

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a large, gnarled, leafless tree with a thick trunk and many thin, bare branches. The ground is covered in sand, with some small green plants near the base of the tree. In the background, there are rolling sand dunes under a bright, hazy sky. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of orange, yellow, and brown.

The Stories of

*The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea*

Book 22

*Lord Efran and the
Half-Bad Faerie*

Robin Hardy

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

Book 22

Lord Efran and the Half-Bad Faerie

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Chapter 1

Efran and Minka were sitting on the divan in the new chapel, now Marguerite's home. She was in a comfortable upholstered chair across from them. It was still a few hours before sunrise on June 1st, and the husband and wife were staring at each other. On the small table in front of them was the mottled parchment with thick silver lettering that read:

Everleigh
Regina Pixie
|
Marguerite
|
Larisse
|
Kewe
|
Minka

Minka turned her glazed blue eyes back to Marguerite. "Y-your mother was Faerie Queene over all the Southern Continent," she said as if trying out a new language.

"Yes," Marguerite said.

"What happened to her?" Efran asked.

"She continued to rule for a little while after my father died. But her heart was bound to his, so she followed him to the Gray Lands," Marguerite said.

The two sitting across from her gaped silently until Efran asked, "Was he faerie?"

"No, he was human. Our line has a weakness for human men," she smiled at Minka. "You'd have to go back another dozen generations before you find the last faerie husband. And that was in the line preceding ours."

Efran said, "So, Everleigh started a new line."

"Yes," Marguerite replied. "Faerie generations, or Toledoth, follow the women, which is why you see no husbands or sons listed here."

"Toledoth," Efran repeated. "The—the Kittim, Aleph, ruler of the Toledoth."

"Yes, the Kittim are a related line. They also are permitted to worship the Creator," Marguerite said.

Efran glanced at Minka, who was still glassy-eyed. He asked Marguerite, "Who is ruling in place of your mother, then?"

She replied, "No one now. The faeries have split into regional groups. Alberon had been king over your group,

you know, until you deposed him and made Kele queene.”

There was a moment of silence while Efran wiped his mouth, then he asked, “Since you are daughter of a faerie, how m-much faerie is Minka?” There sprang up his renewed fear of losing her to another realm.

“Faerie is faerie; it does not dilute through generations of marriage with humans,” Marguerite said, smiling, and Efran did not look encouraged. She went on, “What does diminish, however, is distance from the realm, and the power.”

“Will she be drawn back to the realm?” Efran asked cautiously.

“Not without her heart. She is anchored by her love of you,” Marguerite said.

Efran leaned back on the divan and covered his eyes. “Even if I hurt her?” he choked out.

Minka said sternly, “Don’t be silly. You’re stuck with me.” Laughing weakly, he reached over to hold her, but she pulled away a little, intent on talking. She told Marguerite, “This doesn’t change anything, except for knowing that you are my own kin, and you are here where you belong.”

“I like that,” Marguerite said warmly, and Minka inhaled in satisfaction.

Efran still had questions. “But—this faerie power. Does she have it, still?”

“Yes, in some measure, even if she doesn’t use it,” Marguerite said.

“Then, how does it work with the authority she has as Lady Sovereign?” he asked.

“I don’t think we know yet,” Marguerite said.

“Lovely,” he muttered. Then he looked down at the parchment. “But there is something—some power, here, in this writing. I felt it when we were riding back. And—there was a—a--some kind of resistance on our way back. Someone or something didn’t want me to bring that back to you.”

“I’m sure. Yes, there’s power in it, which is why I needed you to retrieve it,” Marguerite said. “Thank you, by the way.”

“Who was trying to block us?” Efran asked.

“I’m not certain; possibly the trolls, for their elders do have power,” Marguerite said.

Efran nodded, as this confirmed his suspicions. “Then, is Minka to use this?” he asked, gesturing to the parchment. He did not touch it.

“We will talk about that later. The only thing you need to know now is that it is valuable,” Marguerite said. She replaced the parchment in the silver box, which she slipped into the burlap covering to hand to him. “But that’s enough for tonight; I’ve kept you over long when you both need your rest. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, we will. Thank you, Marguerite.” Efran stood with the box, and Minka got up to throw her arms around her auntie’s shoulders and kiss her cheek.

“Tomorrow,” Minka whispered. She turned to the door, swaying, and Efran helped walk her out.

They had to waken the horses to ride back. On the way up the switchback, he kept a hand on her pommel, mostly. Midway up, she stopped to demand, “I’m faerie?”

“That’s what Marguerite says,” he observed.

“But I don’t feel like a faerie,” she protested.

That made him laugh. “It’s not how you feel, it’s how you make people around you feel.”

“I don’t understand,” she said almost despairingly, as if it were a knotty homework problem.

“We just have to sleep on it,” he exhaled. Fennig, the courtyard guard, opened the gates to them and Efran patted his shoulder while handing over their horses.

And they flopped into bed, dressed but for their boots.

Efran was up again only a few hours later. First thing, he went up to the workroom to report to DeWitt and Estes on the trip. In relaying the part about the family records Marguerite wanted, Efran had to go over and shut the door to the corridor first.

Waving the burlap-wrapped box, he told them, “Marguerite is, actually the—the daughter of the most recent Faerie Queene of the Southern Continent. She’s no longer with us, but, Marguerite is, who is—faerie. Which means that Minka is, too. Oh. Minka is actually her great-granddaughter.”

After having gotten that out, Efran paused, thinking that he could have phrased all that better. When Estes and DeWitt just nodded complacently, Efran felt the need to reiterate, “Minka is faerie.”

DeWitt said, “We could have guessed that, Efran.”

Estes concurred, “Yes, we’re not terribly surprised. But how does Marguerite like the chapel?”

Efran stared at them a moment, then said, “She—seems to be settling in fine.”

“Good. We’re glad to hear that it all worked out well,” DeWitt said. Then he leaned over to address a question to Estes about their new budget.

Efran halfheartedly threw up his hands. After placing the box on a shelf, he went downstairs to check on Joshua.

Minka woke up shortly afterwards. She stopped in front of the mirror to clean her ears and make sure the little gold hoops were not sticking, then she ran out the front doors to the courtyard gates. As she made as if to open them herself, the gate guard Stourt said, “Whoa, Lady Minka! Where are you going?”

“Just down to Marguerite’s. I don’t need a bodyguard there,” she said.

But he was whistling over two men, Doudney and Heus, who ran up. As she started to protest, Doudney said, “You’ll break our hearts if you don’t let us accompany you, Lady Minka.” Heus was looking on with sad puppy eyes.

“Oh!” she exhaled, exasperated. “If you want to, but you’ll be bored.”

Heus bowed to her. “Thank you, Lady Minka.”

“Stop that,” she said, slipping out of the half-opened gates to begin trotting down the switchback.

Knowing how that would end up, Doudney ran in front of her to slow her down while Heus came alongside to offer his arm. “May I escort you, Lady Minka?”

“No,” she said irately, then promptly fell over her own feet into Doudney.

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” Doudney said, taking her hand to place it on his arm. Heus was not forward enough to do that, so just walked alongside her. Burning in embarrassment, she allowed them to walk her down.

But on the next switchback level, she paused to look over the edge of the road. “Efran just jumps down when he’s in a hurry.”

“That’s because no one care if he scrapes himself. What d’you suppose he’d do to us if you got all banged up jumping down?” Doudney said placidly.

“I know,” she exhaled. “I’m just so excited that Auntie is actually here.”

“And we’ll get you down there straightway,” Doudney promised. So she settled down to walk with them and tell them all about the piped-in water and cold storage compartment in the kitchen floor, besides the basement.

When they got to the chapel door, Minka knocked loudly, then opened it. “Auntie? Oh!”

“Excuse us, Lady Minka.” Serrano and two other men came out, bowing to her, and he added, “We just dropped off the pouches of royals that the Captain and his crew recovered from Featherstone.”

“Oh, very good, thank you. Poor Justinian needs some new suits,” she said on her way in. “Oh, Auntie! Don’t you need to rest?” Minka cried, running to her as she emerged from the kitchen with a plate of hors d’oeuvres.

“No, thank you, dear Minka, I feel fine.” She took the plate to the two men who were standing at the door. “Help yourselves. Would you like something to drink?”

“Thank you very kindly, Lady Marguerite, but not on duty,” Doudney said. He did, however, take an hors d’oeuvre, so Heus did, too.

Marguerite brought the plate back to the small table in front of the divan on which Minka was sitting. There was a tray with mild ales and glasses, but Minka reached only for the hors d’oeuvres, of which she took a handful.

Before eating, she glanced self-consciously toward the men at the door. As they appeared to be safely out of earshot, she whispered, “Auntie, I—I can’t possibly be faerie. I’m so awkward and silly, and, not beautiful in the slightest. I don’t have any of your poise--I blurt out whatever I’m thinking--”

Marguerite laughed lightly, patting her hands. “Poise and beauty are only secondary faerie attributes, Minka, and they come with cultivation. But surely you’ve seen how men react to you. Efran is deeply in your power.”

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Chapter 2

Minka recoiled at the word *power*. “But, Auntie--” She glanced at the men again, then whispered, “I have a *human body*, and not even a decent one at that.”

Again her auntie laughed. “Oh, Minka, surely you’ve seen how many different kinds of faerie there are, in all different sizes and shapes. You and I are of the altior class of faerie, that is, the higher class, most resembling humans. Over the centuries, altiors have integrated greatly with humans, gravitating to positions of power. And many have lived their whole lives without revealing their true nature.”

“What is our true nature?” Minka asked. “How are we different from humans?”

“Humans were created from the earth; faeries from the air. Thus our nature is of the air—lighter, quicker, and more ephemeral, but for our life spans. Being of the air, we avoid many brutalities of the earth,” Marguerite said.

“That is the other thing,” Minka whispered. “How long will I live? Will I outlive Efran? I don’t want to; I don’t want to do something evil like kill myself, but how can I endure living hundreds of years if Efran only lives to be sixty, or seventy?” Her eyes watered as she aired this fear.

Marguerite sighed, patting her arm. “You may outlive him for a few years, but this is another aspect that your faerie nature takes care of all by itself. Would you say your heart is entwined with Efran’s?”

“Oh, yes!” Minka whispered intently.

“Well, when his heart stops, yours will limp on for a while, but not for long. Where part of your own heart has gone, the rest must follow,” Marguerite said.

“Can faeries go to heaven?” Minka asked in tight fear. “Efran belongs to God. What will happen to me?”

“Oh, how you constrain your Creator! Faeries are created beings, as humans are, and altiors have souls. So He who died saved you as well,” Marguerite replied.

“But your husband is dead, Marguerite, and has been for years, yet you are here, and I need you here,” Minka said, anguished—which caused her to forget something she already knew.

Marguerite glanced down, momentarily saddened. “I loved Takoda, but, he was not my husband; he belonged to another. So there is not the bond between us that you and Efran enjoy. But this also has worked for good, in that I can be here for you. And I want to be, very much so.”

Minka fell on her to cry, holding her tightly. The men standing guard at the door pretended they weren’t watching while they blinked rapidly to keep their eyes clear. In a moment Minka sat up again, wiping her face with her sleeve. Marguerite handed her a napkin, which Minka fiercely put to use, even blowing her nose in it. She said, “I think your appearance as an old lady is assumed. I don’t think you look like that at all.”

Marguerite smiled at her sidewise. “Well, let me just say that I find it more convenient to present myself thus.”

Minka covered her mouth, laughing, then stilled to ask, "Is Hartshough faerie?"

"Yes," Marguerite said.

"And that's not his real appearance either, is it?"

"No, it's not."

Minka bent forward in laughter again, then abruptly straightened. "I want to see. I want to see what you really look like. And Hartshough."

Marguerite flicked her bright blue eyes toward the guards at the door. "Another time."

"Oh, that's just so fun!" Minka exhaled. Then she pouted, "I can't change my appearance like that."

"Welll," Marguerite began.

"Can I?" Minka asked, wide-eyed.

Marguerite looked wary. "Do you really want to? What would Efran do?"

"Oh, you're right. No, I'd better leave well enough alone," Minka breathed. She thought about all this for a little while, then said, "Well, I'm glad you like the chapel. It's nothing like Featherstone, though." And she looked a little depressed.

Marguerite's eyes widened slightly, assuming her own devious face. Minka looked at her sharply. "What? What does that mean?"

"Well, Featherstone was nice, for a faerie build, but it did require a lot of maintenance that I was tired of doing. So it is *very* nice to come live in a human-built space that I don't have to expend any effort at all to maintain," Marguerite said contentedly.

Minka stared at her, mouth wide open. "That's *amazing*. Did you really build all that?"

"Not by myself," Marguerite disclaimed. "And, like I said, it didn't have human-built durability. So I was actually appreciative of the excuse the trolls gave us for coming down here."

Minka exhaled a huge sigh. "I can't believe I have you here." After a moment, she added dully, "I thought I was pregnant. But I'm not." Then she looked up, evaluating. "Can I make myself get pregnant?"

Marguerite shook her head. "Even if you could, you must consider your other heart. What would it do to Efran?"

Minka lowered her eyes. "I might still die?"

Marguerite shrugged. "Faeries are not immortal. We can be damaged to the point of death. But what's more important is placing your desires below Efran."

"Oh, you are so wise." Minka leaned on her to hug her again.

At that moment, a young woman with glistening blonde hair stormed into the hall from the area of the kitchen. “This is pathetic. I won’t spend a moment here. How could you leave your mansion for this, you stupid old woman? Don’t come after me again.”

Minka slowly raised up, bristling, but the woman turned on her heel to berate Hartshough in the kitchen before her voice was cut off by a slamming door.

Minka’s auntie appeared mildly resigned. There was a loud knocking on the door, and the men who had watched the vicious blonde castigate Marguerite now looked to her inquiringly. “Shall we open it, Lady Marguerite?” Doudney asked.

“No, let’s wait for Hartshough. He needs to feel useful,” she waved.

Minka smiled tentatively and the men stood aside. But whoever was at the door started to open it, so Doudney reached over to shut it again. Minka winced. “Is that Efran?”

“No, Lady Minka,” Doudney said, being on the opposite side of the hinges. It was a double door, but one side was locked in place.

Shortly, Hartshough entered the hall from the kitchen, stiffly correct, to march to the door and open it. “Yes?”

The voice at the door said, “Ah, yes, my name is Bozzelli; I’m the architect of this building, and I would appreciate chatting with Lady Marguerite.”

“One moment, please.” Hartshough closed the door in his face and turned to announce, “Bozzelli the architect desires an audience, Lady Marguerite.”

With a devious glance at Minka, Marguerite said, “Let him in.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite.” Hartshough bowed and turned back to the door to open it, saying, “The Lady invites you in, Bozzelli.”

“Thank you,” Bozzelli said tightly, having had the door shut in his face twice now. He began advancing to the divan, where Marguerite looked over. Then he paused upon seeing Minka, but resumed walking to the furniture grouping in order to stand awkwardly in the middle.

“Have a seat, Bozzelli,” Marguerite said, extending her hand to the upholstered chair (one of a pair) across from the small table.

“Thank you, Lady,” he said with a short bow. As he sat, he thought, *Why can’t the dam’ Fortress give me a title? I’m the one who made this building possible.*

Eyes widened, Minka quickly looked at Marguerite, who returned a secret smile. Just for fun, Marguerite had enabled her to hear his thoughts. Marguerite said, “I understand that you’re the architect of this lovely building, Bozzelli.”

“As a matter of fact, I am. And I am delighted to see it house such a celebrated EurAsian as yourself, Lady Marguerite. How long shall you be here in the Lands?” *It better not be for long,* he added in thought.

“I don’t know yet,” Marguerite said tentatively. “I’m having so much fun visiting with my great-granddaughter.”

She reached over to pat Minka, who smiled full-heartedly at her.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me. Out loud, Bozzelli said, "Well, I'm delighted to hear that. Knowing how much Minka appreciates the fine arts—which are of course paramount to you, being from Eurus—I've invited the incomparable mezzo-soprano Arbaiza down to give an exclusive performance--only for the upper crust, of course--and this chapel has the perfect acoustics to accommodate such a rare talent--"

There was a knock at the door. Doudney opened it a crack, then swung it wide open with a salute. Heus saluted as well, and only then did Doudney think to turn and say, "Captain Efran, Lady Marguerite, Lady Minka."

Minka swung around on the divan and Marguerite waved. "Of course! Come in, dear Efran. Oh! Look who you've brought! Oh, my! Efran, is this really your darling baby? Come *here*," she ordered.

After a tentative glance at Minka and Bozzelli, Efran walked over with 17-month-old Joshua on his arm. Bozzelli was fuming, *This is ridiculous. Get out, you stupid Polonti, and take your brat with you.* Minka recoiled at the ugliness, and heard Efran thinking, *She's mad at me for interrupting her time with her auntie.*

"No," Minka gasped, pressing the heels of her palms to her forehead. After putting Joshua in Marguerite's lap, Efran sat on the divan with Minka, looking at her dismally. *No, Marguerite, I don't want to hear either of them thinking,* she pleaded.

Just close the door, dear, Marguerite replied. While Joshua evaluated her, she cooed, "Oh, aren't you a handsome boy! I believe I've fallen in love. Oh, what shall I do? Can I give him a snack, Efran?"

He glanced over distractedly. "Anything soft, yes," he said. Minka was closing a door firmly on his mind and Bozzelli's.

Marguerite threw a hand out. "HARTSHOUGH!"

Joshua jumped, looking back at his father, who was smiling. Marguerite said, "Oh! Did I startle you? How silly of me!" Joshua studied her, then opened his mouth in a wide baby grin. "Oh! You adorable thing!"

Hartshough appeared. "Yes, Lady?"

"Oh! Hartshough, we need soft food for Joshua. You know. Efran, help yourself." She gestured to the ales and the plate of hors d'oeuvres.

But he couldn't do anything at the moment, for Minka had fallen on him to squeeze him tightly. "Oh, I'm so glad you came! Marguerite has been explaining so much to me, Efran, and nothing will change. Only, I'll try to be more careful about blurting out whatever I'm thinking. That's not helpful at all. But, Efran, I'll always be yours, as long as you want me."

"Thank you," he murmured, genuinely relieved. He kissed the top of her head as Hartshough was retreating to the kitchen for toddler snacks. Minka cuddled Efran while Bozzelli looked off in barely contained exasperation.

Marguerite was intently watching Joshua clap out the war drums for her. As he sat against the padded chair arm, she released him to clap along with him. Bozzelli, swaying, took a long swig of ale. Efran opened his mouth to say something to Minka, then glanced at the architect. Efran had a lot of questions, but none he wanted to air in front of him.

With Minka practically purring in his side, Efran said, “Well, I hope you’re pleased with our use of the chapel, Bozzelli.”

“Yes?” Bozzelli said in surprise. His first thought was that Efran had somehow learned of Arbaiza’s scheduled performance.

“Yes.” Efran looked at the ales and hors d’oeuvres, sitting out of reach. Minka suddenly sat up to hand him a mild ale and then put the plate of hors d’oeuvres on his lap. Then she took the ale out of his hand to open it and give it back to him.

Bozzelli was saying, “Well, I must admit my pleasure and surprise--”

“Oh, as we all were both pleased and surprised,” Efran said, pausing to take a swig. Hartshough had brought over a small bowl of baby hors d’oeuvres. For these, the broccoli and ham had been chopped fine before being mixed into the cream cheese and folded in a bit of bread. Joshua picked up one to chew it tentatively with his ten teeth, then swallowed and picked up another. Marguerite beamed on him.

“But—how could you have known?” Bozzelli asked, sitting forward to place his empty bottle on the low table.

“Oh, we didn’t, until she showed up,” Efran said, popping an hors d’oeuvre into his mouth.

Bozzelli caught his breath. “She’s here, then?”

“To stay,” Efran said around his mouthful, looking with satisfaction at the lady.

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Chapter 3

“She’s here to reside? Here?” Bozzelli asked in dazed wonder.

“Yes.” Efran smiled warmly at him, now.

“This is—well, you certainly have room, don’t you? There are four bedrooms upstairs,” Bozzelli said to Marguerite. She flicked knowing eyes to him.

At that time, Justinian came heavily down the stairs. “Ho, there’s enough joviality down here to wake the dead. Hullo, Efran. You look content,” he said, barely glancing at Minka.

She grinned at him while Efran said, “Good morning, Justinian. Is it still morning? We’re very glad to see you, as well.”

Leaning over Bozzelli to scoop up an ale and a handful of hors d’oeuvres, Justinian said, “Then I know it’s not for my sartorial style alone.” The remnants of his suit hung on his lanky form in ragged despair. “I’ve got to get down to The Lands Clothing Shop before I’m required to appear in public,” he muttered around a mouthful.

“Then you know as well?” Bozzelli cried.

“I know everything,” Justinian said in perfect ignorance.

Bozzelli bolted up. “Then I must—excuse me, please—I have so much to do!” And he flew out, Doudney and Heus having opened both doors for him.

“Whatever,” Justinian said. “Dear brother of mine, as you know, we arrived here with barely our skins intact, and none of the lady’s wealth, and yet I must--”

“Oh, Justinian, Efran and his men picked up some of it, and brought it—HARTSHOUGH!” Marguerite summoned. Joshua screeched in laughter, clapping. Wincing slightly, Justinian took a long swig of ale.

“Yes, my lady?” Hartshough appeared, bowing.

“Oh, Hartshough, Justinian needs clothes money. You know,” Marguerite said.

“Yes, my lady.” Hartshough bowed and withdrew, then appeared again with two pouches of royals, one on each shoulder. Efran squinted, knowing the weight of those pouches. But Hartshough said, “Shall I take these up to your room, Lord Justinian?”

“That would be excellent. Hold on.” Justinian darted over to flip one pouch open and remove a handful of royals. “Thank you, Hartshough,” he said, stuffing the royals into a pocket.

“You’re welcome, Lord Justinian.” Then the late-middle-aged servant began walking the pouches easily up the elegant curved stairway. Efran watched thoughtfully.

“I’ll be back for dinner,” Justinian said, bending over Joshua to kiss Marguerite’s cheek. As Justinian turned toward Minka, Efran raised blank eyes to him. So he merely cleared his throat, patted Efran’s shoulder, and hurried to the doors. Doudney and Heus held them open for him, as well, so he paused to put a royal in the hand of each.

After he had lit out, the two men held their royals uncertainly, looking to the Captain. Efran laughed, “You may keep it.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Doudney said. Heus eyed his partner, who explained, “Hazard pay,” as he pocketed it. Heus nodded, stashing his as well. Then he checked to make sure there were no holes in his pocket.

With his arm around Minka’s shoulders, Efran leaned back on the divan, murmuring, “Bozzelli took that a lot better than I expected. But—I feel like I’m missing something--” He watched Hartshough serenely descend the stairs again to return to the kitchen.

Minka snorted, “He thought you were talking about Arbaiza, the mezzo-soprano.”

“What? Who?” Efran asked.

“Before we took the chapel out from under him, he’d already arranged to have this opera singer come perform here,” Minka said. “And now he thinks she’s going to be living here.”

“Oh. Oops,” Efran laughed. Then he considered, “Arbaiza? A singer?” And his face slowly cleared. “With long, curly red hair?” he whispered in consternation.

“I don’t know,” Minka said, watching him. She was fighting with herself as to whether to open the door to his mind again, but resisted the temptation. “Why?”

He looked at her, then looked at Marguerite, who had her head down talking to Joshua. Wiping the sweat from his lip, he said, “I might have—known her when, when she came with a troupe to Westford, ah, about, six years ago.”

Minka, lips pressed tightly together, watched him. Pale, he tossed his head for the sweat dripping down his temple from the spiky black hair. “Minka, I. . .” She started shaking slightly, and he closed his eyes in dismay.

“Oh, you poor thing!” she cried, bursting into laughter. Marguerite kept her mouth closed to avoid joining in. He studied his wife, and she said, “Didn’t we cover this already?”

He winced. “The women? Some of them.”

“Efran, you’re all caught up. I’m not going to demand any further accounting from those years,” Minka said, and he started breathing again. “Now, when she shows up *here--*”

“Oh, that’ll be no problem. I’ll just hide,” he vowed.

Minka suddenly blinked, asking Marguerite, “Was that *her--*?” Marguerite was shaking her head *no*. Then Minka realized that Efran had described Arbaiza as having curly red hair, not light blonde. So Minka asked, “But, should she sing here?” she asked Marguerite.

Efran also looked at Marguerite. “If you don’t want her to, I’ll make sure she doesn’t. You needn’t do a thing.”

Thoughtfully, Marguerite said, “Actually, I would love to hear her, if it wouldn’t distress you unduly, Efran.”

“We will do whatever you want,” Efran said.

So she turned her face to summon, “HARTSHOUGH!”

“HAWSO!” Joshua cried joyfully, and everyone around him collapsed in laughter.

The summoned appeared and bowed. “Yes, Lady Marguerite? Lord Joshua?”

“Oh, no,” Efran laughed, a hand over his eyes.

“Yes, Hartshough, the last bedroom upstairs, for Arbaiza, the mezzo-soprano,” Marguerite said.

“I shall have it furnished at once, Lady,” he said.

“Thank you, Hartshough,” she noted, “but, we need to know when to expect her.”

Hartshough asked, “May we borrow your men, Lord Efran?”

“Certainly,” Efran said. “As many as you need.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran.” To Doudney and Heus, he said, “Gentlemen, if you will procure eight or ten men, we

will not require a wagon. However, I request that one of you find Bozzelli to inquire when the singer is to arrive and when she is to perform. We shall be ready for her.”

“Right, Hartshough. Captain,” Doudney said, saluting, as did Heus. Then they both disappeared through the double doors.

Efran stood. “All right, I need to go apprise Estes and DeWitt of a few developments. Let’s go, Joshua.”

He bent for his son, but Joshua turned away with a peremptory, “Unh.”

Efran’s mouth hung open and Minka caught her breath. “Oh my goodness, he wants to stay with dear Auntie!”

“Be still, my heart,” Marguerite said, clutching her chest. “But you’ll get bored when Papa leaves.”

Casually turning to the door, Efran said, “I’m going to get Kraken.”

“Anh!” Joshua ordered, reaching to Papa. So Efran went back for him. Hefting his son, he shot a glance of gratitude to his faerie wife, and she grinned.

Left by themselves, Marguerite and Minka smiled at each other. Then Marguerite rose from her chair. “Come on out, dear, and let me show you what we’ll have growing on the back grounds. The lovely owner of Dix’s Plant Shop should be coming out today with rose bushes and perennials.”

Minka jumped up with a gasp. “Oh, Auntie! Can I help you plant them?”

“I’m afraid not, dear,” Marguerite said, leading her out to the back through the kitchen. “Dix insists that her own contractors do the planting to make sure it’s done right, because she offers a money-back guaranty on anything that dies.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right, then,” Minka said.

As they emerged onto the back grounds, Minka said, “I didn’t realize that your fence was already up. That’s beautiful.” It was a scrolled black iron, much like the fortress fence, only with daintier, more decorative finials. “Oh, and the fountain is wonderful!” she added.

The craggy stone fountain stood in the center of the grounds, rising from a hammered copper basin. The water poured over the edges of seven or eight indentions in the stone to collect in the basin and somehow rise to the top stone again to pour itself out once more. “I’ll never understand how the water’s pumped to the top,” Minka murmured.

“Well, we have specialized help, there,” Marguerite said. “Say hello to Minka, water friends.” The pouring water parted as six pixies peeked out from the flow. Marguerite said, “Dear Minka, please meet Raindrop, Splash, Misty, Foggy, Dewdrop, and Drizzle.”

“Hello! I’m so glad to meet you! You make for such a beautiful fountain!” Minka cried. They gurgled sweetly at her, then disappeared.

“Oh! So much fun. And you have pebbled paths running all in between your beds.” Minka looked under her feet in admiration.

“Yes. Over here we’ll have the rose bushes, then the lavender here, and the cabbage tree over here, with the rosemary in front there, and cypress all along the fence--” Marguerite broke off to look around in mild concern. “Oh dear. I seemed to have caused some hard feelings.”

“What? You?” Minka asked.

Then she heard: “Dear Minka, may we have a word with you?”

“Kele? Yes, of course,” Minka said. She looked over as Kele appeared with a hundred or more faeries behind her. “Kele, what is the problem?”

“Dear Minka, that’s what we’d like to ask you,” Kele said with glistening tears in her eyes. “If I have been unsatisfactory as Abbey Lands Faerie Queene, it would have been good of you to alert me to my deficiencies before you bring in a replacement—an altior, in fact.” She looked hurt and humiliated.

Minka stood frozen in incomprehension, then said, “Marguerite? As your *replacement*? Oh, no, Kele, you misunderstand! Dear Auntie is here for me, personally—she is my only relative, my great-grandmother. Oh, no, Kele! Efran appointed you Queene, and I’d never think to overturn that. You’ve been wonderful, as all the Abbey Lands faerie have been. But Marguerite is my kin.”

“Oh. Well.” Kele looked mollified, then had a quick conference with a few of the faeries behind her. She turned back to Minka to say rather pettishly, “If that’s the case, Minka, may we ask Lady Marguerite to put a faerie tree on her grounds?”

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Chapter 4

Minka turned to Marguerite, who said, “I would be honored to have an Abbey Lands faerie tree here. In fact, I think it would be delightful to have one in this back right-hand corner. However, I understand that Efran says you must confine all parts of the tree to my property if the neighbor objects to any of it on his.”

“Oh, yes,” Kele gushed, “I’ve already talked to Minogue [owner of the neighboring plot] and he said he’d love the shade.”

“I certainly would as well. Please make yourselves at home,” Marguerite said graciously.

“You are too kind, dear Lady Marguerite,” Kele purred. Immediately, a faerie tree began growing in the northeastern corner of the plot (a double one). And faeries began arguing over prime spots in it.

At this time, Dix’s planting crew arrived, so Minka and Marguerite withdrew into the chapel, where Hartshough’s slave labor had arrived with furnishings and feminine décor for the fourth bedroom. Marguerite sent Minka down to the basement for bottles of purified mineral water that Averne was now offering, and they two sat in the kitchen to drink waters and keep an eye on both Dix’s landscapers in the back and Hartshough’s laborers going up and down the stairs.

During a quiet moment, Minka asked her, “Auntie, who was that awful woman who burst in yelling at you?”

“Larisse,” Marguerite sighed.

It took a minute for Minka to remember where she had seen that name. “Larisse. Your daughter?” she gasped.

“Yes. She’s just passing through,” Marguerite said firmly.

Minka asked, “What about Verlice and his sons, Marguerite? Are they faerie?”

“No,” Marguerite said. “In unions with humans, faerie passes down only through the women. Otherwise, the race would be in danger of extermination, for faerie men are . . . unaccountable.”

Minka’s jaw dropped, and she said, “Alberon.”

“He is a good example,” Marguerite said wryly.

At that time, a man’s voice called, “Lady Minka?”

She immediately got up from the table to go out to the great open hall, Marguerite following. There they found a soldier who said, “How do you do, Lady Marguerite? I am Seagrave. Lady Minka, the Captain asks that you please come up to the fortress for dinner.”

“Dinner!” Minka exclaimed, looking toward a window. “Already? I can’t believe—oh, Marguerite, you mustn’t let me take up your whole day like that!”

“If I didn’t want you to stay, you wouldn’t, darling,” Marguerite said, kissing her cheek. “Run up to your Efran, and I will see you tomorrow.”

Minka sighed, closing her eyes. “I can’t believe it’s that easy. Yes, tomorrow, dear Auntie.” With a last hug, she let go of her Marguerite and accompanied Seagrave up the switchback, chatting to him about everything that had happened today (or, almost everything).

After stopping in her quarters for just a moment (because she had been too shy to ask to use Marguerite’s garderobe) Minka ran into the dining hall to find Efran and Joshua (and Ella and Quennel) waiting at their back table.

“See?” Efran said as she held on to his shoulder to climb over the bench. “I came in and sat and everything—even got you a plate—without worrying that you’d come.”

“Well, I’m glad you sent Seagrave after me, because I had just lost all sense of time,” she said. “Oh, I like the rice. I don’t know what they season it with, but it’s very good.”

“Seagrave?” he said, cutting into his ham.

“Yes, he came and told me you asked that I come for dinner,” she said. “Oh, is Joshua eating the rice?”

“A little,” he said, glancing up at Seagrave, who had been at that particular table for the last half hour.

She leaned forward to look past Efran. “Hello, Ella. How are your ears?”

“Doing well,” Ella said, pulling back her hair to show one small gold hoop. “I want to come down and see your Auntie Marguerite in the chapel.”

“Yes, let’s do that tomorrow. I can’t believe I stayed there practically the whole day,” Minka said, disturbed. “We’ll send a carriage for her to come up and see the fortress,” she told Efran.

He nodded, his mouth full. She glanced at the head tables and asked quietly, “Did you tell Estes and DeWitt . . . everything?”

Efran swallowed. “Yes. I can’t keep anything secret from them.”

“I know. Let’s just not—tell anyone else,” she whispered, glancing at Ella beside him.

“I understand,” he said.

They ate quietly, then she asked, “What did they say about my being—you know?”

He looked at her, shaking his head. “They already knew.”

“What?” she demanded.

“They just acted like they were glad we finally found out,” Efran said. She peered at him, and he said, “I’ll bet anything that Commander Wendt knows. In fact, when Marguerite showed us the lineage chart, my first reaction was, ‘of course.’ Somehow, I knew it all along, as well. I just didn’t know what I knew.”

“Excuse me, Captain.”

Efran and Minka both turned to see Shane saluting behind them. “Commander Wendt just received messengers from the Lady Arbaiza. She will be arriving tomorrow afternoon from Crescent Hollow.”

“Tomorrow,” Efran exhaled.

“Yes, sir,” Shane confirmed.

Efran said, “Thank you. Please make sure that Marguerite knows. Dismissed.” Shane trotted off; Efran and Minka tentatively studied each other. “Are you all right with that?” he whispered.

“Are *you* all right?” she asked. Looking a little green, he shoved his plate of ham aside.

The following day, June 2nd, Efran made sure that he was very busy anywhere but Marguerite’s. Minka went down to the chapel in the morning to see if she could help or if she should stay out of the way. (She asked Ella if she wanted to come, but Ella decided she’d rather wait until after the mezzo-soprano left.) When Hartshough gave Minka entrance with her bodyguard, he led her out to the back patio, where grapevines were already growing up the corner posts of the arbor. Marguerite was sitting at a tea table.

“Oh, this is new! It’s beautiful,” Minka said, gazing up at the wooden crossbeams that filtered the sunlight. Her men Leneghan and Gaul stood on either side of the back door.

“It is nice,” Marguerite admitted. “What would you like to drink, dear? Tea, ale, water?”

“Oh, the chilled mineral water is wonderful. Bring a couple for my men, please,” Minka said, sitting in the dainty chair across from her. Hartshough bowed and departed. Minka continued, “But, Auntie, you can’t let me intrude on your whole day again. Just tell me when to leave.”

“Now, dear, I can’t imagine how I’d make it through the excitement without you,” Marguerite said. Minka exhaled in gratification, a hand to her chest. Marguerite continued, “Dix’s landscapers did a wonderful job, don’t you think? I was simply unsure about the cabbage tree—especially with the faerie tree in the back corner, but her crew made a lovely center display with the cabbage tree, the fountain, and the palmetto, daylilies, and sage. And the faeries are helping maintain it all.”

“I’m so glad. It is beautiful, Auntie,” Minka said, looking over the landscaping.

Hartshough brought their mineral waters, then they were startled by the sudden appearance of Bozzelli in high excitement. “Lady Marguerite! Is this not wonderful? The diva Arbaiza will be arriving this afternoon to rest, and then her concert will begin around dusk tomorrow. Now, here is a list of the elite who will be attending. We don’t want them crowded, as the hall will only comfortably seat one hundred. Now, I will be organizing--”

“Hold on,” Minka said, scanning the list of attendees. “You’ve left out a few. At the top of your list must go Marguerite, Hartshough, Justinian, myself, Estes and Kelsey, DeWitt and Tera, Ryal and Giardi, Commander Wendt and Gabriel, Ella and Quennel, and anyone else I’ve forgotten. These will be on the front row.” She deliberately excluded the afflicted one, Efran.

