the other—from the Passage, sluggish in the freezing air, to the old stone bridge, half-hidden under the drifts, clear to the east as far as he could see, there was a layer of white. Judging from the eight-foot-high stone walls, the snow drifts there were up to three feet. And it was still coming down.

Freezing kills the sticks and the eggs. He almost thought that God had gathered them here to die, like the trolls.

Efran looked up to the sky directly above them. "It's not snowing up here."

"No, Captain," Ori said. "There's no snow anywhere on the hilltop. And there's no sticks, either."

Efran quickly looked to the northwest, beyond the rocky hillside. The trees were standing, and there was no snow. In fact, there was little snow west of the Passage that he could see, and little tree damage. The trolls were fine.

He dropped his head to cry again, but not on the fence, because it was cold and hard.

When he was still out here mid-morning, Minka made him come in and eat. He didn't remember her leading him to bed after that, but she did.

He awoke mid-afternoon. Lurching up, he went out to the courtyard again. It was still snowing. And it snowed for the next two days.

During that time, Efran stopped worrying about the walking sticks and began worrying about the people who were trapped in their homes without being able to go to market or tend animals. But Pia's Polonti—and some Polonti in the army with knowledge of old skills—made snowshoes using ancient techniques straight out of Eledith. Thus equipped, soldiers could walk on top of the snow to bend down and knock on doors or windows, seeing who needed help.

Most people had enough on hand to carry them through a few snowbound days, but everyone was cold. Who in the Lands needed to heat their homes in mid-November, for heaven's sake? A few people built fires in February, but that was mostly to clear out old wood that might be insect-infested. Other than that, the Lands never got cold. Where did all this snow come from?

So soldiers were conscripted to cut down dead trees, chop them into firewood, and clear away enough snow from residents' doorways to pass the wood into them. Plunkett, also, had peat squares on hand. Although he was unable to get to his drying shed north of the Lands, he had enough stored behind his house to offer numerous families relief. Because no one could get out to work, he gave away his peat. So DeWitt paid him from Fortress funds.

As for those in the fortress, they finally got to enjoy fireplaces that had sat unused over the last couple of years.

When morning broke on November 28th, Landers cautiously peeked out of their doors and windows to see that the snow had stopped and the clouds had begun to disperse. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the air began to warm up, and the snow began to melt.

That brought new concerns to the attention of the Fortress leadership: what would they do with thousands upon thousands of dead walking sticks when all the snow melted? As it would take days—perhaps a week—for the snow and underlying ice to melt, Estes, DeWitt, Efran, and Garrett (the head gardener) met in the workroom to discuss options. They also brought up Ryal and Soames for their input.

Garrett was telling the others, "Yes, of course, they can be used for compost, and after lying in a deep freeze for two, three days, the eggs will be inviable as well. But, we have only so much room in our compost piles, not nearly enough for what's out there."

“We could—cart them to the Passage,” Efran threw out, only half serious.

“Yes,” Ryal said. “But your whole army could be doing nothing else for a week while the greater number of walking sticks are rotting everywhere.”

Estes said, “At the same time, our residents have lost hundreds of fruit and nut trees, shrubs, vines, plus vegetable gardens. Our primary concern, for the survival of everyone, is to get them replacements as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, but, from where?” Garrett asked.

Efran asked, “Do you think it snowed in Westford as well?”

DeWitt said, “It must have, surely. I went up rooftop during the second day of snow—the twenty-sixth—just to see what I could north of us. The cloud cover extended to the horizon.”

“I . . . don’t know why I asked,” Efran muttered, head hanging. He was spent, physically and emotionally, from the last week and a half.

The room lapsed into silence, then Dango came to the door to salute. “Captain, Lady Marguerite sends a message from Hartshough—he says that a line of mountain trolls are on their way for the frozen walking sticks, and asks that you open the gates for them.”

There was a moment of dumbfounded silence, then DeWitt said, “Take this message down to Barracks A; tell them to get the gates open immediately.”

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Chapter 14

“Yes, Administrator.” Dango saluted and disappeared from the second-floor workroom.

DeWitt peered at Efran. “Mountain trolls. From Hartshough?”

Efran was trying to remember what exactly had been said. “It was—days ago, maybe four days, when we were at Marguerite’s talking with Justinian about the infestation. And Hartshough said that walking sticks were a delicacy among mountain trolls. His mother was a mountain troll, I believe. So I asked him if he could get the trolls to help us with them, and he said he’d try.”

The men looked at each other, then Efran stood. “I think we’re done here.” While Ryal and Soames went back down to his shop, and Garrett returned to the conservatory, Estes, DeWitt and Efran went to the second-floor balcony to look north. They saw Abbey soldiers shoveling snow away from the gates to slowly open them outward, which was all they could do.

After watching for a few minutes, DeWitt and Estes went back to work, but Efran went down to the dining hall for a chair which he brought to the stairwell leading to the courtyard balcony. He paused to tell Fennig, on duty in the foyer, “If anyone comes looking for me, I’m up here.”

“Yes, Captain,” Fennig said, glancing up the stairs. He hadn’t been up there before, and frankly, didn’t know where they led. So he said, “May I trot up to see, Captain?”

“Yes,” Efran said over his shoulder.

So Fennig came up to look around the small space. “I’ve seen this balcony from Main Street, but, thought it was just for show. Captain, I’m off duty now. May I relay your message to my replacement Henris and join you up here?”

“Yes,” Efran said, glad for the company. “But you have to bring your own chair.”

“Yes, sir.” Fennig grinned, saluting. Shortly, he and the Captain were comfortably seated on the courtyard balcony with ales and cheese balls, looking down Main to the wall gates, now open.

They talked for a minute about the unprecedented snow, among other things. Fennig said, “My grandfather was here visiting my mum when the snow hit, and he just laughed at everybody running around with their hair on fire. She lives on the street behind Croft’s, there; you can see he’s already got her doorway cleaned out so I could come check on her.” Efran looked where he was pointing, and nodded.

Fennig continued, “He said that when he was a boy, in Craghead, near here, he and his brother were caught out in the open in a freak snow storm just like it, except in early December. He said the snow came so quick and so hard, it blinded them, and they couldn’t see their way home. But the clouds opened at just the right spot to shine sunlight on the great fir tree near their house. So they ran for it, and made it safe.”

Taking a swig, Efran smiled at him. “So, is your grandfather a great storyteller?”

Fennig stood to scan the northeast for a minute. “There,” he said, pointing. Efran stood to look as Fennig said, “See that great fir with nothing else around it but the tiny house thirty feet away, practically in its branches?”

Efran breathed, “How old is that tree?”

“I don’t know, Captain, but my grandfather said it was mighty when his grandfather took him to walk around it for the first time,” Fennig said.

Efran absorbed that, then looked quickly back to the main wall gates. “Oh ho, here they come.”

Fennig looked down Main, then they heard, “There you are!” It was Minka’s voice, as she had just stepped off the stairs. She was wrapped up in Efran’s striped coat—the one he wore walking to Westford from Eledith when he was 13. She had worn it continuously since the snow began.

Fennig directed her to his chair. “Please sit here, Lady Minka; I’ll get another chair for myself, if you don’t mind. May I bring you a lager?”

She began, “No, that’s not—”

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir,” Fennig said. “And I won’t run down the stairs, sir.”

“Good,” Efran said, pulling Minka’s chair closer to his. “Here come Hartshough’s relations,” he told her.

They both looked down Main at a line of giants entering the gates single file. They were about ten feet tall, wearing hooded shrouds that covered their heads and hands, and extended clear down to their feet (in sandals, on huge snowshoes). The first five or six mountain trolls carried great shovels or mattocks; the rest carried bundles in their hands.

There was a slight commotion on the stairs behind them. Efran looked back to see Fennig carry another chair onto the balcony, with Hartshough following him. Turning as well, Minka cried, “Hartshough! Sit beside me and tell me what we’re seeing!” Fennig handed her the lager, which she opened without thinking.

Hartshough bowed. “As you wish, Lady Minka.”

She took a drink, then looked at the bottle in confusion. “Where did this come from?”

As Hartshough sat, Efran told Fennig, “Go get Estes and DeWitt.”

“Yes, Captain.” Fennig did slightly run down the stairs.

“Do you know them, Hartshough?” Efran asked, nodding toward the line of giants.

“No, Lord Efran, but I am told that they are the Lekkerkerker clan of East Uytenbogart in the Fastnesses.”

Minka listened, open-mouthed, and Efran said, “They came all the way down from the Fastnesses in four days?”

“No, Lord Efran, that is their ancestral home. They now occupy caves and caverns somewhere around here, though not on the Lands,” Hartshough said.

At this point, Estes and DeWitt joined them on the balcony, followed by Fennig. Minka turned to tell them, “You’re just in time. We’re watching how the Lekkerkerker clan of East Uytenbogart are going to help us get rid of the walking sticks.”

“That is correct, Lady Minka,” Hartshough said.

She patted his hand as the others took note of her faultless recall. “Now you go on; don’t let me interrupt,” she told him. Then she turned up the lager again.

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” Hartshough said. “You see the forward line shoveling up the loose snow at the far north end of Main, which they deposit on either side of the road outside the gates. Meanwhile, you see the greater number of shovelers who remain outside the gates to clear the road of snow. It’s not entirely necessary for the transport of the frozen walking sticks, but it does permit them to be moved much faster—”

“They’re picking up snow from half the road on one shovel load,” DeWitt marveled.

Hartshough turned. “Yes, Administrator DeWitt. Mountain trolls are prodigious shovelers, diggers and tunnelers due to their long habitation in mountains and caves.” Turning back to observe his kinsmen, Hartshough said, “Now that they have cleared away the loose snow from north Main, they are using the mattocks to break up the blocks of ice containing the walking sticks so that they may be carried away. Although the insects landed everywhere, the heavy, sustained snowfall swept them down into the roads, being the lowest point. This also makes for a neater package.”

There were several minutes of silence while the balcony observers watched the giants wield their great mattocks to separate the ice into blocks. With one digger on either end of the first block, they pried it up in unison for two other giants to slide their arms underneath it and carry it out of the gates and up the northbound road. By now, this road had been cleared of loose snow almost as far as those on the balcony could see.

Estes leaned forward. "That one block has got to weigh five hundred pounds!"

Hartshough corrected gently, "I would estimate seven hundred forty pounds, Steward."

"Are they taking it back to their cave?" Minka asked.

"Yes, Lady Minka, where they can keep it frozen until such a time as the insects are needed," Hartshough said.

Fennig asked, "What are the men doing with the parcels, sir? It looks as though they're just leaving them on doorsteps that they've cleared—that's Barracks A and Coghill's, so far. Oh, and Shurtleff's. I missed that."

"Oh, yes. Mountain trolls abide by strict rules of reciprocity. Therefore, if they take something of yours which benefits them, they will leave something of theirs which should benefit you," Hartshough explained.

Minka said, "That's wonderful. Do you know what they're leaving? They're piling them up beside Averne's, now." She craned her neck to look, finishing the lager. Then she just held the empty bottle.

"From what I understand, Lady Minka, they have selected choice seedlings and young plants which should acclimate readily to the Abbey Lands climate and soil," Hartshough said. Efran dropped his head to quietly cry.

Those on the balcony continued to watch the systematic dismantling of great patches of snow and ice. The courtyard below them was also crowded with spectators, while residents on the Lands emerged cautiously to watch the work and investigate the parcels. Their discovery of the contents created great excitement and promiscuous hugging all down Main. However, noting the early disputes over the parcels, Commander Wendt instructed the men to bring them all into Barracks A.

There, he had Gabriel, Captain Towner, Captain Stites and Viglian group the parcels and begin taking them to the appropriate residents with the greatest need. Evidently observing this, the giant trolls began leaving the parcels in front of Barracks A exclusively.

After another half hour of observation, DeWitt and Estes returned to the workroom. Hartshough rose as well. "What will happen now, Lord Efran, is that the Lekkerkerkers will continue their work until dark, then resume it tomorrow, if you permit."

"If I permit," Efran repeated ironically. "How long can they work?"

"From what I understand, Lord Efran, as long as the ice enclosing the walking sticks is solidly frozen, they will continue to dig. At the rate of the thaw in progress, I would estimate that to be only for one more day. But if you will excuse me, I have work of my own waiting."

"Of course, Hartshough. Can you—thank them for us?" Efran asked.

"I doubt that is necessary, Lord Efran, as they are highly desirous of the product of their digging," Hartshough said. "But I will communicate your appreciation of their reciprocity."

“That works. Thank you, Hartshough,” Efran exhaled.

“Lord Efran.” Hartshough bowed, and descended the stairway.

Fennig said, “If you’ll excuse me, Captain, I’d like to go down and check on my mum, maybe get one of those parcels for her.”

“Yes, you’re dismissed. Send someone else up here,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain. Lady Minka,” Fennig saluted. She smiled at him and he turned to the stairway. Then he paused to come back and take her empty bottle.

Shortly, Serrano appeared on the balcony and saluted. “Captain. Lady Minka.”

Without turning, Efran gestured. “At ease. Have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.” Serrano sat on his left while Minka rose on his right.

“The children should be out of class by now. I’m going to see if they want to come out to the courtyard to watch. Will you come down?” she asked Efran.

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Chapter 15

“Yes, I’ll be down shortly,” Efran told Minka. He stood to kiss her head. “I like it,” he said, brushing back her angel hair.

“You don’t catch your fingers in it nearly as often,” she noted. He lifted his head, smiling, as she turned to the stairs.

Efran sat again, and for the next several minutes, he and Serrano watched quietly. Efran glanced up to the sky to note, “Sun’s out now, and it’s warming up considerably. Hope they can keep working.”

“I think so, Captain, because they seem to have habitation close by somewhere,” Serrano said.

“You think?” Efran asked, scanning the ridge north of them, where the snow was rapidly melting.

“Yes, sir, because we’re seeing the same ones carry off ice and come back again,” Serrano said.

“How can you tell them apart?” Efran asked. “They’re all dressed the same.”

“Yes, they are, Captain, but—there, the one with the pickaxe in front. He snared his sleeve and’s now got a rip in it. So we’re calling him Rip. He’s on his third run,” Serrano noted.

“Ah,” Efran said.

“And, the second one back, who just laid down a pack at the barracks—watch him when he turns. There,” Serrano said.

Efran laughed, “He’s got a streak of mud all across his front.”

“Right. He’s Mud Boy,” Serrano said. “Also—look at the one in front, who’s testing the depth of the snow. He’s got six fingers on his right hand! I wonder if all of them do.” There was another giant following him with a large bundle.

“Interesting,” Efran said. He looked down to the courtyard, then, where the children rushed the gates and fence to look below, clamoring to go down for a better view. This was denied them.

At that time, Routh appeared on the balcony, saluting. “Captain, Lady Minka requests your presence in the courtyard.”

“All right.” He rose, smiling, to begin down the stairs with Serrano behind him.

Passing through the foyer into the courtyard, Efran noticed Martyn carrying Joshua, who was looking down at the shrouded giants in great interest. “Anh!” He commanded, pointing, but Martyn declined to take him down.

Then Efran looked to see that the diggers were about three-fourths of the way down Main, now. They were so much closer to the hill, the courtyard observers could see that when the wind blew the hood back on one of them, it exposed a lumpy head with eyes so far apart as to be almost over his ears. Those in the courtyard who caught sight of him gasped before he replaced his hood with permanently curved digits.

Minka came up to press into Efran’s chest, grinning, but one of the men said, “Captain!”

They all looked to see that the diggers had briefly paused in their labor to watch the giant with the bundle approach the end of the cleared road. The giant before him, who had been testing the depth of the snow, turned to talk with him, showing him something on his measuring rod. There was a problem, somehow; evidently the giant with the bundle desired to approach the switchback with it, but the snow was a hindrance.

The bundle squirmed, then, and skinny legs with awkwardly wrapped feet stuck out from the bottom—“Efran!”

Minka gasped. “It’s a child!”

And it was. The mountain troll was carrying a child, covered with a shroud as they were. The young one was evidently uncomfortable—even on the hilltop, they heard him or her voicing a complaint. The giant spoke to him, and he cried out. When the wind blew the covering off his head, he or she raised a hand to cover the black hair again.

“Efran, he’s bringing us a reciprocal gift!” Minka cried quietly. But so much of Main—forty feet, at least—was still obstructed by a deep layer of snow. That was the problem: the giant could not safely transport the gift through the remaining snow.

Efran turned his head to whistle, and Kraken came loping around the northwestern corner of the fortress, as usual. He drew up for Efran to tell him, “You’re going to take me down to get that child, and if you can’t get through the snow, I’ll take another horse that can.” Kraken bucked in anger, then lowered his head in submission for Efran to grasp his mane and jump on his bare back. Having forgotten to put on a coat when he came out,

Efran didn't even see the ones being thrust at him by his men. So he rode down in his black and white floral shirt (which had been washed at least once since he first wore it about a week ago).

The courtyard guards Lund and Elrod opened the gates for Kraken to lope easily down the old switchback. The giant stuck at the end of the cleared section with his gift raised his head, and the one with the measuring rod scurried away. At the bottom of the switchback, where the snow commenced, the faerie trees leaned over as far as they could to brush snow away from the street. But that was not very effective, leaving at least thirty feet of piled snow that Kraken had to traverse.

He plunged right into the drift that covered his chest, then lifted his front feet to simply plow through it, sending billows up around him. This excess clung to Efran's lower legs, melting against his skin so that his pants became encrusted with snow. Kraken continued to plunge forward as though enjoying it. He did skid a bit on the ice beneath, but never lost his footing. It took only six bounds for him to reach the end of the snow.

Efran tightened his legs to make him stop before he lit on the icy road, where the mountain troll was waiting. He was so tall that Efran did not need to lean down to take the child from his arms. Resting the young one on his thighs, Efran uncovered the child's head. And he found a Polonti, about ten years old, staring up at him in terror. The shape of his head alone told Efran that it was a boy. As for his face—

Efran exhaled at the sight of the cleft lip. It surprised him, in a way, to see the boy at all. Deformities were almost unknown among Polonti, because any born that way were tossed over cliffs or left out for wild animals. It was a tradition that Sister Therese fought with all her heart, but was never able to overthrow.

Looking at the giant who bowed before him, Efran realized that this child was a foundling that the Lekkerkerkers must have discovered in or near the Fastnesses, and took in. But they perceived that the human child needed to be with his own kind, so brought him to the place that cared for abandoned children.

"Thank you," Efran whispered, his eyes watering. The giant uttered something unintelligible to him, then turned away, and they all resumed their work.

Efran turned Kraken in the snow for him to easily bound his way to the switchback entry through the path he had forged. Then he trotted up the switchback in victorious ease. Meanwhile, the child was trembling violently on Efran's arm. It was possible that he'd not only never seen Polonti before, but humans.

They rode through the gates into the silent courtyard. Efran handed him down to Elrod, who gazed at him with red eyes before looking to Lund. He looked stricken as well, having also seen tiny, imperfect Polonti thrown out like trash. The child struggled in Elrod's grip, who let him down.

Efran slid off Kraken, patting him, then stood by the boy while the other children pressed forward to study him. "What happened to his mouth?" Hassie cried.

Toby scowled at her. "That's rude!"

Efran said, "It just didn't form right. Wallace will fix it. We're going to adopt him." He looked at Minka as he said this, both of them knowing that Polonti children were hard enough to adopt out; no one would take a deformed Polonti. She looked back at him in adoration.

The boy, dropped into the midst of alien beings who croaked incomprehensibly as they clustered around him, expressed his terror by evacuating right there in the courtyard. The children backed away, shrieking in disgust.

Efran gathered the shroud around him to pick him up and carry him into the foyer, then down the corridor to the stairs. The child was rigid in shock, which made Efran think of his first impression of the slugs who saved his life. On the way up to Wallace's quarters, Efran talked to him: "My name is Efran. We're going to take care of you. We'll get you cleaned up, and the doctor will fix your mouth. It will hurt, but he will make you better."

As the boy turned blank eyes to him, Efran added, "I know that you don't understand me now, but you will, soon."

When Efran brought him into Wallace's quarters, Leese looked up. Efran told her, "The mountain trolls that are cleaning up the walking sticks brought him to us. Bring wash water to the garderobe, please."

Noting the stains on the shroud and the deformed mouth, she moved off with, "Yes, and I'll get Wallace."

Efran took the boy back to the garderobe in the doctor's quarters, going in with him and leaving the door open. First he wiped the boy's bottom and legs with the shroud before dropping it down into the hole. Leese brought him a bucket of soapy water and cloths, then another bucket of rinse water. Efran dunked a cloth in the soapy water and got to work scrubbing the child from his head to his feet. Efran saw no other deformities but for the skinny arms and legs and the slightly bloated stomach that indicated malnutrition.

The boy seemed to accept that he was being cared for. Eventually, his trembling subsided.

When Efran had him cleaned up, he sat the boy over the hole to finish evacuating. With a hand on him, Efran stepped back to move the buckets out of his way. The exposure in the open garderobe made the boy cringe and cover himself (as his human genitals were much different than that of the mountain trolls) so Efran let go of him to drop his own pants and breeches. "Look. I'm just like you." (Catching a glimpse of Efran's bare back side, Leese swiveled in the opposite direction.)

Seeing Efran's male equipment, the boy looked down at his own, then raised his face to study Efran's face. He reached out a hand to touch Efran's forward-facing eyes, then his own. Concentration began to replace the fear. Efran had pulled his own pants back up by then.