She looked pointedly at him, and Bozzelli gazed at her, slack-faced. “I . . . don’t know if there’ll be room--”

“Then you must cut some,” Minka said. “And you will not be organizing anything; that’s Hartshough’s job.” Turning, she handed the list to Marguerite’s man. “Dear Hartshough, will you please revise this list to include those I mentioned? And--”

Looking to the bodyguard at the doors, she said, “Gaul, please get us a pair of men for the front doors. No one’s to come in without Hartshough’s say. And please relay to Commander Wendt the fact of the diva’s arrival this afternoon; I want him to provide her an escort here.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, turning to trot off. Hartshough had disappeared with the list to make a new one.

Bozzelli said unsteadily, “I don’t believe it’s your office to dictate all this, Minka.”

“Oh, but it’s Marguerite’s house. Am I out of line, Auntie?” she asked, looking to her.

Marguerite glanced up to purr, “I don’t know what I would do without you, dear Minka.”

Minka looked back to Bozzelli. “We’ll let you know what’s needed of you. Goodbye.” Reeling, Bozzelli turned to find Gaul right beside him to escort him out.

In the momentary silence, Minka looked back at her auntie. “If I overstep, you must correct me, Marguerite.”

“You’re doing splendidly,” Marguerite replied with a half-smile.

Minka looked off, continuing to think. Then she asked, “Do you feel like walking a little ways? There’s someone I need to introduce you to.”

“I’d enjoy the exercise, and meeting your friend,” Marguerite said, rising.

“He is a very good friend,” Minka said, taking her arm.

As they passed Leneghan, Minka patted his arm. “Please stay and tell Hartshough I’ve taken her down to Barracks A.”

He was shaking his head. “I must stay with you, Lady Minka.”

“Ah. Of course. Then we’ll send word back to him,” Minka said.

“I can help you there, Lady,” Leneghan said, opening the front doors for them.

Arm in arm, Minka walked with her dear auntie down Main. Following them, Leneghan gestured to the first Abbey man he saw to take a message back to Hartshough.

As they walked, they passed Trina in another new, colorful outfit, and Lowry driving his cart of fresh meats to the fortress. Delano almost passed them on an errand, but stopped to greet Minka and meet her auntie. Soldiers they encountered bowed to her and asked if she had instructions, which she gave them. Marguerite looked at the eateries, the shopfronts, the children, and the street cleaners.

When they came to Barracks A, where the Commander and Captain Towner had their joint office, Minka led her auntie inside. The men talking with the Commander fell silent, turning to them, and Wendt stood. Despite his blindness, he saw Minka’s outline in shimmering silver, as he always had. But he also saw the outline of the figure next to her in a streaming, multicolored array. “Oh, my,” he murmured.

“Lieutenant Commander Minka reporting with the Lady Marguerite, Commander Wendt, if you have a moment,” she said.

“Absolutely, Lieutenant. Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Lady Marguerite,” he said. Barr, Gabriel, Captain Towner, Melchior, and several other men whom Minka didn’t know were quiet, watching.

“Thank you, Commander,” Marguerite said, extending a hand to him. He took it, and something passed between them before she withdrew her hand.

She said, “The architect of the chapel, Bozzelli, has arranged for a famous singer, Arbaiza, to perform tomorrow night. She’ll be arriving this afternoon, and I understand that Minka wants your men to escort her to the chapel.”

“I heard something of this, which we’ll be delighted to do,” he replied. Minka saw his tentative thoughtfulness.

Marguerite added, “I’m afraid there’s more. Minka wants you at the performance tomorrow, and has decreed a front-row seat for you.” Her tone was humorous, while carrying the expectation that he would cooperate.

“I can hardly wait. Arbaiza, eh? The mezzo-soprano. I’ve heard her sing. She’s quite talented,” Wendt said, and Minka’s eyes grew wide. He knew about Arbaiza and Efran.

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Chapter 5

“Excellent,” Marguerite said. “Hadn’t you required some other of these men to attend the concert, Minka?”

She glanced around. “Yes, Barr and Gabriel. Melchior, you must bring Geneve. Beyond that, I’ll have to check with Efran.”

“We’ll do that, then,” Marguerite said. “But if any of your men wish to hear the performance, Commander, they’ll be accommodated.”

“That’s very good of you, Lady Marguerite. I’ll see that they’re free to go,” Wendt said. Minka was studying him.

Marguerite replied, “Thank you, Commander. Good day, gentlemen.” They all bowed to her as she took Minka’s arm to leave.

The two walked silently up Main as Marguerite looked around, evidently enjoying the sights. Then Minka asked, “Auntie, do you . . . know the Commander? Before today?”

“I know of him,” Marguerite replied. “The circumstances of his blinding were known in Eurus.”

Minka stopped abruptly. “Auntie, can you—can you heal his eyes?”

“No, darling, I’m so sorry. That’s beyond any earthly power,” Marguerite said gently.

“I know,” Minka breathed. “I just wish--”

Marguerite hugged her. “I know, dear,” she whispered. And Minka had to stop on the sidewalk while Marguerite consoled her. Leneghan and Stephanos, behind them, brusquely directed foot traffic around them until she got going again.

She did, quickly. Wiping her face, she began, “I’m sorry, I just--”

“Excuse me, Minka.” A man with a cane limped forward, and she quickly looked up.

“Bowring! How are you?” she asked in concern. He was very thin, and obviously not entirely healed from his ordeal in Eurus about six months ago.

“Better, Minka, thank you,” he said. “Pardon my intrusion, but I assume that this is Lady Marguerite?”

“Yes! Marguerite, this is Bowring, Trina’s father,” Minka began, unsure of how much of his history she should cover with Marguerite. Some of it she would know, as Bowring’s tormentor Reinagle had been Surchatain of Eurus for a short time.

Marguerite said, “Hello, Bowring. Would you kindly accompany us for tea at Averno’s?”--which was practically across the street from them.

“Why—I’d--be delighted, Lady Marguerite. Thank you,” he said in surprise.

“Very good. Oh, look—there’s a crosswalk right here. How convenient that is,” she said. Before stepping out, she did look to see that horses and carts were prepared to stop for them. They were.

The pedestrians crossed to the outdoor pavilion of the eatery, where Averne placed them and their bodyguard in a prime spot highly visible to the street with the pond on one hand. They gave their order, and Minka ordered food and drink for Gaul and Leneghan.

When the server departed, Minka turned to Gaul. “Please run up to the fortress and get us money from Doane.”

As Gaul stood, Marguerite objected, “No, go to Hartshough.”

But Bowring said, “Absolutely not; I have plenty of money and nothing to spend it on, certainly nothing so pleasant.” And he took a handful of royals out of his pants pocket.

“That is very kind of you, Bowring,” Marguerite said. Gaul hesitantly sat back down.

“Not at all, when I’m about to ask the most outrageous favor,” Bowring said grimly.

“How exciting! Do ask,” Marguerite said, and Minka grinned at her.

“I heard of the diva Arbaiza’s expected performance, and I would deeply appreciate the opportunity to hear her again,” he said.

“Naturally,” Marguerite said. “Minka, dear, please remind me to have Hartshough add him to the list. So you’ve heard her before, Bowring?”

“Yes, when she sang in Westford a few years ago. My goodness, what a voice! And what a crowd she drew, especially of men. She turned them all away, except--” He abruptly broke off, then said, “I understand the chapel was specially designed with acoustics in mind. It should be a highly satisfactory venue, if the seating is right.”

Marguerite said, “Well, if you have any expertise in theatre seating, you must come give us an opinion.”

“Only as an amateur admirer of music, Lady Marguerite,” he demurred.

“That’s the best kind,” she said.

Minka mostly kept quiet while Marguerite and Bowring chatted about music over a delightful midday meal. As they were leaving, and Bowring paid for everyone’s meal, a man in Abbey red ran up to Minka. “Lady Minka, the Captain requests your presence in the dining hall.”

“Oh, I forgot *again*,” she said, anguished. “Dear Marguerite, I’ll leave you in Bowring’s hands. I hope to be back when the diva arrives, however.”

“Certainly, dear.” Marguerite leaned forward for Minka’s kiss on the cheek.

To Bowring, Minka added, “Thank you for the dining. It was fun.”

“You’re most welcome, Minka,” he said sincerely. Marguerite took his arm on his weak side, and Minka briefly watched in satisfaction as they began up Main back toward the chapel.

Then she exhaled, "I've got to hurry."

"We're with you, Lady Minka," Gaul said as he and Leneghan began trotting beside her up Main toward the switchback.

Before they even got there, Martyn came riding down on Rose. He pulled up beside her to dismount. "I'd help you up, but I know you don't need it," he smiled at her.

"Thank you, Martyn," she said, with a resigned laugh. "Thank you for your service," she told the bodyguards.

Gaul waved. "Don't wait on us, Lady."

"No, I won't," she said, and loped the mare on up the switchback to the courtyard.

From there, she ran into the foyer and down the corridor to the dining hall. Efran quickly looked back as she put a hand on his shoulder to climb over the bench. "There! You made it again!" he said, pleased.

"Well, of course, when you--" Then she paused. "Didn't you send for me?"

"Oh, no, I'm not going to interrupt your time with Auntie. But I'm very glad you remembered to come eat with me," he said gratefully.

"Of course," she said thoughtfully. *Why, I do believe Auntie may be sending me reminders not to neglect Efran.* Looking at Joshua on Efran's lap, she asked, "Is the custard good, Joshua?"

"Gud," he affirmed, wielding his own small spoon.

"That's what I'll have, then. We stopped at Averne's on our way back from the barracks," she said, watching Wardly come over with something that looked like a bowl of custard.

"Oh?" Efran asked. So she told him about the diva's scheduled arrival today, and Marguerite's meeting the Commander and Bowring.

Efran listened to all that, then asked hesitantly, "Do you want to go down to meet her?"

"Oh, I'm afraid I have to. I kind of yanked everything out of Bozzelli's hands," she winced.

He nodded, then said, "If it's all right with you, I'm . . . going to send DeWitt as our official Abbey greeter. You can ride down with him."

"Yes, that's fine. What about Estes?" she asked.

He grimaced. "He doesn't want to go. He's afraid she'll mistake him for me."

"Oh no!" she laughed. "All right. I had him and Kelsey on the front row for her performance tomorrow."

"I don't think so," he said, pained. "I don't have to go, do I?"

She scowled. "No, of course not. You think *I'm* going to make you go?"

He laughed lightly. "Thank you. No."

A few hours later, as they were relaxing on the back grounds with the children, Nakam, and Kraken, Fellowes came trotting up to salute Efran. "Captain, the diva's carriage is approaching the gates, so the Administrator DeWitt is about to ride down to the chapel. He wants to know if Lady Minka is coming."

Efran looked over to her as she stood. "Yes, I am, thank you. Have them saddle Rose, please."

"Yes, Lady," he said as Efran nodded. Saluting again, he ran around the west side of the fortress directly to the stables.

"I hope no one expects me to get dressed up for this," she said, smoothing her riding skirt.

"No, no point in it," he said, standing with Joshua. "I'll see you off from the courtyard. Kiss Marguerite for me."

"You owe her one when the diva leaves, then," she noted.

"I pay my debts," he smiled. They re-entered the fortress to walk up the corridor to the courtyard.

There, they found DeWitt waiting with two bodyguards: Stephanos and Ley (a new Polonti). DeWitt said, "Oh, good, are you coming with me, Minka?"

She eyed him. "Do you need me? You already have bodyguards."

"Yes, but, I think Tera would appreciate knowing you're along for the ride," DeWitt said with a grimace.

"Wait—you saw this woman when she was in Westford?" Minka asked.

"Yes," DeWitt admitted reluctantly.

Minka glanced at Efran, who looked off, and she said, "Then I shall protect you as well, DeWitt. No fear." The bodyguards maintained tight, nonsmiling faces as the party rode down to the chapel, where the doors stood open.

Entering, Minka, DeWitt and the bodyguards were greeted effusively by Marguerite. "You made it just in time! Isn't this exciting?" With her were Justinian, Bozzelli, Bowring, Rimbault, Firmin, and a few other prominent Landers. Minka grinned at Justinian, who looked elegant in a dove gray suit. He doffed his hat to her, then glanced around for who was not there.

"Where is Efran?" Bozzelli asked, frowning.

DeWitt said, "I regret that he's unavailable." Justinian's eyes went to Minka, who looked innocent.

A carriage drew up to the front steps, and everyone in the chapel foyer looked out the open doors. The footman climbed down to open the carriage door and pull down the step. Then he held out his hand to assist a woman down from the carriage and up the chapel steps. (Her four liveried guards remained on their horses. As long as their mistress was here, they would stay at Croft's.)

As the woman appeared in the chapel doorway, Marguerite said, "Welcome to the Abbey Lands, dear Arbaiza. I am Marguerite; among those here to welcome you are Minka, Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,

and its Administrator DeWitt. Do you care for any refreshments before retiring to your room?” Hartshough stood at a nearby table stocked with mineral waters, ale, and canapés. Justinian joined him.

During this short speech, everyone was studying the diva. She was certainly luxurious, with mounds of curling red hair and cushiony lips. While not fat, she had a robust form, especially her top, and languid green eyes. And although not a great beauty, she was swathed in a strong aura of sensuality. All this was probably accentuated by her exhaustion from a long, tiring carriage ride.

“I’ll just have water,” she whispered.

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Chapter 6

Several men moved toward the refreshment table, but Justinian, having divined her preference, advanced to hand her a cut-glass goblet of sparkling water. “Lord Justinian at your service, diva,” he said, removing his top hat to bow.

“Thank you,” she said, eyeing him from under heavy lids as she took a delicate sip.

The footman and another servant entered with numerous pieces of luggage and paused. “This way,” Hartshough said, turning toward the stairs, and they followed.

Meanwhile, Arbaiza was scanning the attentive men as she sipped her water. She looked sharply at the Polonti Ley, who made an abbreviated bow. Then her eyes rested on Minka, and she murmured, “Lady Sovereign. Is there no Lord Sovereign?”

Minka opened her mouth but DeWitt said, “Regrettably, he was unable to come.” Minka shut her mouth, feeling no compulsion to add to that.

The diva sighed, turning away with the beginnings of an excuse of exhaustion. But Bozzelli blurted, “It is such an honor to host you, Lady Arbaiza; Bozzelli at your service. I am the architect of this building, in which you will perform.”

She glanced around the hall indifferently. “Very nice,” she murmured, suppressing a yawn. Then she turned toward the staircase where Hartshough was descending.

Bozzelli began urgently, “Many of your admirers contributed to the construction of your performance hall here. Rimbault personally paid for the stairway—the curving balustrade is very expensive, you know. And the elegant stained-glass windows above the doorway, created by a master craftsman, were Firmin’s particular area of interest, in that he bore the entire cost of their creation and installation. Further--”

“Later,” she murmured, heading up the stairs.

In frustration, Bozzelli blurted, “Minka’s here; why couldn’t Efran make it down to greet this amazing woman?”

Arbaiza glanced back at him. “Efran.” It was not a common name. “I knew an Efran, in Westford. Your Efran

isn't Polonti, is he?" The question was sardonic, as she obviously expected no such coincidence.

But when everyone stood in silence, she grew interested. "Efran is here?" she asked. Again, no one answered. So she looked at Minka to ask, "Your husband, the Lord Sovereign, isn't named 'Efran,' is he?"

"Yes," Minka said.

Arbaiza turned full toward her. "Is he Polonti?"

"Yes," Minka said again.

"Was he Captain of the Westford army?" Arbaiza demanded.

"Yes," Minka said, smiling.

Lips parted in astonishment, Arbaiza looked her up and down. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Old enough to be Lady Sovereign," Minka replied, still smiling. "How old are you?"

There were a few gasps and strangled chortles from the onlookers. Arbaiza smiled at her. "Clever child." And she turned toward the stairway, Hartshough hurrying behind her.

With the disappearance of the diva upstairs, DeWitt leaned back with a quiet laugh. Minka looked complacent, and Justinian shook his head. "Given half a chance, I could embarrass a whole roomful of people while not in attendance just as well." Obviously, he blamed Efran, not Minka, for the minor discomfort.

"A noble aspiration," DeWitt said, still laughing.

Bozzelli turned to Minka. "How could you?"

"How could she?" Minka replied.

"But she's--" he began in a sputter.

"And I'm--" Minka rebutted. "I don't want to be rude, but no one's going to run over me. And that's nothing compared to what Efran would say had he heard it." She glanced at Marguerite, who was smiling at her.

DeWitt sighed, "All right, I think we're done for the afternoon. May I escort the Lady Sovereign up to her fortress?" He held out his arm to her.

"Yes, thank you, DeWitt," she smiled, laying her hand on his arm. Stephanos and Ley followed them out, grinning. Bozzelli turned away, muttering.

When Minka and DeWitt arrived back at the fortress, they both went up to the second-floor workroom. There, they were surprised to see Efran waiting for them, in a way. He was lying on his back on the floor so that Joshua could crawl on him. He also was surprised to see them back so quickly. Raising up, he asked, "Did she not come yet?" Estes looked up from his customary seat at the table.

"Nooo, she came," DeWitt said, returning to his chair.

“What is this?” Efran asked in astonishment, studying him. Estes was also regarding him suspiciously. Efran demanded, “DeWitt, are you wearing a devious face?”

“Who, me?” DeWitt laughed, so Efran and Estes swung to look at Minka. She placidly sat at the table.

“All right, what happened?” Efran asked in vague dread. Both he and Estes looked between Minka and DeWitt.

“Let him tell you,” she said. “I want to hear his side of it.” At that, DeWitt leaned back in his chair to laugh robustly, and Efran had to get very stern with his Administrator to get him to shut up and talk.

So DeWitt narrated the inadvertent exposure of Efran’s identity and Minka’s subsequent jousting with the diva. Efran studied her dubiously and she said, “I did nothing wrong.”

“Yes, Efran,” DeWitt said in defense of her. “The lady, ah, went for the throat, asking her age. It may have been unintended, but, Minka had every right to turn it back on her. It was a rude question.”

Getting up from the floor, Efran agreed. “The whole thing was my fault, anyway. But I appreciate Bozzelli calling out my absence,” he added with tight irony.

“Well, she’ll sing tomorrow, and that’ll be it,” DeWitt said, returning to his worksheets. Efran looked warily to Minka, and she shrugged.

The following morning, June 3rd, Minka was annoyed that the presence of the diva prevented her from seeing Marguerite all day, until the concert. What time that would be, Minka didn’t know. So she fretted a great deal that morning.

Justinian did not fret. When Hartshough alerted him to the fact that the visiting diva was up and requesting breakfast (as Justinian had asked him to do), the dapper young man took the tray to her room himself, wearing a new morning suit in a dusty rose, which complemented his dark brown hair nicely. He knocked on her door, and hearing something not negative, carried the tray in.

“Good morning, Diva. We here at The Chapel Resort are anxious to make your stay fun and memorable. That’s why we don’t send the competent but unexciting Hartshough up with your breakfast, but the incalculable Lord Justinian, who may or may not arrive with it all on the tray, but is certainly more exciting than Sir Reliable.”

Setting the tray on the bedside table, he said, “Now, here’s where your part comes into play. Don’t be alarmed; it’s not difficult. You can either sit up yourself, which is how many people the world over do it, or you can allow me to raise you to a sit, which is a chancy means of getting there, but stimulating for at least one of us. So, what’ll the lady have?” he inquired, eyeing her like a disreputable barkeeper.

Still somewhat sleepy, she was watching him in faint amusement. With a ladylike grunt, she pushed herself up to a sit. “You’re rather droll, but I think I’ll make you wait for your excitement. What’ve you got there?”

He tore his eyes away from her chest to look at the plates on the tray. “Eggs Benedict, crisp bacon, mango and apricots (from whence I have no clue) and pancakes with cream.”

Blinking, she sat up. “Set it here,” she said, patting her lap. So he placed the bed tray over her lap and sat at the foot of the bed, shaking out his handkerchief with an authoritative snap. Startled, she looked at his sitting there with the hankie in his fist. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Waiting for spills,” he said intently.

She leaned back to laugh (in a rather operatic manner). “I hope to not oblige you there. What is your name? Justin?” She began eating intently.

“Justinian, Lord. We musn’t forget the flourish on either end,” he said.

Her fork hung in the air as she thought about that. “What do you mean?”

“‘Lord’ at the front and ‘ian’ at the end,” he explained.

“Hm hmm,” she said dubiously, as her mouth was full. Swallowing, she inquired, “And who are you married to?”

“No one at the moment, but I’m taking applications,” he announced.

She flicked her green eyes up at him. “Mango. How in the world—where in the world—did you get mango here?”

Justinian looked off in consideration. “Either faerie magic or the conservatory in the fortress.”

“The white castle at the top of the hill,” she said, lifting her napkin to catch a drip of cream, then wiping it from the front of her nightdress.

Justinian caught himself before gulping. “Yes, that’s the one.”

“Is Efran there?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” he said warily.

“I’d like to see the inside,” she announced. Justinian was uncharacteristically silent, making no promises. She apparently did not notice, as she was preoccupied with the amazing breakfast.

This she quickly finished, lifting the tray from her lap. He immediately stood to receive it. “You wait outside while I ready myself, then you may show me around,” she announced.

He bowed over the tray, losing a few utensils. “I am utterly at your command.” After retrieving the silverware from the floor, he went out and shut the door behind him.

Justinian was waiting at the foot of the stairs when Arbaiza came flowing down, wearing a casual but well-made dress of some shiny material. Her profusion of red curls cascaded across her shoulders and down her back, and Justinian had to steady himself by clutching the balustrade. Still, he made an elegant bow.

He walked her to the open front doors, at which two men in Abbey red stood guard—Graeme, a Southerner, and Suco, a Polonti. She flicked her eyes over both men, lingering on Suco’s form. Then she raised her eyes to the white fortress, feeling drawn to it. Justinian asked, “Is there anything you’d like to see in particular, Diva?”

“Yes, take me up there,” she said. Suco and Graeme glanced at each other, having heard about her interest in the Captain.

Justinian paused blankly, then said, “Certainly, dear lady, but we must wait for the cleaning crews to finish; they’re perfect ogres. Meanwhile, let’s have a jaunt down Main.”

“I suppose so,” she conceded. He held out his arm for her to place her hand on it, and he fairly floated down the steps.

Upon their departure toward Main Street, Graeme stepped into the main east-west road to whistle at a passing soldier, Tomer. He was then sent up the switchback with a message. Minutes later, Tomer arrived at the second-floor workroom to salute and say, “Steward, Administrator, Lord Justinian has taken the diva for a walkabout, and she asked to see the fortress.”

“Are they coming up?” DeWitt asked in alarm.

“No, Administrator; he took her down Main Street,” Tomer said.

“Good,” DeWitt exhaled. “She’s not to be permitted through the gates.”

“Yes, sir.” Tomer saluted and ran back down to deliver the message to the courtyard gate guards.

Estes and DeWitt looked at each other, and Estes remarked, “Quick thinking by someone to avert disaster. Where is Efran?”

“With Minka and Joshua at the horse pens,” DeWitt said. Estes nodded, returning to his ledger.

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Chapter 7

Meanwhile, Justinian was walking Arbaiza down Main while passersby on foot, on horseback, or in carts tried not to stare at her. Justinian pointed out the shopfronts, the street lanterns, the crosswalks, the huge community well, and especially Delano’s with its expensive tivoli stone.

She glanced past all this in boredom, having seen the best of all the major cities on the Southern Continent. Justinian noted, “Two years ago, this was all wolf-infested grassland. It’s rather remarkable what Ef-- what the Abbey leadership has done with it.”

“I didn’t bring my best costumes,” she murmured, looking sharply at the women who flounced by—specifically, at their dresses. Most of the upper class wore rather original creations which she critically evaluated. With alterations, she could see herself wearing a few of these. Aware of her scrutiny, only the bravest women ventured into her line of sight.

These included Challinor, who was wearing a gay, light-colored, flowing summer dress. Catching the diva’s eye, Challinor puckered and winked. Arbaiza paused, half smiling in acknowledgment.

Then Trina broke their line of sight, riding down the street sidesaddle, except bareback, having seen Minka do this. But while Minka had Efran beside her to steady her, Trina had a resentful hireling who shuffled along in

front of the horse with a casual hold on the reins. He burned in resentment, needing the money but seeing every smiling glance directed toward the rich lady in crazy clothes.

Today she had outdone herself in layers of vivid yellow, orange, and red, which evoked an apocalyptic sunrise. The diva stopped in her tracks to laugh, her powerful voice rising to a crescendo. The horse reared at the unfamiliar sound, and Trina tumbled off the back. Instead of attempting to catch her, her escort lunged for the reins, which eluded him as the horse bolted forward.

Meanwhile, Lowry had been driving his wagon close behind her with a touch of impatience. But at the horse's uplifting, he leapt from his seat, aiming to catch Trina before she hit the ground. She fell into his arms as the lackey chased the horse down Main, and observers on both sides of the street dropped whatever was in their hands to applaud the hero of the hour.

Watching in interest, Arbaiza murmured, "What a wonderful libretto that would make."

"Yes, it seems we very nearly experienced the dramatic death scene as is required in all operas," Justinian replied with glazed eyes. Lowry let Trina down on the far sidewalk, tipping his hat to her, and Challinor put an arm around her to help her home. The horse and pursuing lackey had disappeared down the main east-west road.

"Speaking of which, what will you sing tonight?" Justinian asked.

"Oh, I don't know, something low-brow for country folk. I can't believe Efran is here; he seemed intent on staying in Westford—absolutely refused to come with me on tour," she said resentfully.

"Er, have you seen Westford recently?" he asked. It was mostly rubble after the Goulven were cleansed by fire six months ago, but some haphazard rebuilding had commenced.

"All that's in the country are cows and sheep," she muttered, watching an elderly ram being led to a shed.

"And pigs, per your bacon this morning. And let's not forget the chickens," Justinian noted.

"What is there to *do* here?" she asked despairingly.

"Stay alive?" Justinian suggested.

She barely glanced over the eateries, and shied away from Lowry's butcher shop. Then they were at the wall gates, and she looked around with a vacant sigh. "In Eurus I was fêted by the most amazing woman—Lady Marguerite. She has this marvelous mansion filled with the most amazing people, the most notable of Eurus."

"Was there one Lord Justinian among them? Tall, handsome fellow, impeccably dressed?" he asked.

"That was a place I was comfortable singing in. I have no idea how my voice will sound in the little chapel," she said hesitantly.

"I understand that Bozzelli designed it with you in mind," Justinian observed.

"Oh, don't you get bored in such a dead place?" she demanded, looking around. She did pause at the sight of the new Polonti, Aceto, exiting Barracks A. He certainly was majestic as he turned a cool eye to her. She regarded him with slightly raised brows—her infallible summons--but he walked on to his destination.

“Actually, I heard about a riveting performance by the comedy team Nonesuch and Asmuch. I’d love to see them in person,” Justinian mused. He suddenly looked across the street to Averno’s, where two men were sitting at a streetside table. Smiling, they raised their glasses to him, and he stared.

“I want to see Efran,” she expelled. “I can’t believe he’s married to that child. I asked him to come with me and he wouldn’t. I offered to marry him and he told me he’d never get married, because he’d die young and didn’t want to break some girl’s heart. Wouldn’t *you* marry me if I asked you?” she demanded.

“I, er, need to think about that,” he said pensively.

“Men!” she vented with heaving bosom. The wall gate guards were watching her with vacant smiles. “Heartless beasts! They deluge one with flowers and jewelry and luxurious carriages, but all it requires is one smiling Apollo who’ll climb into one’s bed only to leave before morning and break one’s heart. Why wouldn’t he take off his boots?” she asked in sudden disgust.

“To quickly get gone?” Justinian posed.

“And here you are. We have a score to settle, dear Efran,” she muttered, gazing at the white fortress in the distance.

Sighing, Justinian took her elbow. “Why don’t you come back to the chapel and rehearse for tonight? I’ll introduce you to Lady Marguerite.”

“The hotelier was furious about the mud on the sheets,” she recalled.

“I suppose so,” he said sympathetically, walking her along.

When they reached the main east-west road, they both looked over quickly at a group of children streaming down the switchback in great excitement. Both Arbaiza and Justinian watched the children outrun their two guardians to emerge off the switchback and run west. There was a great black shape unfolding itself at the base of the northwestern hillside. Justinian, recognizing it, braced himself to catch the diva if she fainted or screamed.

But they were both silent watching the black thing rise up in front of the children, its three heads waving on long, sinewy necks. Arbaiza suddenly began marching toward them. Justinian dutifully followed.

When they arrived behind the children, both guardians looked over, recognizing him, and by extrapolation, her. But Arbaiza didn’t look at either of them, not even the Polonti Capur. (The Southerner was Finn.) So the bodyguards returned their attention to the children and the hydra, Jonguitud.

“What are you eating now, Jonguitud?” the children cried. This was their new favorite topic with him.

He waved his black heads. “Eating is--” Then the eyes in his middle head went to slits and he vomited up a partially digested fish. The children screeched and laughed. Hassie climbed up on Finn to hide her face. Jonguitud’s right head looked down at it and said, “Is eelfish.”

“Ugh!” “Get rid of it!” “That’s gross!” they cried in delight.

But Toby said mostly to himself, “The eelfish are back. That’s not good. I’ll have to tell Efran.”

Arbaiza swung to Justinian with widened eyes. Then she raised her hands in rejection of this entertainment and

backed away. The guardians glanced at her, smiling. As she made haste to leave Jonguitud to his dinner of half-digested eelfish, Justinian trailed her.

She looked back at him once or twice as if to make sure he was coming. Then she ran up the steps of the chapel and through the doors that Graeme and Suco were holding open. As Justinian followed her inside, she wheeled to inform him, "You people are *so strange*."

He disclaimed, "I take no responsibility for the hydra, the eelfish, or the hydra eating eelfish."

Throwing up her hands, she ran upstairs.

Justinian exhaled and began walking back to the kitchen. He took off his hat, dropping it onto a work table, then leaned down into the cold storage compartment for an ale. As he brought it up, he looked out a back window to see Marguerite sitting contemplatively under the grapevine arbor. He thought she looked lonely, so he decided to go sit--

"You!" At the exclamation, he juggled the bottle of ale and turned. Arbaiza, glaring, demanded, "What is your name?"

He was tempted to give an alias, but surrendered: "Justinian."

"Well, you come help me judge acoustics," she ordered, and turned to stalk back into the hall. With a sigh, he set the unopened ale next to his hat and followed her. She stood on the platform at the front of the hall and ordered, "You stand in the back by the doors; tell me when you can hear me."

"All right," he said, wishing he had brought the ale. But he stood by the (closed) front doors and said, "Here I am."

"Your little Lands are pathetic," she said quietly.

"Well, I don't really know if that's fair. At one time, I would have agreed--"

"No, repeat what I say," she instructed impatiently. Then she said, "I'm going to make Efran talk to me."

"You're going to make Efran talk to you, unfortunate man." He added the last two words in a lower voice. But he was surprised to discern her words at this distance.

"I'm going to give a performance no one will ever forget," she said.

"I'm sure you will," he replied. "The acoustics are amazing. I can hear your every word."

Then she began singing scales, and he listened, spellbound. After a few minutes, she segued into an aria. Hartshough and Marguerite came out to listen. Graeme and Suco opened the front doors to hear better. A workman on his way to the construction site of the new inn next door stopped to gape in between the door guards.

When a crowd had gathered at the doors, she abruptly left off, walking toward the stairs. "Someone come tell me when it's time to perform." And she ascended the stairs to her room.

Justinian mused, "I wonder if we can keep her in a box and bring her out to sing every now and then."

“Without having to listen to her, otherwise,” Graeme offered.

“That’s my thinking, yes,” Justinian admitted.

Meanwhile, Efran and Minka had a tranquil day with the children, their pets, and each other. Beischel had been provisionally adopted into a family with two older boys whom he worshiped, but there were two new children, about 4 and 6 years old, whom leaseholder Dufton had discovered one morning playing with his ducks and geese. With no clue as to who their parents were, he brought them to the fortress.

Estes couldn’t get any information from them beyond their names: the six-year-old girl was Acy and her 4-year-old brother was Pim. They were placed with the new children’s matron Dorey, and adjusted like—ducks to water.

While all were sitting down to dinner in the fortress dining hall, Hawk approached Efran as he stood behind the bench. Saluting, Hawk asked, “Captain, the diva’s concert is about to start, and Lady Marguerite wishes to know if you and Lady Minka will be coming.”

Conversations all around them stilled. Lowering his head, Efran said, “No. Give my regrets to Marguerite; I will be by to see her tomorrow.”

“Yes, Captain.” Hawk saluted and ran out.

Efran sat, and then realized he had answered for Minka without even asking her. He looked to her apologetically, but she shrugged. “It would probably be a distraction if I started fighting with her.”

He snorted, “Thank you.” Just to check, he glanced up to the head tables to see DeWitt and Estes sitting with their wives. They weren’t going, either.

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Chapter 8

Nonetheless, a great many people were streaming into the chapel. Responding to Marguerite’s personal invitation, Commander Wendt was here, accompanied by his Seconds Barr and Gabriel. Bozzelli’s friends filled the front row, but Bowring was seated at the far end of the second row, well within sight of the platform.

Geneve and Melchior were here as well, several rows behind the Commander. Nearby were Ryal and Giardi, with Ella and Quennel next to them. Felice and Koschat were seated on the row behind them. Felice was wearing another gorgeous dress from Elvey’s, who had paid Bozzelli a nice sum for (what she was told were) prime seats for Felice and her husband.

The hall was filled to overflowing, standing room only. The front-row guests were afforded padded chairs, while everyone behind them sat on benches. As the crowd stilled in expectation of the diva’s appearance, Marguerite sent Hartshough upstairs to inform her that it was time.

The crowd in the hall watched him ascend the stairs, then . . . come down alone. He went straight to Marguerite to whisper, “The lady says she will not sing unless Lord Efran is in attendance.”

“Oh. Tell one of the men at the door,” she whispered back.

So while everyone in the hall watched, Hartshough went to one of the Abbey guards at the door, Cudmore, to tell him, “Please inform Lord Efran that the diva Arbaiza requires his presence to perform.” The guard’s eyes widened slightly, but he nodded and untied a waiting horse.

Meanwhile, word was passed through the audience that they had to wait on Efran’s arrival to hear the diva sing. Somewhat disgruntled, they settled down to do so. Wendt whispered for clarification from Gabriel, who explained the situation. Wendt leaned back with a tight smile.

Cudmore arrived at the fortress dining hall as the diners were finishing. “Captain.” He saluted, and Efran turned around, holding Joshua. “The diva won’t sing unless you’re there, sir.”

“What?” Efran fairly exploded, and Cudmore repeated the message. Scowling, Efran said, “No. I won’t be blackmailed; she can sing or not without me.”

“Yes, sir.” Cudmore saluted again, then turned to run to the courtyard and ride back down the switchback. Doubly winded, he arrived at the chapel to give his message to Hartshough: “He won’t come, sir.”

Unfortunately, he was overheard, so that outraged, disappointed cries rose all over the chapel: “No, that’s not right!” “How could he refuse?” “This is ridiculous.” “Someone go talk to him!” “How selfish of him, to take away this marvelous opportunity from us all!” Upon hearing, Ryal and Giardi winced at each other. Ella looked at Quennel, who shrugged.

Felice also peered at Koschat, who leaned over to whisper, “Nah, he’ll come.”

“WAIT! EVERYONE!” Justinian raised his arms, and the tumult subsided. “This is merely a misunderstanding. I will go talk to her. Everyone, please resume your seats.” Hesitantly, they did, watching him run up the staircase.

In the fortress dining hall, Minka was eyeing Efran. He knew it, so refused to look at her, until he had to. “Don’t tell me you want me to give in to her,” he protested in aggravation.

“If you don’t go down, no one else gets to hear her. Is that the right thing to do? What about Auntie?” she asked quietly.

Efran groaned, looking away. Meanwhile, most of the hall was made aware of the standoff, including Estes and DeWitt.

In the chapel below, Justinian was at Arbaiza’s door. He checked behind him to make sure that no one had followed him up the stairs, then he assumed Efran’s voice to say, “Arbaiza, I’m here.” (Justinian had longstanding practice in mimicking Efran, and was quite good at it.)

Feeling her at the door, he held the lever so that she couldn’t open it. “No, I’m not going to see you face to face until after you perform. I’ll be standing in the back, and you won’t see me at all. Now, are you going to come out and sing?”

(Below in the hall, Wendt’s head suddenly swiveled toward the stairway. He whispered a question to Gabriel, who leaned down to be able to see past the top of the stairs. “No, that’s Lord Justinian,” he whispered. Wendt leaned back, smiling.)

“Yes, Efran, as long as you’re there, I’ll sing,” Arbaiza said.

“Good. Now you give me sixty seconds to get down the stairs and go to the back of the room, and then you go on down,” Justinian said, still in Efran’s voice.

“I will,” she exhaled.

He kept holding on to the lever because she kept trying to open the door anyway. When she finally gave up for the moment, he released the lever to dart into his room next door. Hearing her door bang open, he peeked out of the crack of his door to see her racing down the stairway. “Don’t fall,” he muttered.

Then he slipped out to watch at the head of the stairs as she emerged onto the platform to thunderous applause. She waited until it began to die down, then she opened her mouth to produce the most amazing stream of sounds heard on earth. And she did it with no accompaniment whatsoever. Her listeners were utterly silent, enraptured.

In the fortress dining hall, Minka continued to look at Efran until he sighed, “All right. You win. You always win.”

“I know. I do,” she said, satisfied.

“But you have to come with me,” he stipulated.

“I will,” she agreed.

He gave Joshua up to the nursery workers, then he and she went to the courtyard. He began, “Horses--” But Kraken was already trotting around to the front, so they only had to wait for Rose to be saddled and bridled. Efran did not want Minka riding bareback unless he was walking along beside her.

In the dining hall, having witnessed Efran’s capitulation, Estes and DeWitt looked at each other, then kissed their wives and told them they’d be right back. They went to the courtyard for horses as they watched Efran and Minka ride down the switchback to the chapel.

More Abbey men had gathered outside the open front doors, so Efran and Minka left their horses with them while they slipped inside the hall. It was illumined throughout by chandeliers filled with hundreds of candles in holders with downward-reflecting caps.

The two newcomers stood in the back where it was impossible for Minka to see, but it was also unnecessary: the heavenly sounds reached her where she stood, and she clasped her hands in wonder. Estes and DeWitt slipped past the door to stand along the other wall and listen. Justinian, spotting Efran’s entrance, descended halfway down the staircase to watch the proceedings.

The hall—the whole chapel—was breathlessly still as the diva sang full-heartedly for over an hour. Even the men outside the open double doors could hear her. They were all quiet, enthralled by her voice. At the end of the last song, she lowered her head, raised her hands, and said, “That is all.”

The audience surged to their feet to applaud until the windows shook. Bozzelli was triumphant, hugging everyone within reach and leaning over chairs to pat the shoulders of the unsuspecting. A few of the braver patrons approached the platform to congratulate the diva, some offering flowers. But she was scanning the far reaches of the hall.

Efran had nodded at Minka and begun to move out when Arbaiza cried, "Efran! I see you!" Wendt sat again with an ear toward the back, so Gabriel and Barr reseated themselves on either side of him.

The applause died immediately. The whole hall took their seats again, turning to look at Efran as he faced her. "Hello, Arbaiza."

"Come up here," she ordered.

"I can hear you fine from here," he said.

She stood a moment, chest heaving, to regard him (Minka being invisible behind everyone else). Then Arbaiza flung at him, "You left me!"

"I had duty. I never made you any promises," he said. Most of the men in the hall nodded unconsciously: that was reasonable, even commendable.

Her voice lowered to say, "But I loved you." Hearing a suspicious gurgle, Geneve's eyes shot toward her brother Gabriel on the row in front of her. He had his head down. Yes, he had been in Efran's regiment at that time.

"I'm sorry," Efran said unapologetically. Heads were pivoting back and forth from her to him throughout this interchange.

"You broke my heart," she choked out. Lady Nianne closed her eyes in empathy, placing a hand on her Member badge. Yes, she understood, having also experienced intimacy with Lord Efran (in the form of a kiss only).

Numerous faces turned expectantly to Efran, who said, "It made you a wonderful singer. It filled your voice with a depth of emotion you never had before." Glancing down at Minka, who was sniggering, he whispered, "Shut up."

Geneve was watching Gabriel's shoulders shake tellingly. Ryal looked to the beamed ceiling contemplatively while Giardi attended the unfolding drama—the second act, as it were. Beside them, Ella looked at Quennel, who was smiling with vaguely raised brows.

Arbaiza countered, "I never expected love to lead me into suffering." More than one woman wiped her eyes.

Audience members turned fully in their seats to attend Efran's reply. And he said, "Life has no meaning without suffering."

Barr looked quickly at Commander Wendt, who mouthed, *Efran's helpful there*. Justinian was in tears on the stairway, but at least he was quiet. Captain Towner, however, standing in the back, had to turn around to face the wall and Gabriel lowered his head almost to his lap. Felice hissed at Koschat, "If you laugh, I'll cut you." He shook his head, smiling broadly.

"Then I wish a life full of meaning for your wife," Arbaiza said cattily.

The whole hall turned for Efran's response, and were not disappointed. With his glorious smile, Efran said, "Oh, she gets a full serving, I'm sorry to say."

The insinuation was clear, upon which the audience fell apart. Gabriel barked into his lap; Geneve turned to

Melchior only to see his Efranesque smile, which made her cry out in laughter, so she beat on him for making her laugh. One man started applauding, to be stifled by a blow to his arm from his wife.

Arbaiza wheeled dramatically in her full skirt to run up the stairs, shoving Justinian along the way. So he turned to cry, “Dam’ you, Efran!” as a last shot of drama.

In the ensuing chaos, Marguerite stood. “Hartshough, if you’ll collect some of these handsome men to help, we’ll pass around the canapés now.”

“Yes, my lady,” Hartshough said. He waved a hand at the soldiers clustered at the back of the hall. Wiping away tears, they immediately followed him into the kitchen.

Thus ended a magnificent performance all the way around. (And for days afterward, all of the men and many of the women agreed that the aftershow, plus the canapés, had the been the highlight of the evening.)

Efran slipped out of the chapel with Minka; DeWitt and Estes followed close behind. As they walked over to their horses, Estes patted Efran’s shoulder while DeWitt was muttering in disbelief. “Efran, where do you come up with this lofty drivel-- ‘Life has no meaning without suffering’?”

“I don’t know,” Efran winced. “It just flows, like song.” Minka almost fell over laughing again, so he had to snatch her off her feet. “Almost gave me away with your snickering,” he accused her, holding her to his chest.

“I’m sorry,” she laughed, arms around his neck.

“I never heard a more insincere apology,” he murmured into her lips—apparently not even the one uttered tonight by his own self.

“Good evening, you two,” DeWitt waved. As he and Estes mounted their horses to walk them back up the switchback, DeWitt asked, “Do you remember her at all?”

“Oh, yes,” Estes said. “Efran wasn’t her only conquest in Westford, nor her first. She was a threat to our entire regiment as long as she was in the city—about two, two-and-a-half years.”

“Did you, ah--?” DeWitt asked delicately.

“Oh, no. That was after Challinor, after which I started walking the straight and narrow,” Estes avowed.

“So it wouldn’t come back and hit you in the face like this,” DeWitt said.

“Exactly. And Efran is extremely fortunate to be married to someone like Minka, who can laugh it off,” Estes said.

“I think she learned to do that after Lady Vories,” DeWitt said. Estes winced, nodding.

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Chapter 9

Bozzelli and several other ardent admirers of Arbaiza were on hand for her departure the following morning, June 4th. They loaded her down with gifts, and Bozzelli paid her the remainder of what was due for the performance. "Where shall you be off to now, dearest Diva?" he asked in anguish.

Settling down in the luxurious carriage, she glanced at him through the window. "I've been invited to Eviron to give an exclusive performance for the new logging establishment. Not generally my cup of tea, but they're paying me an outrageous sum."

"Come back through the Abbey Lands, and we'll pay you as much for another performance," Bozzelli rashly promised.

She glanced back in the direction of the white fortress. "Perhaps. If Efran comes."

Distastefully, Bozzelli protested, "He's so unappreciative of you."

"He didn't used to be," she murmured, leaning back on the seat cushion and closing her eyes. "Go!" she said, tapping the roof, and Bozzelli had to quickly step away from the moving carriage. Her bodyguard followed, and he watched them turn up Main to drive down the middle of the street and exit the gates.

Sighing, Bozzelli returned to the chapel, where workers were removing the benches and replacing the large rug and seating area. "No, hold off on that," Bozzelli said, waving. They paused to eye him as he passed on out of the hall into the kitchen. Here, Hartshough was working on fruit cocktails. He startled mildly at Bozzelli's appearance.

"Here now, Hartshough," he said authoritatively, extending a sheet to him. "This is a schedule of the remaining performances for this week. We'll need the hall to remain open for rehearsals, and, of course, I'll need a set of keys, since Efran changed the locks on me."

"Excuse me, but, this is a private residence, sir," Hartshough said, declining to take the sheet.

Bozzelli smiled, tapping his arm as he left the sheet on the worktable. "Of course, and I know how frequently Lady Marguerite used her residence in Eurus for the advancement of the arts. I'll be by later for the keys. Meanwhile, you may leave the front door open." Frowning, Hartshough picked up the sheet as Bozzelli walked out.

He went back through the hall, checking to see that the workers were not further molesting the benches. "Good. I'll let myself out," Bozzelli declared, and did. One worker watched him walk over to the inn under construction next door. The Meeting Hall was entirely finished.

Hartshough emerged from the kitchen as Bozzelli was leaving. One of the bewildered laborers asked, "Sir, do we take the benches to storage or not?"

"Yes, do as you were told," Hartshough said. They resumed work, and he looked up as Marguerite descended the stairs. "Good morning, Lady," he said.

"Good morning, Hartshough. Did I happen to hear Bozzelli?" she asked, smoothing her caftan.

“Yes, Lady, and it seems we need to confer,” he said, handing her the sheet. “If you will, let us have a word over your morning cocktail.”

“That sounds delightful, Hartshough. Will you kindly send up to Minka, and ask when she might be available to drop in?” she asked, waving the schedule.

“I shall do that immediately,” he said, inclining his head.

“I’ll be on the patio,” she smiled, turning out. And Hartshough directed one of the laborers up to the hilltop with a message for Lady Minka.

Shortly, Minka was bounding up the stairs to the workroom. When she entered, she paused upon seeing Efran, Estes and DeWitt standing at the east-facing window, looking out. “What is it? What’s wrong?” she asked quickly.

“Nothing,” Efran answered just as quickly. “But Estes and I are taking a few men out to the eastern Lands, just to look around.”

“All right,” she said, scrutinizing their blank faces. “Marguerite has asked me to come down to the chapel.”

“Excellent,” Efran smiled. “You go on down to your auntie, and I’ll drop by when we get back. Take two men,” he added, lowering his head.

“I will,” she promised, assessing them again. But she was excited that Marguerite had asked to see her, so she quickly turned to the door.

He began, “And don’t--”

“--run down the stairs. I never do. Hardly ever,” she insisted from the corridor. Efran smiled at his administrators, then grew pensive looking out the window again.

Before arriving at the courtyard, Minka stopped by Doane’s cubicle for a handful of royals, just in case. Outside, she found Jehan, Coish, and three horses waiting. “Oh, yay! Two of my favorite people. I don’t know that we need horses, but it does make it easier coming back up.”

“Yes, Lady Minka, it does,” Jehan said, and they watched her mount Rose without help.

She paused, looking down the old switchback at the soldiers collecting on the east-west road, and she grew uneasy. So Efran and Estes had to take twenty or thirty men out to the east Lands because . . . ? “Let’s take the new switchback down. It’s a little closer to the chapel than going down the old” (which it wasn’t, strictly speaking, but she did not wish to get in the way of the men’s leaving).

Jehan nodded, watching Coish pause to talk to one of the men about to ride down from the courtyard. Minka waited until he was done, and had trotted over to her. She asked, “Well? Are they riding out with Efran and Estes?”

Coish said, “Yes, but they don’t know why. It could be just to look around.” Minka nodded, eyeing the bows and swords the men below carried. Seeing her apprehensive glance, he added, “They always arm when riding out, Lady Minka. Even if you don’t expect trouble, it’s foolish not to prepare.”

“You’re right,” she said definitively. So she turned Rose down the switchback to arrive at the chapel. One of the many workers swarming the double plot took their horses. “We’re setting up a stableyard in back, Lady.”

“Oh, good. Thank you,” she said. Another worker opened the front door for her. She led her bodyguard through the hall, satisfied to see that the sitting area had been restored. Then Hartshough met them with fruit cocktails and led them back to the patio off the kitchen where Marguerite sat. She gestured to the empty chairs, and they sat to look over the landscaping and the construction in the far back corner, near the faerie tree.

At this time, Henris’ discussion group was gathering in the library. Twelve men had shown up today, including Cyneheard, Hawk and Conte. (The Librarian was here, of course, but tried not to interject his opinion unless he were asked. Sometimes he was asked, which thrilled him. For today, law class would commence when the discussion group was dismissed.)

Most of the group looked more interested in eating tangy chicken wings and drinking mild ale than in talking over lofty ideas. They were sitting on the floor, lounging with small plates on their laps. But Henris got their attention when he stood at the front of the library to say, “Our discussion topic today has been provided by Captain Efran.”

The men paused to look at him, and he said, “True or false: Life has no meaning without suffering.” Then he looked around the group.

One man said, “That’s crazy. Anybody’d give their eye teeth to be guaranteed a life free of suffering.”

Conte said, “But that’s not the question. The question is, what gives life meaning? An easy, carefree life is unlikely to be meaningful.”

“So, what makes a life meaningful?” someone else asked.

“Duty,” another said.

“Service,” said another.

“But how can you justify the suffering of innocents on the basis of ‘meaning’?”

“No one’s justifying suffering; we’re talking about whether it gives meaning to someone’s life.”

“What does *meaning* mean?”

“C’mon, do you have to ask? When you get to the end of your life, what do you look back on with pride?”

“The statement is false, because the people who suffer most are the least powerful, who have the least say in it and the most to lose.”

“The statement is true, because a man taking their suffering upon himself has found purpose.”

“But is that the *only* way to give a life meaning?”

“Or just the surest way?”

The discussion raged for their allotted hour, drawing in men who were passing by. Toby, sweeping the corridor,

paused to listen. Then he said, “People who’ve never suffered don’t know what it’s like, so they don’t do anything for someone else who is suffering. Efran knows what it’s like to be hungry.”

The men looked at him in surprise, and one said, “That a fair point. And the Captain never expects us to do what he doesn’t ask of himself.” The others agreed with this, then continued arguing. Toby went back to sweeping.

When they had to leave for their duty, they carried the argument with them, embroiling everyone else who overheard it. And by the end of the day, the question had consumed almost the whole Abbey Lands army.

Back to Minka and her Auntie Marguerite: They were settling on the patio with Minka’s bodyguard Jehan and Coish, all enjoying Hartshough’s fruit cocktails. Minka began right in, “Oh, Auntie, it was so gracious of you to host the diva. She was really wonderful, wasn’t she? But, oh, dear—I don’t know that I could endure a string of soirées like that. Oh, this is wonderful.”

She stopped talking for a moment to eat, and her bodyguard did as well.

“Nor could I, I’m afraid,” Marguerite said. “So you must help me with this.” She laid the sheet in front of Minka.

Frowning, Minka held the spoon motionless in the air while she studied the sheet. “What? What is this? ‘Bidderscombe Bell Ringers on June fifth’? That’s tomorrow! ‘Ruddock Chorale on June seventh’? ‘Halfenaked Exotic Dancers on the eighth’? Auntie!” Minka cried in disbelief.

Marguerite sat back, laughing. “Yes, I’m afraid that poor Bozzelli was so swept away by the diva’s success, he’s scheduled a number of performances in the chapel. And he’s demanding the keys.”

“Oh, no,” Minka said decisively, laying down the sheet. “No no no. That will never fly.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know how to tell him. After all, I’m a newcomer to the Lands,” Marguerite said.

Minka suddenly looked around. “Haven’t you gotten your certificate and your badge?”

“Pardon?” Marguerite said blankly.

“Efran has named you Lady Commander of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. You’re titled here, too, as well as in Eurus. Bozzelli isn’t titled here or anywhere, that I know of. Oh, no. I’ll go talk to him. Be right back.” Minka stood with the sheet, and her bodyguard lurched up.

The woman with glistening blonde hair suddenly appeared sitting in the chair that Jehan had just stood from. Minka and her boys startled, but the woman—Marguerite’s daughter, Larisse—muttered, “Why do you have these Polonti about? Nasty things.” She was brushing off the back of the chair as though it were covered in lice.

Already primed for battle, Minka asked, “Why are so disrespectful to your mother? That’s shameful.”

Larisse peered at her with a mild shake of her head. “Why are you even talking to me?” Turning back to her mother, she said, “You’ll appreciate this. I’ve been creating art honoring our family crest.” The last two words came out in a sneer.

“Be careful, Larisse,” Marguerite warned quietly.

“Oh, don’t worry; I haven’t been doing anything nearly as wrong as sleeping with a married man,” Larisse said—referencing her own mother’s history. Minka gaped at her, so the woman swung around to say, “This is a private conversation, if you don’t mind.”

Minka shut her mouth and leaned down to kiss her auntie. “I’ll be right back.”

As she turned out on her mission, Jehan paused to say, “Thank you for the fruit cup, Lady Marguerite.”

“You’re welcome,” she laughed, watching the two bodyguards run into the chapel in pursuit of their charge. Marguerite smiled at Hartshough, receiving her cup of morning tea. But Larisse had more on her mind.

From the chapel hall, Minka paused, hearing Larisse berate Hartshough—that is, Minka’s own *grandmother* was abusing the gentle butler. Tamping down her indignation, Minka resolved on one battle at a time, her first task being what Auntie asked of her. Emerging from the front doors, she looked around at the laborers to ask, “Does anyone know where Bozzelli went?”

“To the inn, Lady,” one replied as he and others pointed to the construction next door.

“Thank you,” she said, turning to stride toward the inn with the schedule in hand and her bodyguard at her sides. But she and they stopped upon seeing Efran and Estes lead their men down the main east-west road going east. Efran spotted her and crinkled his eyes. She watched mistrustfully. If he thought things happened when she stepped out of the fortress, worse things happened when he rode out on the Lands.

At this time, Bozzelli was conferring with the reservations clerk Dowdeswell in his cubicle on the first floor of the inn. This floor had been largely completed; the second and third floors were under construction. Bozzelli was saying, “I’m very appreciative of your getting the Meeting Hall ready for us so quickly, but as it happens, we won’t need it after all. So I’m canceling all of our events and requesting a refund of deposits.”

Dowdeswell primly replied, “As you wish, but I must warn you that if you cancel and receive a refund, your reserved slots will be given to the next party on the waiting list. We’ve had a tremendous interest in scheduling the Meeting Hall.” (Fortunately, the group desiring to worship in the Meeting Hall had a standing reservation for every Dominica, paid by the Fortress.)

“That’s quite all right; I’m happy for them to have the slots,” Bozzelli beamed. Not only was the chapel a superior venue, he didn’t have to pay anything for it.

Dowdeswell looked down at his reservations book. “Are you sure? You have a number of imminent events scheduled.”

“I’m sure, my good man,” Bozzelli said in satisfaction.

“Very well,” the clerk said. So while Bozzelli waited, humming an aria, Dowdeswell crossed off twelve events from his reservations book and tallied up the amount of refunds due. Then he brought up a lockbox and counted out twenty-four royals into Bozzelli’s hands. “There you are, sir,” Dowdeswell concluded.

Pocketing the royals, Bozzelli thought, *With no cost for the events, I can afford a better suit*. True, the money had been contributed by the Abbey Lands Arts Council, but as President of that body, shouldn’t he be entitled to appropriate wear for their events?

While Bozzelli debated this, Dowdeswell was sending messages to the first on the waiting lists for the newly

available times. And those contacted began showing up immediately to reserve their slots.

At this time, a serious individual approached Bozzelli. “Sir, I am Firmin’s accountant Gudgeon. Eight members of the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers have ordered a great deal of food and drink and claim that you’ll pay.” A young assistant attended him.

“Well, I suppose I should, then. How much?” Bozzelli asked, jingling the gold in his pocket.

“They’ve ordered fifteen royals’ worth so far, sir, but Firmin requests twenty royals to cover the bill, and if there’s any unspent, he’ll refund you,” Gudgeon said.

Bozzelli paused in shock. “Twenty royals? That’s—ha ha—quite a bit of food for eight people.” More correctly, it was an enormous amount of food for eight people. And Bozzelli had contractually obligated himself to provide food and lodging during their performance tenure.

“They appear to be hearty eaters, sir,” Gudgeon said. Dowdeswell was making new reservations for the canceled Meeting Hall time slots at a brisk pace. Thinking hard, Bozzelli dismally fondled the money in his pocket. He didn’t think he could get the kind of suit he wanted for four royals.

“Excuse me,” a firm feminine voice said. Gudgeon and his assistant turned to the young girl with curly hair. She extended a sheet of group names and dates under Bozzelli’s nose, and he quickly looked up. “This. Won’t. Work,” she enunciated.

“What?” Bozzelli said, lost at sea. “Oh, Minka. The schedule. That’s for Marguerite.”

Minka replied, “Yes, she gave it to me, to tell you, that it Won’t Work. The chapel is the private residence of Lady Marguerite, and you will schedule no more events without her explicit permission beforehand.” A few others came up behind her to listen.

Gudgeon sputtered, “But—excuse me, Lady Minka--how can you give a public building to a private individual? Many business owners, including Firmin, contributed to the construction of the chapel.”

She coolly replied, “I’m sorry you and the others have been misled into believing that, but the Fortress paid for everything on the chapel. And my relative needed it after trolls destroyed her mansion in Eurus.” Gudgeon, and a growing number of people around him, listened in astonishment. She turned back to Bozzelli to say, “And you don’t get the keys to her personal residence.”

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Chapter 10

A man behind Gudgeon blurted to Minka, “But this is serious. Can you prove that the Fortress paid for the chapel?” Jehan and Coish eyed him stonily, but others were watching for her answer.

“Yes,” she said, turning her great blue eyes on him. He was a tall, authoritative man with long hair combed back from his forehead. “Who are you?” she asked.

"I am Xander, the new orchestra conductor. Our orchestra is scheduled to practice in the chapel once a week starting today," he said.

Her face opened in delight. "An orchestra! Oh, I'm not going to tell you 'no,' only that you have to get clearance from Hartshough about that. But as for proof, go up to the fortress and tell the door guard I asked DeWitt to show you the receipts for the chapel work."

"DeWitt. But now--who is Hartshough?" Xander asked, puzzled.

"Lady Marguerite's butler, and the one you need to ask to do anything in the chapel," she said. He eyed her for a moment, then turned toward the door.

Gudgeon told him, "Wait a moment, if you will; I'll go with you to the fortress." Xander paused as Gudgeon turned back to Bozzelli to say, "Twenty royals, please. Or we'll have to turn away the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers."

Pale, Bozzelli groaned, "Of course." He counted out to him twenty of the twenty-four royals in his pocket. Gudgeon handed them to his assistant to take to Firmin, then bowed to Minka and left with Xander.

"Here, you might need this back." Minka folded up the schedule sheet and tucked it under Bozzelli's arm. Then she turned to walk off, flanked by her bodyguards.

When Minka, Jehan and Coish returned to the chapel next door, all the laborers were gone, except one, sitting on the chapel steps. At her approach, he stood to bow. "Eryk at your service, Lady Minka. I finish my task, and Lady Marguerite tells me ask you what more job you have." This was unusual, that Marguerite would refer him to Minka instead of Hartshough. But there was a reason.

He glanced self-consciously at Jehan and Coish as he related Marguerite's request. He was Polonti, with a terrible purple scar running down the right side of his face. His right ear was missing, which his long hair almost covered. His speech was heavily accented, and, he looked unkempt and hungry.

Minka restrained an uprush of distress to ask, "Where are you from, Eryk?"

"Venegas, Lady," he answered reluctantly.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"Wounded in battle, Lady, so, was put to work in the fields. But they are torched, and I walk up here to see if I could earn bread," he said. He turned his intact ear to her as they talked. (Yes, Minka knew that her husband had torched those fields to preempt Venegas' use of slave labor.)

She pressed her lips together, looking aside to keep her eyes from tearing up. She wished to not humiliate him further with pity. Glancing at the front door, she asked, "Can you rig a bell pull at the front door that will ring back in the kitchen?"

He looked at the door, then reached over to open it to look around the walls. "Yes, that is easy."

She took three royals out of her pocket to hand him. "Get you something to eat at Croft's, then ask Hartshough where to get the hardware you need. Tell him I gave you this job."

“Thank you, Lady. It gets done today.” He bowed to her and she nodded, turning toward the kitchen. Coish patted his shoulder in passing.

Up in the fortress, Ellor, on door guard duty, came to the workroom with two men. DeWitt and Koschat looked up (being the only ones here right now, as Estes had ridden out with Efran and his men to the east Lands). Ellor said, “Administrator, this is Firmin’s accountant Gudgeon and the orchestra leader Xander. Lady Minka told them to come ask you to see the folder of construction receipts for the chapel.”

DeWitt put his quill down and leaned back in interest. “Hello, Gudgeon. [He nodded in response, as they knew each other.] An orchestra leader. Do we have an orchestra in the Lands?”

Xander carefully replied, “One is being formed, Administrator. We were told that we could practice in the chapel weekly.” He studied DeWitt as Gudgeon looked on silently.

“Ah, and I bet I know by whom. What did Minka tell you about it?” DeWitt asked.

Glancing at the bookshelves behind DeWitt, Xander replied, “She said she would not tell me we couldn’t use the chapel, but that I must clear it with Hartshough.”

DeWitt laughed lightly, standing. “Minka is correct, as usual. So, you want to see our receipts for the construction costs on the chapel. May I ask why?” Anticipating an answer, he went to a shelf to withdraw a bulging folder tied with twine.

He looked up at the silence, as Xander was looking to Gudgeon. The accountant uneasily explained, “To verify who paid what.”

DeWitt replied, “I see. Here you are. Obviously, everything needs to stay in this room.” And DeWitt dropped the folder at the end of the table in front of Efran’s chair.

Gudgeon sat at once to untie the twine and open the folder. Xander paused to regard the faerie tree growing from the middle of the table up through the ceiling and down through the floor. Then he pulled up a chair beside Gudgeon to look with him.

Ellor saluted. “I’ll send up another man to escort them down when they’re ready to leave, Administrator.”

“Yes, thank you, Ellor,” DeWitt said, glancing up as he sat again. Ellor departed and Koschat resumed his work on the counting board while keeping a wary eye on the two visitors.

Gudgeon flipped through the folder rapidly, growing increasingly agitated. “Why do you have no record of Firmin’s contribution to the chapel costs?”

DeWitt glanced over to him. “Because we didn’t receive anything from him, Gudgeon.”

“But he paid the architect hundreds of royals which we have the receipts for,” Gudgeon protested.

DeWitt leaned back. “The architect Bozzelli does not represent the Fortress in any capacity. We hired him to design and oversee construction of the chapel. You’ll find receipts for those payments in that folder.”

“Yes, those I noticed.” Gudgeon slapped the folder shut and sat back in deep perturbation.

Xander added, "I don't understand. Then Bozzelli does not authorize use of the chapel? I came here from Eurus on his assurance that we would have a suitable place for practice and performances."

DeWitt shook his head. "That falls to Lady Marguerite. It's possible that you may work out an agreement with her. She was a generous benefactress in Eurus."

"Yes, I knew of her, and knew that she had come down here," Xander said, tapping his fingers on the table.

Gudgeon opened the folder again to continue looking. "What does she charge for use of the facility?"

"Marguerite?" DeWitt laughed in disbelief. "Nothing. If she allows anyone to use her home, it will be gratis. But if so, Efran will want everyone vetted."

"Efran?" Xander asked blankly.

DeWitt, Koschat, and Gudgeon looked at him. DeWitt clarified, "Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. That Efran."

"I wish to talk to him," Xander said.

"You know, I do, too," Gudgeon said, lifting a receipt from DeGrado. "Firmin explicitly paid for the colored-glass windows. Bozzelli acknowledged it with a gracious letter which Firmin had framed to hang in his office."

"I'm afraid that Efran is not here right now. Xander, I strongly suggest you talk to Marguerite and Hartshough first, because Efran will defer to her. Gudgeon, you had best ask Bozzelli about Firmin's contribution," DeWitt said blandly.

"Yes, I will." Gudgeon closed the folder again and Xander stood, looking toward the door.

DeWitt whistled, and Teschner appeared, saluting. DeWitt nodded, "Yes, our visitors are ready to leave."

"Yes, Administrator. This way, please," Teschner said. Gudgeon nodded tentatively. Xander eyed him, glanced back at DeWitt, and then followed the soldier out.

After they had gone, DeWitt said, "Koschat, go put two men on rotating duty twenty-four seven at the chapel."

"Yes, Administrator," Koschat said, striding out.

Then DeWitt leaned back in his chair. "So Bozzelli thanked Firmin in writing for his contribution. Ho, good luck pinning theft of it on Geneve."

On the eastern Lands, west of the shallow branch of the Passage, Efran and his men rode heads down, looking at the terrain. There were channels gouged in the ground—very even, consistent lines about two feet wide and six inches deep. It looked as though a heavy sledge had been dragged through the meadowland, leaving a distinctive pattern of dark earth that extended in every direction as far as the men could see. But the lines were not parallel nor all straight. A large curve could be detected after loping along one line for a few minutes, and a sharp angle was apparent at another point. That's all that could be determined from the ground.

But from the east-facing window of the second-floor workroom, the fortress administrators could see that the

lines were not random, nor was there more than one. The pattern was created from a single line that never crossed itself. And it depicted a great bird.

On the ground, Efran asked Estes, “Who was the first to spot it?”

Estes explained, “That would have been Hereward, about a week ago. He was riding after a couple of cows who had gone the wrong way out of the barn, and, just came across a shallow trench. He didn’t see anything unusual about it until he came upon a curve. Then he realized they were part of a pattern which he couldn’t see altogether.”

Efran dismounted Kraken to run his hand along one line. “The uniformity of it is—unnatural. And this is hard-packed dirt, not easy to move, nor to uproot the meadowgrass so neatly.”

Martyn observed, “And there’s no spillover. Where’s the dirt and grass that was shoveled out to make these trenches?”

Efran looked to Estes again. “Did you see anything from the fortress rooftop?”

Estes shook his head. “No, it’s too high or too distant, or both.”

“So strange.” Efran began walking along one line. Kraken pawed inside one with a sharp hoof. Efran almost reached out a hand to stop him, then let him continue to dig. A moment later Efran restrained him and knelt to feel the ground. “Well, now it’s wet.”

Martyn and Estes came over to look. “From below?” Martyn asked in confusion.

“Must be,” Efran said, standing.

“Uh oh. Does that mean there’s a cavern close underneath?” Krall asked.

Efran turned his head, thinking. “It’s . . . possible, I suppose, but—*why*? What’s the purpose of a huge bird drawn on the ground?”

They continued to follow the lines a little while, then Estes raised his face to look over the horizon. “Are there more?”

Efran said, “To see, we’d have to ride beyond the east Passage, outside the Lands’ boundary. And I don’t have a reason to do that right now. So—let’s head back.”

At the chapel, Minka was relieved to see Larisse gone, for the moment. So Minka and her bodyguards sat with Marguerite at her patio table under the grapevine arbor to watch the ongoing construction of a small stable. The two women sipped cool mineral water while they chatted about everything—the beautiful new landscape plants, the progress on the new inn next door, and especially the concert last night. Minka sighed, “It was wonderful. I’ve never heard such singing in all my life.”

Marguerite noted, “That’s gracious of you, dear, considering what she had to say afterwards.”

The bodyguards winced as Minka looked vacant for a moment. “What? Ohh, about Efran? Oh, dear, wasn’t he awful?” And she fell over laughing again.

Jehan and Coish squinted, trying to make sense of this. Polonti women were insanely possessive of their men. Marguerite sipped her water.

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Chapter 11

Hartshough then emerged from the kitchen with a tray. “Excuse me, ladies and young men. I have been experimenting with a new canapé recipe using smoked salmon. Please favor me with your judgments.”

“Hartshough, you’re a treasure,” Minka said, helping herself to one, as did Marguerite. “Ohhh,” Minka exhaled, closing her eyes in bliss. Then she looked at Jehan and Coish watching dubiously. “Why aren’t trying them? He specifically invited you to.”

“That’s correct,” Marguerite said.

The boys looked at each other, then cautiously reached out for a canapé. “I’m not sure this is in the regulations,” Jehan said, holding it tentatively.

“I don’t think it is,” Coish murmured, straining to remember.

“You’re allowed to perform services for the residents as long as you do your assigned duty. Here I am, and I’m not going anywhere until we help Hartshough with his experiment,” Minka said. Whereupon her bodyguards ate the canapés.

She glanced back to the hall, where Eryk was working on the bell pull. He climbed down from his ladder to come say something to Hartshough. The butler went to the front door, then emerged onto the patio once again. This time there was a man behind him, whom Minka recognized as the orchestra leader.

Hartshough said, “Lady Marguerite, may I present Xander, who is assembling an orchestra in the Abbey Lands. I understand that he wishes to discuss the possibility of his practicing here once a week.”

Xander looked dubious about all this, but Marguerite said, “Oh, how can we discuss anything when he hasn’t even got a chair or water? Sit him down here, Hartshough, and we’ll talk.”

So Minka and Jehan scooted their chairs away from each other to make room, and Xander was soon sitting between them with a tall, cool glass of mineral water in one hand and a smoked salmon canapé in the other. Marguerite said, “I assume you know Lady Minka, Xander, who is also my great-granddaughter [which was news to her bodyguards]. And these young men who are warding her are Coish and Jehan. Did I get your names right?” she asked them.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Coish said.

“Oh, well, then, have another canapé,” Marguerite said. “Hartshough needs considerable encouragement when he’s experimenting. [They obeyed.] Now, Xander, how many are in your orchestra?”

“Only twelve at present, Lady, though we are hoping to expand after we get established here in the Abbey

Lands,” Xander said. “May I tell your cook that his canapés are divine?”

“HARTSHOUGH!” Marguerite roared. Minka’s boys burst into grins and Xander’s eyes widened.

“Yes, Lady?” He entered, bowing.

“Hartshough, Xander says that your experiment is divine,” Marguerite related.

“I agree completely,” Minka said. “Jehan? Coish? What is your verdict?”

“Oh—they are—better than anything I’ve ever eaten,” Jehan said.

“They are sup-erlative,” Coish said, trying out a new word.

“Your kindness encourages me to hope in the continued success of my paltry efforts,” Hartshough said with a bow. Minka, laughing, glanced past him to Eryk working in the kitchen. She started to call to him to come get a canapé, but Marguerite was talking.

“Now, what do you think, Hartshough? Can we accommodate Xander’s orchestra to practice here one day a week? Say, the day after Dominica?” Marguerite posed.

“That would be acceptable, Lady Marguerite,” Hartshough said, bowing again.

Minka told Xander, “Oh, I would love to have the children come watch. Would you mind? They would be quiet, except if they got restless, we could turn them out into the yard. But I think it would be wonderful to expose them to good music.”

Xander was mildly gaping around the table. “I—I have no objection at all. Do you mean, Lady Marguerite, that we have your leave to practice here every Monday? It may take as long as three hours a session.”

“Oh, that won’t bother anyone, but I would so love to have the children here to visit. I hadn’t even seen Joshua at all until three days ago. It’s time I saw him again, you know,” Marguerite said with peevish air.

There was the sound of a bell ringing in the kitchen, and they all turned to watch Hartshough gravely walk to the front doors. “You got it up! Come have a canapé,” Minka called to Eryk, who was scrutinizing the bell in surprise.

Shortly, Efran appeared on the patio carrying Joshua. “You put in a bell like I told you to,” he said, bending to kiss Marguerite’s head. Coish and Jehan sprang up to salute, and Efran motioned them down.

“Yes, my new handyman,” she waved at Eryk, who was still trying to figure out how the bell had gotten connected. Efran glanced at him as Marguerite cooed, “Hello, Joshua!”

“HAWSO!” he cried in delight.

“Yes, Lord Joshua?” Hartshough said, re-emerging from the kitchen.

“Don’t encourage him,” Efran said, shaking his head.

“Sit down, Efran,” Marguerite ordered, as Hartshough brought out another chair. So Efran put Joshua on

Marguerite's lap before sitting himself. Joshua helped himself to a canapé and Efran leaned over to give Minka a quick kiss.

"Oh, guess what?" she said, handing him a canapé. "Xander's orchestra will be practicing here once a week, and he said the children can come watch."