The boy looked at Efran's black hair, fingering his own shoulder-length hair. Efran didn't know at the time that mountain trolls were bald. Even the women had only fuzz on their heads. But here was another point of similarity that the child had never seen before.

With the boy clean and somewhat dry, Leese brought Efran breeches and an undershirt for him. As Efran dressed him, she said, "Lay him down on this bed back here."

"All right." Efran carried him into the examining room to lay him on a high bed with a pillow, then pulled up a chair to sit facing the bed, his hand on the boy's skinny arm. "I'm going to sit with you." The boy held onto his arm, looking around.

When Wallace entered to look down on the newcomer, he began trembling again. The doctor said, "So the mountain trolls brought him to you?"

"Yes," Efran confirmed. Staring at the gray hair above the wires with shiny spots on the doctor's forward-aligned eyes, the child gripped Efran's arm with both hands.

"Leese said you bathed him. Did you see anything irregular, other than the lip?" Wallace asked, lifting the child's shirt.

He cried out in fear, and Efran chided him, “No, come on now. Let him look at you. You’ll be all right. I promise.” The light tone quieted him, and Efran replied to Wallace, “No. He’s underfed, and you need to look at his feet.”

The child relaxed his hold a little, but kept his eyes on Efran while Wallace glanced over him generally, then picked up a foot, murmuring, “Mild frostbite, nothing permanently damaging.”

He then lifted his chin to look through his spectacles at the child’s cleft lip. Wallace raised a corner of the lip, then pressed down on the boy’s jaw to look in his mouth. Straightening, he said, “Only the lip is affected, not the palate, which is good. Leese, come wash his mouth. Then help me find the surgical snips, needle and catgut.”

“Snips?” Efran asked uneasily.

“Yes, we need to cut up the sides of the cleft there, to align the edges of the lip for stitching,” Wallace said, indicating the elongated lips along the cleft to its point above his teeth.

Efran winced. “Can we give him ale?”—for the pain, obviously.

“Yes, let’s see if half a bottle will suffice,” Wallace said.

“All right.” When Efran started to rise, the boy clung to his arm. Efran bent over him. “Let Leese wash your face. I’ll be right back.”

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Chapter 16

The boy seemed to understand. While Leese brought in a small washbasin, Efran went out to the corridor. It was unnecessary to whistle, as three Polonti—Enon, Elowen, and Salk—stood waiting. He told Salk, “Bring me a mild ale.” The boy saluted to run off, and Efran told Elowen, “Go down to the courtyard; tell Lady Minka that Wallace is going to stitch the boy’s lip.” That messenger also darted away, so Efran told Enon, “Stand by.”

He saluted. “Yes, Captain.”

Returning to the examining room, Efran found Leese just now withdrawing the wash water from the boy’s bedside. She had also brought small towels to tuck under his chin.

Sitting again, Efran regarded the trusting brown eyes. “You need a name,” Efran told him. “Your name is . . . Isreal”—not *Israel*, as it should have been, but *Isreal*. Efran had seen the name before, and knew that it was probably just a misspelling, a mistake, something that should have been discarded, but—survived anyway.

Seeing Leese bring over the surgical equipment, Efran unfastened the top buttons of his own shirt to expose the Goulven scars with their stitches. He told Isreal, “Look. This is what Wallace is going to do to your lip. It will hurt, but it will heal closed. You see?”

Regarding Efran’s scars, Isreal raised tentative fingers to his upper lip. “You understand,” Efran said in surprise.

They both looked over as Salk entered with an ale in one hand, saluting with the other. "Your ale, Captain."

"Very good." Opening it, Efran said, "Salk, this is Isreal. I'm going to adopt him."

"Oh! You're very lucky!" Salk told the boy, who studied him. Salk was only a few years older than Isreal.

Lifting the boy to rest against his chest, Efran put the bottle to his mouth and said, "Drink. This will help it not hurt so much." Isreal tried his best, cringing at the taste. Drinking around the gap in his lip was also difficult, but he took in enough to satisfy Efran. And he was definitely woozy when Efran laid him back down.

Leese returned with a long strip of cotton. This she passed over Isreal's forehead and under the bed before tying the ends at the side, immobilizing his head. Then she brought over another strip to bind his chest and upper arms to the bed. It was obviously necessary to prevent his jerking away, which could result in a worse injury. Regardless, the boy was hardly aware of it.

Wallace took his time gauging where along the cleft to cut, and when he did snip the flesh, he did it quickly. The boy let out a strangled cry as the blood gushed from his lips. "Here. Hold this here," Wallace instructed Efran, who put a cloth between Isreal's teeth to prevent his choking on blood.

Then Wallace deftly pierced the cut edges with the needle to thread the catgut around the raw edges of flesh. Leese leaned over to dab the blood. Isreal did move his head with the pain, so Wallace paused while Efran gripped his head with one large hand, whispering, "Be still. It only hurts for a little." Peering at him through half-closed lids, Isreal stilled.

From there, it took scant minutes for Wallace to finish, tying off the catgut and snipping the end. "There, now," Wallace said. "A neat job, if I say so myself." Leese continued to pat the blood away with a damp cloth. Wallace instructed, "Sit him up to wash out his mouth with the ale, Efran."

"That will sting," Efran said reluctantly, pulling the strip off over Isreal's head.

"For a moment," Wallace acknowledged. Efran untied the strip over Israel's chest to lift him up and pour a little ale in his mouth, then bend him forward over the towel. With another cry, Isreal spat out the bloody mouthful. Then he laid his head on Efran's chest and went right to sleep.

Efran held him for a few minutes while Wallace left to check on another patient and Leese removed the bloody cloths and pillow. When Wallace reentered to look him over, Efran laid the boy back down. "I'll check back in before dinner, but if he wakes, send for me," he said.

"Yes. Efran. Thank you for your help," Wallace said.

"We're adopting him, Wallace," Efran replied.

"Of course." Wallace patted his back as someone else came in with a complaint.

By now it was midafternoon. Efran knew he needed to stop by the workroom, but detoured to the second-floor balcony on the way. He looked out to see that the trolls had finished Main, and were now working down Chapel Road and New North Road. At the same time, he saw that the blocks of ice appeared to be thinner, lighter. With the Lands' warming, the ice was melting.

Turning back toward the workroom, Efran muttered, "Keep working, gentlemen—" Then from nowhere it hit him: *God allowed this invasion in order to get Isreal to us.*

He stopped dead in the corridor as this perception took hold of him. The scourge of the walking sticks. The snow and ice that covered them long enough to kill them and their eggs. The trolls who came to dig them out, leaving gifts of seedlings—and a human child whom they had evidently been sheltering for years.

"And I railed at God for abandoning us," Efran whispered. "Why can't I just wait out a crisis long enough to see what He's doing?" He stood there in part exasperation, part wonder, then progressed to the workroom to tell his administrators about their new orphan, whom he and Minka would soon adopt.

Following, he went downstairs and to the courtyard, narrowly missing Minka, who had been told that he was in Wallace's quarters. There, she looked in at the boy with the newly stitched lip sleeping off the ale, then she stopped by the workroom. Suspecting that Efran had gone to the courtyard, Estes went down with her to look for him.

And there he was. "Sometimes I think I need to bell you, so I can find you," she murmured, leaning on his arm.

"I always tell someone where I am," Efran said dismissively.

"And which of the hundreds of men here would that be?" she asked, arching her brows up at him. He opened his mouth to think about that.

"This is incredible," Estes murmured, looking over the roads scraped clean of ice. "If the trolls stopped right now, we would be able to handle the rest." As Hartshough had noted, the hard-pelting snowfall had driven most of the walking sticks off sidewalks and yards down to the streets to be frozen there for the trolls to collect.

Main Street was now open; workers were out shoveling stick-sprinkled snow from in front of businesses into carts to dump it—anywhere, really, except in the community well. One careless worker who had lifted a shovelful over its stone wall almost got throttled. Other than that, any place that didn't see much traffic was an acceptable dump site. "We should send someone up to Westford tomorrow," Estes told Efran.

"Yes, I'll go," he said.

"Can I go down to see Auntie?" Minka asked, looking down Chapel Road where the trolls were still working.

"Yes, tomorrow. Let's see how much of the road they get cleared out," Efran said, looking as well.

Javier appeared behind them, saluting. "Captain, Leese says Isreal is awake now."

"Ah, good," Efran said, turning. Then he paused to ask her, "Can you find him some clothes, and shoes? He's about Calix's size."

"Yes, of course. I'll bring them right up," she said. They entered the foyer together to part ways.

Efran arrived at Wallace's quarters on the second floor to look into the examining room where Isreal was gazing around vacantly. The moment he saw Efran step through the door, his face cleared in relief. His lip was swollen, with a red line down its bound edges, but no longer bleeding.

Efran came over to sit on his bed. "How are you feeling?" Isreal crawled over to sit on his lap. Holding Efran's

arm, he brought up the large brown hand to study it. Then he placed his small brown hand next to it, noting the similarity, but for the size.

Watching this, Efran murmured, "You need to know who you are."

The boy seemed fine with just sitting there, then Minka came to the door with boy clothes. "I don't know how well the shoes will fit, but if he's got frostbite, he needs them," she said, having talked to Leese.

"Let's try them on him." Efran took the pants and shirt off her arm to dress their newest ward, who watched in tentative curiosity. Then Efran leaned down to bring up his feet and put on his socks and shoes. When he stood the boy upright, he stared down at his feet in wonder. Although Efran knew that his lip must be hurting, it didn't seem to incapacitate him.

Efran looked at Minka to ask, "You still have the large mirror in our quarters, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," she said, brows raised. "Don't you usually stumble over it when you go in and out in the dark?"

"Is that the mirror? Then yes, I do," he confirmed. "Come on, Isreal." Standing, he took the boy's hand to begin leading him slowly. Isreal shuffled forward, head down, watching the brown things at the end of his legs move.

Minka walked with them as they slowly navigated the corridor only to be faced with the stairs. Still holding his hand, Efran stepped down with his left foot, and waited for Isreal to choose which foot would go down. He decided on his left, so Efran brought his right foot down to the next step. Isreal evaluated this new thing before likewise bringing his right foot down.

Efran looked back at Minka on the stairs above them to observe, "So, there are no stairs in the mountain trolls' home."

"Not like ours," she agreed.

Nonetheless, Isreal and Efran made it down to turn up the corridor toward his quarters. Minka opened the door to precede them into the receiving room, then closed the door behind them. Efran sat in a chair with Isreal on his knee and reached over to turn the standing mirror toward them. Minka sat in a chair to quietly watch all the following.

Isreal didn't see the mirror at first, until the reflection of his own movements caught his eye. He looked at himself without recognition. Seeing Efran in the mirror, he turned quickly to confirm that it was his knee underneath him. Looking back at the mirror, Isreal got up to put his hand on it. Observing his own actions in the mirror, he paused to study his hand in conjunction with its reflection.

He came up close to the mirror to examine his stitched lip, gingerly touching the knotted catgut. For reference, he turned to inspect Efran's upper lip, which was whole. And Isreal perceived that this was something necessary to make him whole as well.

Isreal turned back to the mirror to briefly regard the background furnishings reflected in it, including Minka, who smiled at him. Once again, he turned to see that the mirror only showed what was there.

He looked again at Efran in the mirror, watching with a contemplative smile. Isreal turned to see that yes, Efran was smiling. Isreal tentatively smiled back at him. Looking to his own reflection, he compared it point by point with Efran's: the hair, similarly thick and black; the skin, of almost identical brown; the eyes, at the same place

on the face, again of brown; the flat nose, although Efran's was again larger.

Efran pulled Isreal back to stand beside his knee so that they could see both reflections close together. Pointing to himself, Efran said, "Efran." He pointed to the boy, and said, "Isreal." He did that twice more, repeating their names: "I am Efran. You are Isreal." Then he pointed at himself: "Polonti." And he pointed at Isreal with the same, "Polonti."

He did not have to say it again. Isreal fell on him, bursting into tears.

Dinner was another new experience. Efran walked him by the hand into the dining hall with Minka on Isreal's other side. Quennel had Joshua on his leg already, who was grimly, intently getting the greens cleared off his small plate before he could have the good stuff. He paused to regard the new boy, so Efran stopped to say, "Joshua, this is Isreal."

"Awright," Joshua said, returning to the task at hand, and there was laughter. Isreal squinted in recognition of his name, lightly touching his stitches.

For tonight, Efran sat Isreal between himself and Minka. When Wardly brought over the plates of broiled salmon, Efran asked for a small plate for the new boy, and juice or water. Minka got salmon as well, choosing to disregard the fact that fish have eyes.

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Chapter 17

Diners around them who knew about the new boy looked on covertly as he watched Efran eat, then did his best to use his fork in the same way. Eating around the stitched cut was difficult, but possible, especially as hungry as he was. Efran showed him how to take small bites from his fork into the right side of his mouth, the healthy side. Drinking was even harder because of the swelling of his lip, but Efran asked for a small, light cup (like Joshua used) so that Isreal could just pour a little bit of water into his mouth.

After cautiously tasting everything on his plate, he devoured it all. Then he sat looking around. Efran continued to eat, talking to Minka and Ella around Isreal, and Rondi across from him.

Mathurin was sitting next to Rondi, as he often did, and Isreal suddenly focused on him. When Mathurin smiled at him, Isreal said, "Po'onti." (It would take him a while to learn to talk their language around his healing lip.)

Several people sat up, and Mathurin grinned. "Yes, I'm Polonti like you and Efran. My name is Mathurin."

Israel was insensible to everything but the pivotal word. He began looking around with purpose, then pointed at Pleyel with, "Po'onti."

"Polonti!" Pleyel said, raising his cup. "*Koa!*" (While technically, it was a call to fight to the death, in happy moments it was also a toast.)

Isreal got up and over the bench to begin wandering the hall. "Po'onti!" he said, pointing at Captain Stites in the middle of a table of Polonti. They all looked back at him, raising their cups. "*Koa!*"

Bleating out something between a cry and a laugh, Isreal spun around, looking for more. But what he saw was Toby coming forward with his hand out. "Hello, Isreal. Welcome to the Abbey Fortress. I'm Toby."

Isreal studied him uncertainly, his face clouding. "Po'onti?"

Toby, smarter than most children or adults, said, "No." Clapping a hand to his chest, he said, "Boy." Then he tapped Isreal's chest. "Boy!"

This was new. Isreal looked back to Efran, who patted his own chest, smiling. "Boy." Yes, Isreal had already seen the requisite equipment.

Then Isreal looked to the manly table of Polonti soldiers, who fell back, laughing, "Boy!" "All boys!" Felice raised her voice in protest, unheard.

"Boy," Isreal said happily, and Toby patted his shoulder.

Then Hassie ran up to him, arms crossed, to declare, "Girl!"

Something else new! Isreal squinted at her. "Boy?" The 'B' was hard with a stitched lip, but he did it.

"No, GIRL," she clarified.

With a helpless whine, he looked back to Efran. "Girl," he said, taking Minka in his arms to cuddle her. She melted into him.

"GIRLS!" The Polonti table roared. Koschat grabbed his wife Felice to kiss her, hard.

"Gir'." Isreal took Hassie by the arm, looking back to Koschat and Felice for instruction. Hassie shrieked, running away, and the hall rocked with laughter.

But now Isreal was deeply confused. All these different people—who were they? He looked around, almost pleading. "Po'onti? Boy? Gir'?"

No one really knew how to answer that, until Minka got up. She went over to kneel beside Isreal, placing an arm around his shoulders. Then she stretched out her hand to indicate one whole side of the hall. "Friends," she told him. Turning him around to another part of the hall, she swept her hand across the smiling faces there. "Friends." Back around to the last part of the hall, she pointed them all out: "Friend. Friend. All friends."

He took in all the attentive, smiling faces, then turned back to her. "Friend," she said, laying a hand on her chest with a warm smile. So he took her in his arms and plopped his mouth on hers.

It hurt them both, but in the midst of the laughter, Minka kissed his forehead, and that made it better.

That night, Isreal slept in the children's ward, guided by Toby. Minka and Efran came in to tell him and all the children good night, but there was no kissing.

The following morning (November 29th) Efran wanted Isreal in class with the rest of the children, regardless of what he could understand, or not. It seemed the quickest way to get him acclimated and learning. Unseen, Efran

stood in the corridor just outside their open classroom door to listen. The tutor, having been warned that the new boy with the stitched lip would only be observing, welcomed him briefly before beginning the day's lesson. "Open your lesson books to page ten and read the poem silently for us to discuss," she said.

But Toby said, "Mistress Hazeldene, Efran wants Isreal to learn to talk. Can I read the poem aloud for him?"

Efran listened to her pause and say, "That's good idea, Toby. Read it aloud."

So Toby read:

"'You think I am dead,' the apple tree said,
'Because I have never a leaf to show;
Because I stoop,
And my branches droop,
And the dull gray mosses over me grow.
But I am alive in trunk and root;
The buds of next May I fold away—
But I pity the withered grass at my root.'

"'You think I am dead,' the quick grass said,
'Because I have parted with stem and blade;
But under the ground I am safe and sound,
With the snow's thick blanket over me laid.
I'm all alive and ready to shoot,
Should the spring of the year come dancing here—
But I pity the flower without branch or root.'

"'You think I am dead,' a soft voice said,
'Because not a branch or a root I own.
I never have died, But close I hide
In the plummy seed that the wind has sown.
Patient I wait through the long winter hours.
You will see me again; I shall laugh at you then,
Out of the eyes of a hundred flowers.'"

Hearing that, Efran was satisfied. So he stepped out to the courtyard to look over the Lands. The mountain trolls had come out again, and the gates were standing open for them. But by now—more than an hour after sunrise—the snow was almost completely gone. The blocks of frozen walking sticks that the trolls harvested that morning were slender, light and few. Shortly, they all trudged away again—after leaving such a great pile of reciprocal gifts in front of Barracks A that no one could get in.

Wendt then conscripted Tourse's security force to run the trolls' gifts all over the Lands, especially out to Choules' group and the far eastern settlements whose residents had been unable to get to Main Street. That cleared the barracks of gifts inside and out within hours.

However, Tourse's men encountered unexpected difficulties with some of the new settlers in the easternmost Lands. This they reported to Tourse, who took their concerns to DeWitt. He, in turn, agreed this was something that Commander Wendt needed to know about.

Meanwhile, after much agonized consideration, Faciane went to the chapel to ring the doorbell. When Hartshough answered, she said, "I know it's early, and I apologize. But, I'm so worried about Verlice. He went up to Westford days ago, before the storm hit, and he hasn't come back. He was supposed to go to Lady Cocci's house LeVisay, you know, to design for her. But, since I haven't heard anything from him, I was hoping that Justinian might drive out to Westford today, to look for him, if I might ask."

Hartshough said sympathetically, "I certainly understand your concerns, Lady Faciane, and I will speak to Lord Justinian this morning."

"Thank you, Hartshough," she exhaled in relief. Then she walked back to Averne's. (Now that Verlice had his own rooms at Elvey's, Faciane had returned to work as hostess at Averne's, boarding there as well.)

Shortly, Hartshough did take a particularly invigorating bracer up to Justinian's room to wake him.

At the same time, Efran was summoning Kraken to the courtyard, geared up, as well as two other men with horses. Efran vaguely noted the teams of men who were shoveling soggy walking stick remains into great piles for feed. After the sticks had consumed much of the grass and sorghum in livestock fields, the cattlemen discovered that their stock feasted on the newly dead bugs, some still partly frozen. So until the feed lots grew back, the livestock still got their feed.

Having gotten past that crisis, however, Efran was now looking ahead. He intended to take a couple of men up to Westford to see how they were getting along. So he, Truro, and Stephanos rode out of the gates on clean, deiced streets to lope up the main northbound road. Aware that it was probably cooler in Westford, being late November, they wore light jackets.

It was an easy ride, and the air did get chilly as they progressed northward. Also, there was a light covering of snow on the road beginning about three miles south of Westford. This covering grew in height and density the farther they rode. But it was not uncomfortable until they arrived at the city proper, where there was an incline leading up to a massive ridge of snow ahead of them. Looking to the right, they saw the lake that had engulfed the palace was completely frozen over, so that a dozen thrillseekers were skating on it.

The Landers looked to the left, where snow three feet high filled the main street in front of the new Porterhouse, with drifts up to five feet along its walls and front walk. Looking over to Lovedahl's Beauty Treatments, Efran noted the wind-swept snow drifts reaching up to within four feet of its roofline, and he felt vindicated, somehow.

Paused at the incline leading to the great white wall, Truro and Stephanos looked to the Captain. With a shake of his head, he said, "I don't see anything that we need to do here. Back to the Lands." They turned their horses south again, although the two men were not greatly enthusiastic about the shoveling that awaited them at the Lands, either.

As they were approaching the old stone bridge, they encountered a gorgeous blue carriage advancing north toward them. Two mounted Abbey soldiers rode with it. Efran pulled over to the side, and his men did likewise. The carriage slowed to a stop so that Efran could look down into the window. "Justinian, Westford's completely snowbound," he warned him.

"I'm sure it is, dear brother," Justinian yawned, "but I am on a mission of mercy for my dear, almost-ex wife."

"Which one would that be?" Efran asked in confusion.