"Oh. Good," Efran said, glancing at the only one at the table he didn't recognize.

"You're Lord Efran," Xander said, studying the sturdy Polonti in work clothes.

"That depends," Efran said cautiously.

But Minka asked Xander in gleeful deviousness, "Oh! Were you at the performance yesterday?"

"Yes?" he said warily.

She started laughing into her hand. "Efran wants to apologize to everyone for his insincere apology."

"No, that was you apologizing insincerely," he insisted.

Still laughing, she saw Eryk lingering in the doorway. He said cautiously, "Bell pull works, Lady Minka."

"Good," she laughed. "Come get a canapé."

Hesitantly, he came to stand at the table, where Jehan pushed the tray toward him. He took one, then turned quickly as Hartshough put a chair behind him and a glass of mineral water in his hand. He sat in a haze of disbelief, then ate and drank quietly while the Lord of the Abbey Lands was insisting, "I didn't see any reason to apologize at all, and did it only to save Marguerite from an hysterical scene."

Xander attempted to acknowledge the lord's comment before asking Marguerite, "May we meet here briefly tomorrow, to acclimate everyone to the new practice venue?"

She replied, "That's all right with me, but run it by Hartshough, as he's the one who keeps track of everything."

Xander turned to Hartshough, who said, "That will be acceptable, sir. Shall we say the first hour after noon?"

"Yes, thank you, that's ideal," Xander said.

While Eryk ate quietly, several speakers were voicing their thoughts simultaneously: Joshua pointed, "Canpay."

Efran protested, "How is one supposed to react being attacked in public by a woman one hardly remembers?"

Xander asked Hartshough, "How much shall I owe you?"

To which Hartshough replied: "Nothing, sir, this is a privilege of community service."

Xander was looking close to tears when Justinian, elegant as usual in a creamy white suit, stopped by the table to chastise, "Marguerite, why do you allow such rabble into your home?" Eryk cringed, but Justinian was surveying Efran in his slightly soiled work clothes.

“Where else would you go for Hartshough’s experiments?” Efran replied. He removed the canapé platter from Joshua’s reach, who already had two grasped in his fists, and extended it to Justinian.

“That is a consideration,” Justinian admitted, taking a canapé to taste it. “Hartshough, you are a culinary genius.”

“Thank you, Lord Justinian.” Hartshough bowed.

Justinian added to Efran, “But since you’re here, I thought to let you know I’ll be off to Eurur or Crescent Hollow tomorrow.”

“No, Justinian, you just got here!” Minka wailed.

He darted his eyes to her, then checked Efran, who looked cross. But Efran said, “I don’t want you going back to Eurur until we know what threat the trolls are. And Crescent Hollow may be in upheaval with Sughrue taking control.”

“Shouldn’t I find out?” Justinian asked.

“Clear it with Commander Wendt before you go,” Efran said.

“Well. Whatever shall I do meanwhile?” Justinian asked, looking at Minka.

“Xander’s orchestra will be rehearsing and performing here! They’re going to have just a short session tomorrow,” she informed him.

Justinian raised a brow at Xander. “Really? An orchestra? Then I’ll try to stay alive for that.” Xander blinked and Justinian took another canapé before handing the platter off to Coish.

To Efran, Justinian said, “But if you’re going to be a tyrant about it, I’ll go check in with the Commander. Later, dearest.” He leaned over to kiss Marguerite’s cheek. As he paused over Minka, Efran raised his eyes to him. Justinian cleared his throat and departed with an impertinent salute.

“All right.” Efran stood with Joshua. “I’m going to take my wife back to the place that she actually lives, but I’ll send her back to you tomorrow.” Jehan and Coish stood promptly.

As Minka got up, Efran bent to kiss Marguerite’s head, but Joshua reached to her, crying, “Hawso!”

“Oh, my darling,” Marguerite sighed, a hand to her chest.

Efran heartlessly pulled him away. “If you’re good, I’ll bring you back tomorrow.”

“Hawso,” Joshua sulked.

Minka kissed her auntie while her bodyguards bowed to the lady. Coish said, “Thank you, Lady Marguerite.”

“You boys go on, but come see me again.” She waved as though despondent at their leaving.

When that party left, Xander also stood with a deep bow. “I am dazed at your generosity, Lady Marguerite.” Bozzelli expected to be paid for every favor.

“We are most anxious to hear your orchestra perform, Xander,” she said.

“You certainly shall,” he said. He bowed to Hartshough as well, who counter-bowed, so that was confusing for a moment, until he left.

Eryk slowly stood. “Thank you for work, Lady,” he began hesitantly. He was bracing to ask to sleep in her backyard, as the Lands did not permit vagrants to sleep on public property.

But she waved. “HARTSHOUGH!”

He appeared magically at her side, as usual: “Yes, my lady.” Eryk watched tensely, expecting to be shown out the door.

“Hartshough, get him clothes, show him the bath and a bed. We need at least one permanent handyman in house,” she said.

“Yes, Lady. If you will follow me, please,” Hartshough told him.

Eryk turned to her, his face contorted in disbelieving gratitude, but she waved him away. “Willingness is more valuable than wholeness, you know.” He paused to take that in, then went to follow Hartshough.

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Chapter 12

Up in the fortress, Efran and Minka found that they were just in time for dinner, but Joshua had passed out on his father’s arm. So they dropped him off in the nursery before turning down the corridor to the dining hall. “I’m not hungry,” she laughed warningly, so that he wouldn’t make her eat.

“I’m not very much, either. Hartshough’s canapés were certainly filling. But we need to see the children,” Efran said.

“Yes. Oh, I’m so glad Xander won’t mind their coming to watch them play. Toby, in particular, seems to love music,” she said.

“Toby’s interested in everything. But yes, that will be good for all of them,” Efran agreed. He held her elbow to help her sit at the bench. “Just a small plate for me, Wardly,” he said, seeing Madea’s oldest child advance. “What will you have?” Efran asked Minka.

“Just custard. Thank you, Wardly,” she said.

“Yes’m, yes, Cap’n,” he said, turning to go get their plates.

The children converged on them, having seen little of them today. So after listening to their various complaints and accomplishments, Efran told them, “We’re taking you down to the chapel tomorrow to hear an orchestra practice. I think you’ll like that.”

“What’s an horchester?” Hassie asked suspiciously.

“Musical instruments that play together. We can have you taught on any of them that you like,” Efran said.

“We’ll see,” Hassie said, reserving judgment.

Efran and Minka went to bed early, after he had convinced Kraken to sleep in his stall tonight. As she nestled into his side, he kissed her head, murmuring, “You haven’t said much about . . . what you found out”—about her being faerie, as was her great-grandmother.

She opened her eyes a little, and her fingers tightened in his shirt. “Nothing has changed,” she whispered back. “I’m no different than I was before, and I don’t think that just knowing makes any difference.”

She raised up abruptly to look in his face. “Efran, I’m not—not different from you. I’m not an alien or another creature,” she stammered.

“No, of course not,” he said, stroking her hair. “You’re just what I always knew you were, deep inside. It’s all right.”

She lay her head back down on his shoulder, but didn’t go to sleep for a long time afterward, thinking, *He wouldn’t bring it up if it hadn’t been bothering him.*

The next morning, June 5th, Firmin’s accountant Gudgeon paid a visit to Bozzelli at his house in the western section. Bozzelli answered his knock, glowing. “Gudgeon! Come in! Wasn’t Arbaiza’s performance the most glorious thing you ever heard? We’re going to have her back for an encore, you know. Here, have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Gudgeon sat in an overstuffed chair and regarded the elegant sitting room. “Do you happen to be married to a decorator? This looks fairly palatial,” he remarked in admiration.

“No, dear friend, just help from casual acquaintances,” Bozzelli demurred. “Oh, and we secured the chapel for Xander’s orchestra as well. I am so pleased that the current resident is being reasonable about our using it.”

“Is that right? The Lady Marguerite? How much is she charging you?” Gudgeon asked indifferently.

Bozzelli paused. “Well, we’re trying to be quiet about that aspect. We’ll go to whatever lengths necessary to bring the arts to the savages.”

“The ‘savages’?” Gudgeon laughed painfully.

“So to speak,” Bozzelli said, nestling into a companion overstuffed chair. “You must admit that the Lands is not on the level of Eurus or Crescent Hollow.”

“But, those cities have been established for hundreds of years. The Abbey Lands is merely two years old,” Gudgeon said. This he knew for a fact, as he was Firmin’s first hire, and Firmin’s was one of the very earliest shops in the Lands.

Bozzelli merely laughed. After an uncomfortable silence, Gudgeon said, “Well, Firmin himself was so pleased to contribute to the chapel’s construction. Didn’t he pay for the stained-glass windows?”

“I don’t really know,” Bozzelli said indifferently.

“You don’t know,” Gudgeon said flatly.

“No, my goodness. How should I keep up with the financials when I had to design it and see that those designs were faithfully rendered during construction?”

Gudgeon was looking at him almost in pity. “You mentioned at the grand opening the businesses that had contributed to the construction. Rimbault and the grand stairway?” he prodded.

Bozzelli fluttered his fingers lightly around his head. “These last few days have been such a whirlwind that I can’t even remember what I said yesterday.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gudgeon said sincerely. Reminding him about the thank-you letter he had sent to Firmin for his contribution for the windows was pointless, although that framed letter was now on display in Firmin’s office.

“Well, then.” Gudgeon stood sadly. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to work” *and somehow find a way to tell Firmin the truth.*

Bozzelli stood, as well. “I also, my friend. I’m pitching an idea to Rimbault to add a performance hall to the first floor of the inn going up, which I will design, of course.”

Gudgeon blinked at him. “A performance hall? But they have the Meeting Hall which is finished and in use.”

“No, no, no,” Bozzelli said with the mildest condescension. “I’m not suggesting a ‘meeting hall’ for religious people or amateur productions; I’m proposing a quality performance hall for professional artists.”

“At the site of the inn now going up?” Gudgeon asked, confused.

“Adjacent to it,” Bozzelli said.

“Which you *will* design?” Gudgeon asked.

“Correct,” Bozzelli said, smiling. All of which constituted an impossibility.

Blinking rapidly, Gudgeon took his hand to shake it. “Good luck then, my friend.” He turned toward the front door.

“Thank you. Then you’ll put a word in to Firmin for me?” Bozzelli inquired.

Gudgeon turned back, still mildly confused. “For . . . ?”

“A contribution for the construction of the new hall,” Bozzelli said.

“Ohh,” Gudgeon exhaled. Opening the door, he patted Bozzelli’s shoulder. “Of course, old friend. Of course.” And when he left, Bozzelli was rubbing his hands in anticipation.

That afternoon, Minka and four Abbey men—Arne, Elowen, Melott and Nee—were supervising a wagonload of

ten children riding down the switchback toward the chapel. Toby, Noah, Ivy, Alcmund, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, Jera, Acy, and Pim were all the children in the Abbey's care right now, except for three babies who were too young for this field trip, and Joshua. (This also did not include Pia, the gifted Polonti child who rarely left the hilltop woods.)

Minka sat beside Arne, who drove the wagon, while the other three men rode on horseback around them. The children were quietly excited and nervous, having been told what this trip was about, what they would see, and what they should do if they got bored (ask to play outside in the backyard, which would be permitted).

Efran and Joshua were supposed to be riding down with them at this time, but he had been diverted to the second-floor workroom at the last minute. With Joshua on his arm, he stood at the east-facing window with DeWitt and Estes on either side of him. Estes was whispering, "Efran, we believe that the lines have moved."

Efran was staring at the giant bird etched into the ground on the east Lands. "What do you mean?"

Estes explained, "It appears that the pattern as a whole has moved westward several feet, at least."

Gazing out, Efran shook his head. "How can you tell?"

"Here's one indication," DeWitt said, picking up a sheet of paper to show him. "When your group got back from looking at it, Goss sat down and sketched it. Look at the wings on the paper, then look out the window."

Efran did that, looking back and forth from the paper to the window several times. "The wings are spread farther than they had been, according to this. But—how sure are you that Goss got it right?"

"Remember the drawings of the Graetrix he did from memory?" DeWitt asked.

Efran's face cleared. "Yes."

Estes added, "One more thing, Efran: I and several others remember that the most forward point of the design, the head, was even with the ridge six miles from the east branch of the Passage. Look out there now at the ridge."

Efran looked. "The bend of the wing is at it now; the head is past it by—what? Twenty or thirty feet?"

"It's hard to tell how much from this distance, but, yes," Estes said.

Efran turned to him, peering. "So this giant drawing on the ground is *flying toward us*?"

DeWitt half laughed, "We don't know what we're seeing."

Frowning out the window again, Efran shook his head vacantly. "Carry on."

Down at the chapel, Marguerite was effusively greeting the children, who were quietly awed to see the inside of the oyster house (as they called it, due to the shape of the roof as seen from the hilltop). Then, they watched the musicians gathering on the platform to sit in a semicircle of chairs. The children slid onto benches a respectful twenty feet from the platform. While several men stood guard outside the door, Minka, Arne and Elowen sat with the children to watch the musicians assemble.

Xander, before them, turned to bow to Minka, and she smiled at him. Almost human now, he instructed his musicians to set up their instruments before their chairs. There were a frame drum, a harp, a lyre, a vielle, a flute, a recorder, a lute, a rebec, and two trumpets. They opened their music at a certain page, and, following his hand movements, began to play.

The children watched in fascination for the first ten minutes or so, then began to get restless. The sounds were sweet, but not very loud nor varied. But the children waited, seeing if there were more to come. Little Pim crawled up on Minka's lap with his sister beside them. Toby and Alcmund sat on either side of Marguerite, given that Toby remembered her from a visit they'd made to her great house a year and a half ago. She received them warmly then and now.

Almost unnoticed, another group was allowed into the chapel, as they were bearing instruments as well. At first, they stopped in the back of the hall to watch and listen to the selection being played. Then with the next song, they came to life, hearing something that they evidently knew.

The eight of them pulled out their handbells, careful to keep them quiet until the players on the platform reached a certain point in the music, then the newcomers rang their bells in accompaniment. Everyone wheeled to look at the eight beaming men playing along.

When the musicians on the platform fell silent with their conductor staring at the new arrivals, one of them nodded and grinned, "You play 'Fortune Owes Me Plenty.' We know this, too! Do you know 'Beggars Rich in Love'?"

"You're the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers!" Minka laughed in delight.

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Chapter 13

"Yes, yes!" The eight Bidderscombe Bell Ringers rang their bells in a lovely cascading flourish. Then they looked to the conductor for his directions, and Minka turned her large blue eyes on him.

"Get up here!" Xander ordered.

With great joviality, the bell ringers clambered up onto the platform and arranged themselves to stand behind the seated musicians. Then the whole group began "Fortune Owes Me Plenty" from the top. What had been a rather pedestrian effort was transformed into a full-bodied, though uneven, musical experience.

Xander had the ringers damp their bells at certain points of the music so that they wouldn't overpower the other instruments, and after some practice, the two groups were melded into a unified orchestra. It was amazing to hear the difference.

Under Xander's direction, the combined musicians played through that piece several times, then covered "Beggars Rich in Love" and "Lady, If You're Mine"--all popular songs of the time. Xander stopped the playing to talk with the bell ringers for a few minutes, then they took up "Beggars Rich in Love" again, to work through a few rough spots.

As they were playing the last song, Efran came in with Joshua. He stood in the back until they finished, then the musicians took a break. Hartshough happened to put out refreshments just about then, so players and children swarmed the great dining table, eating and talking.

When Joshua called, "HAWSO!" several people turned, including the one summoned. He came over to bow. "Good afternoon, Lord Joshua. Do you care for a bite?"

"Bite!" Joshua said, reaching for him.

Efran objected, "Joshua, he's busy. I can't let you--"

"Please do not trouble yourself about it, Lord Efran. I will supervise his snacking," Hartshough said, taking the toddler.

"Sneckee," Joshua agreed. And Hartshough transported him to the dining table to join the musicians and the other children.

Minka cried, "There you are! Finally!" She ran up to land on Efran, reaching up to kiss him, but he was watching Xander follow her and didn't lower his face.

"Lord Efran," Xander said, bowing. "We've had a most productive practice with the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers, and now they all want to perform tomorrow evening. Is that possible, sir?"

"I'm glad to hear it, but that's up to Lady Marguerite," Efran said, nodding as she approached to pat him on the shoulder.

"Oh my goodness, Efran, what a grand bout of music we've had this afternoon!" she said.

Minka grinned. "Weren't they great? But, Auntie, they want to perform here tomorrow night!" Two of the bell ringers came up behind her to listen.

"Well then, they should," Marguerite said. "The only difficulty would be to get word out about the performance in time for everyone to come."

One ringer interjected, "Lady, we have bells! We can go up and down the streets ringing the news!"

"Then that's what you should *do*," Marguerite said.

The ringers had started to move off when Xander stopped them. "Thank you, Lady Marguerite; that is very gracious of you. But, there is another issue, that being, they have no money for lodging for the night, and--"

Marguerite interrupted, "Well, if they're willing to sleep four to a room, they can stay here."

"Grand Lady, wonderful patroness of the musical arts!" one bell ringer cried. She just laughed.

Xander look at her intently for a moment, then said, "Lady Marguerite, would you marry me?"

"No," Efran said, scowling, while Minka and her auntie laughed.

Marguerite said, "Oh, Efran, he's just trying to express gratitude. You men have difficulty with that." To Xander,

she added, "Send out your ringers, then practice as long as you like. Hartshough and I won't care."

Several people spoke, but Efran overrode them: "Has Justinian already left?"

"Left the Lands? I don't think so. He should be back some time tonight," Marguerite said.

Efran turned to whistle, and several soldiers ran up, saluting. He said, "Arne, find me four men who can stay awake tonight. I want them stationed here in the chapel." This was Efran's method of vetting, especially with someone as carelessly generous as Marguerite.

"Yes, Cap'n," Arne said. Then he motioned another man over to give him instructions.

Efran looked down at Minka with misgivings. "I see you've been busy this afternoon."

"Oh no," she disavowed, hands up. "I had nothing to do with any of this, except to enjoy the music."

As the children were getting rowdy, Efran whistled for them to be collected into the wagon and hauled up to the fortress grounds where they could wear themselves out before dinner. Receiving Joshua from Hartshough, Efran leaned over to kiss Marguerite's head. "All right, then, we'll be back tomorrow," he said, studying Xander.

"We're fine, Efran," Marguerite said, patting him. "The visitors just ensure that I won't get lonely and put too many demands on you or Minka."

He looked down at her. "We owe you."

"That's not a reason to burden you, especially when it's unnecessary," she insisted.

Almost groaning, he looked over to the last of the children being ushered out the front doors. "Count them," he called, then put his arm around Minka's shoulders to walk her out to their horses.

They caught sight of Justinian approaching the chapel, and paused to wait for him. "Did you talk to the Commander?" Efran asked.

"Yes," Justinian exhaled in dissatisfaction. "He told me not to leave yet. Hullo, Minka."

She smiled. "Hello, Justinian. Don't worry; you'll have plenty of entertainment while you're waiting. The Bidderscombe Bell Ringers are staying the night and performing tomorrow with Xander's orchestra."

"Staying the night," Justinian repeated, glassy-eyed. "How many?"

"Eight," Minka admitted.

"Eight Bidderscombe Bell Ringers," Justinian said tightly. "If they practice down the loft from me tonight, there may be only five or six remaining for the performance tomorrow."

Minka laughed as she climbed into the driver's seat beside Arne. Efran advised Justinian, "Check with Hartshough, first." This made her laugh again; Justinian twirled his silver-headed walking stick noncommittally.

While a soldier held Joshua, Efran jumped up on Kraken's back. He took Joshua to ask Arne, "Are all the children here?"

Both Minka and Arne turned to count. They said, “Yes,” and “Yes, Cap’n.” So with Joshua perched on Efran’s leg on Kraken, they rode up the new switchback to the fortress gates.

While everyone unloaded in the courtyard, Minka watched Efran looking distracted and preoccupied. The children’s bodyguards herded them around the western side of the fortress to the back grounds. Taking Efran’s arm to snuggle him while he carried Joshua into the foyer, she said, “Efran, you mustn’t worry about Marguerite. She’s been dealing with suitors and shysters in Euris for many years.”

“Yes, being faerie helps,” he murmured, glancing around. Then she heard him think, *Is that why I fell in love with her? Because she’s faerie?*

She let go of his arm, catching her breath. He wasn’t thinking about Marguerite.

Blankly, she stood at their quarters while he took Joshua on down to the nursery. Then she absently turned in to use the garderobe, freshen up, and clean her ears. There was a little crustiness, but they weren’t infected.

Then Minka sat at the table in the outer room. She couldn’t think, and couldn’t stop her hands from shaking.

Efran opened the door; seeing her at the table, he sat with her. He wiped his mouth and began, “I keep thinking. . .” Her heart froze; she could do nothing but watch him. He continued, “I keep thinking about the chart, the lineage in the silver box that Marguerite sent me back for. It must be important; it must be more than just the names. But what? Has she said anything about it to you?”

Minka shook her head, dumb. He went on, “I may ask her. Can you ask her? It doesn’t really involve me.”

She began, “Are you s-sorry--”

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Efran stood to open it. Outside, Arne said, “We’ve got yer four men in the chapel, Cap’n; the orchestra leader and his group have left for the day; Hartshough is getting the bell ringers situated and Lady Marguerite wants yer to know they’re all behaving.”

“Good, Arne; thank you,” Efran half-laughed, shutting the door. He sat at the table, again, folding his arms across his chest.

Watching him, she thought, *He’s such a beautiful man, so intelligent, so dedicated. And he fell in love with me because of the faerie influence. There’s no other explanation for why a man like him would even look at me. As she stared off, her thoughts ran on, So what is there to do? How is that to be corrected? . . . It’s not. There is no option to change what you are.*

Efran was talking again, but for the first time ever, she wasn’t listening. Instead, she was thinking, *He could marry any woman he wanted—the most beautiful, the most talented. And as Lord of the Abbey, he’s no longer constrained by his race. He could fall in love for real.*

“So what do you think?” he finished tensely. She only nodded.

The following morning, June 6th, Minka slipped down to the chapel on foot, and the gate guards let her go by herself because they knew men were already stationed there. She entered to find a great hubbub with the musicians having breakfast and Xander arguing with Bozzelli, but Minka looked past them to the patio, where

Marguerite was sitting at the table looking at the fountain and the new plantings.

Minka went out to sit beside her, and Marguerite looked over with soft eyes. “Good morning, Minka.”

“I wish it were,” Minka murmured, dark circles under her eyes. “Auntie, I—I need help. Efran thinks that, he fell in love with m-me because of—the faerie. That I am faerie. He fell in love with that.”

“He probably did,” Marguerite whispered.

“Then—what do I do? It’s like—entrapment, or, deceit. And now that he realizes that--” She couldn’t even finish the thought.

Marguerite was silent a moment, then she said, “Efran has a choice to make. You must stand aside and let him make it.”

“I want to leave,” Minka gasped.

Marguerite was shaking her head. “That would only disrupt the process, making it more difficult for him and you. Stand back and let him make his choice. Then you will know what to do.”

Minka dropped her head, pouring tears. “You are so wise, it’s almost unbearable.”

“Yes, isn’t she?” Larisse snarked, suddenly beside them. “But she’s not the one who set up the choice he has to make.”

Minka rounded on her, demanding, “*Go away!*” With an impish pout, Larisse vanished.

Minka put her head in her hands to pull herself together. Then she raised her face, squinting. “Auntie . . . what did she mean about setting up the choice he has to make?”

Marguerite sighed in reluctance. “Larisse decided to invoke her position as your grandmother to impose a Test of Faithfulness on Efran.”

“Wha--?” Minka breathed. “How . . . ?”

“It’s a privilege granted your forebears, to insure that your choice of a human husband is worthy. Normally, this happens before marriage, but as Larisse was late on the scene, she invoked it now,” Marguerite said.

“What happens if he fails?” Minka whispered.

“Then your marriage is annulled,” Marguerite said.

“No,” Minka breathed.

Marguerite shook her head. “This is Faerie Law, and Roman’s Law. Infidelity destroys a union.”

“Then that would revoke his charter,” Minka whispered in shock.

“Yes,” Marguerite said. After a moment’s thought, she said, “It’s time he pulled out the lineage chart he brought back from Featherstone. Tell him to put it back in the silver box when he’s not using it.”

“All right,” Minka said, then asked, “Will it help him make his choice?”

“Yes,” Marguerite smiled.

Minka pleaded, “Auntie, t-tell me that it w-will be all right.”

“It will be as it was meant to be,” the woman replied, and Minka looked into an ageless face of love.

With a gasp, Minka leaned over to hold her tightly. Then she exhaled, standing. “Thank you, Auntie.”

Marguerite nodded. “Don’t forget the concert tonight.”

“I’ll be here,” Minka smiled.

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Chapter 14

Leaving Marguerite on the patio, Minka went out through the hall, where Bozzelli and Xander were still arguing. Bozzelli stopped her with, “Minka, you need to--”

She threw up her hands. “You do whatever Marguerite tells you.”

“There!” Xander flung at him. Bozzelli continued to argue, but she walked around them to exit the front doors.

Kraken was standing at the steps, swishing his tail. Krall said, “There’s your ride up, Lady Minka.”

She exhaled, reaching over to pet his nose, and he snuffled her. “Help me up, please, Krall,” she sighed, as Kraken was bare, without saddle or bridle.

“Sure thing, Lady.” He grasped her waist to place her on Kraken’s broad back, who turned to begin walking toward the old switchback. She clutched his mane the whole way up.

In the courtyard, Serrano helped her down, and she went in through the foyer. In the corridor, she paused at the library door, where Law lessons were underway with Soames, Ella, the Librarian, and several soldiers on the floor. She stuck her head in to interrupt: “I’m sorry to be late again—I have to give Efran a message, then I’ll be right down.”

“Yes, thank you, Minka,” Soames said, gratified, and Ella smiled at her.

So Minka trotted up the stairs to the second-floor workroom. As she entered, Efran, Estes and DeWitt turned from the window. Efran came over to meet her at the table, and she asked, “Didn’t you bring the lineage chart up here? Auntie said you need to look it now. She said to put it back in the box when you’re not using it.”

“Yes, it’s--” Efran went over to the shelf where he had left it. He pulled the silver box from the burlap, asking her, “How do I use it?”

She shook her head. “That’s up to you to figure out. She seemed to think you would.” Behind him, DeWitt smiled, and Estes nodded.

She began to turn out again, and Efran said, “Wait.”

“I’ve missed too many Law classes. I promised Soames I’d be right down,” she said. Then she left without waiting for an answer.

She returned to the library to sit at the small table with Soames, Ella, and the Librarian. The soldiers leapt up to bow to her, and she said, “Please sit. Excuse me for interrupting again, Soames. Please continue.”

“Yes, Minka. We’re covering legitimate and illegitimate grounds for divorce,” he said.

“Oh. What difference does it make?” Minka looked so despondent that Ella laughed in sympathy.

“It matters for the support that a husband is required to pay his ex-wife,” Soames said. He began to cover the stipulations while Minka listened intently. *What would Efran pay me? He’d be generous, she knew. If he has anything left.*

Upstairs, Efran was sitting at the table while Estes and DeWitt stood on either side of him. He pulled the silver box from the burlap, telling them, “This is what Marguerite sent me to retrieve from Featherstone after they escaped the trolls.”

“Well, that tells you why she couldn’t take it herself,” DeWitt observed.

“Right,” Efran said. He had to examine the box for a moment to figure out how to open it. He muttered, “It seemed like she just--” And the box fell open in his hands.

His administrators watched him withdraw the parchment and lay it out on the table. They leaned over him to study the thick silver lettering on mottled parchment, which read:

Everleigh
Regina Pixie
|
Marguerite
|
Larisse
|
Kewe
|
Minka

DeWitt murmured, “So, Marguerite’s mother Everleigh was Faerie Queene over the entire Southern Continent. Isn’t that what you told us?”

“Yes,” Efran said. “She said her daughter Larisse was a wild child that she lost contact with for a number of years, and, you know what happened with Minka’s mother.”

“I wonder why her faerie nature couldn’t prevent her being abused like that,” Estes said.

Efran shook his head. “Marguerite said something about—growing into it. Apparently, she just never had a chance. . . .” He trailed off, thinking of Minka. Was she growing into her faerie nature? Her . . . power?

Lightly touching the lettering, Estes said, “Silver is associated with faerie magic, isn’t it? These names look to be written in silver.”

“I don’t know, but I’m not interested in using any magic,” Efran said. Abruptly standing, he rolled up the chart to replace it in the box, which he dropped into the burlap bag. This he shoved back onto the shelf before returning to the window.

“Now. Has it moved from yesterday?” he asked.

They studied the bird silently for a minute. Then Estes said, “I can’t tell. Except—the wings are tucked tighter, though the head is still leading.”

“Looks like a falcon, doesn’t it?” DeWitt murmured. Estes nodded in confirmation.

Efran said, “We need a way to measure its movement. What about—large stakes driven into the ground at the beak?”

“And at the tips of the wings,” Estes concurred.

“Yes, I’ll have a team get on that,” DeWitt said, moving to the door.

“Large stakes with colored flags that we can see from up here,” Efran said.

“Right.” DeWitt left the room, and Estes sat in front of his ledger again.

Feeling the weight of necessity, Efran paused in front of the shelves to reluctantly take out the burlap-wrapped silver box again. He plopped into his chair to open the box and spread out the parchment. This he studied without comprehension, shaking his head. He looked toward the window, leaning back.

Look at me, something breathed not quite audibly. Restless, Efran looked back down at the parchment. “Names, names,” he muttered. His booted heel began tapping the wood floor, and Estes raised his eyes in displeasure. “Sorry,” Efran sighed.

He made his foot be still, but couldn’t bring himself to focus on the parchment. Then he paused to wonder, *Why can’t I make myself look at it? Because there’s nothing there? But how do I know that if I won’t look?*

So he focused on the first name, Everleigh. Regina Pixie: Faerie Queene.

Everleigh. Regina Pixie.

Everleigh. As he stared at the name, he saw the silver lettering of all the names begin to melt and flow together until a layer of silver covered the parchment from edge to edge. Gazing into this silver, he saw a breathtakingly beautiful woman in regal dress riding a white horse in a procession to a great cathedral. She dismounted at the foot of massive, long steps, where she lifted her skirts to ascend to a man waiting for her at the top, dressed in

crimson. He extended his hand to take hers and lead her into the great cathedral to marry her.

From there, Efran saw glimpses of battles, and courtroom proceedings, pronouncements made to raging mobs, and dinners attended by hundreds. All he understood of what he was seeing was that this was a condensed view of her reign over many years—hers and her husband’s.

There was the birth of a child, a daughter, whom Efran only glimpsed. She was a beautiful little thing, but, evidently not a high priority of her mother’s.

Then he saw a darkened bedroom in which the man lay on a great bed, breathing his last. An attendant drew up the sheet to cover his face as the woman knelt beside his bed. After all these years, her face was unchanged—except for the shock of sorrow that she had never experienced before.

There was another procession, this one of black horses drawing a black hearse to an ancient burial ground. The woman wore black for a while, and then gray.

From then on, Efran saw nothing but gray. She was dressed completely in gray, with a filmy gray shawl covering her head. She walked among gray trees over a lifeless forest floor. There were no sounds, only echoes of something far distant. The gray clouds above produced no rain, only an infertile mist. And before she disappeared into the mists, there was a dark gray shadow of a bird flying overhead.

“Efran . . . Efran . . . Efran!”

He startled, looking up at Estes, who asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so,” Efran said, blinking. He looked around the dim workroom.

“I’m going down to dinner. DeWitt’s already gone. Minka’s at the concert in the chapel,” Estes said.

Efran stood in shock. “How long have I been--?”

“Ah, five or six hours. There must have been a great deal to read there,” Estes said, glancing at the chart. To his view, the five names and one title were now as they had been.

“Yes, I’m—going down to the chapel,” Efran said. He stood unsteadily to replace the chart in the silver box, which he then covered with the burlap.

Following Estes down the stairs, he muttered, “I lost a whole day on that.” But it must have been essential, somehow. He just didn’t know what it meant yet. *Everleigh was Marguerite’s mother. So the child I saw was . . . Marguerite.*

Estes entered the dining hall with Efran behind him, who looked to the front where DeWitt and Tera were eating, and Kelsey was waiting for Estes. Then Efran looked down at the back table, where Ella was watching him quizzically. “Are you going to eat, Father?”

He patted her shoulder, glancing to Quennel beside her with Joshua on his knee. “No, I’m going down to the chapel to get Minka.” She nodded, and he turned to trot to the front door.

Fennig, on door duty, said, “The beast has been trying to come in all day, Cap’n.”

Efran blinked at him, then looked out at Kraken standing at the foot of the fortress steps. Upon seeing Efran, he tossed his head, snorting. *You scared me.*

“How?” Efran asked, coming down the steps to jump up on his bare back.

You were gone. I couldn't find you.

“Going back in time,” Efran said, patting his neck. “I have to do it a few more times, but right now we’re going down to the chapel.”

Kraken turned to trot out of the courtyard as the gate guards saluted. Then Kraken carried his rider down the new switchback while Efran looked to the chapel’s front grounds, which were clogged with waiting carriages, horses, and attendants.

Arriving at the far edge of this impenetrable group, Efran slid off Kraken, patting his neck. “You wait here.” Then Efran began working his way through the obstacles toward the chapel doors. The closer he got, the clearer the instrumental sounds came through the early evening air. The light from the chandeliers streamed out as well.

He finally managed to press his way inside the doors to stand along the back wall. Surveying the back of a hundred heads, he saw no soldiers (except for those on duty). But there were many coiffed heads over highly colored collars and shoulders.

Then on a row close to the front, he saw Marguerite’s gray head. Next to her was a curly light-brown head that was lowered as if in sorrow. That was Minka’s.

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Chapter 15

While the orchestra on the platform finished up a rousing number, Efran studied Minka’s head. When she was listening, paying attention, or happy, she raised her head. But, her head was definitely lowered now. Was she upset that he had not come? But surely Estes or DeWitt would have told her that he was studying the chart Marguerite had given him.

The number ended; the conductor turned to bow, extending a hand to his players, who also bowed. The audience leapt to their feet to applaud. Minka also applauded, raising her head only minimally. Next to her was Justinian’s dark brown head, without his hat. (He was far too socially adept to wear it in a concert setting.) The musicians left the platform to eat, drink, or mingle with the listeners.

At length, the audience began to drift away to talk to someone across the hall or make their way toward the doors. Efran continued to watch Minka until she turned to scan the back wall, and saw him.

Her face brightened, and then faded as though she had remembered something. But she spoke to Marguerite, who turned to blow him a kiss. Justinian turned to blow him a raspberry. Then Minka began working her way to him at the back wall. Because she was small, it was a stop-and-go trip. But it was pointless for Efran to force his way to her only to have to clear a path coming back.

When she drew up to him, he encircled her with an arm to lift her off her feet and carry her out on that one arm. “Efran!” she laughed, holding his neck.

“All right, you’ve done enough for the cultural arts. I’m sorry that I couldn’t suffer through another musical program with you, but I was studying your auntie’s lineage. I just didn’t know it would take so long,” he muttered.

“Did you learn anything?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know, but I saw—oh, where’s your horse?” He stopped to drop her to her feet and look around.

“I walked down,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “Here’s Kraken.” Snorting, the horse drew up to snuffle her, and she petted his nose. Efran hoisted her up to his back, then began walking toward the switchback at Kraken’s head.

“No,” she protested. “I want to walk with you.”

“No, stay there,” he said. She began to argue, but Efran grabbed Kraken’s mane with his left hand to jump up on his back behind her. Leaning forward against her, he told Kraken, “You can carry us both up the switchback.” The horse snorted, but complied.

Minka leaned back in Efran’s arms, sighing. “So what did you see?”

“I saw bits and pieces of Marguerite’s mother’s reign. I don’t know what I was supposed to get from it; it was so—disjointed. And not very happy. When her husband died, she just faded to gray. And I didn’t even know that I was sitting there for hours. I don’t know what I can get from the rest of them . . . except yours.”

“Mine’s going to be shorter,” she promised. Her hands rested on his arms, and she felt so secure there. But she knew that to be wishful thinking, until he got past this choice, whatever it was. And then . . . who knew where she would be?