"Faciane. She hasn't seen her husband since he came up here at Elvey's bidding to design for Lady Cocci. I

would suggest that she let lying dogs sleep, but for some unfathomable reason, she would like to see him again.” Squinting in the brightness of the morning, Justinian pulled out a jar of Hartshough’s bracer from a wicker basket.

“You’ll never be able to get through--” Efran broke off as Stephanos dismounted to peer underneath the carriage. One of Justinian’s bodyguards, Leneghan, was nodding down to it.

In admiration, Stephanos said, “Have a look at this, Captain—runners mounted just inside the wheels, and a handle at the back for raising and lowering ’em.” The horses, of course, could plow through any amount of snow, as Kraken had demonstrated.

“Yes, Hartshough’s design, so I really had no excuse. If I’m not back in a week, lay a wreath on Averno’s door for me,” Justinian instructed.

“Not the chapel doors?” Efran asked.

“No, I want Faciane to see it,” Justinian grunted, then laid his head back on the cushioned backrest.

“Ah. God speed, then,” Efran said. Stephanos remounted for the men to resume riding south while Justinian’s carriage and bodyguard proceeded northward.

Arriving back at the hilltop courtyard, Efran dismissed his men, but rode Kraken around to the back grounds to find the children newly released from class. Along with them bounded out Nakam, Joshua, and Isreal, bewildered but interested. When Isreal caught sight of Efran, he began running to him as hard as his feet would allow. When Joshua saw Kraken, he did the same. All the other children were engaged in their play.

Dismounting Kraken, Efran put Joshua and Isreal together in the saddle, then walked them around to the stables. There, he sent a man to bring Minka to the courtyard. Lifting the boys down to begin unsaddling Kraken, he told him, “If you let me harness you to a cart, you can come with us. If you’re too good to pull a cart, I’ll harness Trud.” As he expected, Kraken’s ears shot up, and he presented himself for harnessing.

It was a light, one-horse cart, quick to set up. So Efran soon had the boys settled on the back seat while he climbed into the driver’s seat himself. He tapped the reins for Kraken to settle the harness and trot out to the courtyard. When they pulled up, Minka looked over in delight.

Efran extended his hand to assist her into the seat with the boys, then remembered to send a man up to the second-floor workroom to tell Estes and DeWitt of the current conditions in Westford, as well as Justinian’s quest and where he himself would be. Then Efran guided the cart down the old switchback.

Isreal was looking around in lively interest, engaged and unafraid. He’d had a rude shock before class that morning, when Leese had sent for him to look at his lip and daub it with light ale. That had stung, and he was now suspicious of her. But the stitches hardly bothered him at all.

“How fun! Where are we going?” Minka asked, cuddling Joshua on one arm and Isreal on the other. (“Gir’,” Isreal said in satisfaction.)

“We’re going to Ryal’s. To adopt Isreal,” Efran said, glancing back at her.

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Chapter 18

Hearing his name, Isreal looked up for Minka to smile on him: “Of course.” Not understanding, and doing something else completely new, he looked tentative. But because she was smiling, he was not afraid.

After exiting the switchback, Efran directed Kraken to pull the cart over the curb and stop beside Ryal’s shop on Chapel Road so as not to block Main. He took Joshua on one arm while Minka helped Israel down the cart step. Then Efran led his partial family up the steps into the notary’s shop. (He and Minka had adopted Toby, Noah, and Ivy early on.) At this point, there was no snow to be seen anywhere, except low drifts sheltered from the sun against buildings.

Giardi was helping one customer in the shop: Reinagle, the former Chancellor of the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford and, notably, a former Surchatain of Eurus—possibly the only one to be deprived of the office while keeping his life. Scowling, Reinagle turned to complain, “Efran, these rents are too high!”

Efran laughed, “You’d have to spend one or two of your thousands of royals for rent anywhere, Reinagle.”

“I don’t have all that much left. It’s disappearing,” he grumbled.

“Ah. Do you still have the servant who was caught stealing from you and Folliott?” Efran asked.

“He’s not the one doing it,” Reinagle grouched.

“Then hide it better.” Efran sat Joshua on the counter for Giardi to coo at him. Reinagle peered down at Isreal’s stitched lip until the boy hid his face on Efran’s hip. “Hello, Giardini,” Efran smiled, crinkling his eyes at her.

She said, “Very well, I’ll laugh just for your bringing these beautiful children to see me. And how are you, dear?” she asked Minka.

“Excellent. No one looks twice at my hair anymore. But we’re here to adopt Isreal,” Minka said.

“Oh, yes,” Ryal said. “Is this the mountain trolls’ gift to the Abbey?”

“Yes, Ryal. And we’re going to make sure that he never lacks a home,” Efran said. Reinagle left the shop at that time, then looked around the corner at something which caught his attention.

Smiling on the boy, Ryal said, “Hello, Isreal. Can you understand me?”

Efran shook his head as Isreal eyed the old man dubiously. Then Ryal observed, “Well, since I cannot ask him if he wants to be your son, I will simply note how he clings to you. And how are you, Joshua?” he asked the one sitting on his counter.

“Awright,” Joshua said, looking off.

Giardi laughed in surprise. “What a perfect mimic!”

When Efran grinned at his youngest son, the older one gripping his hand said, “Awright,” looking up for the expected approval.

This he received. Minka bent to cuddle him and kiss his cheek while Efran said, "There you have it, Ryal. What more do you need?"

"Nothing," Ryal admitted. So Giardi handed him the form and then pulled out the book of adoptions. Isreal looked on alertly for what else might be required of him.

As Ryal was filling out the form, Efran told him, "Take care for the spelling—rather, the misspelling, Lord Ryal. It's I-S-R-E-A-L."

"There's a story behind that," Ryal observed, writing.

"Yes, I believe that he's a cast-off—a mistake—that the trolls found in the mountains somewhere. Polonti dispose of imperfect babies. We want them," Efran said.

Minka tightened her arm around Isreal's shoulders, and he looked at her pensively. "Gir'," he said.

She glowed at him. "Mama." He wavered at that, but she insisted, "Mama."

"Mama," he repeated.

She patted Efran's arm with, "Papa."

"Papapa," Joshua elaborated.

"Whichever," Minka grinned down at their newest son.

After leaving his usual overpayment on the counter, Efran brought his completed family out of the shop to turn the corner—and find that Kraken had disappeared with the cart. Efran raised his face in aggravation, then they became aware of a disturbance just twenty feet up Main.

Coming back around the corner of the shop, Efran saw Kraken and the cart crossways on Main, effectively blocking all traffic. Reinagle was in the driver's seat, whipping the reins on Kraken's back in an effort to make him go. Meanwhile, Kraken was half-rearing, kicking at the cart, and backing so that the whole contrivance was immovable.

Joshua still on his arm, Efran came up to take Kraken's bridle with his other hand, laughing, "Reinagle, why are you taking our cart?"

"Eh, just borrowing it to get home. I'm too old to walk that far," Reinagle grouched.

"We'll give you a ride. Drop the reins," Efran instructed, leading Kraken forward to align the cart next to the sidewalk. When Efran had the cart stopped, Reinagle clambered over the driver's seat to plop onto the only seat in the cart, spreading out across it.

Efran sighed, "Reinagle, sit behind the seat."

"What? Behind the seat? I can't sit behind the seat! I'm old and there's no cushion!" Reinagle objected, trembling in his usual outrage.

"It's either that or walk," Efran said.

Grumbling bitterly, Reinagle climbed over the back of the seat to sit in the storage area behind it. Efran gave Minka a hand up to sit her in the seat, then placed Joshua beside her. Isreal clambered up by himself on her other side, then both boys turned around to stare at the curmudgeon—and laugh. Efran clucked Kraken forward.

As Efran drove the cart down a side street between Delano's and Lowry's toward the new northbound road, Minka had to keep her lips shut tightly and her face forward while the crank vented to the boys, "What's so funny? Haven't you ever seen an old man robbed out of house and home? I'm being robbed, I tell you! Robbed blind! It's nothing to crack up about, you little heathen. Efran, are you listening to me?"

"No," Efran said, turning the cart onto Reinagle's street. As he pulled up to his house, there was an instant in which Efran saw something out of the corner of his eye and recognized it. But the perception was lost in the next moment, for the door of Reinagle's house opened, and out came Folliott, carrying an obvious pouch of coins.

He stared at the cartload of people, who stared at him in return. Then Reinagle leapt from the back of the cart with a mighty cry to begin chasing Folliott, who was trying to get around him, call for help, and explain himself all at the same time. Minka and the boys were laughing lustily. Efran turned his head to whistle so loudly, Kraken half-reared again.

"No, you don't understand," Folliott was saying. "It's Trina! She's robbing both of us! She divorced me and sneaks back into my house to take my money because her father Bowring hid all of his!"

"That doesn't give you the right to steal my money!" Reinagle shouted. They were tussling over his pouch.

"She's your wife!" Folliott shouted.

"She divorced me!" Reinagle shouted.

"The notary doesn't have any record of it, so she's still your wife!" Folliott shouted again.

Four soldiers came running in response to the Captain's whistle. He nodded to the combatants in the middle of the street. "Take them and the pouch to Ryal. You'll need to find Trina, as well; she may have something to do with it."

"Yes, Captain," said Gaul. He directed Cyneheard and Fiacco to separate Reinagle and Folliott, then Heus paused to find out from them where Trina lived, and sprint to her house in the western section. Meanwhile, Efran was pensively scanning the street. What had he seen? It was significant, but now it was gone.

The soldiers had to split up to search for Trina. She had sold the large house she had purchased at the height of her wealth, and moved back in with her father Bowring (who also lived here in the eastern section, one block over from Reinagle). So, against her wishes, but on orders from the Notary Lord Ryal, she was brought from Bowring's house to Ryal's shop so that she might give her side of the story.

While Efran took his partial family to Marguerite's, Ryal sat down with Reinagle, Folliott, and Trina in his back room. Soames sat at the small table nearby to take notes. After putting the three under oath, Ryal asked, "Folliott, the pouch you removed from Reinagle's house contained seventy-one royals. Why did you take it?"

Folliott answered promptly, "Trina promised to leave my money alone if I would get her what she needed from her husband." Reinagle yelped at the bold statement.

Ryal looked at Trina in surprise. "Were you not divorced from Reinagle in Eurus?"

"No," she said loftily.

"Yes!" Reinagle cried. "And then you married Folliott!"

"It didn't count, because I wasn't ever divorced from you," she said.

"Yes! In Eurus!" Reinagle shouted.

"No. I swore out the document here, but never could get it to you. The messengers were too afraid of your bodyguards that killed everyone. So I just left the document with them to get it to you whenever they could, and told everyone we were divorced so that I could get away," she said.

There was a moment of silence, then Ryal asked, "Do you have the divorce decree, Reinagle?" The old man began trembling, eyes darting here and there. Then he wailed to Trina, "When you sued me here, you told this notary we were divorced!"

"I was mistaken," she said indifferently.

Stroking his brow, Ryal asked Reinagle, "Sir, can you prove by any means that you received the divorce decree? Were there witnesses?"

"I don't remember," Reinagle whimpered.

"Is it possible that you did *not* receive it?" Ryal asked.

"No! She married Folliott!" Reinagle wailed. Trina shrugged and Ryal closed his eyes. Folliott sat smugly unperturbed.

Then Reinagle abruptly changed course. "If we're married, then you have to sleep with me."

"If I feel like it," she sighed.

He began trembling again, then shouted, "Then I want a divorce!"

"Which means you have to divide all your money with me," she said.

"I already did that, when you and your father sued me! It was right here in the Lands!" Reinagle cried.

"That was before we were divorced," Trina said.

The three antagonists looked at Ryal, who looked at Giardi and Soames. Ryal mused, "This may be the first time in my career that I don't know what to do." His wife and apprentice began laughing. The claimant and counter-claimants began shouting at each other again.

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Chapter 19

At the chapel, Efran had just brought in his newest family member to meet Auntie Marguerite. Minka introduced them: "Auntie, this is our son Isreal. He was a reciprocal gift from the mountain trolls for the walking sticks."

Efran sat on the divan to put Joshua on the floor in the midst of his wooden toys while Marguerite bent over Isreal with a glowing smile. "I'm so glad to finally meet you, Isreal. I hope you feel that this is your second home."

Isreal studied her for a minute, then said definitely, "Gir'."

His family laughed, but in a nice way, then they looked toward Hartshough coming out of the kitchen. "Good afternoon, all. May I interest you—"

With a cry of recognition, Isreal jumped up to throw his arms around Hartshough's lower waist. The boy was pouring speech that the butler apparently could understand. He knelt to speak with Isreal in a common language.

Watching, Efran murmured, "Of course. Hartshough is part mountain troll, and the one to contact the Lekkerkerkers on our behalf to begin with." Minka and Marguerite silently watched the two converse, while Joshua glanced up occasionally from his play.

Finally, Hartshough sat Isreal on the divan next to Efran and gave him a cup of something which he gulped right down around his stitched lip. Joshua then desired a cup as well, so Marguerite took him on her lap to assist him with it. (He took only a sip before desiring to get back down among the toys.) Hartshough sat in the chair opposite her.

"Very interesting," he told the group. "As you apparently surmised, Lord Efran, Isreal recognized my trollish accent, so spoke to me. We did not achieve perfect understanding, as the Lekkerkerker dialect is considerably different from that of my own clan, the Guppenbergers. But when you permitted them to come harvest the frozen walking sticks, and they saw the Polonti among you, they knew that they had found the place where their young guest belonged."

"So they found him in the mountains somewhere, abandoned?" Efran asked.

"Most likely, Lord Efran," Hartshough said. "Isreal does not know how he came to be with them."

"What did they call him?" Efran asked.

Hartshough put a question to Isreal, and he replied. Hartshough paused, then said, "If I am translating it correctly, Lord Efran, his name among them was *Wati*, which means, er, Pig."

"Pig? No, we're not going to call him that in any language," Efran said. "I hope he doesn't want us to."

Hartshough spoke to Isreal again, who looked back to Efran to say something. And Hartshough replied, "He likes the name you gave him because it is special to you."

Efran turned his beautiful smile on his newest son, who came over to sit on his leg. Hartshough continued, "They called him that because he was always hungry. And he was always cold in the caves; they had trouble keeping him warm. In fact, I don't know how he survived. Moreover, they had decided to trek back to their

ancestral home in the Fastnesses—they don't like the Southern Continent; it is too warm for them. But they knew that their little human would not survive, and were trying to decide what to do with him. They had to leave him somewhere, and they were about to start out five days ago—the day that the walking sticks invaded the Lands.” He paused, and Minka's eyes started watering.

Hartshough resumed, “When frozen, certain insects, such as the praying mantis, leaf bug, dragonfly, and walking stick, are ideal for making *augstkalns*—mountain trolls' travel food. One troll can survive on one pound for days. But the manner in which the insects are frozen is crucial to their usefulness. Despite the spread of the walking sticks and the snow over a vast area, from the plains east of Vychan—what used to be Scylla—clear to the Passage, the trolls found that essential layering of ice, insects, and snow only here on the Lands. But this they discovered only after they were invited to harvest them,” Hartshough said.

They were all silent, then Minka looked at Efran. “It was all set up, all arranged perfectly for us to get Isreal.”

“I know,” Efran said, looking down at Isreal. “You were meant to come here.”

“Polonti,” Isreal said, intent on pronouncing it right despite his lip.

“Yes, but—Lander. We are all Landers,” Efran said.

“Lander,” Isreal repeated. Efran drew a deep breath.

At that moment, there was a tumult at the front doors. Everyone in the seating area looked over as Leneghan and Arne lugged in a groaning, moaning, gaping man in a wreck of a cumin-colored suit. “Verlice!” Marguerite exclaimed. “What has happened? Put him in the chair, there, if you will,” she told the soldiers, gesturing to her vacated armchair.

This they did, although Hartshough had risen from his chair, as well. Eryk came in the front door; Marguerite went over to speak to him, and he left again.

Justinian entered the chapel around Eryk on the way out. Glancing at the newly recovered Verlice, Justinian said, “Whatever you're going to prepare for him, I'll have as well, Hartshough.”

“Certainly, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said, removing to the kitchen.

“Greetings, all,” Justinian said, sitting in Hartshough's vacant chair. He paused to brush off a tiny dark speck from his dove-colored afternoon suit.

Efran laughed, “Congratulations, I think. What happened?”

Justinian briefly surveyed the product of his mission, who was spread across the armchair, seemingly on the verge of unconsciousness. His mother was checking him over for injuries. Justinian exhaled, “As to what caused the wretched condition of the rescued party, I have no idea. My own part in his recovery was trivial. I simply ordered the driver—one of your men, Efran—to take us to LeVisay, which was possible, even enjoyable, due to the genius of dear Marguerite's butler in conveyances as well as the culinary arts—”

Efran shot up off the divan, catapulting Isreal to his feet. Swinging to the doors, Efran instructed the guards there to do something immediately. When he returned to the seating area, Arne said, “Captain, what do you need done?” It sounded more like a command than a question from a subordinate.

“At ease, Arne; I’ll give you and Leneghan instructions shortly. I just now remembered what I saw near Reinagle’s house,” Efran said. “Forgive the interruption, Justinian; I’m anxious to hear what happened.” He sat again on the divan for Isreal, unperturbed, to climb back onto his leg. It was just another new thing.

Demonstrating some jealousy, Joshua toddled over to pat his father’s other knee. Efran started to lift him up, but then Joshua remembered a toy he wanted, so had to go get it before allowing his father to bring him up on his other side.

“If we’re all settled, I’ll tell you,” Justinian said. But Hartshough emerged from the kitchen to begin passing around bracers at that time. He gave the first to Marguerite to administer to Verlice, and the second went to Minka, on the divan with Efran and their boys.

She tasted it, raising wide eyes as Hartshough gave the next glass to her husband, quickly followed by one to Justinian, who was waiting in exaggerated patience. Efran tasted his, then looked up sharply. “It’s—*aquae vitae*, flavored with—with—orange peel, saffron, and—”

“Gentian root,” Justinian said. “With a touch of—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Marguerite cried. “Pulverized cochineal! An insect! Now, please, Justinian, tell us what happened.”

“Of course, dear Marguerite. Forgive me. Excellent mix, there, Hartshough,” Justinian said, setting his half-empty glass on the low table.

“Thank you, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said.

Efran opened his mouth, but Minka reached over to clasp his knee, so he refrained from speaking while Justinian said, “As I was saying, Efran’s driver Lambdin knows his way around the new Westford admirably, so drove us in our carriage-cum-sleigh to Lady Cocci’s house. The gentlemen standing by here, Arne and Leneghan, went to the door to knock and were allowed entrance. They emerged shortly thereafter with the—survivor you see sweating all over Lady Marguerite’s upholstery, and inserted him into our carriage. We departed to arrive here. And that’s it.”

Everyone then looked at Leneghan and Arne. They glanced at each other, then Leneghan said, “Yes, ah, Captain, Lady Minka, Lady Marguerite—we asked the man who answered the door to direct us to Lord Verlice. He took us to a door through which we could hear, ah, crying and pleading. The door was locked, so we broke in and brought Lord Verlice out to the carriage. And, that was our part of it.” There was patently more that neither was willing to say.

Everyone then looked to Verlice, who was sitting up, in his right mind. He surveyed them all a moment, then said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

With that, everyone looked cautiously at each other, but no one spoke. Isreal leaned over for the half-empty glass that the lord had left on the table, but Efran took him back on his leg, laughing, “No, no.”

“No worries; I’ll finish that,” Justinian said, reclaiming the glass to drain it. “I never knew you were a connoisseur of mixed drinks, dearest Marguerite,” he noted with a glance.

She waved impatiently. “I saw the recipe.”

Everyone was silent, then Efran asked, "Was I right? About what was in it?"

"Yes, Efran; you both were," Marguerite said.

Everyone was silent again, then Minka asked, "Shouldn't we tell Faciane?"

"She won't care about the drink," Efran said dismissively.

Minka turned stern eyes to him. "That her husband is here."

Efran was opening his mouth in belated acknowledgment when Marguerite said, "I sent Eryk for her, dear."

Verlice looked up in alarm, then rose from the chair. "I believe I'll—"

Too late. Someone rushed in through the front doors. Pale, Verlice sagged back down to the chair. But it was a messenger, Javier, who saluted Efran with, "Captain, Lord Ryal wishes you to know that he has given a divorce to Reinagle and Trina, and Reinagle has agreed to give her one hundred royals. Lord Ryal told her that this is all she gets from him or Folliott, and if she takes any more from them, she will be punished and maybe kicked out of the Lands."

"I see. Thank you, Javier," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain." With another salute, Javier departed. Verlice resumed lolling back in the chair. Several people were looking at each other. When the front doors opened again, Verlice sprang up.

This time it was Commander Wendt. Efran stood to salute, dislodging his sons. His men saluted as well, but Wendt said mildly, "At ease." While Efran sat again, Joshua sat on the floor among his toys. Isreal reclaimed Efran's leg, but leaned over to watch his brother's play.

Marguerite came to Wendt's side, and Verlice plopped back down to the chair to spread himself over both arms. After regarding him for a moment, Wendt looked down on Marguerite to say, "I seem to be missing a great deal by sitting in army headquarters. What in heaven's name—?"

But Faciane came rushing into the hall, followed by Eryk at a walk. Spotting those in the seating area, she ran over to them. "Marguerite! Where—?"

Verlice hadn't bothered to see who had come in this time until she made the inquiry to Marguerite practically in front of him. Lurching up from the chair, he said, "Here I am, dear."

She wheeled to fall into his arms. "Oh, Verlice! What happened? I never got any messages—" She broke off, distractedly glancing at his rumpled suit. "I smell—perfume."

"That was a preventive treatment to protect against the walking sticks," he said with a straight face. Efran went rigid and Justinian smiled, studying his fingernails. Minka stared at the floor, not trusting herself to look at anyone who might make her laugh.

Faciane drew back from her husband, asking plaintively, "But why couldn't you send me any messages? It's only a half-hour's ride."

"The *snow*, dear," he said emphatically.

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Chapter 20

Still confused, Faciane said, “But—didn’t Justinian make it through with a carriage? Eryk said they brought you back in a carriage.” This she told Verlice without anger, only trying to understand.

“It was specially equipped with sleigh runners,” he said, gauging her face.

“Oh. So messengers on horseback couldn’t get through? I suppose you were unable to receive my messages,” she said despondently.

Without looking up, Verlice could see the smiling faces of the men around the room at her back. “I did receive one—maybe two,” he allowed. “But I was unable to. . . .”

She was studying him now. “My messengers found you, but you couldn’t tell them, ‘Tell her I’m all right; will send more as I can’? They returned with nothing from you.”

His face screwed up, and he choked out, “It was hard, Faciane.”

“How was it hard, Verlice?” she asked.

The room was silent, except for the tiniest chortle—not even loud enough to be a chuckle, nor malicious enough for a snigger, snicker or giggle. Minka immediately raised her eyebrows in innocence, disavowing the sound. But Efran’s eyes flicked to Justinian, who was completely motionless, except for his Adam’s apple.

Watching him, Efran began to shake imperceptibly. Isreal studied him in fascination, then smiled. Joshua glanced at them both and smiled. Minka, with Isreal blocking her from throwing herself on Efran to shut him up, could only watch helplessly as Justinian glanced over, then froze with the effort of suppressing the imminent explosion.

Out of the corner of his eye, Verlice saw all this, and began to shake, his eyes watering. Because the preliminaries to laughter look remarkably like crying, Faciane responded with a woman’s compassion. “Oh, Verlice, I don’t care—”

There was a hubbub at the front doors, and two soldiers—Goss and Nee—entered on either side of a third party, whose arms they held tightly. Saluting, Goss said, “We found ’im, Captain.” Between them stood Thurlow, clutching the biggest walking stick anyone had ever seen.

There followed momentary bedlam as soldiers rushed Thurlow, attempting to seize the creature which he was protecting underarm, shouting at them. The sensible parties—including Marguerite, Minka, Faciane, and Justinian—were quietly watching.

Efran issued a shrill whistle so that the soldiers paused. Because they were still holding Thurlow’s arms, he dropped the walking stick, which then began weaving away. Arne raised a foot over it, but Thurlow shouted, “Don’t! It’s mechanical!”

Although Efran had heard this before, he said, "Arne, stop." He lowered his foot harmlessly, and the men stilled.

Thurlow was then able to rush over to pick up the walking stick. He panted, "This is what I was trying to find when you sent your goons after me." That was ten days ago. "It's what I found in Eurus; it's a mechanical toy. Look."

Placing the creature on the long dining table, Thurlow reached under the abdomen to move a hidden lever. The thing went still. Everyone came to stand around the table to look at it. Isreal pressed against Efran's leg while Joshua, who couldn't see, beat on his other leg.

Picking up Joshua, Efran told Thurlow, "You brought us a live creature and paid a lackey to back you up." (The search for the lackey, Beekman, was ongoing.)

"I was improvising to buy time," Thurlow groaned. "I knew you wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth, but I also knew it was still here in the Abbey Lands, and've been looking for it in the insanity of the real bugs swarming, and the snow, and the giants crushing everything underfoot—but look." Thurlow opened a hidden panel on the thorax, and they all leaned over to see small cams, rods, levers, chains and other such parts densely packed in the scant space.

"How is it powered?" Efran asked.

"With a mainspring!" Thurlow laughed.

Wendt asked, "Then, this is a wind-up toy?"

"Yes!" Thurlow's laugh bordered on the hysterical.

Efran leaned back. "You didn't design or make this."

"No, I stole it, of course. Now the Tinkerer is after me," Thurlow said in disgust.

After a moment, Justinian posed, "Someone named the Tinkerer built this, and he wants it back."

"Yes, wouldn't you, were you he?" Thurlow asked scornfully.

There was a brief silence, then Wendt said, "I'm not particularly happy about your making an enemy of someone with this skill, then hiding from him here."

Thurlow was shrugging when Efran asked, "How do we get it back to him?"

"Well," Thurlow winced, "you may not want to do that."

"Why not?" Efran asked, chin lowered.

"At this point, he's not likely to take kindly to the gesture," Thurlow said pensively.

Wendt posed, "What if we don't care what he does to the one who stole it?"

"That's the thing," Thurlow said, hand over his mouth. "He takes revenge, and it's not likely to be confined to me. That's what you just saw with the swarm."

His hearers stared at him. Efran said, "You cannot mean that this Tinkerer called down a half-million walking sticks on us for your taking his toy."

"He—does things." Thurlow flailed at the impossibility of expressing what he knew.

Wendt asked, "Then *why* did you steal it from him?"

"What do you mean, 'why?' You could make a killing replicating it," Thurlow said as to an idiot.

Efran suddenly asked, "What did you know about Lissa's replications? Her strawmen?"

Thurlow's eyes narrowed, and he took on a guarded air. "Nothing," he said quickly.

Wendt gestured in impatience. "All else aside, how do we contact the Tinkerer to return his toy?"

Thurlow was shaking his head to profess ignorance when Justinian said quietly, "That may not be necessary."

They all turned at a slight noise from outside the front doors, which opened slowly, groaning. At first, nothing more was seen. Then a ruffled man shuffled in with the assistance of a cane. He was clean-shaven with gray-streaked black hair, a skewed necktie, and a vacuous expression. He looked around on them through thick glasses that made his faded eyes look unnaturally large.

Efran's hair almost stood on end at the shock of power that hit him head-on. Preemptively, he said, "I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. You will take your toy and leave in peace."

The inventor looked at the man holding a toddler, and there appeared to be a momentary standoff. Then the walking stick came to life, startling several of those around the table. It scuttled down a table leg to cross the foyer floor to its master.

He raised the tip of his cane to point to Thurlow. "I require the thief, as well." His soft voice was so penetrating that Verlice fainted and Isreal hid behind Efran. On his arm, Joshua merely eyed the crank. Thurlow went white.

Efran hesitated, looking to Wendt, who raised a brow of indifference. So Efran told the Tinkerer, "You may not torture him or kill him."

"Your mercy is misplaced," the ruffled man observed.

"That's not your call," Efran said.

The Tinkerer lowered his head in what might have been acquiescence, then Thurlow began walking toward him mechanically, clearly against his will. "Help me," he said through lips that would not move.

"You slammed the door on me," Efran said. Then they all watched the Tinkerer depart with his walking stick and walking man. Minka huddled into Efran around Joshua. Isreal, on his other side, thoughtfully watched the doors close after them.

The following day, November 30th, Wendt received reports from two different teams he had sent east—one to Vychan, and one to Venegas. Wendt invited Efran, Estes and DeWitt to come hear both reports back to back;

Efran came, but Estes came without DeWitt to hear for them both, as his administrative work had piled up during the snowstorm. (The only one who was completely undisturbed was the Fortress Accountant Ploense, who worked on, oblivious to cataclysms beyond his third-floor quarters.)

So Efran and Estes rode down together to hear the reports in the conference room of Barracks A with Wendt, his Second Gabriel, and the Captains Rigdon and Chee (from the hilltop) and Towner and Stites (from the lower barracks).

Krall and Heus, who had ridden out to Venegas' logging camp Vychan, gave their report first. Both were shaking their heads as Krall said, "It was a bad, bad decision to try to burn out the walking sticks, Commander. The fires torched about fifty to seventy acres before the snows came, and the burn pattern bypassed probably half of the sticks—it was only the snows that killed 'em. Worse, the trees that the walking sticks ate up could still be harvested for lumber, but the burned wood is good for nothing."

Heus added, "All this we heard from the logging crews, who are out of work and out of wood. We weren't able to ride over all the burn area; it's too large."

Efran nodded pensively. "We rode out there a week ago, just a day before the walking sticks overran us. I understand why they felt pressed to do something; it was—horrific. Even worse than what we saw here, because of the great trees being eaten before our eyes."

He looked at Krall, who had been of that party. "Yes, Captain. And they did the only thing possible to make it worse."

Efran winced. So Wendt looked to Mathurin and Martyn, who had scouted Venegas. Martyn said, "Yes, Commander, Captain. The anger over the fires is just boiling over, with everyone blaming everyone else. That's all we heard about while we were there."

"I hope they don't depose Sewell over it," Efran muttered. "His replacement could find the anger a good excuse to get heavy-handed."

The meeting ended with nothing decided but to watch and wait.

In the ten days since Windry had learned of Lilou's emancipation and the sudden evaporation of demand for her dresses, she had been consumed with designing and creating new dresses. She took sketches of her new designs to Elvey's, whose staff sniffed at them in disinterest. Then she took a few sample dresses to The Lands Clothing Shop, where they gently refused her. Racheal told her, "We seem to have a reputation for menswear now, and can't get the women back."

So Windry trudged back home through streams of bugs, outraged at whoever was responsible for it. She continued to fret, and drink maybe a little, until she opened her door to go out, and found her street completely blocked by this ridiculous layer of white that turned out to be *snow*.

"Snow! Here on the Lands, where I was told it never got cold!" she vented. "Who's got anything to wear in all this? No one can wear cotton in this! They'd need—" And she looked at her baskets of wool skeins and her piles of woven wool fabrics.

Chapter 21

So Windry spent the next several days in a frenzy of creativity: weaving, cutting, sewing, altering—making a whole wardrobe of beautiful new winter clothing. She designed on the fly, throwing together fresh, beautiful ensembles of plaids and solids, even some complicated woven patterns with tufts and pom poms.

After working almost around the clock for three days, she fell into bed to sleep most of the next 24 hours. Then she rose again with fresh hope and determination to pack up her winter selections—dressing herself in one such outfit—to take her clothes around to the best shops.

As she was getting ready, she fretted about how to make it from shop to shop in the ice and the snow, but decided to see how bad it was, first. So she opened her door to look out into warm sunshine and a clean street—no bugs, nor ice, nor snow, nor even rain today.

Windry sat right down on her front step to cry in frustration and fury. After a few minutes of this, she heard someone say, “Oh, now, Windry! What is it, girl?”

She raised her face to peer at Macherral. He was a bricklayer, but a smart man. He was the one who had told her about the Abbey’s getting shut down if its lord, Efran, were convicted of a serious crime. But then this new provision was suddenly discovered that gave the Lady Sovereign power to reject claims against her husband that she didn’t like. So that plan went up in smoke.

“Oh, Macherral. I’ve been working night and day trying to come up with clothes to sell. If I don’t do something soon, I’ll get behind on my rent again,” she groaned.

“I can help you there,” he smiled.

She eyed him sullenly. “It didn’t work, remember? Minka said, ‘Forget that,’ and the notary wouldn’t even listen to me.”

He leaned back, smiling. “Yes, I read the notices in his window, then went in to look at the Law book. The new provision they’re relying on isn’t actually *in* the Law, but they’re treating it as *part* of the Law. But that’s all right; I see how you can beat it.”

“You mean, I can get my children back?” she asked, sitting up.

“Yep,” he grinned. “Guaranteed.”

“How?” she asked earnestly.

“First off, you have to get Surley’s cooperation,” he said. This was her ex-husband who beat her for sleeping around (although she didn’t like to acknowledge that last part).

“And if I do?” she asked, interested.

“You get your children back. I’ll show you how,” he said. “If. . . .”

She hesitated. “You guaranty I’ll get my children back?”

“Yep,” he said. So they went into her house together. Then she sent a message to Construction Supervisor Surley at Normous in Westford.

On December 2nd, Surley, genial and smiling, rode placidly through the gates of the Abbey Lands to be cordially met by his ex-wife, Windry. He stabled his horse at Croft's, then walked with her to the notary's shop. They entered to be greeted by Giardi, who was courteous but alert.

Surley identified himself to her, and told her, “I and my ex-wife would like to be remarried.”

“I see. Please let me check on this,” Giardi said. Ryal was out of the shop, at the fortress conferring with DeWitt right now.

First, Giardi checked the book of divorces to see that Windry and Surley had been divorced on June 11th of this year. This amply satisfied the one-month waiting period for remarriage after divorce. So she pulled out the book of marriages and the proper form to marry them again. But she cautioned, “I am only the assistant and cannot notarize your marriage license. You may either wait for Ryal to return—which I hope will not be long—or we can send a message to you when he does.”

“We'll wait,” Windry smiled. Giardi nodded, and they sat in the outer room to smile and murmur to each other.

Only minutes later, Ryal did return to the shop, and noted the waiting couple with a wary glance. When he came around the counter, Giardi told him of the divorced couple's desire to remarry, and showed him the form that she had completed.

Looking everything over, Ryal approved the remarriage and notarized the form, although his mind was working the whole time. He was sure there was an angle to this, given Windry's attempts to reclaim her children. Lilou, having been granted Emancipation, was out of her reach, but Calix was perhaps vulnerable. If his father and mother were remarried and wanted him back, it was possible that Ryal would have to revisit his ruling that permitted Calix to stay at the fortress.

With the remarriage notarized, Surley said, “Thank you, Lord Ryal. We have one other action we wish to pursue.”

“Yes?” Ryal asked. Giardi was also tense, waiting.

“Yes,” Surley said, smiling. “We wish to charge the Lady Sovereign with perjury in refusing to allow my wife to bring charges against Lord Efran for rape, and we demand that she go on trial before ten citizens for this crime. However, we will not pursue our claims against the Lady Sovereign if the Abbey will restore our children Lilou and Calix to us, so that we may be a family again.”

Ryal studied him for a solid minute, then said, “Very well. Since this action is unprecedented, I will have to research the proper forms and inform the Lord and Lady Sovereigns of the charges. This should take no more than two days. Please leave us an address where we may notify you of actions taken on your complaint.”

“Thank you, Lord Ryal,” Surley said, still smiling. “I am working in Westford, but my wife maintains a house here at Number Seventy-one Orchid Row.”

“I believe we have that,” Ryal said, looking over to Giardi, who nodded.

“One more thing, Lord Ryal,” Surley said, smiling continually (which was beginning to irritate the notary). “Westford has a notary, Lord Shaffer. We reserve the right to have him attend the trial, and if he finds irregularities in it or your rulings, to have him vacate your judgment.”

Ryal replied dryly, “I happen to know Lord Shaffer, and, irrespective of your threats, I would welcome his presence and input, Surley. Good day.”

Surley’s smile faded, but he and Windry left at that time. Ryal and Giardi remained behind the counter to study each other. She murmured, “What horrible people.”

Ryal shifted. “An acquaintance of Windry’s—I don’t know his name—stopped in to look at the new provision and asked to see the Law. I let him, of course, but noted the sections he was studying. So I’m betting that this friend of hers advised them on this course.”

“What are you going to do?” Giardi asked.

“Oh, fulfill his demand to the letter,” he said. “However, whoever did advise them does not know all the provisions of the Law that will come into play here. It will not go as he or they think.”

Giardi vented, “But to put Minka on public display again—!”

“Now, dear, you’re getting ahead of yourself and the Law,” Ryal smiled. “But since you mention it, I believe that their advisor remembered her being hauled up to face charges under Public Offense against Morality—which trial Efran halted, after which Soames pointed out the Prohibition of Show Trials. Yes, their legal advisor may be remembering that trembling little girl,” Ryal said thoughtfully. “In which case, he will be considerably surprised by the brawler he may see now.”

“Yes,” Giardi purred, and he hugged her.

Nevertheless, he had to summon Efran and Minka to the shop to advise them of the action against her. As Ryal expected, Efran seethed at the news, muttering angrily under his breath. He told Ryal, “I won’t permit it. It’s a show trial, again, meant to humiliate her and blackmail me into letting them take Lilou and Calix. I’ll fight it. . . . What?”

“Efran. Look at Minka,” Ryal said.

“What?” And Efran looked.

She was smiling at him with slightly elevated brows. “Ryal’s not angry. Why should we be? I trust Ryal; I trust the Law; I trust the Lord. We will fight, but in the right way, according to the Law, so that anyone who tries to usurp my authority again will have second thoughts.”

Efran peered at her a moment, then said, “Now I’m a little afraid for them.”

“Well, I want to scare anyone who tries to take away our children under the charter,” she said.

He looked back to Ryal. “This could get bloody, couldn’t it?”

“Yes, there are pitfalls in trying to twist the Law,” Ryal said grimly. Efran smiled.

That day, the news exploded through the Lands that Minka was to go on trial before a jury of ten Abbey Lands residents for the crime of perjury in refusing to allow Windry to charge Efran with rape. Windry reveled in the news, being stopped on the street every three steps to be asked about it. She even sold a few dresses on the implicit promise of discussing it.

But the more she talked, the more public opinion cooled toward her. She talked too willingly, too happily, almost luxuriating in the prospect of humiliating the Lady Sovereign. The staff and regular customers at Firmin's were outraged by the news, and Lilou mortified. Also, Windry's proclivity toward casual relations with men was well known, which made the charge of rape against any one of her numerous partners doubtful.

And when Windry got home at the end of the day, she began to think. A trial meant that she would have to testify before the jury, didn't it? And they would ask her about her relations with Efran, and maybe even her efforts to get him to marry her, which were widely discussed at the time. Yes, there was a lot that she might rather not talk about.

Two days later, on December 4th, Ryal sent a written message to Windry at her home to inform her and Surley that the preliminary hearing on their complaint would take place the following day at the chapel. In conjunction with the Abbey Fortress administrators, a panel of ten jurors and two alternates had been chosen by Ryal, with input from other prominent (unnamed) Landers. Therefore, she and Surley were invited to attend the hearing beginning at nine of the day candle, December 5th.

For Windry, this notification raised a crop of questions. After getting a message off to Surley, she hastened to the notary's shop to find a line of customers ahead of her. Impatient and stressed, she called, "Ryal! I got the notice about the hearing but I need to know more!"

"Let me take care of these good people ahead of you, then I'll answer your questions, Windry. Sign here, please," Ryal told the customer in front of him.

"Why is it at the chapel house? That's Minka's Auntie; she'll be prejudiced toward her!" Windry objected.

Ryal did not answer at once, as he was explaining another matter to the customer. When he had left with his business completed (casting a black glance at Windry on the way), Ryal told her, "Marguerite is not participating, she's just providing a suitable venue."

"Well, how many does it have room for to come watch?" Windry asked.

Sighing, Ryal handed off the next customer to Giardi, then replied, "The hearing is closed, to determine if there is enough evidence for an indictment on the charges. This is standard practice when a statute does not specify a different protocol."

"This isn't a trial? She's supposed to go to trial," Windry protested.

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Chapter 22

Ryal explained to Windry, "The Law specifies steps to a trial; in many cases, I am the one to indict; that is, to determine that there is enough evidence to hold a trial. In a case as momentous as this, in which a jury of peers is stipulated, the jury must first decide if there is enough evidence to hold a trial at all. That hearing is closed to the public to prevent harassment of the jury or the defendant. Next!"

Windry let out a breath in exasperation. "But Surley and I can come watch?"

"Excuse me a moment," Ryal apologized to the customer, who glanced back at her, peeved. Ryal told her, "Yes, you and Surley may come watch silently. You do not speak unless you are called as a witness. Then you will be sworn in to give testimony."

"I might have to give testimony?" she asked in reluctance.

A customer turned around to vent, "Whaddya think, if you're charging him with rape?"

"Efran isn't on trial for rape here; Minka is on trial for not letting him *go* to trial," she corrected him.

Ryal answered, "If it doesn't come up in the hearing, and the jury votes to send her to trial, then, yes, the charge of rape will certainly be referenced then."

"How many have to vote to send her to trial?" Windry asked suspiciously.

"A majority," Ryal replied.

Windry brightened. "Oh, that's easy. We'll get that." And she walked out.

At nine of the candle on the following morning, December 5th, the jury and alternates assembled around Marguerite's dining table. They were: Coghill (the doctor), Felice, Madgwick, Shurtleff (the fishmonger), Croft, Howe (Bethune's husband), DeGrado (the maker of stained-glass windows), Eavenson (the leather worker), Racheal, and Geneve, heavily pregnant at eight months. Therefore, one of the alternate jurors Gudgeon (Firmin's accountant) or Lowry (the butcher) might be necessary. But Geneve, outraged by the charge, insisted on being allowed to serve. The jury was composed of six men and four women, but the two alternates were also present today.

Chairs were arranged along the wall for the allowed witnesses: Efran, Lord Shaffer (Westford's notary), DeWitt or Estes (as they would interchange due to their duties), Windry and Surley, and the amanuenses Soames and Oulton (Captain Rigdon's scribe). Because they were in Marguerite's and Wendt's home, those two were permitted to watch, although both slipped in and out quietly. Hartshough was also there, unseen.

Minka was placed at the head of the table. She was calm and composed, dressed in one of her linen work/riding dresses, wearing a pair of Dallarosa's earrings. Her newly washed white hair was still damp, lying limp and fine around her face, which made her look all the younger.