In the courtyard, he swung down from Kraken, and she slipped off for him to catch her. From there, they went to the dining hall to have a late dinner. “Did you eat?” he asked her, scanning the kitchen doors, and she shrugged. As Wardly came toward them, Efran asked her, “What do you want?”

“You,” she said inaudibly, but he heard her. Then she corrected herself, “I had something to eat at Marguerite’s.”

“Good,” he said, studying her, and Wardly brought him the best of what was left.

The following morning, June 7th, Minka made sure that she was the first to Law class, except for the Librarian. When Efran got up to the workroom, Estes was not there yet, but DeWitt was at the window. On his way over, Efran asked, “Any change?”

“Have a look,” DeWitt said.

Efran peered out the window. “Are the stakes lying on the ground?”

“They seem to be,” DeWitt said.

Efran was continuing to squint at the distant lines. “What—what is that, all that behind the bird?--that shadow all behind it, where the lines had been before. Oh, there’s no use trying to see from this distance. I’ll get a few men and ride out there.”

“Good plan,” DeWitt said, seating himself at his worksheets.

So Efran collected the first four men he could find, and had them bring heavy stakes and hammers. Then he rode out on Kraken (saddled and bridled) with Willis, Truro, Seagrave and Dango. When they reached the forefront of the lines—the bird’s beak—they saw that the stake marking its previous location (as of yesterday) was lying broken ten feet back from the new beak location.

The stakes that had been installed at the wing tips when they were tucked were also broken, and the new tips extended about fifteen feet on either side from the previous location. Truro remarked, “It’s as though it’s flying on the ground—the movements are the same.” Efran agreed.

While the other three men were hammering the new stakes at the beak and wingtips, Truro and Efran rode toward the tail end, where the shadow started appearing in the pattern. They could see it from a distance, and Truro noted, “It just looks wet.”

They approached it at a cautious walk. Stopping at the westernmost edge, both men studied the wet, sinking grass. Suddenly, the ground below them gave way. Efran began, “It’s--!” Kraken reared and fell back, but Truro’s horse pitched forward and down feet first. Truro was thrown over his head, disappearing with a splash in what appeared to be a bog.

Efran fell from the saddle to crawl to the edge of the bog. It looked to be advancing by inches westward into previously solid ground. Truro’s horse had managed to free its front feet and run away, but there was no sign of the man. Glancing around, Efran saw a long fragment of stake. He picked this up by the broken end and began sweeping it slowly through the bog.

Something made it stop. Hoping that was Truro, Efran began pulling back on it. About three feet of muddy stake emerged, then Truro’s head and hands came with it. “Hold on,” Efran breathed, pulling steadily until Truro, gasping and choking, clutched the edge of the bog. It crumbled under his hand as it advanced. Efran threw aside the stake, now too slippery to grasp, and reached out to wrap his fists in Truro’s muddy jacket and pull.

The suction of the bog was such that Efran began to slip over the deteriorating edge. Truro was fighting to keep his head above the mud. Efran tried to yell at the rest of the men over his shoulder, but couldn’t get his breath. Kraken stood over his back, front feet on either side, and reached down to take Efran’s belt and waistband in his teeth. He walked back, pulling both men free inches at a time. When they were clear of the bog, he spat out ripped fabric, making horse faces.

Efran stumbled away from the bog’s edge, dragging Truro, who was choking, unable to breathe. Efran held him upside down to whack his back hard, causing him to expel globs of mud. Efran let him down again for him to gasp, retch, and begin breathing unsteadily.

With an eye on him, Efran caught Kraken’s reins to pat his neck. The other men, having caught Truro’s horse in panicky flight, came riding up. “Stay back!” Efran called. They pulled up about twenty feet away.

Efran knelt to check Truro again, who waved, gasping, “I’m good, Captain. Thanks for the assist.”

“Captain! What is it?” Seagrave called.

“A bog, and it’s spreading,” Efran said. “Have you got Truro’s horse? Good. We’re done here.”

Truro climbed onto his horse and they loped back to the populated Lands to warn the Commander and the Captains about the encroaching bog. Efran stopped in his quarters to put on a clean shirt, as well as clean pants that didn’t have a gaping hole in the backside. Then he ran up the steps to the workroom.

Estes, DeWitt, and Koschat looked up as he said, “All right, we found out what the shadow is. It’s a bog, and it’s coming this way.”

“Whut,” DeWitt mouthed.

“To the window,” Efran said with a jerk of his head. While they stood looking out at the bird with the dark shadow trailing it, Efran told them what his group had found. They discussed this for some time, but couldn’t think of any way to counter it. For the meanwhile, they agreed to keep it quiet—it was far enough removed from the populated Lands to pose no danger to them.

Following Law class, Minka decided to spend some time with the children on the back grounds, feeling that she had been neglecting them for Auntie. (Also, after her copper bracelet—her birthday present from Efran—had gotten lost a second time, she started leaving it in their quarters until she came in for dinner.) But she worried that her dear Auntie might be getting lonely. And she wanted her ugly daughter to keep away from her.

Minka should not have worried. Because of the tremendously favorable reception to yesterday’s concert, the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers decided to stay over another day. This was also due to the arrival of the Ruddock Chorale late that morning, who expected (per their arrangement with Bozzelli) to perform in the chapel that evening, June 7th.

The Chorale was composed of six singers who normally performed a cappella, but were interested in combining their efforts with an orchestra and supplementary bell ringers. This Xander was eager to attempt, but it would require a second day of rehearsals. This would push the performance back to June 8th—tomorrow. Therefore, Xander beseeched the dear, generous Lady: was it possible that she could house the Chorale overnight as well as the bell ringers? The Lady could.

To accommodate the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers, Hartshough had already drafted a handful of Efran’s men to move her bedroom furnishings to a downstairs room, ceding the entire upstairs to visitors and Justinian. To make space for the Chorale, Eryk was temporarily relocated to a room off the kitchen, which he readily accepted. Justinian was initially conflicted about the fresh infusion of strangers before deciding that the presence of several attractive women overnight would be bearable.

With the Lady’s blessing, Xander began intense rehearsals. This required that errand boys be sent around to the prominent businesses to inform them of the schedule change. Also, for last night’s performance, they had merely passed a hat. Doing so had collected a fair amount, even a few royals (from Minka). But Xander determined that such an enhanced performance should merit admission to be paid at the door.

Therefore, the errand boys also informed prospective attendees that door entry would be 5 silver pieces. Seating in chairs on the third row would be 10 pieces; in chairs on the second row 15 pieces, and on cushioned chairs in the first row a royal (equivalent to 30 pieces). This created the demand for reservations, prepaid, which required the services of a competent, honest girl to keep track of all that.

Bozzelli, smelling money, arrived at the chapel to claim a portion of the proceeds due to his having engaged the bell ringers and chorale in the first place. Xander had Efran's men escort him out and bar him from even attending rehearsals or the next night's performance.

Efran, knowing nothing more that could be done about the encroaching bog, sat hesitantly at the worktable with the silver box again. He hated to give up another whole day, but this was evidently important for reasons he didn't understand right now.

So he opened the box to spread out the parchment. He was disturbed to find the edges crumbling, evidently due to his handling it yesterday. Also, Everleigh's silver name and title were now black with tarnish. Therefore, he tried to be more careful smoothing out the parchment to focus on the next name under Everleigh: Marguerite, her daughter.

The remaining silver names melted and merged to cover the parchment, as they had yesterday. And Efran saw Marguerite as a little girl. Although beautifully dressed and educated, she was neglected. Great and tumultuous things were happening around her in the faerie realm, but she was mostly alone except for an occasional servant.

The servants were humans, given the faerie uprising, and little Marguerite became fascinated with them. She hardly ever saw her exalted mother, especially when localized uprisings spread into rebellion—over what, Marguerite never understood. Nor did Efran, though he got the impression that Everleigh's human husband had imposed restrictions on the faeries which they found unjust.

When Marguerite was a teenager, the rebellion reached the palace. All staff and servants fled for their lives, but young, beautiful Marguerite had no friends with whom to take refuge. However, she had admirers, and one of them descended on her like a stooping falcon moments before an angry mob broke down the doors to pillage the palace.

He was human, and the most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on: Lord Takoda of Wirrin Valley.

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Chapter 16

Takoda took Marguerite to a cottage on his lands, and nine months later she bore him a son, Verlice. When he was about three, Takoda removed him from the cottage to his own home, presenting him as an orphan to his wife. But Takoda continued to visit Marguerite, and she became pregnant again. Efran watched, heartsick, as she became aware of her bondage and his lies. When she finally came to grips with the fact that humans were no more righteous than faeries, she escaped the cottage with the aid of a rather lumpy faerie who befriended her. His name was Toogood.

She and Toogood disguised themselves as humans and made their way to Eurus. There, in a rented room, he taught her how to develop her faerie abilities to produce an income stream and forge useful friendships. All the while, she hid her pregnancy under loose dresses. When the time came, he assisted her in giving birth to a daughter, and helped her care for the little girl.

Efran watched Toogood help Marguerite buy a large, desirable plot near the palace of Eurus. At the time, the plot

contained tenements that had been abandoned during an outbreak of the fever. These she and Toogood tore down, building a nice, spacious house in its place. While they were occupied with this endeavor, he took a human name and form more suited to his assumed rôle of butler: Hartshough. And Marguerite threw herself into caring for her own precious child, Larisse.

At this point, Larisse's story merged into the scenes Efran was seeing on the parchment. Despite Marguerite's efforts, Larisse was an angry child from the beginning, resentful that she fit in neither the human nor the faerie realm. While still a child, she had discovered the identity of her father, and had gone to him expecting welcome. He had turned her out without even deigning to see her.

From then on, her life was a spiteful rebellion against both worlds, and especially against her mother. In fact, Larisse disappeared so thoroughly that it was several decades before Marguerite even found her again--

Efran startled, looking around. "Yes?" But the workroom was empty.

He quickly went to the window to see the noonday sun. "Well, that only took a few hours," he exhaled in relief. Then, freezing in apprehension, he went over to look at the dates of receipts on DeWitt's side of the table. "June seventh," he sighed in relief, flipping through them all. "Yes, it only took a few hours."

Then he looked back at the parchment to see it crumbling almost before his eyes. Gasping, he gingerly took up the half-page to replace it in the box. There were two silver names left: Kewe and Minka. And he couldn't get to the important one without going through the forgotten one.

Efran went downstairs to look for Minka. As he expected, he found her on the back bench watching the children play around Joshua. Hassie was practically on her lap, talking about dear Auntie's marvelous house and wondering when they could visit her again. Kraken was pulling a till down a garden row with Toby and Almund standing on a bar above the tines to push them down into the soil.

Smiling at Hassie, Efran sat on Minka's other side, draping an arm over the back of the bench behind her. Minka looked over to smile pensively. Hassie, meanwhile, responded to Jera's and Acy's calls to come help them pick the right flowers for the dinner tables tonight. Tourjee hastily got them shears and baskets, wishing to prevent carnage among the plants.

Joshua crept over to Efran, who picked him up. "Well, it only took me a couple of hours this morning to cover Marguerite and her daughter Larisse," he said tentatively.

"What are you learning?" she asked.

"Again, I don't know," he said in dissatisfaction. "I have a feeling I won't know until I see yours and Kewe's. But . . . Marguerite's was—an eye-opener. I had the idea that, because of her wealth and her grace, she'd had a charmed life. That's not the case at all; she *made* a charmed life for herself, with Hartshough's help. Oh—his real name, his faerie name, is Toogood."

"Toogood!" she laughed. "That's—perfect."

"I was sure you were going to say 'too good,'" he observed.

"That would be too perfect," she murmured. She still looked tentative, as though waiting on something.

After a moment, he observed, "I thought you would be at Auntie's today."

“I was neglecting too much here,” she said. “And, I’m . . . kind of ready for all the musicians to clear out of her house.”

“Who’s there now?” he asked.

“Ah, I understand that there are the bell ringers, numbering eight, along with the chorale, numbering six. And we mustn’t forget Xander’s original orchestra of twelve,” she said.

“All staying in the chapel?” he asked, pained.

“I don’t know. But I’m sure Marguerite’s in control,” she said.

“True.” He shifted Joshua on his lap.

At that time, Justinian appeared at the back door, with a sentry pointing to Efran on the bench. So Justinian began ambling over, twirling his walking stick. When he drew up to them, Efran asked sympathetically, “All dressed up and nowhere to go?” Justinian was his usual elegant self in a fawn-colored suit and top hat.

Eyeing the children nearby playing in the dirt, Justinian muttered, “If I get any more musical culture, I’m going to sprout wings and start warbling.”

“Is Auntie all right?” Minka asked apprehensively.

“Need you even ask?” Justinian said in light derision. “She’s enjoying herself, for some reason which God alone knows.”

“Do you get the sense she’s doing something?” Efran asked.

Justinian looked at him sharply to ask, “With ulterior motives?” Efran nodded, watching Kraken prick his ears toward him. But the horse saw no reason to shuck off the tiller. “Possibly,” Justinian allowed. “She’s deep.”

“Yes,” Efran murmured. *Did she prepare that parchment just for me?*

None of them went to the concert that evening, which was just as well. From the reports that Efran’s men brought that night (after Minka had gone to bed), it was a rousing success—so much so that there were fights.

“What? Fights about what?” Efran demanded.

“Well, take your pick, Captain,” Verrin said. “First, some of the seating was mixed up, in that a few people who paid for first-row seats didn’t get ’em, so they had to be accommodated somehow. They didn’t want a refund and a lower seat; they wanted right up front with the orchestra. So the maestro put them right up against the platform. Looked uncomfortable to me, but they were satisfied.”

Efran exhaled in disgust, and Verrin went on, “Then a few of the ladies started brawlin’.” Efran looked at him in pained disbelief, so he explained, “They seemed to be wearing dresses that looked much alike, so they were snarking at each other, and kept it up after the music started, so that everyone around ’em was shushing ’em, so that the maestro had to stop the music and tell everyone to shut up. That was rather grand,” Verrin said in appreciation.

Efran groaned, “Are there plenty of men keeping watch in the chapel?”

“Oh, yes, Cap’n, a good half dozen,” Verrin said.

“All right. Dismissed,” Efran said.

Efran was up early the next morning, June 8th, hoping to finish the parchment before the men came back with a report on the bird and the bog. So he lit a double candleholder to take it up to the workroom even before DeWitt got there. Sitting at the long table while the eastern sky was barely lightening, Efran opened the silver box for the bit of parchment—barely a third of the original. He did not know that someone else awoke at that time to see what he saw.

Efran focused on Kewe’s name, growing uneasy at the long darkness. Finally, he realized that the darkness was most of her story. There were confused images of people yelling at her, and striking her, bits of derisive talk and brutal laughter. Suffused through that was a jagged bird call—*airk airk airk*. He could feel her unending confusion and distress.

There was intense pain, and blood, and the weak sound of a baby crying. Then there was a terrible thrashing of murky green water—hands pushing her down into the reeds. Efran almost felt as though he were drowning himself. But he saw her rise up to fight until finally, the water went still. Everything was still.

For the first time, he saw light in the images of Kewe. He saw a pretty pixie face looking up to the light. The serenity and love surrounding her brought tears to his eyes. Then she turned to look at him, and smiled. She smiled directly at him. No other figure in the scenes had seen him. But she did.

The next scenes came faster. He saw a delicate little girl curled up on Marguerite’s lap, and immediately knew that was Minka. Then all of a sudden, she was yanked away to be dropped into the midst of people who disdained her or ignored her, and an older sister who bullied and berated her. Efran saw the little girl grow wary, yet continually reach out for love.

Then he saw himself in her henhouse, smiling when he talked to her. And he saw her accidentally pull him off the henhouse roof. When he saw himself land on his back and laugh, *You did the best you could*, he could see the love pour out of her like water overflowing an inadequate cup.

The subsequent scenes came in a rush, as the parchment was getting smaller by the minute. He didn’t understand what he was seeing at first—she was on the back grounds of the fortress, about ten feet from the cliff overlooking the Sea. But he couldn’t pinpoint where that was, because he saw no fence. But there was the shadow of a bird flying high in the sun.

As she was standing there, apprehensively looking at the cliff, he saw himself pass behind her, carelessly bumping her with the words, *You’re the only one I loved*. That propelled her about two feet closer to the cliff.

Efran knew where that originated—after the trial for the Provision for a Wronged Husband, in which Leila lied to save him, that’s what he had told her in the kitchen before kissing her. Minka had witnessed that, and it had devastated her.

Then he saw her eight feet from the cliff, still looking warily at it. Again he saw himself pass behind her, laughing, *Oh, Minka, wash it off!* With that derisive laughter, he shoved her another three feet toward the cliff. Efran remembered that, as well—he had immediately regretted laughing at her efforts to make herself look like

Leila with makeup. But by then the damage was done.

As she was five feet from the cliff, looking down at it in genuine fear, he saw himself pass behind her while she said, *Efran, defend your man!*--after she had taken up Tisi's right to choose her own husband. And he saw himself stubbornly shut his mouth, denying her direct petition in front of all his men. He watched himself silently reach out to shove her another three feet toward the edge.

Now she was teetering a mere two feet from the cliffs high over the rolling waves. From somewhere above, Efran heard the harsh, skirling cry of a falcon. Minka was shaking, aware of her peril, but somehow unable to move away. And now the parchment was crumbling to only a few inches wide and deep. She looked back in pained hope as he passed behind her once more. But he watched himself look aside to someone else to ask, *Where did you come from?*

He heard Minka cry out—and the parchment crumbled to dust. The box beside it was black with tarnish.

Efran put his head in his hands. “No. Oh, no, dear God, please, please don't let me do anything to hurt her like that again.”

While he was sitting there in anguish, with the bright morning light flooding the eastern window so as to make the candle flames look weak and useless, DeWitt came in with Stephanos. “Captain,” he saluted as DeWitt closed the door behind them. “The bird has advanced about ten feet toward the Lands. The bog has gained twice that.”

Efran absorbed that silently. Then he asked, “What about the cattle? The Minogues? The animal pens?”

DeWitt answered, “Those were moved early on to the northeastern Lands, after a cow broke through the ground to a cavern below. It's solid earth northward, and the grass is better. The wolves are better suited to the southeastern Lands. Anyway, the farms are not immediately imperiled. However . . .” DeWitt hesitated. “The bog's reach is accelerating west, and spreading south.”

“Spreading south,” Efran repeated slowly.

“By the time it hits us, it may stretch from the hill to the northern wall,” DeWitt said.

Efran considered that, then asked, “Can you estimate how long we have?”

DeWitt winced. “Perhaps a . . . week?”

Efran stood, glancing from DeWitt to Stephanos. “Spread the word calmly, so that people will know to leave.”

“That's probably best,” DeWitt said.

“Captain,” Stephanos saluted. “The men are not leaving, sir.”

Efran shook his head slightly. “I won't order it, but I want everyone to know what's coming. Dismissed.”

Stephanos saluted and walked out. DeWitt patted Efran's arm and went over to sit at the table. Efran eyed him, and DeWitt said, “You don't expect me to leave with unbalanced books, do you?” Efran rolled his eyes as he left the room.

Trotting down the stairs—since it didn't matter anymore if he fell or not—Efran was thinking, "*Where did you come from?*" *I don't remember saying that to anyone. So, if this is something that hasn't happened yet, then I may have a chance to not let it happen.*

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Chapter 17

Efran went up the corridor to the foyer, heading for the keep. The worship place of the fortress, with the ten-foot-tall crucifix and the Scripture engraved on the wall, was the place he went in times of crisis, the place he prayed.

Swinging into the open door of the keep, he suddenly hit something solid that dropped him flat on his back on the stone floor of the foyer. Gasping for breath, he sat up to look in confusion through the doorway. He could see the benches, the lectern, and the crucifix under the window of the far wall.

Cautiously, Efran got to his feet to approach the door again. As he tried to cross the threshold, again he was stopped. He put up a hand to feel a hard, invisible barrier in the doorway. He could not enter.

While he stood there, Earnshaw came up. "Pardon, Captain, the Librarian asked to borrow the Holy Canon. I'll return it directly."

By the time Efran opened his mouth to warn him of the obstacle, Earnshaw was halfway up the center aisle. He picked up the great Book from the lectern, then came back out. "There are other copies floating around, but nobody knows where they are right now," he said in mild disgust.

Efran watched him depart the foyer to the corridor, then he turned back to the keep to step forward—and hit the barrier again. Stepping back, he whispered, "So it's just me. Why have You blocked me? Why can't I pray?"

It occurred to him that it wasn't essential for him to come to the keep to pray, but, he felt he needed it. He needed the accouterments of stone and painted wood and stained glass to make him feel prayerful. Efran stepped away as the door guards came belatedly to duty.

He exited the fortress into the courtyard and looked to the west. Kraken came trotting around the northwestern edge of the fortress to stand before him, nosing his hand. Efran stroked his head, then grabbed hold of his mane to jump up on his bare back. "Let's see who we can find."

He trotted Kraken down the switchback to go up Main toward Delano's. Arriving at the closed front door, with shades drawn over the windows, he dismounted to look at the paper gummed to the door. It read: "Harvesting hops in Westford. Will return within a week with fresh brews! Delano, Madgwick and Wystan"

Backing away, Efran murmured, "Are You going to tell me that I don't need Madgwick to pray for me, now?" Jumping up on Kraken again, Efran turned him back south to stop at Ryal's. When he dismounted and opened the door, the bell suddenly dislodged from the door frame to hit him on top of the head.

"Ow!" he vented, putting a hand to his head as he looked up at the holes in the framing. Glimpsing Ryal at the counter, Efran grouched, "Didn't I have someone just put that up for you?"

“Yes, but people keep slamming my door,” Ryal said dryly. “And how is Marguerite enjoying her new status as Abbey Lands’ Patroness of the Arts?”

“I don’t know, and I’m afraid to find out,” Efran grunted, picking up the doorbell parts from the floor. Placing these on the counter, he said, “You have to leave, Ryal.”

“Are you evicting me?” Ryal asked with mildly raised brows.

“I’m serious, Ryal. There is a bog expanding this way a few miles east of here. It’s going to envelop the Lands in about a week,” Efran said.

“Uh huh,” Ryal deadpanned.

“Why do you think I’m joking? It almost killed one of my men, and it’s headed this way!” Efran insisted.

“So, a mysterious bog just appears out of nowhere to threaten the Lands’ very existence. Sounds like something the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands should handle,” Ryal said.

Efran was shaking his head. “I don’t know how. Should I command the bog to stop?” He stepped to the door to open it and say, “Bog, as Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I command you to stop. Go away. Or, dry up. Whatever.” He released the door to step back in. “Now, if that worked, I should be getting reports from deliriously happy men shortly.”

“Efran, this is the Destroyer all over again. Or the water giant. Or any number of attacking armies. You’ll figure out what to do,” Ryal said.

“There’s more,” Efran whispered. “I’m worried about Minka.”

“We will pray for her, Giardi and I,” Ryal said. He did not need to pry for specifics of the problem.

“Thank you,” Efran exhaled, turning back to the door. Then he stopped to say irately, “Get someone who knows what he’s doing to fix this bell.”

“So you think I’ll be here to need it. That’s good to know,” Ryal said.

“Shut up,” Efran muttered sulkily.

From there, Efran walked Kraken next door to the chapel. “Don’t you dare come in,” Efran muttered to him.

There’s not room, Kraken said. Efran glanced back at him on his way up the steps, and the soldiers at the doors saluted him before opening them. And Efran looked in warily at chaos.

The benches had been shoved up against the walls, as the whole hall was filled with bodies. Musicians were rehearsing on the platform while bell ringers were practicing along the far wall. Singers were going over their music, and a group of half-dressed men were throwing half-dressed women into the air.

Efran backed up in bewilderment. Stourt came up to salute. “Captain, the Halfenaked Exotic Dancers have arrived claiming to have a contract with Bozzelli to perform here tonight.”

Efran glanced around in near shock. “Does anyone think I’m going to do anything about any of this?”

“Not necessarily, sir, we just thought you might like to watch,” Stourt said blandly.

Efran backed away, asking, “Is Marguerite here anywhere?”

Stourt looked around at the various bodies before dubiously offering, “I don’t rightly know, sir.” Waving him away, Efran sidestepped obstacles to the door to go out again.

Marguerite, watching from the loft, whispered, “You have to do this all by yourself, Efran.”

He rode Kraken back up to the fortress, then left him in the courtyard to stride to the library. The Librarian turned to bow upon his entrance. “Good afternoon, Lord Efran. How may I assist you?”

Efran began, “I suppose you know about the bog and the bird that are--” He broke off, thinking. “The bog, and the bird, which looks like a falcon. And there was—a bird, a falcon, in, all the stories. All of them? Yes, I think so.”

The Librarian waited patiently while Efran worked through this point of similarity. Then he shook his head to clear it. “Anyway, Librarian, do you know anything about the bog on the Lands—how we might neutralize it?”

“Regrettably, no, Lord Efran. This is something I have never seen before,” the Librarian said.

“I see,” Efran exhaled. “Sir Nomus? How about you? Is there anything in the Hall of Memories that will help me hold back this bog?” he called, looking upward.

“Thank you for your inquiry, Lord Efran,” a scratchy voice said. Efran and the Librarian looked toward the pivoting bookshelf that gave entrance to the hidden library. It was shut, but the Atticitian stood before it. “However, as the Librarian noted, this is unprecedented in the history of the Abbey Fortress.”

“Unprecedented?” Efran gasped. “You mean, that for almost five thousand years, the Abbey has not faced anything like this?”

“That is correct, Lord Efran,” Nomus said. As Efran was looking away in consternation, Nomus added, “But I perceive that you have been equipped to deal with it.”

Efran looked at him quickly. “How?”

“How is any evil dealt with?” Nomus asked rhetorically. Then he answered, “Follow your conscience, Lord Efran.”

Efran turned his eyes away. In all the stories that the parchment had shown him, there was only one that involved him, only one in which his actions were relevant. “Minka,” he whispered. Somehow, she had something to do with this.

He went out back to look for her, and his gut coiled to see her leaning on the back fence, looking out to Sea. But then he saw that she was not looking down, but west. And he remembered that every time she had discovered she was not pregnant, she needed to go look at the sun sinking into the Sea at the dying of the day. She watched the sunset whenever she was sad.

He came up behind her to caress her hair, lowering his hand to her waist. She turned her face up to him with the hopeful smile he had seen in the parchment. He whispered, “Are you ready to come to dinner?” She nodded with that slight smile, that of someone barely hanging on. But he didn’t know what to do.

The following morning, June 9th, Efran was out in the courtyard at first light watching the scouts prepare to leave to check the progress of the bog. (The bird was a secondary concern, almost irrelevant at this point.) Connor told him, “Captain, since so many bogs or marshes seem to produce flames, we’re carrying a torch to see if we can burn any of it. It’s a shot in the dark, for sure, but, we’re trying anything at this point.”

Efran nodded, then turned to another man to say, “Saddle Kraken for me, please.” The man saluted, running off, and Efran told Connor. “I’m coming to have a look.”

“Yes, Captain,” Connor said. Meanwhile, Efran studied Ayling and Aceto, who were waiting with torches. Pleyel and Nee were both carrying rope, necessary in the event that the bog crept up on someone more rapidly than they expected. When Kraken was brought, Efran mounted easily, and the party of six loped down the new switchback to head east.

In an alarmingly short time, they spotted the leading edge of the bog. “It looks to have crept up miles in the last few days,” Efran said.

Connor replied, “Yes, Captain; it appears to be picking up speed.”

As they slowed to approach, Efran thought, *Well, my command as Lord Sovereign didn’t do anything.* He wasn’t surprised, however, as he didn’t expect it to work. Why not? For one thing, his command obviously didn’t address the specific issue. It seemed comparable to his facing down Abaddon in the Hall of Memories—ordering Abaddon to “stay” made it stay, but not leave, as Efran wished.

What am I dealing with, then? What is the specific issue? Efran watched as Aceto and Ayling tossed their torches over the bog. To no one’s surprise, they both sank without a spark.

The issue was something personal that had to do with Minka, although it didn’t appear to be something she knew about. It was a matter of conscience, Nomus had said. And there was something specific related to the bird, the falcon. Mulling over these parameters, Efran shook his head. He didn’t know. He might not know until a catalyst appeared. If some illumination, some impetus to act didn’t come soon, he’d go to his grave without knowing what he might have done.

A lot of people would die as well, apparently. Since asking DeWitt and Stephanos to spread the word that they needed to leave, he hadn’t seen any kind of exodus. They must not believe there was a threat, and it was true that Efran kept issuing pointless orders to evict. But unlike the Destroyer, which Ryal had likened it to, this threat was in plain sight. “What do you think? How long until it hits our east wall?” he asked generally.

“Three days, Captain,” Aceto said.

“If it doesn’t pick up speed, which it’s been doing,” Pleyel observed.

“You’re both right,” Efran exhaled. The bird design was far back from the leading edge of the bog by now. *Why the bird—the falcon? It must mean something. “Where did you come from?” . . . No, I still don’t remember saying that to anyone. But Nomus said I had the answer inside me.*

They looked over the vast stretch of deadly bog a moment more, then Efran said, “Back to the fortress.” And they rode home.

But on the way, something occurred to him. His actions in Minka’s scenes were clearly thoughtless; that is, it didn’t appear that he meant to push her off a cliff. Nonetheless, that’s what he was doing. So how could he control his unconscious actions?

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Chapter 18

At dinner that evening, Efran asked Minka, “What have you asked me to do that I’ve not done?”

She blinked at him. “What?”

He struggled to explain, “I’ve . . . hurt you badly several times. I want to not do that ever again, but, I don’t realize what I’m doing.”

She laughed, “I’ll tell you.”

He studied the mild exasperation in her large blue eyes. “Yes, you’re good about that,” he said.

“Gud,” Joshua said, spooning up custard.

There was a performance at the chapel that evening featuring Xander’s orchestra, the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers, the Ruddock Chorale, and the Halfenaked Exotic Dancers. Also, without permission, Bozzelli had a man in the back of the hall selling small cups of ale for 5 pieces each. The performances and refreshments were so well received that there ensued fights and considerable damage to the chapel. Abbey soldiers had to incarcerate a total of 23 drunken, unruly performers and/or audience members in the barrack cells overnight.

Early the following morning of June 10th, Efran was in the courtyard awaiting the scouts’ return from looking at the bog. He hadn’t been out here when they left, but he got here in time to see them ascend the new switchback with Commander Wendt, Barr and Gabriel. Efran walked over as they pulled up and dismounted.

“Captain Efran here, Commander,” he said, saluting.

“Efran,” Wendt acknowledged. “Let Barr tell you what they saw.”

Efran looked to him, and Barr said, “The bog will encroach on the Lands within hours, Captain.”

Absorbing that, Efran looked back to Wendt. “Your recommendations, Commander?”

“Anyone still here should make their peace with God,” Wendt said.

“Are you leaving, sir?” Efran asked.

“No,” Wendt said.

Efran reached forward to grip his shoulders, then hug him tightly. An instant later, Efran composed himself to step back and salute. “Thank you, sir.”

“Carry on,” Wendt said, reaching for his saddle. The rest of the party saluted and descended the switchback.

Efran looked up to the brilliant blue sky and prayed, “You won’t let me pray. I don’t know what to do. But if You have decided that this is how the Abbey ends after standing thousands of years, I won’t fight You.”

Over the next hour, Efran watched the delayed exodus from the Lands. The visiting performers were the first to get out, as were the shiftless, the drifters, the loners, and the hangers-on. He was surprised to see few residents packing up to leave, but he knew once they saw the bog begin to engulf homes and yards, they’d flee.

Seeing an unfamiliar carriage enter the wide-open wall gates against the flow, Efran frowned. This was a visitor who didn’t know, and hadn’t stopped at the gates to find out why so many were leaving. Sighing, Efran turned to grip Kraken’s mane and jump onto his bare back. He loped down the switchback to intercept the carriage in the middle of the street. The driver pulled over to the curb to stop, and someone opened the door from the inside.

Someone else noted the carriage that stopped, and the door opening. Eryk had been up all night after the wild concert had ended, helping to corral and evict the drunkards, first, and then clean up ruined food for the pigs. Following, he mopped up spilled and splattered ale from the marble floor, the whitewashed walls, and the clear glass windows. Right now he was on his way back to the chapel from Firmin’s, having picked up a large order of fresh fruits and vegetables that Hartshough required. (No, Firmin wasn’t leaving, and he scowled at the suggestion that he should. An encroaching bog? Balderdash!)

Having stopped in curiosity, Eryk watched the entire scene unfold from the sidewalk about ten feet away:

Efran dropped off Kraken’s back to walk up to the carriage. He did not notice the peregrine falcon stooping down on a dove above. The woman who had exited the carriage turned to him to smile softly. “Hello, Efran.”

He paused in shock, and it took him a moment to place her. Then he realized: “Windry. Where did you come from?” She had been a married lover of his about four years ago—the only one willing to divorce her husband to marry him. But she had young children, so, he dropped her.

She replied, “Westford. I stopped by to see the new construction. I have friends moving back in, rebuilding their homes.” Her eyes, her whole body exuded a warm, glowing love.

“Where are your children?” he asked.

“With their father. I heard you were here,” she said.

He said, “Well, you had better go back up. This whole place is about to go under.”

He watched her chest expand in a breath. “I don’t care what happens; I want to be with you. Come back with me.”

He squinted at her. “You want *me* to . . . ?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “You can’t imagine that I ever stopped thinking about you. I have my own little house,

tucked away out of sight, where there are no cares, no burdens, no enemies at the gates or faithless friends to break your heart,” she whispered.

Efran studied her softly curling hair, her full lips, her expression of warm and eager longing. He looked up to the sky to laugh, “What is this? It’s the worst Impostorization I’ve ever seen.” Turning back to the woman, he ordered, “Show yourself.”

“What? Who do you think I am? Efran, it’s *me*,” she said, grabbing his hand to make him feel the back of her head, where there was a prominent lump. “Remember that? When my husband hit me with the frying pan?”

Removing his hand, Efran bent to peer into her face. “It’s really Windry?”

“Yes!” she cried.

“Oh, that’s even worse,” he said, straightening. “Go back to your little house, or not. If you stay here, you’re sunk. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let Minka die without me.”

She cried, “Efran!” as he hoisted himself back up on Kraken.

Loping to the switchback, he muttered, “If I had known how many problems I’d create for myself sleeping with all these women, I’d’ve--” Kraken interrupted with a braying laugh, and he cried, “Shut up!”

Eryk continued to watch the woman, who looked confused and disoriented. Then she spoke to the carriage driver, who drove around to the back of Croft’s while she went inside. Eryk took his grocery purchases back to the chapel.

At this time, Minka was on the back grounds of the fortress, sightlessly watching Joshua play around her while she sat on the bench. There was anger boiling up inside her, and she whispered, “It’s not fair, or right, for everything to be thrown into chaos over some kind of test after the fact. Hasn’t he been tested enough, so many times? This is *wrong*.”

Trembling, she looked up at the blue sky to say, “Queene Kele, I would have a word with you, please.”

Kele appeared at once. “Yes, dear Minka, what can I do for you?” She sounded most sympathetic.

“Kele, this—this test of Efran—if he missteps, somehow, we could lose the whole Abbey! The charter and everything, and we have no clue what it’s about. Kele, how is this allowed under Faerie Law?” Minka cried softly.

“Well, dear, it was meant to protect the young, innocent faeries from devious men,” Kele began uneasily.

“But we’ve been married two years now, and he’s proved himself faithful! How is this justified?” Minka demanded.

“Well, let’s look at the Law,” Kele suggested, waving a hand. And a gilt-edged page appeared in the air, with golden writing that read: “Sec. 1232 Par. 14: Test of Faithfulness

“This test is to be administered to any Human Man attempting to marry a Faerie, to protect her from Mean, Evil, or Duplicitous Men. The Faerie wishing to marry a Man shall select the Relative of her choice, the Woman closest to her, to devise a satisfactory test of the Man whom she loves, and this Relative of Choice--”

Minka jumped up, turning from the hovering page back to Kele. “But—this says I should choose the one giving the test, and I didn’t! I would never have chosen Larisse for this. Does that mean the test is invalid?”

In reply, Kele pointed to the hovering page, which now read: “Unfortunately, once a test is initiated without protest from the Vulnerable Faerie, it must proceed to its conclusion.”

“That’s not fair! I didn’t even know about it!” Minka said, shaking. “Is all Faerie Law so unjust?”

Kele murmured comfortingly, “Faerie Law is made to all work out just right. You’ll see, dear.” Minka turned away, angry and heartbroken, to flop back down on the bench.