Efran, sitting far back from the table but with a clear view of her, was both heartsick and proud. He was sick to death of his past actions continually springing out to whip back on her, but her composure was admirable. She was in battle mode, as the riding dress attested.

Ryal opened: "Thank you all for your service on this jury; I hope to make this inquiry as quick and least disruptive as possible. I also wish to express my deep appreciation to Westford Notary Lord Shaffer for coming down to assist with his guidance and observations." Shaffer nodded minutely at the acknowledgment.

Ryal continued, "We will begin by administering the oath to the defendant, Minka, Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Lady Minka, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," she said, then looked toward Coghill, who was stirring.

"Lord Ryal, forgive the interruption, but I have a question about this whole charade," Coghill said. "How can perjury be construed from her simple refusal to endorse the charge against Efran?" Windry narrowed her eyes at his obvious bias.

Ryal said, "Thank you, Doctor Coghill. I will answer to the best of my knowledge, then if Lord Shaffer has any insight, I invite you to share it." Again, Shaffer barely nodded, and Ryal went on: "I am leaning far out on the fringes of the Law to allow the hearing, but I feel it necessary to fully resolve the questions at hand, for future reference. It could be inferred that the Lady knows that the charge is true, but desires to shield her husband. In which case, it is imperative to uncover that. By the same token, if the charge is false, then both the Lord and Lady Sovereigns deserve vindication. This is the only way I see to achieve that."

"Well said," Gudgeon murmured. Ryal looked to Shaffer, who declined to add anything.

Ryal said, "If there are no more questions, we shall proceed. But I invite any juror to ask questions at any time during the hearing."

They mutely acknowledged this, and Ryal turned to Minka. "Lady Minka, did your husband ever speak to you about his relationship with Windry?"

"Frequently," she said, at which Windry stiffened. Eyes narrowing in concentration, Minka said, "Early in our marriage, Efran confessed to me his past indiscretions with married women. He felt it necessary to get it all out, to reassure me that, now that he had his own love, he was done trying to find one among the married women he knew."

She paused to remember something. "To back up, before we were married, when I first found him lying sick in the henhouse, I fell in love with him right away, and tried in my own awkward way to get him to make love to me. He simply—refused. He climbed up on the high perches to get away from me." There was some quiet chuckling.

She went on, "As I found out later, that was because he had a bright line—his words—against taking advantage of young girls. He would not touch the young ones. But, as he told me, the bored, wealthy married women were always throwing themselves at him. So he accommodated them."

A few jurors glanced surreptitiously at Efran, who was listening with his elbows on his spread knees, his head down. Those who knew him well knew that she was speaking the bald truth.

Minka went on: "As far as Windry, he told me in that early confessional that she was the only one of the married women who was willing to divorce her husband to marry him. He was—grateful that she had the courage to speak to him on the street. *Moekolohe*, you know—the Southern women who were happy to bed him treated him like dirt in public. Not Windry; she greeted him as a friend. But she had young children who needed a mother

and father, and he couldn't bring himself to break up a family. So, as he told me, he broke her heart instead."

The hall was quiet as she paused to recollect, and Ryal waited. She continued, "She was brought to the Lands by my grandmother, as a test of Efran's fidelity." Some of the jurors looked confused, so she explained, "That is, La —my grandmother took advantage of an obscure law allowing her to impose a test of faithfulness on him. [Minka wasn't about to bring the faerie business into it.] So she lured Windry down by making her think that Efran was willing to leave the Lands with her. He wasn't, and she was left confused and adrift. Her husband Surley had their children, and wouldn't let her see them. While he was at work, he kept them locked up all day in one room of his house, with a housekeeper."

Some jurors glanced at Surley, who kept his eyes straight ahead. Minka looked off, her brow creased. Then she told Efran, "I don't know how it happened that you went to get Lilou and Calix."

Lifting up, Efran replied, "I swear on my soul to tell the truth in this hearing. Eryk heard her complain about her children, and asked if I would go get them. I told him I would. As we were riding down—Cyneheard, Martyn, and Hawk with me—she called out from Croft's to thank me."

Some jurors nodded, looking back to Minka. She said, "Yes. Well, I think it was the next day that Surley came to try to take her, and the children, with a wagonload of armed men, but one of Efran's men ran her to your shop [nodding to Ryal] to swear out an emergency divorce for abuse. She has a lump on the back of her head from when he hit her with a frying pan." Several jurors glanced toward Windry and Surley, who sat very still.

Tilting her head to think, Minka went on: "Windry and her children lived here, in the chapel house, for a little while, but Calix fell when he tried to climb on the loft railing." She glanced up at the loft behind her (now somewhat blocked by the slender faerie trees) then said, "Efran caught—no, my grandmother caught him. But that scared Windry, so she got a house and married Eryk. Marguerite's handyman." He was not here at present. Windry was glassy-eyed.

"Windry worked as a weaver, but let her children play in the street during the day—Calix was ten and Lilou twelve. He's eleven now; she's about to turn thirteen. They saw the Fortress children go out to the play hut, and went out with them. Then they began coming up hilltop to play with them on the back grounds. This became a problem, because it blurred the lines of which children the Abbey was responsible for. Estes always prefers to adopt them out into families, because that's best for the children. But Lilou and Calix had a mother here already who needed to take responsibility for them.

"Also, they were not in class; they were not learning to read or write or do numbers, as the Law requires. So Efran went down to talk to Windry at her house, and I went with him. He told her that she needed to take care of her own children, to supervise them and tutor them. She was very offended at this, and asked, 'Why can't they play up there on the hill with all the other children?' Efran tried to explain that that's not how the charter works, and she said something like, 'You just don't want to bother about them.' He told her, 'I'm not their father,' and she said, 'So you don't owe me anything for sleeping with me?'"

Heads swiveled back and forth between Windry and Efran. She was rigid, having forgotten all that. Efran had his elbows on his knees again. But he had his head up, watching Minka with an occasional light nod.

She glanced reluctantly toward Windry. "I'm afraid I did say some things to her, particularly about how she had a new husband who should help her with her children. Anyway," she exhaled, "nothing changed; Lilou and Calix kept coming up to the fortress because they liked it. But since Lilou was twelve, I asked Windry to take her around to some of the businesses to see if she could get work. Windry said she was too busy, so I took her to Firmin's and, she just dove in like a frog at a pond. She adores Ionadi, and does good work."

She looked at Gudgeon, who smiled.

Raising her eyes to think, Minka said, “Calix asked to stay at the fortress all the time—that is, not go home at night. Since Windry didn’t care, Efran said he could, but he had to go to class with the other children. He did. About—three months passed, and Windry didn’t come up to see him at all. About that time, Efran began to realize that Windry had been using him when they were together. He told me that she saw how attentive he was to her children, so she used that to try to make him marry her. If he had, he said, she wouldn’t have been any more faithful to him than she had been to Surley, which is probably what made him so angry.”

“That’s a lie!” Windry cried, standing. Surley was staring off into space. Smiling tightly, Efran looked back at her.

Ryal turned to her. “Then come sit here, Windry. I will put you under oath and you can tell us the truth.” Windry slowly sat again where she was.

Ryal turned back to Minka. “Go on, please.”

Minka shifted, thinking. “Then it was in mid-September of this year—Windry was getting married again, so she wanted Lilou and Calix back. But Calix was happy with the other children at the fortress, and Lilou was happy at Firmin’s, so we called you for a custody hearing. You ruled that both could stay where they wanted,” she told Ryal.

He looked over the table of jurors. “That is true, and I have the folder of notes from that interview here, available to any of you who wish to see it.” To the witness, he said, “Please continue, Lady Minka.”

Minka nodded, looking aside to locate the thread. “She didn’t marry the man, after all, whoever it was. Oh, I forgot—she and Eryk had divorced by that time. Anyway, she was having trouble making ends meet, and had been borrowing money from Lilou. Then she decided that since Lilou was making so much money, she needed to come back home and share her earnings. Lilou didn’t want to, so came to you for Emancipation, which you granted,” she told Ryal.

He told the jurors, “That was a few weeks ago, November twentieth. I also have that document and a transcript of the hearing for any of you who would like to see it.” Some jurors looked at each other, then Ryal said, “Please continue, Lady Minka.”

“Yes,” she said, eyes sweeping the hall. “So, when Windry came up to us at Firmin’s to announce that she was taking Efran to trial for rape, I knew right away that this was another ploy to get her children—at least Lilou—back under her roof. So I denied it.” She fell silent, having said all she knew.

Ryal looked around the table. “I will now permit questions to this witness.”

Lord Shaffer shifted. “Lady Minka, that was a comprehensive yet concise recounting.” He paused, but she waited for his question. So he asked, “Did you keep notes on all this?”

“No, Lord Shaffer,” she said.

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Chapter 23

When Minka said no more, Lord Shaffer asked, "Then how do you remember it all so specifically?"

"It concerns the two areas of my life that are most important to me: Efran and the children," she said.

"Commendable—if it's all accurate," he noted. She did not reply.

They waited, looking around, then Gudgeon said, "Lord Ryal, everything she says has been observed by three-quarters of Main Street. In my mind, there's no question about any of it." A few others nodded.

Then Howe said, "I'd like to hear from Surley under oath."

All heads turned to Surley, whose face was impassive. Ryal asked, "Surley, are you willing to testify?"

"Yes," he said, leaning back to cross his arms.

"Excellent. Please sit here so that all of the jurors may see and hear you," Ryal said, indicating Minka's chair at the head of the table. As she stood, he said, "Thank you, Minka." She glittered at him briefly, then went to the side of the hall where Efran was bringing a chair to place beside his. She sat, and he studied her in admiration.

Meanwhile, Surley had sat in the witness chair. Ryal gave him the oath, to which he replied in the affirmative. Ryal looked to Howe to ask, "Is there a specific question you had for him, Howe?"

"I'd like to hear your questions, first, Lord Ryal," Howe said.

"Very well. Surley, please tell me: what is the point of bringing Minka to trial?" Ryal asked.

Surley hesitated, then said, "I want my family back. Now that my wife and I are remarried, we want our children back."

Howe asked, "After what we've just now heard, do you feel you deserve them?"

Surley mulled this over for a moment then said, "Perhaps not. But we'd like to make a new start. Everyone deserves another chance."

Felice asked, "Why do you need your children for that?"

He looked surprised. "So we can be a family again."

"What good is that to them?" she asked, her anger rising. "Why should they give up their new start to help you with yours? They are happy and working. Why should they have to go back to sitting in a locked room all day?"

"I agree," Geneve said.

"We're going to do things differently this time around," Surley said firmly.

Felice said, "Fine. But you and your wife should prove that you can before you drag them into it."

Racheal said, "Lord Ryal, Lilou's been granted Emancipation. How can that be taken away from her now?"

Everyone looked at Ryal. He said, "It won't be. The only reasons to revoke Emancipation are if the child gets in serious trouble or requests it, neither of which applies to Lilou."

"What about Calix, then?" Lowry asked Surley. "You're going to take him away from his friends, his schooling, and now his sister? For what?"

When Surley had no answer to that, Ryal said, "These are important questions, to be sure. However, they're not what we're considering today. The question before us is, Did Lady Minka lie in refusing to allow Lord Efran to face charges for rape?"

"No!" Felice spat.

"No," Coghill said.

Other voices began to chime in, then Ryal held up his hands. "Here. I see that we need to take a formal vote. Lord Efran, Lady Minka, Windry and Surley, I must ask you to step out for the vote now." While Surley rose to return to Windry, Ryal sat at the head of the table.

But Shurtleff asked, "Why do they have to step out? Why shouldn't they hear the vote?"

Everyone looked to Ryal, who said, "To protect the privacy of the jurors."

"Who objects to their hearing the vote?" Croft asked, looking around.

When no one spoke, Ryal asked, "Is there any objection to the witnesses remaining for the vote?" The jurors all looked at each other, but no one spoke.

Ryal exhaled, "While I admire your forthrightness, I fear challenges to a public vote. Therefore—Soames, have you got—? No, you don't. Hartshough, may I ask you to provide slips of parchment and charcoal for our jurors?" Efran and Minka had sat again by now, so Windry and Surley sat as well.

"Yes, Lord Ryal. I happen to have prepared them for just such an exigency," Hartshough said. With a basket of supplies, he went down the table, placing a scrap of parchment and piece of wrapped charcoal before every juror. They looked at him in mild wonder. Wendt, Marguerite, Efran and Minka smiled at each other: Hartshough was just being the consummate butler, as usual.

Gudgeon then asked Ryal, "Do we alternates vote?"—nodding to the other alternate, Lowry. Hartshough paused in passing out supplies.

Ryal hesitated. "I don't see why not. What do you think, Lord Shaffer?" The Westford notary shrugged, declining to offer an opinion. So Ryal said, "Yes, we might as well take your votes as well. Here are your instructions: You are answering the question, 'Should Lady Minka be remanded for trial on the charge of perjury?' Yes, she should go to trial, or no, she should not. Please write your name on your vote along with 'yes' or 'no.' No one will see it but me, Lord Shaffer, and the scribes Soames and Oulton. Please vote now."

The jurors wrote on their slips, folded them, and passed them up to Ryal at the head of the table. This was all done within seconds. Ryal murmured, "I should have twelve here." They watched as he counted them, then said, "Twelve. I shall now tally the votes."

The hall was silent but for breathing as Ryal opened one slip after another. Then, stacking them all to the side, he said, "Well. The vote was unanimous: No. Some with exclamation points," he observed. Windry began to rise to leave, but Surley held her arm, glancing at the Westford notary. Looking at him as well, she sat back down.

Not seeing this subtle action, the jurors inhaled in vindication, smiling at each other. Ryal looked over to where Minka and Efran were sitting, and said, "Lady Minka, please rise." She stood, and Efran stood with her, hands clasped before him, spreading his feet.

Ryal said, "Lady Minka, according to the vote of the jury of your peers administered by the Law of Roman, you have been found not liable for trial on the charge of perjury. You are free to go." Patting Efran's shoulder, Estes went out to inform the fortress. Messengers from Wendt also lit out at that time, headed for the lower and hilltop barracks.

Efran turned to envelope Minka as the jurors congratulated each other, then Lord Shaffer said, "Regretfully, Lord Ryal, I am afraid I must vacate your ruling. She shall stand trial for perjury." Surley glanced meaningfully at Windry, and she smiled.

Everyone in the hall stared at Shaffer for several thunderstuck moments. Then Gudgeon asked, "Why?"

"I shall route my opinion to Notary Ryal within a week," Shaffer said, standing.

Lowry asked, "Excuse me, but who are you to overrule a unanimous jury ruling on the Lands?"

Croft added, "Yes, what authority do you have in the Abbey Lands?"

Coghill said, "This goes against everything in the Law about local rule."

Other voices were raised in objection, and Shurtleff asked, "What if we just ignore you?"

Shaffer looked in Shurtleff's direction to say, "I wouldn't advise it."

Others fell silent when Efran asked Shaffer, "Who appointed you to the office of notary?"

Shaffer languidly turned his head to focus on him, and replied, "The-the-the Committee for the Re-re-revitalization of Westford."

Efran laughed, "Another committee! Why was that so hard to get out? Who is part of this exalted body?"

Lord Shaffer opened his mouth, but did not speak at once. Instead, his head began jerking in tiny tics. While he continued to look at Efran with his mouth partly open, the involuntary jerks continued.

The others stared at him, and Ryal came up to peer at him in concern. "Shaffer? Are you quite all right?"

Shaffer's eyes turned to him, but he seemed unable to answer. "He's not well. Coghill? Can you have a look at him?" Ryal asked. Unnoticed, Surley took Windry's arm to leave at this time.

Coghill came over to study him, then take his pulse. "Fast, but not excessively so," he murmured. He put a hand to his chest to gauge his breathing. "I don't feel any obstruction there." Just in case, he placed a hand at the back of his neck. "He has a spine," he told Efran in relief, who appeared just as relieved.

Stepping back, Coghill said, "This is something that requires an expert evaluation."

Efran turned to the front doors. Before he could whistle, Nyarko and Suco, standing guard at the doors, presented themselves. Efran told them, "Lord Shaffer is not well. Get his carriage and his bodyguard and send him home. Have a pair of scouts follow them as far as the Porterhouse, then return."

"Yes, Captain," Nyarko said. They took Shaffer gently by the arms to lead him away with his tics.

After they had departed, Efran told the remaining group, "I second Shurtleff's suggestion to ignore Shaffer." This proposition met with applause, and Shurtleff waved. Turning back to Hartshough with a vague smile, Efran asked, "What've you got in the kitchen for some happy Landers, Hartshough?"

"Funny you should ask, Lord Efran—I have been experimenting with some new mixed drink recipes," Hartshough replied.

There rose laughing encouragement for him to produce the results, and the jurors and witnesses stood around the table to talk while they waited. Felice told Madgwick, "I was so surprised that you didn't say a word. You're not shy. Did you really have nothing to say?"

Others looked on as Madgwick said, "I was afraid to."

"Afraid! I don't believe that at all," Howe said.

Madgwick said, "No, he was set to object from the beginning. Since I could see how that would go, I was afraid to pour oil on the fire. I think Minka sensed it though, what with the way she answered him." In a lower voice, almost unheard, she added, "Something's wrong with him."

But they all looked at Minka, who shrugged, "It's nothing personal. He just has no standing to oversee Ryal on anything." In the concurring laughter, she went right over to Geneve to hug her tightly and demand, "Tell me how you're feeling! Tell me every little thing!"

Geneve groaned, "You don't want to hear. I'm miserable."

"Tell me anyway. It's the closest I'll come to experiencing it myself," Minka said without a shred of self-pity.

Efran's eyes filled with tears, but he took up a glass from the tray that Hartshough put on the table. When the others had their drinks as well, Efran proposed, "A toast to friends, to loyalty, and to love."

The Landers raised their glasses to him. "Hear, hear!" Efran's voice said from the heavens, and everyone looked up to see Justinian and Eryk descending from the loft to receive drinks. Obviously, they had witnessed the whole hearing from above. (Verlice was also on the loft, resting in the northernmost room.)

"Minka, dearest," Justinian said in his own voice, "when I go on trial for anything—and I hope it's for the sheer number of dalliances that Efran has accumulated—I'll want you to testify on my behalf."

She cried, "Justinian! I can't help you there; I don't know anything!"

"No matter. Just sit in the chair and look sincere. You can recite poetry and that will suffice," he said, then took a sip of his drink. "Ah. Green chartreuse, of course—"

“Herbal bitters,” Efran said over his glass.

“Lemon,” Justinian countered.

“Honey,” Efran added.

DeGrado winced at Marguerite. “Do they ruin every drink like that?”

She turned large eyes and highly lifted eyebrows at the two, who assumed faces of pained innocence. “No, of course not,” Efran said, sucking up his drink.

“Not at all,” Justinian concurred. Then he whispered, “Honey sage,” to Efran, who looked dubious.

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Chapter 24

The day after the hearing, the Landers, and especially the Fortress, were still celebrating Minka’s victory. While her poise and remarkable recall were praised, everyone also agreed that Ryal won it for her by simply letting her talk without leading or interrupting her. That got the whole picture over to the jury with great clarity, even to those who knew nothing about it.

Also, there were a few jurors going in who thought that the power given to Minka to simply wave away accusations against Efran was dangerous and subversive. However, after listening to her recount the whole convoluted history of Efran and Windry, they came around to seeing its benefits. But they privately agreed that in anyone else’s hands but Minka’s, it was still dangerous.

Efran and Minka celebrated by sitting on the bench under the walnut tree to watch the children play. There were two new girls out here today, De Luca and Dal Occhio, who were twin sisters. But they would be gone soon, as they were healthy, pretty 11-year-olds who had a string of families wanting to adopt them. Estes was in the process of carefully vetting the families before they interviewed with the girls.

They played well with the other children, but avoided the skinny boy with the ugly stitches on his mouth. He did not resent anything, because he was still trying to learn words and games and how to talk around his healing lip. His adoptive parents were pleased with his progress, especially as it had been only a week since he had been presented to the Abbey Fortress as a reciprocal gift from the mountain trolls.

Efran and Minka were also pleased to see that he took pains for Joshua, by far the youngest and smallest of the group. Isreal was always checking to see where he was, and that he was not hurt or scared by anything. This created mixed feelings in the almost two-year-old—he liked the attention but not the protection. Also, Joshua was frustrated that he couldn’t get his sibling’s name right; it kept coming out as something like “Isuhl,” which sounded like a sneeze. But they got along.

Also, Isreal was not strong; he had very little physical stamina, which could only be corrected by good food, lots of play, and time. Meanwhile, when he tired, he would climb up on the bench next to Efran. Isreal liked Minka, and would caress her arm or her hand, but Efran was his harbor, his anchor.

As the children were being called to their chores, and Toby came for Isreal, Teschner ran over to the bench to salute Efran. “Captain, Administrator DeWitt wishes you to know that Beekman has been located and is being brought up to the workroom.”

Minka looked at Efran inquiringly, and he mused, “Beekman. . . . Oh, Beekman!” He got right up, taking her hand. “You’ll want to come hear this. Tell him we’re coming,” he told Teschner, who saluted again to trot off.

“Who’s Beekman?” Minka asked, having to trot to keep up with her husband.

“An accomplice of Thurlow’s who disappeared after Thurlow got caught with a stolen gabbot,” Efran said, laughing.

“A . . . gabbot?” Minka asked.

“I can’t wait to hear what he has to say for himself,” Efran said, almost grinning.

When they arrived in the workroom, they found the despondent Beekman sitting at the head of the table, in Efran’s usual chair. Efran accepted this usurpation happily, sitting Minka three chairs down from Beekman before sitting in the chair to her left, only two seats away from the captive witness.

Clasping his hands on the table, Efran said, “Welcome back, Beekman! We missed you. When was it that we had him up here?” Efran asked, looking to DeWitt on the opposite side of the table. Estes was here as well, but was mostly focused on the list of families who wanted to adopt De Luca and Dal Occhio. Also standing by was Milo, who would report afterward to Commander Wendt.

DeWitt replied, “That was two and a half weeks ago. So, Beekman—wait. Were you the hitchhiker who came down with Justinian and Thurlow from Eurus?”

Beekman exhaled, “Yes, I was, sir; I was so anxious to get out of the city, I promised to back him up on whatever he said. So he gave me the bag with the mechanical walking stick—the gabbot—to hide it in the luggage compartment of the carriage. It was when I was trying to get in myself that your men caught me. But what I told you about the lords Hammersnark and Fige-Stickel working out terms of peace with the labor leaders Ufford and Gatlin was true.”

Efran glanced sharply at DeWitt, who returned the look. Beekman’s accent was definitely working-class Eurusian. Efran said sardonically, “And those terms of peace involved the wholesale production of gabbots.”

Beekman closed his eyes. “No sir; that was such a fib as almost bowled me over. What’s true there is that the lords agreed to let the laborers do their work without the licensing fees and taxes what was just ruining us all. I don’t know what they got down in writing, but that was the announcement they made to get the workers to put down their arms.”

Efran and DeWitt absorbed this silently. Then DeWitt asked, “Have you heard anything since then from anyone in Eurus?”

Beekman looked conflicted. “Yes sir, what with the number of people leaving. But Wenger says one thing; Macklin says another, when no one really knows what’s happening on the inside.”

In all likelihood, this was true. After another moment, Efran asked, “What are you doing now?”

“Digging the sewers, sir. The pay’s great,” Beekman admitted.

“Where are you staying?” DeWitt asked.

“Laborers’ Hall, for now. But if I keep making this much, I’ll have enough to lease a room in one of the inns here or even a house,” Beekman said, sitting up.

DeWitt and Efran silently communicated again, and Efran nodded minutely. DeWitt told Beekman, “Well then, we’ll let you do that. Tell your friends who’ve come down from Eurus that we will pay them for any information that can be verified one way or another. It may take us time to check up on what they say, but anyone who gives us solid information about what’s going on in Eurus will get paid for it.”

Eyes widening, Beekman said, “That’s good to know.”

“Very good. You can go now,” DeWitt said.

In mild disbelief, Beekman rose. “Yes sir, thank you.” As he started around the table toward the door, he paused beside Minka. “I was right glad to hear of your getting out of the show trial, Lady Minka.”

She looked at him in astonishment, but said, “So was I! Thank you.” Nodding in satisfaction, Beekman departed.

Grinning, Milo saluted. “Permission to be dismissed, Captain.”

“You’re dismissed,” Efran laughed. DeWitt leaned back in his chair and Estes returned to his notes, shaking his head.

Windry was greatly conflicted after the hearing. With hardly a word to her, Surley left right away to get back to work in Westford. Feeling that she had to talk to someone, Windry stopped by the notary’s office.

There were no customers at the time, so Ryal and Giardi watched sympathetically as she came to the counter. After some hesitant fidgeting, she got out, “I didn’t really want to bring Efran or Minka to trial, but, a friend talked me into it. He said I could get back my children doing it.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryal said. “But they’re still within reach. They don’t have to be living with you for you to have a relationship with them. In fact, this may be the best way for everyone to make a new start.”

“I don’t know if I haven’t already burned all those bridges,” she murmured despondently. “And Surley hardly said a word before he left! But he was stuttering. He started stuttering before he rode off. He’s never done that.” She wrinkled her nose in bewilderment.

Ryal had lost some color in his face. “He started stuttering?” he repeated.

“Yes, but—oh, I don’t know what to do now! How am I supposed to live?” she cried. Ryal opened his mouth, but she spat, “Oh, you’re no help! You have all you need and Efran to help you when you don’t!” Outraged, she flounced out of the shop to storm back to her little house.

She let herself in with a bang, then stewed in anger for a while, throwing her newly produced woolen dresses all over her weaving room. Remembering the advice she had received, she snatched up a heavy wooden shuttle and

walked over to Laborers' Hall on the next block, facing New North Road. Here, she waited as the workers came out for their shifts. When Macherral appeared, she cracked him over the head with the shuttle. His fellow workers laughed as he dropped, out cold. Feeling minimally better, Windry stalked away again.

On her way back to her house, someone behind her murmured, "Windry?"

Barking suspiciously, "What?" she turned to see Bryat, a new barmaid at The Lands' Best Inn.

"I heard about the trial," Bryat said, sidling closer. The skewed description of the hearing that was percolating through certain groups depicted Windry as "the other woman" in Efran's life. "Have you got dresses for sale?" Bryat asked.

Surprised, Windry said, "Yes, but they're mostly woolens."

"I'd like to see what you have," Bryat said.

"Yes, of course." Windry took her home to gather up several pieces of which she was most proud. Bryat bought two dresses and a cute cap—all with Windry's label, of course. Shortly, other women came to clear out the rest of her stock, even the woolens.

Wearing Windry's creations on the street, these women glanced at each other as part of a clique, the ones who could catch the eye of the Lord of the Fortress. Unaware of the hidden signal, Barrueta and Colletta bought several of these dresses as well, seeing only that some very attractive women were wearing them. Except, Barrueta's dresses had to be altered with insets so that she could squeeze into them. Incidentally, having glimpsed her first love Ure on the street—and being unable to catch him—she forgot all about Bullara.

So Windry forgot all about the hearing and began designing, weaving, and sewing again. Although she was already putting labels with her name in these dresses, she decided they needed a special designation. So she relabeled them all "Minunni by Windry."

Sharp-eyed Trina, seeing the success of these dark-horse creations, began copying them and selling lower-cost knockoffs from her father Bowring's house (as he still wouldn't share any of his money with her). Reinagle and Folliott, rather missing her incursions, began scheming as to how to lure her back.

Late in the afternoon of December 5th, Wendt asked Efran to stop by Barracks A to receive a belated report from Featheringham, whose messengers Verrin and Tiras had arrived two days ago. Wendt and Efran sat in the conference room for Tiras to repeat his report to the Captain.

"Yes, sir," Tiras said, receiving an ale from Viglian. "We saw no walking sticks at the compound, and only a light dusting of snow—they had a little more snow in Crescent Hollow, but for sure no walking sticks. Ah, the big news from the city is that they got the monkey population under control, at least in the Market District. The rat catcher Stief is back on duty, and they had him lace fruit with arsenic, then set it aside in boxes marked, 'Danger: Poison' or some such warning. That killed maybe fifty or sixty monkeys, and the rest cleared out. But they may have just relocated to other areas of the city, particularly the dump site, which could be worse."

"Right," Efran acknowledged. "Well, if they're busy fighting monkeys, maybe they won't bother attacking us again."

"Yes, Captain. That's really all we saw," Tiras said.

“Thank you. Dismissed,” Wendt said. Tiras saluted and left.

Wendt and Efran remained at the conference table, just mulling things over. Wendt asked, “How is Minka?”

“Fine,” Efran half laughed. “Nothing about the hearing bothered her at all. She has perfect confidence in Ryal, who handled it just as we all expected. But this—this Shaffer—I’m still trying to figure him out. Ryal had known him from Westford; had great respect for him. But Madgwick said he was set from the beginning to override a favorable ruling. And when he broke down there at the end—did you see that?”

“From the back, at a distance, so no. Marguerite said it looked like a stroke,” Wendt said.

“Yes, it could’ve been, in which case I would have thought Coghill would mention the possibility. But, I don’t know.” Efran shook his head. Then he asked cautiously, “Is Verlice still at the chapel?”

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Chapter 25

Wendt told Efran, “Yes, Verlice is still at the chapel and I’m not going to suggest he leave. He seems to be just resting and eating. Marguerite can’t get anything out of him as to what happened in Westford, but I suspect an entanglement with Lady Cocci. He hasn’t returned to Elvey’s, either,” Wendt said, and Efran winced.

“What about Faciane?” Efran asked.

“She’s working and boarding at Averne’s for now. I think she suspects something, as well, but is biding her time,” Wendt said.

“And their sons—Brayan and Arturo?” Efran asked.

“Doing very well as part of Tourse’s Enforcement Unit, as are Verlice’s former bodyguards Wiatt and Gastrell. They may have also earned commendations; I’ll have to check on that,” Wendt said. “And how about your newest son?”

Efran smiled hazily. “He’s coming alive. His lip is healing well, though the stitches will have to stay in for weeks yet. He was just—very weak and underdeveloped, and if the mountain trolls only fed him insects, I can understand why. He’s faced with something new every day, and people who don’t understand where he’s come from, but, he’s grateful. You can see the gratitude in his eyes.”

“That makes it all worthwhile,” Wendt said.

Efran regarded the clear blue eyes that had once been blinded with acid, and got choked up. “Yes.”

Two days later, on December 7th, Efran rode down the old switchback to Main upon a request from Lemmerz to view plans for new barracks in the eastern Lands. Hopping down from the saddle at the community well (behind which was Lemmerz’s construction office), Efran turned to see Youshock approaching at a trot. “Hello, Youshock,” Efran greeted him, half-smiling.

“Yes, sir, thank you, Captain.” Youshock saluted and paused. “Ah, Captain, I’ve found a visitor here that you may want to talk to.”

“All right. Where?” Efran asked, glancing around.

“I left him at the side door to Delano’s, sir,” Youshock said. Efran blinked at him, so Youshock added, “Let’s just step around so I can show you, sir.”

“Yes, let’s,” Efran said. Leaving Kraken to play in the watering trough behind the well, Efran followed Youshock around Lemmerz’ construction office. Here, Efran immediately saw a man standing at the side door of Delano’s. Efran was unable to see who it was because the man was facing the closed door.

Efran looked in astonishment at Youshock, who said, “You do have interesting visitors here on the Lands, Captain. Let me see if I can coax him out of the doorway there.”

So Efran watched Youshock go over to take the man’s arm to draw him out of the doorway and bring him over a few steps. Efran’s face cleared. “Thurlow! What are you doing?”

There was a pause while Thurlow appeared to look for him. “I am doing well. And how are you?” Thurlow asked, slightly slurred. Efran studied him. The last he had seen, Thurlow was being led away by the Tinkerer, presumably to be punished for stealing his mechanical walking stick. That was eight days ago.

While Youshock looked on, Efran reached behind Thurlow to feel the back of his neck, and the unmistakable vertebra between his shoulders. “What happened with the Tinkerer?”

“The Tinkerer. He . . . let me go,” Thurlow decided. Efran studied his eyes, which seemed to focus on Efran’s collarbone.

“Bring him,” Efran told Youshock, who took Thurlow’s arm to guide him behind the Captain as he gained the sidewalk to turn north on Main.

“There are many interesting buildings along this street, Mister Thurlow,” Youshock began agreeably. “But I am curious as to what you were looking for on the door there.”

“I couldn’t . . . back up,” Thurlow said. Still walking briskly, Efran glanced back at them.

“That would be an uncomfortable position anywhere, in which case I might just go on forward. Were you reluctant to turn the handle and open the door?” Youshock asked.

After another pause, Thurlow said, “I . . . didn’t want to go inside.”

“Well, sir, where did you want to go?” Youshock asked.

“To go . . . where to go. I must go find Efran,” Thurlow said.

Opening the door to Coghill’s house, Efran glanced back sharply.

Delio looked up from her desk, and Efran said, “Where’s Coghill? We need him.”

“He’s down at the apothecary, getting more plantain and hyssop. He should be back soon. Tolliver is out on a call to a patient. What’s wrong here?” she asked, looking between Thurlow and Youshock.

“That’s what we need to find out. Where can we wait?” Efran asked, glancing toward a back room.

“That room behind you is fine,” she said, so Efran nodded Youshock to steer Thurlow in that direction.

“Sit him there,” Efran told the soldier, nodding toward the high examination bed. Thurlow was complacent and unresisting as Youshock led him to the bed.

Youshock said pleasantly, “Here you go, sir. And we have Captain Efran right here in front of you.” Focusing on Efran’s left shoulder, Thurlow did not respond.

Efran picked up Thurlow’s hand to feel the pulse in his wrist. “What did the Tinkerer do to you?” he asked, opening his shirt to look at his chest. There were no marks. Efran put a hand over his heart to feel it beating normally, if a little fast.

“The Tinkerer. With the glasses. He—lectured me for a long time,” Thurlow said with a mild pout.

“Um hmm. And what else?” Efran asked, surveying him.

Thurlow’s eyes narrowed. “The Tinkerer, you know. His name . . . there is a name . . . a name.”

“No, I don’t know the Tinkerer’s name,” Efran said. Finally, he unbuttoned Thurlow’s shirt to take it off him. Then Efran turned him around to study his back. There were no marks nor bruising. Youshock watched silently.

Coghill came in at that time to hand off several parcels to Delio. Entering the examining room, he asked, “What’s this? What’s wrong with him?”

“That’s what I need you to find out,” Efran said. “Youshock found him standing in a doorway after a visit with the Tinkerer, and there is *something wrong*.”

So Coghill closed the door and Youshock helped him strip Thurlow down to his breeches to conduct a thorough examination. The doctor looked in his mouth and down his throat, into his ears and his eyes. Holding a reflective silver disk up to his face, Coghill paused in concern. “His pupils aren’t contracting as they should.”

Moving on, Coghill had him flex his fingers, hands, arms, feet and knees, then felt his abdomen for irregularities. Coghill then had him roll over on his stomach so that he could feel his back, his sides, and even his buttocks. Thurlow submitted docilely to all this without complaint. Youshock said, “I’m no doctor, but it seems to me the problem is in his head, sir.”

“Yes, if we could find out what’s causing it,” Coghill said, then told Thurlow, “You may sit up again.” Thurlow did.

Efran was regarding him in frustration. “Where did you go in Westford? Did you stop in at LeVisay?”

“LeVisay,” Thurlow repeated. “Lady Cocci’s house. No.”

“It’s been a week since the Tinkerer took you. Did you stay the whole time with him?” Efran asked.

“The Tinkerer . . . the name . . . a name . . . I need . . . to remember,” Thurlow said. He was weaving slightly now.

“What do you need to remember?” Efran asked, squinting at his hesitant blankness. This was nothing like the Thurlow he had heard.

Watching over Efran’s shoulder, Coghill observed, “It’s almost as though he’s been drugged. What did he give you to eat or drink?” he demanded of the patient.

Thurlow indifferently frowned. “I don’t—know. Nothing.”

“No strong drink? Hard ale?” Efran asked, placing his hands on either side of Thurlow’s head to raise it.

“Nothing. The name. Remember . . . the name,” Thurlow said, but Efran was not listening. His fingers had found something abnormal.

He asked, “Thurlow, what is this on the back of your head?”

With Efran right in front of Thurlow, Youshock informed him, again, “This is Captain Efran.”

Focusing on the face inches in front of him, Thurlow said, “You are Efran. I have a new name.”

Without responding right away, Efran turned him around to run his hand down the back of his skull. Having a metal plate in his own skull, Efran knew what it felt like. Coghill and Youshock watched as Efran felt the skull through the brown hair.

“You have a new name,” Efran repeated blankly, feeling. He turned to tell Coghill, “There’s a plate under the skin, like mine.”

Youshock told Thurlow, “So, you had to find the Captain to tell him your new name.”

“Yes. I have a new name. The name . . . remember . . . the name,” he said vaguely to Efran behind him.

“What’s your new name?” Efran asked vacantly. His fingers paused on a small round soft spot.

“Gabbot,” Thurlow said. “Gabbot.”

“Uh oh,” Youshock said quietly.

Thurlow went on dreamily, “The name . . . the other . . . name.”

Efran hardly heard either of them. When he pressed lightly on the spot, a door about three inches square opened in the back of Thurlow’s head. Then Efran, Youshock and Coghill stared at tiny cams, wheels, rods and other metal parts densely packed in the small space.

“What?” Efran gasped. “Your name is *Gabbot*?”

Thurlow began weaving again. “Gabbot, gabbot. Guh--uh--Pa—Pa—Pa—Paraskevi.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on December 7th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

FUN AND INFORMATIVE NOTES:

“[Antimony sulfide](#) (Sb₂S₃) is mentioned in an Egyptian papyrus of the 16th century BC. The black form of this pigment, which occurs naturally as the mineral stibnite, was used as mascara and known as khol. The most famous user was the temptress Jezebel whose exploits are recorded in the Bible. . . . Antimony became widely used in Medieval times, mainly to harden lead for type, although some was taken medicinally as a laxative pill which could be reclaimed and re-used!” (Click on History under the Fact box.)

The itinerant preacher's comments to Efran were taken from Samuel Rutherford's [letter](#) to Cardonness, Elder, in 1637.

The poem that Toby reads in Chapter 17 is “Talking in Their Sleep” by Edith M. Thomas. It was published in *The Child's World Fourth Reader*, edited by W.K. Tate (Richmond, B.F. Johnson Publishing Company, 1917)

Regarding the walking sticks: “[Notable damage](#) has occurred to plants in southernmost states, where walking sticks [*Carausius morosus*] are more prevalent. . . . In the tropics, where walking sticks are abundant, they have caused severe defoliation of forest trees, resulting in tree death, animal habitat destruction and economic loss.”

“[One of the reasons](#) this insect's population is growing so fast is the fact that the female Indian walking stick can reproduce without a male and can produce hundreds of eggs in her lifetime. Unfertilized eggs will hatch into only female insects that mature and repeat the process.”

Recipe for [Saffron Bitters](#), which Hartshough serves to an incapacitated Verlice. All ingredients that the characters mention are in this mixed drink. See also “Plague Water” at the same link.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran's Reciprocal Gift* (Book 29)

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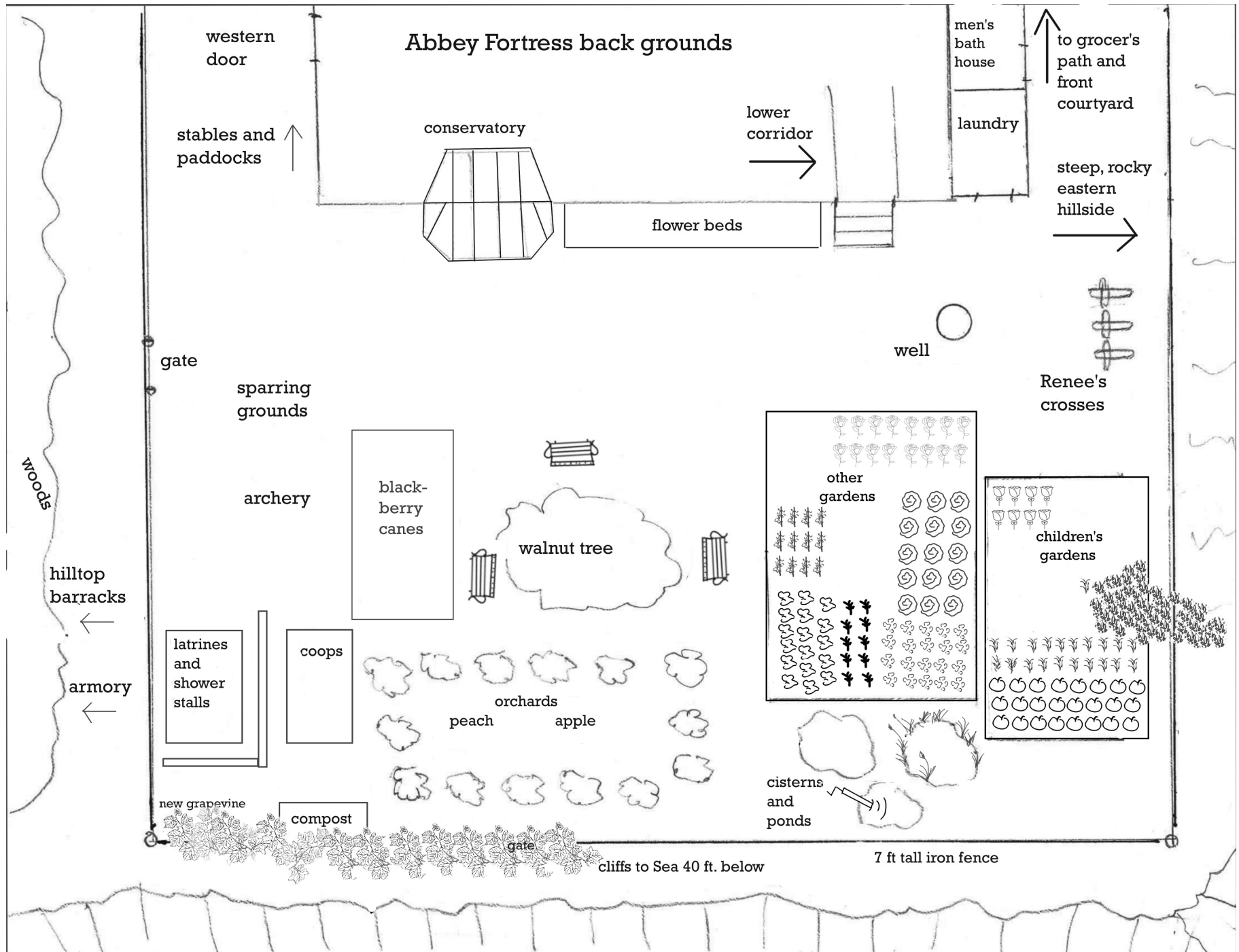
Aiello—eye YEHL oh
 Allyr—AL er
 altior—ALL tee or
 amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: *-ses, -seez*)
 antimony—AN tuh moh nee
 apothecary—ah PAH thuh ker ee
aquae vitae—AWK way VEE tay (brandy)
 Ares—AIR eez
 Arne—arn
augstkalns—AWKST ahns
 Averne—ah VURN
 Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh
 Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah
 Bethune—beh THUNE
 Borgnino—born YEEN oh
 Bowring—BOWE ring
 Brie—bree
 Brogna—BRONE ya
 Bryat—bright
 Bullara—bu LAR ah
 Calix—KAY lix
 Camembert—KAH mum behr
 caova—kay OH vah (coffee)
 Cocci—COH chee
 cochineal—KOCH uh neel
 Colquhoun—CALL kwan
 Cyneheard—SIGN herd
 Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa
 Dal Occhio—dal OH kyo
 DeGrado—deh GRAW doh
 Delano—deh LAN oh
 Delio—DEE lee oh
 De Luca—deh LOO kah
 Doane—rhymes with *own*
 Eavenson—EV en sun
 Efran—EFF run
 Eledith—ELL eh dith
 Elowen—EL oh win
 Elvey—ELL vee
 en masse—ahn mahs (all together, all at once)
 Enon—EE nun
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurasian—your uh SEE un
 Eustace—YOUS tis
 exigency—ECK suh jen see (an urgent need)
 Faciane—fah see ANN
 Felice—feh LEESE
 Fiacco—fee AH koh
 Figle-Stickel—FIG uhl STICK uhl