Meanwhile, Efran passed through the courtyard to ride around the southwestern side of the fortress. Here he stopped to look for Minka. Upon seeing her sitting on the bench with Joshua in his cart nearby, Efran rode on over.

She quickly looked up as he dropped off of Kraken. Joshua raised a hand, squealing, “Wide!”

Efran bent to scoop him up, telling Salk, “Thank you; I have him.”

“Captain,” Salk saluted.

Minka stood to come over as Efran placed Joshua on Kraken’s back. Instinctively, Joshua grabbed his mane. She brushed Efran’s arm lightly, with a tentative smile. He looked around at the gardening crews at work, the archers at practice, and the sparring groups in formation. “Are the children in class?” he asked.

She nodded. “As they always are at this time of the morning.”

“Then, let’s walk around this way. I want to . . . sit where we can look at the Sea,” he said.

“All right,” she said quietly.

Efran led Kraken while Minka walked alongside him to keep a hand on Joshua, though it was unnecessary. Efran led them through the western gate into the hilltop woods. Here, they walked in the morning shade to a spot where they could see the steeply sloping hillside clear to the Sea and the forests beyond to the edge of the world.

Efran found a relatively clean place to sit, putting Joshua on his lap, and Minka snuggled into his side. Kraken nosed around, but there was little grass here, so he lay down to roll in the detritus, snorting. Joshua screeched in laughter, but Efran wouldn’t let him roll around likewise.

“The men say it will be a matter of hours before the bog hits the Lands,” he told her. Looking back over his shoulder, he added, “When the children get out of class, we’ll call them over.”

“All right,” she said, her head on his shoulder.

He turned to kiss her hair, then rested his chin lightly on her head, looking off. “I don’t understand,” he said, blinking back tears. “I don’t know why it has to end like this. I don’t know what I did wrong.”

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t care,” she whispered, holding his fingers.

He barked out a sudden laugh. “You’re the second woman to tell me that today.”

“What?” She raised up.

“A woman I knew from Westford showed up in her carriage! She wanted me to come away with her,” he said wryly.

She stared at him, slowly repeating, “A woman from Westford asked you to go away with her?”

He laughed, pained. “I thought it was a faerie impersonation, because I felt the tingle. But apparently, it was really her. I think I told you about her—she was the one who was brave enough to greet me in the street. She wanted to divorce her husband to marry me, but, she had young children, so I just—walked away from her.”

“And you walked away from her today?” Minka asked, trembling.

He looked at her in confusion. “Aren’t I here?”

“Yes,” she said, faint. “Yes.” She started crying.

Thinking that she was crying over the appearance of another woman he had known, he pressed her hands to his face, kissing them, and murmured, “I will love you forever. And Minka, we’re—very close to forever.”

“Oh, Efran!” She gripped him tightly, laughing. “We’re always on the edge of forever.”

They heard sharp whistling behind them, and faint calls. “Captain! Captain!”

Efran stood, scooping up Joshua. “Here comes forever,” he said, expecting to hear that the bog was swallowing up the eastern walls. With Joshua on one arm, he gripped her hand. Kraken staggered up to follow as Efran led them back to the gate.

Several soldiers spotted them; one, Mathurin, ran up to open the gate for them to enter the fortress grounds. “Captain,” he said, saluting. “It stopped.”

Efran blinked at him, uncomprehending. “It stopped.”

“Yes, sir. The bog stopped advancing, and now appears to be hardening,” Mathurin said.

“You did it, Efran,” Minka exhaled, holding his arm.

“What?” He turned to her in utter ignorance. “What did I do?”

“Did you ask her, ‘Where did you come from?’” Minka asked with shining eyes. When Efran just gaped at her, she laughed, “You made the right choice!”

“The right choice,” he repeated, still not making the connection.

“To be faithful to me! You passed the Test of Faithfulness!” she cried.

He stared at her. “Windry? Her coming was--some kind of *test*?”

“One you answered with authority. I should have had more faith in you,” she murmured, still crying.

Efran rocked back on his heels, as she wasn’t explaining anything. Then he said, “All right, we’ll figure that out later. For now, let’s go down and see what has happened, or not. Get the lady a horse, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” Mathurin saluted and ran off. Efran with Joshua, Minka and Kraken followed at a walk to the courtyard. A great number of men were streaming back and forth from the main road and the courtyard to the east wall (supplemented by the barricade) via both switchbacks. A line of soldiers was holding off the residents from going out to the bog, as well.

Loseby ran up to breathlessly report, “It’s settling in place and hardening, Captain. We can even walk on it.”

Efran turned, extending Joshua to the nearest soldier. “Here, I need--”

“ANH!” Joshua objected, clutching his father’s arm.

“All right! You can ride with Mama,” Efran said. After Minka had mounted Rose, Efran put the toddler on her leg. “Is he too heavy?”

“No, I have him,” she said, so Efran turned to grip Kraken’s mane and jump up.

They rode at a walk down the new switchback, where Efran turned to whistle sharply at the residents attempting to push through the line of soldiers. “STAY BACK!” he roared, and the crowd subsided.

Arriving at the farthest eastern wall, that with the barricade of tree trunks, Efran’s party followed the soldiers to study the ground past the barricade. The bog had flowed to within five feet of it, covering even the road in its approach.

Efran dismounted, turning to Minka. “You and Joshua wait here, please.”

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Chapter 19

“Yes, Efran,” Minka said. Joshua chewed thoughtfully on his fist.

Efran walked to the edge of the bog, studying it. There was no movement that he could see, and the color was the same as the surrounding ground. Only the shape of the surface, with its folds and rolls, indicated that it had once been a moving peril. Looking back over his shoulder, he asked, “Who has rope?”

Several men came forward, extending coils to him. Efran picked what looked to be the largest coil and shook it out, tying one end around his waist. Captain Stites stepped up, then. “Permission to take your place, Captain.”

“Denied,” Efran said, tightening the knot.

“Permission to accompany you, Captain,” Stites then said.

Efran glanced up. “Granted.”

So Stites tied another rope around himself. Then, while numerous others anchored the ends of both ropes, Efran and Stites tentatively stepped onto the flow at divergent points. As their feet sank slightly, they drew back. Efran stepped again, looking at his footprints. Then he knelt to scoop away handfuls. “I’m seeing a shallow, sandy layer on top of hard ground. What are you finding?”

“Much the same, Captain,” Stites replied.

They walked as far as their ropes allowed, then Efran turned to whistle at Kraken. The horse trotted out onto the bog to him. “Walk around; see how firm it feels.” Horses were adept at discerning weaknesses in the ground beneath their hooves.

Tossing his head, Kraken walked on the bog, then began trotting, then loping in circles far out on the once-deadly morass. He kicked out his back feet in play before dropping to roll in the fine dirt, snorting in pleasure. Then he hoisted himself up to roam farther and farther away until Efran whistled at him to return. The outline of the bird was nowhere in sight, having been apparently obliterated by the bog. Kraken loped back to his human to receive pats on his nose while Efran gestured Stites to withdraw.

When they stepped out of the remaining dust of the bog to untie the ropes, Efran glanced up at Commander Wendt with his Seconds Barr and Gabriel. “Captain Efran reporting, Commander. The bog appears to be . . . solidified.” He handed the unknotted rope to a nearby man, who saluted.

“What did you do, Efran?” Wendt asked.

“I’m not sure,” Efran said. “But, if you have a moment, I’d like to step over to the chapel and ask Lady Marguerite a few questions.” He looked over as Minka walked Rose over to him. He stroked her nose, and Kraken nudged his arm jealously.

Wendt replied, “I happen to have several moments. My calendar was clear for the day.”

“Then let’s—walk on over,” Efran said. He still looked dazed. But as the Commander and his Seconds were on foot, Efran walked beside him, carrying Joshua. Minka rode behind them, and Kraken followed his human.

At the doors of the chapel, Efran tugged the bell pull, and Conte opened the door. He saluted, “Commander. Seconds. Captain. Hello, Lady Minka. Please come in.”

He stepped aside, and Efran asked, “Conte, is Marguerite available?”

“I will check, Captain. Please sit.” He gestured to the seating area that had been restored. As Conte turned up the stairs, Minka glanced at the evidence of repairs and cleaning that had recently been accomplished around the hall. The grand opening had been less than three weeks ago.

Gabriel shot a questioning glance to the Captain as to where to sit the Commander, and Efran waved him down to the divan. So Gabriel and Barr sat with Wendt there. Seeing Joshua asleep on his arm, Efran summoned a nearby soldier, Elrod.

He dropped his cleaning rag to trot over and salute. “Captain.”

“Please take him to the nursery,” Efran said, handing over his son.

“Yes, sir.” Elrod deftly took the sleeping child to the front doors, which were opened to him by the guards on duty.

Efran put Minka in one upholstered chair across from the divan, then sat on the floor beside her to lie down on his back, knees in the air. “Efran?” Minka laughed.

“I’m just going to lie here until Marguerite gets down,” he said.

Hartshough approached to bow to the group. “Welcome, Lady Minka, gentlemen. May I bring refreshments?”

“Yes,” said Efran.

At the same time, Wendt said, “That’s not necessary, thank you.”

Also at the same time, Minka said, “That cold mineral water would be wonderful, Hartshough. Is Auntie all right?”

“Yes, Lady Minka; she is merely changing into appropriate attire,” he said. Bowing, he moved off, then shortly returned with a tray of clear, bubbly water in cut-glass goblets. These he placed directly in front of each guest (and Efran’s on the floor beside him) before bowing again.

“Thank you, Hartshough,” she said warmly.

“You’re Toogood,” Efran observed.

Hartshough paused to observe, “You are too kind, Lord Efran.” Then he returned to the kitchen.

Having been informed by Gabriel that he had water in front of him, Wendt picked it up, observing, “Well then, I suppose I’ll drink it. I don’t want to be rude.”

“Minka gets what she wants,” Efran said from the floor.

When Marguerite appeared at the group, all of the men stood, though Efran had to struggle up from the floor. He kissed Marguerite’s head before sitting her in the other upholstered chair across from Minka. All the while, Marguerite protested, “Oh my goodness, sit down, all of you. How are you, Commander?”

“Far better than I was an hour ago, thank you, Lady Marguerite,” he said, sitting again. Justinian, newly awakened, came out of his bedroom to the loft railing. Scratching himself, he yawned and looked down to quietly listen.

“Yes, Hartshough told me that the bog is no longer a threat,” Marguerite said.

“You see how surprised she is?” Efran remarked. He plopped back down on the floor between Marguerite and Minka.

“Auntie, I think Efran needs to hear what you know about it,” Minka said.

“Yes,” Efran said, “first, about the chart, the lineage. Did you make that, Marguerite?”

“No, it was created by a specialist, a *lignéer*. I only knew that it contained information you or Minka would need,” Marguerite said.

“Yes, it did, very much so. But by the time I had gotten through Minka’s name, it—crumbled to dust,” Efran said.

“Which is why I never attempted to read it,” Marguerite said—obviously meaning the stories behind the names.

“Well, I didn’t remember until today about the bird appearing in the stories—most of them, I think,” he said, straining to remember.

Marguerite said, “The falcon has been on our family crest for hundreds of years.”

“Your family crest,” Efran repeated, at once relating that to the giant bird drawn on the ground. That’s what it looked like—the emblem on a crest.

Skipping that for now, he told them about seeing Windry today, and her asking him to leave with her. “You remember her, don’t you, Gabriel?” he asked.

Reluctantly, Gabriel said, “Yes, she—seemed desperate to get out of her marriage, and, you came on the scene as a likely savior, Captain. At least, that’s how it looked to us.”

Efran nodded. “Yes, but when I saw her today, I didn’t believe it was really her; I thought it was a faerie impersonator. But when I ordered her to show herself, she didn’t change. Still, the whole thing makes no sense. If it was really her, how to explain the timing? If it was a test, why was it such a poor one? I wasn’t tempted at all to leave with her.

“And I don’t understand how it was shown in Minka’s story from the parchment, when it hadn’t even happened yet. I didn’t realize that I had repeated the words, *Where did you come from* until Minka asked me. But that was the first thing I said when she stepped out of the carriage. Marguerite, whatever you know, please tell me.”

Everyone was silent while Marguerite considered this. Minka watched in growing concern, as her auntie had always been frank and forthright. Then Marguerite said, “Yes, Efran, it’s time you knew. You were subjected to a Test of Faithfulness, that a faerie’s next-of-kin has the right to administer.”

Efran leaned forward, his face a study of pained disappointment. “You--put me to a test, Marguerite?”

“Not I. Larisse,” Marguerite said.

Efran said, “That’s your daughter. Minka’s grandmother.”

“Yes,” Marguerite said.

“*Why?* Why would she do this?” Efran breathed.

Brows arched, Marguerite said, “I think you should explain yourself, Larisse.”

A woman appeared behind Efran, between Marguerite’s and Minka’s chairs. Twisting in surprise, he got to his feet to see that she was the living image of Adele. Knowing that had to be an illusion, Efran ordered, “Show yourself.”

With a huff of irritation, Larisse transformed into a pert-looking young woman similar to Minka, only with mounds of glittering blonde hair. “As a faerie, I don’t have a ‘real’ appearance to show you,” she lectured him. Minka narrowed her eyes at the near lie: faeries did have favored, or standard, appearances.

Efran said, “But as faerie on my Lands, you are subject to me.” Looking back to Marguerite, he asked, “How was she able to defy Faerie Law to cause harm here?”

Dubiously, Marguerite replied, “As I understand it, because, first, no one was actually harmed, and second, you were unaware of her doing it.” Some faeries stretched their Law very thin.

“Now we know better,” Efran said, looking back to Larisse. “You will do no further faerie magic on my Lands.”

“My, you’re irritating,” she said, surveying him.

“That’s a lie,” Minka said, raising her eyes.

“Just an opinion,” Larisse said quickly. She knew about the Provision for a Wronged Human, which stipulated that any faerie caught in a lie lost half their power.

But Minka was just getting started. “You had no right to impose any kind of test on him; I never chose you. And you *did* harm him. You caused him needless anxiety with this bog when he shoulders the burden of protecting the entire Lands. You caused some here to pack up and leave their homes and their businesses out of baseless fear.”

Catching her breath in sudden illumination, Minka sat up. “You were trying to usurp him! You thought you could just trick him out of his charter!” The men looked at Larisse with hard eyes, and Justinian leaned on the loft railing in fascination.

Larisse side-eyed the men contemptuously, then replied, “Nonsense. It was just a bit of fun, Sybil.”

Breathing deeply, eyes watering, Minka lurched to a stand. “You will not stay here. You’re mean and ungrateful—you bully Marguerite and treat Hartshough shamefully.”

“What do you know?” Larisse said, half disdainful, half wondering.

Minka choked on a sob, and Efran stepped to her side in alarm. She unloaded on her grandmother: “You abandoned my mother when she was little and helpless. Marguerite found her barely in time to save my life, but not hers. You will hurt no one else here. And my name is MINKA!” she shouted, then turned to run out, hardly waiting for the guards to open the doors. Justinian leaned over to see her disappear through the doors. By this time, Eryk had joined him at the loft railing.

Efran said, “Excuse me, Commander—Marguerite--” and ran out after her.

Those left in the chapel were still. Barr and Gabriel watched the Commander, waiting for what he would do. Marguerite remained quietly seated and Larisse stood motionless. Then she murmured, “What an interesting child.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Wendt said. Everyone looked at him as he added, “You won’t win.”

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Chapter 20

Larisse turned brilliant green eyes to Commander Wendt. “The blind man has special sight,” she said derisively.

Wendt said, “Even Minka doesn’t know how much power she can tap into. But if you push her, she’ll find out. You will, too--you’re not immortal.”

For some reason, Larisse felt the need to rebut him. “Faerie Law prevents Minka from doing anything to me, as her grandmother.”

“Here, Faerie Law is subsumed under a higher Law that you know nothing about. Here, she’s not your granddaughter; she’s Lady Sovereign. And subjecting the Lord Sovereign to some moronic test is the height of stupidity. This is the only warning you’re liable to get,” Wendt said.

Larisse rolled her eyes. “Humans are so tiresome. You may send up my breakfast,” she directed her mother. Then they watched her stride to the staircase to begin ascending it. Eryk fled the loft and even Justinian stepped back.

Immediately, she hit an invisible barrier which caused her to tumble down the first few steps, landing flat on her back. Pushing herself up, she screeched, “Mother!” Eryk returned in time to lean over the railing and watch in delight with Justinian.

Marguerite replied, “I didn’t do that, Larisse. Minka told you that you’re not to stay here. As Lady Sovereign, her word carries authority.”

“We’ll see about that,” Larisse said crisply. Straightening, she walked to the front doors to open them with a wave and disappear. The men standing guard there looked at each other, then back to the Commander.

Listening, Wendt stood, and his Seconds with him. He said, “If it’s all right with you, Lady Marguerite, I’m leaving a few men here for my peace of mind, and Efran’s.”

Marguerite stood as well. “Thank you, Commander. I am not afraid, only—sad for my daughter. But Minka has been everything that Larisse did not want to be, and Kewe could not be.”

“I see that, and I’m glad. Stand by,” he said with a wry twist of the lips.

He left with his Seconds, and Marguerite went to the kitchen with Hartshough. Justinian and Eryk immediately came down the stairs to join them.

On their way back to the barracks, Gabriel said, “Commander, I request a briefing here. What do you know about Minka, sir?”

Barr looked over, and Wendt began explaining what he had seen of her accidental use of power. He finished with, “Minka is just beginning to explore her abilities. But she considers Efran her head, and he is ruled by a sense of duty. He just has to bring all parts of his life under that discipline. His marrying Minka was the best thing that ever happened to either of them.” Gabriel nodded in comprehension.

Efran was holding Minka in front of him on Kraken's bare back as he took them up the switchback. "Minka, how did you know all that about your grandmother?" he whispered.

She shifted to lay her head on his chest. "Watching her talk to Marguerite a few times, and, the scenes from the parchment. I saw them when you did. I think they were all accurate, except mine. Mine had been—tampered with, somehow, because it was not truthful."

He shook his head. "No, it was. I said all of those hurtful things, except--"

"No." She sat up, twisting toward him. "It showed you pushing and kicking me intentionally toward the cliff when you said those things. But you never did that; you never hurt me intentionally. And you were right to keep silent when I challenged you to defend Neale. You knew more about how the men would react than I did, and you acted according to what you knew was best. You did *not* do that to hurt me," she insisted. He wanted to agree with her.

She went on, "I did fall in love with you when you told me, 'You did the best you could.' But all the rest of it was—twisted. Larisse had to have done that. And she inserted the scene with Windry coming because she had enticed the poor woman to do it, and sprinkled her with faerie appeal. Then it was easy for her to slip the words, 'Where did you come from?' into your mouth. There was a reason that she looked like Adele at first: she was trying to hurt us both."

"You saw all that from the parchment scenes?" he asked dubiously.

"Yes, the scenes were windows into their hearts," she said.

Efran writhed in the discomfort of knowing that the scenes were also windows into her heart, and his. She loved him so much that she blamed Larisse for Efran's brutality in pushing Minka to the brink. But that was as it appeared: the dark impulses of his own heart. He loved Minka, but there was still some brutal selfishness in him. *There is none righteous, no, not one*, Therese seemed to whisper. [Rom. 3:10] *Certainly not me*, Efran thought dismally.

And the forecast of his saying, "*Where did you come from?*" was simply the logical outgrowth of how he thought and how he spoke. No outside interference was needed for that to come true. But—Windry? What had happened there? He knew he'd sensed faerie magic, but that was really Windry. So had Larisse lured her down to the Lands to test his faithfulness to her granddaughter?

"Oh, Efran." Minka turned to hold him tightly, and Kraken had to nose her leg back in place. "Marguerite was looking for a man like you, but Takoda was not—honorable; he took advantage of her. Verlice had to straddle the divide to please his father while trying to take care of his mother. He did send some hooligans to threaten the tax assessor when he was trying to gouge her," she noted. He hugged her a little tighter with one arm.

"Oh, Efran." She twisted her hands in his shirt, crying again. "My mother's with God, Efran; she's happy and at peace."

"I saw that," he whispered, his eyes watering. "She smiled at me—the only one in the scenes who saw me."

She nodded, wiping her nose on his shirt. "I know."

Back at the chapel, Marguerite welcomed Justinian and Eryk into the kitchen where Hartshough was preparing a light midday meal with the groceries Eryk had brought from Firmin's. "Oh, hello, boys. Hartshough will have something ready in just a moment."

"Thank you, Lady Marguerite and Hartshough," Eryk said self-consciously.

"Marguerite, we can scrounge for ourselves," Justinian said, kissing her cheek.

She protested, "Oh, but you both were so helpful last night. Justinian, you almost had me rolling in laughter to watch you toss great drunken men out the doors. I cannot imagine how you learned to do that."

"Mostly from being on the receiving end of it, dearest," he replied absently. "But as one who generally enjoys a rollicking good show, I deeply hope that there'll be no more performances for a while."

Marguerite let down with a sigh. "No, I believe all the groups that Bozzelli signed have been accommodated. Any other performances will be for private parties."

"Private parties," Justinian repeated. "That I could tolerate, I believe--assuming that one were allowed to invite guests," he added tentatively.

"Of course, Justinian." She patted his arm in reassurance.

Eryk received a bowl of chopped vegetables and ham in a spicy vinaigrette. "Thank you, Hartshough," he said, then broached, "Lady Marguerite, I . . . saw Captain Efran talk with the woman he described to you, who had come down because of faerie magic, but I did not hear her name well."

"Oh, dear. Windry?" Marguerite said, and Justinian nodded.

"Windry," Eryk repeated. "She seemed—sad and confused when he left."

"Did she go back home?" Justinian asked.

"No, she went in to Croft's," Eryk said.

"Sounds like she could use a friend, friend," Justinian said, patting his shoulder. Eryk ducked his head to eat his ham and vegetables.

While Efran and Minka were having some much-needed alone time, Larisse was having a light afternoon meal at Firmin's (which she had obtained by making the silly counter boy believe he'd been paid). She sat in the outdoor dining area, enjoying the ambience of the garden and the pond nearby (which was actually on Averde's property next door, but Firmin cleverly arranged his outdoor seating to allow his patrons to enjoy it as well). A flash of color across the street drew Larisse's attention, and she peered at a brunette woman in an interesting chartreuse dress. It fit her tightly from the shoulders to the knees, with a line of billowing ruffles down the lower back like a dragon's scales.

"I rather like that outfit," Larisse mused. "I wonder what it would look like with shoulder wings." So she flicked a finger at it, and was dumbfounded when shoulder wings did not appear. Then she remembered Efran's forbidding her to use magic on his Lands.

“How inconsiderate,” she muttered. Getting around the prohibition was possible, but it would require effort that she didn’t care to expend right now. “I liked the Bog,” she sighed. “I had no idea I could create anything that realistic. I mean, it did kind of run away from me, didn’t it? Anyway, I thought it very clever. It certainly got them all excited. Gave them something to do. I’m so bored. Maybe I’ll go tease my dear brother. Oh, I forgot—he hired that creature to block my little spurts of fun-colored fire. How unkind! If Minka thinks me mean, she should meet Verlice. He is an ogre.”

While she was musing thusly, Efran was lying on his back, satisfied and drowsy, with Minka’s head on his chest. Kraken, having been locked out of their quarters, was standing at their door, blocking the corridor until they should open it. Minka murmured, “I have to do something about her.”

“Hmm?” Efran queried, stroking her hair.

“My grandmother. She’s a terror,” Minka said, lifting her face to kiss his chin.

“No. I’m not going to devote the least little bit of effort to a rogue faerie. She’s stripped of her powers here, and that’s all I care about,” he said, minimally waking.

“But she’ll--”

He rolled over onto her to hear nothing more about a faerie Adele.

Meanwhile, Eryk was watching Windry sit by herself at a table in Croft’s outdoor dining area. She looked lonely and depressed. A few men approached her (as men outnumbered women by about three to one in the Lands), but she wouldn’t even raise her face to speak to them, so they went away. Eryk didn’t see any reason why she should raise her face to a scarred Polonti laborer who was missing an ear, but, he knew enough about her to know that she needed someone. So he took his courage in hand and went over to her table.

“Hello,” he said quietly. She glanced up, and paused. While he had an opening, he went on: “My name is Eryk; I work for Lady Marguerite. I saw Captain Efran talk to you this morning, and I heard how the faerie Larisse tricked you, and--”

“A faerie,” she breathed. “That’s what happened! She worked faerie magic on me! Sit down,” she ordered. “What is your name? Eryk?” He nodded, and she said, “Do you want something to eat?”

“Nothing, no, thank you. Hartshough makes fine dishes. But, I only wanted to see how I could help you,” he said.

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, but I don’t think anyone can help me,” she said, biting back a sob. “My husband has my children at his house, but he won’t even let me in to see them, and I—managed to get my own small place, and I can work—I’m a weaver, but I can’t bear to do anything without knowing how they are, and--”

She had raised her teary eyes inadvertently toward the outdoor seating at Firmin’s next door. Her face cleared, and she whispered, “There she is! Sitting right over there! She’s the one who got the carriage and convinced me that Efran wanted to see me again. Oh! And she’s a faerie! Oh, I wish I could take her to court or something--!”

All at once, Windry, Eryk and their table were sitting high up overlooking Main Street. They could see the community well, along with the roofs of the notary shop, Minogue’s, Lemmerz’s construction office, and Delano’s across the street. To their right was the roof of Elvey’s, and to their left Firmin’s roof. They sat on a

sloped surface of roofing tiles, but the back legs of their table and chairs had been shortened to accommodate the slope so that they sat upright.

Looking all around, Eryk said, “We’re on the roof of Croft’s!”

“And she is, too!” Windry cried, pointing. About ten feet away, Larisse sat at her table, likewise adapted to the slope. She had a bottle of ale poised at her lips as she stared wide-eyed around her.

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Chapter 21

All at once, there was great activity around the rooftop diners. Although Windry, Eryk, and Larisse knew none of the players, they were as follows:

The Abbey Lands Faerie Queene Kele was attempting to steady her crown on top of the full wig she wore. Dressed in a scarlet robe with a white kerchief at her neck, she was sitting behind a unique curved judge’s bench with a marble top. There were various accouterments on it that she barely avoided knocking over—a vase of flowers, a nutcracker, and a great gavel. She adjusted her costume while issuing orders to various faeries scurrying hither and yon on the rooftop.

“Now! Sir Ditson, you are appointed Prosecutor of the Accused, and shall sit at the hand of the Complainant,” she dictated.

Ditson, wearing a shimmering black robe and short, white wig, bowed so effusively that his wig slipped down over his eyes. He righted it to say, “I am thrilled beyond measure to assume this grave responsibility, Your Honor Queene Kele.” He swept over to sit at his own small but decorated table next to the Croft’s table at which Windry and Eryk sat. They stared at him.

Kele nodded regally. “Very good. And you, Sir Nutbin, are appointed Defense for the Accused, and shall sit at her hand.”

“As you instruct, Your Honor.” Nutbin bowed to her in confidence of his wig remaining in place, as holes had been cut in it to accommodate his longish, fuzzy ears. Nonetheless, his curling, twitching tail caused the back of his robe to hike up over his haunches, which he did not see. However, the monocle he always wore was particularly suited to the occasion.

He sat upon a stool next to Larisse, who peered at him. “I’m on trial?” she demanded.

Judge Kele pounded the gavel on her bench. “The Defendant shall remain silent until she is addressed by the Court! Now, the Jury shall be seated in their box.” She gestured to two rows of chairs, six to each row, enclosed in a compartment to her right, and a flurry of faeries filled it, jostling for the available seats. “There now! One to a chair,” she admonished, and a small faerie attempting to share the seat of another disappeared in a petulant huff.

“Now, then. We are all arranged.” Kele finally placed the crown on the bench before her. After adjusting her wig, she proclaimed, “Larisse, daughter of the esteemed Lady Marguerite of the Abbey Lands, has been accused of

Deceiving a Mortal for Nefarious Purposes, and is hereby brought to trial to answer this charge on this date of June the tenth in the year eighty-one fifty-five from the creation of the world. Larisse, how do you plead to this charge?"

Larisse's mouth hung open, but Nutbin stood to say, "The Defendant pleads Insanity, Your Honor."

"No! Not guilty!" Larisse cried.

Nutbin, tail twitching violently, uttered, "You'd best take my counsel, but, as you wish."

"Not Guilty," Kele said skeptically, writing something in a great book before her. The Jury stirred in anticipation, not entirely favorable to the Defendant. "Now. The Petitioner shall state her Grievance to the Court."

Ditson stood to extend his hand, indicating a momentous speech to come, but Windry cried, "She came to me, offering me a carriage to come down here and bring Efran back to my home! She said he wanted to come, and I believed her against my better judgment because she put me under some kind of cloud. I couldn't think straight. All I knew was that, when I knew Efran in Westford—he had been my lover then—he had been kind to me and my children, and listened to my complaints about my abusive husband. When I asked him to marry me then, he said no, because he couldn't bear to break up my family. But it was already broken."

She had to cry for a moment, during which the Judge wiped her eyes and some of the Jury openly wept. Windry then resumed, "So when this—creature came offering my heart's desire, I accepted, but when I came down here and found Efran, he laughed at me! He said he'd rather die with his Minka," she sobbed. The Jury as a whole stirred in indignation, directing dark glances toward the troublemaker. Eryk impulsively put an arm around Windry, who leaned into him.

Kele demanded of the Plaintiff, "And why did Lord Efran think he was about to die?"

"I don't know!" Windry cried.

Expanding in his robes, Ditson said, "Your Honor, that is another crime which may be laid at the feet of the Accused. For by powerful magic inherited through her illustrious line, being the granddaughter of the great Queene Everleigh, the Defendant created an irresistible Deadly Bog which was encroaching upon the Lands. Lord Efran sought every means to turn it aside, but finding none, resigned himself and his Lands to a horrible, suffocating Death."

The Jurors stared in horror at the Accused, who cried, "No, it was just a joke! Just an illusion! Nothing would have happened, and no harm came of it." Only then did she realize that Something Else had entered her joke, and the other Something was still there, lurking in the background.

She should alert them to it. But if she did, she risked becoming Pariah--a sentence worse than death for a faerie. *I'll just be quiet about it. They won't know. And nothing will happen as long as they don't invoke It by name.*

"No harm, do you say?" Ditson roared, turning a scowling visage upon her. He flung up a hand, and the vision appeared before them of Efran raising his anguished face to heaven to say, "*You won't let me pray. I don't know what to do. But if You have decided that this is how the Abbey ends after standing thousands of years, I won't fight You.*"

The Jurors wept for his distress, and Ditson said scornfully, "To top it all off, the Defendant maliciously blocked the entrance to Lord Efran's prayer closet with an Invisible Wall."

The Jurors gasped in revulsion; Nutbin leaned over to Larisse to hiss, "You should have taken the Insanity plea." She had nothing to say to that last charge, of which she was guilty. It was funny to watch Efran fall flat on his back, that's all. And she had been proud of herself for lifting it quickly to allow the other man to go in and out of the keep, and then get the wall back up to block Efran again. At least this silly court could acknowledge the skill that took.

"Well. This is grave. Very unfaerielike," Kele said. Spectacles suddenly appeared on her nose, and she removed them to place an earhook in her mouth. "Well, members of the Jury, there you have it. How do you find the Defendant, Larisse, on the charge of Deceiving a Mortal for Nefarious Purposes?"

"GUILTY!" they all cried.

"Are there any mitigating circumstances we should consider on the Defendant's behalf, Counselor?" Kele asked Nutbin.

He looked at the criminal faerie, and she could only turn a pitiable face to him. He stood to say, "The Defendant suffered a devastating attack of Temporary Insanity, Your Honor."

"Hmph!" Kele snorted dubiously, then inquired of the Plaintiff, "What do you wish to happen as a result of these proceedings?"

Windry stared at her, and Ditson declined to speak for her. Then she gasped, "I want my children. My husband Surley is keeping them in his house Normous just north of Westford. I'm not permitted there, and they aren't allowed out. I want them brought to me."

"Ah," Kele said, turning to Larisse. "There is your Task of Compensation: to bring Plaintiff's children safely to her."

Larisse sat back, crossing her arms. "And if I don't?"

Kele informed her, "Then we will reconvene to consider the charges against you for distressing and distracting the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Lands with pranks. However, if you successfully perform your task, that will satisfy the demands of your guilt, and you will be free to go."

Larisse's face cleared, and she slowly sat up. "I will be free to go? With no further punishment?"

"That is correct," Kele said.

Larisse turned intently to Windry. "How many children?"

"Two," Windry said. "My twelve-year-old daughter Lilou and my ten-year-old son Calix."

"And they are at Surley's house Normous north of Westford?" Larisse asked.

"Yes," Windry said.

Larisse stood. "I need my carriage and driver."

"They are out front for you," Kele said.

“How long will this take? Where shall I wait?” Windry cried.

“Not long. You’d best wait at Croft’s,” Larisse told her, then turned to Judge Kele to say, “Let me go now.”

“This Court will reconvene upon the return of the Defendant,” Kele said, pounding her gavel.

Windry and Eryk at once found themselves, with their table and chairs, back in Croft’s outdoor dining area. They both looked across to Firmin’s, but Larisse’s table was empty.

Eryk, scanning the street, pointed, “There she goes.” Windry looked quickly to see the carriage that she had arrived in pull away from the curb, drawn by two roan horses. Larisse, seated within, turned to them with a casual, two-finger salute.

The two at Croft’s watched the carriage roll up the street to exit the wall gates and disappear over the old stone bridge. “Oh, I can’t endure it,” Windry exhaled, covering her face.

“I will wait with you,” Eryk said.

She looked over to study his scars, and he glanced down. “What happened to you?” she whispered.

“I was a soldier,” he said.

She observed, “But, you don’t sound like a soldier.”

“I am learning your language,” he said, shamefaced.

“No, I mean, you’re not mean and hard, like a soldier should be. You’re a kind man,” she said.

“Which made me like this,” he said, gesturing to his face.

“But I like you like that,” she said, taking his hand. He squeezed her fingers gently.

She looked north down Main. “Why is it taking so long?” she groaned.

Eryk shook his head. “It takes longer than this just to get to Westford.”

“Yes, but--” She stirred uneasily. “I didn’t stop to think—my children, especially Lilou, are suspicious of strangers. I don’t know that they’d go with this woman, this faerie, even if she found them.” She grew troubled, and Eryk looked back at the fortress.

“Do they know the Captain?” he asked.

She glanced at him. “Efran? Yes, I think they would remember him.”

He stood. “Wait. I’ll be back.” Then he started trotting up Main toward the switchback.

By that time, Efran had lazily dressed and taken Kraken out of the fortress (where he had been waiting outside his human’s door) to the courtyard. As he was about to head around the northwestern corner of the fortress toward the back grounds, he heard, “Captain Efran!”

He looked back to the gates, where an exhausted Polonti was breathing heavily over his knees. The guards had not opened the gates to him yet, looking to the Captain for his word. He came over to nod, “Let him in.”

They did, and the man still had to catch his breath from running up the switchback. Squinting at him, Efran said, “You’re Marguerite’s handyman. . . .”

“Eryk, yes, sir,” he said, straightening. “There are two children who may need your help to get back to their mother here. Windry said they would remember you.”

Efran winced, but listened as Eryk gave him an abbreviated version of the trial and Larisse’s Task of Compensation. When Eryk had gotten all that out, Efran was nodding: anything that involved the retrieval of children spoke directly to the Abbey’s charter to care for abandoned children. While Windry’s were not abandoned, they were certainly in danger. Efran remembered Surley, and that he had abused his wife. So she was justified in fearing for Lilou and Calix.

He slapped Kraken’s haunches, telling the nearest man, Cyneheard, “Take him back for a saddle and bridle, and get me two more men besides yourself, with horses.”

“Yes, Captain.” Cyneheard reached for Kraken, who was already loping toward the stables. So Cyneheard had to run after him.

Efran turned back to Eryk. “‘Normous.’ That’s in the area of new houses for construction supervisors in Westford, isn’t it?” After the devastating fire of six months ago, Westford was gradually being rebuilt.

“I think so; I don’t know,” Eryk admitted.

“Yes, I know where that is,” Efran mused. Then he said, “Go tell Windry I’m taking a few men out there.”

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Chapter 22

“Thank you, Captain,” Eryk breathed in relief. And he turned out of the gates to start trotting back down the switchback. Windry was now standing beside her table to watch for him. He waved to her on his way down, and she clasped her hands in hope.