Folliott—FOH lee uht
 garderobe—GAR de robe
 Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g's)
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goss—gahs
 Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)
 Graeme—GRAY em
 Graetrix—GRAY trix
 Guerry—GEHR ee
 Gwynne—gwin
 Hartshough—HART soh
 Heus—rhymes with the noun *use*
 hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz
 Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
 Javier—JAY vee er
 Jehan—JAY han
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 Kelsey—KELL see
koa—KOH ah (fight to the death)
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Kraken—KRAY ken
 Leila—LYE la
 Lekkerkerker—LEK er ker ker
 Lemmerz—leh MERZ
 Leneghan—LEN eh gan
 LeVisay—leh VEE say
 Lilou—LEE loo
 Lowry—LAHW ree
luku—LOO koo (destroyers)
 Lystra—LIS tra
 MacCaa—mak KAY
 Macherral—MAK er uhl
 Madea—mah DAY ah
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 Mathurin—mah THUR in
 McElfresh—mak EL frish
 Milo—ME low
 Minka—MINK ah
 Minunni—meh NEW nee
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
 Mumme—mum
 Nibor—NEE bor
 Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
 Ori—OR ee
 Paglietta—pay ee ET ah
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pleyel—PLAY el
 Ploense—plonse
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran's Reciprocal Gift* (Book 29)

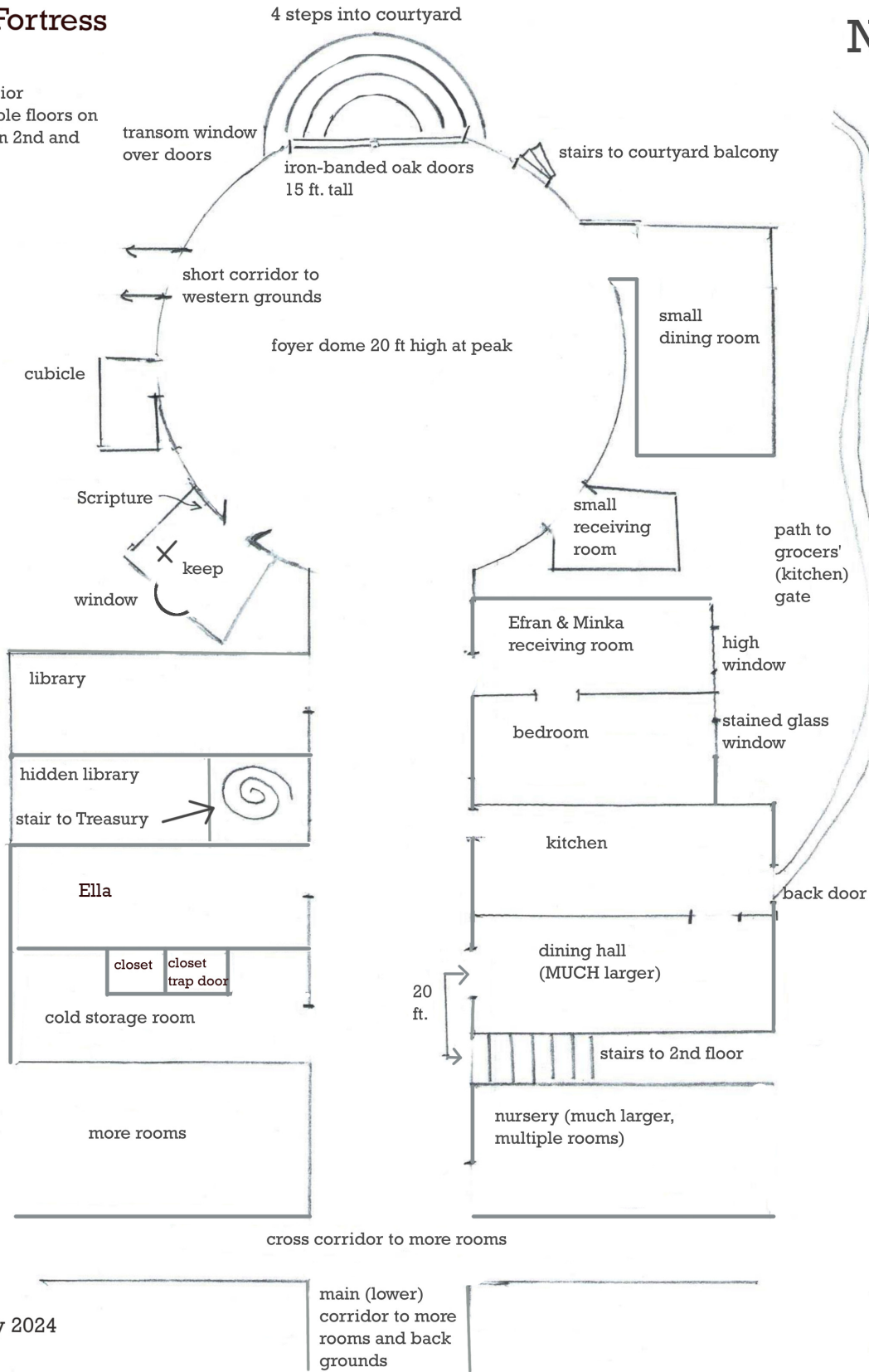
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Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Reblochon—reuh BLOH shohn
reciprocity—reh suh PRAH suh tee
Reinagle—REN ah gull
Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Scylla—SILL ah
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Shirreff—SURE if
skeins—skayns
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stief—steef
Stites—stights
Suco—SUE coh
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Tera—TEE rah
Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tica—TEE kah
Tiras—TEER us
Tourjee—TUR jee
Trina—TREE nah
trough—troff
turmeric—TUR mur ick
Ufford—UHF erd
Ure—YOUR ay
Uytenbogat—uht en BOH gart
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
verisimilitude—veh reh suh MIHL eh tood
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Vychan—VI kan
Westfordian—west FOR dee un
Windry—WIN dree
Wystan—WIS tan



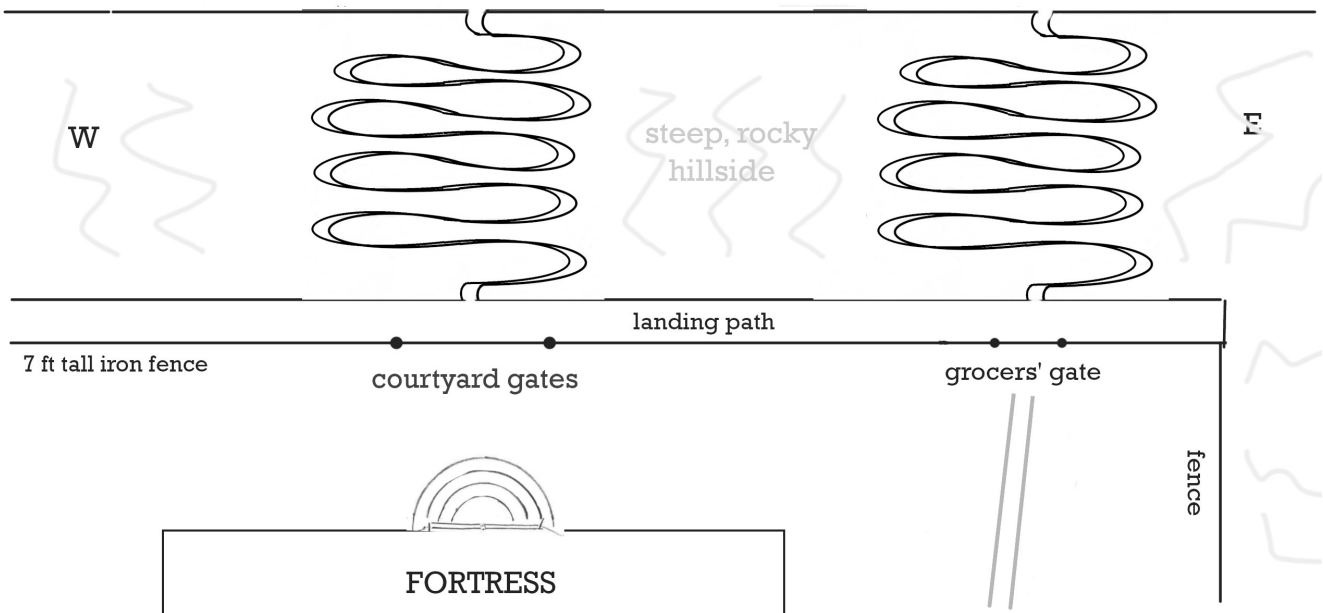
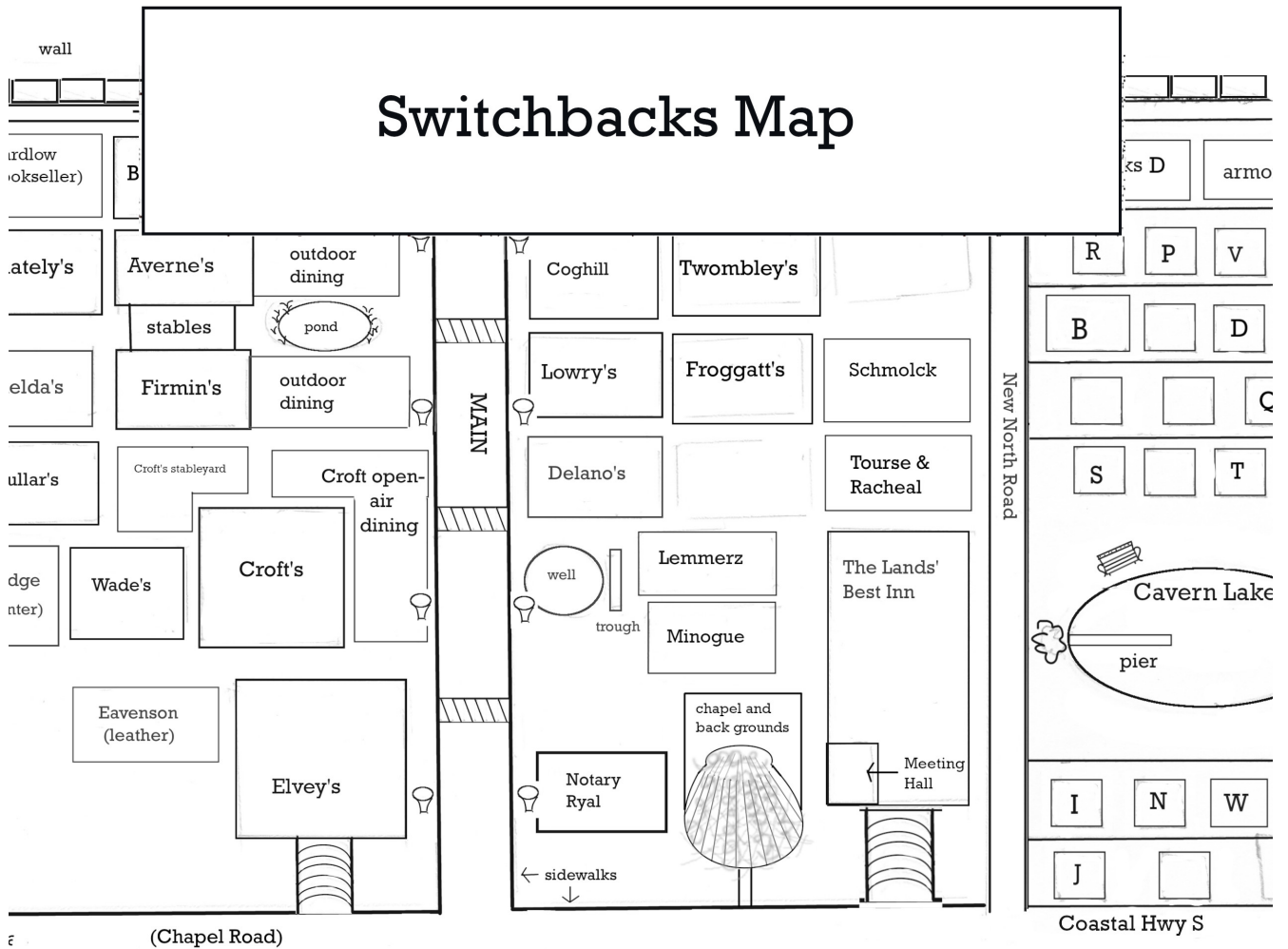
Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

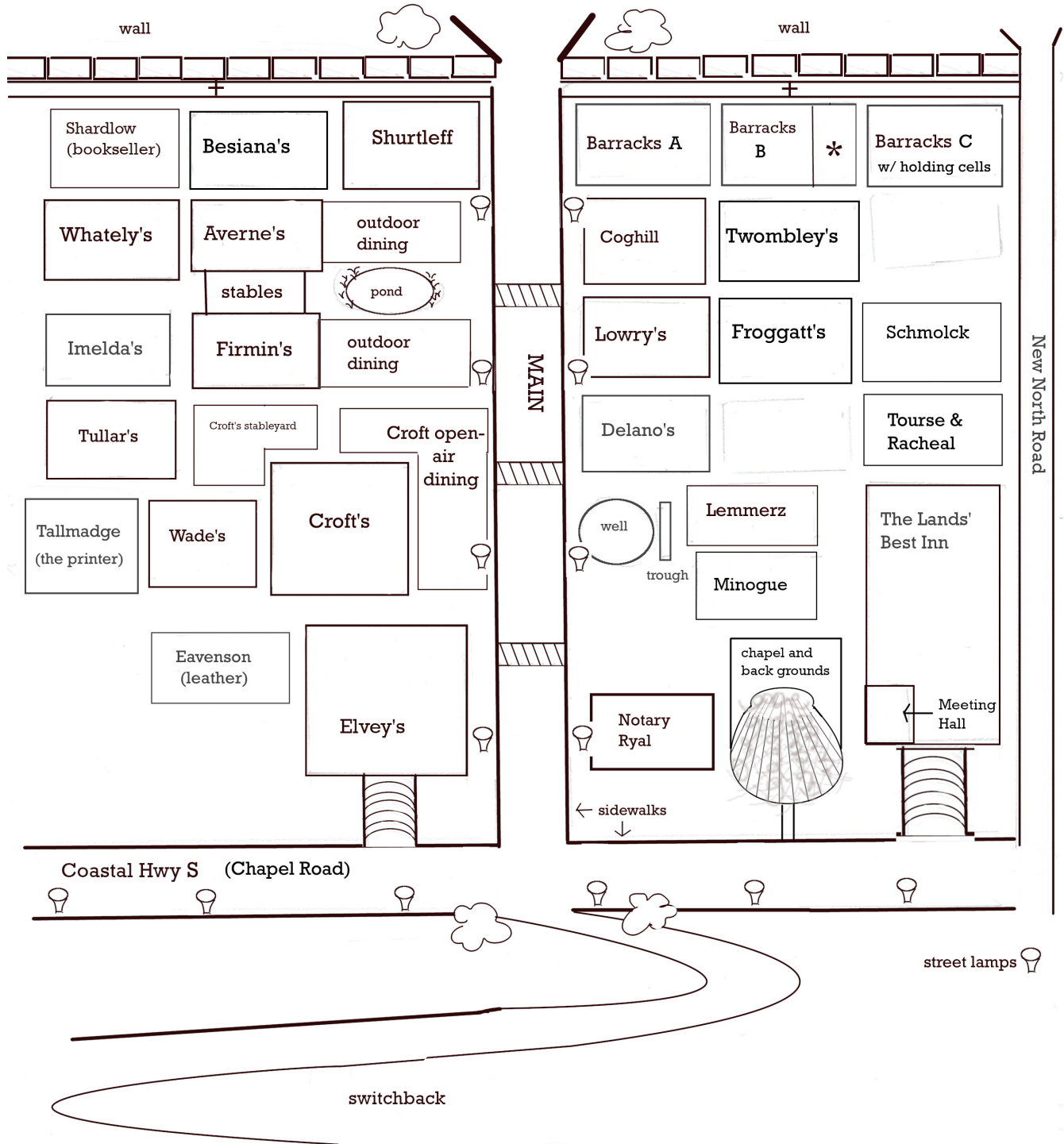
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Abbey Lands Main Road

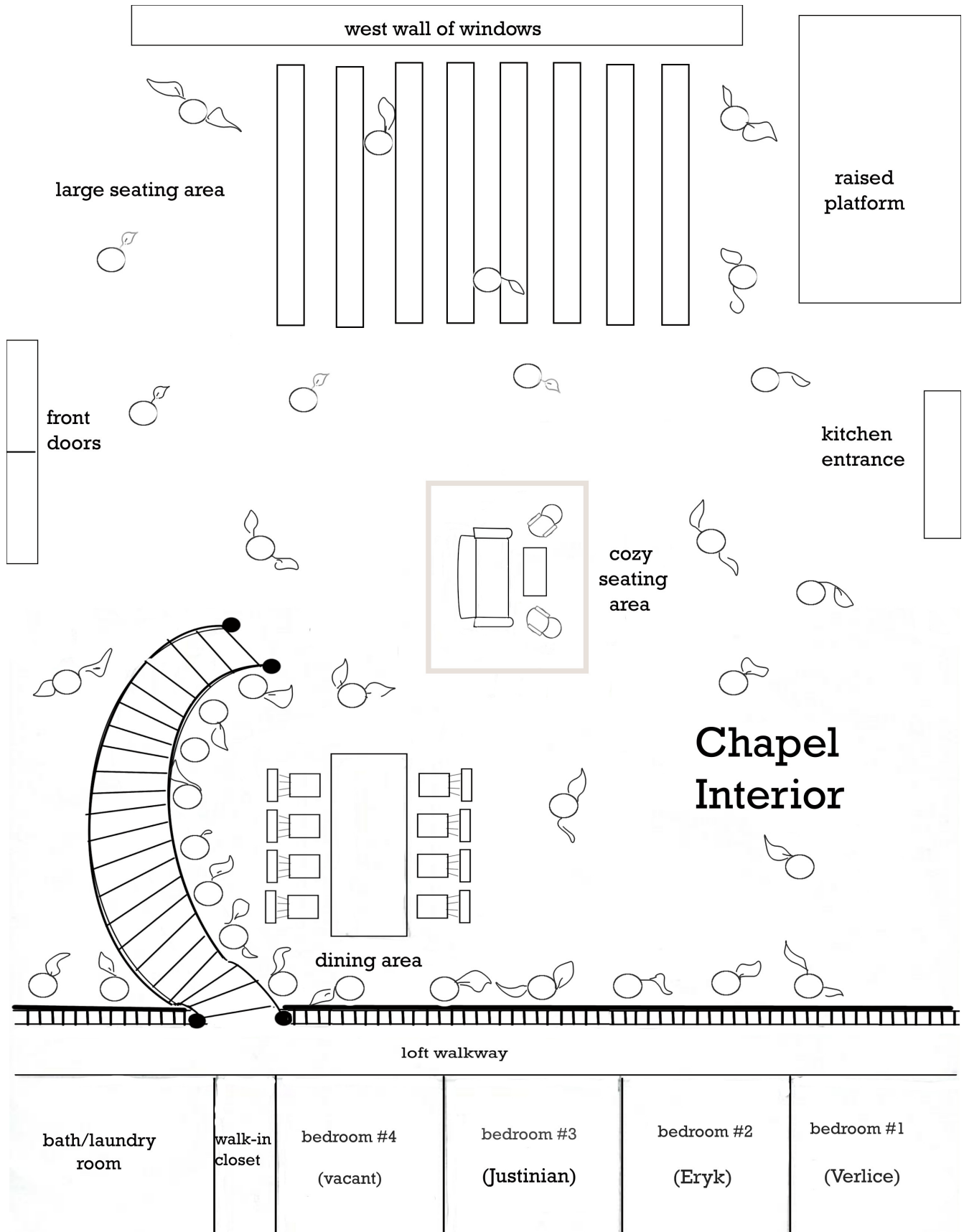
* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements

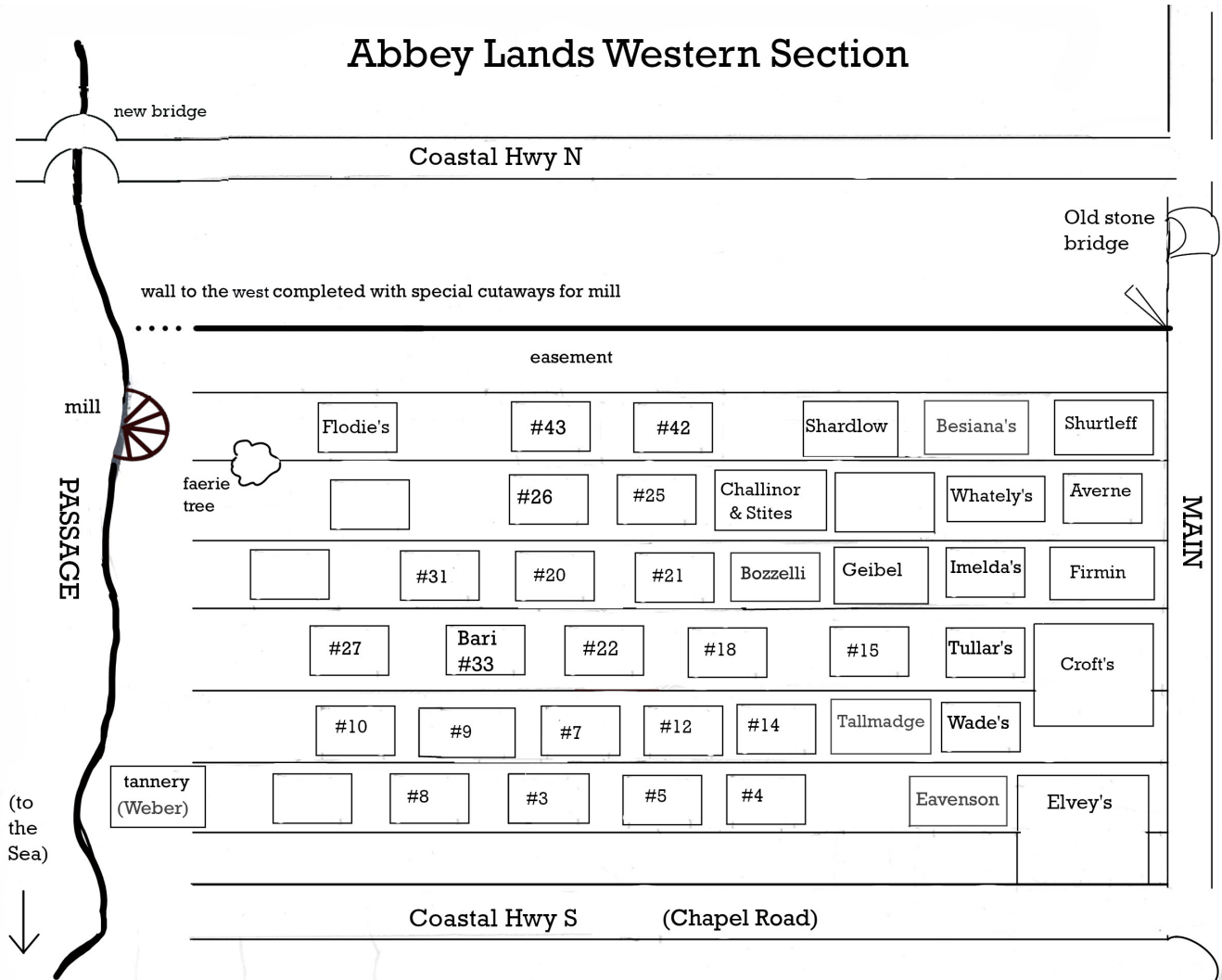


Map 5 Chapel Interior

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Abbey Lands Western Section



(to the Sea)
↓

rocky NW hillside



hydra nest & hole

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

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 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



faerie tree

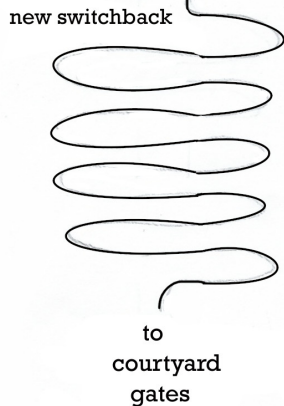
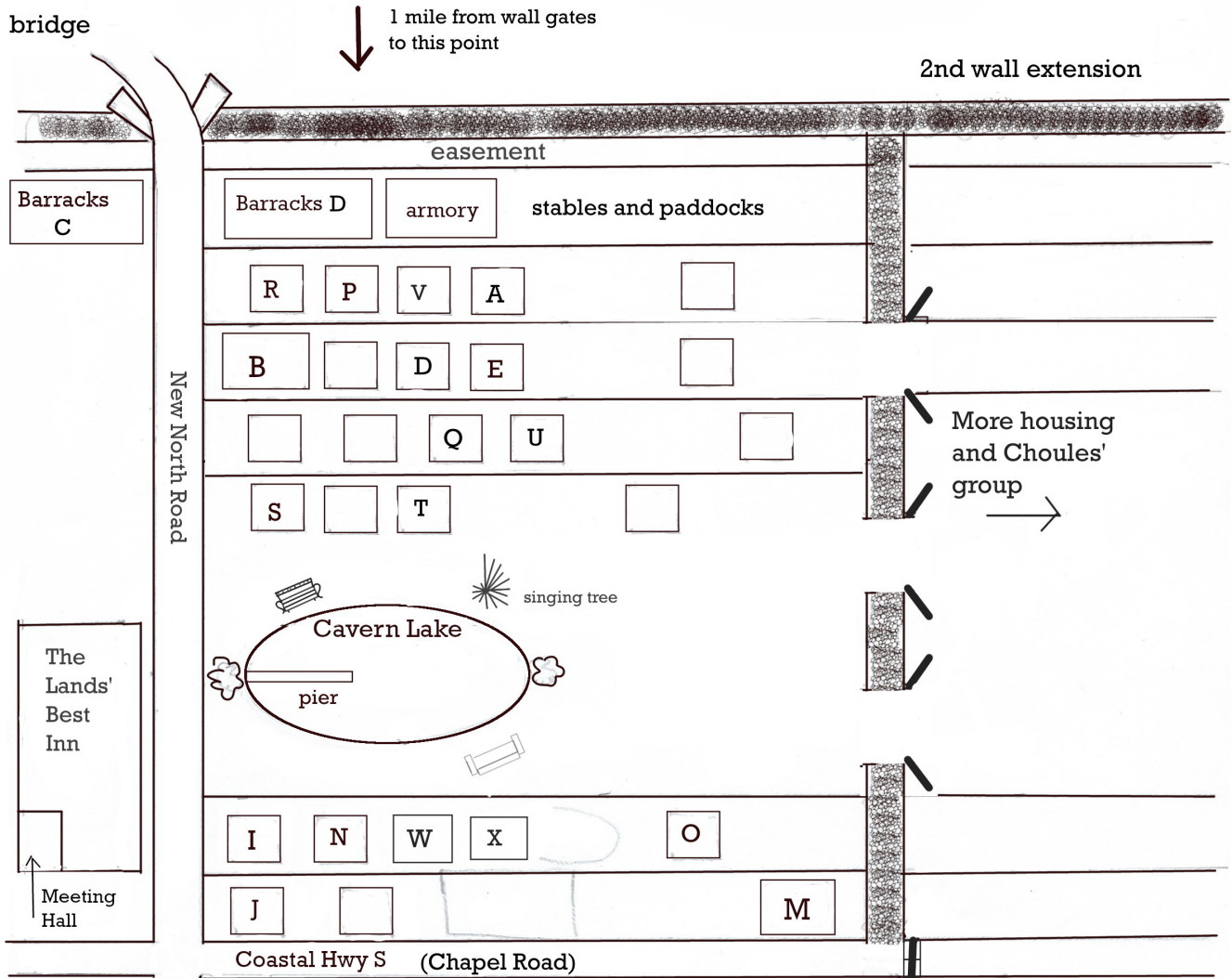
7 ft tall iron fence

FORTRESS

woods

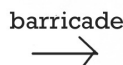
road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands



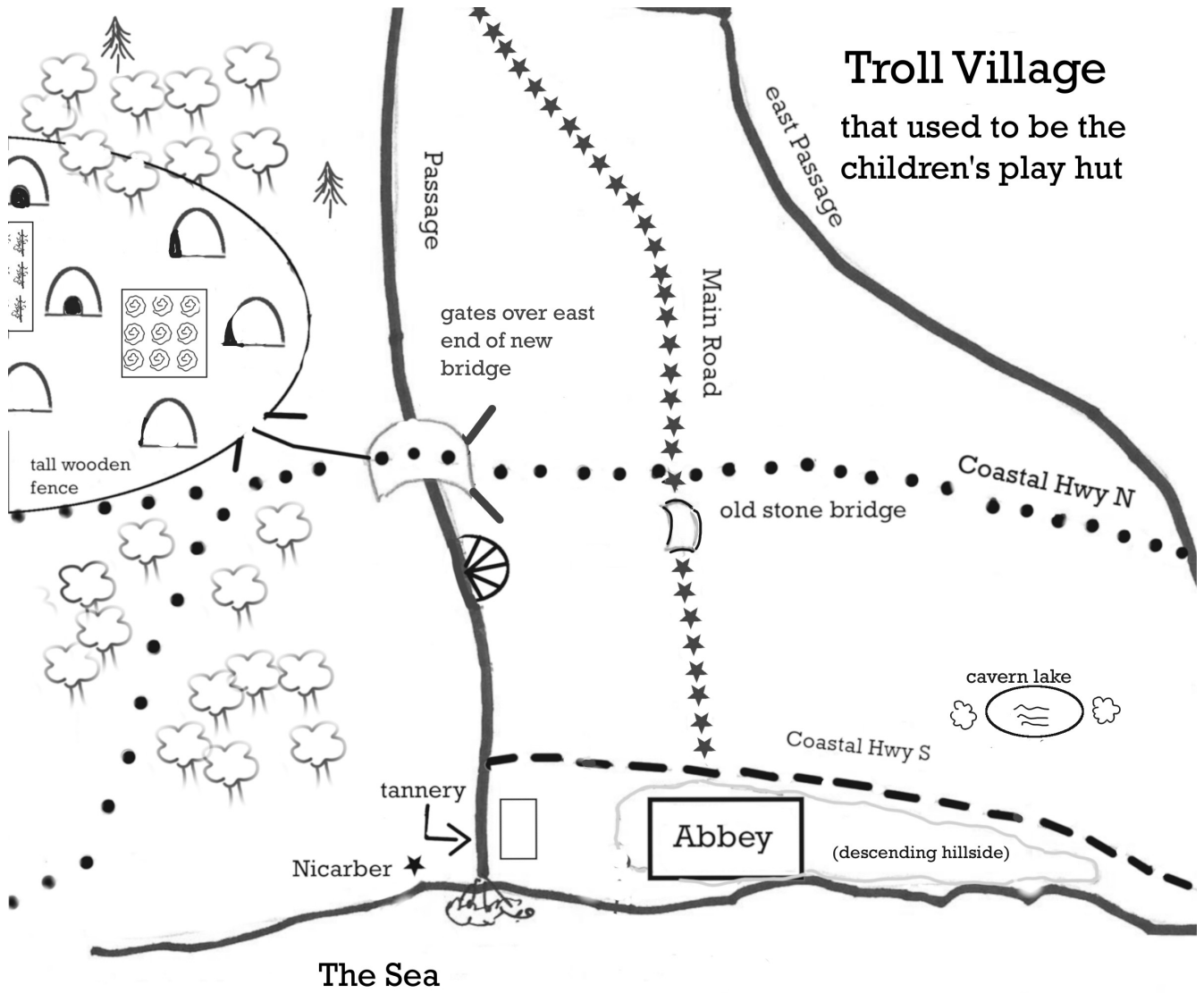
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring & Trina
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

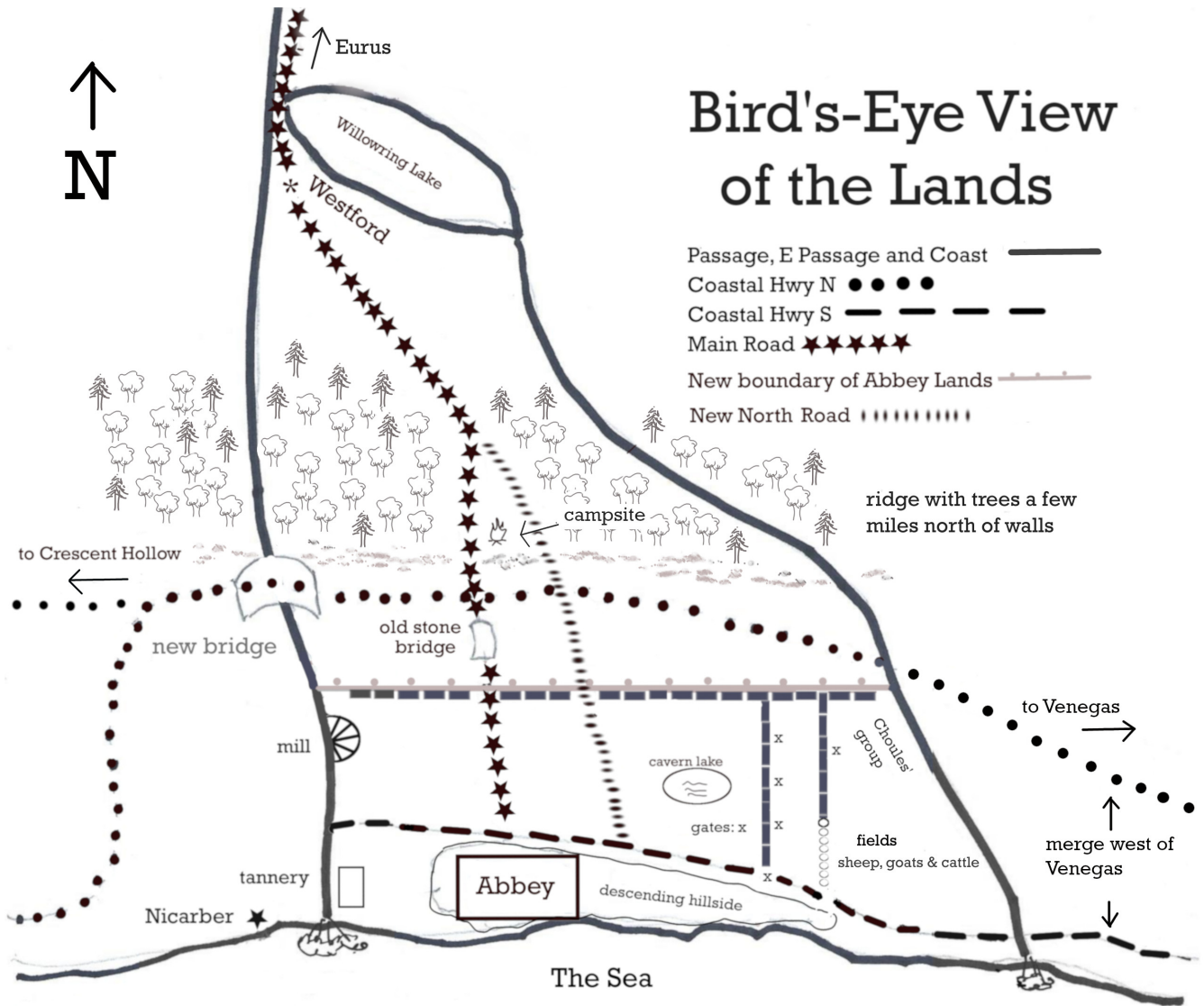
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry (#71 Orchid Row)
- W - Barrueta & Colletta
- X - Tambling's fam & Escarra



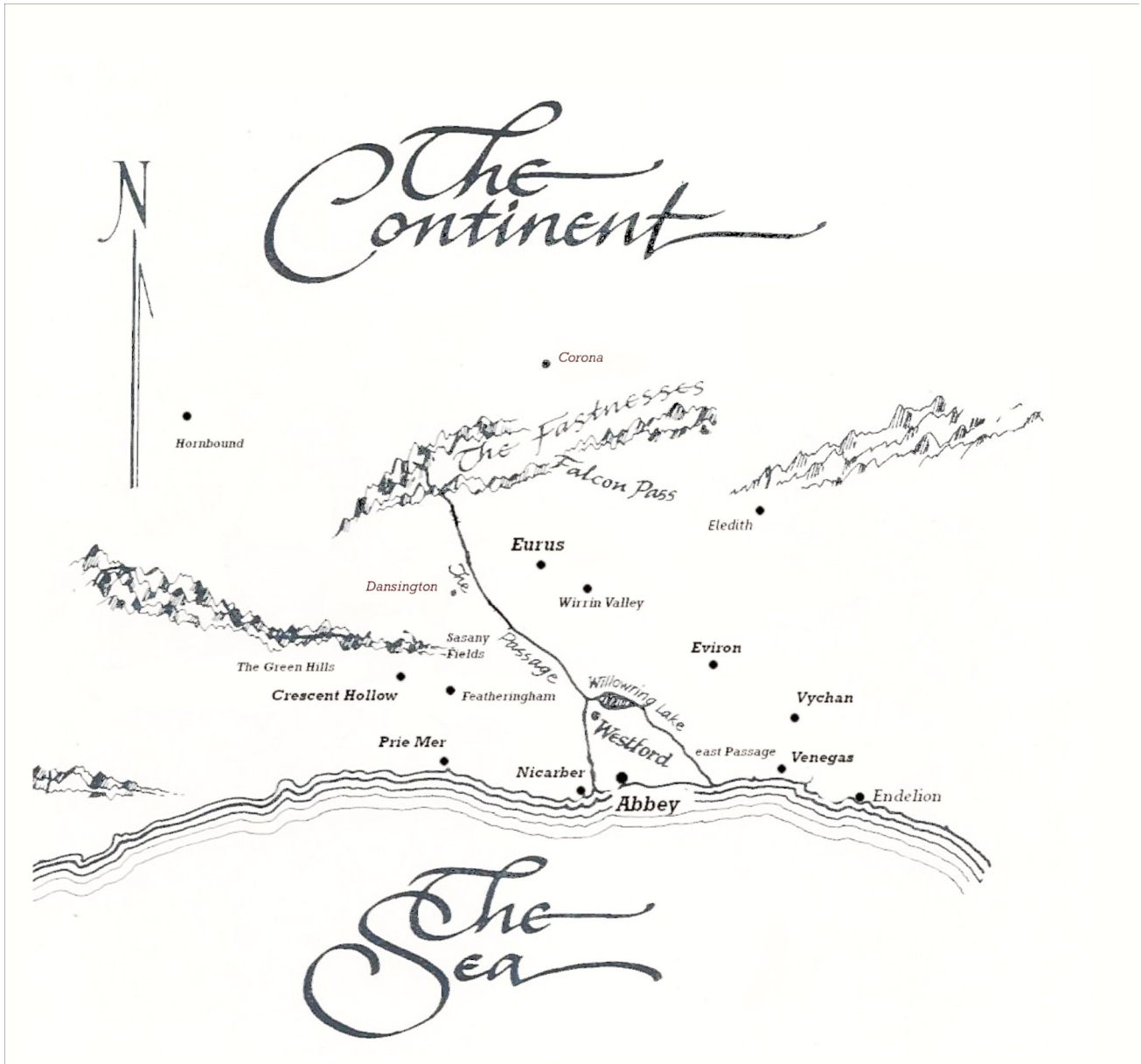
Troll Village

that used to be the children's play hut





NOT TO SCALE





Thurlow's Gabbot (Book 29:
Lord Efran's Reciprocal Gift)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

Yes, that's my [go-to-guy](#)¹ for portraying Efran in these illustrations. I like that he doesn't seem to know how to pose for a photograph. Since I used [this guy](#)² to play the evil Windish in the illustration for Book 25, *Lord Efran and the Minor Regent*, I thought it only right for him to be our hero DeWitt in this one. His suit came from [here](#),³ and I was disappointed that I couldn't use the guy wearing it, as well. The [table](#)⁴ is also from that illustration for Book 25. And since the Fortress supplied Nibor with [writing instruments](#)⁵, DeWitt got them, too. (It looks as though he's adding some notes to Estes' Polonti *Code of Justice*.) The faerie tree growing up from the table came from Pngwing, [here](#). The backdrop for all of this is apparently a room in a [Japanese house](#) (on Pngtree).

What [Thurlow](#)⁶ is regarding in despondence is a genuine [Walking Stick](#)⁷. Although I don't think they're as big as I made this one, the biological details I included in the story are accurate.

Robin Hardy
June 14, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

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2. Photographed by [Styves Exantus](#) on Pexels
3. Photographed by [Ketut Subiyanto](#) on Pexels
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