Minutes after Eryk had reached her, Efran and three of his men—Cyneheard, Martyn, and Hawk—rode past Croft’s on their way to the wall gates. Windry called, “Thank you, Efran!” He didn’t dare respond, but he was fine with Cyneheard’s courteous wave to her.

About that time, Larisse had arrived in the clearing where the construction supervisors’ houses were built. These homes were—not shabby, but not very well built, either, having been thrown up quickly for an immediate need. Once better houses for the supervisors were built, these would most likely be torn down.

The carriage driver called down to her, “Where to, Lady?”

“I’m looking for a house called Normous,” she called back up. “Can you find it?”

“I’ll just have to drive around and look,” he said, clucking to the horses.

Larisse leaned back in dissatisfaction. There had to be a quicker way to find the children, but her formidable faerie powers were not optimal for this task. As she craned her head out of the window, she saw an old woman empty a dustpan out the side door of a house. So Larisse called, “Hello! I’m looking for the house Normous.” Although she dispatched waves of faerie Friendliness, the woman turned inside the house and closed the door.

So the carriage roamed over the area for some time before the driver called, “What’s the name of the owner, Lady?” She paused, trying to think. Remembering names was not a priority of hers. But then he called, “Surley? There’s a sign here that says, ‘Surley Rep. Bortniansky.’”

“Surley. Yes, that’s him. Stop there,” she said at once.

“Shall I pull up to the door?” he asked.

“No. Stop and let me out, then turn this rig around,” she directed.

“Yes. Lady.” He drew up on the reins and she hopped out of the carriage to run up the walk to the front door.

Here she paused to work up a great swell of Friendliness around her. Then she knocked, and presently the door was opened by a housekeeper. “Helloooo,” Larisse said, beaming Friendliness as hard as she could. “May I come in?”

“You need to come in,” the crinkly-faced woman said.

“Yes, that is so true,” Larisse said, and the woman slowly opened the door.

Inside, Larisse glanced around and asked, “Where are the children?”

The woman struggled a moment against the known prohibition, but Larisse placed a hand on her arm to add to the pressure of Friendliness. “In the room at the back of the corridor that’s locked,” the woman said, scowling.

Larisse crinkled her nose in a show of cuteness while holding the woman’s hand in both of hers. “Have you got the key, dear heart?”

“Eh.” She couldn’t bring herself to answer, but pulled the key out of her pocket.

“Thank you! Oh, you look so tired and sleepy. So, so sleepy,” Larisse said, gently leading her to a cushioned rocker. The woman sat right down and closed her eyes.

Larisse swiftly took the key to the last door of the corridor to turn it in the lock. And she opened the door to look into the room, where two children sat beside a locked window. They looked over immediately: the boy was tentatively hopeful, but the girl’s eyes were hard and suspicious.

“Hello, children,” Larisse said, making the Friendliness bubble up. “Your mother wants you back! So I’m to take you to her.”

The boy almost stood, but the girl held his arm. “Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Larisse. And your mother asked me to come get you!” she said with the brightest possible smile.

“What’s’er name?” the girl asked rapidly.

Thrown off by the quickness of her question, Larisse paused a fraction of a second too long. “Ah—Windry, of course. We just met today,” she explained. But now the girl’s eyes were knowing and the boy was watching only his sister.

At that time, four riders drew up to the carriage outside Surley’s house as the driver regarded them in great discomfort—three wore red uniforms while the fourth wore a disturbing smile. “Oh ho,” Hawk said softly. Cyneheard bent from his saddle to look in the carriage window, then shook his head.

Efran gestured his riders to the cottage door and said, “Martyn, you and Hawk watch the door. Cyneheard, come in with me.” They saluted, collecting around the front door as Efran and Cyneheard dismounted. The nervous driver drew the carriage a few paces down the road, but didn’t desert his fare.

Efran quietly entered the unlocked door with Cyneheard following the same way. They saw the woman asleep in the rocker, then both turned at the voices coming from a room down the corridor. The girl was asking, “What are our names?”

Larisse gritted her teeth; she should have known to practice the names on the way here. But behind her, Efran said, “Pretty Li and Mighty Cal.” He used the nicknames he had given them when he was with their mother.

The children’s eyes widened and Larisse spun to him. Lilou cried, “It’s Efran!” She and her brother ran to him. He picked her up and Cal latched onto his leg.

“This is Cyneheard,” he said, nodding to the young man beside him, who smiled. Efran added, “We’re going to take you to your mother.” As Cyneheard reached down to pick up Cal, who raised his arms to him, the door behind them slammed shut.

All four of them looked at Larisse. She exhaled, still attempting Friendliness. “Hello, Efran. And—Cyneheard. I’m so glad you’re here! It will be wonderful for you to escort the carriage, because you know that’s the most comfortable way for the children to travel.”

Cyneheard looked away, resisting the assault of Friendliness, but Efran went over to the door, carrying Lilou. When it wouldn’t open, he looked back to say, “Open the door, Larisse.”

She winced as though in great pain, and said, “I *can’t*, Efran; I’m the one who has to take the children back.”

“We don’t want to go with her,” Lilou said firmly, confident in her grip on Efran. Calix scrunched his head like a turtle in Cyneheard’s arms.

Efran walked over to Larisse and she pleaded, “Listen. Please. You’re welcome to ride along with me, but I have to bring them back to satisfy the Task of Compensation.”

“Open the door,” Efran repeated, unyielding.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that,” she said tightly.

Lilou hid her face on Efran's neck and he said, "As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I am fulfilling my chartered duty to care for children. Neither you nor any power will stop me. Cyneheard, open the door."

Larisse stiffened but Cyneheard went over to push down the lever and swing the door open. He walked out with Calix, then Efran came out with Lilou. The moment he was past the door, it slammed shut again. Larisse, still inside, fell on the door to wrestle with the handle and pound. "Efran! It's stuck! Open the door! I'm trapped!"

On their way out, Lilou asked in distaste, "Who is she?"

"A half-bad faerie," Efran said.

She snorted and Calix said, "She's not even pretty." But Efran was contemplating the fact that his authority to carry out his charter extended beyond the Lands.

Outside, the children had their choice of who they wanted to ride with. Lilou claimed Efran; Calix hesitated, telling Cyneheard, "I like you, but he looks like Efran"--indicating Martyn.

"Next time, then?" Cyneheard asked. Calix nodded in conciliation as Cyneheard handed him up to Martyn.

When the riders passed the carriage driver, Efran told him, "You'd better go get her out before their father comes home." Then his party rode on as the driver scrambled down to run into the house.

The children wanted to chatter, but it was hard to talk when they were loping, and Efran considered it a priority to get them back as quickly as possible. Lilou rode behind his saddle, clutching his waist, while Calix rode in front of Martyn. Calix cried to his sister, "I'm guiding the horse!"

She looked back as best she could while hanging on tightly. "Good for you."

The gates were standing open when they rode up, and Windry was seen running down the middle of the street toward them with Eryk following. Efran and Martyn let down their passengers to much crying and kissing from their mother. While Cyneheard, Martyn, and Hawk returned to the fortress hill, Efran drew Eryk aside to tell him, "Take Windry and her children to Marguerite; I'm sure she'll want to house them."

"Yes. Yes, that's a good idea, Captain." Eryk was smiling, which made his scar a little less distracting.

As Efran was remounting Kraken, Lilou came running up to him. "Efran! Efran!" He stopped at once, dropping to one knee. "Are you going to start coming to see us again?" she demanded.

There was a prevailing silence as he looked at her, chastised. Windry was a few feet away, trying not to watch. Efran said, "I'm sorry that I won't be able to come as often as I'd like. But I want you to meet someone." He stood to jerk his head to Eryk, who came over. "This is a friend of mine, and your mother's, who helped me find you. His name is Eryk, and he's going to introduce you to a lovely lady who lives in an oyster house."

She glanced at Eryk, but was more intrigued by this purported house. "Whaaat? An oyster house?" she asked dubiously, cocking her head.

"Eryk will show you," he said, looking at Windry.

She smiled down at her child. "Then let's go see it."

When those four had left, Efran took up Kraken's reins, then saw the Commander standing by the door of Barracks A. Efran exhaled, patting Kraken. "You know where the water is." Kraken just nodded, as he did when he knew that his human was in no mood for horse talk.

Efran walked up to salute. "Captain Efran reporting, Commander."

"Come in," Wendt said. He climbed the steps himself to enter the barracks and go to the back room. Sitting at the conference table, he instructed, "Shut the door and sit down, Efran." When he was seated, Wendt said, "Now you can tell me what happened. Larisse was put on trial?"

"That's what I understand, Commander, but I wasn't there—you'd best talk to Eryk, Marguerite's handyman, who was there. But I understand that Larisse was brought up on several charges, including, ah, Deceiving a Mortal for Nefarious Purposes—that is, she enticed Windry to come down thinking that I would, go back with her. Larisse was found guilty, so assigned a Task of Compensation, which was to retrieve Windry's children from their father's house. But, Windry was afraid they wouldn't want to go with her, which they didn't, which is why I followed to get them back. And that's what we just did," Efran related in discomfort.

"And they went with you without question," Wendt said.

"Yes, they remembered me," Efran said.

"So, even though you couldn't marry her, the relationship proved to be beneficial, in the end," Wendt said. When Wendt found out about it at the time, he had dragged Efran over the coals for sleeping with a vulnerable married woman who had young children.

"You could look at it that way," Efran said uneasily. This whole recounting was uncomfortable.

"I choose to. Now, what about their father?" Wendt asked.

"He'll be showing up at the gates shortly. But he was abusive to Windry, and had the children locked up, so, there's no way I'll let him in or let them leave with him," Efran said.

"So she was finally able to break free of him, with her children," Wendt said.

"Yes, sir," Efran said firmly.

"Good. Then you can stop feeling guilty about it," Wendt said.

"Thank you, sir," Efran acknowledged, dropping his head. [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 23

At that time, Eryk was leading Windry and her wide-eyed children up the steps to the chapel doors. The Abbey guards opened the doors to them, and Eryk brought them into the expansive hall with its beautiful woodwork and colored-glass windows and the seating area to one side. A substantial dining table sat on the other side. The visitors looked at the marble floor under their feet, the beamed ceiling high above their heads, and the elegant curved stairway to the loft. Windry whispered, "You know who lives here?"

But Eryk was calling, “Lady Marguerite?”

She came flowing out of the kitchen in one of her lightweight embroidered caftans. “Eryk! Who have you brought to me?” she cried in delight.

He grinned. “Lady Marguerite, please meet Windry and her children Lilou and Calix. They have no place to go.”

“Oh, but we have plenty of room here, now that the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers and the Ruddock Chorale and the Halfenaked Exotic Dancers are gone. Oh, my! Such beautiful children! Would you like something to eat?” Marguerite cried.

The children gazed at her in wonder. Windry said tremulously, “That would be lovely, if you would. I—don’t know what they’ve had to eat today--”

Marguerite turned to roar, “HARTSHOUGH!” The children held their breath, looking toward the kitchen for what sort of ogre might emerge.

But the placid Hartshough came from the kitchen wearing an apron and wiping his hands on a dish cloth. “Yes, Lady?”

“Oh! The children, Hartshough. You know,” she said.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite. They may prefer to have snacks on the patio, as I have noticed rabbits in the new plantings and birds in the fountain,” he said gravely.

“Oh! Yes, come out back,” she ordered.

“This way, please,” Hartshough said, bowing, and the children rushed after him as he turned away. Windry was torn between following them and talking to their hostess, but finally went after the children.

Eryk told Marguerite, “Thank you, Lady. They have—no place to stay, as they ran away from their father, who beat her--”

“Oh, well, the room upstairs at the north end is clean and empty; don’t you think they’d like that one? Hartshough will see they have everything they need,” she said.

“You are kind, Lady; you are a very good woman,” Eryk said in gratitude.

“Come now; we all help each other,” she said, patting his hand, and they went out to join their guests.

The following morning, June 11th, Surley did indeed show up at the gates. He was on horseback, but a wagonload of men armed with axes and hammers followed him. The gate guards looked them over in amusement while a messenger was sent up to the Captain. Some of the men in the wagon wanted to storm the gates; others who noticed the smiling guards with superior weaponry decided to sit back and wait.

Surley was shouting, “You rats, you kidnapers! Where are my children? What kind of law do you have here, that allows you break into a man’s house, assault his housekeeper, and make off with his flesh and blood? I’ll have your blood!”

While he was ranting thus, Efran was leisurely riding Kraken bareback down the switchback and up Main. A crowd gathered a discreet distance from the gates, and Surley went quiet as Efran loped up. "Hello, Surley," he said. Efran's hair was now black again, and had grown out to almost its usual length.

"You," Surley breathed. "It's you! You filthy, wife-stealing Polonti rat! It is you! I'll have you up on trial for Provision for a Wronged Husband!"

Some of Efran's soldiers looked cautious. The Provision for a Wronged Husband stipulated that a man proved of sleeping with another man's wife was required to give the wronged husband half of his wealth. Just ten months ago, Efran had narrowly avoided paying a Eurisian nobleman 12,000 royals (not counting anything from the Abbey Treasury) when the man's wife decided to lie at the last minute and claim that nothing happened.

Efran laughed, "Surley, criminals can't bring charge for anything, and even if I were inclined to let you onto my Lands, it would be only to charge you before the notary with wife abuse. She still has the scars."

Surley paused, and Efran leaned down to Shane to whisper, "Windry's at Marguerite's. Take her quickly to Ryal to swear out an emergency divorce for abuse. Bring it to me; keep her away."

"Yes, Captain." Shane appropriated another man's horse to begin loping hard up Main toward the chapel.

Efran sat back up on Kraken to smile at Surley, who was regarding him with as much hatred but a little more caution. "I just want my children," he growled.

Efran replied, "Oh, the children you took away from their mother to keep them locked up all day? Her own children that you wouldn't even let her see? They're back with her now, and I haven't heard that they're complaining of anything."

"Are they here?" Surley rasped.

"Are you crazy?" Efran laughed.

"Where are they, then? I'm their father; I have a right to know," Surley said.

Efran lifted his face, apparently thinking. But he was only stalling. "You have a point there, but I can't risk your taking them again. So what I will have to do is send them a message and ask if they wish to see you. If they do, we'll have to set up a safe meeting place, perhaps halfway between your house and their location. Regardless, given your history of beating their mother, I wouldn't count on anything right away."

Surley had begun to sweat when several of Efran's men noted Shane running a cloaked woman into Ryal's shop, which happened to be right next door to the chapel. Efran waited quietly at the gates, ostensibly for Surley to decide what he wanted to do. Finally, the man shrugged, "Just ask her to talk to me."

"I'd have to send her a message," Efran said.

"Well, do it!" Surley said.

"I'll think about it. I don't want her bullied into doing anything," Efran said.

Surley groaned, leaning back in the saddle, but his men were getting restless. If they couldn't bash heads, they

wanted to get to work so that they'd get paid. They were earning nothing sitting here in a wagon.

They waited a few minutes longer, until Shane loped up to hand Efran a folded paper. Efran opened it to look it over, then he nudged Kraken forward to extend the paper over the gates toward Surley.

He took it impatiently, perusing it in growing anger. "She is here!" he shouted, rattling the paper.

"She left it here," Efran corrected him. "We have the only notary for many miles around." Backing Kraken away from the gates, he said, "You are to leave Abbey property now—that is beyond the old stone bridge." He issued a whistle, and his archers ran up, bows nocked.

"I'll sit here for however long I wish," Surley snapped.

Efran issued another short whistle, which was the signal for warning shots. And a stream of arrows thunked all along the near side of the wagon.

The workers in the wagon started shouting, and the horses shied, half rearing. Containing them, the driver turned them back north. When Surley continued to sit on his horse at the gates, the archers swiveled to aim at him. Angrily, he wheeled his horse to follow the wagon.

As the Landers watched him go, one of the gate guards, Serrano, asked, "Will he come back, you think, Captain?"

"Not if he's smart. But he's not. So, keep watch," Efran said, turning Kraken with his knees.

Efran began walking Kraken back up Main toward the fortress. As he rode, he was thinking in the back of his mind, casting back over everything that had happened these last few days. Kraken walked easily, in no hurry, with no alarm, but Efran was vaguely aware of something unaccountable, something . . . not quite coherent.

He looked aside at Larisse sitting glumly in Averde's outdoor eating area next to the pond. Watching her, Efran tightened his knees slightly on Kraken's sides. *What does that mean?* Kraken asked.

"Pull aside and just stop for a moment," Efran said. Kraken stopped, but it was in the middle of the street, and Efran watched Larisse. She either didn't see him or just ignored him, which was fine with him either way. But--

"Queene Kele, may I have a word with you?" Efran asked.

She immediately appeared, sitting between Kraken's ears facing the rider. "Yes, Lord Efran. What can I do for you?" Kraken's ears twitched, but he let her be.

"Kele, I heard a little bit about Larisse's trial," he began slowly, "that she was on trial for Deceiving a Mortal for Nefarious Purposes."

"That's correct, Lord Efran," she said firmly.

"That was bad, to be sure, Kele, but, Minka seemed to think that Larisse was also responsible for the bog, and that was a much greater threat than her luring Windry down here," he said.

"Oh, she said that was just a joke, an illusion, which also comes under the heading of Deceiving Mortals," Kele explained.

“An illusion,” Efran murmured. “Kele, how much harm can an illusion do? I had a man almost drown in the bog.”

“Oh, no, Efran, if it came to mortal peril, the illusion would be exposed,” Kele assured him.

For faerie illusions, that was obviously the case. And although Master Crowe’s illusions could kill, his power was of a different stream than that of the faeries, one that the Lands was shielded from. Efran objected, “But my man almost died in the bog—he would have died had I not been able to pull him out. And after that, the bog began advancing, growing stronger. Kele, that was no illusion.”

“Really? Oh, dear,” Kele murmured. She began concentrating, peering, searching.

“Kele?” Efran asked apprehensively.

“Well, Efran, if that’s the case—if her illusion became real. . . .” She stopped as though listening, then whispered, “There are some bad ones that like to—hide under illusions and bend them into reality. But nothing like that could be here, because only good faeries are here.”

Efran glanced toward Larisse. “What about half-bad faeries? Could such a parasite latch on to the illusion of a half-bad that sneaked in?”

“Perhaps,” she said reluctantly. “But there are no half-bad--” She broke off, looking at Larisse.

Efran posed, “So if a half-bad faerie created the opportunity with a mischievous illusion, could something really bad enter it?”

Kele protested, “Oh, there’s almost none that would have the power to take control of something as vast as a bog that could swallow up the Lands! Only--” Her face went slack and she looked at the ground under Kraken’s feet.

She mouthed something. Efran leaned toward her. “What?” She spoke again, her lips hardly moving. Efran said, “A Sandgolem? What is--?”

There was a tremendous upheaval under their feet. Efran was pitched off Kraken, who fell onto him. And the paved road before them rose up with an earth-shattering roar that began blowing massive amounts of sand, dirt and bits of paving over man and horse.

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Chapter 24

Residents screamed and ran from the inexplicable burst of wind. The alarm bells at the wall gates and the courtyard began clanging simultaneously. Estes and DeWitt jumped up, knocking over their chairs, and ran from the workroom to look out from the second-floor balcony. “What--?” gasped DeWitt.

“Efran’s under that!” Estes shouted, seeing only Kraken’s legs.

DeWitt turned to run to the opposite end of the corridor and throw open the window. “Minka!” he called down to the back grounds. She looked up from the bench. “Go to the courtyard! Hurry!” he shouted.

She dropped Nakam to run to the back door and up the corridor. Emerging into the courtyard, she saw something monstrous rising up from Main Street to create a huge mound of suffocating dirt and sand over something—or someone—in the street.

“Stop it!” she cried. “As Lady Sovereign, I order you to stop and leave the Lands! Go! NOW!” she screamed.

The massive, bulging creature reared up with paddle-like limbs to launch itself high in the air, shedding sand as it went. The more sand it dropped, the more it disappeared into the air heading north.

As the sand, dirt, and bits of debris settled back in place over the street, scores of men thronged in to begin scooping out armfuls from the center pile. They zeroed in on one particular lump to cooperatively pull, and Minka watched in horror as Efran’s limp form was exposed.

While several men worked on him, more pulled at the larger form that had covered the man, but it was too heavy. So they concentrated on clearing sand away from Kraken’s face and nostrils.

Minka began running down the switchback and promptly fell. She gathered herself up as Routh brought a horse to her. “Here, Lady.”

“Thank you, Routh,” she gasped, grabbing the pommel while he lifted her to the saddle. She turned the horse to kick it insistently to a downhill lope.

When Minka arrived at the sand pit, she fell off the horse to fall onto Efran, now standing. He held her while he stood over the men doing what they could for Kraken. Minka stared down at the unmoving horse. “Efran--” she gasped.

He was shaking his head, blinking dirt out of his eyes. “He fell with his head covering mine,” he gasped, pausing to cough to the side. Then he turned away, muttering, “Stupid horse. I never get attached to a horse. That’s what happens--”

He had to stop and breathe a moment, then he looked up at Avene’s customers returning to their street-side tables. They looked highly displeased to see their dinners ruined and their chairs filled with dirt. A few of them eyed Efran as the culprit. When he began stalking over to the streetside seating, shedding dirt with each stride, most of them quickly stepped back.

But he stopped in front of Larisse, sitting in defiance. “Come with me,” he said quietly, tears leaving streaks down his dirty face.

Larisse looked at Minka in aggravation, but came out from the seating area to walk with him, not too close. He stopped over Kraken again, pressing his lips together while the tears continued to wash the dirt out of his eyes. Then he took Minka’s hand firmly to lead her toward the chapel with Larisse following. He did not see Giardi running out of the notary shop to fall onto Kraken.

The Abbey men had the chapel doors open for the three to enter. Hartshough, in the process of advancing, stopped to incline his head. “I will find Marguerite, Lord Efran. I believe she is upstairs getting Windry and her children settled into their room.”

“Thank you,” Efran said, watching Hartshough turn to ascend the stairs. Then Efran just stood in the seating area to wait. Periodically, he issued short, hacking coughs to clear his airway. Larisse and Minka sat on each end of the divan with a wide space between them. “Sandgolem,” he exhaled, peering at Minka through his watering eyes. “Did you order it off the Lands?”

“Yes,” she said.

He nodded, wiping phlegm from his face. Then he turned as Marguerite came down the stairs. She reached out to hold Efran’s shoulder and pat his back. “Are you all right?” she asked quietly.

He nodded shakily. “Yes, but, we have some things to talk about.”

“Sit,” she said, placing herself in one of the upholstered chairs. Efran sat down on the area rug in the middle of the grouping.

He leaned his arms on his raised knees, then looked between Marguerite and Larisse to rasp, “I’m going to make some guesses, and you tell me if I’m right. I think the Sandgolem took over your bog illusion to make it real. When I passed the ‘test,’ that did away with the bog, but the Sandgolem remained, and I accidentally called it up.” Larisse looked at him without replying. “But before all that, it piggybacked on you to get into the Lands,” Efran finished with a cough.

Larisse didn’t reply, but Marguerite said, “I’m afraid that’s accurate, Efran.”

“What else has she brought in?” he asked her.

Marguerite said, “Nothing else . . . for now.”

“Then you’re a threat to everyone here,” Efran said, looking at Larisse with watering eyes.

“What are you going to do?” Larisse asked. For once, she was neither threatening nor sarcastic.

All at once, the hall was filled. The four in the seating area looked up, startled, as Queene Kele sat at a curved judge’s bench elevated about ten feet off the floor. Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin were seated at lower tables on her right and left hand. The faerie jurors sat in their box a little lower still, while remaining over the heads of the onlookers. And hundreds of faeries crowded the hall around them to watch. Efran had to swivel on the floor to get the whole view.

Queene Kele, in her judge’s wig and robe, banged her gavel on her bench. “We shall now reconvene the trial of Larisse. While noting her failure in her Task of Compensation for the crime of Deceiving a Mortal for Nefarious Purposes, we now bring against her the charge of Grave Endangerment of Protected Humans, and the sixteen corollary charges associated with it, which we shall not bother to enumerate at this time, being outraged by the primary charge of a crime which has been perpetrated in a most heinous fashion upon the Lands.”

She paused to contain her passion, then resumed, “Notwithstanding our extreme respect and admiration of Lady Marguerite, we are forced to consider the barbarous nature of the crime, in allowing a Sandgolem entry into the Lands without so much as a peep of warning and the subsequent upheaval which endangered the life of the very one on whom we are all dependent.

“Having seen the crime played out before our very eyes, Members of the Jury, what is your verdict on the charge against Larisse of Grave Endangerment of Protected Humans?” Kele asked them.

“GUILTY!” they said. The verdict was unanimous.

The faerie witnesses applauded loudly, causing Kele to bang her gavel repeatedly, demanding, “Order! Order in the Court!” They settled down to listen.

Kele put her glasses back onto her nose and lifted a scroll, which was glowing a fiery, ominous red. “By Universal Faerie Law, the punishment for this crime is Assignment of Pariah Status. This requires that the Condemned be stripped of all Faerie Power and prohibited from all Fellowship for the remainder of your time on this Earth.

“Henceforth, you are barred Fellowship from not only all Faerie, but all Human, all Fauna, and all Flora. Faerie will not acknowledge you; Humans will not see you; Animals will attack you; Plants will die around you. The Wind will sweep you away; the Rain will puncture your skin; the Sun will burn you; the Moon will drive you mad; the Stars will pierce your heart. And no means will suffice to kill you until the Creator grants you entrance to the Gray Lands.”

In a lower voice, she said, “This punishment, which I hope never to announce again, is extreme, but the magnitude of the crime is such that no other option is left to me. So it is signed and ordained this Eleventh of June in the year Eighty-One Fifty-Five from the Creation of the World.” She tossed the scroll from the bench for it to land at Larisse’s feet.

Kele said softly, “You will have one hour to make your peace with the Creator. Know that wherever you try to flee on this Earth, the Punishment will follow you and consume you.” Kele banged her gavel again to say, “This trial is concluded.”

She, the faerie witnesses, jury, and all courtroom furnishings vanished. The scroll was left burning at Larisse’s feet. She gazed at it in terror, and then overwhelming sorrow. She looked to Efran as though to speak, but her courage utterly failed.

Minka and Efran stared at each other, then looked to Marguerite. She seemed calm and contemplative, as usual. Larisse, pale, raised her eyes in brokenness. Minka opened her mouth, wanting to give comfort somehow, without knowing what could possibly be said.

Then they heard a child call, “Efran!” They looked up to the loft. Calix said, “Isn’t this great? This loft is super. Look how high I am! Hey, watch what I can do! I’m Mighty Cal!” And he began climbing up on the loft railing.

Efran lurched up. “No, Calix, get down.”

“No, watch, Efran, I can balance!” the child insisted.

“Get down, Calix,” Efran repeated, hacking as he came out from the grouping.

“No, loo-” And Calix toppled over the railing. Minka screamed and Efran leapt into a running stride.

“Time, stay,” Marguerite said softly. Calix hung suspended in the air, eyes widened and mouth open. Efran was stretched out like a panther in mid-stride. Minka was half off the divan, face contorted in fear.

“Why, Mother!” Larisse said in admiration. “I had no idea you could stop Time.” Her cavalier attitude was belied by her trembling.

“Only for short periods. You have seconds to make a decision before the child hits the floor,” Marguerite said, eyes lowered.

“To save him?” Larisse asked.

“Catching him will cause you to hit your head on the floor. You’ll die,” Marguerite said.

Eyes watering, Larisse cried, “The Scroll won’t let me die!”

“The Scroll bows to a higher Law. If you die saving a life, you are granted Paradise. Kewe is there, and many other Faerie who have given their lives sacrificially,” Marguerite said.

“Kewe?” Larisse asked in a sudden uprush of guilt and grief.

“Yes, because she died helpless, she also was given the peace in Paradise that she had been denied in her lifetime,” Marguerite said. She glanced over at Efran striding in midair and Minka standing. The boy had dropped another five feet from the loft. His mother had appeared at the door of the farthest bedroom at the top of the stairs.

Marguerite added, “If you do not choose quickly, you’ll be too late anyway.”

Larisse sat frozen a moment, then lurched up from her chair without even seeing the Scroll. Pausing before her mother, she leaned over to kiss her cheek, whispering, “Thank you.” Then she stood underneath the child, who was now soundlessly screaming. “Is this good?” she asked, shaking.

Marguerite was watching her. “One step forward. Hold your arms out,” she said. Larisse adjusted her position. Marguerite added, “Spread your feet a little more. Get your head back out of the way.”

“This?” Larisse asked, eyes fixed on the child.

“Yes,” Marguerite said. Then, very quietly, “I will love you forever.”

Without taking her eyes off the boy paused in his plummet, she whispered, “I love you, Mother. I’m sor--” All at once the child hit Larisse and both slammed into the marble floor. On the loft above, Windry screamed. Justinian bolted out of his bedroom to look over the rail. Minka was crying, but stopped abruptly to look at Larisse’s empty chair. The Scroll lay in ashes before it.

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Chapter 25

Efran skidded over to pick up Calix. “Don’t *ever*—are you hurt?”

“No,” Calix gasped, clutching Efran’s neck. “I’m sorry--I--”

Windry came sailing off the stairs to grab him up. “What did you think you were doing?” she cried. Then she looked down at Larisse, whose head was bleeding onto the marble.

Efran whistled, and one of the guards opened the door. Almost before Efran could tell him, “Go get the doctor,” he had seen Larisse and turned to run. Efran knelt by her to put a hand on her neck, then her chest. He looked reluctantly back to Marguerite. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s all right,” Marguerite said. “I still have Minka.” She looked at her with eyes of peace, and Minka fell on her.

Windry was walking Calix back up the stairs with much motherly scolding. Lilou met them halfway. Turning to walk on his other side, she laid a comforting arm around his shoulders. To the children, enduring their Mum’s tirades was worse than cracking a head on the floor.

Before Coghill and his helper arrived, Larisse’s body had disintegrated into a pile of dust on the floor. It reminded Efran strongly of the disintegration of the lineage parchment. And when the doctor had burst through the double doors, even the dust that remained was being taken up into the air. For while humanity had been created from the earth, faerie had been created from the air.

Coghill stared around at the normalcy, blurting, “What? Where? Is there--?”

And Efran coughed out, “False alarm. Sorry, doctor.” The door guards, who knew otherwise, were gazing at the empty spot on the floor. Even the blood was gone.

Minka stared at the bright sparkles disappearing one by one, and thought, *Is that how I will go, then?* She looked up at her exhausted husband. *Oh, Efran, I never want to leave you.* Exasperated by the wasted trip, Coghill and his helper left.

Efran went over to Marguerite’s chair to kiss her head, then paused at her serenity. He guessed, “That was a better alternative. Is that right?”

“It is as it was meant to be,” Marguerite said quietly. “She has made up for much, and earned a better place.”

Efran nodded hazily, glancing at the distance from Larisse’s chair to the point under the loft where Calix had fallen. All traces of the scroll were gone. He shook his head, unable to process any of that right now. “Minka will be back to see you a little later,” he promised, covering his continual coughing with his sleeve. Marguerite patted his back while Minka wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

He walked her to the doors, thinking about authorizing Kraken’s beautiful black hide to be made into a rug, as he had continually threatened. But that was something else he couldn’t bear to deal with right now.

As the doors swung open, he looked into the attentive eyes of the animal stubbornly blocking the steps while waiting for his human. Minka gasped, “Kraken!”

Efran, tired of crying, grasped him around the neck to cough, “You stupid horse.” Kraken cleared dirt out of his nostrils by blowing them out on Efran’s shirt. He turned to hoist Minka onto the broad black back, then walked alongside them to ascend the old switchback.

After sending Kraken around the fortress to the back grounds, Efran and Minka passed through the foyer to get him some clean clothes. On the way, Minka caught another green frog to take it outside, as the children were still terrified of their being put on the menu. Efran also took his clothes outside, to the men’s bath house. He bathed while Kraken carried Joshua on his back, Minka walking beside them to investigate the progress on the gardens. Both she and Efran were quiet, still numb.

Meanwhile, the Abbey Lands faeries were organizing into work crews to repair the damage caused by the Sandgolem. Kele felt they were responsible for this, as a half-bad faerie had unknowingly brought it into the Lands. After requiring an hour to organize, they finished the actual work on Main Street in about ten minutes. The residents were pleased with the results, as the street was even smoother than before, with sparkles that illuminated the yellow crossings even in the dark.

Late that afternoon, a crowd of mounted, armed men appeared at the gates, requesting asylum. They preceded a great procession of wagons loaded with women, children, furnishings and equipment of all kinds. Messengers were sent to Efran, who was in his quarters with Minka, and thus inaccessible. Kraken, lounging outside the door, bit anyone who tried to knock, so they went up to the second-floor workroom instead.

Shortly, Estes, DeWitt, Koschat and a team of men with papers and writing implements rode out to meet them. Their leader turned out to be Choules, the Eurasian cobbler and beltmaker whom Efran had freed from chains in Venegas about six weeks ago, along with upwards of fifty other men who were with him now. These were skilled craftsmen, among them wheelwrights, masons, armorers, carpenters and ironmongers, among other trades.

Since there was no longer any bog to impede settlement of the easternmost Lands, the Fortress administrators and surveyors quickly began apportioning plots to the new residents. Messengers streamed back and forth from the plots to Ryal's shop to register them, and the old-timers on the Lands such as Averne, Firmin, Elvey, Croft, Wade, Delano, Schmolck, Rimbault and Walford sent gift parcels to those whose services might prove useful.

When the group leader Choules received his plot assignment and began setting up a tent until his house could be constructed, his wife Saoirse raised her face to DeWitt. "I never imagined to hear carillon bells again—and way out here, of all places."

"Yes?" DeWitt said in surprise, looking to the fortress in the distance. He had forgotten about the rooftop bell tower.

"Yes, and they're playing 'Home at Last'!" she gasped, tearing up.

DeWitt turned his head to listen. "I hear them now. I had no idea they had such range." He thought about that while she listened and he finished recording the plot information with his sharpened charcoal.

Windry, frightened by her son's near-fatal fall from the loft railing, desired a small, one-story house to live in that would accommodate not only her and her children, but her loom, spinning wheel, tools, yarns, dyes and other equipment, still at her little house about a half-hour away. But Eryk argued that it was unwise for her and her children to live alone when her ex-husband was still a threat.

Windry asked who was to protect her; Eryk said, "Me." So they went to the notary's to get married. But Ryal was impossibly busy with the plot assignments, so Giardi issued them a marriage license with no questions asked and no waiting period required. Hartshough found them a nice house which Marguerite paid for, and they even began furnishing it. But retrieving her weaving equipment from her old house would have to wait until tomorrow.

Minka lay on Efran's chest, listening to him breathe. He still had to cough a little, but they were light coughs. She whispered, "Would you have married me without the faerie appeal? I know you can't know, but—knowing what you do know, do you think you would have? I don't think so. You'd have no reason to even look at me."

He looked down at her, smoothing back her hair. “Would you have married me if I weren’t Polonti? I don’t think so. You just oozed *moekolohe*. I don’t think you would have even looked at me as a Southerner.”

She raised up in shock. “Efran!”

He laughed. “It’s all part of the package—you can’t separate out pieces as important or not; they’re all necessary to the whole.” She laid her head back down on his chest with a huge sigh, and he smiled.

By dinner that evening, Efran was almost fully recuperated. Sitting down to tenderloin with Minka on his right, Joshua on his leg, and Ella to his left completed his healing.

But Minka gasped, clutching his arm to lean behind him. “You’re wearing new earrings!” she cried quietly.

“Yes, do you like them?” Ella asked, leaning behind Efran to finger the beads dangling in her dark hair. “I got them from Dallarosa. She had a whole new assortment ready.” Quennel, on her left, was smiling and shaking his head. It never ceased to amaze him what women got excited about.

Minka cried out softly in yearning. “I want to go see! Can I go see Dallarosa’s new earrings?” she asked Efran, pulling up on him.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “I’ll ride with you.”

She exhaled in gratitude, holding his arm, and he patiently waited until she got over her excitement so that he could resume eating.

That evening, Marguerite sat on the patio watching the fireflies fill the trees as she listened to Hartshough putter in the kitchen. Nakham, the guardian angel of the hill, was sitting with her. “A good job all the way around, Marguerite,” he said. “I know it was hard.”

“Yes, but easier than seeing her become Pariah,” she murmured. “By the way, thank you for letting me know that Calix was about to fall.”

He said, “You’re welcome. We’re all glad you’re here, you know. New challenges will spring up without any more warning than Efran got for the Sandgolem.”

Her brows drew down. “That’s frightening.”

“Frightening? Oh, no, Marguerite,” Nakham said. “That’s why the Abbey was established as a fortress, with a soldier as its lord.”

“I understand,” she acknowledged, smiling, and they both looked out to the fireflies, the faeries, and the stars.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on June 11th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

I borrowed the concept of the Gray Lands from numerous sources. While it bears a certain resemblance to *Sheol* of the Old Testament, there is nothing in Scripture that confirms it or rules it out entirely before the Judgment. So let's just roll with it as a literary device and not a statement of reality.

I also borrowed the great bird from the [Nazca Lines](#) in southern Peru.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Half-Bad Faerie*
(Book 22)

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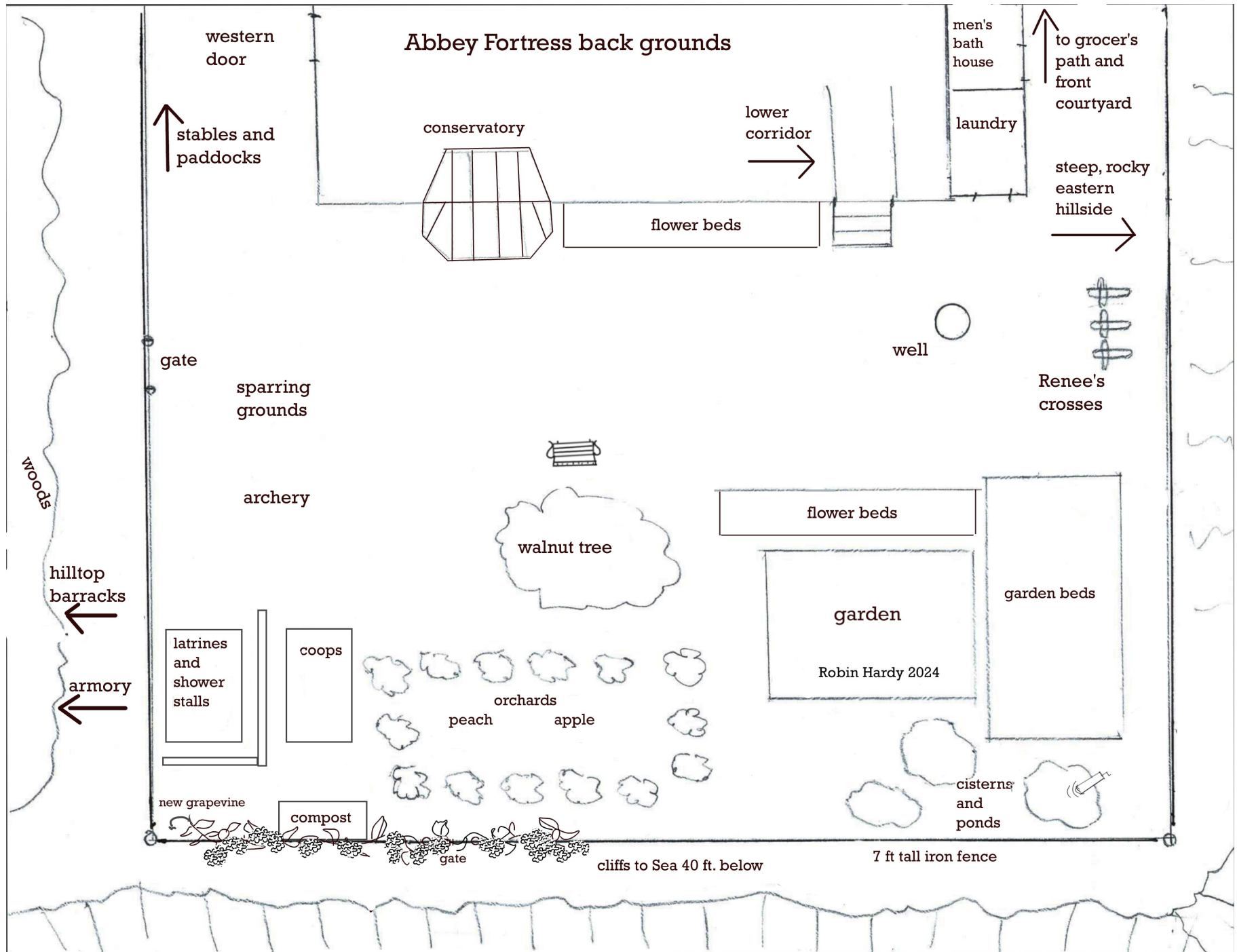
Aceto—ah SEE tow
Adele—ah DELL
Alberon—AL ber on
altior—ALL tee or
Arbaiza—are BAZE ah
Arne—arn
Atticitian—at eh SISH un
Averne—ah VURN
Ayling—AYE ling
Beischel—BESH ull
Bortniansky—bort nee AN ski
Bowring—BOWE ring
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee
Calix—KAY lix
canapés—KAN ah payz
Capur—KAH pir
carillon—CARE uh lahn
Challinor—CHAL en or
Conte--cahnt
Cyneheard—SIGN herd
Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa
DeGrado—deh GRAW doh
deign--dayn
Delano—deh LAN oh
diva—DEE vah
Doane—rhymes with *own*
Dominica—dah MIN ee ka
Efran—EFF run
Elowen—EL oh win
Elvey—ELL vee
Estes—ESS tis
Eurus--YOUR us
Eurusian--your uh SEE un
Everleigh—EH ver lee
Eviron—ee VIRE un
Felice—feh LEESE
fête--fate
garderobe—GAR de robe
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
Hartshough—HART soh
Hereward—HERR uh wuhd
Heus—rhymes with the noun *use*
hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz
hotelier—hoh TEL yur

Jehan—JAY han
Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Justinian--jus TIN ee un
Kele—kay lay
Kelsey—KELL see
Kewe—CUE ee
Koschat—KOS chat
Kraken—KRAY ken
Larisse—la REESE
Leila—LYE la
Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Ley--lay
lignéer—lean YEAR
Lilou—LEE loo
Loseby—LOWS bee
Lowry—LAHW ree
Madea—mah DAY ah
maestro—MY strow
Marguerite—mar ger EET
Mathurin—mah THUR in
Melchior—MEL key or
Melott—meh LOT
mezzo—MET soh
Minka—MINK ah
Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
Nomus—NO mis
Pia—PEE ah
Pleyel—PLAY el
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
rebec—reh BEK
Reinagle—REN ah gull
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Saoirse—SUR shuh
segued—SEH gwayd
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
sheol—SHE ohl
soirée—SWAH ray
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stites--stights
Suco—SUE coh
Sughrue—SUE grew
Sybil—SEH bull
Takoda—teh KOH da
Tera—TEE rah
Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tisi—TEE see

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Half-Bad Faerie*
(Book 22)

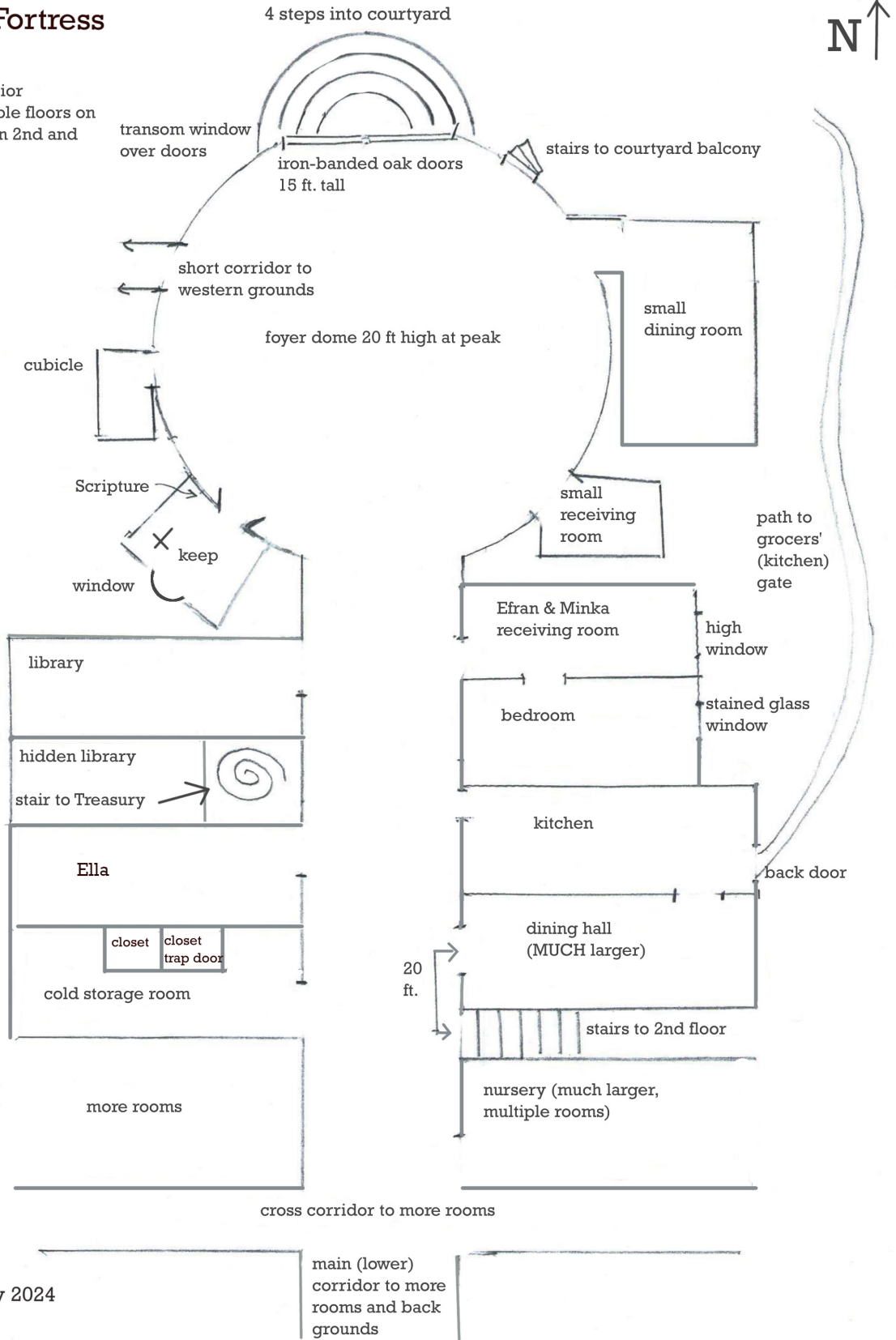
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tivoli—TIV uh lee
Toledoth—TOLL eh doth
Tomer—TOH mur
Tourjee—TUR jee
Trina—TREE nah
Venegas--VEN eh gus
Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
vielle—vee AY
vinaigrette—vin eh GRET
Vories—VORE eez
Windry—WIN dree
Wirrin—WEER en
Wystan—WIS tan
Xander—ZAN der



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



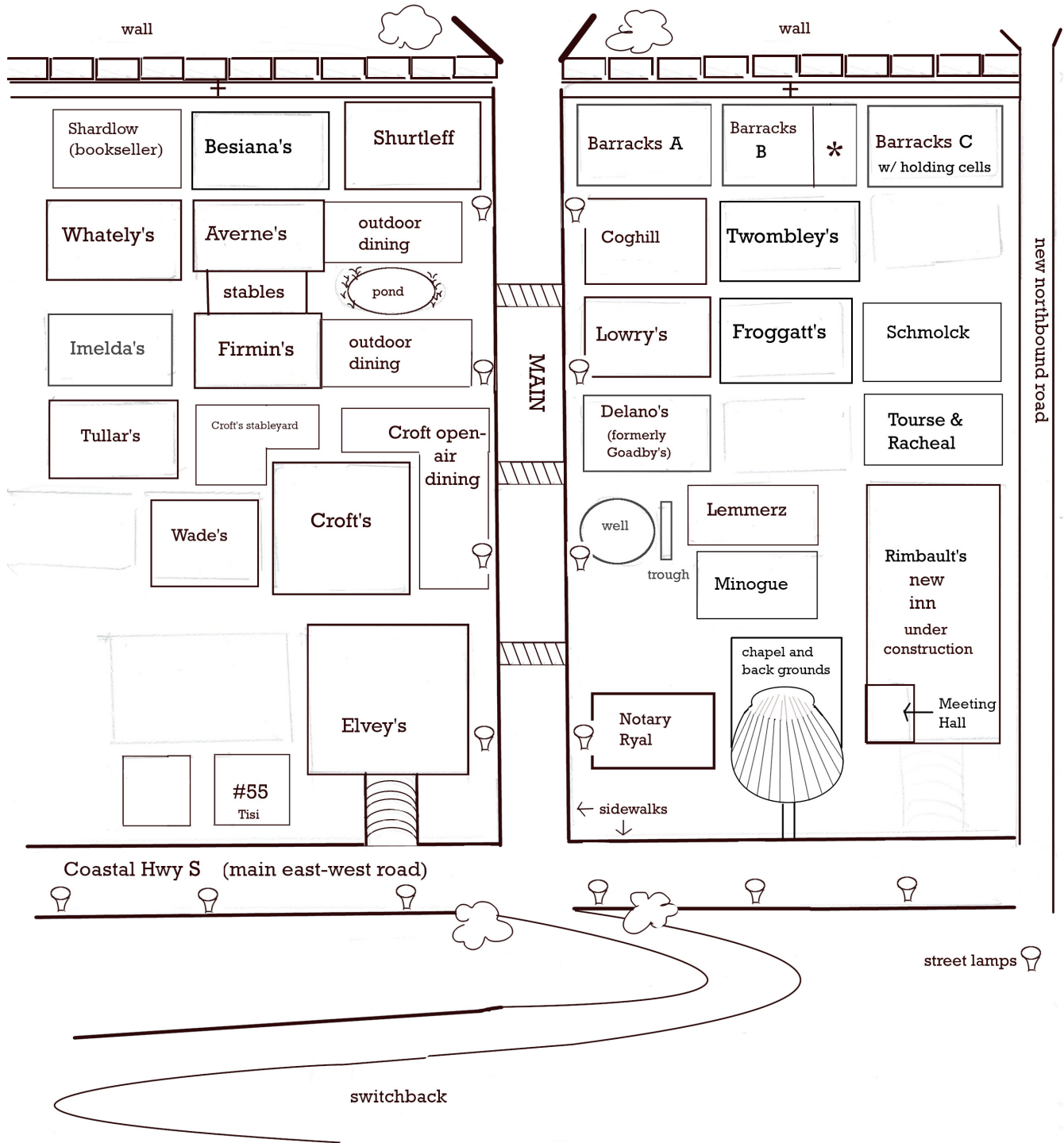
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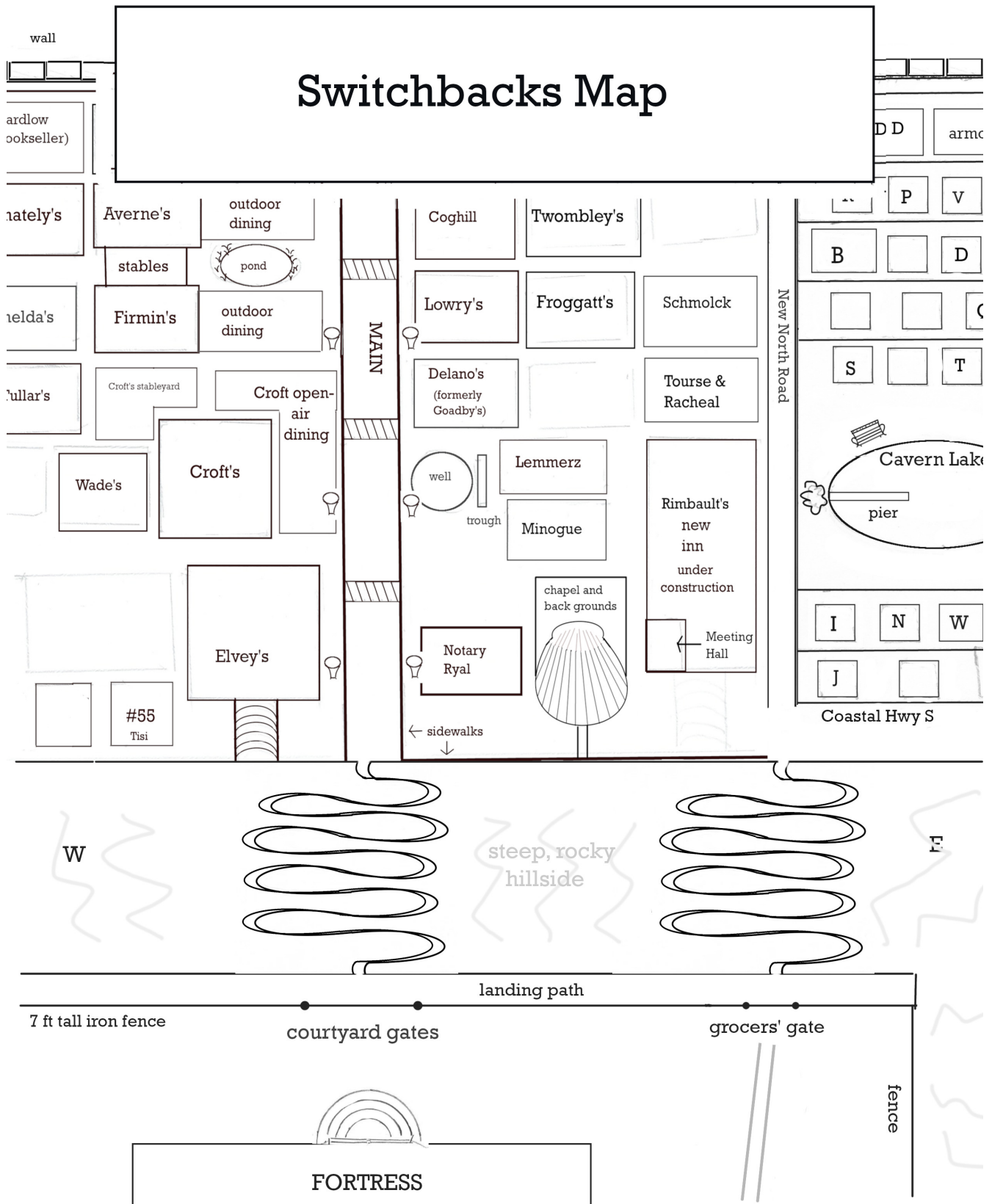
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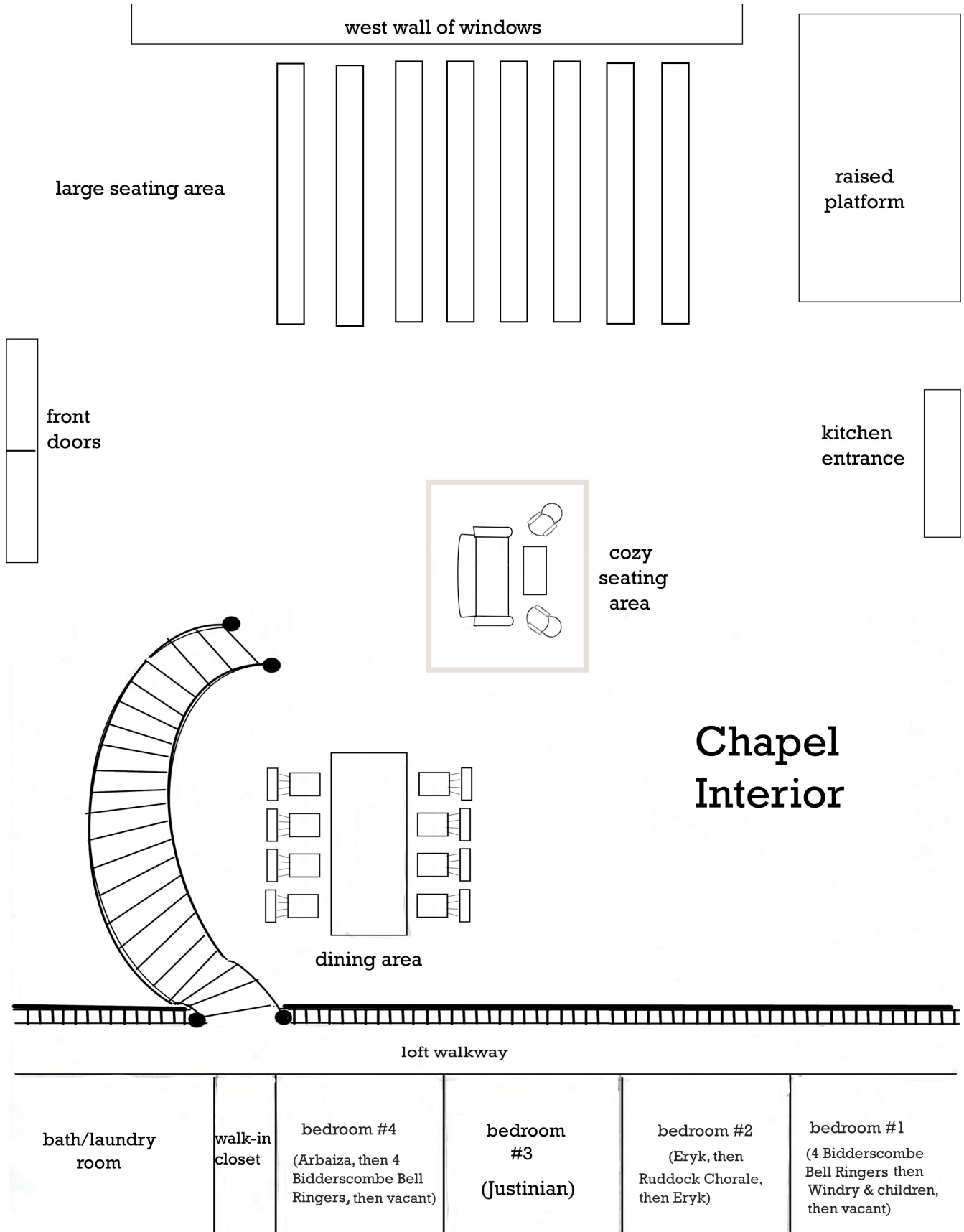
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements







Chapel Interior

large seating area

west wall of windows

raised platform

front doors

kitchen entrance

cozy seating area

dining area

loft walkway

bath/laundry room

walk-in closet

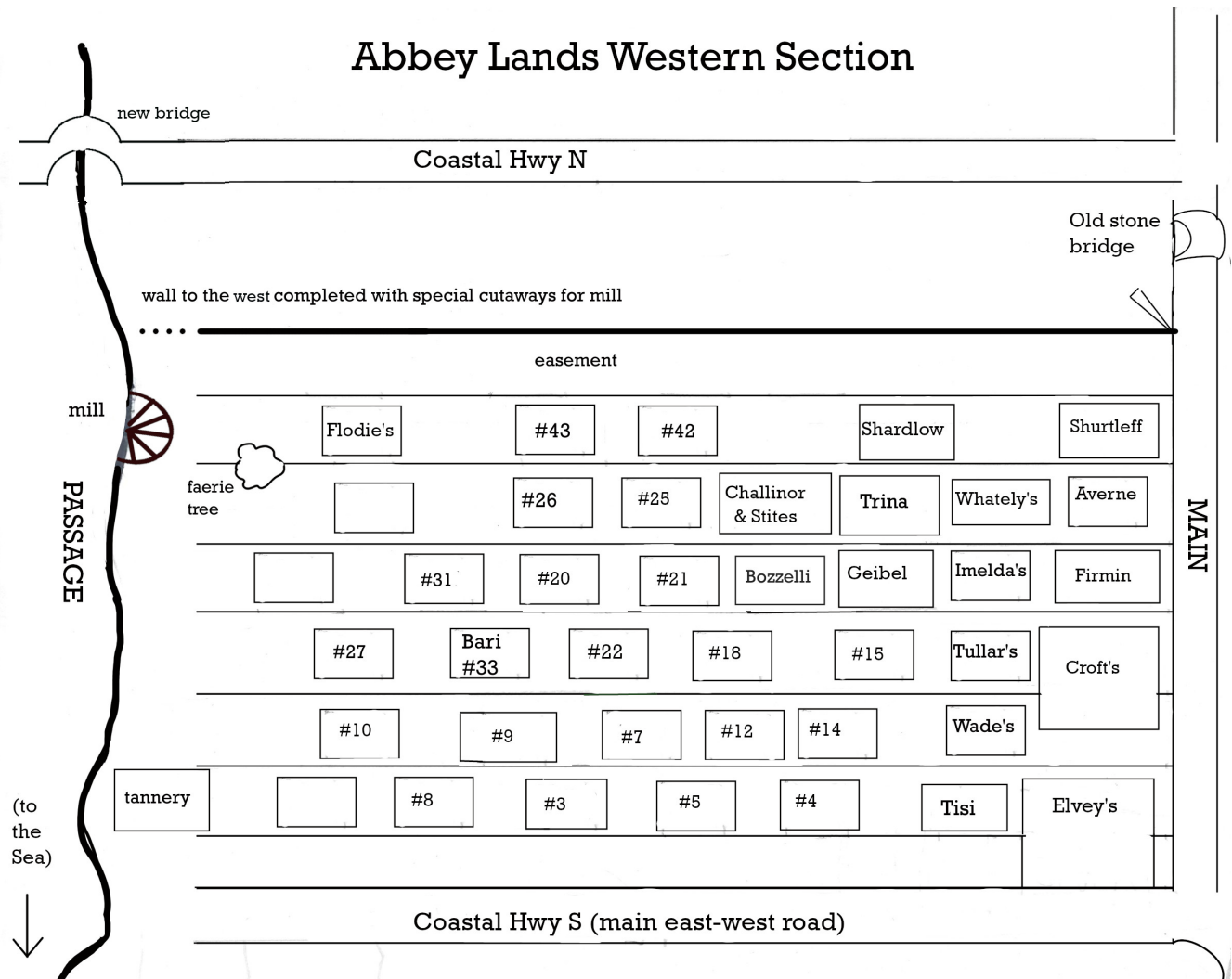
bedroom #4
(Arbaiza, then 4 Bidderscombe Bell Ringers, then vacant)

bedroom #3
(Justinian)

bedroom #2
(Eryk, then Ruddock Chorale, then Eryk)

bedroom #1
(4 Bidderscombe Bell Ringers then Windry & children, then vacant)

Abbey Lands Western Section



rocky NW hillside



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

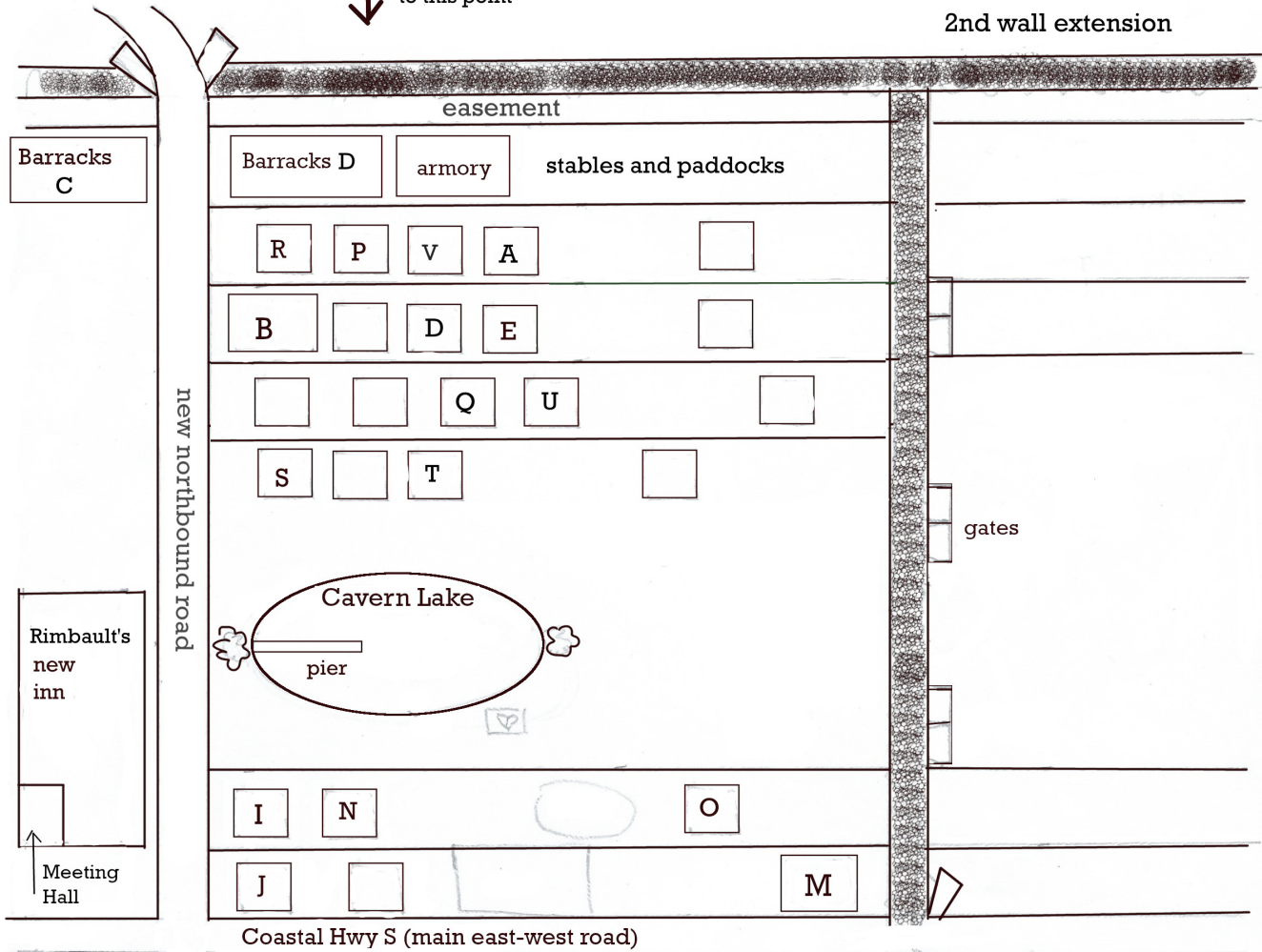
FORTRESS

woods

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



new switchback

 to courtyard gates

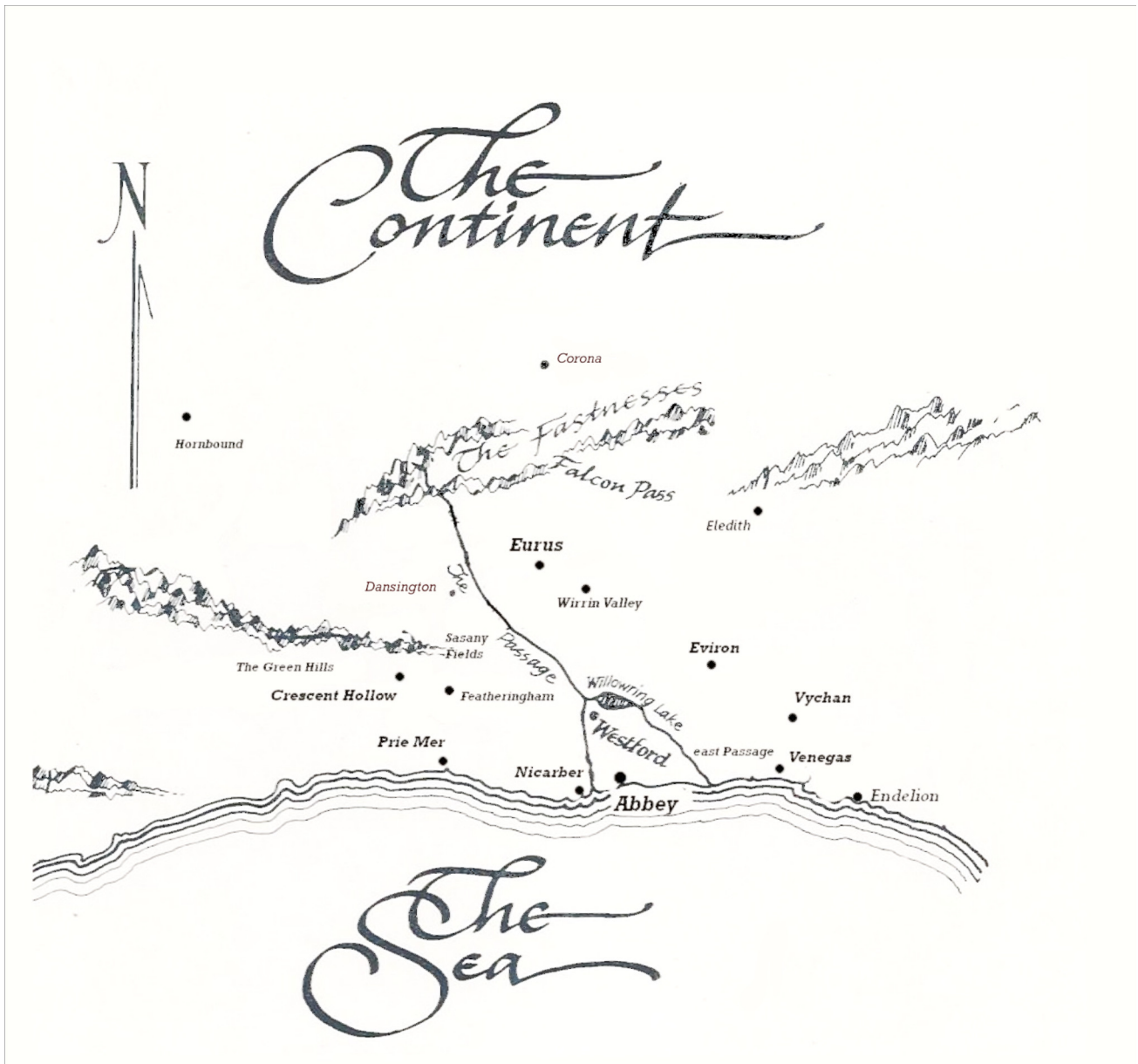
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk

East Lands Flying Bird



NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024



Assignment of Pariah Status (Book 22:

Lord Efran and the Half-Bad Faerie)

See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Well, I'm pleased to see that the faeries who showed up for jury duty appear to be, for the most part, engaged in the seriousness of the charges against Larisse. Starting at the lower left corner of the jury box (which is whatever the faeries [have on hand](#)¹) you may recognize the sardonic face of our [Standing Godling](#)². He just has a strong sense of civic duty. The gentleman in a bow tie and glasses was found on a street corner [here](#)³, and the lovely but doubtful lady next to him interrupted her dinner at the [Birmingham Museums Trust](#)⁴ to participate in this trial. The shocked and appalled juror in front of her was found [here](#), and the extremely distressed individual at her side should be returned to the [asylum](#) shortly.

As usual, Queene Kele is on the job, and her attractive yet serious persona was provided by [Pexels](#)⁵. She's presiding over the second trial of Larisse, which takes place in Auntie Marguerite's chapel (here represented by the entrance foyer of [Casa Amatller](#)⁶ in Barcelona.) Kele's unique judges' bench came from the reception area of [OfficeAero](#),⁷ and her [court dress](#) from Wikipedia (specifically, [here](#)⁸). Meanwhile, her gavel cost nothing at [FreePik](#).⁹ The scroll was [AI generated](#),¹⁰ which is fine because it didn't have to look realistic.

And poor Larisse, who finally found peace, came from [Pexels](#).¹¹

Robin Hardy
May 26, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on my illustration.

1. Photographed by TrimmerinWiki on Wikimedia Commons
2. Photographed by [Ludovic Migneault](#) on Unsplash
3. Photographed by [Artur Tumasjan](#) on Unsplash
4. *Medea*, painted in 1868 by Frederick Sandys; featured on Unsplash
5. Photographed by [Tima Miroshnichenko](#)
6. Photographed by Eli Beckman on Wikimedia Commons. Since I didn't care for the colored glass rounds in the great window, I replaced them with Savill's [summer garden](#) (photographed by [David Short](#) on Wikimedia Commons).
7. Photographed by OfficeAero on Wikimedia Commons and considerably altered by me to fit Kele.
8. Photographed by [InfoGibraltar](#) and altered by me.
9. Photographed by [Racool_studio](#)
10. By [Aom W.](#) on rawpixel
11. Photographed by [Lany-Jade Mondou](#)